Contexts of Silence and Disclosure in Women's Experiences of Workplace Harassment

Yaliu Yang[1] , Valentina Rojas[2*]

[1] Marriage and Family Therapy Department, Iona College, New Rochelle, NY, United States
[2] Department of Civil Engineering, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

* Corresponding author email address: valentina.rojas@ing.puc.cl

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to explore how women in Chile experience, interpret, and navigate silence and disclosure in the context of workplace harassment.

Methods and Materials: Using a qualitative, interpretive design, the study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 women from diverse professional sectors in Chile, including education, healthcare, public administration, and corporate organizations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo 14 software following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis identified recurrent patterns and contextual dynamics shaping participants' decisions to remain silent or disclose their experiences. Ethical approval was secured to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation.

Findings: The analysis generated four major themes: (1) Culture of Silence and Fear, reflecting institutional tolerance, power asymmetry, and fear of retaliation; (2) Psychological and Social Consequences, encompassing emotional exhaustion, identity disruption, and withdrawal; (3) Pathways to Disclosure, illustrating incremental, strategic, and collective disclosure processes; and (4) Healing and Resistance, describing women's efforts to reclaim agency through storytelling, solidarity, and advocacy. Findings revealed that silence was a learned survival strategy shaped by structural inequities, while disclosure emerged as a negotiated act dependent on social support, trust, and contextual safety.

Conclusion: The study highlights that workplace harassment is sustained by systemic silence rooted in fear, gender hierarchy, and institutional neglect. However, women's acts of disclosure and resistance signify transformative pathways toward empowerment and organizational change.

Keywords: *Workplace harassment; silence; disclosure; women; Chile*

1. Introduction

Workplace harassment remains one of the most insidious and persistent barriers to gender equality, undermining women's psychological safety, professional advancement, and human dignity. Despite decades of legal and organizational reforms, women across different industries continue to face environments where harassment is normalized, silence is expected, and reporting mechanisms are weak or punitive (Mercado-Aravena, 2025). The contemporary discourse on harassment has shifted from individual pathology to systemic dynamics, emphasizing that silence is not merely the absence of speech but a socially produced strategy shaped by fear, power asymmetry, and institutional complicity (Zeighami et al., 2022). In many contexts, women internalize silence as a survival mechanism within patriarchal and hierarchical organizations, where disclosure can result in retaliation or reputational harm. Understanding the contexts in which women choose silence or disclosure, therefore, is crucial for addressing the hidden psychological and structural mechanisms that sustain harassment across workplaces.

Workplace harassment, defined as unwanted and harmful conduct of a sexual or gender-based nature, has significant psychosocial consequences. Victims often experience depression, anxiety, somatic stress, and loss of professional confidence (Paudel, 2022; Raj et al., 2020). Yet, despite its prevalence, underreporting remains pervasive, particularly in regions where cultural, economic, and organizational factors converge to discourage open dialogue (Hadi, 2022). Studies conducted in South Asia and the Middle East have shown that women's silence is often enforced through subtle forms of social control, managerial denial, and institutional neglect (Anwar et al., 2021; Ayesha et al., 2020). These contexts foster a moral climate of fear and dependency, where silence becomes intertwined with notions of loyalty and professionalism. Furthermore, the underreporting of harassment cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader intersection of gender, class, and authority structures that shape women's workplace experiences (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019).

Empirical evidence across global settings reveals that harassment is sustained by power hierarchies and gendered organizational cultures. In many patriarchal institutions, male-dominated management structures discourage accountability while subtly reinforcing masculine privilege (McLaughlin et al., 2012). Women who occupy subordinate roles often face what has been termed the *paradox of power*, where formal authority or competence paradoxically increases their visibility and vulnerability to harassment (McLaughlin et al., 2012). Within such contexts, the act of disclosure is complicated by fear of retaliation, disbelief, or damage to career trajectories (Hershcovis et al., 2021). Social silence, in this sense, is not simply passive compliance but a networked phenomenon sustained by collective denial, complicity, and institutional inertia (Hershcovis et al., 2021).

