Human resource practitioners as sexual harassment commissioners: Sisyphus amid gender inequalities

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Abstract

Purpose – There has been ample research on the antecedents and consequences of workplace sexual harassment (WSH), a volatile issue in contemporary labor markets. There is, however, a lingering gap in the scholarly literature regarding the organizational practices involved in contending with WSH incidents following their occurrence. By exploring the practices and challenges of sexual harassment commissioners, a mandatory role performed by Israeli human resource practitioners, this study aims to unpack the embedded power dynamics, which construct how WSH is both deciphered and handled within organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 sexual harassment commissioners (SHCs) in various business organizations in Israel to explore practitioners' conceptions of the challenges underlying their role. A grounded theory approach was utilized.

Findings – The findings demonstrate that, while SHCs seemingly are empowered by their exclusive authority to inquire into an intricate organizational matter, counter practices have emerged to undermine their authority and influence. This negatively affects their ability to reduce the prevalence of WSH. SHCs' attempts to approach WSH utilizing a power discourse are eroded by systematic barriers that channel them toward adoption of the default legal discourse. The latter frames WSH in terms of individual misconduct rather than as a phenomenon stemming from and expressive of organizational and societal gender inequalities.

Research limitations/implications – This study does not represent the voices of WSH complainants or of top executives. The data focused on SHCs' descriptions of their role challenges.

Practical implications – Implications are suggested regarding the academic education and training of SHCs.

Originality/value – This study sheds light on covert and unspoken barriers to gender equality in the labor market.

Keywords Gender inequality, Power dynamics, Sexual harassment commissioners, Workplace sexual harassment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Workplace sexual harassment (WSH) is a central as well as volatile issue in contemporary labor markets (McDonald, 2012; Pina and Gannon, 2012; Quick and McFadyen, 2017). Since the beginning of the #MeToo movement, incidents of WSH have frequently been reported in the media and heatedly discussed on social networking sites (Amber *et al.*, 2020; Leopold *et al.*, 2019; Mainiero, 2020; Schneider and Carpenter, 2020). "Talking sexual harassment in the new economy" (Brunner and Denver, 2014, p. 459) seems to have become even more complex in a post-truth era, in which racist, misogynistic and homophobic attitudes are often voiced by leading elected figures (Ng and Stamper, 2018).

There has been much research on WSH. Studies have inquired into WSH's antecedents (Ollo-López and Nuñez, 2018; Pina and Gannon, 2012) and consequences (Adams-Clark *et al.*, 2020; Hanson *et al.*, 2020; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2017; Willness *et al.*, 2007), as well as its legal aspects, including policy, enforcement and sanctions (Gomes *et al.*, 2004; McDonald *et al.*, 2010). In addition, a voluminous literature has explored the experiences and perceptions of WSH from the viewpoint of the victims (Bowling and Beehr, 2006), employees (Brunner and

Denver, 2014) and observers (Diekmann *et al.*, 2013; Espinoza and Cunningham, 2010; Tseng, 2014). In short, cumulative evidence has highlighted not only the multifaceted complexity of WSH but also its severe personal and organizational consequences.

Another stream of studies has explored intraorganizational efforts to reduce the prevalence of WSH (e.g. Buchanan *et al.*, 2014). While this literature has been mostly theoretical (e.g. Hunt *et al.*, 2010; McDonald *et al.*, 2015), there is evidence regarding the limitations of such interventions (Perry *et al.*, 2012; Dobbin and Kalev, 2020). For example, although some empirical evidence has suggested that trainings were effective in the short term, there is little evidence to support long-term attitudinal or behavioral change, outside of the training environment (Medeiros and Griffith, 2019). Despite increased awareness, organizations do not seem to have made enough progress in the reduction or prevention of WSH (Quick and McFadyen, 2017; Stockdale *et al.*, 2020a, b).

In the ample scholarly literature, there is a lingering gap regarding organizational practices of contending with WSH incidents *following* their occurrence. Too little is known about how cases of WSH are dealt with by various *internal* position holders (e.g. Trotter and Zacur, 2012), as opposed to external constituents, such as the police and the courts of law. Evidence suggests that organizations fall short of handling WSH properly (Good and Cooper, 2016; Ineson *et al.*, 2013). For example, supervisors avoided penalizing favored employees who had harassed organization members (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, employees coping with and contesting sexual harassment from customers experienced gaps between law and practice (Walker *et al.*, 2019), given that in many service organizations employees are expected "to be friendly" toward customers (Good and Cooper, 2016). The limited evidence that has thus far been accumulated suggests that "the organizational responses to many of the allegations of sexual harassment were inadequate" (McDonald *et al.*, 2008, p. 173). Consequently, many questions remain unanswered in regard to the organizational interactions following cases of WSH.

Although WSH occurs in work organizations, it has also been studied at the micro level, i.e. as an *interpersonal* phenomenon involving victims and perpetrators characterized by personal variables (e.g. De Judicibus and McCabe, 2001; Tseng, 2014). However, sexual harassment is most often performed by men against women (McDonald, 2012), therefore it is a form of sex discrimination, and thus an issue of inequality (Kamir, 2005). Cases of WSH are seldom isolated incidents between a complainant and a perpetrator. Rather, WSH is usually affected by and embedded in organizational phenomena such as work climate, type of leadership (Ollo-López and Nuñez, 2018; Perry *et al.*, 2020) and industry (e.g. Hennekam and Bennett, 2017; Ineson *et al.*, 2013). Despite decades of scholarship, basic questions about how workplace mechanisms reflecting power affect harassment remain unanswered. As sexual harassment continues to plague work organizations (Hart, 2019), understanding the daily practices of reacting to and contending with WSH complaints is vital.

This study aims to fill the lacuna in the literature by addressing the internal mandatory role of sexual harassment commissioners (hereinafter SHCs) in business organizations in the Israeli labor market. This study assumes that an analysis of the internal SHC role reflects embedded power dynamics, which construct how WSH is both deciphered and handled within organizations. The Israeli labor market, in which equality and diversity are systematically undermined (Haberfeld and Cohen, 2007; Kuna and Nadiv, 2019; Nadiv and Kuna, 2020), provides a relevant context for examining the following research questions:

(1) Which organizational challenges do SHCs face while handling WSH complaints within organizations?

(2) Consequently, how do SHCs contend with their role challenges?

In the following section, we elaborate on the theoretical framework of WSH and power and present the research context. Next our methodology is outlined. We then present our findings. The article concludes with a discussion offering theoretical considerations and practical implications.

WSH and power

Berdahl (2007, p. 644) defined sex-based harassment as "behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual's sex. It may involve acts, comments, or materials that derogate an individual in sex-based ways, such as sexually objectifying and subordinating women. It may also involve seemingly sex-neutral acts, such as repeated provocation, silencing, exclusion, or sabotage, that are experienced by an individual because of sex." WSH includes an array of behaviors that have the collective effect of creating a hostile work environment for the targets of such behavior, such as demands for sexual favors as a condition of employment as well as comments and jokes related to physical appearance and sexual conduct. Sexual harassment, which is most often performed by men against women (McDonald, 2012), is motivated more by control and domination than by sexual desire (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012). It is therefore embedded in power relations (MacKinnon, 1979; Popovich and Warren, 2010; Stockdale *et al.*, 2020a, b). While the concept of power has been amply defined and conceptualized across disciplines, most share the notion of power as multilayered, context-related, highly intricate and involving the assertion of dominance over others. It has been suggested that WSH draws on all three of Lukes' (1986, in Wilson and Thompson, 2001) dimensions: power as a means to prevail over the contrary preferences of others; power in terms of preventing decisions from being taken on controversial issues and power as relations of dominance, which affect beliefs and cognitions (Wilson and Thompson, 2001).

