

Analysis of Sexual Harassment in China: A Criminological Perspective

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Abstract

Despite legal frameworks, workplace sexual harassment in China remains pervasive, which reflects gaps in prevention and enforcement mechanisms. Therefore, this study examines workplace sexual harassment in China through a criminological lens, utilizing situational crime theory to explore its causes, characteristics, and underlying motivations. This research used a mixed-methods approach, including online surveys and semi-structured interviews with 45 employees who experienced harassment. The findings reveal key characteristics of workplace sexual harassment, such as the socialization of harassment settings, the externalization of organizational relationships, and the digitization of harassment behaviors. Power imbalances, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and workplace subcultures, such as misogynistic and patriarchal norms, are identified as critical enablers. The study investigates the occurrence of workplace sexual harassment in organizational settings in China and explores its potential effects on gender dynamics and employee well-being.

Keywords

Crime Prevention, Gender, Sexual Harassment, Situational Crime Theory, Workplace

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment, a term first introduced by American legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon in 1979, refers to sexual demands imposed under conditions of power imbalance. These may include verbal sexual innuendo or teasing, forced physical contact, suggestive actions, or coercion to engage in sexual acts under threats related to work (MacKinnon, 1979). Today, the workplace has become a major site of social interaction, and the quality of workplace environments has a direct

impact on society at large. Among the issues affecting workplaces, sexual harassment is one of the most harmful.

In recent years, repeated incidents of workplace sexual harassment have drawn significant attention and widespread public debate. Such incidents not only harm the physical and mental well-being of victims but also negatively affect the public image of involved companies and the sense of safety among other employees.

From the perspective of legal protections, multiple laws and regulations in China, such as the *Civil Code*, the *Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests*, and the *Guidelines on the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment* published by the All-China Women's Federation, provide authoritative legal grounds for defining, punishing, and preventing workplace sexual harassment. However, the frequent occurrence of workplace sexual harassment in China indicates that legislation is merely the starting point for curbing such behaviors and safeguarding women's rights. From a criminological perspective, in the absence of reasonable crime prevention strategies, even well-designed legislation and criminal justice measures may become ineffectual "castles in the air".

Currently, academic research on workplace sexual harassment in China remains limited. Most studies focus on legal doctrines, the application of legal provisions, or corporate governance, with only a few adopting perspectives from psychology or management. Empirical studies on workplace sexual harassment from the perspective of crime prevention remain rare (Tang & Liu, 2021). To understand the new dynamics and characteristics of workplace sexual harassment, this study conducted online surveys and semi-structured interviews with employees who have experienced harassment. The aim is to provide targeted recommendations for addressing and preventing workplace sexual harassment.

2. Literature Review on Workplace Sexual Harassment

Workplace sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue globally, with significant implications for employees' well-being and organizational effectiveness. Recent scholarly efforts have sought to understand the mechanisms enabling such misconduct, its impact on victims, and effective prevention strategies. This literature review synthesizes current research on workplace sexual harassment, focusing on the methodologies employed and the critical insights garnered from these studies.

2.1. Organizational Mechanisms and Cultures

The interplay between organizational mechanisms and cultures significantly influences the occurrence and perpetuation of sexual harassment. Guschke and Sløk-Andersen (2022) argue that inherent contradictions and tensions within professional settings create an environment that facilitates such misconduct. This notion is further supported by Pryor et al. (2024), who identify Masculinity Contest Cultures (MCC) as significant predictors of men's self-reported harassment behaviors. Competitive and hyper-masculine environments foster harassment by normalizing aggressive behaviors among male employees. Besides, Duffy et al.

(2023) highlight the concept of institutional betrayal, where organizations exacerbate victim trauma by protecting perpetrators and failing to enforce policies effectively. This creates a culture of silence and complicity, undermining the safety and well-being of employees.

2.2. Impact on Mental Health and Well-Being

The workplace sexual harassment shows a significant impact on psychological consequences. Del Gallo et al. (2024) found that women who experience harassment report significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and burnout. Moreover, Nguyen et al. (2023) emphasize that ineffective harassment prevention measures can demotivate employees, suggesting that robust policies and supportive environments are crucial for maintaining employee morale and mental health.

2.3. Role of Empathy and Perceptions

The role of empathy in shaping perceptions of harassment is critical. Ashdown et al. (2024) discovered that lower empathy toward accusers and higher empathy toward the accused lead to victim derogation, indicating a need for interventions that enhance empathy to reduce victim-blaming. Furthermore, entrenched social and gender norms, as examined by Oosterom et al. (2023) and Nazneen & Huq (2023), constrain women's agency and responses to harassment. These studies illustrate how the normalization of male aggression and victim-blaming cultures perpetuates harassment and inhibits effective reporting and resolution.

