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Werkrelaties tussen vrouwen en mannen. Een onderzoek naar ongewenste intimiteiten in arbeidssituaties

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SUMMARY

WORK RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

A study on sexual harassment in the workplace

Although the phenomenon of sexual harassment is not new, it is only very recently that the term 'sexual harassment on the job' was invented. In the eighties 'sexual harassment' became a topic of public discussion and, supported by the women's movement, women were beginning to challenge sexual harassment in the workplace.

This study examines the issue of sexual harassment within the context of (changing) power-relationships between men and women in the workplace. From the sixties on trends in the workforce allowed us to witness a growing number of female workers outside the home. The composition of the female workforce has undergone important changes in the areas of age, marital status and educational background. Although the sexual division of work and the inequality between the labour positions of men and women can by no means be said to have disappeared, these quantitative and qualitative changes in the workforce may have had some impact on the relationships between men and women at work. In some workplaces the (increasing) presence of female workers may have affected the dominant social and cultural norms in the day-to-day relationships between the sexes. However, the issue of sexual harassment is not brought up in all kinds of workplaces. Especially in male-dominated workplaces women find much difficulty in challenging unwelcome sexual advances by men. Also, the same behavior of men can be interpreted in different ways by different women, for example some women will think of sexual advances at work as more acceptable than other women do.

This study investigates these perceptions and value-judgements of (unwelcome) sexual advances in relation to the social and cultural relationships and the balance of power between the sexes in the workplace. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the work of Norbert Elias. Manners and standards of human behavior are in his historical sociological perspective considered as structural and ritual expressions of the balance of power and interdependence between social groups. Changing modes of behavior are closely connected to changing balances of power. From this perspective, the phenomenon of women starting to bring the problem of sexual harassment to a head could be interpreted as an expression of a change in the balance of power between the sexes at work. The central issue of this research is is there a correlation between the perception of women of unwanted sexual advances, the extent to which the issue of sexual harassment is expressed by women, and the power relationships between the sexes in the workplace?

This relationship was examined in twelve different workplaces (seven workplaces in a local government; five workplaces in an industrial firm). These workplaces differed from each other in terms of material aspects in the balance of power between the sexes, the distribution of women and men throughout the hierarchical structure of the workplace and the sex-

ratio. The workplaces were categorized into three groups according to their power ratios: workplaces where the power balance between the sexes was very uneven, uneven and relatively even, respectively. The results of this quantitative analysis show a relationship between the material power structure and the reported frequency of unwanted sexual advances by women. However, this is not a linear relationship. As was to be expected, the lowest rate of sexual harassment was found in workplaces with relatively little inequality between the sexes. But most cases of sexual harassment were not reported by women in workplaces with a very uneven balance of power between the sexes. The highest rate of reported sexual harassment was found in those workplaces where power differences between the sexes were still uneven but to a lesser extent than the very uneven workplaces.

Succinctly, a more detailed qualitative study of the relationship between the problem of sexual harassment and the power balance between the sexes in the workplaces was conducted. The theory of established-outsiders relationships focuses not so much on material (economical) power resources as well as on less noticeable, immaterial aspects of power relationships. In his study on the tensions and conflicts between three different neighbourhoods, Elias and his colleagues, found that the status superiority of the established group was to a large extent derived from greater cohesion, social control, uniformity of norms and beliefs. In this study the relationship between the sexes in the various workplaces is analysed in terms of these 'structural features' of established-outsiders relationships: we and they-images, social cohesiveness and social control, tensions and conflicts between both groups. Secondly, it was investigated as to how these immaterial aspects of the relationships between the sexes related to the material power structure in the different workplaces. As to the process of change in the power balance between the established and the outsiders, Elias distinguishes three phases with respect to the changing balance of power between the sexes. The results of the analysis in this study indicated that some workplaces could be distinguished as examples of first phase figurations, while other workplaces showed many characteristics of second or third phase figurations.

