



The Role of Leadership in Perpetuating and Mitigating Sexual Harassment: A Multi-Level Analysis of Organisational and Ethical Dynamics

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Abstract

Leadership in contexts of sexual harassment and oppression is shaped by complex interactions between perpetrators, institutional structures, and the responses of bystanders and communities. While much research emphasises individual or organisational culpability, less attention has been paid to the role of leadership in either perpetuating or mitigating sexual harm. This paper examines the dynamics of leadership during periods of sexual harassment and sexual oppression, arguing that leaders operate as both agents of power and arbiters of social norms. Silence, complicity, and inaction among leaders and subordinates can amplify systemic abuses, while proactive leadership strategies may protect victims and transform institutional culture. Drawing upon social psychology, feminist theory, and organisational studies, the paper identifies mechanisms linking leadership behaviours to the prevalence and persistence of sexual harassment, including authority legitimization, normative conformity, structural reinforcement, and fear-based compliance. Historical and contemporary case studies, ranging from corporate environments to educational and political institutions, illustrate how leadership choices shape outcomes for vulnerable populations. Ethical and normative analyses underscore the moral responsibilities of leaders in addressing harassment and fostering accountability. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy interventions, organisational reforms, and future research aimed at strengthening leadership accountability, promoting ethical decision-making, and reducing systemic sexual oppression. By highlighting the interplay between leadership, silence, and structural dynamics, this study contributes to understanding how institutions can either perpetuate or mitigate sexual harassment and oppression.

Keywords: Leadership, sexual harassment, sexual oppression, organisational culture, ethical responsibility, institutional accountability.

Introduction

Leadership in contexts marked by sexual harassment and oppression is both consequential and ethically complex. While extensive research has focused on the behaviour of perpetrators or the

experiences of victims, comparatively little attention has been given to the role of leaders in shaping, enabling, or mitigating sexual misconduct within organisations and institutions (Bourne, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Bourne&Charles,2010; Bourne& Foster, 2024, 2025; Bourne& Solan, 2025; Bourne et al., 2022, 2023; Burns, 1978; Katz & Moore, 2013; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Leaders occupy positions of authority that allow them to set norms, enforce policies, and influence organisational culture (Bass& Bass, 2008; Northouse, 2022; Yukl, 2020). When leaders fail to act, remain silent, or implicitly condone harassment, they inadvertently reinforce power imbalances and contribute to the persistence of oppressive environments. By foregrounding leadership as a determinant of both harassment prevalence and institutional response, this paper seeks to illuminate the social and structural mechanisms through which sexual oppression is sustained.

Existing scholarship predominantly examines harassment from the perspective of individual victims or perpetrators, emphasising psychological, behavioural, or legal factors (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Katz & Moore, 2013). However, the literature provides limited insight into how leadership behaviours, ranging from inaction and silence to proactive intervention, systematically shape organisational climates and cultural norms. Little research integrates the ethical, structural, and psychological dimensions of leadership, creating a gap in understanding how leaders simultaneously influence policy enforcement, subordinates' reporting behaviour, and institutional accountability (Munro, 2018). Addressing this gap is essential for comprehensively understanding the conditions under which sexual harassment persists or is mitigated within organisations.

Silence and inaction among leaders often arise from fear, reputational concerns, or organisational pressures. Leaders may prioritise institutional reputation over ethical responsibility, resulting in the minimisation or concealment of complaints (Munro, 2018). In some cases, leaders themselves may be perpetrators or complicit in systemic harassment, further complicating accountability. When subordinates observe leadership inaction, a culture of normative conformity emerges, in which reporting harassment is perceived as risky, futile, or socially unacceptable (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). This collective reinforcement of silence amplifies the structural and psychological constraints on victims, limiting avenues for redress and fostering long-term oppression.

