

Mitigating the Impacts of Sexual Harassment: Evidence from a National Survey of Retail and Restaurant Workers

Report by Sanjay Pinto, Phoebe Strom, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett

Executive Summary

Workplace sexual harassment and violence inflict a variety of costs on survivors, raising important questions about prevention: changing the conditions that give rise to the problem in the first place. So long as sexual harassment and violence persist, mitigating their impacts and creating clear channels for recourse will also remain crucial, shaping the wellbeing and agency of survivors in navigating a way forward.

Drawing on data from a national survey of retail and food service workers conducted as part of the Shift Project, the current study traces some key impacts of workplace sexual harassment and how they are moderated by perceptions of supervisory fairness and coworker support. We find that worker experiences of sexual harassment in the current job reduce job satisfaction and increase turnover intention, while experiences of harassment in both current and past jobs reduce sleep quality and increase psychological distress. Worker perceptions of greater supervisory fairness mitigate the impact of sexual harassment on turnover intention, sleep quality, and psychological distress, and perceptions of greater coworker support mitigate the impact of sexual harassment on turnover intention and job satisfaction.

These results indicate that the orientation and behaviors of supervisors and coworkers can play a meaningful role in enabling survivors to navigate the trauma of sexual harassment and violence, helping to reduce negative consequences for people's wellbeing and career trajectories.

Introduction

Building on long histories of organizing, the unfolding of the #MeToo movement in recent years has drawn attention to sexual harassment and violence and helped to confront the problem across a variety of contexts.

Changing rules, shifting practices, and transforming toxic cultures in ways that curtail and eliminate these harmful behaviors is a central goal for activists and advocates on the issue. So long as sexual harassment and violence persist, providing channels for recourse and mitigating impacts also remain critically important.

Here, we use data from a national survey to consider how supportive workplace ties might help to reduce the negative impacts of sexual harassment and violence. We start by briefly sketching relevant literature. Then, using a 2018 Shift Project survey that polled retail and restaurant workers nationally, we examine different career- and wellbeing-related consequences of sexual harassment and consider the potential moderating effects of having fair supervisors and supportive coworkers. Finally, we draw out some implications and suggest potential directions for future inquiry.

Background

Workplace sexual harassment and violence (hereafter referred to as workplace sexual harassment) includes a spectrum of unwanted sexual behaviors ranging from inappropriate remarks and images to physical advances and sexual assault.¹ The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission recognizes two primary categories of workplace sexual harassment that form a basis for legal claims: 1) those that create a “hostile work environment,” and 2) “quid pro quo” behaviors that solicit or coerce sexual favors in return for job-related benefits.²

There is a significant body of work on the prevalence, antecedents, and impacts of workplace sexual harassment. The problem cuts across different workplace settings and is far more widespread than what gets formally reported through workplace procedures or other formal channels. Unsurprisingly, women are consistently found to experience sexual harassment at higher rates than men, and there is also evidence that those facing particular barriers to speaking up are more likely to be targeted for abuse.³

Workplace sexual harassment and violence exact a range of documented impacts on survivors. Career consequences include lower job satisfaction, more limited career mobility, and a higher likelihood of leaving a job once such abuses have occurred. Wellbeing-related consequences include higher levels of anxiety, sleeplessness, and depression.⁴ Such impacts are also interrelated in complex ways that existing research has only begun to unpack.

A variety of organizational-level factors—often characterized as part of a broader “organizational climate”—have been identified as significant predictors of the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment.⁵ Using data from multiple waves of the General Social Survey, Rocigno (2019), for example, has found that more positive relationships with supervisors and coworkers were associated with a lower likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination.⁶

Extending this framework, the current analysis considers how these relational aspects of organizational

climate might help to mitigate different impacts of workplace sexual harassment. Specifically, we consider whether perceptions of supervisory fairness and coworker support moderate the impacts of sexual harassment on job satisfaction, turnover intention, sleep quality, and psychological distress.

