Occupational Health Science (2021) 5:391–414
https://doi.org/10.1007/s41542-021-00093-6

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Workplace Sexual Harassment and Vulnerabilities among Low-Wage Hispanic Women

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Received: 26 August 2020 / Revised: 11 June 2021 / Accepted: 18 June 2021 /
Published online: 27 July 2021
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Abstract

Workplace sexual harassment is particularly widespread in industries with many low-wage jobs where Hispanic women are likely to work. This qualitative study examines the experiences of Hispanic women in low-income jobs to identify workplace sexual harassment situations, support seeking actions, barriers to report, and forms of retaliation. A qualitative research design with one-on-one structured interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Hispanic women in low-wage jobs regarding workplace sexual harassment situations and potential contributing factors. Second, a conceptual framework is proposed to integrate the reported organizational factors and social vulnerabilities that interact, eroding the individual's ability to cope effectively with workplace sexual harassment. These include organizational resources for preventing and reporting, community and family resources for support, and health effects attributed to sexual harassment. Workplace sexual harassment was described by participants as escalating over time from dating invitations, sex-related comments, unwanted physical contact to explicit sexual propositions. Temporary workers reported being very often subject to explicit quid pro quo propositions. While these patterns might not differ from those reported by other groups, work organization factors overlap with individual and social characteristics of Hispanic women in low-income jobs revealing a complicated picture that requires a systems approach to achieve meaningful change for this vulnerable population.

Keywords Workplace violence · Social support · Low-income · Immigrant workers · Women workers · Overlapping factors

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Introduction

Sexual harassment includes a wide range of behaviors, from leering and staring suggestively, making rude jokes and demeaning comments, to unwanted touching and sexual assault (Berdahl & Raver, 2011; Cortina, 2001; Hersch, 2015). The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as a form of employment and sex discrimination, which includes the full range of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature, and/or offensive remarks about a person's sex (US EEOC, 2019b). The EEOC also states that it is illegal when its frequency or severity creates a work environment that would be "intimidating, hostile, or offensive to reasonable people or when it results in an adverse employment decision such as the victim being fired or demoted." Broad categories of sexually harassing behavior include: 1) gender harassment,which refers to verbal and nonverbal behaviors that convey hostility, objectification, degrading, and sexist attitudes (e.g., inappropriate jokes, comments, or visual material targeted to degrade a particular gender, or inappropriate sexual gestures); 2) unwanted sexual attention, meaning unwelcome verbal or physical sexual advances, sexual imposition and assault (e.g., unwanted touch, sexual comments about appearance, or inquiries about sexual history); and 3) sexual coercion which denotes subtle or explicit solicitation of sexual activity by the promise of a "quid pro quo" reward or threat of punishment unless demands are met (e.g., offering a promotion, modifying job contract conditions, or writing negative performance reports) (Cortina, 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Waugh, 2010).

Workplace sexual harassment has gained visibility in recent years due especially to allegations involving high-profile women in media. However, it affects working women in all industrial sectors, especially in low-wage positions. The U.S. EEOC disclosed that half of the sexual harassment claims occurred in industries with large numbers of low-wage jobs (Frye, 2017). According to Frye (2017), of 42,150 claims filed in 2016, 14% came from the accommodation and food services industry, followed by retail trade (13%), manufacturing (12%), and health care industries (11%). While both women and men experience workplace sexual harassment, women were four times more likely to report sexual harassment.

The 11.1 million Hispanic women in the U.S. civilian labor force are more likely to work in low-income occupations than those with higher wages (BLS, 2019b). In 2017, 32% of Hispanic women were employed in service occupations (i.e., healthcare support, food preparation and serving, cleaning and maintenance, and personal care) (BLS, 2018) which are occupations where workers traditionally face lower wages, less wage growth, and high volatility (Butcher & Schanzenbach, 2018). For instance, in 2018, about 60% of all workers paid at or below the federal minimum wage were employed in restaurants and other food services (BLS, 2019a).

Sexual harassment is not necessarily motivated by sexual desire; on the contrary, it may be an expression of control and power (Berdahl, 2007; Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2012). Power perspectives explain sexual harassment as a manifestation of asymmetrical power relations between men and women which are extrapolated into the workplace due to organizational culture and hierarchies (e.g., male boss-female subordinate), as well as

into male-dominated settings where masculine characteristics are highly valued (especially salient for peer harassment) (McDonald, 2012; Quick & McFadyen, 2017).

Determinants of workplace sexual harassment have been studied mainly at the organizational level. Organizational context includes aspects related to the work organization, job gender, job position, organizational climate, worker participation, co-worker support, supervisor support, or balance of power (McDonald, 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Mueller et al., 2001; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). However, it has been widely argued that there is a need for a macro-level analysis which examines the interaction of organizational conditions with individual and social factors to identify groups that might be at high risk of experiencing sexual harassment (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Cunningham et al., 2014; McCluney & Cortina, 2017; Mueller et al., 2001). Individual demographic characteristics such as age, education, and marital status have been identified as predictors of workplace sexual harassment (McDonald, 2012; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). At the social level, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socio-economic class, social support, cultural roles and power, acculturation, and community resources play a role in the risk of sexual harassment in the workplace (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Cortina, 2004; Krieger et al., 2006). Women with irregular, contingent, or precarious employment contracts are also more vulnerable to experiencing workplace sexual harassment (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; McDonald, 2012). Non-unionized low-income workers are more likely to face sexual harassment at the workplace (Krieger et al., 2006).

