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"We don't Report for Fear of Losing our Position": The Consequences to and Reactions of Women Victims of Sexual Harassment in the Brazilian Organizations

Alice Oleto[1], Rafael Alcadipani[2], José Vitor Palhares[3]

[1] Fundação Dom Cabral, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil
[2] Fundação Getulio Vargas, Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
[3] Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Ciências Econômicas, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil

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Corresponding author:
Alice Oleto
Fundação Dom Cabral
R. Bernardo Guimarães, n. 3071, Santo Agostinho,
CEP 30140-083, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: this study aims to understand the consequences and reactions of women victims of sexual harassment in organizations. **Methods:** a qualitative research design was adopted, based on the principles of grounded theory. Data were collected through 43 interviews with women working in Brazilian organizations who reported experiences of sexual harassment. **Results:** the findings reveal that sexual harassment in the workplace has severe consequences for women's physical and mental health, often subjecting them to degrading and traumatizing situations. Common reactions include self-blame and the silencing of the violence due to fear of dismissal or feelings of shame. **Conclusions:** the study highlights the urgent need for further research on sexual harassment in the workplace within the field of business administration. It also calls for the development of organizational practices aimed at preventing and addressing such violence, regardless of the victim's position within the company.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment can be considered a universal problem that distresses workers all over the world, mainly women (McDonald et al., 2015). In Brazil, one of the reasons that increase this kind of violence is the Brazilian culture, which often undermines women and portrays them as sexual objects (Pedro & Luz, 2024; Pereira & Amorim, 2021).

In Brazil, recent research highlights the relevance of analyses to understand gender-based violence in workplace contexts. Oliveira (2024) explores how social markers such as gender, race, and sexuality interact to reinforce hierarchies and inequalities, highlighting the impact of 'images of control' in perpetuating symbolic and practical oppressions. According to Rodrigues (2024), gender-based violence has a structural nature, sustained by a system of male domination that subjugates women and naturalizes gender inequalities. This system manifests itself through practices such as sexism, misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia, laying the foundations for various forms of gender-based violence. Currently, sophisticated work management mechanisms, combined with persistent gender inequalities, intensify the conditions of insecurity and violence in labor relations, creating an environment conducive to the occurrence of sexual harassment. Thus, sexual harassment can be understood as a form of gender-based violence that recurrently affects female bodies, which have historically been silenced (Rodrigues, 2024).

Gender-based violence in workplace relations reflects a structural system of domination that combines patriarchal, racial, and capitalist dimensions. Studies such as those by Rodrigues (2024) and Oliveira (2024) highlight how these dynamics are perpetuated in organizations, naturalizing inequalities and practices of moral and sexual harassment. In Brazil, the intersectionality of race, gender, and class amplifies the vulnerabilities of black and LGBTQIAPN+ women in workplace contexts, as pointed out by Rodrigues (2024). Moreover, Oleto and Palhares (2022) investigated the experiences of Brazilian gay academic teachers with heterosexist harassment in the workplace. The study revealed that being more effeminate leads to more explicit and violent forms of harassment, highlighting heterosexist harassment as a form of gender-based violence.

In its Manual on Preventing and Combating Moral and Sexual Harassment and Discrimination (Ministério Público do Trabalho [MPT], 2019), the institution informs that power relations influence the existence and maintenance of harassment in the workplace, highlighting not only the importance of reporting the harasser but also the need for evidence to support the victim in the complaint. The manual also highlights that victims of sexual harassment hesitate to report the aggressor for fear of being punished or losing their jobs.

In this sense, victims may experience sexual harassment as a loss of dignity and trust in others, which causes depression and self-destructive behaviors, generates feelings of discouragement and abandonment, and affects women's health in general (Pagel, 2020). Furthermore, many of these consequences can become chronic, leading to social isolation, decreased motivation for work, and lower quality of professional performance itself (Pagel, 2020).

Generally speaking, studies about sexual harassment in organizations have focused on literature reviews on the issue (Mainiero, 2020; McDonald, 2012; Oleto & Palhares, 2019; Siuta & Bergman, 2019), the cultural context that changes the perception of what is or is not considered sexual harassment (Halouani et al., 2019; Rubino et al., 2018), and the consequences of sexual harassment for the work community (Higa, 2016; Vidu et al., 2017). Yet, very few studies have researched the reactions and implications of sexual harassment over the life of the victims (Pagel, 2020). Therefore, this research aims to understand the consequences for and the responses of women who were victims of sexual harassment in organizations, bearing in mind the opportunities for analysis of the issue.

