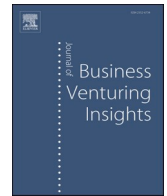




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Sexual harassment by multiple stakeholders in entrepreneurship: The case of Japan

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment in entrepreneurial contexts remains a critical yet underexplored issue. While workplace harassment in traditional employment settings has been widely researched, little is known about how power dynamics and cultural norms shape the sexual harassment risks faced by entrepreneurs. To address this gap, we conducted an exploratory study within Japan's entrepreneurial context, where cultural norms and limited institutional protections create distinct vulnerabilities. Through an anonymous online survey of 197 participants (105 of whom identified as female entrepreneurs), we collected both quantitative and qualitative data. We found that 52.4% of female entrepreneurs reported experiencing sexual harassment by multiple stakeholders in the past year. Investors emerged as the primary perpetrators (43.2% of cases), followed by customers, mentors, and members of entrepreneurial support organizations. Qualitative insights suggest that power asymmetries, especially in funding and mentorship relationships—create unique vulnerabilities for entrepreneurs to sexual harassment that differ from those in a traditional workplace. Our study not only advances research on Japanese entrepreneurship, but also provides actionable insights for other contexts with similar cultural and institutional barriers. These findings can inform efforts to combat gender stereotypes and strengthen legal protections against harassment.

Speak Up, Step Up, and Change: Build Fair Entrepreneurship

Sexual harassment casts a dark shadow over entrepreneurship, burying brilliant ideas and pushing incredible talent away from the field. Our research reveals something deeply troubling—that sexual harassment is not the result of a few bad apples but a systemic issue that forces many entrepreneurs to either work in toxic environments or abandon their dreams altogether. When we do nothing, we undermine these people's dignity and well-being, undercutting entrepreneurial initiatives and closing the door on a tomorrow that is rich with unexplored frontiers. So, how can we turn this around? Change can begin with words. Start by speaking up against harassment in ways that feel safe for everyone. Whether that means sharing your stance with colleagues, supporting others who speak out, or simply saying “that's not acceptable”—every action represents progress toward creating a zero-tolerance culture. More than individual actions, we need institutional backing for the entire entrepreneurial ecosystem to step up. Investment firms need to set up independent ethics boards to kick out abusive investors. Support organizations must implement effective anti-harassment and bystander intervention training and enforce strict conduct codes. Policymakers should strengthen these penalties and protections against sexual harassment. Researchers need to deepen our understanding and rigorously assess interventions to determine their effectiveness. Media professionals should keep shining the spotlight on both the progress and the setbacks of these initiatives. Together, let us transform entrepreneurship into what it should be—a fair playing field where talent and innovation thrive.

1. Introduction

I was developing a service related to women's careers, but after hearing countless discriminatory expressions towards me, and towards working women who were the service recipients, from sales targets and VCs, I lost my motivation and confidence as an

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entrepreneur and decided to close this business. [...] If being a woman alone puts one at such a disadvantage, both practical and mental, there's no real need to go out of one's way to start a business in Japan.
— Former female entrepreneur (Respondent #27¹)

While 'gender equity' dominates headlines, sexual harassment persists in workplaces, from work cubicles to conference rooms (ILO, 2022). In Japan, recent media has highlighted that female entrepreneurs are often confronted with serious misconduct—ranging from inappropriate comments to quid pro quo funding propositions (Ichino, 2024; Taketani, 2024). Although the government's 'Startup Development Five-Year Plan' aims to boost entrepreneurship (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022), sexual harassment continues to hinder both individual success and broader economic innovation.

Sexual harassment encompasses gender harassment, unwelcome sexual attention, and coerced sexual demands (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). It is often fueled by power imbalances and cultural biases (McLaughlin et al., 2012). Larger gender gap in traditional workplaces correlates with increased harassment (Folke and Rickne, 2022). While gender gaps in entrepreneurship are well-documented (Brush et al., 2019; Bullough et al., 2022; Guzman and Kacperczyk, 2019), few studies explore how sexual harassment—rooted in these structural inequities—persists in entrepreneurial settings. This gap raises an important question: *Under what circumstances are entrepreneurs, particularly women, more vulnerable to sexual harassment?*

The Japanese workplace is an ideal context for examining and addressing this issue, given its pronounced gender inequalities and weak legal protections against workplace misconduct (World Bank, 2024). The country is also often overlooked in entrepreneurship literature, making it a compelling setting for an exploration of how social and entrepreneurial contexts intersect to enable harassment. This study aims to uncover these dynamics and offer insights for more equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems in similar contexts.

2. Conditions enabling sexual harassment in the entrepreneurial context of Japan

To understand how sexual harassment takes root in Japan's entrepreneurial space, it is crucial to examine the relevant social, cultural, and legal factors (Saguy and Rees, 2021). In the Japanese context, cultural norms have historically positioned women in subordinate roles, with persistent gender inequality reflected in the country's consistently low rankings on global gender equality indices (The Economist, 2024). This environment is characterized by patriarchal expectations that naturalize the idea of women having certain familial and social obligations that should take priority over their economic independence and autonomy, fostering deference to authority and discouraging direct confrontation (Dalton, 2021).

These cultural dynamics are especially pronounced in the context of Japan's collectivist society (Gobel and Miyamoto, 2024), where maintaining social harmony is often considered more important than addressing individual grievances, leading many victims to remain silent (Dussich, 2016). This reluctance intensifies in informal business-social settings—such as at networking events, dinners, and meetings—where the boundaries between professional and personal spheres often become blurred (Crowley, 2023). These gatherings, while vital for funding and mentorship opportunities, may force entrepreneurs to tolerate inappropriate behavior to avoid damaging essential professional networks.

