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Race, threat and workplace sexual harassment: The dynamics of harassment in the United States, 1997–2016

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Sexual harassment is a persistent problem for women in the workplace. Prior research has explored the effects of sexual harassment on the psychological, physical and economic wellbeing of the victims. Despite the extensive research exploring the causes, most studies focus on micro-level factors, and few studies examine the role of macro-level factors on sexual harassment in the workplace. Using public Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) data and a separate dataset of individual level workplace sexual harassment complaints, we test two hypotheses about sexual harassment in American workplaces. First, we show that the decline in workplace sexual harassment complaints has been uneven, with African-American women experiencing an increased relative risk of sexual harassment in the workplace, even as overall reported harassment complaints are down. Second, we show that economic threat — operationalized in this case through unemployment rates — drives increases in sexual harassment of women in American workplaces. While the data on harassment complaints is limited, data strongly suggests that the changes are driven by shifts in underlying levels of harassment, rather than changes in the likelihood of reporting harassment.

KEYWORDS
gender, inequality, race, sexual harassment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment continues to be a 'systemic trauma' (Fitzgerald, 2017) for women in the workplace, with consequences for victims that include depression (Friborg et al., 2017; Houle, Staff, Mortimer, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2011), burnout (Takeuchi et al., 2018), anxiety (Mushtaq, Sultana, & Imtiaz, 2015) and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Avina & O'Donohue, 2002; see Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008, or Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016, for meta-analyses and a review of health effects). All of this is in addition to the effects on women's careers: harassment may make them more likely to quit jobs, even when doing so is economically disadvantageous (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2017), with long-term economic effects.

But despite how much we know about the effects of sexual harassment on individuals, there is much that we do not know, and this article aims to fill in some of the gaps through the use of macro-level workplace sexual harassment data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). By examining the dynamics of workplace sexual harassment in the United States over the past 20 years, we can test findings about sexual harassment that have arisen from the existing micro-level research, and look for the effects of societal level factors on rates of harassment. While sexual harassment is a societal issue, most of the research on it has been in studies looking at individual workplaces or small cohorts of victims. The goal of this article is to analyse it as a social phenomenon, and begin to unravel the large-scale factors underlying the prevalence of sexual harassment in the United States.

Even if we were not interested directly in workplace sexual harassment, it would be worthwhile to understand it in order to come to a better understanding of other forms of inequality. For example, sexual harassment in the workplace discourages women from entering fields where they expect sexual harassment, and pushes women out of those fields when it is experienced, contributing to occupational segregation (Dresden, Dresden, Ridge, & Yamawaki, 2018; Gauchat, Kelly, & Wallace, 2012) and, indirectly, to the gender wage gap (Blau & Kahn, 2017). These sorts of effects are explored directly in McLaughlin et al.'s (2012) study, which uses in-depth interviews and longitudinal survey data from the Youth Development Study to show that among early career women, the experience of sexual harassment results in financial stress mostly due to job change and harms future professional prospects.

The EEOC defines sexual harassment as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment can result from employers creating a hostile work environment by, for instance, making disparaging remarks about women in general. While the law does not prohibit jokes, or teasing, they can constitute harassment if they continue or are so severe they constitute a hostile or offensive work environment (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018). Our use of the EEOC definition is not in any way intended to discount experiences of sexual harassment that do not meet it: as Schultz (2003) notes, sexual harassment is both a legal issue and a lived experience. However, because of the nature of the data we are using, we rely on the legal definition. Note also that sexual harassment is legally and conceptually distinct from gender harassment, in which women are subjected to hostile behaviours at work that aren't tied to sexual interest, such as the use of gender-oriented slurs, which is rather more common in the workplace (Cortina & Magley, 2003).

Existing research also shows that sexual harassment is consistently under-reported: McCann, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Badgett (2018) find that 99.8 per cent of women who experience sexual harassment in the workplace never file formal charges. To some extent, this is likely due to seemingly justified fears of retaliation from employers (Berrey, Nelson, & Nielsen, 2017; Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012), which may have increased over time. It also may be due to a misunderstanding of what constitutes sexual harassment. In probability samples, when sexual harassment is not defined in the survey, about 25 per cent of women report having experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, a figure that's consistent across multiple studies (EEOC Task Force Report). But, when respondents are asked about specific behaviours that constitute sexual harassment — such as sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention — the reported rate of sexual harassment among women increased to about 40 per cent.

2 | THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

While the effects of sexual harassment are well-documented, research has started to emphasize an intersectional approach to the study of sexual harassment, highlighting differences in which workers are most likely to be harassed. Single women are more likely to experience sexual harassment (De Coster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999) as are highly educated women (De Coster et al., 1999) and women in power positions (McLaughlin et al., 2012).

It seems reasonable to expect that women of colour would experience greater levels of sexual harassment. As Kalof, Eby, Matheson, and Kroska (2001) argue: 'because sexual harassment is about power, we would expect less powerful people (e.g. women, minorities and younger individuals) to be particularly vulnerable to harassers' (p. 283). While McCann et al. (2018) have found that women of colour are less likely to be fired in retaliation for sexual harassment reports, more generally, feminist researchers have called for an intersectional analysis of harassment. Many have argued that it is necessary to examine race, gender, class and intersecting categories in order to understand oppression (Buchanan, 2005; Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Chafetz, 1997; Collins, 1990, 2000; McCall, 2005; Murrell, 1996; Texeira, 2002; Welsh, Carr, Mac Quarrie, & Huntley, 2006). Still, scholars working in this area have based their findings almost entirely on micro-level analyses of the experiences of individual women, or in individual workplace cultures, making clear the need for a macro-level analysis of the intersectionality of sexual harassment behaviours.

Research has also shown that other demographic factors also play a role in understanding sexual harassment. Citizenship status (Arat-Koc, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997; Nakano Glenn, 2000a; Welsh et al., 2006), ethnicity (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Morris, 1996) and race of the women play a role (Kalof et al., 2001; Mansfield et al., 1991; Tester, 2008; Welsh et al., 2006; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1996). While earlier studies found no difference in the rates of sexual harassment of women of colour (Gutek, 1985), others find evidence for differential rates of harassment (Welsh, 1999; Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 2004) and point to the complexity of intersectional systems of domination of race, class and gender (Collins, 1990; Nakano Glenn, 2000b; West & Fenstermaker, 1993). In that vein, scholars have found that race and gender are intertwined in the harassment of women of colour in the workplace and are not theoretically and methodologically separable, referring to 'gendered racism' and 'racialized sexual harassment' (Banneriji, 1995; Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Texeira, 2002; Welsh et al., 2006).

