Work and Occupations

Everybody knows: Barriers and incentives to reporting witnessed workplace harassment

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Abstract:	Workplace harassment is being considered by academics and policymakers, as its prevalence is a concern. Less is known about how witnesses could support victims and contribute to healthier workplaces. The present study ran an online questionnaire (N = 1147) for witnesses of workplace harassment. It revealed that harassment was seldom reported, most commonly because witnesses feared consequences; many discussed incidents with colleagues without the victim's permission; and that 'everybody knows', which was both an incentive and barrier to formal reporting. By redirecting people's need to discuss workplace harassment, witnesses may be mobilized to act more appropriately when they encounter it.

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Workplace harassment has been described as interpersonal behavior aimed at intentionally

harming an employee (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Research on workplace harassment includes

bullying, interpersonal conflict, social undermining, and abuse (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000),

which refer to the same overall construct, the abusive treatment of an employee (Lapierre et

al., 2005). Sexual harassment is now recognized as a serious social and organisational

problem (e.g. Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Ilies et al., 2003; Neall & Tuckey, 2014;

Willness et al., 2007). Figures suggest that anywhere between 38 to 60% of women (Ross,

2016) and 17% of men (EEOC, 2016) have experienced sexual harassment at work. The

situation is even worse in the service industry (e.g., restaurants), with estimates of more than

90% of women experience sexual harassment (MSNBC, 2014). However, it is only one form

of inappropriate workplace behavior.

Until recently, non-sexual harassment (including name-calling, scapegoating, physical

abuse, and work pressure) was seldom studied within an organisational context, despite being

as frequent and as severe as sexual harassment (Brodsky, 1976). Harrison et al. (2012)

reported that over 97% of LGBT workers had experienced workplace harassment. One reason

for this lack of focus could be that in some workplaces, non-sexual workplace harassment has

been reported as sexual harassment, as the only option available (Neall & Tuckey, 2014).

Workplace harassment is now being considered more extensively by academics and

policymakers (Nielsen et al., 2017), as its prevalence has become a concern. Workplace

harassment is detrimental to health and well-being (Burgess et al., 2007; Deitch et al., 2003;

Taylor et al., 2013; Triana et al., 2015). It is associated with symptoms of PTSD (Willness et

al., 2007), poor physical health (Bergman & Henning, 2008), high blood pressure (Krieger et

1

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al., 2008), substance abuse (Silverschanz et al., 2008), cigarette smoking (Krieger et al., 2005), work-to-life conflict (Minnotte, 2012), and insomnia (Ragins et al., 2017). There is also an accumulative effect (Lim & Cortina, 2005) and women who experience both sexual harassment and workplace abuse are more likely to suffer from depression than those who have not experienced both (Marsh et al., 2009).

Public awareness about workplace harassment has grown rapidly due to recent social media campaigns such as MeToo (n.d.). Such social media campaigns highlighted the issue of underreporting, focusing exclusively on victims[1]. However, research investigating the reporting of workplace harassment is less common. One comprehensive study before #MeToo, by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2016), found that roughly 70% of those who experience harassment in their workplace do not report it, even though staying silent has been found to cause health, mental well-being, and career consequences (Cortina & Magley, 2003) and isolation (Herbenick et al., 2019). The most common reason that victims do not report harassment incidents is fear of consequences. For example, fear of not being believed, fear of being blamed for the incident, and fear of adverse career consequences are common reasons for not reporting incidents of harassment (AHRC, 2008; Charlesworth et al., 2011; Near et al., 2004). Other common reasons are because: (i) they do not know how to report; (ii) embarrassment (Banyard et al., 2007; TUC, 2019); (iii)

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[1] Note: henceforth, someone who has been the target of workplace harassment will be referred to as a victim as this was the term we used in the survey (see the Materials and Procedure section below).

2

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they choose to handle it alone (AHRC, 2008; Charlesworth et al., 2011; Finn, 2004); (iv) they

felt that nothing can be done (Near et al., 2004); and (v) they do not know to whom to report

(Finn, 2004). This is justified as victims often experience retaliation for reporting (Lee et al.,

2004; TUC, 2019).

The fear of not being believed (Dougherty, 2000) and the focus on victim reporting

can give the impression that workplace harassment occurs in secret. The EHRC (2018) found

that 32% of BAME employees in the UK had witnessed or experienced workplace

harassment. Rai and Agarwal (2017) found that 56% of participants in India had witnessed

bullying, and MacCurtain et al. (2018) found that 71% of participants had witnessed bullying

in the previous six months. It appears that victims are under pressure to act alone even if

incidents are witnessed, although witnesses can play a supporting role by reporting on the

behalf of the victim, or by providing supporting evidence.

Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) found that those who witness sexual

harassment can be powerful forces in confronting and reducing it. This is supported by

Rayner and Bowes-Sperry (2008) and Paull et al. (2010), who proposed that workplace

harassment training should include witness roles. Additionally, previous studies indicate that

the stigmatisation of groups (such as LGBT[QI+]) (Potter et al., 2012), victim isolation

(Herbenick et al., 2019, McDonald et al., 2016), and feelings of betrayal, can be amplified if

witnesses do not intervene (McDonald et al., 2016) but reduced if witnesses support the

victim. For instance, D' Cruz and Noronha (2011) found that friendships between victims and

witnesses developed after an incident, supporting the idea that work-related issues draw

colleagues together. Witness reporting could also benefit witnesses themselves, as merely

3

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being aware of workplace harassment can increase stress (Holm et al., 2019; Ragins et al., 2017), negative emotions (Miner & Eischeid, 2012) and absenteeism, and lower commitment to the organisation (Ragins et al., 2017). However, like victims, witnesses also rarely report (Good et al., 2012) and, until recently, there has been little in the way of including witnesses in research and public policy (Báez-León et al., 2016).

There are several possible reasons for the witness's reluctance to report. one is known as the 'Bystander Effect'. The Bystander Effect expresses the idea that people do not intervene (when they witness an incident or violation in the presence of others), as they believe others will (Latané & Darley, 1970). One explanation for non-intervention is that witnesses treat intervention as a cost-benefit choice (e.g., MacCurtain et al., 2018; Miceli & Near, 1988). They balance considerations such as not wanting to be retaliated against (Hulin et al., 1991) and the potential commitment involved with considerations about potential long-term disadvantages of not speaking up (Bandura, 1999) (e.g., shame, or regret) compared with the benefits of doing so (e.g., pride, gratitude, or praise). As such, there can be tension between intention and behavior (Báez-León et al., 2016). Additionally, institutional normalisation can affect decisions about intervening. This makes it difficult for bystanders to recognize behavior as inappropriate, that intervention is required, and that they are qualified to intervene (MacCurtain et al., 2018).

However, Levine and Manning (2013) found that shared social identity increases the likelihood that bystanders will intervene, which has also been found in research on workplace bullying (Báez-León et al., 2016). This is echoed by Reicher and Hopkins (2000), who concluded that social solidarity is increased when identities are shared. Other bystander

4

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

research (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2014) proposed that perceived responsibility, costs, and being able to choose a suitable action also influence witnesses' reporting decisions. Thus, by creating workplaces with a positive shared identity of responsibility, social solidarity, and agency, witnesses of harassment might be encouraged to support the victim. If so, this could help to improve the well-being and organisational commitment of both victims and witnesses and improve workplace climates. However, if incidents are discussed among colleagues without the victim's knowledge or consent, their isolation can be amplified. Discussion of incidents among colleagues has been found to cause a social contagion effect (Christakis & Fowler, 2013) on individual attitudes and groups (Barsade, 2002). The present research thus aims to examine how commonly witnesses report incidences and what factors encourage witnesses to report incidents. The present research also aims to identify the barriers and issues with witness reporting decisions. It is hoped that by understanding witnesses' experiences, organisations can improve communication between employees and HR, and build healthier workplaces.

Method

Participants and Design

After receiving ethical approval from the first author's home university, participants were recruited for an online survey via Positly (n.d.), Survey Circle (n.d.) and social media (i.e., Twitter and Facebook). Most participants were from the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia. In total, we collected data in three phases, including a phase where questions were flipped to check for bias. In the first phase, 717 people participated. Simultaneously, we ran

5

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

the second phase where the questions were flipped, to check for bias (n = 61). Finally, after examining the results for themes that had been mentioned in free text sections of the questionnaire, we ran a third phase of data collection. In this final phase, 369 individuals participated. This amounted to 1147 participants who took part in three phases. However, 41 participants were excluded who did not complete the questionnaire.

As such results were replicated from all three phases, therefore, in the present study we mainly present data from Phase 3 to simplify the results. Each analysis is clearly labelled with the Phase and sample size.

