

SEXUAL HARASSMENT
IN OPEN PLAN OFFICE ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the phenomenon of sexual harassment within a particular work environment, with special attention to spatial arrangements and networking dynamics. It offers a sociological analysis using interviews and theorists of social spaces, to argue that the open plan office works as an environment which in some sense divorced from the formal world of legal regulation. The open office is presented as an example of what Foucault would call micropower, which regulates between and around existing legal frameworks, operates informally, through networks, space and practices. I examine the phenomenon of sexual harassment within this environment, which is seemingly missing from the existing literature. On the one hand there is a huge amount of literature on harassment from various perspectives and using very different methodologies and on the other hand there are studies which analyze influences that offices and particularly open plan offices have on numerous aspects of everyday work. My thesis aims to combine the two in a way to show that sexual harassment operates in a different way there. I identified and discussed four implications of space in conjunction with business culture in order to help the implementation of relevant policies which contribute to decrease the occurrences of harassing situations in workplaces. The four functions that influence employees' perceptions and experiences regarding sexual harassment are the following; space as a regulator, space as a catalyst, space as a vehicle in which inconveniences could disappear and space which diminishes hierarchy.

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Why Sexual Harassment?

„Harassment is a significant problem in the European workplace, with considerable costs both for workers and organisations”(European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2012). The expert forecast on the emerging risks carried out by the European Risk Observatory indicated violence and harassment as one of the emerging psychosocial risks related to occupational safety and health. Sexual harassment is a special form of workplace harm, and establish discrimination on the field of labour between women and men. According to the Anti-discrimination Directive 2006/54/EC (5 July 2006) it is defined as a situation ‘where any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature occurs, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment’. Harassment at work causes considerable stress and harm to the victims, and to their colleagues and families, as well. In some cases, individuals are unable to function normally at work and in everyday life. It can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, loss of self-esteem, anxiety, depression, apathy, sleep disorders, and even suicide. After highlighting the potential costs of ignoring effective treatment of sexual harassment, let me turn to statistics. European Commission data reveal that between 40 to 50% of women and 10% of men reporting sexual harassment experiences (Owens, Gomes, & Morgan, 2004). It is apparent also from these figures that the problem is not trivial. Correspondingly supports those scholarly assumptions that it is still seems to be natural bearing harassing behavior.

Legal and policy solutions to the phenomenon exist not only in the United States, where the very first sexual harassment cases were launched at courts or in broader international arena mainly lead by the United Nations but in the European context, as well. Prohibition of discrimination, and its special form, harassment appears - without striving for completeness - in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in the practise of the Court of Justice, it is a part of the *acquis communautaire*. That is why puzzling that it still apparently continues to be an

unresolved issue. According to Dougherty, “Despite the fact, that legislation is demanding a profound change in policies, and the lives of individuals, harassment continues to be a problem. There appears to be a gap between the aims of sexual harassment policies and the enactment of those policies”(2001:373). Thus, the question arises for what reasons regulation on sexual harassment does not work properly? Practically the access to justice is the field which should be improved, as the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)(2012) suggested last year in regard of all the potential grounds of discrimination across the European Union. Perhaps a more substantive answer could be found when the approach comes from a different perspective, because it seems that the caused harm is not getting out of the environment from which it is originated, instead of the fact that there are well established channels to launch claims to relevant authorities or professionals. There is seemingly a conceptualization gap between legal provisions and everyday life perceptions which offers a possible answer to the problem, why only a very few cases are reported. Here the question arises; how do participants in the labor market conceptualize sexual harassment in the light of legal regulations and their own gendered conceptions? At that moment, the policy or legal concept of sexual harassment is a gender neutral definition blind to contextual specificities of various labor fields and long-standing ways of communication between men and women in the work setting. The practice fill the provision with content, apply it to diverse situations in which on the one hand, employees’ perceptions on certain types of interpersonal behavior are divided by gender and on the other hand constrained by the specificities of the workplace. My thesis can contribute to shed light on the prevalence of sexual harassment in a certain physical setting and could be indirectly contribute to make the legislation work on this field. In complete agreement with Zippel I would emphasize that “laws against sexual harassment can be meaningful tools for individuals and groups to create a more equal gender culture in the workplace and ensure equal and fair working conditions for women and men” (2009:154).

A significant amount of literature on sexual harassment exists, in which a various range of research designs and focuses can be found, largely defined by the researcher's background; whether (s)he is for example a sociologist, a psychologist, or a legal scholar or a practitioner in law. Much of the initial research from the 1960's (mainly in the United States) was exclusively descriptive, in that it was aimed at identifying the frequency of occurrence of sexually unwanted forms of behaviors, or who harasses and who are the victims, or describing those circumstances under which it occurs more frequently according to Langley(1998). Emerging number of studies focus on the employers' perspectives, centers on duties, commitments with the aim of advocating the economic advantages of proper treatment of the question(Stockdale, 1996). Legal scholars often analyze domestic or international legal/court cases in order to show the difficulties, shortcomings or potentials of suing for SH. We have already learnt also a lot about perpetrator's motives, or about the characteristics of the most likely harassed persons, see Pryor's work(Pryor and Day, 1988; Pryor, 1985). There has been research on certain sectors of labor, for example on female coal mine workers(Yount, 1991), female registered nurses in hospitals(Libbus, M Kay DrPH, RN; Bowman, Katherine G. MS, RN, 1994) or on a group of professionals like women managers in insurance sales(Collinson, 1996) or hotel employees(Guerrier and Adib, 2000) or from the same university community, as we have found many examples in the scholarship. What is missing from the existing literature is, to concentrate on the physical environment in which harassing behaviors could occur. Whilst a huge variety of factors have been reviewed as potential contributors to the prevalence of sexual harassment; spatial arrangements, the impacts of physical space remained untouched. Based on this recognition and supported by Alan Vaux(1993) who suggests investigating sexual harassment within the confines of a certain workplace; I conduct my research center in an office environment, more specifically an open plan type one. Interpersonal behavior and communication at open-plan offices deserve a systematic investigation, because it has significant impact on social interactions and relations. Driven by this, there is an opportunity to look into this problem through 'gender lenses'. How do men and women at workplaces relate

and communicate to each other differently within an open-plan office environment they would do in another setting?

The aim of the present research is to identify in which situations or confined by what circumstances employees working in business office environments define behaviors as harassing ones and whether gender-based differentiation in their perceptions can be demonstrated. I conducted and analyzed ten semi-structured interviews and follow up vignettes filled out with office workers from my professional acquaintanceship. I will show that the contact centered open plan office space, hand in hand with a special business culture built upon a complex system of networking (covering regular business events, capacity building trainings, common dining places and so on) where not just business but private socialization also have taken place among co-workers; is a very rich context to be analyzed. These special circumstances affect interpersonal work relations in a multiple way. With the help of investigating the impacts these variables cause, I will answer questions like what are those things which might lead or on the contrary, prevent sexual harassment situations within a specific work setting. I will show that open plan office could operate as a social control system, and also as an environment which neglects ranking in organizational hierarchy. Furthermore, it could dissipate discomfort, and on the contrary fueling harm, as well.

Accordingly, my thesis advocates review of policies to ensure that laws are effectively implemented which can serve as realistic and workable tools for those targeted by sexual harassment at work. In order to find future directions of development on this field, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary. At least in terms of acknowledging that attention should be paid not only to legal practicalities but as well as to sociological contexts.

The first chapter offers a brief theoretical background on the one hand about the main considerations of the most important explanatory models scholars have built up in order to explain the phenomenon of sexual harassment and on the other hand about the key issues

concerning an open plan office environment which have been explored recently in scholarship. Then, the second chapter provides details of methodology. In the third chapter I show the specificities of the business culture through the gendered specificities of networking and socializing within this office environment. In the fourth chapter, the data analysis part aims to identify the various nature of influence shaped by the spatial setting and the work environment on prevalence of sexual harassment. I identify four functions the open plan office embodies in gendered interpersonal relations. I end with my conclusion as this special work setting make perceptions of sexual harassment a very context-driven phenomenon and make it understood as a result of a mixture of drives, motives and factors. I argue that the already existing socio-cultural-psychological explanatory models on SH are still applicable, because those mechanisms and dynamics described by them appear but all of them should be examined as working together and are highly influenced by the specificities of certain work settings.

1. Theoretical grounds for examining Sexual Harassment

In this chapter, I show significant and important scholarly approaches to sexual harassment, which serve as main grounds for the research I present here in this thesis. Primarily I give a legal context to the problem, how does sexual harassment fit to the world of human rights and the field of discrimination, then show basic explanatory models from socio-cultural, psychological perspectives which aim to define underlying causes and dynamisms behind the phenomenon.