Sexual harassment at the workplace has been conceptualized and studied as a gendered form of discrimination and a way to assert social dominance and status (Berdahl, 2007; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012). WSH has afflicted women's labor since the rise of capitalism in Western societies; it has maintained the gender status quo by undermining women's ability to perform well at work (e.g. MacKinnon, 1979; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012). In addition, Brewis (2001) suggested that WSH is a mechanism through which power is enacted between individuals to create and maintain control of sexuality, specifically feminine sexuality. "Girl watching" activities, for example, demonstrated men's power to sexually evaluate women at the workplace (Quinn, 2002). The vulnerability of women to WSH has been exacerbated in the new economy, as high levels of employment insecurity sharpened discrepancies in power within the employment relationship, particularly for women in precarious jobs and industries (Brunner and Denver, 2014; Fitzgerald, 2020; Hennekam and Bennett, 2017).

Two consistently interrelated phenomena in the WSH literature are manifestations of gendered power relations: women's reluctance to complain about sexual harassment (typically performed by men), and the tendency to blame women for being victims of WSH. WSH remains severely underreported (Hart, 2019), even though sexual harassment is prohibited by both the law and company policies in many countries (e.g. Chotalia, 2005; Gomes *et al.*, 2004; Jeffers, 2005). According to SHRM's (2018) sexual harassment survey, 76% of nonmanagerial employees, who anonymously disclosed that they experienced WSH over the last 12 months, did not report the incident in their workplace. While some victims explained that refraining from officially reporting WSH was due to their fear of retaliation against them, others downplayed the severity of the incident or assumed that no recourse was available to them. Examining retail culture, Good and Cooper (2016) found a "dependency framework" where customers were perceived to hold power over employees as quasi "second managers." Consequently, employees were unlikely to recognize customer misbehavior and accepted it as part of the job. Another explanation for the underreporting of WSH is that victims do not necessarily have a trusted organizational position holder in whom to confide their distress (McDonald *et al.*, 2008; Brown and Battle, 2020).

The fact that women refrain from complaining about sexual harassment is closely related to evidence showing that women often encounter victim-blaming attitudes and responses, especially from men (De Judicibus and McCabe, 2001; Diekmann *et al.*, 2013). In their study on

the unreasonableness of reporting WSH, Bergman *et al.* (2002, p. 232) noted that "reporting does not occur in a vacuum." They suggested that organizational responses to WSH reports range from supporting the complainant, through ignoring the report, to retaliating against the reporter. Negative organizational responses to reporting WSH exacerbated job, psychological and health outcomes (Bergman *et al.*, 2002). Hart (2019) found that relative to women employees who experienced nonsexual harassment or sexual harassment reported by a coworker, a woman employee who *self-reported* sexual harassment was perceived as less worthy of career advancement. The backlash against the #MeToo movement, (Solnit, 2018) has also demonstrated the negative stigma that continues to attach to women who report incidents of sexual harassment. Recent evidence is consistent with this backlash, showing that women are frequently blamed for being harassed (Bongiorno *et al.*, 2020).

The organizational dominance of the legal approach to WSH

Women's reluctance to complain about WSH and the tendency to blame women for being its victims go hand in hand with organizations' utilization of legal means primarily to protect employers from liability for WSH, rather than to eradicate or prevent it. In her article entitled "The culture of compliance," Grossman (2003, p. 3) stated: "The rules of employer liability for harassment are calculated to ensure that employers adopt basic policies and procedures with respect to workplace harassment, not, surprisingly, to ensure that they actually prevent it." In that vein, Bisom-Rapp (2001) found that reporting mechanisms designed to decrease an organization's legal liability were not likely to decrease the occurrence of WSH. In their study of the legalization of WSH training, Chappell and Bowes-Sperry (2015) argued that this measure, which was supposedly aimed at protecting the less powerful employee, actually served to protect the more powerful employer. Furthermore, Perry *et al.* (2010) found that WSH training was implemented to reduce legal liability regardless of its effectiveness: There was no requirement for the training to elicit attitudinal or behavioral change in WSH. In short, ample evidence suggests that the ineffectiveness of the legal approach toward WSH (Feldblum and Lipnic, 2016) emanates from paradox: measures taken for the purpose of legal compliance may *interfere* with reducing WSH de facto (Chappell and Bowes-Sperry, 2015). This paradox is a manifestation of gendered power relations: not only does it preserve the power of employers but it also allows WSH to persist as a gendered form of discrimination (Berdahl, 2007).

In summary, despite legislation and company policies prohibiting WSH, organizations are still ill-equipped to contend with it (Stockdale *et al.*, 2020a, b). Women's reluctance to complain about sexual harassment and the common tendency to blame them for being victims of WSH make it clear that women suffer not only from acts of sexual violence at work but also from wider embedded forces that dominate their conceptions of and reactions to WSH. Understanding the day-to-day organizational dynamics of gender, power and sexual harassment is therefore vital.

The research context: gender inequality in the Israeli labor market

Israeli society provides an intriguing setting for exploring conceptualizations and practices of (in)equality, given its exceedingly conflictual character not only in terms of gender but also in terms of sexual orientation, marital status, nationality, religion, ethnicity, age and (dis) abilities (Haberfeld and Cohen, 2007; Kuna and Nadiv, 2019; Nadiv and Kuna, 2020).

Continuing gender gaps in favor of men persist in all areas of Israeli life including the labor market, in which women's employment is characterized by lower salaries, precariousness and a very low rate of female executives (Tzameret-Kertcher *et al.*, 2020). The growing neo-liberalization in the Israeli labor market (Grinberg, 2017; Mundlak, 2017) has also negatively affected women. In particular, the gender outcomes of policy changes, which have

occurred since the 1980s, have been documented. Through its prioritization of low-cost bids, the contract state has promoted women's deskilling in public services and consequent income reduction (Benjamin, 2011). Outsourcing women's labor by the state has played a significant role in this shift (Benjamin, 2016a, b). These changes have exacerbated women's lower status in the Israeli labor market (Tzameret-Kertcher *et al.*, 2020).

In legislation that was considered progressive in 1998, Israeli law took a significant stance in the fight against sexual harassment. The 1998 Israeli sexual harassment law "prohibits sexual harassment as a discriminatory practice, a restriction of liberty, an offence to human dignity, a violation of every person's right to elementary respect, and an infringement of the right to privacy. Additionally, the law prohibits intimidation or retaliation that accommodates sexual harassment" (Kamir, 2005, p. 315). Furthermore, in the workplace "an employer is vicariously liable for the civil consequences of sexual harassment or prejudicial treatment perpetrated by anyone in his or her employ. To avoid liability, an employer must take all the measures prescribed by the sexual harassment law" (Kamir, 2005, p. 315).

As a part of these measures, every employer must nominate a SHC, whose main tasks are accepting employees' WSH complaints, counseling the complainants and inquiring into the complaints, as well as reporting conclusions and recommendations to top management (Kamir, 2005). Consequently, SHCs have the exclusive formal authority to receive and investigate WSH complaints within their organization. SHCs are approached by various organization members, including harassed employees, their colleagues, witnesses and concerned organization members, who come forward with relevant information. Following their investigation of WSH complaints, SHCs submit their reports to senior decision-makers [1].

While the legislation has been considered progressive, recent data indicate that WSH in the Israeli labor market is pervasive and persistent (The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, 2018). Although some barriers to the reduction of WSH in the Israeli labor market have been documented, a systematic exploration of the challenges facing SHCs has not yet been offered.

Method
Sample and participants
The participants in this study were 45 Israeli SHCs (100% female [2]), who are human resources' (HR) practitioners working in medium to large business organizations from various industries in Israel, including finance, communications, high-tech, retail and tourism. All the participants held two organizational positions concomitantly: a junior to mid-level position in an HR department [3] and a position as an SHC. Only one out of 45 participants in this study was a senior HR practitioner (but not an HR executive). All of the participants had a bachelor's degree in human resource management (HRM) and organizational behavior, and 33% of them held a Master's degree in these disciplines. Their average age was 34 years, ranging between 26 and 48 years. The participants' tenure in the SHC position ranged from 11 to 35 months, with an average of 17 months.

The study was conducted in collaboration with an Israeli non-governmental organization (NGO) that aims to combat sexual harassment in Israel. It provides an array of services, including introductory training courses for employees newly appointed as SHCs. We requested a random list of 50 course participants and contacted them by e-mail. This effort yielded half of the participants in this study. We enlarged our research sample by using the snowball sampling method. We published an ad asking for study participants in an Israeli HR practitioners' Facebook group. This strategy yielded all the additional participants.

