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# Sexual harassment in workplace

## A challenge in diversity management

*Paola Galifi, Antonella Varetto, Gaia Dibiase, Adelina Brizio and Daniela Acquadro Maran*

*The aim of this paper is to collect the voices of women who report experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace and those who have not. Twenty-four participants were asked to describe a profile of the prototypical victim and indicate how the phenomenon can be prevented. Overall, the survey shows a significant difference in the way the two groups portray the phenomenon. While employees who state that they have experienced sexual harassment at work are more cautious when describing the prototypical characteristics of victims as well as strategies for coping with an incident, the other employees delimit the phenomenon in a more differentiated way. They state that they are not sure how to deal with the incident, especially if it is not physical harassment. There seems to be a perception that sexual harassment in the workplace is a misunderstanding, so the opinion of another person (colleague, relative, friend...) is needed to understand whether or not the incident should be considered sexual harassment in the workplace.*

Sexual harassment in the workplace (SHW) is a pervasive and pressing organizational problem. It may result in a variety of harmful effects, including lower engagement and performance at work, poorer mental and physical health outcomes and increased economic instability (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1993; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). Its detrimental consequences affect victims, witnesses, and their entire social and professional environment. It is important to identify the factors that may influence the perception of the phenomenon and, in particular, the judgments of the victims. Indeed, people tend to associate victims of sexual harassment with prototypical women. According to Bandt-Law (2021) and Kaiser et al. (2022),

prototypical women are described as young, Caucasian, traditionally feminine and physically attractive. In this biased association, only some women are likely or more likely than others to be considered victims of sexual harassment. Recognizing SHW and effectively preventing it can be hindered when women who deviate from the prototypical image of the victim are involved. These women may not be believed and the harassment they suffer is not recognized, considered less harmful and trivi-

alized (Berdahl, 2007a, 2007b; Goh et al., 2022). It is important to understand how a victim may be perceived, as it may be even more difficult for them to report SHW if they are misrepresented (Fohring, 2018).

Diversity management can contribute to a more inclusive prevention strategy. The term «diversity management» refers to all those practices and strategies aimed at respecting the overall diversity within the organization, supporting different lifestyles and responding to the needs of everybody. According to Köllen (2021), Diversity Management should address the question of how the workplace can be made as inclusive as possible for this already existing diversity, e.g. through company policies and codes of conduct (e.g. anti-discrimination policies).

In this paper, we focus on women's narratives to examine whether there is a difference between women who report having experienced verbal and/or physical sexual harassment in their current or previous work environment (SHW<sub>PERYES</sub>) and those who have not (SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub>) when describing a prototypical victim.

## 1. Sexual harassment in workplace

Sexual harassment is a form of gender discrimination that MacKinnon (1979) defines as the unwanted imposition of sexual demands in the context of an unequal power relationship. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, see Chappell & Di Martino, 2006) defines SHW as unwanted, non-reciprocal, and imposed acts that can have serious consequences for the victim. SHW can include touching, stares, sexually suggestive language, attitudes, jokes referencing to a person's private life or sexual orientation, innuendos with sexual content, comments about physical appearance or dress, intrusive fixing of a person or parts of their body (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). In addition, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, see Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019) describes SHW as unwelcome sexual conduct and advances that negatively impact job performance and employment status, thereby creating a hostile work environment. Taken together, these definitions refer to a situation of unwelcome sexual conduct that denigrates and places the victim in a power imbalance.

In the Italian context, the first national survey on violence and sexual harassment, which includes both women and men aged 14-65 (15,764 women and 16,347 men), were published by ISTAT in 2018. It shows that 8,816,000 women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lifetime. Verbal harassment (24%) is the most frequently experienced harassment, followed by stalking (20.3%), harassment with physical contact without the victim's consent (15.9%), episodes of exhibitionism (15.3%) and finally 10.5% phenomena related to the sending of obscene messages with a sexual reference. According to this survey, the likelihood of a woman being sexually harassed at work increases with age: the risk is about half as great in the 15- to 24-year-old age group as in the 45- to 65-year-old

age group. Limited data are available on employability, and it is likely that respondents were harassed when they were engaged in a job other than the one they are engaged during the survey. This could explain the higher proportion of victims among women employed in salaried jobs (2.6%) and in the public sector (3.4%) compared to younger women, who are often in precarious/flexible jobs (Pagano & Deriu, 2018).

The available data suggests that victims rarely report their experiences. For example, 45% of women who took part in a survey of 42,000 women in 28 European countries stated that they had experienced one of the most serious forms of sexual harassment at least once in their adult lives; in a third of cases, the incident of harassment occurred in the professional context in which they were employed (FRA, 2014). In the same study, 35% of women who described themselves as victims did not speak to anyone about the incidents, either at work or in their private lives, 28% confided in a trusted person outside the workplace, 24% spoke to a family member, 14% to their partner and 4% reported the incident to the law enforcement authorities. Only 4% of victims informed the employer or a coordinator, and finally, less than 1% of victims asked a union representative for help or consulted a competent person such as a lawyer (FRA, 2014).

