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## Peer sexual harassment in adolescent girls: A cross-national study (Spain-Italy)<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** International studies have concluded that sexual harassment among adolescents is more frequent than expected. However, estimations of sexual harassment vary according to different studies. Some of these differences can be explained in terms of the different dimensions and explicative models used. This descriptive study tried to contribute to this area of investigation testing different models of sexual harassment in a sample of 318 female adolescents (mean age 17.05 years old) of two European countries, Spain and Italy. Using confirmatory analyses and multiple group models in order to assess the measurement invariance across countries, results confirmed that a bi-dimensional model comprising a verbal/visual dimension and sexual harassment with physical contact fitted well. Fitzgerald's model was also tested but fit indices failed to reach acceptable values. Results are discussed in relation to previous studies on this object and in terms of the implications for prevention and intervention programs on sexual harassment and courtship during adolescence.

**KEYWORDS.** Sexual harassment. Violence. Adolescence. Peer relationships. Transversal descriptive study.

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**RESUMEN.** Los estudios internacionales sobre el acoso sexual en la adolescencia han mostrado que este fenómeno es más frecuente de lo esperado, aunque la prevalencia del acoso sexual varía de unos estudios a otros. Algunas de estas diferencias han sido explicadas en función de los modelos y dimensiones explicativas de las que parten los diferentes estudios. La presente estudio descriptivo intenta contribuir a esta línea de investigación, evaluando diferentes modelos explicativos del acoso sexual en 318 chicas adolescentes (edad media 17,05 años) de dos países europeos (España e Italia). Aplicando análisis confirmatorios y modelos de múltiples grupos para medir la invarianza en ambos países, los resultados mostraron que un modelo bi-dimensional, compuesto por la dimensión acoso verbal/visual y la dimensión acoso físico fue el que mejor ajustó los datos. El modelo de Fitzgerald también fue evaluado aunque los índices de ajuste no alcanzaron niveles tan satisfactorios. Los resultados se discuten con relación a las investigaciones previas en este campo y respecto a las implicaciones que estos resultados tienen para la prevención y la intervención sobre acoso sexual y cortejo en la adolescencia.

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** Acoso sexual. Violencia. Adolescencia. Relaciones entre iguales. Estudio transversal descriptivo.

From a developmental perspective, sexual harassment during adolescence is related to changes at both interactional and individual levels. The development of mixed-gender peer crowds leads to an increased number of cross-gender social interactions. At the same time pubertal development characterizes individual changes and it may directly affect sexual motivation and interest (McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig, 2002), and in turn unadjusted sexual behaviours toward the other gender. One of the developmental tasks for adolescents during this age consists in learning to express their own desires and intentions to others, and reciprocally, to learn to receive such information from others. Although sexual harassment is a widespread phenomenon among peers during this specific age and its emergence is correlated to biological development, this behaviour is neither normative nor socially appropriate given the negative impact on victims and its association with other aggressive and violent behaviour (Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, and Jaffe, 2009). In relation to this, different studies have underlined how important it is to consider the effect of sex on sexual harassment (American Association University Women, 2001; Dahinten, 2003; Fitzgerald, Gelfand and Drasgow, 1995; Gruber, 1992; McMaster *et al.*, 2002; Witkowska and Kjellberg, 2005). Specifically, some studies have found that boys and girls interpret sexual harassment in different ways, and this has a different psychological impact for each sex. Dahinten (2003) found that sexual harassment was more problematic for girls than for boys, as girls' experience is more upsetting than boys'.

Starting from these considerations, the present study aims to analyse sexual harassment only in adolescent girls in two countries, Spain and Italy. Two reasons justify the interest in studying this topic in these countries. First, the majority of published studies come from Anglo countries. Spain and Italy, in contrast, are Mediterranean countries still in transition from a patriarchal society towards more equal

roles between men and women. These particular characteristics could reflect differences among sexual harassment in Spanish and Italian adolescents compared to their Anglo counterparts. Besides, until now, the authors are unaware of any studies on peer sexual harassment in Spain and Italy even though both countries have a large tradition in the area of school violence research (see Fonzi *et al.*, 1999; Martínez-Ferrer, Murgui-Pérez, Musitu-Ochoa, and Monreal-Gimeno, 2008; Menesini, 2008; Menesini and Modiano, 2002; Ortega, Del Rey and Fernández, 2002; Ortega and Mora-Merchán, 1999; for a review). Second, the few studies conducted in Spain and Italy to analyse the prevalence of sexual harassment within dating relationships (Fernández-Fuertes, Fuertes and Pulido, 2006; Menesini and Nocentini, 2008; Ortega, Ortega-Rivera and Sánchez, 2008) or within intimate partners (Ulla *et al.*, 2009), often have not used a clearly defined measure of sexual harassment, which makes it difficult to compare results and develop a clear understanding of this phenomenon in adolescence. For example in Italy, Menesini and Nocentini (2008), used the most frequent items of the American Association University Women Survey (1993), to assess the prevalence of sexual harassment in adolescence -just verbal items. The authors found that 44.4% of students sexually-harassed their partners at least once during the last 2 months (*e.g.*, made sexual comments, jokes, movements, or looks at...), whereas 57% of adolescents affirmed they had been sexually-harassed by their partners (*e.g.*, spread sexual rumours about them). In Spain, Ortega *et al.* (2008) used the same procedure as Menesini and Nocentini (2008) showing similar levels of sexually-harassed adolescents. Specifically, 65.6% of the Spanish adolescents reported having been sexually-harassed by their partners in the last two months.