Data and Method

The Shift Project collects data using an ongoing national survey of service sector workers.⁷ The research presented here draws on data from 8,919 workers who completed surveys in Spring 2018. All of these respondents were hourly workers employed at one of the 80 largest (by revenue) food service and retail companies in the United States.

To measure sexual harassment, we asked workers to report if they had experienced hostile environment or quid pro quo forms of sexual harassment in either the retail/food service job that placed them in the survey sample or another employer (for more on the wording of these and other relevant survey questions, please consult the Data Appendix). The results we report below are based on a composite measure that includes both forms of sexual harassment.

There were two phases to our analysis. In the first phase, we considered whether experiences of sexual harassment affected different career-related outcomes (job satisfaction, desire to seek a new job) and wellbeing-related outcomes (sleep quality, psychological distress). We report results from 1) uncontrolled models, 2) models with controls for demographics and work characteristics, and 3) models that add employer fixed effects to this battery of controls.⁸

In the second phase, we considered whether these impacts are moderated by perceived supervisory fairness and coworker support. Building on the models with employer fixed effects and other controls, we report results from 4) models with supervisory fairness or coworker support included as predictors and 5) models in which supervisory fairness or coworker support are interacted with experiences of sexual harassment.⁹

Findings

Impacts of Sexual Harassment on Career- and Wellbeing-Related Outcomes

Overall, around one in four survey respondents reported they were “very” or “somewhat” dissatisfied with their current job. Those who reported experiencing harassment in their current job were much more likely to be dissatisfied than those who had never experienced harassment (see Table 1).

Given their higher rates of dissatisfaction, workers experiencing sexual harassment also might be expected to leave their jobs and seek new employment at higher rates; indeed, such career changes may underlie some of the long-term financial penalties experienced by survivors of workplace harassment that have been shown in other research.¹⁰ We found that those experiencing harassment in their current job were more likely to be seeking a new job than those who had never experienced harassment (see Table 2).

Table 1. Sexual harassment and Job Dissatisfaction

	M1	M2	M3
Experienced sexual harassment at current job	.60***	.58***	.60***
Experienced sexual harassment at past job	.04	.04	.06*
Controls	N	Y	Y
Employer fixed effects	N	N	Y
N	8277	8277	8277
Pr(DV) Harassed at current job	2.4	2.4	2.4
Pr(DV) Harassed at past job	1.9	1.9	1.9
Pr(DV) Not harassed at past job	1.8	1.8	1.8

Table 2. Sexual Harassment and Seeking a New Job

	M1	M2	M3
Experienced sexual harassment at current job	.23***	.21***	.22***
Experienced sexual harassment at past job	.01	.02	.03
Controls	N	Y	Y
Employer fixed effects	N	N	Y
N	8275	8275	8275
Pr(DV) Harassed at current job	66%	65%	65%
Pr(DV) Harassed at past job	44%	45%	46%
Pr(DV) Not harassed at past job	43%	44%	43%

Our analysis showed that experiences of sexual harassment had significant impacts on the wellbeing-related outcomes. A majority of workers in our sample described their sleep as “fair” or “poor,” but there were significant differences between those who had never experienced sexual harassment and those experiencing it at either their current job or another job (see Table 3). While the effects of sexual harassment at the current job were stronger, harassment at other jobs also produced notable differences in sleep quality.

These findings together with similar results on psychological distress (see Table 4) indicate that experiences of sexual harassment at both the current job and past jobs held negative implications for wellbeing.

