Coping with sexual harassment: the experience of young working women in Italy

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The aims of this qualitative study were to describe sexual harassment (SH) as experienced by young Italian women in the workplace and to analyse their reactions and forms of resistance. A sample of 20 university students who mostly held casual jobs was recruited at one university and interviewed in 2017–18; the transcriptions were analysed using a thematic method. Respondents experienced multiple forms of SH, from sexual comments and requests to physical contacts, carried out by male employers, co-workers and customers. Often SH had a pronounced pornographic nature, and occasionally women were treated as ‘prostitutes’; dress-code implied ‘dressing sexily’, and becomes a form of SH. All women evaluated these behaviours as inappropriate, but no one considered making a formal complaint. They reported confusion, attempts to minimise, going along with a smile, asking the help of colleagues, and using the boyfriend as a protector. Few took direct actions such as confronting the harassers, retaliating or complaining to the employer. Notwithstanding the hostility and humiliation experienced, the young women interviewed retained a strong sense of their dignity as workers, which can count as another form of resistance to a system that consistently tries to objectify them and disqualify them as workers.

Key words sexual harassment • sexualised labour • gender • women • female university students

Key messages
• Working students experienced frequent sexual harassment, and occasionally were treated as prostitutes.
• They reported confusion and minimising; some reported asking for the help of colleagues or their employer, but no one made a formal complaint.
• They experienced humiliation but retained a strong sense of their dignity as workers, which counts as a form of coping and resistance.
Forty years ago, Catharine MacKinnon (1979) contended that sexual harassment (SH) was an expression of male power over women resulting from women’s low status in society and in the workplace, represented sex discrimination, and affected the economic rights of women. Despite this groundbreaking analysis, decades of feminist campaigning, and legislative changes, SH is ‘still the last great open secret’, so widespread and so harmful to be defined as a ‘systemic trauma’ (Fitzgerald, 2017: 483).

According to the International Labor Organization, SH often consists of repeated, unwelcome, unreciprocated and imposed actions which may have a very severe effect on the person. SH may include touching, remarks, looks, attitudes, jokes or the use of sexually-oriented language, allusions to a person’s private life, references to sexual orientation, innuendos with a sexual connotation, remarks about dress or figure, or the persistent leering at a person or a part of her/his body.

The forms of SH may include coercive behavior, such as threatening dismissal if sexual favours are not granted (quid pro quo) (Milzareck, 2010).

Louise Fitzgerald (1990) developed a more operative definition of SH. She identified three main categories of SH: ‘gender harassment’, including inappropriate comments or looks, sexual talks or exposure to pornographic materials; ‘unwanted sexual contacts’, consisting of unwelcome physical contacts or insistent invitations; and ‘sexual coercion’, consisting of quid pro quo situations or sexual aggressions.

SH has traditionally been considered a ‘woman’s problem’, but recent studies indicate that men can be victims and women the perpetrators. However, the most frequent situation consists of a male harasser and a female victim (McDonald, 2012).

The frequency of SH varies across studies, also because of differences in definitions and methods. In a meta-analysis of 74 national European studies, 17% to 81% of employed women reported SH in the workplace (Timmerman and Bajema, 1999). In a survey of 42,000 women in 28 European countries, 45% of respondents had experienced at least one of the most serious forms of SH during their adult lives; in one third of cases, SH had occurred in the professional context (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). According to Italian national data, 7.5% of women had experienced sexual blackmail in their working life (Istat, 2014). Studies in more specific professional contexts provide even higher rates of SH: considering the last 12 months, 54% of the female staff in an Italian hospital reported at least one type (but usually many more) of SH, from superiors, colleagues or patients (Romito et al, 2004).