Victims may be reluctant to report SHW because they fear that they will not be believed or because they have other negative feelings such as guilt, shame, or fear of retaliation (see, e.g., Keplinger & Smith, 2022). Avoiding the harasser or developing coping strategies, such as downplaying the incidents, are the most common reactions to SHW.

Sometimes the victims themselves do not recognize SHW because they believe that the violence suffered has more to do with morality than with harming the person.

According to Schuster (2019) and Haskell and Randall (2019), the possibility of being recognized as a victim depends on the credibility of a person reporting a SHW episode. Credibility depends on many factors, including the prototypical image of the victim.

The prototypical image of the victim can also bias witnesses' perception of SHW. Witnesses can be an important protective factor because they may intervene and stop inappropriate behaviours (Salin & Noteaers, 2020). However, some individual factors influence their attitude when SHW takes place. For example, witnesses may not recognize the misconduct: some behaviours, such as sex jokes, may simply be interpreted as funny and harmless (Shupe, 2020).

However, SHW has consequences not only for the victims but also for the witnesses (Acquadro Maran et al., 2022). Victims and witnesses who perceive the phenomenon of victimization in a professional context tend to experience more stress, the desire to change job and turnover (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). The workplace is perceived as an unethical place where no one dares to speak their mind (Hershcovis et al., 2021).

Inclusion and respect for diversity are not only important from an ethical perspective: but also they improve the company's image (Tajima, 2021) and contribute to performances, because in an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their uniqueness, people are less stressed and work better. Paying attention to diversity and inclusion policies therefore offers many benefits (Bernstein et al., 2020), such as: a more representative and productive workforce, able to bring a variety of perspectives, backgrounds and ways of thinking to the organisation, which also has a positive impact on innovation and consequently on financial performance; a more effective and consequently better ability to attract and retain talent; a better employee experience with a positive impact on employee engagement and loyalty. It is worth remembering that commitment to these principles will lead to positive outcomes for both the organization and its employees in the medium to long term (Joo et al., 2022).

## **2. Prototype of victims of sexual harassment**

Rosch (1973) defines the term prototype as an element that is prominent in the formation of a category because it is the first stimulus associated with it, and thus the version that best fits that category. Vaughan and Hogg (2013) describe how schemas derive from categories and how both relate to the prototypical concept. A schema is a cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a type of stimulus or concept, including its attributes, and allows a situation, person, event, or place to be understood quickly based on a small amount of information. There are different types of schemas that influence the encoding of incoming information, such as person, role, self, or even script schemas. To apply a schema, people must properly categorize an instance. People think of categories as groups of examples and members that are not identical but belong to the same family. The prototype, then, arises within the category: a cognitive representation of the typical characteristics that define that category. Thus, when people perceive and evaluate others, they judge them according to the extent to which they fit the higher-level prototypical representation (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Drawing on the perspectives of prototypes (Rosch, 1973) and perceptions of discrimination (Visser, 2002), Kaiser and Major (2022) suggest that gender types can model perceptions of sexual harassment. Because the perception of sexual harassment requires to associate a potentially harassing behavior to a woman as a member of a gender group (Goh et al., 2022), the extent to which a woman resembles the prototype or mental representation may hinder or facilitate the perception of being a likely victim of sexual harassment. In the search conducted by Bandt-Law (2021) on the internet and on the pages of *The New York Times*, the image of a female victim of sexual harassment is more often described as young, Caucasian, traditionally female and physically attractive.

Even if prototypical images are shaped by the media, the subjective determinants are known: perceptions are subjective and are shaped by motivations, cognitive structures and life experience (Kaiser & Major, 2006), leading to ambiguity in whether a particular event is perceived (or not), as SHW. This ambiguity can affect victims, witnesses and the organization as a whole, blurring the boundaries of the phenomenon and making it difficult to manage (Brunner & Dever, 2014): many victims are not believed because they do not fit the prototype, and organizations fail to recognize SHW incidents and implement strategies to protect victims and the workplace (Gómez-González et al., 2023).

The aim of this study is to investigate the prototypical image of victims in female employees, both in SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> and SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub>. The hypothesis, consistently with Kaiser and Major (2006)'s work, is that the experience of SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> may influence the description of the prototypical victim. Different experiences with SHW can lead to different descriptions. In particular, SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> may be less inclined to describe victims in prototypical terms, while SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> might be more attached to that prototypical image.