Table 3. Sexual Harassment and Sleep Quality

	M1	M2	M3
Experienced sexual harassment at current job	-.16***	-.15***	-.15***
Experienced sexual harassment at past job	-.05***	-.05***	-.05***
Controls	N	Y	Y
Employer fixed effects	N	N	Y
N	8277	8277	7845
Pr(DV) Harassed at current job	20%	20%	21%
Pr(DV) Harassed at past job	31%	31%	31%
Pr(DV) Not harassed at past job	36%	36%	36%

Table 4. Sexual Harassment and Psychological Distress

	M1	M2	M3
Experienced sexual harassment at current job	3.6***	3.1***	3.16***
Experienced sexual harassment at past job	1.19***	1.17***	1.21***
Controls	N	Y	Y
Employer fixed effects	N	N	Y
N	7991	7991	7692
Pr(DV) Harassed at current job	13.0	12.6	12.6
Pr(DV) Harassed at past job	10.6	10.6	10.6
Pr(DV) Not harassed at past job	9.4	9.5	9.4

Moderating Effects: The Importance of Supportive Work Relationships

In the second phase of the analysis, we found that supervisory fairness and coworker support can significantly moderate the impacts of sexual harassment. The survey data show that, overall, three-quarters of respondents felt like their supervisors treated them fairly. Among those reporting harassment at their current job, just over half (55%) felt their supervisor treated them fairly—that is to say, experiences of sexual harassment were correlated with lower perceptions of supervisory fairness.

To understand how perceptions of supervisory fairness shape the impacts of sexual harassment on individual workers, we built models testing whether these perceptions moderate the relationship between current sexual harassment and our outcomes of

interest. We found that, following harassment, individuals who believe their supervisor treats them fairly are less likely to look for a new job, experience psychological distress, and experience sleep issues than those who feel their supervisor is unfair (see Figures 1-3; please refer to the Appendix to view the data tables for this section).

While supervisors play a large role in shaping work climate, day-to-day interactions with coworkers are also important. This may be particularly true with regard to sexual harassment, since coworkers can provide moral and tangible support for survivors. To measure coworker support, we relied on an indicator of how many coworkers respondents spoke to about personal matters in the past two weeks. On average over the prior two-week period, workers in our sample spoke to five coworkers, with no statistically significant difference between those reporting harassment and those who did not.

Figure 1. Moderating Effect of Supervisory Fairness on Seeking a New Job Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

