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An exploratory study of sexual harassment: Experiences of Polish early-career professionals

Zuzanna Banaszek

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Carlos Cabral Cardoso

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Abstract

Even with the thousand years of evolution behind, humankind could not exterminate the willingness to prey on some particular representatives of our species. With sexual harassment (SH) being covered topic by many researchers, journalists and even scriptwriters, few studies have covered Poland especially with the focus on only the young. The present research is one of the first attempts to check whether SH is present among early career professionals. For that, the current study focuses on Polish university students. A survey will target early-career professionals from Poland with an early job experience who have witnessed or were a victim of sexual harassment during their short-time job trial.

According to preliminary findings, sexual harassment appears to be a widespread phenomenon even among early-career professionals in Poland. More than 40% of respondents reported being harassed, and almost 50% noted having witnessed harassment or inappropriate behaviour by a colleague. A statistically significant difference occurred between the genders: women are more likely than men to have experienced or witnessed an incident of harassment. The presence of policies does not seem to reduce the prevalence of this behaviour, which indicates that structural changes alone cannot help where the culture is unsupportive. The majority of those affected and witnesses chose not to report the incident, indicating a culture of silence. These findings emphasize the need for far more effective organizational remedies while also highlighting the need for awareness campaigns for ultimate prevention and support.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, early-career professionals, victims and witnesses of sexual harassment

Resumo

Mesmo com milhares de anos de evolução, a humanidade não conseguiu extinguir a vontade de atacar alguns representantes particulares da nossa espécie. Sendo o assédio sexual (AS) um tema abordado por muitos investigadores, jornalistas e até guionistas, poucos estudos se debruçaram sobre esta realidade em alguns países, como a Polónia, especialmente no que se refere apenas aos jovens. O presente estudo é uma das primeiras tentativas de verificar se o assédio sexual está presente entre os profissionais em início de carreira e, em caso afirmativo, como experienciam ou testemunham o assédio sexual e os efeitos produzidos nos participantes. Para o efeito, o presente estudo reporta os resultados de uma investigação baseada num inquérito, realizada na Polónia, entre estudantes com uma experiência profissional precoce que tenham testemunhado ou sido vítimas de assédio sexual durante o seu curto período de experiência profissional.

Os resultados deste estudo mostram que o assédio sexual parece ser um fenômeno generalizado, mesmo entre profissionais em início de carreira, na Polônia. Mais de 40% dos respondentes indicaram terem sido assediados, e quase 50% observaram comportamentos inadequados ou assédio por parte de um colega. Uma diferença estatisticamente significativa ocorreu entre os géneros: as mulheres são mais propensas do que os homens a terem experimentado, ou testemunhado, um incidente de assédio. A presença de políticas não parece reduzir a prevalência desse comportamento, o que indica que mudanças estruturais não conseguem, por si sós, alterar comportamentos e culturas. A maioria dos afetados e testemunhas optou por não relatar o incidente, indicando uma cultura de silêncio. Estes resultados enfatizam a necessidade de soluções organizacionais muito mais eficazes, e de campanhas de conscientização para a prevenção e apoio às vítimas.

Palavras-chave: Assédio sexual, profissionais em início de carreira, vítimas e testemunhas de assédio sexual

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1. Introduction

From the early beginning of human appearance, somewhere among the urge to survive and necessity to evolve, the norm of working was born into the reality of habit. And just as a thousand years ago, we keep on working to survive the struggles of everyday life. However, even though people started working inside fancy skyscrapers or other cozy insights where coffee fills up their veins and with fruity Thursdays distracting their minds, no matter how hard they try, there is still this prehistoric lust that can transform into many kinds of dangerous behaviour.

We live in a world where approximately 45% of our life is dedicated to work. Children receive basic education in primary school. Learn about biology, history and basics of sciences, move to high school where that knowledge is deepened. After all that trouble, young people choose the faculty they want to study, spend 5 years of their lives, and then the real work begins. The work they have been studying their lives to go to. They have learned about teamwork, they are ready to cooperate and fully dedicate themselves to tasks that are ahead of them. Yet, suddenly between all the assignments, the atmosphere changes. There is a shift in timing of getting a coffee, there is a quicker and more nervous look that is scanning the workplace just before the entrance. There is a quiet voice that every day assures you that today is going to be different.

Sexual harassment is something everybody would like to avoid in the work environment. It goes under many disguises, has many different types and levels of intensity. Everybody agrees upon the statement that it is a poor, bad and unprofessional behaviour. Yet, it still exists. It can hide as a mold in the apartment where no one can see it. Or thrive somewhere in the background just in the corner of our vision, when people can feel that something is wrong, yet still put a blind eye on it, since it does not affect them personally. And finally it can also eat you alive like cancer. Penetrate you to the core, take control of every action and move you make, and make you feel weaker and insignificant. It makes you smaller in your own body. Vulnerable to attacks.

Young people are the fresh blood in every work environment. They are full of new ideas, eager to learn and excited with new challenges. The objective of this dissertation is to explore whether these early-career professionals have already experienced or were a witness of sexual harassment, during their relatively short working probation.

While extensive research has been carried out by many researchers all around the world, we still lack a full comprehension of to what extent this rotten behaviour spreads. Clearly it exists. Hides under jokes and "just being friendly" excuses. Specifically, what remains unclear is: does it capture its victims even at the very beginning of their journey?

To address this call, this dissertation will examine only young career professionals between 19 and 26 years old. Given the importance of understanding the nature of SH, this research will additionally include the descriptions of other types of harassment in order to fully understand and differentiate the differences between them. Data were collected through a survey, and questionnaire was made available to potential respondents using snowball method.

The main contributions of this study are threefold. Firstly, it provides empirical evidence of relevance of sexual harassment among early career professionals. Secondly it examines experiences of the mentioned group. Finally, it contributes to a better understanding of sexual harassment and these findings will also have practical implications for future employers and employees that maybe in future might find a practical and actually functioning prevention system that helps exterminate SH in workplaces.

The remaining chapters include the review of the literature and describe the current perspective of the problem, followed by a description of the methodology used and a detailed analysis and discussion of the data.

2. Literature review

This chapter is dedicated to exploring the concept of sexual harassment, including the definitions, types and key features that are already described and identified in the literature. Describing profoundly the wider issue of sexual harassment is used to frame this study and the following chapters where the collected data is presented and analysed.

2.1. Defining sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a form of harassment that includes a sexual dimension, involving the use of implicit or explicit sexual overtones (Armitage, 2022). There are many different forms or types of how harassment can occur: verbal or non-verbal, including physical and digital violations. It is an act that bursts or acts against the comfort of personal space, physique or even law and principals (Stephan, Uhlaner, and Stride, 2015). This type of harassment can occur in every social setting such as school, workplace, home, religious institution, public spaces or public transport. Victims and harassers are not determined by any gender, religion or age. Sexual harassment can affect anybody and happen to anyone and since Mackinnon's (1979) "Sexual Harassment of Working Women" all-round scientists have considered sexual harassment as a huge stressor that can affect mental and physical health (Bernard, Bouck, and Young, 2000).

Nowadays sexual harassment is forbidden by law in most countries. However, in most cases it does not include teasing, informal comments and minor incidents since it is not determined as violence, according to the general Civility Code. It is considered unacceptable behaviour in most workplaces especially when it is perceived by the victim as hostile behaviour (Cortina, 2021). Creating a hostile work environment where employees quit or sue the harasser is usually a situation that the company wants to avoid. Therefore, many businesses key goals nowadays are to prevent sexual harassment and defend the employees from it.(Chamberlain, Crowley, Tope and Hodson, 2008).

2.1.1 Key forms of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment may occur during a variety of different circumstances. The victim can identify with any gender and may have any kind of relationship with the harasser (Abbey, 1987). The harasser himself, or herself can be a direct manager/person in charge, indirect

supervisor, colleague, teacher, coworker, peer, absolute stranger or even someone from a close circle like family. Harassment can happen with or without witnesses. Furthermore, the predators may be also unaware of the fact that their actions are being perceived by the victims as sexual harassment. Similarly at that moment, the targeted person may also be not fully aware or able to understand what is happening. Furthermore, in order to qualify an "incident" as a sexual harassment there is no need for it to happen repeatedly. It may be a one-time occurrence whether it arises from a reasonable or unreasonable misunderstanding by the perpetrator or/and the victim.

The most common forms of sexual harassment, according to Dansky (1997):

- Making specified or implied requests for sexual favours to advance in one's career or to obtain a job;
- Sexual assaults that are physical acts;
- Request or demand for sexual favours;
- Sexually suggestive verbal abuse, such as jokes about sexual behaviour or sexual orientation;
- Unwanted sexual advices;
- Unwilling physical contact that include:
  - Touch,
  - Unwanted sexual approaches.
- Talking about sexual relationships, fantasies, or stories at work or at school or other venues;
- Feeling pressured to have sexual relation with somebody;
- Sending unwanted sex explicit mails, messages, or images;
- Sexually suggestive verbal abuse, like a joke about sexual behaviour or orientation;
- Feeling pressure to have sexual relation with somebody;
- Exhibiting through sexual acts such as exposing oneself or engaging in sexual activities;
- Unwanted e-mails, messages, or pictures that have sexual explicitness.

2.1.2 Differences between harassment, sexual harassment and sexual assault

Sexual harassment is a broad concept that includes many different types of unwelcome verbal, physical, written and digital attention (MacDonald, 2012). Sexual assault

refers to behaviour often physical that happens without consent of the victim. In most of the cases sexual assault is a criminal act whereas sexual harassment violates civil law and might not be a criminal act. Sexual assault usually include:

- Rape, usually determined as penetration of the victims' body;
- Attempting to rape;
- Forcing the victim to perform sexual acts, including oral sex and penetration of the harasser's body;
- Unwanted sexual touching;
- Unwanted fondling.

Whereas harassment and mobbing in order to be qualified as such, needs to happen repeatedly sexual harassment may be one-time event. A wide range of behaviours might contribute to creating a toxic workplace that leads to the existence of work harassment. It also can form in a variety of ways that includes physical or mental abuse, discrimination, bias and so on. Some most common forms of harassment:

- Abusive supervision – a situation where the authority creates a hostile environment for the employee through making demands that are impossible or are unreasonable for the employee to complete. They can put an employee in the situation where he will be underestimated or insulted about his, or her competences;
- Mental or psychological harassment – all comments and actions that may lead to mental health problems or cause a physiological damage to the employee,
- Personal prejudice – it can be held on a personal level or even by the company. Appearance of it can be determined by various factors and can occur during circumstances like:
  - individual discrimination against employee caused by a particular bias;
  - providing or restricting some benefits to one employee due to personal reasons;
  - situation of retaliation when some of a past experience or bad feelings resonates between two employees;
- Stereotyping – marginalizing some group with common features in the work environment usually based on their gender, sex or age;
- Cyberbullying – use of application or platform accessible in a workplace in order to post or write derogatory content about another employee;

- Religious bias – discrimination against an employee with a certain religion.

All types of harassment are prohibited in the workplace and the companies' objective is to prevent them from happening. However, preventing these behaviours needs meticulous work in order to be effective.

2.1.3 Body perception and sexual objectification

Sexual objectification is an act of making a person feel and being treated as an object of sexual desire. Objectifications include dehumanization and strip away moral intuition which is responsible for preventing morally grey decisions from being committed (Kurt and Fledman, 2011). The lack of critical and sober thinking associated with body objectification can be one of the reasons of sexual harassment occurrence even in professional settings.

