

Developing Gender Equality Policy in Finnish Higher Education: Sexual Harassment at a Focal Point

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1. Introduction

While the western university was born in the 11th century, the first Finnish university was established five hundred years later and remained the only Finnish university until the beginning of the 20th century, when its attendance was 2,300 students (Välilä 2001), nearly all of whom were men. Women received the right for admission to university studies in Finland in 1901. The University of Oulu—established in 1959—has a current student population of approximately 16,000. Throughout Finland, 67 percent of university undergraduates today are women and 57 percent of PhD graduates are women. However, women hold just 23.5 percent of Finnish professorships (Statistics Finland 2009) and five percent of rectorships (Higher Education 2007, 2008). The situation in the top Finnish academic positions is not better in Europe generally; for example, women retain only 14 percent of European professorships (see Rees 2007, European Commission 2002).

Academia is the ground for various power struggles and gendered domination, one form of which is the double control of women, who are evaluated and controlled both on the basis of academic results and as embodied beings. *Embodiment*, one of a central means of the marginalisation of women, is manifested in both ‘sexual’ and ‘sexist’ harassment and coercion. Finnish legislation and gender equality policies employ the two-fold term ‘sexual and gender harassment,’ defining both as discrimination. This research separates *sexual harassment* and *gender harassment*, however. By sexual harassment the authors mean harassment that is explicitly sexual in nature, whereas gender harassment may appear—for instance—in the downplaying of a person’s intellectual ability (see Sunnari, 2010; Sunnari et al 2003; Heikkinen, 2003). We also use the term *sexist harassment* to refer to harassment, exclusion, and discrimination that is not explicitly sexual in form, but in which sexual images and discourses are used and maintained in a hetero-normative culture.

Significant variations exist in the experiences of what actually occurs in sexualised encounters, and in understandings of sexual harassment. Feminist theorists have argued that sexual harassment and

other forms of sexualised violence contain sexual, political, and violent elements in complex, variable interaction. Feminist theorists have also argued that sexualised power relations interact with other forms of power, particularly sexualised, racialised, and classed relations (see for example Sunnari 2010, Zippel 2006, Sagay 2003, Crosthwaite & Priest 2001, Le Moncheek 2001, Bacci 1998, Thomas and Kitzinger 1997).

Sexual harassment—and other forms of gender harassment and sexualised violence—are human rights issues that require concerted action worldwide, nationally, and locally. In Finland as in many other countries, the elimination of violence against women and other types of gendered and sexualised violence has been on the public policy agenda since the 1990s. The importance of preventing violence against women (VAW) has increasingly been understood. However, public measures to prevent VAW have been insufficient and have displayed remarkable shortcomings (see for example Hagemann-White 2007).

Data has been gathered on gender and sexual harassment at the University of Oulu over the past twenty years; development in gender equality policy has also occurred during those two decades, including the formulation of guidelines to increase awareness and eliminate sexual harassment. Harassment persists, however, although the forms have changed to some extent—as have the ways in which people discuss sexual harassment. This paper presents the data collected at the university and elaborates on the shortcomings and insufficiencies of institutions' gender equality policies concerning sexual harassment. Finally, we focus on the approach that emphasises responsibilities of communities and educational institutions in implementing and improving sexual harassment policy.

2. The data and research method

Data on sexual harassment was collected in the University of Oulu on various occasions between 1990 and 2010; specifically, in 1992, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2006, 2009, and 2010. That data concerns students' personal experiences and encounters of maltreatment and of the burdens of study, as well as the gender and sexual harassment experiences and encounters of students and personnel and their awareness of gender and sexual harassment policies. All seven instances of sexual harassment data collected include different types of information about gendered maltreatment, in addition to information about sexual harassment and sexist harassment and coercion.

The second body of data comprises gender equality policy documents,—including three gender equality plans for 1997 to 2010—and two brochures (2001, 2009) describing gender and sexual

harassment policy and enforcement guidelines¹ of the University of Oulu. The first sexual harassment guidelines were published in Finnish 2001, and in 2009 a somewhat amended version of the guidelines was published, as well as an English language version.