Leadership in oppressive contexts also interacts with broader structural and cultural factors. Organisational hierarchies, gendered norms, and power asymmetries often intersect to produce environments in which harassment is tolerated or invisibilised (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Leaders' decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, and disciplinary action shape the perception of what behaviour is acceptable. Structural failure to address harassment signals tacit endorsement and normalises abusive conduct. By examining the interplay between individual leadership behaviour and organisational structures, this paper addresses a critical gap in the literature by elucidating the systemic mechanisms that allow sexual harassment and oppression to flourish.

This paper argues that leadership is a central mechanism in both the perpetuation and mitigation of sexual harassment. Drawing on social psychology, feminist theory, and organisational studies, the analysis explores how silence, complicity, and proactive intervention operate at individual,

group, and institutional levels. Historical and contemporary examples from workplaces, educational institutions, and political organisations illustrate how leadership decisions affect the prevalence and persistence of sexual oppression. By reframing leadership as a critical factor, this paper moves beyond victim- or perpetrator-centric explanations, explicitly addressing the under-researched role of leadership and highlighting the moral, ethical, and organisational responsibilities of those in positions of authority.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership during periods of sexual harassment and oppression can be examined through multiple complementary theoretical lenses that illuminate the psychological, social, and structural mechanisms at play. Social dominance theory provides a useful framework for understanding how hierarchical organisational structures and power asymmetries facilitate the persistence of harassment (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Leaders occupying positions of authority can either reinforce or challenge these hierarchies, shaping the extent to which oppressive behaviours are tolerated. When leaders normalise or ignore harassment, they perpetuate structural inequities that disadvantage subordinate groups. Conversely, proactive leadership that enforces policies and models ethical behaviour can mitigate power abuses and promote organisational justice. Social dominance theory, therefore, highlights the interaction between authority, hierarchy, and systemic oppression in shaping workplace climates.

Complementing this, the spiral of silence theory offers insight into the social dynamics that sustain harassment within institutions (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Individuals are highly attuned to the perceived opinions and behaviours of leaders and peers, often suppressing dissent when they believe their views are unpopular or risky. In contexts where leaders fail to condemn harassment or appear complicit, subordinates may interpret silence as tacit approval, thereby reinforcing conformity and discouraging reporting. This process produces a self-reinforcing cycle in which abuse persists unchallenged. By integrating the spiral of silence theory, the framework recognises that leadership is not only a structural force but also a social cue shaping collective behaviour and perceptions of acceptable conduct.

Feminist organisational theory further situates leadership within broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts, emphasising how gendered norms and systemic inequalities influence harassment dynamics (Acker, 1990). Organisations are not neutral arenas; they are sites where patriarchal values and gender hierarchies are reproduced through policies, practices, and informal cultural codes. Leaders play a crucial role in either perpetuating or challenging these systemic biases. By applying feminist theory, the study foregrounds the ethical and normative responsibilities of leadership to address sexual oppression, highlighting the intersection of individual agency, institutional culture, and societal power structures. This perspective underscores that sexual harassment is both a personal and structural problem, requiring leadership interventions that address multiple levels simultaneously.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives allows for a multi-level analysis of leadership in periods of sexual harassment and oppression. At the micro level, social dominance and spiral of silence theories explain individual behaviours, such as fear-induced silence or complicity. At the

meso level, feminist organisational theory illuminates how leaders influence organisational culture and enforce—or fail to enforce—ethical standards. At the macro level, institutional policies, societal norms, and legal frameworks shape the structural context in which harassment occurs. Together, these theories provide a cohesive framework for understanding how leadership choices interact with social, psychological, and structural forces to either enable or mitigate sexual harassment. This theoretical foundation informs the subsequent literature review, which critically examines empirical evidence on leadership, organisational culture, and sexual oppression.

Literature Review

Research on leadership during periods of sexual harassment and oppression highlights the pivotal role of organisational culture in shaping the prevalence and persistence of abuse. Studies consistently show that leaders who fail to address harassment contribute to a climate in which misconduct is tacitly condoned (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Munro, 2018). Leadership behaviour signals to subordinates what is acceptable, and silence or inaction often reinforces hierarchical power imbalances. Organisational norms that prioritise reputation management over victim protection exacerbate this effect, discouraging reporting and reinforcing complicity (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Conversely, leaders who actively promote accountability and ethical standards can transform institutional culture, reducing the occurrence of harassment. Empirical studies in corporate, academic, and political contexts underscore that leadership is both a structural and symbolic mechanism, capable of either sustaining or mitigating sexual oppression. These findings demonstrate the critical intersection between authority, policy enforcement, and cultural messaging.

