

Unheard Voices: Navigating Sexual Harassment and Victim-Blaming at Mohammed First University

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ABSTRACT

Sexual assault in universities has dominated recent headlines, as students across the country are coming together to speak out against a culture of sexual violence many feel is pervading their campuses. However, nobody is aware of exactly how pervasive the sexual demands are in Moroccan universities as victims fail to report the harassment over fears of social shaming. Female students are often hesitant to report sexual harassment and frequently face victim-blaming attitudes, particularly from men in positions of authority. Therefore, this paper aims to elucidate the key theories that interlink to form a pervasive culture of woman-blaming, which contributes to the prevalence of moral decadence. While women are undoubtedly blamed due to sexism and misogyny, this phenomenon is further reinforced by additional factors, such as rape myths and stereotypes, belief in a just world, individualism and collectivism, attribution bias, self-preservation instincts, denial of personal vulnerability, and counterfactual thinking. Moreover, this paper assesses attitudinal constructs hypothesized to be related to victim-blaming as part of a survey on UMP students to examine the reasons why some people tend to blame victims of sexual harassment and how this denial significantly contributes to the promotion of misogyny and sexism.

Keywords- Misogyny, sexual harassment, university students, victim-blaming.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Background of the Study

The contentious issue of sexual harassment of women by men is a widespread and frequently hidden social issue (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2017). Recently, social media outlets have been overwhelmed with appalling stories of sexual abuse and assault against women all over the country. Notwithstanding, some people's reactions vis-à-vis these increasingly pervasive attitudes have also exposed the stigma that continues to cast a negative shadow on women who are sexually harassed, shield harassers from social blame, and further discourage victims of sexual harassment from reporting this form of abuse. Consistent with this attitude, a large and growing body of research elucidates people's propensity to blame women for being harassed through an emphasis on their supposedly provocative behaviors (De Jucibus & McCabe, 2001). Research also indicates

that men are more susceptible to adopting a victim-blaming attitude towards female victims of sexual harassment and endorse other negative views that further limit the culpability of male perpetrators (Lonsway et al., 2008). To adequately address the problem of sexual misconduct, it is important to understand the definition of sexual harassment with its various implications and to unearth the underlying conceptions of victim-blaming attitudes towards women who are sexually harassed.

Contrary to common misconceptions, sexual harassment manifests in various forms and includes a wide array of behaviors, such as leering, staring, unwelcome touching, and sexual insults or taunts. It occurs in diverse contexts, including workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and online environments (Ilies et al., 2003). While sexual harassment can affect both women and men, with individuals of any gender potentially being victims or perpetrators, this research specifically examines male-to-

female harassment. This form of harassment is demonstrated through extensive research as the pervasive form in most developing countries (Berdahl et al., 1996).

Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem worldwide, and Morocco is not exempt from it. Obtaining precise data on sexual harassment and assault in Morocco is challenging. However, a nationwide poll indicates that almost two-thirds of women in Morocco had encountered physical, psychological, or sexual abuse at least once in their lives. According to the same survey, in public as well as private places, the touching of women and girls is disturbingly frequent - while men, both adolescents and adults, act with great impunity (Higgs, 2020).

Furthermore, figures from the Public Directorate of National Security in the year 2000, during the onset of the global pandemic COVID-19, show that the public prosecution received 300 cases of sexual extortion. This number represents the highest incidence rate compared to other significant crimes such as terrorism (21), embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds (231), and currency counterfeiting (250) (Benhima, 2021). Most women who were victims of bullying or sexual assault suffered in silence for fear for their honor and that of their families, because they were prisoners of the victim-blaming mentality that further vilifies the victim and exonerates the perpetrator, or because of the legal vacuum in this area.

Put differently, when survivors muster the courage to report and seek assistance, they are often subject to unjust scrutiny and social stigma. This phenomenon frequently exacerbates the trauma experienced by the victim. Extensive research underscores that women who have endured sexual harassment and assault can develop enduring psychological conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alongside chronic insomnia and persistent anxiety. In environments where sexual harassment is prevalent, women may experience heightened apprehension in everyday activities like walking in public, using public transportation independently, or attending educational and professional settings (Higgs, 2020).

It is important to note that one of the milieus whereby sexual harassment has long reigned supreme is Moroccan universities. Abdelmalek Saadi University in Tetouan and Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech were, not long ago, the two main fronts of female students' under-reported and barely investigated struggle against what appears to be a "sexortion" issue in many higher learning institutions across Morocco. More recently, reports that five professors at the Hassan I University in Serrat were implicated in an outrageous "sex for grades" scandal. The ethical epidemic seems to have awakened many Moroccans to a horrid occurrence that most female students have been experiencing for ages (Latrech, 2021).