Although we can have some indirect information from studies related to dating sexual harassment, as mentioned before, we are not aware of studies specifically dedicated to peer sexual harassment in either country. Furthermore, we think that indices based on the most frequent items may not represent the complexity of the problem among Spanish and Italian adolescents. Therefore, more specific and deeper analyses could help us to understand this phenomenon in the two countries.

Sexual harassment during adolescence is a very pervasive and frequent phenomenon, well documented by studies and research developed in different countries (American Association of University women, 1993, 2001; Espelage and Holt, 2007; Gruber and Fineran, 2008; McMaster *et al.*, 2002; Menesini and Nocentini, 2008; Ortega *et al.*, 2008; Pellegrini, 2001; Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yuile, and McMaster, 2006; Shute, Owens and Slee, 2008; Witkoska and Kjellberg, 2005). Despite the high level of interest, no agreement seems to exist among researchers on a common definition of sexual harassment. Studies developed from the feminist point of view, characterise sexual harassment as an imbalance of power between boys and girls (Lacasee, Purdy and Mendelson, 2003). From a developmental perspective, some authors emphasize the proactive aggressive nature of the phenomenon (Goldstein, Malanchuck, Davis-Kean, and Eccles, 2007; Shute *et al.*, 2008) that emerges, together with pubertal changes occurring during adolescence and increasing sexual interest in interpersonal exchanges (Goldstein *et al.*, 2007; McMaster *et al.*, 2002; Pellegrini, 2001). Other authors assume psychological definitions, not only the aggressive nature of sexual harassment, but also the concern for the victim's suffering (McMaster *et al.*, 2002) stressing the victim's perceptions of unwelcome and

unacceptable behaviours as the core aspect of sexual harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Shute *et al.*, 2008; Timmerman, 2002). Other definitions take the characteristics of traditional models of sexual harassment in the workplace, including the impact of it on adolescents. From this conceptualization, sexual harassment creates a hostile environment that interferes with the educational process and with school life, affecting students and groups (Espelage and Holt, 2007; Gruberg and Fineran, 2008; Lacasee *et al.*, 2003; Witkowska and Kjellberg, 2005).

In this study, we defined sexual harassment among adolescents as “an unwanted and unwelcome sexual behaviour” because sexual harassment causes distress and discomfort to the victims, which can interfere with the normal life of students in schools. Sexual harassment includes different behaviours, such as name-calling, rumours, sexual comments, looks, gestures, attempts at personal contacts, and physical attacks. A wide range of behavioural attitudes and conducts are included in the definition. These behaviours vary from verbal manifestations (jokes and comments), visual forms (shows pornographic material and sexual photographs), to more severe forms of sexual harassment as sexual coercion and physical assaults. We think that some of these behaviours are ambiguous and difficult to appreciate as unacceptable for students. As some authors note, sexual attraction becomes very important during adolescence and motivates cross-sex interactions. In this new context, adolescents must learn how to regulate and to express their desires and intentions appropriately. This may mean that sometimes they act behaviours and attitudes that could be considered as sexual harassment when they are trying to show interest and attraction toward another person (Lacasee *et al.*, 2003; Timmerman, 2002).

In line with the difficulties to find a clear definition of sexual harassment and as the phenomenon comprises a variety of behaviours, researchers have failed to test the dimensional structure for sexual harassment among adolescents. The study of the factorial structure of the construct of sexual harassment allows for a more accurate assessment of the nature of this behaviour. The distinction in different dimensions (latent constructs), representing the broader category of sexual harassment, makes it possible to evaluate whether different types of sexual harassment differ in terms of antecedents, causes, behavioural expression and consequences.

Up to present, we have not seen successful studies that permit to understand the dimensions of sexual harassment among adolescents. Three aspects, from our point of view, help us explain this difficulty. The first one is the fact that only few studies have tried to determine peer sexual harassment factor structure using confirmatory factor analyses (CFA; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1995; McMaster *et al.*, 2002; Witkowska and Kjellberg, 2005) or exploratory factor analyses (EFA; Dahinten, 2001; Gruber and Fineran, 2008; Lacasee *et al.*, 2003). On the contrary, the great part of developed studies have used theoretical models and descriptive analyses to present sexual harassment dimensions (Espelage and Holt, 2007; Hand and Sanchez, 2000; Timmerman, 2002; see Table 1).

**TABLE 1.** Dimensions of sexual harassment reported in different countries.

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Instrument</i>	<i>Dimensions of sexual harassment</i>	<i>Statistical analyses</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Gruber (1992)	SH in the workplace	Review	Verbal remarks Verbal requests Physical assaults	Review	Review
Association of University Woman (1993)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1993	Physical SH Non-physical SH General SH index	No reference	1632 school students (mean age 16 years) boys and girls
Fitzgerald <i>et al.</i> (1995)	SH in different contexts	SEQ, 1995	Unwanted sexual attention Gender harassment Sexual coercion	CFA	Different samples: adult women and university girls (no age reference)
Hand and Sánchez (2000)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1993	Physical SH Verbal/visual SH Derogatory SH	Theoretical models	1607 students (mean age 15 years) boys and girls
American Association of University Woman (2001)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1997	Physical SH Non-physical SH General SH index	No reference	2064 school students (mean age around 16 years) boys and girls
Dahinten (2001)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1993	Gender harassment Sexual advances/impositions	EFA	565 high school students: 217 boys / 348 girls
Pellegrini (2001)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1993	General SH index	Descriptive analyses	138 (mean age 12.8 years) 129 (mean age 14.01 years) boys and girls
Timmerman (2002)	Peer SH Teacher SH	AAUW, 1993	Verbal SH Physical SH Non-verbal SH	No reference	2802 high school students boys and girls
Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, Grasley, and Pittman (2001)	Dating sexual violence	CADRI, 2001	Sexual violence index	EFA	1019 (mean age around 14-16 years) boys and girls
McMaster <i>et al.</i> (2002)	Peer same-gender SH Peer cross-gender SH	AAUW, 1993	Verbal SH Visual SH Physical SH	CFA	1213 students (mean age around 12 years) boys and girls
Lacasee <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Peer SH	SEQ, 1995	Moderate SH Severe SH	EFA	324 (mean age 13.7 years) 144 (mean age 16.6 years) boys and girls
Foshee, Bebefield, Ennet, Bauman, Suchindran (2004)	Dating sexual violence	Ad-hoc measure	Sexual violence index		1965 high school students boys and girls
Witkoska and Kjellberg (2005)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1993	Three models were tested: Fitzgerald's model (1995)	CFA	980 students (mean age 16-17 years) boys and girls

