Harassment in Dutch Academia

Exploring manifestations, facilitating factors, effects and solutions

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Harassment:

Overarching term for patterns of intense behavior that have the aim and/or the effect of violating a person’s dignity and/or that create a hostile working environment, thereby obstructing scholars in their academic work and their career progress.
Research background

- Explorative qualitative research
- Focus on women academics
- 20 interviews / 33 written testimonials
- Research questions:
  - What practices of harassment can be identified?
  - What structural and cultural characteristics and developments in the academic system facilitate harassment?
  - What are the consequences of harassment for individuals, organisations and science in general?
Respondents

Table 1. Respondent’s position during participation in this study (n=53).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applying for PhD position</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postdoctoral researcher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practices of harassment

• Scientific sabotage
• Sexual harassment
• Physical and verbal threats
• Denigration
• Exclusion
• Problematizing “special needs”
Scientific sabotage

• All behaviours that directly obstruct a person’s work as a scientist
  - Making a person’s work, ideas and expertise invisible
  - Refusal of promotion, or denial of tasks/ functions needed for promotion
  - Blocking access to spaces, documents, objects or information
  - Labelling of people as incompetent
  - Physical or financial destruction of a person’s research project.
Facilitating factors

• Hierarchies within and outside of academia
  - Organisational authority, dependency and fear
  - Academic stardom and strategic alliances
  - Definition power and the silencing of critical voices
Definition power and the silencing of critical voices

“A lot of the above [experiences with multiple manifestations of harassment] has happened because I’m very critical: I do not let other people tell me what to do. I speak up if I disagree. I stand out from the crowd, and I’m being cut down for that. Many of the professors I met are extremely authoritarian, and have difficulties dealing with criticism” (V35).
Facilitating factors

• Hierarchies within and outside of academia
  - Organisational authority, dependency and fear
  - Academic stardom and strategic alliances
  - Definition power and the silencing of critical voices

• A competitive and individualistic culture

• Inadequate responses to incidents

• “Self-silencing” among victims
Table 6. Outcomes of participants’ efforts for getting help (n=35).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Received no help</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received some support, but no (satisfying) solution</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received adequate help</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awaiting outcomes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asking for help

“It was made into my individual problem. The Dean said: ‘If you want to change something, you’ll have to talk to him.’ I said that I didn’t dare to do that, because I didn’t feel safe, but the Dean insisted: ‘You’ll have to, if you want to move on.’ So that was where it ended for me. […] It feels like you have to be raped here before they undertake any action. I feel that what happened to me doesn’t really count” (R1).

“Our Dean is very kind, but I wish he was a bit stricter. Because in my case, he disagrees [with the professor performing the harassment], but [apparently] he still thinks: ‘I want to preserve my relationship with that professor, so that relationship will be my priority’ (R17).
Effects of harassment

- Feeling unwelcome, excluded and unsafe
- Psychological and physical problems
- Negative effects on personal relations
- Productivity, creativity and motivation problems
- Negative effects on organisations and science in general