

EXPLORING EU STUDENTS' BELIEFS AND EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

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Abstract. *Sexual harassment and assault are the factors that decrease youth quality employment. The research aim is to explore students' beliefs and exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault in selected countries of the European Union underpinning the elaboration of implications for higher education. Theoretical analysis and modelling were used. The exploratory study was implemented to investigate the relationship between students' self-assessment of their beliefs and levels of exposure in relation to sexual harassment and sexual assault in the selected countries of the European Union. The theoretical analysis resulted in the establishment of the inter-connections between sexual harassment and sexual assault, on the one side, and students' employment and work/job, health as well as non-direct economic impact, on the other side. The exploratory study revealed that the level of students' belief is higher if compared to the level of exposure to sexual harassment and assault. Students most believe that people physical appearance, race and being young impact sexual harassment and sexual assault. Exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault coincide in relation witnessed sexual harassment and sexual witnessed assault as well as their ranking. Implications for higher education refer to teaching staff in higher education. Further research directions were proposed.*

Keywords: *employment, European Union countries, mean, ranking, sexual assault, sexual harassment, students.*

Introduction

The goal of the European Union Youth Strategy in 2019-2027 is quality employment for all (European Commission, 2018). Sexual harassment and sexual assault are the factors that decrease youth quality employment.

Conventionally, higher education is regarded as the preparation for employment (Ali & Jalal, 2018). The present work is based on the assumption that, to some extent, students' higher education studies can be also considered as employment as students have to follow the university contract regulations (Ahrens, Zascersinska, & Macovei, 2022b). Consequently, the terms "youth" and "students" are used synonymously in this work.

It should be pointed that quality employment is closely inter-connected with quality job (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2002) as depicted in Figure 1.

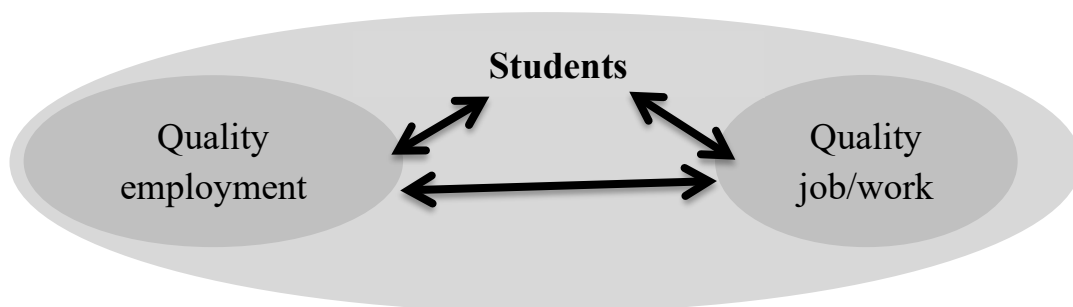


Figure 1 The inter-connectednes between youth, quality employment, and quality job (made by authors)

Sexual harassment and sexual assault put young people at risk for short-term and long-term employment problems (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013). Sexual harassment and sexual assault negatively impact youth job performance, job change and insecurity, career opportunities, and retaliation for reporting (Lim, Ghani, & Remme, 2018).

Sexual harassment and sexual assault also influence youth health (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013). In turn, youth health affect youth employment and employment possibilities. Thus, negative experiences relevant to the field of sexual harassment and sexual assault may be traumatizing youth ability to cope with stressors and develop their identity (Kaltiala-Heino, Fröjd, & Marttunen, 2016) including professional identity. Sexual harassment and sexual assault lead to increased anxiety and depressive symptoms among young females but not males (Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021). Moreover, undesired sexual experiences may increase later physical and sexual violence experiences, and the victim may commit in the future physical or sexual violence (Banvard-Fox et al., 2020; Norcott et al., 2021). Additionally, sexual harassment and sexual assault also have

the economic side of the impact on youth employment in terms of expenses of healthcare system, direct and indirect costs to companies, industries and governments (Lim, Ghani, & Remme, 2018).

Figure 2 gives an overview of the areas impacted by youth sexual harassment and sexual assault.

The aim of the present research is to explore youth beliefs and exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault in employment in the selected countries of the European Union underpinning the elaboration of implications for higher education.