The persistence of this networked silence has been documented across multiple cultural contexts. For example, research in Iranian healthcare settings found that women nurses often endured repeated acts of harassment while internalizing guilt and responsibility, believing that speaking up would worsen their situation (Zeighami et al., 2022). Similar findings in Nepal show that educated women still encounter stigma and disbelief when reporting sexual misconduct, indicating that education alone does not guarantee empowerment or institutional responsiveness (Paudel, 2022). In the Pakistani context, organizational hierarchies and patriarchal values create barriers that discourage women from pursuing justice, perpetuating cycles of silence and normalization (Anwar et al., 2021; Hadi, 2022). Even in highly visible sectors, such as politics, women's voices are constrained by entrenched gender norms and fear of reputational harm (Ayesha et al., 2020). These findings collectively suggest that silence is an adaptive, albeit costly, response to environments that reward conformity and punish dissent.

Parallel to these institutional dynamics, social movements such as *#MeToo* have challenged the invisibility of harassment and redefined the meaning of speaking out. Yet, research from India shows that while *#MeToo* enabled collective expression, it also revealed the enduring power of shame and social judgment, as many women expressed they "would have taken this to the grave, like most women," had the movement not provided an alternative discourse (Sambaraju, 2020). This underscores the dual nature of disclosure—both empowering and exposing. Disclosure transforms private suffering into public accountability, but it also entails personal and professional risks, especially in environments where legal and institutional safeguards remain weak. In societies with strong collectivist values, disclosure is often perceived as threatening group harmony, making silence a culturally acceptable form of self-preservation (Raj et al., 2020).

Gender, race, and class intersect in shaping how harassment is experienced and reported. The U.S.-based

analysis by (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019) demonstrated that racialized women face compounded vulnerability, as both gender and race intensify the likelihood of harassment while reducing the credibility of their complaints. Similarly, studies in African contexts highlight that women in public service sectors experience pervasive gender-based violence reinforced by bureaucratic patriarchy and social stigma (Vučković et al., 2017). In South Korea's film industry, a sector defined by creative competition and informal power networks, women experience harassment that is frequently dismissed as part of the "industry culture," reflecting how occupational norms normalize boundary violations (Lee et al., 2023). These variations suggest that the contexts of harassment are not homogeneous but embedded in specific cultural, economic, and professional systems.

Organizational silence, as explored by (Fernando & Prasad, 2018), reveals how bureaucratic norms and gendered expectations lead women toward reluctant acquiescence, where survival requires strategic compliance. Silence, therefore, is not simply an individual act but a collective outcome of fear, dependence, and systemic failure. This aligns with the concept of "institutionalized helplessness," where women's perceptions of futility in reporting misconduct stem from repeated experiences of inaction and disbelief (Spiliopoulou & Witcomb, 2022). Within this climate, disclosure often becomes a last resort—an act taken after emotional exhaustion, social withdrawal, or witnessing harm to others (Gawali, 2023).

From a psychological perspective, the phenomenon of **non-resistance** to harassment has been interpreted through evolutionary and behavioral lenses. (Liu et al., 2024) argued that women's perceived tolerance or passivity in such situations may represent adaptive responses aimed at minimizing conflict and ensuring survival within hostile environments. However, this adaptive framing must be critically examined, as it risks reinforcing stereotypes of female submission rather than recognizing the structural constraints that limit agency. Indeed, cross-national studies affirm that harassment occurs not because of women's passivity but because of entrenched power asymmetries and institutional neglect (Tatum, 2018; Tatum & Lent, 2024). Understanding silence as a contextual, meaning-making process rather than a mere absence of action is therefore essential.

Theoretical perspectives on workplace silence have evolved to capture its relational and cultural dimensions. (Hershcovis et al., 2021) conceptualized "network silence" as a dynamic in which employees collectively withhold acknowledgment of harassment to maintain social equilibrium, while (Tatum & Lent, 2024) and (Tatum, 2018) extended social cognitive theory to show how contextual barriers and identity management processes influence behavioral choices under threat. These models underscore the importance of examining both individual cognition and organizational climate. Similarly, (Fernando & Prasad, 2018) emphasized that silencing mechanisms operate through bureaucratic scripts that frame harassment complaints as disruptive rather than legitimate. Consequently, harassment persists as a hidden organizational norm sustained by fear, dependency, and learned helplessness.