3 | SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND DOMINANCE BEHAVIOURS

Work on the intersectionality of sexual harassment in the workplace has led researchers to engage with why men carry it out in the first place. The most compelling argument comes from the masculine overcompensation model (Willer, Conlon, Rogalin, & Wojnowicz, 2013), which posits that men react to potential loss of relative status by carrying out extreme forms of masculinity. For instance, Cassino (2018) finds that men who are simply told that women are increasingly likely to earn more money than their husbands (whether it is true in their case or not) became more likely to support Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential race, and less likely to support Hillary Clinton. Similarly, men who lose income relative to their spouses adopt more conservative views on political and social issues like affirmative action and abortion, doubling down on conservative male dominance views in the face of a threat to their economic status. Such threats also lead men to overestimate their own height (Cheryan, Cameron, Katagiri, & Monin, 2015), hold negative attitudes about effeminate homosexual men (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007), think about physical aggression (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008), put more effort into a handgrip strength test (Funk & Werhun, 2011), become more supportive of war (Willer et al., 2013), spend less time on housework (Besen-Cassino & Cassino, 2014) and make more muscular virtual avatars for themselves (Lee-Won, Tang, & Kibbe, 2017).

This behaviour has been repeatedly linked directly with sexual harassment. Weaver and Vescio (2015) subjected participants to a gender knowledge test, and gave them feedback indicating that they were relatively masculine or

feminine. Men who were given masculinity-threatening feedback became more likely to accept group-based inequality, and more likely to deny that other groups — gay men and women, in their study — were subjected to discrimination. Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, and Grasselli (2003) found that threats to men's dominance and gender identity led them to be more likely to sexually harass women in online forums, in their case, through the unwanted sharing of pornographic or suggestive images. Workplace culture itself may be pervaded by a toxic gendered competition between men, what Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, and Williams (2018) have labelled a 'Masculinity Contest Culture'.

The key element here is the need to perform masculinity (Goffman, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987) in the face of threats to social standing. Just as researchers have previously identified increased status of women in the workplace as a cause of sexual harassment, as their status presents a threat to men (Chamberlain, Crowley, Tope, & Hodson, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Stainback, Ratliff, & Roscigno, 2011), societal changes, like economic threat can be expected to lead to increased harassment as well. To the extent that sexual harassment functions as a gendered display of power and dominance, we would expect men to engage in more sexual harassment when they face economically threatening conditions.

So, perceptions of threat lead men to engage in higher levels of sexual harassment. While most threat may come at the personal level — earning less than a spouse, having a female manager — there are also larger scale factors that can induce some degree of threat in male workers. Here, the unemployment rate seems like a reasonable proxy for economic strain and threat. Past work shows a strong relationship between the perceived threat of unemployment and poorer psychological and physical health (Benach et al., 2014; Burgard, Brand, & House, 2009; Burgard, Kalousova, & Seefeldt, 2012), lower reported happiness (Di Tella, Mac Culloch, & Oswald, 2001), and increases in bullying and aggressive behaviour in the workplace (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Roscigno, Lopez, & Hodson, 2009). Simply put, unemployment, or the threat of it, has been linked with stress and undesirable workplace behaviours, making it an indicator of strain and threat to economic status. As such, conditions of higher unemployment — experienced by workers as greater threat of job loss personally, knowing more individuals who have lost their jobs and hearing about job losses in the media — are likely to lead to greater aggregate levels of economic threat. This connection between employment status and masculine identity has been made explicit in some recent research. Michniewicz, Vandello, and Bosson (2014) find that US men believe that others will see them as 'less of a man' if they lose their jobs, believe that the loss of gender status will be larger than US women think it will be and overestimate how much others will perceive the loss of status. That is, even though society does not perceive a strong link between men's gender identities and their employment status, men do see a link and thus, any threat of unemployment is a threat to masculinity.

While all of the existing data about threat is on the individual level, our data on threat is entirely on the macro-level, which may seem to be at a remove from the experiences of individuals. If we were trying to predict individual reports of sexual harassment, it would probably be inappropriate to make use of macro-level indicators, but our analyses look at the overall number of EEOC reports in a given place, or time, or within a demographic group. While we cannot say that any macro-level indicator will induce threat in any individual, we can be confident that higher macro-levels of threat will lead to increases in the overall levels of threat experienced within a given population. This might not lead to one particular instance of reported sexual harassment, but may well lead to an overall greater prevalence of harassment behaviour.

4 | HYPOTHESES

The existing research leads us to two expectations about the dynamics of macro-level rates of sexual harassment in US workplaces. First, we expect that African-American women should report higher levels of sexual harassment in the workplace than white women. To the extent that sexual harassment is an exercise of power, we expect that men should be more likely to target African-American women, who, in general, have less power in society.

Second, as sexual harassment is an exercise in power, we expect that rates of sexual harassment should increase in response to worsening economic conditions. The need to express power is, itself, dynamic: when times are good, there should be fewer men looking to express power or dominance through sexual harassment. When the economy turns sour, especially in a way that is felt by workers, we would expect a greater need to exercise power and dominance, and therefore more sexual harassment of women.

These two hypotheses are linked in several ways. Both test expectations from previous research in workplaces, and in individual narratives given by victims of sexual harassment. Both deal with the underlying argument that sexual harassment in the workplace is driven by a need to show power and dominance over women. And, from a methodological perspective, examining sexual harassment of a group that has relatively less power in society (African-American women) helps build the case that observed changes in harassment complaints are reflecting changes in underlying rates of sexual harassment, rather than changes in reporting.

5 | DATA

In 1997, the first year that the US Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission began releasing detailed data on reported complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace, it logged 16,000 such reports (data from earlier years is available, but in highly aggregated form). In 2017, the most recent year for which data is available, that figure had fallen to 9600, a decline of more than 40 per cent over the last 20 years. Such a drop seems like something worth celebrating: but it turns out that the decline in reports of sexual harassment to the EEOC haven't been equal across all groups, and that any decline in the underlying levels of sexual harassment seemingly hasn't benefitted African-American women. What exactly is happening here, and why complaints of sexual harassment among African-American women have not fallen along with those of white women, is an important question, and one that we can gain some leverage on, even with the limited data available to us.

