

Article

Sexual Harassment in Academia: Analysis of Opinion Articles in the Portuguese Press

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Abstract: #MeToo furthered the debates about sexual harassment in academia in different contexts and locations. In Portugal, two moments drove the media debates around sexual harassment in higher education. Specifically, the allegations that emerged at the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon (FDUL) in 2022, and the case related to the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra in 2023. This study aimed to investigate the media coverage of these cases and their respective contributions to the national debate on sexual harassment in academia. We analysed the opinion articles published online between April 2022 and June 2023 in five Portuguese newspapers, *Diário de Notícias*, *Jornal de Notícias*, *Público*, *Expresso*, *Observador*, and *Correio da Manhã*, conducting a comparative analysis of the two cases. Sexual harassment was broadly discussed as an endemic reality, exacerbated by the precariousness and gendered hierarchical structures of academia. At the same time, there was a tendency to personalize the debate, by focusing on Boaventura Sousa Santos, CES's emeritus director. This served as a basis for the instrumentalization of sexual violence as a form of political attack against the left, thus weakening the potential of the debates about sexual and moral harassment in academia.



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1. Introduction

1.1. #MeToo in Academia

The concept of sexual harassment is linked to Lin Farley, a staff member at Cornell University, who, in 1975, talked about sexual harassment as unwanted sexual advances against women in the workplace (Farley, 2017; Eckert et al., 2022). The concept was fostered by Catharine MacKinnon's landmark book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (MacKinnon, 1979), which framed it as sex discrimination.

Since then, some legal reforms and several quantitative studies about sexual harassment in higher education unfolded over the years, despite society's overwhelmingly persistent victim-blaming and the media's tendency to approach sexual violence as isolated cases rather than a social problem (Eckert et al., 2022). Existing research describes sexual harassment in academia as pervasive and markedly gendered, producing negative health impacts, affecting victim-survivors psychologically and professionally, and reproducing inequalities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Täuber et al., 2022; Valls et al., 2016).

The #MeToo mediatization in 2017 prompted a new visibility of sexual harassment, also in higher education, marking a shift in public awareness of sexual violence more broadly. Certainly, significant protests happened before #MeToo in different locations, such as South Africa, in 2016 (McCall, 2019), Spain, and the USA (Joanpere et al., 2022); nevertheless, in the words of D'Agostino and Elias (2020), “[p]rior to the onset of the #MeToo movement, sexual harassment and violence in academia received little attention” (p. 1109).

In December 2017, an anonymous online survey with the accompanying #MeTooPhD hashtag was shared online to collect stories of sexual harassment in academia (Kelsky, 2017). The reported stories showed a range of experiences, including verbal harassment, sexist jokes, unwanted touch, and sexualized attention (Kelsky, 2017; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). The debates on gendered imbalanced power in academia gained new traction in different countries and academic fields (e.g., in medicine, STEM, anthropology, and geography, McCall, 2019; Jagsi, 2018). Discussions on epistemological injustices (Ennsner-Kananen, 2019), the pervasive precarity and inequalities in academia (Täuber et al., 2022), and the impacts of sexual harassment on women's careers (Mansfield et al., 2019) were infused with new visibility. In this context, solidarity networks were forged (for instance, MeToo University in Spain) (Joanpere et al., 2022). Institutional report mechanisms, as well as policies to prevent sexual harassment across higher education, were created or revised. Indeed, the potential gains of #MeToo are neither homogenous nor linear. They cannot be taken for granted, nor are they equally rooted in the voices and experiences of all victim-survivors. Writing in 2018, Anna Sicari affirmed that “[t]he #MeToo movement, with its rapid pace and platform for all voices, has the potential to have lasting and positive impact on the academy; for similar reasons, it has the potential to fade away” (Sicari, 2018, p. 200). Several years post #MeToo, expressions of backlash have been strong—among them the increase in defamation cases brought against women who speak out and media and publishers who disseminate their voices—and marginalized voices continue to remain sidelined in the debates about sexual harassment in academia (Goddén-Rasul & Serisier, 2024, p. 256; Robinson & Yoshida, 2023). A study conducted in the UK with findings up until the end of 2021 concluded that, despite many examples of good practices, “there are significant structural barriers to case handling for GBVH being effective and fair” (Bull & Shannon, 2023, p. 54).

Research on media practices and narratives surrounding violence against women post-#MeToo has shown how journalistic practices and the reception of #MeToo are shaped by cultural, religious, and political contexts. In the European context, for instance, Cerqueira et al. (2023) found contradictory discourses and ambivalence toward #MeToo and feminism in the Portuguese press. In Spain, Brandariz Portela and Sosa Sánchez's (2022) analysis of the Spanish press showed that reporting on #MeToo mostly focused on celebrities and lacked an intersectional approach. Eilermann's study (Eilermann, 2018) on newspaper coverage of #MeToo in Germany found that, while some articles legitimized the movement, others openly contested it, and some framed it as a complex issue. Overall, there was little room for marginalized voices. Additionally, a study comparing news coverage of #MeToo in Sweden and Denmark revealed significant differences in media framing between the two Scandinavian countries. While Swedish newspapers tended to frame #MeToo as a broader political movement, Danish newspapers often delegitimized it—either by portraying it as a campaign without real impact or as “a witch hunt against men” (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2019).

1.2. #MeToo in Portugal

Scientific research on the #MeToo movement in Portugal is still limited, particularly regarding sexual harassment in academia. Initially, Portuguese news coverage of #MeToo echoed the cases reported by the U.S. press, which involved Hollywood celebrities and men with political profiles, thus having high news value. The news coverage tended to be descriptive and case-specific, following high-profile international cases and overlooking broader discussions on violence against women (Almeida, 2019; Amante et al., 2023; Garraio, 2023).

