

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR DEALING ASSERTIVELY WITH SEXUAL HARASSMENT

A Survey of Students and Alumni of the
Business Schools in the Global Network
for Advanced Management



GLOBAL NETWORK FOR
ADVANCED MANAGEMENT

“Our strongest finding is that a reputation for tolerance of sexual harassment translates into a substantial recruitment and financial liability for would-be employers.”

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OVERVIEW

The #MeToo movement has put a glaring spotlight on sexual harassment in the workplace. Scholarly research has found that many women face debilitating mistreatment at some point in their career.¹ At the same time, the strength of the #MeToo movement has prompted a few prominent observers to caution against disproportionate responses to bad behavior.² If spokespeople of the #MeToo backlash are right, many people in today’s workforce may feel that “excessive and dangerous” attention to sexual harassment puts workplace harmony at risk. If this is true, they would perhaps prefer work environments that seek to downplay these issues.

We find a starkly different reality than the specter of rampant and unfair overreaction against harassers raised by some observers, including Harvard Law School professor Cass Sunstein (2019). Our recent survey, in which we asked students and alumni from the 30 Global Network for Advanced Management business schools with workplace experience in 84 countries about desirable workplace conditions, shows definitively that the battle against workplace harassment is not yet won; and that victims, not perpetrators, remain the principal concern. The business school students and alumni who we surveyed offer a conservative basis for interpretation, because their elite education and relatively high economic and social stature are likely to give them higher-than-average levels of empowerment with which to confront their harassers and the latitude to leave unpleasant working environments. As a result, their experiences of sexual harassment may be on the low side. On the other hand, senior women in male dominated industries may be more exposed to harassment than women lower on the totem pole who pose less of a psychological threat (Folke, Rickne, Tanaka, and Tateishi 2020).

Please see *Appendix 1* for the breakdown by sex and type of experiences our respondents reported in the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire. When asked about their experiences in the past twelve months, 12.6 percent of the women who responded reported unwanted sexual

attention or touching in the workplace, and 18.4 percent told of sexually hostile behaviors including whistling or sexually offensive jokes or comments. Over a third (34.7 percent) of the women said that they felt they were treated differently because they were women; 22.1 percent specified that they suffered from condescending behavior and comments. Given that these reported experiences were limited to the past twelve months, it can only be imagined what larger percentage of women would encounter some of these experiences over the span of their careers.

Contrary to fears that sexual abuse is over-reported, victims the world over in fact vastly under-report episodes of harassment for fear that their employers will trivialize their complaints or retaliate against them for disrupting the “harmony” of the workplace.³ This means that, even if some of reported abuse turns out to be baseless or over-dramatized, the actual percent of false accusations are likely to be extremely small. In the U.S., for example, false reports are estimated to be between 0.002% and 0.008% of all sexual assault cases, once adjusting for the large (estimated) denominator of unreported harassment.⁴ The same is true of Global Network respondents: as we detail below, fewer than 10% of those who said they experienced sexual or sexist misconduct in the past twelve months actually reported this misconduct to any entity inside or outside the firm. (See Research Finding #2) For women in business schools or in the workplace, this is a discouraging number indeed.

Finally, our findings point to a clear business case for dealing with sexual misconduct. Not only do women continue to feel vulnerable to various kinds of sexual misconduct; a reputation for lax attention to sexual harassment at the workplace comes at a substantial and measurable cost to firms seeking to hire talented workers. By means of an experimental design, we found that women on average were 43% more likely to choose a job with a firm that suspended a sexual harasser compared to one that took no action. This is a substantial figure, amounting to a real economic recruitment cost to employers who do not establish a reputation for swift and strong responsiveness to assault claims. Ignoring sexual misconduct is a poor business decision.

RESEARCH DESIGN

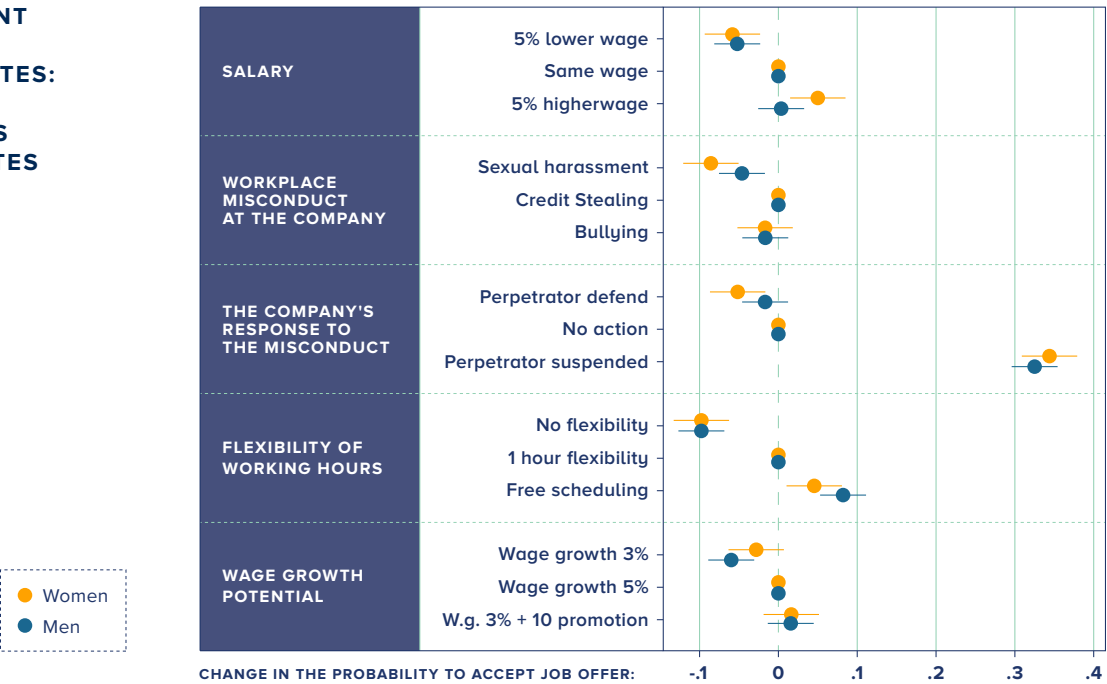
We designed a workplace survey to understand what kinds of workplace attributes are most highly valued and by whom (men and women). To direct respondents’ attention away from our interest in sexual misconduct so as not to invite “socially desirable” answers that sound tougher against sexual misconduct than they may actually believe, we used an experimental strategy. We asked respondents to choose between two hypothetical workplace options with randomly scrambled attributes: wage premium, three kinds of workplace misconduct (bullying, credit-stealing, and sexual harassment), and varying levels of firm response to the misconduct (no response, harasser suspended, and harasser defended). We also asked about flexibility in workplace hours, and prospects for wage growth to give scenarios additional nuance and texture.⁵ We chose these features of the workplace in particular, because they are often seen to be the most important dimensions of the job search for professional, highly educated people like our respondents (see Wiswall and Zafar 2018, for a similar approach).

