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Attitudes to Sexism and the #MeToo Movement at a Danish University

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\begin{abstract}
We explore the relationship between academic employees’ attitudes to modern sexism and the #MeToo movement to better understand how interventions designed to address sexual harassment might be received in Danish academia. Using a survey of employees at a large Danish university (N = 1128), we categorized employees’ open answers about their attitudes to the #MeToo Movement as (a) positive, (b) ambivalent, or (c) negative. These categories were associated with employees’ modern sexism scores, such that those higher in modern sexism were more likely to be negative about the movement, while those with lower scores were more likely to be positive. To better understand possible sources of resistance to policy interventions, we used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to analyse the open comments for themes related to employee’s negative attitudes towards #MeToo. The two most prominent themes were: (1) delegitimisation of the purposes of the movement, and (2) perception that the rights of potential sexual perpetrators were more important than those of potential victims. We discuss the implications for the implementation of interventions targeting sexual harassment.
\end{abstract}

Although many Danes pride themselves on the fact that gender equality has been adopted as a “Danish value” (Dahlerup, 2018), Danes are not as supportive of gender equity initiatives as one might expect. Previous research within a Danish university demonstrates reasonably high levels of modern sexism (Skewes, Skewes, & Ryan, 2019), a set of attitudes that includes (a) denial that sexism and gender discrimination continue to occur, (b) antagonism towards women’s demands for equality, and (c) lack of support for policies designed to increase gender equality (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Support for modern sexist views pose a major obstacle for any organization that wishes to achieve gender equity, such as closing the pay gap, tackling discrimination, and of particular interest in this paper, reducing sexual harassment.

People who score high on modern sexism are unlikely to support initiatives that address sexual harassment as a structural problem, and instead are more likely to favour an interpretation of such issues as an individual problem. However, the link between modern sexist attitudes and support for gender equity initiatives, such as those related to sexual harassment, has not, to our knowledge, been explored in Denmark. We address this research gap within a University context, with a focus on attitudes towards the #MeToo movement, the largest and most well-known movement addressing this issue.

Women in the workplace have always been at risk of exposure to sexual harassment (Borchorst & Agustin, 2017; Rudman & Glick, 2010), and women continue to be subjected to sexism in their
everyday lives (Bates, 2014; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). However, it is only recently that the issue has been publicly addressed through campaigns such as the #MeToo Movement. #MeToo was initiated in 2006 to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment to victims themselves, to illustrate that they were not alone nor to blame for what was done to them. The movement went viral in October 2017 when a Hollywood celebrity used, and encouraged others to use, the #MeToo hashtag on social media to demonstrate the magnitude of the problem (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). The hashtag was used 12 million times within the first 24 hours (CBS, 2017). This exposure of the problem has had positive effects, including increasing the reporting of sexual crimes to the police (Levy & Mattson, 2019) suggesting that speaking openly about the problem has the potential to changes social norms.

We start our review of the literature by defining sexual harassment and identifying potential risk factors in universities. We then explore the silencing mechanisms associated with reporting of sexual harassment and how these intersect with both modern sexist attitudes and the current approach to gender equity interventions in Danish academia.

**What is sexual harassment?**

There are many definitions of sexual harassment. Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley (1997) describe it as “unwanted sex-related behaviour at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding resources, or threatening her (sic) well-being” (15). Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow (1995) elaborate, uncovering three distinct sub-categories: (a) *sexual coercion*, where sexual favours are demanded to ensure continued employment or promotion; (b) *unwanted sexual attention*, such as treating a person like a sex object; and (c) *gender harassment*, which involves degrading women as a group. Conceptualizations of sexual harassment tend to share two elements: (a) the victims experience the verbal or physical actions as offensive or intimidating, that is, in violation of their physical or personal integrity (FRA—European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014); and (b) the actions are carried out with the *intent* or the *effect* of intimidation, hostility, degradation, or humiliation (McDonald, 2012).

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights’ *Violence Against Women* report (FRA—European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014) shows that 45–55% of women have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment (95), with 13–21% reporting incidents within the last 12 months. The FRA survey further reveals that women with tertiary degrees and in the highest occupational groups are most likely to experience sexual harassment, with 74–75% reporting exposure to sexual harassment, 32% of which take place in an employment context (FRA—European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). This suggests the importance of universities evaluating their sexual harassment policies and interventions to protect their employees.