1.1. Discrimination or violence against women?

The General Recommendation No. 19 (11th session, 1992) to the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in its Article 11 declares that equality in employment can be seriously impaired when women are subjected to gender-specific violence, such as sexual harassment in the workplace. Point No. 18. states that sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behavior as physical contact and advances, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography or sexual demand, whether by words or actions. Beyond the acknowledgement of the fact that legislation, policymaking treats sexual harassment as a form of discrimination based on sex or gender and also as a form of violation of human rights, research should find the underlying causes which result in this. It is a complex problem, as two scholars with 30 years differences sums it up briefly. “Sexual harassment arises from the nexus between a sexual demand and the workplace” (MacKinnon, 1979:31) and it is a “gendered problem and involves complicated issues of sexuality along with power, dominance and abuse” (Zippel, 2009:153). *Is it a human right, women’s right issue which belongs to the terrene of violence against women?* Does it have the same roots like violence within families or rape? Catharine MacKinnon and others (for example Andrea Dworkin) would argue that it is absolutely, because for her, male sexuality represents an eroticized domination which prevails over female sexuality. She proposes that sexual harassment occur to a large and diverse population of women because of their group characteristic, that is, sex (MacKinnon, 1979:27). In her critical evaluation;

“working women are defined, and survive by defining themselves, as sexually accessible and economically exploitable” (1979:55). Based on this, male privilege is demonstrated through sexual harassment similar to other forms of violence against women. Along this vein of thought, power is sexualized, so sex is power. She connects the problem of workplace discrimination and the issue of violence/sexuality, therefore linking economic to sexual rights, as Zippel stated. In accordance with this, in Fitzgerald’s word we are socialized as “to accept the male cultural prerogative to initiate sexual contact in virtually any situation” (1993:1072) workplaces are not exceptions. Thus “sexual harassment such as rape and domestic assault, simultaneously arises from and reinforces women’s subordinate position in society” (Fitzgerald, 1993:1072). Dworkin and MacKinnon “have expressed their general view that all sexual language and behavior in the workplace constitutes harassment” (Boyd, 2010:330). There are scholars who move forward and go deeper and use the notion of subordination of women by men but not only the basis of sex but on the basis of gender. *Thus, the following question is whether SH a gender equality problem?* Some academics insist on this latter explanation. For example, in Franke’s(1997)argument sexual harassment is sexually discriminatory wrong because of the gender norms it reflects and perpetuates; it is a sexual conduct when it operates as a means of enforcing hetero-patriarchal gender norms. She argues that sex discrimination enforces and policies a set of gender norms that seek to feminize women and masculinize men, and gender based subordination as an overarching practice that has as its goal the production of feminine women as (hetero)sexual objects and masculine men as heterosexual subjects. She proposes that sexual harassments should not be understood as sex discrimination just because it may be an expression of sexual desire, rather a sexual conduct when it operates as a means of enforcing gender norms. And it is wrong because it is deeply heterosexist in its assumptions.

1.2. Socio-cultural-psychological explanatory models of sexual harassment

After I have introduced the main puzzle of how sexual harassment fits into the larger picture of inequalities between men and women, I turn to those basic explanatory models which aims to

describe those mechanism which typify the most general scenarios of sexual harassment. These models cannot account for all instances of sexual harassment, but offer a basic outline of the main dynamics which have been revealed on this field. I am convinced that it is useful to review them here, in order to have the chance to refer back to them later whilst analysing the data gathered from this research project. I applied here the logic used by Stockdale(1993) to bring together the dominant models.

Beginning with the most evident explanation; according to the *natural/biological model*, sexual harassment is a result of natural attraction between people, thus sexual desire is the drive force which can be found as a cause effect. In this sense, we could say that sexual harassment behaviors would resemble courtship behaviors designed to flatter women in the case of hostile environment type sexual harassment. This explanatory model could be more provocative(Stockdale, 1993), if it is viewed in light of misperception theory based on male and female different perceptions. Misperceiving cues to determine whether a woman is interested or not, typically her friendly behavior are often lead to sexual harassment. There are scholars who strictly oppose to this explanation, such as Franke, who clearly argues for the de-sexualization of assaults labeled sex crimes (1998:1162) in order to shed light on how sex gets put to work in the service of myriad power relations (1998:1143). She follows Foucault's thought of "sexual as a regulatory ideal" (1998:1163), thus problematizes whether the sexual is a satisfactory lens of analysis by which to understand the meaning of interpersonal practices such as sexual harassment.

The *organizational model* supports Franke's aforementioned critique as proposes that there is power not desire which can be found at the heart of sexual harassment. Amongst others, for example Pryor has found that behavior in hypothetical scenarios is more likely to be judged as harassment if the perpetrator is of relatively higher status (Pryor, 1985). Stockdale(1993) also suggests investigating the influence of power distribution patterns behind harassment. She concludes that in several sexual harassment cases malevolent misusing of organizational positions explain the

harm causing. In her argument, based on a patriarchal social structure in which men typically hold more powerful positions; women are likely to be in subordinate positions, therefore become victims of sexual harassment. According to Stockdale, organizational position is an excellent predictor of a particular form of sexual harassment: 'quid pro quo'. Vaux(1993) calls attention to the fact that discussions on power dynamics tend to ignore power from sources other than organizational position.

The third category is a macro-level explanation, the *socio-cultural model* which refers to the patriarchal structure of society and culture. According to this, sexual harassment is about an abuse of the powerful over the powerless, and because of women is more likely to be powerless in societies, they turn to be the victims. Within this model, "gender differences in perceptions of sexual intent are a function of a sexual harassment supportive belief system that is created and perpetuated by a patriarchally based culture" (Stockdale, 1993:96).

And finally, culturally based gender stereotypes are in the core of the *sex-role spillover model* which results in differential treatment of women and men holding similar organizational roles. Stereotypes of femaleness are the characteristics of sexiness, affectionateness, attractiveness which are expected to represent even in the workplace. Where gender is made salient, this model is more significant. When Vaux(1993) lists the grounds for viewing harassment as a problem, She uses *Abuse of power* and *Sexism* as labels for categories equal to Stockdale's organizational power and sex-role spillover.

1.3. The importance of differences between male and female perceptions

Many of the scholars marked this as an essential factor in the case of analysis of the phenomenon of sexual harassment; therefore in this section I introduce those scholarly views which have found the variable of sex/gender as a core issue when examining perceptions on potentially harassing situations.

Early findings points out the differences without moving towards investigating its impacts, such as Terpstra and Baker (1989) (IN Baugh, 1997:903) who found that sex role stereotyping and religiosity contributed to a complex set of interactions with other traits in determining perceived seriousness of sexual harassment. Gohmann and Thacker (1993) investigated perceptions on 'hostile working environment' and they were interested in how male and female respondents' opinion differs. They found that it is worth to distinguish between a concept of a 'reasonable' men or women, because a gender-blind concept might cause misuse of legal concepts. They made it probable that behind the reasonable person model we usually find male concepts of harm. In this sense women are judged by norms, (mis)beliefs, thoughts which exist and created by males. In the worst scenario certain problems remain unrecognized or misunderstood if women's experiences are ignored or neglected. The more radical scholars, such as Kelly and Redford (1990) focus particularly on this problem, the so called 'malestream' thinking which regularly label harassing behavior as 'nothing'. Accordingly, they almost blame men for the individualization of women's experiences and for the fact that accordingly they make those problems bagatelle. In Baugh's (1997) argument there is also a strong justification of the urge of studying perceptions. She argues that social norms about sex roles and differentiation in perceptions of sexual harassment between men and women are the two main reasons which are implicated in the persistence of sexual harassment. There are studies which use the concept of sexual misperceptions by men, e.g. of women's friendliness in Stockdale(1993) or of women's different interpersonal behaviors indicated by Saal's(Stockdale, 1996). Baugh (1997) noted that there are a little research on exploring awareness of gender based perceptual differences. My thesis aims to touches upon this question, also, whether these differences can be read from the empirical data this project is built upon.

1.4. Key issues concerning work in open-plan offices

In this section, as my research centers around the impacts of the arrangements of open plan offices on judgments about sexual harassment, I explore the specificities of this physical

environment through the main fields and problems which have recently been under scrutiny in connection with.

