Coping Strategies for Sexual Harassment in Higher Education: "An Official Action May Harm you in the End More than if Someone Slaps your Butt"[1]

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Coping Strategies for Sexual Harassment in Higher Education: "An Official Action May Harm you in the End More than if Someone Slaps your Butt". The paper asks in what ways students in Czech higher education cope with sexual harassment and what strategies they choose to deal with it. It builds on a qualitative study of a higher education institution in Prague. The study reveals that student's narratives are organized on two planes between which there is a clear discrepancy: on the "hypothetical" plane external strategies of open resistance against sexual harassment predominate; on the second plane involving students' narratives about dealing with real situations of harassment or deeper considerations of hypothetical cases of harassment, scepticism prevails toward these strategies. In this case internal strategies predominate, together with avoiding the harasser. Active resistance against harassment and challenge to the status quo through coping strategies for sexual harassment are limited by two types of "ideational" and "material". On the ideational level students often downplay their experience, express fears of secondary victimization and being accused of making false accusations; these responses are tied to a severe power imbalance. On the "material level" students report lacking information about the issue and distrust in school management.
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Sexual harassment may take many different forms, from less explicit verbal comments to explicit forms such as blackmail and physical assault. (Fitzgerald et al. 1988; Gruber 1992) Although no unified definition of sexual harassment exists (Fitzgerald 1996: 25), there is certain consensus about harassment being unwelcome, inappropriate and offensive behaviour which usually involves the abuse of unequal power given by the formal and gender structure of society. (MacKinnon 1979; Dziech – Weiner 1984; Thomas 1997: 148; Huerta et al. 2006) Sexual harassment includes both 'hostile environment' and '*quid pro quo*' harassment. (MacKinnon 1979; European Commission 1998)

Sexual harassment in the educational context has severe impacts on its targets. The frequent strategy of avoiding the harasser, absence from lectures, forced change of a tutor, supervisor or even discipline may result in mental problems, poor study results and sometimes in quitting school altogether. (Benson – Thompson 1982; Hill – Silva 2005: 28; Huerta et al. 2006) Sexual

harassment may thus have negative impact on students' wellbeing as well as on their further educational and professional path.

In my paper I focus on coping strategies for sexual harassment in higher education, specifically on students' harassment by teachers. Without wanting to neglect the fact that members of the academic staff may encounter sexual harassment and that it may take various forms (e.g., Dey et al. 1996; Hill – Silva 2005), I concentrate on students' harassment by teachers which I consider through the students' perspective. Due to the severe power imbalance between the actors and the limited options students have to defend themselves, students' harassment by teachers is a specific and one of the most serious forms of harassment. Moreover, universities play an important role in the process of forming new social norms and reproducing old ones. (Herbert 1997: 28) I ask *in what ways students in Czech higher education cope with sexual harassment and what strategies they choose to deal with it.* I build on in-depth interviews from one of the first studies to be carried out in the country at the turn of 2008 and 2009 at a selected faculty of a public higher education institution in Prague.

Studies carried out in the Czech Republic so far point to a relatively large prevalence of sexual harassment in the labour market (Křížková et al. 2006) and higher education. (Vohlídalová 2011; Smetáčková – Pavlík 2011) The study by Křížková et al. (2006) focused on the labour market discovered that two thirds of respondents encountered less explicit forms of gender harassment while one fifth of respondents experienced explicit forms of harassment such as unwanted physical contact, sexual proposals etc. Similar findings were reached by two studies focused on sexual harassment in higher education. According to Smetáčková and Pavlík (2011) 74% of students encountered one of the forms of harassment (62% encountered gender harassment, 22% unwanted sexual attention and 6% sexual coercion). Consistent with these findings are the conclusions reached by Vohlídalová (2011), where 67% of responding students encountered one of the forms of sexual harassment (66% gender harassment, 18% unwanted sexual attention and 9% sexual coercion). According to a recent international research from 2012, 51% of respondents in the Czech Republic encountered one of the forms of sexual harassment at some point during their life (since the age of 15). (FRA 2014: 99)

It was not until 2000 that sexual harassment was included in the Czech law. It is treated solely in the Antidiscrimination Act (No. 198/2009 Sb.). Treatment of harassment is not a common or obligatory part of higher education policies, unlike many universities in the US and in Western Europe. In the CR the existence of sexual harassment is frequently denied and belittled. (See e.g., Komárek – Havlíček 2010; Horský 2010; for more detail see True 2003; Křížková et al. 2006) The first initiative from 2009, aimed to systematically redress the issue specifically in higher education (Smetáčková – Pavlík –