In this context, it is important to highlight that the concept of woman adopted in this paper can be understood from an intersectional (Crenshaw, 2013) and performative (Butler & Trouble, 1990) perspective, considering not only biological aspects but also the diverse experiences that emerge from socially constructed identities marked by interactions of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In the Brazilian context, the intersection between these categories reveals profound inequalities, which amplify the violence suffered by black, indigenous, and trans women (Bento, 2021). Misogyny, transphobia, and structural racism, combined with patriarchy, configure a scenario of particularly pronounced vulnerability, where sexual harassment is experienced in diverse but equally devastating ways. This understanding is fundamental to delimit the phenomenon studied and to understand the particularities of gender violence in Brazil. Thus, the concept of woman used in this study is expansive and seeks to encompass the complex social dynamics that shape the experiences of violence and inequality faced by different groups.

We hope this study encourages business administration researchers to continue investigating sexual harassment committed against women, regardless of their position in the company. This will strengthen a field of study still in its infancy and encourage manage-

ment practices that seek to prevent and combat this type of violence in the workplace. However, the investigation of sexual harassment in organizations is made difficult by the fear that many people have of speaking out openly on the subject and suffering retaliation at work.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The concept of sexual harassment in organizations and the victims' different reactions regarding the violence suffered

When thinking about sexual harassment, the most elementary but quite complex point is its definition (Quick & McFayden, 2017). In this article, we understand sexual harassment as an unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of unequal power relations, in the condition of a process of eroticized dominance based on men's economic power over the working relationship (MacKinnon, 1979), constraining the victim in their privacy (Leskinen et al., 2011).

In other words, it is an invasive, undesirable, unsolicited, and offensive act, making victims, generally, women, feel offended and threatened by that act (Wilson & Thompson, 2001). Sexual harassment ranges from unwanted verbal comments, jokes, and sexual gestures to actions that involve attempted touching and the establishment of a coercive sexual interaction that can lead to rape (Chamberlain et al., 2008).

In the booklet created by the International Labor Organization (Ministério Público do Trabalho & Organização Internacional do Trabalho, 2017), sexual harassment is characterized as acts, insinuations, forced physical contact, and impertinent invitations. Furthermore, each has one of the following characteristics: (1) a clear condition to remain employed; (2) influence the career advancement of the harassed person; (3) harm professional performance, humiliate, insult, or intimidate the victim; (4) threaten and make victims give in for fear of reporting the abuse; and (5) offer growth opportunities or impose disadvantages on victims in academic and work environments, among others, in exchange for something, such as enabling intimacy to be favored at work.

Regarding the different reactions of victims of violence, it is worth highlighting that the coping strategies used by women may vary depending on various aspects, such as the position they occupy in the company, the support they receive from management, the length of time they have worked in the organization, among others (Oleto et al., 2020).

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) had already verified strategies used to deal with harassment. They concluded that victims could engage in coping behaviors, exercised in three ways: eliminating or modifying the conditions that lead to the problem (e.g., negotiation, discipline); controlling the experience in a way that neutralizes its problematic nature (e.g., selectively ignoring what is harmful); and/or keeping the emotional consequences of harassment within manageable limits (e.g., passive acceptance, silence).

Pereira and Amorim (2021) reported that victims stopped working for some time because they refused to grant sexual favors, asked for transfers or were transferred to other companies, talked to co-workers, were dismissed, left their jobs and/or tried to avoid contact with the harasser. Oleto et al. (2020) reported different types of reactions from victims of sexual harassment in companies, such as resilience, blaming, naturalizing, and silencing the violence suffered.

In other research, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2018) investigated a wide range of reactions from victims of sexual harassment. They observed seven types of informal reactions and four types of formal reactions used by victims to deal with sexual harassment. The seven informal reactions were: ignoring the aggression, avoiding the aggressor, asking the aggressor to stop, making fun of the behavior, reporting the behavior to the supervisor, threatening to tell other workers, and agreeing with the behavior. The four formal reactions were: requesting that the organization investigate the case, filing a complaint, filing the sexual harassment complaint or lawsuit, and requesting an investigation by an external agency.

However, despite several studies that present some forms of the victims' reactions, the most common continues to be the silencing. Fielden et al. (2010) noticed that at least 75% of the victims preferred to remain silent for fear of losing their jobs or suffering negative organizational consequences. Lonsway et al. (2013) and Higa (2016) also point out the fear of reprisal as the main reason victims do not report the harassment. According to Silveira et al. (2024), the naturalization and invisibility of sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as the lack of reporting due to fear of retaliation, are factors that contribute to its perpetuation.