To track reports of sexual harassment, we make use of three EEOC datasets: the first is publicly released annual data reports, which include all types of harassment and discrimination, and are broken down by the type of discrimination reported. The second is state-based EEOC data, which contains the same data found in the national EEOC reports, broken down by the state (or territory, including Washington, DC) in which the report was made (see also the analysis from Hersch, 2018), not including Fair Employment Practices Act reports, as they may include a related, but different, set of reports. All of the state-based analyses use this data. The third is data made available from a BuzzFeed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, which includes records from October 1995 until August 2016. After BuzzFeed finished its initial reporting on the dataset, they made the data publicly available to researchers, a boon given that the data acquired through the FOIA is far more detailed than that normally provided by the EEOC in their annual reports. The BuzzFeed data includes an exact date of each filing, allowing us to analyse below the annual level provided in the public reports, and some individual characteristics of the women making the complaint (age, racial and ethnic background and national origin), and the company (number of employees, industry) where the harassment occurred. However, this level of granularity comes at a cost: rather than being broken down by state or territory, as in other EEOC reports, the data only includes national level data, as there are few enough reports from some states that including such data might make individual cases identifiable. All told, there are a little less than 160,000 cases of sexual harassment reported by women (we excluded the relatively small number of cases — about 6 per cent — reported by men) in the BuzzFeed data.

We aggregated each of these datasets into time-series data. In the BuzzFeed data, we aggregated individual cases by the month of the report, as well as the age of the complainant, their racial and ethnic background, and the size of their employer. In the EEOC data, we disaggregated the annual level data by the state or territory in which the report took place. In both cases, the resulting variables consist of a number of harassment claims in a category (racial, ethnic group or age category, or state, for instance) in a month (for the BuzzFeed FOIA data) or year (in the EEOC data).

It's important to note that all of this data on reported sexual harassment combines two theoretically separable constructs: actual sexual harassment in the workplace and reports of that sexual harassment. It is entirely possible for the amount of reported harassment to change because of a change in the likelihood of reporting, rather than a change in the underlying rate of sexual harassment, and vice versa. We would argue that reported harassment is itself an important indicator, as it drives policy responses and official statistics, but also that there is little reason to believe that women have become *less* likely to report sexual harassment over the last 20 years, indicating that observed declines in reported harassment are more likely due to changes in underlying rates, rather than in propensity to report harassment.

In addition, because we are looking at the dynamics — that is, the change — in sexual harassment complaints made to the EEOC, we do not need to assume that the EEOC is a perfect, or even an unbiased measure of workplace sexual harassment in the United States. Since we are looking at *changes* in the number of reported cases, it is not necessary that the EEOC data be comprehensive, or even unbiased, so long as it is consistent, and sufficiently large to allow for variance.

In this case, consistency means that the EEOC data is measuring the same thing over time. Ideally, it would mean that there is some underlying stochastic process that results in some unknown (but very small) proportion of women experiencing workplace harassment to the EEOC. So long as that proportion remains relatively stable, changes in the number of reports will reflect changes in the underlying number of workplace sexual harassment cases. The most likely threat to this consistency would be an increase in the likelihood that women would report harassment to the EEOC (as might be the result of the #metoo movement, which took place after the data analysed here). To the extent that we see an increase in the number of sexual harassment reports, this would be problematic, as the increase could be due to an increase in the underlying rate, or an increased likelihood of reporting. However, to the extent that we observe a decrease in EEOC reports, this would simply mean that the observed decrease is *understating* the actual decrease underlying harassment.

In addition, it is necessary that the EEOC sexual harassment numbers be large enough to allow for both positive and negative movement. If the reporting rate is so low that there are frequently zeroes in the dataset, we would not be able to distinguish between stability in the underlying amount of sexual harassment and decreases, as they would be observationally equivalent. However, given the number of reports on an annual, or even monthly, basis in the data, this is rarely an issue. There were some series, consisting of sexual harassment reports from US territories like the Marshall Islands and Guam, in which there are frequently zero reports in a month or a year; we excluded these from our analyses.

We understand that this question of unobserved underlying rates and reporting rates is a major concern, and, as such, have taken pains to establish, whenever possible, that we are looking at changes in the underlying rates, rather than in reporting. But given that we are observing, in general, decreases in reported rates of workplace sexual harassment, a change in reporting would only call into question our findings to the extent that women have become markedly *less* likely to report harassment over the past 20 years, something that has no basis in scholarly research on the subject.

Our analyses also require us to make use of an indicator of economic conditions. Scholars have used many indicators to measure relative economic conditions in the United States: the performance of the stock market, real wages and inflation, for instance, but we focus on the unemployment rate. We do this because unemployment has the greatest direct effect on individual workers, and increases in unemployment rates are likely to cause the greatest threat to workers.

Finally, we should note that all of the analyses discussed here are based on data gathered prior to the start of the #metoo movement in late 2017. It is entirely possible that #metoo has led to an increase in the reporting of sexual harassment, or even a wholesale shift in the dynamics of the reporting of sexual harassment; however, this will have to wait for a later analysis. The advent of #metoo, and the potential it has to shift the dynamics of reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace make the analyses here more urgent, as they help to establish the baseline against which #metoo will be judged.

6 | SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

Using the BuzzFeed FOIA data, we can separate out rates of reported sexual harassment by the race of the woman making the report: white, African American and, starting in 2007, Hispanic/Latinx. The results are striking: the decline in reported harassment among white women almost exactly parallels the overall change in reported harassment rates in the publicly released data, while the rate of harassment among African-American women has stayed remarkably consistent since 1995, ranging from 250 to 750 reports per month, with a mean of 471 and a standard deviation of 94. In contrast, reports from white women range from 470 to 2690 per month, with a mean of 1153, and a standard deviation of 397.

If we were to look only at reported sexual harassment of white women, the story would be fairly simple: harassment was highest in the mid-1990s, before entering a slow decline. It picked up again briefly around the time of the Great Recession, before dropping to new lows in the 2010s. However, the story about reported sexual harassment of African-American women is rather different: while it did slightly decline at about the same time as reported harassment of white women, it never saw the sustained decline between 1995 and 2007, and has stayed at basically the same level for more than 20 years, as seen in Figure 1.

