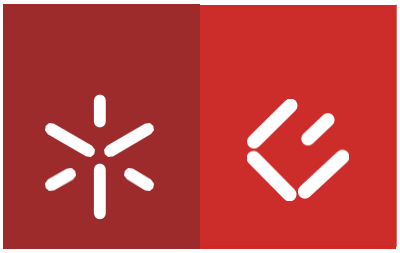
Universidade do Minho
Escola de Economia e Gestão e Ciência Política

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Harassment and Intersectionality at the Workplace

April 2026

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Harassment and Intersectionality at the Workplace

Master's Project
Master's in Human Resources Management

Supervised by
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1. ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the relationship between workplace harassment and intersectionality, focusing on how overlapping social identities shape individuals' vulnerability to discrimination in professional environments. More specifically, the study examines the experiences of queer women in the workplace, considering how gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation interact within interpersonal workplace relationships. Drawing on intersectionality theory and role congruity theory, this research seeks to move beyond single-axis approaches to discrimination by analysing how multiple identity dimensions jointly influence experiences of harassment, exclusion, and unequal treatment.

Using a qualitative research design, the study is based on semi-structured interviews with queer women who have current or previous work experience. Through these narratives, the dissertation investigates how participants perceive, navigate, and respond to discriminatory behaviours, as well as how workplace relationships affect their emotional, mental, and professional wellbeing. The research also examines the strategies participants use to manage identity visibility and negotiate safety within organisational contexts.

By bringing together theoretical analysis and qualitative fieldwork, this dissertation aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of workplace harassment as a multidimensional and intersectional phenomenon. The study highlights the limitations of approaches that examine gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation in isolation and reinforces the need for organisational practices that address the complex realities of identity-based discrimination. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to discussions on workplace equity, inclusion, and the promotion of safer organisational environments for queer women.

2. INTRODUCTION

Workplace well-being is one of the key factors to employer satisfaction, productivity, and to their mental and physical wellness. If one or several of those factors are lacking, it can

lead to burnout and health complications (Adams, 2019). By then adding the component of harassment potentially occurring in the workspace due to someone's gender, ethnicity and/or sexual orientation, the matter becomes even more nuanced (Abdulla et al., 2023). I aim to define the possible forms of harassment that may occur in work-related contexts, as well as their prevalence and consequences. I will explore the topics of intersectionality and harassment, and how those two connect when it comes to their role in the workplace. From an intersectional perspective, I will present a comparative study on discrimination processes in interpersonal relationships at work, more specifically, the way homosexual women experience, navigate, and respond to these challenges

There is a strong link between workplace harassment and many adverse health outcomes: "The results indicate that exposure to chronic generalized WH[1], which due to the multiple experiences of such behaviour is consistent with the definition of workplace bullying, is associated with an increased risk of coronary heart disease" (Abdulla et al., 2023, p. 5). That is why, due to how serious and real these consequences are, I will aim to explore the reasoning and explanation behind such health-related consequences and comprehend the true impact of intersectionality on the degree of vulnerability to workplace harassment.

This study aims to investigate how overlapping social identities shape individuals' experiences with workplace harassment, moving beyond single-axis analysis to consider how systemic inequalities interact. It will focus on intersectionality and how it influences an employer's vulnerability to harassment within interpersonal workplace relationships, by delving into three ramifications of the above-mentioned theory: gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Those components will be analysed not only on an individual level, but also in relation to one another (Triana et al., 2023). To improve the efficiency and coherence of data collection, the study will focus exclusively on homosexual women. Expanding the sample to a more diverse population would add considerable heterogeneity, thereby complicating the

process of gathering and analysing qualitative data.

Through a combination of literature review and qualitative data analysis, this dissertation will seek to uncover patterns of discrimination that are often invisible in mainstream workplace policies. In order to understand the relation between workplace harassment and intersectionality, I will also touch on the role congruity theory, which provides a better understanding of "the emergence and consequences of prejudice in a wide range of organizational settings" (Triana et al., 2023, p. 188). It does so by speculating that negative evaluations can arise when there is a perceived mismatch between the expectations associated with two social roles simultaneously held by the same individual (Triana et al., 2023).

This research is fuelled by the need of further investigation into the relationship between intersectionality and workplace harassment. The already existing studies "(...) often neglect how gender and race and sexuality are simultaneously implicated in experiences of oppression" (Luiz & Terziev, 2024, p. 2), which highlights the limitations of approaches that analyse identity categories in isolation. Since this dissertation also explores the interpersonal workplace relationships of queer women, it is important to consider how these relationships may reproduce, challenge, or intensify experiences of discrimination and harassment. This makes the topic particularly relevant, as workplace identities, power dynamics, and forms of harassment are likely to be constantly evolving, requiring continuous academic attention and updated organisational responses.

The anticipated contributions of this study include the following: providing a deeper understanding of how intersecting identities shape harassment experiences in professional environments; understanding the experiences of gay women and their interactions with colleagues and supervisors, as well as identifying effective strategies to address harassment from said members; contributing to the broader discourse on equity and diversity in employment settings and bridging gaps in existing literature. Those gaps are reflected on how

limited research on the complexities of intersectionality in the workplace remains. Most studies tend to focus on one or two aspects of identity in isolation, rarely examining how multiple, overlapping facets of one's identity interact to influence an individual's vulnerability to harassment in professional settings (Woods et al., 2021). As Luiz and Terziev (2024, p. 2) note, "[m]uch of this literature on LGBT discrimination focuses on the single dimension of sexuality but we know that discrimination is often compounded by multiple forms of inequality and disadvantage creating obstacles that are not always fully understood.". This highlights the pressing need for approaches that recognize how gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation jointly shape individuals' lived experiences, instead of tactics that keep their focus limited. Therefore, I aim to investigate and offer insight into the overlapping axes of oppression and identity present in each person, to incorporate those findings into the reality of the workplace and dissect them.

In order to properly navigate this topic, it is essential that we define our objectives through the key questions guiding this research. The following questions will serve as an initial foundation for the dissertation:

1. How does intersectionality play a role in one's vulnerability to harassment at work?
2. How do gay women perceive and deal with discrimination in the workplace?
3. In what form do interpersonal relationships at work affect one's mental, emotional and physical wellbeing?
4. What kind of harassment is the most prevalent one?
5. In what way do some identities predominate over others?
6. How do we achieve intersectional equality?

Apart from finding an answer to those queries, the overall goal of this research is to explore the intersection of workplace harassment and identity, with particular attention to how overlapping factors such as gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation influence an employer's

experience. This is an often-taboo subject, which continues to be inadequately addressed by many organizations despite formal, evolving policies. Through this dissertation, I seek to foster a deeper understanding of the systemic dimensions of workplace inequality and harassment. More specifically, I aim to investigate the relationship between intersectionality and vulnerability to harassment in workplace settings and to then propose a theoretical and practical framework for promoting intersectional equity in organizational environments.

With my findings, I aim to contribute to the very theories that underpin this dissertation: the intersectionality theory and the role congruity theory, in order to enrich the understanding of the topic in place. I do not want to solely use them as pillars for the present study but also participate in the matter. I intend to support and extend existing research on workplace harassment and its links to identity conditions, through both the theoretical framing of this dissertation and the empirical insights from my qualitative research.

Regarding the structure of this dissertation, it will be as follows: it will start with the introduction, which will provide the background information needed for the purpose of contextualizing my work and the topic at hand; this will be followed by a structured literature review, so that my later argument and its necessity can first be justified; then, the methodology will be presented so I can accurately explain how my research has been conducted; thereafter, the results of my data collection and analysis will be concisely stated and then discussed. To complete it, I will clearly state my conclusions concerning the central argument of the paper and highlight my contributions to the field.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this dissertation, a multitude of studies are reviewed in order to understand the intricacies of workplace harassment, and the theoretical foundations of the intersectionality theory and the role congruity theory, as well as the relation between these frameworks. This theoretical grounding serves as the basis for the subsequent qualitative research process, which

aims to generate in-depth, human-centred insights into participants' lived experiences in the workplace. By combining established theoretical perspectives with empirical data, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of harassment and intersectionality at the workplace.