Inadequate legal protections compound these cultural constraints. Japan stands out among OECD countries for its lack of both explicit statutory penalties and comprehensive victim remedies for workplace sexual harassment (World Bank, 2024). Under the current system, victims must navigate tort law proceedings, which entail substantial costs and investment of time and resources (Civil Code of Japan, Goto, 2023). This legal gap is particularly problematic for entrepreneurs, who face additional vulnerabilities due to their exclusion from key worker protections. Specifically, entrepreneurs fall outside the protective scope of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which covers only traditional employees (Nemoto, 2016). Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by their reliance on external stakeholders, such as investors, mentors, and entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs), because entrepreneurs are not themselves covered by employment-based legal protections in these relationships (Clayton, 2024).

These social, cultural, and legal factors create an environment in which sexual harassment often goes unchallenged. When structural discrimination and patriarchal norms remain uncontested, policy initiatives to boost women's entrepreneurship can inadvertently perpetuate unequal power relations (Ahl and Marlow, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1. Overall design: Single anonymous online survey

We conducted a single online survey that collected both quantitative and qualitative data, aligning with a convergent mixed-methods framework (Creswell and Clark, 2017). The survey was anonymized to encourage honest reporting, as anonymity was essential given Japan's cultural barriers to reporting harassment (Dussich, 2016) and the documented benefits of anonymity in sensitive research (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007). This approach also aimed to offer maximum privacy for respondents to reduce social desirability bias (Folke and Rickne, 2022). We developed and refined the survey questionnaire using established measures from foundational sexual harassment research (e.g., Fitzgerald and Cortina, 2018), ensuring construct and item appropriateness for the entrepreneurial context (Table 1). All questions and answers were presented in Japanese, and we used Google Forms for data collection due to its user-friendly interface and data protection features (Vasanth Raju and Harinarayana, 2016).

¹ Throughout this paper, respondent identifiers are rendered as #Number (e.g. #27), for brevity.

Table 1
Survey design and questions.

Category	Survey Question and Option
Experience and Types	Experience of Sexual Harassment in the Past Year: Yes; No; Prefer not to say If you selected "Yes," what types of incidents did you experience? (Select all that apply): <i>Inappropriate statements/inquiries; Excessive staring or uncomfortable gestures; Inappropriate physical contact; Uncomfortable behavior in unavoidable environment; Uncomfortable contact via digital tools; Unwanted relationship demands or quid pro quo; Stalking or persistent following; Prefer not to say; Other (Please specify)</i>
Perpetrator	Who was the perpetrator of the harassment? (Select all that apply): <i>Investors/VCs; Mentors/Advisors; Support Organization Members; Entrepreneurs; Customers/Clients; Own Company Members; Prefer not to say; Other (Please specify)</i>
Consequences	How did the incident affect you? (Select all that apply): <i>Mental distress; Physical distress or symptoms; Decreased motivation for work; Decreased confidence as an entrepreneur/professional; Deterioration of relationships; Negative perception of perpetrator's profession or affiliation; Negative perception of entrepreneurial ecosystems; Temporary business suspension; Business withdrawal or dissolution; No Impact; Prefer not to say; Other (Please specify).</i>
Reporting	Did you seek advice from others or report the incident to relevant authorities?: Yes; Sometimes yes, sometimes no; No; Prefer not to say If you selected "Yes" or "Sometimes yes, sometimes no" in the previous question, please explain why. (Select all that apply): <i>Fear of retaliation or harassment from the perpetrator; Worried about the incident becoming gossip; Didn't have the time or emotional energy to report it; Not sure where to report or seek advice; Worried about potential backlash from confidants or relevant authorities; Accepted that such things happen; Avoid making the issue bigger; Didn't believe reporting would improve the situation; It was uncomfortable but not severe enough to report; Felt that my response to the situation might not have been appropriate; Prefer not to say; Other (Please specify)</i>
Factors influencing sexual harassment	Regarding sexual harassment against entrepreneurs in the Japanese entrepreneurial ecosystem, please select the statements that best reflect your views and understanding (Select all that apply): <i>There is a male-dominated culture in society as a whole; Laws and penalties against perpetrators are insufficient; Close overlap between personal and work life makes harassment more likely; Ecosystem norms and culture tolerate sexual harassment; Entrepreneurs who report are at high risk of retaliation or disadvantage; There are insufficient safe reporting mechanisms for victims; It's essentially a personal issue with the perpetrator; Ecosystem-wide knowledge and understanding of sexual harassment are inadequate; I don't think such issues exist; Not sure; Prefer not to say; Other (Please specify)</i>

Table 2
Respondent demographic by gender.

