

## Research and Evaluation

# Sexual Harassment: The Nexus Between Gender and Workplace Authority: Evidence from the Australian Public Service

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*Sexual harassment in the workplace is commonly portrayed as the male supervisor harassing female subordinates. Within this popular characterization, the unequal distribution of formal, organizational power is believed to be a necessary precondition for sexual harassment. The traditional cultural image of harassers and targets has however not kept pace with changing workplace realities. Research has indeed found that female supervisors may in fact be more likely to be subjects of sexual harassment. This article uses survey data from the Australian Public Service to explore this kind of contrapower harassment. Results indicate that a strong link between gender, workplace authority, and sexual harassment exists, but also that this relationship is strongly influenced by age.*

**Key words:** *inequality, power, sexual harassment*

## Introduction

Since the late 1970s, sexual harassment has become increasingly visible leading to rapid legal and organizational responses (McLaughlin et al. 2012). Regardless of this evolution, the traditional cultural image of harassers and targets has not kept pace with changing workplace realities. Sexual harassment is often still portrayed as an abuse of power in the workplace. A good example is the popular characterization of the “sleazy” male supervisor harassing his “powerless” female secretary. Within such portrayal, the unequal distribution of formal power is believed to be a necessary precondition for sexual harassment. By implication, those in formal positions of authority are not likely to be sexually harassed (Grauerholz 1989).

Nevertheless, there is an increasing body of literature that emphasizes that females with formal authority are in fact more often the target of sexual harassment compared to their

counterparts without similar authority (e.g. McKinney 1992; Wilson and Thompson 2001; Chamberlain et al. 2008; Stainback et al. 2011; McLaughlin et al. 2012). Surprisingly, harassers in such cases are often men who occupy less formal powerful positions within an organization (Benson 1984). Benson (1984) coined the term “contra-power” harassment to refer to this kind of sexual harassment.

Cases where employees with “lesser” power harass those with more power lead to a dilemma for traditional theories of sexual harassment. These theories focus solely on power differentials within the workplace and fail to recognize the sociocultural power men hold over women. Yet the power relation that is essential to sexual harassment is exactly the type of relation that exists between men and women in society and not necessarily the formal organizational power relationship that exists in the workplace. Women who occupy supervisory positions where they can lay claim to some organizational power does not mean that they

embody the informal power required to prevent sexual harassment.

Although there is increased attention on contrapower sexual harassment, Paludi (2013) stresses that this kind of harassment is highly complicated and urgently requires further research to more effectively address this behavior. This is especially the case since much of the evidence is based on small and narrowly focused samples, for instance, a specific type of organization or limited divergence in the age of respondents (McLaughlin et al. 2012). Moreover, this issue is becoming progressively more important since women occupy an ever-increasing percentage of middle- and upper-management positions in all workforce settings.

The aim of this article is therefore to further explore the role of formal power and gender in cases of sexual harassment. Are females with positions of authority in the workplace more likely to be sexually harassed compared to their counterparts without such authority? This issue is assessed using data from a large-scale survey of the Australian Public Service (APS), allowing for an examination of contrapower sexual harassment across different public sector organizations, types of work, and age groups.

This article is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the theoretical underpinnings; the data and various descriptive statistics are presented in Section 3; and the main findings are discussed in Section 4, followed by concluding remarks.

### Theoretical Background

Sexual harassment is defined in the *Sex Discrimination Act*<sup>1</sup> as any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favors or conduct of a sexual nature in relation to the person harassed in circumstances where a reasonable person would have anticipated the possibility that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated, or intimidated (Annual Report Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). Despite being outlawed for over 25 years, sexual harassment in the workplace remains a serious concern. In fact, nearly one in five complaints received by the Australian Human Rights Commission under the *Sex Discrimination Act* 1984 relate to

sexual harassment (Annual Report Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014).

The literature proposes two distinct theoretical models to explain sexual harassment (Rospenda et al. 1998). The first and common theory is the organizational model. This model posits that structural aspects such as hierarchy (e.g. Gruber and Bjorn 1986), the nature of the job task (Giuffre and Williams 1994), inadequacies related to policies, and grievance procedures (Tangri et al. 1982) promote power inequalities between individuals and set the stage for sexual harassment (Rospenda et al. 1998). Workplace harassment is thus believed to be the result of an exploitative, unequal power relationship within the workforce (Gutek 1985).