The repercussions of #MeToo abruptly entered Portugal in 2018 with the *Der Spiegel* report on the accusation against footballer Cristiano Ronaldo. Given his outstanding celebrity status, most reactions were marked by the strong defence of Ronaldo and the blaming and disbelieving of Kathryn Mayorga, the woman who accused him of rape (Garraio, 2023; Garraio et al., 2020).

A national version of #MeToo erupted only in 2021 under the hashtag #EuTambém, after a television interview given by actress Sofia Arruda, in which she shared that she had been a victim of sexual harassment by a television producer. Arruda recounted the producer's "suggestive" approach and the threat of professional exclusion if she did not comply, which eventually occurred. This mediatic moment was followed by several accounts from public figures—mainly from the artistic and audiovisual industries—recounting experiences of sexual harassment (Roque et al., 2024; Roqueta-Fernández & Caldeira, 2023).

Research about sexual harassment in Portuguese higher education institutions is still scarce and focused on students' experiences and perceptions of harassment (e.g., Amorim, 2021; FAL et al., 2019; Melo, 2019; Neto, 2020). Leite (2001), a scholar who initiated the study on sexual harassment in academia in the late 1990s, has described the discredit from her peers (Carvalho & Santos, 2023). Later, a researcher reported having had her research project on sexual harassment in academia blocked by a university in Lisbon, advising her to change her subject and claiming that there was no record of sexual harassment against students (F. Costa, 2020).

In 2022 and 2023, two key moments assumed particular importance, driving the media debates around sexual harassment in higher education. Specifically, the allegations that emerged at the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon (FDUL) in 2022 and the case that came to the public at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra in 2023. Also, in 2023 (shortly before the "CES case" was made public), the national debate on sexual violence was amplified by the hypervisibility of the public presentation of the report from the Independent Commission for the Study of Sexual Abuse of Children in the Portuguese Catholic Church.

1.3. Sexual Harassment Allegations at Universities in Portugal: The FDUL and CES Cases

The sexual harassment allegations at the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon (FDUL) became widely known in April 2022, following a report by *Diário de Notícias*, which revealed that "10% of the faculty professors" had been "accused of harassment and discrimination" (Câncio, 2022). The news highlighted 50 validated complaints, received in 11 days, made to the Faculty (22 related to sexual harassment) through a channel created by the Student Association—with the support of a professor, Miguel de Lemos. Incidents of sexual harassment, as well as moral harassment based on "discriminatory practices, sexism (. . .) xenophobia/racism, and homophobia" were reportedly already known to students, who warned each other about the behaviour of certain professors. The FDUL pressed charges against Miguel de Lemos for defamation, following his remarks at a Faculty council meeting, where he accused some members of the institution of covering up the complaints of sexual harassment (E. Santos, 2022).

Subsequently, the Faculty's administration announced the creation of a dedicated email address for reporting complaints and the establishment of a Victim Support Office. However, reportedly, the office received no support requests. This lack of engagement was attributed to students' perception of inadequate confidentiality guarantees. According to a news report (Horta, 2024), ten complaints were made through the cited email, but none led to disciplinary proceedings. A year later, the dismissal of the complaints sent to the Public Prosecutor's Office was made public. It concluded that the lack of identification of victims, perpetrators, and other critical details led to the closure of the investigation. Two years later, the press reported the Faculty's intention to create an "independent commission to prevent abuse". Simultaneously, the new administration downplayed the seriousness of the initial allegations, framing them as a generational mismatch regarding behaviours previously socially tolerated, along with opportunism by those seeking attention: "There was an explosion that perhaps combined exaggeration and people eager for attention. It's normal; it's part of society" (Horta, 2024).

In April 2023, the "CES case" was triggered by the publication of the chapter "The walls spoke when no one else would" (Viaene et al., 2023), authored by Lieselotte Viaene, Catarina Laranjeiro, and Miye Nadya Tom, which depicted situations of sexual harassment and assault, intellectual "extractivism", and moral harassment at a progressive research centre, as well as institutional cover-ups by individuals in positions of responsibility. The chapter initially circulated on social media, and subsequent reporting by *Diário de Notícias* in April 2023 by journalist Fernanda Cândia (Cândia, 2023) brought the case to national attention. Cândia identified CES as the institution depicted in the chapter, its emeritus director Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a prominent left-wing intellectual and an internationally renowned sociologist known for his work on "Epistemologies of the South", as the "Star Professor", and researcher Bruno Sena Martins, a scholar specialized in racism, disability and colonialism in Portugal, as the "Apprentice".

Boaventura Sousa Santos initially dismissed the chapter as a "typical product of an ad hominem attack in which the academic world is becoming fertile. The goal is to throw mud at those who stand out and fight for a better world" (Cândia, 2023), attributing the attack to the neoliberal system: "Neoliberalism is stealing the soul of solidarity and social cohesion and creating subjectivities that channel their resentments into accusations that they know cannot be effectively countered. This is called cancel culture" (Cândia, 2023). Bruno Sena Martins described the chapter as "fantasized insinuations" (DN/Lusa, 2023) that incited "public lynching", evoking racist motivations behind the news.