Of course, some degree of this difference may be due to differences in labour force participation rates (LFPR) between the groups. Between 1996 and 2016, the civilian non-institutional population of both white women and African-American women increased (from 13 million to 17.4 million for African-American women, and from 88.6 million to 101.4 million for African-American women), which would be expected to lead to an increase in the number of women in the workplace, if that population increase hadn't been matched by a decrease in LFPR in both groups. White women's LFPR fell from 59.1 to 56.3 per cent over the 1996 to 2016 period, and LFPR for African-American women fell from 60.4 to 59.4 per cent (both changes are largely driven by a shift in the age of the overall population, with older workers falling out of employment). All told, the number of white women in workplaces across America increased from 52.4 to 57 million, while the number of African-American women increased from 7.8 to 10.3 million. This means that even a stable rate of reporting of sexual harassment would indicate a decline in the per

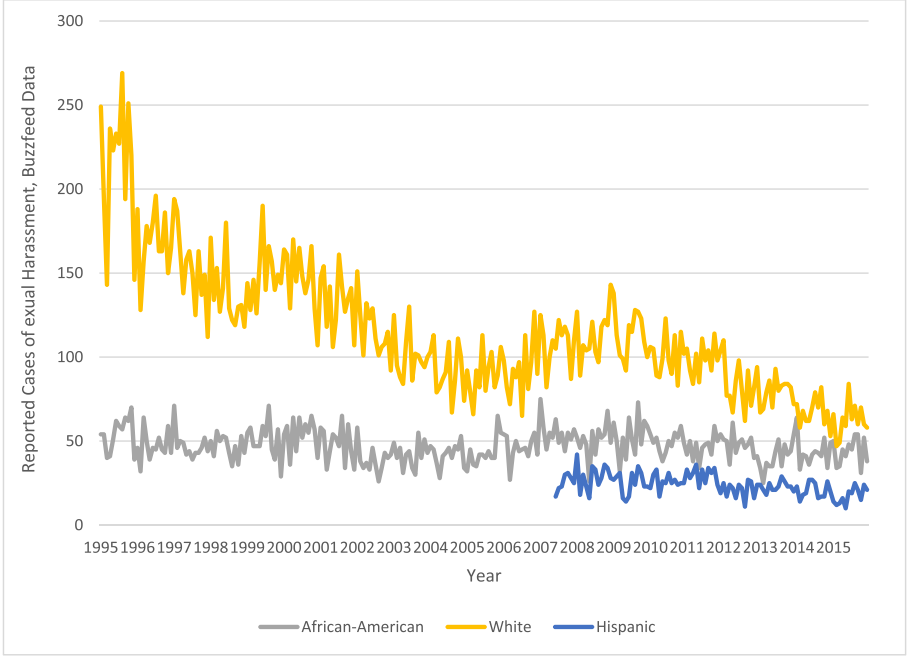

FIGURE 1 Women's sexual harassment reports by race of complainant, BuzzFeed data

capita rate of sexual harassment, and, indeed, on a per capita basis, reports of harassment declined in both groups. But this is hardly sufficient to explain the racial discrepancies: among white women, reports of sexual harassment declined from 47 per 100,000 in 1996 to 13 per 100,000 in 2016. For African-American women, the decline was from 82 per 100,000 in 1996 to 51 per 100,000 in 2016.

Put another way, the likelihood that an individual white woman would report sexual harassment to the EEOC dropped by more than 70 per cent between 1996 and 2016, while the rate for African-American women dropped by only 38 per cent. This magnifies the racial disparity: in 1996, African-American women were 1.7× as likely as white women to report sexual harassment to the EEOC. In 2016, they were 3.8 times as likely to do so. Even as overall reporting rates have fallen, the racial discrepancy has increased. No matter how we slice the data, African-American women are, and have been, much more likely to report sexual harassment than white women. We would also note that after this article was initially submitted, a separate analysis of EEOC micro-data (McCann et al., 2018) showed similar results on the differential harassment faced by white and African-American women.

6.1 | Changes in reporting, or in underlying rates?

But are these reporting rates reflecting changes in actual rates of sexual harassment, or in the likelihood of reporting? Again, we would argue that the amount of reported sexual harassment is intrinsically important, but the data offers some clues. The first possibility we can exclude is the idea that sexual harassment reports, or reports of discrimination in general, increased differentially in states that have a higher African-American population. Using the public release EEOC data broken down by state (not the BuzzFeed FOIA data, which lacks geographic information), we can track changes in reports by the racial characteristics of a state. In the ten states where the population is 2 per cent African American, or less, per capita sex discrimination complaints (a category that includes sexual harassment, as well as other sex-related discrimination issues) increased by 47 per cent between 2009 and 2017, according to the EEOC data, from 1.37 per 100,000 residents, to 2.05 per 100,000. In the ten states that are 20 per cent African American, or more (and the District of Columbia), sex discrimination complaints fell, from 15.2 per 100,000 to 12.7 per 100,000. At the same time, total discrimination reports to the EEOC declined in the states with the largest African-American populations (from 45.3 per 100,000 to 37.9 per 100,000), while increasing in those states with the smallest African-American populations (from 3.8 per 100,000 to 5.5 per 100,000). Note that this analysis is limited by the data made available by the EEOC. While detailed data on the number of complaints made about any particular kind of harassment is available on a national basis back to 1997, state by state data on the number of complaints is available only starting in 2009.

This data also indicates that sex discrimination charges, on a per capita basis, are much more common in states with large African-American populations than in those with smaller African-American populations. For instance, Alabama, which was 26.4 per cent African American in 2010, has averaged 64 sex discrimination complaints per 100,000 residents between 2009 and 2017. In contrast, Maine, which is barely 1 per cent African American, averages only 2.6 sex discrimination complaints per 100,000 residents. All told, sex discrimination complaints per capita in a state are correlated at +0.77 with the per cent of the population that is African American (if we exclude Washington, DC, which has a much higher proportion of African-American residents than other areas, from the analysis, the correlation drops to 0.64). But, while the number of sex discrimination charges is, in general, higher in states with a larger African-American population, that cannot be what's driving the racial disparity in complaints, as those states have seen a *drop* in sex discrimination charges, while the states with a small African-American population have seen an *increase*. Using the same dataset, we can see where sexual discrimination charges per capita have increased over the 2009–2017 period. The biggest increases are in Mississippi (+3.0 per 100,000), Vermont (+2.4) and Utah (+1.7); the biggest declines are in Washington, DC (−15.5), Oklahoma (−6.2) and Tennessee (−4.6). The overall correlation is −0.41, and remains significant ($r = -0.07$) even when we remove Washington, DC from the data. If it were the case that the relative increase in sexual harassment claims among African Americans were simply being driven by increases in reports from states that happen to have large populations of African Americans, we would expect a

positive correlation between the change in the number of sex discrimination reports and the proportion of the population that is African American. Instead, we're seeing the opposite: lower levels of reporting in states with a small African-American population throughout the period studied, which tend to increase (or at least not decrease) over the period studied. Whatever is driving the disparity, it's not just the states where African Americans are more likely to live, as seen in Figure 2. In both of these analyses, re-estimation without the inclusion of Massachusetts and California, because of concerns about reliability of reports coming from these states, has no substantive effect on the results.