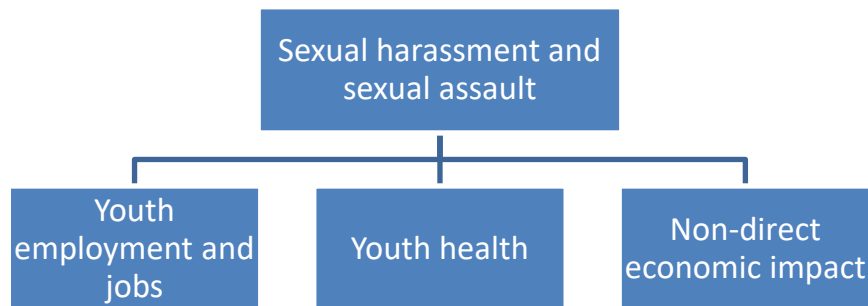


Figure 2 *The areas impacted by sexual harassment and sexual assault (made by authors)*

The method of this work is the exploratory study. The exploratory study was implemented to investigate the relationship between students' self-assessment of their beliefs and levels of exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault in the selected countries of the European Union.

Conceptual Framework

In this part of the paper, the key concepts relevant to the study of students' sexual harassment and sexual assault in the selected countries of the European Union are outlined.

Quality of job/work and employment includes four areas (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2002) ensuring career and employment security; maintaining and promoting the health and well-being of workers; developing skills and competences; and reconciling working and non-working life.

Based on this description of quality employment and quality job/work, the term "workplace" refers not only to the specific location where work is being performed, such as an office or factory, but also to locations where work-related business may be conducted (Bon et al., 2015). These could include, but are not limited to (Bon et al., 2015) work related social activities, such a reception organized by the enterprise for staff or clients, etc.; conferences and training sessions; official business travel; business meals; work related telephone conversations; and work-related communications through electronic media.

Quality employment and quality job/work can be affected by sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Sexual harassment is defined as any behaviour of a sexual nature that affects the dignity of women and men, which is considered as unwanted, unacceptable, inappropriate and offensive to the recipient, and that creates an intimidating, hostile, unstable or offensive work environment (Bon et al., 2015). Occasional compliments that are socially and culturally acceptable and appropriate are not considered to be sexual harassment (Bon et al., 2015). Any interaction of a sexual nature which is consensual (except for those prohibited by the law such as sexual intercourse with children), welcome or reciprocated is not considered to be sexual harassment (Bon et al., 2015).

Sexual assault focuses on assaults that involve completed or attempted physical contacts against an adult (age 18 or older) or child sexual abuse or other sexual acts (e.g., exhibitionism, sexting, sexual harassment, touching, or forced touching or fondling in public, i.e., frotteurism) (Williams & Walfield, 2016).

In employment and job, sexual harassment and sexual assault outline two broad classes of prohibited behaviour (Raday & Oksenberg, 2014):

1. Quid pro quo – behaviours of employers that extort sexual cooperation by means of subtle or explicit threats of job-related consequences.
2. Hostile environment – sex related behaviours that are unwelcome, offensive and humiliating that damage and embitter the employee's working conditions.

Methodology

The exploratory study was implemented to investigate the relationship between students' self-assessment of their beliefs and levels of exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault in the selected countries of the European Union in the period of March-December 2022.

In March-April 2022, the survey based on the elaborated questionnaire was carried out in five European Union countries. The five European Union countries were chosen for their participation in the survey on the basis of their participation in the Erasmus+ project #Mot Me. The sample was composed on the principles of sample appropriateness, sufficiency, and confidence (Ahrens & Zascierinska, 2015). Altogether 309 respondents from Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, Lithuania, and Romania took part in the survey. The respondents were young people, aged 18-30. The majority of the respondents were university students, some students were enrolled in colleges.

The obtained data were analysed via calculating the mean results in each question and per country. The mean of a question in the dataset from the survey questionnaire represents the average value of the question in this dataset. The mean is based on the data taken from every observation shown by the respondents

of the survey questionnaire. The mean indicates the centre value in each question in the survey questionnaire. The centre of the collected data is a numerical value from 1 to 4. The mean allows for the description of the data tendency. In the case of the present research, the mean shows whether the respondents agree or disagree with the survey questions about sexual harassment and sexual assault. The mean results were analysed at the levels of mean in sexual harassment and sexual assault in each country, and mean in sexual harassment and sexual assault in all the five partner countries, namely Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, Lithuania, and Romania. On the level of each country, the results of each question on each level of the 4 point Likert scale were calculated separately and presented in a table. In the present work, only the total mean will be shown.