2.4. Legal and Policy Frameworks

Despite global legislative progress in prohibiting workplace sexual harassment, significant gaps remain, particularly in low-income countries (Heymann et al., 2023). Kannegiser & Hunter (2024) note that merely having organizational policies is insufficient; effective implementation is crucial for meaningful change. This highlights the need for comprehensive policy frameworks that not only exist on paper but are actively enforced and supported within organizations.

2.5. Personality Traits and Individual Differences

Personality traits also play a role in the dynamics of harassment. Pryor et al. (2024) found that dark personality traits, such as psychopathy and narcissism, are linked to increased self-reported harassment behaviors, mediated by organizational norms. Additionally, Weaving et al. (2023) demonstrated that individuals' attitudes toward social hierarchies influence their reactions to harassment cases, affecting recommendations for punishment. This indicates that individual differences and personality traits can shape how harassment is perceived and addressed within organizations.

2.6. Cultural Shifts and Movements

For example, the #MeToo movement has significantly impacted societal attitudes

towards sexual harassment. [Keplinger et al. \(2019\)](#) observed a reduction in severe forms of harassment, although there was an increase in gender harassment. Women reported feeling more empowered to speak up, signaling a cultural shift in addressing harassment. [Jackson et al. \(2024\)](#) further analyzed how feminist campaigns have influenced media coverage and public discourse on sexual harassment in the UK, contributing to evolving social attitudes and policies.

2.7. Prevention and Training Interventions

The effectiveness of training programs aimed at preventing sexual harassment is a crucial area of focus. [Desplaces & Ogilvie \(2020\)](#) questioned the efficacy of existing training but found that scenario-based activities can enhance awareness among participants. [Duffy & O'Shea \(2022\)](#) emphasized the importance of empowering victims and bystanders, advocating for reforms that challenge secrecy and blame in harassment cases. This empowerment is vital for creating a supportive environment that encourages reporting and accountability.

2.8. Organizational Justice and Identification

Perceptions of justice within organizations can significantly affect how harassment is perceived and reported. [Ro et al. \(2024\)](#) found that organizational identification and perceptions of organizational justice moderate the relationship between experienced and observed harassment. [Nguyen et al. \(2023\)](#) highlighted that victims often advocate for changes in organizational culture, including enhanced awareness education, legal reforms, and supportive policies, to foster an anti-harassment environment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Access

This qualitative research involves two approaches: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The research involved 45 employees who had experienced workplace sexual harassment from 2015-2021. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, the research was primarily conducted through online communication and interviews. To ensure the authenticity and validity of the research, participants were recruited voluntarily by responding to a public notice posted by the researchers on social media platforms, where they expressed their willingness to participate. All participants were asked to use pseudonyms, and all information was anonymized. Furthermore, the researchers sought explicit consent from each participant prior to initial communication, during the interview process, and during follow-up interactions. To ensure proper documentation, a "Research Consent Form" was prepared and signed by all participants.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Materials were collected in various forms, including interview transcripts, images provided by participants, and the researchers' notes and logs recorded throughout

the research process. Then, after deriving the research findings, the researchers shared the results with participants and observed their feedback and reactions. Finally, the researchers engaged in extensive discussions with professors, experts, and industry professionals familiar with workplace sexual harassment. These discussions allowed for the exchange of ideas and the incorporation of diverse perspectives.

4. Current State and Characteristics of Workplace Sexual Harassment

4.1. Current State of Workplace Sexual Harassment

In recent years, workplace sexual harassment has increasingly garnered social attention due to its adverse effects on employees' mental health, career development, and the workplace environment. Although the overall incidence of workplace sexual harassment is relatively low at 11.07% (see **Table 1**), it is widely present across various workplace types, posing a potential risk. Data indicates that the proportion of female victims is significantly higher than that of male victims, with women accounting for 84.15% of all victims (see **Table 2**). This gender disparity not only reflects the influence of workplace power structures and social culture on women but also reveals the gendered nature of workplace sexual harassment.

Table 1. Incidents of workplace sexual harassment.

Experienced Workplace Sexual Harassment	Yes	No
Number of People	458	3681
Proportion (%)	11.07	88.93

Table 2. Gender distribution of workplace sexual harassment victims.