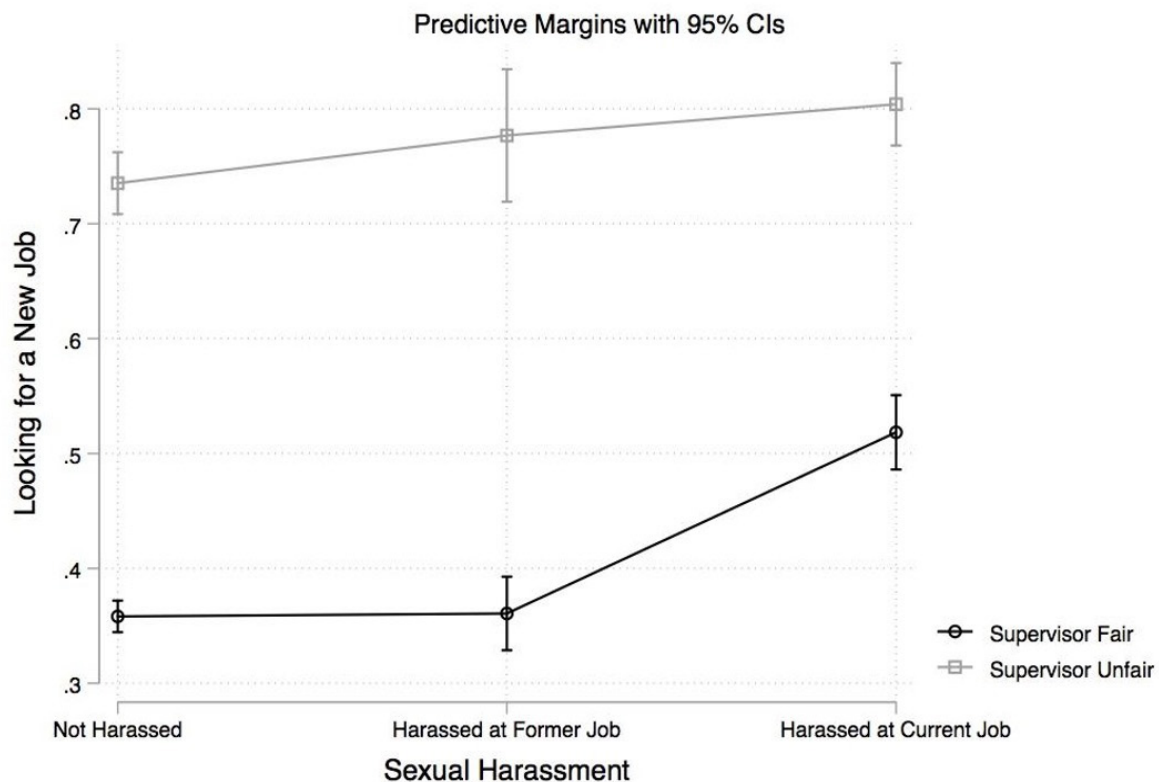


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Supervisory Fairness on Poor Sleep