There is also a phenomenon known as self-objectifying, present across women mostly during choice of clothes in particular when choosing wardrobe pieces for fashion over comfort (Tiggemann and Andrew, 2012). Trend of self-objectification is also appearing across high performing athletes (both men and women) during a situation like wearing tight-fitting outfits that generate great negative feelings towards the bodies of their owner. Most critical outcome comes from wearing a Speedo suit and one-piece (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2005). All these kinds of objectification lead to situations where women tend to act as if they are less important in social interactions (Saguy et al., 2010).

There are a number of studies that have already examined objectification under different circumstances. Key concepts of the studies were gathered in Table 1.

Key concept	**Findings**	**Authors & year of publication**
Objectification of Bodies	Wearing underwear or swimsuits leads to viewing individuals as mere bodies for others' pleasure and use.	Bartky (1990)
Impact on Women's Self-Perception	Swimsuit-wearing women are experiencing more body shame and have performed worse on math tests than sweater-wearing women.	Fredrickson et al. (1998)
Decreased Mind Attribution	Sexual objectification is linked to reduced mind attribution and diminished agency perception.	Loughnan et al. (2010); Cikara et al. (2011)
Perception of Competence	Sexualized women are seen as less competent and less fully human.	Vaes et al. (2011)

Focus on Appearance vs. Personality	Emphasizing appearance reduces the degree of human nature attributed to women.	Heflick and Goldenberg (2009)
Social Perception and Dehumanization	Recognizing human nature differentiates humans from objects, but sexualized women are dehumanized by both genders.	Loughnan and Haslam (2007); Gervais et al. (2011, 2012)
Objectifying Gaze	A focus on appearance increases objectifying gazes, with more attention to chests and waists than faces.	Gervais et al. (2013b)

Table 1 Key findings about body objectification

Source: Author's elaboration.

Kilbourne and Jhally's (2000) research proved that the first factor for girls which teaches them self-objectification apart from peers, families and social groups are usually media images of women across television, film, social media, video games, magazines, internet and advertisement. Since women's bodies are disproportionately used to promote a big range of different products, girls are influenced by them even at a very young age. In accordance with Reichert and Carpenter (2004) the biggest sexualization of the woman body in advertising is dated between 1983 and 2003. It also created a link connecting objectification to body shaming, anxiety related to appearance and increased acceptance and sense of normality when it comes to objectifying women's bodies and viewing them as a sexual object.

Although most studies focus on women self-objectifying, it is also now established that this problem can as well happen among men (Hallsworth, Wade, and Tiggemann, 2005). The cause and main reason are obviously different and regards mostly muscle mass (Gerieve and Helmick, 2008), yet the negative consequences of it are still considered as less harmful and rough than the one-woman face (Morry and Staska, 2001). Therefore, it appears that self-objectifying is a problem that affects both genders, although the burden hits women more heavily.

2.2. Legal aspects of sexual harassment

This part includes legal definitions of gender-based violence that are used in EU Member States that Poland is a part of. Descriptions are made according to their proper terminology and national legislation. Last update was made in 2019. Sexual harassment is not

considered as a criminal offence on its own, yet can be prosecuted under Articles 198 and 199 of the Criminal Code.

- Article 198: "*Whoever, taking advantage of the vulnerability of another person, or of the lack of ability to recognise the significance of the act or ability to control his/her conduct, resulting from mental disability or disorder, subjects such a person to sexual intercourse or makes him/her submit to another sexual act or to perform such an act shall be subject to the penalty of the deprivation of liberty for a term of between 6 months and 8 years.*"[1]
- Article 199:

  "§ 1. *Whoever, abusing a relationship of dependence or by taking advantage of a critical situation, subjects such a person to sexual intercourse or makes him/her submit to another sexual act or to perform such an act shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for up to 3 years.*

  § 2. *If the act specified in §1 was committed against a minor, the perpetrator shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for a term of between 3 months and 5 years.*

  § 3. *The punishment specified in § 2 shall be imposed on anyone, who subjects a minor to sexual intercourse or makes him/her submit to another sexual act or to perform such an act by abusing a trust or by giving a material or personal benefit or promise to provide it.*"[2]

Many research exist on the topic of sexual harassment, however only a few actually show the effectiveness of prevention programs that many companies implement, despite all the resources that are allocated to this goal (O'Donohue, Downs and Yeater 1998).

2.3. Research gap and justification of the study's relevance

Sexual harassment nowadays is quite a "popular" topic especially among the pro feminist and self-awareness movement in many places around the world. Table 2 shows a comparison between different papers and studies about sexual harassment. Year of publications of studies vary between 2012 and 2023 which shows that the topic of sexual harassment exists for over a decade and still continues to be present and relevant among recent publications. Participants in these studies are usually women of different age groups and not from a specific age group. Studies focus on experiences of women in general. Sometimes the examination of experiences lasted for years just to repeat the questions and check if the answers changed across the defined period of time. Type of research varies from one study to another, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used as well as a mixed

[1] Article 198, Acr of 06.06.1997, Penal Code, (Dz.U. Nr.88 poz. 553)
[2] Articles 199, Acr of 06.06.1997, Penal Code, (Dz.U. Nr.88 poz. 553)

one. Researchers used questionnaires, interviews and surveys to later identify the findings. Studies also touched different topics like level of stress, reporting mechanism, legal and organizational interventions, responses to sexual harassment and overall workplace dynamics. Sample size started (in qualitative research like interviews) from 6 people and reached even more than a thousand in quantitative research. Participants were usually not divided or eliminated by their nationality therefore every woman could participate in any of the research.

Studies shown in Table 2 are considered to be the most relevant and close to the topic of this dissertation, yet the existence of other papers regarding similar topics is taken into account.

Study	Theoretical Grounding	Research Question/Aims	Sample	Independent Variable(s)	Dependent Variable(s)	Findings
McLaughlin and Blackstone A. (2017)	Feminist theories on gender and work	How does SH affect economic and career outcomes for women in early careers?	364 employed women, Youth Development Study	Experience of sexual harassment	Financial stress, career attainment	SH causes significant disruptions to careers and increased financial stress. Women face challenges in rebuilding career trajectories.
Grace Hart C. (2019)	Stereotype and normative discrimination theory	What biases do women face when self-reporting SH, and how does it affect their careers?	Survey participants in five waves (US)	Reporting mechanism (self vs. others)	Perceptions of morality, likelihood of promotion	Self-reported SH results in normative discrimination, lowering promotion chances compared to non-SH victims or those reported by others.
Fernando D., Prasad A. (2019)	Discursive hegemony and rhetorical persuasion	How are victims of SH silenced by organizational actors, and what are the outcomes?	19 early- and mid-career female academics	Organizational responses to SH	Silence behaviours, victim responses	Victims often reluctantly acquiesce due to systemic silencing by HR, peers, and managers, reinforcing inequities.
McLaughlin H., Uggen C. Blackstone A. (2012)	Organizational theory, gender inequality	How do power structures influence workplace sexual harassment?	1,000+ employees across sectors	Workplace power imbalance	Incidence and severity of SH	Power asymmetries correlate with increased SH, especially in male-dominated settings
McDonald P. (2012)	Feminist legal theories, socio-cultural	Synthesize knowledge on SH and assess effective interventions.	Literature spanning 30 years	Legal and organizational interventions	SH prevalence, effectiveness of policies	Limited progress despite regulations; cultural barriers persist
Spiliopoulou A., Witcomb G. (2023)	Feminist theory, socio-cultural dynamics	Explore lived experiences of SH and organizational response via online narratives.	199 online forum comments	Cultural normalization, workplace dynamics	Lived experiences, themes of power dynamics, and normalization	Online platforms reveal unreported and nuanced cases; organizational neglect highlighted.

Table 2 Published papers regarding similar topic

Source: Author's elaboration.

All variables considered and many papers read there are pointed to reach a conclusion that there is no study that focuses only on Polish women especially during their early stage of entering a job. The gap is identified and considered relevant suggesting that further research is needed.

2.4. Theoretical model

The current research addresses the research problem "Explore how and to what extent do early-career professionals in Poland experience or witness sexual harassment in the workplace", and it is complemented by additional research questions:

RQ1: Are women more likely than men to witness sexual harassment in the workplace?

RQ2: Are women more likely than men to experience sexual harassment in the workplace?

RQ3: Does the presence of workplace anti-harassment policies reduce the likelihood of reported experiences of sexual harassment?

RQ4: Is there an association between witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment and thoughts of leaving one's job or changing career direction?.

Data were collected through a questionnaire survey and analysed in SPSS.

3. Methodology

In this chapter of the dissertation there will be an explanation regarding the methodology that was applied to collect the data. Good method is crucial to gather reliable data and to create a validated outcome in the form of statements and conclusions.

3.1. Research design

During phase one (quantitative) data will be collected through survey to identify patterns and prevalence. This part is essential and necessary to conduct, in order to gather data that will support the research questions or refute them. Phase two will cover analysis of findings and answers of the respondents – the crucial part of it is to identify correlations and patterns in the data that may seem unrelated at the first sight. The survey is extended to not only victims of sexual harassment but witnesses and bystanders also. Nevertheless, sexual harassment is extremely fragile and intimate topic. There is no guarantee and no possible way to predict how many and if any of the respondents of a survey will dig into the details of their past which could have caused them severe physical and / or psychological damage. Regardless of the outcome, the primordial concept of the study assumes two phases.

During phase two (analysis) data collection and responses gathered in the survey will be analysed with the SPSS program. All answers from phase one will be inserted into the program and modified if needed in order for the program to understand them.

3.2. Measures

The measures used were all drawn upon previously published and pretested scales. Previous studies mostly focused on one methodology and since it showed reliable outcome this study will as well gather analytical data and dig into the core of the problem with a similar approach.

McLaughlin and Blackstone (2017) in their research about "Economic and career effects of sexual harassment" adapted mixed methods which is broader thanks to the qualitative insights. Their 364 women sample included two dimensions of survey and interviews to measure how sexual harassment affects economic and career outcomes for women in early careers.

All other methods used are presented in Table 3 where deep analysis has been conducted in order to capture the most interesting values.

Study	Method	Independent Variable(s)	Dependent Variable(s)	Scales	Findings
McLaughlin H., Blackstone A. (2017)	Mixed methods (survey + interviews)	Experience of sexual harassment	Career attainment, financial stress	Self-reported scales on stress and job satisfaction	SH increases financial stress and disrupts careers, particularly early careers, forcing job changes and lowering attainment
Grace Hart C. (2019)	Survey experiment	Reporting mechanism (self vs. others)	Promotion likelihood, perceptions of morality	Likert scales	Women who self-report SH face normative discrimination; they are perceived as less moral and socially skilled
Fernando D., Prasad A. (2019)	Qualitative (interviews)	Sex-based harassment, organizational responses	Victims' responses to SH, silence behaviors	N/A	Victims are silenced by organizational actors, leading to "reluctant acquiescence" and perpetuation of workplace inequities
McLaughlin H., Uggen C. Blackstone A. (2012)	Survey data, statistic analysis	Power dynamics in workplace	Prevalence and experience of SH	Likert scales for harassment perception	Higher power inequality increases SH; supervisory roles exacerbate issues
McDonald P. (2012)	Literature review	Legal framework, cultural factors	Prevalence, reporting rates, and outcomes	Varied across studies reviewed	Varied definitions and outcomes complicate consistent reporting; SH remains pervasive
Spiliopoulou A., Witcomb G. (2023)	Thematic analysis of online forum comments	Cultural narratives and power dynamics	Women's experiences and organizational responses	Qualitative coding	SH normalized as part of women's professional identity; limited organizational response

Table 3 Published papers on similar topic with used methodology

Source: Author's elaboration.