Open-plan offices have been the object of many studies since the 1970s. One way to approach the issue has been to assess how open-plan solutions affect the end-users' environmental or job satisfaction. The other has been to investigate the psychological consequences of the open-plan office conditions. Many of these works touch upon social relations among employees within open-plan offices, but there are no efforts to analyze them as being in focus. The most discussed problems in studies examining open offices are noises, density, privacy, distractions, crowding, presence of others and ambient conditions. Interesting to see how scholars link job satisfaction for example, what extent the employees are capable of changing the temperature or light intensity by them. Also to see what types of distractive factors they name when are asked about what made them less efficient. A very stimulating study conducted by Ding(2008) concludes that involving office occupants in designing changeable modular system furniture can make employees more productive. I propose it is a similarly inspiring topic to research whether there is any difference between male and female interpersonal behavior within this special work setting. In line with Rasila and Rothe(2012), research would profit of focusing on understanding context-specific workplace experiences instead of understanding how average employees on average perceive their environment In this sense, I treat sexual harassment as an example of this; accordingly examine it as a special gendered interpersonal act, situation, and behavior. I argue that it belongs to privacy issues which are also on the list of the most discussed problems of open-plan environments in recent literature on this particular field. What is important for my research here; the concept and importance of visual privacy which has been distinct from acoustic privacy by scholars, such as Rasila and Rothe. In other scholarly terms; these are the problems of visual distractions and speech privacy(Ding, 2008). Academics refer to visual privacy when taking into account that individuals may see each other and what others are doing. They state that this might lead to a perceived need to behave in certain ways (Rasila and Rothe, 2012:365). According to their

findings concluded by a small scale research with twenty interviewees from Generation Y (mostly individuals born in 1982-2000), working for one big Finnish telecommunications company; visual privacy was more relevant to employers. For example, respondents found it problematic when others were passing by and may see what they are doing on their computers. My interviewees did not mention this as something that bothers them. Apart from inconveniences caused by disturbed virtual brakes, I suggest expanding the notion of virtual privacy with interpersonal connections, and not only focusing on effects on individuals caused by others' behavior or presence. This leads us to questions center around self-regulatory/self-reflexive practices. Rasila and Rothe hinted the idea that "one might feel a need to sit in a certain way or not use the internet if someone is watching" (2012:365). I will show that the fact that everyone might see to whom you are talking to, which body-talk, gestures you and the respondent use, what's more what are the reactions and contra-reactions during a conversation or even along a short talk; effects the way how employees communicate. They might use a slightly louder voice and even those others who are not supposed to be involved in certain topics, will be. One of my male interviewees describes this well: "You always hear everything. It is unavoidable to get into things into which otherwise you do not really want to." With this observation, there is another move into the terrene of acoustic privacy which refers to the lack of own private/confidential discussions and unintentionally listening to others. Another respondent referred to conversation on telephone: "Those kinds of information could leak from a phone talk which cannot be without fail, even business related topics, not just considering private matters." I argue that above all of this aforementioned scenarios, male to female or female to male co-workers' conversations are also at the spot when they are taken place in the main office area. It really does matter who is talking to whom and in what manner. The risk of misunderstanding by others around or the fear of accusation of anything highly influence the way of behaving. Similarly to this the features of the spatial environment also have impacts. For example, what is acceptable in front of the water machine or at the dining room is not at the desk of someone's supervisor.

Based on the above there are several ways of examining the phenomenon of sexual harassment. My work does not provide a legal analysis despite of the fact that there is some background information on the legal aspects of the phenomenon in the beginning. My thesis offers a sociological analysis, using interviews and theorists of social spaces, to argue that the open plan office works as an environment which in some sense divorced from the formal world of legal regulation. The open office is presented as an example of what Foucault would call micropower, which regulates between and around existing legal frameworks, operates informally, through networks, space and practices. I examine the phenomenon of sexual harassment within this environment, which is seemingly missing from the existing literature. On the one hand there is a huge amount of literature on harassment from various perspectives and using very different methodologies and on the other hand there are studies which analyze influences that offices and particularly open plan offices have on numerous aspects of everyday work. My thesis aims to combine the two in a way to show that sexual harassment operates in a different way there. In my argument space could regulate certain behaviors and dissipate harm, therefore contribute to the establishment of a harassment-free workplace. In addition, on the contrary, it could serve as a catalyst in the intensification of displeasing situations, as well. I argue further that it has a role in diminishing hierarchies in terms of gendered interpersonal relations, which overrules the dominance of the long-standing power-misuse explanatory model which is still extensive in recent scholarship.

2. Research design

In this chapter, I show the details of how I gathered my data, what were my selection criteria in terms of grouping the interviewees and what kind of method tools I have chosen to learn about their thoughts. After the introduction of the practical side of the project, I turn to broader questions like what are the possibilities and limitations of a small scale research project like this.

Studies on sexual harassment which can be directly linked to certain countries are very rare. It could not be surprising, because generalizing on a national level seems to be an unreasonable endeavour. What is more likely to be desired is to understand the constant prevalence of the phenomenon until these days. And in my argument, this could be traced only if scholars go down to the field and examine micro-level environments. The rationale of my choice, to start my research in Hungary, with Hungarian employees; is that I am aware of the case-law on this field here. I also have taken into consideration that without language barriers I could have got more precious understanding of the interviewees' sayings. Apparently, the whole employment sector is very wide and heterogeneous in contemporary Hungary, such as elsewhere in the world, I had to figure out into which type of workplace I can easily get access. The other important factor was that I insisted on finding a company environment I am quite familiar with. Thus, I have chosen a group of a particular kind of employees from my professional acquaintanceship. These employees, this group has certain things in common, which allows me to handle them as a quite homogeneous group in terms of work conditions and environment. They are parts of a gender-balanced community of workers, working spatially at one place – 'open-plan office style', and they are highly educated and paid workforce (holding university or college degree). They are all Hungarian employees working for multinational, global companies seated in Budapest. I have contacted two women who have been aware of my recent research interest and have been always open to my questions. The others have been found with the help of the so-called 'snowball' technique. These two women helped me with suggesting names. I intended to ask males and

females in the same proportion, so when they suggested someone who might talk to me willingly, I considered keeping a gender-balance. At the end, I have done semi-structured interviews with six women and four men, working for four different companies. I have talked to them informally, out of their work. Because it was not a systematic research focusing on one company with the aim of revealing how they, as employers relate to sexual harassment, or what is their employees' opinion about their endeavors on the field; I did not make an official query to let me doing an in-site research. On the other hand, I do not pay attention to their specific policies, measures, procedures, or cases they had or have. I mention them in general terms, as business firms which offer certain type of working environment to their employees. I have contacted my interviewees independently, they do not know to whom I have been talked to, because some of them know each other.

All the ten interviews lasted around one hour, and each of them was taken in a comfortable, good manner. They all know that I am a lawyer and a student in Gender studies. I have meet some of them before the interview occasionally, because our acquaintances often socializing together. We are in an the same age group between 28 and 35, and in a quite similar life stage. All of them were very open-minded and willingful to take part in this project, therefore they talk to me straight and in an upfront manner.

I myself, as a researcher did not provide a definition of sexual harassment when I started to ask them. I was interested in whether they wanted to have a concept, therefore ask me to give one or whether they mention legal or policy terms, phrases during our talks. I asked whether their company has a policy on harassment which they can turn to in such harmful cases, what types of procedures they know exist on this field that could help them. Two respondents out of the ten said that they have no any idea whether there is a policy or not and is there anybody who deals with such matters. Two female employees were fully aware of the content of the anti-harassment policy of the firm. It is worthy to note that they were the two who told me clear-cut sexual

harassment experiences they had recently. Others were aware of the fact that there is a certain regulation accessible by intranet, or in printed form, and some of them attended trainings which touched upon harassment, as well. One of the interviewees found it worth adding that this policy is not really propagated compared to the health and safety issues, for example. It is on paper, it is available, but there are no further efforts to make it visible or call attention to its importance.

I am alert that the answers, or the phrasing of them might be influenced by my gender and/or professional background. I think I succeeded to create such an environment which was necessary to feel comfortable and willing to talk to me freely. I am also aware of the statistics of SH (which says that the majority of victims are women) and have some personal experience on investigating SH cases, so I was particularly paying attention to be open to any kind of opinions, experiences and I was not expect certain things from male respondents, for example. I was open to all thoughts they shared with me. My research ethics was driven by the claim not to cause any harm. After having the talk I let the interviewees know I was planning to contact them a couple of days later. I compiled a test/questionnaire/mini vignette-type query to get their opinions on twenty situations. Alongside the interviews we have been talking in general, or about personal or standby experiences regarding gender roles at workplaces, about sexual harassment potential situations and behaviors and about human rights embedded into labour rights. Some of them mentioned at the end of the interview that it's a pity that (s)he was not aware of the detailed topics we were talking about; because it could have helped her/him to start thinking of these dynamics. Some of them marked that after the interview they would look at certain working relations or situations through another lenses, from this kind of a gendered perspective in the future. These feedbacks made me think of sharing more information with them from the very rich literature on the topic, and getting more detailed views from them at the same time. I felt that I would like to show them how various and multiple-layered scenarios could happen, and to make them feel, to what extent certain circumstances influence their judgments, opinions. With the help of imagined scenarios I made them involved and showed how easy to play with power relations, for example. I put

together these hypothetical situations driven by the knowledge I've gained from various research projects. I was curious how they react to one and other scenarios with different added information. Of course, I intended to figure out whether males and females differ when evaluating the same situation.

I am aware of the fact that this small scale research cannot shed light on the Hungarian society's opinion on sexual harassment, but can inform us on a special field of employment; the world of business employers and white collar workers. I am interested in gender inequalities of labor, and I am aware that the research I made, is a contribution to understand in more depth the underlying dynamics of this huge issue in a particular setting.