		Overall N = 197 (100)	Female n = 153 (77.7)	Male n = 40 (20.3)	Other† n = 4 (2)
Age	Under 20s	2 (1)	2 (1.3)	–	–
	20s	33 (16.8)	29 (19)	3 (7.5)	1 (25)
	30s	82 (41.6)	68 (44.4)	13 (32.5)	1 (25)
	40s	55 (27.9)	41 (26.8)	13 (32.5)	1 (25)
	50s	16 (8.1)	9 (5.9)	7 (17.5)	–
	Over 60s	6 (3)	2 (1.3)	4 (10)	–
	Prefer not to answer	3 (1.5)	2 (1.3)	–	1 (25)
Residence	Tokyo metropolitan area	140 (71.1)	108 (70.6)	30 (85)	2 (50)
	Osaka metropolitan area	19 (9.6)	15 (9.8)	4 (21.1)	–
	Nagoya metropolitan area	8 (4.1)	4 (2.6)	4 (21.1)	–
	Fukuoka metropolitan area	3 (1.5)	3 (2)	–	–
	Other areas in Japan	10 (5.1)	10 (6.5)	–	–
	International	9 (4.6)	8 (5.2)	–	1 (25)
	Prefer not to answer	8 (4.1)	4 (2.6)	1 (5)	1 (25)
Occupation	Entrepreneur	126 (64)	105 (68.6)	20 (50)	1 (25)
	Startup executive/employee	20 (10.2)	12 (7.8)	7 (17.5)	1 (25)
	Investor/VC	15 (7.6)	7 (4.6)	8 (20)	–
	Startup Partner	12 (6.1)	8 (5.2)	4 (10)	–
	Mentor/Advisor	7 (3.6)	5 (3.3)	1 (2.5)	1 (25)
	Support organization Member	2 (1)	2 (1.3)	–	–
	Other	12 (6.1)	12 (7.8)	–	–
Prefer not to answer	3 (1.5)	2 (1.3)	–	1 (25)	

Notes. Sample size: This table includes all survey respondents (N = 197). Percentages in parentheses may not total 100% due to rounding. *Categories:* †The "Other" gender category includes a non-binary/genderqueer participant (n = 1) and those who preferred not to answer their gender (n = 3). Due to the small sample size and privacy concerns, this group is treated as a single category.

3.2. Data collection

All respondents participated voluntarily and without compensation. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, we prioritized ethical considerations: we fully explained the study's objectives through an informed consent statement displayed on screen before participants could proceed to the questions. A total of 197 individuals completed the survey (Table 2). They comprised 126 entrepreneurs (105 female, 20 male, and one non-binary) and 71 non-entrepreneurs (e.g., startup executives/employees, investors, and others). While Table 2 provides an overview of the entire sample, Table 3 focuses specifically on the entrepreneur subgroup. Because

Table 3
Entrepreneurial experience by gender.

		Overall n = 126 (100)	Female n = 105 (83.3)	Male n = 20 (15.9)	Other† n = 1 (0.8)	
Years of Experience	Less than 3 months	11 (8.8)	10 (9.5)	1 (5)	Not disclosed to protect privacy	
	3–6 months	2 (1.6)	2 (1.9)	–		
	6 months to 1 year	7 (5.6)	5 (4.8)	2 (10)		
	1–3 years	32 (25.6)	29 (27.6)	3 (15)		
	4–6 years	26 (20.8)	19 (18.1)	7 (35)		
	7–9 years	25 (20.0)	21 (20)	4 (20)		
	10 years or more	20 (16.0)	18 (17.1)	2 (10)		
	Prefer not to answer	2 (1.6)	1 (1)	1 (5)		
Business Area‡	Agriculture, forestry, and fishing (A)	3 (2.4)	3 (2.9)	–	Not disclosed to protect privacy	
	Manufacturing (C)	7 (5.6)	4 (3.8)	3 (15)		
	Wholesale and retail trade (G)	19 (15.2)	19 (18.1)	–		
	Accommodation and food services (I)	2 (1.6)	1 (1)	1 (5)		
	Information and communication, publishing, broadcasting (J,K)	20 (16.0)	14 (13.3)	6 (30)		
	Financial and insurance services, real estate (L, M)	2 (1.6)	2 (1.9)	–		
	Professional, scientific, and technical services (N)	14 (11.2)	11 (10.5)	3 (15)		
	Administrative and support services (O)	4 (3.2)	3 (2.9)	1 (5)		
	Public services (government, education, welfare) (P, Q, R)	13 (10.4)	12 (11.4)	1 (5)		
	Other services (arts, households, other activities) (S, T, U, V)	35 (28.0)	31 (29.5)	4 (20)		
	Prefer not to answer	6 (4.8)	5 (4.8)	1 (5)		
	Considering business ideas: Pre-seed	7 (5.6)	7 (6.6)	–		Not disclosed to protect privacy
	Developing products/services: Seed	38 (30.4)	34 (32.1)	4 (20)		
Introducing products/services to the market: Early	35 (28.0)	28 (26.4)	7 (35)			
Growing and expanding the business: Middle	24 (19.2)	22 (20.8)	2 (10)			
Business is established in the market: Later	6 (4.8)	3 (2.8)	3 (15)			
Business is currently paused	3 (2.4)	3 (2.8)	–			
Business has been sold	4 (3.2)	2 (1.9)	2 (10)			
Others	5 (4.0)	4 (3.8)	1 (5)			
Prefer not to answer	4 (3.2)	3 (2.8)	1 (5)			

Notes. Sample size: This table includes respondents who identified as entrepreneurs (n = 126). Respondents who identified as employees, investors, or other roles (n = 71) were excluded, as the analysis in this table focuses solely on entrepreneurial experience. Percentages in parentheses may not total 100% due to rounding. *Categories:* †The "Other" gender category includes one respondent who identifies as non-binary/genderqueer. Due to the small sample size and privacy considerations, no details are disclosed. *Classification:* ‡Alphabets in parentheses represent the classification of the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC), Revision 5. Respondents not engaged in any industry are not listed.