Data collection and analysis
In-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow the participants to construct their own meanings and interpretations of their daily work. The SHCs were asked to describe in

detail the processes of the WSH complaints they handled. The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview protocol (see Appendix) designed to explore the processes and interactions between SHCs and organization members regarding WSH complaints. The face-to-face interviews lasted 80 min on average. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants were promised confidentiality and anonymity.

Field notes. Following each interview, each author wrote out technical notes (i.e. emergent issues in the course of the interview, such as a participant's request to stop the audio recording at a certain point) and analytical notes (conceptual reflections).

We used a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The value of qualitative research stems from its capacity to build conceptual and theoretical frameworks based on grounded interpretations, explanations, impacts and underlying causes. The three phases of coding – open, axial and selective – in the process of analyzing the transcripts were guided by Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model.

In the first stage of open coding, we began by assigning first-order, data-driven codes to the texts, based on words and phrases used by the interviewees themselves. In open coding, transcripts were coded using labels that described SHCs' verbal statements at a higher level of abstraction. For example, the statement "I do it [the SHC role] using work hours designated for my HR role as an employee recruiter. Sometimes I even put in extra time, for which I am not compensated" (Sarah, participant number 14) was given the open codes of "SHC budget constraints" and "No compensation for SHC role."

The first stage of open coding also influenced further data collection. Each interview was transcribed verbatim immediately afterward. After accumulating two or three interview transcripts, each of the two authors conducted a separate open coding and then both authors returned to the field to continue interviewing. As codes were generated from additional interview transcripts, both authors jointly compared them to previously coded interviews. This step modified some of our interview questions. For example, the fifth question in our semi-structured interview list ("How do various organization members affect your role as a SHC?", see Appendix) was added to our initial list after identifying two emergent codes ("Organization members threaten SHC's HR career" and "Hostile reactions from perpetrators' colleagues"). These actions were carefully noted in our memos.

In the next step, the axial coding that was conducted after accumulating all the interview transcripts, the authors compared all the codes that each of them had generated and jointly grouped them into broader categories. These categories were then arranged following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) suggestions for axial coding. Our axial coding stage generated eight categories: (1) the mandatory tasks of SHCs, (2) the legal power basis of SHCs, (3) lack of designated SHC resources, (4) gaps between top management's rhetoric and practice regarding WSH, (5) SHC loneliness and emotional burden, (6) SHCs who have themselves been victims of WSH, (7) a clash between SHCs' role and the systematic organizational barriers to reducing WSH and (8) SHCs' adoption of an alternative discourse – the power discourse and concomitant practices.

In the third and final stage of analysis, selective coding, we confirmed the central categories and organized the findings in a coherent theoretical context. Through iterative movement between our data, our research questions and the literature, we have identified a pattern of relationships between the eight categories elicited in the previous stage. For example, we realized that four categories that function jointly as systematic organizational barriers to SHCs' fight against WSH yield another category: a clash between these barriers and SHCs' role. We continued refining a framework that connects all the categories through the overarching comparison between two competing discourses (and their concomitant practices) in regard to WSH: the legal discourse and the power discourse. This final stage enabled us to achieve our stated goal: unpacking the embedded power dynamics surrounding

WSH through the identification of a profound organizational conflict between these two discourses and their concomitant SHC practices.

We used Atlas.ti software for our data analysis (Smit, 2002). During these three stages, we also engaged in memoing (Smit, 2002): we used *code memos* during the open coding stage, whereas during the axial and selective coding stages we used *theoretical memos*. We also utilized *operational memos* which contained directions relating to our evolving research process. For example, during the axial coding phase, following the emergence of the conflictual category "Clash between SHCs and the systematic organizational barriers to SHCs' role," we noted in our memos that we needed to search for Israeli reports that include data about SHCs' tenure and their reasons for leaving this role, only to discover that such data were unavailable (as will be noted in the Discussion section).

Findings
This section reports primary categories derived from our analysis. An overview of categories that emerged from the analysis of the interviews is presented in Table 1. In summary, our findings indicate that SHCs in Israeli business organizations are in an ambiguous and equivocal organizational position. While they seemingly are empowered by their exclusive authority to inquire into an intricate organizational matter, counter-practices have emerged to undermine their authority and influence. Consequently, two competing discourses exist regarding WSH: the legal discourse and the power discourse. The former frames WSH in terms of individual misconduct and liability, while the latter analyzes it as a wider power phenomenon, which stems from and expresses embedded societal gender inequalities.

The mandatory tasks of SHCs and their power basis
The Israeli law defines the mandatory tasks of SHCs, which consequently become their power basis. Israeli employers are protected from WSH liability, provided that SHCs lawfully perform their role. SHCs have the exclusive formal authority to receive and investigate WSH complaints within their organization. The SHCs in our study described in detail how they have gradually developed practices that document employees' WSH complaints and wisely counsel the complainants. They have also learned how to carefully inquire into WSH complaints, a process that typically involves discreetly interviewing several parties including the harassed employees, the defendants, their colleagues, witnesses and other relevant organization members. Following their investigation of WSH complaints and bearing in mind their responsibility, SHCs have also learned how to meticulously write conclusive reports that they submit to senior decision-makers.

The tasks and practices entailed by the SHC role are empowering in several respects. First, SHCs have exclusive access to highly sensitive organizational information. Second, SHCs fill a vital accommodating function for complainants, the vast majority of whom are women in distress, while also providing them with valuable legal information [4]. Third, SHCs' recommendations, included in their reports submitted to top management, may bear significant consequences, not only for the prospective employment and careers of both complainants and defendants but also for their marital and family lives as well. Therefore, SHCs occupy an exclusive empowered position in regard to the sensitive and often volatile domain of WSH inquiries.

Organizational dominance of the legal discourse regarding WSH
The wide array of practices that SHCs in our study have learned to carefully perform is not a neutral set of acts and roles, but rather a series of demanding tasks that are performed by using a particular type of discourse. Despite the variance across the business organizations in

STEP1: Open coding	STEP 2: Axial coding	STEP 3: Selective coding
Detailed codes	**Categories**	

• Exclusive authority to inquire into WSH complaints
  o Knowledge of Israeli law
  o Sensitive/volatile domain
  o Role importance
  o Consequences for complainants and defendants
 	
SHC tasks:
• Document complaints
• Counsel complainants
• Inquire into WSH complaints
• Collect evidence
• Interview complainants, defendants, witnesses
• Defendants = deviant individuals
• Write conclusive reports
• Submit reports to top management
	The legal power basis of SHCs
	
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	Mandatory tasks in the SHC role
		The legal discourse
		WSH is the misconduct performed by *deviant individuals* and should therefore be investigated by legal means to establish their guilt and liability.

• Budget constraints in the SHC role • No compensation for filling the SHC role • No designated time to work on WSH complaints • Use personal time to work on WSH complaints	**4 systematic organizational barriers to reducing WSH:** Lack of designated SHC resources	

• Top management: "zero tolerance towards WSH"
• Daily contradictions, conflicts, inconsistencies, mismatches
  o Decisions made without SHC
  o SHCs' recommendations ignored by top management
  o SHCs' recommendations reversed by top management
• Disappointment with top management
• Hostile reactions from perpetrators' colleagues
• Organization members threaten SHC's HR career
	Gaps between top management's rhetoric and practice regarding WSH	

• Listen to painful claims of aggression • Cognitive burden: deliberate over dilemmas • SHC loneliness • SHC stress and tension • SHC as victims of WSH • SHC fear of future retaliation in the form of WSH	SHC loneliness and emotional burden SHCs themselves as victims of WSH	Vs.
• No reduction in WSH • Frustration with status quo • Feel like a "fig leaf" • SHCs' strong dismay with their role	**A clash between the SHC role and the 4 systematic organizational barriers to reducing WSH**	

• SHCs realize WSH is performed by men against women:
  o Control/domination
  o Sex discrimination
  o Gender inequality
 	
• Proactive approach and new practices:
  o Process WSH complaints more thoroughly
  o Support an increased volume of WSH complaints
  o Advance awareness of WSH
  o Identify organizational risk factors
  o In need of suitable infrastructure
  o Provide extensive anti-WSH training
  o Sustain the emotional wellbeing of SHCs
  o New success parameters
	SHCS' adoption of an alternative discourse, the power discourse, and concomitant new practices	**The power discourse**
		WSH is a form of sex discrimination, and thus an issue of gender inequality

Table 1.
Overview of categories that emerged from analysis of the interviews arranged in accordance with Strauss and Corbin's model (1990)

our study, a common theme appeared in SHCs' narratives: The dominant organizational discourse regarding WSH is the legal discourse, which constructs it as misconduct performed by *deviant individuals*, who therefore should be investigated to establish their personal guilt and liability. SHCs' authority within their organizations as well as their ability to carry out their duties stems from the legal discourse: they *investigate* WSH complaints, collect *evidence*, question *witnesses* and write reports, aiming to determine *liability* as well as proper sanctions.