The Latin American context adds another dimension to this conversation. Research has shown that in Chile and neighboring countries, workplace harassment remains under-discussed despite advances in gender equity policy, primarily due to social taboos and institutional underreporting (Mercado-Aravena, 2025). Socioeconomic hierarchies and informal work arrangements exacerbate vulnerability, while traditional gender roles continue to stigmatize women who disclose experiences of harassment. In such environments, silence becomes both an emotional and professional strategy—protecting one's livelihood at the expense of psychological well-being. This tension between economic dependency and moral agency reflects the broader structural inequities faced by working women in transitional economies (Gawali, 2023).

At the same time, global discourses of resistance are emerging. Feminist scholars and activists are reframing silence not as weakness but as evidence of systemic failure. Women's collective narratives of resistance—from local advocacy in South Asia to cross-sector mobilization in Latin America—demonstrate that disclosure can become a form of transformative agency (Gawali, 2023; Sambaraju, 2020). Nevertheless, disclosure must be understood as a process rather than a singular event. It involves negotiation, risk management, and emotional labor, reflecting the complex interplay between personal courage and social support structures. As (Spiliopoulou & Witcomb, 2022) observed, women often disclose incrementally—first to trusted peers, later to external networks—testing the safety of their environment before going public.

In addition to its social and institutional dimensions, workplace harassment has profound implications for mental health. Victims frequently report chronic anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms, with psychological distress compounded by the isolation of

silence (Mercado-Aravena, 2025; Paudel, 2022). The inability to speak or to be believed intensifies trauma, transforming the workplace from a site of productivity into one of psychological injury. In this sense, addressing harassment requires a shift from reactive legal frameworks to preventive, culture-based interventions that prioritize well-being and voice.

The current study builds upon this growing body of literature by examining the contexts of silence and disclosure among Chilean women who have experienced workplace harassment.

2.   Methods and Materials

2.1.   Study design and Participant

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided participants with the opportunity to narrate their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe into the contextual and emotional dimensions of silence and disclosure. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on how they perceived, responded to, and communicated their experiences of harassment. Questions addressed topics such as the initial recognition of harassment, perceived barriers to disclosure, organizational responses, and coping strategies.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, either in person or via secure online platforms depending on participant preference and logistical considerations. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

2.2.   Measures

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Interviews were conducted in Spanish, either in person or via secure online platforms depending on participant preference and logistical considerations. Each interview

lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from a local institutional review board, ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their identities.

2.3.   Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software. Thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), guided the analytical process. The analysis involved six iterative steps: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generating initial codes capturing significant features of the data, (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes, (4) reviewing and refining themes for coherence and distinctiveness, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final narrative synthesis.

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was maintained by keeping analytic memos and discussing emerging interpretations with peer researchers to enhance credibility. Patterns related to silence and disclosure were examined not only as individual psychological processes but also as socially and institutionally embedded phenomena. Theoretical saturation was confirmed when additional data no longer contributed novel conceptual insights to the developing thematic framework.

3.   Findings and Results

A total of 17 women participated in the study, all of whom were residents of Chile and employed in diverse professional sectors, including education (n = 5), healthcare (n = 4), public administration (n = 3), corporate/private organizations (n = 3), and non-governmental or social organizations (n = 2). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 52 years, with a mean age of approximately 38 years. In terms of marital status, 9 participants were married, 5 were single, 2 were divorced, and 1 was widowed. Regarding educational attainment, 11 participants held a university degree, 4 had completed postgraduate education, and 2 had technical diplomas. Their work experience varied from 3 to 27 years, representing early-career, mid-level, and senior professionals. The majority of participants (n = 10) reported being employed in male-dominated organizations, while 7 worked in mixed-gender environments. This diversity of age, background, and professional context enriched the data,

allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of how social, institutional, and interpersonal factors shape

women's silence and disclosure patterns in the face of workplace harassment.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts of Women's Experiences of Workplace Harassment