Table 4
Occupation and gender of qualitative respondents (subset of 197 total participants).

Occupation	Total	Gender		
		Female	Male	Prefer not to answer
Entrepreneur	36	35	1	0
Support organization member	5	4	1	0
Startup partner	5	3	2	0
Other/Prefer not to answer	2	1	0	1

Notes: This table presents only the subset of the 197 total survey participants who provided qualitative comments.

no publicly available, comprehensive list of Japanese entrepreneurs existed at the time of the survey, we were not able to establish a formal sampling frame. Consequently, we employed a non-probability sampling approach (primarily snowball sampling) by leveraging professional networks and accelerator programs. We circulated the survey link through internal mailing lists, social media groups, and community channels (e.g., Slack, Facebook, etc.). As the total number of Japanese entrepreneurs, and more saliently, the number of entrepreneurs exposed to the channels chosen for survey dissemination, are unknown, it was not possible to calculate response rate. As a result, our findings should be regarded as exploratory, highlighting key patterns and laying the groundwork for future, more comprehensive studies.

3.3. Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative component of our research focused on demographics, prevalence, harassment types, perpetrator categories, and reporting behaviors. We applied descriptive statistics to gauge prevalence and logistic regression to identify predictors (e.g., gender, years of experience, etc.). We used multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) to explore associations between harassment types and perpetrator categories (Ribeiro-Navarrete et al., 2021). See Appendix A for further analytical details regarding our MCA.

Table 5
Representative supporting data.

Aggregate dimension	Second-order theme	Illustrative Examples
Embedded Discrimination	Gender Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I was told, "Do women really want to work after marriage and childbirth?" and "My wife doesn't work. I can't imagine many women different from her." (Former Female Entrepreneur, #27) - I received unwarranted and offensive remarks about my pregnancy, such as "If you're pregnant, why don't you close your company?" and "Balancing childcare and business is difficult, so I would like the investment returned." (Female Entrepreneur, #3).
	Role Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I was told that "Sales must be easy for you; after all, you only got that deal because you're a woman." They think women's success resulted from leveraging sexual allure. (Female Entrepreneur, #8) - I was reprimanded based on the belief that mothers should not leave home and should protect the household. (Female Entrepreneur, #11) - Many, including CEOs and senior executives at large corporations, expect female entrepreneurs to act like traditional Japanese hostesses, pleasing male clients. (Female Entrepreneur, #39)
Systemic Exploitation	Coercive Leverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using the fact that they have funds, they make personal demands on investment candidates and say they won't invest unless those demands are met. (Female Entrepreneur, #33) - I was forced into sexual acts and recorded without my consent by an investor. (Female Support Organization Member, #7)
	Predatory Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I was approached by an investor and started a company. However, the investor began making unwanted advances. (Former Female Entrepreneur, #17) - Occasionally, when seeking business advice, I've been inappropriately propositioned to engage in a regular sexual relationship in exchange for financial support. (Female Entrepreneur, #40)
	Blurred Professional Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I was told about an opportunity to meet potential new business partners by an entrepreneurial support organization member, but it turned out to be a matchmaking party. (Female Entrepreneur, #13) - He asked personal questions about my age and relationships. I was invited to dinner and offered a ride home [during mentoring sessions]. (Female Entrepreneur, #12).
Safeguard Voids	Insufficient Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual and small business owners often don't have the opportunity to learn about harassment and therefore remain unaware of their own actions. (Female startup executive/employee, #47) - I feel there's a low awareness of gender issues and compliance in regional startup support communities. (Female Entrepreneur, #21)
	Lack of Reporting Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I'm afraid of the consequences of speaking out. It's not just about direct harm; I worry about being seen as "difficult" and being ostracized. (Female Entrepreneur, #16) - I feel it would be good to have a place where I can consult about it. (Female Entrepreneur, #34)
	Inadequate Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It becomes difficult to consult about issues due to concerns about future interactions. There have been cases where meetings were actually cancelled. (Female Entrepreneur, #4) - The perpetrator's high position deterred me from reporting the incident. (Female Entrepreneur, #15)
Adaptive Burden Choices	Resigned Endurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Even now, it's become a trauma. (Female Entrepreneur, #34) - I thought it was something that just happened. (Female Entrepreneur, #1)
	Costly Confrontation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I wanted to do business with them in the future, but I gave up due to their harassment (Female Entrepreneur, #14) - Personally, I'm concerned about the high costs for startups, such as legal fees and suspended transactions, which often result in greater damage to the startup. (Female Entrepreneur, #6)
	Ecosystem Exit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When I rejected all unwanted advances by an investor, he retaliated by abusing his position, ultimately leading to my removal as CEO and forced resignation. This all happened within the last six months. (Former Female Entrepreneur, #17)

3.4. Qualitative data collection and analysis (open-ended survey items)

We gathered all qualitative data from the open-ended questions embedded in the same online survey. Of the 197 total respondents, 48 respondents provided written narratives describing their experiences of sexual harassment (Table 4).² We used an inductive coding approach (Gioia et al., 2012; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to identify patterns and themes within the textual responses. Table 5 presents illustrative excerpts. Our initial review yielded 205 codes that we then consolidated into 33 categories (first-order analysis). Subsequent refinement generated 11 themes (second-order analysis), and, finally, we identified four overarching dimensions that explain how sexual harassment arises and persists in Japan's entrepreneurial context (Fig. 1).