Materials and Procedure

The data was collected between February 2019 and May 2019 utilising an online questionnaire [It is available on at the first author's university repository – details can be included here if the paper is accepted]. After clicking a link, participants were given information and asked to provide informed consent. The survey began with definitions and examples of harassment and discrimination. Participants were also given the following definitions of 'witness' and 'victim' to help them answer the questions:

> **Witness:** *This study is looking at witnesses of harassment or discrimination. When we use the term witness, we mean someone who has seen, heard, or knows of another person being harassed or discriminated against.*

> **Victim:** *When we use the term victim, we mean someone who has been the target of harassment or discrimination themselves.*

6

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The questionnaires were built using Qualtrics (n.d.). The questions were informed by reviewing literature investigating workplace harassment. There were 54 questions in the questionnaires which were distributed during Phase 1 and Phase 2 and 141 questions in the Phase 3 questionnaire. In all three Phases, we used branch logic – to branch respondents to different questionnaire flow elements based on their question responses. Participants could take as long as they needed to respond (mean completion time = 8 minutes).

Results

Witnesses to workplace harassment.

In the following analyses, 'victim' refers to participant responses after reading the definition above, and 'witness' refers to individuals who responded that they had either seen or heard about an incident, after being asked, "*Have you ever witnessed any incident(s) of harassment or discrimination in the workplace?"*. The options were: *Yes, I was there when it happened* (direct witness)*; I wasn't there, but I heard about it* (indirect witness)*; No*. The final option was *I was the victim, and I would like to describe what happened to me*. These participants were given the option to leave the survey and describe what had happened to them to a chatbot on a separate website (Talk to Spot, n.d.), or to continue with the survey by describing witnessed incidents. After answering this question, 295 (82%) participants responded that they had witnessed workplace harassment either directly (227, 77%) or indirectly (68, 23%). These 295 participants made the final sample. All participants who completed the survey were given a link to the chatbot in the debrief.

Reporting workplace harassment to HR.

7

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The EEOC (2016) estimated that 70% of victims fail to report workplace harassment. To explore witnesses' reporting decisions, we compared them to this EEOC figure. All participants in the final sample (N = 295) were asked, "*Did you make a formal report to the HR department?*". Of these, 227 did not report (77.21%). A Binomial test revealed that the proportion of participants that did not report was significantly greater than the proportion of victims that the EEOC estimated do not report (p =.01). This indicated that witnesses of harassment were even less likely than victims to report it.

We then compared the reporting decisions of direct and indirect witnesses against the EEOC figure of 70% (2016). Binomial tests revealed that the proportion of *direct* witnesses that did not report (73.57%) was not significantly different from the proportion of victims that the EEOC estimated do not report (p = .14). Put simply, about 26% of our 'direct witness' participants reported, which was comparable to the EEOC's estimate that about 30% of victims report. However, the proportion of *indirect* witnesses that did not report (89.55%) was significantly greater than the proportion of victims that the EEOC estimated do not report (p <.001). In other words, only about 10% of our 'indirect witness' participants had reported. Thus, people who have only indirect knowledge about harassment are particularly unwilling to report it, but even those who have directly witnessed their colleagues being harassed are as unlikely to report it as those being harassed.

Reporting different forms of harassment.

We explored whether the type of incident (sexual or non-sexual) was associated with reporting. Participants were given the option of describing the incident(s) in their own words. A total of 108 participants described the incident. We then analysed whether the type of

8

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

incident was correlated with reporting. Seventeen responses were either expressed unclearly along these terms or described both sexual and non-sexual harassment, so these responses were removed from the analysis. A Chi-Square revealed that reporting was significantly associated with the type of incident(s), $\chi 3$ (1) = 5.08, *p* = .02: 69.2% reported sexual harassment while only 30.8% reported non-sexual harassment. In short, witnesses were significantly more likely to report sexual harassment than other workplace harassment.

Discussing workplace harassment with colleagues.

We also examined whether witnesses that had not reported to HR talked to other people in the workplace, or whether incidents were not discussed with anybody. Participants were asked, "*Did you tell anyone at work other than HR (e.g., your line manager or a colleague)?*", and 285 responded. Of these, 175 (61.4%) responded that they did not discuss the incident(s). A Binomial test revealed that the proportion of participants that did not report (77.21%) was significantly greater than the proportion of those that did not discuss the incident with a colleague (*p* >.001). In other words, about 23% reported to HR and 39% spoke to a colleague.

Again, we compared reporting decisions between participants who witnessed harassment directly or indirectly. As described above, 73.57% of *direct* witnesses responded that they had not reported. Binomial tests revealed that the proportion of direct witnesses that did not tell colleagues (57.5%) was significantly smaller than the proportion of those who did not report (*p* <.001). In other words, while about 26% of 'direct witness' participants reported, 42.5% told a colleague. When it came to *indirect* witnesses, 89.55% responded that they had not reported. Again, the proportion of indirect witnesses who did not tell colleagues

9

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

(75%) was significantly smaller than those who did not report ($p > .001$). In short, about 10%

of 'indirect witness' participants reported while 25% told a colleague. Thus, witnesses were

more likely to discuss witnessed incidents with colleagues than report them.