SH is so widespread that it seems difficult to find workplaces where harassment is more prevalent or if some workers’ characteristics represent risk factors for victimisation (McDonald, 2012). SH is frequent in typically male jobs (for example, construction, Watts, 2007) but also in typically feminine jobs (for example, domestic work, DeSouza and Cerqueira, 2009). It seems a constant in the hospitality industry, where often workers are required to do ‘aesthetic labour’ (that is, physical appearance, even sexiness, is required as part of the job) (Poulston, 2008; Good and Cooper, 2016). Recently, thanks to the ‘#MeToo’ movement, the alarming frequency of SH in the entertainment industry, the media and political life was revealed (Hoel and Vartia, 2018). Frequent victims are professional women or women in positions of
authority (Romito et al, 2004; Watts, 2007) but also precarious or illegal workers (Ducret, 2010). Most studies agree that younger women, women who are socially vulnerable, or women of certain races or sexual minorities are at increased risk of SH (McDonald, 2012).

SH has serious consequences for victims’ health, their career, and their relationship with work. Negative health effects include feelings of rage, anxiety and powerlessness; symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome; functional symptoms; and unhealthy coping strategies such as alcohol use; less intense but frequent experiences (for example, a sexist organisational climate, sexual innuendo or leering) and less frequent yet more intense experiences (for example, unwanted touching or quid pro quo) have comparable effects on women’s wellbeing (Sojo et al, 2016).

SH has harmful consequences also on victims’ occupational wellbeing in terms of loss of self-confidence, reduced productivity and performance, and high absenteeism (Milczarek, 2010). If women are not supported by the institution, they may decide to renounce a career or quit their job. Absenteeism due to sick leave, high staff turnover and costs linked to court procedures in the event of a complaint represent important costs also for companies (Hoel and Vartia, 2018). More generally, as stated by the Recommendation of the European Commission on the ‘protection of the dignity of women and men at work’ (1992), ‘Sexual harassment pollutes the working environment and can have a devastating effect upon the health, confidence, morale and performance of those affected by it. Sexual harassment may also have a damaging impact on employees not themselves the object of unwanted behaviour but who are witness to it.’

Individuals often fail to recognise certain abusive behaviours as SH. When they recognise them, common reactions are to try to avoid the harasser or elaborate forms of ‘interpretative coping’, such as considering manifestations of SH as ‘jokes’ or normal heterosexual interactions (McDonald, 2012). As for other forms of sexual or gender-based violence, complaints of SH are infrequent: it has been estimated that only between 5% and 30% of victims file a formal complaint, and fewer than 1% participate in legal proceedings (McDonald, 2012). In Italy, among women who experience quid pro quo harassment, most keep silent and almost none take formal actions (Istat, 2014).

There are various models to explain SH, its nature, its motivations and reactions to it. According to the ‘power perspective’, at the heart of SH are hierarchical relationships: men over women, boss/employer over employees, and customers over retail or service workers (Welsh, 1999). Contra-power harassment occurs when the gender hierarchy overcomes the professional/institutional hierarchy, as in the situation of a male student harassing a women professor (Rospenda et al, 1998).

The model of ‘legal consciousness’ outlines how the perceptions of SH are shaped and the likelihood of subsequent responses (Charlesworth et al, 2011). There are three steps: naming (the experience is perceived as injurious), blaming (another person is held responsible), and claiming (a remedy is sought, a formal complaint is made).

These two models help explain the reactions of victims of harassment. On the one hand, in a context of power relationships, a firm rejection of the inappropriate behaviour may cause retaliation (from ridiculing the woman to mobbing and sacking). On the other, by ‘refusing the label, declining to protest’ (Thomas and Kitzinger, 1994), victims protect their self-esteem, which could be shattered by the acknowledgement
of their powerlessness to react. These mechanisms should be seen in the main social context, in which the confusion between joking or flirting and SH is still pervasive and in which a certain amount of sexual teasing and innuendo is considered normal and pleasurable in many workplaces. Cairns (1997) explained the mechanism by which silence is perpetuated: in a patriarchal context, women are accommodating themselves in male-defined forms of femininity; they may believe that their experiences are not ‘real’, that they are in the wrong and should be ashamed. In this contradictory and confusing situation, silence and denial become acts of resistance and a manifestation of agency (Watts, 2007). In addition, some young women may refuse to identify as victims of violence, in the context of a more general rebuttal of feminist interpretations of men–women relationships (Lee, 2001).