4. Research findings

4.1. Prevalence and predictors of sexual harassment

Our quantitative analysis revealed a high prevalence of sexual harassment, with 52.4% of female entrepreneurs reporting such experiences in the past year (Table 6). The prevalence was lower (15%) for male entrepreneurs, indicating that while sexual harassment disproportionately affects women, men are not entirely exempt from such experiences. Gender was the strongest predictor

² Although Table 4 presents participants' distribution by occupation and gender, we do not offer a more comprehensive demographic breakdown (e.g., by age, years of experience) to maintain confidentiality, as combining such details with qualitative accounts could potentially reveal individuals' identities.

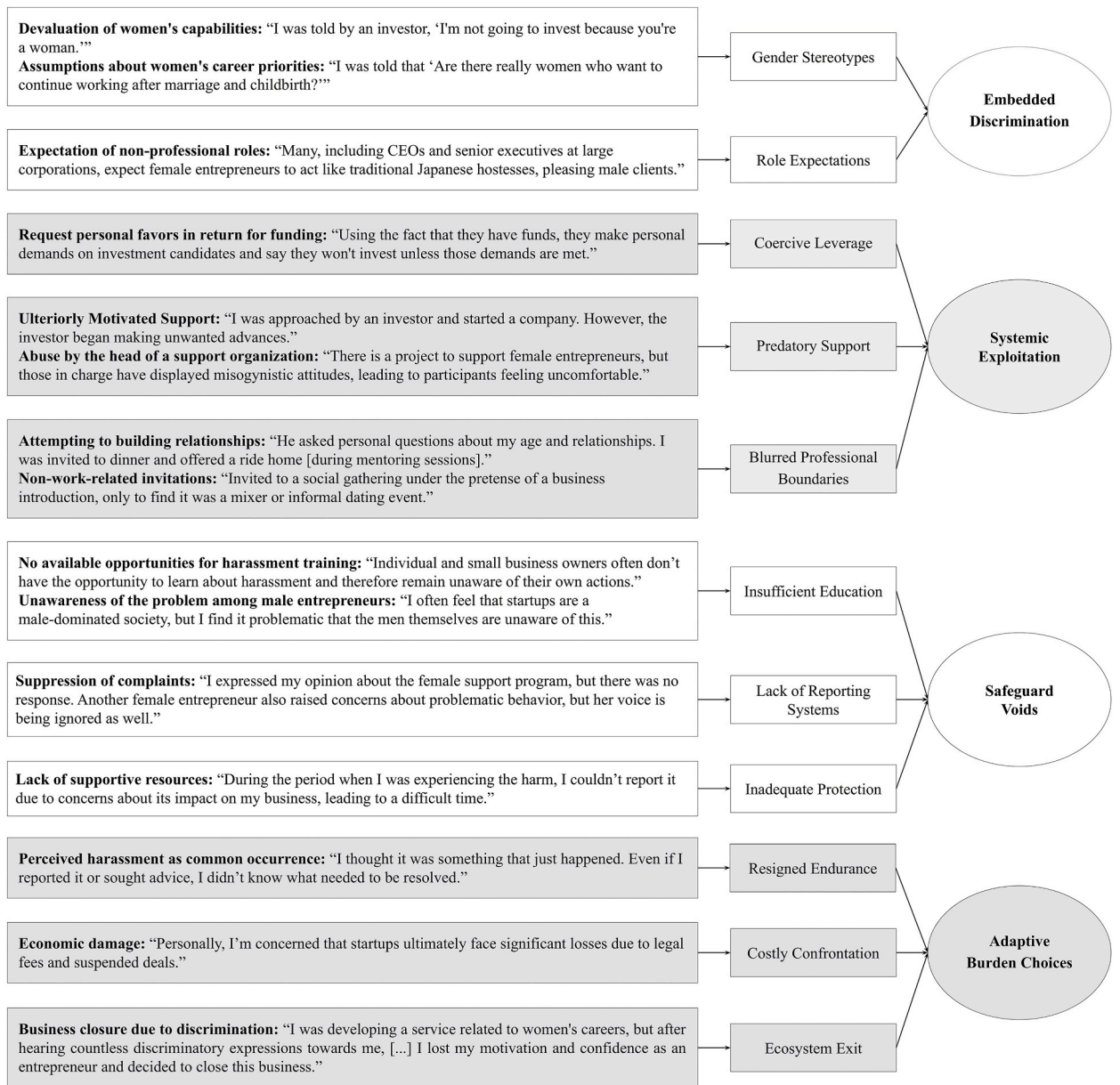


Fig. 1. Data structure.

of sexual harassment experiences across all models (Tables 7 and 8). We found female entrepreneurs to be 4.01 times more likely to experience sexual harassment (Table 8, Model 2: OR = 4.01, 95% CI: 1.16–18.62). Additionally, entrepreneurs with four to six years of experience are more likely to face sexual harassment than those with one to three years of experience (Table 8, Model 3: $\beta = 1.27$, $p < 0.1$).

4.2. Revealing the underlying dynamics

We examine the dynamics of sexual harassment in Japan's entrepreneurial context by merging qualitative insights with quantitative data (Creswell and Clark, 2017). Our analysis identifies four components: *Embedded Discrimination*, *Systemic Exploitation*, *Safeguard Voids*, and *Adaptive Burden Choices* (See Table 5 for supporting quotations).

