"I'm a troublemaker": The need to focus on early-career academics' experiences of sexual harassment in Ireland

Aoibhinn Ni Shuilleabhain, Aoibhinn.nishuilleabhain@ucd.ie, University College Dublin, Ireland

Craig Skerritt, craig.skerritt@manchester.ac.uk, University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

The issue of sexual harassment of early-career academics in Ireland has recently been brought to the fore through the mainstream media. Little research has been undertaken, however, on highlighting and documenting such experiences, leading to a lack of awareness and dearth of specifically targeted initiatives for this cohort. The authors, themselves early-career academics, attempt to highlight this problem by sharing data generated through focus group interviews with early-career academics, who reported experiences of sexual harassment in the context of challenges they faced in their work environment. The data presented here are shared to highlight these issues as being more common among early-career academics than believed. The authors call for further research to be undertaken focusing on early-career academics in order to raise awareness of such issues and for more resources to be developed to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and violence in higher education in Ireland.

Keywords

Early-career academics; early-career researchers; sexual harassment; sexual misconduct; higher education;

Key Messages

- Rates and experiences of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, and sexual violence of early-career academics in Ireland are unknown.

- Our data suggest that these issues are more prevalent than commonly believed

- Early-career academics' experiences of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct and sexual violence should be a focus of future research in order to raise awareness of such issues and for more resources to be developed to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and violence in higher education in Ireland.

Introduction

In this paper we, both early-career academics (ECAs)[i], critically reflect on a project we previously collaborated on and raise issues around sexual harassment in higher education in Ireland that merit further attention. As outlined by Bull (2022), there is currently a heightened focus on complaints processes in higher education institutions (HEIs) internationally and this has also been mirrored in Ireland (Department of Education & Skills, 2019; Higher Education Authority, 2022a). In the context of this focus and recent national policy change in Ireland, we want to bring the problem of sexual harassment of ECAs to the fore by utilising data from focus groups documenting ECAs' experiences in Ireland. Recent research in Ireland has found that only 16% of staff in HEIs considered sexual harassment and violence to be a problem for staff (both faculty and administrative) on campuses (MacNeela et al., 2022). Contrasting with this, 52% of women in that same study had experienced some form of sexual harassment (MacNeela

et al., 2022), in line with figures from other jurisdictions (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Ferrer-Pérez & Bosch-Fiol, 2020; McCarry & Jones, 2021). There are no data, however, that focus on ECAs, a particularly vulnerable group in higher education in Ireland.

We hope this contribution will emphasise the prevalence of this issue for ECAs in higher education and move the conversation from the anecdotes, rumours, and problems that often get swept under the carpet (e.g. Mullally, 2020), are considered as 'normal' (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2022), or are underestimated. We consider this a necessary direction of research in the context of chronic casualisation of contracts and precarity of employment for this cohort of academics, with ECAs and particularly women often dependent on unfair and exploitative work in the higher education system (Higher Education Authority, 2022b; IFUT, 2023; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). In this submission we "start from experiences, rather than from theory" (Gill, 2016, p.43), as the first author experienced sexual harassment from a more senior, male academic colleague while working as an ECA on a short-term contract. The lack of an adequate institutional response "necessitated personal exposure" (Gill, 2017, p.2) (see Mullally (2020) for initial media reporting), which contributed to policy changes within the Irish landscape (Oireachtas TV, 2021; Higher Education Authority, 2022a). We note, however, that no subsequent focus on the experiences of ECAs in the broader context across Ireland has followed and highlight that, while there is often a "secrecy surrounding complaint-making" (Coletu's introduction to Ahmed's 'Complaint Biography', 2019), there is a necessity for further documentation of ECAs' experiences in this regard.

Sexual harassment in higher education and research

Sexual harassment includes any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose, or effect, of violating the dignity of a person,

especially when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment (Council of Europe, 2011). It describes a continuum of behaviours and attitudes better understood as a system, rather than a set, of isolated incidents (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Lombardo & Bustelo, 2022). While sexual harassment is not confined to one gender alone the features of how it occurs and how it is addressed in higher education are gendered, where women often have to navigate power imbalance, an institutionalisation of policy responses, and a normalisation of gender inequality and sexual harassment or violence (Blithe & Elliot, 2020; Lombardo & Bustelo, 2022; McCarry & Jones, 2021). Brorsen Smidt et al. (2020) note the emerging gendered sites of resistance related to gendered and sexual harassment in higher education, where women are the main protagonists, resulting in actions such as exiting the institution. They also highlight the associated challenges of female academics who experience such harassment while attempting to keep up with 'academic housework' (Heijstra et al., 2017), maintain a career trajectory while on a precarious contract, and attempt to avoid generating additional workplace tension (Blithe & Elliot, 2020; Brorsen Smidt et al., 2020; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). Raising awareness of this issue for female ECAs is thus of increased importance.

