

A Fear of Elevators: Addressing Sexual Harassment on Parliament Hill

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, the media has focused on sexual harassment in Canada's Parliament. The movement has raised many questions about power dynamics in the institution, employees' lack of confidence in complaint process, and the extent of parliamentary privilege. Party dynamics, media scrutiny, limited protections for staff and the privileges enjoyed by Parliamentarians create challenges that are unique to the parliamentary workplace.

In Spring 2018 I interviewed twenty-six parliamentarians. As well, 200 parliamentary staff members participated in an online survey or discussion groups. My goal was to determine whether #MeToo and the media attention it has garnered have led to change on the Hill, be it a better understanding of the issue of sexual harassment, a cultural change, or a transformation of the parliamentary workplace.

The purpose of this research project is two-fold. It seeks to provide an overview of the situation at a given point in time and to serve as a starting point for dialogue on this issue.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Has there been a change in mindset, attitude and behaviour when it comes to sexual harassment in the parliamentary workplace?

METHODOLOGY & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research took place in April, May, and June 2018 in both English and French. Twenty-six parliamentarians were interviewed: twenty-five Members of Parliament (MPs) and one senator. The pool of MPs who participate reflect the wider demographics (gender, party, region) of the House of Commons during the 42nd Parliament. Nonetheless, the data is not statistically significant.

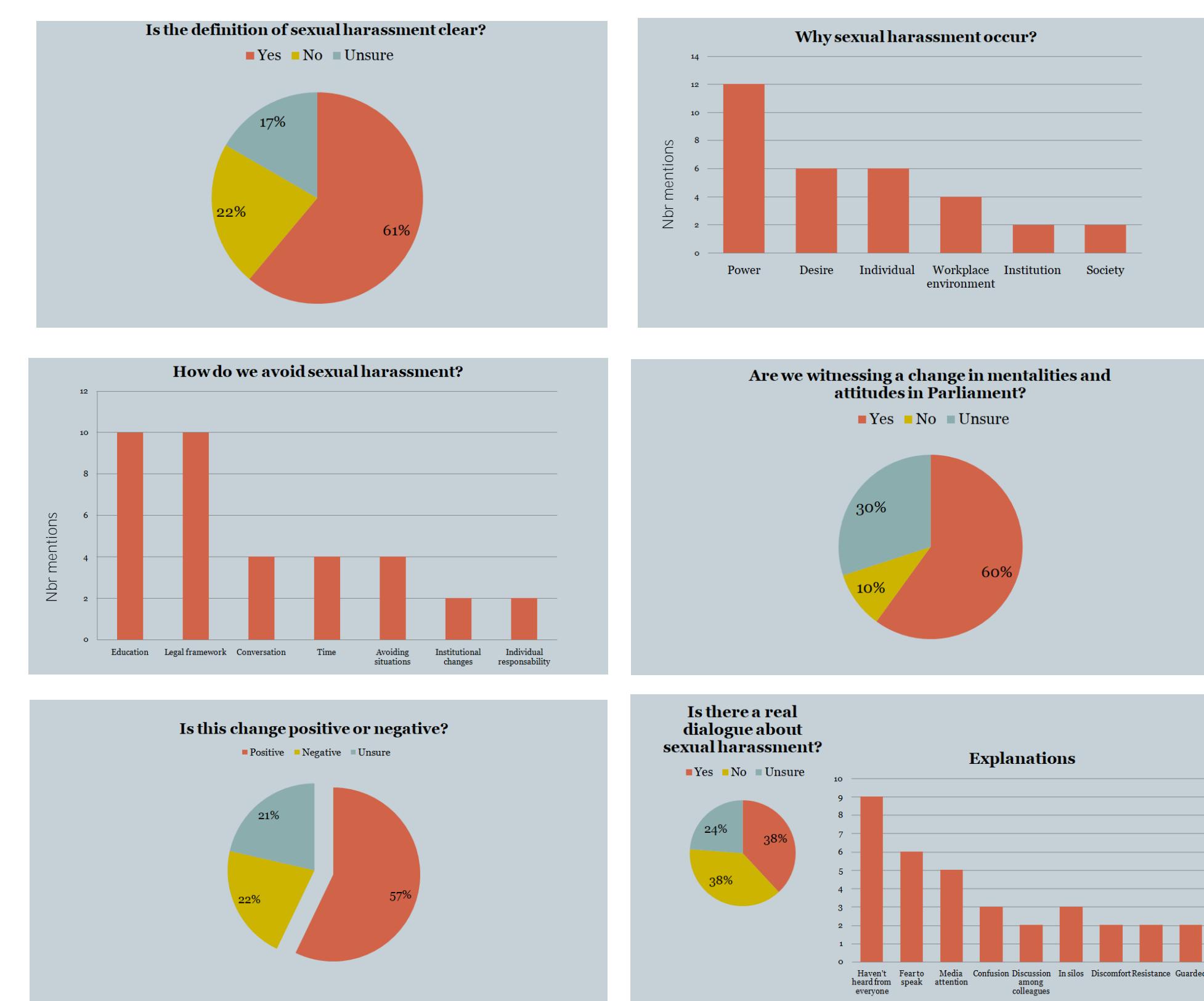
A bilingual survey was also carried out among partisan support staff. It went out to employees, interns and volunteers working on Parliament Hill and in constituency offices. Interns and employees of the House of Commons were also took part in bilingual facilitated discussion groups. A total of 200 staffers, interns and volunteers participated overall.