Gill and Febbraro (2013) identified seven factors that influence the victims' silence: (1) belief that a formal process can be harmful, as people will label them pejoratively as troublemakers or snitches; (2) fear of being dismissed; (3) a feeling that nothing will be done or that there will be no change regarding the current scenario; (4) uneasy and shame in sharing personal experiences seen as intimate or shameful to strangers; (5) difficulties in considering their own negative experience as a case of sexual harassment; (6) fear of going through a process of revictimization, in which, besides the dam-

age caused by the sexual harassment itself, they would suffer an invasion of their personal life; (7) the possibility of retaliation by the aggressor or the organization, transferring the blame to the victim themselves.

Therefore, remaining silent about this behavior suggests that the misconduct might not result in legal or disciplinary action, allowing the violence to persist and continue harming more victims.

The consequences of sexual harassment to the victims

The consequences experienced by victims of sexual harassment range from physical and psychological issues, which affect their sexual freedom and dignity as individuals, to changes in their work performance, often associated with lower job satisfaction and negatively affecting organizational commitment (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009).

Gettman and Gelfand (2007) found that sexual harassment is negatively related to job and health satisfaction, in addition to affecting psychological suffering. Siuta and Bergman (2019) argue that sexual harassment affects any form of contentment in the workplace, with strong effects on satisfaction with interpersonal relationships at work compared to satisfaction with the work itself.

In addition to the adverse consequences related to job satisfaction, victims of this type of violence tend to suffer from a wide range of mental and physical pathologies, negatively affecting their quality of life and general well-being, not only in the work environment (Sojo et al., 2016). Friborg et al. (2017) and Pagel (2020) understand that sexual harassment in the workplace is one of the key causes of an increase in long-term illnesses and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

In general, when focusing on the reactions and consequences of harassment for victims, it is possible to notice a model with four stages of psychological response: (1) confusion and shame (Gutek & Koss, 1993); (2) fear and anxiety (Andrade et al., 2023); (3) depression and anger (Rugulies et al., 2020); and (4) disillusionment (Diehl et al., 2018).

The first stage indicates that the victim believes that the assaults may be incidental or temporary. However, as the episodes of violence escalate, the victim experiences a sense of helplessness. This stage often includes self-blame and doubts about whether the events are perceived as harassment, exacerbated by cultural norms and the internalization of gender stereotypes. Confusion can also be fueled by fears of judgment, especially in organizations that do not have clear guidelines on what constitutes harassment. In terms of workplace implications, confusion can lead to a decrease in the victim's ability to communicate their concerns clearly, impairing their professional performance. In terms of personal impacts, feelings of shame intensify social isolation, preventing the victim from seeking appropriate support (Gutek & Koss, 1993).

The second stage shows that the victim begins to envisage the permanent possibility of suffering retaliation at work, future damage to their career, and financial loss. These feelings affect not only professional performance but also the victim's overall health. Furthermore, from an organizational perspective, fear can be amplified by corporate cultures that favor aggressors or by the lack of effective protection for victims. In personal dynamics, psychological stress often manifests itself in physical symptoms, such as insomnia and gastrointestinal problems, in addition to damaging interpersonal relationships due to the constant state of vigilance (Andrade et al., 2023).

In the third stage, the victim turns their anxiety into rage when they realize the injustice they are suffering. The victim begins to perceive the structural injustice in the situation, especially when corrective action is not taken by the organization. Feelings of anger can sometimes drive the victim to seek justice, while depression contributes to a cycle of apathy and demotivation. In terms of mental health, this stage is associated with clinical symptoms such as loss of appetite, constant fatigue, and self-deprecating thoughts. As for organizational consequences, work performance can decrease significantly, as the victim may avoid environments or people associated with the violence. Feelings of fear, anxiety, shame, guilt, and stress can also reduce the ability to concentrate and engage (Rugulies et al., 2020).

The fourth stage indicates that the organization's responses to the complaint harm the victim or are frustrating. In other words, disillusionment reflects the victim's frustration with inadequate institutional responses or with re-victimization in the reporting process. The perception of abandonment leads to progressive alienation, not only in relation to the organization but also to institutions in general. The impacts on work often culminate in extreme decisions, such as resigning, reducing dedication to work, or even avoiding entire sectors where the harassment occurred. As for personal implications, disillusionment can have long-term effects, such as difficulty in establishing new relationships of trust, both in professional and personal contexts (Diehl et al., 2018). Here, the victim begins to feel naive for believing that the organization would support them and also starts to suffer other institutional abuses, resulting in a feeling of injustice. When harassment is tolerated or poorly managed by the company, it creates a culture

of insecurity and disrespect that impacts not only the victims but also their colleagues, reducing everyone's engagement and productivity (Oleto & Palhares, 2022).

