

# What We Know:

An Evidence Review of What We Know About  
Sexual Harassment and Dating Violence



Art by Jasu Hu

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## Framing the Conversation

The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have called unprecedented attention to sexual harassment and assault: its prevalence, consequences, and inequities in the workplace in general.

**What the national dialogue is currently lacking, however, is a proactive discussion on ways to engage young and adult men in ending sexual harassment beyond the typical one-off discussion, lecture, speech, or short training.** Furthermore, sexual harassment is often addressed in isolation rather than in the context of pervasive, underlying, and persistent gender inequalities in the United States (U.S.). This includes widespread inequalities in schools, at home, and in the workplace.

**What needs to be done? What drives sexual harassment, and what does the evidence tell us about how to prevent it?** In the well-intentioned pursuit to end sexual harassment and violence, we need to keep the focus on what works, what evidence we have to support these approaches, and what we can do to scale those up. This briefing provides a summary of key data on the causes and responses surrounding sexual harassment as well as dating violence (where most of the evidence on prevalence – as well as what works – exists), paying particular attention to factors that drive perpetration of sexual harassment and to preventative measures practitioners and researchers have developed to prevent further victimization. We also pinpoint a number of gaps in research and programmatic approaches. This review should be considered a brisk scan of the vast amount of research on sexual harassment, focusing on recurring themes observed across literature in the past ten to fifteen years.

## The Extent and Drivers of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault

**Sexual harassment and sexual assault are, unfortunately, ubiquitous in the U.S: most women and many men have experienced some form of sexual harassment, sexual coercion, or dating violence in their lives.** Polls have shown that 32 percent of all Americans say that they have been sexually assaulted at some point in life, and one-fifth of all Americans have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Lee, 2017; Rubin, 2017). A 2016 national survey from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) found that one in every four women have experienced direct sexual harassment in the workplace, and 60 percent of women report experiencing some form of unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).

**A review of existing research confirms that there are multiple and overlapping drivers of sexual harassment.** They include: 1) inequitable gender norms that encourage sexual harassment and men's domination; 2) context-specific factors, such as specific norms in a fraternity, given workplace, peer group, or sports team; 3) reactionary or backlash harassment by men (e.g. reacting to women's new leadership, new roles); and 4) power imbalances

between individuals or groups of individuals, particularly related to men's power over women. Given these drivers, sexual harassment can exist as an ongoing chronic behavior for an individual, a one-off event, and/or as a learned response from peers in a new group or office dynamics.

**Though the majority of men do not harass, bully, or approve of violence, many – 20 percent to 33 percent – do** (Heilman, Barker, & Harrison, 2017). Young men who hold the strongest belief in harmful masculine norms such as hypersexuality, homophobia, and aggression, are nearly **10 times as likely to have harassed** as men who least believe in these norms (Heilman et al., 2017). Drawing inspiration from a concept originally developed by Paul Kivel and the Oakland Men's Project, we called these attitudes "the Man Box," referring to seven categories of restrictive norms about what "real men" should be in the U.S. As listed in the figure below, these categories include:

1. Self-sufficiency;
2. Acting tough;
3. Physical attractiveness;
4. Rigid masculine gender norms;
5. Heterosexuality and homophobia;
6. Hypersexuality; and
7. Aggression and control.

This same study found that even when controlling for age, income, and education, the likelihood of harassing for men who held those strong beliefs remained the same. These seven "pillars" of traditional manhood are shown on the following page.

# Measuring the Man Box



1

## Self-Sufficiency

A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect

Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help

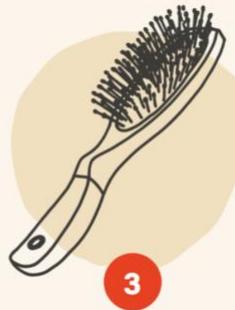


2

## Acting Tough

A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak

Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside



3

## Physical Attractiveness

It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good

Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin

A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly



4

## Rigid Masculine Gender Roles

It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, and take care of younger children

A husband shouldn't have to do household chores

Men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women



5

## Heterosexuality and Homophobia

A gay guy is not a "real man"  
Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement)



6

## Hypersexuality

A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can  
A "real man" would never say no to sex



7

## Aggression and Control

Men should use violence to get respect, if necessary  
A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage  
If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time

Other research (Quick & McFadyen, 2017) found that although there is a noticeable gap in empirical research and data on the specific characteristics of individual harassers, what is

understood is that their **harassment is a form of abusing power**, not of clumsy seduction by men as is commonly portrayed in popular media.