Gender	Female	Male
Number of People	385	43
Proportion (%)	84.06	15.94

The data show that workplace sexual harassment is not confined to any specific type of organization but is prevalent across all types of workplaces. This universality suggests that all workers, regardless of their organizational context, may face the risk of sexual harassment.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that workplace sexual harassment is closely linked to the workplace environment, power structures, and social psychology. Power imbalances are a critical factor, particularly in cases where superiors exert authority over subordinates. Workplace cultures that emphasize deference to authority and tolerate sexual harassment make it difficult for victims to refuse or report such behavior. Moreover, the prevalence of the "996" work schedule

(working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week) and the rise of online work have further expanded the time and space in which sexual harassment occurs. The blurring of work settings and private spaces has made such behavior more concealed, leaving victims in even more vulnerable and helpless situations.

It is worth noting that, as the survey results suggest, workplace sexual harassment is not limited to certain workplace characteristics. Where workplace relationships exist, the possibility of sexual harassment exists. This universality not only increases the difficulty of prevention but also raises higher demands for governance from governments, businesses, and society.

4.2. Key Characteristics of Workplace Sexual Harassment

An analysis of workplace sexual harassment reveals some notable patterns. With the diversification of workplace structures and changes in work practices, the forms and settings of workplace sexual harassment have also evolved, becoming more complex and concealed. These characteristics include the socialization of harassment settings, the externalization of organizational relationships, and the digitization of harassment behaviors.

4.2.1. Socialization of Harassment Settings

Traditionally, workplace sexual harassment occurred within office settings, such as offices or meeting rooms. However, as workplace socialization has increased, high-risk settings for sexual harassment have extended beyond traditional office environments to include work-related social gatherings, business trips, and online interactions. The lack of overt supervision in these settings makes harassment behaviors more likely to occur.

For example, workplace social gatherings and business trips are two typical high-risk scenarios. In workplaces where drinking culture prevails, forced drinking or excessive persuasion to drink often serves as a cover for harassment (Han, 2024). Supervisors or colleagues may exploit the pretext of drunkenness to engage in harassment or to establish inappropriate personal relationships through sexual insinuation or direct misconduct. Business trips, due to their private nature and sense of distance from the regular workplace, also constitute high-risk settings for harassment. Supervisors may arrange private meetings under the guise of work discussions or require subordinates to visit specific locations, increasing the concealment of harassment and making it harder for victims to resist.

The rise of online communication has expanded the range of settings in which sexual harassment occurs. Using platforms like WeChat, email, or video conferencing, perpetrators may engage in suggestive messages, harassment, or inappropriate behavior under the pretext of work. These forms of online harassment are often concealed and persistent, making it difficult for victims to identify and reject them immediately, thereby exacerbating the harm caused by harassment.

Respondent 2-C:

“What left the deepest impression on me wasn’t what happened in the office,

but an incident during a business dinner organized by the company. At the time, my department head forced me to drink several glasses, claiming it was to ‘integrate into the team’. When I started feeling dizzy, he took the opportunity to move closer to me, place his hand on my shoulder, and whisper some highly inappropriate comments. I felt extremely uncomfortable, but in that setting, others just laughed and watched without stepping in to help. I couldn’t simply walk away because I was afraid of being labeled as ‘not a team player’, or even losing my chance for a promotion. Later, a similar incident happened during a business trip. That time, he asked me to come to his hotel room at night under the pretense of discussing work. I firmly refused, but the way he looked at me made me feel scared. I even started worrying that he might retaliate against me for rejecting him.”

4.2.2. Externalization of Organizational Relationships

Another notable characteristic of workplace sexual harassment is the externalization of relationships, where harassment is no longer limited to interactions between internal employees but extends to external stakeholders such as clients or business partners. This trend increases the complexity of prevention efforts and blurs the boundaries of corporate accountability.

Traditionally, workplace sexual harassment involved internal actors, such as superiors harassing subordinates or colleagues harassing each other. However, as business collaboration models diversify and external communication becomes more frequent, external clients or collaborators may also become perpetrators. For instance, some clients exploit business interactions to demand personal contact with female employees or to engage in sexual insinuations or verbal harassment during professional exchanges (Tian, 2024). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in roles that require frequent interaction with external entities, such as sales, marketing, and public relations.

This externalization of harassment poses new challenges for corporate prevention efforts. Since external actors are not directly subject to the company’s internal management systems, it becomes difficult for companies to impose effective restrictions or penalties on them. Furthermore, victims are often placed in a more passive position when facing external perpetrators, as refusing a client or business partner may jeopardize work tasks or impact individual performance evaluations.