**What are the risk factors?**

Although sexual harassment is often explained away as welcome sexual attention (Samuels, 2003) it is not primarily about sex, but rather about power. One key risk factor for sexual harassment in organizations is power differentials between men and women, that is, where men are over-represented or hold positions of greater status than women (Easteal & Judd, 2008; Illies, Hausman, Schwocchau, & Stibal, 2003; McCabe & Hardman, 2005; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). Both of these power imbalances are clearly evident in a university environment. Adding to the risk is the universities’ increasing use of temporary positions, as precarious employment is a sexual harassment risk factor (FRA—European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; McDonald, 2012; Takao, 2001). Finally, belonging to socially stigmatized categories, such as those based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or non-binary gender identities also increase the risk of being exposed to sexual harassment (Berdahl, & Moore, 2006); Buchanan and Fitzgerald, 2008; Konik & Cortina, 2008; Settles, 2006).
These risk factors suggest that academia is likely to have problems with sexual harassment. Indeed, a recent study amongst Danish university students found that 40% of students reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and 58% reported witnessing such behaviour experienced by others (Guschke, Busse, Khalid, Muht, & Just, 2019). Another study amongst Danish University students showed that 22% reported personal experience with degrading comments about their gender, 8% reported unwanted physical contact, and 2% reported offensive sexual advances from a person in a superior power position (Magisterbladet, 2018). Despite these findings, work by Borchorst and Agustin (2017) reveals that Danish universities have almost no court cases regarding sexual harassment, suggesting that there may be an unaddressed problem of sexual harassment in Danish academia.

**Silencing and modern sexism**

Given the prevalence of sexual harassment, it is important to uncover why it was not discussed openly prior to the #MeToo movement. Stories collected in the Everyday Sexism Project (Bates, 2014) offer examples of the silencing mechanisms that keep sexual harassment under the radar: (1) disbelief of the victims’ experiences, (2) normalization of the problem, (3) victim blaming, and (4) accusations of humourlessness. These silencing mechanisms encourage victims to doubt their own experiences or their right to reject sexual harassment.

Similarly, Scott and Martin (2006) describe *outrage management* as techniques aimed at silencing both victims and bystanders. These strategies are applied by powerful people to minimize or deny the harmful effects of their unjust behaviour. McDonald, Graham, and Martin (2010) outline these strategies in relation to sexual harassment: (1) cover-up: ensuring that victim is alone or offsite; (2) reinterpretation of events: for instance denying it occurred, claiming that the victim misunderstood or is to blame for the action; (3) devaluing the target: using derogatory labels, writing victims off as dishonest or unprofessional, or questioning their motivation to report; (4) insisting that justice will be done by reporting via organizations formal procedures (which are typically slow and do not do justice to the victim); and finally (5) intimidation or bribing.

These strategies are used to maintain asymmetrical power-relationships—and thereby the power to define events—which is typically successful exactly because perpetrators hold more power than victims (McDonald et al., 2010). Indeed, silencing mechanisms are particularly powerful in masculine work cultures where women avoid labelling behaviours as sexual harassment to be perceived as both competent and team players (Collinson & Collinson, 1996). Such silencing mechanisms are also consistent with modern sexist attitudes (Swim et al., 1995) through the denial of discrimination, antagonism towards women’s demands, and the lack of support for gender equality policies. We will examine these attitudes in more detail, with a focus on the Danish context.

**Modern sexism in Danish discourse**

To understand the importance of modern sexism for the current study three former studies are useful. Past research has demonstrated relatively high modern sexism scores within a sample of Danish university employees (M = 4.18 on a 7-point scale; Skewes et al., 2019) compared to M = 3.19\(^1\) for Swedish university students (Ekehammar, Akrami, & Araya, 2001). The only sample we could find with similar modern sexism scores is a study of the South African navy (M = 4.30,\(^2\) Van Wijk, 2011). Based on yet unpublished data, the Danish university’s high modern sexism score is mirrored in Danish society more generally. In a sample of over 3,000 Danish participants (representative on gender, age, geography, education) we find an average modern sexism score of 4.20. This suggests that Denmark has a significant gender equity challenges ahead.
Another potential stumbling block for addressing sexual harassment constructively in a Danish context, is the way the Danish media has prevented victims from being heard. Askanius and Møller Hartley (2019) document cross-cultural difference in media coverage of the #MeToo movement in Denmark and Sweden, revealing that (a) the Swedish media offered greater coverage of #MeToo (with 84.9% of the stories); (b) Swedish news articles used MPs as their sources 15% of the time while Danish politicians were virtually absent; (c) only 1% of the Swedish articles had critiques or delegitimisation of #MeToo as their core theme, compared to 10% of the Danish articles; and (d) the articles in Sweden were primarily news stories or editorials, while the articles in Denmark more often were placed in the debate section. Møhring Reestorff (2019) links this situating of #MeToo articles as opinion pieces to the perception that the content can be freely interpreted by anyone. She argues that this creates an unstable basis from which to report incidents because of the constantly changing definition of what constitutes a “real victim”.

