Survey on:
Gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the Swedish higher education sector
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Summary

Background

In 2019, the Research and Collaboration Programme was launched with the aim of jointly increasing knowledge about gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the Swedish higher education sector, as well as the underlying causes and consequences. In collaboration with Statistics Sweden (SCB), a survey was conducted in the academic sector in 2021. The purpose of this report is to describe the implementation of the survey and to give a first account of a selection of the data. The higher education institutions included in the survey were given the opportunity to order results in table form for a pre-determined set of questions and background variables.

The study

The overall goal of the study was to establish research-based knowledge on the prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in academia to form a basis for the development of prevention and support models and methods. The study was focussed on employees, doctoral students and students at the 38 higher education institutions that are members of the Swedish Universities and Higher Education Association (SUHF) and was conducted during May-July 2021. The survey examined sexual harassment using two different proven scales. The survey also included proven scales measuring organizational and social work environment, health, exposure to bullying, hatred and threats, and incivility. In addition, the survey included two questions on respondents’ perceptions of whether them being subjected to gender-based violence had decreased or increased during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Presentation of results

The report presents the results mainly as percentage estimates with margins of error (95% confidence intervals). The percentages are estimates of the sector as a whole, although only a sample was surveyed and not all of them responded. Some analyses, however, have been done on primary data, from the 38 918 respondents, and do not represent estimates for the sector as a whole.

Occurrence of sexual harassment

Percentage estimates show that four percent have been subjected to sexual harassment in the past 12 months. Young people, students and women report the highest levels of sexual harassment. Eight percent have learned that others have been subjected to sexual harassment in the past 12 months. Again, young people and students report high levels of being aware of others being subjected to sexual harassment (women and men are equally likely to have been aware).

A total of 38 918 respondents completed the survey: 18,582 students, 5,256 doctoral students and 15,080 employees. This corresponds to a total response rate of 31.9% (students 24.3%, doctoral students 37.7% and employees 47.5%).

Of the total number of respondents, 59.6% were women and 40.4% were men.
A number of different behaviours that can be interpreted as sexual harassment are reported together. This measure could only be derived from analysis of primary data. 38% of respondents reported that they were subjected to at least one of these behaviours at least once (the scale is not time-limited). The group “female doctoral student” reported the highest level of being subjected to this measure of behaviours. The most common behaviours reported were “asked questions about your private life, looked at you and made comments about your appearance or age in an uncomfortable or unpleasant manner.”

Occurrence of other forms of gender-based violence

Percentage estimates show that seven percent have been subjected to bullying in the past 12 months — women, employees and doctoral students report the highest levels of being subjected to bullying. 16 percent have learned that others have been exposed to bullying in the past 12 months. Percentage estimates show that 5% have experienced online harassment in the last 12 months. A high proportion of respondents have experienced incivility. The most common forms of incivility were “not paying attention to your statements or being uninterested in your opinions” and “interrupting or talking over you” which about 50% reported.

Consequences of sexual harassment

Analyses of the consequences of sexual harassment are based on primary data. 12% (14% female and 8% male) of respondents who reported that they were subjected to sexual harassment filed a formal report of the incident. The most common reason given for not filing a report was “it wasn’t that serious” for women and “I dealt with it myself” for men.

Analyses of the relationship between organisational factors and undesired sexual attention were conducted. These show, among other things, that those who reported that they were subjected to sexual harassment (both women and men) also reported lower levels of experienced support from colleagues/fellow students and from managers/teachers. In comparison to non-exposed, respondents (both women and men) who reported that they experienced undesired sexual attention indicated poorer general health, higher stress and higher levels of burnout. Respondents who reported that they experienced sexual harassment also reported to a higher degree that they were considering leaving their job/studies.

The survey provides a national sector-wide picture of the extent and consequences of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. The results show shared challenges that the Swedish higher education sector is facing. The intention is that the presented results can contribute to future preventive and supportive work at a national level.

Covid-19 and vulnerability

Analyses of questions about Covid-19 are made on primary data and show that being subjected to bullying and sexual harassment in most cases has not been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the cases where it has been affected, it has decreased — women reported more frequently that this is the case.
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