# Journalists' gender and influence: effects on the perceived severity of sexual harassment

## Género de periodistas e influencia: efectos sobre la gravedad percibida del acoso sexual

## Gênero de jornalistas e influência: efeitos sobre a gravidade percebida do assedio sexual

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**ABSTRACT**

Can journalistic coverage of gender issues affect the opinions of its readers and thus promote social change? In this process, are male and female journalists equally influential? To answer this, an experiment was conducted in which the perceived gender of a journalist who talks about sexual harassment was manipulated to measure its effect on the readers' opinions about the severity of this social problem. The results indicate that men are more influential, a result that remains statistically significant among female participants, who also feel more compassion for victims of sexual harassment.

**RESUMEN**

*¿Puede la cobertura periodística de temas de género afectar las opiniones de sus lectores y promover así cambio social? En este proceso, ¿son los periodistas hombres y mujeres igual de influyentes? Para responder a esto, se condujo un experimento en el que se manipuló el género percibido de un/a periodista que habla sobre acoso sexual, para medir su efecto en las opiniones de los lectores sobre la gravedad de este problema social. Los resultados indican que los hombres son más influyentes, resultado que se mantiene significativo entre las participantes mujeres, quienes también sienten más compasión por las víctimas de acoso sexual.*

**RESUMO**

Pode a cobertura jornalística das questões de gênero afetar as opiniões de seus leitores e, assim, promover mudanças sociais? Nesse processo, são jornalistas homens e mulheres igualmente influentes? Para responder a isso, foi conduzido um experimento no qual o gênero percebido de um jornalista que fala sobre assédio sexual foi manipulado para medir seu efeito nas opiniões dos leitores sobre a gravidade desse problema social. Os resultados indicam que os homens são mais influentes, um resultado que permanece significativo entre as mulheres participantes, que também sentem mais compaixão pelas vítimas de assédio sexual.

## INTRODUCTION

On October 15 of 2017, after the renowned American producer Harvey Weinstein was accused of abuse and sexual harassment, the actress Alyssa Milano (2017) tweeted: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or abused wrote 'me too' as their status, we could give people an idea of the magnitude of this problem". While the expression *Me too* was coined a decade earlier by the civil rights activist Tarana Burke, Milano's tweet made the hashtag #MeToo go viral, which encouraged women from all over the world to share their stories as victims[1] of abuse and harassment (Khomami, 2017). The use of the hashtag #YoTambién in the Hispanic world (Respers France, 2017), as well as the #MosqueMeToo amid Muslim women (Sykes, 2018), among others, demonstrated the ubiquity of a problem that affects women around the world in their jobs, on the street, and in educational settings (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018; Leach & Sitaram, 2007; Navarro-Guzmán, Ferrer-Pérez, & Bosch-Fiol, 2016; Oliver, 2011; Peoples, 2008). In Latin America specifically, different studies have demonstrated the prevalence of sexual harassment at work, on the street, and in educational settings, as well as other forms of gender based violence (Contreras, Bott, Guedes, & Dartnall, 2010; Gherardi, 2016), that have been widely denounced in the last years by feminist activism and social movements such as Ni Una Menos[2].

Feminist academics have argued that gender-based violence responds to problems of power and inequality and that it is rooted in institutional and cultural networks (Morrison, 1992; Segato, 2016). As part of this, the survivors of sexual violence have to live with the constant questioning of their testimonies (Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013), which can be exacerbated by the media construction of narratives around gender-based violence (Andelsman & Mitchelstein, 2018; Roberts, 1999). In that sense, it is important to study the possibilities that journalism presents, as social discourse, to lessen some of these problems. In that light, this study asks: Can the journalistic coverage of sexual harassment impact the gravity with which the problem is socially perceived? More precisely, when reading journalistic articles that advocate to perceive gender-based sexual harassment as a serious issue, does the gender of the journalist matter in the formation of opinions regarding the severity of sexual harassment? In other words, given that sexual harassment is a gender-based problem that affects women more, do women achieve more influence than men when discussing the severity of the problem?

With the objective of answering these questions, and with a focus on the role of sources within the theoretical framework of social psychology of communication, an online experiment was designed in the American platform MTurk. The objective was to study the impact of the perceived journalist's gender, who argues in favor of perceiving sexual harassment as a serious issue, on the severity that readers grant to sexual harassment after reading the article. For that, we utilized a complete factorial design among subjects of 3 (journalist's gender: male/female/control) x 2 (participant's gender: female/male). In the treatment groups, the participants read an opinion column in favor of considering sexual harassment as a serious issue. The participants were randomly assigned to reading this editorial as written by either a male journalist or a female journalist. Afterwards, they answered a survey about the perceived severity of sexual harassment.