In order to understand what strategies could be useful in cases of SHW, we also asked them what to do in case of victimization and what preventive measures could be taken to protect victims. This is because there may be a «prototype paradox» in the organization in relation to sexual harassment, where the people who feel most uncomfortable with certain behaviors are not the people they imagine and react to as the object of sexual harassment. It must be noted that, as the results of Bandt-Law's (2023) studies have shown

when a less (e.g., more feminine) vs. more (e.g., more masculine) gender prototypical woman was sexually harassed, the incident was less likely to be labeled as such and her claim was perceived as less credible. Additionally, the harassment was thought to cause her less harm and her harasser was given a more lenient punishment (pp. 3-4).

Therefore, prevention can be more effective, when more scenarios with fewer prototypes of victims are presents (Goh et al., 2022).

In this case, our hypothesis is that intervention is needed in both samples (SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> and SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub>), with suggestions for reporting episodes and interventions to protect the victims and the whole context.

### **3. Method**

The study was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines for Research on Violence Against Women published by the World Health Organization (2001) and following the Italian guidelines cited in the Code of the Italian Psychological Association (CNOP, 2023). The study took place from December 2022 to March 2023. All participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary,

and that no compensation was provided. Interviews were recorded, subject to the written consent of the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of the collected material – to be used exclusively for educational and research purposes – as well as the possibility to terminate the interview at any time were guaranteed. Participants were explicitly given the option not to answer if they felt uncomfortable with the question and were given instructions to do so. They were also informed that the researcher was available to them at any time should they have further doubts or concerns. Interviews were later transcribed verbatim into a Word document.

#### **4. Participants**

The sample consists of 24 women from different regions of Italy, including 11 SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> and 13 SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> (age 22-56,  $M = 31$ ).

The women included in this study were represented by age and employment sector (e.g. private sector employees, public sector employees), with sensitive data (name, surname) omitted. The sample size was determined to achieve a statistical power of at least 0.80 (Cohen, 1992) and was then based on the construction of a matrix in which two design variables were crossed:

- a) Type of organization (public or private);
- b) Age (1. 18-30 years; 2. 31-45 years; 3. over 45 years).

For each cross resulting from the multiplication of the  $2 \times 3$  (= 6) cells of the designed sampling matrix, four workers were recruited, so that the total number of eligible individuals was 24. Once this number was reached, recruitment was stopped: according to Richards and Morse (2009), adding new participants does not provide additional information (namely saturation or theoretical redundancy). The first question was whether or not they felt they had been a victim of verbal and/or physical sexual harassment during their work experience. A snowball system was used as a recruitment method: the first respondent was asked to indicate another person (woman, employee) according to research needs (age group, workplace). Information about respondents and victims of sexual harassment is kept to a minimum to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants.

#### **5. Procedure**

Two different interview procedures were designed (one for SHW<sub>PERYES</sub>, one for SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub>) and in both cases we conducted a semi-structured interview lasting between 20 and 40 minutes. We wanted to encourage a communicative exchange characterized by flexibility in order to give the interviewees the opportunity to better explain certain points that emerged during the interview. This method makes it possible to fully capture the speaker's point of view without predetermining their



answers. Qualitative interviews allow for a deeper exploration of themes and a better elaboration of the meaning participants attach to the stories they tell (Babbie, 2020).

Participants were asked to describe the episode freely, as if they were telling it to a familiar person. Information was asked about age, work and the role played in the organizational context.

Questions addressed to SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> were:

- «Would you like to talk about an episode of SHW?»
- «Were you alone or were there other people present during these episodes? (for example, a colleague, a supervisor...))»
- «What are your feelings about that?»
- «Did you report the episodes?»
- «Have you changed any habits as a result?»
- «What do you recommend to prevent sexual harassment and protect victims?»
- «Now let's imagine a female victim of sexual harassment. How would you describe her? By what physical and/or behavioural characteristics would you recognise her?»

The questions addressed to SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> were:

- «Have you ever witnessed sexual harassment in your workplace?»
- If yes: «Did you do anything about it?»
- «What would you do if you were the victim of sexual harassment in your workplace?»
- «What would you recommend to prevent sexual harassment and protect victims?»
- «Now let's imagine a female victim of sexual harassment. How would you describe her? By what physical and/or behavioural characteristics would you recognise her?»

Interviews took place both in person and by telephone.

