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Addressing Workplace Sexual Harassment Through Organizational Policy Messaging

Lindsey E. Blumell [a] and Dinfin Mulupi [b]

[a]Journalism Department City, University of London, London, UK; [b]Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park, USA

ABSTRACT

This online experiment ($N = 894$) of working professionals in Kenya, South Africa, and the UK explored the potential impacts of organizational messaging on implementing anti-sexual harassment policies. After reading a victim focused, penalty focused, or neutral message, participants were tested on the Likelihood to Sexually Harass (LSH), Likelihood to Report (LR), Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance (SHMA), and Ambivalent Sexism Inventory scales. Results showed the victim- and penalty-focused messages were a negative predictor of hostile sexism but not the remaining measures. The control was a positive predictor of LSH and a negative predictor of LR, indicating any messaging was better than none. Men had higher levels of LSH, SHMA, and hostile sexism, and lower levels of LR. UK participants were a positive predictor of LSH but notably, had lower levels of SHMA and ambivalent sexism. South African participants had higher levels of LR. The results show the need for organizations to increase their messaging on anti-sexual harassment policies as part of a pluralistic approach, while understanding the influence of culture and gender norms across multiple country contexts.

KEYWORDS

Sexual harassment; sexual harassment myth acceptance; likelihood to sexually harass; likelihood to report; ambivalent sexism; policies

Sexual harassment is an insidious part of working life (Mainiero, 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Nunez & Ollo-López, 2022). With it comes several negative impacts including decreased job satisfaction (Blumell & Mulupi, 2021; Bowling & Beehr, 2006), increased job stress and work withdrawal (Chan et al., 2008), economic and career impediments (McLaughlin et al., 2017), and psychological distresses (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). If experienced in one's early career, sexual harassment can have long-term effects such as depressive symptoms (Houle et al., 2011). There are intersectional factors that increase the likelihood being sexually harassed, such as gender and ethnicity. Women are more likely to be harassed than men, racialized and ethnic minorities are more likely to be harassed than Whites, and racialized and ethnic minority women have the highest experiences of sexual harassment (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Rospenda et al., 2009).

How organizations address sexual harassment is influenced by societal cultural norms (Zimbroff, 2007), the stressfulness of the job (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Willness et al., 2007), and organizational work environments (Foster & Fullager, 2018; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018;

CONTACT Lindsey E. Blumell Lindsey.blumell@city.ac.uk Journalism Department, University of London, Northampton Square, London, UK

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McCabe & Hardman, 2005; McDonald, 2012). To counter sexual harassment, organizations need robust anti-sexual harassment policies, as well as effective communication with stakeholders to address problematic attitudes and foster zero-tolerance work environments (Diehl et al., 2014; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018).

The aim of this study was to understand to what extent organizational messaging on anti-sexual harassment policies impacts associated attitudes and behaviors. The online experiment ($N = 894$) of working professionals tested how a victim focused, penalty focused, or neutral message on instituting an anti-sexual harassment policy at work impacted the levels of likelihood to sexually harass (LSH), likelihood to report (LR) experienced sexual harassment, sexual harassment myth acceptance (SHMA), and ambivalent sexism. Myth acceptance in this study refers to generally false beliefs that justify sexual harassment (Diehl et al., 2018; Lonsway et al., 2008; Moscatelli et al., 2021). The aim for testing messaging types was to understand how they influence individual attitudes that can act as barriers to eliminating workplace sexual harassment, such as not reporting (Benavides Espinoza & Cunningham, 2010), minimizing sexual harassment (Ready et al., 2021), and likelihood for sexual harassment (Hardies, 2019; Masser et al., 2006).

Although workplace sexual harassment is common in many countries, to date, many studies on workplace sexual harassment ignore the so-called Global South (Lyons et al., 2022). To address this limitation, participants were sampled from Kenya, South Africa, and the UK. By including a multi-country comparison, this study expands knowledge on how sexual harassment attitudes function in multiple contexts.

Attitudes on Sexual Harassment

The definition of sexual harassment varies by contexts and countries. Many countries have narrow legal definitions, whereas experts and academics generally are evolving their understandings (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Liang (2024, 1638) offers the general definition that "the majority of researchers concur that it constitutes an unwelcome, offensive, and threatening experience of sexual conduct within the workplace context." The Tripartite model (Lundgren & Wieslander, 2024, pp. 5–6) classifies sexual harassment as gender harassment (verbal and non-verbal behaviors based on negative gendered attitudes), unwanted sexual attention (unwanted sexual advances), and sexual coercion (unwanted sexual advances tied to job-related pressures). Workplace sexual harassment is often legally divided into two categories: *quid pro quo* or *hostile environment* (Brase & Miller, 2001). Quid pro quo occurs when ". . . an employer or supervisor conditions employment benefits on the employee's submission to unwelcome sexual conduct" (Dickinson, 1995, p. 107). Hostile environment refers to conduct that creates abusive, intimidating, or offensive working conditions (Baker, 1995).