Psychological processes further explain why leadership matters in shaping responses to sexual harassment. Research on conformity and bystander behaviour indicates that individuals are highly influenced by the perceived attitudes of those in power (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Katz & Moore, 2013). When leaders appear indifferent or complicit, employees and subordinates often remain silent due to fear of social sanction, retaliation, or reputational damage. The phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance—where individuals mistakenly believe they are alone in opposing harassment—intensifies this effect, reinforcing organisational silence (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Conversely, visible support from leaders can break the cycle of silence, empowering subordinates to report misconduct and resist oppressive norms. Social and psychological mechanisms, therefore, interact with structural factors, creating a feedback loop that either normalises harassment or fosters accountability. Leadership is thus central in shaping both the perceptions and behaviours of organisational members.

Structural and institutional factors further condition leadership's role in harassment contexts. Legal frameworks, reporting procedures, and institutional policies create the boundaries within which leaders operate (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Leaders who ignore or manipulate these structures may shield perpetrators, while proactive leaders can ensure compliance with anti-harassment regulations and ethical codes. Historical analyses indicate that systemic harassment often persists in organisations with hierarchical rigidity, gendered norms, and inadequate accountability mechanisms (Acker, 1990; Munro, 2018). Furthermore, institutions that reward

loyalty over ethical conduct incentivise leaders to prioritise self-interest or organisational reputation at the expense of victims. Structural analyses highlight that leadership effectiveness in addressing harassment is inseparable from the organisational and societal contexts in which leaders act. Understanding these interactions is essential for designing interventions that target both individual and institutional responsibilities.

Finally, contemporary literature emphasises the importance of integrating ethical and normative perspectives into leadership research on sexual harassment. Scholars argue that leadership in oppressive contexts is not merely a technical or managerial concern but a moral and civic one (Katz & Moore, 2013; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Leaders bear responsibility for shaping environments that either protect or endanger vulnerable populations. Research suggests that ethical leadership, characterised by transparency, accountability, and proactivity, reduces harassment incidence and strengthens organisational integrity (Brown et al., 2005). Normative analyses complement empirical findings by framing leadership as a societal and ethical intervention, not just a managerial function. The literature collectively underscores that addressing sexual harassment requires multidimensional strategies combining leadership action, structural reform, and cultural change. By examining leadership across psychological, structural, and ethical dimensions, researchers can better understand and mitigate sexual oppression in organisations.

Methods

Given the conceptual nature of this study, the methodology relies primarily on theoretical synthesis and critical analysis of secondary literature from organisational studies, social psychology, and feminist theory. Existing empirical research, historical records, and case studies are examined to identify the mechanisms through which leadership affects the prevalence, persistence, and mitigation of sexual harassment and oppression. By triangulating evidence across multiple organisational contexts, corporate, educational, and political, the study ensures a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics. This approach allows for the integration of structural, psychological, and ethical dimensions, highlighting how leaders' actions or inactions influence institutional culture and individual behaviour (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Munro, 2018).

Historical and contemporary case studies are drawn from published research to illustrate the complex interplay between leadership, organisational culture, and sexual harassment. Examples include high-profile corporate misconduct cases, academic institutional failures, and political scandals where leadership decisions either perpetuated or mitigated harassment (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Katz & Moore, 2013). These cases serve as empirical touchpoints, providing evidence for the theoretical mechanisms identified in the framework, such as authority legitimisation, normative conformity, and fear-induced compliance. By examining these diverse contexts, the study captures both universal and context-specific patterns, enhancing the generalisability of findings and supporting cross-institutional comparisons.