Kolářová 2009), encountered a relatively harsh and condemning reaction from both expert and lay publics. (Horský 2010; Komárek – Havlíček 2010)

Foreign researchers note the link between pro- or anti-feminist moods and attitudes in society toward sexual harassment. (Thomas – Kitzinger 1997; Lee 2001; Anderson 2006; Zippel 2006) The refusal and unwillingness to recognize sexual harassment as a legitimate issue may be related to a general anti-feminist atmosphere in Czech society. (Havelková 1993; True 2003; Weiner 2010) Sexual harassment is one of the manifestation of gender power (e.g., Benson – Thompson 1982), which occurs in the context of gender inequalities and is targeted predominantly at women. The study of strategies for coping and addressing sexual harassment may underscore some of the mechanisms through which sexual harassment and relatedly the gender order are reproduced and gender inequalities maintained. (Cairns 1997)

Sociocultural Models and Patriarchy as "Power to"

I build on the perspective of sociocultural models which regard sexual harassment as a consequence and instrument of maintaining the gender social order. Gender inequalities in society interact with organizationally defined inequalities and at the same time are the primary source and cause of sexual harassment. (See e.g., MacKinnon 1979; Benson – Thompson 1982; Grauerholz 1994; Wood 1994; Thomas – Kitzinger 1997; Nicolson 1997) From this perspective, sexual harassment is not an isolated problem motivated primarily by sexual desire but a manifestation of a patriarchal system which keeps women in a subordinate position. (Benson – Thompson 1982). In this perspective sexual harassment is an instrument of gender discrimination applied mostly against women (most targets of sexual harassment are women, most sexual harassers are men). (Dziech – Weiner 1984: 80; Paludi 1996: 5; White 2000; Kalof et al. 2001)

Allen (2009) distinguishes two basic concepts of gender power in feminist thought: *power-over* and *power-to*. The notion of patriarchy as power-over is represented by classical theories of men's oppression developed by second wave feminists (e.g., S. de Beauvoir, S. Firestone). It understands patriarchy as a social fact which affects women as if 'from outside'. The conceptualization of gender power as power-to which can be found especially in ethnometodological and poststructuralist feminist theories (e.g., West – Zimmerman 1987) regards patriarchy as a process and acknowledges actors' active role in the reproduction and potential change of the gender social order. Thus, on the one hand, there are conceptualizations of sexual harassment as an instrument maintaining and confirming patriarchy where women tend to figure as victims (e.g., MacKinnon 1979; Walby 1990); on the other hand there are approaches that attribute an important role in the reproduction of the patriarchal

social order and thus also sexual harassment to women themselves. (e.g., Bingham 1994; Clair 1994; Wood 1994; Nicolson 1997; Eyre 2000) These approaches tend to focus on the nuanced ways in which such behaviour is maintained, reproduced and normalized.

A starting point for theories working with power-to is that dominant and 'subordinate' groups alike actively participate in the maintenance of the *status quo*. Sexual harassment is thus understood as a manifestation of hegemony which does not involve brute violence but active acceptance of a privileged position of a certain group. (Gramsci in Clair 1994: 64) Clair, however, cautions that hegemony must not be mistaken for blaming the victim. (Clair 1994: 64) The goal of the approach is to stress that both targets and harassers construct social realities and that both are subject to principles of patriarchy which are transmitted culturally.

Bourdieu (2000) claims women contribute to their disadvantaged position as they acquire schemas of perception and cognition through socialization. Women regard themselves through the patriarchal perspective, whereby they confirm, legitimate and enact men's domination. Bourdieu (2000: 34) terms this mechanism *symbolic violence*: women do not have a chance to refuse men's dominance because they are imbued from childhood with knowledge-making instruments through which they recognize existing principles of men's domination and which do not allow them to objectively reflect on this situation. Symbolic violence is one of the main principles wherein lies the durability of the principles of masculine domination. Their subordination is, therefore, paradoxically both spontaneous and enforced. (Bourdieu 2000: 37)