Discussing different forms of harassment with colleagues.

We then explored whether the type of incident(s) witnessed (sexual; or non-sexual)

was associated with discussing it with colleagues. A Chi-Square revealed that discussion with

colleagues was not significantly associated with the type of incident, $\chi 3 (1) = 0.01$, $p = .91$. In

other words, employees are just as likely to discuss non-sexual harassment incidences with

colleagues as sexual harassment incidences.

Why witnesses chose to not report to HR.

Participants who responded that they did not report to HR (n = 167) were asked:

"*We would be interested to know why you did not tell HR.*",

Most participants selected *I was worried about the consequences* (63.64%). Over half

selected either: (i) *I did not want to interfere* (53.63%)*; (ii) I thought it was the victim's

responsibility to report* (52.17%); and (iii) *Everybody already knew* (51.69%).

Direct witnesses.

When examining the responses of direct witnesses only, 68.49% said that *I was

worried about the consequences* while 33.58% described that *I was worried they would not

be believed.* This was followed by five items that related to the reporting culture in the

workplace. For instance, 60% said *there was no point, as nothing would be done;* 53% stated

10

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

that *everybody already knew* and *I did not want to interfere*; and 42% said that they did not

report the incident because *they did not want to be seen as a 'snitch'*. Interestingly 50% felt

that it was *the victim's responsibility to report* (48.51%).

Participants described various reasons for their decision not to report the incidents.

For instance, 34% decided not to report because they felt *powerful people were involved* and

they they were *afraid of the consequences* if they reported the incident; 28% stated that they

did not know how to report it; and 12% identified that *there was no reporting mechanism for*

witnesses or *witness reporting is not allowed.* Thus, as with victims, underreporting seems to

be driven by fear of the consequences, although workplace cultures and reporting processes

are also barriers.

Indirect witnesses.

When examining the responses of indirect witnesses only, the most common reason

for not reporting was witnesses felt that *it was the victim's responsibility to report* (62%).

Compared with direct witnesses, significantly fewer indirect witnesses stated; (i) they were

worried about the consequences (50%) $\chi2$ (1) = 5.67, *p* = .02; (ii) *there was no point, as*

nothing would be done (33.33%), $\chi2$ (1) = 8.84, *p* = .01; (iii) they *decided to ignore it*

(9.52%), $\chi2$ (1) = 13.41, *p* <.001; (iv) they *did not want to be seen as a 'snitch'* (51.47%), $\chi2$

(1) = 3.74, *p* =.05; (v) they thought *powerful people were involved* (18.87%), $\chi2$ (1) = 4.22, *p*

= .04; (vi) they perceived that *the incident was not serious enough* (8.7%), $\chi2$ (1) = 10.12, *p* =

.01; and (vi) they *decided to do something else* (8%), $\chi2$ (1) = 4.53, *p* = .03. Significantly

more participants selected they *did not have enough information* (53.49%), $\chi2$ (1) = 19.22, *p*

<.001; or *the incident had already been reported* (53.49%) $\chi2$ (1) = 14.79, *p* <.001. Thus, the

11

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

main reasons that indirect witnesses do not report workplace harassment (lack of information

and not wanting to get involved) differ from those of direct witnesses.

Why witnesses report to HR.

The 67 participants who responded that they had reported to HR were asked why they

made this decision.

Only participants who responded either "I reported to HR for this reason" or "I did not report

to HR for this reason" are included in figure 2.

Seven participants who witnessed harassment indirectly reported it, so we combined

the direct and indirect witness data in Figure 2.

[Insert fig 2]

Figure 2 revealed that every participant who reported that they *dislike unfair*

treatment also stated that the *perpetrator needed to stop* (96.92%) and: *they wanted to offer*

support to the victim (87.1%). Therefore, altruism seems to drive witnesses to report. Over

70% of the participants indicated that the *workplace culture needs to change* (75.86%) and/or

they wanted to reduce the burden on the victim to report alone (72.21%), and many indicated

that workplace harassment was a shared issue (62.96%). Half of the participants stated they

wanted evidence/protection (50%); they perceived that *everyone knew except HR* (50%) and

they felt *everyone else was afraid to report* (49.02%). Finally, 19% reported that they had

been asked to do so by the victim. This indicates that victims may not feel that they can ask

for support. This is also of concern if the victim is not aware that the witness has reported.

12

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

Seeking permission from victims.

Discussing incidents without the victim's knowledge or permission can compromise their anonymity, potentially leading to retaliation that they had been trying to avoid by not discussing or reporting it themselves. So, we also asked whether witnesses sought permission from the victim before reporting or discussing incidents.