To ensure access to the most relevant and reliable information, the literature review primarily draws on academic journals, including *Journal of Management and Organization Studies*, published by Sage Journals, as well as *Gender, Work & Organization*, accessed through the Wiley Online Library. These sources were selected due to their strong academic reputation and their focus on organisational behaviour, gender studies, and workplace dynamics. Alongside these academic sources, several official websites and institutional publications were also consulted in order to incorporate practical insights, policy perspectives, and up-to-date data. This combination of scholarly and institutional sources allows for a more robust and well-rounded analysis of the topic.

3.1 Harassment

According to the International Labour Organization (2022, p. 12), "[g]lobally, more than one in five persons in employment has experienced violence and harassment at work during their working life" which equals to 590 million people in employment (in the year of 2021).

> Harassment is unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including sexual orientation, transgender status, or pregnancy), national origin, older age (beginning at age 40), disability, or genetic information (including family medical history). Harassment becomes unlawful where 1) enduring the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment, or 2) the conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider

> intimidating, hostile, or abusive. (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d., para. 2, Retrieved July 5, 2025)

Harassment is an unlawful behaviour under the Equality Act 2010 (Service, 2016) that happens when one treats another unfairly because of their race, colour, religion, sex, age, disability, national origin, or genetic information. The many different types of harassment include sexual (unwanted touching, jokes, requests), discriminatory (offensive behaviour towards an individual based on their identity), personal (based on the employee's personality, looks or work), physical (unwanted touching, damage to personal property, threats of physical violence), verbal (demeaning remarks and criticism, insults, hurtful comments), psychological (exclusion, isolation, belittling, gaslighting), power-based (involves a superior who uses their power to harass subordinate employees), cyberbullying (online harassment), retaliation (harassment that happens when the harasser wants to get revenge for something) and third-party harassment (involving someone from outside the company) (Muller, 2025). These are the most common types of workplace harassment, a term that should not be confused with "bullying" as they are distinct notions though are often used interchangeably (The Law Society, 2024).

> Bullying may be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, or an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient.
>
> Harassment is defined in section 26 of the Equality Act 2010 as unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic and which violates a person's dignity or has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. (The Law Society, 2024, p. 1, Retrieved September 18, 2025)

Workplace harassment constitutes a significant source of stress, adversely affecting employees' job performance and overall productivity. Moreover, such experiences can lead to a diminished sense of engagement with one's role and, in more severe cases, may result in absenteeism or even the decision to leave the organisation altogether (Luong & Green, 2023).

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, this analysis incorporates data from the study "Workplace Harassment and Health: A Long Term Follow up" (Abdulla, Lin & Rospenda, 2023), which provides important evidence on the long-term health consequences of workplace harassment, demonstrating that chronic exposure is associated with increased risks of both physical and psychological morbidity. In particular, generalised workplace harassment, often aligned with workplace bullying, is linked to a higher risk of coronary heart disease, while sexual harassment is associated with conditions such as migraines and arthritic or rheumatic disorders. These findings reinforce and extend existing literature by showing that workplace harassment in adulthood can have significant and lasting effects on physical health.

The study suggests that these outcomes are largely driven by chronic stress responses. Prolonged exposure to harassment may trigger neuroendocrine and inflammatory processes, leading to immune dysregulation, increased cytokine activity, and the development of conditions such as autoimmune diseases and cardiovascular disorders. Furthermore, workplace harassment is strongly associated with psychological conditions, including anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, which can further exacerbate physical health problems (Abdulla, Lin & Rospenda, 2023).

Indirectly, these psychological effects may contribute to poorer health behaviours, such as reduced engagement in healthy lifestyles, disrupted sleep patterns, and limited access to healthcare. Sleep deprivation, in particular, emerges as a key pathway linking harassment to broader health risks, including metabolic disorders, cardiovascular disease, and increased

mortality. Overall, the findings highlight that workplace harassment is not only a social and organisational issue but also a significant public health concern, with far-reaching consequences for individual wellbeing and long-term health outcomes (Abdulla, Lin & Rospenda, 2023).

Furthermore, other studies such as Rospenda et al. (2023) also link workplace harassment to alcohol misuse over the course of individuals' careers, with effects persisting even years after exposure has ended and remain significant even when individuals are no longer part of the workforce. There is a direct association between prior harassment and heavier alcohol consumption, highlighting important behavioural consequences. Although some of these effects are moderate, they remain significant due to their implications for long-term health, including increased risk of disease and mortality (Rospenda, K.M., *et al.*, 2023).

In this study, I am not only investigating workplace harassment, but also its' relationship with intersectionality, and understanding how one's identity increases their vulnerability towards different types of prejudice in their workspace. I believe it is necessary to examine workplace harassment through an intersectional lens, as individuals with overlapping marginalised identities may face specific and intensified forms of vulnerability. This provides the foundation for the following section, which explores intersectionality as a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of identity interact to shape experiences of discrimination and harassment in the workplace

3.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (UN Women Australia, n.d., para. 1), and it recognizes that "socially-constructed identity categories (e.g., race, class, gender and sexual orientation) simultaneously interact with one another and with wider societal and power structures to construct experiences of oppression and privilege unique to each individual." (Kele et al., 2022, p. 1179). That is, our identity shapes our lives and gives

us advantages and disadvantages according to the surrounding context and power structures in place. It identifies invisible barriers and aims to understand individual experiences and how they differ. Its purpose is to limit the lack of knowledge that exists around the term and the reality it refers to, because what is misunderstood or unknown is often feared, rejected and attacked. Discrimination is frequently segregated based on the person's identity, but intersectionality aims to intersect these different components and study how they affect one another (UN Women Australia, n.d., Why does it matter? section).

However, there are still gaps in people's understanding of equality and in the most effective solutions to fight unfairness in organizations, which brings the necessity of a new concept – intersectional equality, as defined by Woods et al. (2021). This concept is based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, and its' purpose is to create a notion anchored on feminist, critical organizational literature, as well as justice literature, allowing intersectionality to be a continuous and evolving conversation (Woods et al, 2021).

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (Crenshaw, 1989, 149, Retrieved April 11, 2026).

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argues that traditional approaches to discrimination fail to account for the experiences of individuals who are subject to multiple, overlapping forms of oppression. With a focus on black women, Crenshaw demonstrates how systems of power such as racism and sexism do not operate independently but intersect to create unique forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood through single-axis frameworks. Instead, she

introduces intersectionality to explain how overlapping identities, particularly being both black and a woman, create distinct forms of discrimination that are not simply the sum of racism and sexism. In her work “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, Crenshaw (1989) highlights how antidiscrimination law failed black women, due to how courts would classify claims as either race or gender discrimination, disregarding their intersectional identity, rejecting the possibility of compound discrimination against black women, and discarding their claims if they did not fit into one narrow scoped category. This marginalized black women and painted their experiences invisible, which prompted Crenshaw to move beyond simplistic categories and conceptualize a multidimensional phenomenon in which overlapping systems of oppression interact to produce unique forms of disadvantage. Furthermore, Crenshaw critiques both the feminist theory and antiracist discourse for failing to account for these intersecting identities, often privileging the experiences of white women and black men, respectively. She highlights the need for more inclusive and structurally redefined frameworks that recognise the complexity of discrimination and better address the realities of those situated at the intersection of multiple social identities, arguing that policies and theories must be restructured instead of simply expanded (Crenshaw, 1989).

Since Crenshaw’s original formulation in 1989, intersectionality has developed from a critique of single-axis approaches to discrimination into a broader framework for understanding inequality in contemporary organisations. While Crenshaw demonstrated how systems such as racism and sexism intersect to produce distinct forms of disadvantage, recent organisational scholarship has expanded this perspective by examining how workplaces reproduce and respond to overlapping inequalities. Woods, Benschop and van den Brink (2021) contribute to this development through the concept of intersectional equality, which shifts the focus from merely identifying intersecting forms of oppression to considering how

organisations can actively address them, and ultimately, build a practical path towards equality. Their work suggests that although organisational research has advanced in recognising workplace inequality, progress toward equality remains limited when organisations fail to account for the ways power, interests and domination reappear in new forms. In this sense, they call for a change in perspective (Woods et al, 2021).