Embedded Discrimination. *Embedded Discrimination* arises from social and cultural norms that reinforce *gender stereotypes*, often leading to a focus on a woman's appearance or marital status rather than her professional skills. Among our 197 respondents, 68.0% identified a male-dominated culture as a contributory factor in sexual harassment (Table 9). Over time, these stereotypes manifest in explicit discriminatory acts, such as investors asserting "*We're not going to invest because you're a woman*" (#17) or implications that

Table 6
Prevalence of sexual harassment by gender and entrepreneurial status.

Past Year Experience	Overall N = 197 (100)	Entrepreneurs n = 125		Non-entrepreneurs n = 68		Other† n = 4 (2)
		Female n = 105 (53.3)	Male n = 20 (10.2)	Female n = 48 (24.4)	Male n = 20 (10.2)	
Yes	81 (41.1)	55 (52.4)	3 (15)	18 (37.5)	3 (15)	2 (66.7)
No	96 (48.7)	49 (46.7)	15 (75)	21 (43.8)	11 (55)	–
Prefer not to answer	20 (10.2)	1 (1)	2 (10)	9 (18.8)	6 (30)	2 (66.7)

Notes. Sample size: This table includes all survey respondents (N = 197). Percentages in parentheses may not total 100% due to rounding. *Categories:* Non-entrepreneurs are respondents who identified themselves as investors, mentors, or other non-entrepreneurial roles. For detailed information on the composition and proportions of non-entrepreneurs, please see Table 1: Occupation. †The "Other" gender category includes a non-binary/genderqueer participant (n = 1) and those who preferred not to answer their gender (n = 3). Due to the small sample size and privacy concerns, these two groups (n = 4) are treated as a single category.

Table 7
Logistic Regression Results for All respondents.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Odds Ratio†
(Intercept)	−1.5755 (0.4485) ***	0.3599 (0.8679)	0.6276 (1.7146)	1.43 (0.26, 7.85)
Female	1.5755 (0.4801) **	1.3281 (0.4934) **	1.2351 (0.5021) *	3.77 (1.43, 9.93)
Age	–	−0.0452 (0.0180) *	−0.0466 (0.0184) *	0.96 (0.93, 0.99)
Metropolitan, Tokyo	–	–	−0.1525 (1.4385)	–
Metropolitan, Osaka	–	–	0.0020 (1.5109)	–
Metropolitan, Nagoya	–	–	−0.7474 (1.6794)	–
Metropolitan, Other	–	–	0.2301 (1.5680)	–
Null deviance	233.95	233.95	233.95	–
Residual deviance	220.61	213.85	212.94	–
AIC	224.61	219.85	226.94	–
Pseudo R ²	0.1007	0.1488	0.1552	–
Observations	170	170	170	–

Notes: Sample size: Of the total 197 respondents, those who selected “Prefer not to answer” for any demographic questions (n = 27) were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 170 individuals who provided complete data for gender, age, and residence. *Model details:* Logistic regression analyzes the experience of sexual harassment as the dependent variable (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Standard errors are shown in parentheses. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. †The Odds Ratio shows the odds ratio with 95% Confidence Interval for Model 2, which showed the best fit based on AIC.

Table 8
Logistic regression results for entrepreneurs.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Odds Ratio†
(Intercept)	−1.6094 (0.6324) *	0.6913 (1.1479)	−0.4593 (1.5452)	2.00 (0.20, 19.11)
Female	1.6309 (0.6656) *	1.3885 (0.6847) *	1.9528 (0.7585) *	4.01 (1.16, 18.62)
Age	–	−0.0545 (0.0236) *	−0.0474 (0.0270).	0.95 (0.90, 0.99)
Experience: <3 months	–	–	0.0052 (0.8561)	–
Experience: 1–3 years	–	–	0.1817 (0.6740)	–
Experience: 4–6 years	–	–	1.2723 (0.7369).	–
Experience: 7–9 years	–	–	−0.1650 (0.7102)	–
Experience: other	–	–	1.8462 (1.1905)	–
Null Deviance	152.79	152.79	152.79	–
Residual Deviance	145.13	139.33	131.38	–
AIC	149.13	145.33	147.38	–
Pseudo R ²	0.0891	0.1527	0.2347	–
Observations	110	110	110	–

Notes: Sample size: This analysis focuses on respondents who identified as entrepreneurs (n = 126). Respondents with incomplete responses (n = 16) were excluded, resulting in a final sample size of n = 110. *Model details:* Logistic regression analyzes the experience of sexual harassment as the dependent variable (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Standard errors are shown in parentheses. p < 0.1; *p < 0.05. †The Odds Ratio shows the odds ratio with 95% Confidence Interval for Model 2, which showed the best fit based on AIC. While exploring various model specifications, we tested other variables, such as residence and business area, in Model 3. However, this consistently resulted in a poorer model fit than the current Model 3.

female founders rely on their personal attributes rather than their professional competence. Within this framework, *role expectations* frequently pressure women to take on supportive tasks—particularly household responsibilities—while discouraging overt displays of ambition. Such prescriptive behaviors can lead to calls for women to prioritize personal responsibilities or to maintain a more subdued professional presence, rather than to actively pursue leadership roles. Since entrepreneurs depend heavily on external partnerships, these stereotypes can act as gatekeeping forces that restrict women’s access to funding and professional networks. Consequently,

Table 9
Institutional factors contributing to sexual harassment.