We analyzed responses from 2,729 Global Network students and alumni; and because each respondent chose one of a pair of workplace options three times, each with randomly generated values on each attribute of interest, we could work with a larger sample size than the number of respondents alone.

The figure below shows, for those who are familiar with conjoint experiments, the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) for each workplace attribute, by gender of respondent. Please see *Appendix 2* for the specific questions asked of the respondents.

The results of the conjoint experiment are striking: both women and men place high value on swift attention to issues in the work environment. Women put the largest weight on punitive responses to sexual harassment, whereas punishing bullying is the most important for men.

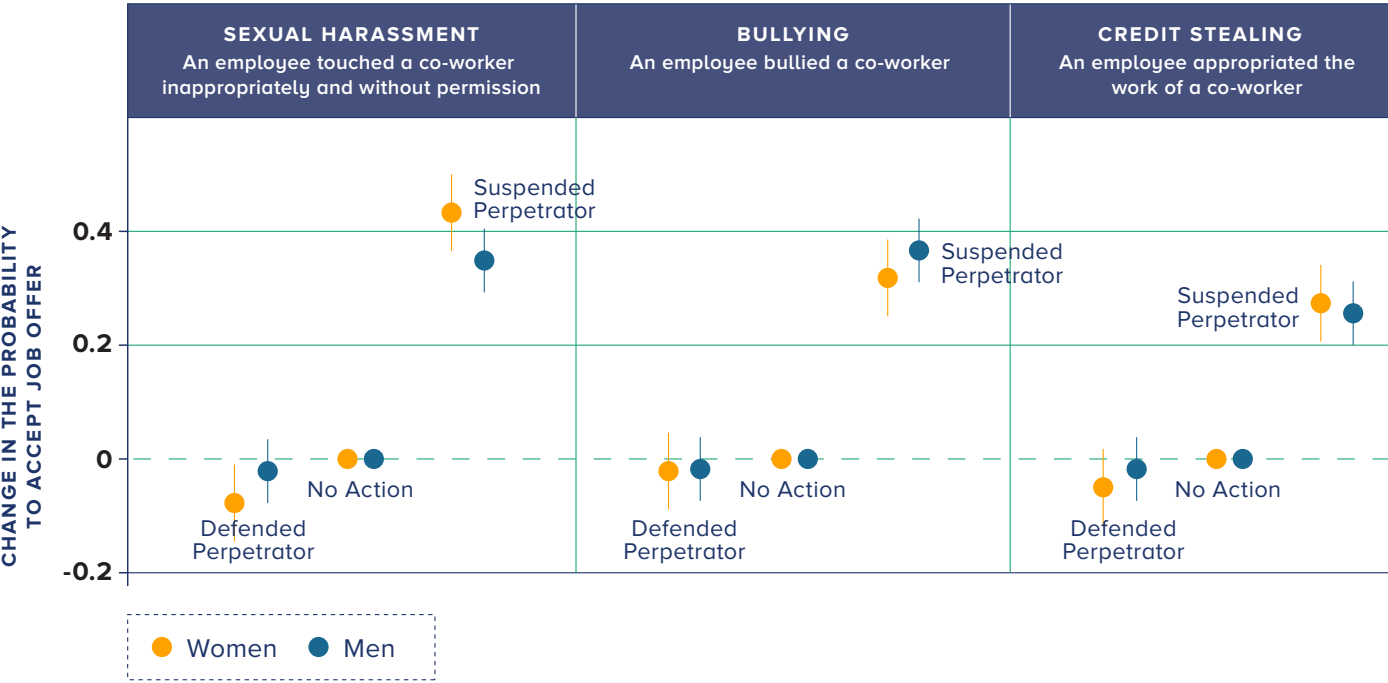
CONJOINT EXPERIMENT OF DESIRABLE WORKPLACE ATTRIBUTES: AVERAGE MARGINAL COMPONENT EFFECTS (AMCES) OF ATTRIBUTES BY GENDER



Another finding from this survey, which underpins the business case for a zero-tolerance attitude towards sexual harassment, is the negative value that women place on workplaces with harassment relative to other types of negative work environments. Notwithstanding much public attention on flexible hours, respondents cared even more about the handling of sexual harassment than about choice of working hours. As we state in more detail below, women with children placed somewhat more value on flexibility than women without children, as we would expect from the typically uneven burden of family work within heterosexual married couples; but both married and unmarried women placed a greater value on punishing perpetrators of sexual harassment than on *any other attribute of the workplace*.