Consequently, the legal discourse, which typically becomes the default discourse of the SHC role, deciphers WSH complaints as an *interpersonal legal matter* between a complainant and a defendant. This legal matter involves investigating "who did what to whom" and "what evidence exists to support each version." This is illustrated in the following quote from Iris, an HR practitioner and SHC in hi-tech:

> As an SHC, I contend with workplace sexual harassment cases mainly by using the legal discourse, which provides me with a formal mandate, a professional aura in the eyes of organization members and a few legal tools. Like other SHCs, I attended a designated training course, which presented the legal aspects of workplace sexual harassment and the tasks of the SHC. The legal discourse and tools are needed because workplace sexual harassment is, first and foremost, a criminal offense, which must be identified and punished. It's important to acknowledge that, before we even begin to consider workplace sexual harassment in ethical and social terms.

In short, the legal discourse, which provides the legitimacy for the SHC role and practices, has a distinct effect: it shapes how WSH is conceived within the organization. The law, which mandates that SHCs occupy an exclusive empowered position regarding organization members and the organization, has also become the source of the discourse that deciphers how sexual violence occurs within the workplace: The legal discourse constructs WSH as misconduct performed by deviant individuals. In the legal discourse, the organizational context is deemed marginal and insignificant.

While SHCs occupy an exclusive empowered position, they also acknowledge the organizational barriers that have emerged, which inhibit them from successfully combating WSH, as described next.

SHC as Sisyphus: four systematic organizational barriers to reducing WSH
A contrary power backlash has emerged, which weakens and isolates SHCs and negatively affects their ability to reduce and prevent WSH. This is demonstrated by the following four categories: lack of designated SHC resources, gaps between top management's rhetoric and practice regarding WSH, SHC loneliness and emotional burden, and SHCs who have themselves been victims of WSH.

Lack of designated SHC resources. SHCs must contend with a systematic lack of resources for investigating WSH complaints. Most SHCs are not allocated time and budget for this role. These are necessary because SHCs need to invest resources in order to carefully inquire into WSH complaints. Although SHCs participate in mandatory formal training prior to filling their role, they claim that given the nature of WSH complaints and the denials that they elicit from defendants and among their colleagues, SHCs are often kept in the dark during highly complex WSH investigations. They often attempt to arrive at decisive conclusions despite partial and blurry information and persistent, contradictory versions of what happened from the employees involved. Sarah, an HR practitioner and SHC in hi-tech, puts it as follows:

> Organizations appear to be very complicated "crime scenes" for HR practitioners who are typically unequipped for detective tasks that aim to determine "the objective truth." Rather, we are trained to understand a wide array of *subjective* human experiences. Having said that, the SHC role demands arriving at conclusions, based on a thorough inquiry. The organization, however, does not provide me with proper tools to investigate workplace sexual harassment complaints that are, by definition, *very* intricate and volatile. I therefore rely mainly on partial tools including my common sense and intuition, as well as my understanding of the law. (Emphasis in the original)

In addition, the HR practitioners were not personally compensated for the SHC role. They performed it as part of their HR job, since handling WSH is typically considered by senior executives to be an integral part of the HR practice. In reference to their occupational image, the interviewees owned that HR is perceived by management as "*dealing with people problems*."

Given that the legal discourse constructs WSH as misconduct performed by deviant *individuals*, that is, employees with "*personal problems that cause their aggression*," as they are often referred to by other employees, HR departments seem to be the suitable function for handling them. The SHCs in our study, who are typically highly devoted to their unique position, are frustrated with the lack of designated resources necessary for performing their role responsibly and meticulously. They reported that their recurring requests for additional resources were systematically refused by top management. This frustration is also illustrated by Sarah's remarks:

> Not only am I not supplied with proper tools to investigate workplace sexual harassment cases, but I do it using work hours designated for my HR role as an employee recruiter. Sometimes I even put in extra time, for which I am not compensated, like those mad and lonely detectives in the movies that just *have* to see the case solved, when everybody else in their squad has already gone home. (Emphasis in the original)

When handling complex WSH complaints, SHCs contend with a significant workload, given that they continue performing their routine HR tasks in addition to their SHC tasks. Despite the devotion of our participants to their SHC role, they are afraid that the lack of distinctive resources for contending with WSH complaints is gradually inhibiting their ability to function effectively as SHCs.

Gaps between top management's rhetoric and practice regarding WSH. In our participants' organizations, the top managements (typically composed mainly of men) were described as declaring their commitment to the reduction and prevention of WSH. In addition to the lack of SHC designated resources, SHCs recognized yet another major gap between top managements' rhetoric and practice: the exclusion of SHCs from final decision-making processes regarding WSH complaints.

According to Israeli law, SHCs do not implement their own recommendations in regard to both sets of employees – defendants and complainants. Rather, they pass on their recommendations to top management, which decides how to proceed (e.g. reinstate the defendant in another department, demote him/her, etc.). As Israeli law does not mandate the involvement of SHCs in final decision-making processes regarding WSH complaints, our participants say that final decisions in WSH cases are typically made without them. This makes it possible for dominant covert and unspoken organizational attitudes and norms regarding WSH to prevail over SHCs' careful judgment. While not deciding themselves may take some of the burden off SHCs' shoulders, not having a seat at the executive (typically all male) table is also experienced as devaluating and marginalizing.

Furthermore, SHCs' recommendations are commonly ignored or even reversed by top management. SHCs report that despite top managements' common rhetoric of "zero tolerance toward WSH," certain WSH cases are dealt with rather lightly, "so as to sweep them quickly under the organizational carpet," as metaphorically put by some SHCs. For example, Suzanne, a SHC in the communications industry, described how her report, which recommended ending a business contract with an external construction contractor, who had harassed female employees, had been set aside until the contractor finished supplying the organization with expensive building materials. Only then did management circulate an internal memo directing logistics managers to work with other external contractors, without even stating the reason for the change. When such disappointing outcomes recur, they not only elicit frustration among devoted SHCs but also serve as a strong signal of the organization's unspoken, yet obviously tolerant, stance toward WSH, as is also illustrated in the following quote:

> After a long series of workplace sexual harassment cases, in which my recommendations as SHC had been ignored or even reversed by top management, including the CEO, it dawned on me that the whole damn bunch on the management floor don't really care for preventing workplace sexual harassment. They simply want *to appear as lawful employers*. I don't think they're "bad" people who

wish ill for others. They're just relatively indifferent to the wellbeing of harassed employees, who are mostly women. (Grace, HR practitioner, SHC in retail, emphasis in the original)

Another troubling expression of the gap between top management's rhetoric and practice, reported by the participants in this study, is that male organization members, including senior managers, often try to manipulate SHCs into dropping WSH complaints against senior male defendants. The following example is illustrative:

The defendant's friends in the organization heard about the workplace sexual harassment complaint against him and pressured me to "let it slide." They said: "The inquiry process caused Tom enough suffering. Don't transfer him to a distant warehouse where he will be far away from his longtime colleagues." They tried to manipulate me with heartbreaking stories about his lovely wife and cute kids . . . One senior manager even accused *me* of wrecking families! (Irene, HR practitioner, SHC in retail, emphasis in the original)

At times, these manipulations take the form of personal threats to SHCs' careers as HR practitioners. For example, Dana, an SHC in banking, told us that after her refusal to "*quietly bury in the drawer*" a WSH complaint against a popular executive, his colleagues approached Aaron, her boss in the HR department, and told him off the record "*not to bother recommending Dana for promotion anytime soon.*" Dana said that while Aaron supported her work as an SHC, she understood that he was also obligated to conform to pressures from his own supervisors. As SHCs know that Israeli law prohibits intimidation or retaliation that accommodates sexual harassment, such pressures from and manipulations by executives exacerbate the gaps that SHCs identify between top management's rhetoric and practice regarding WSH. These intimidating pressures exacerbate yet another challenge faced by SHCs: their loneliness and emotional burden, which is portrayed next.