Recognizing the seriousness of the issue in 2018, the Moroccan government, with the support of women's rights activists, implemented a new law criminalizing all sorts of violence against women. Transparency Maroc has also joined its efforts to the plentiful NGOs and student organizations speaking out against sexual harassment and extortion in Moroccan universities (Toutate, 2022). Nevertheless, while implementing laws to criminalize sexual harassment is of paramount importance, it is also essential to shift attitudes that tolerate acts of sexual misconduct toward women and further blame them for it.

2. Problem Statement

Women have continuously been subjected to sexual harassment whether in the street, workplace, or university campuses. The recent sexual harassment scandal at Morocco's National School of Business and Management (ENCG) in Oujda and King Fahd's School of Translation in Tangier catalyzed an enormous outrage among students and activists who broke their silence to bluntly condemn the "outrageous" activities of professors. Sexual harassment against female university students is now stirring a heated debate on social media platforms as the problem has come to light again. A former student at ENCG Oujda exposed a professor who initiated sexual discussions and made explicit proposals. The perpetrator is reported to have blackmailed the student, threatening to ruin her academic year (Latrech, 2021). The graphic details of the incident garnered significant attention from authorities and the public alike. Lawmakers, concerned citizens, and various media outlets seized upon the story to catalyze discussions surrounding sexual harassment in higher education. While sexual assault is not a new topic, the ongoing repercussions of this particular incident have intensified scrutiny on how colleges and universities address allegations of sexual assault and the societal response to victims of sexual harassment.

To date, relatively little empirical research has been conducted on people's reactions to sexual harassment cases in Moroccan universities. Limited research has examined the experiences of female students regarding sexual harassment in Morocco, particularly concerning legal frameworks and the harmful consequences of societal reactions to the prevalence of this social issue. The underlying assumption is to create awareness among different social classes and age groups of the fundamental causes of victim-blaming attitudes as well as the deleterious repercussions associated with such apathetic behaviors. To address the research gap in the literature, this case study was conducted to assess the knowledge, attitude, and awareness of the gravity of sexual harassment issues among Moroccan university students. This is substantial to catalyze attitudinal reforms to the public sphere knowing that the fight against such outrageous social crimes heavily depends on people's reactions towards them.

3. Purpose and Significance of The Study

Recent headlines have been dominated by sexual assault in universities, with students nationwide joining together to denounce what they perceive as a pervasive culture of sexual violence on their campuses. However, nobody is aware of exactly how pervasive the sexual demands are in Moroccan universities as victims fail to report the harassment over fears of social shaming. Female students often exhibit reluctance to file sexual harassment complaints and frequently encounter victim-blaming attitudes when they do, particularly from men in positions of authority. Therefore, the overarching purpose of this study is to assess the attitudinal constructs hypothesized to be related to victim-blaming as part of a survey of UMP students. Additionally, the objective of this paper is to examine the reasons why some people tend to blame victims of sexual harassment and how this denial significantly contributes to the promotion of misogyny sexism, and sexual misconduct.

The study is grounded in the research hypothesis that asserts female students in Morocco bear responsibility in numerous sexual harassment cases due to sexism and misogyny. However, this assertion is reinforced by additional factors including stereotypes, belief in a fair world, attribution bias, our instinct for self-protection, refusal to acknowledge personal vulnerability, and even counterfactual thinking. Therefore, the study seeks to explore numerous research inquiries. The inquiry was conducted via an online survey using Google Forms. In summary, the research methodology, the inquiries being investigated, and the research methods will be expounded upon below.

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

To examine, study and interpret the attitudes of Mohamed First University students regarding female victims of sexual harassment, the primary research questions and hypotheses guided this study:

RQ1) In what way do sexism and misogyny contribute to the secondary victimization of sexual harassment victims?

RQ2) How frequently do people reference the victim's clothing, actions, and behaviors in cases of sexual assault?

RQ3) How is the responsibility for sexual crimes constructed and attributed to Mohamed First University? And how do people's attitudes vary according to gender?

RQ4) To what extent do the participants' belief in a just world, stereotypes, and attribution bias contribute to the promotion of sexual misconduct?

H1) In contrast to women, men tend to assign more blame to victims. Furthermore, men's tendency to assign blame to victims can be attributed to their comparatively lower empathy for female victims and their relatively higher empathy for the male perpetrator.