Connected to sexual harassment are harmful and pervasive attitudes (Goldberg et al., 2019; LeMaire et al., 2016). There are several tested factors that contribute to varying levels of sexual harassment tolerance such as political ideologies (Benavides Espinoza & Cunningham, 2010; Herrera Hernandez & Oswald, 2022; Holman & Kalmoe, 2021), age (Blackstone et al., 2014), gender (Rothgerber et al., 2021), and personality traits (Hardies, 2019) to name some. Furthermore, there are common cultural norms that normalize all forms of sexual harassment and violence in many societies – often referred to as rape culture (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). Rape culture is

a concept used to describe the acceptance of sexual violence, which disproportionately occurs to women and is disproportionately perpetrated by men (Buchwald et al., 2005) but can happen between and to all genders. The specific mythology connected to sexual harassment (which overlaps with rape culture and rape myths) is the primary focus in this study.

Our sampled countries exhibit similar patterns of societal attitudes acting as obstacles to eliminating sexual harassment. In Kenya, sexual harassment is common, along with patriarchal social structures that often downplay or excuse the issue (Blumell & Mulupi, 2021; Kuira, 2022; Maina & Caine, 2013). The Sexual Offenses Bill enacted in 2006, designed to decrease sexual harassment and violence (Onyango-Ouma et al., 2009), has had widespread opposition that promoted myths of false reporting and slippery slope rhetoric (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2007). Sexual harassment continues, even before entering the workplace in schools and at home (Otiso, 2024; Spinhoven et al., 2022). The ubiquity of sexual harassment in Kenya normalizes sexist attitudes, despite years of feminist activism in the country (Mwikya et al., 2020). For instance, when female secondary students were interviewed about their experienced sexual harassment, Njihia (2018) found internalized blaming and shifting responsibility from preparator to victims.

In South Africa, sexual harassment is also common along with initiatives to combat it (Chicktay, 2010; Joubert et al., 2011; Msimanga et al., 2023). The Employment Equity Act was legalized in 1998, which instituted comprehensive reforms for achieving gender equality including addressing sexual harassment as a serious problem (Zalesne, 2002). Nevertheless, scholars pointed early on to the obstacles of implementing the EEA in a patriarchal society with sexist attitudes around sexual violence and harassment (Jagath & Hamlall, 2024; Kubjana, 2020; Zalesne, 2002). Since then, research has shown mixed results in experienced sexual harassment and societal attitudes. In one study, researchers found lower than expected levels of myth acceptance amongst university students, despite the commonness of gender-based violence (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021). Nevertheless, in-depth interviews of university students and staff in another study showed common myth acceptance such as victim blaming and downplaying the seriousness of sexual harassment and violence (Kiguwa et al., 2015). Kheswa (2014) explains victims of sexual harassment feel that power structures not only situate them as vulnerable to sexual harassment but that there is little recourse after experiencing it. Women in South Africa are more likely to experience workplace sexual harassment (Blumell & Mulupi, 2021; Bowen et al., 2013) but both men and women report being harassed (Oni et al., 2019).

In the UK, research shows a trivializing of workplace sexual harassment despite existing legislation against it (Boyer, 2022; McCarry & Jones, 2022; Pina et al., 2009). For instance, a cross-country comparison of flight attendants indicated lower reported sexual harassment in the UK compared to North American participants, but that sexual harassment was under-reported and under-identified (Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2020). Similarly, a survey of British police officers identified attitudes that normalized sexualized workplace banter and did not distinguish between hostile environments and threatening behaviors (Brown et al., 2018). Other research shows that sexual harassment has not been as prominently addressed in organizations in the UK when compared to other countries like the US (Phipps & Smith, 2012; Proudman, 2020). Also, prevalent in the UK is so called "lad culture," which is defined as a group mentality, often fostered through alcohol consumption and sports activities, that consists of sexist and homophobic attitudes (Phipps & Young,

2015). Lad culture is described as ubiquitous for young men in the UK with harmful consequences such as perpetrating sexism and sexual violence (Jeffries, 2020).

Measuring Attitudes

Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance

One well-used scale for measuring attitudes about sexual harassment is the *Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance Scale* (SHMA) developed by Lonsway et al. (2008). Their work reviews and builds off previous studies that assessed sexual harassment beliefs (Bartling & Eisenman, 1993; Cowan, 2000). They define sexual harassment mythology as, "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual harassment of women" (p. 600). For this study, the scope expands to include the possibility of sexual harassment occurring between and within all genders while still acknowledging that many myths are based on heteronormative ideas of men and women.

Through the development of the SHMA, Lonsway et al. (2008) identified four broad subdomains of mythology: fabrication/exaggeration (i.e., claims are usually frivolous, those who wait to report are usually making it up, they must have done something to deserve it), ulterior motives (i.e., want to ruin their supervisor's career, are seeking money, developed from a fantasy), natural heterosexuality (i.e., most secretly enjoy being hit on, most take offense too easily, it is flattering to get sexual attention at work), and woman's responsibility (i.e., women can usually stop unwanted sexual attention, nearly all cases could be avoided).

To test the SHMA outside the US, Expósito et al. (2014) adapted the scale to the Spanish context and found convergent validity. They also found, like Lonsway et al. (2008), that men generally have higher myth acceptance levels than women. Similar results were found in Turkey (Kara & Toygar, 2019) and Germany (Diehl et al., 2014). Along with gender, there are correlated factors with SHMA, such as homonegativity (Ready et al., 2021), and traditional attitudes toward gender (Herzog, 2007; Shi & Zheng, 2020). Importantly, sexism and SHMA are highly correlated (Diehl et al., 2018; Moscatelli et al., 2021).