Thus, situations of sexual harassment have significant and potentially irreversible consequences for victims. At the organizational level, there is a reduction in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity, while levels of occupational stress, absenteeism, turnover, and voluntary or forced dismissals increase. These effects are aggravated when institutional responses are ineffective, reinforcing feelings of injustice and disillusionment (Friborg et al., 2017). At the personal level, sexual harassment compromises the physical and psychological well-being of victims, increasing the prevalence of post-traumatic disorders, symptoms of depression, and anxiety (Siuta & Bergman, 2019). Such consequences highlight the importance of proactive and supportive organizational approaches to mitigate harm and offer reparations to victims.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is an excerpt from a study in which research was conducted on sexual harassment against women in the Brazilian labor market.

To meet the objective proposed in this paper, we conducted a qualitative and exploratory study, using grounded theory as the research strategy, as suggested by Charmaz (2009). Grounded theory codified the behaviors through which theories were generated via detailed analysis of qualitative data to attribute precise relevance to real-world problems and phenomena (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2010).

Data were collected over one year and five months through interviews with 43 women in the job market, aged between 25 and 59, all Brazilian, without distinction of race, ethnicity, color, or sexual orientation. All 43 interviews were conducted via Skype, telephone, WhatsApp video, or audio calls.

Before the start of each interview, we informed participants about the objective of the research, the possibility of withdrawing from the interview at any time, and the option to pause it as many times as necessary. The interviewees were also informed that their names would be changed to maintain the absolute confidentiality of their identities.

To conduct the interviews, we used the methodology proposed by Charmaz (2009) regarding the grounded theory method, according to which the initial interview questions should be based on concepts derived from literature or experience. However, we did not keep the research instrument closed. We adapted the interview guide throughout the research process. We also used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to code the interviews.

For the number of interviews conducted, we followed the saturation of the categories that emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), in which the central idea in theory construction is to collect data until no new or relevant data appear in any category.

This research was submitted to the Committee for Ethical Compliance Involving Human Beings at the institution where it was conducted and received approval for its execution. Given the sensitive nature of the topic addressed, a protocol was established to minimize potential harm to participants. All interviewees were informed, prior to data collection, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, either during the interview or after data collection, if they wished. Furthermore, it was ensured that any collected data would be destroyed in case of withdrawal, thereby safeguarding their information and emotional well-being.

Data analysis occurred in three stages. The first was open coding, an analytical process by which concepts were identified and developed according to their properties and dimensions. From then on, a microanalysis of the data was carried out, line by line, to identify the main concepts or codes that contributed to understanding the phenomenon. One hundred and twenty codes were initially identified, representing the concepts emerging from the data, including concepts such as 'psychological consequences,' 'physical health problems,' 'professional difficulties,' and 'emotional impact.'

In the second stage, we performed axial coding, which improved the categories resulting from open coding, selecting the most relevant categories and placing them as a central phenomenon to establish relationships between the categories and subcategories. Thus, data were organized according to the connections between categories. In this work, the codes identified from the microanalysis were linked into two categories: victims' reactions and consequences of sexual harassment, as they showed what reactions victims experienced during and/or after the harassment, and how this type of violence affected their lives. These codes were selected and regrouped into 42 codes. The categories that emerged were: (1) consequences of sexual harassment, related to psychological (disorders, depression), physical (pain, sleep problems), and professional (decreased productivity, career changes) impacts; and (2) victims' reactions (addressing the types of responses of victims, such as reporting the harassment, remaining silent, or adapting to the work environment).

The third stage, selective coding, aimed to integrate and refine categories at a more abstract level. The categories that emerged were improved, and we identified

that they made up the central category 'consequences and reactions of victims of sexual harassment,' which was, therefore, the category that explained what reactions women had when being harassed and what social, physical, and psychological consequences this violence caused in their personal and professional lives. In this stage, the codes were refined to select the most representative elements of this category, highlighting the lasting effects of harassment and the reactions faced by victims, while ten more codes were excluded because they were redundant or less relevant to the focus of the study.

FINDINGS

Here, we present the results regarding the reactions and consequences of sexual harassment in the lives of the women participating in this research. We inform that, throughout the presentation and analysis of the data, excerpts from the interviews conducted with participants are included, which may contain descriptions of sensitive and potentially triggering situations for readers, especially for those who have experienced similar circumstances. Therefore, we recommend that the text be read with caution, considering the possible emotional impact of the narratives presented.