The study also applies a multi-level analytical approach, examining leadership effects at the micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level, the focus is on individual leader behaviour,

including ethical decision-making, policy enforcement, and responses to reports of harassment. At the meso level, attention shifts to organisational culture, structural hierarchies, and communication norms that reinforce or constrain leaders' influence. At the macro level, societal norms, legal frameworks, and institutionalised gender inequalities provide the broader context in which leadership operates (Acker, 1990; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This multi-tiered approach enables a nuanced understanding of how leadership intersects with psychological, structural, and cultural factors to affect outcomes for victims and organisations alike.

Finally, ethical and methodological considerations guide the analysis. Secondary sources were critically evaluated for reliability, relevance, and scholarly rigour, ensuring that case examples and theoretical arguments are grounded in credible evidence. Reflexivity is applied to acknowledge the researcher's own assumptions and potential biases, particularly in interpreting sensitive issues related to sexual harassment and power dynamics (Munro, 2018). The study also emphasises transparency in conceptual reasoning, clearly linking leadership behaviours to structural and social mechanisms. By combining theoretical synthesis, case analysis, and multi-level evaluation, the methodology provides a robust framework for understanding the complex role of leadership in periods of sexual harassment and oppression.

Analysis and Discussion

Mechanisms Linking Leadership to Sexual Harassment and Oppression

Legitimisation Through Leadership Inaction

Leaders who fail to address complaints or visibly condemn harassment often legitimise abusive behaviours, signalling to subordinates that misconduct is tolerated (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Inaction can be interpreted as tacit consent, reinforcing hierarchical power imbalances and emboldening perpetrators. This mechanism also interacts with organisational culture, where silence by authority figures establishes a normative standard that discourages reporting. Historical and contemporary studies show that when leaders prioritise reputation management over accountability, harassment persists unchecked (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). In effect, leadership inaction functions as both a structural and symbolic endorsement of sexual oppression. The legitimacy conferred through silence reduces organisational pressure on perpetrators while increasing the perceived risk for victims and bystanders to act. Consequently, leadership inaction creates a self-reinforcing cycle that perpetuates harassment across multiple levels of the institution.

Fear and Self-Censorship

Fear induced by potential retaliation or negative career consequences represents a central mechanism through which leadership influences subordinate behaviour (Munro, 2018). Employees and other members of the organisation often remain silent due to the anticipation of reprisals, which may include demotion, ostracism, or dismissal. Over time, these fears become internalised, fostering a culture of self-censorship where reporting harassment is considered futile or dangerous (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Leaders who fail to enforce protective policies exacerbate this effect, as subordinates perceive organisational support as absent or unreliable.

Psychological safety, or the lack thereof, is therefore a critical mediating factor in whether victims and witnesses voice concerns. Fear-based silence extends beyond the immediate context, shaping long-term organisational norms that tolerate or obscure sexual harassment. Leadership decisions directly influence the prevalence and endurance of this fear, highlighting the centrality of proactive intervention.

Normative Conformity and Organisational Culture

Individuals tend to conform to the observable behaviour of leaders and peers, especially when authority figures remain silent or complicit (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). When dissenting voices are absent or discouraged, silence becomes the default organisational norm, marginalising opposition and reinforcing harassment. Leaders serve as behavioural exemplars, shaping perceptions of acceptable conduct through their responses—or lack thereof—to complaints (Katz & Moore, 2013). Over time, normative conformity embeds harassment within the organisational culture, making ethical breaches appear routine or unavoidable. This mechanism is reinforced by hierarchical structures, reward systems, and social pressures, which collectively amplify conformity and diminish accountability (Acker, 1990). Breaking these cycles requires intentional, visible action from leadership to signal zero tolerance and empower victims. Normative conformity illustrates that leadership impacts not only policy enforcement but also the social and psychological dynamics that perpetuate sexual oppression.