The results showed that, in comparison with a control group that read an article not related to gender topics and which author was not identified, reading a female journalist condemning sexual harassment did not affect the opinions regarding the perceived severity of sexual harassment. On the contrary, the results suggested that reading articles from male journalists was more influential. When analyzing this relationship according to the gender of the participants, it was observed that it was statistically significant only among female participants, who also indicated that they felt more compassion for the victims of sexual harassment.

This research recognizes that the focus on the identification of gender is binary. This is not because it denies that transgender and non-binary people suffer from different forms of sexual violence (Gamboa, García, & Winton, 2018; Wirtz, Poteat, Malik, & Glass, 2018), but because this study wanted to evaluate the dynamics of social influence of journalists whose gender is perceived in binary terms. Due to the limitations of the MTurk platform, this online experiment was conducted with a sample of participants from the United States. Because of the scale and relevance of the problem, the literature focuses on sexual harassment and violence on a global context, but with a focus on the Americas and, especially, the United States, given the study sample. This work constitutes a preliminary stage of experimental analysis of hypotheses and forms part of a broader research agenda. Future research will focus on the comparative analysis with other regions, as well as the evaluation of possible causal mechanisms that explain the results.

## PROBLEM AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to the World Health Organization, one in three women in the world suffers from some type of physical violence or abuse during her life (World Health Organization, 2013). In Latin America and the Caribbean, official data from 2017 indicated that femicide rates are alarming: in countries like Brazil or Mexico, 760 and 1133 femicides for every 100 thousand women were reported, respectively (CEPAL, n.d.). At the same time, studies of the region about forms of gender-based violence less reported or visible, such as obstetric, political, media, or sexual harassment (Gherardi, 2016), point out that, even though they profoundly undermine the autonomy of individuals, less legislation exists to address them (Gherardi, 2016; Organización Internacional del Trabajo, 2013). Studies in the Hispanic world about sexual harassment in educational settings indicate that this form of violence is mainly psychological, although sometimes it can become physical (Navarro-Guzmán et al., 2016) and that even though the victims are mainly women, the violence also increases when the individuals are members of sexual, religious, or ethnic minorities (Realphe, Ferrand, González, & Cedeño, 2015). The diverse forms of misogyny, discrimination, and harassment in higher education environments impact the learning experiences and create barriers in the pursuit of future professional plans (Oliver, 2011). When the harassment occurs at work, there is direct damage to the economic autonomy of women and other minorities, given that it produces, among other things, health problems, stress, psychological discomfort, higher absenteeism, abandonment intentions, and worse performance (Acevedo, Biaggii, & Borges, 2009; Topa Cantisano, Depolo, & Morales Domínguez, 2007).

In other regions of America, such as the United States, there is also alarming data about gender-based violence. Throughout their lives, almost 44% of all women in the country are victims of some type of sexual violence, one in every five is victim of rape or a rape attempt (Smith et al., 2018) and more than 80% of women experience sexual harassment (Raj, Johns, & Jose, 2019). Public opinion studies in that country indicate that, when it comes to supporting public policies or government actions related to women, there are no substantive differences among genders (Huddy & Cassese, 2013). Nevertheless, sexual harassment is one of the few topics in which a consistent gender gap exists in opinion (Biber, Doverspike, Baznik, Cober, & Ritter, 2002; Huddy & Cassese, 2013). Usually, those

are conceptualized as differences in the *tolerance* that men and women have with respect to sexual harassment (Kenig & Ryan, 1986; LeMaire, Oswald, & Russell, 2016; Russell & Trigg, 2004). Regardless, this study, like others (Galesic & Tourangeau, 2007), will maintain that the gap is due mainly to *what* is understood as sexual harassment. Diverse studies demonstrate that women tend to define sexual harassment as a set of broader behaviors and less often attribute the blame of the harassment to the victims (Baird, Bensko, Bell, Viney, & Woody, 1995; De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Herrera, Herrera, & Expósito, 2014; Kenig & Ryan, 1986). Therefore, this study coins the term *perceived severity of sexual harassment*, which defines this social problem with higher precision.

The public interest for topics of sexual harassment has grown in the last years. From 2004 until now, the interest in news about sexual harassment reached a peak in April of 2017, followed by another one in December of the same year, according to world data from Google[3]. Journalists such as Carol Costello, from CNN, have expressed fear to observe a negative effect: "I am afraid that there is a rebound effect, that people will say that the accusations have gone out of line or that they are all lies" (Costello, 2017). Different academic and feminist reflections have referred to how some advances of the feminist agenda can provoke a *boomerang* effect of misogyny and resistance (Herrera et al., 2014; Oakley & Mitchell, 1997). For example, regarding the advancement of feminism in Sweden, Stark (1998) highlighted the importance of the role of the media, which in many cases "blames the women, creates divisions among women and presents the men as victims of women" although sometimes they also "perform an important and good quality job clarifying issues" (p. 234). With the purpose of understanding what is the potential of journalism to promote an agenda of social justice for the victims of harassment, this study will attempt to answer the following question: (1) Can the journalistic coverage of sexual harassment (SH from now on) as a serious issue modify the severity with which readers perceive the problem?

