Author's response to reviews

Title: Workplace sexual harassment and depressive symptoms: a cross-sectional multilevel analysis comparing harassment from clients or customers to harassment from other employees amongst 7603 Danish employees from 1041 organizations

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Reviewer reports:

Cris Sullivan (Reviewer 2): This is a revised description of a large-scale examination of workplace sexual harassment and its impact on depression. The authors addressed a number of the concerns raised by this and the other two reviewers. The abstract and literature review are now clearer and bring in the gendered nature of sexual harassment. The strengths of the study remain: it is large scale and examines harassment committed by clients (which is often ignored).

The investigators do not convincingly explain why they kept the 42 men in the sample. As they note, analyses by gender are suspect, given the small number of men harassed. Further, they do not convincingly explain why the three organizational variables were kept in this revision, given they are not empirically linked to either harassment or depression in the literature review and (not surprisingly) had no significant relevance to the current study.

While I continue to think this study has limited utility given the use of a single item to measure the main construct of interest, I think it would at least be "promising" if the authors removed the 3 organizational variables (which are just distracting), removed the men from analyses (which is justified by the small n as well as the gendered issues related to sexual harassment and career
categories), and focused on examining the differences between being harassed by someone from work vs a client/customer. I would modify the title accordingly, and focus on this important and understudied issue. I believe the result would be a straightforward, interesting article that could spark future research.

Response:

Thank you for your re-reviewing our manuscript and for your comments.

1) We agree that the difference between harassment from clients/customers and colleagues/supervisors/subordinates is one of the foci of the paper, which might not have been reflected appropriately in the title. We have now modified the title to include this issue and it now reads:

Workplace sexual harassment and depressive symptoms: a cross-sectional multilevel analysis comparing harassment from clients or customers to harassment from other employees amongst 7603 Danish employees from 1041 organizations

2) We agree that the organizational factors that we examined were not previously linked to sexual harassment or depression in the literature. However, we cannot remove them from the analyses because the examination of effect modification by these factors were part of our study aims. If we had found any effect modification, for example that sexual harassment was less strongly associated with depressive symptoms in workplaces with access to psychological treatment compared to workplaces without access to such treatment, this would have been an important result suggesting that workplaces can implement preventive actions to reduce the impact of sexual harassment on employee mental health. We did not find such effect modification, but since we had formulated the research aim of studying effect modification, we must now report the results. As you surely agree, publishing null results is as important as publishing statistically significant associations.

3) With regard to including or not including men in the analyses, we respectfully disagree with the reviewer. We believe that our approach is the most appropriate here, that is to start the analyses with all participants and not to a priori exclude some participants. This approach also gives the best statistical power, as excluding men from the sample would mean excluding all 3487 male participants, and not only the 42 men who were exposed to sexual harassment. We agree, though, that the relation between sexual harassment and depressive symptoms may be different for men and women and therefore we have added supplementary analyses stratified by gender. We present both sets of analyses, the analysis including both genders and additional analyses that show the associations for women only and men separately. We believe that this is the most appropriate approach that gives the reader the most comprehensive information.