Since organizations have not been efficiently adopting the concept of intersectionality as a means to think about and deal with the inequalities present at work, more studies should be conducted and discussed to encourage a continuous and open dialogue around the topic and its prevalent existence.

3.3 Role Congruity Theory

Role Congruity Theory was introduced by Eagly and Karau (2002) to explain prejudice against female leaders. The central argument of the theory is that bias can emerge when there is a perceived mismatch between the stereotypes associated with a social group, and the attributes believed to be necessary for success in a particular social role. It offers a valuable framework for understanding how prejudice operates in the workplace and it allows social science scholars to examine different forms of prejudice and to explore the mechanisms through which these biases emerge and are maintained (Triana et al., 2023).

This theory originates from the broader foundations of role theory and social role theory. Role theory suggests that individuals learn role expectations through social experience and are generally conscious of the expectations they associate with particular roles. Although it acknowledged differences between gender roles, it did not fully explain why these differences developed or continued over time. To tackle this limitation, Eagly introduced social role theory, which argues that gender differences in social behaviour emerge from the societal division of labour between genders. According to this perspective, the division of labour is reinforced through psychological and social procedures. These processes create expectations

about appropriate gender-role behaviour, encouraging men and women to act in ways that are consistent with traditionally gendered work roles (Anglin et al., 2022).

Building on these foundations, Role Congruity Theory is based on a set of interrelated concepts that explain how individuals are evaluated according to socially shared expectations. A central concept is the social role, which refers to the expectations associated with individuals who belong to particular social categories, perform specific responsibilities, or occupy certain social situations. These expectations shape how people interpret and judge behaviour. Within this framework, expectations can be divided into descriptive norms and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms refer to beliefs about how members of a group typically behave, indicating what individuals are perceived as likely to do. Injunctive norms, by contrast, refer to beliefs about how members of a group should behave, reflecting whether certain behaviours are socially approved or disapproved. Role congruity or incongruity emerges when an individual simultaneously occupies two social roles whose expected characteristics are perceived as either compatible or incompatible. When the expectations attached to these roles conflict, role incongruity may occur, which can contribute to negative evaluations, prejudice, or doubts about a person's suitability for a given role. This mechanism is particularly relevant in organizational contexts, where individuals are often assessed not only according to their actual qualifications or performance, but also according to how well they appear to fit the expectations associated with a given role (Triana et al., 2023).

Role congruity research in management shows that role incongruity affects evaluations, workplace outcomes and self-adaptation. When a person's social identity is seen as inconsistent with the expectations of a role, they may be judged more negatively. This is often studied in relation to women in leadership, but it can also apply to other identities, such as sexuality, marital status, or occupation. It can also influence hiring, promotions, pay, career progression, dismissal, funding opportunities, and other material consequences. Furthermore,

people who expect to be seen as role-incongruent may adjust their behaviour, hide parts of themselves, avoid speaking up, or limit their ambitions, which can also lead to psychological distress (Triana et al., 2023).

For example, a woman in a leadership position may be judged through both the lens of the female gender role and the leader role. If leadership is culturally associated with agency, authority and decisiveness, while femininity is associated with communality, care and supportiveness, the woman leader may be perceived as violating one of these role expectations. This produces a double bind, if she behaves in a communal way, she may be perceived as insufficiently leader-like, if she behaves in an agentic way, she may be perceived as insufficiently feminine. Another example relates to how sexual orientation can shape perceptions of occupational fit: gay men tend to be viewed as better suited to roles traditionally associated with women, while straight men are more often seen as fitting roles traditionally associated with men (Triana et al., 2023).

In the context of this study, Role Congruity Theory is particularly relevant, as it provides a framework for understanding how overlapping identities may influence how individuals are perceived and treated in the workplace. When these identities do not align with dominant organisational and societal expectations, individuals may be more vulnerable to subtle or overt forms of discrimination, including harassment.

3.4 The Relation between Intersectionality and Workplace Harassment

While workplace harassment has been often discussed in recent decades, much of the existing research adopts a one-dimensional approach, examining factors such as ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender in isolation. However, individuals do not experience the world through single aspects of their identity. (UN Women Australia, n.d.). The theory of intersectionality highlights how overlapping identities can compound experiences of discrimination. (Woods et al, 2021). In professional environments, this means that individuals

who belong to multiple marginalized groups may face unique and intensified forms of mistreatment. This section explores the relationship between intersectionality and workplace harassment, emphasizing how compounded identities influence both the occurrence and impact of such experiences.

As an example, I will present the case of educated minority-ethnic women in the United Kingdom, that are disproportionately represented in positions that do not reflect their qualifications, especially when compared to their white peers (Kele et al., 2022). If these factors are also complemented by religion, an even bigger discrimination happens – which is usually the case for Muslim women. Although minority-ethnic women demonstrate a strong desire to progress in their careers, they also recognize the importance of networking in achieving professional advancement. This emphasis on networking reflects a broader awareness that social capital plays a critical role in career development. Limited access to the "right people" can serve as a significant barrier to advancement. This represents a concrete example of how inequality regimes operate in practice, reinforcing systemic disadvantages within organizational structures (Kele et al., 2022). For instance, in response to the statement: "In my organization, your identity or background can have an effect on the opportunities you're given", 31% of 332 minority-ethnic women surveyed agreed, compared with 19% of 298 white women." (Kele et al., 2022, p. 1181).

Overall, the relationship between intersectionality and workplace harassment reveals that discrimination cannot be fully understood when identity categories are examined separately. Experiences of harassment are shaped by the interaction between individual identities and broader organisational structures. These overlapping dimensions can intensify vulnerability, limit career progression, and reduce access to protection or support within organisations (Kele et al., 2022). Therefore, analysing workplace harassment through an intersectional lens is essential to understanding not only how harassment occurs, but also why

certain individuals are more exposed to it and why its consequences may be more severe. This perspective provides an important foundation for the present study as it allows workplace harassment to be analysed not only as an individual act of misconduct, but as a phenomenon shaped by overlapping identities, unequal power relations, and organisational structures that may intensify vulnerability for queer women.

3.5 Interpersonal Relationships in the Workplace

A substantial portion of an individual's life is spent in the workplace – a demanding environment that already brings its' own set of challenges (Ervasti et al., 2021). In Portugal, the average working week comprises 37.5 hours (Giattino & Ortiz-Ospina, 2021), meaning that employees spend a significant amount of time in close contact with their colleagues. It is imperative to recognise the pivotal role of healthy and positive interpersonal relationships in the professional environment for one's overall well-being. Such relationships exert a significant influence on shaping daily experiences, job satisfaction and performance, and most importantly, they play a crucial part in the mental and physical health of employers – even more so in the case of homosexual women, whose workplace experiences may be shaped by additional identity-related pressures (Donaghy & Perales, 2022).

The main types of interpersonal relationships that emerge in the workplace include those between supervisor and subordinate, among coworkers, between employees and customers, and romantic relationships between colleagues (Carson & Laura Westmaas, 2022). However, the latter two fall outside the scope of this research and will not be addressed. This dissertation focuses mainly on relationships between colleagues and between employees and supervisors, as these are central to participants' experiences of inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, and harassment.

Harassment can occur within these workplace relationships when organisational interactions are shaped by exclusionary, abusive, demeaning, or discriminatory behaviours. In

relationships between colleagues, harassment may appear through everyday communication, such as jokes, comments, slurs, gossip, exclusion from informal networks, or assumptions based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, or other identity markers. These behaviours may seem subtle or be framed as humour, but they can contribute to a hostile environment, particularly when they reinforce stereotypes or make individuals feel that they cannot fully express themselves at work. In interpersonal relations between managers and subordinates, harassment may be intensified by hierarchical power dynamics, as supervisors hold authority over work conditions, role allocation, performance evaluation, promotions, and access to opportunities. This imbalance can make it more difficult for employees to challenge inappropriate behaviour or report discrimination, especially when they fear retaliation, disbelief, or professional consequences (Crossman, 2023).