H2) Keys to victim-blaming attitudes in the UMP context are people's belief in a just world and the victim's provocative behavior, clothing, or promiscuity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Blaming the Victim

Among the direct factors of the aggravated, extended, and unnecessary suffering of victims of sexual harassment or violence is victim-blaming. The positive social response received by the victims from family, friends, and professionals after they disclose violence is of paramount importance to their recovery. Especially since victims are often lacking in power and resources. However, a large and growing body of literature indicates that very often victims of sexual assault receive some of the blame for initiating the sexual provocation (Andrews, 2003). Blaming the victims not only adds to the shame, self-loathing, and humiliation that they already feel but it also discourages them from coming forward and speaking against a culture of sexual abuse and misogyny. Most patriarchal societies tend to stigmatize the victim and consider their experiences of sexual harassment as a stain on their character and proof of their vulnerability, promiscuity, and moral decadence.

Accordingly, it is crucial to challenge the established perception of sexual harassment as a consensual interaction when it involves one person acting nonconsensually against another's will and well-being (Wade, 1997). In response-oriented practice, the term "victim" describes an event rather than a fixed identity. However, being labeled a victim carries such negative connotations in our society that many individuals opt not to disclose their experiences (ibid). Similarly, those who choose not to disclose instances of sexual harassment often face accusations of having a "victim mentality." In the realm of social sciences, there exists a discipline known as "victimology," yet there is no corresponding field dedicated to studying perpetrators. Criminology, as a broader discipline, does not specifically focus on the study of perpetuation. Legally, an individual is deemed a criminal only upon conviction; most perpetrators of violence do not face legal consequences (Fast and Richardson, 2019).

Furthermore, in victim-blaming, there is sometimes an implication that the victims did something to bring the violence on themselves, such as dressing provocatively, acting wantonly, not having boundaries, assertiveness skills, self-esteem, or knowledge of self-defense. Allan Wade (1997) notes that this form of victim-blaming is like saying "If you weren't so Aboriginal, I wouldn't be so racist ... if you weren't so disabled, I wouldn't make fun of you ... if you weren't so annoying, I wouldn't beat you up" (p. 27). Subsequently, for women living in a context of gender disparity, not doing what partners, bosses, teachers or fathers tell them to do is seen as a call for reprimand, criticism, or aggression. When power relations are imbalanced to the advantage of the perpetrator, a refusal to comply does not tend to open space for mutual discussion, exploration, and solution-finding; instead,

the result is often the resistance of the victim (Fast and Richardson, 2019).

2. Reporting Sexual Harassment in Morocco

In recent years, legislation on sexual assault has undergone significant upheavals. Instead of the legal vacuum that marked this area of interest for ages, Morocco has started to provide women with more legal protection ever since 2004 when the family code was ratified. The new Moroccan family code brought about a wide array of significant reforms such as restricting polygamy by stipulating the approval of the current wife. Moreover, the legal age of marriage rose from 15 to 18 years old. More importantly, the penal code has come to protect women from human trafficking and all kinds of gender-based crimes, including sexual harassment.

Article 404, for instance, indicates that “Any perpetrator of violence or abuse against any woman because of her gender, any pregnant woman if her pregnancy is evident or known to the perpetrator, any woman with a disability or known to have mental incapacity; against any ascendant, custodian, spouse, fiancé, or any person having guardianship over the perpetrator, or against a divorced party or in the presence of one of the children or one of the parent, shall be punished as follows: 2 In general, the punishment may range from 5 years or above and a fine from 10,000 MAD (approximately 1,000 Euros) or above in case of a felony and under 5 years up to one month in case of misdemeanors.”

Regarding crimes of sexual harassment, the following article outlines its penalties:

Article 503-1-1: Any person who persistently harasses another shall be deemed guilty of sexual harassment and shall be subject to a prison term of one to six months and a fine ranging from 2,000 to 10,000 MAD, or one of these penalties. This includes:

Harassment in public spaces through words, actions, or gestures of a sexual nature for sexual purposes, sending written letters, phone or electronic messages, recordings, or images of a sexual nature for sexual purposes. If the perpetrator is a work colleague, or responsible for the order or security of public places, the punishment shall be doubled. Additionally, the second part of Article 503 states that the punishment will be doubled if the perpetrator has authority over the victim, or if the victim is a minor.

Article 503-1-2: A sentence of three to five years of imprisonment and a fine ranging from 5,000 to 50,000 MAD shall be imposed if the sexual harasser is an ascendant, an unmarried relative, a custodian, or someone with authority or tutorship over the victim. This sentence shall also apply if the victim is a minor (Benhima, 2021).