Adding to this challenge, 27% of Danish MPs believe that gender equality has been achieved and 5% believe that it has gone too far (Dahlerup, 2018). Assuming the opinions of politicians reflect voters’ opinions, this suggests that while Danes may pay lip service to gender equity as a “Danish value”, they may be less motivated to back this up with action. This belief may also have contributed negatively to Danish laws regarding sexual harassment in the workplace. The Nordic Council of Ministers (NIKK) reports that: “Unlike other Nordic countries, the Danish gender equality legislation does not require employers to actively prevent sexual harassment” (NIKK—Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018, p. 2).

How Danish politicians chose to speak about gender equality and sexual harassment may also shape how it is addressed outside of parliament. A former Danish Minister for Equal Opportunities said that we “must be careful not to draw the victim card” (cited in Møhring Reestorff, 2019, viii), a statement in line with techniques used to silence victims. Thus, one may expect a negative effect on the rest of society, including state-owned institutions such as Danish universities. In line with this, Guschke et al. (2019) demonstrated that Danish university students were less likely than non-Danes to categorize sexual harassment experiences as such, especially verbal harassment.

Taken together, the above examples suggest that Denmark may be ill equipped to deal with interventions that target sexual harassment. However, it is important to underline that although Danish law does not protect victims as well as other Nordic countries, sexual harassment is still illegal: “sexual harassment is considered a form of gender-based discrimination and is thus illegal in Danish workplaces” (NIKK—Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018, p. 2) and “employers are required (...) to stop all occurrences of sexual harassment that they are or should reasonably be aware of” (NIKK—Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018, p. 3).

**The current study**

In this study we aim to explore how modern sexist attitudes are associated with individuals’ attitudes to the #MeToo movement. Exploring this in Denmark is particularly relevant because of (a) the incidence of sexual harassment uncovered in previous Danish research (Guschke et al., 2019), (b) the high levels of modern sexism in Denmark (Skewes et al., 2019), (c) the under-representation of women in Danish academia particularly at the upper echelons of the hierarchy, and (d) the challenges retaining female researchers in Danish academia (Danish Ministry of Education and Science, 2019; Nielsen, 2017).

Our expectation is that those who endorse modern sexism to a greater extent would be less likely to support #MeToo, as this movement aims to make sexual harassment visible as a systemic, rather than an individual, problem. Moreover, we expect those who endorse modern sexism to a greater extent to be more likely to silence reports of sexual harassment.

A Danish university supported us in conducting this study to gain knowledge about their organization’s gender equity challenges.
Materials & methods

Participants

The survey was distributed by the University to staff via university email addresses, including student assistants, researchers, and administrative staff. Participants could respond in either Danish or English. They were asked to provide demographic information, complete the modern sexism scale (Swim et al., 1995), and provide open answers on their opinion of the #MeToo movement.

We conducted the survey as part of a larger examination of support for gender equality interventions, and other results from this research are published elsewhere (Skewes et al., 2019). In total, 15,493 members of staff were invited to participate; 1,128 provided an open answer response to the question about #MeToo, and their data are analysed in this study. Participant demographics are included in Table 1A (Appendix).

Materials

Participants completed 8 items from the modern sexism scale, on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree; e.g., “Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in Denmark”, “It is rare to see women treated in a sexist manner on TV”). Reliability for the scale was good (alpha = .89).

For the question “What do you think of the #MeToo Movement?”, participants could provide an open answer response, or could respond “I don’t know what the #MeToo Movement is”; “I don’t have an opinion on the #MeToo Movement”; “I prefer not to answer”.

Design and analysis

We analysed the results of the survey using an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. Here, qualitative data are used to provide further explanation of results identified at an earlier quantitative phase of analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). We collected all data in a single survey; however, analyses were conducted in two phases. The first analysis was quasi-quantitative, as we used qualitative analysis to categorize individuals’ attitudes in the open answers, before analysing them statistically. In this phase, we hand coded all open answers as either (a) positive, (b) ambivalent, or (c) negative. We then investigated demographic patterns in individuals’ attitudes so identified, and we statistically related responses in these categories to individuals’ scores on the modern sexism scale. The second phase was purely qualitative. In this phase, we re-coded all open answers from scratch, to explore the qualitative themes underlying individuals’ attitudes to the #MeToo movement, and to relate those attitudes to the quantitative results. This second, purely qualitative phase, was important, because it allowed us to identify more specific forms of possible resistance to sexual harassment policy.

Results

Attitudes towards the #MeToo movement

Of the 1805 participants that answered other parts of the questionnaire, many opted out of the open question about #MeToo, 384 (17.6%) responded “I don’t have an opinion on the #MeToo Movement”; 378 (17.3%) left the question blank; 237 (13.1%) responded “I prefer not to answer”, while 56 people (2.5%) responded “I don’t know what the #MeToo Movement is.” The remaining participants (1128) provided an open response. The employees who provided an open answer had significantly lower modern sexism scores (M = 3.91, SD = 1.03) compared to those who chose not to offer an answer (M = 4.29, SD = 0.97), (t(1076.6) = 6.83, p < .001). This suggests the open answers represent a less sexist sub-sample of the employees and therefore offers a conservative estimate of the resistance to #MeToo.
Of the open answers, 4.2% could not be categorized as either positive, ambivalent, or negative, either because they were off topic or stated a fact with no accompanying opinion. This left 1083 meaningful answers. Of these, 44% were almost exclusively positive about #MeToo. The most prominent descriptive words to summarize this group’s attitudes towards the movement were: good (N = 92), important (N = 88), necessary (N = 55), fine (N = 39), timely/long overdue (N = 25), and relevant (N = 23). The following quotations are illustrative of the positive attitudes:

"I think it is a necessary wake-up call, and hopefully it will lead to more fundamental changes in the way our society treats women" (Female, Administrator).