Ambivalent Sexism

Glick and Fiske (1996, 2011) developed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), which is divided into hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism describes the misogyny or overtly negative views of women. Benevolent sexism describes the chivalry, or the cherishing of women in traditional gender roles. Benevolent sexism is accepted by both men and women (Blumell & Mulupi, 2021; Hammond et al., 2018) as it measures (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2011) protective paternalism (i.e., women being cherished), complementary gender differentiation (i.e., women having a superior moral sensibility), and heterosexual intimacy (i.e., men ought to have a woman they adore). However, Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001) conceptualized benevolence as the complementary reward or carrot for women who conform to the patriarchal status quo, while hostile sexism is the stick that justifies antagonism toward women who challenge gender inequalities.

While both benevolent and hostile sexism have negative consequences, for this study hostile sexism is the primary focus as it relates to SHMA. The items on the ASI for hostile

sexism measure biases, such as women exaggerate problems at work, are too easily offended, seek special favors, put men on tight leashes, tease men sexually, etc. (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2011). In particular, hostile sexism rejects feminism and situates women challenging men's "authority" as a threat to men's dominance (Barreto & Doyle, 2023). Related to this study, hostile sexism attitudes are correlated with gender-based violence such as intimate partner violence (Mthembu et al., 2014) and rape proclivity (Masser et al., 2006). Several studies show a connection between sexual harassment and hostile sexism (Begany & Milburn, 2002; Diehl et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2020). This study builds on research that shows sensitizing messaging can lower levels of hostile sexism and gender-harassing behaviors like sexual harassment (Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021) by assessing if sensitizing communication from organizations can also have impacts.

Communicating Anti-sexual Harassment Messages in the Workplace

Scholars continue to stress the importance of organizational messaging on sexual harassment, particularly around policy implementation, as key to eliminating workplace sexual harassment (Keyton et al., 2018). However, it should be noted that communication is only one strategy and action must also be taken by organizations. Research on organizational communication around workplace sexual harassment, stresses the need for action in shifting organizational culture to create environments wherein staff have confidence in their organization to address the problem (Bell et al., 2002). Nevertheless, since organizational climate is an antecedent of sexual harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Willness et al., 2007) and organizations set the tone for sexual harassment tolerance through their messaging (Foster & Fullager, 2018; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; McCabe & Hardman, 2005; McDonald, 2012), it is ultimately the responsibility of organizations to effectively communicate to stakeholders on workplace sexual harassment (Ford & Ivancic, 2020). As Dougherty and Sorg (2020) write, "Communication is key to how sexual harassment is enacted and engaged, meaning that communication determines whether organizational cultures are resistant or prone to sexual harassment" (p. 663, citing Dougherty & Smythe, 2004).

One possible approach to effective organizational communication on sexual harassment is focusing on the victim. In an experiment, Diehl et al. (2014) found that presenting messages that contextualize sexual harassment and its negative impacts led to increased empathy and decreased sexual harassment myth acceptance. Victim-focused messaging can also support victims to report, which many do not due to fear of backlash and other consequences (Blumell & Mulupi, 2021; Herovic et al., 2019; Scarduzio et al., 2018). Furthermore, due to organizational tolerance and incompetency, reporting can have negative consequences for victims such as re-traumatization and difficulties to bounce back (Ford et al., 2021). Therefore, victim-focused communication must be accompanied by robust anti-sexual harassment policies to not further victimize survivors.

Another communication strategy is a penalty or zero-tolerance approach. In an experiment, Jacobson and Eaton (2018) found that participants were more likely to report hypothetical experienced sexual harassment when exposed to organizational messaging of zero-tolerance policies versus neutral or no messaging. This builds off early work that focused on organizations' need to stress zero-tolerance of sexual harassment in their messaging and training (Bell et al., 2002). A zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment

has also been situated in legal scholarship as a deterrent for employers to utilize (Rose, 2004).

Overall, the research shows that singular approaches such as implementing an anti-sexual harassment policy alone is not enough. Organizations must show they are serious about eliminating sexual harassment through effective communication (and action). However, communication can be tricky given the cultural norms that normalize sexual harassment while simultaneously making its taboo to discuss at work. Not to mention that management, who spearhead such communication, can also abuse their power via sexual harassment.

Research Questions

This study used an experimental design to test how different types of messaging (victim focused, penalty focused, or neutral) impacted various reactions or preventions to sexual harassment. It builds on previous research that tested message type (Bell et al., 2002; Diehl et al., 2014; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018) to understand if likelihood to sexually harass, likelihood to report, and harmful attitudes on sexual harassment are impacted:

RQ1: To what extent does organizational messaging on anti-sexual harassment policies impact LSH?

RQ2: To what extent does organizational messaging on anti-sexual harassment policies impact LR?

RQ3: To what extent does organizational messaging on anti-sexual harassment policies impact SHMA and ambivalent sexism?