Following these reactions, other women spoke out, thus intensifying media attention to the case: Bella Gonçalves, a state deputy in Brazil, told *Público* that she had been harassed by Boaventura Sousa Santos while pursuing her doctorate at CES, describing the profound impact this had on her (Silva, 2023). Moira Millán, a Mapuche activist from Argentina, was another woman cited in the Portuguese press: in a video that had been shared online before the chapter's publication, Millán openly accused Boaventura of sexual assault (J. A. Cardoso, 2023). On 17 April 2023, a group that described itself as "an international collective of women from various professional backgrounds and profiles, united by our shared experiences of violence perpetrated in academic contexts coordinated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos while we were students or researchers at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra" (*Academia sem assédio*, 2023) issued the first of several open letters. Furthermore, the "*Todas Sabemos*" [We all know] manifesto (Balona de Oliveira et al., 2023), published in *Público* and signed by more than 800 people, condemned all forms of harassment at institutions of higher education and expressed solidarity with the authors of the Routledge chapter and the women who spoke out, thus intensifying the media attention to the case.

Initially, Boaventura categorically denied the accusations. Later, he published an article in *Expresso* (B. S. Santos, 2023) where he admitted to some inappropriate behaviour—while unequivocally denying any criminal conduct—and explained some of his actions as a product of his socialization and generational context.

The scientific and political stature of Boaventura Sousa Santos amplified media interest, placing this case alongside other high-profile international cases like those involving Avital Ronell and John Comaroff. Indeed, CES's case garnered widespread media coverage, commentary, and reactions beyond Portugal. Following legal threats by a CES researcher, Routledge removed the chapter and suspended the book, prompting a wave of personal and institutional reactions. In response to the removal, several open letters (Bull et al., 2023) were published, signed by scholars from various regions of the globe, calling for the reinstatement of the chapter and the defence of academic freedom. The book is now “in a limbo state” (Goddén-Rasul & Serisier, 2024, p. 253), as described in an Editorial of *Feminist Legal Studies*, which considers that the book's retraction by Routledge “can be read as part of a wider reassertion of these epistemic hierarchies in the aftermath of #MeToo” (Goddén-Rasul & Serisier, 2024, p. 256).

In 2023, an Independent Commission was commissioned by CES to investigate the centre's internal procedures and the handling of sexual harassment complaints. The commission's report, presented in March 2024, stated that: “An analysis of all gathered information, as well as the accounts from both complainants and accused individuals that were consistent with each other, indicate patterns of abuse of power and harassment by some individuals in superior positions within the CES hierarchy” (Neves et al., 2024). Following this report, CES initiated internal inquiries about several researchers and announced its commitment to improve and implement mechanisms to prevent situations of sexual and moral harassment in the future. The Public Prosecutor's Office is currently conducting investigations following defamation complaints against the women who spoke out, which the collective of women defined as a typical case of “lawfare” to silence victims of sexual harassment (DN/Lusa, 2024).

1.4. This Study

This study aims to analyse the discourses mobilized in the Portuguese press regarding sexual harassment, specifically in the opinion sections available online. We conducted a comparative analysis of the two cases, seeking to identify dominant themes and their distinct contributions to national debates on sexual harassment. We also aim to identify common themes in the media coverage of both cases, as well as the specificities observed in the media construction of each case.

The pertinence of this comparative analysis is due not only to the importance of these cases as unparalleled triggers of media attention and national debates on sexual harassment in Portuguese academia. Moreover, FDUL and CES represent, in some ways, symbolic opposites, associated with very different political and institutional cultures. The first is markedly conservative and formalistic, while the second is seen as progressive and committed to Human Rights, Decolonial Thinking, and Feminism. This contrast highlights the interest in investigating the political framing of media visibility of sexual harassment, and how discourses, representations, interpretations, and narratives differ according to context.

This study contributes to the research about the complicated relationship between #MeToo and journalism and journalism's role in bringing decades-long behavioural patterns into the public eye. Investigative reports in *The New York Times* (Kantor & Twohey, 2017), *Times*, and *The New Yorker* (Farrow, 2017) exposed the “culture of silence” imposed on victims, often through aggressive tactics like threats and confidentiality agreements, aided

by complicity within the film industry. However, a critical analysis of #MeToo's popularity also reveals that the processes of "rendering visible" often operate through a "celebrity culture" entangled in sensationalist reporting which creates a strong network of (racialized) invisibilities (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Zarkov & Davis, 2018).

Finally, by privileging opinion pieces in the analysis corpus, this study contributes to discussing the processes of gatekeeping and representativity in mainstream journalism. As a journalistic genre, opinion pieces are largely dominated by elite voices—those with access to platforms, cultural capital, and rhetorical sophistication. These texts reflect a situated, often privileged understanding of the world, raising important questions about gatekeeping and whose perspectives are legitimized in public debates (Cerqueira et al., 2023). Therefore, it is essential to analyse how this intellectual elite perceives the issue of sexual harassment in higher education.

2. Materials and Methods

We present a qualitative study on published online opinion pieces in the Portuguese press, focusing on the period between the first news reports on the FDUL inquiry results (April 2022) and June 2023, after the publication of Boaventura de Sousa Santos' opinion article where he admitted to some inappropriate behaviour in *Expresso*. These 15 months correspond to the peak of media visibility of the two cases. This study aims to analyse the collective discussion surrounding both cases (FDUL and CES) and its framing of sexual harassment in academia. This study does not include opinion pieces about later developments in these cases such as the chapter and book withdrawal by the publisher, the formation of the Independent Commission, and the release of its report.

We prioritized opinion pieces over news reports due to their broader expressive freedom in fostering debate. Opinion articles offer more freedom for debating ideas, which allows for a better understanding of subjectivities and imaginaries around the topic and a better mapping of the national debates on sexual harassment. Additionally, opinion pieces are often underrepresented in academic studies on the media (Cerqueira et al., 2023).

