

# Italian Companies And Their Relationship With Sexual Harassment

Isotta Rossoni, Samuel Colleoni,  
Sara Ferrari, Viviana Premazzi



The purpose of this brief and of the analysis contained herein is to **investigate whether large Italian companies have policies in place in order to prevent and report sexual harassment** in the workplace, how they are structured and if and how they could be improved. Why is this topic important? Because women all over the world have experienced **at least one case** of sexual harassment in their lifetime and it is **very common** for violence to occur in the workplace. As stated by the UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet, **up to six out of ten women will suffer physical or sexual violence in their lifetime**. A 2016 study published by ISTAT, the Italian National Statistics Office, found that over 404.000 women had experienced sexual harassment at work at least once in their lives. Due to a wide range of factors including **fear of reprisal** and of being fired, many of them had stayed silent about the abuse suffered <sup>1</sup>.



Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) impacts the workplace and threatens employees' safety and has financial reverberations on companies themselves. For example, experiencing violence can lead to emotional and mental health **issues**, increase absenteeism and decrease workplace productivity. The economic costs of gender-based violence in the workplace in the United States alone are estimated to add up to **billions of dollars**.



<sup>1</sup> Istat. (2018). Violenza sul luogo di lavoro. Available at: <https://www.istat.it/it/violenza-sulle-donne/il-fenomeno/violenza-sul-luogo-di-lavoro>

Companies have an **obligation to prevent** such human rights breaches and guarantee a safe workplace where all employees can feel protected. Every country has its own culture(s), **traditions and legislation**, which reflect on how cases of sexual harassment are managed. To this one must add company culture that impacts both the definition and management of SGBV. International companies that attract employees from different parts of the world should **carefully prepare employees** to understand local and international legislation and policy on SGBV, as well as make them aware of cultural differences that can impact how sexual and gender-based violence is perceived and framed.

The growing heterogeneity of workplaces means that people from different cultures interact daily, and this further strengthens the need for a more culturally sensitive standard. Richard Blumenthal has suggested the adoption of a **“reasonable victim”** standard <sup>2</sup>. This standard, according to Blumenthal (1998), takes into account “the alleged **victim’s perspective** in evaluating whether sexual harassment was perceived.”<sup>3</sup> It is apparent that any “reasonable victim standard” cannot discount culture and that individuals’ lived experiences of what has taken place, as well as their support needs may **vary based on their background**.



<sup>2</sup> Zimbroff, J. (2007). Cultural differences in perceptions of and responses to sexual harassment. *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, 14(2), 1311.

<sup>3</sup> Blumenthal, J. A. (1998). The Reasonable Woman Standard. *Law and Human Behavior*, 22(1), 33–57. p.52.

The reasonable (and culturally-aware) victim standard ought to be married with awareness of existing legal and policy frameworks in the country of residence.

## Methodology

Inspired by the methodology used by Transparency International Italy in its annual Business Integrity Forum, we analyzed the **top 100 largest Italian companies** as listed in Mediobanca's 2020 and 2021 Report on the "Main Italian Firms".<sup>4</sup> The 2021 edition covers 1,059 leading groups and 2,378 individual companies. In the report they are firstly listed in alphabetical order. The companies are **subsequently divided in tables**, from Table I to Table VIII:

**Table I:** manufacturing, trading and service companies

**Tables II and III:** financial service and holding companies

**Table IV:** leasing companies

**Table V:** factors and consumer finance companies

**Tables VI, VII and VIII:** banks

**Tables IX, X, XI and XII:** insurance companies.

As per the Mediobanca report, we divided them into **3 main categories**: industrial and services (which includes: food industries, tourism services, retail, Italian trains and more ); Banks, and Insurance Groups.