A second approach to explain sexual harassment is the sociocultural model. This model reflects a more feminist perspective, whereby sexual harassment is regarded as the outcome of patriarchal systems that enable men to exercise sexual power to assert and maintain male dominance (Farley 1978, MacKinnon 1979; Rospenda et al. 1998). As explained by Rospenda et al. (1998), sexual harassment can be regarded as ‘the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power’ (p. 45). In essence, the sociocultural model is based on the fact that sexual harassment comes from gender socialization processes that create and maintain power differences between men and women at the societal level (Rospenda et al. 1998).

The remarkable feature of contrapower harassment, however, is that it is those in power who are harassed by employees with “lesser” organizational power. This leads to several dilemmas; for instance, when women hold positions of power within an organization, how can they be harassed, and why should the law protect them if they do not protect themselves? Although the organizational and sociocultural models are useful to understand different sources of power underlying sexual harassment, their limitations become apparent when faced with this ‘deviant’ form of sexual harassment.

The organizational model focuses excessively on positions within an organization as

sources of power and underestimates the importance of gender and other social characteristics. The sociocultural model, on the other hand, offers a way to understand contrapower harassment since it recognizes that gender is fundamental in structuring power differences between men and women in the workplace (Rospenda et al. 1998). However, its major shortcoming is that it only explains same-sex harassment or female–male harassment.

To explain contrapower harassment specifically, the power-threat model is often cited (McLaughlin et al. 2012). This model builds upon Connell's theory (1987) of hegemonic masculinity, which is based on the assumption that society privileges a single normative ideal of male behavior. Women are more likely to be targets if they challenge their subordinate position in the gender system, while men who are perceived as feminine are also more vulnerable (DeSouza and Solberg 2004; Waldo et al. 1998). Sexual harassment should therefore be regarded as a tool to 'police appropriate ways of doing gender in the workplace and to penalize gender nonconformity' (West and Zimmerman, 1987:149). For instance, Berdahl (2007) suggests that females who act in stereotypically masculine ways (e.g., assertive or dominant) are more likely to face harassment.

The power-threat model is essentially an extension of this theory by postulating that women with formal positions of power who hold authority over men challenge the presumptive superiority of men, making them more likely to face harassment (Chamberlain et al., 2008; De Coster et al. 1999; McLaughlin et al. 2012; Mueller et al. 2001) and discrimination (Stainback et al. 2011). Contrapower harassment can thus be regarded as a means to counteract or equalize power differentials with women supervisors. It reinforces the inferior gender status of women by negating their higher status within an organization (LeMoncheck and Streba, 2001). The study of De Coster et al. (1999) found that females with greater tenure are more likely to view sexual harassment as a problem in the workplace. They conclude that sexual harassment is used instrumentally against females who intrude in male territory.

According to the power-threat model, harassers acquire informal power through race, gender, or class, which emboldens them to harass those with greater formal organizational authority or power (McLaughlin et al. 2012; Rospenda et al. 1998). Even though contrapower harassment appears to be strongly linked to the positions of individuals within an organization, at the root of this type of harassment is gender-based sociocultural power. The type of power relation that is essential to sexual harassment is not the formal organizational form of power but rather the relation that exists between men and women in society (Benson 1984).

## Data

Our analyses apply the 2013 APS employee census, which was designed to measure key issues such as employee engagement, leadership, health and wellbeing, job satisfaction, and general impressions of the APS. It was administered to all available APS employees (recorded in the Australian Public Service Employment Database (APSED)). It provides a comprehensive view of the APS and ensures that no eligible respondents were omitted from the survey sample. Furthermore, it removes sampling bias and reduces sample error. The total targeted population was 158358 of which 102219 employees responded, which is equal to a response rate of 66%. The methodology removed sampling bias and minimized sample error by ensuring that all APS employees were invited to take part. Yet, some employees who had recently entered the APS were not recorded in the APSED at the time the invitations were sent out. The omission of these employees or those who had changed agencies recently may have introduced some sampling error. However, agencies were given the opportunity to review or provide their email lists and were encouraged to contact the organization in charge of the census if they did not receive one. Nonsampling bias was verified by comparing the survey sample against the overall APS population on gender, classification, location, and employment category. No significant difference was noticed.<sup>2</sup>

### **Measuring Sexual Harassment**

The relevant variable – sexual harassment, is based on the following questions: “*During the last 12 months have you been subjected to harassment or bullying in your workplace?*”

The following definition was provided to respondents:

*“For the purpose of this survey, workplace harassment entails offensive, belittling or threatening behavior directed at an individual or group of APS employees. The behavior is unwelcome, unsolicited, usually unreciprocated and usually (but not always) repeated. While there is no standard definition of workplace bullying, it is generally used to describe repeated workplace behavior that could reasonably be considered humiliating, intimidating, threatening or demeaning to an individual or group of individuals. It can be overt or covert.”*