**Sexual harassment in Italy**

In Italy, there is no law addressing SH per se. The Labour Law contains measures aimed to protect workers’ health; the employer is held responsible for enforcing them. Behaviours that pertain to the area of SH that can produce a physical or moral damage can be legally prosecuted and the victim can receive compensation. In the Penal Code it is possible to use the article on ‘Harassment or disturbance to people’, that includes unwanted courtship or attention, or disturbing phone calls; for behaviours implying a physical contact, victims can appeal to the law on sexual violence, in the Penal Code.

In Italy the rates of gender-based violence are below the European average: concerning SH (not limited to the workplace), the European rate is 45%, whereas the rate in Italy is 37%; 29% of women in Europe report that they have been touched or kissed against their will as compared with 21% in Italy (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Another study, by Hoel and Vartia (2018), indicates that Italy, Romania and Bulgaria have the lowest rates of SH in Europe; Hoel and Vartia comment that rates are low where the phenomenon is little acknowledged. This observation is confirmed by the reactions to the #MeToo movement (in Italy ‘Quellavoltache’, ‘that time that…’): very few women publicly denounced occurrences of SH and one who did, the actress Asia Argento, was brutally attacked by many media sources (Taylor, 2018).

**Aims and methods**

The aims of this study were to describe SH as experienced by young Italian women in the workplace and to analyse their reactions and coping strategies.

The analyses presented in this paper are drawn from a larger project aiming to explore SH quantitatively and qualitatively among young people in Italy, using convenience samples of university students. The quantitative survey results have been published elsewhere (Romito et al, 2016, 2017; Bastiani et al, 2018).

**Participants**

For the qualitative study, we recruited participants by means of advertisements in one university, presenting a study on ‘sexual harassment and other unpleasant experiences at work’, and by snowball sampling, and we obtained a sample of 23 students who
mostly held seasonal or casual jobs. Only three participants were men and were therefore excluded from the analyses presented in this paper; the final sample consisted of 20 women.

Women were between 21 and 27 years old (Table 1); all were Caucasian. Some had more than one job, the more common being seasonal jobs in the hospitality sector, as bartenders or waitresses: this is not surprising because the university is in a high tourism area. Two women were promotors of perfumery products; four were sport instructors; and one did occasional work as a model. The women had worked under various conditions: some had a permanent, part-time job; some had short-term or seasonal contracts; and some had jobs in the underground economy. Some had shifted from one to another job type and contract in their working lives and even in the same occupation.

**Procedure and instruments**

Interviews were performed in 2017–2018 by junior researchers trained in qualitative methods and gender-based violence; at the end of the interview, they provided respondents with information concerning possible sources of legal or psychological help. Interviews were carried out with the ‘long interview’ approach (Kaufmann, 2007), starting with a few questions (descriptions of the experience; reactions: feelings and actions; support or lack of it), and inviting the participants to express their views

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and to introduce new subjects. The length of the interviews varied from 25 to 80 minutes; they were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the authors’ university, the University of Trieste.

Analysis

The interview transcripts underwent content analysis with the following steps: definition of recording units, construction of categories for analysis, identification of the core categories, test of the coding and assessment of the reliability (multiple-coders), searching for the ‘negative case’, development of a model and interpretation. One researcher developed a preliminary definition of the recording units and identified categories. These categories were discussed with the other researchers of the team, until final agreement was reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Results

In the first part of the results (Living day to day with SH), we present an analysis of the harassment and harassers experienced by women. The main categories of SH were the pornographic nature of SH, dress-code as a form of SH, and from aesthetic labour to prostitution mode. In the second part (Coping with SH), we present an analysis of women’s reactions to harassment. The main categories were confusion, minimisation, shame; tolerating, accepting, smiling; putting a distance between (change the place, run away, quit the job); humour and solidarity (or lack of it); defending oneself, hitting back; the boyfriend as a protector; and the vindication of your own status as a worker.