Because the conjoint experiment’s Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE) with interaction terms for different types of harassment are complicated to interpret, we split the sample to find the AMCE for the responses to each type of workplace problem. That analysis, which we offer below, suggests that women care more about the swift punishment of sexual miscreants than of bullies while men feel more strongly about suspending bullies. Credit stealing is universally reviled, but with less intensity.

HOW RESPONSES TO THREE TYPES OF WORKPLACE MISCONDUCT AFFECT RECRUITMENT



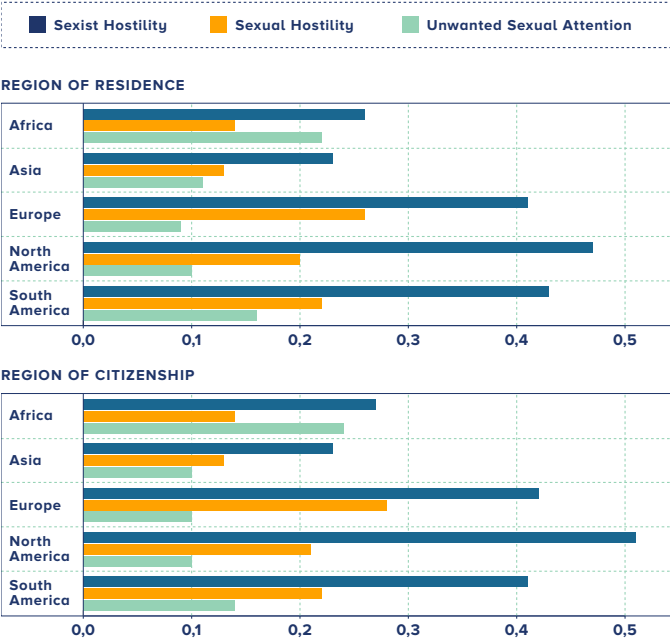
FINDING #1
Sexual harassment remains prevalent in the global business community, even among the business elite

It is easy to imagine, and many people concede, that young women in weak career positions are highly vulnerable to sexual predation. The first women to launch the #MeToo movement were young actors seeking to break into the extraordinarily competitive world of super stardom, which is controlled by male directors and producers. Women with advanced business degrees might, one would imagine, have more force within a firm. On the other hand, business is a male-dominated field, which by its very nature exposes women to more harassment. Women may also face more harassment when they take jobs that are stereotypically held by men, and when they climb organizational hierarchies.⁶

Our modified version of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ), which follows the scholarly protocol of detailing specific kinds of harassment, revealed that our respondents are not immune to many of the same dangers that confront women in the entertainment world that first came to light in the #MeToo movement. Among the 2,642 respondents who have held a job in the last 12 months, 42% of women and 15% of men self-reported some form of sexual harassment or gender discrimination in the past twelve months. Even if we exclude complaints about sexism or misogyny, over a third of the women reported *sexual* harassment from a workplace manager or colleague *in the past twelve months*. This is a stunning and troublingly large number.

Our data are not sufficient to allow a country-by-country breakdown, suggesting the importance of additional country-specific examination in future research. When we break down our respondents’ self-reported experiences with harassment by their region of residence or citizenship, as we report in *Appendix 3*, women in Europe, North America, and South America are considerably more likely to report personal experiences of sexist and sexual misconduct than women in Africa and Asia. Women in Africa and South America were more likely to report unwanted sexual attention.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY REGIONS



Women in Europe, North America, and South America are considerably more likely to report personal experiences of sexist and sexual misconduct than women in Africa and Asia.

A word of caution is due here: although we followed the scholarly protocol of asking very specific questions and promising anonymity in order to gain more truthful answers, women in societies without a strong culture opposing sexist and sexual misconduct may not think of their experiences in the same way as women in countries with a deeper feminist tradition. The fact that European and North American citizens are even more likely than European and North American residents to report sexist hostility seems to support this interpretation. As a result, countries and regions with the highest levels of *reported* sexist and sexual misconduct may not be the countries and regions with the greatest problem, in fact.

FINDING #2

Most agree that victims should be trusted, but victims still fail to report

An overwhelming majority of our survey respondents believed that reports of sexual harassment in the workplace should be trusted. More than eight in ten respondents leaned towards trusting rather than distrusting reports. The inclination to trust alleged misconduct were similar for men (86%) and women (83%) who took the survey, and there were no notable differences across regions of the world. A significant percentage of respondents, 16%, said that reports should “always” be trusted, which adds strength to the case for establishing reliable procedures.

Among the Global Network respondents who said they experienced sexual harassment or gender discrimination in the last 12 months, fewer than one in ten victims formally reported the incident(s) inside or outside their workplaces. This is consistent with the scholarly research we referenced at the outset about prevalence of under-reporting. Of our respondents who said they experienced misconduct, only 5%, consulted their boss, their Human Resources Department, or other units specializing in sexual harassment issues inside the firm. Reporting to outside entities was even rarer. A miniscule 0.7% consulted with the police, a lawyer, an official in their municipal government, or a specialist in a non-profit organization; and even fewer (0.25%) consulted with a labor union or the national government’s labor bureau. These baleful figures lend credence to the scholarly literature’s conclusion that reporting remains low.



The inclination to trust alleged misconduct were similar for men (86%) and women (83%) who took the survey, and there were no notable differences across regions of the world.