For our analysis, we selected five national newspapers: *Diário de Notícias*, *Público*, *Jornal de Notícias* and *Expresso*, *Correio da Manhã*, and *Observador*. These outlets were chosen to illustrate the diversity and plurality of perspectives within the Portuguese press. *Diário de Notícias* (since 1864) is the oldest newspaper in Portugal and, along with *Público* (since 1990), is considered a reference newspaper with a centre-left editorial stance (Garraio, 2023). *Jornal de Notícias* (since 1888) has a strong regional presence in northern Portugal, with a generally centrist stance. *Expresso* (since 1973) is a centre-right weekly print newspaper. *Correio da Manhã* (since 1979) has the largest circulation and follows a tabloid style. *Observador* (since 2014) is the most recent newspaper, founded in 2014, and its opinion section is often associated with conservative right-wing views. All these publications are available online.

The initial step involved mapping published opinions by searching for relevant keywords on the respective websites: "sexual harassment", "sexual harassment academia", "sexual harassment Boaventura", "sexual harassment CES", "sexual harassment FDUL", and "The walls spoke when no one else would". In the second phase of data collection, we used the UnCoveR (2024) project database, repeating the same keywords.

Our methodological approach followed Gavey's feminist discourse analysis (Gavey, 1989; Gavey, 2005), which views language as a key vehicle for producing and reproducing social meanings. We sought to identify the dominant themes and discursive patterns surrounding sexual harassment in opinion spaces, guided by the following key questions: How is sexual harassment represented in opinion pieces? What meanings are mobilized? How are the FDUL and CES cases treated in published opinions, and what commonalities and differences can be noted between them?

The collected articles (Table 1) were read multiple times to identify discursive patterns, including repetitions, conceptual alignments, and rhetorical devices such as metaphors, comparisons, analogies, and hyperboles, as well as strategies like the use of humour and irony. This thorough and repeated reading allowed us to become deeply familiar with the data and to identify dominant themes and frames, primarily expressed through recurring expressions and ideas.

Table 1. Distribution of opinion articles by media outlets.

Newspapers	2022	2023	Total
<i>Correio da Manhã (CM)</i>	5	12	18
<i>Diário de Notícias (CM)</i>	3	6	9
<i>Expresso</i>	6	9	15
<i>Jornal de Notícias (JN)</i>	2	8	10
<i>Observador</i>	2	15	17
<i>Público</i>	4	18	22
Total	22	68	90

Guided by our research questions, we examined the specificities of each case, along with the commonalities and contradictions between them. For instance, we analysed how the alleged perpetrators and their respective institutions were named and characterized in both cases.

3. Findings

The media debate on sexual harassment, centred around the two cases, attracted a wide range of contributors. Opinion pieces were authored by journalists, academics, current and former politicians (including members of parliament and ex-ministers), artists, and activists.

There was notably greater media coverage of the CES case compared to the FDUL case. This was especially evident in newspapers ideologically opposed to CES's political stance, such as *Observador* and *Correio da Manhã*. The heightened attention to the CES case was largely due to the involvement of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a sociologist of international renown with a frequent presence in the Portuguese media, which increased the case's newsworthiness. While most of the articles were published after April 2023—during the height of the “CES case”—some 2023 pieces referenced both cases or provided broader reflections on sexual harassment in academia without directly citing either.

Although media coverage of the CES case often focused on its emeritus director, sexual harassment was broadly portrayed as an endemic issue—exacerbated by precarious employment conditions and academia's hierarchical structure. The manifesto *Todas Sabemos* (“We All Know”) (Balona de Oliveira et al., 2023) encapsulated many of the key issues echoed across multiple opinion pieces. These included the persistence of gendered power relations in academic spaces, the disproportionate scrutiny of victims (alongside tolerance for successful perpetrators), the general absence of effective codes of conduct, and the inefficiency of existing reporting mechanisms. These issues were frequently connected to broader characteristics of Portuguese society, including its historical context, mechanisms of social reproduction, and the prevalence of small-scale social networks.

At the same time, significant differences emerged in how the two cases were represented in the media. The CES case was marked by political instrumentalization and the use of humour to portray Boaventura as a “hypocrite”, discredit his ideas, and—at

times—criticize the political left. In contrast, the FDUL case—where only one professor was publicly named and did not receive much media attention—was characterized by the identification of institutional conservatism and rigid hierarchies as key enablers of harassment.

We now turn to a more detailed analysis of these points. First, we examine the common framing of sexual harassment as a structural issue in academia and an expression of professional and gendered inequalities. Then, we delve into the specific features and media portrayals of the FDUL and CES cases.

3.1. Sexual Harassment as a Structural Problem in Academia

Many opinion articles framed sexual harassment as a structural problem, intertwined with precariousness and endogamy. This framing avoided presenting the FDUL and CES cases as anomalies or exceptions within the university system. In a collective opinion piece, for example, it is stated that “in higher education institutions (IES), harassment is endemic”, with sexual and moral harassment being the “two most common variants of abuse” (Gouveia et al., 2023). Another article in the same newspaper, *Jornal de Notícias*, mentions that “the Portuguese academy needs to be investigated by an independent commission, similar to what happened with the Church” (Araújo, 2023).