We can also gain some traction in the analysis by looking at the changes in sexual harassment complaints by the age of the woman making the complaint within racial groups. In 1996 (note that since this is based on national, rather than state reports from the EEOC, we can track reports back farther than is possible with some of the other datasets), sexual harassment complaints from white women were most common for women in their 20s and 30s. Complaints from women in their 50s or over were relatively rare. In 2016, however, there were almost exactly the same number of complaints from white women in their 20s, 30s and 40s, with about 150 from each age cohort, while the number of complaints from women in their 50s and older was almost the same as it had been in 1996, down only slightly. The dynamics for African-American women are similar, with more complaints from women in their 20s and 30s early on in the data, but complaints from women in their 20s, 30s and 40s converging by 2016, at about 110 complaints from each of those age cohorts. The notable difference, though, is that the number of complaints from African-American women in their 50s or older have actually gone *up* between 1996 and 2017, though this could be due to increased LFPR in that group. Sexual harassment complaints, by age, for white and African-American women are in Figures 3 and 4.

This lack of differences based on age between African-American and white women is itself striking. In general, we would expect that women more able to exert power in the workplace would be more willing to report sexual harassment, and as power in a workplace is generally correlated with age, women in their 20s (or younger) should be less willing to report harassment, while women in their 30s and 40s should be more willing, as older women are more likely to have job stability, and/or managerial positions. The fact that the trends in complaints by age are strikingly similar for both African-American women and white women indicates that these dynamics are the same across these racial groups. If, for instance, we found that reported sexual harassment had increased for African-American women

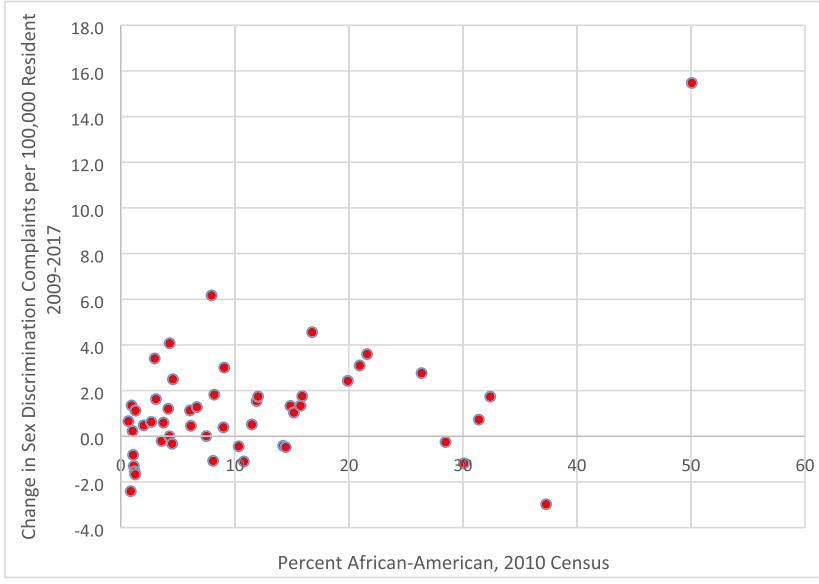

FIGURE 2 Change in per capita sex discrimination complaints by per cent African American in each state

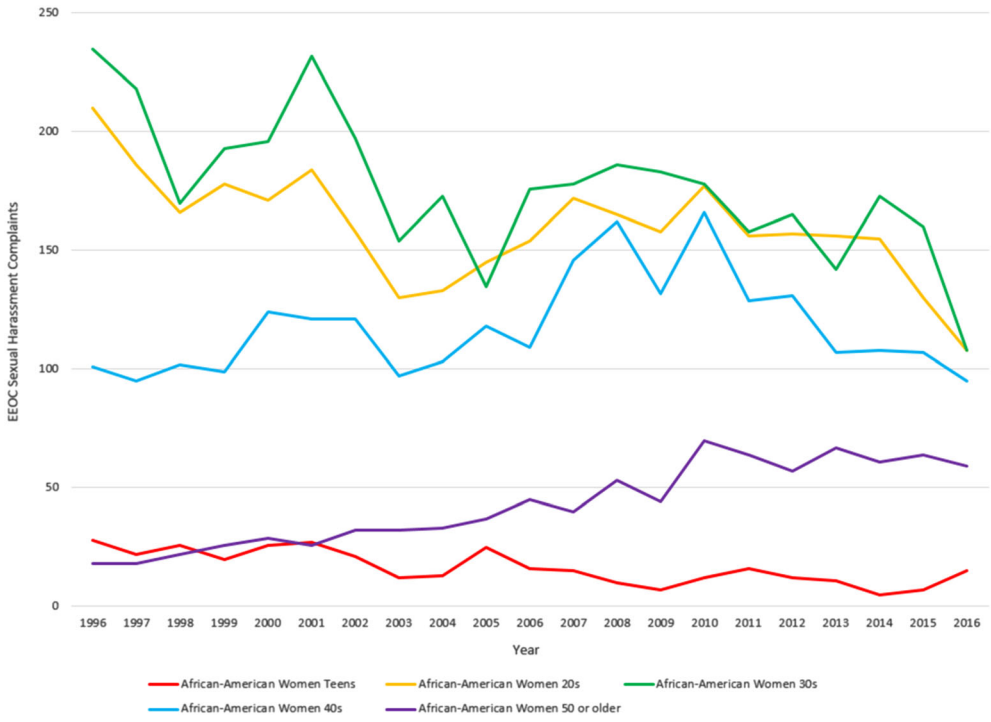

FIGURE 3 EEOC sexual harassment complaints by year, age of complainant, African-American women