**TABLE 1.** Dimensions of sexual harassment reported in different countries. (Cont.)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Instrument</i>	<i>Dimensions of sexual harassment</i>	<i>Statistical Analyses</i>	<i>Sample</i>
			Gruber's model (1992) Larkin's model (1994)		
Fernández-Fuertes <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Dating sexual violence	CADRI, 2001	Sexual violence index	EFA	572 (mean age 16.65 years) boys and girls
Pepler <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Peer same-gender SH Peer cross-gender SH	AAUW, 1993	General SH index	Based on McMaster <i>et al.</i> (2002)	961 students (mean age, 12.6 years) boys and girls
Espelage and Holt (2007)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1993	General SH index	Descriptive analyses	684 students (mean age 14.50 years) boys and girls
Gruber and Fineran (2008)	Peer SH	AAUW, 1993	Public SH Unwanted personal advances	EFA	369 middle school students (girls) 199 high school students (girls)
Shute <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Peer SH	Focus group	Verbal SH Indirect SH Physical SH	Content analyses	74 boys and girls (around 16 years) 7 teachers
Menesini and Nocentini. (2008)	Dating SH	AAUW, 1993	General SH index	More frequent items	1300 students (mean age 15.12 years) boys and girls
Ortega <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Peer and dating SH	AAUW, 1993	General SH index	More frequent items	490 (mean age 16.08 years) boys and girls

The second aspect is related to the theoretical models on which studies are based. In this regard, most studies have tried to test theoretical models from workplace settings, making particularly difficult the generalization of these results to educational contexts and to adolescents' development (Witkowska and Kjellberg, 2005). The most relevant models originate from Fitzgerald *et al.* (1995) and Gruber (1992). Fitzgerald and colleagues conducted one of the first studies to try to confirm structural factors of women sexual harassment in different cultures and contexts using CFA. Based on Till's (1980) five dimensions construct of sexual harassment, Fitzgerald *et al.* (1995) and Gelfand, Fitzgerald and Drasgow (1995) found that the best model for sexual harassment in work and university contexts was a three-component model comprising *Gender harassment*, *Unwanted sexual behaviour*, and *Sexual coercion*. *Gender harassment* refers to verbal and non-verbal behaviours not aimed at sexual cooperation. It includes negative and degrading attitudes about women which reflect hostility and aversion to them. *Unwanted sexual behaviour* encompasses repeated harassing behaviours, such as request for dates, phone calls, letters, and touching. *Sexual coercion* refers to harassing behaviours aimed at sexual cooperation or conversely at unwanted sexual behaviour; and often there is a threat or intimidation to victims in relation to job loss or job/educational

benefits. According to Fitzgerald *et al.*, this three-component model differentiates types of sexual harassment instead of severity, and each of the dimensions includes mild and severe examples of sexual harassment.

Different studies have tried to test Fitzgerald's model to the educational context. To this regard, Dahinten (2001) applied this model with a sample of Danish adolescents (boys and girls). Using EFA, the author found two factors that were very similar to some of Fitzgerald's dimensions: *Gender harassment* and *Unwanted sexual impositions*. The third factor, *Sexual coercion*, was not found. Hand and Sanchez (2000) adapted Fitzgerald's model to adolescents' populations. The authors considered *Derogatory sexual harassment* (close to gender harassment), *Sexual impositions* (close to physical sexual harassment) and *Visual/verbal harassment* (in some aspects near to unwanted sexual behaviour and gender harassment). Also Lacasee *et al.* (2003) tried to test Fitzgerald's model with adolescents but the model failed to represent the Fitzgerald's dimensions.

Gruber (1992) proposed a different model of sexual harassment in the workplace. Based on a theoretical review of the literature, he distinguished three general dimensions of sexual harassment that could be classified not only by the behaviour they describe, but also in terms of severity. The dimensions Gruber proposed were: *Verbal request*, that includes verbal advances aimed at initiating sexual relations; *Sexual remarks* or comments about women that are not necessarily oriented at a specific target, and *Non-verbal display*, that includes sexual assaults, touching, posturing, physical threats, and the use of pornographic material. Although Gruber (1992) did not test the model, he concluded about the difficulty to apply these categories to men. According to the author, male sexual harassment presents peculiarities which make difficult a generalization of legal and sociologic characteristics from women to men. Recently, Gruber and Fineran (2008) have applied the "American Association of University Women Survey" (1993) to adolescent girls. The authors have extracted a two-factor model for sexual harassment using EFA. *Public Sexual harassment*, which refers to experiences occurring before an audience or a group of others (*i.e.*, "wrote sexual messages about you on bathroom walls") and *Unwanted personal advances*, which are one-to-one experiences involving physical assaults.