Living day to day with sexual harassment

Harassment and harassers

Manifestations of SH varied by type of job, included disturbing behaviours, and in most cases consisted of frequent, repetitive acts. Harassers were colleagues, employers and clients.

Women working as perfumery products’ promoters reported SH by clients: it consisted mostly of insistent looks, requests for appointments or having a phone number, and in some occasions also physical contacts. Respondents who were sport instructors or coaches reported being exposed to vulgar comments, and to repeated unwanted touching.

“I was promoting perfumes and a man touched my ass; that is, I was there, trying to sell him a perfume and he was there with his son. He approached me and gave me a pat on the ass in a very casual way, you know, as if nothing was happening. I obviously did not comment and did not say anything.” (Iris)

“There [is] also the touching or the slaps on the ass [by colleagues] even if done in a ‘playful’ way [quotation marks added by the interviewee] […] it’s humiliating and eventually a lack of freedom.” (Alice).
Coping with sexual harassment

Young women working in bar or restaurant reported more diverse and intense experiences of SH, including both verbal and physical behaviours, and usually from colleagues, employers and clients.

“Yes, let’s say that he [employer] had no problems even if he was married. […] He asked me if I had [a] boyfriend. He made […] inappropriate compliments […] I think they were real advances [silence].” (Marina)

“My colleagues used to touch my ass behind the bar. They gave me pats as if it was a nice thing [annoyed and a little embarrassed]. Then they made inappropriate comments about my tits […] they treated me like I was no good and I felt extremely uncomfortable.” (Gloria)

The pornographic nature of sexual harassment

Comments and requests made by clients or co-workers especially in the hospitality sector had a strongly pronounced pornographic nature.

“Well, for instance, comments on my dress ‘You could unbutton a shirt button’, ‘You could be a little more, ehhmm, strip a bit more’.”(Flora)

“Maybe you turned to wash the cups or to put on a dishwasher and [the customer says] ‘go on, bent a little more’ […] Excuse me, but what the fuck do you want? Who are you?” (Maria)

“Maybe you bend to pick something up and they begin to laugh and all that, and you hear the comments: ‘Ah what a nice ass’ or […] you have the blouse more unbuttoned than usual, and they say to you ‘But what are you looking for today? Are you in heat?’” (Claire)

“(The cook) used to say phrases like ‘Haha are you wet?’ or things like that […] and there it was really revolting, but really revolting, I felt a disgust […] incredible.” (Marianna)

Dress-code as a form of sexual harassment

Women working as promotors and even more so those employed in the hospitality sector were requested to adopt a dress code and perform an ‘aesthetic labour’, that is, use their physical appearance to sell the product.

“You must always have a kind of uniform and they tell you how it is; in my case it was a kind of black suit with pants, because to work in perfumery you have to be elegant ehh.” (Iris)

Especially in the hospitality sector, the requirements went beyond aesthetic labour: the imposition to dress sexily inevitably implied that women ended up behaving sexily, sometimes adopting quasi-pornographic attitudes and postures.

“There was an obligation, on Friday evening, to put on a very short dress and once it happened that I simply put a pair of jeans and a tank top, but he (employer) threatened to send me home because I did not have the dress. I must say that it was quite embarrassing to work with that short dress because
it often happens [that I] have to bend, I do not know, to clear a table, etc […] and you could not bend naturally, you had to bend […] on the knees because otherwise everyone saw what you had under the dress. We also had another uniform, very very low-cut, and also it happened that when I went to serve people at the table I had to bend, and I was embarrassed because I knew that you could see everything inside the neckline.” (Laura)

Bar and restaurants: from aesthetic labour to prostitution mode

Women were requested to dress enticingly, even provocatively. This style implies sexual availability and gives a pretext to clients to treat them explicitly as prostitutes.