FINDING #3

Tolerance of sexual harassment hurts recruitment

78% women and 55% men agree that “the existence of a culture of sexual harassment at a workplace is a factor when you look for a job.”



Organizational tolerance of sexual misconduct is, by common recognition, a principal factor contributing to chronic and persistent workplace harassment. Workplaces fail in their responsibilities to employees when they fail to take a report of sexual harassment seriously, defend the perpetrator, and most egregiously when they retaliate against the victim or allow other employers to ostracize the victim. Workers expect that employees will and should believe the victim and discipline the perpetrator.

As we described in our section on research design and the conjoint survey experiment, we measured the attractiveness of a workplace depending on how an employer is perceived to have handled incidents of sexual harassment. Compared to taking no action at all, defending the perpetrator reduced a firm’s attractiveness to new employees by 8 percentage points among women and 2 percentage points among men. Suspending the perpetrator, in contrast, increased the attractiveness of the workplace by 43 percentage points among women and 35 percentage points among men. These are numbers that employers could, as it were, take to the bank upon addressing harassment problems in their workplaces.

Our respondents’ preferences for a workplace that chastised the perpetrator –with suspension from work– can be put in perspective by comparing these numbers to valuations of jobs with different degrees of schedule flexibility. For men, a fully flexible schedule made a job 18 percentage points more attractive compared to a job with an entirely inflexible schedule. This rate was the same for men with or without children. For women, a flexible schedule made the job 22 percentage points more attractive for women with children, and 14 percentage points more attractive for women without children.

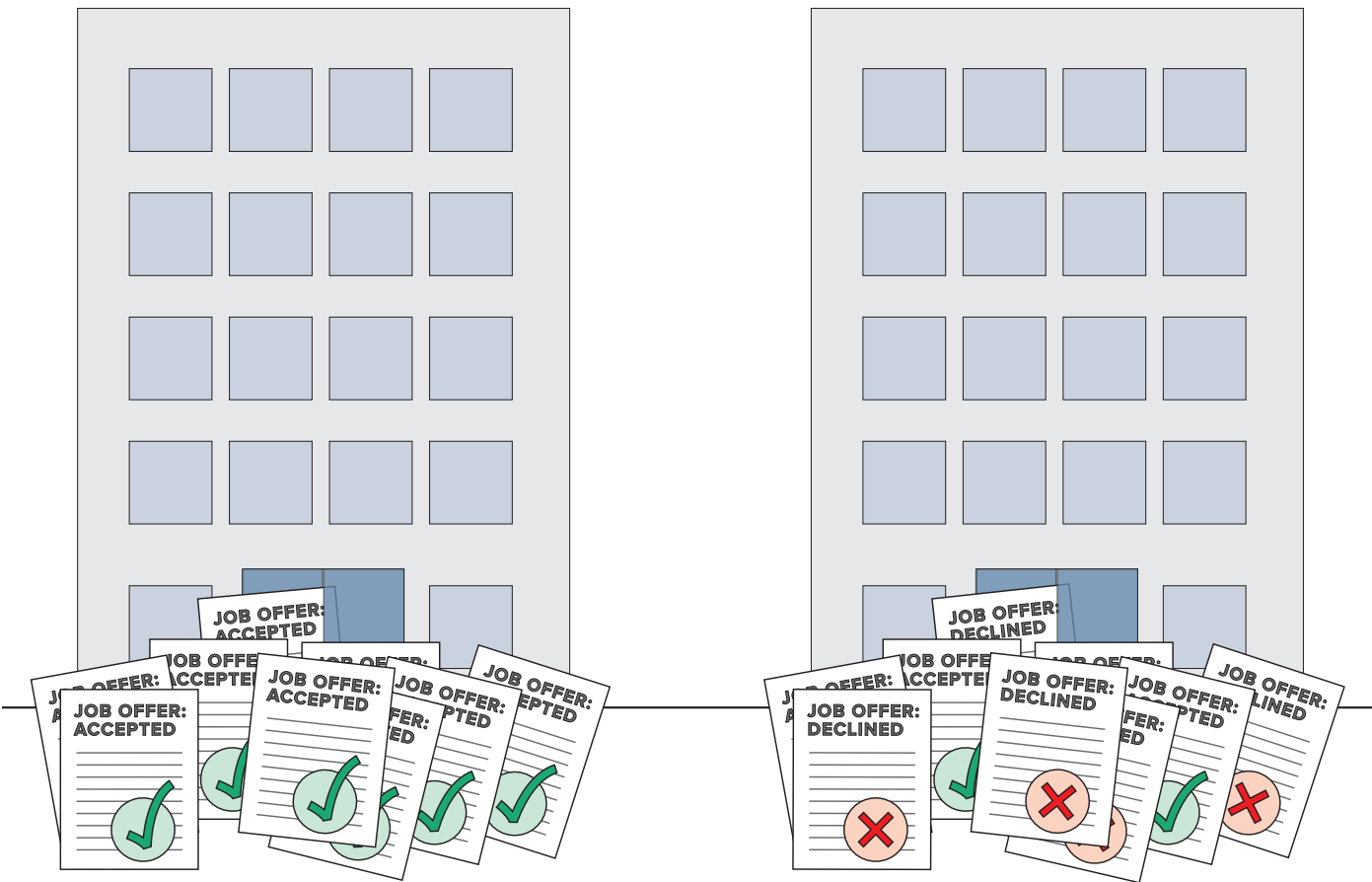
We found measurable evidence that women employees avoid firms that defend perpetrators of sexual harassment, and that they favor workplaces that suspend perpetrators. Men held similar views, if less intensely.