According to persuasion models in social psychology of communication, if a message contains information that is personally relevant to an individual, in the sense that the matter is considered to have real life consequences for the person, there is a higher likelihood that the message will produce a change of opinion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that the

different forms of sexual violence tend to affect women more than men (Gherardi, 2016; Pereyra, Gutiérrez, & Mitsuko-Nerome, 2018), for which it could be argued that the issue is more relevant to women and that, therefore, their opinion would be more affected. In that sense, this study will ask: (2) Does reading an anti-SH editorial have a similar effect on the opinions of male and female readers regarding the severity of SH?

According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), the perceptions regarding who the sources of information are affect the processing of such information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The credibility of sources, either from considering them trustworthy or expert, is one of the variables traditionally associated with a stronger processing of information, which leads to a higher degree of persuasion (Benoit & Strathman, 2004; Chaiken, 1987; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Given that SH is a problem that affects women more than men, the former could be considered more expert and trustworthy on the topic and be more persuasive than their male peers when discussing SH.

In addition to the credibility of the sources, the identification with a source can be another variable that increases the likelihood of accepting or internalizing the ideas presented in a communication (Wang & Arpan, 2008), or the positive emotional responses, and hence facilitates a change in opinion (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). If the similarity between a source and a recipient can lead to a higher degree of persuasion in the direction of the message, it could be argued that when women read opinion pieces written by other women, and when men read opinion pieces written by other men, more instances of influence will occur.

Despite the role of identification between narrators and audiences, studies that focus on the intersection between gender and social influence argue that, in general, men are considered conversation participants with higher social status, their performance is evaluated more favorably, they receive more support for their contributions, are influential regardless of their communication style, and are considered more credible sources, which positions women at a clear disadvantage when it comes to influencing listeners, especially men (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch Jr., 1980; Carli, 1990, 2001; Lakoff, 2004; Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979). Despite this, previous studies have indicated that women are more influential when it comes to gender-based topics, such as childcare or fear of crime (Falbo, Hazen, &

Linimon, 1982; Gerrard, Breda, & Gibbons, 1990). Nevertheless, when women are victims of gender-based violence they often suffer from credibility problems or are accused of exaggeration (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001). Given what was mentioned regarding the credibility of sources, the identification processes between narrators and audiences, as well as the power differentials among communicators, this study asks: (3) Are readers equally persuaded by male journalists and female journalists who advocate for perceiving SH as a serious issue?

One of the possible explanations of the existence of a gender-based gap in the severity with which the issue of SH is perceived is that, despite the fact that male victims exist, men generally suffer from significantly less harassment and sexual violence than women[4]. Additionally, previous studies have indicated that men show, in general, less emotional empathy than women (Emmers-Sommer, Triplett, Pauley, Hanzal, & Rhea, 2005). This is consistent with feminist theories that indicate that because of how gender roles are traditionally socialized, women tend to develop more relational personalities than men (Chodorow, 1989), as well as a deeper understanding of the oppressive structures of society (Hartsock, 1983). Feeling empathy or compassion for the suffering of members of other groups is important because it leads to better attitudes towards them (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002)"container-title":"Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin","page":"1656–1666","volume":"28","issue":"12","source":"Google Scholar","shortTitle":"Empathy, attitudes, and action","author":[{"family":"Batson","given":"C. Daniel"},{"family":"Chang","given":"Johee"},{"family":"Orr","given":"Ryan"},{"family":"Rowland","given":"Jennifer"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2002"]]}}]],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} and a higher degree of support of public policies aimed at benefiting them (Mutz & Nir, 2010). Alternatively, the use of examples in narratives about victimization indicates a lower likelihood of blaming the victim for the problem when an identification between the reader and the subject (victim) occurs (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). Given this, (4) will men and women feel similar levels of compassion for the SH victims mentioned in the articles?

This study presents the following hypotheses:

- H1: Individuals who read an anti-SH article will report a perception of SH as a serious issue more

than those who read a control article (not related to a gender topic).

- H2: As a consequence of reading an anti-SH article, women will report perceiving SH as a more serious issue than men.

- H3: Men who read articles from male journalists speaking against SH will perceive SH as a more serious issue than those who read articles from female journalists.

