

Workplace Sexual Harassment and Productivity Loss Prevention

Subjects: [Womens Studies](#) | [Industrial Relations & Labor](#) | [Social Issues](#)

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Workplace sexual harassment (WSH) is a severe problem affecting millions of women's wholeness and well-being worldwide. WSH refers to unwanted sexual advances, unwelcome requests for sexual favors, verbal or physical conduct or gestures of a sexual nature, or any other sexual behavior that may be offensive, humiliating, or intimidating in the work environment.

[equitable management](#)

[sexual harassment at work](#)

[labor productivity](#)

[social conflicts](#)

1. Introduction

In the workplace, critical events such as health epidemics, social conflicts, and natural disasters present challenges that can be devastating to the survival of companies ^[1]. These challenges can manifest in forms such as significant productivity losses, increased turnover intention, and the emergence of disruptive behaviors, including workplace sexual harassment and other counterproductive behaviors. In response to these crises, many organizations may be tempted to scale back preventive measures against gender-based violence, focusing on the immediate survival of the business. While this strategy may seem pragmatic in the short term, evidence does not support its long-term effectiveness.

In November 2022, Peru began to experience a series of social conflicts that developed into a social crisis. Initially, a self-coup d'état was ordered by former President Pedro Castillo. Then, the population demanded changes in the political constitution, requested the resignation of President Dina Boluarte, and requested the release of Pedro Castillo from imprisonment ^[2]. Additionally, the arrival of Cyclone Yaku in March 2023 and the beginning of the "El Niño" phenomenon in June 2023 triggered extreme rains on the country's coast ^{[3][4]}.

2. Workplace Sexual Harassment

Workplace sexual harassment (WSH) is a severe problem affecting millions of women's wholeness and well-being worldwide ^[5]. WSH refers to unwanted sexual advances, unwelcome requests for sexual favors, verbal or physical conduct or gestures of a sexual nature, or any other sexual behavior that may be offensive, humiliating, or intimidating in the work environment ^[6]. WSH can thus encompass a wide variety of behaviors and practices of a sexual nature, including unwanted sexual comments or propositions, jokes with sexual content, the display of images or posters that objectify women, physical contact, or sexual assault ^[7]. Evidence shows that women are significantly more likely to be victims, and perpetrators primarily tend to be colleagues, followed by supervisors/bosses and clients ^[8].

WSH has gained substantial visibility in the last two decades, driven by global movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up and powerful regional initiatives like #NiUnaMenos in Latin America. While #MeToo and Time's Up have predominantly resonated in high-income countries, #NiUnaMenos emerged as a compelling voice against gender-based violence in Latin America, shedding light on deeply entrenched societal issues. This emphasis on confronting gender violence is particularly relevant given the high prevalence of workplace sexual harassment worldwide, with a notably significant incidence in countries in the Americas [5]. The situation is particularly alarming in Peru, with about one in three female private-sector workers reporting sexual harassment in the past year [8][9]. The strength and resonance of movements like #NiUnaMenos highlight the urgency and relevance of addressing these challenges head on.

The consequences of sexual harassment at work are multiple and severe. Studies show that those who experience sexual harassment report less job satisfaction, psychological distress (including anxiety, anger, and depression), and physical stress [10]. In addition, economic hardship may result from a loss of employment when victims decide to leave their positions or are fired in retaliation for reporting. Organizations in which harassment is prevalent often face absenteeism, increased staff turnover, decreased work performance and productivity [8], increased legal expenses, and the deterioration of their public image [11], among other effects.

3. The Impact of Conflict and Disasters on WSH

No specific studies have examined the relationship between the prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace and the loss of productivity during periods of crisis. However, numerous studies have separately explored the relationship between sexual harassment in the workplace and productivity loss, as well as the influence of economic, social, and natural crises on labor productivity and gender-based violence more broadly. For example, it is known that sexual harassment in the workplace can have detrimental effects on employee morale, mental and physical health, and, ultimately, on labor productivity [8][10]. In addition, crises can generate an environment of uncertainty and stress, which can negatively affect work productivity [12]. In adverse situations, such as war conflicts, droughts, and health crises, levels of gender-based violence against women often increase significantly [13].