The already existing literature on sexual harassment offers many explanation models what might be found behind it, why is it still prevail, who are the actors and what are the motivations in general. We can imagine that several types of situations, people, and places might be involved in sexual harassment; therefore any kind of generalization is dangerous. Early research is important when the main directions and basic understandings were formulated but now researchers should be more specific. As Vaux (1993) suggests "hypotheses should specify which organizational conditions will increase the probability of which types of harassment, through which mechanisms, among which employees". To sum up, the time and space limits of this MA research drive me to sharpen my senses to the specificities of the working environment in which my interviewees are working. In this way I have to assess/test the existing explanatory models to what extent and how they are revealed there.

3. Networking and socializing within an open plan office

environment

This chapter provides an insight into the complex nature of interpersonal relations which makes the open plan office environment different from other type of work settings. In my argument, multifaceted networking practices operating beyond and in parallel with the spatial arrangement of the office contribute to understand better employees' precarious perceptions on different situations when sexual content or sex/gender implications drive the communication. Therefore, it is worth analyzing it separately and upfront, before focusing particularly on spatial impacts. The main attitude of the employees was how relative it is what could be sexual harassment and according to their examples this caused by the fact that their interpersonal relations are shaped by the contact centered office climate.

In connection with the open plan office environment, all of them referred many times to the advantageous or to the disturbing effects of a certain business culture and climate. This could be described by having a strong networking element along permanent socializing with others. All pointed out the high importance of quality of connections and relations they have with colleagues, particularly with those, who are sitting around within their smaller team.

Every one of them has relations which go beyond working relations with colleagues. They are going out, playing sports together or even living in partnerships with colleagues. They agree that they usually and naturally have private conversations apart from work-task related discussions in general, with most of the co-workers. All of them found this necessary and inevitable, because they are thinking of themselves not just robots or machines. P. K. brings up that "it is easier to make friends, letting know each others there". He emphasized that "a friendly and open collective is so important because people spend too much time at work. The more people work for the company the more friends you can make. The chance is greater to find those who are similar to you and contribute to feeling yourself good and comfortable at work." They stressed

that everyone can and has to decide to what extent (s)he is open to others and how deep and true personal relations could be established on the top of just being coworker's.

As a response to my question about how the company contributes to socializing or networking, they mentioned at first the specificity of the spatial arrangement of the office, and then listed company events such as team building days, team or department dinners and parties, professional trainings, few days' long visits to foreign offices, sport support, huge Christmas parties, sport or health days, different projects for employees (safety/drawing competition). They feel all of these occasions are useful and make it easier to know others apart from those who are working in the close environment of everyday. They said most of the people show another face of their personality outside of the strict work/office-setting, so if someone is interested in knowing better colleagues, company events offer a good chance to do it. A. M. said that even if he cannot bear some female colleagues within the office, he found no problem getting along with them during out-of-workplace events. This informal but still work-related meeting helps him to reconcile certain communication issues in the office. One of them mentioned that it is a good thing to get off work every now and then and they are lucky because the company can afford to provide these opportunities to its employees. When I raised the question whether and to what extent these company driven events contribute to mixing or blurring the borders of private and professional elements of working relationships, they reflected that this is nothing serious, inevitable and something which could be treated intelligently. Everyone has to be cautious how to behave on these events, particularly when alcohol is present, as well.

Their thoughts also support the idea that business climate which fosters socializing attitude inevitably generates gendered tensions among male and female employees. During the interviews we discussed various aspects of perceptions on sexual harassment. They have been indefinite, ambiguous in terms of where is the starting point of labeling some behavior harassment and they emphasized that this depends on so many things. They all have mentioned at the first place that

what is really matter is the quality and level of the relationship between the parties we are examining in a potential sexual harassment situation. How well they know each other, to what extent the acquaintance is personal; because these influence what is natural, acceptable or tolerable towards a specific person. A.M. said:

“I make compliment only to those female colleagues, who knows me and my style, who can accept it without being offended or feeling bad about it.”

This implies that he behaves in a more personal way only with those, who knows him. This means that he does not flatter anyone in the office. If he does, it indicates that they are in a closer relation then being only workmates. P.K. supports this idea that if you do not know anything about someone, you will not advance him/her or make compliments. In his words: “For those who are completely stranger to you, it is not typical at all, just out of the blue saying things.” And even with those who are acquaintances, majority stated that being cautious is always in their mind. They stressed that everyone has his/her own tolerance or sensitivity level which should be noticed and acknowledged by others. P.K. phrased it like this: “You make compliments, or use appealing words, if you know the other party and with respect to her tolerance level.” Seemingly all of the male employees emphasized that they have to consider certain things in order to avoid causing harm while they are making jokes or compliments. Z.K. mentioned:

Everyone has to be aware of how far he can go with the other person, it is very important. In terms of verbal communication, everything can be imagined. It is always depends on from whom the person receives it and what is the nature/quality of their relationship. These two are the most important parameters. Maybe the third is whether (s)he receives these things in front of a broader audience.

Their opinions implied that the same way of joking could have various effects on different persons therefore they should pay attention to this. Based on the above, the contextual nature of

their judgments on gendered interpersonal communication and harassment is the most clear-cut conclusion I can make, which is highly influenced by the fact that strong networking is an important part of their work and office climate.

3.1. Romance and sexuality at work

Having introduced before, the complexity of the socializing motives and efforts contribute to stagger judgments on potential harassing situations. In complete agreement with Lee who says “sexuality is never truly absent from the work institution”(2006:611), I provide here in this section an overview of the phenomenon of workplace romance and sexuality which directly tackles the question of being women and men at the first place not only gender-blind employees at work.

There is certain amount of studies which focus on the phenomenon of workplace romance which mainly center on the problem whether to allow sexuality to prosper in workplaces. Majority of them mention sexual harassment in this context as a negative outcome, it comes when affection or affairs turn out badly. Many of the scholars, such as Clarke summarizes that “sexual relations at work are ‘unprofessional’, as antithetical to the true purpose of the organization: sex at work is bad for business“(2006:350). As she explains it, this may be because personal relationships produce conflicts of interest, whereby individuals are unable to deal with each other as colleagues, or it is about deeper worries about the attack of the workplace by “such unpredictable forces as emotions and sexual desire” (Clarke, 2006:350). Therefore, there are companies, institutions which introduce different bans on dating among employees. Boyd (2010) cites Margaret Mead (1978) who is an anthropologist and clearly advocates for the necessity of an “incest taboo” – dating – at workplaces. Others think that prohibition on romance restricts the freedom of employees and ignore those facts which prove the benefits and positive effects caused by co-workers’ well functioning partnerships. According to Boyd (2010:327), Anderson and Fisher (1991:177) remarked that “Mead’s organizational incest proposition does not appear feasible or

desirable given the social milieu of today's workplace. Consequential thoughts of my interviews' around the topic support this observation.

Regarding the potential of finding partners among colleagues, J.S. mentioned that:

It is a good place for finding even partners, especially when so many single men and women at similar ages and with similar life styles work together. Spatial arrangements serve these socialization processes well.

The implication here is that J.S. thinks about her workplace as a perfect place for finding romance or love. This shows that employees do not think of themselves strictly being as co-workers but as women and men, also. The fact that they are in a similar demographic group without families only increases the chances of pairing. Two among the ten interviewees I have asked were companions and knew each other at the workplace. Two other respondents mentioned that they had love affairs with colleagues. Apart from the fact that majority agreed upon that affection or attraction between the sexes make the working climate more pleasant and enjoyable, there were some who directly referred to the fact that sexuality is presented in more concrete ways, as well. I was told a story which shows a scenario in which it is revealed: how. A female employee who is in a leadership position said:

Where I sit, not a single day passes without themes popping up in a similar kind (sexual-ed.), and yes, perhaps the most extreme themes, like prostate massage, but not with a certain tone. Girls initiate this, by the way, for the record, just one. But we know she is like this. When I got into this group, I was really surprised about this. There is this woman and two relatively youth male colleagues, and yes, themes and topics are popping up and those types of comments she makes regularly made me blush sometimes. In spite of the fact that I am not that kind of shy women. But this is an accustomed thing for now, for me. If a male newcomer would arrive I can imagine this could have taken badly.

Yes, this is a kind of joking, and it does not hurt us, but for a perfect stranger I might say it shall be shocking.