The work developed by Witkowska and Kjellberg (2005) represents an important contribution to peer sexual harassment research. In an attempt to validate the factorial structure of sexual harassment in adolescence, the authors tested the models of Gruber and Fitzgerald on a sample of Swedish adolescents. Models were run separately by gender, and in spite of not finding a satisfactory common model, the results indicated the necessity to approach sexual harassment separately by gender since the phenomenon takes place differently in boys and girls. Specifically for girls, Witkoska and Kjellberg (2005) found that the best model was a *General sexual harassment* and two specific factors: *Verbal/symbolic factor* and *Direct physical contact factor*. The *Verbal/symbolic factor* was close to the *Visual/verbal factor* proposed by Hand and Sanchez (2000), congruent with Gruber and Fineran (2008) *Public sexual harassment*, and with Fitzgerald's *Gender harassment*. *Direct physical contact factor* was similar to the physical dimension presented in all other models. For boys, the best model was a general factor with two factors comprising a mixture of items from different dimensions. In any case, the authors concluded that workplace models were not useful to understand sexual harassment in adolescence, although Fitzgerald's models presented close to acceptable fit indices.



The third aspect that can affect our understanding of sexual harassment is the instrument used to measure it in adolescence. The most used questionnaires in the majority of studies have been the “American Association of University Women” Survey (American Association of University Woman), developed in 1993 to analyse the presence of peer sexual harassment in American students, and the “Sexual Experiences Questionnaire-High Schools” developed by Fitzgerald *et al.* (1995). The use of both instruments has played a relevant role in these studies because they have permitted a comparison of general indices of sexual harassment across countries, frequently based on dichotomized indices. On the other hand, these questionnaires have been used with different theoretical approaches and aims, making it particularly difficult to reach a common structure (Espelage and Holt, 2007; Hand and Sanchez, 2000; Pepler *et al.*, 2006). As we have seen, Hand and Sanchez (2000) applied the Fitzgerald’s model to American Association of University Women (1993) survey, identifying three dimensions: *Physical sexual harassment*, *Visual/verbal sexual harassment*, and *Derogatory sexual harassment*. In another study, McMaster *et al.* (2002) administered the American Association of University Woman (1993) instrument to analyse the characteristics of same- and cross-gender sexual harassment. Although the authors distinguished three sexual harassment factors (*i.e.*, *Verbal*, *Visual*, and *Physical*), CFA was run to confirm the different nature of same- and cross-gender sexual harassment instead of the dimensions per se of sexual harassment. More recently, Petersen and Sibley Hyde (2009) have used the American Association of University Women survey. Although the authors also differentiated same- and cross-gender sexual harassment victimization, they used a descriptive approach using a dichotomized index of sexual harassment. On the contrary, Lacasee *et al.* (2003), using the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire in Secondary Schools, did not find the factors proposed by Fitzgerald *et al.* (1995). In their study, EFA analyses yielded a two-component solution: moderate and severe forms of sexual harassment.

After a revision of these studies, we can derive two important conclusions. First, that no agreement seems to be present regarding the dimensions of sexual harassment, especially for the non-physical forms. Considering these studies it emerges that there is a severe and clear form of sexual harassment that is well-recognized by students as an undesired and unwelcome sexual behaviour. However, verbal, visual, non-physical, moderate, or degrading sexual harassment behaviours or attitudes are presented as poorly defined since they share a pattern of similar behaviours (most of the time measured with the same questionnaire). In our opinion, these dimensions include behaviours that can be difficult to appreciate, like unwelcome sexual behaviours in adolescents. Moreover, a considerable number of studies have used only descriptive analyses and theoretical models to define the components of sexual harassment, whereas not enough effort has been made in using more recent methodologies to assess this important aspect of the construct. The second issue is related to gender differences in sexual harassment. The original models were aimed at analysing sexual harassment towards women and girls (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1995; Gruber, 1992), and this tradition has been continued in recent studies developed to analyse girls sexual harassment (Foshee *et al.*, 2004; Gruber and Fineran, 2008). In fact, most studies trying to test the dimensions of sexual harassment have failed to reach a common structure for boys and girls (Witkowska and Kjellberg, 2005). Only Dahinten (2001) and the study of McMaster *et al.* (2002) reached a common structure for same- and cross-sexual harassment among

boys and girls, but their aim was not to find the dimensions outside of the group where sexual harassment occurred. As previously mentioned, it is necessary to develop new studies for a better understanding of sexual harassment differentiated in relation to sex. To this end, in our study we will analyse the dimensions of sexual harassment perceived by girls using CFA.

This research, considered as a cross-sectional descriptive study (Montero and León, 2007; Ramos-Álvarez, Moreno-Fernández, Valdés-Conroy and Catena, 2008) will try to contribute to the study area of sexual harassment definition and dimensions in adolescence. To sum up, taking into consideration that The American Association University Women survey has been one of the most used instruments to assess sexual harassment in adolescence, we will analyse the factor structure of this scale among Italian and Spanish adolescent females. Specifically, the aims of this study are twofold: 1) testing the measurement invariance of the latent structure across country; and 2) analysing the prevalence of sexual harassment across the two countries.

## Method

### *Participants*

Starting from a sample of 672 high-school students of two European cities Seville (southern Spain) and Florence (central Italy), we selected 361 female adolescents for the present study. Forty-three students were excluded from analyses due to missing data: the final sample consisted of 318 adolescents (170 from Spain and 148 from Italy).

In the Italian sample the age range was from 16-18 years (mean age = 17.07 years;  $SD = .76$ ). In the Spanish sample the age range was from 16-18 (mean age = 17.02 years;  $SD = .80$ ). The Italian sample was part of the third follow-up of a longitudinal study carried out in Tuscany designed to analyze bullying and risk behaviour during adolescence. The sample was representative of the school distribution in Italy: 36.6% students attended lyceum high schools, 43.5% students attended technical institutes, and 19.8% students attended vocational schools. The Spanish sample was recruited specifically for this comparative study. Participants attended high schools (86%) and technical institutes (14%) which is in line with the national distribution of students in these two educational contexts. In both cases, samples were selected using a random procedure from the total population of public schools in both cities.