Respondent 7-E:

“I work in the marketing department and often have to interact with external clients. One time, during a business negotiation, a client suddenly asked me if I had a boyfriend and said, ‘A girl like you must have a lot of admirers’. I could only smile awkwardly and try to steer the conversation back to work. But later, he sent me more explicit messages via WeChat, saying things like, ‘If you’re willing to have dinner with me, this deal will go through easily.’ I was terrified and didn’t dare tell my supervisor, nor did I know how to reject him. If I offended the client, it could affect the company’s orders or even my performance review. So, I had to endure it, but the feeling was incredibly oppressive.”

4.2.3. Digitization of Harassment Channels

With the rapid advancement of information technology, the widespread use of social media has made sexual harassment behaviors more concealed and persistent (Sun, 2023; Luo & Ma, 2024). Platforms such as WeChat, QQ, and other online communication tools have become primary channels for harassment, especially in scenarios where the boundaries between work and private life are blurred.

Online harassment behaviors typically include sending suggestive messages, sharing sexually explicit images or videos, or engaging in private chats with inappropriate content. These forms of harassment have the following characteristics. First, concealment: online harassment often occurs in private chat windows, making it difficult for other colleagues or supervisors to detect. Second, persistence: perpetrators can repeatedly harass victims through multiple social media platforms, even if the victim blocks or deletes their contact information. Third, anonymity: The virtual nature of online communication can embolden perpetrators, as they may feel less accountable for their actions.

In the context of remote work, the digitization of harassment channels has become even more pronounced. Remote work relies heavily on online tools for communication, creating opportunities for harassment based on power imbalances and information asymmetry in virtual environments. For example, some employees report being asked inappropriate questions during virtual meetings or receiving sexually suggestive messages in work-related group chats. These forms of harassment not only disrupt victims' work experiences but also negatively impact the overall workplace atmosphere.

Respondent 4-B:

“Our team mostly communicates via WeChat for work. One of my supervisors often messages me late at night, asking things like, ‘Are you asleep?’ or commenting, ‘You looked really nice in that outfit today,’ with suggestive emojis. At first, I politely replied, but later, he started sending inappropriate jokes and explicit images, which made me feel embarrassed and angry. I tried blocking him, but since he’s my supervisor, I still had to interact with him at work. Every time I opened WeChat and saw his messages, I felt anxious, not knowing what he might send next. I didn’t know how to report this either, because while these messages made me uncomfortable, they didn’t seem like clear evidence, and I was worried my supervisors might dismiss it as me ‘overreacting’.”

5. Analysis of the Causes of Workplace Sexual Harassment

This study uses Python as a tool for data processing and analysis, which has been widely applied in both qualitative and quantitative research in social sciences in China. In this paper, the word cloud library in Python was used to create word clouds based on the descriptions of workplace sexual harassment collected from victims. The primary function of this tool is to visualize the most frequently occurring words or phrases in the text, with higher frequency words displayed in

larger font sizes. This visualization helps researchers better connect their findings with the original data and greatly simplifies the process of text analysis. After removing insignificant words, the 25 most frequently mentioned words or phrases from the interview content were visualized to provide an initial impression and understanding of the material. See **Figure 1** for details.



Figure 1. Victims' descriptions of workplace sexual harassment.

Situational Crime Theory provides a systematic framework for analyzing the environmental, opportunistic, and contextual factors behind criminal behaviors. Workplace sexual harassment, as an opportunistic crime, is influenced not only by individual psychological factors but also by situational elements. By applying situational crime theory, we can better understand the situational components, core inducements, and deep-rooted causes of workplace sexual harassment. Below, we analyze these factors in detail through the lenses of crime opportunity, risk, and rewards, as well as power structures and cultural influences.

5.1. Components of Workplace Sexual Harassment Situations

5.1.1. Existence of Crime Opportunities

Situational crime theory posits that crime occurs when opportunities are present, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the individual (Zhou, 2014). Thus, the occurrence of crime requires only the presence of suitable opportunities, which are often shaped by specific situational factors.

In the context of workplace sexual harassment, opportunities for misconduct are closely related to the openness of the environment, the ambiguity of behavioral norms, and power imbalances. An open environment allows perpetrators to access potential targets in relatively private or informal settings, including secluded workplace areas and non-work-related activities such as social gatherings. These settings often lack clear behavioral boundaries, enabling perpetrators to rationalize their inappropriate actions as being permitted by the "environment". For instance, some respondents note that inadequate boundaries in the workplace

inadvertently create “convenient access” for harassment. In virtual work environments, the informal nature of online interactions and the anonymity of digital tools further amplify the opportunities for committing harassment.