She made it clear that this kind of ‘sexual talk’ was unconventional and surprising even for her, who had been working for a while for the company and who thought not about herself as being unashamed when delicate issues are at the focus. She had to get use to it, because there was no choice; she has been transferred to this position. As she pointed out there is a possibility that someone cannot adapt to this environment. B.H. did not label this behavior as sexual harassment, but she mentioned this story as an example of portraying how hard is to mark the borders between joking and harassing in the case of talk of a sexual kind. According to their overall opinions, flirting or dallying in a certain sense is part of the average office communication. I argue that within this environment, introduced above; is harder to make sharp distinctions between harassing, disturbing, bothering or annoying situations. It is hard to decide whether certain style is acceptable or not or what topics belong to the workplace and what are those which are inappropriate there. The problem of feelings and affections is even more complicated. How and to what extent those things could be controlled and whether there is a need to control them. There is a category of sexual harassment which is unequivocally prohibited. What does this category covers? Situations, behaviors which are unwanted from the victim’s perspective and causes negative affects on his/her working environment. Therefore, the emphasis is on the non-consensual feature of the advancement and the harm-causing effect. Obviously, the general provision is dependent upon the context in which it happens and it is not easy to “draw lines in office sand” (Pesta and Hrivnak and Dunegan, 2007).

3.2. Career advancement implications

It is important to note that these multinational companies rotate employees from one position to another regularly, in order to challenge them and try another field, to deepen their overall expertise. Thus, in general, they change teams/groups/departments in every two to three years.

Accordingly, colleagues working in close proximity, such as team leaders, supervisors are changing over time. Workers also have the opportunity to reach higher positions, gaining leadership responsibilities, therefore getting closer to managerial level. Job transfers or promotional steps are mainly based on professional ranking, work quality assessment and naturally on (inter)personal skills, motivations. In a highly competitive environment like this, not only maintaining positions but rather building a career is a goal of the majority of the employees. This business setting embodies a highly contact centered design in which interpersonal connections, style and ambitions are important determinants regardless of gender. A male interviewee pointed out an important dynamic which is worthy to be emphasized here. Z.K. said, if he were an attractive woman, he would have lunch with the boss, perhaps regularly, and not because of the boss's charming or sympathetic personality, but because of the advantages it might bring in the future. In his words:

It is natural, existing practice within multinational firms, where networking, socializing, communication, (self- and work- also) presentation is very important. I am convinced that in many situations it is much more important how good relations you have with others than the professional tasks you have done. In an atmosphere like this it is hard to decide/separate whether you are harassing someone or taking steps toward building your career or just tries to adapt to this business culture.

He made it clear that for the sake of his career he would use or exploit his sex appeal. An assessment of this kind shows how sexuality could serve as an advantage in career building. A perfect example of this is a nice meal and kind chatting or flirting with someone who pleases you and might have influence on decisions which are taken place about your advancement. This interviewee also pointed out that within an atmosphere like this, when playing with attraction or charm – and here he reflected to himself as a man who pleases a woman in a higher position – is customary, it is hard to judge what types of behavior cross those certain thresholds and leads to

potentially harassing situations. One day these frequent lunch invitations or those times spent together could turn to be unwanted occasions by one of the parties and if the other is still keen on continuing; the original scenario has been twisted. Inspired by this male thinking I constructed a hypothetical scenario and asked all the interviewees with the help of a questionnaire what they think about a situation similar to this. The vignette was about a male colleague who conspicuously praises his supervisor, invites her to lunch, regularly passes by her desk and makes compliments on her femininity and seizes all opportunities to please her. It is obvious that he behaves like this on purpose and wants to be promoted quickly. The woman asks him to stop this, because it starts to be annoying and disturbing. The male subordinate does not stop. On the scale of 0-5, three respondents gave 4 and three gave 5 which means non acceptable behavior or sexual harassment obviously. There was one opinion which covers 2, that means 'perhaps for someone it is harassing'. The only one who gave 0 which means 'not at all sexual harassment' was the male respondent who told me the original story which inspired the cross-examination of others. To sum it up, others than this one male respondent do not support the idea that it is a customary way to manage careers, probably caused by the risks involved, namely these situations easily can turn to harassing situations.

Having explored that working in an open office setting in a very competitive field of labor market implies certain gendered communication patterns and situations I argue that judgments on sexual harassment relative and precarious because of this. This setting contributes to understand the tendency why employees are so ambiguous and cautious when it comes to make judgments about what types of situations could be stated as sexual harassment. In the next sections of the study I process all of those references they made to sexual harassment and gendered inter-personal communications patterns during our conversations and through their answers to the imagined scenarios I've sent to them through email. I will show that the open plan office environment in conjunction with the business culture introduced above influences in a multiple way how employees perceive potentially harassing situations.

4. Space and Sexual Harassment

In this chapter I offer an analysis of how and to what extent spatial arrangement, in particular, open plan office environment contribute to shape perceptions and judgments on sexual harassment. I argue that space could intensify inconvenient overtures and in another time could help neglecting offensive, harmful comments. It functions as an invisible control system which makes people watch over their agency, such as an environment in which organizational ranks lose their significance.

My interviewees describe their workplace as a multinational, modern, well-equipped office without walls; an open space divided into cubes or boxes. They can see and hear everyone from their places, there is no opportunity for separating themselves. Primarily they mentioned the positive aspects of this specific environment but after shared negative ones, as well. Majority said that this is the only reference they have; they socialized in an environment like this, so this is what is natural for them. Many of them thought concretely they could have not imagined working in another setting.

It seems almost being obvious that we cannot find the same dynamics, conditions and problems in different types of workplaces. A hyper masculine environment with a limited number of female staff, for example a mine or an IT department is different from a main office of a leading global firm with a gender-balanced workforce. Although this approach - which looks at the work setting primarily - promises valuable insights, it has not received serious empirical attention in sexual harassment research. There are some scholars like Alan Vaux (1993) who calls attention to the fact that it is necessary to understand how harassment in the workplace is different from similar behavior in other settings. What is the contribution of the work setting, if any? He suggests working with testable hypotheses about the types of organizational relationships, occasions and settings in which types of seduction, imposition are likely to occur. These kinds of models help us identify prevalent forms in various types of work. Generalizing explanatory and

research patterns would not contribute to the elimination of harassment in the future. We need to look into certain sectors, companies, not only make general conclusions on all fields of employment. Vaux recommends looking into special organizational features, also. He says that “different combinations might facilitate different mechanisms for harassment, such as sex-role spillover, miscommunication, or explicit coercion” (1993:130). Grounded in his vein of thought, I focus on how and to what extent certain conditions impact those employee’s perceptions on sexual harassment whom I interviewed. Which types of mechanisms among which employees can be read from the opinions and thoughts they have shared with me; which one of the well-known explanatory models of sexual harassment can be applied and in which contexts?

In order to navigate among the rich data I gathered, I use a structure which contributes to understand how and to what extent the open space variable hand in hand with the system of interpersonal behaviors implied and supported by a certain business climate influence judgments. I identified four functions the open plan office embodies in gendered interpersonal relations. These are the followings in the order of appearance along this chapter. Open plan office space which operates as a form of social control, secondly as an environment which can dissipate discomfort, thirdly as a contributor to nurture harm and then as an environment which neglects ranking in organizational hierarchy. I argue that these all influences how employees perceive certain situations as harassing or harmless ones.

4.1. The Open plan Office Space as social control

In this section, I show that an open plan office environment has a kind of regulatory function with a restraining effect in which someone has to consider what to say and do. The opinions of my interviewees’ support the idea that the specific spatial arrangement generates mechanisms which regulate workplace behavior and foster a certain disciplined climate in which sexual harassment is unlikely to occur. These kinds of views resembles to certain efforts which aim to control workforce indirectly. Some authors suggest Foucauldian Panopticum-style spatial arrangements, in order to make employees feel that they are under permanent surveillance. Being

watched and heard by everybody in every single minute of work time could create a certain climate, which helps the employer to take the lead and being at the charge of control. In my argument, this type of surveillance impacts inter-colleague communication and relationships, as well. It counts who is talking to whom, in what manner or style. How long does a conversation take? What words are leaking out or directly being spoken out? Visual impressions are always there, in many times coupled by listening to conversations. Based on the respondents' opinion, this make persons avoid offensive, harmful, jarring or allusive comments. It really matters what kind of a picture is established about someone by the collective. Z.K. emphasized that everyone has to pay attention in talking to whom and about what:

Of course, you are cautious and well-mannered at work. An open air, lots of people, and you do not chit-chat to your female colleague even if you want, maximum when only the two of you are there. You have to pay attention the content of your say.

He emphasized that there is a distinction between behaviors at or out of work; the first is a considered one, where people do not talk to each other about everything. Topics are limited; also the use of appropriate words is taken into account. Another male respondent referred to a similar thing, the presence and potential of gossips: "This is a big company, also the open space, here things are spreading easily. Gossip is a common thing." (P.K.)

Accordingly, it seems that there are things men avoid doing. For example, chatting only the sake for talking to someone, thus not to serve as a ground for any gossip, because there is always the chance that news or topics are being shared unintentionally or on purpose. P.K.'s answer to my question what kinds of comments among a broader audience of the open office happen in general: "It happens that there are certain comments on women's appearance; but mostly not articulated directly to her. You are more cautious then this, because it is not really necessary to say it directly to her. But among each others people talk about others easily."