The interviews with parliamentarians were analyzed using discourse analysis techniques developed by communications and sociology scholars.

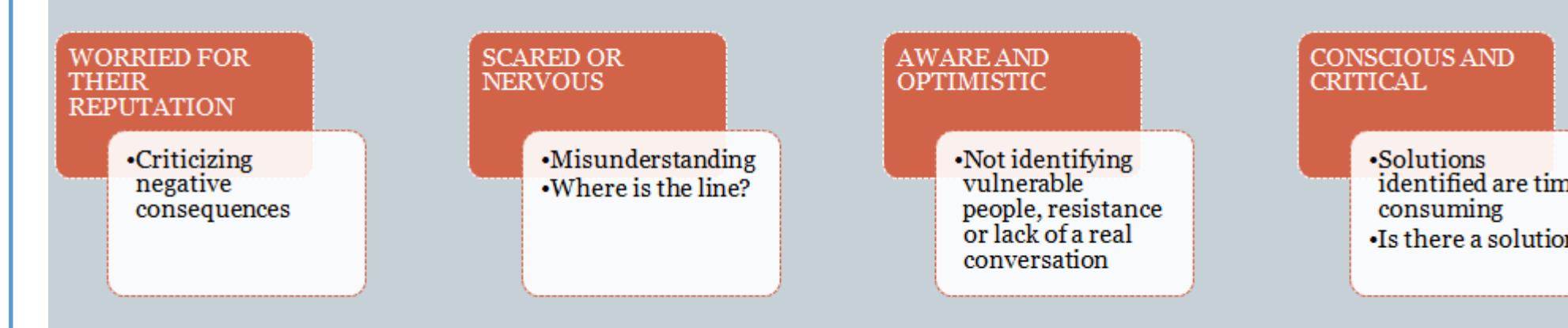
In "Gendered Construction of Power During Discourse About Sexual Harassment: Negotiating Competing Meanings," Debbie S. Dougherty proposes that discourse analysis be used to examine the connection between sexual harassment and power. Discourse can demonstrate a willingness to maintain an unequal or patriarchal environment (Clair, 1998) and it can serve as a form of resistance within an organization. Discourse can also be used to hide things, such as an unwillingness to identify behaviour as sexual harassment. An inability to contribute to the discourse is an indicator of the workplace's social and cultural climate (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). Contradictions in the discourse, such as conflicting or inconsistent definitions of what constitutes sexual harassment within an organization, are indicative of a lack of a common understanding (Dougherty, 2001; Kitzinger & Thomas, 1995).

RESULTS: PARLEMENTARIANS

This section presents the graphic analysis of the compilation of the 26 interviews held with parliamentarians. Each interview lasted about twenty minutes and was transcribed its entirety. The answers were then divided into themes. Recurring patterns in the answers were then identified and quantified.



MAJOR DISCOURSE TYPES



WORRIED FOR THEIR REPUTATION

"We now have to adapt to a new way of thinking. For example, if there is only one person in the elevator, I don't get in."
— Anonymous

SCARED AND NERVOUS

"There is no debate because everyone is afraid to say what they really think about these things. It's about social conformity...If you step out of line, you'll suffer the consequences..."
— Anonymous