Main Categories (Themes)	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Culture of Silence and Fear	1.1. Organizational Tolerance for Harassment	Normalization of misconduct; managerial denial; "don't make trouble" culture; silence as protection of institution; blame reversal; gendered hierarchy
	1.2. Fear of Retaliation and Job Loss	Threats of demotion; job insecurity; being labeled "problematic"; fear of social exclusion; loss of references; isolation tactics
	1.3. Emotional Paralysis and Self-Doubt	Shock response; guilt for not speaking; minimizing experience; internalized blame; emotional numbness
	1.4. Lack of Safe Reporting Mechanisms	Ambiguous policies; distrust in HR; bureaucratic barriers; lack of confidentiality; previous failed reports
	1.5. Power Asymmetry and Gendered Authority	Male dominance in leadership; hierarchical silencing; abuse of seniority; invisibility of women's voices
	1.6. Complicity of Bystanders	Peer indifference; silent witnessing; fear of involvement; subtle reinforcement of norms
2. Psychological and Social Consequences	2.1. Emotional Exhaustion and Anxiety	Chronic stress; insomnia; hypervigilance; psychosomatic tension; work avoidance
	2.2. Identity Disruption and Self-Image	Shame; erosion of self-esteem; questioning professional worth; identity fragmentation
	2.3. Withdrawal and Social Isolation	Avoidance of colleagues; loss of trust; shrinking social networks; reluctance to form new ties
	2.4. Internal Conflict Between Loyalty and Justice	Ambivalence about disclosure; moral dissonance; fear of harming the organization; guilt toward coworkers
	2.5. Coping Through Rationalization	Justifying perpetrator's behavior; self-silencing as strength; redefining the experience as "misunderstanding"
	2.6. Search for Emotional Containment	Reliance on family support; spirituality as refuge; seeking online support groups
3. Pathways to Disclosure	3.1. Catalysts for Speaking Out	Witnessing others' experiences; cumulative injustice; organizational changes; emotional breaking point
	3.2. Informal Disclosure Strategies	Sharing with trusted peers; coded communication; selective confiding; testing reactions
	3.3. Role of External Validation	Media exposure; NGO support; peer advocacy; feminist networks
	3.4. Empowerment Through Collective Action	Group complaints; union involvement; solidarity among victims; collective awareness campaigns
	3.5. Negotiating Risks and Consequences	Anticipating backlash; weighing personal costs; strategic timing; anonymity in disclosure
4. Toward Healing and Resistance	4.1. Reclaiming Agency and Voice	Narrative reconstruction; speaking in public forums; self-advocacy; rewriting personal story
	4.2. Transformative Learning from Trauma	Critical reflection; redefining self-worth; boundary setting; re-evaluation of career goals
	4.3. Feminist Consciousness and Solidarity	Awareness of structural inequality; identification with women's struggles; mentorship; activism
	4.4. Rebuilding Professional Identity	Seeking safer workplaces; re-entering workforce with caution; mentorship roles; resilience-building
	4.5. Institutional Hope and Reform	Advocacy for policy change; participation in awareness workshops; promoting ethical leadership
	4.6. Personal Growth and Meaning-Making	Spiritual renewal; emotional closure; finding strength in adversity; transformation through struggle

1. Culture of Silence and Fear

The first major theme that emerged from participants' narratives was the culture of silence and fear that shaped their responses to harassment. Women described working environments where misconduct was normalized and subtly tolerated by those in authority. Many expressed that speaking up was seen as an act of disloyalty or weakness,

often met with dismissal or ridicule. As one participant explained, *"When I reported what happened, they told me to forget it if I wanted to keep my position. That's when I realized silence was safer than truth."* Fear of retaliation and job loss was pervasive, as participants recalled being labeled "problematic" or "difficult" when they resisted advances or complained. Organizational hierarchies reinforced this

fear—senior male managers were often viewed as untouchable, while bystanders remained complicit through inaction. Another participant reflected, *"Everyone knew what he was doing, but nobody wanted to be the one to say it out loud."* The lack of confidential reporting mechanisms and the perception of human resources as "protectors of the company, not the employees" further entrenched silence. For many women, internalized self-doubt and emotional paralysis prevented them from identifying their experience as harassment until much later. Collectively, these accounts depict a systemic environment where power asymmetry, social isolation, and institutional neglect perpetuated silence as a means of survival.