**Sexual harassment in the workplace is both a function of organizational climate and gender-related power imbalances, as well as prevalent hierarchal social norms.** Sexual harassment is not some anomaly of men's behavior but is rather part of systemic issues in the workplace of patriarchal dominance and abuse of power rampant across most professional fields (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013). Given these structures, women are disproportionately at the receiving end of these imbalanced power dynamics time and time again. This gendering in the workplace is also reflected in sex-based disparities in pay, roles and responsibilities, advancement opportunities, and the sex segregation of jobs. These broad-reaching gender inequalities in power and professional mobility set the premise for sexual harassment in professional settings (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013).

**There is also evidence that some sexual harassment is a result of some men's backlash toward women's empowerment and increasing equality in the workplace.** When women reach positions of power, some men choose to harass through "masculine overcompensation," whereby men act in extreme shows of masculinity (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012). These men may feel their power and authority being challenged and react by engaging in inappropriate, harassing, and dominating behavior with the goal of making the other individual feel uncomfortable and inferior.

For college-age populations, sexual harassment and sexual violence in particular are highly prevalent and have specific drivers. Within the 18-24 year old age group, 20–25 percent of female undergraduate students and 30 percent of female non-students report experiencing attempted or completed rape during this time period (Sinozich & Langston, 2014; Vladutiu, Martin, & Macy, 2011). Social norms of binge drinking and drug use during this period of social development, coupled with a necessity for peer acknowledgement through displays of mimicked behavior, among other factors, can snowball into what some have called rape culture (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011). As in the case of sexual harassment, the research on the drivers of sexual assault and dating violence on college campuses affirm **sexual assault is not the problem of a few individual men, but rather is part of the social cultures at schools, universities, and workplaces.**

**Research also affirms how understanding sexual assault on campus is as much about the social setting as it is about the individual.** Research affirms that experiences and decisions made at the college-age level are informed by interactions and observation of their surrounding social settings. During this time period, students are looking for closeness, belonging, and connection, and thus seek such social support from peers (Franklin, Bouffard, & Pratt, 2012). Some researchers (Franklin et al., 2012) posit that support systems like these become problematic when those same peers hold adverse beliefs about women and heterosexual relationships. This can reinforce or influence young men to think that interacting with women in abusive ways is socially appropriate according to group norms. Research also shows a strong

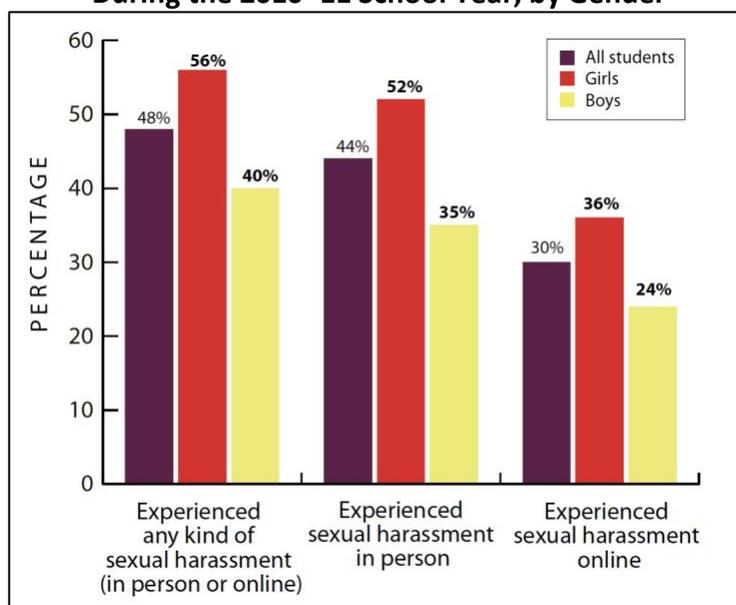
relationship between trait aggression and physical assault in males who reported high hostility towards women (Parrott & Zeichner, 2003).