SHC loneliness and emotional burden. SHCs contend – typically on their own – with a persistent emotional burden that stems from listening to claims of aggression and conflict, as well as the cognitive burden of deliberating over highly intricate ethical and interpersonal role dilemmas. Consequently, SHCs often experience loneliness and isolation as well as stress and tension. The following two quotations from interviewees are illustrative examples of such emotional challenges:

Following my investigation of a dramatic workplace sexual harassment complaint, I lost the friendship of some of my colleagues who had become involved in the case as supporters of the defendant, claiming his innocence. When you start investigating a workplace sexual harassment complaint, you don't know the identity of employees that will be involved as witnesses, and by the time I realized that major witnesses were my friends, I was already committed to my role as SHC, especially as the sole organizational confidant of the victim. Everybody turned against her for submitting a workplace sexual harassment complaint against her boss, Ben, a very likable guy in this hotel. I was the only person in the organization she could confide in. Despite my emotional conflict, I could not have someone else replace me as SHC without totally betraying her. Eventually I paid a personal social price because some employees considered me her ally, for doing my job. They had stopped talking to me after the hotel management had decided to reassign Ben to work in another hotel in the chain. No one in the organization had even realized what I was going through, at that difficult time. *The irony is that I was not even the victim in this case!* (Monica, HR practitioner, SHC in tourism, emphasis in the original)

The role of the SHC definitely takes its emotional toll. When a workplace sexual harassment complaint is filed, you hear really nasty things that people do to each other. As you probe deeper into the case, you hear even nastier things that the two sides say about each other to protect themselves from negative consequences. Given the necessity of discretion, I cannot consult any organization members regarding workplace sexual harassment. Once I asked the CEO whom to turn to for advice, and he referred me to a retainer law firm the bank works with. However, what I required then wasn't legal advice, but rather someone with whom to share the emotional hardship of the SHC role.

So, I initiated contact with SHCs in other organizations who quickly became my unofficial support group outside the organization. We meet and talk after hours. (Linda, HR practitioner, SHC in banking)

SHCs themselves as victims of WSH. Some of our participants report that they themselves have been victims of WSH, either before or during their role as SHCs. There was often a difference between our participants' accounts of how they had fought assertively, as SHCs, for the employees who confided in them and their own rather unassertive attitude toward the aggression they had faced as victims. The following example is Tina's account of how she contended with WSH:

As an SHC for many years, I had always heard about workplace sexual harassment from other women, until it happened to *me*! I was already a senior HR practitioner when one day I was sitting down for lunch in corporate headquarters with one of the top executive directors. He knew I was divorced and started asking very personal and intrusive questions regarding my dating habits, with an obvious hint at my sex life. I tried to avoid this line of talk, but he was very persistent and far from subtle. Some of his questions and remarks definitely qualify as workplace sexual harassment. As a highly educated professional, he's probably aware of the law; he's not some ignorant street thug. Rather, he probably assumes himself to be *above* the law, given his seniority and status in the organization. There was nothing I could do without risking my entire career in that organization; so I decided to keep it to myself. Since then I still see him around, of course, and typically I try to avoid direct contact with him. I say to myself that even though I was verbally harassed, unpleasant as it was, it's not as bad as other cases I dealt with as an SHC, which included physical assault or terrible recurring threats. (Tina, senior HR practitioner, SHC in hi-tech)

The power discourse as an alternative SHC discourse regarding WSH

Given the systematic organizational barriers that they face in their fight against WSH, SHCs have come to realize that their function may be abused as an organizational fig leaf, which *preserves,* rather than changes, the status quo: The great majority of complainants are women claiming to have been harassed by men. SHCs' inquiries reveal that WSH is indeed most often performed by men against women.

Consequently, SHCs report that as they gain more experience in their role, they proactively choose to approach WSH not by solely utilizing the legal discourse, but rather by adopting a wider societal power discourse, which acknowledges WSH as reflecting gender inequalities. By adopting and utilizing an alternative discourse, a power discourse, SHCs attempt to combat WSH more effectively. The difference between the legal discourse and the power discourse resides in the following related four points: the construction of WSH, the role of SHC, its relevant infrastructure, and finally the success parameters of the SHC role. A summary of the comparison between these two competing discourses regarding WSH appears in Table 2.

To begin with, the construction of WSH is different in each of these two discourses. While the legal discourse is undoubtedly respected by SHCs as the basis of their authority and professional approach to handling WSH cases, they are concerned about the limits it imposes on their ability to reduce WSH or prevent it altogether. The legal discourse assigns responsibility for WSH to individuals that are labeled within the organization as "deviant" and therefore solely liable for the act, instead of placing it on the larger systems, including work organizations, in which women live and work. SHCs acknowledge that the individual-level construction of WSH, which derives from the legal discourse, cannot speak to the macro-level relationships between power, gender and the cultural/societal meaning of men's sexual violence against women. SHCs understand why the legal discourse regarding WSH is encouraged by top management: it serves to distance and even divorce employers from the commonly held understanding of *WSH*, that is, a phenomenon, which takes place within work organizations and is, therefore, by definition, related to and affected by organizational characteristics and practices.

	How is WSH constructed?	What is the role of SHC?	What is relevant organizational infrastructure for the SHC role?	What constitutes SHC success?
Legal discourse	WSH is the misconduct performed by *deviant individuals* (employees, customers) and should therefore be investigated by legal means to establish their guilt and liability	Obey the law by performing mandatory tasks in the SHC role: receive WSH complaints and inquire into them effectively; advise complainants; report conclusions and recommendations to top management	(1) Legal knowledge (2) Time (3) When necessary, additional legal counsel is provided to SHCs by the organization's legal department or by an external counsel hired by the organization	(1) Protect the employer from liability for WSH by performing mandatory duties lawfully (2) *Low* number of WSH complaints (3) Finish processing WSH complaints as *quickly* as possible (4) Maintain a positive organizational reputation in the eyes of both its members and its external stakeholders
Power discourse	Most complainants are women claiming to have been harassed by men; WSH is most often performed by men against women; WSH is motivated by control and domination WSH is a form of sex discrimination, and thus an issue of gender inequality	All of the above + Adopt a proactive approach to raise organization members' awareness of various levels – societal, cultural and organizational – of power relations in which WSH is deeply embedded	All of the above + Permanent resources for: (1) Advancing organizational awareness of WSH as a wider societal and cultural phenomenon (2) Providing extensive anti-WSH training across the organization (3) Sustaining the emotional well-being of SHCs themselves	(1) Protect the employer from liability for WSH by performing mandatory duties lawfully (2) Processing WSH complaints *thoroughly* (3) Reducing WSH prevalence by encouraging increased organizational awareness of it as a wider societal and cultural phenomenon (4) An *increased* volume of WSH complaints

Table 2.
Comparison between two competing discourses regarding WSH in the SHC role

The SHC role, as shaped by the legal discourse, is focused on obeying the law by performing a specific set of mandatory tasks. In contrast, the SHC role, as shaped by the power discourse, encourages the adoption of a proactive approach by SHCs to raise organization members' awareness of various levels – societal, cultural and organizational – of power relations, in which WSH is deeply embedded. This approach is translated into new practices: SHCs aim to increase organizational awareness of WSH by providing extensive training and encouraging more frequent and open discussions of WSH within the organization. In addition, SHCs adopting the power discourse encourage all employees to not only critically assess the

behavior of colleagues, customers and external parties like contractors and suppliers but also to share with the SHC behaviors suspected of being sexual harassment. SHCs also change their reports on WSH complaints to include reference to organizational factors that they identify as increasing the risk of sexual violence toward women, such as placing a solitary female employee in night shifts at an all-male work site (e.g. a gas station, a back-office in a warehouse).