Of those who reported, 63% indicated that they had not sought a permission from the victim. For instance, one participant stated, "*I felt the victim would have told me not to report it so I felt it was my duty to report it without their knowledge.*" This effectively compromised the victim's anonymity without their consent and/or knowledge. However, a binomial test revealed that the proportion that did not seek permission to report to HR was significantly smaller than those who did not seek permission to discuss the incident(s) colleagues (88%, *p* < .001). Thus, most witnesses discussed or reported incidents without seeking permission from the victim, particularly when it came to discussing them with colleagues. This mirrors the 'everybody knows' data (in figures 1 and 2), indicating that harassment is known in workplaces, albeit without the knowledge of HR.

Retrospective feelings about reporting decisions.

As witnesses experience negative consequences of workplace harassment (Ragins et al., 2017), we examined further whether witnesses' reporting decisions were related to subsequent positive or negative feelings.

13

The χ2 statistic (χ2 (3) = 23.84, *p* < .001) showed a significant association between reporting decisions and regret. Participants were significantly more likely to feel regret if they did not report to HR (51.5%) than if they did report (16.6%).

Discussion

The MeToo movement (n.d.) has highlighted the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace, which is echoed by other forms of workplace harassment (EEOC, 2016; Shannon et al., 2009). The goals of the present research were therefore to see whether; (i) like victims (EEOC, 2016), witnesses to harassment fail to report; (ii) whether reporting barriers are similar or different between victims and witnesses; (iii) whether reporting might benefit witnesses themselves; and (iv) to consider how workplaces can enable witnesses to support victims by reporting on their behalf or by submitting evidence.

We explored how common it was for witnesses to report incidents. The results indicated that 74% of direct witnesses chose not to report witnessed incidents of harassment and discrimination to HR. This is similar to the EEOC (2016) report that about 70% of victims fail to report to someone of authority in the workplace. Research conducted since #MeToo indicates that the EEOC figure is probably conservative. For instance, McCann et al. (2018) found that almost all (99.8%) sexual harassment incidents are never reported. However, using the EEOC figure as a starting point, results indicate that for every victim that does not report a witnessed incident, there is one witness who has also failed to report.

It is a common assumption that it is the victim's responsibility to report incidences (e.g., #whyididntreport) It was suggested in the House of Commons (2018) that workplace

14

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

reporting processes often place an unreasonable burden on victims to tackle harassment alone. This assumption is supported by the present research, where over half of those who had not reported to HR stated that *they thought it was the victim's responsibility to report* or *they did not want to interfere*. Several responded also that witness reporting was either not an option in their workplace or was actively discouraged (MacCurtain et al., 2018). These 'victim-driven' processes overlook the supportive roles that witnesses could play. Workplaces could address these issues by providing reporting mechanisms or processes that allow for both victim and witness reporting, including ways of reporting together (e.g., Vault, n.d.).

We then examined whether witnesses also face challenges and barriers to reporting. Participants who took part in the present study reported several barriers and the most common was concern about the consequences. Indeed, two-thirds of the participants said they chose not to report the witnessed incidents of harassment and discrimination because they feared the negative consequences. It is promising to note that intentions to help victims can increase when witnesses do not fear the consequences, suggesting that personal cost is critical to their decision (Báez-León et al., 2016). MacCurtain et al. (2018) note that witnesses only take formal action when organisations are perceived to provide safety and support afterwards. Thus, it is important for workplaces to reassure witnesses that they will not suffer adverse consequences if they report workplace harassment. Just over a third of our participants did not report due to powerful people being involved, supporting MacCurtain et al. (2018) findings. One way to tackle power imbalances when it comes to encouraging witnesses to report would be to create multiple reporting pathways that can bypass powerful individuals who were either involved or have conflicts of interest with the parties involved.

15

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

Next, we examined whether there were incentives for witnesses to report. All the

participants stated that they *dislike unfair treatment* and they felt that the *perpetrator needed*

to stop. Thus, incentives centred around the harassment culture and the victim, rather than

something related to themselves. This indicates that bystander altruism (Campos-Mercade,

2021) and workplace fairness were important reasons for reporting. Two-thirds of the

participants (63%) perceived that witnessing harassment and discrimination incidents had

affected everyone in their teams. This finding is in line with Ragins et al.'s (2017) research,

which found that even being aware of harassment negatively affects witnesses (see also

Holm, et al. 2019; Miner & Eischeid, 2012).