"It is important because it raises awareness of everyday acts of sexual harassment, which are too often tolerated as being part of normal and expected male behaviour." (Male, Assistant Professor)

"A kick in the right direction (which means directly in the balls) of the power-horny men." (Male, Assistant Professor)

"[#MeToo is] appropriate. It is important to speak out. Generally, I feel that people who have no issues themselves receive the initiative gracefully; however, those who make a fuss and gethorribly animated about it might feel they have been hit in a sore spot and are afraid of the consequences and of losing power. When you are used to privileges, gender equality feels like suppression." (Female, Research Assistant)

These positive views of #MeToo suggested that these participants both believed the victims and wished to see a change in the world to which #MeToo is contributing.

The second largest group consisted of 417 university employees (38.5%) who were ambivalent about the #MeToo movement, expressing both positive and negative opinions. The typical word choices in this group combined the positive terminology described above and the negative terminology described below. The following quotations are illustrative of these ambivalent attitudes:

"In the beginning, the movement allowed women to raise awareness about the problem; however, it then became a way to victimise oneself in situations that were completely normal social interactions between two different genders." (Female, Postdoctoral Researcher)

"In a way, [#MeToo is] understandable (I of course distance myself from all types of assault), but at the same time it is a dangerous movement which can become more like a people’s court where one is guilty until proven innocent." (Male, PhD)

"Good with some attention [to #MeToo]. However, I think it has developed into a public witch hunt where someone without any consequences can accuse anybody of anything." (Male, Professor)

"While it has been an empowering movement for women, it has become its own enemy, as, in some cases, it is now being used by some radical feminists to get back at the male gender. We need movements that promote dialogue, transparency and equity, not a shift of power to the female gender" (Male, PhD).

Clearly this group is more ambivalent. They are still able to find positive sides to the #MeToo movement, but they also draw attention to the potential negative sides. Many of these employees express a desire for #MeToo to tone down its message, implicitly or explicitly claiming it has gone too far.

Finally, a group of 191 university employees (17.6%) expressed almost exclusively negative attitudes towards #MeToo. Their most common descriptive word choices were: out of control (N = 22), too much (N = 21), exaggerated (N = 16), witch hunt (N = 14), gone off at the deep end (N = 13), too much focus (N = 9), court of the public/mob justice (N = 8), public lynching/pillory (N = 7), hysterical (N = 6), men-bashing/men-hating (N = 5), gone off track (N = 5), and ridiculous (N = 5). The following quotations are illustrative of these negative attitudes:

"It is a movement with questionable origins, questionable supporters, questionable tactics and questionable goals. To be clear: I’m against sexual harassment as well, but this #MeToo stuff is one giant witch hunt and it is a disgrace towards women who are actual victims of sexual harassment." (Male, Postdoctoral Researcher).

"Undoubtedly women are often abused at work, but I cannot get behind the movement. I see the basic point, but it ignores the principle ‘innocent until proven guilty in a court of law’. As such, the movement is open to
abuse by disgruntled and sometimes dishonest women who seek retaliation. I respect men, and this movement is disrespectful to them and leaves them vulnerable and unable to defend themselves.” (Female, Professor)

“#MeToo is detrimental to the women´s rights movement. It is lashing out against men in a way that alienates many of us men who are supportive of the cause. Displaying hatred against men and publicly shaming men doesn’t make us more sympathetic towards women or the cause of gender equality. This is not an expression of how to work together to solve this problem where it exists.” (Male, Associate Professor)

 “[W]e should focus on real problems of human civilisation, such as disease prevention, hunger, environmental issues. Once we have solved these and are really bored, let’s start hashtag campaigns” (Male, PhD Fellow)

This group of employees express aggression and outrage towards #MeToo. People in this group seem to perceive the reports of sexual harassment as illegitimate and an expression of unjust attacks on men.