To identify whether the harassment or bullying was based on sex, a further question was posed, whereby respondents could identify the factors on which the harassment or bullying was based. One of these factors was sex, allowing respondents to identify whether the employee had been confronted with sexual harassment.<sup>3</sup>

### **Measuring Gender and Workplace Authority**

The survey included information on the gender of the respondent. Moreover, information was also available on workplace authority. The following question was included in the survey: “In your agency, how many employees do you have direct performance management responsibility for?” Based on these answers a dummy was created that was set to 0 if the employee indicated to have no performance management responsibility for other employees. The dummy was coded as 1 if the employee indicated to have such responsibility. We thus equal workplace authority with supervisory authority. To model gender differences in the influence of organizational power, an interaction term between gender and supervisory authority was created.

### **Additional Explanatory Variables**

#### *Individual characteristics*

The additional individual characteristics that have been included in the analyses are the educational level of the respondent (year 12 or lower, completed vocational qualification, or completed tertiary qualification); the existence of a medical condition that requires reasonable adjustment in the workplace or in some way affects the ability to perform tasks; and the respondent’s age (younger than 30, between 30 and 44, and older than 44).

The literature (e.g. De Coster 1999:29) establishes that females with a higher education are more likely to report harassment (see also Das 2009 and McLaughlin et al. 2012). Moreover, various studies confirm that those with a medical condition or disability are more likely to be targeted or experience more virulent forms of harassment (Holzbauer and Berven 1996).

Although age is linked to power and gender relations (Connell 2000; Thorne 1993; Ohse and Stockdale 2008; Reese and Lindenberg 2005; Sally et al. 2005; Blackstone et al. 2014), it has rarely been considered in studies of workplace sexual harassment (Gruber 1998) let alone in contrapower harassment. Nonetheless, research has found that age is an important factor that affects perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment, particularly in relation to minor or ambiguous behaviors (e.g. Adams, 1997; Dubois et al. 1999; Reese and Lindenberg, 2005).

#### *Work and organizational characteristics*

Respondents also included the length of service in their current organization, as well as in the APS in general (Less than 1 year/ 1-5 years/5 years or more). Moreover, information on the substantive classification level as well as the stability hereof was added to the analyses. Stability of the classification level is a dummy measuring whether the respondent has been in his current classification level for at least 5 years. These variables reflect the job security. Some studies report a negative correlation between job security and harassment, although the temporal ordering has not yet been firmly established (Fitzgerald et al. 1997;

McLaughlin et al. 2012). For instance, O'Driscoll and Brough (2010) find that bullying and harassment causes stress, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem that in turn leads to job insecurity, absence from work, and even resignation. On the other hand, Mauno and Kinnunen (2002) demonstrated that strain caused by job insecurity (assessed via job uncertainty, the worry over job continuity, and the probability of job-related changes) led to increased stress on the work floor that in turn affected the likelihood of bullying and sexual harassment.

Finally, also the type of work a respondent does is included in the analyses. These dummies are based on the APS Job Family Model that groups functionally similar positions that have related skills, tasks, and knowledge blocks (see also <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/job-family-model>). The nature of the job task has been found to contribute to sexual harassment (Tangri et al. 1982), omitting this kind of information can therefore potentially distort our results. Sixteen dummies reflecting the type of work a respondent does are consequently included in the subsequent analyses as control variables.

Organizational characteristics include the size of the organization (small, <251 employees; medium, 251–1000 employees, and large 1000+ employees), as well as the amount of formal and informal feedback the respondent received during the year prior to the survey. These were used as indicators of the organization's culture. As discussed by Vijayasiri (2008), organizational culture and trust have a strong effect on the willingness to report sexual harassment. Organizations with a more open culture where employees are encouraged to discuss problems, challenges, and issues leads to higher employee satisfaction and a lower likelihood of workplace harassment (Vijayasiri 2008). Although not perfect, formal and informal feedback are used as an indicator for such an open organizational culture.

### *Analysis of the Regressors*

This section is devoted to a descriptive analysis aimed at investigating the representative-

ness of the subsample used in the regression analysis. We were forced to use a subsample of the APS employee census since respondents not always answered all questions. Due to these missing data for the explanatory or dependent variables, the data used for the analyses is limited. Consequently, we test in Table 1 whether the estimation subsample used in the regression analyses continues to be representative of the entire sample or is biased by one or more variables, because of an unbalanced distribution of missing values.