This article focuses exclusively on sexual harassment and sexist harassment. Only the relevant parts of the data, those that refer explicitly to sexual harassment, will be used in aiming to elaborate on and illustrate the shortcomings and insufficiencies of gender equality policies. This approach corresponds to critical qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000). Analysing the forms of sexual and sexist harassment, the main categories and nuances within each category were deducted and inducted from previous research and theories of sexual and sexist harassment, attempting to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin & Lincoln 2008).

However, we emphasise that in spite of the clear deficiencies, the action that the university has taken to eliminate sexual and sexist harassment is a step forward.

3. Sexual Harassment Policies and Guidelines at the University of Oulu

Gender equality and equality work within Oulu University stands on a basis of legislation. From 1995 employers have been responsible for creating an ‘action plan’—specifically, a ‘gender equality plan’—to promote equality between women and men in the workplace. A ‘gender equality committee’ was appointed by the rector in order to promote equality; that committee comprises representatives, usually chairs, of each faculty gender equality task force, as well as expert members - acting consultants: director from the human resources department and chair from the Women’s and Gender Studies.

An Oulu university executive board meeting approved the first gender equality plan in spring 1997. The plan has since been updated triennially. The principle goal of the first plan (1997 to 2001) was to point out the central gender equality problems and to set measures to correct those problems. A survey was conducted among the university personnel for that purpose. According to the survey, gender and sexual harassment was among the most important gender equality considerations. Sexual harassment has therefore been on the agenda of Oulu University’s gender equality policy from the very beginning of gender equality committee’s gender equality work, and is addressed in each of the university’s gender equality plans.

¹ Now one referred as sexual harassment guidelines.

The first gender equality plan discussed the *definition* of sexual harassment, framed as a question of personnel politics and as a psychological personnel safety issue. The special nature of the phenomenon as a covert, hidden, unspoken form of discrimination was realised and the importance of the early intervention brought up. Moreover, the gender equality committee proposed that both a female and a male person—with the required education, experience and personal characteristics—be nominated as contacts in case of sexual harassment.

Additionally, in the 1997 to 2001 term, preparation of the sexual harassment guidelines was commissioned by the first gender equality committee. That guideline brochure, published on June 20, 2001 with the title that translates “Gender and Sexual Harassment and Coercion - guidelines for problem situations,” covers the following six areas. *One*, the vice-rector introduces the paper, emphasising the topic’s importance; *two*, the phenomenon is defined; *three*, examples are given of some forms of harassment and coercion; *four*, instructions are given on how an individual should proceed in a case of harassment; *five*, responsibilities and consequences are clarified, emphasising the importance of prevention and of individual discussion, as well as group discussion involving the director and other parties, including an ‘equality contact person;’ and *six*, the ‘equality contact persons’ for staff and students are identified.

The target readers of the guidelines were victims of harassment as well as department heads and supervisors: the guideline was delivered to each faculty administration in printed form. The guidelines were also made available in the human resources office of the university administration building, and disseminated through the university’s human resources website.

The gender equality plan for 2004 to 2006 stated that gender and sexual harassment, and coercion were problems in a gender-equal university culture. The plan also introduced the sexual harassment guidelines as university policy, and published the web-address of the electronic version of those guidelines. Additionally, the 2004 to 2006 equality plan emphasised the responsibility of department heads and supervisors for immediate intervention in each case. The plan states moreover that both student and staff have nominated gender equality contact persons whose contact information is included in the previously mentioned guidelines.

In the present gender equality plan—for 2008 to 2010—the description of sexual and gender harassment has remained identical to that of the previous plan. The proposed actions have developed somewhat, however; specifically, the following text was added:

“We will take care that faculties and units will nominate gender equality contact persons, who will be educated to recognise and comprehend what harassment is about. Through education it will be ensured that they are sensitive to the matters at hand. The contact persons are there to turn to in cases of harassment and coercion, and their task is to guide a case forward, aiming to deal with it properly.