It is important to note that, despite the several laws and regulations incriminating the act of sexual harassment as well as other sexual misconducts, gender-related crimes are expanding at an alarming rate as victims continuously fail to report them and local

authorities euphemize the occurrences. Researcher Holly Johnson referred to charges of sexual assault as the attrition of sexual assault charges; she noted that while 460,000 women self-reported a sexual assault in 2004, only 1,519 males were convicted of a sexual assault in 2006 (Desson, 2014).

Johnson’s (2012) research elucidated the fact that of the assaults that are reported, most do not make it to the charging or sentencing stage of the court process. The fact that there are so few convictions means that life becomes less safe for these women, who are then sometimes accused of making false allegations.

3. Gender Differences in Reaction towards Sexual Harassment

People’s reaction towards victims of sexual harassment is gender-coded. Research has indicated that men generally tend to exhibit an apathetic attitude toward female victims of sexual misconduct. Meta-analytic reviews suggest that unless the behavior is extreme, men are less likely than women to perceive it as sexual harassment (Blumenthal, 1998). For instance, men are more likely than women to consider derogatory remarks or dating pressure as nothing more than a harmless flirtatious attitude. Men are also more likely than women to believe that women tend to conceal reality in a cloud of misleading rhetoric and fabricate or exaggerate sexual harassment claims because of ulterior motives. Women are also often blamed by their male counterparts for being sexually harassed due to behaving or dressing provocatively or failing to clearly discourage men’s sexual advances (Bitton et al., 2013).

People’s negative attitudes toward disadvantaged or stigmatized groups, including men’s greater tendency to hold women responsible for being sexually harassed, can be understood, according to established theory and research, in terms of their lack of empathy toward the victim or the victimized group. This indifferent stance largely stems from a failure to adopt the perspectives of victims or to empathize with them. To explore how empathy might influence negative attitudes toward female victims of sexual harassment, Diehl, Glaser, and Bohner measured both men’s and women’s levels of victim empathy alongside their endorsement of sexual harassment myths (Lonsway et al., 2008). Through hierarchical regression analysis, they found that men were more likely than women to endorse sexual harassment myths; however, when participants’ levels of victim empathy were included in the model, the gender difference in endorsing these myths became statistically insignificant. The researchers interpreted this outcome as suggesting that gender disparities in victim empathy could account for gender differences in accepting sexual harassment myths, although this conclusion was not directly tested for mediation or moderation effects (ibid).

4. Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory examines how individuals interpret the causes of their own and others’ behaviors

(Littlejohn & Foss, 1978). According to this theory, people seek to explain others' actions as a means to predict or influence their environment. In this process, individuals attribute behavior either to internal factors or external circumstances. Internal attribution involves attributing behavior to personal traits, while external attribution attributes behavior to outside events or situations beyond the individual's control (McLeod, 2023). For example, when someone displays anger, we may attribute it to personal disposition (internal) or external factors such as job loss or personal loss (external).

The placement of attribution influences perceptions of whether actions are controllable or uncontrollable, thereby shaping judgments about those actions. A critical aspect of Attribution Theory is its role in understanding stigma (Heider, 1944). Women whose behavior is perceived as provocative may face blame for sexual harassment even when they are the victims. Similarly, bystanders' attributions of blame significantly influence perceptions of sexual harassment cases.

5. Victim's Clothing

A substantial body of research indicates that the physical appearance of the victim, particularly their choice of clothing, significantly influences how responsibility for sexual assault is attributed, either to the victim or the perpetrator. Experimental studies consistently demonstrate that participants tend to assign greater blame to the victim and recommend shorter prison sentences for the perpetrator when the victim is described as wearing provocative clothing compared to non-provocative attire (De La Torre Laso & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2022). This phenomenon suggests that references to the victim's attire may lead to a reduction in accountability for the perpetrator, ascribing their dishonorable behavior to external factors such as the victim's clothing choice rather than the perpetrator's actions. Such attributions can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and myths about sexual assault, undermining efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and support victims. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing interventions and policies that promote justice and support for survivors of sexual violence.

6. Belief in a Just World

The concept of BJW stems from peoples' eternal quest to live in a world that is just, fair, and where all people are compensated for what they do (Lerner & Matthews, 1967). According to this theory, people's negative perception, and blame, of sexual harassment victims occurs as a result of their attempt to justify the seemingly unjustifiable act. Furthermore, by considering victims as the authors of their own misfortune one could restore the belief in a just and equitable world whereby crimes of sexual assault can never afflict innocent people such as themselves (Schmitt et al., 2008).