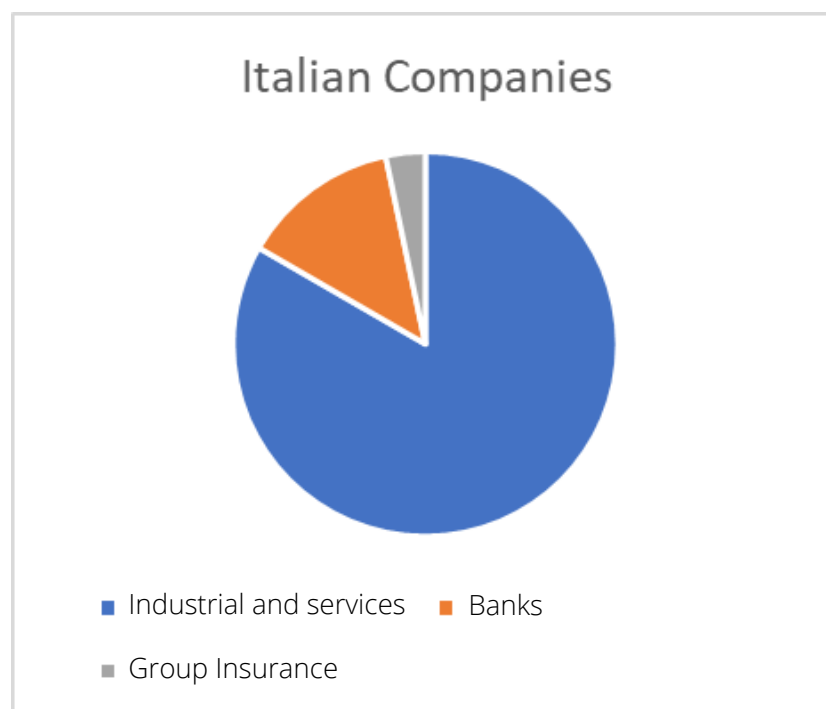


<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.areastudimediobanca.com/it/product/le-principali-societa-italiane-2020>

80 companies fell under service industry and manufacturing, 16 were banks and 4 were Insurance Groups. The aim of the analysis was to **understand if the companies in the sample had a policy against sexual harassment**, if it was an ad-hoc policy or if it was subsumed under a broader policy such as the code of ethics / conduct.

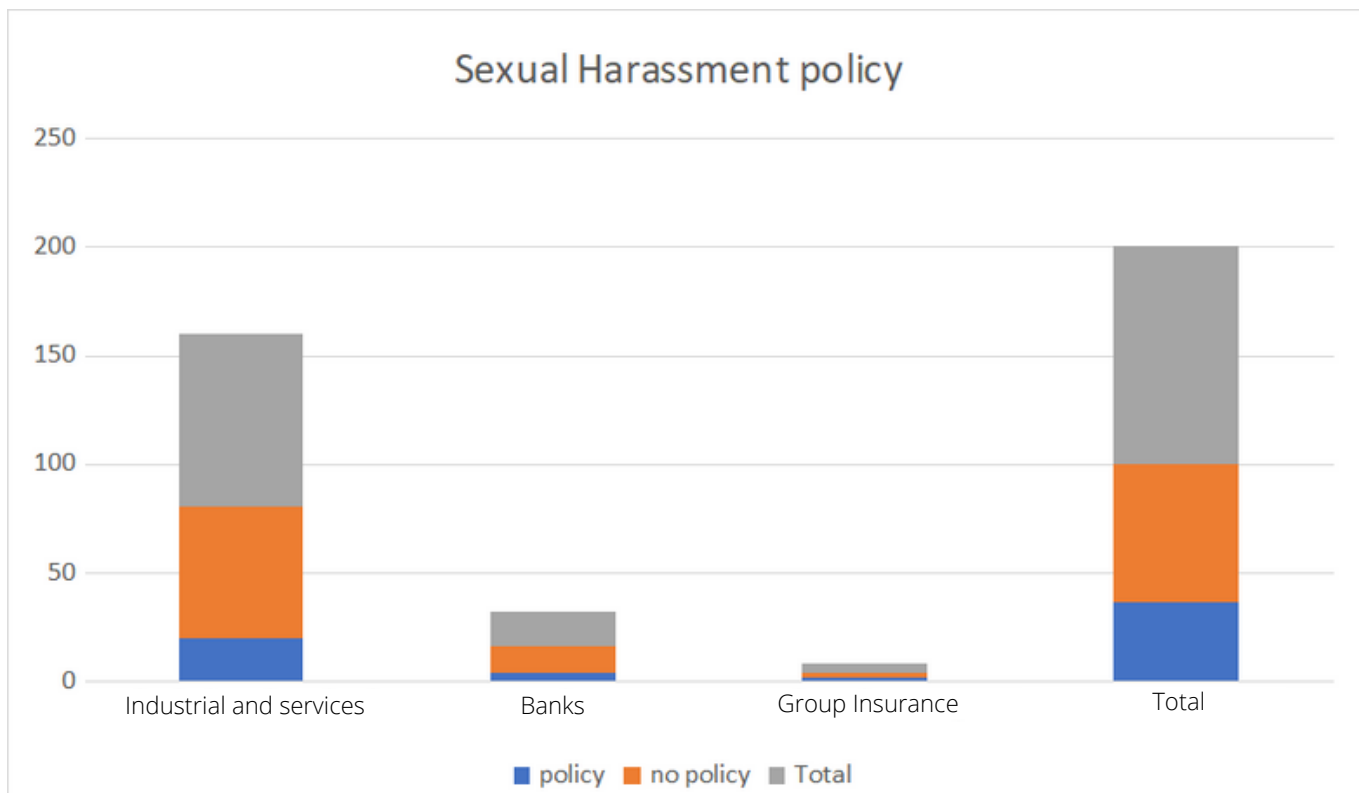
Once we selected the companies to include in the sample, we ran a keyword search on various search engines. We then looked up the company website and searched for **specific sexual harassment policies**. We took note of whether they had or didn't have a dedicated policy, included reference to sexual harassment in other policies, or failed to mention sexual harassment altogether. It should be noted that in many cases, company policies were not retrievable online.