“[A customer] said ‘Look, with this ATM card I would not only pay what I consumed but I would be able to afford all of you too’, as if we were prostitutes, understand?” (Laura)

The sexualisation up to the ‘prostitutionalisation’ of waitresses was an explicit business strategy for the employer.

“Always because of the desire of the owner of making money, it often happened that customers wanted to offer the baristas something to drink and of course we had to accept because it was cash, ehm, only I used to drive to work [light laughter], so I could drink but […] not overdo it and then more than once it happened that I had to pretend to drink an alcoholic shottino and instead I had made myself a fruit juice.’ (Paula)

“(A customer) started to pull me at him, and I started screaming ‘What the fuck do you want? You are out of your mind.’ […] and the owner got pissed off and told me ‘You’re here to sell and sell yourself, so you cannot do that.’” (Maria)

Coping with sexual harassment

The reactions to SH varied from accepting the situation to fighting back or leaving the job, with many women reporting more than one reaction. No one mentioned the possibility of making a formal complaint.

Confusion, minimisation, shame

A common reaction was confusion, the surprise about what was happening or the uncertainty concerning its meaning; sometimes it was difficult to accept that your nice employer, your nice young colleagues or the ‘super-nice’ young clients were molesting you.

“[Clearing her throat] It happened more than once that I passed by there, took the pizza from the table where he [employer] was working and went to the tables to serve [embarrassed tone], and he gave me a pat in the ass and it was quite unpleasant […] but I did not know how to interpret the situation, I was more disoriented than anything else. Because on the one hand he had
a very nice way to do [it], and then you say boh, I do not give importance, but on the other side he should not touch me even if it is joking.” (Teresa)

“There was a group of guys, super nice eh, for heaven’s sake, about 30 years old, and punctually every time they arrived they stayed in front of me and within an hour, at least 6 comments arrived, on anything you bent to get something and you heard them calling you [...] absurd.” (Claire)

In other situations, such as for Carla, the swimming instructor, the surprise is such that they could not react. Shame and, more rarely, feeling guilty may follow.

“The swimming team kids have seen me [...] (I am the coach so anyway I am a point of reference) [...] to be treated so from this guy [...] the kids were looking at me perplexed and it was a double annoyance; that is, it was annoying and also embarrassing because obviously I would not in front of the boys [pause]. I did not understand how to behave and then it was even worse that time [...] I was just embarrassed [...] I felt really humiliated [...] crushed [raising her voice].” (Carla)

“The shame blocks you even if the shame should be experienced by those who make these comments and not by those who receive them. But unfortunately, in receiving them, you are put in a state of inferiority in which you feel embarrassed or disgusted by the way you are treated, so you do not feel confident enough to denounce these facts.” (Julia)

Tolerating, accepting, smiling

Most of these young women worked because they needed the money. They lived in a socio-cultural context in which acknowledgement of SH and legal sanctions were extremely infrequent; they held casual jobs, in most cases during the summer, that would end in autumn. So, it is not surprising that many of them accepted the situation. In addition, in the hospitality and retail jobs, there was the obligation to smile, even when being exposed to improper comments or behaviours.

“You always had to smile [...] between us, it was a nightmare! At the beginning, I tried to be always kind, I laughed too, because behind the counter with all the customers in front I could not get angry, and I had to keep smiling, but then the situation began to wear and I really was fed up, because with this hell kind of excuse that you always had to smile, they took advantage of me more and more, because they knew that I could not do anything [angry and agitated].” (Gloria)

Even when the job was a permanent one (Alice, the swimming instructor), the woman ends up tolerating the harassment without a firm protest; she considers that speaking with the employer is useless and she would be considered too ‘sophisticated’.

“Yes, I have clearly said [to colleagues] that it bothers me to be touched but they do not care [...] they think I am touchy; they consider it a joke [...] even if you talk to the superiors, they do not take it seriously, and being the
last addition to the group, I would pass for the ‘sophisticated’ one. In practice, you understand that you have to get good [at] it, and that’s it.” (Alice)

Quotations from the promotor Maya’s interview illustrates the contradictions and the costs of the obligation to received customers’ harassment with a big smile on your face.