SHCs assume that increased organizational awareness following their adoption and practical dissemination of the power discourse will consequently elicit more complaints from employees who have been harassed but have formerly been reluctant to complain, or from employees who have formerly not identified certain behaviors as WSH. While this turn may create a greater workload for SHCs, they welcome it as an avenue for change within their organization.

The infrastructure available for SHCs utilizing the legal discourse includes legal knowledge, time and additional ad hoc legal counsel that is provided to SHCs by the organization's legal department or by an external counsel hired by the organization. In comparison, the adoption of the power discourse requires additional infrastructure for the SHC role, in particular permanent resources for these actions: advancing organizational awareness of WSH as a wider societal/cultural phenomenon; providing extensive anti-WSH training across the organization and sustaining the emotional well-being of SHCs themselves, in order to support their demanding battle against WSH.

A final distinction between the two competing discourses lies in their definition of SHC success. According to the commonly held legal discourse within organizations, the success of an SHC is determined according to the following parameters: (1) protection of the employer from liability for WSH, by performing SHC mandatory duties lawfully; (2) a low number of WSH complaints; (3) quick processing of WSH complaints and (4) maintaining a positive organizational reputation in the eyes of its members and its external stakeholders. According to the power discourse adopted by SHCs, however, their success is determined by a different list of parameters. In addition to protecting the employer from liability for WSH by performing SHC mandatory duties lawfully, SHCs aim to reduce WSH prevalence in the long run by *encouraging* increased organizational awareness of WSH, a parameter that may manifest in an *increased* volume of WSH complaints in the short run. SHCs confirm that top management rarely welcomes this paradoxical implication.

The SHCs in this study report that their attempts to approach WSH by utilizing the power discourse are eroded by systematic organizational barriers that pull them back toward the default legal discourse. The next quote from Rachel, an SHC in finance, illustrates her futile critical attempt to contend with WSH by utilizing an alternative discourse:

> During a private discussion with the CEO regarding a workplace sexual harassment case, in which the perpetrator readily admitted to having harassed young female subordinates, I told the CEO that not only the perpetrator was to blame, but organizations on the whole that for years allowed men to treat women that way, for example by not providing proper training in regard to workplace sexual harassment. Even though I spoke in the plural and referred to the labor market in general, the CEO would not hear of it! He quickly agreed to my recommendation to fire the perpetrator and declared, as many times beforehand, his "zero tolerance" approach to workplace sexual harassment. For him it was an open and shut case of a rotten apple, which is thrown out. He thanked me for properly handling the investigation of the complaint against "this nasty creep," and quickly returned to his responsibilities that awaited him. (Rachel, HR practitioner, SHC in finance)

As illustrated by Rachel's remarks, SHCs' attempts to utilize the power discourse to approach WSH are eroded by the very same organizational barriers that testify to the deeper power relations and inequalities in which WSH is embedded. This cyclical process is illustrated in Figure 1.
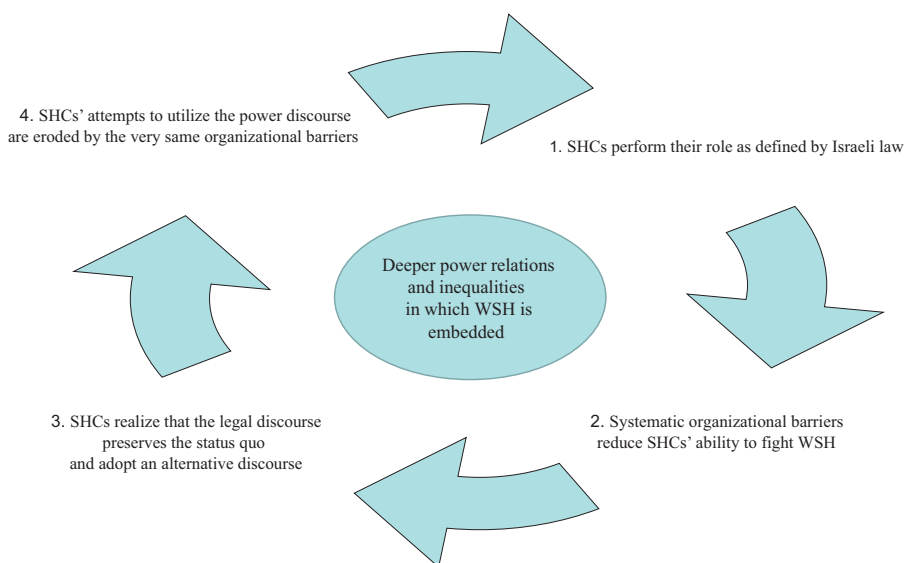
4. SHCs' attempts to utilize the power discourse
are eroded by the very same organizational barriers

1. SHCs perform their role as defined by Israeli law

Deeper power relations
and inequalities
in which WSH is
embedded

3. SHCs realize that the legal discourse
preserves the status quo
and adopt an alternative discourse

2. Systematic organizational barriers
reduce SHCs' ability to fight WSH

Discussion

This study aimed at unpacking the embedded power dynamics, which construct how WSH is both deciphered and handled within organizations. It posed two research questions: Which organizational challenges do SHCs face while handling WSH complaints within organizations? Consequently, how do SHCs contend with their role challenges? In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 Israeli SHCs in various business organizations in Israel to explore practitioners' conceptions of the challenges underlying their role. The Israeli labor market is a fascinating ground for exploring inequality, given not only Israel's exceedingly conflictual character but also the continuing gender gaps in favor of men in all areas of Israeli life (Tzameret-Kertcher *et al.*, 2020).

Our first research question addressed the organizational challenges that SHCs face while handling WSH complaints within organizations. SHCs have the exclusive formal authority to receive and investigate WSH complaints within their organization. Israeli law defines the mandatory tasks of SHCs, which consequently become their power basis. The SHC role is thus performed by using the legal discourse, which has become the dominant organizational discourse regarding WSH complaints. It constructs WSH as misconduct performed by *deviant individuals.* Accordingly, SHC tasks include practices aimed at collecting evidence to determine individual responsibility and liability. Our findings demonstrate that while SHCs seemingly are empowered by their unique position within an intricate organizational territory, they face the following four consistent organizational barriers: lack of designated SHC resources, gaps between top management's rhetoric and practice regarding WSH, SHC loneliness and emotional burden, and finally SHCs as victims themselves of WSH. The emergence of these counter organizational barriers undermines SHCs' authority and influence, also negatively affecting their ability to reduce the prevalence of WSH.

These barriers to SHCs' fight against WSH are also intertwined. Lack of designated SHC resources also manifests the gap between top management's rhetoric and practice, because only thorough WSH investigations, which require additional resources, could manifest a genuine organizational commitment to combating WSH. Furthermore, the lack of designated role resources, which puts devoted SHCs in a Sisyphean position, exacerbates SHC loneliness

and emotional burden. And the gaps between top management's "zero tolerance" rhetoric and its practice regarding WSH, which are evident not only to SHCs but also to other organization members, signal that sexual aggression will not be penalized, hence is maybe even encouraged. Management's reluctance to punish WSH in this study is consistent with prior findings (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2017). Contending with such demanding barriers also make SHCs themselves more vulnerable to aggression, including to being victims of WSH.