AWARE AND OPTIMISTIC

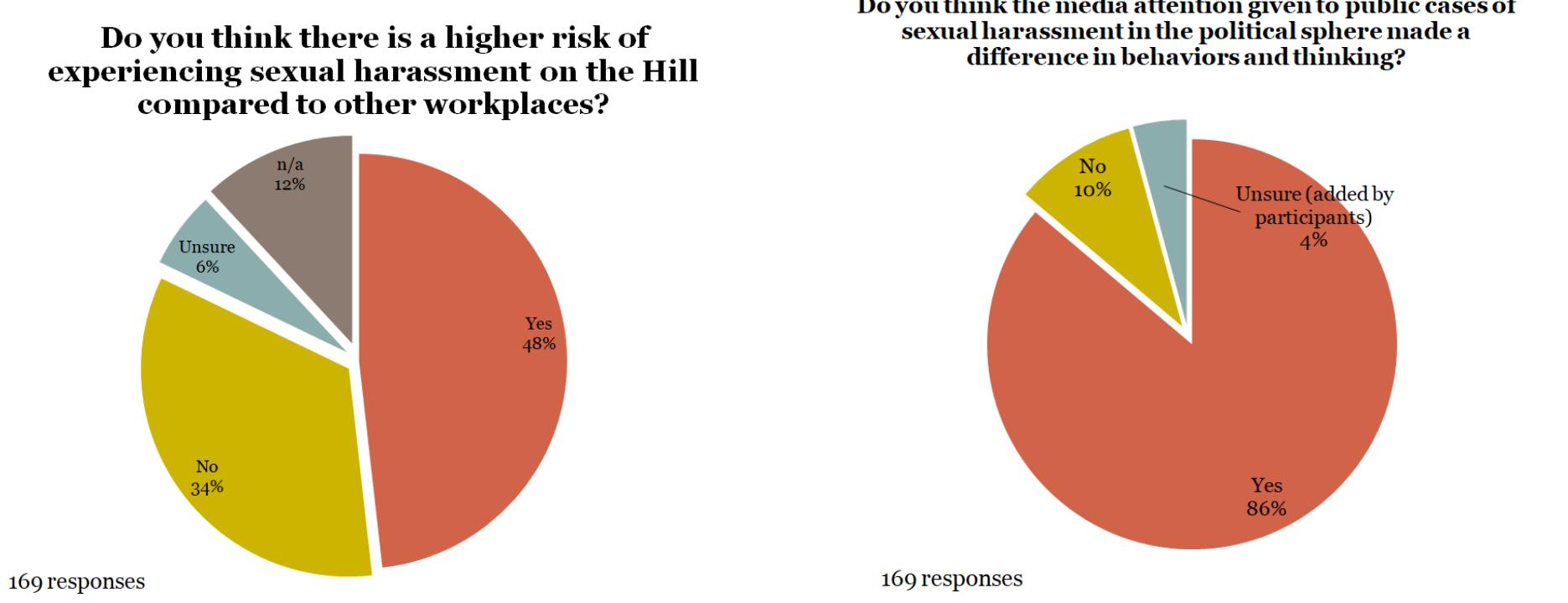
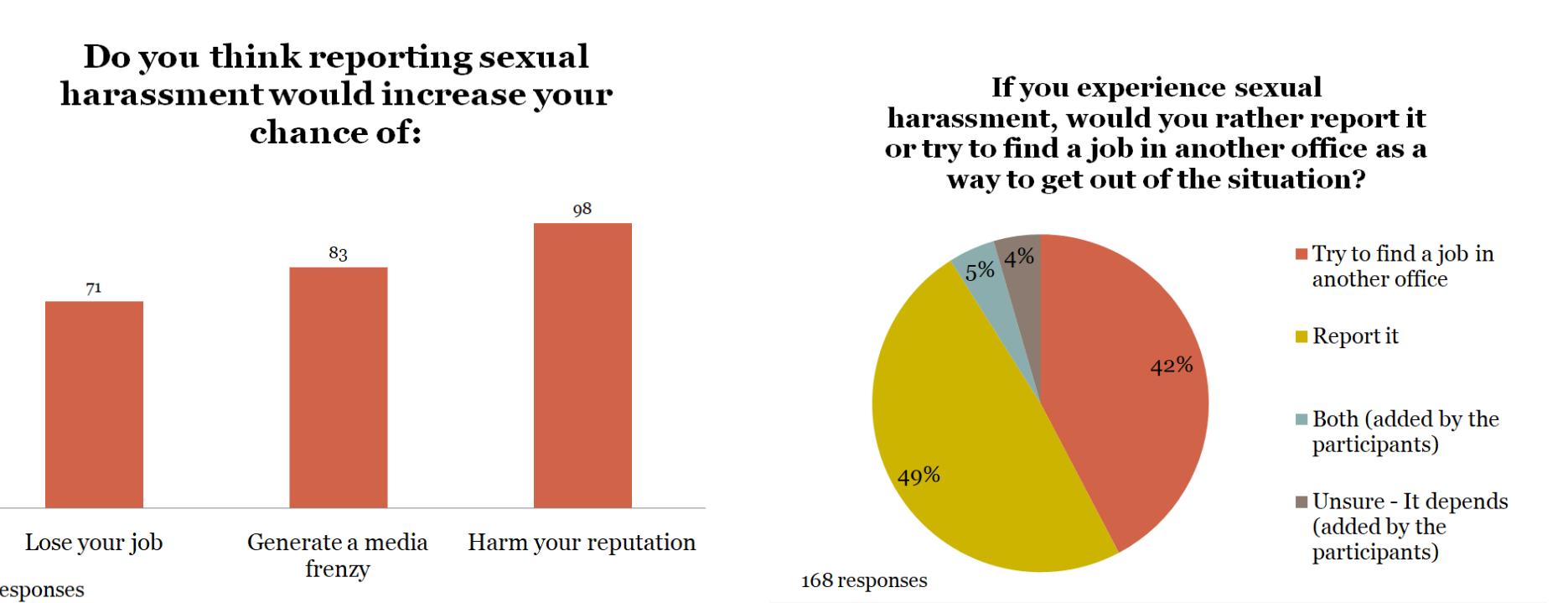
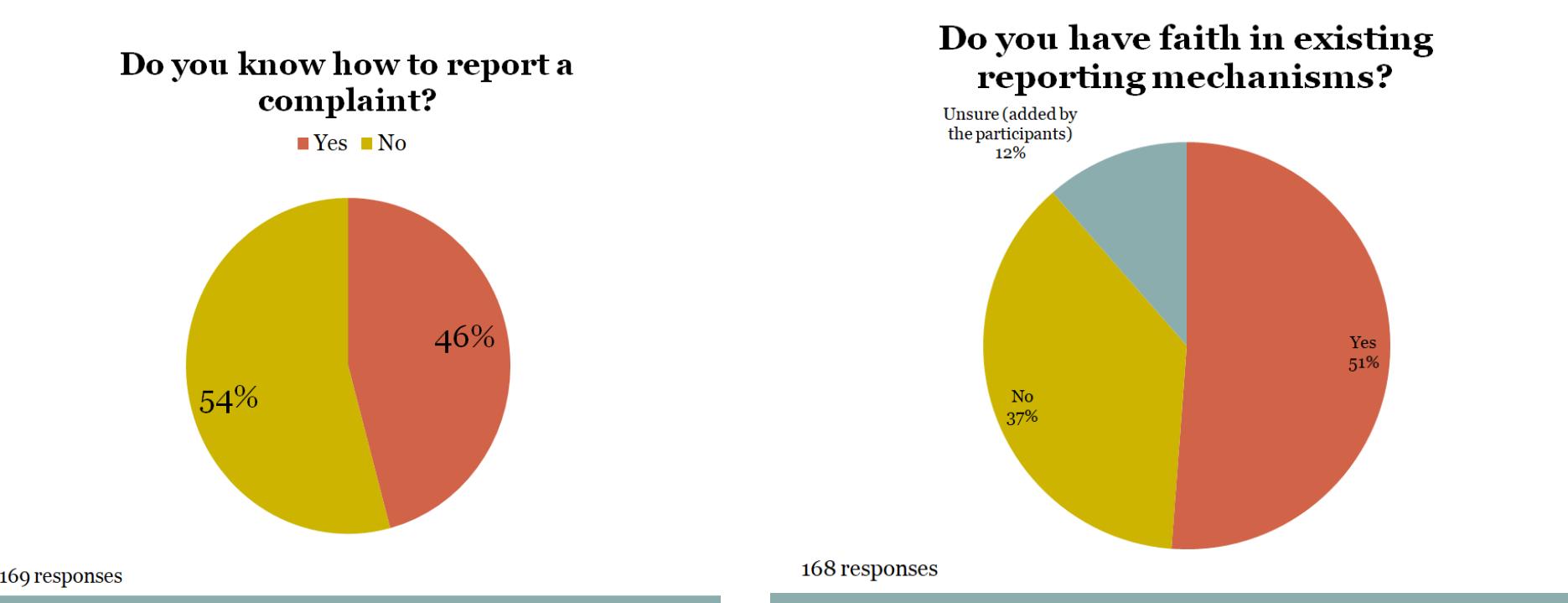
"We'll find equilibrium in terms of where everybody agrees that line is drawn. If you think in history around issues of discrimination, [discrimination] used to be completely socially acceptable. And over time, it started to change and there was a lot of awkwardness for a period of time on how you actually deal with that issue. But eventually [preventing harassment] became an accepted norm; it became very clear."
— The Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans

CONSCIOUS AND CRITICAL

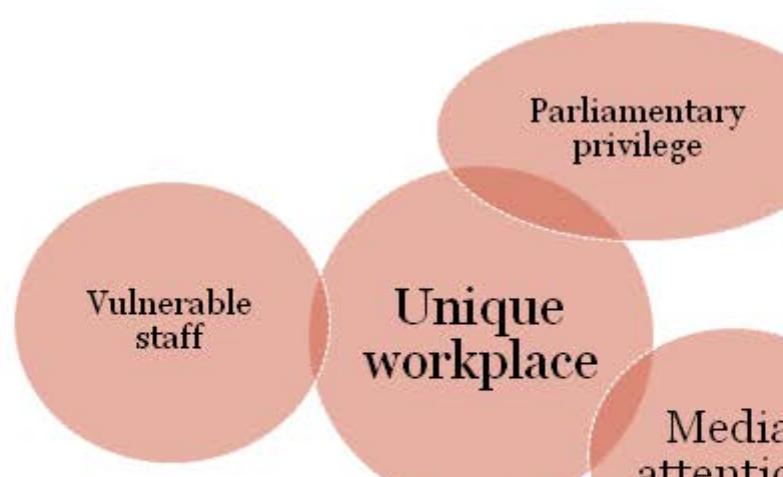
"Can we get there [to a safe workplace]? I don't know. It has to get better. Can it be free of it [harassment]? I don't know. I don't know if I can answer that question. I think the dynamics here will always lend [themselves] to it [harassment]. But I [definitely] think it will not [be] acceptable."
— The Hon. Bernadette Jordan, Minister of Rural Economic Development

RESULTS: STAFFERS, INTERNS & VOLUNTEERS

Approximately 200 volunteers, employees and interns were surveyed, all anonymously.



MAJOR THEMES



VULNERABLE STAFF & UNIQUE WORKPLACE

"Staff, in particular female staff, still feel powerless when sexually harassed. Often they will prefer not to report for fear of ruining their reputation and for fear of facing backlash from colleagues and their bosses."

MEDIA ATTENTION

"I think that attention in the media has helped to make a difference, but I think that it has also polarized the response of people that have not been educated about how their actions can be considered harassment. This can result in backlash from people that are not on board and can leave them feeling like a victim."

PARLIAMENTARY PRIVILEGE

"I experienced what I consider to be mild sexual harassment within my first week on the job. When you are working with very powerful individuals (who cannot be fired) and you can earn a reputation quickly, it makes you feel a little helpless."

INDICATORS

1. PARLEMENTARIANS UNSURE ABOUT CHANGE

- 40% of the parliamentarians interviewed state that they believe the definition of sexual harassment is unclear, that there is no clear change in mentalities and that change in the current workplace is not beneficial (willingness to maintain an unequal or patriarchal environment; see Clair, 1998).
- 60% of parliamentarians interviewed believe there is no ability to contribute to the discourse (not an open dialogue; see Hardy & Clegg, 1996)
- They are many competing definitions and understandings about what constitutes sexual harassment amongst parliamentarians, why it exists and how we avoid it (confusion, lack of common understanding; see Dougherty, 2001; Kitzinger & Thomas, 1995)

2. STAFF FEEL VULNERABLE

- A majority of staff who responded do not know how to report a complaint, are afraid to report a complaint, or have no faith in existing reporting mechanisms and think Parliament is more dangerous than other workplaces. (vulnerable victims; see Stainback, K., Ratliff, T. and Roscigno, V., 2011)

CONCLUSION

Because parliamentarians hold positions of power on the Hill, they have a considerable influence on the potential for cultural change. According to my results, about half of the parliamentarians interviewed express resistance to change or are uncertain about what constitutes sexual harassment and how to stop it. Parliamentarians are more worried about unfounded allegations and threats to their political reputation.

In addition, the cultural climate within the organisation is characterised by an absence of open dialogue. Staff feel vulnerable and do not have confidence in existing complaint mechanisms.

Thus, there is no obvious transformation taking place in the parliamentary workplace. If there is a change in behaviour (such as avoiding being alone in an elevator with a woman) it is not related to real reflection or an active effort to make the workplace safer.

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