Workers in low-income jobs can be particularly vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment since they are located at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy and can be perceived as powerless due to their socioeconomic conditions. However, relatively limited research has focused on the interaction between workplace exposure to sexual harassment and its association with the characteristics of low-income workers that can make some workers more vulnerable than others (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2019; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Jain-Link et al., 2019; Krieger et al., 2006; Waugh, 2010; Welsh et al., 2006).

Due to the complex and sensitive nature of sexual harassment, qualitative research methods can be more suitable to obtain insight into how the risk factors interact and may shape perceptions and responses to workplace sexual harassment from the perspective of those experiencing or witnessing it. While quantitative research requires the hypothesized study constructs to already be defined prior to data collection, this study required a more open-ended scope in order to expand beyond what had been learned in prior research and foreground the experiences of this segment of the workforce. This qualitative study aimed to examine the experiences of Hispanic women in low-income jobs who had suffered from or witnessed sexual harassment in the occupational settings and to identify organizational and societal factors that may contribute to these situations. It also aimed to identify strategies that participants perceive as promising for preventing sexual harassment at the workplace.

Methods

Study Design

This study used a qualitative research design with one-on-one structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of Hispanic women's experiences in low-wage jobs regarding workplace sexual harassment situations and potential contributing factors. Broad sexual harassment categories identified by Fitzgerald et al. (1997) such as gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion were used to structure interview guidelines. Additionally, factors such as organizational resources for preventing and reporting, community and family resources for support, and health effects attributed to sexual harassment were included.

Materials and protocols used in this study were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Massachusetts Lowell (16–109-PUN-XPD). All respondents agreed to participate and authorized audio recording of the session via oral informed consent according to the approved protocols. Participation was confidential, with no personal identifiers collected or associated with the interview data. Each participant received a $25 gift card as compensation for participation.

Interviewers were members of the Asociación de Mujeres Internacionales (AMIM) of the Massachusetts Coalition for Safety and Health (MassCOSH). All interviewers were trained in the protection of human subjects, strategies for reaching a cross-section of the target population, interviewing techniques on sensitive topics, and practices to accurately document results from interviews. Peer investigators were also trained in essential workers' rights and health resources, so that study participants in need of services could be appropriately referred. They received a modest stipend for recruiting and interviewing research participants.

An Advisory Board of 12 members was formed with representatives from academia, community, worker centers (outreach workers and attorneys), city agencies, and health providers to discuss the study methods, including recruitment protocols, data collection, and to interpret the results.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited in the Greater Boston, MA, area using purposive sampling. The aim was to recruit Hispanic women from low-income jobs in a variety of occupations, who had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace. AMIM members and volunteers comprised the recruitment team. Recruiters attended local community meetings to present the study and invite Hispanic women to participate. A recruitment flyer in English and Spanish describing the study's aims was circulated in all the meetings. Selection criteria were to be at least 18 years old and employed currently or during the last 12 months in a job with an hourly wage rate below $15.

Data Collection

The interviews were structured around an interview guideline developed by the research team using the EEOC legal definition of sexual harassment, current topics

reported in the scientific literature (e.g., company's policies, report procedures, internal and external resources to cope with sexual harassment, health impacts), and input from members of the MassCOSH AMIM team. The guideline was revised and refined through several meetings between the research team and members of AMIM, and then with the Advisory Board. This process included discussions about the themes, wording, question order, readability, and interview protocols.

The one-on-one interviews allowed participants to discuss their experiences in-depth as they felt motivated to do so. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 min, was conducted in Spanish and in a private room at the MassCOSH offices. When needed, participants' responses were probed to ensure clarification and depth of understanding. The instrument was piloted with four MassCOSH volunteers, who were not involved in the project, to obtain feedback on the clarity of each question. The final version was presented to the Advisory Board for approval. A limited set of standardized questions on socio-demographic background was included at the beginning of the interview.

Data Analysis

All the audio-recorded interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim into English by a co-author (MM). A thematic analysis was used for data analysis allowing the emergence of themes beyond those anticipated by the interview guideline. The analysis was carried out with QRS Nvivo 11 software by the first author. First, transcripts were thematically coded according to the categories defined in the interview guideline previously based on Fitzgerald et al. (1997). Secondly, latent content emerging from the data was also coded. Then, categories were redefined, and new categories developed by fitting them to the data. In an iterative process, all data were reanalyzed by the same investigator to assure an accurate categorization into the new categories.

The categories identified were used to develop an expanded conceptual model that considers the interaction between the organizational context, individual variables, and social factors to understand behaviors, barriers, and vulnerabilities of Hispanic women in low-income jobs experiencing workplace sexual harassment.

Results

Participants

A total of 52 Hispanic women from low-wage occupations in the Greater Boston area were invited to participate in this study. Seven women declined to participate, while four stated that they had not ever experienced or witnessed any sexual harassment situation in the workplace. In these latter cases, the interviews did not continue. Thus, the final sample consisted of 41 interviewees. Each of the women who agreed to be interviewed had faced and/or witnessed at least one sexual harassment experience. Fourteen (34%) participants said that in addition to experiencing sexual harassment themselves, they had also witnessed it at work. Participants held a variety of occupations, including factory operators, residential cleaners, babysitters, hotel housekeepers, and restaurant workers (dishwashers, waitresses, cashiers) (Table 1). Most of the participants had direct contracts with their employers (68%); 20% reported had been

hired through a temporary agency and 10% by a contractor/subcontractor. Workplace size ranged from 2 to 250 workers, with 87% of the participants from small workplaces (Table 1).