Overall, the values reported in Table 1 in the Full Sample and Used Sample columns are very similar. This suggests that missing values were randomly distributed, and that the observations used to estimate the regressions therefore constitute a representative subsample of all the employees that were originally included in the survey. Possible collinearity problems have also been checked using the variance inflation factor (VIF). The mean VIF equals 1.34 whereby, as expected, the highest VIFs exist for length of service in the APS (2.48) and length of service in the current agency (2.24). These values indicate that no collinearity exists between the variables. A correlation matrix is provided in Table A3 of the appendix.

## **Methods and Results**

To examine the likelihood of being sexually harassed, we make use of a logistic regression. Hereby, we calculate odds ratios; for a unit increase in  $x_k$ , the odds of a lower outcome compared with a higher outcome are changed by the factor  $\exp(-\beta_k)$ , holding all other variables constant. For instance, an odds ratio of 2 for gender (1 = female) means that the odds of being sexually harassed are two times higher for females than for males (See Long and Freese, 2006, for a more thorough discussion).<sup>4</sup> The results are presented in Table 2.

In the first column (Model 1), the probability of sexual harassment is examined for the entire sample. These results indicate that women are 89.2% more likely to be sexually harassed than men. Having supervisory authority leads

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

Variable	Description	Question <sup>a</sup>	Original sample			Used sample ( <i>n</i> = 70208)	
			Mean	SD	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD
Sexual harassment	0/1	q57a and q57d_5	0.0164	0.127	75346	0.017	0.128
Female	0/1	q1	0.531	0.499	77512	0.534	0.499
Supervisory authority	0/1	q62	0.352	0.478	74884	0.338	0.473
Education	1/2/3	q7	2.268	0.847	77306	2.263	0.846
Age	1/2/3	q2_	2.279	0.724	77512	2.269	0.723
Length of service in APS	1/2/3	q5	2.682	0.551	76595	2.680	0.551
Length of service in current agency	1/2/3	q6	2.492	0.655	76467	2.491	0.654
Substantive qualification level	1/2	q4_	1.337	0.518	77367	1.303	0.459
Stability of substantive classification level	1/2	q52	1.514	0.499	75447	1.516	0.499
Type of work	1–16	q16	8.489	5.196	75100	8.501	5.201
Agency size	1/2/3	Agency_SizeV1	2.824	0.463	77512	2.828	0.459
Medical condition (reversed)	1/2	q33a	1.891	0.312	76928	1.890	0.312
Formal performance feedback (reversed)	1/2	q60a	1.171	0.377	75228	1.171	0.376
Informal performance feedback (reversed)	1/2	q60b	1.835	0.811	75242	1.835	0.810

<sup>a</sup>The survey can freely be consulted on: <https://data.gov.au/dataset/state-of-the-service-employee-census-2013>

to a lower likelihood of sexual harassment – employees with supervisory authority are 28% less likely to be sexually harassed. To examine whether women with supervisory authority are more likely to be sexually harassed, an interaction term between gender and supervisory status has been included. This proves to be highly significant, seeming to offer support for the existence of contrapower harassment. Interpreting interaction terms in a logit model is however difficult and can lead to erroneous conclusions. Therefore, and as discussed by Williams (2010), we graph the predictive margins of the probability of being sexually harassed by gender and supervisory authority.

Based on Figure 1, it is clear that the significant interaction between gender and supervisory authority offers no evidence of the existence of contrapower harassment. Females are not more likely to be sexually harassed when they have supervisory authority. However, gender does matter, but only for men. When men attain supervisory authority, the likelihood of being sexually harassed decreases significantly

( $\chi^2(1) = 6.61^{**}$ ). When women gain positions of authority, the likelihood of being sexually harassed does not significantly differ ( $\chi^2(1) = 2.19$ ). This seems to suggest that workplace authority has, at least for women, no effect on the likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment. Yet for men it appears that gender-based sociocultural power matters but can be significantly reduced by power derived from organizational positions. Intuitively this makes sense: when men become supervisors they in essence confirm the presumptive superiority of men, making them less likely to become a victim of sexual harassment.

When inspecting other variables, it is apparent that if the employee has a stable classification level, he or she is less likely to be harassed. This is in line with the existing literature (e.g. Fitzgerald et al. 1997). Moreover, the existence of a medical condition, as well as formal and informal feedback significantly affect the likelihood of sexual harassment. It is however important to note that these variables have been reversed. Hence, employees with a