Method

This is an online experiment using panel data conducted by TGM Research with participants from Kenya ($n = 301$), South Africa ($n = 295$) and the UK ($n = 298$) for a total of $N = 894$ participants. Ethical approval was granted by the host university before any data collection began. Data collection included a pilot test in each country of $n = 30$ participants. The target demographic was working professionals to simulate potential staff at an organization with an anti-sexual harassment policy. On average, the experiment took 14.25 min to complete. Participants were recruited and compensated by TGM Research as is the standard practice with panel data collection.

Participants

Each participant was asked a series of demographic questions. In total, 51% of the participants identified as male ($n = 452$) and 49% of the participants identified as female ($n = 442$). It is important to note that a third category of gender non-conforming was also available for participants, but only five chose the option and

were thus eliminated from the results due to too small of a sample size. There were attempts by TGM Research to increase the sample size of gender non-conforming participants, but it was beyond capacity. Future research should include more targeted sampling such as snowballing to increase the sample of gender non-conforming people. The breakdown of gender by country was as follows: South Africa (male = 150, female = 145), Kenya (male = 155, female = 146), and the UK (male = 147, female = 151).

In terms of the highest education achieved, participants ranged from less than high school ($n = 27$), high school ($n = 203$), some college ($n = 250$), 2-year degree ($n = 72$), Bachelor's degree ($n = 273$), Master's degree ($n = 53$), and PhD ($n = 17$). The age of the participants was evenly distributed between the ages of 25–60. In total, 35% of the participants ranged between 26 and 35, 29.3% of the participants ranged between 36 and 45, 24% of the participants ranged between 46 and 55, and 11.7% of the participants ranged between 56 and 60.

Conditions

The participants were told they worked for a mid-sized organization and were randomly assigned one of three different e-mails on instituting a new anti-sexual harassment policy within the organization. There was also a control group. See the supplementary file for the full text. One type of e-mail was victim focused, which emphasized the company's support for victims of sexual harassment. A second type of e-mail was penalty focused, which emphasized the organization's commitment to a zero-tolerance workplace. A third type of e-mail was neutral, and stated the organization had a new anti-sexual harassment policy. The zero-tolerance and neutral e-mails were based on conditions included in Jacobson and Eaton's (2018) study that tested bystander reporting. The victim-focused e-mail was based on Diehl et al. (2014) study that included contextualizing information on reports. A manipulation check question that included three possible e-mail topics (online fraud, false complaints, and anti-sexual harassment policy) tested participants' ability to correctly identify the topic of the e-mail. There was a 97% accuracy rate. Any participant who incorrectly answered the manipulation check question was removed from the study.

Measures

After reading their assigned condition, participants were asked for items to test their likelihood to report if sexually harassed and their likelihood to sexually harass. Finally, levels of sexual harassment myth acceptance, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism were also measured to test relevant attitudes.

Likelihood to Report

The *Likelihood to Report Scale* (LR, see Jacobson & Eaton, 2018) was used to measure if participants would report experienced sexual harassment in various scenarios. The participants were presented with a verbal harassment scenario that described a coworker sending suggestive messages and obscene photos for an extended period, and a physical harassment scenario that described a coworker grabbing the participant by the waist when alone. After each scenario, participants were asked three questions on a 7-point Likert scale on how

likely they were to report to their company, their supervisor, and to HR (α = .95). Two additional questions were added to each scenario that asked how likely the participant was to report if the perpetrator was a junior or senior staff member. Answers were on the same 7-point Likert scale.

Likelihood to Sexually Harass

The *Likelihood to Sexually Harass Scale* (LSH, see J. B. Pryor, 1987; J. Pryor & Wesselmann, 2011) was used. Three scenarios were adapted (Diehl et al., 2014; Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021) using gender neutral language. After each scenario, participants were asked three questions on a five-point Likert scale: likelihood to offer job (not included in analysis), likelihood to ask on a date, and likelihood to ask for sexual favors (α = .83). The first scenario stated the participant was promoted to a senior position in their company and could hire an attractive assistant. The remaining scenarios asked to imagine what the participant would do if they were 1) a news director hiring an attractive news presenter, and 2) a Hollywood film director casting a minor role with a sexy actor.

Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance

The *Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance Scale* (SHMA, see Diehl et al., 2014; Lonsway et al., 2008) was adapted using gender neutral language (α = .91). The 20-item scale includes statements that signify a popular myth (i.e., if a person is sexually harassed, they must have done something to invite it) followed by a 7-point Likert scale on the level of agreement.

Ambivalent Sexism

The *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory* (see Glick & Fiske, 2001, 2011) was used (α = 85) to measure benevolent sexism (α = 80) and hostile sexism (α= .88). The 22-item measure includes statements that test benevolent (i.e., a good woman should be cherished and protected by men) and hostile (i.e., women are too easily offended) sexism followed by a 7-point Likert scale on the level of agreement.