5.1.2. Reduction of Crime Risks

Situational crime theory incorporates the rational choice perspective, which posits that individuals assess risks when deciding to commit a crime. If the perceived risks are low, criminal behavior is more likely to occur (Piquero, 2019). The reduction of risks in workplace sexual harassment is primarily due to the lack of supervision and accountability mechanisms in workplace environments. In daily workplace settings, the absence of oversight mechanisms manifests in the following ways.

1) Insufficient Formal Oversight

Workplace sexual harassment often occurs suddenly, and the lack of preventive measures leaves victims little time to gather evidence. Additionally, harassment frequently takes place in secluded areas or during one-on-one interactions, making it difficult for victims to substantiate their claims (Wang & Shu, 2022)

Respondent 11-A:

“Our office spans several floors, and some areas, such as the tea room near the equipment storage on higher floors, are quite isolated and lack surveillance cameras. One time, when I went to the tea room to get water, a male colleague deliberately brushed against my arm and made some inappropriate jokes. I felt very uncomfortable, but since there was no one else around and no surveillance, I had no way to explain what had happened. Later, I found out that he had done similar things to other female colleagues, but the company never addressed it, not even fixing the surveillance blind spots. It felt like no one cared about these issues.”

2) Ambiguity in Behavioral Norms:

The absence of clear rules defining what constitutes sexual harassment enables perpetrators to believe their actions will not result in serious consequences.

Respondent 5-D:

“At the end of the year, our department organized a gathering, after which the supervisor took a few of us to karaoke. During the event, he sat next to me and put his arm around my shoulder while joking, ‘You seem so tense, relax a little.’ Everyone laughed, but I felt extremely uncomfortable and embarrassed. When I later mentioned it to a colleague, she said, ‘It’s not a big deal; everyone jokes around at gatherings.’ I felt confused—does this count as sexual harassment? The company has never clearly stated what behaviors are prohibited, not even providing a definition of sexual harassment. I had no basis to file a complaint.”

3) The Inadequacy of Reporting Mechanisms

The inadequacy of reporting mechanisms further reduces the perceived risks for perpetrators. Victims’ silence often plays a critical role in lowering these risks. This silence may stem from various factors, including difficulties in gathering evidence, fear of retaliation, and insufficient institutional protections (Liu et al., 2023). As a result, perpetrators develop a sense of “immunity from consequences”,

which further reinforces their inappropriate behavior.

Respondent 13-B:

“After my department head sexually harassed me, I wanted to report it, but who would I report it to? Human resources? I was really worried that if I reported it, the matter would leak out and eventually get back to my department head. I was afraid he would retaliate against me, like making my work difficult or spreading rumors about me to other colleagues. In the end, I chose to remain silent because I didn't want to take that risk.”

5.1.3. Increased Rewards of Perpetration

According to Bentham's principle of utility, individuals commit crimes because the pleasure derived from the crime outweighs the pain of adhering to the law or the punishment for the crime. Seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are key motivators for behavior. The occurrence of criminal behavior often results from perpetrators' rational assessment of potential rewards and costs. When the perceived rewards outweigh the costs, the likelihood of the crime increases significantly. In workplace sexual harassment scenarios, the rewards for perpetrators can be categorized into multiple dimensions:

1) Psychological Rewards

The psychological rewards of workplace sexual harassment often stem from the abuse of power and the satisfaction of control desires (Gou et al., 2014). Particularly in situations of power imbalance, perpetrators may experience a sense of superiority or psychological gratification through harassment. This sense of gratification is frequently manifested as an assertion of authority through acts of harassment, which often serve as a demonstration of power.

Respondent 7-F:

“My direct supervisor often makes vulgar jokes about me, like commenting on my appearance or, in front of other colleagues, saying things like, ‘Young women join the company just to brighten up the office.’ Every time I see how smug he looks, I feel furious, but I don't dare to confront him because he's my boss and controls my performance evaluations. I don't think he does this because he likes me, but rather to prove his superiority. He can say or do whatever he wants, and I can't resist.”

2) Social Rewards

The social rewards of sexual harassment are primarily reflected in how perpetrators use harassment to consolidate their power in the workplace, reinforce dominance over subordinates or colleagues, and, in some cases, use harassment as a “workplace language” to build camaraderie with other power groups. Such behavior not only humiliates the victim but also perpetuates gendered power dynamics and inequality in the workplace. Perpetrators seek social recognition and belonging through these actions, forming an implicit alliance with other perpetrators, where sexual harassment becomes a mode of expressing power.