**Table 2. Logit results for the likelihood of being sexually harassed**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	All ages odds ratio	Age: <30 years odds ratio	Age: 30–44 years odds ratio	Age: 45+ odds ratio
Female	1.892*** (0.151)	4.013*** (0.868)	1.509*** (0.176)	1.749*** (0.234)
Supervisory authority	0.720** (0.0920)	1.542 (0.616)	0.711* (0.128)	0.577*** (0.117)
Female*Supervisory authority	1.575*** (0.227)	0.607 (0.265)	1.755*** (0.363)	2.024*** (0.469)
Education (benchmark: year 12 or lower)				
Completed vocational education	1.407*** (0.124)	1.076 (0.234)	1.512*** (0.209)	1.456*** (0.200)
Completed tertiary education	1.306*** (0.108)	0.999 (0.185)	1.427*** (0.186)	1.365** (0.183)
Age (benchmark: age < 30 years)				
30–44 years	0.796** (0.0717)			
45+ years	0.557*** (0.0564)			
Length of service in APS (benchmark: <1 year)				
1–5 years	2.601*** (0.703)	4.843*** (2.299)	1.873* (0.681)	1.375 (1.105)
>5 years	3.386*** (0.921)	9.561*** (4.711)	1.958* (0.707)	1.659 (1.309)
Length of service in current agency (benchmark: < 1 year)				
1–5 years	1.174 (0.165)	0.995 (0.247)	1.032 (0.203)	2.022** (0.715)
>5 years	0.761* (0.109)	0.645 (0.194)	0.647** (0.130)	1.375 (0.474)
Classification level (EI)	0.920 (0.0774)	0.881 (0.236)	0.903 (0.110)	0.913 (0.122)
Stability of classification level	0.789*** (0.0579)	0.783 (0.164)	0.688*** (0.0702)	0.887 (0.110)
Agency size	1.034 (0.0686)	1.294* (0.198)	1.055 (0.102)	0.889 (0.101)
Medical condition affecting performance (reversed)	0.465*** (0.0346)	0.408*** (0.0778)	0.455*** (0.0509)	0.494*** (0.0580)
Formal individual performance feedback (reversed)	1.173** (0.0891)	1.164 (0.199)	1.254** (0.140)	1.077 (0.141)
Informal individual performance feedback (reversed)	1.282*** (0.0466)	1.102 (0.0943)	1.261*** (0.0696)	1.400*** (0.0829)
Type of work (16 categories)	Included	Included	Included	Included
Constant	0.0106*** (0.00437)	0.00280*** (0.00266)	0.0198*** (0.0113)	0.00853*** (0.00764)
Observations	70,208	11,452	28,445	30,311
McKelvey and Zavoina's R <sup>2</sup>	0.122	0.071	0.108	0.13
Joint significance Age	$\chi^2(2) = 40.23$ ***			

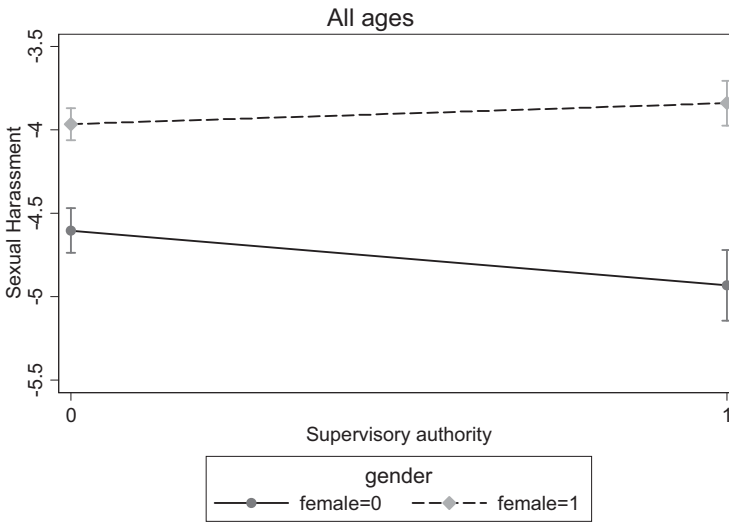
(Continued)

Table 2. Countinued

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	All ages odds ratio	Age: <30 years odds ratio	Age: 30–44 years odds ratio	Age: 45+ odds ratio
Joint significance Length of service in APS	$\chi^2(2) = 23.18^{***}$	$\chi^2(2) = 25.55^{***}$	$\chi^2(2) = 3.45$	$\chi^2(2) = 1.13$
Joint significance Length of service in agency	$\chi^2(2) = 26.38^{***}$	$\chi^2(2) = 3.86$	$\chi^2(2) = 15.51^{***}$	$\chi^2(2) = 9.32^{***}$
Joint significance Education	$\chi^2(2) = 0.98$	$\chi^2(2) = 0.22$	$\chi^2(2) = 0.71$	$\chi^2(2) = 0.46$
Joint significance Type of work	$\chi^2(15) = 78.68^{***}$	$\chi^2(15) = 25.17^{***}$	$\chi^2(15) = 38.88^{***}$	$\chi^2(15) = 41.31^{***}$

Standard errors in parentheses.  
 \*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1.