The need to highlight the Early-Career Academic Experience

As highlighted above, experiences of sexual harassment can lead to ECAs leaving or thinking of leaving their institutions (Bull, 2022; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Furthermore, recent research has demonstrated that the majority of unreported sexual harassment occurs to junior faculty (Blithe & Elliot, 2020) and that contract precarity of ECAs, highlighted as an issue in Ireland (IFUT, 2023; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019), contributes as a barrier to confronting and reporting such

behaviour (McCarry & Jones, 2021). While there has been a progression of national conversations around sexual harassment of students and staff in HEIs in Ireland, little is visible in the research literature around the lived experiences of ECAs. This speaks to, perhaps, the under-consideration of this matter as a prevalent problem in HEIs in Ireland, as exampled by our previous collaborative experience outlined below and personal experience of the first author outlined above.

Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020) note the limited number of studies undertaken with marginalised groups who may be at a greater risk of being exposed to sexual harassment. They particularly note groups such as lesbian or bisexual women, those who are race-typed as non-white or those with functional disabilities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). From their systematic literature review, they also outline the evidence suggesting that younger women and women with insecure employment conditions are more exposed to sexual harassment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Considering this in the national Irish context, more attention needs to be paid to sexual harassment of ECAs who, as outlined previously, are often in insecure and temporary conditions (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019) and where the progression of women academics has been continuously identified as an issue (Harford, 2020; Higher Education Authority, 2022b; Prothero, 2023).

Documenting the experiences of ECAs: An accidental example

The authors, as ECAs, began their collaboration as part of a working group attempting to record supports in HEIs for ECAs across the island of Ireland, north and south of the border, conducted with the Royal Irish Academy. For this project four focus group interviews were conducted in 2018 by author 2 with 35 ECAs from 11 HEIs, the key findings of which have been published as part of a Royal Irish Academy report (see Royal

Irish Academy, 2018). Participation of ECAs in the research was on a voluntary, opt-in basis and, of the 35 participants, 13 identified as male and 22 identified as female. To recruit participants recent recipients of a Royal Irish Academy high-impact travel grants scheme aimed at early-career postdoctoral researchers (i.e., those awarded in 2015/16, 2016/17, and 2017/18), were contacted and invited to participate, with 11 agreeing to do so. A further 24 participants were subsequently recruited through calls issued by HEI research offices and information shared by senior faculty. Ethical approval was granted by the Royal Irish Academy's Policy Oversight Group and informed consent was sought from all participants.

Audio recordings of the focus group interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. The findings related to informal support; a disconnect between teaching and research; research funding; precarity; and gender. While experiences of sexual harassment were revealed in these conversations, these data did not prominently feature in the final publication. In a reflective stance, with better understanding of the gendered and institutional responses to sexual harassment, the authors now share these quotes to highlight these experiences as more prevalent than commonly believed. In the original report participants' comments were unattributed, but pseudonyms are used here to better recognise the personal experience of participants while continuing to protect their identities.

As the focus group data were not generated with a view to explicitly considering issues of sexual harassment, there is a limited proportion of the recorded conversations addressing this. Nonetheless, these comments and contributions are relevant, powerful and deserve to be aired. We acknowledge that these limited data were generated without deliberate questions or research focus relating to sexual harassment and note the work of Bull (2022) in recording such experiences in the UK context.

Sharing ECAs' experiences of sexual harassment

Here we share extracts from the focus groups that explicitly reference sexual harassment and the challenges it causes to female ECAs (Lipton, 2017). What strikes us about these data is the prominence of themes of gender and power, and the differential treatment of female ECAs. As outlined above, precarity is now a common feature of academic careers and particularly, but not exclusively, for younger staff and ECAs (Gill, 2016; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). In this comment from Claire, we see how career opportunities for female junior academics can be presented through and restricted by inappropriate actions:

> Claire: That is where being female came in because certain senior lecturers and some professors were like "Let's go for a drink and discuss this, about how you could possibly do a lecture for me" and it was kind of like "I can't do that". You can't do that as a woman and would you have actually said that to a man? Is it because I am woman that you actually said that to me? So, I had to not follow up on certain opportunities because of that kind of attitude, which is just so archaic and frustrating.