His comment implies a topic that are always out there at the office; such as physical appearance of anybody. What he mentioned as important to avoid is neglecting comments face to face. There were other opinions which reveal that certain non-written rules exist and regulate interpersonal behaviors among colleagues. As a result of this, as the subsequent comments show employees conceive their workplaces as places in which a certain type of behavior is expected from them. P.K. phrased it like this:

In a working environment in which we are doing our job, men are taking account of consequences of their behaviors, thus they show attention to those thresholds, which cannot be crossed.

The implication here is that because of the fact that men are aware of the potential outcomes of behaving in an unacceptable way within this environment; they watch over their agency. Not only him but others referred to certain 'borders', 'cross lines', 'thresholds' which embody the point beyond something turns to be unwanted. One male interviewee shared a similar opinion regarding the workplace as a distinct one from other types of work settings:

Those who are working in the field like me has a certain educational background which supposedly covers a certain intelligence level, which involves respect for each other.
(Z.K.)

A female employee was sure about the restrictive power of being aware of potential sanctions:

Everyone knows that if someone comments on the other and it causes harm or its hurt, there will be real consequences. In my opinion that is why this happens so rarely. There is this harassment issue. If someone is involved in an unwanted situation based on this, a procedure shall be initiated in order to shed light on whom and why and in what circumstances the harm has been caused. (TSZ)

According to her view, the provision of a potential investigation which implies interrogation, seeking for witnesses and other proofs serves as an effective tool to persuade employees to take serious situations which might hurt or cause harm to others.

Based on the above, my interviewees think of their workplaces in general as spaces in which sexual harassment is less likely to occur because they credit their co-workers with a certain intelligence and sensibility level. This indicates a sense of belonging to a community in which moral standards are evident which prevent occurrences of misconducts. In my view there were some among the interviewees who cannot even believe to experience a situation which could be labeled sexual harassment within the setting of their workplace. Whilst we were talking about what types of sexual harassment potential behavior they can imagine happening there, TSZ said:

I cannot imagine a loud, rough and harsh commenting on my appearance similar to experiences occurs to me frequently on the street (by physical workers).

This was the only opinion among others' responses that differed markedly in that it approached my question from the negative side. All the others mentioned unwanted both verbal and physical contacts such as regular invitations to dates, gifts, touching, saying things ... etc. She found it important to make a difference between potential harmful harassing situations inside and outside of work. For her, what is an everyday experience on the streets is completely unexpected in her workplace. She also listed probable venues of sexual harassment such as an elevator or huddle rooms, which both are specific to usually multi-floor open air offices. She did not mention the large, common space as a potential venue, only those places which are somehow isolated, separated from the main office area. This shows that how her imagination was narrowed down by the physical reality she experiences every day.

Beyond all questions, those companies my interviewees are working for employ hundreds of workers who have various personalities and also behavioral styles – which per se expose risks of

various interpersonal conflicts – and within their open plan offices they do have a very limited amount of privacy as all the time they are under others’ eyes and ears control. I argue that the interaction of these factual features leads to certain kind of self-regulatory practices which assist sustaining a harassment-free environment. According to the respondents’ opinions, everyone works in a respectful climate based on morally correct relations at these workplaces. There are certain things which are not allowed in an environment like this but employees are aware of these and follow up the unwritten rules.

4.2. The Open plan Office Space as dissipates discomfort

In this section, I argue that an office with an open plan helps to overcome certain harassing behavior or in other words, helps to take off the edges. In this sense open air works like a vehicle which through harm is not translated into individual level and therefore it is accepted as an experience of the whole community.

I was told a story by more than one respondents working for the same company which was a highly thought-provoking one. This experience suggests a certain supportive function of the space. Those, who shared this with me, were absolutely sure and confident that the subsequent behavior is disturbing, sometimes uncomfortable. For me, with my legal experience, the scenario was obviously eligible to being established sexual harassment. A.K. said:

There is a male colleague who allows himself sexual or private or intimate remarks regularly. In spite of the fact that mainly all of the women are involved and everyone knows about him and his ‘style’; the majority acknowledges him as just being like this. I would say, I cannot take him seriously, and sometimes I just feel these moments awkward and unbelievable. For example, once he made comments on my breasts like they cannot be artificial, because if someone has such a small ones, it is not reasonable have them done.

As more than one respondent alleged, there was no particular incident when someone tried to stop this man, perhaps slight, funny reactions or smiles followed his remarks. One of the interviewees realized that it also could be a part of this problem that nobody talked to him to change. This scenario involves more than one woman and none of them felt the necessity to warn this male colleague despite the fact that he occasionally used nasty or really obscene words. In my argument, the burden of this particular man's words is seemingly scattered in the air and united all the women who ignore this together. In this way, none of them takes it personally as a personal harm but bear it and leave it as a group of women. For that reason it can be proposed that there is a possibility of being more tolerant with those who seem to "beyond recovery" within an open office. This maintains the assumption that common space can contribute to dissolve the seriousness of certain words. It is similar to situations in which others' reactions can help manage certain unwanted comments or ease a certain edge of assertions.

Based on this, I suggest, it is worth thinking of a commonly shared space as a never-ending or infinite territory which could absorb incongruous comments or make nasty experiences felt as being evaporated. In this sense, sexual harassment situations lose their severity and are taken as non-serious, even frivolous events.

4.3. The Open plan Office Space as catalyst for harm

In this section, I argue that open air office environment has a negative side effect which includes those circumstances that foster or support maturation of sexually harassing situations.

I examine here those situations, when commonly shared space foster potential harassing situations or make them worse. Additionally to those which could be evaluated as sexual harassment by legal/policy terms but –as I argue, because it is natural, customary within an open plan office environment – according to the perceptionsof employees; itis not.

4.3.1. 'In front of a crowd'

In general, a disturbing side effect of open spaces is that everyone sees everything; employees do not have visual privacy. Some of the respondents mentioned that if someone enters into the office space, all the others recognize any changes they have in their appearances, like being exhausted after a party night or having changes in hair style. Even if someone has sport injuries for example, it cannot be kept in secret, everyone can recognize and start asking what has happened. TSZ shared this bystander experience:

My friend has a long, blond hair and often uncombed, we can say. One morning, before came to work, she has been at the hairdresser's where her hair was done perfectly. Many of the colleagues reflected on this upon her arrival like 'finally, you've had your hair done'. It was not a pleasant situation.

Thus, reactions are so prompt, and many, which could be pleasant sometimes, but disturbing, even annoying at another time. Now, I turn to examine those opinions the interviewees shared about potentially harassing situations in which the contribution of the spatial variable make their judgments more persuaded. When an embarrassing situation occurs or someone has a nasty experience in front of many of the colleagues, it makes the incident more significant and harder to handle it. The common space is open and spectacular within an office setting; an employee might feel him/herself as walking on a catwalk or performing on stages. In order to test this, I provided a sexual harassment scenario which models the reality of being all the time in front of others. In this sense this is a typical scenario in an open office environment. I was interested in judgments on remarks on physical appearances. At first, there was a direct question about how frequent are these. Six out of the nine answered that they receive this kind of commentary on a weekly or daily bases. As many of the respondents mentioned it is common to stare/gaze at others and comment on looks, because of the visual openness; I gave them two plots of this kind of social office interaction. One of the two is about a women at the center and in the other is a

men surrounded by others of the opposite gender. The situation is similar, the members of the opposite gender pay particular attention to the one who passes by and this confuses her/him. In *Case 1* the plot is the following: 'male employees spectacularly gaze and make comments on a smart, good looking female employee who passes by their desks. The woman feels herself seemingly embarrassed, keen on reaching his work station. This is an everyday experience for her.' Three male respondents rated this situation on the 0-5 scale; 2 which means 'perhaps someone finds it harassing'. Women rated this 3 or above (4 by 2 out of 9), which means 'for the majority it is harassing' or 'do not acceptable at workplaces'.

When I added to the basic scenario that 'one of the male co-workers loudly and directly says the women: How pretty you are, you made my fantasy'; the evaluations changed, as I was expected. Majority of the respondents increased the score. One of the male respondents' answer was particularly interesting; he scored 0 for the basic situation, but scored 4 after the change was made in the scenario. Interestingly there was only one woman who scored 5 at once, which means 'absolutely sexual harassment'. In *Case 2* the plot was: 'female employees are whispering and smiling behind the back of a male colleague regularly, when he passes by. He is good looking, athletic, and charming; women like his appearance and make this clear among them when he is around. After a while, the man chooses another pass to walk, with the intention to avoid this.'