Historical and Contemporary Case Illustrations

Corporate Environments

High-profile cases in corporate contexts, such as the allegations against Uber and Fox News, illustrate the consequences of leadership inaction (Munro, 2018). In both cases, top executives failed to address harassment complaints promptly, creating cultures of fear and complicity. Employees reported that organisational norms implicitly condoned misconduct, while reporting channels were ineffective or ignored. Subsequent investigations revealed systemic failures in human resource oversight and accountability mechanisms. These cases demonstrate that leadership silence not only legitimises harassment but also inhibits organisational reform. Corrective actions only occurred when external pressure, such as media exposure or regulatory intervention, compelled leadership to act. The corporate context highlights the intersection of authority, structural barriers, and reputational concerns in shaping harassment outcomes.

Educational Institutions

Universities and schools provide additional insight into leadership's role in sexual oppression. Studies indicate that administrators often prioritise institutional reputation over student safety, discouraging reporting of sexual misconduct (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). For example, investigations into campus sexual harassment cases show that silence from leadership fosters a culture where victims feel unsupported, and perpetrators remain unchecked. Effective leadership, conversely, involves transparent policies, proactive prevention programs, and visible consequences for violators, which reduce harassment prevalence and strengthen trust in institutional governance (Katz & Moore, 2013). Educational institutions demonstrate how leadership behaviour shapes

organisational climate, influencing both ethical norms and reporting practices. These cases further illustrate the moral and structural responsibilities leaders hold in mitigating sexual oppression. Leadership decisions in such contexts have enduring effects on organisational culture, student welfare, and public accountability.

Political Organisations

Political institutions provide a third domain where leadership behaviour profoundly impacts harassment dynamics. Recent movements, such as the #MeToo campaign, have exposed systemic sexual harassment within legislative and party structures, revealing patterns of tacit tolerance and complicity by senior officials (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Leadership inaction in these settings signals impunity, discouraging whistleblowing and maintaining entrenched hierarchies of power. Conversely, political leaders who enact reforms, support survivors, and enforce consequences demonstrate the potential for leadership to disrupt oppressive norms. Political contexts highlight the intersection of social power, legal frameworks, and ethical responsibility, illustrating the broader societal impact of leadership in mitigating or perpetuating harassment. The case studies collectively underscore that leadership is a critical determinant of both the prevalence and persistence of sexual harassment across diverse institutional settings.

Ethical and Normative Considerations

The ethical implications of leadership in contexts of sexual harassment and oppression are profound, as silence or inaction by leaders constitutes a form of complicity. When leaders fail to intervene or address complaints, they not only enable harm to persist but also breach moral and professional obligations to protect subordinates (Munro, 2018). This complicity extends beyond individual cases, influencing organisational culture by signalling that unethical behaviour is tolerable or inconsequential. The normative responsibilities of leaders, therefore, include ensuring that policies are enforced, victims are supported, and perpetrators are held accountable. Ethical leadership is not merely aspirational; it is a practical necessity to prevent harm and maintain institutional integrity.

Leadership inaction also raises questions about the distribution of responsibility within organisations. While perpetrators are directly accountable for harassment, leaders occupy positions of authority that amplify their influence on norms and behaviours (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). In this sense, moral responsibility is both structural and relational: it arises from leaders' capacity to shape organisational environments and the real consequences of their decisions for victims and bystanders. Ethical frameworks in organisational studies emphasise that authority entails duties to prevent harm, promote justice, and foster cultures of accountability (Brown et al., 2005). Ignoring these duties undermines both ethical standards and institutional legitimacy, illustrating the interconnectedness of morality, power, and organisational governance.

Normative considerations also extend to broader social and cultural contexts. Leaders do not operate in a vacuum; societal norms regarding gender, hierarchy, and power influence both their actions and the responses of subordinates (Acker, 1990). When oppressive norms are embedded in organisational or societal structures, leadership decisions gain amplified ethical significance. Proactive interventions, such as transparent reporting mechanisms, anti-harassment training, and

public accountability measures, not only reduce individual risk but also signal cultural change. Ethical leadership, therefore, functions as both a corrective and preventive measure, reinforcing standards of fairness and respect that transcend individual institutions.