Confirmation of the status quo and the normalization of sexual harassment occur through the process of socialization and discourses which constantly legitimate and confirm the status quo. (Bingham 1994; Wood 1994; Eyer 2001) According to Wood (1994) discourses name, classify, define and form our experience and are controlled by dominant groups. The goal of dominant groups is to protect their interests and the seemingly natural order of the status quo. (Wood 1994: 24) One of the main reasons it has not yet been possible to reduce or eradicate sexual harassment is that it occurs within a gender ideology which actively legitimates sexual harassment. One example of this legitimation may be the tendency to trivialize and belittle sexual harassment and its impact on targets, the resistance to classify forms of behaviour which are legislatively defined as sexual harassment or the tendency to shift the solution of sexual harassment from the institutional (i.e., actions within an organization) to the individual level. (Clair 1994)

Methodology

The analysis is based on 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with students of a selected faculty of a public higher education institution in Prague. The motivation to choose this faculty was the following: i) the percentage of men and women in the student body was roughly the same at the faculty. Important for the choice was that one or the other sex did not predominate at the school and that the environment was not one susceptible to sexual harassment (such as art schools or schools where women form a small minority among students). ii) An important role was also played by the fact that support was obtained from the faculty management; without this support it would have been impossible to carry out the study.

Thirteen women and five men were included in the research sample, of whom eight studied a doctoral, seven master's and three bachelor's programme. Focused on students' experience with and attitudes toward various types of harassment, the interviews followed a prepared script but responded to cues from research participants.

Participants were recruited mainly by advertisements at the faculty requesting cooperation and by snowball sampling. A certain degree of qualitative study participant auto-selection is clearly present and is an integral part of all (not only) qualitative studies. Since the goal of qualitative research is not to provide a representative overview but explain how students construct and experience sexual harassment, such auto-selection does not necessarily limit the quality of analyses. People who are sensitive to the topic or have personal experience may offer rich narratives for analysis. The call for participation did not focus only on students who had personal experience with sexual harassment. As it turned out, most participants in the qualitative study had some experience with sexual harassment, especially the women.

In my analyses I build on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss – Corbinová 1999; Glaser – Strauss 1967), and specifically its constructivist version. (Charmaz 2004) According to the constructivist version of grounded theory, interviews are a reflection of each person's interpretative process. (Charmaz 2004) The goal of my analysis was therefore to understand participants' subjective meanings and how they arrive at these meanings. The interviews were transcribed in verbatim and coded in several steps from codes closely related to the data to more general and more widely understood analytical categories. In line with the grounded theory approach, theses, hypotheses and typologies were developed inductively.

Although the study was done seven years ago the findings are still relevant. There has been no wider social debate and no major actions have been taken since, to give visibility and eliminate this phenomenon. With very few

exceptions, sexual harassment has not been generally addressed in university codices, either.

What Strategies do Students Choose to Cope with Sexual Harassment?

There are many ways to conceptualize responses to sexual harassment and coping strategies. (See e.g., Maypole 1986; Terpstra – Baker 1989; Gruber 1990; Fitzgerald et al. 1995) The analysis identified the main types of coping strategies for sexual harassment similar to the typology developed by Fitzgerald et al. (1995). According to these authors the strategies that students use to cope with their situation are divided into *external* (strategies focused on coping with the situation in the sense of its actual resolution) and *internal* (strategies focused on managing one's own emotions and mental coping with the situation). This division is analytical because individual strategies combine and interweave in actual situations and change depending on sexual harassment dynamics. Internal strategies, if found inefficient, may lead to external strategies, and vice versa. Although the US and Czech cultural contexts differ, it transpired that the strategies students use to cope with sexual harassment have a strikingly similar structure.

In my analysis I work with students' statements about their presumed reactions to a hypothetical situation of sexual harassment as well as their narratives about real responses to sexual harassment they encountered in the past. In view of the fact that it was primarily women who encountered sexual harassment, the analysis of real-life strategies focuses predominantly on women.

External Coping Strategies for Sexual Harassment
The strategy of open resistance: Resolution with the support of an institution and its representatives and direct confrontation with the harasser

On a hypothetical level, the most frequently voiced opinion can be characterized by the following quote: *"The most important thing is that she not put up with it and notify someone."* (Barbora, MA, F[3]). When students talk about what they *would* do if they personally encountered sexual harassment or what they would advise their schoolmates to do, the most frequent answer to sexual harassment is to seek help from the management, the harasser's superiors or other teachers, or also direct confrontation with the perpetrator.

