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Facilitated group discussion method for prevention sexual harassment

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#metoo movement has raised discussion on the extent of sexual harassment also in the academia. In 2018 Helsinki Association of Women Researchers (Finland) conducted a qualitative survey on experiences of sexual harassment and opinions on definition of sexual harassment among Finnish universities. The results show that sexual harassment and related power misuse are problems also in the Finnish research and higher education community. While there are clear cut cases that can be immediately recognized as harassment, a large fraction of the cases belong to the grey area, causing hesitation and deficiencies in reporting and actions. This, among personal suffering, also maintains a risk that the borderline behaviour escalates to the next level. Common definitions of sexual harassment include phrases such as 'unwanted' or 'without consent', which are difficult to interpret unambiguously. Beside provocative statements, there has also been genuine concern that mixed gender workplace social interaction can be interpreted as harassment, which in the worst case can lead to even increased segregation of professional networks based on gender, which is a severe threat to equal opportunities. We have developed and tested a facilitated group discussion activity for workplace communities to establish common understanding for the borders of sexual harassment. The activity involves discussions on hypothetical borderline harassment cases in small groups. The aim is not to form an unequivocal verdict on whether these cases are harassment or not, but discuss which factors affect the assessment. The diversity of opinions rising from, for example, personal and cultural differences is collected on an online-based white-board. We have conducted the activity as part of departmental recreation days and staff training events, and the participants feedback indicates that it is a useful tool in making people more aware of the differences in personal borderlines. Facilitated discussions help in creating an atmosphere where people, irrespective of their position in the power structure, feel more free to express if the limits of their comfort zone have been breached, and where drawing a line is respected rather than ridiculed. The activity not only helps in preventing sexual harassment and bullying, but also stress and burnout by creating a culture where protecting personal limits is permitted and respected.