Contemporary neoliberal universities encourage autonomous, self-motivating, responsibilised subjects (Gill, 2016) and solidify the power of managers (Brorsen Smidt et al., 2020; Morrish, 2020), all the while impacting the careers of academic women who tend to remain largely invisible as academic leaders (Lipton, 2017). This can manifest in belittling the time and space for articulating feminist activism in research and denigrating certain research fields (Pereira, 2016). In addition, the power disparity between ECAs and more senior faculty members and management means that equal treatment and opportunities for remonstrance are, therefore, often removed:

> Sarah: The 'female' thing I have gotten because I have got these throwaway comments about like 'my' studies or 'women's issues' or 'women's problems'. I am like "Yes okay, because rape and sexual assault is only a women's issue" … but

don't get me started…and you can't react…that is probably what is the most frustrating thing, is that you can't react because your potential of ever getting funding is seriously in trouble if you go on a big rant.

Silence is habitually the only option, as to speak out brings its own set of challenges. Sara Ahmed (2019) explains that to hear someone as complaining can be an effective way of dismissing them and that to become a complainer is to become the location of a problem. As can be seen in this exchange between two female ECAs, victims can be dismissed, their experiences diminished, and their characters denigrated:

Alice: I'm a troublemaker.
Claire: Yeah exactly. "Ah sure he didn't mean it."

Thus, these experiences commonly 'remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy' (Gill, 2016, p.40).

Policy reform and the need for further research

New protocols and policies around documenting and reporting sexual harassment are recently required of all Irish HEIs through the national Higher Education Authority (Department of Education & Skills, 2019; Higher Education Authority, 2022a). The introduction of policies, however, do not necessarily lead to the problem of sexual harassment and violence being eradicated or even dealt with appropriately or adequately (Hodgins & McNamara, 2019; Lipton, 2017). The simple introduction of any policy is unlikely to solve any problem when the issue is so complex. In the first instance, new policies should be accompanied by an acceptance and awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment in academia and a clear understanding that it will not be tolerated (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2022). An acceptance and awareness of the problem of sexual

harassment in higher education, particularly of ECAs, can only be achieved by recording experiences.

Our prior collaboration as ECA peers contributed to the possibility of us sharing our experiences, allowing us to validate and explore our thinking on these issues from both male and female perspectives (Macoun & Miller, 2014). We decided to share and accentuate the experiences of ECAs in order to highlight issues of sexual harassment that contribute to large numbers of women leaving the academy (Bull, 2022; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). There are also many, regardless of gender, who stay and suffer the consequences of that decision. More research needs to be undertaken on gender inequality and sexual harassment and violence in academia in Ireland, and particularly on the experiences of ECAs as an often-vulnerable group (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). We highlight the need to work towards unearthing ECAs' experiences of sexual harassment and violence, across a diversity of perspectives and encompassing ECAs from different backgrounds and genders, in order to raise awareness of such issues and for more resources to be developed for preventing and responding to sexual harassment and violence in higher education in Ireland.

References

Ahmed, S. (2019). A complaint biography. *Biography*, 42(3), 514-523. https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0057

Colettu, E. (2019) Introduction to 'A complaint biodigraphy'. *Biography*, 42(3), 514-523. https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0057

Blithe, S. J., & Elliot, M. (2020). Gender inequality in the academy: microaggressions, work-life conflict, and academic rank. *Journal of Gender Studies, 29*(7), 751-764. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1657004

Bondestam, F.,& Lundqvist, M. (2020). Sexual harassment in higher education: A systematic review. European Journal of Higher Education, 10(4), 397-419. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2020.1729833

Brorsen Smidt, T., Bondestam, F., Pétursdóttir, G. M. & Einarsdóttir, P. (2020) Expanding gendered sites of resistance in the neoliberal academy. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 10:2, 115-129, https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2018.1541753

Bull, A. (2022) Catalysts and rationales for reporting staff sexual misconduct to UK higher education institutions. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 6(1), 45-60, https://doi.org/10.1332/239868021X16270572218631

Council of Europe. (2011). *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*. Strasbourg. https://rm.coe.int/168008482e

Department of Education & Skills (2019). *Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive: Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions.* Department of Education & Skills: Dublin. https://assets.gov.ie/24925/57c394e5439149d087ab589d0ff39c92.pdf

Ferrer-Pérez, V. A. & Bosch-Fiol, E. (2020) Sexual harassment at a Spanish public university: an examination of victims' experiences by gender and campus status. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 4(1), 41-58, https://doi.org/10.1332/239868019X15764491770571