It was also important to understand whether witness underreporting is related to

witnesses not wishing to tell HR, specifically, about witnessed incidents of harassment and

discrimination or whether they do not wish to discuss it with anyone. The present results

revealed that 39% of direct witnesses told other colleagues (predominantly team members)

while about a quarter of the participants stated that they reported to HR. This supports

MacCurtain et al. (2018), where 42% of participants reported discussing incidents with

colleagues and 22% discussed them informally with a manager. This suggests that incidents

of workplace harassment are important enough for witnesses to discuss with someone

(Cortina & Berdahl, 2008), but employees would rather do so with a colleague than with HR.

The participants in the present research were significantly more likely to report sexual

harassment than other forms of harassment. #MeToo has shed light on the urgency of

reporting sexual harassment, but this data (collected before #MeToo) suggests either that

even before #MeToo, witnesses considered sexual harassment to be more serious than other

16

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

forms of harassment (and thus more worthy of reporting), or that sexual harassment was the

only type of harassment that would be addressed formally (Neall & Tuckey, 2014). In

contrast, the participants were just as likely to discuss non-sexual harassment with colleagues

as sexual harassment, indicating that employees are discussing all forms of workplace

harassment among themselves. These results are reflected in recent revelations about the

witnessed racial harassment of Azeem Rafiq (Martin, 2021), where the harassment was

widely known about, but nothing was done.

The participants in the present research indicated that workplace harassment was

widely known among their colleagues. McDonald et al. (2016) suggest that one way to

reduce the discomfort of witnessing harassment is to discuss it with colleagues, as this will

mean that witnesses have acted in a way that minimizes the risk to themselves. However, this

may come at the expense of making a formal report. MacCurtain et al. (2018) argue that

discussing incidences with colleagues may perpetuate workplace bullying by boosting coping

without addressing the bullying formally. Christakis and Fowler (2013) suggest that

discussing incidents could have a social contagion effect, as toxicity, fear, and harassment

spreads in the workplace (Foulk et al., 2016; Meier and Gross, 2015; Torkelson et al., 2016).

In terms of the bystander literature, the present 'barriers to reporting' data support the idea

that when an incident is witnessed (or known about) by several people, bystanders will not

intervene (Latané & Darley, 1970). On the other hand, the 'incentives to reporting' data

support the idea that sharing an identity can encourage bystander intervention (Levine &

Manning, 2013). Indeed, Báez-León et al. (2016) found that when one witness intervenes,

others become mobilized to do so also. Therefore, it would be worth workplaces attempting

17

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

to reframe knowledge about harassment as an incentive to report rather than as a reason not to, by creating a shared identity of solidarity and support.

The findings of the present study also raise concerns about victim anonymity, which is important in reporting procedures (Buchanan et al., 2014; EHRC, 2018). If a well-meaning witness discusses an incident without protecting the victim's anonymity, this may lead to secondary victimisation that the victim had been attempting to avoid by not reporting themselves. Without permission, witnesses also risk making the victim feel more isolated (Herbenick et al., 2019), particularly if nothing is done to help them. They can also betray the victim's trust, adding to psychological harm (e.g., Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998). Anonymity will limit some investigations, but it is the most effective way of uncovering workplace harassment. Anonymous reporting can encourage employees to report in the first place, and to disclose sensitive details (e.g., of sexual harassment).

Furthermore, the present study found that most witnesses discussed the incident with colleagues (88%) compared to reporting it (63%), indicating that information is spread around the workplace without the victim's permission or consent. Thus, workplaces might consider educating employees that discussing incidents with colleagues without the victims' knowledge undermines the victims' control over their anonymity and details of the harassment that they might not have wished to disclose. This could put them at risk of victimisation, amplify their sense of isolation (Herbenick et al., 2019), and contribute to a culture that tolerates workplace harassment (MacCurtain et al., 2018).

Witnesses are negatively affected by workplace harassment (Holm, et al. 2019; Miner & Eischeid, 2012; Ragins et al., 2017). Witnessing harassment can have social and emotional

18

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

consequences, such as individuals feeling isolated, unsupported, or unsafe, and can lead to difficulties in relationships with others. In addition, witnessing harassment can cause physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, headaches, and difficulty sleeping. Such negative outcomes can be reduced if they try to intervene (Nielsen et al., 2021). The present study found that those who did not report were significantly more likely to feel regret than those who did, supporting Nielsen et al. (2021). It is worth noting that those who experienced negative consequences following their reporting decision tended to describe regret (in the free text sections of the survey), while those who experienced positive consequences generally described pride. Therefore, reporting decisions can affect subsequent feelings, although this is likely also to reflect the consequences of their decision. Thus, any mechanism that both encourages reporting and supports witnesses after making a report has the potential to mitigate negative feelings rather than exacerbate them.

