

Gender Harassment at Work and In School: Seeing It; Solving It (Panel Discussion)

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Abstract

The landscape of sexual harassment has evolved since #MeToo went viral in 2017. Thankfully, more violent and more egregious forms of sexual harassment, including sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention, have declined. Unfortunately, gender harassment and discrimination appear to have increased in the workplace and schools, including in engineering. Worse, harassment continues to be substantially underreported, especially within engineering.

Since the term gender harassment is often confusing and ambiguous, the panel discussion will begin with a short introduction to both sexist and sexual gender harassment, comparing definitions between social science research and U.S. law. The panelists will crystallize these definitions with stories of their own lived experiences. The moderator will then pose questions to the panelists to develop a broad perspective on solutions to gender harassment.

This panel discussion emphasizes practical strategies to improve the landscape of gender harassment in engineering work and education. The discussion will be built around a framework drawn from a recent book [1] that explores the current status of sexual harassment in engineering. Our five panelists are a diverse group of women engineers representing multiple sexual orientations, races, and family backgrounds. Our panelists will present their experiences with gender harassment, lessons learned, their responses to the harassment, and paths forward. The panel will emphasize approaches and responses to gender harassment that can be implemented from the bottom up – by individuals or localized peer or work groups – without relying on top leadership in an organization to take the initiative to transform culture or take definitive and proportionate action in response to individual harassment cases.

Gender Harassment vs. Sexual Harassment

Sex, gender, sex discrimination, sexual harassment, gender harassment, quid pro quo, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, hostile environment....

Some of these terms likely seem familiar from the media, from reading the peer-reviewed literature, or even from casual conversation; some less so. And some of these words can have different meanings in different contexts. A discussion of gender harassment requires first establishing a common terminology.

Sex refers to physical appearance and genetic characteristics at birth. Most individuals are either of the female sex and born with XX chromosomes and female reproductive organs or of the male sex and born with XY chromosomes and male reproductive organs. *Gender*, on the other hand, refers more to how an individual self-identifies along a continuum between male and female that

includes, but is not exclusive to, traditionally (socially constructed) feminine or masculine characteristics between male and female. In contrast to sex, the definition of gender is fluid and evolves over time. Some of the most common genders in modern terminology are cisgender (gender identity aligns with sex), transgender (gender identity is opposite of sex, “T”), non-binary (gender identity does not clearly align with either male or female sex, sometimes “Q”), and gender non-conforming (exhibiting behaviors that do not conform to traditional norms for their sex). Genders that are not binary male or female are collectively referred to as *gender minorities*.

Sexual harassment and sub-categories of sexual harassment are defined differently depending on their context. For example, some definitions and boundaries of harassment may be different when considered from a legal perspective rather than a social science perspective. For clarity, in this panel, we draw on definitions of sexual harassment from the social science literature. The three most common terms used in social science research to describe different forms of sexual harassment are *sexual coercion*, *unwanted sexual attention*, and *gender harassment*.

Sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention are the more egregious of the three forms of sexual harassment and have received the most media attention. Sexual coercion refers to “demands for sexual activity in exchange for favorable job conditions” [2, p. 379]. Examples of such demands include, but are not limited to, promising positive benefits like a pay raise or promotion, or threatening negative consequences like being fired or left out of an important activity. Sexual coercion is rooted in a power imbalance, such that the perpetrator has the authority or ability to impose significant consequences on the victim's career or education if she (or he) does not cooperate with the demand for sex or sexual activity. Unwanted sexual attention, however, is not limited to those who have power over others. Instead, it can come not only from a supervisor but also from a colleague or client, and even from subordinates or students. Unwanted attention does not have to occur face-to-face. It can involve email of sexually suggestive pictures of the perpetrator, or repeated requests for a date. Unwanted sexual attention can also involve comments that are inappropriate for a professional setting, such as discussing a person's physical appearance. But, like sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention is directed at a specific individual, and implies sexual attraction (although the motive is often believed to be power rather than sex).

