

Behind the silence: A critical exploration of the sexual harassment of women in the hospitality workplace

Hande Turkoglu ^{1*}

¹ Bournemouth University, UK, E-mail: hturkoglu@bournemouth.ac.uk

* Corresponding author

Supervisors:

Dr Lorraine Brown

Dr Jayne Caudwell

Institution awarding the Ph. D. Degree: Bournemouth University, UK

Date of defence: 12th of November 2024

Citation: Turkoglu, H. (2026). Behind the silence: A critical exploration of the sexual harassment of women in the hospitality workplace. *European Journal of Tourism Research* 44, 4412. <https://doi.org/10.54055/ejtr.v44i.4704>

Publication history:

Received: 12/11/2025; Revised: 27/03/2026; Accepted: 04/05/2026; Published online: 01/10/2026;

Volume date: 01/11/2026

Coordinating editors: Marcello Atzeni and Katarzyna Barbara Minor



© 2026 The Author(s)

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

To critically examine the experience of sexual harassment among female workers in the hospitality sector.

Objectives

- ✓ To investigate the linkages between sexual harassment and the hospitality industry.
- ✓ To identify the nature and forms of sexual harassment in hospitality settings.
- ✓ To explore female employees' experiences of sexual harassment in hospitality in the United Kingdom in order to examine how and why harassment occurs.
- ✓ To investigate the impact of workplace sexual harassment upon female employees and analyse the long-term impact of harassment on women.
- ✓ To explore the reporting of sexual harassment by female hospitality workers and the subsequent organisational response.
- ✓ To develop a conceptual framework demonstrating the experience and impact of sexual harassment on female employees in the hospitality sector.

Methodology

An interpretivist-inductive qualitative research design was adopted for data collection through narrative inquiry. Twenty-two in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with female employees working in the hospitality sector in order to generate an understanding of their experience of sexual harassment in hospitality settings. The participants were selected based on their relevance to the research topic using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. A maximum-variation strategy was employed in the selection of participants to ensure that diverse backgrounds (in terms of age, nationality, race, education level, social background, and migration status) as well as different types of hospitality organisations (hotels, resorts, restaurants, coffee shops, and bars) were included. Work experience of participants in both operational and managerial roles was represented. Narrative data were treated using thematic analysis.

Results

The findings address the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual harassment experienced by female employees in the UK hospitality sector. Three key themes emerged from the analysis: being harassed in the workplace, the impact of workplace sexual harassment, and organisational responses. First, the study identifies the prevalence and nature of harassment within hospitality settings, showing that women mostly encounter verbal, physical, and emotional/psychological forms of harassment from customers, colleagues, and managers, which often overlap and co-occur. Second, the findings demonstrate that such experiences have significant short and long-term consequences for women's psychological and professional well-being, career trajectories, and personal lives. Third, the research highlights varied organisational responses, ranging from proactive intervention to passive approaches characterised by normalisation, ignorance, covered-up or victim-blaming. The finding also underlines that societal and traditional norms, gender roles and power dynamics shape how workplace sexual harassment occurs, is perceived, and is addressed. These cross-level dynamics influence the patterns of harassment in hospitality settings.

Theoretical conclusions

This study contributes to theory by providing a holistic understanding of workplace sexual harassment in the hospitality sector through the integration of intersectionality, sociocultural, and coping and resilience theories. The core contribution of this study lies in the development of a cross-level dynamic

framework that explains the interrelationships among individual, organisational, and societal factors in shaping and responding to sexual harassment cases in hospitality workplaces.

While this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the intersectionality aspect in women's experiences of sexual harassment, the findings differ from previous studies by extending traditional identity categories such as gender, race, age, ethnicity, education level, social class, migration status, sexual orientation, dis/ability, to incorporate additional contextual and individual dimensions. These include personal resilience, coping strategies, societal norms, cultural expectations, and managerial approaches within hospitality organisations, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how sexual harassment is perceived, experienced, and addressed in the hospitality environment through the simultaneous influence of multiple structural and individual dynamics.

In doing so, the findings of this study confirm the significance of resilience and coping theories in explaining how individuals respond to stressful conditions and experiences, whilst also supporting socio-cultural perspectives that highlight how cultural norms and power dynamics within societies shape perception, tolerance, and organisational responses to harassment in hospitality settings.

Practical applications of the dissertation

The study revealed that sexual harassment in hospitality workplaces is pervasive and has a far-reaching impact on both the professional and personal aspects of the lives of female employees. This is not a new outcome; the discussion of sexual harassment has been a persistent issue in hospitality organisations for decades. However, this study highlights the most overlooked impact, which goes beyond the workplace, deeply affecting the personal lives of women employees. Therefore, the outcomes of this study indicate the need for hospitality business owners, HR practices, trade unions, policymakers and stakeholders to address and develop more proactive and effective regulations and interventions in order to prevent, control, combat, respond and mitigate the occurrence of such gendered harms.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

The first chapter presents an introductory background to workplace sexual harassment. Workplace sexual harassment is a prominent issue in almost all occupations and industries, and in organisational cultures around the world (UN Women UK, 2021). Even though no workplace is exempt from sexual harassment, it could be more recurrent in some industries, such as in interactive hospitality service work (Zhu et al., 2019; Hadijisolomou et al., 2023), and largely continues to be covered up, diminished, ignored, or normalised. Although both women and men can experience harassment behaviours at work, women in hospitality overwhelmingly tend to be the primary target of harassing behaviours from a colleague, manager or customer (Waudby & Poulston, 2017). While highlighting the prevalence of sexual harassment in hospitality work settings, this study addresses the gaps in knowledge through exploring the impact of harassment behaviour on the lives of women employees in the hospitality workplace.