3.3. Procedure of data collection

The questionnaire was written in English. Regarding the international type of the study it is important that the questions were understandable for Polish participants and the Portuguese committee that will evaluate the dissertation. In accordance to AICEP (Portuguese Trade & Investment Agency) a public body that "*promotes the attraction of productive inward investment and the internationalization of the Portuguese economy, fostering export growth and the*

international expansion of Portuguese companies"[3] , Portugal is ranked as 6th worldwide for English proficiency with a score of 605 EF EPI scale. In accordance with the same Global ranking of countries and regions 2024[4] Poland takes 15th place with 588 EF EPI score. With both countries placed in the first 20 country ranking in ability of English skills it is easy to assume that Polish participants and Portuguese board members will be able to understand questions in the presented survey and whole theoretical background. Questions need to be understandable and the vocabulary should not be too confusing in order to transfer the idea of the researcher and receive valid results.

3.4. Sample

The study is focused on people defined as early career professionals. What that means is that experiences under evaluation may also consider students between nineteen and twenty-six years old, as long as they have some work experience. Their nationality should be Polish and their work and /or study and should also be in Poland. There are no restrictions regarding type, year or field of study. In spite of receiving personal experiences of students in general there is no need to narrow the study type, year or field down only to one category. The most important factor for the participants is to have some experience in any kind of work environment. There is no clear definition regarding how much experience do the participants need to have. Any experience such as a single event is valuable and counted as important. Students can participate in the research even if their experience comes from an internship during studies, full time job or a seasonal summer transitional work.

The chosen sampling method is referred to as a snowball sampling (known also under a name "chain sampling" and "referral sampling"). It is a non probability method of sampling technique where subjects of the study take care of recruitment of future subjects that are usually among their acquaintances. Therefore, the group of respondents is predicted to grow just like a snowball. As more people join the study and sample builds up, there is enough data gathered for further analysis that are useful for research. It is common to use this kind of sampling method in hidden and difficult to access populations such as sexually harassed people, drug users or sex workers.

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[3]AICEP Portugal Global. (2024, November). Portugal ranks 6th worldwide for English proficiency. https://www.portugalglobal.pt/en/news/2024/november/portugal-ranks-6th-worldwide-for-english-proficiency/ [Accessed January 30, 2025]

[4] EF Education First. (2024). EF English Proficiency Index. https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/ [Accessed January 30, 2025]

There will also be another method of sampling used, which is purposive sampling. Known also under a name of nonprobability, judgmental or selective sampling. This form does not use a random sampling technique in which the probability of achieving some particular outcome may be calculated. Purposive sampling is intended to be used to not to draw a statistical conclusion about the overall population. That means that researchers tend to intentionally choose participants based on specific characteristics or criteria. The objective is to focus on a particular person whose insights or experiences are relevant to the research question. The most relevant criteria of choosing participants on this particular study is:

- Having from 19 to 26 years old;
- Being a student in Poland;
- Having some work experience in Poland.

Among four levels of measurement scale (nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio) this research will be conducted using interval sale. Which is a quantitative measurement scale with an order that measures variables that occur at regular intervals within a common scale. It is evaluated as a third level of measurement scale right after nominal and ordinal scale. This type of scale is used in situations when variables do not have a natural ranking or order. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix.

3.5. Demography of Poland

To understand the demographical aspect of country, there is a need to firstly perform a search for the factors that could affect the prevalence of sexual harassment among early career professionals. Table 4 shows the basic aspects of Poland, that the author of this dissertation qualified as a possible factors that may or may not have an impact on the quantity and appearance of sexual harassment among early career professionals.

Aspect	**Poland**
Population	Around 38 million
Geographical size	322 575 km²
Unemployment rate	As of September 2024, the registered unemployment rate was 5.0%, with 769,600 individuals unemployed[5]

[5] Reuters. (2024, October 23). Poland's unemployment rate at 5.0% in September. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/polands-unemployment-rate-50-september-2024-10-23/ [Accessed January 30, 2025, 19:57]

Year of joining EU	2004
Number of universities	Around 400 universities and higher education institutions.
Youth emigration trend	High emigration level among the young. Especially to the UK and Germany[6]

Table 4 Demography of Poland

Source: Author's elaboration.

Considering all factors it is important to acknowledge that all the aspects listed in table 4 covers only a few information about Poland and may as well be completely insignificant when it comes to the appearance of sexual harassment.

3.6. Data analysis methods

The choice of data analysis methods mainly depends on the nature of the research question and the goal of the study itself. In order to receive a reliable outcome there is a need to use a combination of available analysis methods.

1. **Descriptive analysis**

With the purpose of summarizing and describing the most important features of a gathered dataset, descriptive analysis will help to measure how often certain behaviours occur. Afterwards measures of central tendency like mean can be used to summarize the numeral data. Tools that can be useful in these methods are Excel and SPSS.

2. **Inferential statistics**

Inferential statistics will help testing the existence of relationships or differences between variables. The most important would be the usage of correlation analysis as well as chi-square test. Tool that will help with this kind of analysis would be SPSS.

3. **Thematic analysis**

One way of analysing given responses to open ended questions is to identify and analyse reappearance of certain themes or patterns within the answers. Key to this process is to search for a common variable that may be reappearing in every situation.

[6] Reuters. (2024, November 14). Borderless Europe fights brain drain as talent heads north. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/borderless-europe-fights-brain-drain-talent-heads-north-2024-11-14/ [Accessed January 30, 2025, 20:05]

3.7. Ethical considerations

Sexual harassment is a very sensible topic and can cause discomfort even across people who only have witnessed it or herd about it. Filling out a survey about it can be an ethically complex task. That is why it is important to cover the topic of:

1. **Confidentiality and privacy**

The most crucial thing is to protect the identities and experiences of respondents. There is a special need to reassure it when the stories contain survival insights and compound trauma. During difficult topics it is important that the participants can stay anonymous and could not be identified. The best solution is to ensure that information about privacy and anonymity is provided at the beginning of the survey.

2. **Consent**

Survivors may feel the pressure to participate, or they may not fully understand how and why their stories are relevant in the study or how it will be used. Therefore, the survey should contain an explanation of the reason for the study and information how the data will be used. Participation should be absolutely voluntary.

3. **Avoidance of victim blaming**

Language of survey questions and interview should be adjusted in order to avoid shifting unintentionally responsibility onto survivors. In accordance with objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) female bodies tend to be evaluated more intensely than male bodies.

4. **Risk of re-traumatization**

The act of asking survivors to relive their experiences can lead to triggering emotional or psychological response and cause distress to the respondents. This action can be harmful for participants and may have an impact on the research itself by exceeding discussion topics. Since it is a survey that every respondent answers at home or in a private place providing access to professional psychological support is impossible to arrange, yet the researcher can soften the impact of harmful memories by not forcing them to answer difficult questions in the questionnaire.

5. **Bias and power dynamics**

Researchers may unconsciously and unintentionally bring biases into research. Table 5 shows that biases can occur during any part of trial progression. However during anonymous surveys the researcher can not be influenced by any factor like the appearance or attitude of

the respondents. Problems like this may occur during interviews (Wilkins and Pannucci, 2010) which could have caused problems in similar studies which used mixed methods.

Pre trail bias	Bias during trail	Bias after trail
Invalid study design Selection bias	Interviewer bias Misclassification of outcome Chronology bias Performance bias	Citation bias Confounding
Trial planning	Implementation	Data analysis

Table 5 Major sources of bias in research

Source: Author's elaboration.

Intervention of biases can lead to distortion of conclusions or stereotypes. Engaging diverse perspectives may be difficult to perform, however to avoid bias, researchers can use a second opinion from an uninfluenced person when analysing interviews.

6. Ethical use of language

No matter what type of harassment the participant encountered or how the stories may vary from one another, the survey needs to avoid terms that can be seen as underestimation of respondent experience or seriousness of harassment. Our own language can influence perception and can trigger harmful attitudes. Every sentence and question of the questionnaire should use respectful terminology.

4. Findings

The data were inserted in an Excel file and afterwards uploaded to SPSS for further analysis.

4.1. Participants

First questions of the survey regarded descriptive statistics which is a process of summarizing every possible numerical and categorical data to uncover how many people answered the questionnaire and gather general view of the respondents. It involves measures of gender, age, years of professional experience and level of education. The participants' characteristics are indicated in Figures 1 to 4.

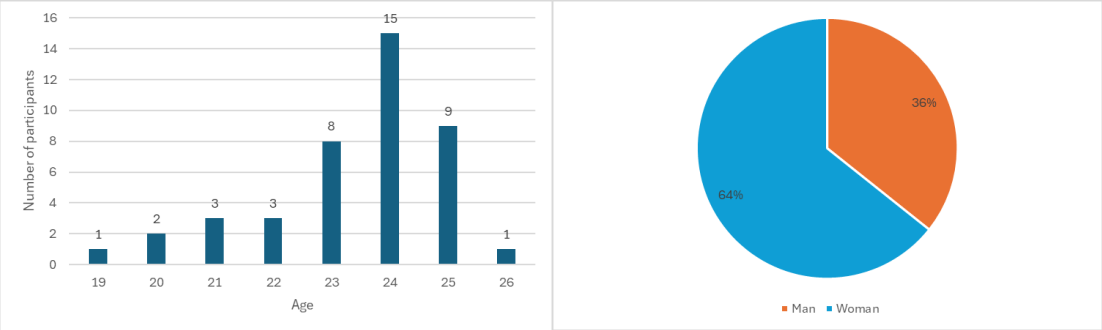


Figure 1 Gender and age of participants in the survey

Source: Author's elaboration

Overall, 42 respondents participated in the survey. In terms of age, the largest group is made up of the 24 years old which makes 35,7% of all respondents, and the 25 years old the second largest group, with nine participants. Women make up 64,3% of the respondents while men from the rest 35,7%. Although in the gender section there was a possibility to choose the "I prefer not to say" answer none of the respondents chose it.

Figure 2 shows the level of education of the respondents.

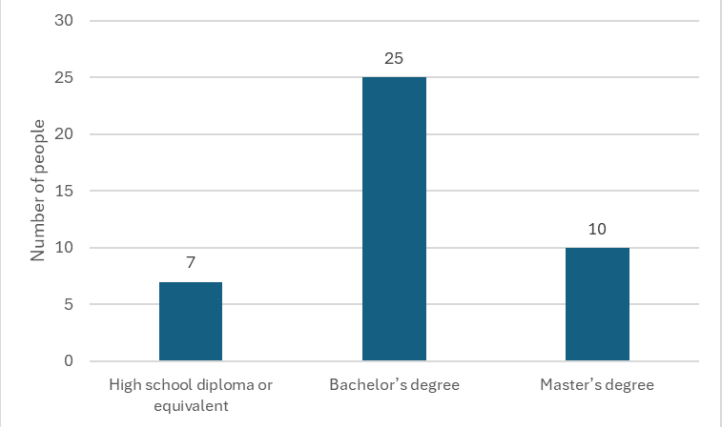


Figure 2 Education level of respondents

Source: Author's elaboration

Gathered results showed that more than half (59,5%) of the respondents already obtained bachelor's degree, and 23,8% also have master's degree leaving only 16,7% of the respondents with a high school diploma or equivalent.