Figure 1. Visual Representation of the Predictive Margins of the Probability of Being Sexually Harassed by Gender and Supervisory Authority for All Ages.



medical condition are in fact more likely to be sexually harassed. This is again in line with the literature (Holzbauer and Berven 1996). On the contrary, formal and informal feedback reduces the probability of experiencing sexual harassment. This is to be expected; the existence of an open culture has been found to positively affect the work environment (Vijayasiri, 2008) leading to a lower likelihood of sexual harassment.

Finally, the length of service in an organization and in the APS in general, as well as the age of the respondent are significant ( $\chi^2(2) = 26.38^{***}$ ,  $\chi^2(2) = 23.18^{***}$ , and  $\chi^2(2)$

$= 40.23^{***}$ ). The longer the length of service, the greater the likelihood of sexual harassment. This can be linked to the fact that employees with a longer track record are more likely to report sexual harassment (Thorne 1993). Employees who recently join an organization are often less confident and therefore less likely to report sexual harassment.

Furthermore, the likelihood of being sexually harassed decreases with age. The literature confirms that age has an effect on sexual harassment (see for instance Ohse and Stockdale 2008). It is established that the



perception of sexual harassment is strongly shaped by age; more specifically, younger employees seem more unaware or are more accepting of sexualized behavior in the workplace, and are therefore less likely to define behavior as harassing (Reese and Lindenberg 2005). Mortimer (2003) argues that this is the result of a learning process, whereby employees learn the meaning and acceptability of various workplace interactions, including sexual harassment. Based on this, one would expect that the likelihood of being sexually harassed increases with age. Remarkably, our findings suggest the opposite.

To examine this in detail, we construct three additional models (similar to Model 1) based on the available age categories. The inclusion of the interaction term between supervisory authority and gender in these models allows one to study the effect of age on the interplay between gender and workplace authority. Although there is a lack of empirical evidence of the relationship between age and contrapower harassment, the existence is not unlikely. On the one hand, younger women with positions of authority in the workplace are expected to be more likely to experience sexual harassment compared to their older counterparts based on the power-threat model. The fact that young women hold positions of authority may be regarded as an even greater challenge to the presumptive superiority of men. On the other hand, one can expect younger women to be less experienced in dealing with and even recognizing sexual harassment. Hence, even predicting the direction of this relationship is impossible.

Model 2 includes all employees younger than 30, Model 3 includes employees between 30 and 44 years of age, and Model 4 includes employees older than 45 years of age. Across all models, women are far more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment compared to men (Model 2: 4.013\*\*\*, Model 3: 1.509\*\*\*, and Model 4: 1.749\*\*\*). These results offer slightly more detail compared to our previous findings (Model 1). Although the likelihood of being sexually harassed does not decline with age, it appears that women younger than 30 are far more likely to be sexually harassed compared to other age groups. For women older than 30,

there is a slight increase in the likelihood of sexual harassment with age. Supervisory authority appears to have a negative effect on sexual harassment for employees between the ages of 30 and 44 and for employees older than 45. Similarly, the interaction term between gender and supervisory authority is only significant for these age groups. In Figure 2, the predictive margins of the probability of being sexually harassed by gender and supervisory authority have been visualized for both age groups.