Reactions to the sexual harassment suffered

Regarding the reactions reported by the interviewees, we perceived different coping strategies used by women, which varied depending on different contexts, confirming the findings of Oleto et al. (2020). However, regarding the characterization of sexual harassment in the workplace, there was a consensus among the interviewees, as they all reported being exposed to humiliating, violent, and abusive situations during their professional lives, including disturbing the quality of life of these women. Nevertheless, some have naturalized this type of violence in the organizational context and treated it as a 'joke.'

Guilt was the most reported feeling when asked about what they felt when they were sexually harassed. In Ana's case, after suffering rape, the feelings of impotence, guilt, and shame became very strong, confirming the studies by Gill and Febbraro (2013) and Oleto et al. (2020).

> After what happened at [company name], it was a feeling of helplessness, a feeling of lack of value, to tell you the truth, because it happened, I felt like it was my fault because it stuck in my head like that, "It was your fault. Why did you accept the ride? Why didn't you walk away? You could have died on the way, but you could have walked away. What did you accept the ride for? It is your fault, your problem." But why didn't I also take it? If there were, for example, a police station, out of shame, I would not have the courage to say that I agreed because my feeling was that I agreed. I would not have the courage to speak up and say that a man had done something to me that I did not want. I was embarrassed to say it and even more embarrassed because people would laugh in my face for saying: "How could you not want a handsome man like that to do something to you?" So, I was ashamed on all sides, so I preferred not to speak out. (Ana)

From the report above, it is possible to see how Ana, due to a sexist culture that not only oppresses but also seeks to blame the victims of the attacks suffered, removes herself from the position of victim and places herself as guilty of the violence she experienced, just because she accepted a ride from her attacker. It also exposes a feeling of impotence that comes along with shame, as if nothing could be done to combat such violence, since many would not believe her — not even the police. This fact exemplifies how sexual abuse, rooted in a sexist culture, can lead the victim to lose the ability to judge the situation, making them internalize and repeat that the violence suffered was their fault and not the aggressor's (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007).

Another reaction that emerged in the data was fear. It appears mainly linked to the idea that if women reported cases of sexual harassment, they would be putting their jobs or career advancement at risk (Diniz, 2014; Correa, 2020), or they could even suffer some retaliation, threat, or persecution within the organization (Lonsway et al., 2013). For Narcisa, the fear of losing a promotion or not being believed justified her decision not to report the harassment she suffered, as shown in the excerpt below:

> But still — at least in my corporate environment — we don't report it because we are afraid of losing our position for fear that the company will not embrace our cause. (Narcisa)

The discredited feelings of the interviewees also emerged from the data. Here, victim blaming once again arises strongly, as victims are devalued for the crime suffered and considered responsible for what happened (Lynch et al., 2020). Ana and Djamila's statements show this. The idea that people will not believe the victim is still very present.

> Imagine [person's name], one of the most respected guys in the company. Oh, you are crazy! The guy is

> married. At the company, there was no one to tell. If I told any friend, any family, they would say it was a lie, that I was interested in him, and that I would be disrespected. (Ana)

> But I remember when I told HR. One of the girls was visceral. She said, "Impossible!" Then you feel terrible because you could hurt someone when you raise an issue like that, whether you like it or not. (Djamila)

From the above, we found that the silencing of violence is a common reaction of victims of sexual harassment in organizations (Fielden et al., 2010; Oleto et al., 2020), as many women are silenced because they feel discredited, helpless, or without support in companies (Gutek & Koss, 1993), or even because reporting aggression can be harmful to themselves, others, and/or the organizational climate (Diehl et al., 2018).

The sexualization, objectification, stereotyping, or degradation of the female body was also a topic discussed by the interviewees. We noticed that some women felt guilty or ashamed for being beautiful or having bodies considered 'standard.' In this context, Ana realized that people saw her as an object. That made her feel not well about her body.

> So, the only attraction for everyone was just the body. I felt like an object. I felt like a worthless woman. I felt like I was a woman who was only good for that. (Ana)

Likewise, an experience working abroad made it clear to Djamila how the issue of stereotyping is related to sexual harassment. She says that upon arriving at the organization where she was going to work, the colleague who welcomed her was disappointed because she did not resemble the Brazilian standard, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

> But he said, "When we picked it up?" and said, "Wow! The Brazilian is coming, we were waiting for someone else..." He was waiting for someone sensual and wearing low-cut clothes. (Djamila)

The fragments above exemplify how sexual harassment is the result of a sexist culture and societies historically permeated by a pronounced sexual division of labor and gender inequalities in the job market, which reflect, among other things, sexualization, objectification, stereotyping, and subalternation of women in the workplace (Higa, 2016; Pedro & Luz, 2024).