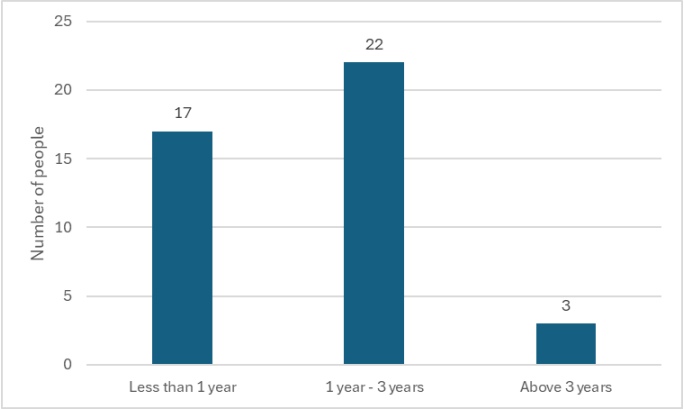


Figure 3 Work experience of respondents

Source: Author's elaboration

Since the study is focused on early career professionals all respondents needed to have some professional experience. The results show that 17 respondents had less than a year of work experience, only three respondents had more than three years of work experience and 22 which make over half of the respondents have been over a year and less than 3 years in a work environment.

The questionnaire was filled in by young people working on a wide range of sectors, as illustrated in Figure 4.

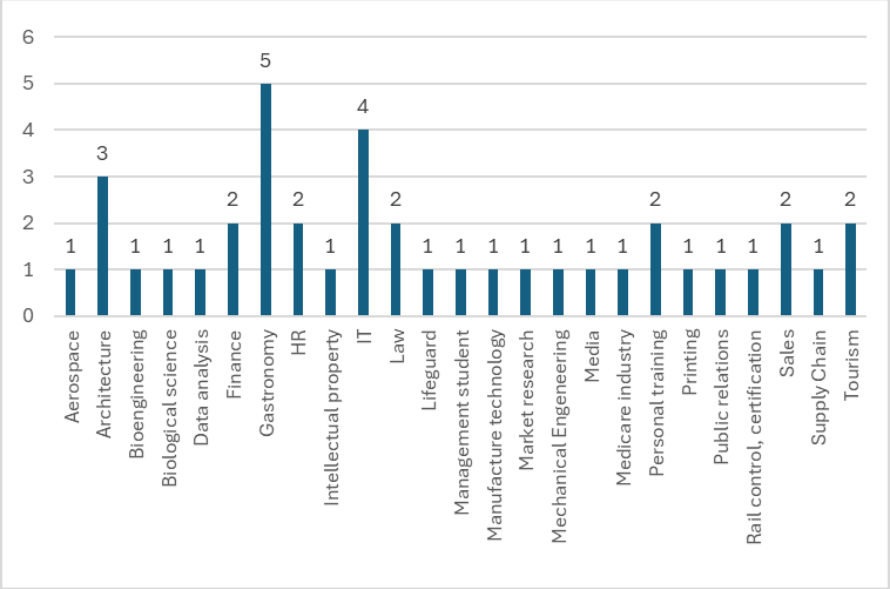


Figure 4 Jobs sector of participants

Source: Author's elaboration

The sample includes a highly diversified sample of participants working in 20 different sectors. The largest number of respondents (13%) worked in the restaurant sector, and 10% of them worked in the IT sector. The third largest group (7,5%) is made up of people working in architecture. Together, these three groups make up about 30% of the overall sample. 17 other sectors have only one representative. That leads to the interpretation that the study sample is very diverse in terms of occupations. Therefore, drawing conclusions that reflect on one sector specific may be inaccurate. Among all the sectors there is a presence of both STEM and non-STEM fields which again emphasize a balanced mix of people.

4.2. Witnessing and experiencing sexual harassment

Figure 5 shows the percentage of participants who have witnessed some kind of sexual harassment in the workplace.

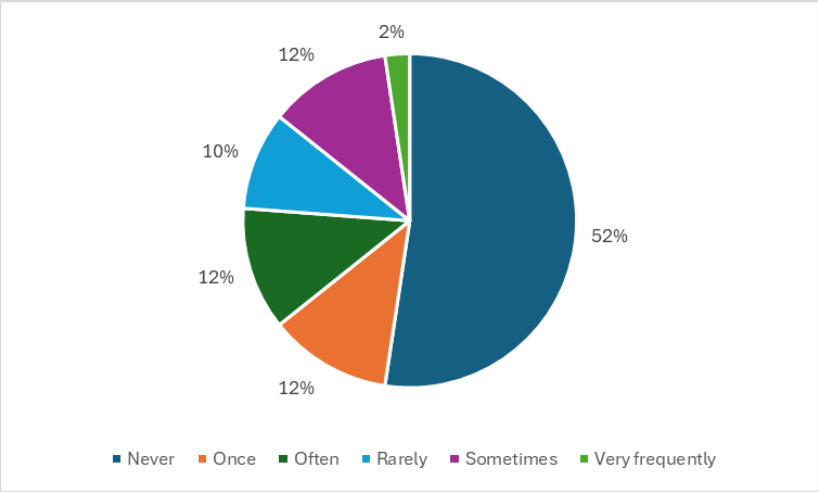


Figure 5 Frequency of witnessing sexual harassment in a workplace

Source: Author's elaboration

As the results shows 48% of all participants declared they have witnessed some kind of behaviour that they perceive as sexual harassment. 12% of respondents declared they have witnessed harassment happened in office more than once and 2% of respondents declared to witness it very frequently. Figure 6 shows a frequency of sexual harassment that respondents experienced.

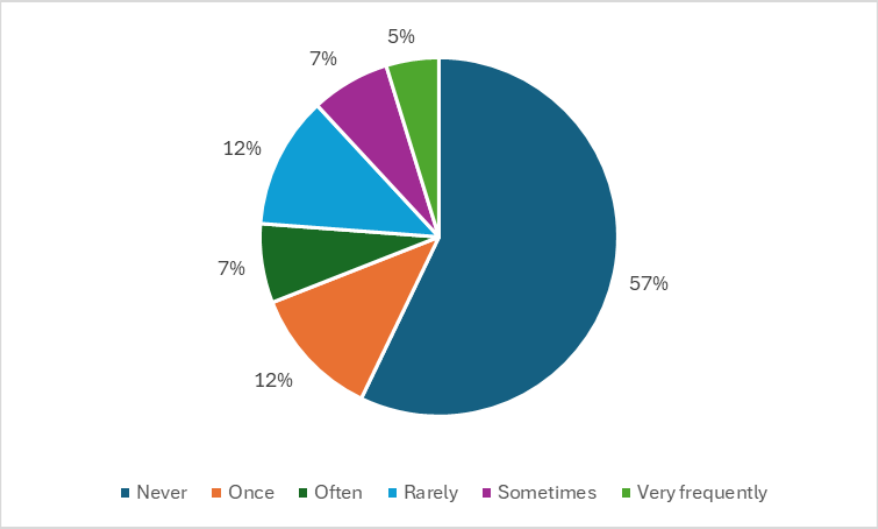


Figure 6 Frequency of experiencing sexual harassment in a workplace

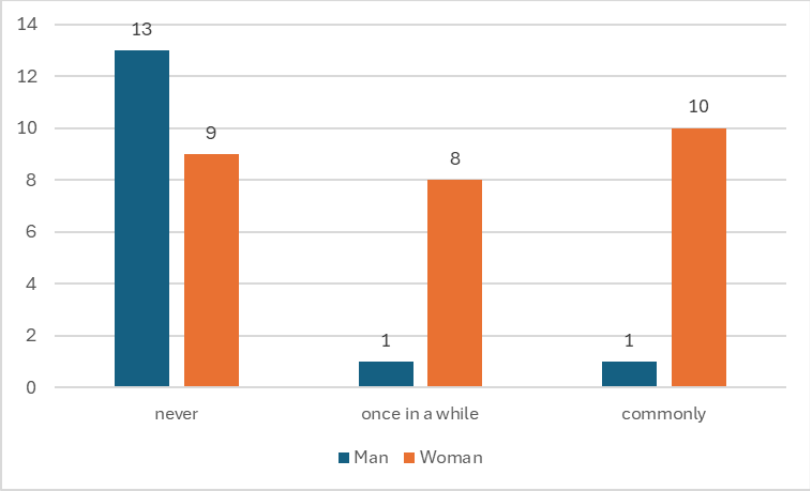
Source: Author's elaboration

Results show that 57% of respondents have never experienced sexual harassment. Moreover, 31% of people declared to have experienced SH with a frequency greater than a one-time occurrence.

4.2.1 Gender and witnessing / experiencing SH

Crosstabs were used in order to examine potential relationships within the gathered data that might not be obvious when firstly looking at survey responses. Moreover, usage of the chi-square test was applied since there is a need to test if the variables are related to each other or independent. It will help uncover variables that can affect certain results or can later become helpful in determining improvement.

Figure 7 illustrates the incidence of witnessing sexual harassment by gender, showing that gender makes a difference in witnessing and experiencing sexual harassment in a workplace.



Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11,005[a]	2	,004
Likelihood Ratio	11,999	2	,002
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 2 cells (33,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3,21.

Figure 7 Dependence between gender and witnessing SH in the workplace

Source: Author's elaboration

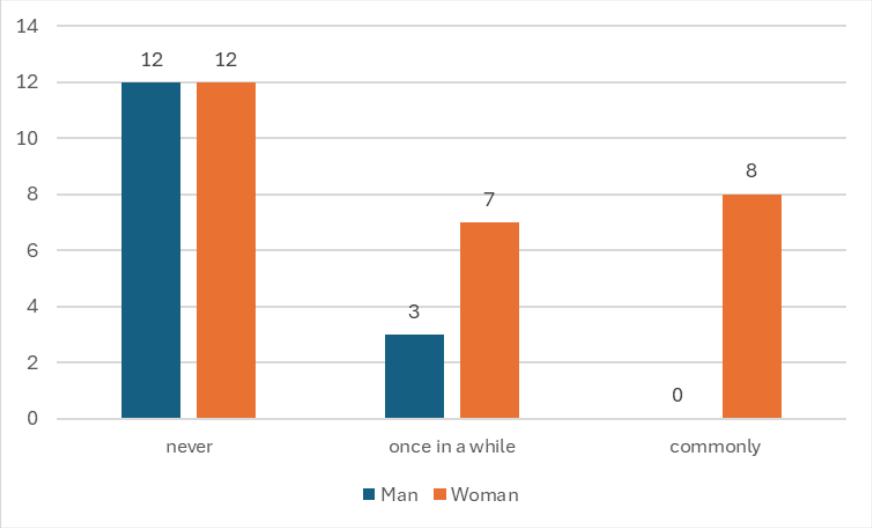
In accordance to gathered results 13,3% of questioned men (2 out of 15) witnessed sexual harassment, whereas 18 out of 27 that means 66,7% of woman gave a positive answer to the same question, which is over 5 times more often than the men. The chi-square test helps to determine whether there is a significant association between these two variables (gender and witnessing SH). Chi-Square = 11,005 and asymptotic significance (2-sided) value 0,004 it leads to interpretation:

$$\alpha = 5\% = 0{,}05$$

$$sig = 0{,}004 = 0{,}4\%$$

$$\alpha > sig$$

Based on the results of Chi-Square we can conduct that there is a significant association between gender and how often respondents witness sexual harassment at work. Additionally men and women experience sexual harassment differently. Figure 8 shows frequency in experiencing SH among men and women in a workplace.



Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6,720[a]	2	,035
Likelihood Ratio	9,259	2	,010
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 2 cells (33,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2,86.

Figure 8 Dependence between gender and experiencing SH in the workplace

Source: Author's elaboration

When it comes to experiencing SH 20% of men reported to have experienced it once in a while which compares to 55,5% of women that reported having had that experience. (Chi-Square= 6,72, $p < 0,05$) it leads to interpretation:

$$\alpha = 5\% = 0,05$$

$$sig = 0,035$$

$$\alpha > sig$$

Based on the results of Chi-Square we can conclude that there is a significant association between gender and how often they experience sexual harassment at work.

That means gender is statistically associated with how often not only someone witnesses sexual harassment at workplace, but also how often they experience it.