Based on the present results, workplace harassment is still a pressing issue, and more is required to make workplaces healthier (Goncharenko, 2019). Therefore, organizations are encouraged to minimize isolated suffering in silence by building workplaces of solidarity and support. They can achieve this by educating witnesses about the benefits of reporting; encouraging witnesses to report; reassuring witnesses that they will be supported rather than victimized for doing so; and requiring witnesses to get permission from the victim before talking about incidents in the workplace.

Conclusion

The present research highlights missed opportunities to encourage witnesses to support victims after workplace harassment, but it also presents workplaces with an

19

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

opportunity to act. Witnesses remain a largely untapped resource in tackling workplace

harassment but are increasingly being seen as allies for victims (offering support and

solidarity), for co-workers (reinforcing a shared identity of empowerment in the face of

inappropriate behavior), and for employers (helping them to learn about incidents that would

otherwise go unreported). This should improve their own emotional response to the incident.

The message is therefore positive. By redirecting people's need to discuss what they have

seen into an effective and supporting reporting channel, witnesses may be mobilized to act

when they encounter inappropriate incidences, empowering themselves to be a force for good

in their workplace, while also protecting themselves.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest: The third author is a co-founder of a harassment
reporting mechanism organisation cited in this paper. The mechanism was offered to
participants in their post-survey debrief. No author is currently employed by the organisation.

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26

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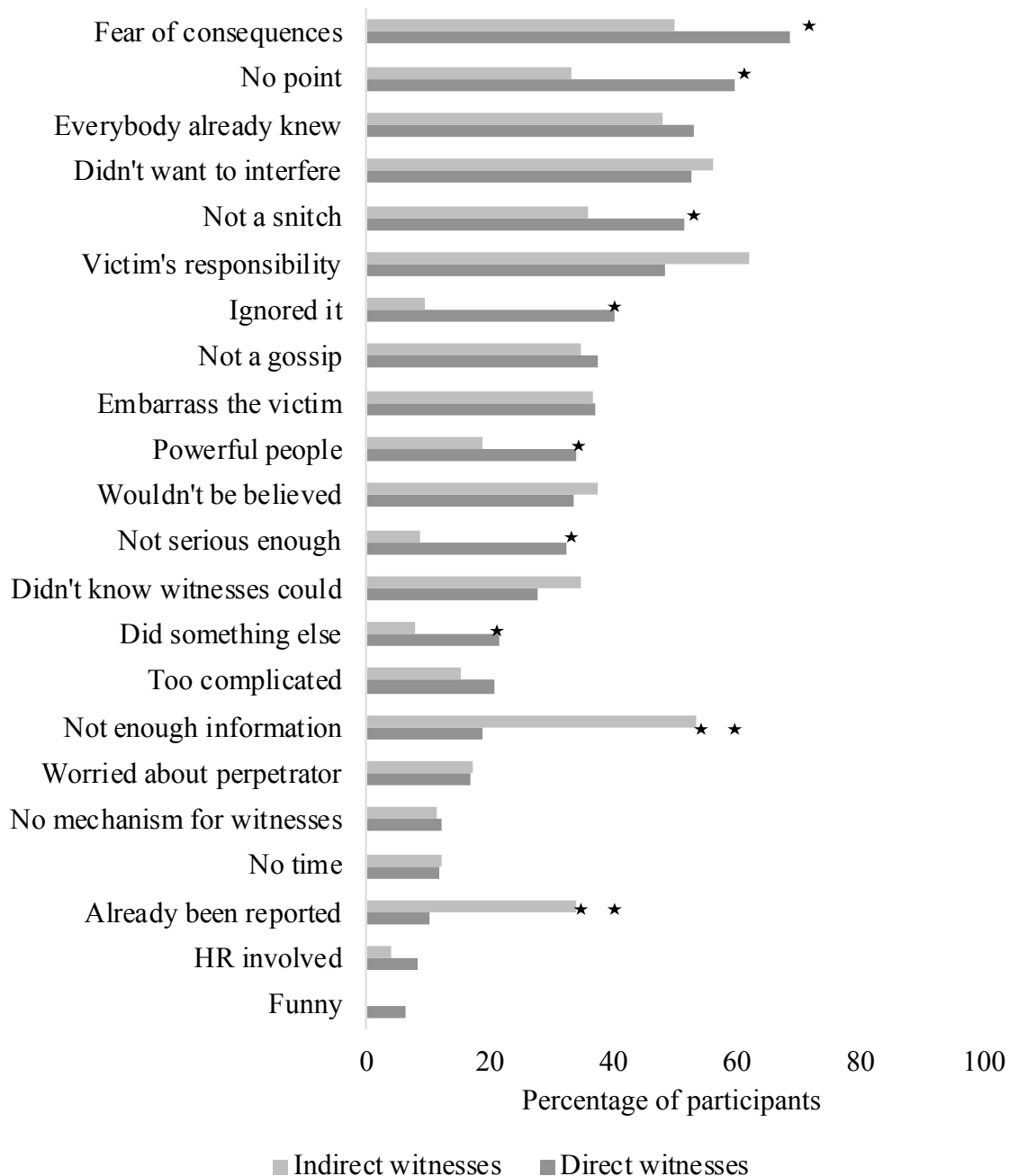Vault (n.d.). https://vaultplatform.com/products/mobile-app/