Respondent 9-G:

“During lunch breaks, I've seen male leaders and male colleagues gather in

meeting rooms and make jokes about female colleagues, sometimes even directly commenting on their bodies or personal lives. Later, I realized that these leaders were using such behavior to bond with each other—especially the male leaders. They use this to show that ‘we’re all in the same group.’

3) Economic Rewards

In some cases, perpetrators may link sexual harassment to the exchange of resources, often involving external stakeholders. For example, perpetrators may coerce victims into acquiescing to sexual harassment by third parties to secure business deals or achieve economic benefits. In such situations, the perpetrator may not directly commit the act but facilitates or pressures the victim into enduring harassment, thereby deriving direct economic rewards (e.g., achieving business targets or increasing revenue).

Respondent 7-B:

“I’m a new employee in the company’s marketing department, and I’m responsible for maintaining relationships with major clients. One time, the company assigned me an important project that required negotiations with a long-term client. During the process, the client sent me numerous suggestive messages, saying that if I agreed to have dinner and drinks with him, he would ‘relax the terms’ on the contract. He even hinted at giving me a personal bonus. I was very resistant, but I didn’t dare outright refuse because the project was crucial to the company’s revenue. My supervisor must have known about the client’s behavior because he explicitly told me, ‘You’re young, and you have an advantage. This client is difficult to handle, so put in more effort.’ In the end, I endured a few such dinners, and the contract was signed. But I deeply regretted it. What made it worse was that some people within the company even saw this as a kind of ‘skill’, saying that I was able to secure the client because I had ‘high emotional intelligence.’ I felt extremely angry and humiliated, but I didn’t know whom I could talk to about it.”

5.2. Core Motivations Behind Workplace Sexual Harassment

The occurrence of criminal behavior is not solely contingent on environmental support but also requires internal motivations as driving forces. Situational crime theory analyzes the interaction between criminal motivations and situational factors, revealing the deeper incentives behind workplace sexual harassment.

5.2.1. The Dominance of Power

1) The Control of Others’ Behavior and Choices

Power is the ability of an individual to influence others, constrained by the extent of the resources or rewards and punishments they control (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). The dominance of power grants perpetrators the ability to control the behavior and choices of others. In the workplace, perpetrators often exploit their positional advantage to place victims in passive situations. For instance, they may control subordinates’ tasks, performance reviews, or promotion opportunities, coercing victims into accepting inappropriate behavior. This dominance not only consolidates the perpetrator’s power but also weakens the victim’s

autonomy and resistance. In such cases, power imbalance becomes a critical factor enabling sexual harassment, forcing victims into a “compliance for survival” dilemma.

Respondent 13-C:

“My supervisor often used ‘mentoring a new employee’ as an excuse to make me work overtime, but the tasks were often unrelated to work. He would keep me late, use the opportunity to get close to me, and even once directly touched my shoulder. I wanted to refuse, but I was afraid he’d use it as an excuse to give me a poor performance review, which would affect my employment status. Later, he publicly praised me in a meeting, saying I was ‘dedicated and willing to sacrifice personal time for the team’, but I knew that wasn’t true. I wasn’t doing it voluntarily—he used his power to force me to comply.”

2) The Desensitization of Emotional Sensitivity

The dominance of power not only allows perpetrators to control others but also makes them more self-centered, disregarding others’ feelings. Perpetrators’ behavior reflects a typical “power dominance” psychology, where they rationalize their actions as “jokes” or “humor”, ignoring the boundaries of others. This behavior is often enabled by workplace power structures, which shield perpetrators from recognizing that their actions may infringe on others’ boundaries. Studies show that individuals in positions of power tend to be less emotionally sensitive to others, overlooking how their behavior affects others. In workplace sexual harassment, this psychological trait leads perpetrators to view harassment as “harmless jokes” or “trivial matters”, prompting continued misconduct.

Respondent 11-D:

“One time during the company’s annual dinner, my supervisor made a joke about me in front of everyone, saying something about how my outfits were ‘too sexy.’ It was obvious to everyone that his comment carried sexual innuendo. Everyone laughed, but I felt deeply embarrassed. Later, I tried to talk to him privately and asked him not to make such jokes again. He replied, ‘You’re being too sensitive—don’t take it to heart,’ and told me to ‘learn to accept workplace humor’. The fact is, he made me uncomfortable, but he thought it was my problem, not his.”