Abstract of Chapter 2

This chapter critically reviews the literature related to sexual harassment, focusing on the main factors contributing to such behaviours against women employees in the hospitality workplace. The existence of highly gendered roles, divisions and stereotypes within hospitality, combined with tough working conditions and the high levels of interaction between employees and customers that foster gender inequality and power imbalance in the sector's working environment, are all factors contributing to this (Morgan & Pritchard, 2019). Thereby, the contemporary hospitality industry puts some women at a

disadvantage, making them vulnerable to sexual, physical, psychological, and emotional exploitation, abuse, and harassment in the workplace. Nevertheless, all forms of harassment lead to negative consequences for employees, organisations, and all parties involved in the process (Zhou et al., 2023).

Abstract of Chapter 3

This chapter presents a qualitative methodology designed to facilitate an open and responsive approach to understanding the experience of sexual harassment among female employees within the hospitality sector. This study adopts an interpretivist approach to analyse and interpret the data obtained from narrative interviews with twenty-two female employees. A range of hospitality organisations, including hotels, resorts, restaurants, pubs, and coffee shops, were included within the sample, and work experience in both operational and managerial roles was represented.

Abstract of Chapter 4

This chapter provides insight into the work life of research participants in hospitality settings. The findings indicated that the process of “*being harassed in the workplace*” was identified with three related sub-themes: gendered spaces and perspectives on labour; perceptions and experiences of harassment in home and host-country contexts; and the types of harassment experienced in the hospitality work environment. Verbal harassment, physical harassment and emotional/psychological harassment were the most common forms of harassment that female employees were mostly exposed to. The types of harassment experienced can overlap and co-occur, and individuals can be subjected to more than one type of harassing behaviour at any given time. Social and cultural expectations, traditional values and power dynamics in social settings play an important role in individuals’ experiences of sexual harassment. This result makes a significant contribution and allows a unique insight into the phenomenon of sexual harassment in the hospitality workplace.

Abstract of Chapter 5

This chapter presents the second theme and related sub-themes of the thematic framework and explores “*the impact of workplace sexual harassment*”. In this study, the impact of sexual harassment on female employees in the hospitality context is multifaceted. Exposure to workplace sexual harassment could have far-reaching short-term and/or long-term consequences on female employees’ individual and occupational well-being. The findings further demonstrate that the impact of sexual harassment can extend beyond the workplace, permeating women’s personal lives and affecting their intimate relationships, career trajectories, and financial well-being.

Abstract of Chapter 6

As the final stage of the narrative journey, this chapter demonstrates the complex dynamics of organisational responses to workplace sexual harassment in the hospitality industry, focusing on two distinct yet interconnected aspects: *ignoring and confronting strategies*. Hospitality organisations exhibited two main responses to sexual harassment: a proactive management approach that directly addressed reported cases and a passive approach where incidents were inadequately acknowledged, addressed, or acted upon, sometimes normalised, downplayed or adopted a mentality of victim-blaming, effectively ignoring the harassment.

Abstract of Chapter 7

This chapter reflects on the main findings of this study by reviewing the themes that arose from Chapters 4, 5 and 6. The evidence suggests that sexual harassment is a pervasive problem in hospitality settings; however, it continues to be a silenced phenomenon. The perpetrators of harassment can include customers, fellow colleagues, junior colleagues, line managers, senior managers, or third-party

employees in hospitality settings. The findings also indicate that the experience of sexual harassment in the workplace is complex and multifaceted, as an individual can experience multiple and co-occurring forms of harassment that interact with various individual and organisational dimensions (Turkoglu, 2020). Therefore, the findings underscore the importance of recognising and addressing the structural and cultural factors that perpetuate sexual harassment within hospitality workplaces.

References

- Hadjisolomou, A., Nickson, D., & Baum, T. (2023). 'He is the customer, I will say yes': Notions of power, precarity and consent to sexual harassment by customers in the gay tourism industry. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 30(4), 1407-1428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12998>
- Morgan, N., & Pritchard, A. (2019). Gender matters in hospitality (invited paper for 'luminaries' special issue of International Journal of Hospitality Management). *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 76, 38-44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.06.008>
- Turkoglu, H. (2020). The silenced phenomenon: Sexual harassment in the hospitality and tourism workplace. In Vizcaino, P. Jeffrey, H. & Eger, C.(Eds.) (2020), *Tourism and Gender-based Violence Challenging Inequalities* (pp. 48-64). CABI, Boston. <https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789243215.0048>
- UN Women UK. (2021). *Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces*. Available from: https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf (Accessed 23 August 2022).
- Waudby, B., & Poulston, J. (2017). Sexualisation and harassment in hospitality workplaces: who is responsible?. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 11(4), 483-499. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCTHR-10-2016-0102>
- Zhu, H., Lyu, Y., & Ye, Y. (2019). Workplace sexual harassment, workplace deviance, and family undermining. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(2), 594-614. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-11-2017-0776>
- Zhu, H., Ye, Y., Zhou, M., & Li, Y. (2023). The impact of customer sexual harassment on customer-oriented OCB: a social exchange perspective. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 35(12), 4555-4573. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-07-2022-0909>