Forms of Sexual Harassment

Almost all the interviewees indicated that workplace sexual harassment usually escalated over time, starting with dating invitations, sex-related jokes and comments, progressing to unwanted physical contact, and explicit sexual propositions. Temporary workers reported being frequently subjected to explicit quid pro quo sexual harassment (Table 2). Two-thirds of the participants identified their supervisors as the harassers. Every interviewee that stated that they had not reported the harassment indicated that fear of being fired and lack of knowledge about the administrative process to report the event were the most common barriers to reporting. Physical and emotional negative health effects such as constant headaches and anxiety were attributed by the interviewees to the workplace sexual harassment situations experienced.

Sexual-Related Jokes and/or Comments Participants reported that comments about physical appearance or dressing were very frequent in the workplace.

> *'Sex jokes and comments are always there. He [supervisor] began with jokes and then, raised to comments about dresses I used to wear; then, it was about how my breast looked like, and at the end, he was making comments about the body movements that we had to do when we cleaned the espresso machine."* Restaurant worker
> *"They [coworkers] used to make comments about my body and manners and at the beginning, I honestly took that as a compliment, but they were not, and I didn't notice it."* Waitress

At first, some did not identify the negative aspects in these compliments but over time they realized these actions were just the beginning of other more abusive behaviors. Some participants interpreted these comments as the harasser's way of "testing the waters" before escalating to more explicit harassment behaviors.

Unwanted Physical Contact Participants described physical and verbal sexual advances such as situations in which personal space was violated and their bosses or co-workers inappropriately touched them. Unwelcome touching ranged from shoulder patting, back massaging, waist, breast, or buttocks grabbing, purposefully rubbing their genitals on women's body, forced kissing, physical attack, and attempted rape.

> *"He [supervisor] began explaining certain things [related to work] to me and ... he touched my leg, and I moved his hands away from my legs. I felt very uncomfortable and very nervous."* Restaurant worker

Table 1 Demographic and occupational characteristics of low-income Hispanic women participating in depth-interviews

Characteristics	***n=41 (%)***
Industry sector	
Bar/restaurant	15 (36)
Cleaning	5 (12)
Hotel	4 (10)
Manufacturing	4 (10)
Garment	3 (7)
Fast-food chain	2 (5)
Retail	2 (5)
Others	6 (15)
Occupation	
Waitress	8 (20)
Cleaner	6 (14)
Cook	4 (10)
Plant operator	4(10)
Cashier	3 (7)
Housekeeper	3 (7)
Sewing	3 (7)
Cooking	2 (5)
Others[a]	8 (20)
Currently working	
Yes	33 (81)
No	7 (17)
No information	1 (2)
Time in the company[b] (years)	
Less 1 year	21 (51)
1 to 5 years	9 (22)
6 to 10 years	2 (5)
More than 10 years	5 (12)
No information	4 (10)
Years living in the USA	
Less 1 year	5 (12)
2 to 5 years	6 (15)
6 to 10 years	7 (17)
More than 10 years	20 (49)
No information	3 (7)
Type of work contract	
Direct	28 (68)
Temporary	8 (20)
Contractor	4 (10)
No information	1 (2)
Company size	

Table 1 (continued)

Characteristics	*n* = 41 (%)
Less than 10 workers	14 (34)
10–25	10 (24)
26–50	7 (17)
51–100	5 (12)
More than 100	3 (7)
No information	2 (5)

[a] Babysitter, lunch monitor, dishwasher, laundry labor, nursing home assistant, food store distributor

[b] Time in the company at the time of the harassment

The harasser (co-worker or supervisor) seemed to take advantage of situations where the worker was in isolated areas, areas with few personnel, or during the night shift. However, supervisors might also exhibit these behaviors in front of other workers.

> *"He touched her[coworker] waist... He grabbed her by the waist to pass by, and there was enough space, so he did not need to get close to her. He took hold of her and kissed her. She smacked him but he grabbed and forced her onto the wall..."* Machine operator

Explicit Sexual Propositions In this category, participants described situations where unwelcome sexual interests, unreciprocated romantic expressions, pressure for dating, and inquiries about sexual history or preferences happened in the workplace.

> *"He [supervisor] always threw me direct questions about having sex with him. I always told him I wasn't interested in that kind of thing."* Machine Operator

Quid Pro Quo This experience was reported mainly by temporary workers. They described situations in which company supervisors often offered to recommend them to be hired directly by the company as an exchange for accepting sexual propositions.

> *"He [supervisor] said I shouldn't be nervous and that if I accepted a relationship with him, I could have a good job position there."* Restaurant worker
> *"He thought that he was going to take advantage of me by telling me he was capable of putting me through the company... but he wanted something in exchange."* Temporary worker

Similarly, some participants reported that help with their immigration status was a condition used by the harasser.

Table 2 Frequency of participants describing specific sexual harassment situations, workplace relationship with the harasser, actions taken to seek support, barriers to report, forms of retaliation, and negative health effects experienced

Themes	***n=41***
Sexual harassment situations	
Continuous sex-related comments	27 (66%)
Physical contact	17 (41%)
Explicit sexual propositions	12 (28%)
Quid-pro-quo	7 (17%)
Worker-Harasser relationship	
Supervisor (boss)	26 (63%)
Co-workers	16 (39%)
Customer	7 (17%)
Sought support by	
Telling co-workers	8 (20%)
Talking with family/friends	8 (20%)
Reporting to the company	7 (17%)
Talking with a community leader/worker center	1 (2%)
Barriers to report	
Fear of being fired	14 (34%)
Unawareness of the reporting process	10 (24%)
Threats from the harasser	7 (17%)
Feeling ashamed or guilty	6 (15%)
Expecting that their reaction would have stopped the harasser	4 (10%)
Forms of retaliation experienced or observed	
Reducing work hours	5 (12%)
Being fired	5 (12%)
Resigning due to lack of support	4 (10%)
Threats due to immigration status	4 (10%)
Health effects experienced	
Emotional (sleep disorders, anxiety)	13 (32%)
Physical (headaches, fast heart beating)	5 (12%)

> *"He [co-workers] asked if I had all my papers [immigration documents] in order because he could help me to stay in the country."* Restaurant worker

They also reported that non-acceptance of unwelcome sexual advances turned into a hostile work environment with permanent threats of being fired, reported to the temporary agency or other authority.