Our findings echo the claim made by McLaughlin *et al.* (2012) that women who hold authority over some men directly challenge the presumptive superiority of men. In our study, SHCs filled a role that empowered them, only to discover counter practices typically enacted by male employees and executives. McLaughlin *et al.* (2012) also found that social isolation was a mechanism linking harassment to gender nonconformity and women's authority, particularly in male-dominated work settings. This finding is also echoed by the loneliness and isolation experienced by the SHCs in our study who work in Israeli business organizations, which are typically male-dominated, particularly in senior positions (Tzameret-Kertcher *et al.*, 2020). To some extent, the organizational responses to SHCs in our study parallel the minimization and retaliation responses to complainants of WSH, identified by Bergman *et al.* (2002). Bergman *et al.* (2002, p. 232) suggested the term "procedural satisfaction" to refer to WSH complainants' evaluation of the way the organization handled their report. Given the systematic organizational barriers that they face in their fight against WSH, SHCs have come to realize that their function may be abused as an organizational fig leaf, which *preserves,* rather than changes, the status quo. The notion of "procedural satisfaction" (Bergman *et al.*, 2002) is also relevant for capturing the significant dismay experienced by SHCs in this study.

Our second research question was as follows: How do SHCs contend with their role challenges? As SHCs come to realize the consistent organizational constraints under which they operate, they understand that the dominant legal discourse, which constructs WSH in terms of *individual* misconduct, is counterproductive to the reduction of WSH, because the latter is an organizational phenomenon rather than an interpersonal issue caused by a deviant few. As SHCs are subjected to manipulations and threats from their own colleagues while attempting to fill their role responsibly, they conceive of WSH as a mechanism dominating women. They therefore aspire to contend with the barriers in their role by embracing an alternative power discourse, which frames WSH as stemming from and expressive of gender inequalities. SHCs' attempts to approach WSH by utilizing the power discourse, however, are eroded by the systematic barriers that channel them back to the default dominant legal discourse, and vice versa.

Israeli employers are protected from WSH liability, provided that SHCs lawfully perform their role (Kamir, 2005). Our findings imply that top managements across business organizations are interested in SHCs' function as a shield against WSH liability more than they are interested in the reduction of WSH, let alone its prevention. Therefore, the success parameters of SHCs according to the legal discourse focus on creating a façade of organizational propriety: handling relatively few WSH complaints lawfully and quickly, while maintaining a positive organizational reputation in the eyes of both its members and its external stakeholders. Given that our findings are based on the day-to-day experiences of position holders, who are formally in charge of combating WSH, these results are alarming. The gap between top management's rhetoric and practice also implies that while the rational discourse is still dominant in management rhetoric (Tengblad, 2012), organizations irrationally allow WSH to persist, despite its well-established negative implications for the workplace on the whole (Stockdale *et al.*, 2020a, b).

Considering employers' persistent and pervasive focus on protection from liability (Bisom-Rapp, 2001; Chappell and Bowes-Sperry, 2015; Feldblum and Lipnic, 2016; Grossman, 2003; Perry *et al.*, 2010), it comes as no surprise that SHCs' attempts to approach WSH utilizing an alternative discourse of power, which poses an opposite set of success

parameters, are futile. Our study echoes prior evidence indicating that measures taken for the purpose of legal compliance may *interfere* with reducing WSH de facto (Chappell and Bowes-Sperry, 2015), consequences that present a power paradox (Sitkin and Bies, 1993). Sitkin and Bies' (1993) arguments in regard to the "legalistic organization" are applicable to the business organizations in our study, in which a significant diffusion of legalistic reasoning and procedures is used to enhance organizational legitimacy.

These findings underscore the fact that WSH is constructed in business organizations in ways that not only minimize employers' responsibility for this phenomenon but also ignore embedded gender inequalities: the great majority of complainants who have approached the SHCs in our study are women claiming to have been harassed by men. In addition, SHCs in this study report that their inquiries reveal that WSH is most often performed by men against women. These findings are in accord with previous studies regarding the extent to which women are the dominant victims of WSH (Berdahl, 2007; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012). The findings highlight the claim that WSH is, first and foremost, an exercise of power (Kamir, 2005; MacKinnon, 1979; Popovich and Warren, 2010; Stockdale *et al.*, 2020a, b; Wilson and Thompson, 2001).

Wilson and Thompson (2001) have argued that WSH draws on all three of Lukes' (1986, in Wilson and Thompson, 2001) dimensions: power as a means to prevail over the contrary preferences of others; power in terms of preventing decisions from being taken on controversial issues and power as relations of dominance, which affect beliefs and cognitions. Building on Lukes' conceptualization, Hathaway (2016, p. 118) suggested deciphering power utilizing three categories: visible power, hidden power and invisible power. Hathaway's (2016) conceptualization is relevant for our findings. Visible power refers to the ways in which actors realize their interests through decision-making and the control of resources. By refraining from giving SHCs the fully needed time and budget for their role, employers realize their interests through the control of resources. In addition, senior executives' power to limit SHCs' steps, as well as silence their voices, is apparent in top management's tendency to ignore or even reverse SHCs' recommendations. Hidden power, evident in backdoor machinations and institutional organization, is manifested in executive decision-making processes in regard to WSH cases, in which SHCs are not invited to participate. Hidden power is also evident in male employees' and executives' manipulations and threats to the HR career advancement of SHCs. Finally, invisible power, which refers to structural use of discourse as a means of domination, is evident in the persistence of the legal discourse, which dictates that WSH be deciphered and handled in organizations in ways that accommodate employers and senior executives, most of whom are men, at the expense of female employees. Our findings also demonstrate that these three types of power are intertwined: those who have visible power also have means to preserve hidden power and invisible power, and vice versa.

We will now discuss what our findings contribute to the literature. First, our findings address a lingering gap in the scholarly literature regarding organizational practices of contending with WSH incidents *following* their occurrence. Little is known about how cases of WSH are dealt with by various *internal* position holders. Despite decades of scholarship, basic questions about how workplace mechanisms that reflect power affect harassment remain mostly unanswered. Our findings, which delve into the daily practices of reacting to and contending with WSH complaints, provide an insight into the intricate procedures that handling complaints entails, through the lens of the internal position holders who are solely responsible for this task within organizations. SHCs attempting to reduce WSH by utilizing the legal basis of their role confront systematic organizational barriers. SHCs determined to fight WSH by adopting an alternative discourse and its concomitant practices are blocked by the very same organizational barriers. Our theoretical contribution hence lies in unpacking the embedded power dynamics surrounding the aftermath of WSH and suggesting a process theory that identifies the consistent organizational barriers which channel SHCs toward the

adoption of the default legal discourse despite their acknowledgment that it enables or even nurtures the persistence of WSH as a form of gender discrimination. This cyclical process testifies to the profound power relations and inequalities in which WSH is deeply embedded.

Second, our findings, which relate to the Israeli labor market, echo previous evidence of poor handling of WSH (e.g. Quick and McFadyen, 2017). The SHCs in this study clearly stated that their organizations are ill-equipped to reduce and prevent WSH. In congruence with the reports of Israeli SHCs in our study, nearly 60% of HR professionals, in the SHRM's (2018) sexual harassment survey, believe that unreported sexual harassment happens in the workplace at times. In addition, while 72% of the survey respondents were content with their employers' efforts to stop WSH, one-third of the respondents claimed that their workplace *fosters* WSH (SHRM, 2018), a conclusion shared by our participants. Gaps between the law and practice (Walker *et al.*, 2019) are evident in Israel too. Our findings add to previous studies by highlighting the fact that while internal practices of inquiring into and sanctioning WSH are necessary legal measures, they are preliminary and insufficient.

Third, our findings suggest the relevance of a "second-order" analysis of WSH. While our findings do not relate directly to harassed employees, who have been the subject of ample studies (e.g. Hart, 2019), our study demonstrates how female position holders, who were formally appointed by their employers to contend with WSH, are *themselves* subjected to the same embedded organizational power dynamics that enable WSH to exist. This finding also manifests how gender inequalities allow both the persistence of WSH and top management's de facto tolerance toward it.

Fourth, our study contributes to the WSH scholarship, which is mostly based on Western (i.e. American and European) studies. The study by Karam and Ghanem' (2019) on workplaces in Lebanon has recently portrayed the effect of local culture on WSH. Our findings in regard to Israeli society, which is characterized by consistent gender inequalities (Tzameret-Kertcher *et al.*, 2020), add to the recently accumulated knowledge about sexual violence in Middle Eastern labor markets.