3) The Expectation of No Consequences

Power imbalances also grant perpetrators a sense of “immunity”, where they believe their actions will not be punished or may even be implicitly condoned. This psychological motivation stems from the centralization of power: perpetrators may control key organizational resources or hold high-ranking positions, leading companies and colleagues to prioritize their interests over addressing their misconduct. Perpetrators believe their actions, even if discovered, will carry no consequences. This sense of immunity is reinforced by workplace power structures that protect perpetrators: in environments with highly centralized power, misconduct may be dismissed as “personal style”, and in some cases, organizations may sacrifice victims’ rights to protect perpetrators’ interests. Such institutional bias not only enables sexual harassment but also deprives victims of avenues

for justice.

Respondent 6-C:

“Our department director is a powerful figure—many major projects require his approval. Everyone knows he likes to ‘tease’ female employees, but no one dares to oppose him. One time during a department dinner, he deliberately sat close to me, touched my leg under the table, and put his arm around my waist. Later, he even sent me suggestive messages on WeChat. I tried to report him, but HR hinted that I shouldn’t ‘make a big deal out of it’, saying he’s a ‘core talent’ for the company and I should ‘be more tolerant’. In the end, I chose to resign because I knew someone like him would never face consequences.”

5.2.2. Workplace Subcultures

Subcultural crime theory posits that the occurrence of criminal behavior is inseparably tied to cultural contexts and social norms. On an individual level, cultural norms manifest as an inescapable web of meanings shaped by culture, where individuals are consciously or unconsciously influenced by these norms and adhere to the behavioral guidelines they prescribe (Zhang & Shan, 2008). As a type of subculture, workplace culture can indirectly influence the occurrence of sexual harassment by reinforcing specific behavioral patterns or norms.

In the current context of workplace sexual harassment, two primary subcultures—the misogynistic subculture and the patriarchal subculture—stand out. The former is characterized by hostile attitudes and malicious denigration of women, while the latter exhibits ostensibly positive but restrictive gender biases that confine women to traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

1) Misogynistic Subcultures

From a macro perspective, workplace culture is often deeply influenced by the broader social culture. In organizations where male-dominated cultures thrive, misogynistic attitudes naturally prevail. In such environments, men assert their masculinity through gender-based bullying of women, while women are expected to “be obedient” and “tolerant”, thereby becoming complicit enablers of this culture. Within these structurally abusive spaces, such workplaces easily give rise to and reinforce informal systems where men harass women. Once established, these systems become embedded in workplace culture and further perpetuate the normalization of such behaviors (Yue, 2024).

Misogynistic subcultures often reinforce male dominance through gender-based bullying. Under the influence of broader societal norms, men are often encouraged to exhibit dominance, aggression, and intimidation, which they achieve by initiating sexual advances toward women. Women, in turn, are coerced into submission and compliance to avoid conflict and are even expected to act as “maintainers of workplace harmony” (Terpstra & Baker, 1986).

Once this “informal system” takes root, it becomes an ingrained part of workplace culture, further reinforced by tacit approval from leadership and imitation among colleagues. This not only makes sexual harassment behaviors more concealed and normalized but also provides a cultural foundation for gender inequality

in the workplace.

Respondent 2-G:

“I remember one time when a male colleague, in front of our supervisor, asked me in a lewd tone if I was single. The supervisor didn’t intervene; instead, he laughed and joked, ‘Young people are lively!’ I felt deeply humiliated but didn’t dare show it because I was afraid that if I reacted too strongly, I’d be labeled as overly serious and end up being isolated.”

2) Patriarchal Subcultures

Diffuse status characteristics often link certain attributes, such as gender, to workplace competence and influence individuals’ perceived status. Among these, gender is one of the most prominent factors. People often hold preconceived notions such as: men are generally more skilled than women, men deserve higher workplace status than women, men have more experience than women, and men contribute more to organizations—therefore, men should naturally hold higher positions (Wang, Liu, & Zhang, 2023).

Patriarchal subcultures are fundamentally rooted in gendered status assumptions: men are presumed to possess greater capabilities, higher levels of experience, and stronger organizational potential, while women are perceived as comparatively weaker. This gender bias manifests in the workplace as: the devaluation of women’s abilities, skepticism about women’s leadership positions, and the naturalization of male dominance in workplace hierarchies.

