

Differences in sensitivity toward situations classified as sexual harassment in the workplace between men and women in Syria

Sexual harassment in the workplace in Syria

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Received 29 October 2023

Revised 21 December 2023

27 December 2023

Accepted 4 January 2024

Abstract

Purpose – Sexual harassment is a pervasive and damaging issue that affects the physical and mental health and well-being of employees in the workplace. It is a serious public health concern that requires urgent attention and action and very dangerous problem in management. Our studies have shown that women are more likely to be the victims of sexual harassment and are more dissatisfied with the situation, organizations have a moral and legal obligation to take proactive measures to prevent and address sexual harassment, including implementing effective policies, providing employee training and fostering a culture of respect and accountability. By doing so, we can create safer, healthier and more productive work environments for all the employees.

Design/methodology/approach – This study consisted of 344 individuals from the Syrian community who completed a questionnaire, that contained statements about harassment to gauge each gender's perception and sensitivity toward it. The questionnaire was carefully designed to include 30 questions, including daily situations in the work environment that may occur and how they are classified by males and females. Is it harassment or not, and about the HR department have personal safety and security standards such as the code of conduct and the rules regulating these behaviors or not and our research project was a collaboration between the two nongovernmental organizations (NGOs): Stemosis and Institute of Human Resources Management (IHRM).

Findings – Our research reveals a distinction between the thinking patterns and coping mechanisms of females and males when it comes to dealing with this phenomenon. We presented various scenarios to our respondents, depicting situations that an individual might face in their everyday life and asked them questions

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related to the definition of harassment, its root causes and strategies for addressing it. Research has shown that women are at a higher risk of experiencing feelings of fear and dissatisfaction when subjected to sexual harassment. This unfortunate reality highlights the need for greater awareness and action to combat such reprehensible behaviors. Save Women!

Research limitations/implications – The study faced several limitations in collecting data due to the sensitive and shameful nature of the topic for both men and women in the Syrian Arab Republic. This caused embarrassment for some participants, leading to their unwillingness to participate in the research. Additionally, the study encountered difficulties in dealing with companies, as they did not accept exposure to such situations and failed to show any codes of conduct under the name of their company, and the participants did not consider certain factors as reasons for harassment. Specifically, 71.2% of participants did not consider inappropriate outfits as a reason for harassment. However, there was a significant difference between the opinions of men and women on this matter (p -value < 0.05). Additionally, political, social and psychological reactions were not considered a reason for harassment by 64.8% of participants.

Practical implications – In our study, there was a situation that one of the respondents (male) was exposed to by the HR manager (female) who was pretending to be a professional, after he confronted her, she threatened him with expulsion from work and despite his annoyance, he ignored her because it was pointless to talk with her and during the study, (44.7%) of the participants had experienced sexual harassment.

Social implications – Victims of sexual harassment experience a similar condition to post-traumatic stress disorder, which can lead to many mental and psychological issues. The overall organizational environment plays a critical role in the well-being of employees. It is widely accepted that victims of violence suffer from a lack of well-being. Employee well-being is based on feelings of happiness and satisfaction that come from a sense of security. According to the Maslow's theory of needs, security is fundamental to people and a toxic workplace environment can destroy an individual's sense of security, negatively impacting their well-being in Syria.

Originality/value – In Syria, society is considered closed about sexual issues and considers it a sensitive issue despite its presence and spread in work environments, as the results showed, and this is one of the challenges we face. Therefore, our study is the first in Syria and the largest that sheds light on this phenomenon clearly, strongly, deeply and directly.

Keywords Behavior management, Human resource management, Mental health, Prevention and management strategy, Sexual harassment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Harassment is usually used to refer to unpleasant sexual actions toward women. This word is not limited to a single meaning. Harassment is classified into five types: sexual, racial, appearance-related, intellectual and political (Rezvan *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, sexual harassment is divided into five types/subtypes: physical, verbal, non-verbal sexual, multimedia sexual harassment and desire for intimacy sexual harassment such as invitations and dates. Sexual harassment does not discriminate based on gender, as both men and women face equal risks of experiencing any form of sexual harassment (Tan *et al.*, 2020; Tan and Kwan, 2022).

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a threat to both employees and organizations. On the one hand, workplace sexual harassment causes internal consequences for victims, including depression, burnout, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. On the other hand, workplace sexual harassment also causes external consequences that emotionally or financially harm stakeholders, including the public, investors, suppliers and shareholders, giving them reasons to think badly of the organization. When stakeholders perceive the organization as responsible for workplace sexual harassment, they may cut ties with it and participate in propagating its negative reputation (Liao *et al.*, 2023).

Sexual harassment of all types is a serious issue. One study indicated that the death rate due to suicide after exposure to sexual harassment is equivalent to the death rate due to cancer. Therefore, workplace sexual harassment should be considered both an occupational hazard and a significant public health problem (Sarkar *et al.*, 2020). Organizations worldwide face a critical problem of violence in the workplace, which is embodied in the five types of sexual harassment mentioned above (Cullen *et al.*, 2018; Cheng *et al.*, 2014; Stutzenberger and Fisher, 2014). According to researchers, workplace violence is an important cause of employee dissatisfaction and poor performance (Chao *et al.*, 2015). It has been a challenge for

organizations to manage the devastating consequences of workplace sexual violence and harassment on employee well-being, relationships with coworkers and overall effectiveness. Failure to address this issue can leave employees feeling insecure and disconnected from their work. Employee engagement refers to the amount of discretionary effort employees put into their jobs (Jóhannsdóttir and Ólafsson, 2004). The nature of the relationship between an organization and its employees determines how employee engagement is described (Groenewold *et al.*, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2019).