Quality Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

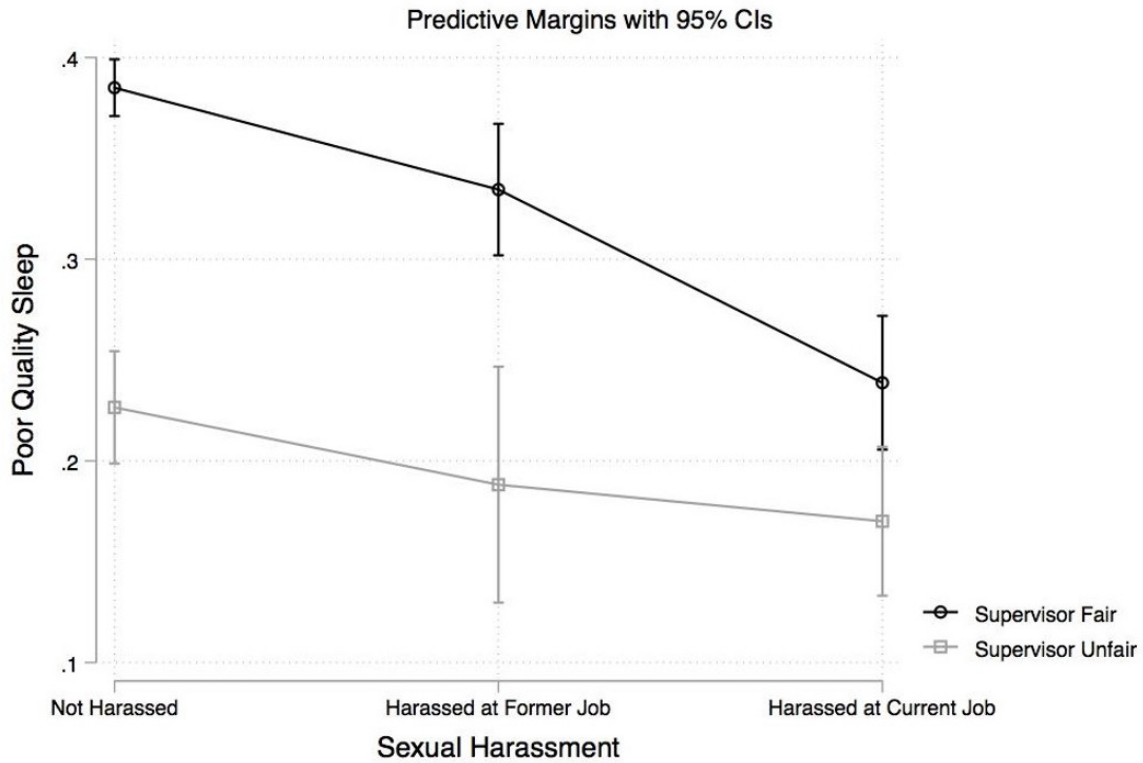
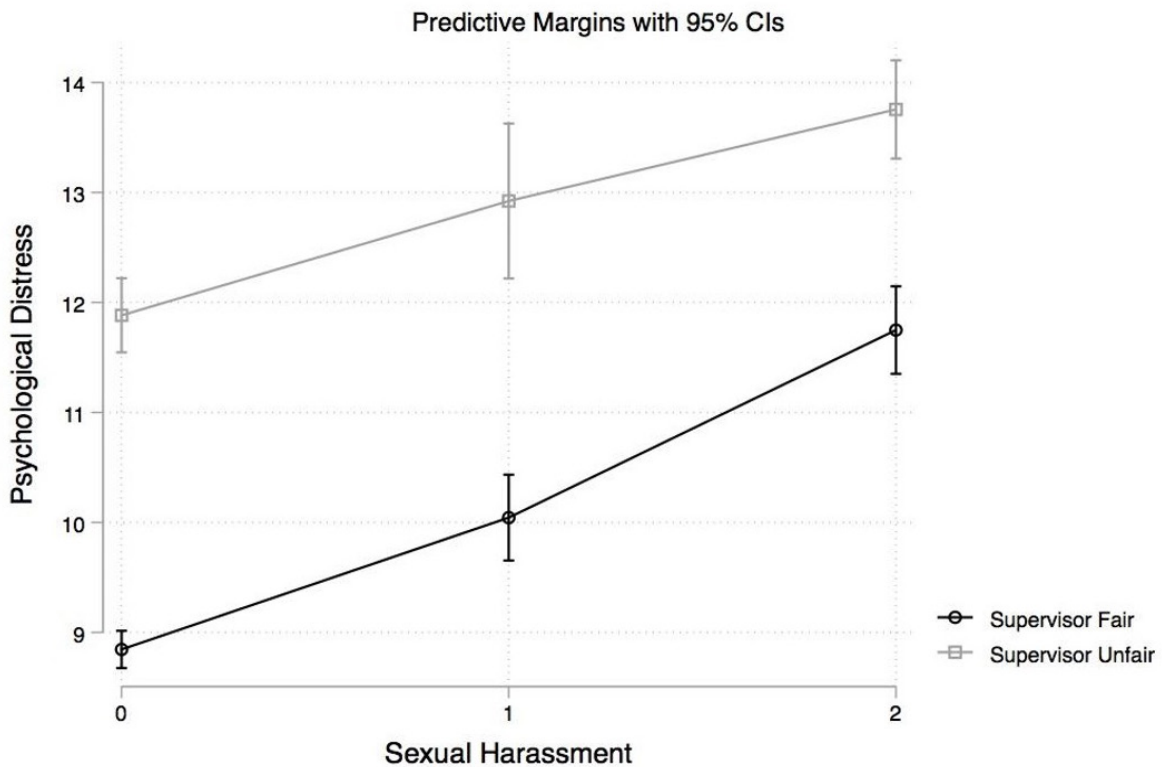