## **6. Data analysis**

The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed using Alceste 6.0 software (Reinert, 1986, 1998). Alceste 6.0 is a software for textual and statistical analysis that is suitable for the analysis of large amounts of qualitative data, such as written texts or verbalised conversations. The software performs a number of operations on the text, creating a word frequency matrix, assigning semantic categories to words, analysing groups of words and editing graphs and tables to display the results. Alceste processes the text data according to a descending hierarchical classification (DHC). The text is first divided into elementary context units (EUA) and then into homogeneous classes. Homogeneity is based on the idea that a particular



topic is expressed through similar ideas and concepts and a similar lexicon. In this way, the software makes it possible to isolate and separate classes within specific populations: Each class is formed on the basis of the co-occurrence of forms and elementary contextual units (Matteucci & Tomasetto, 2002). Alceste proposes an analysis of the internal structure of the corpus, which is not determined by the post-coding grids chosen by the researcher, but results from the distribution of words used by the participants to talk about a given topic (Tomasetto & Selleri, 2004). The software recognizes the most homogeneous classes in terms of content, which therefore have a different lexical-semantic universe from the others. The use of certain words seems to convey the conceptual context of the topic to which they belong, as well as the situation in which they are pronounced. Thus, if a particular word is used frequently, it means that the underlying argument acquires a particular thematic significance. In contrast, the fact that a particular word is used little may mean that it is not relevant to the topic or even that the speaker is not predisposed to that word.

The software uses symbols to indicate the type of root word. For example, the + symbol indicates the identification of the ending and different forms with the same root. An example is *harass+*, which can mean *harasser*, *harassment*. The first class formed will be the most homogeneous in content, i.e., the one whose lexical universe (a specific vocabulary that is used and to which the speaker attributes relevant meaning) appears to be different from that of the other classes. The software determines a specific vocabulary for each class. This step allows the researcher to identify the lexical worlds of the text, i.e., the «familiar places» (conventional topics, *topoi*) of the speech (Reinert, 1998). The software also makes it possible to highlight the recurring segments, i.e. the associations of the most frequent words in a class and in the classes associated with the selected variables. These are called illustrative variables and contain additional information about the text corpus that allows the researcher to identify the specific characteristics that define individuals who share the same semantic universe.

In a second phase, the software also performs a test of  $\chi^2$ , i.e. the association between the words that make up the classes to determine the specific vocabulary of each class. This procedure allows you to identify all the words that occur frequently in each class and the words that occur only once instead (the so-called *hapax*). In addition, the software can analyze the classification of the class tree (dendogram) and insert the illustrative variable that determines the anchoring with the analyzed text. These variables make it possible to identify the specific characteristics of the semantic universe of individuals and contain further information about the text. The influence of the interaction with the interviewer is the main limitation of the procedure: the interviewer's questions are not analyzed, but the lexicon used is often picked up by the interviewee and can influence the lexical relations between the different discursive domains (Tomasetto & Selleri, 2004).

## 7. Results

The texts were divided into two subtexts: SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> and SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> responses.

### 7.1. Text analysis of SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> responses

This corpus consists of 5,200 occurrences, 1,460 reduced forms (mean frequency = 4 per form) and 909 hapax, i.e. words that are used only once. Based on the correspondences between forms and elementary context units (130), the corpus was divided into five classes using a hierarchically descending classification, the dendrogram of which is shown in Figure 1. 69% of the text units were classified (relevance level: high) and 31% were rejected in the analysis. The classified units are divided into 5 classes. As shown in Figure 1, each class is numbered and coloured according to the order in which they appear in the classification. Class 1 is the most specific: it is the first to be extracted from the classification tree and its vocabulary is the most homogeneous with 25.84% of the text units. This is followed by class 2, which accounts for 23.60% of the classified text units. Class 3 accounts for 13.48% of the classified text units, class 4 for 13.48% of the classified text units and finally class 5 for 23.60% of the classified text units. A detailed reading of the software output clarifies the guidelines of the analyzed corpus.

For each class, the first five words that characterize the class are identified in order of chi-squared (Table 1) with the illustrative variables.

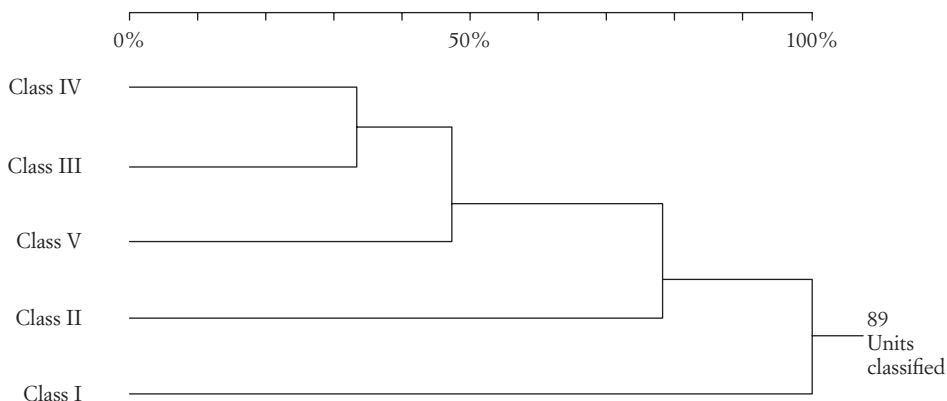
Class 1 contains the participants' descriptions of what should be done to prevent SHW. The words used to describe prevention refer to the responsibility attributed to the organization, with emphasis on the conditional «could be useful». Here below, a sentence from an interview:

I think that training on this topic can be useful in my company, because if you talk about it openly, even if it should not be absolutely normal, female victims might not be afraid to report it.