The precariousness and subsequent professional instability that characterize scientific careers have often been identified as facilitators of dependency and subordination. In this regard, Oliveira (2023) stated:

The increasing precariousness of researchers leaves them increasingly vulnerable to all kinds of abuses. Whether it turns them into mere intellectual workers from whom their capabilities are drained, appropriating their work and ideas; or whether it turns them into sexual objects or harassment targets.

Alongside precariousness, endogamy is also emphasized as a factor that fosters a culture permeable to abuse. Recognizing that “endogamy is not exclusive to the Portuguese academy”, politician Miguel Pinares Maduro stated that it “is particularly high in Portugal” (Maduro, 2023). In *Público*, journalist Ana Sá Lopes wrote that “[i]n a tiny country that lives under a caste system, the risk of reporting [sexual harassment] is infinitely greater than in the United States or the United Kingdom” (Lopes, 2023). Maria João Marques noted that endogamy in universities, alongside “long-standing friendships, loyalty to the institution, and the quest for funding”, all converge to “protect [a] prestigious harasser at the expense of an undifferentiated victim” (Marques, 2023).

In several texts, higher education institutions were held responsible for the persistence of harassment, whether through inertia, indifference, or even complicity and cover-up, particularly in known but unreported cases. Susana Peralta, in an article aptly titled “Sexual Harassment and Stagnant Institutions”, argued that “the CES’s reaction is paradigmatic of the total unpreparedness of our institutions” (Peralta, 2023). In a collective opinion piece, a “culture of fear” and silence within universities is said to exist, aimed at avoiding negative media coverage that could result from publicized harassment cases (Gouveia et al., 2023).

In parallel, the absence of reporting mechanisms and codes of conduct explicitly prohibiting harassment has been frequently highlighted. Summarizing these points, the manifesto “*Todas Sabemos*” (“We All Know”) (Balona de Oliveira et al., 2023) refers to precariousness as a factor of vulnerability, coupled with the lack of formal reporting structures. “[T]he absence of codes of conduct, leaving no real space for reporting”, it states, means that “those who decide to speak are left completely unprotected in their workplace/study environment.” The collective article adds: “They are still subject to retaliation, all the more obscure the greater the ‘informality’ of power relations and the precarization of the bonds that dominate academic labour”.

Frequently, the articles discuss measures deemed necessary to combat sexual harassment, such as legal frameworks and the creation of external reporting and investigative channels. In a text published in *Correio da Manhã*, jurist and university professor Rui Pereira advocated for the autonomous criminalization of sexual harassment (Pereira, 2023b). In *Público*, university professor and economist Susana Peralta supported the creation of codes of conduct and formal reporting mechanisms (Peralta, 2023). The manifesto “We All Know” outlines a set of demands, common to various opinion pieces, which the authors regard as universally applicable to higher education institutions. These include codes and regulations, anonymous reporting mechanisms for cases of sexual and moral harassment, support and protection measures for victims, independent investigative committees, and the implementation of sanctioning mechanisms (Balona de Oliveira et al., 2023).

3.2. Sexual Harassment Is Anchored in Sexism

At the same time, the portrayal of precariousness is interwoven with sexism: the precarization of academia is recognized as disproportionately affecting women. As rapper Capicua (2023) comments:

If academia is a very undemocratic environment filled with gatekeepers, the weight of patriarchy imposes an additional burden on women. And in the rat race of precarious scientific work, they are especially at the mercy of the power at the top of the pyramid (where old professors abound).

Sexual harassment in higher education was often identified as part of a broader culture where “practices of harassment and cultures of masculinity, homophobia, and sexism perpetuate among students, particularly within the context of academic initiation, in front of the complacency or impotence of university authorities”. (Estanque, 2023).

Beyond gendered power structures, the manifesto “*Todas sabemos*” (We all know) (Balona de Oliveira et al., 2023) presents the problem of sexual harassment in conjunction with other forms of violence, rooted in power relations:

Sexual and moral harassment, intellectual extraction (the practice of plagiarizing or reproducing someone else’s work without citation, presenting it as their own), as well as other forms of violence, are structural and structuring of an academic system founded on marked professional hierarchies and divisions of class, gender, and race.

This understanding of sexual harassment as “structural and structuring” mobilizes and calls for an intersectional approach, articulating and relating axes of power and oppression and linking gender with divisions of class and the racialization of social relations. Being grounded in relationships and concentration of power, the manifesto asserts, “harassment can affect men”; however, the expression of harassment is profoundly gendered. The manifesto further addresses the normalization of violence against women, situating sexual harassment within a continuum of violence against women—which also intersects with other forms of abuse and exploitation, such as moral harassment and intellectual exploitation.

References to victim-blaming, sexist bias, and “cultural factors that lead to victim self-blame” (I. Cardoso, 2022) are mentioned across various newspapers. For instance, journalist Paulo Baldaia wrote in *Diário de Notícias* that “Society is sexist in the distribution of power and the distribution of blame. It gives power to men and blame to women. This is centuries and centuries of history” (Baldaia, 2023). Also, in *Diário de Notícias*, psychologist Rute Agulhas wrote that “not infrequently, the question victims hear from the other side is: ‘Why didn’t you tell before?’”, classifying this inquiry as “a question laden with blame, prejudices, stereotypes, and value judgments” (Agulhas, 2023). Regarding victim-blaming

and the protection of perpetrators, illustrator and activist [Não \(2023\)](#) wrote in *Expresso*: “We live in a society with so much structural sexism that the law of harassment seems to be: the abuser is innocent until proven otherwise and the victim was asking for it until proven otherwise with witnesses”. Journalist Ana Sá Lopes stated: “In Portugal, the alleged abuser always has a group of friends in academia and beyond ready to tear their clothes over their innocence, whether in harassment or domestic violence. Being or having been in a position of power, the credentials of alleged innocence skyrocket” ([Lopes, 2023](#)).