Data Analysis

Before answering the RQs, initial analyses were run between the demographic variables and the measures to understand any overall patterns in the data. Table 1 shows a series of t tests between gender and the measures. The results show men were significantly more LSH, and had higher levels of SHMA, and hostile sexism. There was no significant difference between

Table 1. T test between gender and measures (df = 892).

	t	Men		Women		*p*
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
SHMA	7.21	3.84	.99	3.36	1.02	<.001
Hostile Sexism	8.44	4.17	1.30	3.43	1.33	<.001
Benevolent Sexism	1.63	4.52	1.23	4.38	1.31	.10
Likelihood to Sexually Harass	4.35	1.82	1.08	1.54	.90	<.001
Likelihood to Report (verbal)	−5.76	5.17	1.88	5.83	1.51	<.001
Likelihood to Report (physical)	−5.72	4.87	1.94	5.56	1.66	<.001
Likelihood to Report (junior)	−6.00	4.92	1.85	5.16	1.57	<.001
Likelihood to Report (senior)	−3.83	5.16	1.83	5.60	1.6	<.001

Table 2. One-way ANOVA between countries and measures (df = 2).

	F	South Africa		Kenya		UK	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
SHMA	31.30***	3.58	1.0	3.94	.92	3.29	1.08
Hostile Sexism	16.93***	3.89	1.45	4.07	1.29	3.45	1.28
Benevolent Sexism	61.30***	4.73	1.24	4.79	1.2	3.82	1.15
Likelihood to Sexually Harass	2.40	1.61	.98	1.67	1.01	1.78	1.03
Likelihood to Report (verbal)	6.77***	5.79	1.62	5.29	1.81	5.41	1.74
Likelihood to Report (physical)	7.29***	5.49	1.77	5.22	1.87	4.92	1.84
Likelihood to Report (junior)	10.16***	5.63	1.68	5.03	1.85	5.14	1.66
Likelihood to Report (senior)	14.88***	5.80	1.56	5.28	1.76	5.06	1.78

*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.***$p < .001$.

Table 3. Pearson correlations.

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Age		−.16***	−.08**	−.05	−.04	−.15***	.002
2. Education			.03	−.004	.02	.04	−.01
3. SHMA				.64***	.39***	.32***	−.23***
4. Hostile sexism					.38***	.25***	−.16***
5. Benevolent sexism						.09**	.06
6. LSH							−.11***
7. LR (combined)							

*$p < .05$**$p < .01$***$p < .001$.

men and women for benevolent sexism. On the other hand, women were significantly more LR in all possible scenarios.

Next, one-way ANOVAs were run between the country variable and the measures. Table 2 shows the statistical results and *M* and *SD* for each country. There was significance for all tested measures except for LSH. Examining Bonferroni's post-hoc comparisons, South Africa and Kenya were significantly higher than the UK for the SHMA, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism scales. South Africa and Kenya were only significantly different from each other for SHMA. South Africa was significantly more LR in all scenarios than Kenya and the UK.

Finally, Pearson Correlation statistics were run between the measures, age, and education. Table 3 shows the results. Age had a negative significance with SHMA and LSH. Education had no significance. Not surprisingly, SHMA, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and LSH were all highly correlated. Interestingly, they also had negative significance with LR.

Results

After the exploratory analyses, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with three blocks of variables to answer RQ1, which asked how organizational messaging impact LSH. The regression statistics are in Table 4. Model 1 consisted of the neutral message (reference category), victim message, penalty message, and the control recoded as dummy variables. Model 2 added gender (0 = female, 1 = male), South Africa, Kenya (reference category), and the UK recoded as dummy variables. Age and education were also included. Model 3 included the SHMA, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism scales.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis for likelihood to sexually harass.

Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1					.12	.01	.01
Control	.24	.11	.08	2.10*			
Victim Message	−.10	.10	−.05	−1.13			
Penalty Message	−.14	.10	−.06	−1.56			
Model 2					.24	.06	.05
Control	.22	.11	.07	2.0*			
Victim Message	−.06	.09	−.03	−.66			
Penalty Message	−.11	.09	−.05	−1.32			
Gender	.28	.07	.14	4.2***			
South Africa	−.003	0.08	−.001	−0.04			
UK	.16	.08	.07	1.89*			
Age	−.07	.02	−.14	−4.17***			
Education	.01	.02	.02	.60			
Model 3					.39	.15	.14
Control	.17	.11	.06	1.6			
Victim Message	.04	.08	.001	.04			
Penalty Message	−.06	.08	−.03	−.74			
Gender	.11	.07	.06	1.72			
South Africa	.10	.08	.05	1.29			
UK	.10	.08	.17	4.36***			
Age	−.06	.02	−.12	−3.89***			
Education	.03	.02	.04	1.09			
SHMA	.27	.04	.27	6.47***			
Hostile Sexism	.06	.03	.08	1.92*			
Benevolent Sexism	−.004	.03	−.004	−.12			

*$p < .05$**$p < .01$***$p < .001$.

Model 1 was significant, $F(3, 890) = 4.09$, $p < .01$. The control variable was a significant predictor of LSH. Model 2 ($F(8, 885) = 6.74$, $p < .001$) showed the control, men, and the UK were predictors of LSH. Age was a negative predictor of LSH. Finally, Model 3 showed the most significance, $F(11, 882) = 14.12$, $p < .001$. The significant predictors were the UK, SHMA, and hostile sexism, with age again being a negative predictor. Interestingly, the control ($p = .11$) and gender ($p = .09$) were no longer significant in the third model. As shown in Table 4, the third model accounts for 15% of the variance. The results show the importance of considering contextual factors and attitudes. The significance of SHMA and hostile sexism must be considered. As well as country context, with the UK being a significant factor. Unexpectedly, age was a negative predictor.