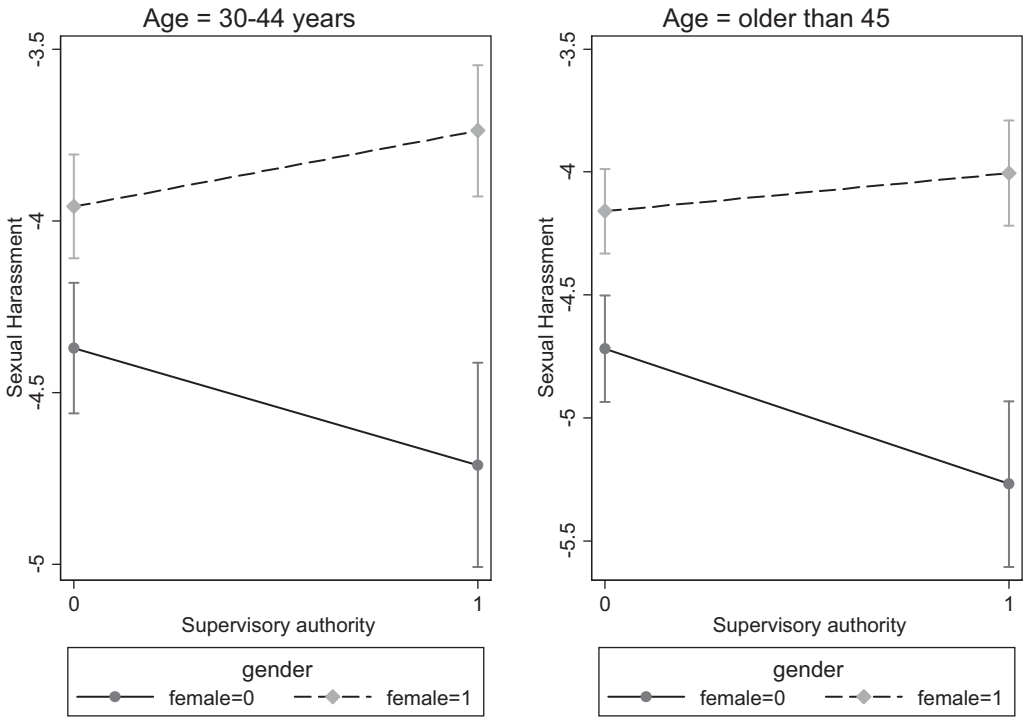
Based on the left side of Figure 2, we find support for contrapower harassment. For the age category 30–44, women with supervisory authority are more likely to be sexually harassed compared to women without supervisory authority ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.58^{**}$ ). Moreover, male supervisors are significantly less likely to be sexually harassed compared to males without positions of authority in the workplace ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.14^{**}$ ). These findings indicate that contrapower harassment exists within the APS.

However, no such effect is demonstrated when examining the right side of the Figure 2 (employees older than 45). Women of this age category are not more likely to be sexually harassed because they hold positions of authority ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.20$ ). Nonetheless, male supervisors are less likely to be sexually harassed compared to males without workplace authority ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.40^{***}$ ).

Based on these findings, it appears that age has a determining effect on the relationship between gender, workplace authority, and sexual harassment. The existence of contra-power harassment can only be confirmed for women aged 30 to 44.

When examining the remaining variables, while education appears to have no impact on the likelihood of sexual harassment (Model 2:  $\chi^2(2) = 0.22$ , Model 3:  $\chi^2(2) = 0.71$ , and Model 4:  $\chi^2(2) = 0.46$ ), the length of service seems to have such an impact. The length of service in the APS in general affects the odds of being sexually harassed for those younger than 30 years of age (Model 2:  $\chi^2(2) = 25.55^{***}$ ). Yet for the other age categories, the length of service in the APS has no effect, although the length of service in the current agency does

**Figure 2. Visual Representation of the Predictive Margins of the Probability of Being Sexually Harassed by Gender and Supervisory Authority for Different Age Groups.**



(Model 3:  $\chi^2(2) = 15.51^{***}$  & Model 4:  $\chi^2(2) = 9.32^{***}$ ). Hereby, those between 30 and 44 years of age, who have worked for more than 5 years within the agency are less likely to be sexually harassed compared to employees with other lengths of service. Within the age group older than 45, employees with a length of service of between 1 to 5 years are more likely to be sexually harassed compared to other employees.

Similar to the original model, results indicate that having a medical condition, as well as formal and informal individual performance feedback affect the likelihood of being sexually harassed.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The results indicate that the link between gender and workplace authority is not as clear-cut as expected. Gender and workplace authority proved separately to have a strong effect on the

likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment. Women are more likely to be victims while the opposite is observed for supervisors. However, results also indicate that both variables are strongly interconnected. Yet the precise working of the interplay between gender and workplace authority is complicated and strongly dependent on age. It appears that supervisory authority and gender operate differently in other phases of life. Females with supervisory authority between 30 and 44 years of age, as confirmed in the literature (e.g. McLaughlin et al. 2012), are more likely to be sexually harassed compared to their counterparts without such authority. A possible explanation for this could be the fact that as they are climbing the career ladder, they are not yet experienced in dealing with sexual harassment, while older women with supervisory authority have become more competent in dealing with potential harassers.

Yet the existence of contrapower harassment cannot be confirmed for younger or older

females. The interaction between gender and supervisory authority proved to be significant for these age groups, but it only reflected a significant decrease in the likelihood of sexual harassment for male supervisors. For female supervisors the likelihood remained more or less the same. As discussed in the previous section, it could be that males who deviate from the normative ideal of male behavior “rectify” their behavior by gaining work place authority, thereby reasserting traditional gender roles.

Overall, this article supports the literature on sexual harassment, yet offers an important nuance to previous findings: age is a significant factor. Although previous work on sexual harassment stresses the importance of age, studies on the interaction between age, gender, and power are currently missing in the literature (McLaughlin et al. 2012). Based on our findings it is clear that age is not only important for the “traditional kind” of sexual harassment, but is equally so for contrapower sexual harassment.