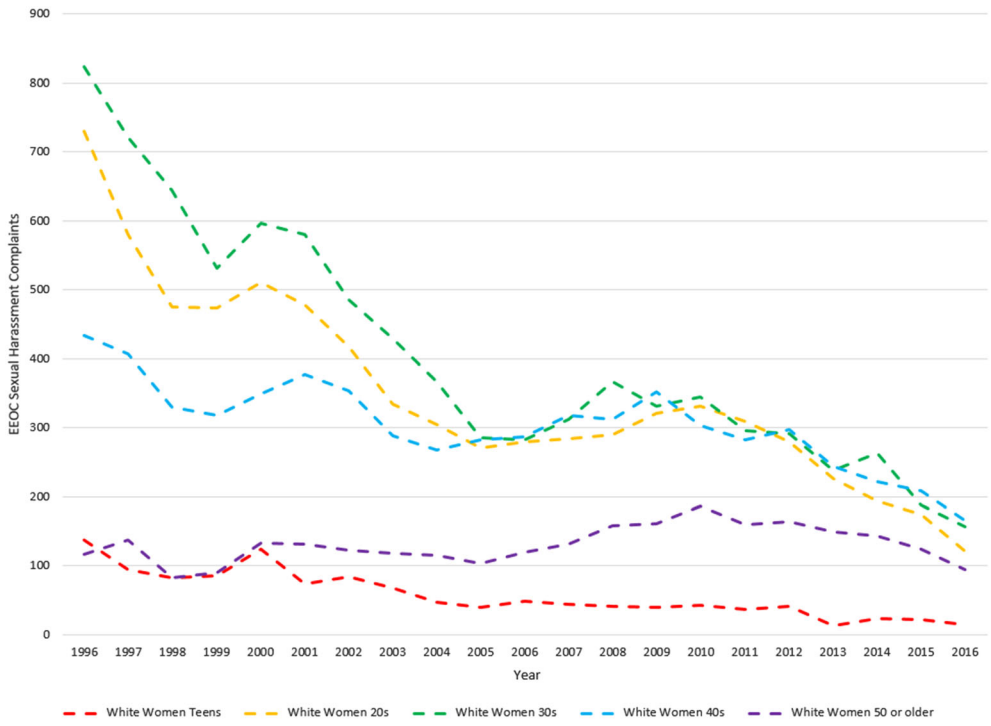

FIGURE 4 EEOC sexual harassment complaints by year, age of complainant, white women

in their 30s and 40s, but not for white women, it could be argued that we were seeing evidence in line with a reporting-based explanation. But, if, as we see here, the age-related dynamics of white and African-American women are the same, it's hard to explain the persistent differences in reported harassment purely based on reporting rates.

Another potential difference between African-American women and white women that could be driving the observed differences in reported sexual harassment is differences in the nature of the employer. In 1996, a majority of the sexual harassment complaints (12,770) made by white women came from women working for smaller firms with 15–100 employees; by 2016, the number of complaints from white women working at companies of that size had dropped by more than 80 per cent, to 2420. Similarly, the number of complaints from white women working at the largest employers, with more than 500 employees, dropped by more than two-thirds between 1996 and 2016, from 6330 to 1950.

Among African-American women, however, the number of complaints from women at smaller firms dropped — but only by about 60 per cent, from 2990 to 1180, rather than the 80 per cent seen for white women. For African-American women working at the largest companies, complaints dropped by only 7 per cent. In sum, harassment complaints from white women to the EEOC fell dramatically at companies of all sizes; but for African-American women, they fell only for women working at smaller companies. This is inconsistent with an explanation based on changes in reporting rates. Women working in larger firms, with generally greater access to human resources departments and opportunities for re-assignment away from an abusive environment, are generally more likely to report harassment than women working at smaller firms.

Finally, we can look at other types of racialized discrimination complaints to see if there's any evidence of a change in reporting rates. Using the EEOC public release data — meaning that we cannot separate out complaints based on individual characteristics of the individual making the complaint, nor can we look at monthly level data — we can look at the rates of racial harassment, which is likely concentrated among non-white individuals. As seen in Figure 5, complaints of racial harassment actually peaked in 2010, and, as of 2017, are at almost exactly the same level they were at when EEOC began keeping such records 20 years prior. If there was an increase in the

FIGURE 5 Racial harassment complaints, EEOC data

willingness of African-American women to report harassment generally, it hasn't shown up in reports of racial harassment (though sexual discrimination and racial harassment claims often go hand in hand). This data is also useful for addressing claims that the change in sexual harassment complaints has come from fear of increasingly sophisticated retaliation techniques (Berrey et al., 2017; Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012): there's no reason why other forms of harassment wouldn't be subject to such strategies.

7 | SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT RATES

7.1 | Methods

To measure the effect of national level unemployment on changes in rates of reported sexual harassment, we make use of the BuzzFeed data (aggregated to a monthly basis) and the monthly unemployment data provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It would seem relatively straightforward to look for changes in the unemployment rate, and see if the rates of reported sexual harassment increase or decrease in response, and we will include this basic model along with the analyses presented later.

The unemployment rate used here is the most widely reported (U6) rate, and, fortunately for the variance in our data, ranges widely during the period studied, mostly due to the Great Recession of 2008–2010. Over the period studied, it averages 7.4 per cent, with a median value of 7.45 (standard deviation 1.73, 10^{th} percentile at 5.1 per cent, 90^{th} percentile at 9.5 per cent). With an analysis looking at the threat to men's economic status, it might be tempting to look at gendered unemployment rates: that is, men's versus women's unemployment. In this case, however, doing so introduces some confounds into the relationship: if men become differentially unemployed, they may be more threatened, but there are also more women in the workforce relative to men, leading to more opportunities for sexual harassment. While the gendered unemployment rates do not move exactly in tandem, they are closely linked ($r = 0.88$), making the overall unemployment rate a good proxy for the unemployment felt by either sex.

However, this basic model ignores some of the critical aspects of the time series that we are dealing with. For instance, the harassment rates have some endogenous aspects to them: standard time-series diagnostics reveal autoregressive components at lags of one and two months, which should ideally be controlled for before we introduce exogenous factors.

Additionally, the amount of reported sexual harassment has trended down significantly, and we can account for this overall trend as well. This factor can be included as a simple year count variable (implying a linear decreasing trend).