Another method of data analysis was ranking (Ahrens & Zascerinska, 2020). Ranking refers to an evaluation used for the advancement of the evaluated item (Ahrens & Zascerinska, 2020). The use of the ranking method was thought as the act of summing up students' beliefs and levels of exposure into a single, holistic number or score is meant (Elbow, 1994). Ranking was intended to emphasise vertical differences between the options (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

The obtained mean of each question of each country was ranked. The options available were placed in order without any attempt to describe how much one differs from another or whether any of the alternatives are, for example, good or acceptable (Coe, 2010, p. 45). It should be pointed that ranking differs from rating as rating means that the used categories are often given numerical labels, such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (Coe, 2010, p. 45). The higher was the mean the higher the question was ranked.

Study Results

The study results are presented in four sub-sections in this part of the paper:

1. Total mean and ranking of EU students' self-assessment of beliefs in sexual harassment,
2. Total mean and ranking EU students' self-assessment of levels of exposure to sexual harassment,
3. Total mean and ranking of EU students' self-assessment of beliefs in sexual assault,
4. Total mean and ranking EU students' self-assessment of levels of exposure to sexual assault.

It should be pointed that the original number of the question used in the survey questionnaire is shown in this work.

1. Total mean and ranking of EU students' self-assessment of beliefs in sexual harassment.

Table 1 created by Ahrens, Zascerinska, & Macovei (2022a) demonstrates the mean results of each question and each question ranking in relation to the students' beliefs in sexual harassment.

Table 1 Mean and ranking results related to the students' beliefs in sexual harassment (Ahrens, Zascerinska, & Macovei, 2022a)

Nr	Question	Total mean	Ranking
38	Do you believe that younger people are more often to experience sexual harassment?	2,83	3
39	Do you believe that people race might impact sexual harassment?	2,85	2
40	Do you believe that people physical appearance might impact sexual harassment?	3,16	1
41	Do you believe that marital status might impact sexual harassment?	2,38	4

Source: Ahrens, Zascerinska, & Macovei, 2022a.
n=309

Table 1 allows for a finding that students most believe that people physical appearance, race and being young impact sexual harassment. These results are presented in the descent order, also after Table 2-4.

2. Total mean and ranking EU students' self-assessment of levels of exposure to sexual harassment.

Table 2 demonstrates the mean results of each question and each question ranking in relation to the levels of exposure to sexual assault.

Table 2 Mean and ranking results related to the levels of exposure to sexual harassment (made by authors)

Nr	Question	Total mean	Ranking
42	Have you experienced sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,35	4
43	Have you witnessed sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,41	3
44	Have you reported about sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,13	7
45	Have you experienced verbal sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,44	2
46	Have you experienced nonverbal sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,24	6
47	Have you experienced visual sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	0,85	10
48	Have you experienced different perceptions of photo content or captions in the last 6 months in your context?	1,67	1
49	Have you experienced physical sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	0,83	11
50	Have you experienced cyber/online sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,03	8

51	Have you experienced physical health problems in the last 6 months in your context?	0,7	12
52	Have you experienced emotional disorders due to sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	0,86	9
53	Have you prevented sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,35	4
54	Have you reacted to sexual harassment in the last 6 months in your context?	1,28	5

Source: The authors.

n=309

Table 2 highlights that the exposure to sexual harassment refers to different perceptions of photo content or captions, verbal sexual harassment, and witnessed sexual harassment.

3. Total mean and ranking of EU students' self-assessment of beliefs in sexual assault

Table 3 prepared by Ahrens, Zascerinska, & Macovei (2022a) demonstrates the mean results of each question and each question ranking in relation to the beliefs in sexual assault.