> *"When I did not accept that [sexual propositions], he had me doing heavy work, and he told me: 'if you do not do what I say, you will never be working directly for the company…'"* Temporary worker in manufacturing sector

Organizational Practices

In general, participants reported a lack of organizational policies and practices either to prevent sexual harassment or to protect workers when these situations happen. They reported a lack of anti-harassment policy, written guidelines, or formal complaint and reporting procedures. In the cases that the employer filed a complaint, participants perceived that the organization made no efforts to deter the situation, had low interest in investigating complaints, and did not discipline the harasser.

> *"I told with a person in the office [administration] about all these things that the field supervisor used to tell me and they said they would talk with the general supervisor… but the general supervisor did not do anything [about the complaint]. He did not want to talk with the workers, he only talked with the field supervisor."* Machine operator

Some temporary workers stated that the temporary agencies accepted their complaints and allocated them into another company. However, since not additional actions were initiated, that was perceived just as an attempt to protect the company-temp agency business relationship rather than an actual mechanism to protect the worker.

> *"I complained many, many times with the temporary agency. They said they can do nothing. But finally, they moved me to another company."* Temporary worker

Participants also reported that they had received ambiguous messages to communicate the organization's position regarding harassment. They stated that the little time managers/owners spent on the work floor interacting with workers might be a barrier to report complaints within the company beyond the supervisor level.

Power Imbalance

Organizational hierarchy was often used by supervisors and managers to create power imbalance relationships which not only create a risk factor for sexual harassment but also a barrier for reporting.

> *"He [supervisor] said that would give me some training to do the job. He began explaining certain things [related to work] to me and … he touched my leg, and I moved his hands away from my legs. I felt very uncomfortable and very nervous."* Restaurant worker
> *"I never accepted what he was telling me so he told me that he wouldn't recommend me to be hired through the company and he would always have me do the toughest jobs."* Temporary worker

Participants also recognized that the manager's/owner's power intimidated them to raise complaints particularly when the harasser was a supervisor.

"When he [owner] was upset he didn't pay us for the full hours worked. He used to make us do more of what we had to do." Cleaning worker

Individuals' Responses to Harassment

Formally filed complaints were infrequent. Instead, two opposing response strategies were reported: directly confronting the harasser and requesting him to stop the behavior or ignoring him and pretending that the situation did not happen.

"He used to come near me and touched my butt... I got scared and I told him "Sir, I told you to stop bothering me" He laughed and made jokes about it." Machine operator
"As soon as I began working there my boss asked me to go out with him and I pretended not to hear him. To have dinner, to speak... but as women, we know when they are inviting you with different intentions." Restaurant worker
"He used to tell me that I was beautiful and other things about my body, then he asked me if I wanted to go out with him, but I ignored it all. I only pretended to not be listening to him."
Restaurant worker

Additionally, as a result of feelings of self-blame, eight participants (20%) reported that they refrained from basic social interactions in the workplace or modified clothing choices.

"I thought it was my fault and I had to basically change my behavior. Then, I barely smiled, and I was very formal. I learned to be this way." Machine operator

Reporting and Reporting Barriers

Workplace sexual harassment was reported to the company by only 17% (7 participants). Co-workers, family, and friends were the main confidants when these events occurred. Participants reported organizational deficiencies in policies and procedures as barriers to confronting the harasser through a formal report. Additionally, they stated having no training or knowledge of any reporting protocol at the company. Fear of being fired, lack of knowledge about the company's reporting process, and threats from the harasser were the leading perceived barriers to reporting sexual harassment situations.

"*You feel afraid of losing your job because you rejected him* [supervisor]" Restaurant worker

These barriers were also mentioned as situations interfering in their willingness to seek help outside of the organization as well. Barriers on a personal level such as feeling ashamed or guilty, and expecting that their reaction at the time of the harassment would stop the harasser, were also described.

> *"I kept that incident as a secret. I was afraid that he was going to do something to me when I was going through a process. I did not feel comfortable to let them [family] know what was happening at the factory"* Sewing worker
> "*The supervisor told me 'people that don't do what I say ended up losing their jobs*'" House cleaning worker
> *"He [supervisor] told me that whatever happens there stays there… if I say anything about what was happening there out the door, just don't bother to come back. I was scared because I needed the job."* Restaurant workers -cook

The lack of mechanisms to overcome the language barriers played a negative role in reporting or filing complaints.

> *"I tried to report the situation to my boss. He said he did not understand me because of my English. He pretended that he did not hear me." Machine o*perator

Co-Worker Support

As to seeking support, telling a co-worker about the unwelcome sexual requests experiencing at work was the most common strategy reported by participants to cope with workplace sexual harassment. Participants recognized the importance of having a supportive work group to feel empowered to refuse unconsensual sexual advances, to intercede and halt harassment, or to understand how to proceed inside the organization to report the event.