To answer RQ2, which asked how organizational messaging impact LR, the same hierarchical multiple regression was run with the combined LR scale as the DV. Table 5 shows the regression statistics. Model 1 ($F(3, 890) = 4.40$, $p < .01$) showed the control as significant, but as a negative predictor of LR. Model 2 ($F(8, 885) = 9.15$, $p < .001$) included both the control and gender as negative predictors. This indicates that men were less likely to report than women. South Africa was also a positive predictor in the second model. Finally, Model 3 ($F(11, 882) = 11.61$, $p < .001$) showed SHMA as a negative predictor, but notably benevolent sexism as a positive predictor of LR. Table 5 shows the third model accounts for 13% of the variance. The control as a negative predictor shows the importance of organizational communication to encourage participants' confidence in reporting. Again, context and attitudes are important with women and South African participants more likely to report and SHMA having a negative significance.

To answer RQ3, which asked how organizational messaging impacts SMHA and ambivalent sexism, the same hierarchical multiple regression was run. Table 6 shows

Table 5. Hierarchical regression analysis for likelihood to report.

Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1					.12	.02	.01
Control	−.49	.18	−.10	−2.79**			
Victim Message	.08	.14	.02	.55			
Penalty Message	.12	.13	.04	.88			
Model 2					.28	.08	.07
Control	−.45	.17	−0.10	−2.64**			
Victim Message	.03	.13	.008	.212			
Penalty Message	.10	.13	.03	.74			
Gender	−.61	.1	−.20	−6.10***			
South Africa	.48	.13	.15	3.80***			
UK	−.05	.13	−.02	−.42			
Age	−.02	.03	−.02	−.59			
Education	−.003	.04	−.003	−.09			
Model 3					.36	.13	.12
Control	−.39	.17	−.08	−2.34**			
Victim Message	−.04	.13	−.01	−.28			
Penalty Message	.04	.13	.01	.28			
Gender	−.44	.10	−.14	−4.32***			
South Africa	.36	.12	.11	2.92**			
UK	−.14	.13	−.04	−1.08			
Age	−.02	.03	−.03	−.88			
Education	−.01	.04	−.01	−.28			
SHMA	−.34	.06	−.22	−5.25***			
Hostile Sexism	−.05	.05	−.05	−1.06			
Benevolent Sexism	.17	.04	.14	3.78***			

*$p < .05$**$p < .01$***$p < .001$.

Table 6. Hierarchical regression analysis for sexual harassment myth acceptance.

Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1					.11	.01	.01
Control	.14	.12	.04	1.17			
Victim Message	−.19	.09	−.08	−2.11*			
Penalty Message	−.16	.09	−.07	−1.76			
Model 2					.37	.13	.13
Control	.19	.11	.06	1.72			
Victim Message	−.15	.09	−.07	−1.79			
Penalty Message	−.14	.08	−.06	−1.66			
Gender	.46	.07	.22	7.10***			
South Africa	−.36	.08	−.16	4.40***			
UK	−.66	.01	−.30	−8.08***			
Age	−.02	.02	−.05	−1.41			
Education	−.03	.02	−.04	−1.25			
Model 3					.68	.46	.45
Control	.16	.09	.05	1.87			
Victim Message	−.01	.07	−.01	−.01			
Penalty Message	−.04	.07	−.02	−.57			
Gender	.16	.05	.08	2.95**			
South Africa	−.28	.07	−.13	−4.29***			
UK	−.27	.07	−.13	−4.01***			
Age	−.01	.01	−.02	−.80			
Education	−.01	.02	−.01	−.37			
Hostile Sexism	.41	.02	.53	18.96***			
Benevolent Sexism	.13	.02	.16	5.71***			

*$p < .05$**$p < .01$***$p < .001$.

the regression statistics for SHMA. Model 1 ($F(3, 890) = 3.64$, $p < .01$) showed that the victim variable had a negative significance. The penalty variable was verging on a negative significance with $p = .08$. Model 2 ($F(8, 885) = 17.10$, $p < .001$) indicated that gender was positively significant, while South Africa and the UK were negatively significant. In Model 2, the victim variable was verging on a negative significance with $p = .07$. Model 3 ($F(10, 883) = 74.54$, $p < .001$) had positive significance with the gender, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism variables, and a negative significance again with South Africa and the UK. The control variable in Model 3 was verging on significance with $p = .06$. Table 6 shows the third model accounts for 46% of the variance. The results show the interconnectedness of the scales and how men have significantly higher levels of SHMA.

Finally, the same hierarchical multiple regression was run for the ambivalent sexism scales. Benevolent sexism showed no significance for messaging, $F(3, 890) = .1$, $p > .05$, but hostile sexism did have significance for all the models. Table 7 shows the regression statistics. Model 1 ($F(3, 890) = 4.60$, $p < .01$) was negatively significant for the victim and penalty messages. Model 2 ($F(8, 885) = 15.81$, $p < .001$) added gender as a positive predictor and the UK as a negative predictor. Model 3 ($F(10, 883) = 72.45$, $p < .001$) showed SHMA, benevolent sexism, and gender as positive predictors, as well as victim messaging as a negative predictor.