Even when women hold positions of authority, they often face greater challenges to their legitimacy compared to men. Research shows that women in positions of power experience more sexual harassment than those in non-authoritative roles (Chamberlain et al., 2008). In fact, women holding leadership roles are often targeted more frequently by male colleagues or subordinates seeking to undermine their authority (Wynen, 2016).

Respondent 4-D:

“As a female project manager, I often feel underestimated at work. One incident that left a deep impression on me was during a cross-departmental project meeting. I was leading the meeting as the project manager, but during my presentation, a male colleague interrupted me and said, ‘Isn’t this plan too risky? Are you women being too emotional?’ I was shocked, but what made it worse was that other male colleagues nodded in agreement, as if my lack of professionalism was assumed because of my gender. Later, this same colleague privately suggested to my supervisor that I should be removed from the project. Although my supervisor ultimately supported me, I could clearly sense the doubt and subtle hostility from others throughout the project.”

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The collective body of research underscores that workplace sexual harassment is a multifaceted problem rooted in organizational cultures, social norms, individual behaviors, and systemic inequalities. Effective prevention and intervention require

a comprehensive approach that addresses organizational structures, promotes empathy and justice, challenges harmful norms, and empowers victims and bystanders.

A key contribution of this study is its application of situational crime theory to workplace sexual harassment, emphasizing the roles of crime opportunities, reduced risks, and perceived rewards in enabling harassment. For example, the lack of formal supervision in isolated or virtual environments creates opportunities for misconduct, while ineffective reporting mechanisms and organizational cultures of silence lower the perceived risks for perpetrators. Moreover, the normalization of harassment within certain workplace subcultures, such as misogynistic or patriarchal norms, perpetuates harmful behaviors and reinforces gender inequality. Organizations must address these structural factors that enable harassment to create safer and more equitable work environments.

Another significant finding is the externalization of workplace harassment, where clients and business partners, not just internal colleagues or supervisors, act as perpetrators. This trend complicates organizational accountability, as external actors are not subject to internal policies. Companies must develop clear protocols for addressing harassment involving external stakeholders, balancing employee protection with business interests. Additionally, the rise of digital communication channels has introduced new challenges, with online harassment often being concealed and persistent. Remote work environments further blur the boundaries between professional and private spaces, exacerbating vulnerabilities for employees.

The analysis also underscores the psychological and social motivations behind workplace sexual harassment. Perpetrators often exploit power imbalances to assert dominance, gain psychological gratification, or consolidate workplace authority. These behaviors are further reinforced by cultural norms that prioritize male dominance and dismiss harassment as trivial or humorous. Addressing these issues requires not only organizational reforms but also broader cultural shifts to challenge entrenched gender biases and power dynamics.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made. First, organizations should strengthen formal oversight mechanisms, such as installing surveillance in secluded areas, implementing clear reporting protocols, and ensuring confidentiality and protection against retaliation for victims. Second, companies must invest in comprehensive training programs that go beyond awareness-raising to address empathy, victim-blaming, and bystander intervention (Qiu & Xue, 2023). Scenario-based training and role-playing exercises can help employees recognize and respond to harassment in various contexts. Third, policymakers should consider enhancing legal protections by mandating stricter enforcement of anti-harassment laws and requiring organizations to establish dedicated anti-harassment units (Li & Feng, 2023). These units should be empowered to investigate complaints independently and hold perpetrators accountable, regardless of their position or power within the organization. Furthermore, organizations must ensure that external stakeholders, such as clients or business partners, are held to

the same behavioral standards through contractual agreements and ethical guidelines. Finally, cultural change is essential to addressing the root causes of workplace sexual harassment. Organizations must actively challenge misogynistic and patriarchal subcultures by promoting gender equity, ensuring diverse representation in leadership roles, and fostering inclusive work environments. Public awareness campaigns, similar to the #MeToo movement, can further promote gender equity by challenging societal norms and empowering victims to speak out.

This study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall bias or underreporting due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Additionally, while sufficient for qualitative analysis, the sample size may not fully capture the breadth of experiences across different industries and regions in China. Future research should consider larger-scale quantitative studies to validate these findings and explore sector-specific dynamics. Longitudinal studies could also provide insights into the long-term effects of workplace sexual harassment and the efficacy of prevention measures over time.

In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to combating workplace sexual harassment in China. Legal reforms, organizational accountability, and cultural change must work in tandem to address the structural and situational factors enabling harassment. By fostering safe and inclusive workplaces, organizations can not only protect employees but also enhance productivity and organizational reputation. The fight against workplace sexual harassment is not just a legal or organizational challenge but a societal imperative that demands collective action.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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