“Instead of asking questions about the product, they ask me: ‘What time do you finish?’ Or, ‘What beautiful eyes you have’ ‘Where do you come from?’ […] So yes, they tend a little ... yes ... to embarrass you, also because you are working at that moment, and I cannot even be rude or send them away ... because it’s my job ... but I cannot even, boh, make a good face in a bad game, because anyway there is my dignity at that time (change tone of voice, angrier now). If he (customer) continues to make ... some advances, for me it is difficult to send him away, because I am working but I cannot even continue to smile at him or ... indulge him. Well ... ehmm ... you still keep smiling a little to the customer, and you know very well that on some aspects you must accept.” (Maya)

*Put a distance: change place, run away, quit the job*

Only one woman reported having found at least minimal support from the employer, who suggested that she stay in the kitchen instead of serving tables when the harasser was present. In one case, Anna, the model, literally ‘ran away’ from an unpleasant and risky situation. Other women, as Maria, the rowing instructor, quit the job.

“You feel extremely uncomfortable in front of many other people that a person who has the age of your father tells you [to] ‘learn to use your cock to relax’ [...] in fact after that, I gave up rowing.” (Maria)

*Humour and solidarity (or lack of it) among women colleagues*

Humour and peers’ solidarity are good strategies to resist SH. Unfortunately, these positive reactions were reported infrequently by interviewed women.

“And the woman who washes the dishes, do you know what she said? [...] ‘Come on, but what are you going to think? These things are normal in the kitchen, eh ... at least we joke, we have a little fun and smile. The other girl has never complained, she knows how to play the game, maybe you do not.’ Do you understand? Of course, I am the one who does not know how to play the game. Look, what she told me humiliated me more than the jokes and unwanted comments on the physical appearance, the sexual jokes, more than all this.” (Sara)

However, Laura, reported an example of solidarity from another female colleague.

“Luckily with the colleagues, we helped each other. A client was often waiting for a colleague of mine until we closed [...] We banded together, and if we knew that he was waiting for her, we would accompany her to the car. We never left her alone.” (Laura)
Defending themselves, hitting back

There was only one case of a woman clearly hitting back: Carla, a bartender, refused to serve the drunkards who were molesting her. Other young women working in bars or restaurants anticipated possible defensive actions, tried to get help from the owner and, getting a refusal, called friends for help.

“One evening, these two men were not going to leave, and I had to repeatedly make them do it. I locked myself in the bar to clean in peace, but I could see from the window that they were still outside the bar. Then I called my boss explaining the situation [...] and he was annoyed and replied that I should not exaggerate. At that point, I knew that my boss certainly would not come to help; then I thought about how to get by myself. I took the scissors I had behind the counter and left the bar with those in [my] hands. Luckily everything ends up for the best [...] After that, I no longer closed the bar alone; some friends passed by and then waited for me to close the bar.” (Nadia)

The boyfriend as a protector

A frequent strategy was to use a fiancé or boyfriend as a protective barrier. The idea that being engaged to a man protected a woman from another man’s sexual propositions and made her less sexually available was shared by all the actors involved: women, potential harassers and employers. It was used as a preventive action, as when women casually informed employers or colleagues that they were engaged, or as a defensive action, as when they asked a boyfriend to be present during working hours or at the end of the shift. This strategy seemed to work only occasionally.

“The owner [...] asked me if I was engaged [...] I said yes, and he asked if my boyfriend was jealous [...] eeh I laughed because I thought it was a joke, you know, a hell of a joke, right? [...] In short, he was saying that ... I should be free ... to be nice with customers and to attract customers.” (Marianna)

“They were asking very personal questions [...] like how old I was, where I lived, if I had a boyfriend, why I did not have a boyfriend.” (Barbara)

Women who did not have a boyfriend invented one to prevent or stop harassment.