Class II refers to the prototypical characteristics of the victims. It is interesting to note that beauty does not appear to be a discriminatory element. Both physical and verbal harassment are attributed to men's interest, regardless of the woman's beauty. Here is an example of a sentence from the interviews:

If I had to think of a possible victim of sexual harassment, I would think of myself. I am a woman, and I feel normal, so she could be a normal woman... It's not because of clothing or attitude that certain incidents occur, so I do not feel like I have to categorise any category of women as more or less likely to be victims of certain acts of violence.

**Figure 1**  
Percentage of textual units classified



**Table 1**  
Words characterizing the Classes I-V

Class I	$\chi^2$	Class II	$\chi^2$	Class III	$\chi^2$	Class IV	$\chi^2$	Class V	$\chi^2$
Train+	31	Physic+	32	Report+	21	Day	27	Other+	16
Use+	29	Verbal	21	Friend	20	Approach+	24	Disinterest	14
Could	25	Men	17	Colleague+	20	Begin	22	Look+ for	14
Organiz+	24	Beaut+	17	Apprec+	16	Manager	14	Protection	10
Prevent+	24	Caract+	17	Fear	16	Talk+	14	Threat	9
*31-45		*over 45		*over 45		*private_org		*private_org	
*public_org		*private_org				*public_org		*18-30	

Classes III, IV, and V refer to the narratives of the victims about the episodes. In particular, the class III specifically refers to the description of the reaction to the episode. Here is an example sentence:

I told this story to at least three or four friends, but they all told me it was not worth reporting, so I did not. Since I had no proof, I did not feel it was necessary to report it. Of course, if he had done something physical to me, I would have reported him.

In the class IV we find the words that describe how SHW began. Here is a sentence from the interview:

One day we were at the slaughterhouse with the doctor and three other colleagues to examine some carcasses. The veterinarian left us very free while we were there, so he had no way of knowing what was going on. When this colleague and I were alone and I was explaining to him some things I had noticed about the carcass. I felt an urgent need to stop, because he stared at me without listening, whereupon he told me I was a beautiful girl. I did not say anything.

Class V describes the people who were involved in the incidents and who could have intervened. Here is an example of a sentence:

What bothered me the most was that the other colleagues always looked the other way, even though I asked them for help by emphasizing the words that were reported to me, even in front of them. The only answers I got were to leave him alone and not to answer him in any way.

## 7.2. Text analysis of SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> responses

The corpus consists of 4,233 occurrences, 1,086 reduced forms (mean frequency = 4 per form) and 626 hapax, i.e. words that are used only once. Based on the coincidences between forms and elementary context units (115) and using a hierarchically descending classification, the corpus was divided into five classes, the dendrogram of which is shown in Figure 1. 82% of the text units in the corpus were classified (relevance level: very high) and 18% were discarded. The classified units are divided into 6 classes. Each class is numbered and coloured according to the order of occurrence in the classification (see Figure 2).

Class I is the most specific and is the first to be extracted from the classification tree. Its vocabulary is the most homogeneous and accounts for 28.72% of the classified text units. Then there is class 2, which accounts for 13.83% of the classified text units. This is followed by class 3 with 14.89% of the classified text units, then class 5 with 17.02% of the classified text units and class 6 with 10.65% of the classified text units.

For each class, the first five words that characterize the class are identified in order of chi-squared (Table 2) with the illustrative variables.

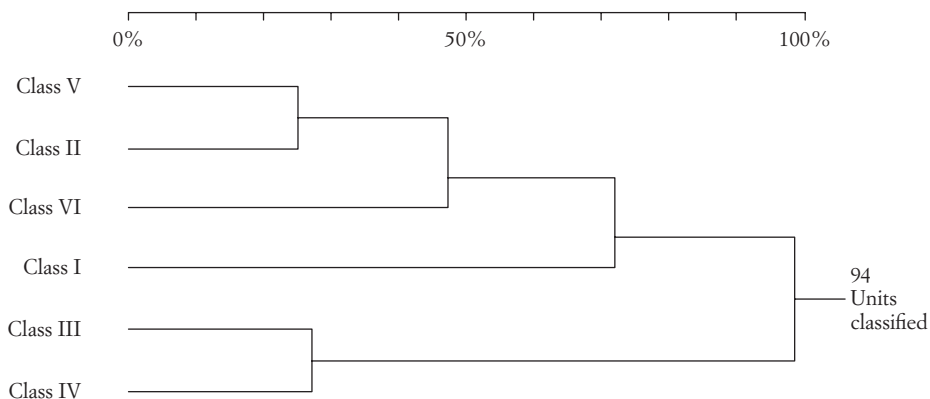
Class I refers to why people have never experienced sexual harassment. In some cases, people have witnessed SHW episodes against other colleagues, in others they have not. Here there are two examples of sentences from the interviews:

I have witnessed scenes where the employer has made inappropriate sexual jokes to both a colleague and patients.