In sum, the analysis shows that:

- No man reported experiencing sexual harassment as "common" whereas 30% of women did;
- Over half of women in the sample reported experiencing sexual harassment at least once. In comparison to only 1 in 5 men;
- 66,7% of women in the sample witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace;
- Woman may be more likely to notice certain behaviours and classify them as sexual harassment than men;
- Women are 9 times more likely than men to witness SH.

Not surprisingly, gender was significantly associated with witnessing as well as with experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. This finding also suggests that early-career professionals are more aware of SH when it comes to noticing any kind of inappropriate behaviour in a workplace directed through other than themselves.

4.2.2 Work and witnessing / experiencing of SH

In this section the analysis looks at whether work experience is related to witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment. Are freshly recruited individuals more or less likely to witness or experience sexual harassment? Table 6 shows comparison between years of experience and experiencing sexual harassment.

		never	once in a while	comonly	Total
How many years of professional experience do you have?	Less than 1 year	4	14	4	22
	1 year - 3 years	0	3	0	3
	Above 3 years	4	7	6	17
Total		8	24	10	42

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4,593[a]	4	,332
Likelihood Ratio	5,668	4	,225
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 6 cells (66,7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,57.

Table 6 Years of experience and influence on experiencing SH

Source: Author's elaboration

Most reports of sexual harassment are detected among respondents with less than 3 years of experience. However, the group of people with above 3 years experience is too small to draw any statistical significant association between years of professional experience and experiencing sexual harassment.

4.2.3 Workplace policies and witnessing/experiencing SH

Another important issue that needs to be addressed is whether the existence of policies to prevent SH actually work and are related with lower figures of witnessing or experiencing SH. Especially whether it appears less often than in workplaces where there are no such policies. Table 7 shows the comparison between workplaces where people indicate the appearance of mentioned policies and if they witnessed or experienced SH regardless of it.

		never	once in a while	comonly	Total
Are there workplace policies in a place you work to prevent sexual harassment?	No	4	13	4	21
	I don't know	4	2	0	6
	Yes	3	7	5	15
Total		11	22	9	42

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7,588[a]	4	,108
Likelihood Ratio	7,703	4	,103
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 6 cells (66,7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,29.

Table 7 Witnessing SH and existence of preventing policies

Source: Author's elaboration

Following results show that sexual harassment was witnessed across all the groups and people who were unsure if these policies exist observed SH almost as frequently as those who declared there were no policies. Another disturbing observation that can be drawn from the answers is that in workplaces where there is policy that should prevent SH from happening 8 out of 15 people, which makes it 53,3% declares witnessing it. With Chi-Square value of 7,588 and asymptotic significance (2-sided) value 0,108 it means that there is no significant association between witnessing harassment with whether a person knows about anti-harassment policies. Although no statistically significant association was found there is still possibility to observe the patterns in raw data that suggest that lack of awareness of workplace policies may coincide with a relatively high number of harassment observations.

		never	once in a while	comonly	Total
Are there workplace policies in a place you work to prevent sexual harassment?	No	3	14	4	21
	I don't know	3	2	1	6
	Yes	2	8	5	15
Total		8	24	10	42

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5,392[a]	4	,249
Likelihood Ratio	4,560	4	,335
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 6 cells (66,7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,14.

Table 8 Experiencing SH and existence of preventing policies

Source: Author's elaboration

Similarly to table 7 almost half of the respondents (about 47%) who reported presence of policies experienced some level of sexual harassment. Among those who did not know if policies existed, 7 out of 21 which makes about 33% also reported any level of harassment experience. With Chi-Square value of 5,392 and asymptotic significance (2-sided) value 0,249

It leads to interpretation that the result is not statistically significant. Therefore, there is no statistical association between policy awareness and harassment experiences — at least not with this sample size and distribution. However, numbers clearly suggest a possibility of a certain trend: that uncertainty or absence of prevention policies may result in a higher rate of harassment; statistical tests do not indicate it as a significant relationship. This outcome can be possibly motivated by small sample size. Even without statistical significance this finding can motivate further exploration or help to suggest additional recommendations for better policy visibility, training, or enforcement of these policies.

4.2.4 Gender and body objectification at the workplace

Body objectification at the workplace is another kind of sexual harassment that needed examination. Is it a real problem among early-career professionals With potential impact on the level of awareness or experience of sexual harassment. Table 9 contains cumulated answers from cross tabulation between gender and whether the respondent did or did not feel objectified at the workplace.

		Never	Once	Rarely	Often	Sometimes	Very frequently	Total
What is your gender?	Man	15	0	0	0	0	0	15
	Woman	13	1	5	2	4	2	27
Total		28	1	5	2	4	2	42

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11,667[a]	5	,040
Likelihood Ratio	16,074	5	,007
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 10 cells (83,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,36.

Table 9 Gender vs feeling objectified at the workplace

Source: Author's elaboration

As data shows, none of the questioned men have ever felt objectified in the workplace whereas 14 out of 27 women, which is over half of them (51,9%) reported feeling some level of objectification. This result seems to suggest that the experience of objectification is reported only by women. (Chi-square= 11,667; $p<0,05$)

$$\alpha = 5\% = 0,05$$

$$sig = 0,04$$

$$\alpha > sig$$

The statistical test indicates that there is a significant association between gender and feeling objectified at work. Since no men answered positively on feeling objectified and over half of the women did, the association is strong and clear even with a small sample. These findings suggest that gender is a strong indicator of whether someone has a possibility to experience the feeling of objectification at the workplace.

4.2.5 Types of witnessed behaviour at the workplace

Out of all different types of SH respondents also were able to choose which kind of harassment they have witnessed. Figure 9 shows the number of people who reported having witnessed SH behaviour.

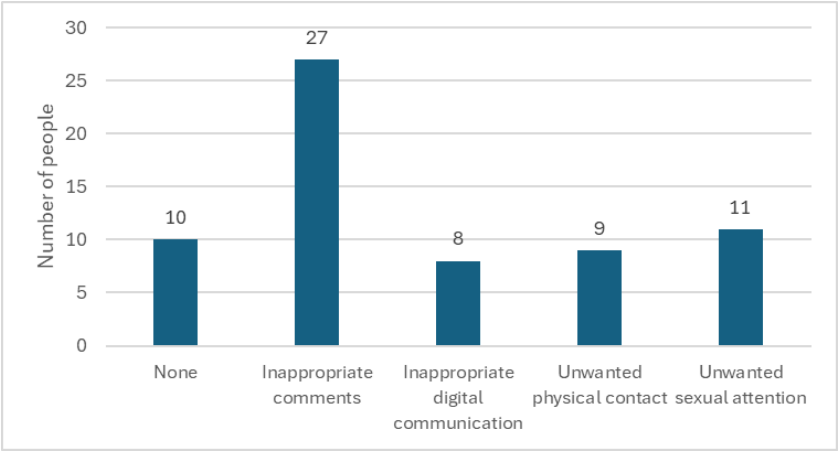


Figure 9 Types of witnessed SH

Source: Author's elaboration

The most common form of witnessed sexual harassment is inappropriate comments with nearly 2 out of 3 of respondents (64%) observing this situation in their workplace. This can suggest that since this behaviour is visible and noticeable by other coworkers, suggestive talks and verbal harassment often happens in public, visible to other coworkers. Second disturbing observation is that nearly 80% of the respondents have observed at least one kind of harassment.

Despite being more intimate and serious 1 in 4 respondents saw unwanted sexual attention, and 1 in 5 saw unwanted physical contact. In the XXI century, one would expect that such unacceptable behaviours were no longer happening, especially given that the results suggest that such behaviours take place in front of other workers. This can also lead to speculation about potential presence of bystander burden – a situation when people may see certain action however feel unsure how or whether to act.

A relatively small percentage of respondents (19%) reported witnessing inappropriate digital communication possibly through email, chat or social media. This finding may reflect the digital professionalism and awareness of traceability and permanency of inappropriate workplace digital platform usage.

Figure 10 shows answers to the type of witnessed sexual harassment. Respondents were to answer and describe what was the nature of harassment: whether it was verbal, visual, physical, digital or written.

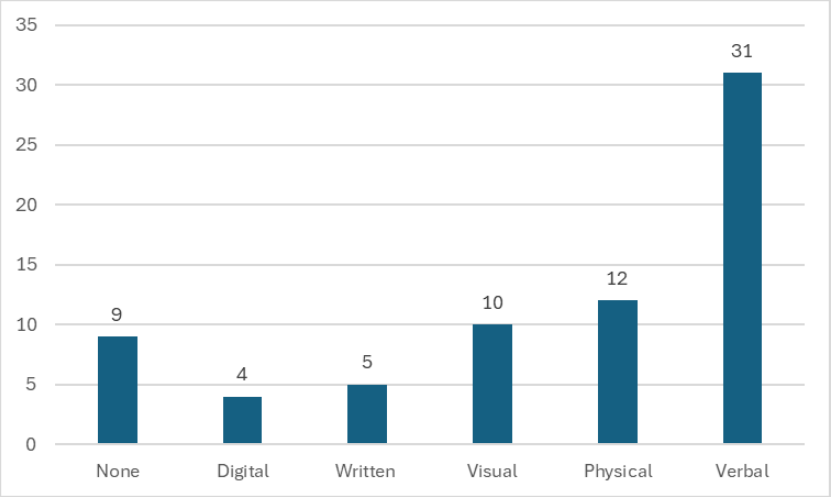


Figure 10 Nature of witnessed harassment

Source: Author's elaboration

There is a noticeable big alignment between verbal harassment and inappropriate comments in being the most common form of SH. Similar alignment was observed with unwanted sexual attention and visual as well as for physical harassment and unwanted physical contact as the second most common type of harassment.

In both Figure 10 and 11 the exact same number of people confirmed that they have never witnessed SH which strengthens the reliability of the answers.

However many behaviours fall into the same category and can be hard to define by the respondents: harassing message can be both qualified as "written" and "digital" or inappropriate comment could be both "verbal" and "visual" since it could involve suggestive wink or longer glare on some part of victims body – this may be the reason why the numbers wary in both figures and are not exactly the same between nature and type of harassment.

4.2.6 Harassers and harassed ones

Figure 11 shows who was the harasser in the situation that they have witnessed.

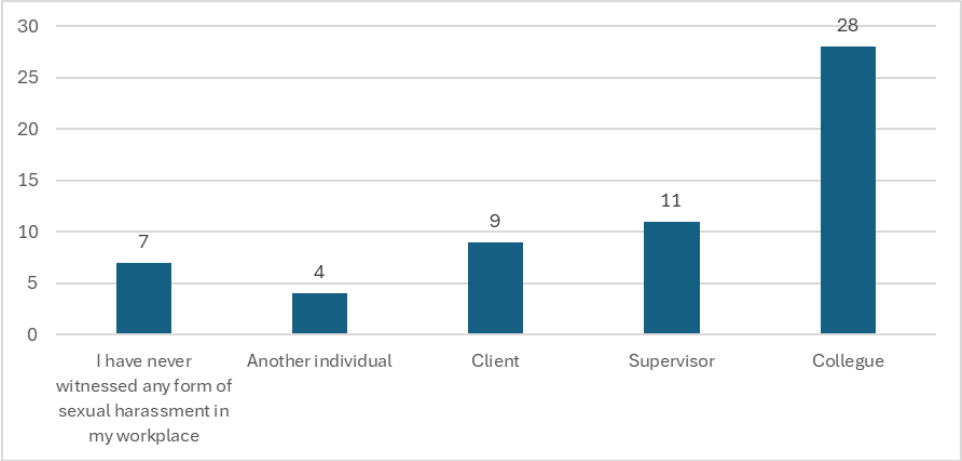


Figure 11 Who was the harasser

Source: Author's elaboration

28 participants reported that the harassment was committed mostly by colleagues. The supervisor was the second person most likely to be a harasser, however the number is significantly lower which can lead to the conclusion that professionalism is still valuable in the workplace. A smaller number of respondents reported witnessing harassment from clients or other individuals, yet making 13 cases all together.