Figure 3. Moderating Effect of Supervisory Fairness on Psychological Distress Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment



As with supervisory fairness, we tested whether having more positive relationships with coworkers reduced the negative impacts of workplace sexual harassment. In contrast to perceptions of supervisory fairness, the influence of coworker connection was apparent with respect to the career variables but not the wellbeing outcomes, reducing workers' interest in finding a new job as well as increasing their job satisfaction (see Figures 4-5).

Clearly, positive workplace relationships do not eliminate the negative personal and professional consequences of sexual harassment. But, across all outcomes studied, they serve to lessen these negative consequences, reducing turnover intent (coworker support, supervisor fairness), mitigating worker dissatisfaction (coworker support), lowering the intensity of distress experienced (supervisor fairness), and limiting sleep disruption (supervisor fairness).

Figure 4. Moderating Effect of Coworker Support on Job Dissatisfaction Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

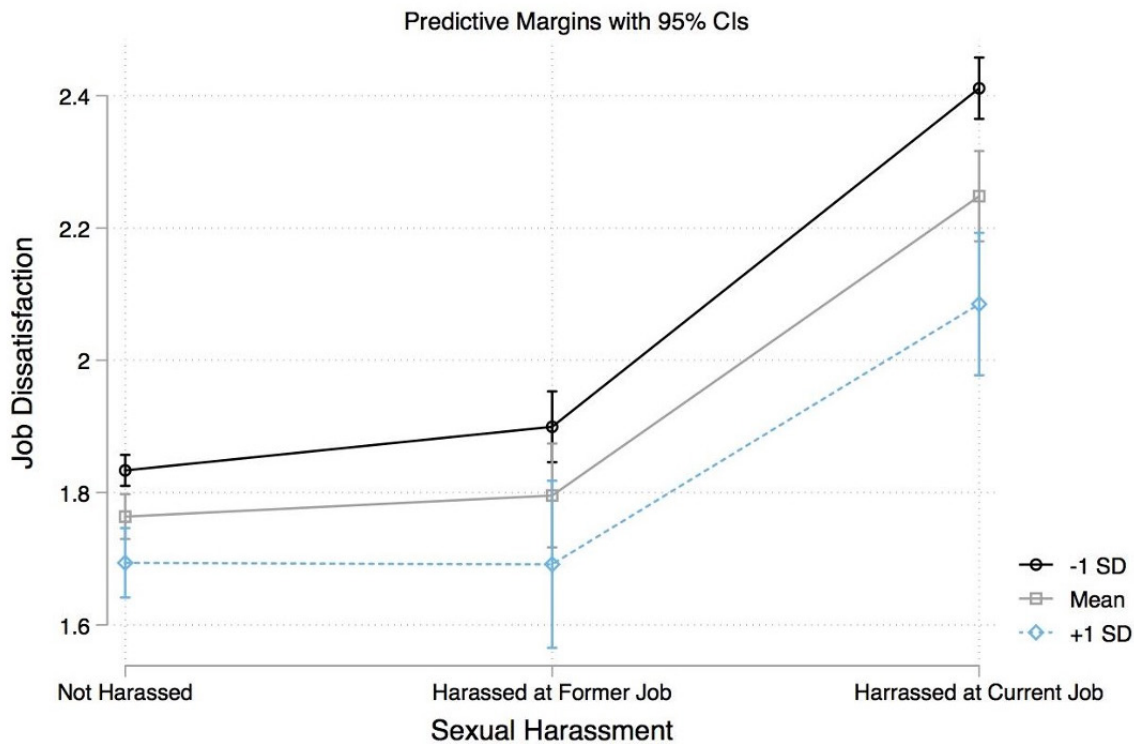
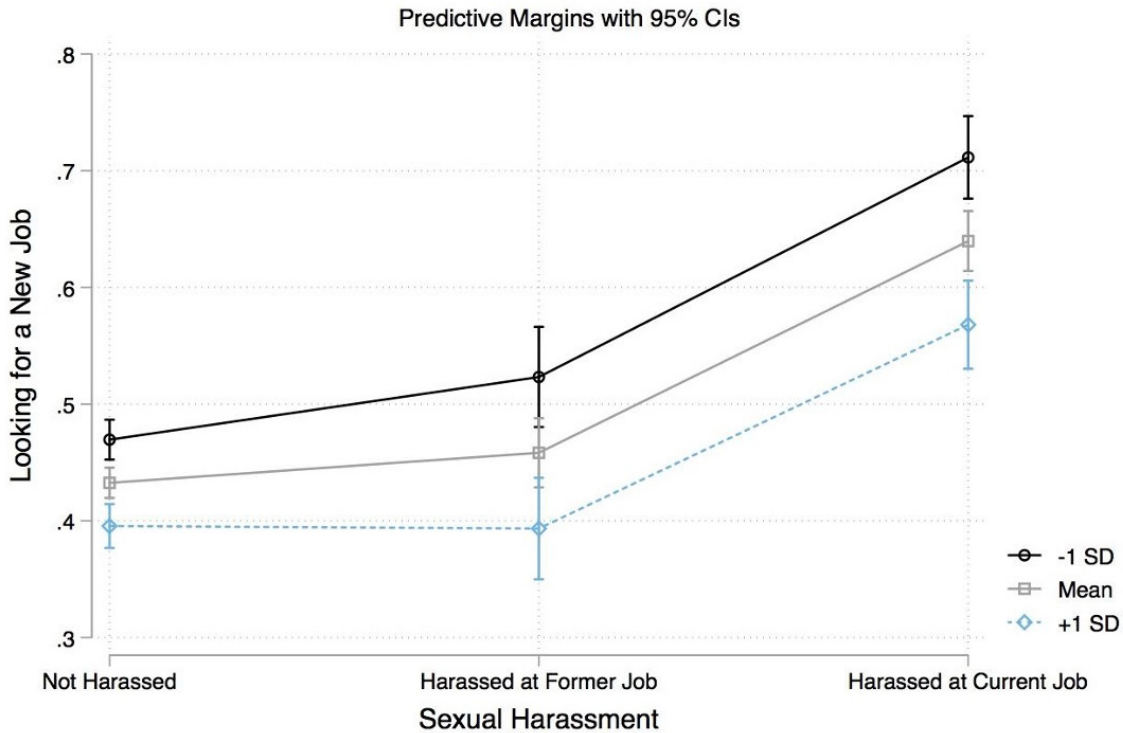