**Modern sexism and attitudes to the #MeToo movement**

Table 1 shows the percentage of responses in each attitude category, by faculty, including both scientific and administrative staff. To investigate differences in attitudes towards #MeToo across faculties we constructed a linear Poisson regression model on counts underlying these percentages. The model included linear effects for attitude and faculty, with ambivalent attitude and Arts included as baseline categories. The regression showed more negative attitudes within Social Science ($\beta = .68, p = .047$), Science ($\beta = 0.72, p = .01$) and Health ($\beta = 1.01, p = .001$). The regression also showed fewer positive attitudes within Health ($\beta = -0.60, p = .006$). Responses “other” and “prefer not to answer” are not included in the table but are included in the model.

**Table 2** presents the percentage of responses which are positive, ambivalent, or negative, by gender and academic rank (administrative staff are not included). To determine whether academic

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<th>Table 1. Percentage of participants whose responses expressed negative, ambivalent or positive attitudes to the #MeToo movement by faculty.</th>
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seniority interacts with gender to influence attitudes towards #MeToo, we conducted a Poisson regression. The model used student worker, female gender, and ambivalent attitudes as baseline categories. The analysis indicates significantly fewer negative than ambivalent attitudes overall (\(\beta = 2.02, p = .007\)), significantly more males in associate professorships (\(\beta = 5.39, p < .001\)) and full professorships (\(\beta = 1.86, p < .001\)), but no significant interactions between gender, seniority, and attitude towards the #MeToo movement (all ps>.05).

Together, these results suggest that attitudes are not dependent on seniority or gender either alone or in interaction. Rather, only faculty appears to significantly influences attitudes to #MeToo, with most negative attitudes in Health and Science, followed by Social Science and Arts. Health also had the least amount of positive responses, suggesting that they may harbour the greatest resistance to gender equity measures that address sexual harassment.

There were differences in modern sexism scores across the three groups, clustered by attitudes towards the movement. Those with more negative views of the movement had higher modern sexism scores: positive, \(M = 3.53\) (SD = 0.95); ambivalent, \(M = 4.01\) (SD = 0.97); and negative \(M = 4.60\) (SD = 0.94). Multinomial logistic regression revealed that mean modern sexism scores were significantly related to attitudes towards #MeToo (Table 3), such that for every point increase in modern sexism, participants are 1.846 times more likely to express negative attitudes towards the #MeToo movement, and .599 times less likely to express positive attitudes, compared with those ambivalent about the movement. This shows a clear connection between holding modern sexism attitudes and seeing #MeToo in a negative light.

**Primary reoccurring theme: delegitimisation**

To further explore the specific nature of attitudes towards the #MeToo movement at the university, we re-coded all open answers independently of the categorization used in the first analysis phase (i.e. positive, ambivalent, negative). We identified two main themes. The most prominent theme was how employees delegitimised the #MeToo movement. Here, 206 people (18.26%) used at least one type of delegitimising strategy. Seven sub-strategies emerged: (a) questioning the legitimacy of the movement due to victims inability to distinguish between severe and ‘innocent’ cases (\(N = 62\)), (b) assuming the problem is niche specific and therefore only exists in other contexts (\(N = 39\)), (c) explicitly questioning the occurrence of sexual harassment (\(N = 26\)), (d) victim blaming, (\(N = 21\)), (e) assumed irrelevance in Denmark (\(N = 21\)), (f) assumed exaggerated attention to movement or victims (\(N = 21\)), and (g) assumed problem of the past (\(N = 16\)). We unfold each of these themes with examples below.

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<th>Table 3. Caption: the results of a multinomial logistic regression model designed to investigate the relationship between modern sexism and attitudes to the #MeToo movement.</th>
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The reference value for the model is set at the “ambivalent” attitude category. The model is implemented in the R language, using the nnet package (Venables & Ripley, 2002). Coefficients represented are the exponentiated values of the logit coefficients.

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
**Fluidity between severe and “innocent” cases**

The most prominent delegitimising strategy was to cast doubt on victim’s distinction between severe cases and “innocent” behaviour (39% men, 59% women):

“I think [#MeToo] conflates rape and other sexual offences. And adds fuel to gender wars.” (Female, Research Assistant)

“I think [#MeToo] has gone of its rails. It had legitimacy when it was about criminal assaults, but now that it has turned into a megaphone for everybody who would like to tell about big and small issues it has lost its seriousness. To treat cat calls on the street in the same way as rape in the workplace is insane, and it does not serve the women’s cause that there is so much “noise.” (Male, Assistant Professor)

This questioning of the victim’s ability to assess problematic behaviour serves to cast the victims, rather than the perpetrators behaviour, as the problem. It is a strategy that applies two outrage management strategies: reinterpretation of events and devaluing the target, casting doubts on victims’ claims while positioning them as trouble-makers (McDonald et al., 2010).

**Niche-specific assumption**

The second most prominent assumption was that sexual harassment was niche specific (e.g., it was tied to the entertainment industry or certain faculties; 48.7% men, 46.2% women):

“It is a good thing that attention has been drawn to the problem because it has turned out to be a big issue in certain lines of business in particular, but I do think it has gotten out of hand and some women are accusing men of violating them sexually even though I do not think that they have done so (according to the stories the women tell)” (Female, Research Assistant).