Finally, ethical reasoning underscores the importance of moral courage and civic responsibility in leadership. Leaders must navigate complex organisational pressures while prioritising the safety and dignity of vulnerable individuals. Failing to act perpetuates cycles of harm and undermines the social contract between institutions and stakeholders (Katz & Moore, 2013). Normative analysis highlights that leadership in sexual harassment contexts is inseparable from ethical accountability: leaders are not merely managers of policies, but moral agents whose choices have wide-reaching consequences. By foregrounding ethical responsibility, organisations can cultivate cultures in which silence is replaced by proactive intervention, ensuring that leadership contributes to justice rather than oppression.

Recommendations

First, organisations should institutionalise **ethical leadership accountability mechanisms** that explicitly link leadership performance to the prevention and management of sexual harassment. Leadership evaluations should incorporate measurable indicators related to responsiveness to complaints, enforcement of policies, and promotion of psychologically safe environments. This approach moves beyond symbolic commitments by embedding responsibility within performance management systems. Independent oversight bodies or ethics committees should be empowered to review leadership decisions, particularly in cases where inaction or silence has contributed to harm. Such mechanisms reduce the likelihood that reputational concerns override ethical obligations. By structurally aligning leadership incentives with accountability, organisations can disrupt cultures of silence and complicity.

Second, **mandatory, evidence-based leadership training** should be implemented, focusing not only on legal compliance but also on power dynamics, bystander responsibility, and ethical decision-making. Training programmes should explicitly address how silence, inaction, and informal norm-setting by leaders contribute to sexual oppression. Drawing on social psychological research, these programmes should help leaders recognise mechanisms such as normative conformity, fear-induced self-censorship, and pluralistic ignorance. Importantly, training must be continuous rather than episodic, reinforcing ethical responsibility throughout leaders' tenure. Leadership development initiatives should also prioritise moral courage and proactive intervention skills. Such capacity-building is essential for transforming leadership from a passive authority role into an active protective force.

Third, organisations must strengthen **reporting and protection structures** to reduce fear-based silence among victims and witnesses. Confidential, independent reporting channels should be clearly communicated and accessible, with explicit safeguards against retaliation. Leaders must be required to publicly affirm these protections and demonstrate their enforcement through transparent processes. Evidence indicates that reporting systems are only effective when organisational trust is high and leadership commitment is visible. Additionally, organisations should ensure that investigative procedures are impartial and timely, with consequences for

leadership failures to act. Strengthening these structures addresses both the psychological and structural dimensions of silence identified in this study.

Fourth, organisational cultures should be reshaped through **normative and symbolic leadership actions** that redefine acceptable behaviour. Leaders should consistently model zero tolerance for harassment through public statements, policy enforcement, and visible disciplinary action. Symbolic actions—such as acknowledging institutional failures, supporting survivors publicly, and promoting equity in leadership representation—play a crucial role in shifting norms. These actions counteract the implicit messaging that silence or tolerance is acceptable. Cultural change initiatives should be monitored and evaluated to ensure they translate into meaningful behavioural change rather than performative compliance. Leadership visibility is central to the success of such normative transformations.

Fifth, policymakers and regulators should reinforce leadership accountability through **legal and governance reforms**. Regulatory frameworks should explicitly recognise leadership inaction or concealment as contributory factors in institutional sexual harassment. Mandatory reporting obligations, leadership liability provisions, and external audits can strengthen accountability beyond organisational boundaries. Public and private institutions alike should be required to demonstrate compliance with ethical leadership standards. Such regulatory measures signal that sexual harassment is not solely an individual misconduct issue but an institutional governance failure when leadership neglects its responsibilities. This broader approach aligns organisational practice with societal expectations of justice and human dignity.