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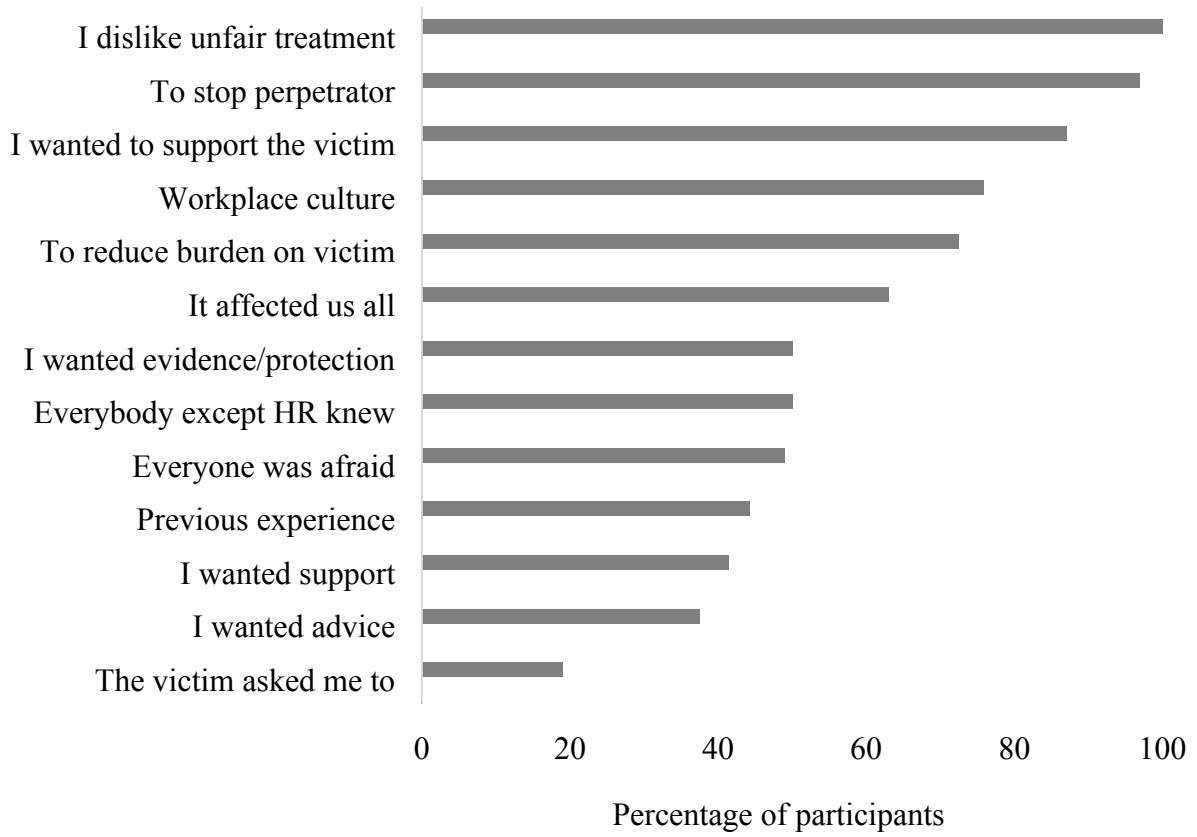
29

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

Figure 1. Reasons for not reporting to HR (direct and indirect witnesses). ** = p < .001, * = p

< .05.

Fear of consequences
No point
Everybody already knew
Didn't want to interfere
Not a snitch
Victim's responsibility
Ignored it
Not a gossip
Embarrass the victim
Powerful people
Wouldn't be believed
Not serious enough
Didn't know witnesses could
Did something else
Too complicated
Not enough information
Worried about perpetrator
No mechanism for witnesses
No time
Already been reported
HR involved
Funny

Percentage of participants

■ Indirect witnesses   ■ Direct witnesses

EVERYBODY KNOWS: WITNESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

Figure 2. Reasons for reporting to HR

Percentage of participants