Recent research studies have indicated that the level of BJW is a substantial predictor of rape blame

attributions. Akin believers of the BJW concept, therefore, attribute higher levels of victim blame and lower levels of perpetrator blame. Moreover, early research on victimization proposed that the BJW would predict respectable rape victims to be blamed more than less respectable victims. Jones and Aronson (1973) demonstrated that victims who were perceived as respectable (married or virgin rape victims) were subjected to greater victimization than were victims who were perceived as less respectable (divorcees or single). The argued rationale for this pattern was that the participants needed to protect themselves from the perception of vulnerability to a similar fate when the victim was respectable since this victim was easier to identify with (p. 417).

III. METHODS

1. Description of the Survey and Research Procedures

The survey served as a tool for gathering data, comprising both structured and unstructured queries. Structured questions offer predefined response options, while unstructured ones afford respondents greater flexibility in articulating their views. The survey was administered online and completed by 110 participants.

2. Sample

The current study employed non-probability voluntary sampling. A solicitation containing the link to the Google form was shared within Facebook and WhatsApp groups for participants to complete. Additionally, purposive sampling targeted specifically Mohamed First University students, as the request specified this group. In terms of demographic composition, 56.3% of respondents were female students, while 43.8% were male students. This sampling approach was deliberate and targeted. The survey was intended solely for Mohamed First University students, although some participants from other universities inadvertently completed it. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 years and older. The age between 18 and 25 constitutes 45%. The age between 25- 30 constitutes 33,3 %. The age between 30-35 constitutes 16,2% and the age 40 and above constitutes 5,4%. The majority of respondents are Mohamed First University Students. The Faculty of Letters and Human Science Oujda constitutes 37,3%. The Faculty of Science Oujda constitutes 19.6%. The ENCGO constitutes 8,9 %. The ENSAO constitutes 9,8, and the remaining 24,4% from other schools like the CPGE, The FMPO, SKEMA, The USMS, the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Dhar Lmehrad, and Abdelmalik Saadi University.

3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The research utilized a mixed-methods approach incorporating a survey comprising 12 items that included both quantitative and qualitative inquiries. The survey featured a blend of closed-ended questions, aiming to quantify responses, and open-ended questions,

designed to capture nuanced opinions. The distribution of the questionnaire was targeted specifically at students of Mohamed First University. Quantitative data underwent analysis using descriptive statistics, focusing primarily on frequencies, while thematic analysis was employed to explore the qualitative insights gleaned from open-ended responses. Each question's response rate will be detailed in the forthcoming data analysis and discussion section.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey consists of many sections that correspond to the areas of study. There are questions about exposure to sexual harassment, the potential causes of victim-blaming attitudes toward sexual harassment victims, and the various causes of women's hesitation to report sexual harassment.

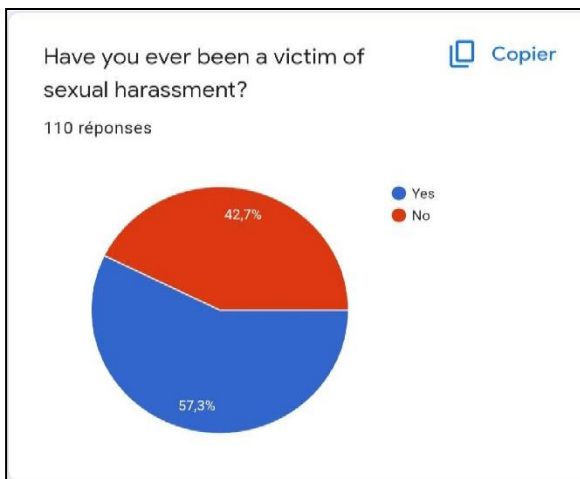


Figure 1: Experience of Sexual Harassment

The majority of respondents (57,3) reported that they have been subjected to sexual harassment.