Table 3 Mean and ranking results related to the students' beliefs in sexual assault (Ahrens, Zascerinska, & Macovei, 2022a)

Nr	Question	Total mean	Ranking
55	Do you believe that younger people are more often to experience sexual assault?	2,74	3
56	Do you believe that people race might impact sexual assault?	2,78	2
57	Do you believe that people physical appearance might impact sexual assault?	2,95	1
58	Do you believe that marital status might impact sexual assault?	2,37	4

Source: Ahrens, Zascerinska, & Macovei, 2022a.

n=309

Table 3 emphasizes that students most believe that people physical appearance, race and being young impact sexual assault. These beliefs coincide with the students' belief in sexual harassment.

4. Total mean and ranking EU students' self-assessment of levels of exposure to sexual assault.

Table 4 demonstrates the mean results of each question and each question ranking in relation to the levels of exposure to sexual assault.

Table 4 Mean and ranking results related to the levels of exposure to sexual assault
(made by authors)

Nr	Question	Total mean	Ranking
59	Have you experienced sexual assault in the last 6 months in your context?	0,77	5
60	Have you experienced completed or attempted rape with unwanted penetration (vaginal, oral, or anal) by force or the threat of force in the last 6 months in your context?	1,06	4
61	Have you experienced emotional disorders due to sexual assault in the last 6 months in your context?	0,75	6
62	Have you experienced mental health problems due to sexual assault in the last 6 months in your context?	0,74	7
63	Have you prevented sexual assault in the last 6 months in your context?	1,2	2
64	Have you reacted to sexual assault in the last 6 months in your context?	1,21	1
65	Have you witnessed sexual assault in the last 6 months in your context?	1,1	3
66	Have you reported about sexual assault in the last 6 months in your context?	1,06	4

Source: The authors.
n=309

Table 2 allows for summarising that the exposure to sexual assault relates to reaction to sexual assault, prevention of sexual assault, and witnessed sexual harassment.

Table 5 reveals Top 3 beliefs and exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Table 5 Top 3 beliefs and exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault
(made by authors)

Ranking	Sexual harassment		Sexual assault	
	Students' beliefs	Exposure	Students' beliefs	Exposure
1	Physical appearance of people might impact gender based discrimination	Different perceptions of photo content or captions	Physical appearance of people might impact sexual assault	Reaction to sexual assault
2	People race might impact gender based discrimination	Verbal sexual harassment	People race might impact sexual assault	Prevention of sexual assault
3	Being young might impact sexual harassment	Witnessed sexual harassment	Being young might impact sexual assault	Witnessed sexual harassment

Source: The authors.
n=309

Students' beliefs are of a higher level in comparison to a level of exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault. Students' beliefs in sexual harassment and sexual assault fully coincide: from the beliefs' side and from the ranking perspective. Exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault coincide in relation witnessed sexual harassment and sexual witnessed assault as well as their ranking.

Conclusions

The theoretical analysis allows for a finding that students' higher education studies can be defined as employment. Theoretical modelling established the inter-connections between sexual harassment and sexual assault, on the one side, and students' employment and work/job, health as well as non-direct economic impact, on the other side.

The exploratory study revealed that the level of students' beliefs is higher if compared to a level of exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault. Students most believe that people physical appearance, race and being young impact sexual harassment and sexual assault. These students' beliefs fully coincide from the beliefs' side, and from the ranking perspective. Exposure to sexual assault is expressed by reaction to sexual assault and prevention of sexual assault. The study also assisted to find out that exposure to sexual harassment and sexual assault coincide in relation witnessed sexual harassment and sexual witnessed assault as well as their ranking.

The research was limited by taking into consideration only the relationships between sexual harassment and sexual assault on the one hand, and employment, on the other hand. The study was limited by the engagement of the respondents from only five European Union countries. The limitation was that the study's sample was composed of students in higher education only.

Implications for higher education refer to teaching staff in higher education. Today higher education can be described as a multi-cultural environment. Due to this, students might have different perception of the same phenomenon. Teaching staff should comment and explain in detail visual materials used in the lecture as different perceptions of photo content or captions was indicated as students' strongest beliefs in sexual harassment. Teaching staff should also carefully choose verbal comments when communicating with students as the study results show that verbal sexual harassment was the second strongest students' belief in sexual harassment.

Future work could focus on the involvement of wider public into the study. Statistical analysis could be used for data analysis in future.

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