- H4: Women will report higher levels of compassion for the victims of SH than men, as a consequence of reading the anti-SH article.

## METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH DESIGN

To test these hypotheses, we performed an experiment with a complete factorial design of 3 (journalist's gender: male, female, control) x 2 (participant's gender: male or female). Only one factor was experimentally manipulated in this study: the gender of the journalist who wrote de article advocating for preceiving SH as a serious issue. The study was conducted in the online platform MTurk, in which participants create usernames and participate voluntarily in online tasks for which they receive an economic reward[5]. The study was conducted in English, in December of 2017, and had only adult participants from the United States due to a limitation of the platform.

### PROCEDURE

The participants were invited to participate in a brief study about public opinion. At the beginning, they had to answer basic demographic questions, their gender identification among them. Afterwards, they were presented with a presumed "general information", prior to the survey, which was the experimental manipulation. That is, the participants in the treatment groups read either (1) an anti-SH article written in first person by a male journalist, or (2) the same article written in first person by a female journalist. The control group read (3) an article not related to gender, but that shared the length, format, and style of the treatment article, and whose author was never identified. After reading the article, the participants had to complete an attention check, to prove that they had paid attention to the article. Afterwards, we measured the dependent variables (compassion toward

the victims whose testimonies had been mentioned and perceived severity of SH, respectively). Finally, a manipulation check was included to confirm that the experimental manipulation of the journalist's gender had been successful.

The articles were designed to be persuasive, in the sense of increasing the perceived severity of SH. To design good arguments, the articles included counterarguments that addressed the prejudices about victims of SH (Sexual Harassment Policy Office, n.d.) and quotes of victims' testimonies.

### MANIPULATIONS AND MEASUREMENTS
#### Manipulation: journalist's gender:

The journalist's gender was the only manipulated component of the experiment. The name of the journalists was mentioned in the following ways: (1) before reading the article ("Please, read the following article written by (Robert Jones/Patricia Jones).", "(Robert Jones/Patricia Jones) is a psychologist and journalist from a prestigious newspaper in the United States"); (2) in the article itself, given that it was written in first person (example: "As a (man/woman)"), in addition to the final signature at the end of the article and, lastly, (3) after the treatment ("Thank you for reading the article by (Robert Jones/Patricia Jones)")[6]. The decision to present them as psychologists and journalists from a prestigious newspaper aimed at strengthening their credibility as sources. To increase the probability of exposure to the entire message, participants had to stay for at least 45 seconds on the screen where the article was presented.

#### Attention check:

After reading the article, participants in all groups were asked to answer an attention check, to confirm that they had read the article[7]. To decrease the likelihood of random success, the attention checks included four options. Both in the treatment groups and in the control groups, 98% of the participants chose the correct answer, showing that they effectively paid attention to the article.

#### Dependent variables:

**Compassion.** In the treatment groups, after answering the attention check, the level of compassion toward the victims of SH whose testimonies had been mentioned in the article was measured using two items. The participants had to answer two questions: "Please, tell us if you experimented the following emotions

7.

toward the victims of SH mentioned in the article". Based on Goldman (2014), two emotions were used: compassion and sympathy. We used a Likert scale of five items (1 = extremely, 2 = a lot, 3 = moderately, 4 = a bit, 5 = none). Both items were combined in an index of compassion toward the victims of SH, with a Cronbach coefficient of 0.99, which indicates that it is a highly reliable measure.

**Perceived severity of SH.** Then, the perceived severity of SH was evaluated using four different types of measurements. Based on Russell and Oswald's (LeMaire, Oswald, & Russell, 2016) Tolerance of Sexual Harassment of Men Scale (TSHM) and the Sexual Harassment Attitude Scale (SHAS), we built a new index of perceived severity of SH. We eliminated the items associated with the specific harassment of men and we adapted the other ones so that: (1) they gained subtlety and (2) it was made clear that they referred to SH of women and not to harassment in general. We used a Likert scale with five items (1 = disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree). Five of the eight items present in the constructed scale of perceived severity of SH were inversely coded for the analysis.

To diversify the type of measures used to evaluate the main dependent variable, we used two vignette measures, adapted from the Vignette Measures of SH (Dillon, Adair & Brase, 2015)[8]. The use of vignettes consists of reading scenarios, which in this case were presented as situations that more or less clearly represented instances of SH. Afterwards, participants had to indicate how comfortable or uncomfortable they would feel if they were a woman in that situation. We used a Likert scale with five items (1 = comfortable, 2 = somewhat comfortable, 3 = neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, 4 = somewhat uncomfortable, 5 = uncomfortable).