Gill, R. (2016). Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia. *Feministische Studien*, 34(1), 39-55. https://doi.org/10.1515/fs-2016-0105

Gill, R. (2017). Beyond individualism: the psychosocial life of the neoliberal university. In: Spooner, M. (Ed.), *A Critical Guide to Higher Education & the Politics of Evidence: Resisting Colonialism, Neoliberalism, & Audit Culture*, 193-216. Regina: University of Regina Press. https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/15647/

Harford, J. (2020) The path to professorship: reflections from women professors in Ireland, *Irish Educational Studies*, 39(2), 193-204. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2019.1698445

Heijstra, Thamar M., Finnborg S. Steinþórsdóttir, and Þorgerður Einarsdóttir. 2017. Academic Career Making and the Double-Edged Role of Academic Housework. *Gender and Education* 29: 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1171825

Higher Education Authority (2022a) *Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions: Implementation Plan 2022-2024*. HEA: Dublin. https://hea.ie/policy/gender/ending-sexual-violence-and-harassment-in-irish-higher-education-institutions/

Higher Education Authority (2022b) *Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions*. HEA: Dublin. https://hea.ie/policy/gender/hea-national-review-of-gender-equality-in-irish-higher-education-institutions/

Hodgins, M., & McNamara, P. M. (2019). An Enlightened Environment? Workplace Bullying and Incivility in Irish Higher Education. *SAGE Open, 9*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019894278

IFUT (2023). *Precarious Employment in Higher Education: IFUT Research. Irish Federation of University Teachers*. https://www.ifut.ie/sites/default/files/publications/public/report/2023//ifutsurvey finalcompressed.pdf

Lipton, B. (2017). Measures of success: Cruel optimism and the paradox of academic women's participation in Australian higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(3), 486-497. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1290053

Lombardo, E., & Bustelo, M. (2022). Sexual and sexist harassment in Spanish universities: policy implementation and resistances against gender equality measures. *Journal of Gender Studies, 31*(1), 8-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1924643

MacNeela, P., Dawson, K., O'Rourke, T., Healy-Cullen, S., Burke, L., & Flack, W. (2022). *Report on the National Survey of Staff Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish HEIs*. HEA: Dublin: https://assets.gov.ie/214118/d8734a4d-1947-4aad-9fad-995822e91f27.pdf

Macoun, A., & Miller, D. (2014). Surviving (thriving) in academia: feminist support networks and women ECAs. *Journal of Gender Studies, 23*(3), 287-301. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.909718

McCarry, M., & Jones, C. (2021). The equality paradox: sexual harassment and gender inequality in a UK university. *Journal of Gender Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.2007471

Morrish, L. (2020). Academic Freedom and the Disciplinary Regime in the Neoliberal University. In: Dawes, S., Lenormand, M. (eds) Neoliberalism in Context . Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26017-0_13

Mullally, U. (2020). Two years of harassment at UCD. *The Irish Times*. https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/aoibhinn-n%C3%AD-sh%C3%BAilleabh%C3%A1in-two-years-of-harassment-at-ucd-1.4346015

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*. Washington, DC: https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/24994/sexual-harassment-of-women-climate-culture-and-consequences-in-academic

Oireachtas TV (2021) Bullying and Sexual Harassment in Third Level Institutions: Motion, https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/oireachtas-tv/video-archive/seanad-videos/4634/

O'Keefe, T. & Courtois, A. (2019). "Not one of the family": Gender and Precarious Work in the Neoliberal University. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 26(4):463:479. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12346

Ni Shuilleabhain, A., & Skerritt, C. (2023). 'I'm a troublemaker': the need to focus on early-career academics' experiences of sexual harassment in Ireland. Journal of Gender-Based Violence (published online ahead of print 2023) https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2023D000000015

Pereira, M. d. M. (2016). Struggling Within and Beyond the Performative University: Articulating Activism and Work in an "Academia Without Walls". Women's Studies International Forum 54: 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.06.008

Prothero, A. (2023) Me, the Patriarchy, and the Business School. *Journal of Management Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12985

Royal Irish Academy. (2018). *Scoping the Current System of Support for Early Career Researchers in Ireland*. RIA, Dublin: https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/scoping_the_current_system_of_support_for_early_career_researchers_in_ireland.pdf

---

[i] We refer to an 'Early Career Academic' as someone who has been awarded a PhD in the previous seven years and is engaging in work in higher education and/or research.