> *"I began my shift at 10 pm and during the night I used to always try to get someone else to be near me because I used to think that I could find him [supervisor] in the dark areas."* Operator
> *"I cried for help from my coworkers, but my female coworkers were all against me because they did not want to have any issues with the supervisor… We all wanted to be hired directly by the company."* Temporary worker

However, they were concerned that being a witness might put their job at risk. Fear of retaliation often prevented coworkers from serving as witness or reporting the behavior.

> *"There was a co-worker that saw how the guy wanted to touch me, and when I said I had a witness, she said she didn't see anything.".* Operator
> *"I work because I needed the money. So, you avoid being embroiled in any problem."* Machine operator witnessing at sexual harassment incident

Immigrant and/or Head of Household Status

Reporting workplace sexual harassment might not be a straightforward decision for Hispanic women who have the role of financially supporting family members and for those with an undocumented immigration status. Difficulties for securing another job

due to their low professional skills and even undocumented status were identified as obstacles to complete formal complaints.

> *"He [supervisor] said that whoever complained would get deported"* Restaurant worker
> *"He [supervisor] said we wouldn't find any other work since we did not have papers [immigration documents]."* Restaurant worker
> *"Being afraid was what really made me stay quiet. But, of course, he [supervisor] used to take advantage of that to tell me that I had nothing to complain about because I was illegal [undocumented]."* Babysitter

Being a breadwinner was another barrier for women to report sexual harassment situations or leave the job when the sexual harassment began or escalated.

> *"I used to ask myself, when am I going to get out of this situation?... I felt like I was in a prison because I had to feed my kid, and I had to pay bills and for the apartment."* House cleaning worker
> *"I came here to this country and I found this job cleaning houses and buildings. This job helps me to pay my bills and to pay for what my two kids need. I cannot afford to lose a job even if it is a bad job."* House cleaning worker

Retaliation and Health Effects

According to the participants, supervisors and even company managers engaged in both indirect and direct retaliation against workers when they refused, resisted, or filed internal sexual harassment complaints (Table 2). The consequences of reporting included reducing regular work hours, cutting off overtime, assigning more difficult tasks, locating the worker in isolated areas, or being fired. Inaction was another form of retaliation since the lack of support by coworkers or the company sometimes resulted in a voluntary resignation.

> "[after reporting] *I was then waiting for the human resources people to speak to me about it. However, it was he who made a complaint against me…*" Fast food worker
> "*They [co-workers] mocked at the fact that I didn't have my documents* [immigration papers]" Hotel housekeeper
> *"He [supervisor] bent on his knees and asked me to not make any sort of complaint against him. So, I felt bad and didn't do anything, but then after he took revenge against me and caused me to be fired."* Residential cleaner

Undocumented status and explicit threats of being reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or any other agency in retaliation made workers afraid to speak up and report harassment in the workplace out of fear of being deported.

> *"They [company] told me that I could do a formal complaint but since I was in the legal process for changing my immigration status that could worsen everything. I just didn't want to complicate things."* Babysitter

As a result of experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment, the prevailing emotional health effects included changes in appetite (increased/loss), stress, changes in mood, and feeling of hopelessness, vulnerability, and a sense of being at disadvantage. Some participants also reported physical negative impacts such as difficulties to sleep and constant headaches.

> *"I was under great stress while I was working there because it wasn't only worried about the job. I didn't want to go back to that job, but I really needed it because it was my only income at that time"* Cashier
> *"I tolerated so many things. When it was a new day, I wished for that day not to be a new day because I did not want to go to work. Imagined how I used to feel…"* Babysitter

"No sexual harassment" Experiences

Four participants who initially accepted to be interviewed were excluded because during the screening process they said they had not been exposed to or witnessed workplace sexual harassment. They argued that inappropriate jokes and unwanted sexual advances were common in every workplace and that they were not exposed because they "did not pay attention" to these situations. Others claimed that their current company had policies and procedures to report sexual harassment situations; thus, they did not "know about sexual harassment situations" occurring in the worksite. Since the interviews did not continue, due to the study protocol, it was not possible to probe those perceptions.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework for workplace sexual harassment against Hispanic women in low-income jobs (Fig. 1) integrates the key themes emerging from qualitative analysis of these interviews and factors identified in the extant literature. The framework illustrates the interaction between organizational context and social vulnerabilities in the pathway to assess individual vulnerability and response to workplace sexual harassment. The organizational context in the framework is comprised of three sets: sexual harassment characterization, organizational context, and harasser's characteristics. The arrows show the bidirectional aspect of the relationship between the individuals and the organizational context.

Within the organizational context, the role of organizational practices in understanding workplace sexual harassment has been considered in previous research (Mueller et al., 2001; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). The conceptual framework proposed here is extended by including social vulnerability as an element that interacts with the organizational context to fully understand the risk of experienced sexual harassment in the workplace as well as the coping responses. One new set of variables is the