2. Psychological and Social Consequences

The second theme, psychological and social consequences, captured the emotional toll and identity disruption that followed harassment experiences and prolonged silence. Participants reported chronic anxiety, insomnia, and somatic symptoms such as tension headaches and digestive issues, describing their workplaces as "psychologically unsafe spaces." Feelings of shame and diminished self-worth emerged as central experiences. One interviewee shared, *"I started to believe maybe I was overreacting—that maybe I wasn't professional enough."* This erosion of confidence often led to social withdrawal, where women avoided colleagues and became increasingly isolated both inside and outside of work. Internal conflict between loyalty to the organization and a desire for justice was a recurring struggle, with participants expressing guilt for "betraying" their workplace if they chose to disclose. Many women engaged in rationalization, reframing harassment as a "misunderstanding" or "part of work culture" to cope with the cognitive dissonance. A few participants sought emotional containment through family or faith-based practices, turning to spirituality as a means of regaining balance. *"Praying was the only time I felt peace,"* noted one woman. These findings highlight that silence not only protects perpetrators but also erodes the psychological resilience and social connectedness of those affected, creating a cycle of emotional exhaustion and alienation.

3. Pathways to Disclosure

The third theme, pathways to disclosure, illustrated how participants moved from silence toward selective or public revelation of their experiences. Disclosure was rarely immediate or spontaneous—it was typically preceded by a "breaking point" triggered by cumulative injustice or witnessing similar harm to others. One participant explained, *"When I saw it happening to my colleague, I couldn't stay quiet anymore. It was like watching myself all over again."* Informal disclosure, such as confiding in trusted peers or friends, was a common first step, often framed in cautious, coded language to gauge safety. Validation from external sources—media stories, NGOs, or feminist advocacy networks—played a crucial role in legitimizing their experiences and emboldening action. As participants engaged with supportive communities, they began to find empowerment through collective action, forming alliances and group complaints that transcended individual vulnerability. Nevertheless, disclosure remained a strategic process—women carefully weighed potential consequences, anticipating retaliation, reputational harm, or job insecurity. Some opted for anonymity when filing reports or sharing stories on social media to maintain control over their narrative. These varied pathways demonstrate that disclosure is not merely a personal act but a negotiated, context-dependent strategy shaped by emotional readiness, perceived safety, and collective solidarity.

4. Toward Healing and Resistance

The final theme, toward healing and resistance, reflected participants' efforts to reconstruct their identities and reclaim agency after harassment. Women described a gradual process of reclaiming voice, often beginning with narrating their experiences in supportive spaces or participating in public discussions about gender justice. *"Speaking my story was terrifying but freeing,"* one participant shared. This process was intertwined with transformative learning, as participants developed clearer boundaries, redefined self-worth, and re-evaluated career goals. Feminist consciousness and solidarity also emerged as critical sources of empowerment. Some participants became mentors or advocates for younger women, translating their trauma into activism. Others found renewed meaning through spirituality or personal growth, viewing their recovery as both emotional and moral renewal. *"I'm not the same person,"* said one woman, *"but I'm stronger, and I know how to protect others now."* On a systemic level, several participants channeled their experiences into advocacy for institutional reform—promoting transparent reporting systems, gender equity workshops, and ethical leadership initiatives. Healing, for these women, was thus not a passive recovery but an act of resistance, reclaiming dignity and transforming private suffering into collective empowerment.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed four major themes—culture of silence and fear, psychological and social consequences, pathways to disclosure, and healing and resistance—each demonstrating how women navigate complex emotional and institutional landscapes when facing workplace harassment in Chile. These findings align with international research indicating that harassment is not only an individual trauma but also a socially reinforced and organizationally sustained condition (Fernando & Prasad, 2018; Hershcovis et al., 2021; Zeighami et al., 2022). Women's experiences of silence and selective disclosure reflect an intricate balance between self-preservation, power asymmetry, and structural inequity across diverse professional settings.

The first theme—*culture of silence and fear*—underscored how institutional tolerance and power hierarchies fostered an environment in which women's voices were marginalized and harassment was normalized. Similar to findings by (Zeighami et al., 2022), participants described how fear of retaliation and loss of employment perpetuated silence even among those aware of organizational wrongdoing. Women often internalized harassment as part of professional endurance, echoing the "reluctant acquiescence" described by (Fernando & Prasad, 2018), where individuals are led to self-censorship to maintain belonging and stability. In this study, managerial complicity and weak reporting mechanisms mirrored patterns found in other patriarchal and bureaucratic contexts, such as Iran and Pakistan, where hierarchical norms discourage transparency and sustain power abuse (Anwar et al., 2021; Hadi, 2022).