In first phase figurations the very uneven material balance of power between the sexes was expressed in the superior status and we-image of the established men. Some of these workplaces were historically occupied by men only. Closely linked to the strong cohesion and informal ties within the men's group was the segregation of work by sex. There was a sharp dividing line between men's work and women's work which was maintained and reinforced by the mechanism of sex stereotyping. The social and functional contacts between men and women were very much restricted. Although some women mentioned experiences with unwanted sexual advances by male colleagues which made them feel very uncomfortable, these behaviours were hardly expressed as a problem. Many of them ignored the sexual advances and avoided direct confrontations with men. The threshold of women's tolerance for the men's sexual advances was rather low. This corresponded to the cultural and material conditions of the workplaces. Open expression was made very difficult by the strong consensus and the uniformity in beliefs especially about the responsibility

of sexual harassment. Most men and women were of the opinion that women should (for the benefit of themselves) adapt to a male-dominated workplace and that women who were harassed have asked for it by the way they dress and behave at work. The milder, verbal forms (sexual remarks and jokes) were viewed as an inherent aspect of these working environments; women who did not approve of these 'innocent' sexual advances were said to lack a sense of humour. Disapproving women who would publicly utter contrary ideas could await social punishments like exclusion from the group or stigmatization. As such, the fact that the minority of women who reported unwanted sexual advances did not raise the issue or make complaints strongly related to the figurational context of the workplace. They would have little to gain and a great deal to lose.

In the second phase figurations the issue of sexual harassment was brought into the open by a substantial amount of women. Sexual harassment is however not the only subject of discussion in these workplaces. Tensions and conflicts about the inequality between the positions of men and women, the sexual division of work and standards of conduct are more or less an integral part of these figurations. Although the material power structure between the sexes is still uneven, the social power of women is gradually increasing. A few women have gained access to higher status jobs and the sexual division of work is less rigid compared to first phase figurations. As to social and informal contacts there is more sexual heterogeneity. Differences in attitude towards matters of sexual inequality were also found between women and to a lesser extent between men. According to the women, in regular discussions about the issue of sexual harassment most men responded in a defensive, ridiculing or hostile way. Although some of the men disapproved of sexual harassment they were reluctant to challenge the language and behaviour of their male colleagues publicly. Women who experienced sexual harassment talked to each other about how to take up the issue and this had increased the solidarity among them. According to some of the women mixed workplace discussions about sexual harassment were part of the process of changing the traditional social and sexual codes. In general, the lack of consensus, the pluriformity of opinions and attitudes which went hand-in-hand with a changing balance of power between the sexes created more opportunities for women to raise the problem of sexual harassment.

In third phase figurations where the balance of power between the sexes was relatively more even, it was found that the reported frequency of sexual harassment was rather low. This does not mean that sexual harassment was not considered a serious problem or that women were reluctant to speak openly about the issue. Although some women gave examples of unwanted sexual advances by men, many women and men referred to their own working environment to explain why sexual harassment was not a daily or structural problem at their workplace. The distribution of women and men throughout the hierarchical structure of the workplace was less unequal, jobs were less segregated by sex and the informal contacts were mixed. According to the workers this situation created a climate in which serious sexual harassment was not very likely to occur. When incidents of sexual harassment took place they were publicly discussed and women had the support of many of their female

and male colleagues in confronting the harasser. As compared to second phase figurations more men in these workplaces took the issue of sexual harassment seriously.

As to the prevention and eventual elimination of sexual harassment, the results of this study indicate that organization policies and procedures should vary from company to company. The possibilities for women to raise the issue of sexual harassment are strongly connected with the material balance of power between the sexes and the social and cultural climate in the workplace. This means that policy measures may not have the same impact in every workplace. It can be assumed that in first phase figurations women are very reluctant to utilize a grievance procedure. These women run the risk of isolation and exclusion by their male and female colleagues. Making a complaint or the existence of a complaint procedure as such may even reinforce the social cohesiveness in the men's group. In figurations with a less uneven balance of power and a more open climate, grievance procedures could be very supportive to women who want to challenge the issue of sexual harassment. In workplaces where the balance of power between the sexes is very uneven policy measures should focus on creating an atmosphere in which women feel safe enough to come forward and complain about sexual harassment. The improvement of the positions of women in these workplaces remains however a necessary condition.

The results of this study indicate that the long-term solution to solving the problem of sexual harassment is for the balance of power in the workplace to be altered. A more equal distribution of women and men in the workplace is a major goal of Affirmative Action programmes. However, restructuring the material power structure is not enough. This study shows that changes in the material balance of power are closely connected to a change in the social and cultural climate in the workplace. To be effective, a positive action programme should take into account the social and cultural climate of the workplace. An adequate analysis of the specific cultural norms and values in the workplace could contribute to the relevance and success of positive action programmes and should be an essential part of these campaigns.