According to research conducted by Anderson and Pearson it is a type of behavior that is not easy to detect, yet it can have a significant impact on the workplace environment (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Montgomery, Kane and Vance note that such behavior can lead to poor employee health, lower job satisfaction, lower productivity, commitment and higher employee turnover (Montgomery *et al.*, 2004).

Johnson and Indvik highlighted that it can lead to various negative outcomes such as absenteeism, decreased creativity, increased stress and decreased sense of security among employees within their work environment (Johnson and Indvik, 2001). Lim and Cortina added that this can lead to decreased trust and workgroup performance among employees (Lim and Cortina, 2005).

Therefore, it is essential to create a workplace culture that promotes mutual respect and positive behavior to prevent workplace incivility. By doing so, organizations can create a positive and safe work environment that enhances employee satisfaction within their work environment and helps increase their participation and productivity in performing the work assigned to them.

The prevalence of exposure to harassment in different countries differs from the prevalence of sensitivity to harassment. Therefore, economically advanced nations across the globe embrace a culture of gender equality, resulting in a higher prevalence of women experiencing harassment. However, working women perceive a comparatively lower rate of sexual harassment in these countries (Otterbach *et al.*, 2021).

While research suggests that women tend to experience higher levels of dissatisfaction in cases of sexual harassment compared to men, it is important to note that men also acknowledge the existence of dangerous and threatening instances of harassment, such as sexual coercion and abuse of power. This means that more studies on sexual harassment in men are needed (Berdahl *et al.*, 1996). The difference in perception of the subject of harassment is reflected in the different reactions of the victim to harassment. Tolerance of sexual harassment depends on the victim's perception of the harassment (is it an opportunity for promotion or a threat?).

They suggest that managers should nurture social support, along with five other aspects of the work environment, to improve the well-being of workers. However, tolerance still has an end point. When organizations do not take appropriate action, victims may report the problem to authorities. Therefore, it is crucial to implement protective policies within the workplace, as everyone has their limits of tolerance in any given situation (Tan *et al.*, 2020).

Material and methods

Study design

This cross-sectional study was conducted over a period of seven months from February 26 to March 20, 2023 among the Syrian population. This utilized internet-based survey conducted through the Google Form platform. We went through several stages to prepare for the research, such as holding brainstorming meetings after thoroughly revision of similar studies in the literature to create the survey which consisted of Arabic-language questions, primarily employing multiple choice and closed-end formats. However, certain questions allowed participants to provide additional answers. To ensure relevance and clarity, a team of four

experts evaluated the questions, and a preliminary version of the survey was piloted with 30 participants to gauge its comprehensibility and ease of response, some adjustments were made to it until it reached its final form. The questionnaire was accompanied by an informative introduction to the study and its purpose, highlighting the voluntary nature of the survey. However, informed consent was collected to ensure ethical compliance (see [Supplement Material](#)).

Participants

We recruited participants through the Institute of Human Resources Management (IHRM), which helped distribute our questionnaire to a large number of employees in Syria. The survey was distributed through various channels, including professional and private social media groups such as Facebook and WhatsApp as well as via email – leveraging IHRM’s extensive contacts at various companies to reach a diverse representative sample. Participants were also encouraged to forward the survey to their colleagues. A total of 344 individuals including both men and women participated, with survey links allowing only a single response per respondent to prevent duplicate participation. While beginning as an opinion poll, the project evolved into a research study with the IHRM’s assistance in recruiting participants from its broad professional network.

Sample size

The number of samples (n) was calculated using Cochran’s formula, assuming a confidence level of 95.5% ($Z = 2$). The margin of error (e) was set at 10%, while the proportion (p) of the population with the attribute in question was estimated at 50% (or 0.5). The value of q was determined as 1-p.

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2} = \frac{(2)^2 * 0.5 * 0.5}{(0.1)^2} = 100$$

The previous formula requires a minimum sample size of 100 (n) for the study

If we reduce the margin of error from 10 to 5%, we need to increase the sample size to 400.

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2} = \frac{(2)^2 * 0.5 * 0.5}{(0.05)^2} = 400$$

Therefore, based on a confidence level of 95.5% and a margin of error between 5 and 10%, our research required a sample size of 100–400 participants. We were able to collect 344 questionnaires, which fell within this range. Our original goal was to achieve a margin of error of 5%, which would have required us to collect 400 questionnaires. However, due to unforeseen difficulties during the collection process, we were unable to obtain more than 344 questionnaires after a full month of effort ([Darjazini Nahas et al., 2023](#)).

Measurement

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part gathered sociodemographic information such as the respondent’s age, gender, place of residence and employment status (whether they worked at a governmental, private company, NGOs, volunteer team, etc.). It also asked about the respondent’s highest level of education. These data are presented in [Table 1](#). The second part of the questionnaire presented five scenarios that are commonly encountered in the workplace. The participants were asked if they considered each scenario to be harassment or not. The results are shown in [Table 2](#). The third and final part of the questionnaire consisted of various questions related to the participants’ personal opinions about harassment. They were

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Demographic information	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Women	253	73.5
Man	91	26.5
<i>Age</i>		
18–25	158	45.9
25–35	141	41
35–45	34	9.9
45≤	11	3.2
<i>Place of residence</i>		
Damascus	227	66.2
Damascus countryside	66	19.2
Otherwise	50	14.5
<i>Educational level</i>		
Postgraduate	66	19.2
University degree	241	70.3
Average institute	23	6.7
Secondary	12	3.5
Basic education	1	0.3
<i>Workplace</i>		
Governmental institution	37	10.8
Private company	193	56.3
NGO	22	6.4
Volunteer team	37	10.8
I do not work	20	5.8
Otherwise	34	9.9