So far, I have never been sexually harassed or observed in my work environment because the place where I work now is quite familiar, almost like a family; therefore, anything that does not work is immediately clarified from all sides.

Classes II, V and VI refer to answers as to whether the woman was a victim or witness of an episode of SHW. Class II refers to descriptions of what people would do if they themselves were victims of SHW. Interestingly, the illustrative variable here refers to participants who work in the private sector. A possible fear response involving the potential loss of employment is revealed:

**Figure 2**  
*Percentage of textual units classified*



If I were the victim of sexual harassment by colleagues, I do not know how I would react. I think it depends on the type of harassment, whether verbal or physical, but also on the type of job. If it's a seasonal job, I would leave, but if it's an important job for my career, I might keep my mouth shut and move on.

Class V describes possible reactions to physical SHW that are perceived as more severe than psychological and emotional reactions. In this case, there appears to be a stronger reaction in favour of intervention:

If I were a victim, I honestly do not know how I would behave. I certainly would not report it immediately, but I would talk to my husband first. I would then report it if it was something physical, but if it was just jokes or comments, I probably would not report it. If it was the employer who engaged in such behaviour, I sincerely believe that there are many workplaces; therefore, after such a serious incident, I would be willing to leave my current job without issue. I would possibly leave first and then report it to press or mass media if he had done something physical to me.

Class VI contains words that are mainly used by people who work in a public organization. In this case, respondents believe that the answer depends on the workplace: in private organizations, it is perceived to be more difficult to complain because of the risk of retaliation. Here is an example sentence:

As for reporting, I would say that it depends on how serious the incidents are. I would not differentiate between comments and physical acts, because there are comments that affect a person's behavior and therefore can be more serious or severe than physical harassment. Of course, I would report harassment or physical contact because I would feel humiliated. If it was the employer doing this, I would act according to my position. If I were in an insecure position, I would have more difficulty reporting it, but I would have the strength to do so.

**Table 2**  
*Words characterizing the Classes I-IV*

Class I	$\chi^2$	Class II	$\chi^2$	Class III	$\chi^2$	Class IV	$\chi^2$	Class V	$\chi^2$	Class IV	$\chi^2$
Observ+	33	Los+	27	Use+	65	Imagine	37	Report+	42	Depend+	18
Work+	28	Fear	23	Organiz+	55	Woman	32	Suggest+	33	No+	12
Context	26	Work	17	Prevent+	53	Beaut+	24	Physical	21	Provoc+	12
Other	18	Difficult+	16	Suggest+	36	Know+	7	Behav+	20	Privat+	10
Colleague+	17	Employer	10	Norm+	24	High+	6	Episod+	15	Normal	10
*public_org		*private_org *over 45		*private_org *over 45				*18-30 *private_org		*over 45 *public_org	

If I were in a much more solid position, I would report the incident without any problems and would not be afraid of losing my job.

In class III, there are words that describe what could be done in terms of prevention. In the case of SHW victims, they refer to what companies can do and what behaviors are appropriate:

To prevent harassment and protect the victims, I would definitely recommend that a company work intensively on codes of conduct or rules of behavior. I would make this type of prevention a core value of the working environment. I would also definitely implement programs to raise awareness, prevention or even more information not only in the workplace but also in the school environment. Women in particular basically do not know what harassment is: maybe SHW happens, but the victim is not aware that what they are suffering from is part of harassment in general. I definitely recommend education and prevention plans. Company training on sexual harassment is definitely useful, but I think above all there is a fundamental problem of misinformation. Maybe a woman thinks that a comment is ironic when actually it hurts and therefore is not ironic. I would not just talk about women, but extend the address a little to men, because even if it mainly affects women, it can no longer be seen as a problem that only affects the female sphere.

Class IV contains the descriptions of the prototypical victims. It is interesting to note that some of the words are the same as those used by participants who have undergone SHW, but with a different meaning. For example, the word beauty in this group of participants is an element that can determine the origin of the incident of harassment:

I do not blame the woman, but beautiful women are certainly subject to more harassment, even if they are not the cause. A woman who I think is mocked more is a beautiful woman, tall and with beautiful forms. The intelligence or character of this woman is secondary.