During the on-going term, the Gender Equality Commission will revise the sexual harassment guidelines to ensure their practicality and clarity and that they are up-to-date (Gender Equality Plan 2008).”

An updated gender and sexual harassment policy and enforcement guidance booklet entitled “Prevention of bullying and harassment at the University of Oulu” was published in Finnish and in English in 2009.

4. The forms of Sexual Harassment - Locating Deficiencies

Examining the data, the following forms of experienced sexual harassment were identified in the University of Oulu. Firstly, *sexist jokes* were the most usual form of sexual harassment mentioned by students from different disciplines and data. The jokes were presented in the guise of humour and were a form of constructing and maintaining a hostile environment. Secondly, *sexist study material* came up as a form of harassment, particularly in the older part of the data. Students mentioned lecturers using sexist humour or ‘inappropriate’ educational material. Thirdly, *sexual and sexist innuendos* were discussed in the data, representing a type of sexist positioning of the harassed. In some cases the innuendo seemed to represent pressure for sexual service or towards the maintenance of a macho-oriented culture. Fourthly, some students and staff members had experienced *visual harassment*, such as overly long gazes. Fifthly, *a fear of becoming coerced into sexual services* was reported by some undergraduate and graduate students. In a long-term academic relationship with a PhD research supervisor, this type of harassment broke the student’s trust in her supervisor and she was not able to continue her research. Finally, *physical sexual harassment* occurred in places and spaces where others were not present, and in the borderlines of academic and leisure-time activities.

5. Shortcomings and insufficiencies of sexual harassment policies

In this chapter we elaborate on the sexual and sexist harassment experiences and encounters reported in the surveys from the perspective of the shortcomings of sexual harassment policy and of other limitations in policies. Comparing the sexual harassment data and the documents promoting equality between women and men, the following shortcomings were identified as categories for discussion: *tolerating a sexist atmosphere – the difficulty of addressing a hostile environment and mundane forms of harassment; an ambivalent understanding of the concepts of harassment, and normalisation of the phenomenon; the emotional difficulties of protesting against the harasser; borderline places and spaces; focusing on the individual instead of the institution; ineffective implementation; difficulties in measuring prevalence; and singular-identity-based equality policy.*

Tolerating a sexist atmosphere – the difficulty of addressing a hostile environment and mundane forms of harassment

Usually veiled as innocent, below-the-belt humour, aimed at the girls in the class. (...)

Typically, sexist jokes in study environments do not concentrate necessarily on individual students but rather on a group of students or on some part of a group, therefore representing *hostile environment* harassment. Through sexist jokes, a harasser makes it congenial to laugh, and, on the grounds of his or her position, also makes those laugh who do not want to be left outside of the ‘inner circle’ being formed and maintained. Those bothered by the sexist jokes—whether individually or as a general concern—are usually silent about the matter.

The use of sexist humour by at least one lecturer was reported by a student, humour that appeared intended to support a masculine hegemony.

It is mainly one lecturer whose substandard comments bother me during the lectures and exercises, when there are other men / male students present.

An ambivalent understanding of the concepts of harassment, and normalisation of the phenomenon

Students in one faculty either did not report having experienced sexual or sexist harassment at all or wrote that they had not been aware of sexual discrimination:

I haven't been aware of anything like that. They are all nice to each other and both sides allow for a small amount of teasing.

Some students who responded in survey they have not encountered sexual harassment wrote additional notes such as “I wish I had” (experienced sexual harassment) that forced us to consider that the respondent did not understand what characterises sexual harassment:

I have not encountered it, I wish I had.

One response from another faculty gave a very different view of the existence of sexual harassment in the Faculty of Technology:

This example isn't from my department, but I have found—mostly in educational material from the Faculty of Technology—almost unbelievable inappropriateness: totally irrelevant pictures—mostly of topless women—being attached to the course handouts. ...