Fifth, our findings contribute to the HRM literature by unmasking the role that top management plays in regard to HR practitioners. In a longitudinal review of the HRM field, Markoulli *et al.* (2017, p. 385) noted that "the practitioner literature places a much stronger emphasis [vis-à-vis the academic literature] on company executives – and especially on the relationships between HR departments and the company executives who tend to be key gatekeepers of organizational resources." Furthermore, Boada-Cuerva *et al.* (2019, p. 63) claimed that "despite the significant influence that top management exerts on different aspects of people management, it remains the missing stakeholder in the HRM literature." Boada-Cuerva *et al.* (2019) called therefore for studies that address the role that top management plays in HRM. Our findings contribute to this gap in the literature by suggesting that top managements across business organizations (ab)use HR practitioners as a shield against WSH liability, as executives' choices and actions make evident, as opposed to their supporting rhetoric. To begin with, top management appoints to the SHC role relatively young female HR practitioners in a junior to mid-level organizational position, a status which *a priori* serves to limit their ability to fight WSH, and may also eventually cause SHC burnout and turnover [5]. By refraining from giving SHCs the fully needed time and budget for their role, top management then realize their interests through the control of HR resources. Finally, by ignoring SHCs' recommendations, top management denies HR practitioners access to vital decision-making procedures regarding WSH. Executives' actions evidently contradict top management's well-known motto, "Our employees are our greatest asset" (Ulrich *et al.*, 2017). The harm is twofold: not only does top management neglect its responsibility toward organization members but it also negates HRM's function in regard to employee well-being.

Finally, we suggest that the SHC role is a particular case of diversity management. Diversity management policies and practices are aimed at enhancing organizational diversity by

addressing social (in)justice and discrimination within organizations (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). We suggest that the work of SHCs is a particular case of diversity management, in the sense that SHCs challenge existing gender inequalities and gender discrimination. Our findings in regard to female commissioners' Sisyphean struggle to reduce WSH, which is a form of gender discrimination and inequality, echo the relentless struggles to ameliorate organizational inequalities conducted by female diversity practitioners (e.g. Swan and Fox, 2010). Our findings are also consistent with the study by Nadiv and Kuna (2020), which showed how diversity managers' initiatives generated organizational tensions that undermined their success and hence amplified the need for further diversity interventions.

Organizations construct diversity: it is an organizational product (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Nkomo *et al.*, 2019; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010) shaped by invisible, yet dominant, power relations (Ahonen *et al.*, 2014), just as WSH is shaped by power relations (MacKinnon, 1979; Popovich and Warren, 2010; Stockdale *et al.*, 2020a, b). Diversity practitioners invest efforts in reconnecting to diversity discourses' histories of struggles for equality (Ahmed, 2007) in ways that echo SHCs' attempts to shape different realities though their daily notions and alternative practices. In the same way that discourses of gender equality shaped the meanings and practices of diversity management (Meriläinen *et al.*, 2009), we claim that discourses construct WSH in ways that reproduce gender hierarchies. Therefore, the counter-practices, which have emerged to undermine SHCs' authority and influence, and which also negatively affect their ability to reduce the prevalence of WSH, are clearly a manifestation of organizational resistance to changing the status quo. Slightly paraphrasing Ahmed's (2009, p. 41) words, we say "males: the world as it coheres around certain bodies."

Practical implications
This study has focused on the daily practices of SHCs. The following practical implications stem from the findings. We begin with occupational implications for the HR profession. Senior HR professionals, especially those in business partner positions (Ulrich *et al.*, 2017), should utilize their position and influence to improve how their organizations contend with WSH. Given HRM's focus on human behavior, HR practitioners can provide significant insight regarding the context, development and evaluation of WSH reduction and prevention efforts. In addition, HR professionals should provide SHCs in their organizations with the necessary role infrastructure, including supervision and constant care. The latter in particular are needed, given the findings regarding SHCs' role loneliness and emotional burden. This implication also echoes recent calls for alternative organizing and spaces of/for feminist solidarity (Daskalaki and Fotaki, 2017; Fotaki and Harding, 2017).

The limited capacity to contend well internally with WSH, which surfaced in this study, implies that some organizations are ill-prepared to reduce WSH, not to mention prevent it altogether. While at times they turn to *external* factors, like the police, organizations should first and foremost adjust their internal infrastructure to better address WSH. For example, even though SHCs do not have the formal authority to make final decisions in regard to WSH inquiries, their ability to fight WSH is undermined by top executives who choose to ignore or even reverse their recommendations. As a practical matter, mandating SHCs' participation in final decision-making procedures regarding WSH reports would alleviate this problem. Furthermore, the four systematic organizational barriers to reducing WSH delineated in this study are domains that can be ameliorated by organizations that aim at reducing WSH. A practical focus on organizational context and mechanisms, rather than on individual roles (e.g. a single commissioner with no designated budget), can cultivate and sustain systematic organizational mechanisms aimed at abolishing WSH.

Finally, we offer an implication regarding management education. Acknowledging the need to successfully contend with WSH should become an integral part of management education, training and development, particularly in light of recent conceptualizations of

inclusive leadership (Perry *et al.*, 2020). Ideally, WSH will be eliminated from the labor market. However, we are still far from that utopia. Hence, aspiring young managers, as well as senior executives, should not only be presented with data regarding WSH (e.g. prevalence, antecedents and consequences) but also be advised about available internal organizational mechanisms for contending with it. This training should be aligned with recent findings to ensure long-term attitudinal or behavioral change outside of the training environment (Dobbin and Kalev, 2020; Medeiros and Griffith, 2019; Perry *et al.*, 2012). This practical shift is vital in light of the contemporary precariousness of women in many labor markets (Brunner and Denver, 2014; Fitzgerald, 2020).

Limitations and suggestions for future research
This study has several limitations. First, quantitative data, which were not gathered in this qualitative exploratory study, may be a valuable source for enriching the findings. Second, the data were based on an Israeli sample of SHCs who operate within organizations in accordance with Israeli law, so its generalization may be somewhat limited also in this respect. Finally, our position as female scholars may have shaped our role as researchers. We deeply empathized with our female participants who shared with us the difficulties they face in their roles as SHCs. We hope, however, that our reflexive approach, during the phases of analysis, ameliorated most of our possible biases. Despite these limitations, the findings may highlight intriguing topics, which bear implications for scholars and practitioners alike.

Prospective research is needed to overcome these limitations as well as to more fully decipher how organizations contend internally with cases of WSH. Many questions have yet to be answered. For instance, it would be fascinating to explore which organizational factors might aid SHCs in their role. Future research could delve further into the practices of SHCs from a comparative cultural approach. These queries are just the tip of the iceberg, as much has yet to be revealed in our quest to prevent WSH.

Notes

1. Israeli law does not state SHCs' role in executive decision-making processes regarding employees (e.g. complainants and perpetrators) involved in WSH complaints.

2. In Israeli organizations, HR practitioners, who are typically women (Nadiv *et al.*, 2017), are commonly assigned the role of SHC. The law recommends that SHCs should be women but does not mandate it.

3. Israeli law does not state fees or compensation for filling the SHC role. It is filled voluntarily by practitioners who are assigned this task as part of their role within human resource management departments.

4. Israeli law enables WSH complainants to proceed in any or all of three independent routes: the disciplinary intraorganizational route, the criminal justice route and the civil suit route.

5. Our participants' tenure in the SHC position ranged from 11 to 35 months, with an average of 17 months. We could not find any Israeli data about SHCs' tenure and their reasons for leaving the role.

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Appendix
Interview protocol

Prepared questions for semi-structured interviews with the SHCs:

(1) Please describe the main duties and common practices in your role as an SHC.

(2) What organizational resources are allocated to your role as an SHC?

(3) Please describe a typical process of being approached by an employee who reports a WSH complaint. Can you give examples?

(4) Are there informal organizational guidelines and policies regarding employees' WSH complaints?

(5) How do various organization members affect your role as an SHC?

(6) How do you react to rumors of WSH in the organization?

(7) How do you contend with partial and ambiguous information, as well as opposing versions, during your investigation of WSH complaints?

(8) What are the challenges and dilemmas with which you contend as an SHC? Please give examples.

(9) How does top management typically react to and utilize the recommendations included in your reports of WSH cases? Please give examples.

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