### *Instruments*

The present study assessed the factor structure of the AAUW Sexual Harassment Survey (American Association University Women, 1993, 2001). Numerous international studies have used this instrument to measure sexual harassment in adolescence, although, until now there have been no studies to clarify the validity and the factor structure of the measure. The questionnaire asked students to report how often they had perpetrated or received a variety of sexual harassment behaviours during the last 2 months. The questionnaire instructions explicitly asked to report only "unwanted sexual behaviours". The questionnaire included 14 items representing physical and non-physical behaviours with a format scale on 5 points ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Daily*) (American Association University Women, 2001). For the present study, we will focus on received behaviours (the experience of being a victim). Since the items showed a strong asymmetric distribution,

we decided to dichotomize the scores. For both countries, questionnaires were translated into Italian and Spanish starting from the English version, and then back-translated to ensure accuracy of translation.

The items and the percentages of students who reported experiencing each behaviour for both countries are presented in Table 2. The preliminary item analysis revealed that three items had a very low endorsement: "Pulled at someone's clothing in a sexual way" (item 6), "Spied on someone as they dressed or showered at school" (item 9), and "Pulled someone's clothing off or down" (item 14). These items have been deleted also in previous studies conducted with the same instrument (McMaster *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, we decided to delete them from the following analysis.

**TABLE 2.** Endorsement of items on Italy and Spain.

	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Italy</i>
	<i>% yes</i>	<i>% yes</i>
1. Made sexual comments, jokes, movements, or looks at you	54.3	27.5
2. Brushed up against you in a sexual way on purpose	12.3	14.8
3. Spread sexual rumours about you	10.6	11.2
4. Called you "fag," "dyke," "lezzie," or "queer"	11.7	6.8
5. Flashed or "moonied" you	31.6	14.6
6. Pulled at someone's clothing in a sexual way	.6	5.6
7. Blocked someone's way or cornered them in a sexual way	5.6	4.5
8. Forced someone to do something sexual other than kissing	2.5	2.3
9. Spied on someone as they dressed or showered at school	1.2	1.1
10. Forced someone to kiss you	6.9	4.6
11. Touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way	6.9	10.8
12. Showed, gave, or left someone sexual pictures, photographs, messages, or notes	9.5	4.0
13. Wrote sexual messages or graffiti (e.g., on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, in a note or book) about someone	7.5	2.3
14. Pulled someone's clothing off or down	1.3	1.7

### *Procedure*

All students agreed to take part in the study and, if necessary, received their parents' permission. Prior to the administration to the students, a researcher met the Principal of the school to explain the aims of the study. The Principal informed the rest of the teachers and a letter was sent to all the students' families outlining the design of the research. Confidentiality was assured to both families and students. After the data collection, the schools received a report of the most important results according to the aim of the study and carrying practical implications.

Data were collected during spring 2006 in both cities. Specific days for collecting data were decided by each school according to their timetable. Normally, data collection took place after the first break of the school day. In complete classes, students were asked to fill out individual and anonymous questionnaires about some dimensions of their relationships with peers (sexual harassment, bullying, and violence outside schools).

Maximum confidentiality of the answers was assured to them by well-trained interviewers throughout the process. The time to complete the questionnaire was 50-60 minutes approximately.

#### *Data analyses*

All the analyses were conducted via Mplus 4.0 (Muthén and Muthén, 2006). Referring to the dichotomous nature of the data, the estimator used for the analysis was a mean- and variance-adjusted least-squares estimator weighted least squared mean variance (WLSMV). Delta parameterization was used (Muthén and Muthén, 2006).

The CFA was conducted through two steps: the first step aimed to analyse single-group CFA in each country separately, and the second one attempted to test the multiple-group analysis across country. The single-group analyses assessed the best fitting model for each group. Five models were tested: 1) a mono-dimensional model; 2) a bi-dimensional model including one dimension encompassing physical forms of sexual harassment and a second dimension including verbal and visual forms of sexual harassment; 3) a three-dimensional model following the proposal of Hand and Sanchez (2000) and Fitzgerald *et al.* (1995); 4) a second factor model with the bi-dimensional structure identified in step 2; and 5) a second factor model with the three-dimensional structure identified in step 3.

In multiple-group analysis, cultural measurement invariance was tested through the following two models, from less restricted to more restricted models (Meredith, 1993; Muthén and Muthén, 2006). Configural invariance was tested through the basic model based on equality of form model, testing the same model with the same pattern of fixed or free parameters without constraints across groups (unconstrained model). In particular, with delta parameterization, thresholds and factor loadings are free across groups; scale factors are fixed to one in all groups and factor means are fixed to zero in all groups. Metric and scalar invariance was tested through models in which pattern factors loading and respectively thresholds are constrained to be equal across groups (constrained model). In particular with delta parameterization, thresholds and factor loadings are constrained to be equal across groups; scale factors are fixed to one in one group and free in the others and factor means are fixed to zero in one group and free in the others. Metric and scalar invariance are tested at the same step because for categorical data factors loadings and thresholds have to be constrained in tandem given that the item probability curve is a function of both parameters (Muthén and Muthén, 2006).