Another relevant point was the issue of naturalizing sexual harassment. We noticed that many interviewees do not consider themselves victims of sexual harassment due to the naturalization of this type of violence in the workplace, as it is still understood by common sense as something acceptable or even a form of joke (McDonald, 2012; Silveira et al., 2024). The reports below show how victims themselves relativize harassment, defending the aggressor and arguing, for example, that it is necessary to check whom the person is harassing to see whether or not that act should be considered harassment.

> I think there are cases and cases. Some men are harassers. It is a pattern of behavior. He does this to me, to you, and whenever he can. I don't think that's his situation. I think he was driven to do this. He is a man and a human. He played, but I don't think so because I was there for many years and followed him closely. ... So, I think he doesn't have that standard. I think it was a situation in his life. Who knows. Suddenly, he fell in love. That may have happened. So, I think, okay, I understand that this was harassment, that I relativize it. But I believe I relativize not to alleviate the situation in the sense that it is worse or better than the others, but in the sense that we also check who is behind the harassment. (Cora)

> I say, "Oh my God, the guy is crazy," right? And it is out of pure necessity, a physical and sexual issue. I am trying to find a justification why it was his mistake. We thought it was normal because he is a man and they have different needs than women, right? (Daiane)

In one of the excerpts above, Cora admits that she suffered sexual harassment, but her reaction fits into one of the seven informal reactions found in the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2018) study. In other words, she admits that she relativizes the violence and tries to ignore the aggression by the person who committed the act. This fact illustrates another way in which victims react to sexual harassment in organizations, seeking to control the violence experienced to neutralize its problematic nature or keep the emotional consequences of harassment within manageable limits (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

To naturalize sexual harassment in organizations, the interviewee uses the biological issue to try to justify it, stating that the aggressor "slipped up. He is a man and a human." Similarly, Daiane also attempted to justify the sexual harassment she suffered by explaining that men have different needs than women. However, such justifications exempt those responsible for the violence committed and redirect the blame to other factors, such

as less hierarchical power relations, which consequently does not help to raise awareness and combat this type of violence in organizations.

Thus, it is common in the literature on sexual harassment that exposure to this type of violence brings a high burden of reactions and feelings to victims, such as fear, guilt, stress, discomfort, impotence, irritation, anger, and degradation. Fear, in particular, is a significant reaction to analyze in data on sexual harassment research, suggesting that fear is the most common and intense emotion felt by victims of sexual violence (Andrade et al., 2023).

However, we noticed in the data other reactions considered passive (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007), such as silencing, mental distraction, pretending to ignore, really ignoring, withdrawal, denial of violence, avoiding aggressors, naturalization of harassment, blaming the victim, shame or embarrassment, and feelings of humiliation and belittlement. These reactions can be especially problematic, as they often do not combat the harasser's behavior, leaving victims, ultimately, vulnerable to abuse.

Silencing was another common reaction from victims of sexual harassment. This reaction occurs because they understand that remaining silent can avoid situations such as dismissal, discomfort, and shame in sharing personal experiences seen as intimate or vexatious; fear of going through a process of revictimization, in which, besides the damage caused by sexual harassment, they would suffer an invasion into their personal life. Furthermore, co-workers could move away, isolating the victim (Gill & Febbraro, 2013). In line with the studies by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020), the data also evidenced reactions of silencing due to fear of suffering retaliation from the aggressor or the organization, with the possibility of losing one's job, suffering a salary reduction, having transferred the blame to oneself, in addition to tarnishing one's reputation.

Furthermore, sex role stereotypes are also related to greater tolerance of sexual harassment (Russell & Trigg, 2004), as this can lead victims to perceive certain behaviors as less earnest and harmful (Shechory & Shaul, 2013). That is even more evident in behavioral situations open to multiple interpretations, such as sexist comments and jokes, dinner invitations, or going out. This can be seen in the reports of the women participating in this research.

Consequences of sexual harassment for the victim

As for the consequences experienced by victims of sexual harassment, they range from changes in behavior and physical and psychological consequences due to the offense suffered, which affect their sexual freedom and dignity as a person, to professional, social, and interpersonal relationship problems (Friborg et al., 2017; Sojo et al., 2016). The change in attitude and behavior within the organization was much commented on, as many interviewees became more serious, closed, and reserved. Corroborating the findings of Siuta and Bergman (2019), it was also possible to notice that some women felt the bond of trust with people was shaken — they became very suspicious — always being left behind, especially with the male figure.