Indeed, natural disasters and social crises can exacerbate existing violence trends, including workplace sexual harassment [14][15]. Although the focus has been on gender-based violence and not specifically WSH, it can be argued that there are similarities in power imbalances that can drive both which are often rooted in patriarchal social norms and unequal gender systems [16]. In times of disaster, social destabilization creates environments conducive to individuals feeling more inclined to exert power and control over others, and sexual harassment can be a means of doing so. In addition, studies have evidenced that critical health events, natural disasters, and social crises may increase the vulnerability of certain groups to gender-based violence [13][17][18][19]. This vulnerability could also extend to sexual harassment. For example, women and gender minorities, often discriminated against and marginalized in the workplace, maybe even more vulnerable to WSH during these crises [14]. This may be especially true if commonly available support systems, such as human resources departments or peer networks, are less accessible or affected by the crisis [20]. Finally, studies suggest that crises may decrease the visibility and reporting of gender-based violence [15]. This could also be the case for WSH. In a crisis, individuals may feel less able or willing to report due to factors that inhibit reporting, such as a fear of retaliation or a lack of resources for addressing reporting during a crisis.

4. Equitable Management to Prevent WSH

Organizational justice and equitable management are crucial concepts in the effective operation of any organization or workplace. Equitable management refers to corporate practices and policies that ensure equal treatment of all employees, regardless of gender, race, religion, age, or other protected categories. These practices focus on removing barriers to equal opportunity and ensuring a work environment in which all members feel valued and respected [21]. Organizational justice refers to employees' perception of the fairness of an organization's treatment decisions, practices, and procedures [22]. This is subdivided into three main components: distributive justice (the perception of fairness in outcomes, such as salary and promotions), procedural justice (the perception of fairness in the processes leading to these outcomes), and interactional justice (the degree of treatment with dignity and respect involved in interactions with superiors, peers, and subordinates).

In an organization, equitable management is not just about being "fair" in abstract terms. It is a tangible and effective strategy that directly addresses the roots and dynamics of workplace sexual harassment, creating a safer and more respectful work environment for all. In fact, fair and just management can play a vital role in preventing sexual harassment. Organizations that promote fairness and equity tend to have cultures that do not tolerate sexual harassment. This type of culture manifests through clear policies, an open line of communication for complaints, effective sanctions for harassers, and empathetic responses to victims. In addition, the perception of a fair and safe work environment can deter potential harassers, reducing the prevalence of harassment. Indeed, a recent study conducted among female workers in private companies in Lima, Peru, found that fair relational management (specifically from management personnel) is a strong predictor of low levels of sexual harassment in the workplace [8]. In the companies whose management was more equitable and fairer, the prevalence and costs associated with WSH were significantly lower than in companies with less fair management. Indeed, lost labor productivity, turnover intention, and counterproductive behaviors were significantly lower.

There is evidence of the deterrent action that a perception of justice has on WSH [23] and how the presence of sexual harassment decreases the perception of justice in an organization [24]. For many reasons, equitable management in the work environment can be an essential factor in preventing WSH. 1. It sets a clear precedent: Management based on principles of fairness and equity communicates behavioral expectations to all employees. This ensures that inappropriate behavior, including sexual harassment, is not tolerated. 2. It promotes mutual respect: Equity and fairness in management foster an environment in which everyone is valued and respected for their skills and contributions and not for gender, race, or other non-work-related factors. This culture of respect reduces the likelihood of inappropriate behavior. 3. It reduces power inequalities: One of the factors that facilitates sexual harassment is an imbalance of power. Equitable and fair management minimizes such imbalances by ensuring that all employees, regardless of their position, are treated fairly and without favoritism. 4. It increases awareness and education: Organizations that value fairness and equity often invest in training and awareness programs that educate employees about appropriate behaviors and the consequences of harassment. 5. It provides mechanisms for reporting and addressing inappropriate behavior: Fair management ensures that transparent and fair channels exist for reporting inappropriate behavior. This ensures that victims feel supported and perpetrators are held accountable. 6. It develops an inclusive culture: By promoting fairness, organizations foster an inclusive culture in which everyone feels valued and accepted. In such environments, behaviors that seek to marginalize or harm others, such as sexual harassment, are less likely to occur. 7. It reinforces responsibility and accountability: Equity and fairness in management mean no exceptions based on position, status, or favoritism. Everyone, from top management to entry-level employees, is equally responsible for maintaining a safe work environment.

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