All the models were evaluated by means of the following overall indices: the chi-squared ( $\chi^2$ ) statistic, the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the weighted root mean square residual (WRMR). Recommended cut-off points for these measures are: for RMSEA, the cut-off is .08 (Brown and Cudek, 1993) or .06 (Hu and Bentler, 1998); for CFI, the cut-off is .90 (Bollen, 1989) or .95 (Hu and Bentler, 1998); finally, for WRMR, the cut-off of 1.0 has moderate-to-strong power to detect miss-specified models with acceptable type I error (Yu, 2002). In addition, to these overall fit indices, the evidence for factorial invariance is tested through the significance of difference in the  $\chi^2$  value between two nested models. Using the WLSMV estimator, differences in model fit for nested models do not correspond effectively with the difference in estimated  $\chi^2$  and degree of freedom between the two models: DIFFTEST Mplus option was used for this purpose.

## Results

### *Single-group models for sexual harassment*

Table 3 presents the goodness-of-fit indices for single-group models tested in the two countries separately. Model 1 is a single factor model with all eleven items loadings on one factor. Model 2 is a two factors model: items 1 and 3 and 4 and 5 and 12 and 13 were indicators of visual and verbal sexual harassment, and items 2 and 7 and 11 and 8 and 10 were indicators of sexual harassment with physical contact. Model 3 is a three-factors model where items 1 and 5 and 12 were indicators of visual/verbal sexual harassment, items 3- 4- 13 were indicators of derogatory harassment and items 2 and 7 and 11 and 8 and 10 were indicators of physical harassment. Model 4 was a second order factor model following the structure of Model 2; since the model did not fit the data, we dropped it from the results presentation. Model 5 was a second order factor model following the structure of Model 3; since the model did not fit the data, we dropped it from the results section.

**TABLE 3.** Fit indices for single-group and multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis.

	<i>Chi</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>WRMR</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	<i>p</i>
Single-Group Models										
Italy										
Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	12.78	12	.38	.99	.99	.02	.73			
Model 2 <sup>b</sup>	14.05	13	.37	.99	.99	.02	.69			
Model 3 <sup>c</sup>	12.57	13	.48	1.00	1.00	.01	.63			
Spain										
Model 1 <sup>d</sup>	29.46	12	.00	.93	.93	.09	1.24			
Model 2 <sup>e</sup>	14.00	12	.30	.99	.99	.03	.84			
Model 3 <sup>f</sup>	11.59	11	.39	.99	.99	.01	.75			
Multiple-Group Models										
1. Unconstrained	26.00	23	.30	.99	.99	.02	1.00			
2. Constrained Model	25.47	24	.38	.99	.99	.02	1.01			
2 vs 1								1.74	5	.88

Note: <sup>a</sup> alpha factor mono-dimensional solution:  $\alpha = .73$ .; <sup>b</sup> Factors correlation is .88: alpha factor 1:  $\alpha = .60$ ; alpha factor 2:  $\alpha = .77$ ; <sup>c</sup> Factors correlation between *Visual/verbal* and *Derogatory harassment* is .85; Factors correlation between *Visual/verbal harassment* and *Physical harassment* is .96; Factors correlation between *Derogatory harassment* and *Physical harassment* .70. Alpha coefficients are: for factor 1  $\alpha = .44$ ; for factor 2  $\alpha = .60$ ; for factor 3  $\alpha = .77$ ; <sup>d</sup> alpha factor mono-dimensional solution:  $\alpha = .76$ ; <sup>e</sup> Factors correlation is .53: alpha factor 1:  $\alpha = .63$ ; alpha factor 2:  $\alpha = .80$ ; <sup>f</sup> Factors correlation between visual and verbal harassment is .67; Factors correlation between *Visual harassment* and *Sexual harassment with physical contact* is .54; Factors correlation between *Verbal harassment* and *Sexual harassment with physical contact* is .41. Alpha coefficients are: for factor 1  $\alpha = .54$ ; for factor 2  $\alpha = .57$ ; for factor 3  $\alpha = .80$ .

The Model 1 showed adequate fit indices for Italy but not for Spain: in the latter, the  $\chi^2$  statistic was significant and RMSEA and WRMR assumed high values. Model

2 showed adequate fit indices for both countries. The improvement for Spain regarded all the fit indices: the factors correlation was moderate-high (.53) and the reliability coefficients were acceptable for both factors, although the *Visual-verbal* factor assumed a lower alpha than the *Sexual harassment with physical contact* (respectively,  $\alpha = .63$ ;  $\alpha = .80$ ). For Italy, Model 2 presented the same fit indices of Model 1; the factors correlation was high (.88) and the reliability coefficients were acceptable for both factors, although also in Italy the *Visual-verbal* factor assumed a lower alpha than the *Sexual harassment with physical contact* (respectively,  $\alpha = .60$ ;  $\alpha = .77$ ). Model 3 showed an adequate fit index for both countries, better than the fit of Model 2. For Italy, factors correlations between *Visual/verbal* and *Derogatory harassment* was .85, between *Visual/verbal* and *Physical harassment* was .96, and finally, correlation between *Derogatory harassment* and *Physical harassment* was .70. Looking at the reliability coefficients, non-acceptable value was reported for the first factor ( $\alpha = .44$ ); for the other two factors alpha presented acceptable values. For Spain, factors correlations between *Visual/verbal harassment* and *Physical harassment* and between *Derogatory harassment* and *Physical harassment* were moderate; factors correlation between *Visual/verbal harassment* and *Derogatory harassment* was high. Looking at the reliability coefficients, non-acceptable values were reported for the first two factors (respectively  $\alpha = .54$ ;  $\alpha = .57$ ).