Finally, future interventions should adopt a **multi-level strategy** that integrates leadership behaviour, organisational structure, and cultural norms. Isolated policy changes or training initiatives are unlikely to succeed without concurrent leadership commitment and structural reform. Collaborative efforts involving leaders, employees, unions, and civil society organisations can enhance legitimacy and effectiveness. Research-informed pilot programmes should be evaluated rigorously to identify best practices for reducing harassment and silence. By addressing leadership as a central mechanism, these recommendations aim to transform institutions from sites of oppression into environments of accountability, safety, and ethical governance.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that leadership plays a central role in both the perpetuation and mitigation of sexual harassment and oppression. Silence, inaction, and complicity among leaders create conditions that legitimise abusive behaviours, reinforce hierarchical power imbalances, and normalise organisational tolerance of misconduct (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Munro, 2018). Leadership behaviour is both structural and symbolic: decisions and inaction shape organisational culture, influence subordinate behaviour, and affect broader social norms. Understanding leadership as a determinant of harassment shifts focus from solely examining perpetrators or victims to recognising institutional responsibility.

The interaction between psychological, social, and structural mechanisms further elucidates leadership's impact. Fear and self-censorship among subordinates, normative conformity, and hierarchical reinforcement all function as mediating processes through which leadership

decisions influence outcomes (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Katz & Moore, 2013). Leaders' choices directly affect these dynamics, either perpetuating silence and oppression or fostering ethical awareness and accountability. Recognising these multi-level interactions is essential for developing strategies that address both individual behaviours and institutional structures. Leadership is thus not a neutral factor; it is a critical determinant of organisational ethics and the prevalence of harassment.

Ethical and normative responsibilities underscore the moral weight of leadership decisions. Leaders are accountable not only for implementing policies but also for creating environments that uphold justice, protect victims, and encourage ethical behaviour (Brown et al., 2005). Failure to act constitutes complicity and contributes to the persistence of oppression. Ethical leadership involves moral courage, proactive intervention, and a commitment to transparency and accountability. By foregrounding ethical responsibility, this study highlights leadership as both a practical and moral mechanism for reducing sexual harassment in organisations.

In sum, addressing sexual harassment and oppression requires an integrated understanding of leadership across psychological, structural, and ethical dimensions. Leaders' behaviour shapes the organisational culture, establishes norms, and influences subordinates' willingness to challenge or tolerate harassment. The findings emphasise that leadership is not only a managerial function but also a societal and ethical obligation. Promoting proactive, ethical, and accountable leadership is therefore essential to mitigating sexual oppression and fostering environments that prioritise safety, dignity, and justice.

Implications and Future Research

The findings of this study have important implications for organisational policy, leadership development, and institutional accountability. Organisations should prioritise leadership training that emphasises ethical responsibility, transparency, and the creation of psychologically safe environments for reporting harassment (Brown et al., 2005; Munro, 2018). Policies must ensure that complaints are addressed promptly and that leaders are held accountable for both action and inaction. Structural interventions, including clear reporting channels, whistleblower protections, and independent oversight, are necessary to reduce fear-based silence and empower victims.

Future research should empirically investigate the effectiveness of different leadership approaches in mitigating harassment across diverse institutional contexts. Comparative studies could examine corporate, educational, and political settings to identify universal and context-specific mechanisms of leadership influence (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Longitudinal research could explore how leadership behaviour interacts with organisational culture over time to produce systemic change. Additionally, research integrating psychological, structural, and ethical perspectives will provide a more holistic understanding of how leadership shapes harassment outcomes and organisational resilience.

Digital technologies and social media also present new avenues for research. Leadership responses in online and remote organisational environments influence the visibility of harassment, reporting mechanisms, and public accountability. Studies could examine how leaders' communication strategies, online policies, and digital monitoring practices affect the prevalence of harassment and the perception of organisational ethics (Katz & Moore, 2013).

Understanding these contemporary dynamics is critical in an increasingly connected and virtual organisational landscape.

Finally, research should explore normative interventions aimed at reshaping organisational culture. Bystander training, ethical leadership development, and institutional campaigns that promote accountability can mitigate silence and encourage proactive behaviour. Evaluating these interventions empirically will allow organisations to implement evidence-based strategies that reduce harassment and foster ethical leadership. By addressing leadership, structural, and cultural factors simultaneously, future studies can provide actionable insights for preventing sexual oppression and promoting organisational justice.

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