About two thirds of our survey respondents agree that “the existence of a culture of sexual harassment at a workplace is a factor when you look for a job.” The frequency of this response was slightly higher among full-time students (67%) than among currently employed students and alumni (62%), and higher among women (78%) than among men (55%). Across regions of the world, African women and men were least likely to consider sexual harassment, and Asian and North American men and women were most likely to do so. Note, however, that our caveat above applies here: women may internalize the culture of tolerance to harassment that surrounds them. We therefore take regional differences with caution.

FINDING #4

Sexual harassment is more repellent to job seekers than other forms of workplace mistreatment

We return to our strongest finding, that a reputation for tolerance of sexual harassment translates into a substantial recruitment and financial liability for would-be employers. To be sure, respondents also care about how firms handle bullying and credit stealing. Respondents were the least concerned about credit stealing, perhaps because there are a variety of ways to avoid or combat the problem. Women cared the most, by a large margin, about how firms handle sexual harassment.



CONCLUSIONS: THE BUSINESS CASE FOR PREVENTING HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is a serious and prevalent cause of workplace distress. Our study adds to the many other studies that show that harassment isolates victims and hurts the productivity of the work group: Victims tend to leave their jobs, taking with them the firm’s investments in their human capital. Employers that can signal their commitment to worker well-being in this way enjoy the benefits of lower turnover and higher total productivity (EEOC 2016).⁷

Our survey captures a different business cost of sexual misconduct: a recruitment cost on the failure to deal with sexual harassment decisively. Our survey of thousands of students and alumni of Global Network for Advanced Management business schools, based on a method known to capture real-life preferences (Mas and Pallais 2016, Basit and Zafar 2017, He et al. 2019), suggests that firm and prompt action against sexual harassment improves the likelihood and lowers the costs of a firm’s recruitment and retention efforts.

In most countries, sexual harassment is prohibited by law and the employer has a legal responsibility to stop it. In practice, many employers trivialize reports of sexual harassment or marginalize the victim (Bergman et al. 2002, Cortina and Magley 2003). We have uncovered and reported overwhelming evidence of the costliness of minimizing reports of sexual assault: Prospective employees shun employers that fail to discipline harassers, and accept lower paying jobs rather than work in such firms. The reputation of being a positive working environment is valuable, hard-earned, and easily squandered.⁸ The costs of establishing effective procedures and personnel to handle harassment claims are, it would appear, well worth paying.

In addition to establishing procedures for handling claims of sexual harassment, it is worth considering briefly what companies should do to minimize workplace sexual misconduct in the first place, given its obvious costs. The fact that such a small percentage of victims are willing to report suggests that they do not expect to be taken seriously—by their employers, by their co-workers, or both.

Scholars recommend, and over a third of our respondents agree, that it is important to establish grievance procedures inside the firm to ensure swift and respectful investigation (Please see *Appendix 5*). The second most important measure, according to research undertaken by sociologists Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev (2019) and corroborated by Global Network respondents in this survey, is to hire more women managers who are more likely to take sexual misconduct seriously.

It is not enough to “train” staff to be more sensitive to sexual harassment; in fact, employees who are required to attend training sessions sometimes feel more negatively towards victims who report harassment after the training than before, as Dobbin and Kalev (2019) show.

Employee backlash against prompt and successful handling of sexual harassment is not, and should not, be inevitable. Global competitiveness in talent recruitment requires getting this right.

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ENDNOTES

1 For a recent survey, see Fitzgerald & Cortina (2018).

2 Reacting to #MeToo and other grievance movements, Sunstein (2019) asserts that a human propensity to rash and disproportionate punishments of alleged wrong doers produces “lapidation”: public stoning of the accused before due process. He labels as “lapidation entrepreneurs” people and organizations helping #MeToo victims.

3 Cortina & Magley (2003); Fielding (2018).

4 Lisak, D., Gardinier, L., Nicksa, S. C., & Cote, A. M. (2010); Fielding (2018); see also Heaney (2018).

5 We first secured respondent consent to take the survey, and we ensured that respondents were current or former students of Global Network for Advanced Management business schools. Next came the conjoint experiment in which we asked respondents to choose one of each of three pairs of firm attributes to gauge preferences about the workplace, as we described above. We then asked a series of demographic questions including age and career ambition. Finally, we asked all respondents several follow-up questions about their own experiences with sexual harassment. We saved that set of delicate and personal questions for the end to avoid priming attention to that issue.

6 McLaughlin, H., Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2012). Folke, O., Rickne, J., Tanaka, S. and Tateishi, Y. (2020).

7 Reviewed by e.g. Welsh 1999, McDonald 2012, Fitzgerald and Cortina 2018.

8 Chris Sullivan, a professor of management at California State University, has recently argued that Uber’s failure to punish perpetrators of sexual harassment, while also retaliating against victims, has cost the company as much as 100 million dollars by hurting employee recruitment and retention. See Emma Goldberg, “‘Techlash’ Hits College Campuses,” *New York Times* (January 12, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/style/college-tech-recruiting.html>

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: SEXUAL EXPERIENCES QUESTIONNAIRE