“The #MeToo movement started as a kind of whistle blower function which was needed in some contexts. Since then, however, it has been clogged by untransparent and diverse stories whereof some probably are serious while others appear more like lynching.” (Prefer not to answer, Associate Professor)

Again, we see a reinterpretation of the victim’s experiences which is used to cast them in a negative light, namely as disruptive or aggressive.

**Explicit questioning that sexual harassment occurs**

The third most common form of delegitimisation questioned whether there was a problem with sexual harassment (65.4% men, 34.6% women):

“[#MeToo] has focused on things that I have never personally experienced or things that I have never heard anyone in my circles experiencing. Therefore, it is hard to relate it to the reality outside of the media.” (Male, Associate Professor)

“[#MeToo] is stupid. Some of the things that have come out are real enough but it ought to have gone through the courts. I quickly get the feeling that several [people] are just using it to get attention which unfortunately ruins the whole concept. Anyone can spin a good story” (Male, Student Employee)

In this sub-category we see an inability to hear the stories being told. Most admit to being exposed to sexual harassment stories, but in spite of this they delegitimise the voices.

**Victim blaming**

The fourth most common way in which employees delegitimised the #MeToo movement was victim blaming (33.3%. men, 62% women):

“Women must learn to put their foot down. In my work life I have seen rather many women offer themselves up voluntarily and afterwards regret it.” (Woman, Professor)
“It [the movement] is a completely idiotic way for lots of women to regret something they obviously and in their right minds consented to. If you fuck your way through your career, you cannot complain afterwards. Even if somebody else took the initiative. Say no when it happens or shut your mouth.” (Male, Other)

Here we find the silencing strategy of disbelieving the victim, which in some cases is very similar to the strategy of reinterpretation of events. With the negative wording, such as “offer themselves up” and “fucking”, we see a clear indication that the victims are devalued by the speaker.

**Irrelevant to Denmark**

Another delegitimising strategy was to accept that other countries had problems with sexual harassment but deny that Denmark had similar problems (57.1% men, 42.9% women):

“Sexual harassment is unacceptable and should be disclosed and punished. However, the attention this movement is getting is disproportionate compared with the rare occurrences of sexual harassment in Denmark” (Male, Associate Professor)

“I think that while [#MeToo] is important worldwide, its relevance in Denmark should be questioned in terms of the realities of the Danish work environment.” (Female, Associate Professor)

Here again, we see the outrage management strategy of reinterpretation. Victims might be reporting incidents in Denmark, but they are assumed to be mistaken.

**Overexaggerated focus on the movement or victims**

Others expressed the opinion that the movement was attracting too much attention and that there was a significant over-reporting of incidents (45% men, 50% women):

“[The #MeToo] has received too much attention. The MeToo-problem is not as great as the press makes it out to be” (Male, Other).

“[#MeToo] has been watered down because of some women’s wish to participate even though their experiences have had no effects on them” (Female, Academically trained administrator with managerial responsibilities).

This focus on the delegitimizing of the victims, uses the outrage management strategy of devaluing the victim, more specifically, by marking the victims as dishonest.

**Problem of the past**

Finally, others argued that the problems addressed by the #MeToo movement belonged in the past (50% men, 37.5% women):

“[W]e often tend to blame individual offenders for things done in the past when norms were different. This of course doesn’t make the actions OK, but we also need to take the historic setting into account before condemning them in the present.” (Female, Postdoctoral Researcher)

“IT is important to focus on sexual harassment, but #MeToo has lost value in my eyes by primarily focusing on old cases centred on a few individuals – what was accepted before is a no-go today and, because of this, #MeToo does not always contribute to a constructive debate. Oh, now I will probably be accused of sounding like an old man …” (Male, Professor)

This category of delegitimising strategies is similar to explicitly questioning whether sexual harassment occurs, they report an inability to hear the voices of present victims.
Secondary recurring theme: rights = perpetrators’ rights?

A second reoccurring theme was a focus on rights (14%). Since #MeToo primarily draws attention to women’s rights, one might expect a bias in favour of women’s rights. However, there was a significant difference in this group between the focus on the right not to be unjustly accused (96.4% of this subgroup) and a focus on the right to not be exposed to sexual harassment (3.6%). Only one participant emphasized the rights of both perpetrator and victim. Importantly, men were much more likely than women to focus on the right to not be falsely accused, (66% men, 34% women).

“[#MeToo] is really over the top. Rape is a terrible thing, and a very bad crime. But #MeToo promotes self-promotion and ends people’s careers without any investigation or due process, due to things that have been claimed to have happened 20 years ago by random women. That is not okay . . . . #MeToo is a one-sided anti-men campaign that stands in the way of actual dealing with real-world issues” (Male, Research Assistant)

“To reveal sexual assault is very important, but this should be done through the police and justice system (who ought to be better at dealing with these cases), not via social networks. The #MeToo movement has developed into a witch hunt were the accused is denied almost all rights that we normally have in a just society.” (Male, Associate Professor)

Very few employees acknowledged that #MeToo addresses a rights issue to not be sexually harassed.