Daiane explains that, before suffering sexual harassment, she was a more accessible and open person when meeting other people. After the abuse, she became more closed, only giving freedom to a person after getting to know them better.

> I'm a much more reserved person. Before, I was used to opening up easier. Today, I need to get to know the person so I can open up, such as opening my face, giving a smile, and being more empathetic. Before, I would be more compassionate, easier. Today, I'm a little drier in that sense. (Daiane)

Bertha reported that she started to police herself to make several contacts and relationships more formal, even with people she likes. She also started to leave it clear that she was married, imposing limits.

> I stay very attentive. Sometimes, I have to be careful because I face some adversities. So, for example, I always make sure it is a formal relationship if I have some affection, even with the teacher, whenever I feel that the conversation becomes a little more intimate, but not for me. I kind of already walk on eggshells and notice that whenever I have to talk to a man about work, for example, with my lawyer or a teacher, I always talk about my husband. (Bertha)

Tarsila said that as a result of sexual violence, she suffered and needed therapy as her psychological condition worsened. She also said that her behavior changed to a more aggressive form, becoming more reactive toward people in the organization where she worked. Eliane already had panic syndrome. For her, the path to the company was torturous, and when she arrived at the organization, she felt vomiting attacks.

> I think that in these cases and all the violence I experienced as a woman, I dealt with a lot in therapy. And I became a very reactive person toward men, extremely aggressive, pushing them away. I think this is a bad thing for me, so you start to see violence even where it isn't there. (Tarsila)

> When I started going to therapy, I would then have panic syndrome. I would arrive at the company and vomit. I was always sick. Then, I negotiated with the department to work from home, justifying that I wasn't in good health. (Eliane)

For Sueli and Carolina, sexual harassment brought problems regarding social issues and interpersonal relationships, as they chose to stop participating in social events at the organizations they were part of. As a defense, they decided to isolate themselves as a form of self-protection, corroborating the findings of Pagel (2020).

> ... I think that, at some points, I also stopped going to happy hour, depending on the group that went to happy hour, because it is also not reasonable to generalize that all men do it to the same extent. However, depending on the group I was going out with, I stopped because I felt a little strange. So, I also intentionally changed my figure because I felt discomfort that I didn't know where it was coming from. (Sueli)

> So, it's a shame because sometimes you lose the professional chance to create a relationship of trust with someone important, but then I try to avoid going out and having a drink or dinner. I try to observe a lot if there are more people, if there will be another woman, who the people are, if I already know them, if I trust them. And I haven't been through any other situation so far, but I'm hopeful that I'll be able to react more immediately. I stopped having these social interactions. (Carolina)

For some interviewees, their jobs or careers were affected due to sexual harassment, as women resigned or were fired, changed jobs many times, or were unable to reach desired career positions, as Andrade et al. (2023) and Rugulies et al. (2020) also attest. Maria Esther and Leolinda had their jobs directly affected, as the first chose to resign, and the second ended up being fired.

> I changed many things, not for that reason, but I made a huge change. That happened in 2018. I resigned from [company name] at the end of 2018. (Maria Esther)

> The two main points are: yes, I was unemployed, and I'm still unemployed. (Leolinda)

The issue of job loss, transfer, or distancing from work is another common consequence of sexual harassment. Sexually harassed women often engage in some form of distancing from work, whether it be a transfer of position to the headquarters or a branch of the organization to stay away from the attacker or taking time off to recover from the violence they suffered. Other women were fired or chose to leave their jobs for good to free themselves from sexual assault (Diehl et al., 2018; Vargas et al., 2020), as seen in the excerpts above.

In this way, we were able to understand how sexual harassment brought multiple and significant consequences to the physical and mental health of the victims interviewed. This is also seen in the research by Reed et al. (2016), Clancy et al. (2017), and Rugulies et al. (2020), who found that women who were sexually harassed, even at low frequencies, had significantly lower levels of general psychological well-being and elevated symptoms of stress.

It is important to emphasize that mental health problems were among the main consequences of sexual harassment in the women studied. Consequences such as anxiety, depression, and stress were identified.

The victims of sexual harassment interviewed in this work faced a wide range of consequences that include both physical and psychological effects resulting from the violence they experienced. As explained by O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2009), this type of behavior harms not only the sexual freedom and personal dignity of victims but also adversely affects performance in the workplace. Specifically, in the professional context, these consequences can manifest themselves as lower job satisfaction, which, in turn, can hurt organizational commitment.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to understand the consequences and reactions of women victims of sexual harassment in organizations. To achieve this, we developed a research with a qualitative approach based on data (grounded theory). We collected data through 43 interviews with women working in Brazilian organizations. To analyze the collected data, we carried out open, axial, and selective coding processes repeatedly, according to the guidelines of Charmaz (2009).