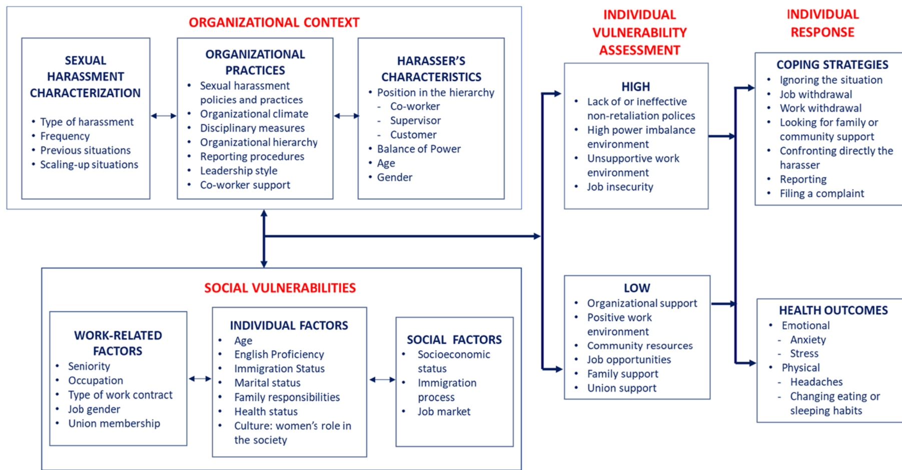

Fig. 1 A conceptual framework for illustrating interactions between organizational context and social vulnerabilities during the assessment of Hispanic workers experiencing and reporting workplace sexual harassment

characterization of the sexual harassment situation. This arose from the interview responses indicating that women in certain settings were more likely to experience certain types of sexual harassment, such as temporary workers facing direct quid pro quo situations. Compounding this, repetitive harassment may itself become a barrier that affects reporting if the experience begins to feel normalized to the victim.

Another set of variables included in the framework concerns the harasser's characteristics. Despite a company's policies and practices to prevent sexual harassment, the position of the harasser in the organizational structure and the imbalance of power between the two individuals can increase the vulnerability of low-wage female workers and reduce the likelihood of reporting. Although by default, the role in the organization hierarchy imposes a power imbalance, other aspects such as the organizational culture, employee-management communication, worker engagement, employees' cohesion, and union support can contribute to the relative power dynamics. Thus, the three sets of factors included in the "organizational context" must be analyzed concurrently to assess women's likelihood of experiencing workplace sexual harassment.

Social vulnerabilities such as immigration status, cultural roles, or English proficiency might make Hispanic women vulnerable to experiencing distinct risk levels of sexual harassment compared to their white or African American counterparts. Social vulnerabilities encompass three sets that emerged from data analysis: work-related factors, individual factors, and social factors. Vulnerabilities associated with work-related factors include tenure, occupation, type of contract, union membership, and job-gender ratio. At the individual level, demographic variables such as age, marital status, family status, and immigration status emerged as aspects that can increase Hispanic women's vulnerability. For example, single women or women heading households seem to be at high risk of sexual harassment but also have a high vulnerability due to their economic dependence on the job, which reduces their likelihood of reporting. Social factors such as low socioeconomic status, unresolved immigration process, and

poor opportunities of finding another job after quitting or being fired increase women's vulnerability and overlap with individual factors.

The interaction between organizational context and social vulnerabilities is the input for assessing individual's risk level and the decision to determine how to respond to workplace sexual harassment. The framework proposes that workers who are afraid of retaliation, losing their job, suffering bullying, or receiving threats are more likely to engage in passive responses such as ignoring the situation, pretending not to notice it, pretending it had no effect, and withdrawal behaviors (job withdrawal and work withdrawal) (Cortina & Wasti, 2005; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Gruber & Bjorn, 1986; Gruber & Smith, 1995). These situations may have an impact on the individual's health and well-being including stiffness of the neck or shoulders, (Stock & Tissot, 2012; Takaki et al., 2013); depressive symptoms (Friborg et al., 2017); nausea and sleeplessness, loss of self-esteem, fear and anger, feelings of helplessness and isolation, as well as nervousness and depression (Kahsay et al., 2020; Roosmalen & McDaniel, 1999); or even posttraumatic stress disorders (Willness et al., 2007). In contrast, when the individual is less socially vulnerable, the worker is more likely to engage in a more assertive response such as confronting the harasser or filing a complaint. The impact of the individual response returns to the feedback loop as an input in the interaction between organizational context and social vulnerabilities.

Discussion

While sexual harassment is common to all industries and occupations, not all workers may be vulnerable in the same way. Forms of workplace sexual harassment identified in this analysis have been previously documented among Hispanic immigrants (Cortina, 2001; Eggerth et al., 2011; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Waugh, 2010), and also among non-Hispanic groups (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Krieger et al., 2006; Leskinen et al., 2011). Among the 41 Hispanic women in low-income jobs who had experiences that they were willing to discuss for this study, the frequency distribution of forms of sexual harassment was as follows: 66% being exposed to or having witnessed lewd sex-related comments, 41% experiencing unwanted touching or physical contact, and 28% having explicit sexual propositions. Temporary workers were more likely to be exposed to overt, *quid-pro-quo* workplace sexual harassment. Within the organization, sexual harassment was perpetrated mainly by those in positions of authority but hierarchically close to the worker, with direct supervisors (bosses) being the most common harassers, but also co-workers and even customers, in jobs involving interaction with the public.

The most common barriers to reporting sexual harassment in the workplace were at the organizational level (fear of being fired (34%), lack of knowledge about the reporting procedure (24%)), interpersonal level (threats from the harasser (17%)), and individual level (feeling ashamed or guilty (15%) and expecting that their reaction would have stopped the harasser (10%)). Those who reported the situation to the company were the target of retaliation in the form of reducing work hours, being fired, or pressured to resign, or receiving threats due to their current immigration status. Participants reported that experiencing or witnessing workplace sexual harassment negatively affected their physical and/or emotional health.