“I think it [#MeToo] is valid and should be supported. It is always important to support human rights.” (Male, post.doc)

“I think it is an excellent way to raise awareness for women’s rights all over the world. It has stirred a long overdue discussion. (…) I’m happy to see how the topics of gender discrimination and sexual harassment have reached the centre of society. It’s no longer only the concern of a minority of feminists. And hopefully it means that politics and workplaces can no longer ignore gender and other diversity issues and will (continue to) make important changes.” (Female, Assistant Professor)

Given that participants’ task was to express their attitudes about #MeToo—a women’s rights movement—this is a major discrepancy. It indicates an asymmetrical consideration for rights, where perpetrators have the majority voice, and victims are left almost unheard.

Discussion

Despite the fact that sexual harassment is illegal in Denmark, there are a number of facets of the current context in Denmark which may stand in the way of interventions intended to reduce sexual harassment. In the Introduction we pointed to: (a) Denmark’s high modern sexism scores both inside (Skewes et al., 2019) and outside academia; (b) the Danish media’s negative representation of the #MeToo movement (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2019), (c) the belief that gender equity has already been achieved (Dahlerup, 2018), (d) the use of silencing techniques (Scott & Martin, 2006; McDonald et al., 2010), and finally (e) the finding that Danish students are less likely to categorize sexual harassment as such (Guschke et al., 2019).

Our study contributes to this overall picture by revealing a positive relationship between modern sexist attitudes and negative attitudes towards #MeToo. The results also revealed that higher modern sexism scores and the anti-#MeToo attitudes were particularly prevalent within male-dominated faculties (Health and Science), although gender was not a predicting factor per se. This suggests that certain faculties have a greater task ahead of them if they intend to introduce successful interventions directed against sexual harassment. Moreover, our study shows that if an employee denies the existence of sexism and gender discrimination (a key aspect of modern sexism), they are more likely to use silencing mechanisms to drown out voices speaking up against sexual harassment.

Keeping in mind that former research (Skewes et al., 2019) has documented overall high levels of modern sexism at the same Danish university, this is particularly alarming. This finding should be viewed in light of the fact that many participants with high modern sexism scores chose not to
respond to the open question about #MeToo, suggesting a conservative estimate of the problem. Together, this suggests that a worryingly large proportion of employees may be opposed to interventions to reduce sexual harassment. In this way, many of this university’s employees may align themselves with the one third of Danish MPs who perceive gender equity to be a done deal that requires no further intervention. Thus, while they may accept the “Danish value” of gender equality (Dahlerup, 2018), they may only pay lip service to it.

Our qualitative findings also resonate with research on outrage management strategies intended to disempower victims and bystanders (McDonald et al., 2010). In particular the three techniques were apparent in the responses: devaluing targets, reinterpreting events, and insisting on formal procedures which do not offer justice to victims. Claims that the movement is open to abuse by “disgruntled women” who seek retaliation and claims that women are falsely accusing men of sexual harassment provide a clear reinterpretation of victims’ stories which leaves them unheard.

Similarly, claims that the #MeToo movement is victimizing, shaming and alienating men is evidence of both devaluing targets and reinterpretation strategies. This form of paternalistic lecturing on how feminists damage their own cause implies that, if victims would just report less, others would be supportive of anti-discriminatory practices. Unfortunately, this reflects the misperception that those who report sexual harassment are creating, rather than reporting, on the problems (Ahmed, 2017). Finally, claims that reporting should go through formal channels demonstrate the strategy of relying exclusively on processes which are currently not empowering victims. This strategy overlooks one of the key strengths of #MeToo, the fact that it can circumvent the immediate asymmetrical power dynamic (one of the core risk factors of sexual harassment) by taking the reporting outside of the context in which it occurred.

Our study also resonates with work on the Everyday Sexism Project (Bates, 2014). Concretely, we see three of Bates four silencing strategies in use: (a) disbelieving the victim’s experiences (similar to the outrage management strategy of reinterpreting stories), (b) victim blaming (a sub-category of delegitimizing strategies), and (c) normalization, captured by comments which downplay sexual harassment as mere “fondling”.

Indeed, almost 20% of participants expressed some sort of delegitimising strategy. While the majority of these relied on an assumption that can be accepted or rejected—for instance, that the victims brought it on themselves or that sexual harassment no longer occurs—the most common delegitimising strategy relies on a controversial logical deduction: that unclear borders between severe offences and acceptable behaviour undermines a meaningful discussion. A more reasonable conclusion might be that we ought to be particularly dedicated to exploring these borders, exactly because discussion of sexual harassment is difficult and messy.