The collective silence documented here also supports the concept of "network silence" advanced by (Hershcovis et al., 2021), wherein bystanders and coworkers withhold acknowledgment to maintain social harmony. This form of complicity reinforces institutional cultures of impunity and deters disclosure. Consistent with the work of (Vučković et al., 2017), who found that Tanzanian public service employees often remain silent due to fear of victimization, Chilean participants described silence as both a defense mechanism and a learned behavior reinforced through organizational messages that discourage confrontation. The internalization of fear and self-blame parallels the cross-cultural findings of (Paudel, 2022), where Nepali women perceived speaking out as shameful or futile. In Chile, this same sentiment persisted, suggesting that cultural scripts of gendered modesty and professional loyalty intersect to sustain silence.

The second theme—*psychological and social consequences*—revealed profound emotional distress stemming from harassment and prolonged silence. Participants' experiences of anxiety, identity fragmentation, and social withdrawal correspond with previous literature on the mental health impact of harassment (Mercado-Aravena, 2025). These findings echo (Raj et al., 2020), who identified that women working in gender-unequal organizations experience chronic stress, job disengagement, and loss of belonging. The emotional paralysis described by participants mirrors (Zeighami et al., 2022), who found that nurses suffering workplace harassment experience "bitter silence" rooted in guilt and self-doubt.

From a sociological perspective, this psychological toll can be understood as a form of *symbolic violence*, where institutionalized gender norms compel women to absorb harm quietly to preserve the image of professionalism (Fernando & Prasad, 2018). Participants' narratives revealed a persistent tension between loyalty and justice, suggesting that silence is often an ethical compromise shaped by structural coercion. This ambivalence aligns with the observations of (Ayesha et al., 2020), who noted that Pakistani women politicians manage harassment through self-restraint and strategic silence to protect public legitimacy. Similarly, Chilean women articulated that disclosure risked social ostracization and career stagnation, reinforcing the notion that harassment produces not only psychological damage but also social isolation.

Furthermore, coping mechanisms such as rationalization and withdrawal highlight the intersection between trauma and agency. Women often reframed their experiences to regain control, echoing the adaptive non-resistance model proposed by (Liu et al., 2024), where avoidance or compliance functions as a short-term survival strategy in threatening contexts. However, unlike the evolutionary interpretation of passivity as adaptive, the narratives in this study reveal that non-resistance is a rational response to perceived futility and systemic inaction. These emotional responses demonstrate how harassment undermines not only mental health but also one's sense of moral coherence and professional identity.

The third theme—*pathways to disclosure*—highlighted that disclosure is neither linear nor universal but a process shaped by contextual cues, emotional readiness, and perceived institutional safety. Participants described *incremental disclosure*, beginning with trusted peers before

escalating to formal or public action. This pattern resonates with (Spiliopoulou & Witcomb, 2022), who found that women often test relational safety before revealing harassment experiences fully. In both contexts, disclosure was an act of negotiation rather than rebellion.

Disclosure catalysts in this study—such as witnessing harm to others or participating in solidarity networks—reflect the influence of collective consciousness in transforming silence into voice. This dynamic is consistent with (Sambaraju, 2020), who observed that women's participation in the *#MeToo* movement in India reframed personal trauma into collective accountability. For the Chilean participants, disclosure was similarly intertwined with solidarity and advocacy; however, institutional and cultural barriers still limited their ability to act without fear. The ambivalence expressed by participants toward formal reporting systems supports prior evidence that legal structures alone do not guarantee justice (Hadi, 2022). Instead, women relied on social networks, peer validation, and external advocacy organizations, similar to the collective resistance strategies described by (Gawali, 2023).