	Overall N = 197 (100)	Entrepreneurs n = 125		Non-entrepreneurs n = 68		Other† n = 4 (2)
		Female n = 105 (53.3)	Male n = 20 (10.2)	Female n = 48 (24.4)	Male n = 20 (10.2)	
There is a male-dominated culture in society as a whole	134 (68.0)	81 (77.1)	7 (35.0)	36 (75.0)	8 (40.0)	2 (50)
Ecosystem-wide understanding of sexual harassment is inadequate	93 (47.2)	43 (41.0)	9 (45.0)	30 (62.5)	10 (50.0)	1 (25)
It's largely a personal issue with the perpetrator	82 (41.6)	39 (37.1)	10 (50.0)	20 (41.7)	11 (55.0)	2 (50)
Entrepreneurs who report are at high risk of retaliation or disadvantage	80 (40.6)	42 (40.0)	8 (40.0)	20 (41.7)	9 (45.0)	1 (25)
There are insufficient safe reporting mechanisms for victims	80 (40.6)	39 (37.1)	7 (35.0)	21 (43.8)	10 (50.0)	3 (75)
Ecosystem norms and culture tolerate sexual harassment	68 (34.5)	41 (39.0)	3 (15.0)	17 (35.4)	6 (30.0)	1 (25)
Close overlap between personal and work life makes harassment more likely	57 (28.9)	26 (24.8)	4 (20.0)	19 (39.6)	7 (35.0)	1 (25)
Laws and penalties against perpetrators are insufficient	52 (26.4)	30 (28.6)	3 (15.0)	16 (33.3)	2 (10.0)	1 (25)
I don't think such issues exist	7 (3.6)	2 (1.9)	2 (10.0)	2 (4.2)	1 (5.0)	–
Not sure	7 (3.6)	4 (3.8)	–	2 (4.2)	1 (5.0)	–
Prefer not to answer	2 (1.0)	–	1 (5.0)	–	1 (5.0)	–

Note. Sample size: This table includes all survey respondents (N = 197). Respondents could select multiple factors, so totals may exceed 100%. *Categories:* Non-entrepreneurs are respondents who identified themselves as investors, mentors, or other non-entrepreneurial roles. For detailed information on the composition and proportions of non-entrepreneurs, please see Table 1: Occupation. †The "Other" gender category includes a non-binary/genderqueer participant (n = 1) and those who preferred not to answer their gender (n = 3). Due to the very small sample size and to protect privacy, this group is treated as a single category.

Table 10
Nature of sexual harassment by gender and role.

Perpetrator	Overall n = 81 (100)	Entrepreneurs n = 58		Non-entrepreneurs n = 21		Other‡ n = 2 (2.5)
		Female n = 55 (67.9)	Male n = 3 (3.7)	Female n = 18 (22.2)	Male n = 3 (3.7)	
Investor/VC	35 (43.2)	24 (43.6)	1 (33.3)	11 (61.1)	–	–
Customer/Client	27 (33.3)	21 (38.2)	1 (33.3)	4 (22.2)	–	1 (50)
Mentor/Advisor	20 (24.7)	16 (29.1)	1 (33.3)	2 (11.1)	–	1 (50)
Support Organization Member	19 (23.5)	11 (20.0)	2 (66.7)	5 (27.8)	1 (33.3)	–
Entrepreneur	17 (21.0)	13 (23.6)	–	3 (16.7)	1 (33.3)	–
Own Company Member	8 (9.9)	2 (3.6)	–	5 (27.8)	1 (33.3)	–
Other Individual‡	5 (6.1)	3 (5.5)	–	2 (11.1)	–	–
Prefer not to answer	4 (4.9)	2 (3.6)	–	1 (5.6)	1 (33.3)	–
Incident						
Inappropriate statements/inquiries	46 (56.8)	29 (52.7)	2 (66.7)	10 (55.6)	3 (100)	2 (100)
Uncomfortable behavior in unavoidable environments	34 (42.0)	22 (40.0)	1 (33.3)	9 (50.0)	1 (33.3)	2 (100)
Inappropriate physical contact	25 (30.9)	18 (32.7)	–	7 (38.9)	–	–
Quid pro quo	22 (27.2)	15 (27.3)	–	7 (38.9)	–	–
Excessive staring or uncomfortable gestures	13 (16.0)	9 (16.4)	–	4 (22.2)	–	–
Uncomfortable contact via digital tools	13 (16.0)	11 (20.0)	–	2 (11.1)	–	–
Stalking or persistent following	9 (11.1)	7 (12.7)	–	2 (11.1)	–	–
Gender harassment/discrimination	10 (12.3)	7 (12.7)	–	3 (16.7)	–	–
Unwanted sexual acts	1 (1.2)	–	–	1 (5.6)	–	–
Prefer not to answer	2 (2.5)	1 (1.8)	–	1 (5.6)	–	–

Notes. Sample size: This table includes all survey respondents (N = 197). Respondents could select multiple items, so totals may exceed 100%. *Categories:* Non-entrepreneurs are respondents who identified themselves as investors, mentors, or other non-entrepreneurial roles. For detailed information on the composition and proportions of non-entrepreneurs, please see Table 1: Occupation. †The "Other" gender category includes a non-binary/genderqueer participant and those who preferred not to answer their gender. ‡Other Individuals in the Perpetrators column include individuals from various backgrounds, such as a teacher, an event attendee, a successor to a business, an industry professional, and a community member.

gender inequalities may become more entrenched in startup environments than in many conventional workplaces, further limiting opportunities for female founders.