Finally, to increase the validity of the measurement of perceived severity of SH, we included a behavioral measure. At the end of the study we invited participants to click on a link of a foundation that offered information about how to combat sexual harassment. The clicks were registered and coded as a binary variable with values 1 (if clicked) or 0 (if not).

The first two measures, that in total computed 10 items, were standardized and combined in an index of *perceived severity of SH*, with a Cronbach coefficient of 0.88, which indicates that the index is a reliable measure. Lower values on the scale represent a low perceived severity of SH and vice versa.

A manipulation check was included at the end of the study, to verify that participants in the treatment group had paid attention to the experimental manipulation (the journalist's gender). Participants in the treatment groups had to answer if they remembered the gender of the journalist from the article they had read. To decrease the likelihood of random success, we included four response options instead of only two. The analysis indicated that 94% of the participants exposed to reading an article from a female journalist correctly indicated her gender, which is statistically significant ($F(1,123) = 832$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, 91% of the participants exposed to reading the article from a male journalist were able to correctly recall his gender, which is also statistically significant ($F(1, 123) = 478$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that the manipulation was successful.

## FINDINGS

The sample had 211 participants, 51% of which were women. Consistent with the previous literature on the subject, women and men differed in their perceived severity of SH, regardless of the experimental conditions. Women (M = 4.14, SD = 0.47) perceived SH as a more serious issue than men (M = 3.98, SD = 0.55), distinction which is statistically significant ($F(1, 209) = 5.106$, $p = .02$). Despite this gender difference, on average harassment was perceived as a serious issue, given that the overall measure was 4.06 (SD = 0.51), on a scale from 1 to 5.

To evaluate *H1* (that reading an anti-SH article leads to perceiving SH as a more serious issue than those who do not read the article), we performed an analysis of variance using the index of perceived severity of SH as the dependent variable and the treatment (1 if treatment, 0 if control) as the factor. The analysis indicated that there is no significant difference in the perceived severity of SH as a result of receiving the treatment (reading an anti-SH article) or reading a control article ($F(1, 209) = 2.05$), $p = 0.15$). Even though the tendency is the expected one, as it can be seen in Figure 1, there is no evidence to support *H1*.

The second hypothesis (*H2*) predicted that, after reading an anti-SH article, women would perceive SH as a more serious issue than men. Given than women, in general, already perceive harassment as a more serious issue it was expected that it would be more difficult to change their attitudes, since they are already fairly extreme. However, *H2* was presented as an argument
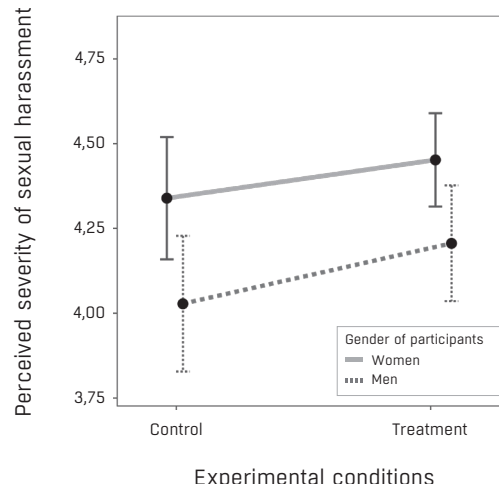
Figure 1. Perceived severity of sexual harassment in treatment and control groups, per participant's gender.

*Source: Own elaboration with N=211. The perceived severity of SH scale has a range from 1 to 5. Lower values on the scale represent a low perceived severity of SH and higher values represent a high perceived severity of SH. Confidence level of 95%.*

due to the personal relevance that harassment has in the lives of women, which has been associated with more persuasion (Petty et al., 1981). Nevertheless, an analysis of variance comparing women in treatment groups with women in the control group showed that the difference in the perceived severity of SH was not significant ($F(1,106) = 0.318$, p = 0.57). Among men, the difference between those who received the treatment article and those who read the control article was not significant either ($F(1,101) = 2.23$, p = .14). In sum, the interaction between reading an anti-SH article or not and the gender of the participants is not significant ($F(1, 207) = 0.607$), p = 0.44). Therefore, there is not enough evidence to support *H2*, that women are more persuaded by the treatment than men. In fact, even though the results are not significant, the evidence suggests that men are more persuaded against sexual harassment after reading an anti-SH article and not the other way around. This can be observed in Figure 1, where the slope for men is steeper.