	WOMEN	MEN
Sexist hostility (insulting, degrading, or contemptuous attitudes about women) <ul style="list-style-type: none">Treated you differently because of your sex?Displayed, used, or distributed sexist or sexually suggestive materials?Made offensive sexist remarks?Put you down or was condescending to you because of your sex?	34.7 32.1 6.2 18.4 22.1	8.9 4.3 2.4 4.9 1.1
Sexual hostility (sexual and obviously hostile behaviors) <ul style="list-style-type: none">Repeatedly told sexual stories or jokes that were offensive to you?Whistled, called, or hooted at you in a sexual way?Made unwelcome attempts to draw you into a discussion of sexual matters?Made crude and offensive sexual remarks, either publicly or to you privately?Made offensive remarks about your appearance, body or sexual activities?Made gestures or used body language of a sexual nature which embarrassed or offended you?	18.4 11.1 5.1 8.1 11.2 10.7 6.9	8.3 2.7 1.0 2.1 3.6 3.5 2.1
Unwanted sexual attention <ul style="list-style-type: none">Made attempts to establish a romantic sexual relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it?Continued to ask you for dates, drinks, dinner, etc., even though you said “No”?Touched you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?	12.6 8.8 8.9 9.9	3.9 2.0 1.9 1.8

Notes: The list of behaviors is derived from e.g. Louise F. Fitzgerald, Vicki J. Magley, Fritz Drasgow, and Craig R. Waldo, “Measuring Sexual Harassment in the Military: The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ–DoD).

APPENDIX 2: CONJOINT EXPERIMENT FORCED CHOICE QUESTIONS

The questions asked of respondents are as follows. Each pair of choices had different levels for each attribute, so that added over many answers, we are able to judge the values of each attribute on average (Average Marginal Component Effect).

In this section, you will be presented with three pairs of hypothetical job offers, both with a very low risk of dismissal. For each pair you will be asked which of the two you would be more likely to accept, and how attractive each offer is to you. Which offer would you be more likely to accept?

Salary: Same as at your most recent job, 5% higher than at your most recent job, or 5% lower than at your most recent job.

Job flexibility in working hours: No flexibility, One hour of flex time at the start and end of the workday, or Full flexibility.

At this company: An employee appropriated the work of a co-worker, An employee bullied a co-worker, or An employee touched a co-worker inappropriately and without permission.

In response to the victim’s reporting, the firm: Took no action, Suspended the perpetrator, or Defended the perpetrator.

Wage growth: 3% yearly increase regardless of promotion, 5% yearly increase regardless of promotion, or 3% yearly increase and 10% increase upon every promotion.

APPENDIX 3: SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY REGIONS

3A: REGION OF RESIDENCE

WOMEN				MEN		
	Sexist Hostility	Sexual Hostility	Unwanted Sexual Attention	Sexist Hostility	Sexual Hostility	Unwanted Sexual Attention
Africa	0.26	0.14	0.22	0.03	0.06	0.06
Asia	0.23	0.13	0.11	0.06	0.07	0.04
Europe	0.41	0.26	0.09	0.07	0.06	0.03
North America	0.47	0.20	0.10	0.16	0.11	0.02
South America	0.43	0.22	0.16	0.11	0.10	0.04

3B: REGION OF CITIZENSHIP

WOMEN				MEN		
	Sexist Hostility	Sexual Hostility	Unwanted Sexual Attention	Sexist Hostility	Sexual Hostility	Unwanted Sexual Attention
Africa	0.27	0.14	0.24	0.03	0.08	0.06
Asia	0.23	0.13	0.10	0.07	0.07	0.04
Europe	0.42	0.28	0.10	0.06	0.05	0.02
North America	0.51	0.21	0.10	0.18	0.12	0.03
South America	0.41	0.22	0.14	0.11	0.10	0.04

APPENDIX 4: PERPETRATOR COMPOSITION

IF WOMAN == 1

Who performed the behavior (gender)?	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Man	396	93.84	93.84
Woman	19	4.50	98.34
Other	1	0.24	98.58
Prefer not to answer	6	1.42	100.00
TOTAL	422	100.00	

IF WOMAN == 0

Who performed the behavior (gender)?	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Man	150	66.37	66.37
Woman	57	25.22	91.59
Other	5	2.21	93.81
Prefer not to answer	14	6.19	100.00
TOTAL	226	100.00	

Women were mostly harassed by men (94%) and men were harassed by both men (66%) and women (25%)