Although the analyses include two indicators for length of service, it would be interesting to add the length of service in a supervisory role. Following our reasoning, females that have a long history of supervisory authority should not have a higher likelihood of being sexually harassed compared to females without supervisory authority. It is however important to note that the sample used in the present study was drawn exclusively from the public sector. The Australian Government is expected to be more sensitive to issues of harassment, representation, and fairness than those of the private sector (Killingsworth, 2002). The existence of contrapower sexual harassment in our public sector sample may even be more pronounced in the private sector.

Our study makes use of cross-sectional data drawn from one single survey, which represents a weakness in our approach. This could make the results vulnerable to common method bias (CMB). It is however important to note that, apart from the dependent, the regressions do not include employee perceptions, which means that the risk of CMB is small. The issue of endogeneity in general, however, poses a greater threat to our analyses, as is the case with every

cross-sectional study. Although we attempted to reduce this risk by including a wide range of indicators in the regression analyses (e.g. formal and informal performance feedback to capture organizational culture), the threat remains that variables that have not been taken into account in the regression, simultaneously affect both the dependent variable, as well as the independent variables. Results should consequently be interpreted with care while future research must take this into account by gathering panel data.

Moreover, this article only highlights a first step of possible analyses; additional steps should aim to strengthen the conclusions. Future research can expand our model by examining and incorporating factors that are difficult to integrate in a quantitative study. Consequently, a qualitative study on this issue, encompassing multiple case studies from different organizations across several countries is not only useful to verify the findings in this article, but can expand the explanatory model used here.

Despite these caveats, this study has various important practical implications. Although formal lines of authority are established to maximize efficiency and help organizations run more smoothly, tensions surrounding gender or other forms of inequality are likely to manifest in other ways (McLaughlin et al. 2012; Roscigno 2011). More women are climbing the career ladder and breaking the glass ceiling, yet the organizational and legal responses to sexual harassment have not kept pace with this evolution. Sexual harassment is often still merely regarded as the male boss abusing his position in the workplace to harass his female secretary. The reality proves to be far more complex and it is necessary for organizational policies and training to reflect the diversity of harassment experiences. In cases of contrapower harassment, organizational policies, and more broadly, organizational culture should allow victims to come forward without undermining their own authority.

1. The *Sexual Discrimination Act* of 1975 was introduced to protect individuals from discrimination on the grounds of sex.

2. This comes from the State of the Service Report 2012–13. Further information on the survey methodology is available at: <http://www.apsc.gov.au/about-the-apsc/parliamentary/state-of-the-service/sosr-2012-13/appendix-three>.
3. The complete list of question can be consulted here: <https://data.gov.au/dataset/state-of-the-service-employee-census-2013>.
4. All models have been tested for heteroscedasticity. No problems were reported.

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**Appendix**  
**Table Correlation matrix**

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Sexual harassment	1.0000													
Female	0.0459	1.0000												
Supervisory authority	-0.0094	-0.0616	1.0000											
Education	0.0083	-0.0999	0.1143	1.0000										
Age	-0.0209	-0.0688	0.1443	-0.1428	1.0000									
Length of service (APS)	0.0067	-0.0289	0.1901	-0.1271	0.4409	1.0000								
Length of service (Agency)	-0.0057	-0.0487	0.1418	-0.1216	0.3715	0.7296	1.0000							
Classification level	-0.0113	-0.1223	0.4664	0.2808	0.1891	0.2115	0.1230	1.0000						
Stability classification level	-0.0047	0.0385	-0.0574	0.1250	-0.4208	-0.4850	-0.4436	-0.0800	1.0000					
Type of work	-0.0028	0.0384	0.0565	0.0992	-0.0442	0.0013	0.0049	0.0784	0.0078	1.0000				
Agency size	-0.0010	-0.0249	-0.0199	-0.0924	0.0661	0.1030	0.1580	-0.0631	-0.0902	0.0387	1.0000			
Medical condition	-0.0424	-0.0412	0.0545	0.0496	-0.0840	-0.0819	-0.0713	0.0389	0.0892	-0.0221	-0.0347	1.0000		
Formal feedback	0.0167	0.0310	-0.0609	-0.0740	-0.0316	-0.0441	-0.0724	-0.0766	-0.0046	-0.0177	0.0066	-0.0100	1.0000	
Informal feedback	0.0277	-0.0354	-0.0668	-0.0458	0.0584	0.0349	0.0294	-0.0499	-0.0644	-0.0542	0.0053	-0.0241	0.2658	1.0000