Communication is especially important in this context because discriminatory behaviour is often embedded in everyday exchanges. Harassment does not always occur through explicit aggression; it may also emerge through indirect comments, silence, exclusion, dismissive responses, or nonverbal behaviours that signal disrespect or rejection. For employees from marginalised groups, repeated exposure to such interactions may weaken their sense of belonging and lead them to self-censor, avoid certain colleagues, or conceal aspects of their identity (Crossman, 2023).

Therefore, interpersonal workplace relationships must be understood as central to the study of harassment and intersectionality. When interactions are respectful, inclusive, and grounded in recognition, it can support wellbeing and belonging. However, when workplace communication reproduces stereotypes, reinforces hierarchies, or normalises discriminatory behaviour, it can become a mechanism through which harassment is sustained. This is particularly relevant to the present study, as queer women's experiences of workplace harassment often occur within everyday interactions with colleagues and managers, where

identity, power, communication, and organisational culture intersect (Crossman, 2023).

4. METHODOLOGY

This dissertation adopts a qualitative research approach, as this methodology is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena through participants' lived experiences, meanings, and perspectives.

> "with its emphasis on context, existence, experience, perspective, meaning, and subjectivity, offers a unique lens through which to explore and interpret the complexities of social phenomena, which is in contrast to quantitative research, not as a contradictory, but as a complementary, each with its distinct strengths and areas of application" (Lim, 2024, p. 202).

I will turn to a narrative centred approach, along with an interpretive research paradigm, a research method which values the holistic explanation and understanding of situations, considering the complexities of human nature and of intersubjectivity (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This method was selected as the nature of the study centres on lived human experience, which is most effectively captured and understood through qualitative inquiry. Because workplace identity is both multifaceted and deeply personal, it demands an approach that can uncover subtle, meaningful insights; that said, I will deploy the exploration of the key questions "what", "why", "when", "where", "who", and "how" – also known as the "5W1H" (Lim, 2024).

Intersectional experiences are not easily measurable through numerical data alone, they are best understood through narratives, personal reflections and the exploration of lived realities. Therefore, I have collected data through interviews, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms. Those interviews will contain questions that aim to

explore the participants' insights towards harassment they may have experienced or witnessed, their relationship with peers and overall staff, their level of safety and comfort at work, among other similar queries. I focus my study on homosexual women of various gender identities and ethnicities, limiting my sample to a maximum of four varieties to keep the collection of information concise. Then, I will analyse the information while preserving the distinctiveness of each account.

As a researcher engaging with a topic closely related to identity and lived experience, I acknowledge that my positionality may shape both data collection and interpretation. This reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process to critically examine potential biases and assumptions.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations. All participants were provided with an informed consent form prior to participation and were made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details from transcripts. Due to the potentially distressing nature of discussing experiences of harassment and discrimination, interviews were conducted in a respectful and participant-led manner, allowing individuals to skip questions or pause the interview if needed. A debriefing moment was offered at the end of each interview to support participants' well-being. All data was securely stored and handled in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

All interviews were conducted by me in Portuguese, the native language of the participants, in order to facilitate clarity and depth of response. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated directly into English by me. This process enabled the preservation of the original meanings while ensuring that the translated data remained suitable for analysis and presentation in an academic context.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, guided by a flexible

interview protocol. This protocol was designed as a general framework rather than a rigid script, allowing questions to be adapted in real time according to each participant's personal characteristics and narrative. This approach ensured both consistency across interviews and the ability to capture rich, individualised experiences. The interview guide (Appendix A) was explicitly developed in alignment with the research questions and informed by the relevant literature. Each section of the interview corresponds to a specific analytical focus, ensuring that the data collected directly contributes to addressing the core objectives of the study. Questions related to workplace context explore organisational conditions and perceptions of safety, while those focusing on interpersonal relationships examine lived experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and discrimination. Additionally, questions addressing identity and self-expression provide insight into how individual characteristics shape workplace experiences. Finally, reflective and forward-looking questions allow participants to suggest improvements and organisational practices that may foster more inclusive environments.

The design of the interview guide was further informed by an intersectional perspective, recognising that workplace experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple identity dimensions, such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Rather than treating these categories as separate, the interview structure allows participants to articulate how these aspects intersect in shaping their experiences. This is reflected in the use of open-ended questions, which avoid imposing predefined categories and instead, prioritise participants' own narratives. The adaptive nature of the interview process also enables the exploration of diverse and context-specific experiences, aligning with the study's aim of capturing the multidimensional nature of workplace harassment.

Prior to each interview, an introductory section was conducted in which I presented the purpose of the study and collected basic demographic information. Participants were also asked for their consent to discuss potentially sensitive aspects of their identity. At the conclusion of

each interview, an optional debriefing phase was included to allow participants to reflect on the discussion and ensure their well-being. This approach reflects a broader commitment to a human-centred methodology, in which participants are treated as individuals with complex and situated experiences rather than as abstract subjects.

All interviews were carefully reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, based on recurring patterns, expressions, and experiences identified across participants' narratives. Subsequently, these initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories through an iterative process of comparison and refinement. This process involved continuously revisiting the data in order to ensure that each category accurately reflected participants' experiences while maintaining conceptual clarity and distinction from other categories.

The final set of categories was constructed to reflect both individual-level experiences (such as identity management strategies) and organisational-level dynamics (for example, the normalisation of harassment), ensuring alignment with the study's research questions and objectives. Throughout the analysis, particular attention was paid to preserving participants' meanings and lived experiences.

In addressing the key research questions of this study, selected excerpts from the interviews will be presented and contextualised where relevant. In total 9 interviews were conducted offering a diverse range of viewpoints that contribute to the robustness and credibility of the analysis. Following this, a brief overview of the participants is provided, along with the criteria used for their selection.

Participants were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms based on flower names. This approach was intentionally adopted to avoid referring to participants as "subjects," a term that may convey a sense of detachment and impersonality. Given the qualitative and human-centred nature of this research, it was important to preserve a sense of individuality and respect

for each participant's contribution. The use of personalised pseudonyms reflects the relational and empathetic character of the interviews, which were designed to capture rich, lived experiences rather than abstract or depersonalised data. Furthermore, this method ensures confidentiality while maintaining a narrative style that remains engaging and aligned with the interpretive aims of the study.

Table 1. Table of participants

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Gender Identity**	**Sexual Orientation**	**Ethnicity**	**Nationality**	**Current/Former Professional Role**	**Relationship Status**
Rose	22	Cis woman	Pansexual	Caucasian	Portuguese	Programmer	In a heteronormative relationship
Iris	22	Cis woman	Bisexual	Caucasian	Portuguese	Waiter and Cashier	In a heteronormative relationship
Lily	23	Cis woman	Bisexual	Caucasian	Portuguese	Waiter	Not in a relationship
Dahlia	23	Cis woman	Bisexual	Caucasian	Portuguese	Journalist	In a heteronormative relationship
Aster	20	Cis woman	Bisexual	Caucasian	Portuguese	Healthcare Assistant	Not in a relationship
Peony	27	Non-Binary	Lesbian	Caucasian	Portuguese	Social media manager and	Not in a relationship

						Front-of-store staff	
Violet	22	Cis woman	Lesbian	Caucasian	Luso-Venezuelan	Waiter and Cashier	Not in a relationship
Daisy	23	Cis woman	Bisexual	Caucasian	Portuguese	Customer Service Assistant	Not in a relationship
Sunflower	23	Cis woman	Bisexual	Caucasian	Portuguese	Supermarket Assistant	Not in a relationship

Participants were selected through sampling based on specific inclusion criteria aligned with the research objectives. To be eligible, individuals were required to: identify as a queer woman, encompassing non-heterosexual sexual orientations and/or non-cisgender identities; be over the age of eighteen; and have current or previous work experience for a minimum of three months. This approach ensured that participants possessed relevant lived experiences related to workplace dynamics and potential exposure to harassment. The sample was intentionally diverse to capture a range of intersectional experiences, particularly across dimensions of gender, sexuality, age, and ethnicity. This diversity allowed for a richer exploration of how overlapping identities shape both vulnerability to workplace harassment and the strategies individuals employ to navigate such environments.