Although it could be deduced from these findings that students are relatively resolute and determined to deal with sexual harassment through open resistance, statements of students who actually experienced sexual harassment

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[3] F = woman, M= man; BC= bachelor's student, MA = master's student, Ph.D. = doctoral student

show that they react differently. Only a minimal percentage of those who experienced sexual harassment actually took formal action, with the help of superiors or through institutional procedures. (e.g., Gruber 1990; Rubin – Borgers 1990; Fitzgerald et al. 1995; Rabinowitz 1996; Kelley – Parsons 2000; Hill – Silva 2005) My findings confirm that when sexual harassment occurs, formal action is taken only in the most extreme cases and only when there is no other resort. (See e.g. Fitzgerald et al. 1995: 121) And even in this case it is by far not the rule that students opt for this strategy. (See e.g. Biaggio – Brownell 1996)

Gita was the only one among the interviewed students who took semi-official action against sexual harassment (concretely by turning to a Secretary of the department):

"[A professor] slapped my butt. I was totally stunned by it (scream), I didn't know what to do. So I confided in the Secretary of the department. I guess he then reprimanded him because he came to apologize. (...) He was totally taken aback that I didn't like it (...) I was quite thankful to him [the Secretary] that he dealt with it for me and that he had it out with him." (Gita, Ph.D., F)

Gita calls attention to the important role of the faculty who took on himself to resolve the problem. It can be assumed that an important part in how Gita dealt with the situation was played by the fact that she was a doctoral student. She was in a much better position to deal with the situation than if she were a master's or bachelor's student. An important role was also played by the fact that this was a very explicit form of harassment which can be presumed to be seen as harassment and impermissible behaviour by other people too.

When students encountered harassment, they did not usually confront the harasser. Only a few of the targeted students had the courage to confront the perpetrator directly: Helena who experienced a severe form of sexual blackmail and also Dana who was invited by a teacher out for a date. Dana clearly shows how an open refusal of a date may be unpleasant and problematic for students. She was afraid to explicitly refuse the teacher for fears that this decision could retaliate during her further study:

"It was more of a soft rejection than a strict no. I was also afraid not to make him angry for no reason. You never know, you get him the next semester and he'll give you trouble..." (Dana, doctoral student, F)

Clearly, a decision about accepting or refusing a potential invitation for a date from a teacher as well as an assertive response to harassment are not necessarily as free and unproblematic in the context of power inequality as it might appear at first sight. On the other hand, ambiguity and uncertainty of the

response can contribute to the fact that such behaviour could be repeated and could reinforce the perception of such behaviour as harmless.

Strategies of hidden resistance: Avoidance of the harasser

While avoiding the harasser is not often mentioned when hypothetical solutions are discussed, it is, in fact, a relatively common response to sexual harassment, as was also shown by Rabinowitz (1996) and Fitzgerald et al. (1995). For example, students try to choose courses with other teachers; if they can choose with whom to take an exam, they try to pick the teacher who they presume will behave appropriately. In a worse case they strive to avoid any contact, including avoiding compulsory or important courses.

For example Kateřina talked about her avoidance as a sort of preventative measure to avoid direct contact with a teacher who had bad reputation and repeatedly used vulgar language to talk about women during seminars:

"...everyone complained about him (...) It was said that he did not treat women well. And so instead of the person who taught the seminar I chose to take the exam with someone whose lectures I did not attend once. It's sort of strange, to choose a person according to how they treat women and not based on their expertise." (Kateřina, MA, F)

Not everyone is self-confident enough to take an exam with a complete stranger. For Helena, who experienced a severe form of sexual blackmail, the choice of another teacher involved too much of a risk of failing an exam and so she did not find the courage to take this action against sexual harassment:

"Back then I wanted to take the exam with another teacher but I couldn't. Because [even when a course is taught by several teachers in parallel] each teacher has a different program, they go through some extra stuff and then they include it in the exam." (Helena, MA, F)

Although avoidance is discussed in the interviews as a relatively easy and risk-free way to deal with sexual harassment, interviews with students who considered or opted for this strategy usually showed that this strategy (would) complicate their studies and to a certain extent limit their access to certain courses, which in the end could disrupt or slow down their study path.