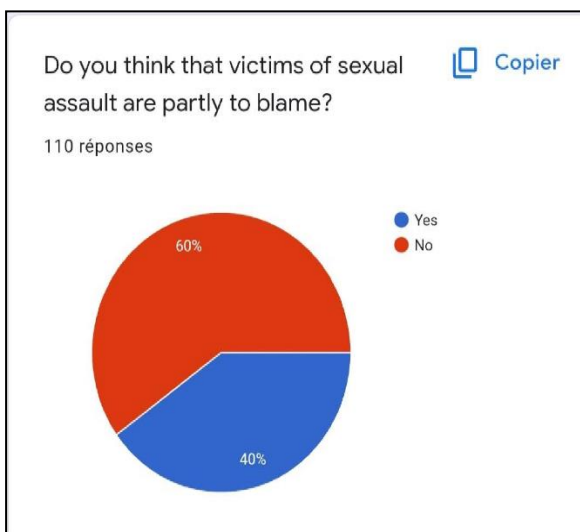


Figure 2: Victim Blaming

Most victim-blaming attitudes come from male responders compared to female responders who exhibit more empathy towards the victims and tend to attribute the proliferation of sexual misconduct to other factors.

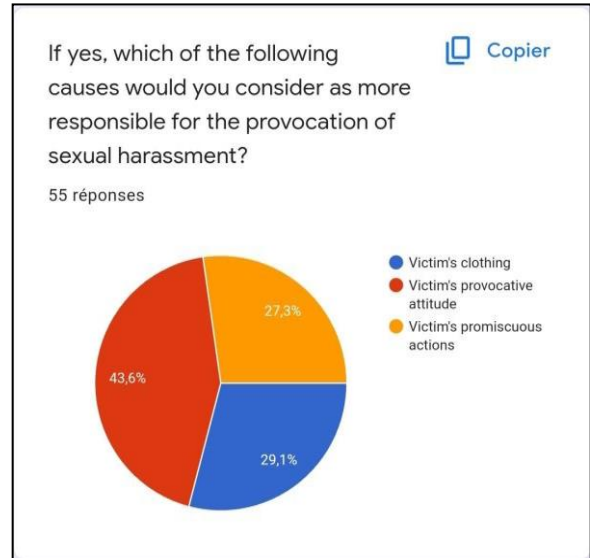


Figure 3: Causes of the Provocation of Sexual Harassment

According to the respondents to the previous question, the majority (43,6 %) think that the victim's provocative attitude is a major factor behind the initiation of sexual harassment. Conversely, 29,1 % believe that the victim's clothing is the main cause for the provocation of sexual harassment while 27,3 % blame the act on the victim's promiscuous actions.

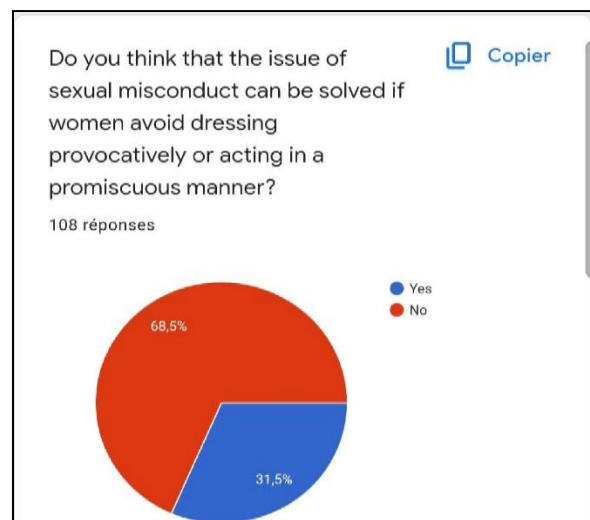


Figure 4: Popular Myths about Sexual Harassment

31,5 of the responders believe that provocative dress and promiscuous behaviors are invitations for unwanted sexual activity while 68,5 % believe that sexual harassment advances stem from a person's determination to exercise power over another.

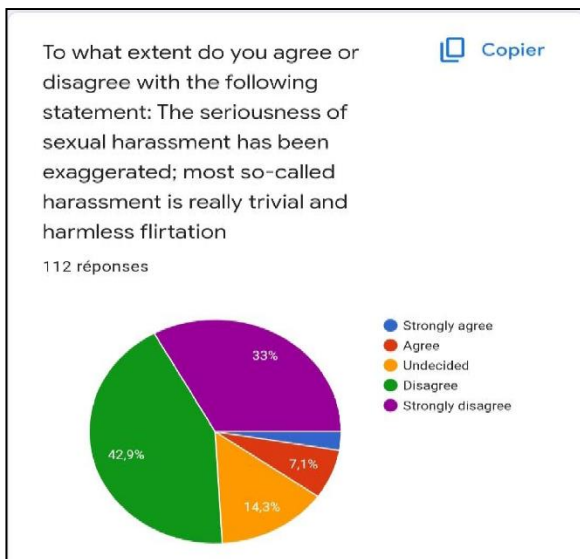


Figure 5: Popular Myths About Sexual Harassment

Most responders who categorically disagree with the popular belief that sexual harassment is nothing but a harmless flirtation are female. Notwithstanding, most male responders tend to euphemize the act, normalize it, and overlook psychological and health-related problems many experience as a result of sexual harassment.