APPENDIX 5: PREFERRED FIRM RESPONSES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY GENDER

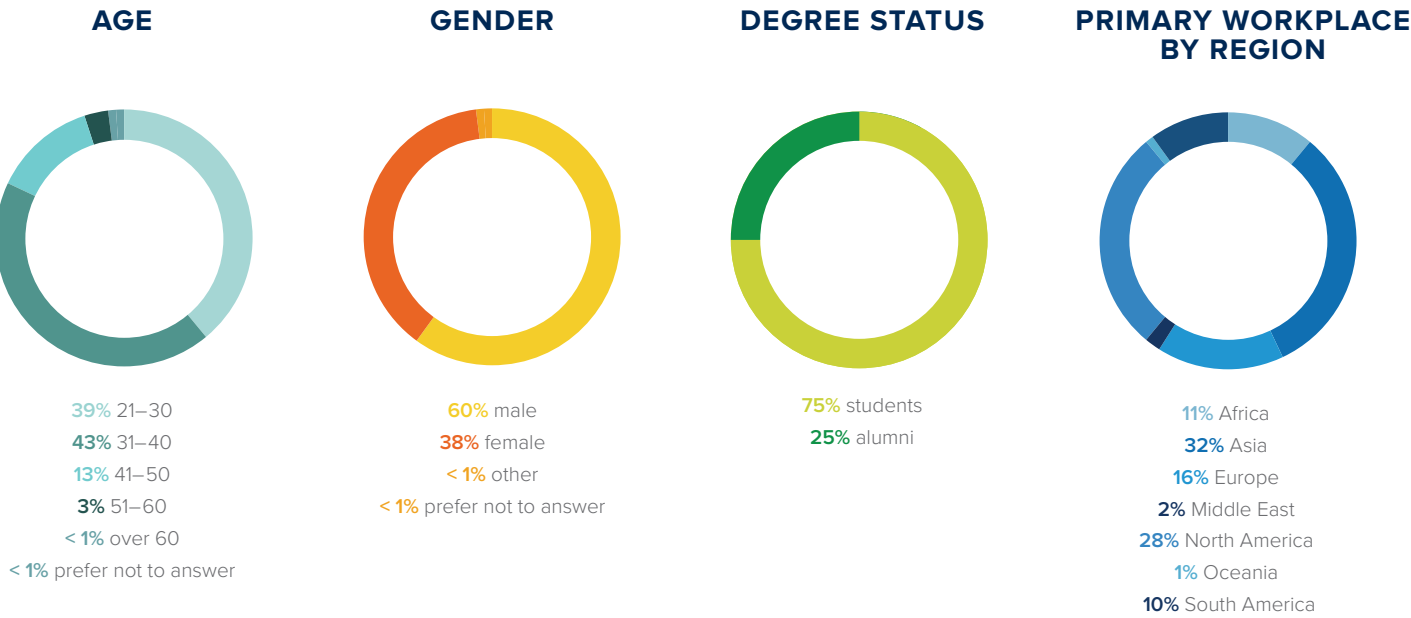
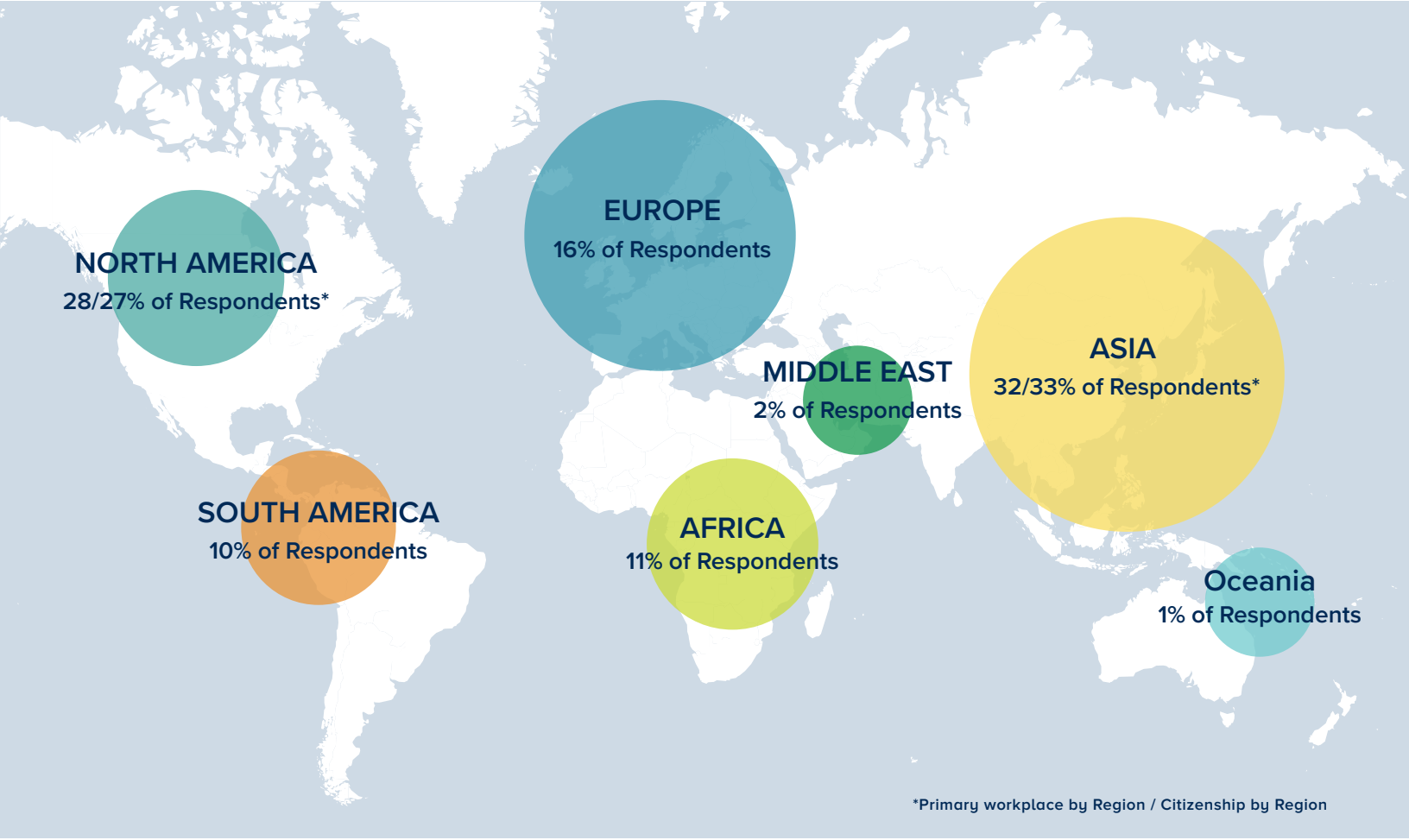
	WOMEN (% top choice)	MEN (% top choice)
Adopt sexual harassment grievance procedures	33	34
Adopt anti-harassment training for employees	14	19
Adopt anti-harassment training for managers	22	26
Ensure the presence of more women in supervisory positions	26	16
No action	2	2
Other	2	3

THE GLOBAL NETWORK FOR ADVANCED MANAGEMENT

Launched in 2012, the Global Network for Advanced Management is a collaborative platform for leading business schools from a diverse set of market-oriented economies that have become increasingly connected and interdependent. The mission of the Global Network is to drive innovation and create value by connecting leading global business schools, their resources, and their stakeholders. Taking advantage of network efficiencies, utilizing new technologies, building strong institutional and personal relationships, and operating with a minimum of bureaucracy, the Global Network has empowered member schools to launch initiatives that improve business education and deepen inquiry into issues of global interest.