Another important finding is that the wording used by those who expressed negative views about #MeToo (e.g. out of control, witch hunt, mob justice, men-hating) suggests a strong emotional sense of being overpowered and losing control. However, such an emotional response seems disproportionate with the threat being posed, as Danish users of #MeToo tend not to report the names of perpetrators (Møhring Reestorff, 2019). Furthermore, despite the high prevalence of sexual harassment in Denmark, it leads to exceptionally few court cases, with extremely low payouts if the accused is convicted (Borchorst & Agustin, 2017). Adding to this, it is almost exclusively the victims of harassment who find themselves out of a job, rather than the accused or convicted perpetrator (Borchorst & Agustin, 2017).

This disproportionally strong emotional response, as well as the asymmetrical focus on the rights of the perpetrator over the rights of the victims, points to a strong push to preserve status quo. Together, this disproportionality and the desire to maintain men’s privilege suggests that those advantaged by the current system are likely to experience intense feelings of control loss if interventions are implemented and enforced, regardless of how minimal a power shift the interventions can be expected to cause. Therefore, it is recommended that gender equity interventions are combined with organizational techniques to minimize backlash effects against victims (e.g., Moss-Racusin et al., 2014)
**Limitations**

While our findings shed light on important challenges when addressing sexual harassment in academia there are some limitations. The lack of intersectionality between social categories, other than gender, is a significant limitation. We recognize that belonging to more than one minority group increases the risk that a person will be exposed to sexism or sexual harassment (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008; Koni & Cortina, 2008; Settles, 2006). However, the study was designed in collaboration with the University, who wanted (justifiably) to ensure that demographic information would not compromise anonymity. We were allowed four demographic variables, and we agreed that the combination of gender, age group, rank, and faculty membership was both informative and maintained anonymity. Given the relatively low numbers of individuals from other minority groups, these demographics were not included. The most optimal solution to this intersectional challenge, would be for future research to be conducted on an even larger sample, where an increase in relevant social categories would not put the employees at risk of being identified.

**Implications and conclusion**

Previous research suggests that Danish universities face a challenge when implementing gender equality policies, since a large proportion of employees are likely blind to the explicit sexism to which they contribute, leaving non-sexist employees to carry the burden of initiatives without structural support (Skewes et al., 2019). The current study extends this work, looking specifically at attitudes to reporting sexual harassment via #MeToo. We found that modern sexist attitudes were associated with increasingly negative views about the #MeToo movement, suggesting that the inability to perceive the problem is, paradoxically, at the core of the problem (for similar findings see Begeny, Ryan, Moss-Racusin, & Ravetz, 2020).

This study uncovers a high degree of delegitimisation of the reporting of sexual harassment, combined with an asymmetrical focus on perpetrators’ rights over victims’ rights (for similar findings see Bongiorno, Langbroek, Bain, Ting, & Ryan, 2020). The study demonstrates that many employees, including women, are not prepared to allow victims of sexual harassment to be heard. Following the recommendations of Borchorst and Agustin (2017) could ensure a less hostile work environment. More specifically progress can be achieved if (a) leaders clearly communicate and enforce a zero-tolerance policy; (b) steps are taken to ensure that all employees understand that sexual harassment is an organizational, rather than an individual, problem; and (c) leaders register all offences, including anonymous reports. Registering anonymous reports serves two purposes: (a) ensuring organizations can learn from each individual case, as reports uncover what needs to change to prevent sexual harassment in the future, (b) documenting the extent of the problem, which many employees currently question.

The delegitimising mechanisms described above reveal that we need to ensure that these voices are heard and that the challenges they identify are addressed by the leaders of the organization as a structural, not an individual, problem.

**Notes**

1. Ekehammar et al. (2001) and Van Wijk (2011) both uses the 5-point Likert scale for their study, but in order to compare we have recalculated their participants average score to fit the 7-point scale we used.
2. See above footnote.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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References


Begeny, C. T., Ryan, M. K., Moss-Racusin, C. A., & Ravetz, G. (2020). In some professions, women have become well represented, yet gender bias persists—Perpetuated by those who think it is not happening. Science Advances, 6(26), eaba7814.


Table 1A. Demographics of participants responding to the open question about the #MeToo movement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–27</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28–37</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38–47</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48–57</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>58–67</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>68+</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job function</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scientific position</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative position</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other position</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic rank (as percentage among scientific staff)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student assistant</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research assistant</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>External lecturer</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
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<td>PhD student</td>
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<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<td>Full Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role among technical/administrative staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative staff with no academic degree (HK)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff with no academic degree (HK) and managerial responsibility</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff with an academic degree (AC)</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative staff with an academic degree (AC) and managerial responsibility</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
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<td>Research/Educational areas</td>
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<td>Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts and Humanities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>