We use autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) based regression to allow us to simultaneously control for endogenous and exogenous factors in the model, and we use multiple specifications, moving from simpler to more complex, to allay concerns about results being driven by specific modelling decisions. In an era in which social science researchers are increasingly concerned about p-hacking (Head, Holman, Lanfear, Kahn, & Jennions, 2015; Simonsohn, Simmons, & Nelson, 2015; Ulrich & Miller, 2015), the presentation of multiple specifications can be useful. To the extent that all of the specifications give a consistent picture of the effects of the independent variable of interest on the dependent variable we are modelling, we can be confident that the results are not being driven by the exact specifications of the model.

7.2 | Results

We present the results of four models of sexual harassment. The first two use the overall level of sexual harassment in a month as the dependent variable, as a function of the unemployment rate in the previous month. In the first of these models, we exclude significant endogenous factors in the model; in the second, they are included. The second two models use the month-to-month change in the level of reported sexual harassment as the dependent variable (rather than the total amount of reported harassment), as a function of the change in the unemployment rate in the

previous month. As we are working with the differenced form of the dependent variable, controlling for endogenous factors is rather more important than in the non-differenced form used in the first two models; including some parts of an ARIMA model (the differencing) without including others (the autoregressive factors) would be inconsistent, so the autoregressive factors are included in both models. However, to help ensure robustness of the results, we include the linear time indicator as an independent control variable in one of these models. The results are presented in Table 1.

The first two models (one including endogenous autoregressive features of the series, one not), give a consistent estimate of the relationship between the overall unemployment rate and the overall level of harassment reported to the EEOC. While many robustness checks (such as jack-knife estimation) are not appropriate for time-series models, estimation of standard errors using Huber–White sandwich estimation shows very similar results in models 1, 2 and 4, though not in model 3. Estimation using outer product of the gradient (OPG, aka Berndt-Hall-Hall-Hausman) or Observed Information Matrix (OIM) techniques lead to the same conclusions as the standard models presented above.

These results indicate that a higher unemployment rate in month 1 leads to an increase in the number of reported harassment cases in the following month: if the unemployment rate is about one standard deviation above the mean for the period (about 9.1 per cent, rather than the mean of 7.4 per cent), we would expect that reported sexual harassment would be about 5 per cent higher.

However, there are other factors that could be leading both of these figures to be higher at the same time: a better test comes from looking at the relationship between changes in the unemployment rate and changes in the number of reported sexual harassment cases. In the two models using the differenced form of the variables, a 1-point increase in the unemployment rate in month 1 was expected to lead to a 5- or 6-point (depending on whether or not the linear time effect is included) increase in the number of reported sexual harassment cases in the following month. Put another way, a one standard deviation increase in the unemployment rate (1.7 points) is expected to lead to an increase of about one-third of a standard deviation in reported sexual harassment in the following month. Note that ARIMA models, like the ones used here, do not estimate overall goodness of fit statistics for the model. However, pseudo-R^2 estimates for these models range from 0.08 to 0.36, depending on the specifications used.

While it's always possible that some extraneous, uncontrolled, factor is confounding the relationship between the two variables, our use of lagged predictor variables can at least remove the possibility of reverse causation. While we cannot mathematically exclude the possibility that something else is driving both numbers, it would have to be some factor that drives unemployment now, and sexual harassment later, which seems unlikely. In addition, we can be certain that we are not seeing reverse causation: the lag ensures Granger causation, establishing that, in the absence of a time machine, sexual harassment cannot be driving unemployment rates (even if, in some individual cases, individuals may quit their jobs to avoid sexual harassment).

The models allow us to reach two conclusions about the relationship between unemployment and reported sexual harassment. First, periods of higher unemployment correlate with periods of higher reports of sexual harassment to the EEOC. Second, increases in unemployment at time 1 correlate with increases in reported sexual harassment at time 2. While the effects are not enormous, they explain a large portion of the variance in the dependent variable, and are consistent with a world in which random factors are the main driver of month-to-month changes in reports of sexual harassment, but factors like the stresses caused by increased economic strain play a role as well.

8 | DISCUSSION

These two analyses make use of under-utilized macro-level data to test the expectations of previous, micro-level studies of sexual harassment in the United States. The major limitation of such an approach is that it relies on complaints made to the EEOC, so the figures may change as a result of either a change in the underlying rate of sexual harassment or in women's propensity to report sexual harassment. It is our stance that the reported rates are,

TABLE 1 ARIMA models for number of EEOC harassment reports, BuzzFeed data

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Dependent variable	**Harassment**		**Harassment**		**Change in harassment**		**Change in harassment**	
***R*-squared**	**0.15**		**0.28**		**0.34**		**0.35**	
	Coef	**Std error**	**Coef**	**Std error**	**Coef**	**Std error**	**Coef**	**Std error**
Unemployment (lagged)	**5.237**	**1.160**	**5.432**	**2.029**			**9.572**	**3.268**
Change in lagged unemployment					**3.517**	**1.782**	**0.726**	**0.315**
Linear time effect					0.125	0.087	**0.759**	**0.289**
Constant	131.752	8.650	130.93	15.287	−252.147	175.862	−1532.936	584.067
AR (1)			0.246	0.116	−1.011	0.014	−1.014	0.139
AR (2)			0.208	0.133	−0.999	0.002	−0.999	0.002
Sigma	21.020	1.610	18.315	1.234	17.548	1.343	16.774	1.374

Bolded figures are significant at $p < 0.05$, one-tailed.

themselves, worthy of inquiry, as they form the basis for official statistics and the information given to lawmakers looking to address the issue. However, our analyses strongly suggest that the movement in the number of reports of sexual harassment is due to changes in underlying rates, rather than changes in reporting propensities. While the likelihood of reporting sexual harassment over time has likely changed, there is no reason to expect, nor have any scholars in our reading of the literature proposed, that women have become *less* likely to report sexual harassment over the last 20 years. As such, we cannot explain the steep decline in reported sexual harassment simply through appeals to changes in reporting rates.

Also, we would expect that women with relatively more power in society would be the most likely to see an increase in the likelihood of reporting sexual harassment, but it is white women who have seen the biggest decline in reported sexual harassment. Similarly, if changes in the propensity to report and driving changes in EEOC, we would expect the biggest declines to occur with large employers, where women are more likely to have access to official channels for their complaints, but the decline in reports was about equal across companies of all sizes. None of this is to say that the propensity to report has not changed over time, but rather that any such changes run counter to the observed macro-level trends, implying that our results are likely *underestimating* the actual effects.