Discussion

Sexual harassment remains a prominent issue in many workplaces, with severe consequences (Mainiero, 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Nuñez & Ollo-López, 2022). Moreover,

Table 7. Hierarchical regression analysis for hostile sexism.

Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1					.12	.02	.01
Control	−.01	.16	−.01	−0.01			
Victim Message	−.39	.12	−.13	−3.27***			
Penalty Message	−.28	.12	−.09	−2.33*			
Model 2					.35	.13	.12
Control	.05	.15	.01	.36			
Victim Message	−.34	.11	−.11	−2.97**			
Penalty Message	−.25	.11	−.09	−2.26*			
Gender	.71	.09	.26	8.25***			
South Africa	−.18	.11	−.22	−1.63			
UK	−.64	.11	−.22	−5.86***			
Age	−.03	.02	−.04	−1.23			
Education	−.05	.03	−.05	−1.46			
Model 3					.67	.45	.44
Control	−.09	.12	−.02	−.78			
Victim Message	−.22	.09	−.07	−.2.48**			
Penalty Message	−.15	.09	−.05	−1.73			
Gender	.36	.07	.13	5.14***			
South Africa	.09	.09	.03	1.07			
UK	.001	.09	.00	.01			
Age	−.01	.02	−.01	−.44			
Education	−.02	.03	−.02	−.77			
SMHA	.71	.04	.54	18.96***			
Benevolent Sexism	.17	.03	.16	5.48***			

*$p < .05$**$p < .01$***$p < .001$.

sexual harassment is often under-reported, and when reported, organizations often fail to properly respond (Blumell & Mulupi, 2021; Paudel & Khanal, 2023). This study aimed to address this ongoing issue with an online experiment of working professionals in Kenya, South Africa, and the UK ($N = 894$). It tested how organizational messaging on anti-sexual harassment policies impacts levels of SHMA, ambivalent sexism, LSH, and LR. The study extends current knowledge by comparing the effects of message types of different geographic locations (Lyons et al., 2022). It included several demographic and attitude-based variables to account for the contextual and cultural barriers that influence how sexual harassment is enacted.

For this study, we build on previous research that stressed the importance of organizational communication (Foster & Fullager, 2018; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; McDonald, 2012), since patriarchal social hierarchies continue within organizations that situate sexual harassment as a taboo topic that is often ignored or downplayed (Paudel & Khanal, 2023). We tested the impact of communication through a victim-focused message, which offered empathy and support, a penalty-focused message, which emphasized zero-tolerance and due process, and a neutral message. The results were mixed.

When testing the effects of the message types, for LSH, having no message was a significant predictor. This indicates any type of messaging is more effective than no messaging. Similar results were found for LR, with the control as a negative predictor. When testing SHMA, the victim message in Model 1 was a negative predictor. But the victim and penalty-focused messages were consistently negative predictors of hostile sexism. This extends research on the impacts of sensitizing messages (Diehl et al., 2014; Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021) to show that message types have higher effects on attitudes than actions, but that any kind of organizational messaging can produce results.

Focusing on LSH, unsurprisingly, men scored higher than women. In a review of research on perpetrators of sexual harassment, Pina et al. (2009) reported that men are consistently more likely to sexually harass than women. However, beyond gender identity alone, sexist ideologies are also consistently associated with LSH (Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021; Krings & Facchin, 2009). In our study, SHMA and hostile sexism were both highly correlated with LSH. This shows the need for organizations to incorporate targeted initiatives that counter these widely held but false ideas about gender. Focusing on sexual harassment alone is not enough to eliminate the issue.

As found by Luthar and Luthar (2008), geography also impacted LSH, with the UK as a significant predictor. Surprisingly, although sexist attitudes are associated with LSH, the UK was a negative predictor for SMHA and ambivalent sexism yet was a positive predictor for LSH. More investigation is needed to explain this contraction. When examining previous literature on LSH and the UK, there have been other inconsistencies. Bevens and Loughnan (2019) found a lack of correlation with objectification and dehumanization with LSH. Hussey et al. (2016) also found a lack of correlation between LSH and the Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure Scale and Attitudes Towards Women Scale. One explanation could be that because LSH's scenarios are based on professional contexts, there is a lack of sensitization amongst UK participants, since sexual harassment is not predominately addressed in UK organizations (Phipps & Smith, 2012; Proudman, 2020).

Next, LR was measured due to the consistent issue that those who experience workplace sexual harassment are not confident to report (Foster & Fullager, 2018; Jacobson & Eaton,

2018). Gender was once again a factor with men reporting less than women. Understanding that sexual harassment has psychological harm regardless of gender (Chan et al., 2008), it is important to acknowledge the disparity between men and women and LR. This is likely connected to underlying hegemonic masculine norms found in other research (Lee, 2000; Smith et al., 2022) that label sexual harassment a "women's problem" and, therefore, a man reporting experienced sexual harassment is somehow degrading his masculinity. Part of shifting organizational culture should consequently include how traditional gender norms of masculinity can impact men both in the likelihood to sexually harass, as well as to not report if sexually harassed.