Other differences existed in what was considered normal and what not. A staff member asked,

Can improper clothing be considered sexual harassment at the workplace, and how can improper clothing be defined? ...She (my colleague) sometimes wears really thin blouses so that her breasts and nipples can be seen very clearly.

This respondent expressed an uncomfortable feeling about the sheer clothing of his female colleagues. Clothing has been and remains a very central form of performing one's gender. Gendered appearance is a strictly controlled and reproduced through fashion, and maintained through the mass media. For instance in the mass media, women are portrayed repeatedly as objects for male sexual pleasure, which can be interpreted on a more general level as an eroticisation of female domination (see for example MacKinnon 1999).

The normalisation of this phenomenon may make the recognition of sexual harassment as maltreatment a challenge; because of the various visions of normal, defining what could be considered sexual harassment may be difficult. However, a clear need exists to increase sensitivity in these matters, including requests that personnel refrain from sexist behaviour and sexist jokes, and to wear demure clothes to work.

The emotional difficulties of protesting against the harasser

A PhD student wrote of her ongoing fear of sexual coercion in addition to other types of harassment experienced in a long-term academic relation with a supervisor:

The matter involves my supervisor. Sexual harassment includes turning everything I said into sexual innuendo: telling dirty jokes, which he thought was extremely funny. A couple of times 'as if unintentionally' he touched my legs or even my breasts. Harassment includes interfering with my personal life and gazing at my body. Harassment always happened in person-to-person situations and therefore without witnesses. I put up with the situation for a year before I got the courage to do something. I had mentioned several times to him that I do not like his behaviour and I am going to make a complaint if he does not stop - this is sexual harassment. Nothing changed. I wrote an e-mail to the dean of the department about the case and asked him to discuss it with my supervisor. The physical and verbal harassment mostly ended. But I still find it uncomfortable in the company of the supervisor, and only the forms of harassment changed.

Although this student knew how to act in the harassment situation and how it is recommended to act, it took one year for her to take sufficient action to finish this sexual and sexist harassment. Also, as the student writes, the harassment as such did not disappear entirely. Clearly, although the harasser was aware that his sexual behaviour was unwanted by the student harassed, the harassment continued for a considerable time before the student was able to report it to the administration.

This case exemplifies the results of campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of sexual harassment in the university: the informant knew how the procedures expected her to act in the situation. The case also highlights an issue of central concern: the responsibility to complain is left to the harassed, placing a double burden on an individual who has already been victimised by maltreatment. An organisational response that expects a student harassed by a supervisor to continue to work with the same supervisor indicates a lack of adequate organisational remedies.

The emotional difficulties of reporting harassment may be intertwined with issues such as nationality, privileged position, and opportunity, which is the case particularly with PhD students in their academic career. Resisting sexual harassment in its various forms may make an individual vulnerable due to stigmatisation; the responsibility to act in an incident of harassment should therefore be shared.

Borderline places and spaces - student residences and excursions

Unwanted approaches may occur in spaces such as excursions or conference trips in relation to

academic work or studies. Additionally, areas related to the university which are not formal university spaces such as lecture halls, classrooms, research labs, but—for example—student housing were spaces in which unwanted sexual advances were made:

The harassment occurred in the corridor of the student apartments connected to the university building. ... This area is not governed by the legal obligations of the university, because it belongs to the student housing organisation.

A woman in the university staff describes an incident of harassment that a female exchange student experienced; physical sexual harassment took place in an accommodation facility during an excursion in which exchange students took part.

Some male members of the university personnel harassed foreign exchange students in a coed sauna evening. The students asked if this was due to their dark skin and their being different from the others.

Informal situations may make some students vulnerable to sexual harassment and some staff members more likely to make improper and unwanted sexual advances. It seems that the current sexual harassment policy cannot yield on the borders of academic life, in student housing and on student excursions. Sexual harassment should be addressed in the policy documents with respect to the existing complex reality of academic life and considering informal places and spaces in academia. A working definition of sexual harassment should include the mundane forms of sexual harassment that build an accepting atmosphere and thereby increase tolerance towards sexist harassment at the expense of wellbeing.