Internal Coping Strategies for Sexual Harassment
Legitimating sexual harassment: Denial, downplaying and normalization

Denial, downplaying and normalization of sexual harassment are some of the most frequent strategies aimed at dealing with the problem emotionally. (As

showed e.g. by Rabinowitz 1996: 204; Dziech – Weiner 1984) Legitimization and downplaying appears in students' narratives in many different contexts, and pertains to softer forms of gender harassment as well as to cases of explicit harassment (such as unwanted physical contact and touching).

Downplaying harassment can be encountered most frequently in cases of gender harassment, which is portrayed as something common. Dana talks about a repeated invitation for a coffee, which was very embarrassing to her: *"in the end there was no problem."* While this experience was a source of stress and presented moral dilemma, she frames it as a benign situation calling for no action.

Lenka related the gravity of the physical form of harassment to the risk which would, in her opinion, follow from an official complaint – she interpreted a slap on her butt, which made her feel *completely stunned"* and *"shocked"*, as an episode *"which essentially doesn't do anything to you"*.

Another form of downplaying the situation is reacting to these forms of behaviour with laughter to lift the gravity of the situation. Laughter makes it possible to reframe harassment as an unintended act or a joke which does not have to be taken seriously, even when it causes embarrassment:

"Everyone laughed at it [a sexist joke which denigrated women], they saw it as shooting jokes in a class but when you think about it later, you will think that the person goes overboard a bit maybe (...) But in the moment you will think: well, ok, let's move on, it was just a joke." (Marcel, BA, M)

In retrospect many students relate to their, often very unpleasant, experience as "a funny story to tell". In the interviews there was also a clear tendency among students to naturalize sexual harassment as something normal. Sexual harassment is relatively often described by students as part of the male nature which cannot be suppressed:

"Well, I guess every guy likes to take a look at a woman and sometimes it takes a worse form. Which I understand, I guess it must be some masculine speciality. They're set that way, they're animals..." (Hana, MA, F)

Sexual harassment is thus re-framed as natural, given and unchangeable behaviour and thus legitimized. These strategies are, however, ambivalent. Downplaying one's own experience with sexual harassment may be, on the one hand, a form of defending one's own personality, effort to maintain one's own dignity and identity and a sign of resistance toward adopting a passive role in the whole incident. (Mott – Condor 1997) On the other hand, the constant reinterpretation of these forms of behaviour as something harmless, innocent, natural or even funny is a crucial element in its reproduction and legitimization.

(Cairns 1997) This may complicate the possibilities to eliminate and actively oppose such behaviour because harassment is not explicitly identified as something wrong, inadmissible and intolerable, something to oppose.

Careful solution not challenging the status quo: Seeking mental support

Unlike direct confrontation or seeking support from faculty management or other teachers, this strategy is motivated by the effort not to cause stir and cope with the problem with one's own resources. As Heda stated, she would prefer to talk about the problem with someone qualified, which seems to her to be a safer strategy compared to a potential official complaint which she links with great risks:

"...if I had the experience, I think I would rather talk about it than write a direct complaint. I would be afraid [to file a complaint] all the more with regard to what consequences it could have for me because I would assume that the person would find out (...) I believe that people [in psychological consulting services] are able, they have psychological education and may be able to advise me on how to cope with it even though I don't know if they were able to resolve the problem..." (Heda, Ph.D., F)

However, as Heda also notes, it is a question to what degree this strategy can realistically resolve the problem. This strategy is focused primarily on psychological coping with an unpleasant situation, but can also act as a path to external strategies.

Despite the fact that according to literature (e.g. Fitzgerald et al. 1995) informal ways, together with seeking mental support among friends and family, are frequently chosen coping strategies, interviewees who encountered harassment surprisingly almost never mentioned that they debated their problem with anyone. Silence was a much more frequent strategy mentioned in the interviews – not only as unwillingness to share the problem with school authorities but also as unwillingness to talk about the problem with people around. This is an aspect typical not only of targets of sexual harassment but also of rape and other types of sexual violence. (Quina 1996)