Figure 5. Moderating Effect of Coworker Support on Seeking a New Job Following Experiences Sexual Harassment



Discussion and Implications

Our findings reinforce previous work showing that workplace sexual harassment carries significant career- and wellbeing-related consequences. Notably, and in line with previous work, we find that experiences of sexual harassment in previous jobs often carry lasting effects related to psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing. While we only found career-related effects from experiences of harassment in the current job, our data are limited in the kinds of career impacts they capture and the complicated ways in which these impacts may compound over time.

Adding to previous quantitative work showing how positive interpersonal relations at work can reduce the incidence of workplace sexual harassment, our findings show that these ties may reduce various career- and wellbeing-related impacts. Together with other work showing that coworker support in particular facilitates reporting of workplace sexual harassment,¹¹ these findings suggest that positive

workplace relations can help survivors to better navigate the traumas of sexual harassment and violence once it has occurred.

Moreover, while previous work has often focused on how supervisory and coworker behaviors specific to navigating sexual harassment bear on the experience of survivors, our results suggest that the general strength and quality of these ties are also important. Of course, there is an element of luck in whether a person ends up with fair supervisors and supportive coworkers. However, establishing such relational dynamics is also, in very important ways, a matter of organizational culture and institutional design. Schultz, for example, has argued that limiting “unchecked, subjective authority” on the part of those with power over others is central to combating workplace sexual harassment and violence.¹² As activists and advocates push for changes to rules, practices, and norms, assessing the ways in which these efforts are able to recast workplace relational dynamics on the ground will be an important area for future study.

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Appendix Tables

Appendix Table 1. Effect of Supervisory Fairness on Job Dissatisfaction Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	.36***	.39***
Sexual harassment at past job	.04	.03
Supervisory unfairness	.93***	.94***
Current sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	-.08
Past sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	.04
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7543	7543

Appendix Table 2. Effect of Supervisory Fairness on Seeking a New Job Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	.12***	.16***
Sexual harassment at past job	.01	.003
Supervisory unfairness	.36***	.38***
Current sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	-.09**
Past sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	.04
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7541	7541

Appendix Table 3. Effect of Supervisory Fairness on Poor Sleep Quality Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	-.11***	-.15***
Sexual harassment at past job	-.05**	-.05**
Supervisory unfairness	-.14***	-.16***
Current sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	.09**
Past sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	.01
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7257	7257

Appendix Table 4. Effect of Supervisory Fairness on Psychological Distress Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	2.52***	2.9***
Sexual harassment at past job	1.17***	1.99***
Supervisory unfairness	2.76***	3.04***
Current sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	-1.03**
Past sexual harassment x supervisory unfairness	--	-.16
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7119	7119