Ineffective dissemination of sexual harassment guidelines

According to the data collected on sexual harassment in Oulu University, very few of its students know of the sexual harassment policies and grievance procedures in place. Dissemination of the prevention guidelines has been directed to supervisors and department heads and to the victims of harassment, but in aiming to implement the policy effectively, it would perhaps be meaningful to cover the entire incoming student population as well as newly recruited staff, since active prevention would be the best way to intervene in sexual harassment. A clear need exists for a multilingual information campaign to promote gender equality policies in university.

Focusing on the individual instead of the institution

The current policy expects someone harassed to *respond personally* to the situation in the moment after an incident of harassment, however emotionally shocked that person might be or experiencing feelings of weakness or self-doubt. He or she contacts a ‘gender equality contact person,’ following which a supervisor or department head is responsible for taking immediate action. A question remains unanswered: what about everybody else? Equality law states that workplaces and educational institutions are responsible for protecting their workers and students from harassment in workplaces and educational environments. Oulu University is obviously failing in this respect; harassment is not just an individual problem: it creates a hostile atmosphere in which the wellbeing of students and staff in general are played with and therefore a shared approach for grievance procedures should be further elaborated instead of individual responsibility.

Difficulties in measuring the prevalence of sexual harassment

Measuring the prevalence of sexual harassment is difficult for numerous reasons, from still quite underdeveloped reporting procedures within higher education to a low response percentage for gender equality surveys, to an insufficient understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment—and including challenges of representation in surveys. Some of those who have experienced harassment may already have left the university:

This is a chain of incidences that took place few years ago when sexual harassment was not discussed in public and I did not know of any means to bring my experiences to daylight. I was alone and left alone with my problem. I was left alone with my research work. My motivation for working (with my PhD research) began to lag because of the long on-going sexual harassment by the professor. I was unable to return to work and had to take extended sick leave. Several factors were affecting my health, but the working relationship with my supervisor and the change that I experienced as threatening were not insignificant.

In Oulu University’s ‘gender equality survey’ of 2009², 10.4 percent of total respondents of the question (377) reported “sexist jokes;” 5.3 percent had received sexually-coloured contact through letters, e-mails, or phone calls; 4.3 percent reported rude comments relating to the body or to their sexuality; 3.5 percent reported unwanted physical approaches or touching; 2.4 percent reported seen

² 11,7 percent of staff responded to the gender equality survey in 2009 the total number of staff being 3265.

offensive material; and 1.1 percent encountered an unwanted, harassing proposal of sexual intercourse. Harassers were usually colleagues (in 54.1 percent or 53 of 98 responses), but included supervisors (in 23.5 percent or 23 of 98 responses) and other directors (in 28.6 percent or 28 of 98 responses). It is unclear how—according to gender equality policy—one might contact supervisors and directors responsible for harassment intervention if those supervisors and directors are themselves the harassers. 77 percent of the respondents said that the harassment does not continue anymore, whereas in 23 percent of the cases the harassment was still continuing.

A singular-identity-based equality policy

Some references were made in the data to sexual harassment in which ethnic-cultural difference is one component of the interaction, with possible differences in interpretations of intentions. The situation might be considered ‘new’ in the context of Finnish universities, whose students have until the 1990s mainly been Finnish. In addition to ethnic-cultural differences, varied sexuality-based differences also exist that have not been taken into account in the guidelines. One respondent reports as follows:

I do not have personal experience (of harassment) in my current workplace, but some observations concerning my colleagues. A transgender person may encounter very difficult gendered expectations and assumptions in their work.

Sexual harassment as understood in the guidelines as male-to-female harassment or female-to-male harassment is unquestionably an overly simplistic understanding of the phenomenon. The singular-identity-based equality policy is not therefore sufficient to meet the challenges of sexual harassment policy development in an increasingly diverse academia in which equal opportunities for all are embraced.