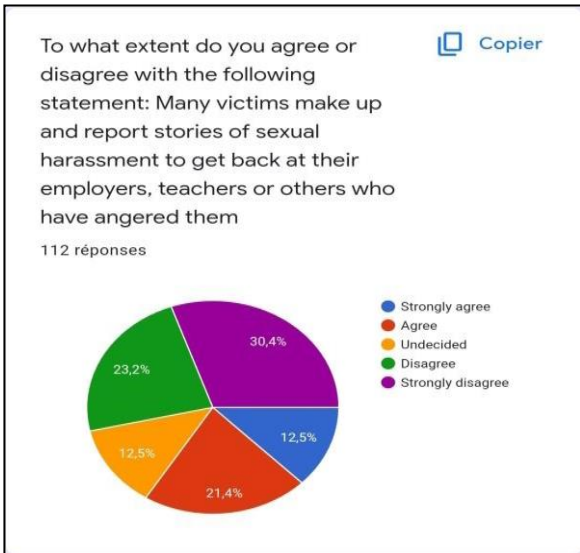


Figure 6: Common Myths about Sexual Harassment

In a similar vein to the previous point, the data indicates a gender-based divergence in attitudes towards the statement. A significant proportion of male respondents either agree (21.4%) or strongly agree (12.5%) with the statement. In contrast, a majority of female respondents either strongly disagree (30.4%) or disagree (23.2%) with the statement, while the remaining 12.5% of respondents are undecided. It is important to note that research shows less than one percent of complaints regarding sexual harassment or assault are

false. Additionally, survivors of such incidents rarely file complaints even when they have valid reasons to do so. This significant discrepancy between actual false reporting rates and perceived rates of false complaints highlights a critical issue. The prevalent belief that a substantial number of sexual harassment or assault allegations are fabricated perpetuates harmful victim-blaming attitudes and contributes to a broader culture of misogyny.

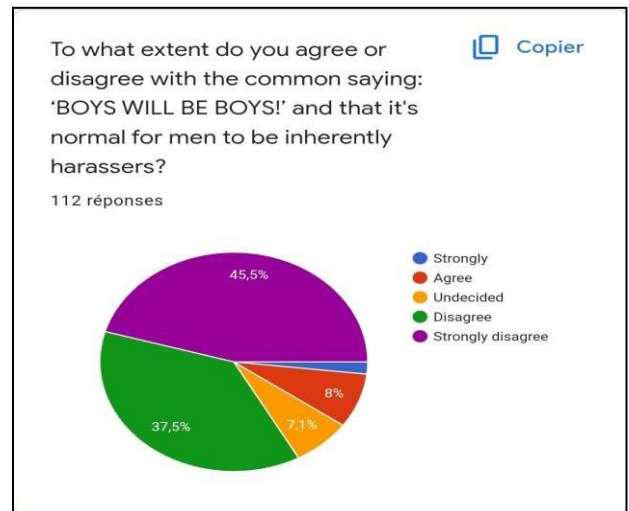


Figure 7: Beliefs and Stereotypes on Sexual Harassment

45,5 of respondents strongly disagree with the statement and 37,5 % disagree with it. However, 8% believe that male sexual aggression is natural. Although this seems to be a low percentage, this finding significantly substantiates the influence that popular stereotypes have on victims' perception of their own unwanted situations and demonstrates the ways in which cultural language delimits victims' recognition of sexual victimization as a crime and inhibits reporting to the police.

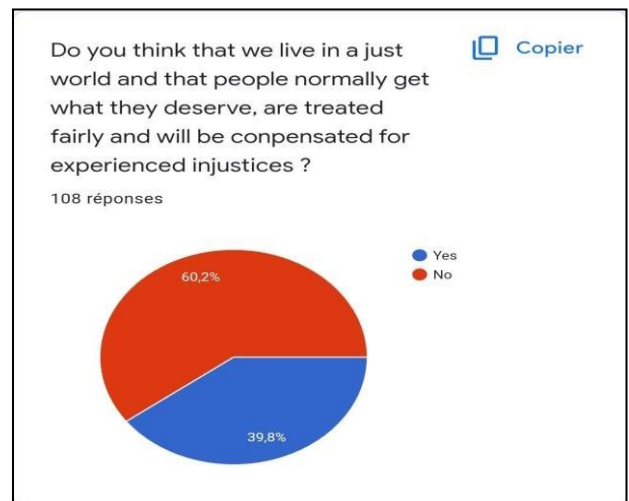


Figure 8: Belief in a Just World

Although the majority of respondents' answers (60,2 %) were negative, 39,8 % of the answers were positive. This finding substantiates the fact that adhering to a belief that we live in a just world is a suggested theory to explain the tendency for others to blame victims, particularly for sexual harassment, through the reasoning that they have received the misfortune that they deserve.