## **8. Discussion**

Sexual harassment is a pervasive and pressing problem with a variety of detrimental consequences, including lower engagement and performance in the workplace, poorer mental and physical health outcomes, and increased economic instability (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1993; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to identify the factors that may influence the perception and judgement of victims. If colleagues, supervisors, friends, and relatives associate victims of sexual harassment with prototypical women, SHW may go undetected. Women may not be believed and the harassment may not be seen as harmful if the victims deviate from the prototypical image. If the perception of sexual harassment depends on victims conforming to a narrow image of women, many women will have difficulty accessing the legal protections of civil rights. Understanding the misconceptions of sexual



harassment victims is crucial in identifying the barriers to accessing legal rights and finding successful solutions for all women experiencing sexual harassment. Furthermore, cases of sexual harassment are underreported by both victims and others in society, which can result in victims continuing to face disbelief, rejection, and barriers to justice (Goh et al., 2022; Hart, 2019).

The goal of this exploratory work was to provide organizations and communities with some elements for planning good diversity training to prevent harassment and violence in the workplace. We collected the voices SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> and SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub>, and we asked the question of who is the prototypical victim and how to prevent the phenomenon. Overall, the data indicate a significant difference between SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> and SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> participants. This difference can be seen in the different approach to the phenomenon. While SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> participants are more cautious when describing the prototypical characteristics of victims and strategies for coping with an episode, SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> show more differentiated boundaries. For example, SHW<sub>PERNOT</sub> indicate that they would not be sure how to handle the incident, especially if it was not physical harassment. There seems to be a perception that SHW can be easily misunderstood, so the opinion of another person (colleague, relative, friend...) is needed to understand whether the incident should be considered SHW or not. It also shows that there is a difference in the classification of words reporting physical SHW as opposed to non-physical ones, with physical SHW having a higher severity level. These data are very interesting in light of the proposal by Gibbons et al. (2013): episodes of non-physical SHW may have similar consequences as physical SHW. Indeed, the persistence of behaviours determines an organisational climate in which the victim experiences ongoing violence.

A general feeling of discouragement and powerlessness seems to be spreading among SHW<sub>PERYES</sub> participants. Participants attribute the first form of prevention to an external element (the organization) without employing the individual strategies that constitute the first form of defence. Another element that emerges is the powerlessness that results from trying to confront others. For the victim, it means not realizing what has happened, not receiving support from others (even if colleagues witness the incident) and the possibility of the same incidents happening to others. In this way, the harassment is only recognized when the victim leaves the workplace. It is very interesting to note that for SHW<sub>PERYES</sub>, the description of the prototypical characteristics of the victim points to the normality of the person in physical terms and attributes the victimization to characteristics that all women share.

It is also interesting that some words are missing. For example, the word school, a frequently used term, does not appear in the text. Some of the researchers who analyzed the texts had expected this word to be present. It is in the first place of education (emotive, affective, empathic...) in relation to the others, but it does not appear among the words that characterize the interviewees' language.

We did not ask a specific question about what can be done at the level of communities, societies, organizations and institutions, but the questions were not binding, and the discourse could move in different areas. It should be noted that in Italian schools the issue of bullying is addressed, but not the specific issue of SHW. The SHW phenomenon is not always comparable to bullying; there are similarities (the repetitiveness of the episodes) but also many differences. For example, unlike bullying, SHW does not require the presence of other people; it does not serve to support a group of peers (Jones, 2006). Therefore, there is a risk that this issue is not addressed and does not help people who are victims of bullying to recognize the first episodes. National campaigns on victimization also run the risk of focusing on certain characteristics (e.g. physical violence) and not distinguishing between non-physical violence. Schools could adopt this type of education to prevent the phenomenon from the beginning and teach appropriate defensive strategies (individually and collectively). This would also allow emphasizing the fundamental role of witnesses, whose behavior can interrupt episodes of SHW (McMahon et al., 2023). Future research could include questions about possible prevention strategies that could involve communities, societies, organizations, and institutions.

## **9. Practical implications**

SHW can be prevented, and the data from this study lead to some considerations. Ziano and Polman (2022) suggest that organizations should become more aware of the prototypes of victims of sexual harassment in the workplace to prevent and recognize it. Furthermore, their studies show that experience is not a factor that protects against prototyping. Some solutions could be to provide employees with a wide range of information, research and studies so that they take training more seriously in order to make fair judgments in the future. For example, the authors suggest changing the hiring methods in the organisation to diversify the work group to reduce the prototype effect. Kaiser and colleagues (2006) note that biases towards all those women who do not conform to prototypes not only hinders attempts to stop sexual harassment, but also makes it more difficult to access justice to create fairer workplaces that discourage certain behaviours.