Workers in low-income jobs are more likely to be exposed to occupational hazards, experience more work-related injuries and illnesses (Baron et al., 2014), have less job autonomy, greater job insecurity, and be in financial stress (Krieger et al., 2006; Landsbergis et al., 2014). Several authors highlight the need for integrated approaches to examine the role and interplay of social and occupational variables in the causal pathway of the multiple occupational hazard exposures faced by low-income workers (Baron et al., 2014; Flynn, Cunningham, et al., 2015a; Landsbergis, 2010; Leigh & De Vogli, 2016; Stiehl et al., 2018). The conceptual model proposed in the study incorporates social vulnerabilities that interact with the organizational context, eroding the individual's ability to cope effectively with workplace sexual harassment.

Individuals in disadvantaged social status groups such the low-income Hispanic workers may be at higher risk than their counterparts of experiencing different types of workplace sexual harassment. It is broadly recognized that one of the underlying causes of sexual harassment is power inequities. Hispanic women in low-income jobs can be seen by themselves and by others as powerless and the power imbalance naturally created due to organizational hierarchies may facilitate those at supervisory levels taking advantage of their authority to engage in harassing behaviors. Although immigration status was not collected in this study, previous studies have reported that organizational power relationships can interact with factors such as immigration status or job security increasing the vulnerability of those Hispanic workers with unresolved immigration status (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Hsieh et al., 2017; Meng, 2012; Villegas, 2019).

While other occupational hazards can be the unintentional result of organizational factors (e.g., competing goals, policies, technology, process, or culture), workplace sexual harassment clearly encompasses a deliberate action from a person to harm another person while taking advantage of organizational or cultural power differential (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Its intentional nature reinforces the relevance of organizational interventions through formal written policies, procedures, and practices to address individual behaviors and permissive culture. However, workplace sexual harassment should be addressed from a systems approach. Interventions must be designed to understand the workplace dynamics and their interaction with external factors to implement effective system-level prevention strategies. For example, individuals with few job skills employed in low-income jobs are most concerned with meeting basic survival needs (Eggerth & Flynn, 2011) which can minimize, regardless of the situation, their interest in challenging authority directly or through the company's regular mechanisms.

Flynn, Eggerth, and Jacobson (2015b) identified that, due to their documentation status, immigrant Hispanic workers tended to address problems at work by attempting to change themselves (reactive mode) rather than the work environment (active mode). Most of the coping strategies shared by Hispanic women in this study were reactive. Self-blaming, modifying their personal dress codes, pretending to ignore the situation, or hoping that their initial reaction might stop the harasser, indicate that they placed causes of this problem at the intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Training interventions typically focus only on enhancing employees' knowledge regarding forms of sexual harassment and how to respond when these situations occur. These trainings may reinforce the belief that "it is a woman's problem" (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2017), blurring the organizational accountability for deterring these situations. As

discussed in the proposed conceptual framework, it is necessary to be aware of the interaction between internal and external factors to minimize individual vulnerability and design system-level prevention strategies.

Education, training, organizational climate, and anti-harassment policies and practices are tangible elements of organizational support (Sojo et al., 2015) which must be broadened to address the individual's social vulnerabilities that may negatively impact their effectiveness. Training interventions across all levels of the organization can increase sensitivity and accuracy in the identification of sexual harassment but it does not act as a predictor (Buckner et al., 2014; Perry et al., 1998). Aligned with organizational policies, training interventions must include strategies to minimize underreporting by both victims and bystanders (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Gaps between promoted and enacted policies as well as the lack of formal procedures to report and investigate can be understood as a tolerant environment, favoring the proliferation of these noxious behaviors and underreporting. For Hispanic women in low-wage jobs, organization policies and procedures, including training, are important elements in the prevention pathway but can be insufficient to minimize their risk when they do not incorporate strategies to buffer the overlapping effect of socioeconomic level, immigration status, language proficiency, and family impact which increases their vulnerability to experience workplace sexual harassment.

The safety and health literature highlights the role of first-line supervisors in assuring safety conditions (e.g., Conchie et al., 2013; Hardison et al., 2014; Kines et al., 2010; Marín & Roelofs, 2017) as well as in promoting a climate in which employees feel comfortable bringing safety concerns to the attention of the organization (Probst, 2015). However, when an unsafe situation is deliberately introduced to the workplace by a supervisor, that unique role as a liaison between the employee and the organization can act in detriment of employees. Organizational policies should anticipate these situations, develop practices to prevent them, and facilitate alternative mechanisms to report any concerns while protecting employees against any form of retaliation.

The organization's responsibility for protecting workers against sexual harassment is not merely limited to those situations in which the harasser is another employee. The EEOC states that the employer must protect the employee even when the harasser is a non-employee (EEOC U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2019a). Thus, when the employee's duties require interaction with clients and customers, the anti-sexual harassment policies must also include clear procedures for employees to file complaints and for managers to address complaints fairly (Johnson & Madera, 2018; Restaurant Opportunities Centers United Forward Together, 2014). The social norms and working conditions in the restaurant, retail and hospitality industry (e.g., reliance on tipping) may discourage employees from stopping or complaining formally when the harasers is a customer-client (Good & Cooper, 2016). Thus, protecting these workers requires employers to encourage a non-tolerance culture that as to sexual harassment the customer is not *"always right."* Legal guarantee of adequate wages would protect vulnerable workers against having to comply with inappropriate behavior in order to receive tips.

Prevention strategies for Hispanic women working as independent contractors, occasional workers, in small businesses or in occupations that are not backed up by a formal organizational structure can be provided through community and society organizations. Community-based organizations, church counseling centers, non-

governmental organizations, workers centers, or state offices for victim assistance can be essential resources for this group of workers. Through these organization, women could get access to no-cost legal services (e.g., documenting and reporting), training, emotional support, and health assistance. At the government level, free legal services on how to document and report as well as providing a limited period of wage guarantee when a worker files a report can encourage workers to exercise their rights.