Silence as a rational choice in masculine hegemony

Analysis of responses of actual targets of sexual harassment, confirmed that silence repeatedly features as a crucial and by far the most common coping strategy. (See e.g. Rabinowitz 1996) However, at the hypothetical level, students were often critical of this response as the worst possible solution; in their opinion it leads to escalation of the problem. Silence does not have the ambition or the possibility to stop harassment. If chosen, it usually leads to

reproduction and also supports feelings of impunity among sexual harassers. On the other hand, it is necessary to understand this strategy as a result of considering real chances and weighing potential costs and benefits of a potential assertive action. In a situation when targets of sexual harassment consider all the pros and cons and compare risks with potential benefits (the likelihood that harassers will be punished and harassment will stop), they usually reach the conclusion that the best solution is to keep silent. As Cairns claims (1997: 101), women have learnt to react to harassment in this way because they often do not see another way out. Silence as an active and rational solution was discussed by Kateřina, for example:

"[If I encountered sexual harassment] I probably would not want to deal with it because I would say that nothing would change. I would therefore try to take an exam with another teacher, but that's not always possible. (...) But I've never had such a problem so I don't know. But probably I wouldn't complain, maybe I would tell myself that they would think that I'm a hysterical woman and that they would ruin me anyway..." (Kateřina, MA, F)

In some cases students reflected on their silence as a response to sexual harassment as their own cowardice. In this way responsibility for harassment is shifted from the harasser to his target.

Refusing being a victim: confidence in one's own capacity to cope with sexual harassment

Student's confidence in their own abilities to deal with sexual harassment, ward off a potential attack and cope with the situation is narrowly linked to almost all the internal and external coping strategies for sexual harassment. The interviews reveal a high degree of declared self-confidence in the ability to cope and deal with the situation – both in the case of a hypothetical situation and in the case of real incidents. In view of the fact that this rhetoric also featured among women students who experienced severe forms of physical harassment, it appears that this is a certain form of a defence mechanism.

The fact that a person is able to cope with sexual harassment strengthens and highlights her agency and makes it possible to distance herself from the identity of a victim (which students link with highly negative connotations). (See Rabinowitz 1996; Cairns 1997; Vohlídalová 2011) Regarding oneself as an active actor makes it possible to maintain a feeling of control over the situation, as for example Gita and Kateřina suggest:

"I think that as a woman I am able to ward off sexual harassment." (Gita, Ph.D., F)

"I have to say, from my personal life, people don't take liberties with me. I just manage to come across in such a way that there is really that barrier." (Kateřina, MA, F)

On the other hand, this strategy may deter students from seeking help from the school management and other teachers, and block strategies of open resistance.

Factors Affecting Reproduction and Disruption of Sexual Harassment in Students Coping Strategies

The **power imbalance** between students and teachers is a crucial framework in which the choice of a coping strategy occurs. This imbalance limits students' options to react to sexual harassment by teachers. The power imbalance is heightened to the extreme, for example, during oral examinations during which the students in my sample usually encountered the most explicit and harshest forms of harassment. If students faced harassment in this context, they were usually paralyzed and did not dare to defend themselves in any way. The power imbalance to a large degree ties students' hands and prevents them from reacting adequately. Therefore, most students choose other coping strategies than official or semi-official channels or direct confrontation.

An interpretation of harassment and its gravity also plays an important role in what form of defence students choose (or would choose). Students would opt for a formal complaint or contacting faculty management or other teachers only if they *interpret* the given situation as very serious. As MacKinnon (1979) already claimed, the way a situation is understood plays a very important role in how and whether a given person decides to address the situation. Even physical and explicit forms of harassment may be interpreted as not serious, irrespective of their actual nature.

My analysis shows that, first, students have to interpret given behaviour as *sufficiently* serious, as for example Barbora states. To anyone who has encountered harassment she recommends being *a priori* suspicious of their own feelings and emotions and advises targets to make *absolutely* sure that the harassment was *sufficiently* grave (the person involved should wait to see whether the harassing behaviour is repeated):

"I would tell her [a schoolmate who would turn to her with a request for help] to try to take it a little longer, to try to wait maybe until the next class, to see if it is repeated, to try to find out what actually happened in the situation, and only then tell someone…" (Barbora, Ph.D., F).

Second, students must be certain that a given form of harassment will be interpreted as serious by others, including the authorities concerned. A general notion of what is and is not sexual harassment and what is and is not a normal

part of interactions between men and women thus becomes a measure through which students judge their chances and risks of filing a complaint. General discourses usually downplay and tolerate harassment (Cairns 1997; Wood 1994), which complicates students' willingness to defend themselves against these forms of behaviour even in cases which they interpret as unpleasant, unwanted or harmful.