A singular identity-based framework may result in the exclusion of certain group of people who remain unmarked and therefore under-analysed, untheorised, and unaccounted for (Russo, 2009). In drafting equality policies and guidelines, providing space for a diversity of identities, experiences, and perspectives is crucial. Too often, groups such as sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, and disabled persons are marginalised and their interests erased in political projects such as the creation of gender equality policy. Therefore, the policy should be sensitive to discrimination on multiple grounds.

6. Conclusion

Measures against sexual harassment that focus wholly on individual prevention do not help if the phenomenon in its entirety is unclear, is approached with a conceptual bias, or constitutes normalised, everyday practice. A clear need exists to account for the plurality of individual identities and for relationships with individuals belonging both to students or staff members to be treated respectfully, despite the formality of the academic setting. Moreover, in 2010 the University of Oulu still does not have a position for a person responsible solely for gender equality issues or a separate budget for disseminating the most central policy documents—and has not conducted a gender equality survey in English despite the increasing number of international students and staff, and despite that one of the university's goals is to recruit more international students into its various programs and to hire international researchers to university posts.

Sexual harassment is intertwined with other systems of oppressions such as race, nationality, able-bodied-ism, sexual orientation, and social class: guidelines should therefore be tuned in that direction and those aspects should be addressed in education on sexual harassment. In fact, education on sexual harassment has not been mainstreamed in the various curricula at Oulu University or in the orientation for new personnel. Courses are only available as an option in the Women's and Gender studies. One way to improve general awareness would be to have studies on gender considered part of the professional requirement procedures and as qualification criteria. Gender-aware and gender-competent staff capable of implementing and justifying the importance of a gender-sensitive approach would allow academic culture to develop its sense of responsibility—driven by both community and institution—to prevent sexual harassment and implement relevant policies.

Current issues challenge us also to consider the implications of research, policies, and politics in terms of whether they contribute to the perpetuation of any of the interconnected systems of oppression and privilege (Russo, 2009). When transforming our knowledge and public policy, it has been seen as important to apply intersectionality when scrutinising systems of power and privilege. Feminist research within institutions of higher education has also proved influential in improving gender equality politics in this respect.

Professor Sylvia Walby from the University of Lancaster, currently the UNESCO chair in gender research, has proposed three indicators of sexual harassment in the workplace that might be applied to the higher education institutions (Walby 2006). The indicator is threefold, concerning *one*, the

percentage of employees and in this case additionally students who report incidents of sexual harassment; *two*, the percentage of private and public universities³ with a policy on sexual harassment; and *three*, the percentage of private and public universities⁴ with procedures for sanctions for perpetrators of sexual harassment. The proposed sexual harassment indicators are an important political tool or rather a goal towards which gender equality policy can be developed within a higher educational system. According to the proposal, the minimum apparent policy standards are the criminalisation of sexual harassment and establishment of a channel for reporting victims of harassment, national legislation enforcing gender equality policy—for instance in a form of ‘action plan’ for developing gender equality within institutions of higher education, and penal code whereby sexual harassment is criminalised and procedures for sanctions are established.

Current gender equality bodies such as gender equality committees and gender equality task forces in higher educational institutions are underdeveloped, under-resourced, and unable to feed sexual harassment indicators with sufficient data or in some cases any data at all. More research on these topics is clearly needed. Other general deficiencies include the low report rate of sexual harassment and the disparity between EU countries in sexual harassment policy implementation, policy requirements, the dissemination of policies in universities, and sanctions for perpetrators. ‘Grass root’ level work is therefore required when aiming to develop gender equality policy in higher education and achieve more concrete results in this field.

To eliminate sexual and sexist harassment and gender discrimination, higher education supranational campaigns and EC policies within the EU and by UNESCO are also needed. Pressure to develop policies may also work in the opposite direction: institutionally-adapted policies and surveillance through statistics can provide the structure and pressure for the national implementation of these policies, and require comparable indicator development by EC and UN bodies.

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³ The original version uses the term ‘enterprises.’

⁴ See previous footnote.

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