Table 1.
Demographic information

Source(s): Table by authors

Agree about the situations (yes)	Females	Males	<i>p</i> -value ^a	Results
Q1. Asking for personal matters	37.7% (95)	30.8% (28)	>0.05	No difference
Q2. Asking for work in a private place	92.1% (232)	57.1% (52)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Q3. Touching to congratulate your efforts	53.6% (135)	22.0% (20)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Q4. Expressing admiration for the outfit and asking to wear it again	65.5% (165)	69.2% (63)	>0.05	No difference
Q5. Suggesting a movie with unsuitable scenes	63.9% (161)	40.7% (37)	<0.05	Significant difference*

Table 2.
Differences in sensitivity toward situations classified as sexual harassment in the workplace between men and women

Note(s): a: Pearson chi-square test; *: *p*-value <0.05

Source(s): Table by authors

asked about the causes of harassment if they had experienced harassment before, and how they dealt with it. Additionally, they were asked if their workplace had adequate protection measures in place to prevent harassment. The results are presented in [Tables 3–5](#).

Data analyses

To analyze the research data, statistical tests were used, specifically nominal and ordinal data since the majority of the data were reported as numbers and ratios. To avoid missing values in

	Females	Males	<i>p</i> -value ^a	Results
<i>Q6 "What determines whether the previous behaviors were harassment or not"</i>				
The work environment	26.1% (66)	19.8% (18)	0.230	No difference
Nature of relationship	78.7% (199)	68.1% (62)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Person knows the other	42.7% (108)	39.6% (36)	0.604	No difference
Religious commitment	27.3% (69)	27.5% (25)	0.971	No difference
Society's perception	10.3% (26)	13.2% (12)	0.448	No difference
Socialization	37.9% (96)	39.6% (36)	0.786	No difference
The situation effects on the person	46.2% (117)	40.7% (37)	0.358	No difference
<i>Q8 "If you were exposed to one of the previous situations, how you manage the problem"</i>				
Leave the job	9.5% (24)	1.1% (1)	<0.05	Significant difference*
File a complaint	41.9% (106)	16.5% (15)	<0.05	
Confront the harasser	69.6% (176)	54.9% (50)	<0.05	
Submit a request to transfer them to another department	11.5% (29)	3.3% (3)	<0.05	
Will do nothing	7.9% (20)	33.0% (30)	<0.05	
<i>Q9 "What would happen if you told your boss that you were harassed?"</i>				
Ignore to avoid problems	34.9% (88)	31.9% (29)	0.125	No difference
Fire the employee and hold him accountable	23.0% (58)	13.2% (12)		
Fire you	1.2% (3)	1.1% (1)		
Move one of you to another section	31.0% (78)	36.3% (33)		
Extra opinions	9.9% (25)	17.6% (16)		
<i>Q10 "Do you have any of the following protections in your workplace that protect employees from harassment?"</i>				
Code of conduct	13.8% (35)	15.4% (14)	0.717	No difference
File a complaint	36.8% (93)	30.8% (28)	0.305	
Hotline	6.7% (17)	11.0% (10)	0.194	
There are none of the previous protections	57.7% (146)	57.1% (52)	0.926	
Note(s): Table contains just who said yes, and % of gender				
a: Pearson chi-square test; *: <i>p</i> -value <0.05				
Source(s): Table by authors				

Table 3. Differences in sensitivity toward situations classified as sexual harassment in the workplace between men and women

some questions, the valid percentage was utilized. To determine the correlation between gender and variables related to harassment, a Chi-Square test was employed. For multiple choice questions, a TRUF analysis was utilized. Statistical significance was determined as a *p* < 0.05 for all purposes. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-25) was used for all analyses.

Results

Sociodemographic information

The majority of respondents were women (73.5%), aged 18–25 (45.9%), living in Damascus (66.2%), holding a university degree (70.3%) and working in a private company (56.3%) (Table 1).

Gender differences in perceptions of harassment situations

According to results, there was a notable difference in the opinions or perceptions of men and women regarding some harassment situations, while most women considered asking for work in a private place, touching to congratulate efforts and suggesting a movie with unsuitable scenes as harassment, the majority of men did not (*p*-value = 0.00, 0.02, 0.00, respectively). However, both genders did view expressing admiration for someone's outfit

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	Females	Males	<i>p</i> -value ^a	Results
<i>Q11 "The existing proceedings are enough to reduce harassment?"</i>				
Yes	11.1% (28)	9.9% (9)	0.279	No difference
No	59.5% (150)	51.6% (47)		
To some extent	29.4% (74)	38.5% (35)		
<i>Q12 "What is the definition of harassment for you?"</i>				
Touch	92.9% (235)	73.6% (67)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Temptation	67.6% (171)	75.8% (69)	0.142	No difference
Asking for the phone number	20.2% (51)	15.4% (14)	0.318	No difference
Stalking	59.3% (150)	49.5% (45)	0.104	No difference
Sending inappropriate content	85.0% (215)	70.3% (64)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Staring	77.1% (195)	68.1% (62)	0.092	No difference
Sexually voices	85.0% (215)	78.0% (71)	0.128	No difference
Sexual gestures	89.7% (227)	80.2% (73)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Proposal to go out with sexual meaning	82.6% (209)	63.7% (58)	<0.05	Significant difference*
<i>Q13 "What are the reasons for harassment in your opinion?"</i>				
Suppression	65.2% (165)	64.8% (59)	0.948	No difference
Bad education	75.5% (191)	72.5% (66)	0.577	No difference
Psychological disorders	73.9% (187)	56.0% (51)	<0.05	Significant difference*
No legal deterrent	66.4% (168)	44.0% (44)	<0.05	Significant difference*
No social deterrent	78.7% (199)	49.5% (45)	0.001	Significant difference*
Inappropriate outfits	22.5% (57)	46.2% (42)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Political, social and psychological reactions	37.2% (94)	29.7% (27)	0.200	No difference
Socialize between men and women	15.4% (39)	28.6% (26)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Poor living conditions	31.2% (79)	48.4% (44)	<0.05	Significant difference*
Free time	44.3% (112)	42.9% (39)	0.816	No difference

