

How Can Women Fight Sexual Harassment in Academia?

Sexual harassment in academia is a widespread problem that has been growing over recent years. It is emotionally and psychologically damaging to the victims, and there can be a professional fallout to compound the trauma.

Fortunately, there are things that can be done to combat sexual harassment in academic settings. Change can come from within, and legal actions can be initiated to send a powerful message to would-be perpetrators.

What Is Sexual Harassment?

There are essentially three different types of sexual harassment that have been identified by experts. Clearly, the most egregious form is direct physical contact of a sexual nature, but this is not the only behavior that can be construed as sexual harassment in a legal sense.

Verbal examples of sexual harassment include flattering comments about a person's appearance, unwanted conversations about sex, the circulation of X-rated photos, and sexually explicit text messages. These are a handful of the possibilities, and there are others.

Sexual coercion is another type of harassment that is not uncommon in academic environments. This is a suggestion that an individual will receive preferential professional or scholastic treatment in return for sexual favors.

The coercion can be in the form of a direct proposition, and short of this, it can be floated by way of innuendo. In academia, the older male presence is ubiquitous, and these individuals frequently interact with younger women. A culture of sexual coercion can coalesce into existence over time.

Gender harassment is the most common form of sexual harassment by far. This is not sexual; it is a consistent disparaging of an entire gender. Demeaning sexist behavior should not be par for the course in an androcentric environment. This is a type of sexual harassment, and it is not acceptable.

How Widespread Is Sexual Harassment in Academia?

There are many illegal actions that take place in the shadows because the victims do not come forward to alert the authorities. Sexual harassment would certainly fall into this category, and the underreporting makes it difficult for experts to fully grasp the extent of the problem.

When you look at the general definitions of the different forms of sexual harassment, you can see that there are shades of gray. In countless cases, people question whether they are actually being sexually harassed because they cannot read someone else's mind.

It is human nature to give people the benefit of the doubt, especially when the individual in question can make your professional and/or academic life very difficult for you. In addition to this element, decent human beings are reluctant to jeopardize the careers of others.

Though the reported cases may be just a fraction of the total instances of sexual harassment, they do provide some insight. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has reported that they have

received over 300 complaints from researchers since 2018, and the majority of them were sexual harassment complaints.

A total of 75 scientists lost their grants as a result of their actions, and over 50 of them were removed for violations of the sexual harassment policies.

An in-depth study was published by The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) in 2018.

The study states that over 50 percent of female faculty members and staffers have been sexually harassed. It goes on to state that at least 20 percent of students report having been harassed by faculty or staff members.

They also found that women that are in the medical field of study are more frequently victimized than those that are studying engineering or science.

What Is the Professional Fallout From Sexual Harassment in Academia?

Science, medicine, and engineering are traditionally male-dominated fields. A different study by the NASEM measured undergraduate degree disciplines by gender.

In 1989, 53 percent of the bachelor's degrees that were conferred in the United States were received by women. Just 39 percent of them were in the field of science, and women received a mere 15 percent of the engineering degrees.

Academia needs more women in these fields to tackle the many challenges that we face as a society. Progress has been made since these statistics were compiled, but sexual harassment can have a debilitating impact.

It can compel female faculty members to vacate their positions, and individuals in leadership positions have actually stepped down. The 2018 NASEM study states that the integrity of research has been compromised at times by the impact of sexual harassment.

What Are the Major Contributing Factors?

The overwhelming male majority is the foundation of the problem. This helps to breed sexual harassment in all of its different forms because there is power in numbers, and gender-oriented peer pressure can be a factor.

The concentration of power in the hands of the few, who are mostly male, creates a culture of fealty that is a byproduct of dependence. Compliance standards are largely symbolic because they are not enforced, and there is a lack of informed leadership that is willing to act.

How Can Academia Respond?

The NASEM has provided several recommendations that would make a major difference if they were widely heeded. Acknowledgment of the need for change is certainly at the top of the list because there will be no improvements if the problems are swept under the rug.

Gender harassment is the form of behavior that should be focused on first and foremost because it is the most common. Researchers find that a culture of gender harassment will spawn all of the other different types of behavior.

This makes sense because subtle and consistent sexist behavior is interwoven into the fabric of every interaction, and it has a sweeping negative affect. The crass prurient sexual harassment is reprehensible, but it is not going to permeate every exchange.

Institutions should proactively endeavor to craft their environments in a mindful manner with regard to diversity and mutual respect. This can be engendered through the formal mission statement, and hiring and promotion policies can alter the hierarchy and the overall dynamic.

More transparency is needed with regard to the way institutions handle sexual harassment allegations, and they should establish clear-cut policies. A regular reporting system should be put into place to bring everything out into the light of day on an ongoing basis.

Academic research is founded on the principle of absolute integrity. If institutions recognize the fact that sexual harassment will in fact harm the integrity of their investigations, the matter will be seen in a different light.

It is an instance of poisoning the well on a couple of different levels. People are not going to be at their best when they are experiencing stress and anxiety because they are being harassed. Secondly, competent people will walk away from the field, and this will dilute the talent pool.

People that have the courage to come forward and report instances of sexual harassment should be strongly supported by their academic institutions. There should be channels for making both formal and informal complaints, and they should be welcomed.

How Do You Receive Compensation for Sexual Harassment Damages?

If you have been the victim of sexual harassment in an academic setting, you do not have to accept it and try to move on. The damages that have been inflicted are very real, and you should receive the appropriate compensation.

When individuals and institutions are forced to make amends, they may be motivated to make fundamental changes, so you can potentially help others as well. We can gain an understanding of the situation and initiate a legal action that will turn the tables on the guilty party.

Call the Bucks County Sexual Harassment Lawyers at Sidney L. Gold & Associates, P.C.

If you have been sexually harassed as an academic, the Bucks County sexual harassment lawyers at Sidney L. Gold & Associates, P.C. are here to help. We also represent clients from Philadelphia, Wilkes Barre, Scranton, Chester County, Delaware County, Montgomery County, and Northeast Philadelphia in Pennsylvania.

Our Pennsauken, New Jersey location is easily accessible from Cherry Hill, Haddonfield, Marlton, Moorestown, Mount Laurel, and all of South Jersey, so New Jersey residents can rely on our firm. You can schedule a free consultation if you call us at 215-569-1999, and you can fill out our online [contact form](#) if you would rather send us a message.

Sources:

[Sexual Harassment in Academia](#)

[Sexual Harassment Complaints in Academia Are Up Since 2018](#)

[Fighting Sexual Harassment and Power Abuse in Academia](#)

[Overview: The Status of Women in Science and Engineering](#)