It is particularly an official action against sexual harassment that students usually link with fears of **secondary victimization and other negative impact which such course of action could have for their further study and mental wellbeing**. Students often voice fears that airing an incident may harm them more than the incident itself. They expect retaliation from the teacher concerned or the leadership; they assume that dealing with the situation through an official procedure will be very unpleasant. They fear that no one will trust them, that they will be blamed and the harasser will go unpunished. These findings are confirmed in other studies as well. (e.g., Dziech – Weiner 1984; Fitzgerald et al. 1995; Rabinowitz 1996)

Fears of being accused of making false accusations are closely linked to students' contemplation of official procedures for dealing with the situation. Abuse of the accusation of sexual harassment is usually depicted in the interviews as surprisingly easy and almost risk-free:

"It seems to me that it's very easy to abuse, when a professor fails you or gives you a bad grade, students turn against him obviously..." (Lenka, Ph.D., F)

This interpretation is in direct contradiction with how students approach potential action against sexual harassment in concrete situations. In a study carried out by Robertson et al. (1988: 800) false accusations formed less than 1% of all the complaints.

Because an accusation of sexual harassment was conceived of in the interviews as a simple and easy-to-abuse instrument of revenge of the unsuccessful, students who may try to take official action, are faced with an *a priori* suspicion that they are retaliating against something and that they have made up their accusation because they failed an examination.

Fears of the negative impact of a potential official complaint is linked with **lack of trust in school management** and its willingness to address such problems. The analytical category "distrust in school representatives" was one of the most saturated analytical categories, to which most participants related in interviews.

Students expressed concerns that school management would defend the interests of their employees and colleagues, especially if a prominent faculty member was involved. Students also voiced fears that potential punishment of the perpetrator would be only symbolic and in reality nothing would change.

They presume that school management would try to let such a situation to peter out. A potential risk related to an official action is thus in huge disproportion to expected gains.

The option for students to choose an assertive reaction to sexual harassment is further complicated by the fact that students lack **information about potential actions against sexual harassment.** Sexual harassment was often described as a taboo, a silent problem the existence of which no one openly admits at the faculty. According to students, no one has ever discussed the issue with them at school; many of them do not have any notion how to tackle such problems and to whom to turn to in case of need. It was typical of the interviews with students that they were full of hesitation, uncertainty and doubt.

Although policies to combat sexual harassment have their limits and are not something that could eradicate the problem from one day to the next, they are a necessary precondition for the elimination of the problem. (Dziech – Weiner 1984; Biaggio – Brownell 1996; Reese – Lindenberg 2003) Interviews show that students would also understand the existence of such policies as a signal showing that school management has an interest in the problem and tackling it. It can therefore be surmised that the existence of such rules would also increase students' trust in school management:

"If there was a piece of paper that said: "In the event you encounter this, go there and there, don't be afraid to talk about it with such and such person." I think that this would be something that would be a sort of guarantee for the student. First, he would know where to go, and secondly, it would be information that the school is interested, because the way it is now one can think: "Well, will it even be of interest to them that he put his hand on my knee?" (Barbora, Ph.D., F)

Discussion and Conclusions

In line with the results reached by Fitzgerald et al. (1995), my analysis confirms that to cope with sexual harassment, students employ both *internal* and *external* strategies. Internal strategies in my interviews include *legitimization of sexual harassment, seeking mental support which does not challenge the status quo, silence as a rational choice in masculine hegemony and refusal of being a victim*. Their objective is not eliminating sexual harassment but emotional and mental coping with sexual harassment. Students less frequently opted for external strategies focused on actual tackling of harassment and its possible elimination, especially *the strategy of open resistance (solution with the support of the institution and its representatives* and *direct confrontation with the perpetrator)*. The most frequently chosen

coping strategy among the external ones was *hidden resistance (avoiding the harasser).* Although it could appear that internal strategies or avoiding the harasser are not actually active strategies but a certain form of passive resistance, analysis shows they are usually a result of very careful consideration of the costs and benefits of other strategies.