Gender harassment, on the other hand, is directed at a particular gender. Often, the gender toward which the harassment is directed is women, but not always. Gender harassment is further divided into two types: *sexual* and *sexist*. *Sexual gender harassment* (sometimes also labeled gender harassment – crude behavior) creates an environment where members of a particular gender feel sexualized and demeaned. Examples include displaying sexually suggestive pictures of women in the workplace or whistling at young women as they pass by on the manufacturing floor. Sexual gender harassment can also come from a generally over-sexualized (and unwelcome) culture at work. For instance, men (or women) sitting around at work or in the classroom sharing their sexual exploits at length can create a hostile environment for others who are chronically exposed to such talk. In contrast, *sexist gender harassment* demeans or devalues a gender group but is not sexual in nature. It is also directed more generally at a particular gender

rather than a specific individual. Examples include labels like “dumb jock” or “dumb blonde” that communicate derogatory and damaging stereotypes which create inequities between the harassed gender group and those outside of that group.

Gender harassment also includes negative treatment for those who don't conform to traditional or expected gender roles (called *gender policing*). Policing often takes the form of calling a person's masculinity or femininity into question. Women are caught in a bind in a masculine culture—if they act too feminine, they are taken less seriously, but if they act too masculine, they are more likely to be harassed [3]. Men who display more feminine behaviors, particularly within a highly masculine work culture, are also more vulnerable to this kind of gender harassment. A related offense is *heterosexist harassment*, which targets a person because their sexual orientation is in the minority (LGB individuals). Like sexist gender harassment, those who commit heterosexist harassment are believed to be protecting traditional masculine norms – in this case, a heterosexual orientation [2].

Sexual harassment is more common in male-dominant environments, in which men outnumber women, and/or there is an expectation that everyone will display masculine traits [4][5]. Not surprisingly, gender harassment and heterosexist harassment often occur concurrently in male dominated environments.

While gender harassment involves only a subset of sexual or other harassing behaviors in the workplace and in the classroom, it has become an increasingly dominant form of harassment over the past five years. This trend, in large part, can be traced back to the events of 2017, when #MeToo took hold in the public eye.

Recent Trends in Sexual and Gender Harassment

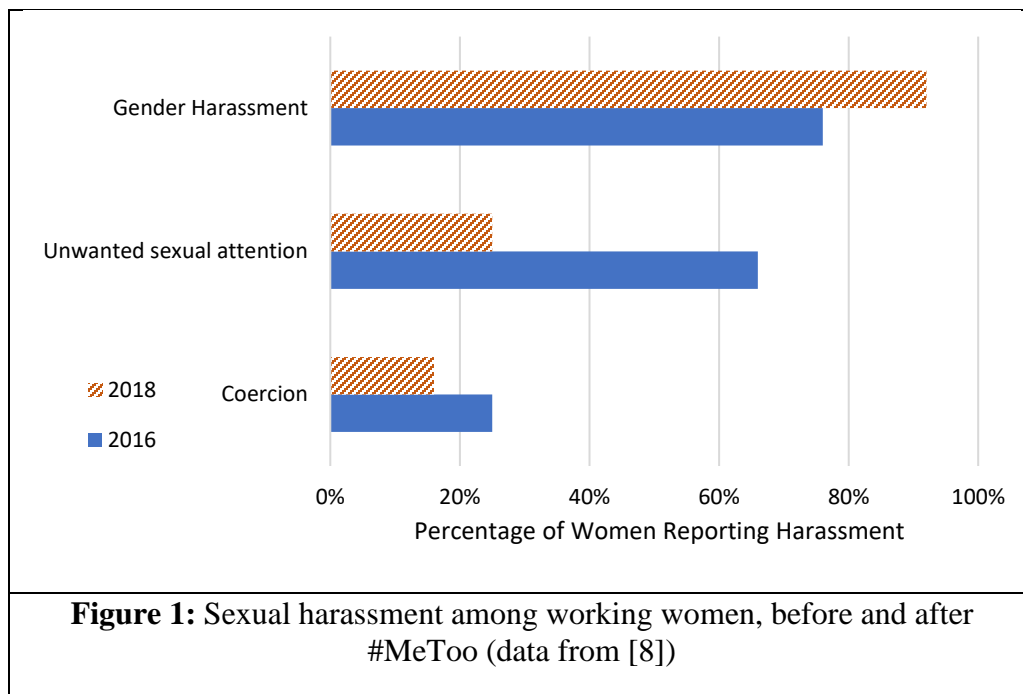
In October of 2017, actress Alyssa Milano made the following post to her followers on the social media platform Twitter:

