

## Sexual Harassment: Out of the shadows

Written by Pina Picierno on 22 November 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

Sexual harassment and mobbing often remain undisclosed, but more victims will break their silence if there are clear support structures, says Pina Picierno.



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Sexual harassment and mobbing are much more common than we think. We owe the #MeToo movement - born out of last autumn's Weinstein scandal - a debt of gratitude, as it showed us that the problem is wider than we could all imagine.

We have some data that give us an idea of the extent of the phenomenon; one in three women have suffered physical or sexual harassment in adult life and 55 percent of women in the EU have been sexually harassed. In addition, more than 20 percent of younger women (those aged 18 to 29) in the EU have been stalked or harassed online at least once.

Considering that most women and girls do not report harassment, the numbers may actually be much higher. This is why we need a European approach to fighting the phenomenon. We need a clear definition of what constitutes harassment, one that takes into account the most recent developments in our society. As perceptions can vary depending on where we are, we need an EU-level definition, or it will be difficult to eradicate this problem.

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Once we have established what is to be considered harassment, sexual or otherwise, we can more effectively suppress this phenomenon and give real and better support to the victims.

In terms of support, there is the difficulty of reporting harassment and mobbing. Too often, women and girls are afraid to report any kind of violence. They are afraid for many reasons, for example, because they are ashamed or afraid of not being believed, or at worst not being helped by the police or judicial authorities.

In addition, as a great deal of sexual harassment occurs in the workplace and is perpetrated by superiors, colleagues or customers, women are also afraid of losing either their jobs or legitimate opportunities for career advancement. These are only some of the reasons why women may not report harassment.

One potential solution is to intensify compulsory training courses for police and judicial authorities. Another is to design clear, independent and safe procedures in the workplace, at universities or in schools, to allow women to feel free to report cases of violence or mobbing, without fear of retaliation.

In the resolution, we have also decided to tackle a new aspect of harassment that takes place online; cyberbullying and revenge porn, of which so many girls, even very young ones, are victims.

“We need a clear definition of what constitutes harassment, one that takes into account the most recent developments in our society”

We also need a clear definition of what constitutes a public space, in order to encompass those virtual spaces such as social networks, blogs or chats, where harassment and stalking are often routine. Once it becomes clear that those spaces are indeed public, it will become easier for authorities to prosecute perpetrators and help victims.

Cases of revenge porn, where girls privately share intimate videos that end up being widely disseminated in public chats or social networks, have terrible psychological consequences - in the

most extreme situations, they have led to the victim committing suicide.

I do not believe that we can remain silent any longer when faced with such tragedies, which is why I have also proposed to include a project establishing an online helpdesk in the next EU budget. This will be easily accessible and built specifically to provide initial support to any girl or woman that has suffered from online stalking, sexual harassment or revenge porn.

We also call on the European Commission to tackle the problem by extending the definition of what constitutes hate speech, as defined in the Framework Decision on combatting certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia through criminal law. This should be expanded to include misogyny and to ensure that the code of conduct to counter incitement to illegal online hatred also covers these crimes.

“One potential solution is to intensify compulsory training courses for police and judicial authorities”

Finally, we also call for a complete and systematic collection of comparable data, by gender and age, on online (and other) harassment, in order to provide a clear view of the evolution of these phenomena.

I believe that the result achieved by adopting this resolution with a large majority can provide a solid starting point for combatting harassment and bullying in public places. The real difference will be made in the form of a Directive, and hence a legislative instrument, addressing violence against women, something that parliament believes should be proposed as soon as possible.

This is a call that we have reiterated in several occasions and it is now included in an own initiative report. We therefore believe that the Commission should no longer wait to make a suitable proposal, just as European women and girls can no longer wait - they have the right to feel safe in every situation.

### **About the author**

Pina Picierno (S&D IT) is the European Parliament’s rapporteur on the report on preventing mobbing and sexual harassment

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