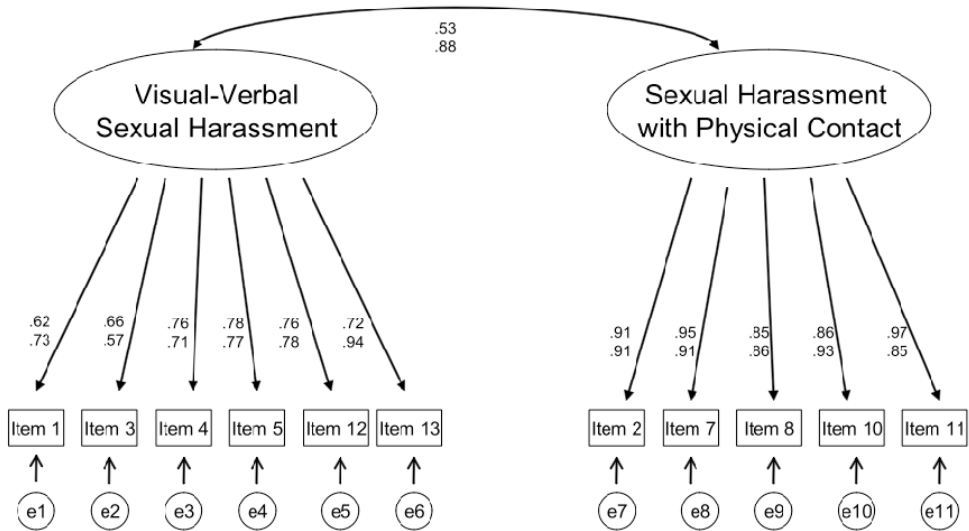
Although fit indices showed a better solution for Model 3 than Model 2, considering that the reliability coefficients on *Visual/verbal harassment* were not satisfying for both countries and those on *Derogatory harassment* were not sufficient for the Spanish sample, we derived that Model 2 is the best model to describe the data in both countries.

For the Spanish sample, the comparison between Model 1 and 2 showed a clear improvement of fit indices for the bi-dimensional Model. For the Italian sample, the two fits were quite the same, and the factors correlation was high. On the base on the principle of parsimony (Bollen, 1989) and on the fact that the unique information provided by each factor in both uni-dimensional solutions was low, we accepted the bi-dimensional model. Finally, looking at reliability coefficients, we found more acceptable alpha values for Model 2 than in the other models. At the end, we decided to consider both solutions as acceptable for the Italian sample, but since our second aim was to evaluate the measurement invariance across country, we decided to conduct the Multiple-Group Analysis with Model 2.

#### *CFA: Multiple-group models*

The results supported full factorial invariance hypothesis for country. The unconstrained model fitted the data adequately. The constrained model showed a non-significant  $\chi^2$  statistic, a good RMSEA, CFI, TLI, and an acceptable WRMR. Furthermore, the test of factorial invariance (DIFFTEST) result was not significant, supporting a full invariance model. The standardized factor loadings are presented in Path-Diagram 1.

**FIGURE 1.** Standardized factor loadings of constrained model. The first estimate is Spanish and the second is Italian.



*Prevalence across the two countries*

Table 4 shows the prevalence of the two types of sexual harassment across the countries. *Visual-verbal sexual harassment* was significantly more frequent in Spain than in Italy; on the contrary, in the case of *Sexual harassment with physical contact* we did not find any significant differences. In relation to females who showed both, *Visual-verbal* and *Physical contact harassment*, we did not find significant differences between countries, although at a descriptive level they were two times more common in Italy as compared to Spain. This result was consistent with the high correlation between the two factors in the Italian sample, where it seems that these two different groups of behaviours have a higher probability to co-occur than in Spain.

**TABLE 4.** Prevalence of visual-verbal sexual harassment and of sexual harassment with physical contact.

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Spain</i>	
Visual-verbal Sexual harassment (VVSH)	65	99	$\chi^2(1, 325)=21.73***$
Sexual harassment with physical contact (SHPC)	33	26	n.s.
Co-occurrence: % of girls involved in SHPC and in VVSH	41.5%	23.5%	n.s.

Finally, it must be emphasized that prevalence of the two types of sexual harassment was not related to the frequency that girls affirmed being sexually-harassed. As table

5 showed, average scores for involved populations in both types of sexual harassment did not show significant differences across country.

**TABLE 5.** Variety score of Visual-verbal sexual harassment and of Sexual harassment with physical contact computed for involved population in each factor.

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>F</i>
Visual-verbal sexual harassment (VVSH)	1.61 (1.05)	1.95 (1.15)	n.s.
Sexual harassment with physical contact (SHPC)	1.88 (1.24)	2.11 (1.31)	n.s.

### Discussion

The aim of this study was to find a dimensional structure for peer sexual harassment perceived by adolescent girls. The results have confirmed a bi-dimensional structure in both samples, Spain and Italy; furthermore, a full invariance across countries was found. The dimensions of sexual harassment we have found are as follows: a) *Verbal/visual* dimension consisting of behaviours including insults, jokes, but also behaviours with an important visual component, as insults via graffiti, or jokes showing pornographic material. This dimension comprises some behaviours such as gender harassment (Dahinten, 2001; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1995) or public sexual harassment (Gruber and Fineran, 2008); and, b) *Sexual harassment with physical contact*, including all the behaviours aimed at sexual cooperation involving physical contact (American Association of University Women, 1993; 2001; Dahinten, 2001; Gruber and Fineran, 2008; Hand and Sánchez, 2000; Lacasee *et al.*, 2003; McMaster *et al.*, 2002; Shute *et al.*, 2008; Timmerman, 2002; Witkoska and Kjellberg, 2005).