The findings are organised into four overarching themes: Intersectional Vulnerability in the Workplace; Normalisation of Harassment; Strategic Identity Management as a Survival Mechanism; Consequences of Intersectional Discrimination. The presented themes were developed through a reflexive analysis of the data, which included repeated readings of the interview transcripts and deep familiarization with the participants' narratives; an inductive coding approach, which allowed themes to emerge from the data, considering both explicit

accounts of workplace experiences but also underlying subtleties; and then grouping the initial codes into broader categories based on shared meanings. The final themes were defined and named to reflect both descriptive patterns and their broader analytical significance. Throughout the process, a reflexive stance was maintained, recognising my active role in interpreting the data while ensuring that the analysis remained closely grounded in participants' narratives.

5. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from the qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with queer women across diverse organisational contexts. The analysis focuses on how participants experience, interpret, and navigate workplace harassment through the lens of intersectionality. The findings are organised into a set of interconnected themes that reflect both the structural and individual dimensions of these experiences. These include intersectional vulnerability in the workplace, the normalisation of harassment, heteronormativity and the dynamics of visibility, and strategic identity management as a survival mechanism, as well as the consequences of intersectional discrimination. Together, these themes illustrate how workplace harassment is not only experienced as a set of isolated incidents, but as embedded within broader organisational cultures and power structures that intersect with multiple, overlapping dimensions of identity, thereby shaping how individuals experience, interpret, and respond to discrimination.

Table 2. Thematic Coding Framework

Theme	Code	Description
Intersectional Vulnerability in the Workplace	Gendered power imbalances	Experiences shaped by one's gender in male-dominated or gendered environments.
	Sexuality-based marginalisation	Marginalisation or disadvantage resulting from non-heterosexual identity.

	Age-related vulnerability	Being younger associated with lack of authority or increased exposure to harassment.
Normalisation of Harassment	Heteronormative assumptions	Sexuality invalidation, heteronormative pressure, assumptions of heterosexuality.
	Sexualisation and objectification	Being sexualised or treated through a gendered lens.
	Lack of organisational response	Failure of organisations to act on complaints or regulate discriminatory behaviour.
	"Joking" as discrimination	Discriminatory comments framed as humour, jokes, or harmless remarks.
	Microaggressions	Subtle, often indirect, everyday discriminatory remarks or behaviours.
Strategic Identity Management as a Survival Mechanism	Selective disclosure	Choosing when and to whom to disclose aspects of identity.
	Self-censorship	Anticipatory self-regulation to avoid negative consequences.
	Resistance and direct assertion	Actively challenging or correcting discriminatory assumptions or behaviours.
	Avoidance strategies	Avoiding people, spaces or situations perceived as unsafe.
	Emotional detachment	Distancing emotionally from workplace interactions as protection.

Consequences of Intersectional Discrimination	Emotional distress	Experiences of anxiety, stress, panic or emotional upset linked to workplace dynamics.
	Reduced sense of belonging	Feeling excluded, isolated or not fully accepted in the workplace.
	Withdrawal and disengagement	Withdrawing from colleagues, conversations, activities or spaces.
	Career-related concerns	Perceived or actual barriers to career progression, opportunities or recognition.
	Reinforcement of resilience	Developing coping strategies, personal strength or greater self-advocacy in response to adversity.

It is important to mention that, given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the intimate, personal character of the interviews, recruitment presented certain challenges. Discussing experiences of harassment and discrimination required participants to reflect on potentially distressing or vulnerable moments, which limited the number of individuals willing to take part. As a result, the final sample size was shaped not only by the study's inclusion criteria but also by participants' availability and comfort in sharing such experiences.

Additionally, despite efforts to recruit a diverse sample, the study did not achieve substantial ethnic diversity among participants. This limitation reflects both the challenges inherent in accessing marginalised populations for sensitive research and the constraints of time and recruitment scope. Consequently, while the study provides valuable insights into intersectional experiences, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, the findings are less representative of the full range of ethnic and cultural perspectives, which should be considered

when interpreting the results.

5.1 Intersectional Vulnerability in the Workplace

Participants' experiences reveal that vulnerability to harassment is shaped not by a single identity category, but by the intersection of gender, sexuality, age, and, to a lesser extent in this sample, ethnicity. Across interviews, gender emerged as a central axis of vulnerability, often interacting with sexuality and age to produce specific forms of marginalisation. Although I initially did not intend to focus on the aspect of age, it emerged as a significant dimension during the analysis. Participants' narratives repeatedly highlighted how age intersected with gender and sexuality in shaping their vulnerability to harassment, leading to its inclusion as a relevant factor within the intersectional framework.

Several participants highlighted how being young women (20-27) in male-dominated environments increased their exposure to inappropriate behaviour. For instance, Dahlia described a work environment in which sexist and homophobic remarks were frequent among her male colleagues. Although she was not often the direct target of these comments, this was largely because she was "barely acknowledged" within the group. She noted that her male coworkers afforded her little importance; however, when an older female colleague was present, these behaviours ceased entirely. This contrast suggests that Dahlia's marginalisation was closely tied to her position as a younger woman, whose presence was perceived as less authoritative or consequential. Similarly, Sunflower reported feeling more connected to younger coworkers, while describing older colleagues as sources of pressure and alienation, reinforcing generational dynamics within workplace hierarchies. Aster's experience further illustrates this intersection of gender and age. She described being consistently objectified by both colleagues and supervisors, with comments framing her as a distraction to male workers. Notably, when asked whether these behaviours were directed at others, she responded, "I don't know if it happened to others, but ever since I arrived, it's only happened to me." highlighting

the targeted and gendered nature of these interactions. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate how gendered power relations, when combined with age, can produce heightened and differentiated forms of vulnerability.

Sexuality further compounded this vulnerability, particularly in environments perceived as less inclusive. While some participants worked in relatively supportive settings, others reported regulating the visibility of their sexual identity in anticipation of negative reactions. For example, although Lily does not actively conceal her bisexuality among trusted colleagues, she expressed discomfort in disclosing it in the presence of her employers, whose political views she perceives as potentially hostile. Likewise, Dahlia chose to conceal her sexual orientation entirely, fearing ridicule and exclusion within a conservative newsroom environment. Sunflower similarly noted that awareness of her coworkers' conservative beliefs limited her ability to fully express herself at work.

An important dimension of intersectional vulnerability that emerged from the data related to the experiences of bisexual and pansexual participants in heteronormative relationships. For participants such as Rose and Iris, being in relationships with men often resulted in their sexual identity being rendered invisible within the workplace. This "heterosexual passing" provided a form of conditional protection from direct discrimination, as their identities were not immediately perceived as non-normative. However, this apparent protection was accompanied by a distinct set of tensions. Both participants acknowledged that their current relationships shielded them from potential bias, while simultaneously recognising that this protection was situational and fragile. Iris explicitly reflected that, had she been in a same-sex relationship, her experiences in previous workplaces would likely have been markedly different, highlighting an anticipatory awareness of discrimination. Nonetheless, her heterosexual relationship did not fully insulate her from gendered and heteronormative scrutiny. She noted that her boyfriend, for being "gentler" and "calmer", was subject to

insinuations about his masculinity, revealing how normative expectations around gender roles extend beyond the individual to their partners.

This dynamic illustrates a key tension within intersectionality: while certain configurations of identity may reduce exposure to discrimination in specific moments, they can simultaneously produce forms of erasure and constraint. In this case, heteronormative relationships function as both a protective factor and a limiting one, shaping not only how participants are perceived by others, but also how they choose to navigate their own visibility in the workplace.