Figure 12 on the other hand shows who respondents recall being victims. Whether it was a colleague, client, direct or indirect supervisor.

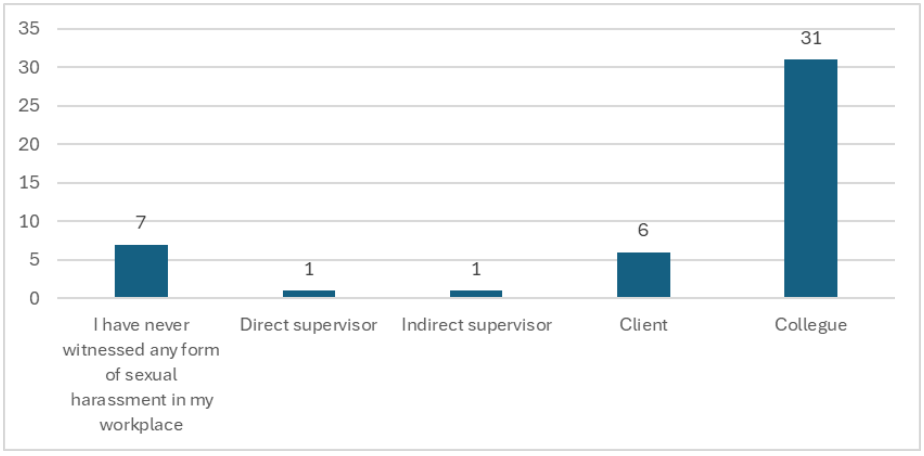


Figure 12 Victim relation with harasser

Source: Author's elaboration

Comparing the results both from figure 11 and figure 12 there is a key takeaway that harassments mostly occur among colleagues. Both predators and the victims of SH situation are estimated to be happening in peer-to-peer relations rather than supervisor-subordinate relations.

However, only two cases were reported of 'supervisor as victim which compares to 11 cases of supervisor as perpetrator. Only 2 supervisors were identified as victims whereas 11 were reported as harassers.

Harassment may also happen with the involvement of third parties - the clients. In 9 cases they were reported as predators and 6 as victims. That indicates that SH can happen in both ways, however slightly more often being committed by individuals who are not involved directly with the company.

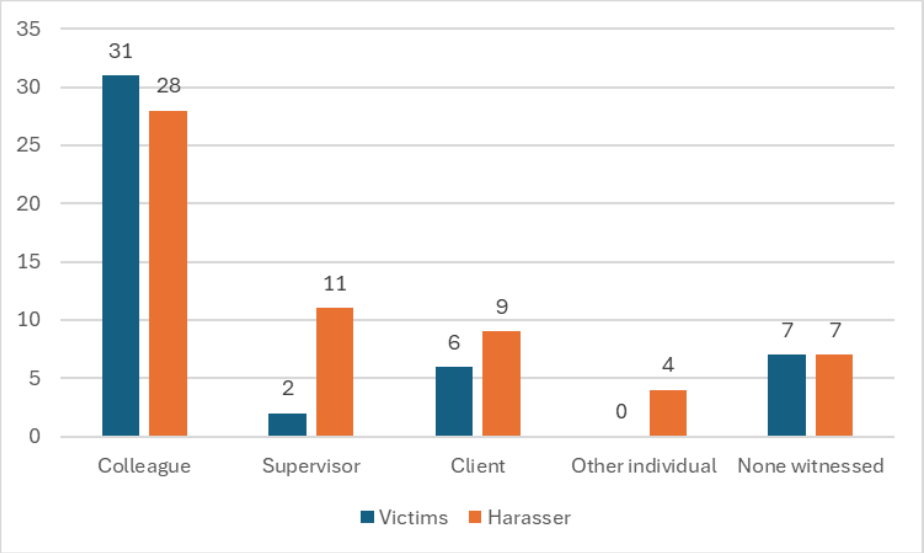


Figure 13 Comparison of company roles of victims and harassers

Source: Author's elaboration

Figure 13 shows previously discussed findings, just to simplify the comparison both results are placed on the same graph.

4.2.7 Perception of where the fault of SH lies

Figure 14 shows perceptions of victims themselves and their opinion on whether after experiencing SH they feel guilty about the occurred situation.

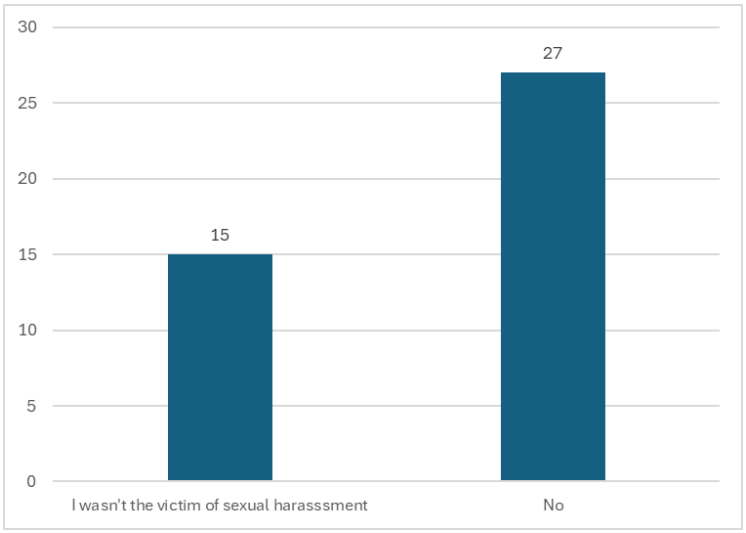


Figure 14 Perception that the incidents could be victims' fault

Source: Author's elaboration

According to the analysis, none of the harassed persons felt that the harassment was their fault. 27 people reported that they did not find themselves guilty of being the prey in a harassed situation. That shows the big self awareness of young people and their realization that the predators are the main problem and not the victims, which can be a common opinion. 15 of the participants declared not being a victim of sexual harassment.

Figure 15 shows whether the victims have the impression that other workers believe that the harassment was their fault.

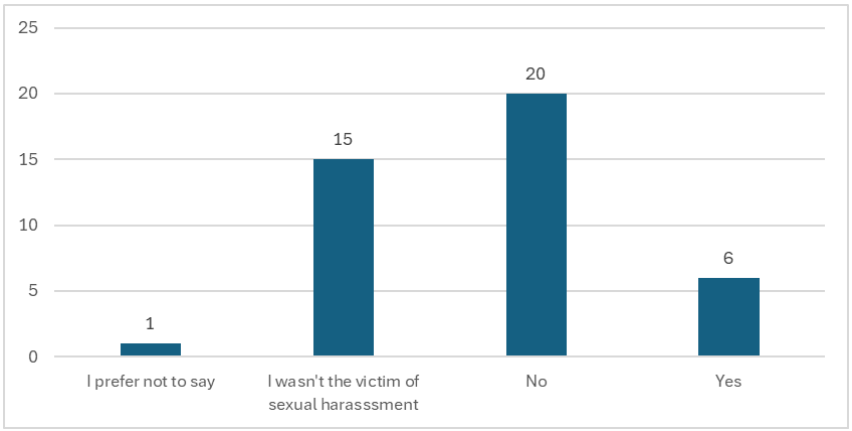


Figure 15 Perception that the other workers believe that the harassment was the victim fault

Source: Author's elaboration

The majority (20 people) of the respondents declared not having an impression from other coworkers that the harassment happened because of their appearance, look or any kind of action / behaviour. However, 6 individuals, roughly 1 in 7 felt blamed by their coworkers. While this is a minority, these numbers are still concerning, especially for the early-career

professionals, who may feel even less secure in the work environment or even reduce their courage to speak up about it. One person chose the "prefer not to say" option and that may indicate the discomfort or uncertainty of the individual – nevertheless even this one person represents the sensitivity of the subject or fear that is associated with speaking about SH and the blame associated with it.

4.2.8 Reporting SH

Figure 16 shows the number of people who witnessed SH behaviours and reported it to higher authority or HR.

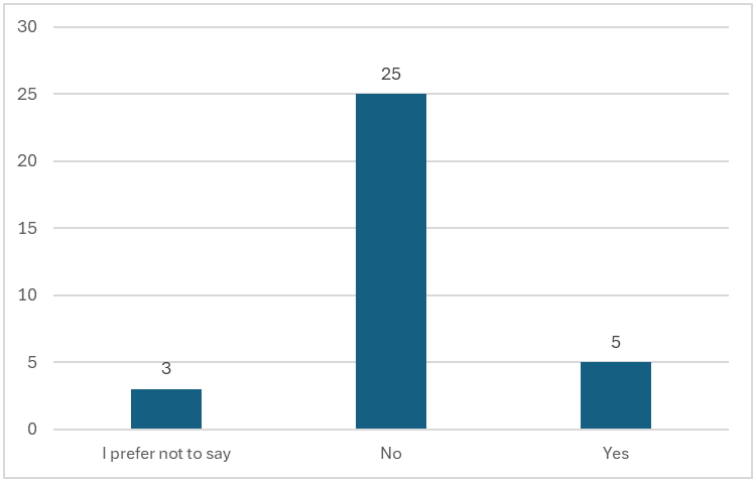


Figure 16 Reporting witnessed SH

Source: Author's elaboration

As reported above, 9 people declared to have never witnessed SH at the workplace. That leaves the study with 33 people who witnessed any kind of SH. Only 5 of them declared reporting witnessed behaviour which makes only 15% of all having the courage to do it, and not to turn a blind eye on what they saw. Most of the witnesses (76%) prefer to stay silent and choose not to intervene.

Figure 17 shows the case of reporting behaviour among participants who have experienced SH in their workplace.

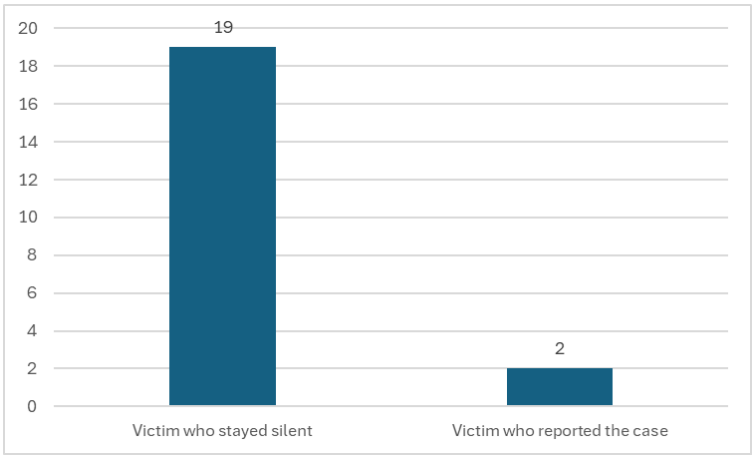


Figure 17 Reporting experienced SH

Source: Author's elaboration

Only 2 out of 21 victims (9,5%) reported experiencing SH and 19 of them (90,5%) stayed silent about the assault they were victims of. This highlights a serious trust or cultural barrier in the workplace that they are in — even when individuals experience SH, they do not feel safe or supported enough to act against it. This overwhelming number of non-reporting victims (90%) probably suggest ineffectiveness of existing mechanisms or a workplace culture that does not support raising voices. This also feeds into the wider organizational dynamics of silence and hence calls for a transforming culture-based workplace where trust-building is core, rather than merely implementing a policy.