If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet.

Shortly thereafter, the grassroots movement called MeToo, which had been initiated by Tarana Burke a decade earlier, went viral. #MeToo quickly became a global movement to highlight and address sexual violence and harassment across all walks of life [6]. One year later, the New York Times investigated outcomes of #MeToo, highlighting 201 prominent men who had lost their jobs since October 2017 as a result of sexual harassment allegations [7]. Of these men, 24% worked in government (primarily in elected positions at the federal and state level), 17.6% worked in the film and television industry, but less than 2% worked in positions in or related to engineering and high tech. This is even more concerning when considering that less than 2% of U.S. workers are in the entertainment industry (including but not limited to film and television) while 5% of U.S. workers are technical (engineers, computer scientists, technicians, and managers of technical workers). These data suggest at best that engineering was slow to react to

#MeToo and at worst that engineering may not have taken #MeToo as seriously as other male-dominant disciplines which have been chronically hampered by sexual harassment.

While we do not know how sexual harassment has changed within engineering specifically, we do know that since #MeToo began, the most severe forms of sexual harassment have declined. In a study comparing the two years from pre-#MeToo (2016) to post-#MeToo (2018), women in the later survey reported having experienced lower rates of sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention (Figure 1) [8]. Unfortunately, rates of gender harassment appear to have been on the increase since #MeToo began. For this reason, our panel focuses on gender harassment rather than on unwanted sexual attention or coercion.



Learning Outcomes

Our panel consists of five women from a broad range of institutions and engineering disciplines at different stages of their careers. Our primary goals in this panel on gender harassment are to clarify what gender harassment is, look at how it manifests in the engineering workplace, and explore solutions to limiting both the harassment itself and its harmful impact. At the end of this panel session, attendees will be able to:

- Readily differentiate gender harassment from other forms of sexual harassment
- Readily differentiate sexist and sexual gender harassment
- Add "in-the-moment" real time, productive strategies to their toolboxes for responding to and dealing with gender harassment.

- Identify multiple potential solutions to gender harassment that can be implemented at the local workgroup level in their own places of employment.
- Know that they are not alone in their experiences with harassment.

Panel Description

Our panel alternates among short mini-lectures and time for our panelists to address questions related to gender harassment. The mini-lectures are intended to provide a context for the subsequent panel discussion. The panelist discussion, in turn, will consist both of a series of questions posed by the moderator toward specific panelists and a time for panel attendees to ask questions of the panelists.

1. Mini-Session 1:

- Introduction of panelists (moderator)
- Terminology in brief: sex, gender, sexual harassment, and gender harassment (moderator)
- Stories: my most impactful lived harassment experience with harassment (panelists). Panelists will address topics such as:

*What has gender harassment typically looked like in your career and workplace?
Of the harassment you've experienced, which has been the most harmful to you?
What has been the biggest impact of gender harassment on your career path?*

- Questions and answers: audience and panelists

2. Mini-Session 2:

- Intersectionality -- what we know (moderator)
- Intersectional identities: what has mattered most (panelists). Panelists will address topics such as:

*In what ways have your intersectional identities impacted how you have encountered harassment and how you have responded to it?
How has implicit bias, against any identity group to which you belong, interacted with your experiences of gender harassment?
Could you describe the situation that ultimately led to you making a career change?*