Note(s): Table contains just who said yes, and % of gender

a: Pearson chi-square test; *: *p*-value <0.05

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 4. Differences in sensitivity toward situations classified as sexual harassment in the workplace between men and women

		Reach	%
<i>Q6 "What determines whether the previous behaviors were harassment or not"</i>			
96% of the participants in the research chose the previous answers as an answer to the question			
	Add Nature of relationship	261	76
	Add How the situation effects	304	88
	Add Socialization	320	93
	Add Religious commitment	330	96
<i>Q12 "What is the definition of harassment for you?"</i>			
99% of the participants in the research chose the previous answers as an answer to the question			
	Add Touch	302	88
	Add Gestures	329	96
	Add Go out with sexual meaning	336	98
	Add Sexual voices	339	99
<i>Q13 "What are the reasons for harassment in your opinion?"</i>			
96% of the participants in the research chose the previous answers as an answer to the question			
	Add Bad education	261	76
	Add Social deterrent	304	88
	Add Suppression	320	93
	Add No goals in life	330	96

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 5. TRUF analysis for multiple choice questions, the respondents (reach) answer

and asking them to wear it again as harassment (p -value < 0.05). Besides, males and females did not consider asking for personal information or matters at the start of a new job as harassment (p -value < 0.05). It is important to note that 56.3% of respondents have not experienced any of the situations mentioned. Therefore, their response reflects their classification of the situation if it occurs with them or others (Table 2, Figure 1).

Gender differences in identifying factors affecting harassment perceptions

In general, most of both genders agreed on that work environment 75.6%, level of prior knowledge 58.1%, religious commitment 72.7%, society’s perception 89%, socialization 61.6% and personal impact 55.2% do not determine whether a situation is considered harassment or not (p -value > 0.05). However, there was a significant difference in opinions between the two genders on nature of relationships as a determinants of harassment (p -value: $0.04 < 0.05$), with 78.7% of women agreeing compared to a lower percentage of men. Additionally, it should be noted that while most respondents held the above opinions, there were seven individuals who expressed a different viewpoint. They believed that individual morals, intellectual affinity and the person’s feelings toward the situation ultimately determine whether it qualifies as harassment or not (Table 3).

Gender differences in personal reaction to harassment

According to Table 3, there was a huge difference between both genders on handling harassment situations. Unlike women, most men stated that they would not leave their job or file a complaint or request department transfer (p -value: $0.00 < 0.05$). In addition, unlike men, most women (69.6%) mentioned that they would confront the person responsible for the harassment (p -value: $0.00 < 0.05$). Lastly, 85.5% of respondents stated that they would do nothing if faced with harassment. Among women, the majority (92.1%) agreed with this approach, and the difference in opinions between men and women was statistically significant (p -value: $0.00 < 0.05$) (Figure 2).

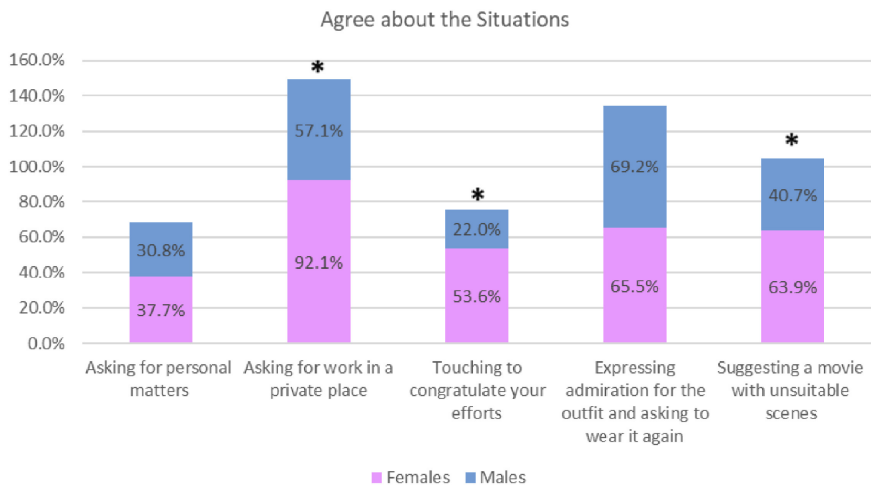
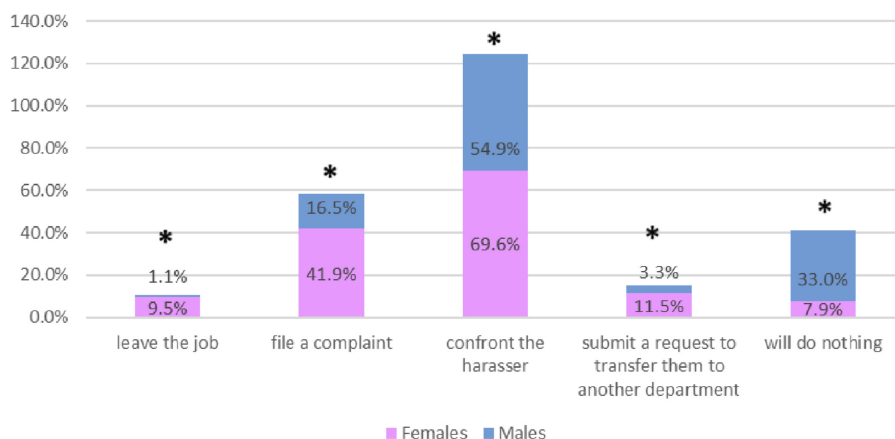


Figure 1. Situations classified as sexual harassment in the workplace

Note(s): *Significant difference between men and women
Source(s): Figure by authors



Note(s): * Significant difference between men and women

Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 2. If you were exposed to one of the previous situations, how you manage the problem

Expected management reaction

Around 34.1% of respondents stated that their bosses would ignore the situation to avoid problems. However, there was no significant difference between the opinions of men and women regarding their boss's reaction (p -value of 0.125). Out of the respondents, 28 individuals expressed additional opinions on how their bosses would handle the situation. Some mentioned that they would choose to ignore the situation, while others would avoid the harasser altogether. Some respondents also mentioned that their bosses would address the issue kindly with the harasser.