The data revealed several causes that students think are behind women's inability to report the sexual misconduct committed against them and foster the prevalence of sexual crimes in general. Whereas some students blame the male-dominant society that favors the proliferation of gender-related issues, others think the victim's nondisclosure of sexual acts stems from their ill-concealed enjoyment of the act itself. Conversely, another faction of students considers the inadequacy of the legal system that softens the echo of these crimes and normalizes them as the main culprit.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the current study aimed to assess the attitudinal constructs hypothesized to be related to victim-blaming, examine the reasons why some people tend to blame victims of sexual harassment, and how this denial significantly contributes to the promotion of misogyny sexism, and sexual misconduct. The study was divided into two parts, namely the theoretical and practical parts. The first part has attempted to shed light on the theoretical background of sexual harassment as well as the causes and consequences of victim-blaming attitudes. Additionally, sexual harassment disclosure in Morocco was discussed, referring to the Penal Law which protects women and gives them more rights.

The second part consisted of the practical study. The study adopted a mixed-method design which makes use of questionnaires with open and closed-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Within this framework, a questionnaire was sent to Mohamed First University students whereby more than one hundred students volunteered to participate in it. The data revealed that in cases of male-to-female sexual harassment, ingroup perspective-taking based on men's shared gender category with the male perpetrator could predispose them to feel relatively more empathy for the male perpetrator and relatively less empathy for the female victim compared to women. This phenomenon occurs because men may identify more with the perpetrator due to shared gender, leading to a bias in their emotional responses. Consequently, this ingroup bias can result in men perceiving the actions of the male perpetrator as more understandable or justifiable, while simultaneously downplaying the experiences and suffering of the female victim. This contrast in empathy levels between men and women highlights the impact of gender identification on emotional responses to incidents of sexual harassment and underscores the importance of

addressing such biases in efforts to promote fair and empathetic treatment of victims.

The main practical implication of this research is that by understanding why some individuals blame victims while others do not, we move closer to reducing victim blaming. The present study reveals that individuals are influenced not only by the crime itself but also by the victim's behavior. For instance, participants who believed in a just and fair world tended to attribute more blame to victims of both sexual assault and sexual harassment. These findings suggest that interventions and social-change campaigns should focus equally on reducing empathy for male perpetrators. This can be achieved by challenging pervasive myths, such as the belief that women provoke men's sexual harassment or frequently lie about being sexually harassed. By addressing these misconceptions, it is possible to foster a more supportive environment for victims and decrease the tendency to empathize with perpetrators. Overall, this research underscores the importance of educational and awareness programs that aim to reshape societal attitudes towards sexual harassment and assault, ensuring a more just and empathetic response to victims.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the hypotheses were examined within a university context using student samples who were self-selected to participate in research about sexual harassment. As a result, we cannot determine whether their responses are representative of the larger student population. Second, the study relied solely on questionnaires as the research instrument. Conducting interviews and focus groups moderated by female researchers could generate more in-depth findings.

DECLARATIONS

1. Study Limitations

The major limitation of the current study is its small-scale nature. Because the study was conducted with a limited sample size, its findings cannot be generalized to a broader population. The specific characteristics of the participants, such as their demographic background, geographic location, and contextual factors, may have influenced the results in ways that are not representative of other groups or settings.

Moreover, small-scale studies often lack the statistical power necessary to detect subtle but important differences or relationships within the data. This limitation means that some findings may be due to chance rather than reflecting actual trends or patterns. Additionally, the narrow scope of the study might miss out on capturing the diversity of experiences and perspectives that larger, more comprehensive studies could provide.

For future research, it would be beneficial to conduct larger-scale studies with more diverse and representative samples. This would enhance the

generalizability of the findings and provide a more accurate picture of the phenomena being studied. Expanding the research to include various populations across different regions and contexts would help validate the current findings and potentially uncover new insights.

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