- Questions and answers: audience and panelists

3. Mini-Session 3:

- Practical and accessible solutions to gender harassment (moderator)
- Solutions: the good, the bad, and the equitable (panelists). Panelists will address topics such as:

*What could universities do to help create a more inclusive engineering culture?
What could academia do to build more allies to support the targets?
Why do so many men look past sexual harassment and support the harasser?
What are specific strategies that enable individuals to persist despite challenges?*

- Questions and answers: audience and panelists

4. *Concluding Remarks*

Panelists

Our panelists represent a diverse range of characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences in engineering. They represent racial majorities and racial minorities, gender majority (female) and gender minorities. They range from early career to late career. They have family backgrounds that range from growing up around highly educated family members to being the first in their families to attend college. Geographically, our panelists represent the West, South, Midwest, and Northeastern U.S. And their career paths are all very different. Their diversity brings a breadth of experience and depth of insight that promises a vibrant panel experience on the topic of gender harassment.

Tamara Floyd Smith, Ph.D., P.E., is Dean of the Leonard C. Nelson College of Engineering and Sciences at the West Virginia Institute of Technology. Prior to this position, she served as associate provost and as professor of chemical engineering at Tuskegee University. Dr. Floyd Smith has an accomplished scholarly career, both in traditional technical research and in engineering education research, where she focuses on belonging and student engagement. She has also served as a rotating program officer in the Division of Undergraduate Education at the National Science Foundation.

Shruti Misra is a Ph.D. student in electrical and computer engineering at the University of Washington and is the lead teaching assistant for the department's industry-sponsored capstone design program (ENGINE). She conducts research on identifying measures that are relevant to characterizing regional innovation ecosystems. Shruti holds an undergraduate and master's degree in electrical and computer engineering. Prior to her PhD, Shruti's background was more technically focused, in the areas of embedded systems, robotics and machine learning. After graduation, she hopes to work at the intersection of science, technology, and business.

Alicia Mullen is an early-career engineer who has recently made a career change. Currently, she is completing an apprenticeship in American Traditional Tattooing while teaching coding fundamentals online to K-12 students. Alicia Mullen has always held a personal interest in STEAM education. During high school she pioneered a new program at the Oregon Institute of Technology that allowed her to take university-level engineering courses and lead the way for other students. She received her B.S. in Electrical Engineering from the University of Washington, during which time she worked as a teaching assistant for the digital circuit introductory series and took on internships in the aerospace industry. After graduation, Alicia

worked as a Systems Engineer for Philips Oral Health Care and startup Jeeva Wireless. She presently has no plans to return to engineering as a career.

Eve Riskin, Ph.D., is Dean of Undergraduate Education at Stevens Institute of Technology. Before this role, she was a professor of electrical and computer engineering at the University of Washington Seattle, where she also served as the Faculty Director of the ADVANCE Center for Institutional Change. Her scholarly research focuses on promoting diversity and inclusion in STEM students and faculty. Dr. Riskin is a Fellow in IEEE and recently received the prestigious Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring (PAESMEM).

Denise Wilson, Ph.D., M.Ed., is Professor and Associate Chair for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Washington Seattle. She conducts research in microsensor systems as well as engineering education and workplace research focused on belonging, self-efficacy, engagement, harassment, and persistence. Dr. Wilson is co-author of the recent book *Sex, Gender, and Engineering: Harassment at Work and In School* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022). She also serves as managing director of Coming Alongside, an environmental services non-profit.

Moderator

Jennifer VanAntwerp, Ph.D., is a professor of chemical engineering at Calvin University. Her research focuses on gender in engineering, both among students and professionals. Dr. VanAntwerp is the recipient of the 2015 Denice D. Denton Best Paper Award from the ASEE Women in Engineering Division. She is co-author of the recent book *Sex, Gender, and Engineering: Harassment at Work and In School* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022).

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