5.2 Normalisation of Harassment

A recurring theme across participants' narratives is the normalisation of discriminatory behaviours within workplace environments. Harassment was often framed as humour, banter or part of organisational culture, which contributed to its persistence and reduced the likelihood of it being challenged. Several participants described environments where inappropriate comments were routine and widely tolerated.

Rose's experience illustrates how this normalisation operates in practice. She described initially interpreting her supervisor's behaviour as harmless curiosity and friendliness, however, this perception shifted when the interactions became increasingly personal, frequent, and occasionally suggestive, extending to text messages which made her uncomfortable. This moment was one of the turning points, where what had been rationalised as benign behaviour was reinterpreted as inappropriate and uncomfortable.

In several of her previous roles, Iris reported being subjected to sexualised comments and behaviours that were often framed as jokes or casual remarks. For instance, a colleague who was aware of her bisexuality frequently made sexual jokes, including comments about threesomes, which, although presented humorously, left her feeling uncomfortable. This dynamic reflects how disclosure of sexual identity can become a basis for inappropriate

sexualisation. Additionally, Iris recounted experiences of physical boundary violations in one of her early full-time jobs, while she was still a minor, where older male colleagues would graze her legs or engage with her in suggestive ways. These behaviours were largely dismissed and normalized within the workplace, reinforcing a culture in which such actions were minimised rather than addressed. Moreover, in another role, a supervisor explicitly suggested that she should wear more revealing clothing during the summer to attract customers, demonstrating how organisational expectations can directly objectify women's bodies as part of business strategy.

Lily's account further reinforces how discriminatory attitudes are embedded within everyday workplace interactions, often expressed through casual remarks that go unchallenged. She reported witnessing homophobic comments from colleagues, contributing to an environment where prejudice is subtly normalised. This pattern is echoed across multiple participants. Dahlia described a newsroom culture in which sexist and homophobic remarks were frequent and dismissed as humour, while Aster similarly experienced objectification and persistent, intrusive questioning about her sexuality from both colleagues and supervisors. Violet's experience illustrates a more direct form of invalidation: despite being openly lesbian, she was repeatedly subjected to advances from older male coworkers and pressured by supervisors to pursue relationships with men, including being encouraged to date a manager's son. Her sexuality was routinely dismissed through comments suggesting she was "confused" or needed to "try men", reflecting a broader tendency to invalidate queer identities.

In Daisy's case, discrimination operated through more subtle but equally harmful dynamics. She reported hearing comments that framed her attraction to women as a "waste" while also observing differential treatment between herself and a more masculine-presenting lesbian colleague. Whereas the latter was treated more like "one of the men", Daisy was instead sexualised, with behaviours justified under the guise of chivalry rather than recognised as

sexism. In another role, she was also advised against wearing clothes deemed too revealing, as that would draw too much attention, reinforcing the policing of female bodies in the workplace. Similarly, Sunflower recounted witnessing a situation in which an older male colleague attempted to set his son up with a female coworker, when the coworker disclosed she had a girlfriend, his reaction shifted to hostility, expressing that it was "shameful" and attributing her sexuality to a lack of experience with men. Together, these accounts highlight how homophobia, sexism, and heteronormativity are often intertwined, manifesting through everyday interactions that are trivialised, justified, or ignored, thereby reinforcing the normalisation of harassment across different workplace contexts.

5.3 Strategic Identity Management as a Survival Mechanism

In response to these environments, participants frequently engaged in strategic identity management, consciously regulating how and when they expressed aspects of their identity. This theme emerged as a key coping mechanism, allowing individuals to navigate potentially hostile or uncertain workplace contexts. A common strategy involved selective disclosure. Many participants chose to share their sexual orientation only with trusted colleagues, while remaining silent in broader organisational contexts. Rose, for example, described maintaining a "professional mask", limiting personal disclosures to avoid potential repercussions. Similarly, Lily referred to presenting a "curated version" of herself, emphasising the distinction between her authentic identity and the version she felt safe expressing at work. In more restrictive environments, participants adopted more explicit forms of concealment. Dahlia deliberately avoided any reference to her bisexuality, while also modifying her clothing choices and behaviour to minimise attention. Iris similarly reported hiding her sexual identity in certain workplaces, particularly those characterised by toxic or unsupportive behaviours. Other participants, such as Aster and Sunflower, described a more nuanced approach to identity disclosure, in which they did not actively conceal their sexuality, yet remained selective and

context-aware in how and when they expressed it.

These strategies were not only reactive but also proactive, reflecting participants' awareness of potential risks. Identity management thus functioned as a form of self-protection, enabling individuals to maintain a sense of control within environments where full authenticity was not always possible.

5.4 Consequences of Intersectional Discrimination

The cumulative impact of these experiences was evident across participants' narratives, with consequences manifesting at emotional, psychological, and professional levels. Emotionally, several participants reported feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and frustration. Violet, for instance, described experiencing panic attacks in anticipation of encountering a colleague who had previously made her feel unsafe, alongside a tendency to internalise blame. Similarly, Iris reflected on the longer-term emotional impact of her experiences, noting a growing sense of distrust and heightened sensitivity toward male behaviour. Aster also reported that the persistent objectification she faced from both colleagues and supervisors contributed to increased anxiety levels. These responses highlight the psychological toll of sustained exposure to discriminatory environments.

At a behavioural level, these emotional responses translated into changes in workplace interaction and engagement. Avoidance emerged as a common coping strategy, with participants distancing themselves from certain individuals or limiting their involvement in workplace dynamics. For example, although Aster identified herself as naturally introverted, she initially made efforts to engage more actively and contribute to a positive work environment. However, these attempts were quickly discouraged by mocking and dismissive remarks from colleagues, leading her to withdraw. Violet similarly described restraining herself from responding to homophobic comments, fearing that confrontation could negatively affect her position or workplace relationships. Sunflower also reported withdrawing from interactions

with a colleague following a homophobic incident, describing feelings of pressure and discomfort that shaped her behaviour at work. She further reflected on how these experiences contributed to internalised homophobia, as repeated exposure to discrimination – both personally and vicariously – reinforced fears about openly expressing her identity. Likewise, Dahlia chose to avoid confronting discriminatory behaviour altogether, despite recognising its harmful impact, opting instead for silence as a means of self-protection.

I would like to highlight an excerpt from my interview with Dahlia, as it particularly stood out to me, and encapsulates the internal conflict experienced by several participants. Reflecting on her experience, she stated:

> "They were talking about me, for sure, but I've always been very sensitive to other people's pain – that's my activist side – and not being able to use that side of me to protect the people I cared about within the company left me feeling hurt and made me wonder… why did not I ever have the courage to speak up?"

This account illustrates not only the emotional burden associated with witnessing and experiencing discrimination, but also the frustration and self-questioning that can arise when individuals feel unable to act. Dahlia's reflection highlights how workplace environments can suppress forms of resistance, leading individuals to internalise responsibility for their silence, even when such silence is shaped by broader power dynamics and fears of retaliation.

Professional consequences were also evident, particularly in relation to career satisfaction and aspirations. Dahlia explicitly linked her negative workplace experience to her decision to momentarily stray away from her field, suggesting that discrimination can influence long-term career trajectories. Similarly, several participants expressed concerns about future opportunities, particularly in male-dominated industries where they anticipated continued bias.

These patterns illustrate how intersectional discrimination not only affects individuals emotionally but also reshapes their behaviour, often limiting their agency, participation, and sense of belonging within the workplace.

5.5 Summary of Findings

The findings outlined in the previous section demonstrate that workplace harassment among queer women is shaped by the intersection of multiple identity dimensions and reinforced through everyday organisational practices. Rather than occurring as isolated incidents, harassment is frequently normalised, subtle, and embedded within routine interpersonal dynamics, making it difficult to identify, challenge, or formally address. Moreover, this normalisation is often compounded by organisational inaction, as companies fail to adequately respond to or acknowledge such behaviours. As a result, employees become discouraged from speaking out and may even fear potential repercussions, including social exclusion, professional disadvantage, or retaliation. This creates a cycle in which harassment is both sustained and silenced, further entrenching its presence within workplace cultures.