Between those who read the anti-SH article, was there any difference in the perceived severity of SH between reading from a female journalist or a male journalist? Those who read the article by a male journalist (M = 4.21, SD = 0.45) perceived SH as a more serious issue than those who read the article by a female journalist (M = 3.93, SD = 0.55). In fact, those who read a control article (M = 4.00, SD = 0.52) not related to gender topics

perceived SH as a more serious issue than those who read the article by a female journalist. To evaluate if these differences are statistically significant, we performed an analysis of variance with perceived severity of SH as the dependent variable and the three experimental conditions as factors, which indicated that there is at least a significant difference among the groups ($F(2, 208) = 5.81$, p = 0.004). A post-hoc Tukey test indicated that the difference between reading the article by the male journalist and the control article is significant (p = .01) and that the difference between reading the article by the male journalist and the article by the female journalist is significant at an even higher level (p = .005). However, the comparison between reading the article by the female journalist and the article not related to sexual harassment was not statistically significant (p = .8). Therefore, reading an article by a male journalist advocating to perceive SH towards women as a serious issue leads the participants, regardless of their gender, to perceive SH as a more serious issue than when they read the same article written by a female journalist. Moreover, reading an article against sexual harassment towards women from a female journalist does not produce significant differences (neither in magnitude nor statistically) compared to reading a control article about a topic not related to sexual harassment.

To evaluate *H3* (that men exposed to reading the article by a male journalist would perceive SH as a more
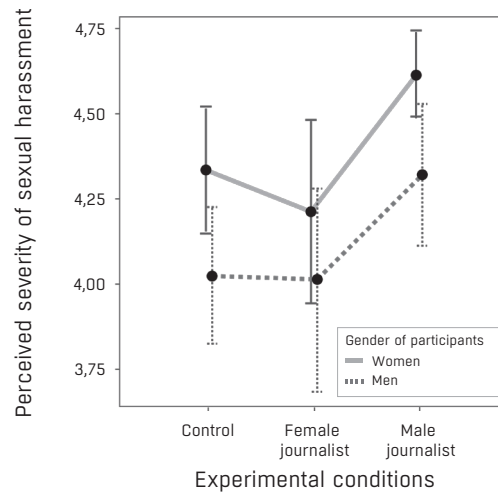
Figure 2. Interaction between experimental conditions and participants' gender in the perceived severity of sexual harassment

*Source: Own elaboration with N=211. The perceived severity of SH scale has a range from 1 to 5. Lower values on the scale represent a low perceived severity of SH and higher values represent a high perceived severity of SH. Confidence level of 95%.*

serious issue after reading the anti-SH article than those exposed to reading the article by a female journalist), we conducted an analysis of variance of 2 (participant's gender) x 2 (journalist's gender). The interaction term between those two factors was not significant ($F$(2, 205) = 0.52), p = 0.59), but this could be due to the fact that both men and women perceive SH as a more serious issue after reading the article by the male journalist. As the slopes in Figure 2 suggest, men who read the article by the male journalist reported higher levels of perceived severity of SH than those who read the article by the female journalist, but this difference is not significant at a confidence level of .05 (F (2, 100) = 2.56, p = 0.082). Thus, there is not sufficient evidence to support *H3*, that men are more persuaded against SH after reading arguments written by men.

Due to the lack of clear directionality, if women were going to be more influenced by male journalists or female journalists remains a research question. The results show that female participants perceived SH as a more serious issue after reading from the male journalist than from the female journalist (F(2, 105) = 4.71, p = .01). This can be observed in Figure 2.

The fourth hypothesis (*H4*) predicted that reading an article against SH was going to incite a higher degree of compassion among women than among men, due to women's higher involvement with and personal connection to the topic. The results indicate that women

(M = 4.46, SD = 0.9) feel more compassion for the victims of sexual harassment presented in the articles than men (M = 4.04, SD = 1.13). The difference is significant (*F*(1, 123)=, p = 0.02). Therefore, the evidence supports *H4*, that women feel more compassion for the victims of sexual harassment than men.

The study also included a behavioral dependent variable. After receiving the treatment, all participants were invited to click on a link that offered information about how to combat SH in work and educational settings. While 9% of women clicked on the link, only 2% of men did, which is a statistically significant difference (*t*(154.75) = 2.35, p = 0.02). Anyway, the treatment did not have an effect in increasing the likelihood of wanting to learn how to combat SH (*F*(2, 208) = 0.808, p = .45), but identifying as female is associated with the desire to learn.

## CONCLUSIONS

This experiment uses the case of SH to offer evidence about the potential causal effects of reading journalists who promote social change in gender-based topics on the opinions of readers regarding those topics. In line with previous studies, we found that women perceive SH as a more serious issue than men. Even though there is not enough evidence to support *H1*, the evidence suggests that reading anti-SH articles could possibly

promote the perception that SH is a serious issue.