Appendix Table 5. Effect of Coworker Support on Job Dissatisfaction Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	.58***	.67***
Sexual harassment at past job	.07*	.10*
Coworker support	-.02***	-.01***
Current sexual harassment x coworker support	--	-.02***
Past sexual harassment x coworker support	--	-.01
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7493	7493

Appendix Table 6. Effect of Coworker Support on Seeking a New Job Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	.21***	.24***
Sexual harassment at past job	.03	.05
Coworker support	-.01***	-.01***
Current sexual harassment x coworker support	--	-.01*
Past sexual harassment x coworker support	--	-.01
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7491	7491

Appendix Table 7. Effect of Coworker Support on Poor Sleep Quality Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	-.15***	-.14***
Sexual harassment at past job	-.10**	-.08***
Coworker support	.01***	.005***
Current sexual harassment x coworker support	--	-.003
Past sexual harassment x coworker support	--	.006
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7214	7214

Appendix Table 8. Effect of Coworker Support on Psychological Distress Following Experiences of Sexual Harassment

	M4	M5
Sexual harassment at current job	3.16***	2.88***
Sexual harassment at past job	1.26***	1.50***
Coworker support	-.07***	-.07***
Current sexual harassment x coworker support	--	.06
Past sexual harassment x coworker support	--	-.05
Controls	Y	Y
Employer Fixed Effects	Y	Y
N	7077	7077

Data Appendix

Sexual Harassment Measures

Have you ever experienced workplace sexual harassment that created an uncomfortable or hostile work environment? This could include unwanted words, signs, jokes, pranks, intimidation, or physical violence. MARK ALL THAT APPLY.

- Yes, at [EMPLOYER NAME]
- Yes, at another employer
- No, never at work
- Don't know/refuse

Have you personally experienced someone in a position of authority at your workplace trying to trade job benefits for sexual favors? Benefits might include being hired, promoted, or maintaining employment. MARK ALL THAT APPLY.

- Yes, at [EMPLOYER NAME]
- Yes, at another employer
- No, never at work
- Don't know/refuse

Career Impact Measures

All in all, how satisfied would you say you are with your job at [EMPLOYER NAME]?

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Not too satisfied
- Not at all satisfied

Taking everything into consideration, how likely is it you will make a genuine effort to find a new job within the next 3 months?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not at all likely

Wellbeing Impact Measures

During the past month, how would you rate your sleep quality overall?

- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Don't know/Refuse

During the past month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

- All of the time
- Most of the time
- Some of the time
- A little of the time

Workplace Support Measures

At [EMPLOYER NAME], my immediate supervisor treats me fairly.

- Always true
- Often true
- Sometimes true
- Never true

In the last two weeks, how many co-workers at your workplace did you talk to about anything related to your personal life?

_____ [NUMBER REQUIRED]

Endnotes

1. Fitzgerald, L. F. (1990). Sexual harassment: The definition and measurement of a construct. *Ivory tower: Sexual harassment on campus*, 21(22), 24-30.
2. See <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/policy-guidance-current-issues-sexual-harassment>. In New York and other states in the U.S., there has been a trend towards expanding the legal definition of “hostile work environment” so that it goes beyond the “severe and pervasive” standard. Cite 5 Years After #MeToo. See Johnson, A., Ijoma, S., and Kim D.H. (2022). #MeToo five years later: progress and pitfalls in state workplace anti-harassment laws. National Women’s Law Center.
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8. The controls included race, ethnicity, gender, age, education, marital status, household income, education, children in the household, tenure, and managerial status.
9. Here, we used moderation analysis, a technique which explores whether the effects of a variable are consistent across levels of other variables (e.g., if the impact of a drug is contingent upon weight). As with our prior modeling, we control for race, ethnicity, gender, age, education, marital status, household income, education, and children in the household, tenure, managerial status, and employer.
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