Participants navigate these environments through strategic identity management, balancing authenticity with self-protection. However, these strategies come at a cost, contributing to emotional distress, reduced workplace engagement, and, in some cases, altered career paths.

These insights provide a nuanced understanding of how intersectionality operates within workplace contexts, highlighting the need for organisational approaches that move beyond surface-level inclusion to address deeper cultural and structural inequalities.

6. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how queer women experience and navigate workplace harassment through an intersectional lens. The findings reveal that harassment is not

experienced in the form of isolated incidents, but rather as part of broader organisational cultures and interpersonal dynamics shaped by gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identity dimensions. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the existing literature, highlighting both alignments and contributions to current research, along with directly responding to the research questions outlined earlier in this dissertation.

6.1 How does intersectionality play a role in one's vulnerability to harassment at work?

The findings strongly support the central premise of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), demonstrating that vulnerability to workplace harassment is shaped by the interaction of multiple identity dimensions rather than any single characteristic. Participants' experiences revealed that gender, sexuality, and age operate simultaneously, producing distinct and compounded forms of disadvantage.

Gender emerged as a primary axis of vulnerability, particularly in male-dominated environments, where participants such as Dahlia and Aster experienced marginalisation, objectification, and diminished authority. However, these experiences were not uniform, rather, they were intensified when combined with other identity markers. Age, although not initially a focal point of the study, became a significant factor, as younger participants were frequently perceived as less authoritative and more easily targeted.

Sexuality further compounded this vulnerability. Participants who were openly queer or perceived as such reported higher exposure to harassment, particularly in environments characterised by conservative or heteronormative norms. At the same time, those in heteronormative relationships experienced a form of "conditional protection," illustrating how certain identity configurations may temporarily reduce visibility while simultaneously producing erasure. This reflects the dynamic and context-dependent nature of intersectionality, where privilege and disadvantage coexist in complex ways.

While the majority of participants reported experiences consistent with intersectional

vulnerability, Peony's account offers an important contrast. Unlike other participants, Peony did not report experiencing direct forms of intersectional harassment in her workplace. This divergence highlights that intersectionality does not operate as a uniform or deterministic framework, rather, it is shaped by context, organisational culture, and specific workplace dynamics. Peony's experience suggests that, in certain environments, organisational practices or team dynamics may mitigate the expression of discriminatory behaviours, even for individuals who hold marginalised identities. As a non-binary lesbian, her identity could be expected, within an intersectional framework, to increase vulnerability. However, her lack of reported negative experiences indicates that inclusive or neutral environments can disrupt expected patterns of marginalisation. This reinforces the importance of contextual factors in shaping how intersectionality is experienced in practice.

6.2 How do gay women perceive and deal with discrimination in the workplace?

Participants' perceptions of discrimination reveal a nuanced understanding of workplace dynamics, where harassment is often recognised but not always immediately labelled as such. Many initially interpreted inappropriate behaviours as humour, curiosity, or part of workplace culture, only later re-evaluating them as discriminatory. Rose's experience, for instance, illustrates how boundaries are gradually crossed in ways that blur the distinction between acceptable and inappropriate conduct.

In response to these environments, participants employed a range of coping strategies, most notably strategic identity management. This included selective disclosure, self-censorship, and behavioural adaptation. Individuals such as Dahlia and Iris actively concealed aspects of their identity in order to avoid potential hostility, while others, like Aster and Sunflower, adopted a more context-dependent approach, remaining aware of when visibility might pose a risk.

6.3 In what form do interpersonal relationships at work affect one's mental, emotional and physical wellbeing?

The patterns observed demonstrate that interpersonal workplace relationships play a critical role in shaping participants' wellbeing, often acting as both the site of discrimination and the mechanism through which its effects are sustained.

Emotionally, participants reported anxiety, discomfort, frustration, and, in some cases, panic attacks. Violet's anticipation of encountering a colleague who made her feel unsafe, as well as Iris's long-term distrust of men, highlight the enduring psychological impact of these experiences.

Behaviourally, these emotional responses translated into withdrawal, avoidance, and reduced engagement. Participants often distanced themselves from colleagues, avoided certain spaces, or refrained from participating fully in workplace interactions. This reflects a broader pattern in which harassment not only affects individuals internally but also reshapes their behaviour and limits their agency within organisational settings.

At a deeper level, interpersonal relationships influenced participants' sense of belonging and identity. Dahlia's reflection on her inability to speak up illustrates the internal conflict and self-questioning that can arise in environments where resistance feels unsafe. This demonstrates how workplace dynamics can suppress not only self-expression but also advocacy, reinforcing existing power imbalances. Similarly, Sunflower's experience highlights how these environments can shape internal processes of identity. She described how repeated exposure to homophobic attitudes and the anticipation of negative reactions led her to withdraw and limit her self-expression, reinforcing feelings of internalised homophobia. Rather than existing independently, these internal struggles were shaped by external workplace dynamics, and fuelled by work experiences, illustrating how discrimination operates not only at an interpersonal level but also becomes internalised, influencing how individuals perceive

themselves and regulate their behaviour.

These findings can be further understood through the lens of minority stress theory, a framework that suggests that discrepancies in health and wellbeing between LGBTQ+ individuals and their cisgender heterosexual counterparts are not inherent, but produced by processes of stigmatisation, discrimination, and social exclusion (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Within such cis/heteronormative structures, stressors are not isolated incidents but are embedded in everyday interactions and organisational practices, contributing to ongoing exposure to marginalisation. More specifically, this theory distinguishes between distal and proximal stressors experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Distal stressors refer to external forms of discrimination, such as microaggressions, harassment, exclusion, and structural inequalities within the workplace. These were clearly reflected across participants' narratives, particularly in the form of "everyday" discrimination, including jokes, sexual comments, and heteronormative assumptions. However, these external experiences also gave rise to proximal stressors, which operate internally and include emotional and psychological responses such as anxiety, identity concealment, and internalised homophobia, which can be seen particularly in Sunflower's experiences (Donaghy & Perales, 2022).

6.4 What kind of harassment is the most prevalent one?

The narratives collected indicate that the most prevalent forms of harassment are subtle, normalised, and embedded within everyday interactions, rather than explicitly aggressive behaviours. These include microaggressions, sexualisation, heteronormative assumptions, and discriminatory "jokes". Participants consistently described environments in which harassment was framed as humour or banter, allowing it to persist without being challenged. The findings indicate that informal organisational cultures may contribute to the normalisation of harassment by making harmful behaviours appear less serious, especially when they are presented as jokes, banter, or part of everyday workplace dynamics. Sexualisation and objectification were

particularly common, especially among younger participants. Comments about appearance, inappropriate physical contact, and expectations related to attracting customers illustrate how women's bodies are often instrumentalised within workplace contexts. At the same time, homophobic remarks and invalidation of queer identities were also prevalent, often expressed through seemingly casual or dismissive language.

These findings suggest that harassment operates less through isolated incidents and more through accumulated, everyday practices, which collectively create hostile work environments.

6.5 In what way do some identities predominate over others?

This study reveals that certain identity dimensions become more salient depending on the context, shaping how individuals are perceived and treated within the workplace.

Gender consistently emerged as the most dominant axis, influencing participants' experiences across all contexts. However, sexuality became particularly salient in interactions involving disclosure, visibility, or deviation from heteronormative expectations. In these moments, participants' sexual identity often overshadowed other aspects of their identity, becoming the primary lens through which they were interpreted.

At the same time, the findings highlight how heteronormativity functions as a regulating force, privileging identities that align with dominant norms. Participants in heterosexual-presenting relationships experienced a degree of protection, while those who were openly queer faced increased scrutiny and discrimination. This demonstrates how certain identities are not only more visible but also more vulnerable within organisational hierarchies.