This study also suggested that, after reading an article against SH, women perceived the issue as more severe, due to a strong personal connection to the topic (*H2*). This prediction was mainly based on theoretical models of persuasion from social psychology of communication, which indicate that individuals pay more attention to messages that are personally relevant to them and that this may lead to a higher degree of persuasion in the direction suggested by the message. The findings indicate not only that the pattern of the results is the opposite –the magnitude change from control to treatment is higher in men–, but that the difference between the means is not significant. As mentioned, a ceiling effect could occur among female participants. Given that women already perceive SH as a very serious issue and it is for them a topic with strong personal connections, it is possible that they already had thought and talked more about the issue, read more articles about it, and developed a more complex and informed thought structure about the topic, as it usually occurs with people who have a high degree of involvement or identification with a subject (Petty et al., 1981). This could explain the results, but this study does not allow for the testing of these causal hypotheses.

The main hypothesis (*H3*) predicted that male participants would be more persuaded after reading from male journalists talking against sexual harassment than after reading from female journalists. This hypothesis was based on the idea that what was going to influence men was not the effect of the perception of an expert source (the idea that women should know more about a topic that overwhelmingly affects more women than men). On the contrary, it was predicted that, due to theories of gender, social status, and power, and for sharing the same gender with the male journalist, another mechanism would occur: men would feel more influenced by what another man said. The difference in the perceived severity of sexual harassment among men who read from a male journalist and those who read from a female journalist was not significant, so there is no evidence to support *H3*. Nonetheless, the pattern suggests the expected direction. Future studies should evaluate this relationship again to observe if with a higher number of participants this turns to be a significant relationship.

Without taking into account the participants' gender, the results indicate that reading from a male journalist speaking against SH leads to perceiving SH as a more serious issue than when reading the same

arguments coming from a female journalist. While this relationship is statistically significant only among female participants, the same tendency can be observed among male participants. How can it be explained that male journalists are more persuasive than female journalists when advocating to perceive the severity of gender-based forms of violence that affect women overwhelmingly more? From the perspective of this study's theoretical framework, this could be due to two different reasons. The literature on persuasion and social influence argues that having a high level of personal involvement with a topic could generate a rebound effect if the source that emits the persuasive message (in this case, the article) is perceived as expert or if the arguments offered are considered not very good (Bohner, Ruder, & Erb, 2002). In other words, previous theory and evidence suggest that when a receiver has a high degree of personal involvement with a topic, such as that of women with cases of sexual violence, the likelihood of them performing inattentive reading of the message by taking mental shortages to make a decision is lower (Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1983; Petty et al., 1981). That is to say, when a person has a personal interest in a topic, he/she usually incurs in a more central rather than peripheric processing of the information, which implies that the person pays more attention to the arguments of the persuasive message. Moreover, previous evidence suggests that when the source is presumed to be an expert in the topic being discussed, but the arguments being presented are not considered very good, less persuasion is achieved than if the source was considered less of an expert on the subject (Bohner et al., 2002). The explanation behind this would be that an expert is perceived as someone with a high degree of knowledge about a topic and that if his/her best arguments are perceived as weak, then maybe there is not a good foundation behind them.

In this sense, how can we explain that women were not influenced by reading from a female journalist? The results could be due to the own characteristics of the article designed for the study: perhaps the arguments presented were not sufficiently novel or good to match the expectations of a source that could likely have considered herself an expert on the subject. It could also be due to the fact that women are more used to reading anti-SH arguments from other women, and that reading those arguments from a man presented a factor of novelty, which is also considered an element that can influence attitudes in the direction of the message (Morley & Walker, 1987).

Another possibility, as previously explained, is that women are perceived as communicators with less influence and social status, whose persuasion attempts tend to be more resisted by men specifically, but not by women (Carli, 1990, 2001; Rhoades, 1979). Additionally, previous studies have shown that women tend to be more influential on topics that are presumed to be more related to women's issues, such as childcare or fear of crime (Carli, 1999; Falbo et al., 1982; Swim, Borgida, Maruyama, & Myers, 1989). Nonetheless, that pattern is not observed in this study: women perceive SH as a more serious issue after reading arguments from men and the fact that the article was about a gender-based topic did not seem to have an effect in the direction suggested by the literature. A more concerning interpretation would be that this is due to the vulnerability of the women who denounce instances of abuse and, therefore, to an internalization of the sexism around the problem of SH. Unfortunately, as feminist movements around the world claim[9], when it comes to fighting for gender equality women continue to face a questioning of their credibility and having less spaces where they can express themselves (Beard, 2014; LeMaire et al., 2016). In that type of situation, unfortunately, perhaps the validation from the masculine other produces an effect of internal legitimation about the problem.