## Findings



Out of the companies in the sample, **only:**  
22 companies in the services and industrials sector  
7 banks  
2 Insurance Groups  
have a dedicated sexual harassment policy.

Of the remaining companies that don't have a policy, **18 don't even have a publicly accessible code of conduct.**



In addition, only Intesa San Paolo, Unicredit, Bayer and Astrazeneca **use the term 'sexual harassment'** in their policies. The remainder do not have a specific policy regarding sexual harassment, but only generic rules and policies about harassment intended in a broad sense, human rights, discrimination, whistleblowing and so on. Sexual harassment is **just cited in a couple of lines or paragraphs**.

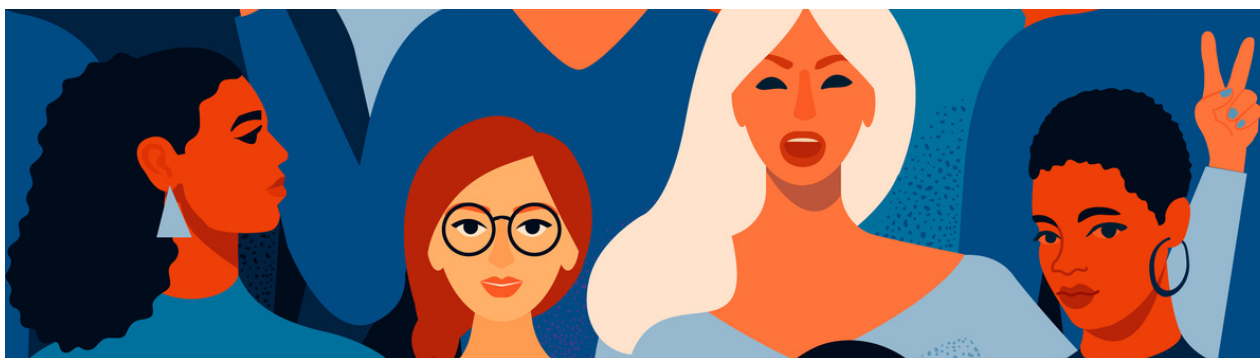
## Conclusion

Out of the 100 major Italian companies in 2020 and 2021, it appears that **more than half** do not have a dedicated policy on sexual harassment that is publicly available. As stated by Fondazione Libellula <sup>5</sup>, there is still **a lot of work** to be done: the relationship between genders, inside and outside the organization, still suffers greatly from stereotyping and curbing of fruitful intercultural dialogue. We often blame culture for violence and it is indeed true that **cultural norms shape abusive attitudes** and behaviours. Nevertheless, while gender stereotypes are dominant in all cultural contexts, there are also **interesting differences** in how different genders are conceptualized across cultures.



There is much to learn from cultures different from our own - willingness to uncover novel perspectives may help us question our own views and those of our society of belonging. **Companies ought to encourage** this kind of dialogue and concurrently develop culturally-sensitive policies and programs on SH in the workplace, that are **both tailored to the context** and can progressively create a company culture where SGBV is not tolerated. Only ongoing efforts in this direction will **help bring about tangible change** and contribute to achieving the fairness, respect and attention that all people - men, women, gender nonconforming - deserve at work and outside of work.

If you want to know more how we can help you on this, get in touch with us: **hello@gmdmalta.com**



## Bibliography

Blumenthal, J. A. (1998). The Reasonable Woman Standard. *Law and Human Behavior*, 22(1), 33–57. P.52.

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