3.3. FDUL Case

The opinion articles about the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon (FDUL) pointed to the institution’s conservatism and authoritarianism as facilitating factors for harassment. The idiosyncratic culture of FDUL—marked by rigidity and hierarchical relationships—was considered conducive to abuse and silencing. Acknowledging that “[m]oral harassment and sexual harassment are transversal realities in all higher education establishments”, Isabel Moreira—a member of parliament elected via the Socialist Party, feminist, and former FDUL student—stated that “FDL has a specific, deep problem that accommodates attitudes of abuse and humiliation and makes it difficult for voices of change” ([Moreira, 2022](#)). She clarified:

FDL is a highly conservative institution, with a strong legacy of authoritarian tradition, averse to challenging the status quo, instigating fierce competition, insensitive to the personal and social situations of each student, and nurturing the figure of authority—although this does not invalidate the existence of many faculty members who have nothing to do with this vision.

In the same vein, Daniel Oliveira wrote: “FDUL is not a faculty of harassers and abusers. But its culture of teaching, evaluation, authoritarianism, and endogamy induces abuse.” Stating categorically that FDUL “does not have a democratic culture” ([Oliveira, 2022](#)), the commentator nonetheless considered that there were signs of change.

3.4. CES Case

Although the most serious situations reported in the chapter “The walls spoke when no one else would” ([Viaene et al., 2023](#)) were attributed to the Apprentice, media commentary mostly focused on Boaventura Sousa Santos (and, by extension, his purported accomplices), especially after Bella Gonçalves and Moira Millán spoke to the press accusing him of sexual harassment. Furthermore, the chapter describes an institutional framework of abuses and cover-ups involving other prominent figures, such as the Watchwoman and some feminists of the institution, who remained virtually absent or in the background in the opinion articles. Unlike the FDUL case, where the alleged specific harassers’ names were generically omitted in opinion articles, there was a tendency to personalize and narrow the criticism and commentary regarding the CES case towards Boaventura Sousa Santos.

In various opinion articles, spanning some of the analysed newspapers—but predominant in *Observador* and *Correio da Manhã*—this personalization highlighted the alleged contradiction between the proclaimed theory, centred on “Epistemologies of the South”, which embodies the global South as the social, political, and scientific source of alternative knowledge committed to the silenced and oppressed, and the labour practices of CES and its main mentors. Daniel Oliveira wrote: “For Boaventura, ‘South’ is a metaphor for human suffering caused by capitalism. If the accusations are true, he is the North of academia” ([Oliveira, 2023](#)).

Not surprisingly, the positions were also more polarized concerning the CES case, leading to divergences about the role of social sciences, neoliberalism, and the political left. The chapter “The walls spoke when no one else would” ([Viaene et al., 2023](#)) was

also subject to different considerations. Some columnists like Carmo Afonso considered the construction of the article and easy identification of the targets as an act of “extreme intelligence” (Afonso, 2023). On the other hand, others like retired professor Pedro Abreu expressed “some discomfort” at the fact that “an academic text published by a prestigious publisher rely on anonymous graffiti to support harassment accusations” (Abreu, 2023).

The CES case was subsumed under the figure of Boaventura Sousa Santos, with Bruno Sena Martins and others largely sidelined or eclipsed in the published opinion about the case. The symbolic importance of Boaventura Sousa Santos for social sciences and the left is a key element to grasp some op-eds’ approach to the case. Expressions such as “guru” (Torres, 2023), “messiah”, and “cult” (Reis, 2023) around Boaventura Sousa Santos depict him as a figure of reference and reverence for a certain political and epistemological orientation, thus opening for a reckoning with these political views. Therefore, the personalization of criticism, centred on the allegedly verified contradiction between the praxis and epistemology / axiology of Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s thought, as the personification of vanguardism and CES, paved the way for a broader critique of social sciences and progressive agendas and knowledge associated with CES. Labels like “heralds of morality” and “identity left” (C. E. Costa, 2023) are expressive of this criticism—often caricatural—of Boaventura and the left, or part of the left, and what it allegedly defends.

The criticism of Boaventura Sousa Santos was sometimes made with humour, sarcasm, or irony, ridiculing the harassment attributed to the sociologist, as well as his public defence strategy. In *Público*, João Miguel Tavares, a long-standing detractor of Boaventura and critic of CES, wrote that “the guru of the radical left, so feminist and so progressive, is accused of behaving not only as a harasser but as a sexual blackmailer—want a scholarship and a doctorate? Then sit here” (Tavares, 2023). In *Expresso*, humourist Ricardo Araújo Pereira wrote an article titled “It wasn’t me, it was the heteropatriarchy”, satirizing Boaventura Sousa Santos’s defence argument (Pereira, 2023a). In *Observador*, humourist José Diogo Quintela ironically stated: “What is sexual harassment? It is a European social construct, rooted in the mercantilist idea of body ownership, only possible in a landowning society that venerates property” (Quintela, 2023).