For the male respondents, this situation was 0 or 1 on the 0-5 scale. When they rated almost the same scenario, included a woman as a harassed party, the same persons gave 2 constantly. The only person, who rated 0 when a woman was involved, interestingly gave 3 when a man was involved. So, majority judged a situation like this as more serious, when it happens to a woman. Female respondents seemingly maintain this trend; they also gave lower or similar scores when the scenario involved a man as a harassed one (3 to 4; 1 to 3; 4 to 4; 2 to 2). Based on the collected data it can be indicated that there are differences between male and female opinions whether it is acceptable bearing sexualized gazes and reflections on desired appearances. Majority

of the women felt that these are harassing circumstances and they should not taken place at a workplace. Majority of men found these acceptable, natural things which might bother someone, but in general not harassing ones. As a conclusion it seems that within an environment like this where principally everyone sees everyone and everything, staring and gazing also become natural and everyday occurrence. For whom cannot be used to this, bearing and handling remarks regarding sex/gender features, even gender/sex roles or attributes might cause real problems. Even they would cope with these in a more personalized environment, the larger audience and open space magnifies certain impacts or impressions. Men respondents did not bothered themselves with the fact that according to the scenario a group of men clearly embarrassed a women intentionally and directly; they did not feel there were any problem with this. Women clearly shared that these situations are harassing and non-tolerable ones. They judged differently the visual freedom what is given at open plan offices; men easily used it as an opportunity, women protested against taking advantage of this.

4.3.2. 'Nowhere to hide'

The other implication of the negative impact of space regarding its contribution to make harassing situations even worse or more frequent is the opportunity to getting closer to someone easily or being always around in a physical sense, in bodily terms. Does physical presence have significance when we talk about gendered interpersonal communication or about potential harassing behaviors? Furthermore, whether the spatial design inspires employees to stop by each others' work stations or catch up with someone who apparently pops up nearby?

I gave the interviewees a scenario in which the plot was the following. 'A male colleague complains about an unknown female co-worker who regularly sends chat messages implying the intention to contact him outside of the office. He is keen on ignoring her intranet messages, her likes on Facebook and avoiding meetings in person; but the woman does not understand that he is not interested.' This basic plot ended like this. The other one was extended by additional

information. 'On one day, the women appears at the men's desk, leans close his face and asks whether they are going to a party or not.' The evaluation of the respondents was very tendentious. Six persons out of the nine gave lower score on a 0-5 scale when the women acted from a distance and through IT devices (3 to 2; 5 to 3; 5 to 3; 4 to 2; 5 to 2; 3 to 2). When she was not nearby, the highest score was a 2 which means that 'perhaps for a few this is harassment'. When she appeared and was being closed in physical terms, five respondents scored 4 or 5 which means 'obviously harassment' or 'not acceptable at all at a workplace'. Two out of the nine did not distinguish between the two scenarios; the male respondent evaluated both plot for 2 and the female both for 5. This test supports the idea that the opportunity to approach someone freely within the open space decreases the chances of avoiding unwanted contacts. There is nowhere to hide from a person who you do not like or do not want to enter conversation with. The respondents' opinions show that an undesirable behavior could be more serious if it appears in its physical reality. It is important to consider in the ages of high-technologies when virtual relationships are basic experiences. When they turn to be physical, the whole dynamics will change. Moving from the intranet chat system to an actual face-to-face contact is not a huge step in an open plan office but influences highly judgments and reactions in connection with.

Finally, I show here N.S.'s caseto show how impossible is to get rid of an unwanted relationship within this office environment. There was a male colleague, a co-worker from the same floor, who was attracted by her. He tried to get closer and paid special attention to her. He navigated in the open space, took advantage of the fact that he easily can pop up or appear every now and then without being conspicuous. Regularly passed by her desk, intended to start conversations, and praised her outfit and appearance. Occasionally he left small presents on her desk like chocolate or flower whilst she was away. N. S. after a couple of occasions realized that he wanted more then just to be in a good relation with, ask him to stop. The men was not able to leave her alone, continued the harassing behavior, bothering her with his presence. N.S. limited the communication with him to strict work-related issues and stopped even being friendly. She has

chosen new paths among the work stations or turn back on the corridor when he was approaching. I argue that the open plan design made N.S.'s case even more unbearable, because she was not able to ignore the harasser completely; there were no place to hide from him. The opportunity to meet him at any time, being at the cross of his gaze shaped her days for a long time. She was also stressed by the fact that he may have reached her desk while she was not there, and may have stared at her from the distance, viewed her daily routines without any difficulties. The open space at that time meant to be an infinite territory in which there were no place to hide.

4.4. The Open plan Office Space as a diminisher of hierarchy

In this section, I argue that open plan space with its spatial design influences the weight of organizational positions and washes out the hierarchical differences in terms of gendered interpersonal behaviors.

One of the main causes which have been observed in scholarship proclaimed the role of power differentials of the parties as the leading underlying factor of harassment situations. The one in a higher position of hierarchy has the opportunity to influence the other's career development or possess even the right to keep or dismiss her/him. This explanatory model links or bridges to those notions which assert that because of usually men are in leading, top positions; usually they are in positions which can allow them to misuse power. Therefore the basic manifestation of sexual harassment, which looks like a superior man harasses a subordinated woman, resonates with women's general subordination in societies. It could be asserted that this is still true in the case of 'quid quo pro' type harassment, when it is obvious that the superiority plays the most important role, because the dependency provides the opportunity for the harasser to compel someone else to make favors. Let me introduce here a clean-cut quid quo pro type sexual harassment situation, which has been told by one of the female interviewees. This story serves as a perfect example of the nexus of the power of hierarchical superiority and willingness to convince someone based on a career promise. The interviewee has been sent to a leadership-

training with others from all across Europe working for the same company, and she had a few words almost with every participant, mainly about work-related issues, country specific firm practices, career opportunities. After a couple of days this event, she had an electronic message from one of the foreign, high-ranking male colleagues which contains that he started the process of her replacement, he would talk to her superiors in order to organize her a highly valued position which shall please her. At the same time he informed her that he visits to Budapest soon and they can spend the weekend together. In this case A.H. was shocked and feared of these messages at first, then started to think it over and over what she could have told to him or how did she act. She realized that she did say nothing which could have been misunderstood or could have taken as an encouragement. She felt that she could get in trouble if she reports this, because his words against hers cannot be equalized because of the hierarchy. She did not feel that a fair investigation would be possible because of their different power relations and the fact that she is a woman against a man's words. The situation is not as simple with the case of 'hostile environment' type sexual harassment. With this kind, being a peer worker or being in a leadership position might not affect judgments on harassment. In a certain work setting, like a modern open-office I have researched; this latter type is the more prevalent. My interviewees did pay a slight attention of making difference on the basis of hierarchical positions when they have talked about harassment. The role of superiority was not a precondition or even an important factor when they talked to me. When I asked preciously about it, they recalled connections but many of them did not mention it just by their own. I argue that the open-plan spatial setting could create a space in which the implications of hierarchy might lose its significance. In general, large proportion of the interviewees highlighted the fact that even managers are sitting close to them without being indicated that they are in a higher position, because of the open plan space setting. In this way, anyone can ask for help very easily and freely. They agree that this spatial arrangement helps smooth and effective communication without fears of being blamed because of lacking knowledge on something. B.H. said that in this way you can be sure that you won't be

out of something important or meaningful in terms of information flow. Z.K. said: “I prefer the open door policy attitude in general, which is perfectly solved with the open-air style spatial design.” These opinions support the idea that strict hierarchical relations are not presented on a daily basis, do not impact significantly every day’s interpersonal communication and relations. I argue that within an environment like this harassment situations are likely to be blind to the fact whether the harasser and the harassed one are on the different organizational level or not. The fact that everyone sit and work in the same office, thus share the same space results in being more equal as individuals. Therefore, in my argument, the sex and/or gender of employees is more likely important than their hierarchical ranks in situations like sexual harassment.

Apart from the interviews conducted, I directly asked for interviewers’ opinion with the help of questionnaires whether a supervisor can allow more things for himself/herself if there is a situation concerning/involving gender issues or sexuality. Six out of the nine respondents agreed, that in a higher position, more attention should be paid. Therefore they rendered a higher standard in this regard for a supervisor. I was interested in how consistent they are in this. So, after this direct question, I provided two hypothetical cases in two variations, where the only difference was in the harasser’s position (colleague or a supervisor). In *Case 1* the plot was: ‘a male worker offers regularly and permanently rendezvous to a female employee. The female finds it unwanted and refuses to date with him, but the male continues to bother her.’ Seven out of the 9 respondents rated both of the situations on the same level, without respect of whether the harm was done by a colleague or a supervisor. In *Case 2* the plot was: ‘a male worker makes a sexual type of offering to one of his female co-workers. He made it probable that a night with him would make a morning of her much happier.’ Four out of the 8 respondents judged on the same level whether it is done by a colleague or a supervisor. Other half of the respondents rated the situation more serious when the harasser was in a higher position.