The normalization of sexual aggression and misogynistic attitudes are interwoven drivers of sexual harassment and assault. Certain groups with special privileges such as social exclusivity and/or physical skills can become breeding grounds for hyper-masculinity. Research shows that male athletic teams and fraternities, for example, tend to carry a stronger adherence to hyper-masculine social norms which are a driver of sexual aggression (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007).

**At the middle school and high school levels, sexual harassment – and the ways it overlaps with bullying – is recognized as a critical issue.** During a period so fundamental and fragile to development, where youth begin to establish their sense of individuality and sexuality, sexual harassment by peers can be traumatic. An American Association of University Women study found that 32 percent of harassed students said they did not want to go to school as a result of the sexual harassment, including 37 percent of girls and 25 percent of boys (Hill & Kearl, 2011).

**Harassment in the form of gendered violence may be normalized both by the students who are the victims of it, as well as those taking part in the harassment.** Students may trivialize the experience, for example stating that “they were just joking” or that “this happens all the time” (Hlavka, 2014). Students can begin to experience some form of sexual harassment as early as the sixth or seventh grade, and studies have shown that 40-50 percent of middle school and high school students can experience some form sexual harassment in a single school year, as shown in the table below. (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Taylor, Stein, & Burden, 2010). Bullying perpetration in middle school has also been shown to be a partial predictor of sexual harassment and violence perpetration in high school for both boys and girls (Espelage, Low, & Anderson, 2016).

**Students Who Experienced Sexual Harassment During the 2010–11 School Year, by Gender**



(Hill & Kearl, 2011)

**Many middle school students who report sexually harassing others say that such behavior “isn’t a big deal,” and that they were mainly trying to do it to be funny (Hill & Kearl, 2011).** However, such harassment and bullying is often used as a way to punish those who are not perceived as possessing the socially desirable traits of manhood. For example, male students who are not athletic or do not perceive themselves as typically masculine are more likely to be sexually harassed than other male youth (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Peer group attitudes about masculinity which value dominance, assertiveness, and lack of emotion in middle schools have been shown to be significantly predictive of homophobic bullying perpetration and name calling (Birkett & Espelage, 2015).

**In sum, the drivers of sexual harassment are deeper, more systemic, and structural than simply a few powerful men abusing privilege. The interactions between power inequalities, gender norms, peer groups, and institutions that uphold and reinforce inequalities drive young and adult men’s harassment. This means that our prevention and responses should be designed to challenge social norms and the structures which uphold them.**

## What Works? Responses to and Preventative Interventions for Ending Sexual Harassment

### In the Workplace:

A growing body of research shows that preventing sexual harassment in the workplace requires much more than a one-off approach, such as a one-time lecture or presentation. Indeed, the research affirms the need for approaches that work across sectors to engage all observers, potential perpetrators, and those most likely to be harassed in preventative programming with a focus on increasing awareness and recognition of harassment in an organization. These can vary from policy-based to bystander interventions; the most effective interventions often include several of these approaches. **A key component needed at this this level of intervention, regardless of implementation strategy, is risk assessment and/or formative research mapping to chart out the antecedents for harassment in a given workplace** (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2010).

The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s recent special report from their select task force on sexual harassment provides **five core principles that employers should uphold to prevent and mitigate sexual harassment in the workplace**: 1) committed and engaged leadership; 2) consistent and demonstrated accountability; 3) strong and comprehensive harassment policies; 4) trusted and accessible complaint procedures; and 5) regular, interactive training tailored to the audience and the organization (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).