Several statements do not hide the authors’ degree of satisfaction with the fact that Boaventura Sousa Santos is publicly accused: “Revolutionaries, as has long been known, are the first to be devoured by the revolutions they initiate”, reads an article in *Expresso* (Monteiro, 2023). In *Correio de Manhã*, another article reads: “Meanwhile, in Coimbra, the guru of theoretical Third World delights about ‘epistemologies of the South’ has fallen from the pedestal on which the ‘far left’ of the Southern and Northern hemispheres had placed him” (Torres, 2023). The expression of personal enjoyment at this public exposure is sometimes quite explicit: in an article in *Correio da Manhã*, the author states: “no matter how cruel it is, there is always a certain secret satisfaction in seeing a moralist ensnared in his hypocrisy” (Amaral, 2023). The article adds:

This is what happened with the recent sexual scandal in the Church. And this is what is happening with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who is now facing a series of accusations that, contrary to what has been emphasized, refer not only to sexual harassment but also to scientific and labor practices.

The alleged contradiction is not only between theory and praxis but broader: between proclaiming a worldview that criticizes the West, its jurisdiction and legal traditions, as well as neoliberalism, while benefiting from them—such as the presumption of innocence and formal mechanisms of defence in a rule-of-law state—as an accused. The criticism of the alleged hypocrisy and cleavage between the proclaimed ideology and praxis thus extends to the collective of which Boaventura Sousa Santos is seen as a representative. As Monteiro (2023) wrote in *Expresso*:

It took being denounced in the terms he has always defended (the prominence of the victims' truth over the truth of the powerful) and the intrinsic evil of the white cis-normative man (which he also seems to be), for some of those who are now suspending and accusing him to realize that it was his ideas and theories, never subjected to the scrutiny that any scientific ideas should undergo, that transformed society for the worse.

Simultaneously, an article in *Público* features lawyer Francisco Mendes da Silva, who ironically states: "Now Professor Boaventura needed 'neoliberalism'" attempting to show the contradiction between theory and practice, ironically stating that "Even he deserves to be protected by the rule of law, this magnificent invention of Western civilization" (Mendes da Silva, 2023).

Such personalization and politicization of the Boaventura Sousa Santos case were criticized by some columnists, especially those from the left. For example, in an article titled "Boaventura de Sousa Santos is not the target", Afonso (2023), who is known for her anti-racist and feminist views, denounced the narrowing of media attention on Boaventura, arguing that the relevance of the case was related to structural conditions and not to an individual case or personality. In another article in *Correio da Manhã*, it was stated that "the professor tried to politicize the issue by claiming to be a victim of 'neoliberalism'" considering that "Some sectors of the right did the same with a case that is, in its essence, unacceptable conduct, regardless of the political sector of those involved", concluding that in this particular case "it is not Boaventura's ideas that matter" (Pinto, 2023). In *Expresso*, Daniel Oliveira, a columnist associated with the far left, wrote that "this time, the enemies of #MeToo will not speak of 'feminist hysteria' and 'witch hunts'" (Oliveira, 2023), alluding to the double standards regarding public reactions to CES's and other cases of sexual harassment.

4. Discussion

The public discussion surrounding sexual harassment, mobilized around the FDUL and CES cases in Portugal, echoes key arguments and reflections stemming from a feminist analysis of sexual violence—chiefly, the recognition of harassment as a structural issue, rooted in historical inequalities and power asymmetries between women and men. Several columnists and commentators have highlighted the challenges involved in reporting sexual harassment, including the vulnerability created or intensified by precariousness in academia. Victim-blaming has been critically addressed across various media platforms. Our analysis suggests that feminist discourses around sexual harassment have, to some extent, become mainstream, possibly reflecting the impact of #MeToo and the subsequent years of public debate.

In this context, the media presence of openly feminist authors and columnists, writing from diverse perspectives across various newspapers, is noteworthy. These include Fernanda Cândia, a journalist for *Diário de Notícias* who was responsible for the investigation that brought the CES case to public attention and also contributed to opinion columns; rapper Capicua in *Jornal de Notícias*; activist Clara Não in *Expresso*; and lawyer Carmo Afonso and columnist Maria João Marques, both writing for *Público*.

The Portuguese media landscape in recent years has been shaped by increased attention to sexual harassment cases in universities, the public exposure of such cases involving prominent figures, and the investigation of the Catholic Church by an Independent Commission. These developments suggest growing awareness of sexual harassment and violence as structural, pervasive social problems, and a possible maturation of the public debate on these issues—or at the very least, their integration into the collective consciousness. Several columnists noted parallels between how academia has handled sexual harassment cases and the Catholic Church: both institutions have been accused of systematically covering

up allegations and employing informal mechanisms to intimidate and silence victims, ostensibly to protect institutional reputations.

These narratives contrast sharply with media reactions to the rape allegation against Cristiano Ronaldo in 2018, which were marked by the discrediting of Kathryn Mayorga, the devaluation of her testimony, and the reinforcement of sexist stereotypes surrounding sexual violence (Garraio, 2023; Garraio et al., 2020). In contrast, the FDUL and CES cases prompted a wider acknowledgment of sexual harassment as an endemic issue.

While these differences are significant, the apparent evolution of public discourse on sexual violence may also be explained by other, not mutually exclusive, factors. At the time of Mayorga's allegation, Ronaldo was not only at the peak of his football career but was widely seen as a national icon—a symbol of personal and professional success, whose media image emphasized humble origins, strong family values, and a “rags-to-riches” narrative (Garraio et al., 2020; Garraio, 2023). He possessed, and continues to possess, social and erotic capital that cannot be compared to that of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who was at the centre of the CES case. Unlike Ronaldo, Boaventura never achieved the same level of national projection or public consensus; moreover, his advanced age—used in part as a defence, to contextualize certain behaviours—distanced him from the stereotype of the seductive or virile man.