Availability of workplace protections

Results revealed that there was no significant statistical difference between the policies implemented in workplaces for men and women (p -value>0.05). The majority of the total participants (85.6%) indicated that their workplace lacks a code of conduct. In addition, (64.8%) stated that they do not have the option to file a complaint, while (92.2%) reported the absence of a hotline for reporting harassment. Furthermore, (57.6%) of respondents noted that none of the mentioned protections are in place (Table 3). Unfortunately, this suggests that many employees are working without adequate job security.

Sufficiency of current measures

When asked whether the current measures are adequate in reducing harassment, 57.4% of both genders answered "no." This result, presented in (Table 4), indicates that both men and women hold similar views on the effectiveness of the existing measures in addressing workplace harassment (p -value of 0.279). Additionally, 23 respondents provided suggestions for potential solutions, including implementing strict laws with penalties for harassers, terminating their employment, segregating male and female employees, installing surveillance cameras, raising awareness and promoting the reporting of harassment incidents.

Gender differences in defining harassment

There were significant differences between men and women in considering certain behaviors as constituting harassment. There were significant differences between men and women in considering

certain behaviors as constituting harassment. A large majority of women (92.9%) viewed physical touch as harassment, compared to 73.6% of men ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, 85% of women believed sending inappropriate content were harassment, versus 70.3% of men ($p < 0.05$). Significant differences were also seen in viewing sexual gestures (89.7% women vs 80.2% men, $p = 0.02$) and propositions with sexual meaning (82.6% women vs 63.7% men, $p < 0.05$) as harassment. However, there were no significant gender differences in considering temptation, asking for a phone number, stalking, staring or sexual voices as harassment ($p > 0.05$ for all) (Table 3) (see Figure 3).

Gender differences in defining the root causes of harassment

The results highlighted gendered perspectives on the root causes of harassment (Table 5, Figure 4). Both men and women largely agreed that suppressive environments and lack of education fuel harassment, while dismissing political, social, psychological reactions and excess free time as key factors ($p > 0.05$ for all). However, significant differences emerged regarding views on psychological disorders and inadequate legal deterrents underlying harassment, with women showing much higher agreement (73.9 and 66.4% respectively) than men ($p < 0.05$). Additionally, men were more inclined than women to cite provocative dressing, mixed-gender socializing and adverse living conditions as reasons for harassment ($p < 0.05$), whereas women rejected these notions. It is worth noting that five respondents had additional reasons for harassment, including managers abusing their power and a lack of awareness and morals. These results are shown in Table 4.

Discussion

Our study showed that 75% of cases of harassment at work are not disclosed because victims believe that their complaint will be ignored or result in severe consequences and retaliatory situations, especially if the harasser holds a high position and enjoys organizational protection (Mathews et al., 2019). Other studies have also confirmed these findings. It was found that the necessary measures were taken in only 15.2% of cases, while 41.3% of complaints were ignored. In addition, women may feel uncomfortable creating a poor work

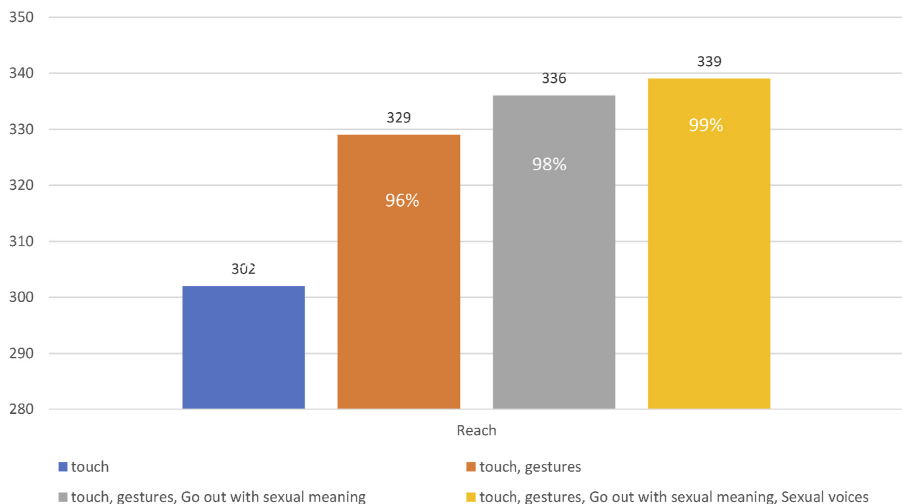
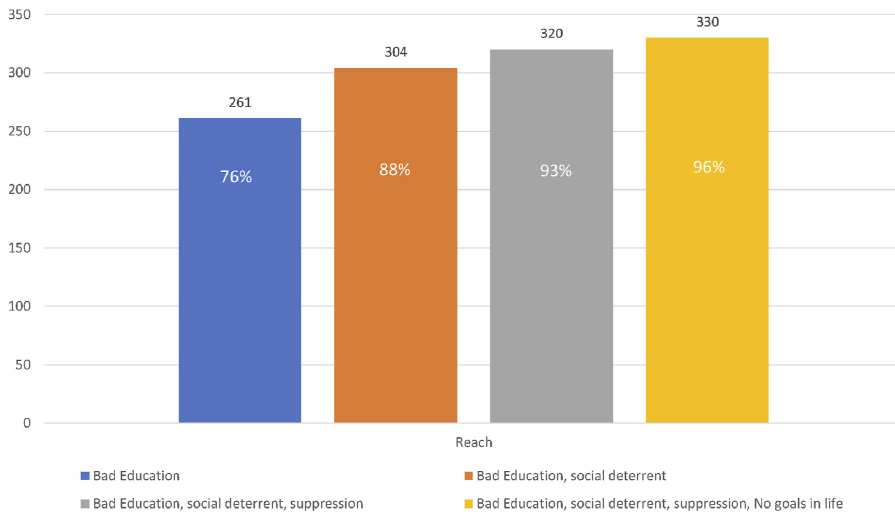