Figure 18 shows victims' reaction to the harassed situation.

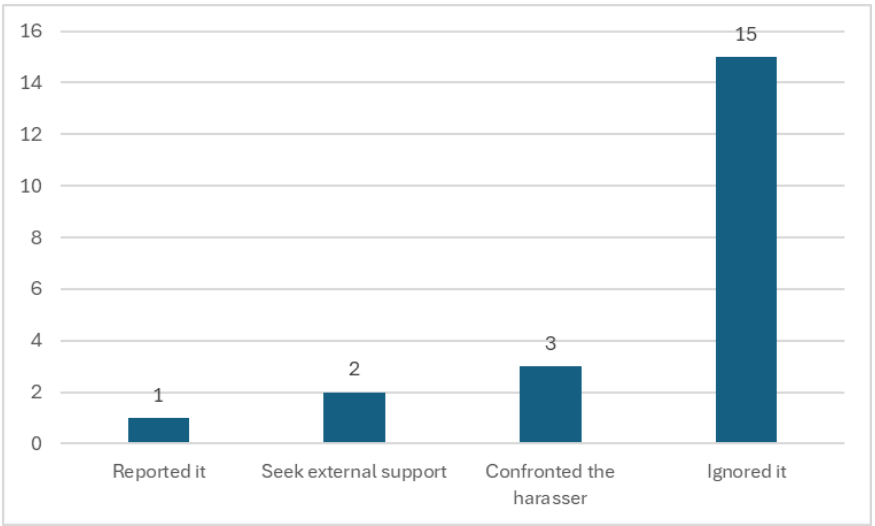


Figure 18 Victims' reaction to harassment

Source: Author's elaboration

From 21 people who reported being a victim, 15 of them (71%) chose to ignore the harassment. Only one person (less than 5%) chose to report the incident which indicates a wide underreporting of similar situations. Only 23% took any actions which were either "seeking external support" or taking actions directly in their hands and "confront the harasser".

Table 10 shows correlation between witnessing SH and questioning whether it was reported to a supervisor, HR or another authority.

WSHnumeric	Pearson Correlation	1	-,408**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,007
	N	42	42
Did you report the incident (s) to a supervisor, HR, or another authority?	Pearson Correlation	-,408**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,007	
	N	42	42

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Spearman's rho	WSHnumeric	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-,399**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,009
		N	42	42
	Did you report the incident (s) to a supervisor, HR, or another authority?	Correlation Coefficient	-,399**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,009	.
		N	42	42

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 10 Correlation between witnessing SH and reporting it to higher authority

Source: Author's elaboration

According to Pearson and Sperman's correlation test, a terrifying results comes to light in a form of statement, that the more frequently a person witnesses sexual harassment, the less likely they are to report it to any kind of authority in the workplace. This is a statistically significant outcome with sig < 0,01 level in both tests, which is strong evidence of this pattern. This may suggest that they seem to be afraid to take action because of a negative impact that possibly occurs because of it. If certain behaviour occurs periodically then bystanders may get used to it and not take it as seriously as they should. This can also indicate the lack of clear reporting pathways dedicated for non-victims to report the incident. This supports prior research on organizational silencing and cultural normalization, indicating that bystanders may feel disempowered or unsure of how to act, even when they recognize inappropriate conduct.

4.2.9 Are witnesses more likely to experience SH?

This section is about testing whether two chosen variables are correlated. That means checking whether one of them changes and the other changes too.

Table 11 shows that correlation between experiencing and witnessing SH – if people who witnessed it are more likely to also experience it.

ESHnumeric	Pearson Correlation	1	,588**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001
	N	42	42
WSHnumeric	Pearson Correlation	,588**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	
	N	42	42

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Spearman's rho	ESHnumeric	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,582**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<,001
		N	42	42
	WSHnumeric	Correlation Coefficient	,582**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	.
		N	42	42

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Tabel 11 Correlation between experiencing and witnessing SH

Source: Author's elaboration

Table on the top uses Pearson correlation test, table below uses Spearman's. With Pearson correlation of 0,588 the correlation between experiencing and witnessing sexual harassment is considered as positive and moderate to strong. Based on the results of the Pearson linear correlation test (sig<0,001) at a=5%, a =0,05 we can say that there is a statistically significant, positive and strong correlation between experiencing and witnessing SH.

With Sperman's test obtaining similar results of 0,582 and p-value again < 0,001 it confirms that individuals who witness sexual harassment are also more likely to experience it themselves.

4.2.10 Correlation between feeling objectified and witnessing SH

Table 12 shows correlation between witnessing SH and feeling objectified in the workplace – do people who witnessed it are more likely to also feel objectified.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.I felt objectified in my workplace	Pearson Correlation	1	-,557**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001
	N	42	42
WSHnumeric	Pearson Correlation	-,557**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	
	N	42	42

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Spearman's rho	Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.I felt objectified in my workplace	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-,572**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<,001
		N	42	42
	WSHnumeric	Correlation Coefficient	-,572**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	.
		N	42	42

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Tabel 12 Correlation between witnessing SH and feeling objectified

Source: Author's elaboration

Table on the top uses Pearson correlation test, table below uses Spearman's. With Pearson correlation of 0,557 the correlation between witnessing sexual harassment and feeling objectified can be considered as positive with a moderate strength. Based on the results of the Pearson linear correlation test (sig<0,001) at a=5%, a =0,05 we can say that there is a statistically significant, positive and strong correlation between witnessing SH and feeling objectified at the workplace.

With Sperman's test obtaining similar results of 0,572 and p-value again < 0,001 it confirms that individuals who witness sexual harassment are also more likely to feel objectified.

That can lead to interpretation that people who feel objectified are emotionally aware and more cautious about their surroundings and pay attention to other people's behaviour. With the feeling of objectification comes continuous stress that can intensify looking out for suspicious interactions of others. All these conclusions are confirmed by the Sperman's and Pearson test.

Correlation between witnessing SH and feeling objectified has already been proven moderate to strong and significant however, Sperman's and Pearson correlation rank was also conducted to examine the relationship between experiencing sexual harassment and feelings of objectification. But there is no statistically significant correlation between experiencing sexual harassment and feeling objectified.

4.2.11 Correlation between experiencing/witnessing SH and impact on career decisions

Table 13 shows the correlation between experiencing SH and the impact on career decisions like leaving the job.

ESHnumeric	Pearson Correlation	1	-,322*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,038
	N	42	42
Did the experience impact your career decisions, such as:.Leaving your job	Pearson Correlation	-,322*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,038	
	N	42	42

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Spearman's rho	ESHnumeric	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-,299
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,054
		N	42	42
	Did the experience impact your career decisions, such as:.Leaving your job	Correlation Coefficient	-,299	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,054	.
		N	42	42

Table 13 Correlation between experiencing SH and its impact on career decisions.

Source: Author's elaboration

Table shows Pearson (parametric) correlation test which indicates a statistically moderate and significant relationship between experiencing SH and making an important career decision because of it such as leaving the job. ($r=-0.32$, $p<0.05$) sig is below 0,05. This finding suggests that experiencing SH in the workplace is correlated with the likelihood of having an impact on their career decisions such as leaving a workplace permanently.

However, Sperman's (non-parametric) correlation test is just above significance threshold (sig = 0.054) which is considered consistent with the previous test, but Spearman is just slightly more conservative due to the data type. It also can be interpreted that results need to be carefully interpreted and replicated with a larger sample.

Table 14 shows correlation between witnessing SH and its effects on the career decisions like leaving your job.

Did the experience impact your career decisions, such as:.Leaving your job	Pearson Correlation	1	-,330*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,033
	N	42	42
WSHnumeric	Pearson Correlation	-,330*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,033	
	N	42	42

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Spearman's rho	Did the experience impact your career decisions, such as:.Leaving your job	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-,352*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,022
		N	42	42
	WSHnumeric	Correlation Coefficient	-,352*	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,022	.
		N	42	42

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 14 Correlation between witnessing SH and its impact on career decisions.

Source: Author's elaboration

Both Sperman and Pearson correlation test shows a statistically significant moderate relationship between witnessing sexual harassment and career decision-making. The findings point that the witnessing SH can influence whether or not a worker would stay ($r= -0.33$, $p<0.05$). This also stresses the importance of working toward a healthy working atmosphere. Given that not only the victim but also the bystanders are impacted by the harassment.

5. Discussion of findings

An objective of the study was to explore the experiences of sexual harassment among early-career professionals. The analysis uncovered important gender differences::

- 47,6% of respondents witnessed SH – 66,7% of women and 13,3% of men;
- 42,9% reported experiencing it – 55,5% of woman and 20% of men;
- 31% of women described experiencing SH as "common" while no men reported this;
- Most common nature of SH is verbal in which 64% is in a form of inappropriate comments;
- Women experience and witness SH more often;
- 31 respondents said the victim was a colleague, showing SH mostly happens between peers;
- There is a strong correlation between SH and thoughts of leaving a job;
- Only 2 out of 21 SH victims reported it which is less than 10%;
- Around 53,3% of people in workplaces with anti-harassment policies still witnessed SH;
- Almost half of the respondents who declared never witnessing SH changed their mind after reading examples of SH presented in survey;
- There is a moderate-to-strong positive correlation between witnessing and experiencing SH ($r = 0{,}588$, $p < 0{,}001$).

Table 15 presents a comparison between the findings of the current study and the conclusions of other studies.

Current study	Study	Takeaway
47.6% witnessed SH; 42.9% experienced SH; 31% experienced it more than once	McLaughlin & Blackstone (2017); McLaughlin et al. (2012)	confirms early-career prevalence and repetition
66.7% of women witnessed SH vs. 13.3% of men; over 55.5% of women experienced SH vs. 20% of men	McLaughlin et al. (2012); Spiliopoulou & Witcomb (2023)	aligns with gender-based exposure and normalization

Most common witnessed forms: 64% inappropriate comments, 26% unwanted sexual attention, 21% physical contact	Cortina & Areguin (2021)	confirms prevalence of subtle, verbal harassment
Only 2 of 21 victims reported the incident; 90% did not take formal action	McDonald (2012); Fernando & Prasad (2019)	supports underreporting and organizational silence
Reporting is negatively correlated with witnessing SH ($r = –0.408$, $p < 0,01$)	Fernando & Prasad (2019)	aligns with organizational silencing and fear of retaliation
Main perpetrators: colleagues (28), supervisors (11), clients (9)	Spiliopoulou & Witcomb (2023); McLaughlin et al. (2012)	peer-to-peer SH is more frequent and normalized
Correlation between experiencing SH and career decisions ($r = –0.322$, $p < 0,05$)	McLaughlin & Blackstone (2017)	confirms career disruption linked to SH

Table 15 Current findings and findings reported in the literature

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 16 is a revisit of research questions and conclude whether the hypotheses are supported or reject.

Research question	Supported?	Notes
Are women more likely than men to witness SH?	Yes	Strong gender difference confirmed.
Are women more likely to than men experience SH?	Yes	High disparity in reported experiences
Does the presence of workplace anti-harassment policies reduce the likelihood of reported experiences of sexual harassment?	No	No significant protective effect observed

Is there an association between witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment and thoughts of leaving one's job or changing career direction?	Yes	Statistically significant correlation with career impact

Tabel 16 Evaluation of research questions

Source: Author's elaboration

Tables above summarize the most significant findings of the study that seem in line with the findings reported in the literature, demonstrating contribution to existing knowledge. As shown, this research aligns with already well-established studies highlighting the prevalence of SH. Additionally, the research uncovered its gendered nature, and its impact on present and future career progression — among early-career professionals. The findings also reinforce the documented trend of underreporting, as supported by McDonald (2012) and Fernando & Prasad (2019), which may be rooted in organizational silencing, fear of repercussions, or normalization of such behaviours. Interestingly, this study offers empirical support for the claim that not only direct victims, but also witnesses of harassment, are significantly affected in terms of career-related decisions, which adds a novel perspective and broadens the discussion about workplace climate and psychological safety.