They add that it is not enough to include the notion of prototype in workplace training, but that it is crucial to broaden the narrow prototype of women to better encompass the many ways in which women act out their gender and the wide variety of groups that intersect with the category of «women». Stenmark and colleagues (2022) advise a better understanding of the ways in which people perceive sexual harassment and violent behaviour. Knowing the characteristics of witnesses and the associations they have with greater or lesser sensitivity in viewing such behaviours as potentially dangerous may be useful in identifying more details that can be addressed in training and education efforts.

It is important to focus not only on the differences in sensitivity between men and women, but also between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ workers: Stenmark and colleagues' (2022) findings suggest that heterosexual men may be more «insensitive» when the victims of SHW are individuals of the same gender but different sexual orientation. In this scenario, the framework for diversity management and an inclusive organizational culture can be crucial. Diversity management is a theoretical and practical approach to the management of human resources in organizations. It aims to identify and create conditions that foster an inclusive work environment (Pless & Maak, 2004), i.e. to promote the different dispositions, experiences, and identities of employees and to value them for the achievement of the organization's goals. In this sense, diversity management means ensuring that every person working in an organization can reach their potential, both in public administration (Ricucci, 2021) and in private companies (Syed & Ozbilgin, 2019). However, it is important to point out that managing diversity is more than just recognizing differences between people. It is about recognizing the value of differences, combating discrimination, and promoting inclusion. Effective managers recognize that certain skills are required to create a successful, diverse workforce. First, managers need to understand discrimination and its consequences. Second, managers must recognize their own cultural biases and prejudices (Van Knippenberg et al., 2020). Diversity is not about differences between groups, but about differences between individuals. Each individual is unique and does not stand for a particular group (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). Furthermore, according to Mousa and colleagues (2020), managing diversity is a comprehensive process of creating a work environment characterized by inclusion, where different perceptions of the same behavior (e.g., due to cultural and/or personal values) must be accommodated. Organizational training could be useful to reflect personal biases and consider others' perceptions of the same behavior. Therefore, organizations need to develop, implement, and maintain ongoing training, as longitudinal training (e.g., one training per year) produces changes in perceptions of SHW-related behaviors (Robotham & Cortina, 2021). Another important prerequisite for managing diversity is creating a safe place for employees to communicate (Hunt et al., 2010). Social gatherings and business meetings where each member is required to listen and has the opportunity to speak are good ways to create dialogs. Managers should implement policies such as mentoring programs to provide employees with access to information and opportunities. In addition, employees should receive constructive and critical feedback so that they can learn from misunderstandings and perceived misconduct related to SHW (Chamberlain et al., 2008).

## **10. Limits of the study**

This investigation inevitably has limitations. First, we did not take into account the contextual and organizational variables that distinguish the context in which

participants work; indeed, each occupation poses different risks, and it might be interesting to investigate whether precarious contracts or insecure work contexts are associated with a greater number of incidents of sexual harassment. Another limitation is the sample size: as in-depth data collection methods are used in qualitative research, it is possible that the sample of participants is relatively small and therefore not representative of the whole population. Other socio-demographic variables were not taken into account. For example, the role within the organization. A higher role may lead to protection from certain types of sexual harassment, less from physical harassment, and more from rumours and gossip. In addition, we did not ask about sexual orientation, because again, a certain type of orientation may serve to engage in SHW. In addition, we have not considered male workers. A starting point for future research is also to study the phenomenon of sexual harassment in the workplace by men, situations in which the harasser is a woman (colleague or supervisor), or situations in which false or exaggerated accusations occur. Future studies could examine the phenomenon using more detailed sociodemographic information, including men and varying sexual orientation in the sample.

## **11. Conclusion**

Diversity management could be a powerful asset within the organization to express new and enriching ideas, practices, norms and values. Respecting individual differences, including perceptions of SHW phenomena, benefits the workplace by creating a healthy perception of the workplace and increasing work productivity. Diversity management therefore benefits all workers who perceive the workplace as inclusive and safe, where everyone has access to opportunities and challenges. Companies can create an organizational culture where the values and norms are focused on inclusion and safety by implementing training that focuses on diversity and problem solving.

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### **Sexual harassment in in workplace: A challenge in diversity management**

The aim of this paper is to collect the voices of women who report experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace and those who have not. Twenty-four participants were asked to describe a profile of the prototypical victim and indicate how the phenomenon can be prevented. Overall, the survey shows a significant difference in the way the two groups portray the phenomenon. While employees who state that they have experienced sexual harassment at work are more cautious when describing the prototypical characteristics of victims as well as strategies for coping with an incident, the other employees delimit the phenomenon in a more differentiated way. They state that they are not sure how to deal with the incident, especially if it is not physical harassment. There seems to be a perception that sexual harassment in the workplace is a misunderstanding, so the opinion of another person (colleague, relative, friend...) is needed to understand whether or not the incident should be considered sexual harassment in the workplace.

*Keywords:* sexual harassment, prototype, workplace, prevention.

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