Figure 3. Q12 “What is the definition of harassment for you?”

Source(s): Figure by authors



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 4.
Q13 “What are the reasons for harassment in your opinion”

atmosphere (Umnikrishnan *et al.*, 2010). Our study showed that 58.1% of women and 83.5% of men would not file a complaint and 34.1% of respondents believed their complaints would be ignored.

The overall organizational environment is a major concern when it comes to the well-being of employees. A toxic work environment refers to harsh and violent treatment of individuals, endangering the safety and health of employees (Rasool *et al.*, 2020). Although the impact of such an environment is felt in every organization, very few workers are willing to report such behavior for personal reasons (Taylor and Rew, 2011). This reluctance on the part of victims to speak up makes it challenging for researchers to study and address the issue (Berquist *et al.*, 2018). However, it is widely acknowledged that victims of violence suffer from a lack of well-being. Employee well-being refers to the feeling of happiness and satisfaction that arises from a sense of security (Avey *et al.*, 2010). According to the Maslow’s theory of needs, security is a fundamental concern for people and a toxic workplace environment destroys a person’s sense of security, thereby hurting their well-being (Maslow, 1958).

Moreover, organizational support plays a crucial role in employee engagement. Numerous studies have examined the psychological processes that foster employee engagement (Carloodoardi *et al.*, 2015; Jawad Abbas, 2019; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Personal engagement, on the other hand, pertains to the extent of employees’ physical, cognitive and emotional investment in their work roles. When employees are personally engaged, they are more likely to perform better in their jobs and experience a greater sense of overall well-being. Besides, this type of environment ensures that employees feel valued, respected, and safe at work, which motivates them to engage more passionately with their work. When employees are psychologically available, they have the necessary mental and emotional resources to invest in their work roles (Kahn, 1990).

However, studies indicate that women are more dissatisfied with situations involving sexual harassment compared to men. Moreover, men tend to be less sensitive to situations that women perceive as sexual harassment. While men consider sexual coercion as the most harmful form of sexual harassment, they can also experience harassment from both women and men. In a research paper that included two studies, the first study aimed to test the hypothesis that men are less likely to feel harassed compared to women. The second

study sought participants' opinions on situations where women and men may perceive harassment differently, specifically focusing on the sexual harassment of men. The findings of the first study revealed that men reported being less bothered by generalized sexual harassment, slightly more bothered by unwanted sexual attention and most disturbed by sexual coercion. These findings support the idea that men have higher thresholds for perceiving harassment (Cullen *et al.*, 2018). To expand on the previous research, our study conducted surveys among both men and women to obtain their viewpoints on different situations and whether they classified them as instances of harassment. The findings, showcased in Table 2, vividly illustrate discrepancies between men and women in how they perceive behaviors that could potentially be considered harassing across various scenarios.

Moreover, the impact of harassment varies depending on cultural factors. For instance, feminist cultures promote non-aggression among individuals, whereas masculine cultures tend to encourage assertiveness (Otterbach *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, studies indicate that in female-dominated organizations, men may experience higher rates of harassment from women, while the opposite may occur in male-dominant organizations (Otterbach *et al.*, 2021). According to a study, men can be subjected to sexual harassment by women in positions of power within female-dominated organizations. A male participant's comment provides clarity on this issue: "some women abused the power given to them. In some cases, this has led to a type of reverse sexual harassment where coworkers of the woman are present and threatened with disciplinary action for failing to make her happy" (Berdahl *et al.*, 1996).

Similarly, in our study, one male respondent shared his experience of facing harassment from a female human resources manager who initially appeared professional. When he confronted her inappropriate behavior, she threatened to terminate his employment. While he was understandably annoyed, he chose not to engage further as he believed it would be unproductive. However, Syria, known for its male-driven culture (Lee and Oh, 2021), tends to allocate most positions to men, creating a sense of masculine authority in the workplace. This situation poses a threat to working women, leading them to be more vigilant and sensitive to instances of harassment, as evidenced by our study.

Sexual harassment has significant consequences on various levels, including public, physical, mental health and occupational and societal aspects. Victims of sexual harassment experience decreased job satisfaction, reduced affiliation and commitment to their organizations and a decline in job performance. Studies also demonstrate a link between harassment and negative mental health outcomes (Street *et al.*, 2007). Victims may report physical symptoms referred to as "diseases of adaptation," such as headaches, sleep disturbances and gastrointestinal disorders. Moreover, exposure to sexual harassment in the workplace can contribute to an increased incidence of infections due to heightened anxiety, which affects immune function. Regarding mental health, individuals who experience sexual harassment in the workplace may suffer from a condition similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, as it is often an unexpected and traumatic event (Chan *et al.*, 2008). A study examining the relationship between sexual harassment and mental health found a clear association between depression, feelings of failure and exposure to sexual harassment (Abdullah Aloraier *et al.*, 2022).