Moreover, the weak association between the presence of anti-harassment policies and actual reductions in harassment leads to the limitations of structural interventions which echoes McDonald's (2012) concerns about legal compliance versus lived reality. The identification of colleagues as most featuring perpetrators also connects to previous discussions that often centre around hierarchical abuse, suggesting that peer-to-peer harassment may be more normalized in early-career or flat organizational settings. These findings strongly emphasize the importance of addressing both structural and interpersonal dynamics when crafting interventions or educational efforts.

Both RQ1 and RQ2, which evaluated sexual harassment occurrences by gender and sexual harassment-induced differences, were supported by data indicating that women are significantly more likely than men to witness or be treated in such a fashion in the workplace. In contrast, RQ3 was not supported. The presence of workplace anti-harassment policies did not appear to significantly mitigate the prevalence of sexual harassment. This finding stresses the weakness of relying on structural policy alone while disregarding organizational culture or enforcement practices.

RQ4 was also confirmed what exposed that sexual harassment and career-related decisions are said to be strongly correlated as participants who had either experienced or witnessed harassment were more likely to consider changing or even leaving their job.

5.1. Limitations of the study

While this exploratory research does provide some insights into sexual harassment experiences among early-career professionals, yet some limitation of the study itself should be considered and acknowledged:

1. **Small and non-representative sample size**

The study only surveyed 42 participants from Poland, which significantly limits the power of statistical analysis and possibility to generalize the findings. Although the diversity of over 20 job sectors is an effective outcome that provides insight to different kinds of occupations. The sample is too small to confidently conduct the conclusions regarding only one sector where only one representative was present in the survey. However, it is possible to draw conclusions about the whole experiences of early-career professionals.

2. **Imbalance in job sector representatives**

This research included the representation of over 20 different job sectors; however, most of them were represented with one interview participant only. This means that the sample was very broad but shallow, so the ability to conclude industry-specific findings would not be possible. Gastronomy, IT, and architecture formed quite good representation however, may be perceived as overrepresented as compared with the other fields, which could skew conclusion perception.

3. **One time survey appearance**

All data was collected at a single point in time. Without reoccurring the survey after some determined period of time it is impossible to determine any kind of changes of patterns that may occur over time. Perception of participants might change after acknowledgement of even a small amount of information in such a survey. Some occurring incidents may be more visible for them in the future, after being presented with questions they might never have thought about before.

4. **Ambiguity of terminology**

Some of the terms found in the survey like "objectification"; "visual harassment" or "unwanted attention" are open to interpretation and may mean different things to different people. Certain behaviour may be perceived differently or even unharmful based on

someone's beliefs or nature. While categories were defined in questionnaires the variation of participants' understanding and perception of these terms might have a big influence on the results.

5. **Lack of in-depth analysis**

Survey was built only around quantitative data. And that limits the ability to capture emotional, contextual or environmental details and factors that participants' experience when experiencing sexual harassment. Without further research there is no possibility to find out the deeper relation of involved parties, for example how do they interact on a daily basis or do they see each other every day, is the type of company important, is it a type of behaviour that is happening to only one particular person or the predator assaults everyone etc. There is still much to uncover regarding each of the questions and gives the opportunity to further research.

6. **Lack of gender diversity**

Although in the gender section there is a possibility to select "I prefer not to say" there is no "nonbinary", "transgender" or any other gender-diverse individuals that participated in the survey. That limits the results to inclusively men and women and fails to represent non-binary gender individuals. Additionally, even if someone from outside the category male/female conducted the questionnaire there is no division other than "I prefer not to say" which may discourage some people at the beginning and repulse them from completing the study.

5.2. Recommendation for future research

To address the limitations mentioned in the section above and deepen the understanding of SH in early-career professionals context, further stages of research should consider:

- Recruitment of larger number of participants with broader diversification especially among gender and possibly religion;
- Repetition of the study after a certain period of time to check if there is any change in awareness and occurrence of SH;
- Inclusion of qualitative methods to deepen the stories and experiences of participants;
- Gather more representatives of gender diversity like nonbinary and transgender individuals as their experiences may differ from men and women;

- Broaden the participants nationality not only to polish but also other European students to perform a cross-country comparison and experiences of SH.

6. Conclusions

While sexual harassment (SH) in the workplace has been widely studied, most existing research focus only on the Western part of Europe, big corporate environment, or mixed-career populations of mature people. This dissertation contributes to this gap by exploring the experience of early-career professionals in Poland — a demographic group that is significantly underrepresented in the literature. Through quantitative survey data and statistical analysis research confirms that both witnessing and experiencing sexual harassment happens with a disturbing frequency among young professionals, especially among women which often goes unreported and without any consequences for the harasser.

The study further revealed that sexual harassment has a noticeable impact not only on the victims' well-being but also on their career decisions, such as leaving the job. What is more, this impact was also observed among those who have witnessed harassment, pointing to the broader organizational costs of a permissive or unsafe workplace culture.

Despite the presence of workplace policies in some settings, there was no significant evidence to suggest that policy awareness meaningfully reduced the likelihood of harassment. This supports the notion that formal procedures are insufficient without cultural change and organizational accountability.

In summary, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering localized, age-specific, and quantitative insights into how sexual harassment affects early-career professionals — a group that is particularly vulnerable yet critical to shaping the future of the workforce. It calls for both more effective interventions and a shift in focus toward empowering both victims and bystanders to speak up, act, and reshape workplace norms.

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Appendix

Survey questionnaire used in the study

An exploratory study of sexual harassment: experience of early-career professionals

Survey is fully anonymous and will be used to determine whether the sexual harassment is present among young people in Poland and Portugal especially during their first work experiences.

* Required

Demographic Information

Please keep in mind that this study is focusing only on students who study in Poland.

1. What is your age? *

- ◯ 19
- ◯ 20
- ◯ 21
- ◯ 22
- ◯ 23
- ◯ 24
- ◯ 25
- ◯ 26

2. What is your gender? *

- ◯ Woman
- ◯ Man
- ◯ Prefer not to say

3. What is your nationality? *

- ◯ Polish
- ◯ Portuguese
- ◯ Other

4. Describe your level of education

- ◯ High school diploma or equivalent
- ◯ Bachelor's degree
- ◯ Master's degree
- ◯ Doctoral degree
- ◯ Other

5. How many years of professional experience do you have? *

- ◯ Less than 1 year
- ◯ 1 year - 3 years
- ◯ Above 3 years

6. What industry/sector or field do you work in?

Experiences of sexual harassment as a witness

Situations described happened to someone else than you

7. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement *

	Never	Once	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
I have witnessed some behavior in workplace that I perceive as sexual harassment	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed unwanted Sexual comments in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed unwanted sexual jokes in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed unwanted sexual advices in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed unwanted physical contact in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed inappropriate digital communication in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed discussions about sexual relations in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed discussions about sexual stories in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed discussions about sexual fantasies in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have witnessed unwanted touching in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

8. What kind of sexual harassment have you witnessed? (you can choose more than one answer) *

- ☐ Inappropriate comments
- ☐ Unwanted physical contact
- ☐ Unwanted sexual attention

- [ ] Inappropriate digital communication
- [ ] I prefer not to say
- [ ] None

9. What was the nature of the harassment like that you have witnessed? (you can choose more than one answer)

- [ ] Verbal
- [ ] Physical
- [ ] Visual
- [ ] Digital
- [ ] Written
- [ ] I prefer not to say

10. Was the harassment (that you have witnessed) from: (you can choose more than one answer)

- [ ] Colleague
- [ ] Supervisor
- [ ] Client
- [ ] Another individual
- [ ] Other

11. In the harassment situation that you were a witness - who was the victim to a harasser? (you can choose more than one answer)

- [ ] Colleague
- [ ] Direct supervisor
- [ ] Client
- [ ] Indirect supervisor
- [ ] Other

12. Have you reported witnessed behaviour?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I prefer not to say

13. Have you ever been pressured to tolerate inappropriate behaviour that you saw, due to fear of retaliation or losing your job? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe
- ◯ I prefer not to say

Experiences of sexual harassment as a victim

Situations described reflect to your experiences directly

14. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement *

	Never	Once	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
I have experienced some behavior in workplace that I perceive as sexual harassment	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I received unwanted sexual comments in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I was the subject of sexual jokes in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I received unwanted sexual advices in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I experienced unwanted physical contact in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I received inappropriate digital messages in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I discussed my sexual relations in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I participated in discussions about sexual stories in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I participated in discussions about sexual fantasies in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I was touched suggestively (hugged, rugged, leaned to) without my permission in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

	Never	Once	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
I received unwanted sexually explicit photos in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I was being whistled at in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My personal space was invaded without my permission in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I felt objectified in my workplace	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

15. Have you been requested for sexual favours at work? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I prefer not to say

16. Do you experience the feeling that the incidents could be somehow your fault? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I prefer not to say
- ◯ I wasn't the victim of sexual harassment

17. Do you have the impression that other workers believe that the harassment was your fault? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I prefer not to say
- ◯ I wasn't the victim of sexual harassment

18. How did the incident(s) affect your emotional well-being?

- ◯ No impact
- ◯ Mildly upsetting
- ◯ Very distressing
- ◯ Severely distressing
- ◯ I wasn't the victim of sexual harassment

19. How do you assess the impact of the harassment on your: *

	No impact	Low impact	Some impact	Little impact	Big imp
Well being	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Self esteem	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Confidence	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Health	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Sleep	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Productivity	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Family time	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

20. How would you describe your response to the harassment? (you can choose more than one answer) *

- ☐ Ignored it
- ☐ Confronted the harasser
- ☐ Reported it
- ☐ Seek external support
- ☐ Quit job
- ☐ I wasn't the victim of sexual harassment

21. Did the experience impact your career decisions, such as: *

	Yes	No	I prefer not to say
Leaving your job	◯	◯	◯
Transferring to other department	◯	◯	◯
Refusing promotion	◯	◯	◯
Changes in your work routine (like the time of getting coffee)	◯	◯	◯

22. Did you report the incident(s) to a supervisor, HR, or another authority? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I wasn't the victim of sexual harassment

23. Why or why not?

24. If you reported, how was the case handled by your workplace?

- ◯ Satisfactorily resolved
- ◯ Ignored
- ◯ Ongoing
- ◯ Led to backfire
- ◯ I wasn't the victim of sexual harassment

25. Are there workplace policies in a place you work to prevent sexual harassment? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I don't know

26. If they exist how do you assess the effectiveness of these policies? *

- ◯ There are no policies preventing SH in my office
- ◯ I have never heard of SH policies in my workplace
- ◯ They exist but have no real impact on the prevention of sexual harassment
- ◯ They exist but have a limited impact on the prevention of sexual harassment
- ◯ They exist and have a positive impact on the prevention of sexual harassment

27. If they DO NOT exist - do you think adding them would make any difference? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ Probably yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Probably no
- ◯ I don't know

Work environment and preventive actions

28. In your opinion, are discussions about sexual harassment openly encouraged in your professional environment?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I don't know

29. Have you participated in any workplace training sessions on sexual harassment prevention? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

30. Do you feel empowered to intervene or report it, if you witness sexual harassment in the workplace?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

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