What is clear from this small scale experiment is that a certain kind of differentiation is represented in terms of hierarchical relations, but this can not serve as an exclusive explanation behind sexual harassment. Notwithstanding, when they refer to someone in a leadership position, they expect more prudence or on the other side of the coin, judge harm-causing behavior more seriously. As an overall evaluation of their opinion in connection with power dynamics I would argue that the typical scenario with the male supervisor as a harasser and the subordinate female still there but amongst many other various scenarios.

This chapter has shown that according to my field work, employees are limited in terms of their perceptions of sexual harassment to their everyday reality, in which spatial settings are significant in conjunction with the specifics of the networking, socializing mechanisms which can be revealed in the confines of a special work climate, multi-national business companies foster. My findings support the idea which has been said before (Rasila and Rothe, 2012:372), that open-plan working environments are complex and interrelated systems where all parts affect the others. Multitude of spatially determined factors such as the opportunity of watching everyone at anytime as well as the fact that superiors are not separated from subordinates or there is no place to hide influence judgments on sexually harassing behaviors.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have used a sociological research methodology to describe and explain how and to what extent employees' perceptions and experiences regarding sexual harassment are shaped by the working environment in which they are spending their days. Inspired by the huge amount of literature which exist on this critical social problem, which combines demands of gender equality, human rights of labor force, women's rights and sexuality; I have chosen a seemingly abandoned aspect to analyze. This is the physical setting, in which potentially harassing situations might occur. Thus, the examination of the spatial variable is the main goal with my work here. I argue that space can contribute to the establishment of harassment-free environments and on the other hand to foster worsening certain harmful situations, also. Spatial arrangements would create unwanted audience and make hard to avoid certain contacts or persons. At the same time space would dissipate harmful comments and release individuals. It has a special regulatory function as well, which decreases the occurrences of unwanted or disrespectful comments. Being conscious of these functions of the space contributes to make precious, correct and legitimate decisions and judgments on sexual harassment situations.

There are emerging numbers of studies which examine the influences of open plan office environments on employee's job satisfaction for example, but it is rare to have one with the focus on interpersonal relations shaped by this particular spatial setting. At the same time, there are studies which analyze sexual harassment in special fields of labor or inspecting various professions, but it is rare to have one with the focus on office environment with special attention to spatial design and related business culture or climate. In my argument, the combination of this two offers valuable insights to the phenomenon. Without taking into account the specificities of certain work settings that allow us to understand the rich context of real life situations, the fight against sexual harassment cannot be effectively waged.

There is a need for further research on this field, to reveal as many impact factors or/and variables as possible which can effect potentially harassing situations. Space and networks of specific interpersonal relations are those I argued for being important here. There are much more to find out. Research should pay attention to workplace specificities which highly influences at least the types of harassing behaviors which likely to occur.

I am aware that the number of the interviews I conducted is not representative but rather informative. This is a small-scale research which aims to show an experiment and inspire future scholars devoted to the field. It would be interesting to see complex examination of companies; conducting in-site research with participation observation. In this way the researcher could compare those things employees share and those things which (s)he observes on the site. It would also be wishful to analyze proceedings companies have on this field and study their policies, compare them to (inter)national laws.

Legal protection lays down the minimum standards for anti-harassment policies. We have an existing well-established system of treating sexual harassment in legal terms, at least in the international and EU level. I thus suggest company policies to adress the spcificities of certain work settings and environments in order to show what law advocates and expects within a particular workplace. It should be interpreted on a company level what might be qualified as harassment. Therefore, it is advised to tailor the explanataion of the content of the regulation according to the specificities of certain workplaces. Give the employees a helpful hand to conceptualize sexual harassment within their everyday reality which considers both spatial factors and also specificities of their office culture centres on strong networking. In the case of open plan offices, tell them that despite of the fact that relations seem to be extremely personalized and friendly and hierarchies are not presented heavily so far; attention should be paid into other's tolerance limits and sensitivity level. Tell them that despite of the fact that the open space encourages to approach everyone and enter into connection even with strangers; personal space

is very important. Do emphasize the need for showing respect, and call attention to the aspects of it in details. With the case of such a complex issue like sexual harassment where social and cultural norms bound to change based on expectations coming from law; switching is not an easy process and deserve extra support.

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Appendix

Interview guide

General questions

- *gender/sex*
- *Age group (25-30;31-35;36-40; above 41)*
- *Do you have direct report(s)? Are you in charge over others? How many?*
- *How long have you been working here?*
- *Describe the working environment for me. What are those things which tell me the important things about it, through your eyes? How is it looks like? Why is it special to you if you have other working experiences?*

Part I.

Working environment and dignity/human rights issues in general

Try to define factors, things which are important to you in order to feel comfortable

- What means to you being in a safe and healthy workplace?
- Name those circumstances which make you feel uncomfortable

What 'human dignity and respect' mean for you, from the perspective of a good working environment? As an individual, a person, a human being ... as an employee ...

- Is there any sex/gender difference in your mind when You think about this? Does this differentiation make sense regarding respect/human dignity?
- Are there special topics/themes/situations which directly refer to specifically women/men?

Have you ever been in a situation in which You have felt that It was not appropriate to live through at a workplace? What kind of situation was this? How did you feel yourself about this?

Part II.

Working environment – gendered relations with colleagues

Have you ever had (any kinds of) problems working with males/females (opposite sex/gender)?

- If YES, does it matter whether she/he is a peer worker or a superior?
- If YES, what types of problems are you referring to? What do you think what kinds of hindrances/difficulties you have to face because of sex/gender differences?
- If NO, have you experienced it with others? Are you aware of some situations/problems which root in this in your opinion?

Have you ever felt that you have been advantaged because of your sex/gender?

Have you ever felt that you have been disadvantaged because of your sex/gender?

Have you ever been in a situation in which you have felt yourself released/very well/appreciated as a consequence of a behavior conducted by a male/female (opposite sex/gender)

Have you ever been in a situation in which you have felt yourself embarrassed/uncomfortable/humiliated as a consequence of a behavior conducted by a male/female (opposite sex/gender)

If YES,

- Tell me about it! What has happened?
- If you have to *describe the situation*, what words/expressions would you use?
- If you have to *label this behavior*, what words/expressions would you use?
- Would you use to label it: 'sexual harassment'? What should happen to use this label?
- What do you think, is it hard/difficult to find the right/proper words to tell about an experience like this?
- What makes it so complicated to describe or label it? Is it complicated?

Part III. Sexual harassment

Have you heard the term 'sexual harassment' before? Give me some ideas, descriptions, thoughts about this. What does this term tell you? What is this cover?

Who are you thinking of when you have heard this term? And in what type of situations occur to your mind? (gender, hierarchy, situation, location ..)

What do you think, what are the factors, motivations/intentions behind these types of behaviors?

What do you think, who is responsible for these kinds of situations? (perpetrator? victim? employer?)

Are you aware of that SH is a prohibited behavior in legal terms, it could be sanctioned by courts/authorities? There are certain laws which cover this. What do you think? Do you think that law could help in these situations/conflicts?

When do you think that problems like this/similar to this should be reported to your superior/employer/lawyer? Thus, where do you draw the line? Is there any line to be crossed?

Does your employer pay attention to prevent sexual harassment? Do you know whether there is an anti-harassment policy or a complaining system?

If you happen to be involved in a situation similar to those we have been talking about, list me a couple of things what you would do? Do you know to whom it would be effective/useful to turn to?

Part IV. Gender roles

How general is, to discuss personal, private issues with colleagues? How frequent? What subjects?

Flirting/teasing/endearment – are these relevant in your workplace? If yes, when? Where? Special occasions/locations? Do you feel comfortable with these?

Are you happy when someone (other gender) comments on your appearance, your hair, your dress? Do you need these kinds of reflections? Where are you drawing the line, from this kind of behavior starts to be uncomfortable?

Do you feel OK/comfortable when someone refers to your sex/gender? Is it embarrassing? In what kinds of situations?

What do you feel/think are there any kind of expectations towards you as a woman at your workplace? (dress, style, talk...) Are you comfortable with these? Are you conscious somehow regarding these issues?

Are you aware that in certain kind of situations how to behave/act/perform as a woman? Is there such a thing? Does this question make any sense for you?

What do you think is it a problem if someone is not feminine as women, or not masculine as men? What do you think is it expectable? (Pronounced or unsaid)

Have you ever have the feeling that you are facing the same expectations as a woman at your workplace, not just in your private life? How is it so?

What do you think is there a difference being a woman at a workplace and at home/in private life?

To what for are you have to be aware/alert/cautious as a women at a workplace?

In what kind of situations have you ever felt the significance of being a woman at your workplace?

Why is it bad/good to work with not just women?

What do you like about your male colleagues? Do they add a positive/negative contribution to the working environment? How? Why?

What disturbs you in male behavior at a workplace? What bothers you in their behavior/attitude?

How a good male colleague looks like/behave like? What is the type, character you are working with kindly?

Anything You would like to add ...