“[I told the molester] ‘Do what you want but remember that my boyfriend is annoyed.’ I actually invented that I had a boyfriend because so maybe [...] he did not bother me anymore.” (Linda)

“My friend stayed at the counter until I had finished working eeh, and even when at the end of the job I was asked [by customers] to drink a beer, he was there and practically pretended to be my boyfriend.” (Marianna)

The vindication of your own status as workers

As shown by the quotations from the interviews, women felt confusion, humiliation, frustration, rage and occasionally fear when faced with SH. They were offended as women but also as workers: SH devalued them as professionals. Notwithstanding these multiple attacks, these young women firmly asserted their status and dignity as workers.
“Mine is a job in which for most of the time you’re in a swimming suit [...] and I let you imagine the comments [...] in the long run you get tired because they are only directed to my physical appearance rather than to how I’m doing my job [...] while among [the] guys, they praise each other for how well the lesson went or how good they are in the style of swimming.” (Alice)

“I’m working and I’m not put there to be the beautiful statuette [smiles in an ironic way] out of the perfumery, my job is to promote the perfume and not myself” (Maya)

“Even if I’m a bartender or a waitress, it’s still a profession and I’m a professional and I have to be respected and treated as such.” (Laura)

**Discussion**

Young working women interviewed in this study experienced serious, repetitive, intrusive forms of SH, from sexual comments and requests to physical contacts, carried out by a multiplicity of male actors: co-workers, employers and customers. In their narratives, SH appeared normalised: harassers behaved sure of their impunity as female sexual availability was granted.

All women perceived and evaluated these behaviours as totally inappropriate and reported negative reactions, such as humiliation, frustration, irritation, rage and occasionally fear. Yet, no one ever considered making a formal complaint, and few took direct actions such as firmly telling the harasser they were annoyed, retaliating or complaining to the employer. Similar reactions were reported in other countries (Guerrier and Adib, 2000; Good and Cooper, 2016).

This lack of formal reaction does not mean that the women interviewed in this study passively accepted the harassing behaviours; rather, it represented a reasonable response to the objective situation. In a social context in which SH is not legally nor culturally recognised and in a working situation in which short-term and sometimes moonlighting workers had few rights, a fight or a formal complaint was not a realistic option.

Women tried to resist the SH and its consequences, however. First, for all women, it was clear that the molesters were wrong. The mechanism described by Cairns (1997) – victims think they are in the wrong and they should be ashamed – through which silence on sexual violence is often maintained, does not concern them. Some reported feelings of shame, but none clearly expressed guilt for the abuse endured.

Nor were women duping themselves with tactics of interpretative coping or denial, as described in other studies. Secretaries interviewed by Mott and Condor (1997) preferred to reinterpret the harassment as innocent, benign behaviours in order to protect their self-esteem and the illusion of ‘nice’, equal working relationships. Restaurant waitresses interviewed by Paules (1991), while describing many instances of rude, offensive or aggressive behaviours from customers, did not even once mention the occurrence of SH.

If the young women interviewed in this study reported feelings of confusion, it was not an inner bewilderment and it did not imply a struggle to maintain illusions or self-esteem. It was a confusion created by the context, generated by the difficulty of reconciling two opposing realities: that the young ‘super-nice’ co-workers or customers and the ‘nice’ employers were the same men offending and humiliating you. This confusion was often cleverly maintained by the harasser himself, and it was impossible, at least in the beginning,
to decide whether he had rubbed against you intentionally or by chance. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir powerfully described the psychology of women in a patriarchal system as consisting of ‘an inner uncertainty and confusion’, due to the fact that they are trying to live under the aegis of a double ontological shock: first, the realisation that what is really happening is very different from what appears to be happening, and second, the frequent inability to tell what is really happening at all (quoted by Bartky, 1990). More than 50 years later, male harassers still do what is in their power to maintain the confusion of victims; however, it seems that most of the young working women interviewed in this study eventually found the ability to recognise and say what was really happening to them.