Moreover, the participants' experiences demonstrate that disclosure entails a strategic balancing of risks and benefits, paralleling findings in the South Korean film industry, where women calculated potential retaliation before reporting (Lee et al., 2023). This suggests that the decision to disclose is embedded in cultural expectations surrounding shame and respectability. Such contextualized decision-making underscores the significance of intersectional analysis, as factors like age, marital status, and job security modulate women's capacity for disclosure. Disclosure thus emerges as both an individual and relational act—one that challenges existing hierarchies but also relies on collective empowerment to endure its consequences.

The final theme—*healing and resistance*—illuminated how women transform experiences of harm into acts of reclamation and advocacy. Participants who overcame silence described *reclaiming their voice* through storytelling, solidarity, and activism, aligning with transformative frameworks of post-traumatic growth. Their narratives mirror the findings of (Gawali, 2023), who emphasized resistance as an evolving process rooted in emotional awareness and social action. Through collective sharing, participants redefined their trauma as a source of empowerment, consistent with feminist consciousness models proposed in global research on workplace equity (Sambaraju, 2020).

This study's findings further support (Fernando & Prasad, 2018), who argued that women's articulation of their experiences constitutes a counter-discursive act that challenges organizational silencing. Similarly, the participants' engagement in institutional reform efforts reflects emerging evidence that survivors' advocacy contributes to organizational change and moral repair (Mercado-Aravena, 2025). For instance, some participants in this study collaborated with unions or gender equality offices to propose awareness programs and gender-sensitive reporting systems. These forms of resistance echo the pathways described by (Tatum & Lent, 2024), where social cognitive factors such as contextual support and identity management foster behavioral agency. Healing, therefore, extends beyond individual recovery—it represents the reconstitution of selfhood within supportive networks and reform-oriented spaces.

While empowerment narratives emerged strongly, they also revealed ambivalence. Participants described empowerment as "hard-won," often accompanied by emotional exhaustion and distrust of institutions. This resonates with (Tatum, 2018), who noted that identity management among marginalized workers often involves balancing authenticity with safety. The transformative learning reported by women in this study parallels findings from diverse cultural contexts showing that survivors integrate trauma into redefined identities anchored in justice, empathy, and advocacy (Raj et al., 2020; Vučković et al., 2017). In this sense, resistance becomes not only a response to injustice but a moral reconstruction of agency that reclaims dignity from structural oppression.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study, while offering rich qualitative insight, carries several limitations. The sample size, though adequate for thematic saturation, was limited to seventeen participants from Chile, restricting generalizability to broader Latin American or global populations. Cultural nuances specific to Chilean workplaces may not fully reflect the experiences of women in other sociopolitical contexts. Moreover, all participants were literate professionals, potentially excluding the perspectives of women in informal labor sectors or rural employment. Interviews relied on retrospective accounts, which might have been influenced by recall bias or emotional framing. Additionally, while reflexive strategies were used to minimize researcher bias, interpretative subjectivity remains inherent in qualitative

analysis. Future research could incorporate triangulated data sources such as organizational policy reviews or focus groups to validate and expand upon these findings.

Future studies should explore cross-cultural comparisons of silence and disclosure to examine how local gender norms and institutional policies shape responses to harassment. Expanding research to include men's perspectives and organizational actors could illuminate systemic power relations that perpetuate silence. Longitudinal qualitative research may also help track how survivors' coping mechanisms and advocacy trajectories evolve over time. Incorporating intersectional analyses—including class, race, disability, and sexual orientation—would deepen understanding of how multiple identities influence harassment experiences. Further, integrating digital ethnography could examine how online feminist networks facilitate disclosure and collective resistance across cultures.

Organizations must move beyond compliance-based frameworks toward transformative approaches that prioritize psychological safety and cultural change. Creating confidential, trauma-informed reporting systems is essential to rebuilding trust. Leadership training should emphasize empathy, active listening, and accountability to dismantle the hierarchical norms that sustain silence. Human resource departments must adopt survivor-centered policies and ensure non-retaliatory environments for whistleblowers. Furthermore, regular dialogue sessions and gender-sensitivity workshops can normalize open discussion and collective awareness. Empowering women's mentorship networks and encouraging collective storytelling within organizations can help convert silence into solidarity. Ultimately, meaningful change requires a shift from reactive punishment to proactive prevention—embedding respect, equity, and care at the heart of workplace culture.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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