Successful women rely on self-motivation rather than external motivation in the workplace, which enables them to adapt to their jobs more effectively. This self-motivation makes them more flexible and less sensitive to the perception of harassment, demonstrating their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities (Fathima *et al.*, 2020). This can be explained in our study of the Syrian society, which is dominated by the supportive nature of males and views women as submissive and weak, which reduces the self-esteem of women and makes them anxious and sensitive. Furthermore, studies have examined the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and workplace harassment, with neuroticism found to be the trait most strongly

associated with exposure to harassment (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). Women tend to exhibit higher levels of neuroticism than men, which may increase their vulnerability to experiencing harassment (Rodríguez-Ramos *et al.*, 2021). It is essential to take action to empower and support women in building their personalities and mental well-being. Implementing strict penalties for reporting harassment cases in the workplace and promoting gender balance can be effective solutions to mitigate instances of harassment (Fathima *et al.*, 2020).

Given the seriousness of sexual harassment and the aforementioned risks, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of finding solutions and implementing appropriate guidelines. Workplace violence, whether physical or psychological, negatively impacts employees, leading to reduced personal engagement and productivity. Conversely, a supportive work environment and organizational culture can help mitigate violence in the workplace and enhance employee engagement.

Unfortunately, in Syria, policies promoting a safe and comfortable work environment are not widespread, and the workplace code of conduct is often not communicated effectively. This lack of moral discipline and failure to protect the rights of harassment victims, particularly women who may feel unsafe, can occur. In the absence of appropriate administrative action, female employees are more likely to perceive situations as harassment compared to their male colleagues (Kahn, 1990). Creating a supportive workplace environment that nurtures employee health, satisfaction and personal investment can boost an organization's productivity, retention and bottom line.

To summarize the guidelines and solutions, effective programs to combat sexual harassment in the workplace should include the following elements: (1) a clear policy, (2) a statement outlining prohibited behaviors, (3) encouragement for employees to report complaints, (4) protections for complainants, (5) privacy safeguards, (6) regular management training and employee awareness programs and (7) prompt corrective actions to stop ongoing harassment (Wang, 2022). There is not yet enough research to show which workplace policies and procedures work best to prevent sexual harassment. However, an organization's tolerance of sexual harassment likely influences how prevalent it is (Willness *et al.*, 2007). In addressing this issue, providing training on what constitutes sexual harassment and the organization's policies regarding it can be beneficial in helping employees, particularly men, recognize and identify unwanted sexual behavior, such as touching, as sexual harassment (Antecol and Cobb-Clark, 2003). This training can raise awareness and foster adherence to the norm within the work groups.

Along with training, organizations should emphasize prevention by issuing strong policy statements that demonstrate a zero-tolerance policy toward sexual harassment. A safe and secure mechanism for reporting complaints of sexual harassment, with safeguards against retaliation, should also be provided. In many workplaces, counseling and support are offered to victims. Having a training program and a clear complaints procedure can also protect the organization against legal liability (McCann, 2005).

Conclusion

In Syria, sexual matters are regarded as sensitive topics within society, despite their existence and prevalence in work environments. The findings of this study highlighted this societal inclination toward secrecy, which presented itself as one of the challenges encountered during the research process. Therefore, our study is the first in Syria and the largest to shed light on this phenomenon clearly, deeply and directly.

The key conclusion from our research is that Syrian companies currently lack adequate policies and procedures to prevent workplace sexual harassment. We found no evidence of codes of conduct governing employee relationships, awareness campaigns on harassment, or even signage on what constitutes inappropriate behaviors. Participants highlighted the

critical need for more awareness-raising to create safe, positive work environments where all employees can thrive without feeling threatened. Victims of harassment can suffer post-traumatic stress, leading to adverse mental and psychological outcomes. An organizational culture that makes employees feel secure is essential for their wellbeing. However, toxic environments can destroy people's sense of safety, negatively impacting happiness and satisfaction as per Maslow's hierarchy. In Syria's male-dominated corporate culture, women feel particularly vulnerable to harassment with most leadership roles held by men. Implementing robust anti-harassment programs is crucial to empower women and enable healthy development. Women also tend to be more anxious and neurotic, making them more affected by stressful situations like harassment. Additionally, further research on men's experiences as victims is warranted. Our findings reveal being female correlates to greater distress from sexual harassment. Shedding more light on how these behaviors impact men at work can facilitate more inclusive and compassionate environments.

Limitations

The study faced several challenges and limitations in collecting data due to the sensitive and shameful nature of the topic for both men and women in the Syrian Arab Republic. This caused embarrassment for some participants, leading to their unwillingness to participate in the research. Additionally, the study encountered difficulties in dealing with companies, as they did not accept exposure to such situations and failed to show any codes of conduct under the name of their company.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all respondents for taking part in the study and we would like to express our gratitude to the Institute of Human Resources Management (IHRM) and Stemosis for Scientific Research, two Syrian NGOs, for their invaluable support in our research. We deeply appreciate their assistance in facilitating our meetings, gathering data and providing a conducive environment for scientific research. We would also like to extend our thanks to Dr Majd Hanna from Stemosis for her exceptional academic writing support and to Dr Osama Al Horani for his invaluable research consultation and the lawyer Mulham Asaad with Nahla Alkordi from IHRM for their efforts in collecting data and her opinion on designing the questionnaire.

Abbreviations: *Stemosis*: Stemosis for scientific research, a Syrian nongovernmental organization (NGO) licensed by "the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research by Resolution No. 5/011006/54 on the date 16/4/2021" and "the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor by Resolution No. 2395 on the date 2/10/2021", we aims to enhance scientific research in Syria among youth researcher in many specializations and raise the classification of Syrian universities through scientific publishing in highly rated international peer-reviewed journals; *IHRM*: Institute of Human Resources Management, a Syrian nongovernmental organization (NGO).