Additionally, age influenced how participants were perceived in terms of authority and credibility, reinforcing existing power dynamics. Younger participants were more likely to be dismissed, objectified, or excluded, indicating that age intersects with gender and sexuality to shape hierarchical positioning within the workplace.

6.6 How do we achieve intersectional equality?

Achieving intersectional equality is inherently complex and difficult to address, as there is no single, definitive solution to achieving equality, rather, it involves an ongoing process of gradual progress. For this reason, each interview concluded with the following questions: “What would help you feel more comfortable in your organisation?” and “What can organisations do in order to foster a safe environment for everyone?”. These questions were intentionally designed to centre the perspectives of individuals who have directly experienced the challenges discussed above. By inviting participants to reflect on what was lacking and what they needed, this approach aimed to generate insights grounded in lived experience, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how organisations might move towards greater inclusivity and equity.

Participants’ reflections on what would make them feel more comfortable in the workplace, and how organisations could foster safer and more inclusive environments, revealed a consistent emphasis on both structural and interpersonal change.

At an organisational level, participants highlighted the importance of clear accountability mechanisms, including stronger monitoring, fairer management practices, and the possibility of reporting misconduct without fear of repercussions, as noted by Iris and Aster. Iris also stressed the importance of formal training on workplace conduct, suggesting that organisations should actively educate employees on appropriate behaviour and inclusion, rather than assuming awareness. Similarly, Dahlia pointed to the need for structured conversations and training spaces where discriminatory behaviours can be challenged openly.

At a cultural level, participants emphasised the role of everyday workplace dynamics. Lily and Peony highlighted the importance of supportive colleagues and meaningful interpersonal connections as key to feeling safe and included, suggesting that inclusion is not only policy-driven but relational. Rose further noted that reducing judgement around

appearance, such as clothing or self-expression, and creating more relaxed and accepting environments could significantly improve comfort. Meanwhile, Aster stressed the need for a more collaborative and less competitive workplace culture, where colleagues support rather than undermine one another.

Across accounts, a common thread emerged: participants did not necessarily call for radical structural transformation, but rather for consistent respect, accountability, and openness in everyday interactions. These insights reinforce the broader findings of this study, demonstrating that achieving intersectional equality requires both formal organisational measures and the transformation of informal workplace cultures that sustain exclusion and discomfort.

7. CONCLUSION

Overall, this dissertation concludes that workplace harassment cannot be fully understood as a set of isolated incidents but must instead be analysed as a phenomenon shaped by intersecting identities, organisational cultures, and unequal power relations. The findings show that queer women's experiences of harassment are influenced by the interaction of gender, sexuality, age, and, to a more limited extent in this sample, ethnicity. Harassment frequently appeared in subtle and normalised forms, such as sexualised comments, discriminatory jokes, heteronormative assumptions, identity invalidation, and microaggressions, which were often embedded in everyday interpersonal workplace dynamics. These experiences affected participants not only emotionally and psychologically, but also behaviourally and professionally, leading to anxiety, withdrawal, self-censorship, selective disclosure, and, in some cases, altered career aspirations.

Theoretically, this study contributes to intersectionality theory by demonstrating how overlapping identities shape vulnerability to harassment in complex and context-dependent ways, while also contributing to role congruity theory by showing how individuals may be

judged or treated negatively when their identities do not align with dominant workplace expectations. In practical terms, the findings highlight the need for organisations to move beyond surface-level diversity policies and adopt more intersectional approaches to inclusion, including clearer reporting mechanisms, accountability structures, inclusive training, and everyday cultures of respect and support.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations, particularly its small sample size, the limited ethnic diversity among participants, and its qualitative and context-specific nature, which means that the findings cannot be generalised to all queer women or all organisational settings. Future research should therefore explore larger and more diverse samples, include greater ethnic, racial, class, and age diversity, and consider comparative studies across sectors, countries, and organisational cultures. Further research could also examine how organisational policies are experienced in practice, particularly whether existing reporting procedures, diversity initiatives, and anti-harassment mechanisms are perceived as accessible, trustworthy, and effective by employees with intersecting marginalised identities. This would help bridge the gap between formal organisational commitments to inclusion and the everyday realities of those who experience discrimination in the workplace.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Guide

Starting questions:

- Before we start, I'd like to ask you: would you be comfortable discussing your gender identity, sexuality and ethnicity for the purpose of this study?
- Can you tell me about yourself and your story?

About the workplace:

- Are you currently employed?
    - For how long have you been working?
- What was/is your position/role at work?
- How would you classify your work environment?
- Did/do you feel safe in your workplace?
    - If yes:
        - What made you feel that way?
    - If not:
        - What made you feel unsafe?
- Did/do you feel comfortable being yourself at work?
    - If yes:
        - Were/are you open about your identity in your workplace?
    - If not:
        - What made you feel uncomfortable?
        - Did you feel the need to change or hide any aspects of yourself in order to fit in?

Regarding interpersonal relationships:

- How was/is your relationship with your peers?
    - Would you consider any of them close friends?
- How was/is your relationship with your superiors?

- Have you experienced discriminatory comments/discriminatory behaviours from peers or superiors?
    - If yes:
        - Can you tell me about what happened? (Who, when, why)
        - In what ways was it portrayed? (Direct/indirect; verbal/physical; etc…)
        - How did you deal with the incident?
        - How did it affect you?
    - If not:
        - Do you feel included and accepted in your workplace?
        - (Continue with questions below ↓)

About the workplace – part 2:

- Have you ever felt excluded from organizational social events due to your identity?
- Do you feel like there are career progression barriers due to your identity?
- How do you express your identity at work?

Ending questions:

- Do you feel like your relationship with your identity has been hindered due to third-party discrimination?
- What would help you become more comfortable in your organization?
- What can organizations do in order to foster a safe environment for everyone?

After the completion of the interview, I will then include a section to cooldown and reflect upon what was talked about. This will be optional with the objective of ensuring the participant is well and satisfied with the session.

Appendix B – Informed Consent Form

Consentimento Informado Livre e Esclarecido

Título do estudo: *Harassment and Intersectionality at the Workplace*

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1. Objetivo do estudo

Este estudo tem como objetivo explorar de que forma o género, a sexualidade e a etnia influenciam as experiências individuais e a vulnerabilidade ao assédio em contextos profissionais. Mais especificamente, compreender como mulheres *queer* vivenciam e gerem situações de discriminação no local de trabalho, no contexto das relações interpessoais, a partir de uma perspetiva interseccional.

2. Procedimento

A participação consiste numa entrevista individual semiestruturada, com duração aproximada de 30 minutos, realizada em português ou inglês, em formato online ou presencial, conforme a preferência da participante. A entrevista será gravada em áudio para fins de transcrição e análise.

3. Riscos e desconfortos

A entrevista poderá abordar temas sensíveis, podendo causar algum desconforto emocional. A participante pode interromper a entrevista, recusar responder a qualquer questão ou desistir a qualquer momento, sem qualquer penalização.

4. Benefícios

Não existem benefícios diretos para a participante, mas os resultados poderão contribuir para o conhecimento científico sobre discriminação e inclusão no local de trabalho.

5. Confidencialidade e anonimato

Todas as informações serão tratadas de forma confidencial. Os dados serão pseudonimizados, sendo utilizados códigos ou pseudónimos. Nenhuma informação que permita a identificação das participantes será divulgada.

6. Direito de desistência

A participação é voluntária. A participante pode desistir a qualquer momento, sendo eliminados os dados recolhidos até esse momento.

7. Armazenamento e eliminação dos dados

Os dados serão armazenados em dispositivos protegidos por palavra-passe e eliminados após a conclusão da dissertação, sendo as transcrições anonimizadas conservadas por um período máximo de cinco anos.

Declaração de Consentimento

Declaro que fui informada sobre os objetivos, procedimentos, riscos e benefícios do estudo e que concordo voluntariamente em participar.

Nome da participante: _____

Assinatura: _____

Data: ____ / ____ / _____