Attitudes on sexual harassment also impact LR with SHMA as a negative predictor. It is logical that if one holds beliefs that downplay sexual harassment and victim blame, LR would be less. The ideologies thus influence both increasing LSH and decreasing LR. Surprisingly, benevolent sexism was a positive predictor of LR. There are mixed results for the impact of benevolent sexism and sexual harassment. Like this study, other scholars have found no connection between benevolent sexism and LSH (Begany & Milburn, 2002). One explanation for the positive association with LR in this study, is the focus that benevolent sexism has on cherishing women (Glick & Fiske, 2001, 2011). Thus, those with higher benevolent sexism, particularly women, may believe their own victimhood enough to report – even if they may doubt others due to the same beliefs (i.e., there are "real" and "fake" victims).

It is noteworthy that South Africa was significant for LR. Although sexist attitudes and sexual harassment continue in South Africa (Bowen et al., 2013; Kheswa, 2014; Kiguwa et al., 2015), the comprehensive reforms that were initiated decades ago to address sexual harassment may have influence on LR (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021; Zalesne, 2002). These initiatives may also influence the negative correlation with SHMA and South Africa.

Besides the type of messaging impacting both SHMA and hostile sexism, it is noteworthy that SHMA and ambivalent sexism were highly correlated. Although each scale holds important distinctions, the continued correlation between heteronormative and gendered-based prejudices (Diehl et al., 2018; Herzog, 2007; Moscatelli et al., 2021; Ready et al., 2021; Shi & Zheng, 2020) shows the need to call out all forms of workplace sexism, even those that are often labeled as harmless, such as "jokes" (Mallett et al., 2016), or revered like benevolent sexism (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). Gendered attitudes may have degrees of severity but are interconnected and lead to higher tolerances of sexual harassment and all forms of sexual violence.

Gender was again important, with men's higher acceptance of SHMA and hostile sexism, but not benevolent sexism. This is consistent with previous SHMA across various countries (Diehl et al., 2014; Expósito et al., 2014; Kara & Toygar, 2019; Lonsway et al., 2008). Despite the consistent results, there seems to be a reluctance on the part of organizations to contextualize these findings within their trainings and communication without perpetuating gender stereotypes, i.e., only women are sexually harassed. It's likely due to a fear of backlash and that organizations largely remain patriarchal with men dominating senior positions.

The problem of sexual harassment will continue until organizations go beyond minimum legal requirements to address the many contextual influences of the issue. It cannot be eliminated by identifying a few bad apples within organizations. As shown here, sexual harassment is rooted in cultural gendered norms that normalize sexual

violence as inevitable and excuse it through various common myths, which victim blame rather than hold the perpetrator accountable (Lonsway et al., 2008; Ready et al., 2021). What is needed is more literacy on why and how problematic gendered ideas are interconnected with sexual harassment rather than focusing on what constitutes sexual harassment alone.

Organizations must take a pluralistic approach (Werkman, 2009) to addressing workplace sexual harassment that includes instituting robust policies, regular training, and effective communication – based on the knowledge of wider social and cultural contexts. The results show that while there are patterns across countries, countries are situated differently. Organizations must understand the cultural contexts in which they operate to institute effective training. Preventative work should be continuous to achieve long-term effects (Medeiros & Griffith, 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation is the number of countries surveyed. Of course, the larger number of countries sampled, the greater data and patterning can be found. Secondly, despite including three categories in the gender variable, only two were used in the analysis because of the sample size. Thirdly, race was not included due to the different racial and ethnic contexts within the sampled countries. Future research should focus on race and other potential demographic influences like occupational industries, sexuality, religiosity, and political ideologies. In future research, qualitative follow-up could investigate some of the findings such as the seeming contradictions in the UK. Finally, it would be useful in the future research to test how pluralistic approaches impact the results of organizational communication when combined with other initiatives such as training and robust policies. This would likely require longitudinal data collection to test trust, organizational action, and attitude change.

Conclusion

The problem of workplace sexual harassment continues across many industries and geographic contexts (Mainiero, 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Nuñez & Ollo-López, 2022). This study showed that there are patterns across different countries such as men having higher levels of SHMA, hostile sexism, and LSH, and women with higher levels of LR; but that there are also unique findings by country that is likely the result of cultural ideologies and the initiatives to eliminate sexual harassment within countries. When considering how organizations communicate to stakeholders on sexual harassment, victim, and penalty-focused messaging produces attitudinal changes, but that any type of messaging is important for action-based measures. Organizations should thus, have regular communication with their stakeholders on their anti-sexual harassment actions as part of a pluralistic approach to eliminate these abuses from the workplace.

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Notes on Contributors

Lindsey Blumell holds a Ph.D. in media and communication from Texas Tech University. She specializes in human rights, with an emphasis on gender. She has largely focused on how sexual violence against women is portrayed in traditional and new media. Her other interests include sexism in newsrooms and the representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the news media.

Dinfin Mulupi is a Journalism Studies Ph.D. student at the University of Maryland, College Park. Dinfin's research interests focus on women's rights, particularly on sexism within the news industry in Africa, and the representation of sexual and gender violence in the media. Her previous projects include research on sexual harassment in 10 African states, and news coverage of sexual violence cases involving high-profile perpetrators in Kenya and the US.

ORCID

Lindsey E. Blumell http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4608-9269

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