Women also had other, more concrete ways to cope with SH: they put a distance between themselves and the abusers; confided in female colleagues or solicited their solidarity; complained to employers; asked the help of friends or family; and elaborated plans anticipating the worst. These plans worked only occasionally but are evidence of the complexity and variety of women’s coping strategies. ‘Using’ the boyfriend as a protection from other men’s abuse or inventing one for this purpose was one of these strategies. Paradoxically, to defend their autonomy and freedom, these young women workers were forced to resort to asking for the protection of a man, therefore denying, in practice, their legitimate quest for autonomy and freedom.

Most of the respondents interviewed were employed in jobs in which the body was central and in which their physical appearance seemed to count more than their skills and competences. In these jobs, mostly low on the social and salary hierarchy, women experienced several occurrences of hostility and humiliation, a de facto disqualification of their presence as women in a professional space. Notwithstanding this context, these young women retained a strong sense of their dignity as workers and their professionalism, which can count as a form of resistance to a system that consistently tries to objectify them.

The women we interviewed reported the obligation to smile also when faced with SH, a pressure that made it more difficult to impose personal boundaries with customers. Hochshield (2012), showed that employees in service jobs are responsible for managing their own emotions maintaining an appearance and disposition that appeals to customers, including smiling. She contends that this ‘emotional labour’ is a strongly gendered cultural performance, with noticeable costs on women’s wellbeing. Other studies of SH in the hospitality and retail sectors reported the obligation female workers have to smile and be nice (Good and Cooper, 2016).

Our respondents also reported strong evidence of the request to perform an ‘aesthetic labour’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). As in other studies (Welsh, 1999), women working as models, perfumery product promotors and waitresses, and in similar situations, also sport instructors, were expected to be attractive and dress appropriately: for waitresses, it meant dressing sexily and also behaving sexily. This sexiness was often an explicit management strategy: as a consequence, women were sometimes treated as prostitutes. As in explicit prostitution contexts, women’s bodies and sexuality become a business for men.

The hospitality sector has a long tradition of being a sexualised environment (Wijesinghe, 2017), but the brutality and the vulgarity of the sexual comments and requests made to women by employers, co-workers and customers should be read within the context of the mainstreaming of pornography and prostitution (Farley, 2009) and of the hypersexualisation of girls and women (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2007).
Limitations

It is possible that the reactions observed in this study were at least partly specific to the sample, consisting of female university students holding a job mainly during summertime: these women were young, educated and even if they had low-ranking jobs, they knew they could aspire to more qualified employment in the near future. Older or less educated workers, or women with permanent jobs may react differently. Yet, other studies of SH in the workplace also used university student samples, mainly for their accessibility but also because such women are now a frequent and structural feature of the retail and hospitality workforce (Guerrier and Adib, 2000; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Good and Cooper, 2016). According to administrative data of the university where this study was based, 68% of the female students who graduated in 2016 had a job while attending university; 40% had casual or seasonal jobs.

Another shortcoming of this sample is the fact that respondents were self-selected, a limitation almost unavoidable especially in qualitative studies.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the paper adds relevant knowledge on how SH is experienced and dealt with in countries, such as Italy, with still limited consciousness on this topic (Hoel and Vartia, 2018). Even in this difficult context, young women were able to activate various strategies to cope with SH, trying to preserve their job, their self-respect and their wellbeing.

Conclusions

The women interviewed in this study were exposed to multiple and severe forms of harassment. None made a formal complaint or sought formal redress, but they all clearly knew that the harassers were in the wrong. They put into action several coping strategies and most retained a strong sense of their dignity as professional women. After 30 years of researching SH, Louise Fitzgerald (2017) defines SH as a systemic trauma that can persist in a context that denies and rationalises the abuse of women. Dismantling this context and the belief system at its base is an immense task. As for Fitzgerald (2017), we hope that the individual voices of women, including the young workers interviewed in this study, magnified by thousands, ‘can prevail over eons of concealment and silence’.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References

Coping with sexual harassment