Students' narratives of coping strategies take place on two planes between which there is a clear discrepancy. On the first plane, which is usually related to contemplating solutions to hypothetical situations and often presents a spontaneous and immediate response to a question about strategies students would choose, strategies of open resistance predominate. Students usually say they would choose official or semi-official channels, or choose a direct confrontation. On this plane these solutions are discussed as unproblematic and risk-free. The second plane presents students' narratives about dealing with real situations or deeper considerations of hypothetical cases of harassment. On this plane, scepticism prevails toward open strategies. Preference is expressed for internal strategies or hidden resistance (avoiding the harasser). Although it could appear from the students' hypothetical responses that they are willing to tackle harassment openly, there was, despite the ample experience students have with various forms of harassment, only one student among the participants who decided to respond to a physical form of harassment through an official channel. As for direct confrontation of the perpetrator, this strategy was also mentioned only by a few women students. This reveals a multidimensionality of the narratives, discussed also for example by Kaufmann (2010). According to Kaufmann, interview narratives are presented primarily in the form of manifest opinions *"which are immediately at hand"* (ibid: 24) and usually reproduce general discourses and socially shared and generally accepted opinions. In this case, it appears to be students' recommendation not to put up with harassment and confide in school representatives, which is presented as something unproblematic. However, this plane does not reflect their actual decisions. As soon as students start to deal with the reality of tackling sexual harassment more closely and start to identify more deeply with the role of a potential target of sexual harassment, they usually reach the conclusion that the choice of a coping strategy is not as free it might have first appeared.

The division between the two narrative planes makes it possible to maintain two mutually contradictory discourses whose contradiction contributes to reproduction of sexual harassment, and may lead to victimization of students. If in the general mind it is easy to speak against harassment and address it officially, the fact that a target did not find the courage to do so may be understood as proof of her inability, cowardice or a strong reason to think that she may be to blame or that she made it up. The generally accepted view which

holds that existing options to address harassment with school management or confronting the perpetrator directly are an easy solution may result, in the current circumstances, to underestimating specific policies and expertise building by school bodies to redress this problem.

While some coping strategies have a clear potential to challenge gender relations and sexual harassment (such as, especially, open resistance), most of the other strategies do not have this potential and lead to its (often unintended) reproduction. It must be realized that students choose strategies within the framework of power and gender structures in which they operate and in which they have been socialized.

The options for active resistance and challenging the status quo through coping strategies for sexual harassment are limited by many factors. Apart from the power imbalance among the actors involved, which often prevents students from reacting forcefully (especially if sexual harassment occurs during an examination), the key factors appear to be *an interpretation of the gravity of harassment* and whether such behaviour would be considered as serious and inappropriate by other people (or the authorities which would deal with a potential complaint), *fear of secondary victimization* and negative impact of an assertive action on students' mental wellbeing and studies, *lack of information* as to how to tackle such a situation, *distrust* in school representatives and *fears of being accused of making false accusations*. It is therefore absolutely understandable why strategies of open resistance tend to remain rather a hypothetical coping strategy.

Based on the results of my analysis, factors that contribute to reproducing or challenging sexual harassment and the gender order can thus be divided between "ideational" and "material". On the ideational level students often legitimate sexual harassment by downplaying their experience, reframing it as a joke or trivial story, often irrespective of the gravity of the problem. This can possibly be attributed to the impact of socialization and general discourses of harassment. As Bourdieu (2000) claims, a key role is played by learnt schemas of perception, cognition and experience which women acquire during their socialization and which are constantly confirmed by general discourses. (e.g., Clair 1994; Wood 1994) In addition to socialization, perception and experience of sexual harassment are also affected by dominant discursive practices which usually downplay and belittle sexual harassment. (Bingham 1994; Wood 1994; Eyer 2001) These discourses treat coping strategies with great ingenuity. On the manifest level, assertive solutions to harassment are depicted in the interviews as a matter of free choice. This *de facto* transfers the burden on the targets of harassment because opposition to harassment is treated as easy and unproblematic.

On the other hand, material aspects which contribute to reproducing sexual harassment are very important. The interviews suggest that students do not have enough information about the issue, do not have confidence in school management and do not believe that the management would tackle the problem fairly. Anti-harassment policies obviously cannot solve the situation in and of themselves; nevertheless, it is possible to see them as a first step in addressing the issue. By formulating policies which explain and define what sexual harassment is, universities declare the position of the management on this type of behaviour and provide information about potential solutions. As interviews with students suggest, such policies would give a clear signal that a school does not want to and will not tolerate such behaviour and that ensuring a safe and non-discriminatory environment for students is of a crucial concern for the institution. For students it would thus be a little easier to challenge actively such behaviour and the appearance of its normality.

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