- Asian Institute of Management** (The Philippines)
- EGADE Business School, Tecnológico de Monterrey** (Mexico)
- ESMT Berlin** (Germany)
- FGV Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo** (Brazil)
- Fudan University School of Management** (China)
- Haas School of Business, University of California Berkeley** (USA)
- HEC Paris** (France) **Hitotsubashi University Business School, School of International Corporate Strategy** (Japan)
- Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Business School** (China)
- IE Business School** (Spain) **IMD** (Singapore, Switzerland)
- INCAE Business School** (Costa Rica, Nicaragua)
- Indian Institute of Management Bangalore** (India)
- Koç University Graduate School of Business** (Turkey)
- Lagos Business School, Pan-Atlantic University** (Nigeria)
- Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO** (Russia) *Joined in 2020, so did not participate in this survey
- National University of Singapore Business School** (Singapore)
- Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile School of Business** (Chile)
- Business School, Renmin University of China** (China)
- Saïd Business School, University of Oxford** (United Kingdom)
- SDA Bocconi School of Management, Bocconi University** (Italy)
- UBC Sauder School of Business** (Canada)
- Seoul National University Business School** (South Korea)
- Strathmore Business School** (Kenya)
- Technion-Israel Institute of Technology** (Israel)
- UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School** (Ireland)
- University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business** (South Africa)
- University of Ghana Business School** (Ghana)
- University of Indonesia Faculty of Economics** (Indonesia)
- UNSW Business School** (Australia)
- Yale School of Management** (USA)

DEMOGRAPHICS OF GLOBAL NETWORK SCHOOL RESPONDENTS



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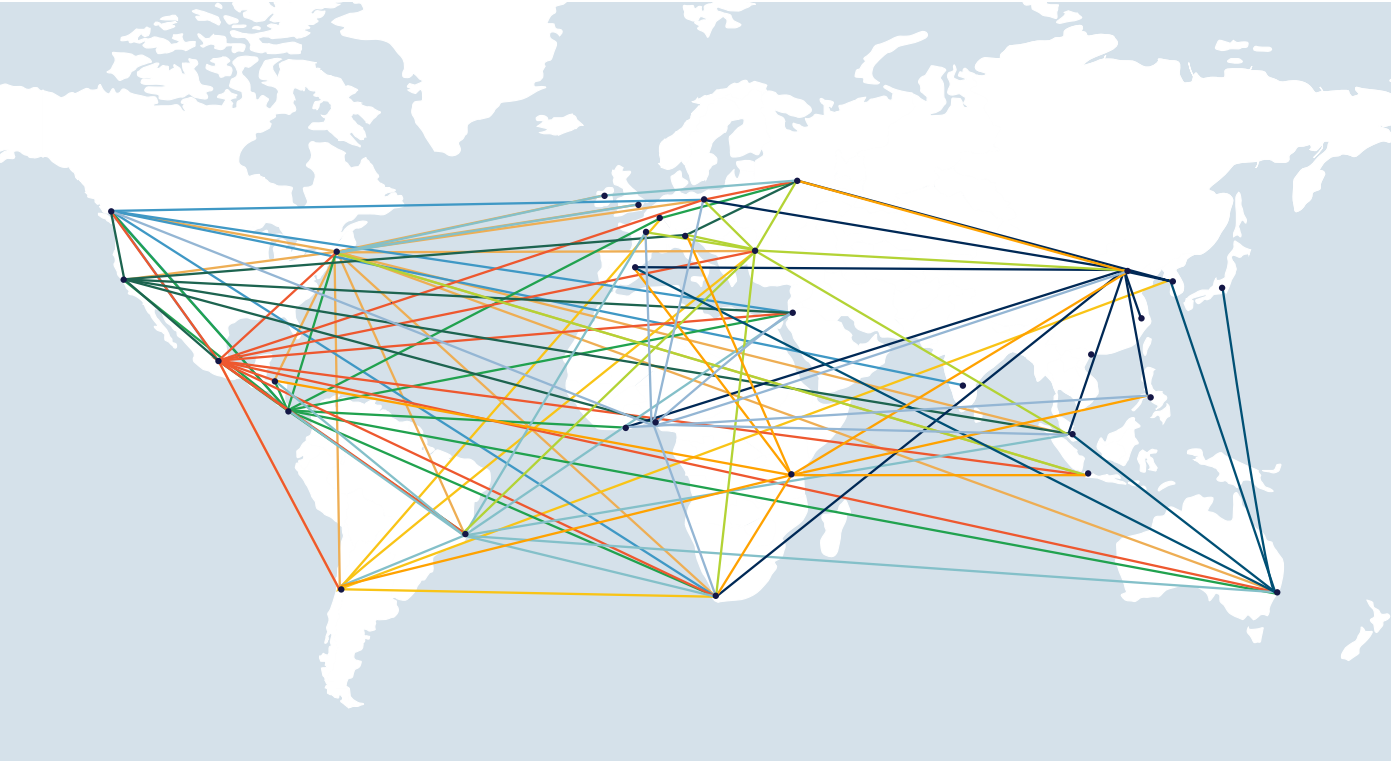
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NOTES

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 28 horizontal blue lines spaced evenly across the page, typical of standard notebook paper. The lines are thin and light blue, set against a plain white background. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