It might also be the case that women may be more willing to report sexual harassment when the unemployment rate is relatively high, as reporting may look easier than finding another job. However, we expect that any such effect would be swamped by the number of women who would choose not to report harassment, for fear of losing their job in a difficult labour market.

The first set of analyses makes the case that sexual harassment is an increasingly racialized phenomenon. Even accounting for demographic changes in the composition of the female workforce in the United States, African-American women have become increasingly more likely to report sexual harassment than white women. The analyses that look at changes in the number of complaints by state, size of employer and age help build the case that the difference is in underlying rates of sexual harassment, rather than in differential rates of reporting. The data tells a clear story: sexual harassment has declined across the board in the United States over the past 20 years, but that decline has disproportionately benefitted white women, who are now much less likely to experience sexual harassment in the workplace than African-American women than was the case 20 years ago.

The second set of analyses shows how national economic factors, like the unemployment rate, can impact the rate of sexual harassment of women in American workplaces. The results show that about one-third of the change in workplace sexual harassment reported to the EEOC can be attributed to changes in the national unemployment rate in the previous month. When the unemployment rate goes up, producing greater societal strain and a need to assert dominance, reported sexual harassment goes up as well. When conditions for workers are better, and the unemployment rate falls, so too do reports of sexual harassment. These results, too, strongly suggest that changes in EEOC reports are driven by actual incidence of sexual harassment, rather than changes in the propensity to report. Given that women (reasonably) report fear of retaliation for reports of sexual harassment in the workplace, we would expect the propensity to report harassment would *decline* when the unemployment rate rises, rather than increase.

9 | CONCLUSION

The general purpose of these analyses is twofold. The first is to bolster the external validity of the research on sexual harassment that has been carried out over the past decades, by testing the findings of smaller scale on the largest available dataset. In this, we were largely successful: just as in the small scale and ethnographic studies, women of colour are much more likely to experience sexual harassment in the workplace, and the benefits that have come from greater awareness of sexual harassment have benefitted white women more than others. Similarly, our results on the effects of unemployment support the notion that sexual harassment in the workplace is about establishing power and dominance. When men feel threatened — in this case, by economic factors out of their own control —

they become more likely to engage in sexual harassment. The causes of sexual harassment that have been identified in the micro-level literature seem well supported in the macro-level data.

For instance, our results serve to complement the findings of McLaughlin et al. (2012). They document the direct and indirect costs of sexual harassment on a cohort of St Paul, Minneapolis, women who participated in the Youth Development Study. They find that experiences of sexual harassment have a 'scarring' effect on women, leading to lower overall earnings for years afterwards. They use qualitative interviews to examine the mechanisms behind this loss of earnings, and find that women who experience sexual harassment in their sample were likely to quit their jobs in the face of the disappointment, anxiety and feelings of betrayal engendered by both the initial harassment and employers' responses to it. While their findings are valuable for how they shed light on the long-term effects of sexual harassment on women's careers, they do not provide any insight into differential experiences of white women and women of colour (only two of their interviews were with non-white women), nor does their analysis of a single cohort allow for any sort of analysis of changes in sexual harassment over time. The combination of our results on the intersectionality of sexual harassment with their findings on the long-term effects of harassment help us to understand how the long-term effects of harassment may differentially impact women of colour, and how this has changed over time. An approach like that taken by McLaughlin et al. (2012) could also be useful in examining the lived experience of women who have been subjected to workplace harassment: if macro-economic factors are as important as our analyses indicate, we would expect that women's decisions about how to deal with harassment — complaints, quitting and so on — would vary based on the state of the overall economy. There is, unfortunately, no way to identify such variance in the present data, but doing so would make for a valuable contribution to the literature.

The comparison with past research, like that of McLaughlin et al. (2012) also serves to highlight the limitations inherent in the past approaches. Studies based on in-depth studies of one, or a small number of, workplaces, necessarily lack external validity. It is always possible that there is something unusual about the workplaces being studied, or the particular institutional culture of the employees or managers. Similarly, studies that follow one cohort of women, or study sexual harassment at one point in time, cannot measure change in rates of sexual harassment, nor changes in the targets of that harassment. By looking at national data, and doing so over time, we are able to establish far greater external validity than is allowed by other approaches. Our analyses also allow us to establish why rates of harassment are increasing or decreasing, rather than merely taking the existence of the harassment for granted, and looking at the effects it has on women. As discussed earlier, sexual harassment in the workplace can have enormous effects on women, but such effects are contingent on the underlying rates of harassment. By better understanding the causes of harassment, and the women most likely to be victimized, we can do a better job of preventing harassment from arising to begin with, rather than treating the consequences.

The second purpose of the analyses is to examine how sexual harassment in the workplace has changed over time. As nearly all of the previous research on sexual harassment has been cross-sectional, it has been impossible to isolate changes, or responsiveness to external factors. Simply put, temporal and macro-level factors have been constants in most previous research, and here, we're able to make them variables. When we do so, they not only reinforce the findings from the micro-level findings, but also allow for new ones: in micro-level studies, it would be difficult to show that sexual harassment has declined over time, or to isolate the effects of national economic factors.

All told, the results tend to support the over-arching conclusion of the smaller scale studies of sexual harassment. Rather than being about sexual desire, or an unavoidable consequence of men and women working together, sexual harassment in the workplace is an expression of power, a way for men to assert their dominance. The shift from sexual harassment of white women to sexual harassment of African-American women indicates that harassers are conscious of power relationships, and choose to target more vulnerable women in their workplaces. The link between changes in the unemployment rate and changes in sexual harassment in the following months indicates that men are responsive to societal threat, and are more likely to engage in harassment behaviour when they have reason to feel that their economic position in society is likely to be under threat.

The studies included here only scratch the surface of what can be done with this data. Future research could examine how rates of reported harassment have changed by industry, or region, and examine how such changes have differentially impacted women, based on their age, race or ethnic background. Researchers can also make use of these approaches to study the impact of the #metoo movement on women's propensity to report sexual harassment, and to see how, if at all, the movement changed the long-term dynamics of sexual harassment reports.

Research on the EEOC complainants themselves could help us to understand what factors lead women to report workplace sexual harassment to the EEOC, which would both help us to understand any biases present in the data, as well as help make changes to encourage reporting, when appropriate. Simply put, workplace sexual harassment is not something that happens in one industry, in one workplace, or with one culture: it is a societal issue, and our approaches to studying it should be as wide as the problem is.

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