Some potential participants denied having experienced or witnessed workplace harassment, arguing that sexual jokes and lewd conversations/comments were regular in every workplace. Since the interviews did not continue, the research team could not identify whether this type of normalization corresponded to a lack of knowledge regarding what constitutes workplace sexual harassment, a perception that verbal is less threatening than physical sexual harassment (McDonald, 2012), a cognitive dissonance mechanism, or simple denial of an uncomfortable experience. Normalization might represent another mechanism used to cope with the stress generated by experiencing (or witnessing) these situations. In the context of the workplace, employees continually contrast their perceptions with organizational policies to develop own beliefs about what is important to the management level and what is not. For example, in an organizational climate where sexual harassment is tolerated (by action or inaction), the lack of organizational support confronts women with conflicting choices (e.g., reporting, putting the job at risk, retaliation, justice) creating a cognitive dissonance which can be resolved with alternative options such as denial or normalization of the harassment.

The negative effects of sexual harassment on a personal level have been documented thoroughly in the literature. Detrimental effects on women's psychological and physical well-being have been reported not only by the direct target but also the witnesses of the sexual harassment incident (Glomb et al., 1997; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007). Power imbalance and situations where the organization is perceived as unresponsive have been associated with work experiences that are harmful to women's well-being (Quick & McFadyen, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

This is one of the few studies focused on sexual harassment among Hispanic immigrants in low-income jobs that analyzes organization, individual, and societal contributing factors. This study involved a robust design, sample size, and data analysis. Other demographic variables such as age, marital status, immigration status, or English proficiency of the participants and the harassers were not recorded from the interviewees so they cannot be discussed here.

Future research in this area should examine the role of differential exposure and vulnerability in the likelihood of experiencing workplace sexual harassment and responding assertively to the situation. The sexual harassment literature highlights that women from different races and ethnicities may have differential exposure to workplace sexual harassment (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Murphy et al., 2015; Waugh, 2010). McLaughlin et al. (2012) suggested an interaction between power and gender, indicating that relations between workers are not driven strictly by organizational rank and that even women in power roles may be harassed by peers, co-workers, clients as a way to enforce "gender-appropriate behavior."

The interview protocol excluded participation by those who denied having been sexually harassed at work. In fact, four such participants acknowledged experience of inappropriate jokes and unwanted sexual advances. It is unfortunate that we cannot report on the individual, organizational, and harasser characteristics of these situations, however future studies should include individuals like these to understand their perceptions, expectations, and reasoning.

Conclusions

The reports from these interviews illustrated sexual harassment as an instrument of power over women in vulnerable employment situations. This study identified risk factors that arose from the organizational-level but also unraveled underlying individual- and societal-level factors that led to the occurrence of workplace sexual harassment among Hispanic women in low-income jobs. These findings suggest that workplace sexual harassment is not only linked to organizational factors but can also be exacerbated by social vulnerability. Societal and individual risk factors overlap with the organizational context, making Hispanic women more vulnerable to experiencing workplace sexual harassment in many of its forms. While organizational factors might not differ from those that other groups are exposed to, their interaction with individual and social characteristics of immigrants in low-income jobs reveals a more complicated picture that requires a system-level approach to intervening.

This study proposes a conceptual framework for understanding and addressing workplace sexual harassment recognizing the mechanisms through which social vulnerability interacts with organizational risk factors with the goal of designing comprehensive intervention strategies. Therefore, recommendations for addressing risk factors involve multiple levels of influence.

At the intrapersonal level, intervention strategies should identify gaps in knowledge regarding types of workplace sexual harassment, company policies, reporting and investigation procedures, workers' rights, and organizational and external resources for support. At the interpersonal level, strategies are needed to improve co-workers' support and bystanders interventions/reporting. At the organizational level, strategies should target the organizational climate through stating well-defined anti-harassment and anti-retaliation policies that encompass customers and clients alike. Strategies should also commit to a *zero-tolerance culture* by establishing roles and responsibilities in preventing sexual harassment across all levels, designing realistic practices and procedures to report and protect workers, defining disciplinary measurements, and protect confidentiality when the worker or bystander requested it. Employers should also consider expanding resources available for their employees through employee assistant programs (EAP) or health promotion programs. At the community level, building partnerships with workers centers, community groups, and researchers to develop culturally adapted materials, delivering customized training, identifying effective interventions, and disseminate evidence-based best practices could be highly effective. Similarly, collaborations with employers and/or unions are important to implement and evaluate interventions. Also, having community leaders educated to provide emotional support and legal guidance to workers is vital for those who are afraid to use the company's mechanisms due to their social vulnerabilities. At the

policy level, a collaboration between workers centers, researchers, community leaders, and unions is important to develop recommendations and explore policy changes based on research findings. Policy level strategies should also consider benefits for employers, such as financial incentives for small and medium companies implementing effective workplace sexual prevention programs.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of members of the Asociación de Mujeres Internacionales (AMIM) of the Massachusetts Coalition for Safety and Health (MassCOSH) in conducting the interviews. We thank the Advisory Committee Members for their contribution on this study.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Author Contributions All authors contributed equally to the study conception, design, data collection, and analysis. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Luz S. Marin and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding This study was funded by a pilot grant from the Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace (CPH-NEW), which is supported by Grant Number 1 U19 OH008857 from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of NIOSH.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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