Availability of data and materials: The datasets collected and analyzed during the current study are available. Some restrictions apply to the availability of these data but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval was not required for this study as it did not involve any interventional procedures. However, all participants willingly provided their consent through a questionnaire, from which the data was collected. Moreover, the study was conducted under the supervision of two Syrian NGOs, namely the IHRM and Stemosis for scientific research (a Syria-based youth association for scientific research). This was done to ensure that high ethical and scientific standards were met during the study.

Consent for publication: As a part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked for their informed consent.

Competing interests: The authors state that they have no conflicts of interest, whether financial or nonfinancial.

Authors' contribution: Nafiza Martini with Imad-Addin Almasri are the first author equally. Imad-Addin Almasri: Conceptualization, methodology, designed the experiments, analyzed and interpreted the data, editing and reviewing. Nafiza Martini: drafting, editing, reviewing and bibliography. Sedra Al kadamani: translating, editing and reviewing. Ensaf Maasarani: translating, editing and reviewing. Munir Abas: is the supervisor and also, contributing to editing and reviewing.

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Supplement material



sexual harassment in the workplace.



We believe that people are creative in their work within a safe environment and based on our approach towards making a positive impact on the issue of harassment in work environments and developing human resources procedures in this field.

The Human Resources Management and the Stemosis for Scientific Research Sent to you “sexual Harassment in the Workplace” questionnaire to study the reality of harassment in the workplace within Damascus Governorate and its countryside.

The questionnaire includes a set of situations in the form of questions. We hope that they will be answered based on your opinion/personal experience in the field of work.

Note that your participation in the answer is voluntary and optional, and filling out the questionnaire means that you agree to participate in the research, noting that the data that will be collected will only be used for research and development purposes, and will be treated with complete confidentiality.

Thank you very much for the effort and time you gave us when filling out the survey.

Demographic information					
Gender	<input type="radio"/> man	<input type="radio"/> women			
Age	<input type="radio"/> 25 - 18	<input type="radio"/> 35 – 26	<input type="radio"/> 35 – 45	<input type="radio"/> 45+	
Place of residence	<input type="radio"/> Damascus	<input type="radio"/> Damascus Countryside	<input type="radio"/> other		
Educational level	<input type="radio"/> Postgraduate	<input type="radio"/> University degree	<input type="radio"/> Average Institute	<input type="radio"/> secondary education	<input type="radio"/> Basic education
Workplace	<input type="radio"/> Governmental	<input type="radio"/> Private company	<input type="radio"/> NGO	<input type="radio"/> Volunteer team	<input type="radio"/> other

sexual harassment in the workplace.

Now we will present a group of situations. We hope that you read them carefully to determine the type of behaviors according to the options available in each question, then answer the questions based on your personal experience in your workplace.

Note: There is no right or wrong answer. Just answer as you see the situation from your opinion and point of view.

Daily situations at work	Yes	No
During the first period of work, your co-worker requested your contact information from the administration. Then she started texting you outside of work hours to talk about personal matters and daily details. In your opinion, does this incident constitute harassment?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
At the end of the official working day, your co-worker asked you to come home in the evening to complete the work out of sight of the employees. In your opinion, is this incident harassment?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your co-worker patted you on the shoulder in praise of your efforts on a project. In your opinion, is this behavior considered harassment?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your co-worker bought new pants and the next day she told you that the pants were very beautiful and asked you to always wear them. In your opinion, is your colleague's behavior harassing?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Over the weekend, your coworker recommended her favorite movie to you, and after watching it, you discovered that there were many inappropriate sex scenes in it. Is this harassment?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Are you experiencing any of the above incidents within your workplace?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If you were exposed to one of the previous situations, how would you behave?		
I do nothing	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Submit a request to be transferred to another department	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Confront the employee.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Make a complaint.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Leave work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
If you tell your manager at work, how do you expect his/her reaction to be?		
Transfer one of you to another department	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Getting YOU fired from your job	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Firing the employee and holding him accountable	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Ignore the topic to avoid problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	



sexual harassment in the workplace.



Below is a set of questions about your opinion about harassment and its causes.

In your opinion, what determines whether previous behaviors constitute sexual harassment or not?		
The extent to which the situation affects the person.		<input type="checkbox"/>
Your social upbringing		<input type="checkbox"/>
Work environment		<input type="checkbox"/>
The nature of the relationship between the two parties		<input type="checkbox"/>
How long you have known the other person.		<input type="checkbox"/>
Religious commitment		<input type="checkbox"/>
Society's view		<input type="checkbox"/>
Does your workplace have any of the following protective measures that protect employees in the event of harassment?		
nothing		<input type="checkbox"/>
Hot line		<input type="checkbox"/>
Make a complaint		<input type="checkbox"/>
Code of conduct		<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you think that existing procedures are sufficient to reduce harassment?		
<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> NO	<input type="radio"/> Maybe
In your opinion, what are the Actions that can reduce the phenomenon of harassment in the workplace?		
<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>		

Below is a set of questions about your opinion about harassment and its causes.	
In your opinion, what is harassment?	
Touch	<input type="checkbox"/>
Temptation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asking for phone number	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tracking and stalking	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sending inappropriate content	<input type="checkbox"/>
squinting	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sounds with sexual connotations	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual comments and gestures	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making suggestions to go out that may have an implicit or explicit sexual nature.	<input type="checkbox"/>
What are Reasons for harassment in your opinion	
Lack of societal deterrent "society collusion with the harasser"	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poor living situation (inability to marry)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of goal or purpose in life	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reaction for psychological, social, and political reasons	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inappropriate dress code for the workplace	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of legal deterrent	<input type="checkbox"/>
Psychological disorder	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bad education	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socialize	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual repression	<input type="checkbox"/>

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