With respect to *H4* (that after reading an anti-SH article, women would show more compassion for the victims), we observed that women do feel more compassion for the victims of SH. Furthermore, to a lesser extent, men also showed that they felt that emotion. Observing how men respond after reading the harassment victim's story is important. Despite the existing gender gap in feeling the emotions of empathy and compassion, the experimental results have demonstrated that witnessing the anguish of people from another group can produce feelings of compassion (Batson et al., 1997), which can improve the attitudes held about that group (Batson et al., 2002), as well as increase the willingness to help their members (Batson et al., 1997; Goldman, 2014). This could suggest that the coverage of so many testimonies of sexual harassment survivors who came out to tell their stories within the framework of #MeToo or #NiUnaMenos could potentially help reduce the gender gap of the perceived severity of SH. Future studies should manipulate the victims' gender to observe what the men's response is to victims of their same gender. Anyway, it should be expected that similar mechanisms would be replicated

even if the victims are men, given the sexist and male chauvinist structures regarding the understanding of harassment and sexual abuse of men (McLean, 2013).

This study, for being the first of a more extensive research agenda, has several limitations. First, the credibility of the sources or the perception of the journalists as experts were not measured, and neither was the direct experience of participants with instances of harassment. Additionally, to evaluate if the lack of compassion can effectively explain the gap among attitudes regarding SH, future studies should perform a mediation analysis. In theoretical terms, this study leans on the intersection between theories of social psychology and the role of sources, but which findings, especially those related to the intersection of gender and influence, given the dates in which they were published, might not be replicable in current times or other contexts.

The social relevance of SH, like all gender-based violence, is unquestionable and concerning, as it has been demonstrated by innumerable protests on the street and on digital spaces guided under the slogans of #MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, #HermanaYoSíTeCreo or the #NãoÉNã. Feminist academics have widely explored the advancement of the feminist fight for gender equality (Barrancos, 2014) and have also discussed the resistance that feminism receives when it attempts to produce these advances (Oakley & Mitchell, 1997; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). This study helps illuminate some of the possible forms of that resistance and the importance of listening to and believing women. It is pressing that future research addresses the different aspects of the gender gap in the ability of social communicators to exert social influence, especially when it comes to gendered topics that predominantly affect women. This study offers causal evidence about this dynamic in the context of the United States, but future studies should evaluate how this dynamic operates in other contexts. Even though feminist movements around the world, which fight against different forms of gender-based violence, have challenged the impunity, achieving important changes (Minué, 2019), there is still a lot to be done. This study presents new questions about possible forms of resistance to the advancement of feminist agendas. To promote the feminist agenda and thus resolve some of the social debts to the fight for gender equality, the findings suggest that, even though it remains a collective task of all citizens, men should listen to women more, as their participation as allies, as an example of that social debt, becomes necessary and urgent.

## NOTES

**1.** Diverse feminist studies have argued that it can be problematic to define the survivors of structures of oppression as victims. While this study uses the term, it recognizes that it does not deny the individual's agency and that it is not the defining characteristic of the people who suffered instances of abuse or harassment. For a discussion on the topic, see Mahoney (1994).

**2.** See  calleentean sido denunciadas porsada en ga del acoso laboral, callejero, feminista contempor feminismo, por ser percibido comohttp://niunamenos.org.ar/

**3.** Measurement based on interest in the search for news about sexual harassment with data from all over the world. See https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?cat=16&date=all&q=sexual%20harassment.

**4.** For recent U.S. data, see, for example, Smith et al. (2018). For Latin American data, see, for example, Contreras et al. (2010).

**5.** Diverse studies show the validity of the MTurk samples with participants from the United States (Clifford, Jewell, & Waggoner, 2015; Huff & Tingley, 2015).

**6.** In total, the journalist's gender was manipulated eight times to increase the exposure to the treatment. Additionally, to avoid a lack of exposure to the treatment due to inattentive reading, the indicators of the journalist's gender in the article were located at the beginning of each paragraph. The selection of names was pre-tested with a small number of participants, given that they had to avoid having geographic, generational, and ethnic associations, among others.

**7.** The treatment groups were asked about the type of relationship between the victim of the first story and her stalker (information located in the middle of the second paragraph). In the control group, participants had to recall the name of a company that had been mentioned in the article, in a similar text location that that of the treatment articles.

**8.** While the original measurement included five vignettes that were neutral in terms of the genders of the perpetrator and the victim, only two were selected and adapted to specify that the perpetrators were men and the victims were women.

**9.** Examples of feminist campaigns that promote believing women and victims of violence are #YoTeCreo, originated in Guatemala (http://mujeresdeguatemala.org/yotecreo/) or the campaign Hermana, yo sí te creo, in Spain (Reguero, 2019).

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