It should be noted, though, that the recommended principles do not address systemic, patriarchal issues around gender and power imbalances, nor does it address some of the

complications that can come with organizational, policy-level measures. One such form of complication can be the oppositional goals of workplace management – searching for a solution to an incident to protect the image of the organization, both outward-facing and internally to its employees – versus the victim who is most likely looking for some sort of retribution and closure (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Workplace approaches should be focused on responding intentionally and empathically to any claims of harassment, and on establishing parameters that deter future harassment, vested in the safety and well-being of all employees.

### On Campus:

**As with workplace sexual harassment programs, research has found that prevention programs for college-based sexual violence tend to be more effective if they are comprehensive and address the root drivers rather than simply being one-off events.**

Specifically, effective sexual violence prevention on campuses seems to be those that are: 1) offered at various times throughout the students' collegiate career, not just as freshmen; 2) workshop-based or offered as classroom courses with multiple frequent and long sessions; and 3) include themes such as gender-role socialization, rape myths and rape attitudes, rape avoidance, men's motivation to rape, victim empathy, and dating communication (Vladutiu et al., 2011). Bystander intervention programs for faculty, students, and even employees of surrounding social venues, such as bartenders, have also shown effectiveness in the prevention or interruption of harassment.

**The focus of these kinds of programs are on changing the social norms that serve as barriers to bystander intervention and that drive violence in the first place.** Such programs that directly tackle rape myths and drivers of sexual violence have shown promising results in reducing its acceptance among men (Powers & Leili, 2017). However, one limitation with this approach is that implementation can at times lack the social justice and feminist foundations of the bystander approach. Recent adaptations of bystander approach, according to its co-creator, Jackson Katz, “reflect a nightclub bouncer ‘if you see something, say something’ model” – focusing on how to intervene at the point of attack rather than address the origin of the problem. In short, bystander intervention models must include a critical reflection on the gender norms that underlie abusive behaviors rather than only focus on the specific incidents of violence (“Men & The #MeToo Movement: How can We Move From Silence to Solidarity,” 2018). These are what Promundo and Katz call “gender-transformative approaches,” in that they seek not only to end violent behavior but to address the harmful gender norms and gender power inequalities that drive violence as well.

### With Adolescents in High Schools and Middle Schools:

Preventative interventions for sexual harassment and violence at the middle school and high school levels are essential for youth development and well-being, given how this formative stage of socialization shapes many of the social norms carried into adulthood. Many middle schools bring in sexual assault or domestic violence educators to implement preventative programming or utilize trainings that incorporate conflict resolution and anger management

techniques, but ignore the gendered nature of violence and harassment (Taylor et al., 2008). Much like in the college setting, programs with multiple sessions that also highlight attitudes or behaviors that promulgate sexual harassment and violence are very effective when working with teens. One example is the program *Safe Dates*, where students complete a 10-session curriculum involving role playing, conflict resolution, and positive communication. Participants in the program reported between 56 and 92 percent less perpetration and victimization, respectively (Niolon et al., 2017). *Shifting Boundaries* is another strong programmatic example of building-based program, where “hotspots,” or areas in the school where students felt most unsafe or likely to be harassed were flagged for school staff to promote safety. Temporary building-based restraining orders for students at risk for teen dating violence were also introduced in this program. New York middle schools utilizing the program saw a 50 percent drop in sexual violence victimization in dating relationships (Niolon et al., 2017).

Those programs are examples of rigorously reviewed and validated interventions. However, programs that address violence and harassment through a gendered lens with middle school and high school students – and data on their effectiveness of addressing these issues – are sparse at best. Promundo’s Manhood 2.0 group education initiative is currently being evaluated by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as a promising practice in sexual assault prevention. Manhood 2.0 is based on Promundo’s Program H approach, which has been used in more than 34 settings globally and has been found to change attitudes related to harmful masculinities and to reduce violence by young men in multiple impact evaluations, from Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia and Europe. This gender-transformative intervention program, Manhood 2.0, tackles both the data and gender-focused programming gaps in interventions (Niolon et al., 2017). That being said, there are not yet enough programs like Manhood 2.0 being implemented domestically to shift the tide in approach. A longitudinal study found that **programs that focused specifically on gendered violence and harassment (GV/H) were significantly more effective in deterring the perpetration of violence, both sexual and non-sexual, than programs that did not have that GV/H focus** (Taylor et al., 2008).

**Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) has also been a promising entry point to shape young people's attitudes, knowledge, and practices around healthy relationships, coercion, harassment.** Theoretical models posit CSE programs which are grounded in addressing both gender and power can have a profound effect on their participants (Haberland, 2015). Indeed, what data there is on the results of these types of programs back that up. CSE programs which emphasize gender and power have been shown to be effective for both behavioral change and in affecting sexual and reproductive health outcomes (reduction in STI’s, pregnancy rates, etc.)(Haberland & Rogow, 2015). Much like in the workplace setting, programs that utilize risk assessment mapping, even more so when that mapping includes where and when harassment might occur in or around the school site, have also been shown to be effective (Hill & Kearl, 2011).

## Conclusion: Where To Go From Here?

While there are tools and resources in place to respond to sexual harassment and violence, the methodologies most commonly used have not necessarily been proven to be the most effective. Programmatic interventions that are not responsive to the role that social media and digital communication plays in perpetration of sexual harassment can only hope to, at best, lessen the overt cases of harassment where there is a fear of being seen. Preventative programs that do not acknowledge the role of patriarchal and hegemonic social norms, gendered imbalances of power, and positive peer reinforcement of hyper-masculine behavior such as aggression will only be able to respond to surface-level issues, not the inequitable underlying constructs that make up the foundation of this behavior. **Whether in schools, workplaces, college campuses or other community spaces, research affirms that engaging men and boys through gender-transformative approaches and comprehensive, longer-term interventions work far better than one-off, punitive, gender-blind, or short-term interventions.**

The encouraging news is that there are programs, with evidence to back them up, that have been shown to change young men's harmful views about manhood, and to reduce sexual harassment and other forms of violence. Other programs using similar methodologies around the world have also shown evidence, in rigorous impact evaluations, of reducing young men's violence. The lessons learned in such programs are:

1. Start early, engaging youth in reflection and discussion about respect and equality in schools and after-school programs.
2. Reach children and adolescents where they are, whether at home or at school, online, in sports programs, and beyond.
3. Directly discuss "what it means to be a man," using critical conversations about gender norms to show how young men can shape their definition of masculinity around respect, care, generosity, and rejection of violence, rather than the harmful alternatives.
4. Listen to women and include their voices at all levels of programming and outreach. Elevate the voices of women of color, disabled women, immigrant women, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual women, and nonbinary individuals – who may be disproportionately affected by violence.
5. Involve caregivers, particularly fathers and other male caregivers, in teaching and modeling equality, respect, and nonviolence at home.
6. Work alongside and follow the lead of women's rights activists.
7. Target all men: sexual harassment and assault is pervasive across men's ages and backgrounds.
8. Work with celebrities and key gatekeepers (such as religious leaders) as visible role models for positive behavior.
9. Implement bystander approaches, teaching young men to speak out in nonviolent ways when they see the abusive behavior of their peers.

Further qualitative and quantitative research is needed for sexual harassment and violence in all settings and for all methods. This gap in data handicaps institutions and organizations when making decisions for how to best address these issues, and at what scale. **Recognition that this is a gender-based issue first and foremost will be invaluable to the evolution of preventative intervention programming** with the aim of creating and preserving safe workplaces, universities, high schools, and middle schools for everyone. A better understanding of why someone harasses, what those key factors are that lead to the perpetration of this behavior, is also an area requiring more attention and research.

## Additional Resources:

[A Call to Men](#)

[Mentors in Violence Prevention \(MVP\) Strategies](#)

[Men Can Stop Rape](#)

[The Representation Project](#)

[Futures Without Violence](#)

[White Ribbon Canada](#)

[MERGE for Equality](#)

[Next Gen Men](#)

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