Regarding the reactions to the sexual harassment suffered by these women, the most cited were: blaming the victim due to a sexist culture that seeks to exempt the real aggressors and blame the victims for the violence suffered; shame to talk about the subject and fear of reporting cases of sexual harassment because they thought they were putting their jobs or career ad-

vancement at risk or because they could suffer retaliation, threat, or persecution within the organization.

Silencing was also another widespread reaction, in addition to the fact that many interviewees do not consider themselves victims of sexual harassment, as a result of the naturalization of this type of violence as 'jokes' or as 'something acceptable,' since this type of violence would have a biological justification for it to happen. That is due to 'the nature of men,' who would have different sexual needs than women. On the contrary, such discourse exempts the real culprits of sexual harassment, strengthening violent discourses and practices in organizations. Sexual harassment is not a biologically determined behavior but violence influenced by a wide variety of factors, such as culture, education, social environment, and individual issues.

As for the consequences of sexual harassment for victims, many women needed psychological and psychiatric treatment, as some even developed panic syndrome, and others had physical problems, mainly in the spine, sleep, and digestive tract. The change in behavior within the organization was the most cited, as many women interviewed became more serious, closed, and reserved. It was possible to notice that jobs or careers were affected due to sexual harassment, as many women resigned or were fired, had to take time away from their work, or changed jobs many times. The data also identified problems regarding social issues and interpersonal relationships, as women chose to isolate themselves as a form of self-protection.

From a conceptual standpoint, this research contributes to the understanding and refinement of the definition of sexual harassment. While existing literature often emphasizes sexual harassment as an individual or isolated behavior, the findings of this study highlight its systemic nature, deeply embedded in cultural, social, and organizational practices. A key contribution is the identification of the normalization mechanisms that obscure the recognition of harassment by victims themselves, thus perpetuating cycles of silence and invisibility. These insights challenge and expand existing conceptualizations by emphasizing that harassment is not merely an act of aggression but a complex phenomenon sustained by broader cultural and institutional dynamics.

Moreover, this study revealed singularities in the emotional and professional consequences faced by victims, such as the interplay between their reactions and the organizational responses — or lack thereof — to harassment complaints. By integrating these findings into the theoretical framework of sexual harassment, the research advances the sophistication of the concept, demonstrating how reactions such as silence or self-isolation are not simply personal choices but are shaped by systemic inequalities and organizational complicity. These nuances underscore the importance of revising traditional definitions to incorporate intersectional and organizational perspectives, making the concept more robust and applicable across contexts.

As academic and organizational contributions of this research, we seek to strengthen a field of study still in its infancy in the people management area and promote management practices that seek to prevent and combat this type of violence in the workplace. As for the social implications, given that sexual harassment is a violation of human rights and a form of gender discrimination, we hope to increase visibility, awareness, prevention, and combat of this type of violence at work so that other women are encouraged to tell their stories and report cases of harassment in organizations.

As for the limitations of the research, we can mention the choice of the population investigated, which was more focused on the issue of gender and did not delve into the possibility of using intersectionality during data manipulation. In this sense, for future research, we recommend intersectional studies that include other characteristics for analyzing topics such as race, social class, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, and stereotypes.

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Author

Alice Oleto
Fundação Dom Cabral
R. Bernardo Guimarães, n. 3071, Santo Agostinho, CEP 30140-083, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil
aliceoleto@hotmail.com

Rafael Alcadipani
Fundação Getulio Vargas, Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo
Av. Nove de Julho, n. 2029, Bela Vista, CEP 01313-902, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
rafael.alcadipani@fgv.br

José Vitor Palhares
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Ciências Econômicas
Av. Pres. Antônio Carlos, n. 6627, Pampulha, CEP 31270-901, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil
titopalhares@hotmail.com

Authors' contributions

1st author: conceptualization (lead), data curation (lead), formal analysis (equal), investigation (lead), methodology (equal), project administration (lead), resources (equal), supervision (lead), writing - original draft (lead), writing - review & editing (equal).

2nd author: conceptualization (lead), formal analysis (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (lead), resources (equal), supervision (equal), writing - original draft (equal), writing - review & editing (equal).

3rd author: conceptualization (supporting), formal analysis (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (supporting), resources (equal), writing - original draft (equal), writing - review & editing (equal).