In our opinion, these two dimensions encompass very well the construct of sexual harassment because: 1) they are based on descriptive characteristics and not on intentions or consequences. As previous studies have concluded, it is important to note that adolescents can have difficulties to understand others' intentions in relation to sexual harassment (Hand and Sanchez, 2000; Witkoska and Kjellberg, 2005); 2) these two descriptive labels minimize the ambiguity presented in previous studies, where some dimensions included overlapping behaviours. In addition, these two dimensions also could be described in terms of gravity but we think this differentiation may not exactly correspond with adolescents' perception of harmfulness, specifically for moderate forms of physical sexual harassment. For example, Hand and Sánchez (2000) found that the item "pulled at your clothes" was perceived less harmful than other visual items as "wrote sexual graffiti about you". Future studies could measure adolescents' perception of harmfulness of sexual harassment. On the other hand, we think that *Visual/verbal* dimension express very well how adolescent's relationships are in natural contexts. In other words, some times it is difficult to distinguish behaviours that appear during peer interactions. For example, "show pornographic material" and "make sexual comments" are behaviours that very probably can emerge among adolescents together.

Measurement of invariance emphasized the power of the results as it demonstrates that the same structure is maintained in different groups. In this case, the same structure



is equivalent in two countries (Spain and Italy). These results seem to indicate that Spanish and Italian girls share the same perception of sexual harassment, which can be explained in both terms of visual/verbal and physical contact. We think that this result represents an important contribution for the research on sexual harassment in adolescence, and specifically for future studies in Spain and Italy since there was no previous research on this topic. However, these results do not permit to conclude that these two dimensions are peculiar of either country. New studies, trying to validate this model in same-country and across-countries could test these two dimensions and contribute to the comprehension of sexual harassment at cross-cultural level.

In addition, Fitzgerald's model fitted well in both Spain and Italy samples as Hand and Sanchez (2000) proposed in their study. However, the reliability indices were low, specifically for two factors: *Visual/verbal* and *Derogatory sexual harassment*. One explanation of these low indices could be the different items we have used to compose these two dimensions in comparison to Hand and Sanchez's study. Specifically, it is important to note that in our study, the two factors derived from three items only, the item "spied on someone as they dressed or showered at school", having been dropped for its low frequency. This two-factor structure is in line with the findings of Witkowska and Kjellberg, (2005). In their study, the authors found that Fitzgerald's model showed a close to acceptable fit for girls. In this sense, we think Fitzgerald's model must be considered in future analyses and studies.

On the other hand, our results are partially different from those of the study of Witkowska and Kjellberg (2005). The authors did not find a satisfactory model for both boys and girls samples. In contrast, a nested model with a general factor with two specific factors was the most acceptable model for girls. In this sense, the authors conclude that a general index of sexual harassment was the best model for girls. Although the two specific factors were very similar to the results we have found in this study, *Verbal/symbolic* dimension was very close to *Visual/verbal* dimension, and *Physical* factor was equivalent to *Sexual harassment with physical contact*. Future studies could test both models in adolescent girls. To this regard, if sexual harassment in adolescence can be analysed as a general construct or as a bi-dimensional construct is still an open question. Our study supports a bi-dimensional model of sexual harassment, which seems to be more comprehensive of the nature of this phenomenon. We think that a mono-dimensional construct of sexual harassment does not enable us to discriminate the wide range of behaviours that sexual harassment includes, and does not permit the identification of severe forms of sexual harassment. At a practical-clinical level, a bi-dimensional model can facilitate the work of professionals, as different indicators of sexual harassment may be associated with different psychological and health symptoms.

The second aim of this study was to analyse the prevalence of female sexual harassment in two countries. Once the factorial structure has shown to be invariant across countries, meaningful differences can be obtained. Results have showed how in Spain, girls experienced more *Visual/verbal sexual harassment* than in Italy. In contrast, no differences were found for *Sexual harassment with physical contact*. Despite this different prevalence of both types of sexual harassment, verbal/visual forms were more frequent than physical ones as reported in previous studies (American Association of

University Women, 1993, 2001; Timmerman, 2002). The existence of cultural differences cannot be used as a basis to interpret the source of those differences; instead, they need to be explained by unpacking the contents of the culture, the specific psychological processes that differ across cultures and that are conceptually likely to account for the hypothesized cultural differences. Future studies are needed in order to deepen this issue.

These results reflect the usefulness of different dimensions of sexual harassment for their practical implications. At a prevention and intervention level, results support that in both countries prevention programs have to be focused on both dimensions of sexual harassment. At the same time, the high correlation between the two types of sexual harassment and the high co-occurrence found in the Italian sample stress the need to consider both types of behaviours especially in Italy, where possible escalation from less severe forms of sexual harassment, such as sexual verbal comments, to more severe types involving physical contact can be found. Although a few studies have reported that some sexual harassment behaviours are experienced as forms of courtship or common interactions among adolescents (Lacasee *et al.*, 2003), the present study underlines that these behaviours have to be considered with more attention because they may represent first manifestations of risk behaviours. Further studies, exploring not only the prevalence, but also the consequences of sexual harassment on victims' physical and psychological health, could confirm this hypothesis.

Finally, some limitations must be considered. Our sample was quite limited and this fact reduces the power of the statistical analyses and of the results obtained. New studies with large samples must be carried out in order to confirm these results. Our study has been focused on girls but not on boys. It is true that previous studies recommend analysing sexual harassment separately by sex (Gruber, 1992; Witkoska and Kjellberg, 2005) but it is also true that research on sexual harassment among male adolescents has been more scarce than on female adolescents. In line with this tradition, our results do not contribute to research on male sexual harassment. We think it is necessary to deepen the dimensions of sexual harassment experienced by boys, but also the nature of dating sexual harassment to have a more complete idea of the different types of sexual harassment among genders in different contexts.

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