Boyle (2019) has analysed how formerly powerful and untouchable men such as Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and Jimmy Savile could be repositioned by the media as “credible perpetrators”, due to particular traits—such as age, weight, sexual orientation, race, class origins, or waning careers—which rendered them undeserving of what she terms “himpathy” (p. 114). Boaventura de Sousa Santos, with a long history of political detractors both within and outside academia, and subject to pervasive ageism that marked him as outside dominant ideals of sexual desirability, was similarly resignified to fit the collective imaginary of the “credible perpetrator”.

Another way in which the media discussion of the FDUL and CES cases mirrored dominant trends in the mediatization of #MeToo was the absence of an intersectional lens. While the gendered nature of sexual harassment was widely acknowledged, there was little discussion of how gender intersects with class, nationality, race, or ethnicity. Although these intersections were made explicit in the *Todas Sabemos* manifesto—significant in part due to its large number of signatories—and were occasionally addressed in op-eds about the CES case (e.g., highlighting that several women who spoke out, including Moira Millán, came from the Global South), intersectionality was largely absent from broader public debate.

This lack of intersectional perspective is not limited to the CES and FDUL cases. Cerqueira et al. (2024) found that Portuguese media coverage of harassment and sexual violence in the #MeToo era predominantly centred on white women of reproductive age with media visibility—typically actresses or other public figures—thus marginalizing the voices of racialized, older, or working-class women. Additionally, the prominence of male commentators in shaping public discourse on #MeToo is noteworthy. For example, Henrique Raposo, a white man, author, and columnist in *Expresso*, was a dominant voice in Portuguese press coverage of the movement (Cerqueira et al., 2023).

Finally, despite a growing recognition of sexual harassment as a structural, gendered issue, there was also a noticeable tendency—especially in the CES case—toward political instrumentalization of harassment allegations. In some instances, women's voices were appropriated not to call for structural change or protection, but as leverage to attack Boaventura de Sousa Santos's political affiliations and intellectual legacy. This trend was particularly apparent in *Correio da Manhã* and *Observador*, raising critical questions about how sexual violence is treated in the media and how women's experiences can be sidelined in favour of competing political agendas.

The instrumentalization of sexual harassment—a distinctive feature of the CES case—echoes a broader pattern across contexts, where survivors' voices are co-opted for unrelated causes, including in debates around immigration and public security. A meaningful, honest public conversation about sexual violence in the media must confront not only sensationalism and voyeurism but also the political and ideological exploitation of survivors and their stories.

4.1. Recommendations and Practical Implications

Many of the analysed articles raised important issues that can help shape policies on both the prevention of and response to sexual harassment. In this context, we highlight the manifesto *“Todas Sabemos”*, which addresses sexual and moral harassment alongside other exploitative work practices that are often overlooked. We emphasise the need for an intersectional approach that considers multiple dimensions of power and vulnerability, such as sexism, racism, ageism, and heteronormativity. For instance, migrant women studying or conducting research in a foreign country may lack support networks and be less familiar with codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, exacerbating their vulnerability and dependence on peers and supervisors. This should be considered when addressing sexual and moral harassment, for instance, by ensuring the visibility and dissemination of codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms in multiple languages.

In 2024, a commission was established to monitor the implementation of harassment prevention strategies in higher education institutions in Portugal. This commission published a report outlining key findings and a set of recommendations (Casaca, 2024), which aligned with several ideas raised in the analysed opinion articles. Among these recommendations were the establishment of a harassment prevention strategy; the adoption of plans for equality, non-discrimination, and inclusion; regular internal assessments; and the widespread dissemination of information on mechanisms to prevent and combat sexual and moral harassment within academic communities. The report also emphasized awareness-raising initiatives and the need to strengthen psychological support services for victims. The adoption of these strategies and their effective monitoring is vital to address, prevent, and respond to sexual and moral harassment.

4.2. Limitations and Future Directions

This study contributes to the knowledge of the public debates on sexual harassment in Portuguese academia. This research focused on opinion articles published within a specific time frame. While FDUL case is apparently closed, there are ongoing legal procedures regarding the people involved in CES case. Future research will be needed to examine the whole public repercussions of these cases in the realities of sexual harassment in Portuguese academia and national debates on the topic. Future research will benefit from analysing opinion articles and news articles in the Portuguese press.

5. Conclusions

The two cases analysed in this article made a significant contribution to the debate surrounding sexual harassment in Portugal. The public discussion in Portuguese mainstream newspapers was not monolithic, presenting tensions and dissonant trends in the representation of harassment and the actors involved. The opinion articles analysed point to a cultural diagnosis that considers sexual harassment as a result of sexism, as well as the hierarchy, endogamy, and precariousness that characterize the academic reality. In that sense, the cases fostered an unprecedented awareness of the problem of sexual harassment in academia through a feminist lens attentive to the socioeconomic factors that frame knowledge production in neo-liberal academia.

On the other hand, the recognition of sexual harassment as an endemic and structural problem coexisted with the instrumentalization of the allegations in the CES case and the exploitation of its contours for political disputes (often polarized and personalized). While the Routledge chapter at the origin of CES case used personal experiences to move beyond the particular to the macro-realities by producing an analysis about the way neo-liberal structures enable the normalization of sexual, moral, and labour harassment at institutions formally committed to progressive agendas, many Portuguese columnists reversed this approach: they used the macro discussion on sexual harassment in academia to target a particular scholar and political thought. In their reckoning with the left, these columnists reduced the women who spoke out against Boaventura to the role of testimonies of lived experiences of sexual harassment, thus ignoring and silencing their rich contributions to leftwing, feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial agendas and thought as researchers, scholars, activists, and political leaders.

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