Systemic Exploitation. *Systemic exploitation* refers to the strategic misuse of power by stakeholders who control critical resources. Quantitative data reveals that investors are the most frequently identified perpetrators, accounting for 43.2% of reported cases, followed by customers, mentors, and members of entrepreneurial support organizations (Table 10). Notably, 27.2% of all cases involved quid pro quo harassment. In this context, *coercive leverage* manifests when investors take advantage of founders' dependence by pressuring them to endure sexual advances. Additional exploratory analysis, as represented by our MCA, further supports this dimension, showing a strong association between investors and quid pro quo harassment (Fig. 2). Support mechanisms can thus morph into *predatory* support, where investors—or even the leader of a specialized accelerator for women—demand sexual compliance

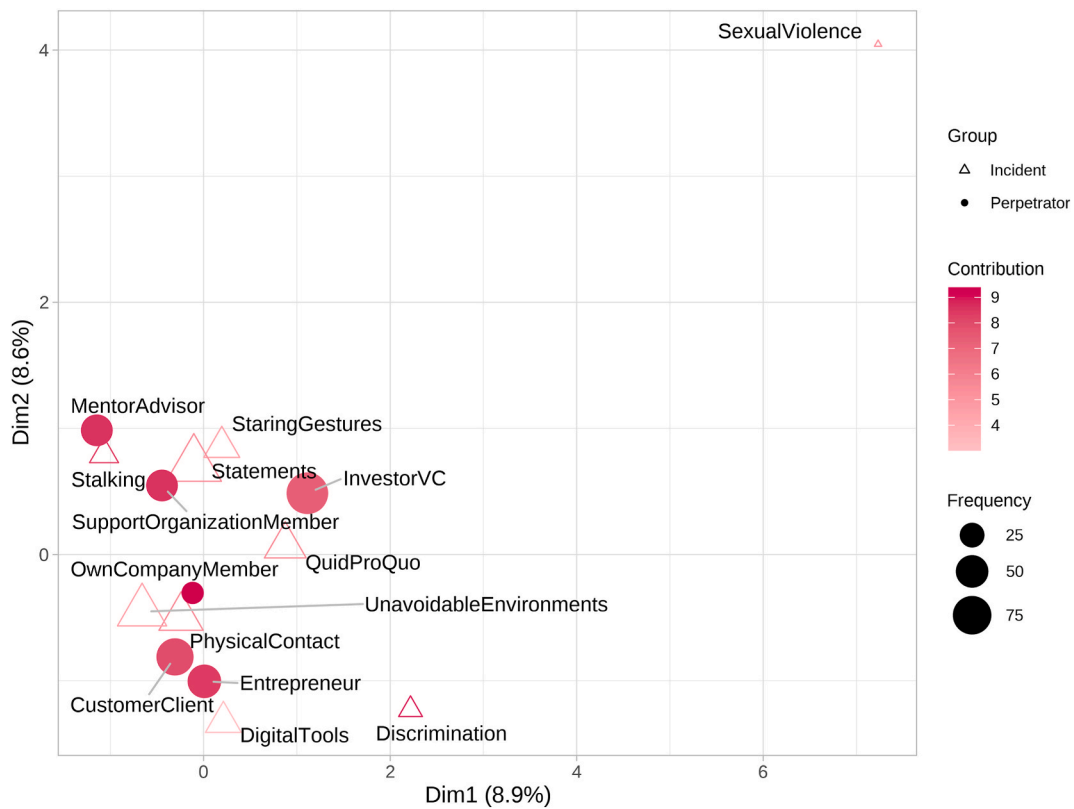


Fig. 2. Perpetrator and harassment incident Relationships.png.

Table 11A

Reporting behaviors after sexual harassment.

	Overall n = 81 (100)	Entrepreneurs n = 58		Non-entrepreneurs n = 21		Other† n = 2 (2.5)
		Female n = 55 (67.9)	Male n = 3 (3.7)	Female n = 18 (22.2)	Male n = 3 (3.7)	
Yes, always	12 (14.8)	9 (16.4)	–	3 (16.7)	–	–
Sometimes	19 (23.5)	11 (20.0)	–	7 (38.9)	1 (33.3)	–
No	48 (59.3)	35 (63.6)	3 (100)	7 (38.9)	2 (66.7)	1 (50)
Prefer not to answer	2 (2.5)	–	–	1 (5.6)	–	1 (50)

Sample size: This table summarizes reporting behavior among respondents who experienced sexual harassment (n = 81) and barriers to reporting among non-reporters or partial reporters (n = 67 out of 81). Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding or multiple responses. **Categories:** Non-entrepreneurs are respondents who identified themselves as investors, mentors, or other non-entrepreneurial roles. For detailed information on the composition and proportions of non-entrepreneurs, please see Table 1: Occupation. †The "Other" gender category includes a non-binary/genderqueer participant (n = 1) and those who preferred not to answer their gender (n = 1).

disguised as opportunities. Such behaviors are further enabled by *blurred professional boundaries* when business meetings and networking events shift to informal environments, giving perpetrators more freedom to cross the boundaries of appropriate behavior without obvious repercussions. Overall, this *systemic exploitation* is particularly insidious because the overlap between legitimate support and personal manipulation creates an environment where resource dependence can be readily exploited.

Safeguard Voids. In the entrepreneurial context, critical safeguard gaps exist. Only 14.8% of victims reported harassment incidents they experienced, either formally or informally (Table 11A). One reason is that nearly half of non-reporters (n = 67) viewed incidents as “uncomfortable but not serious enough to report” or “did not believe reporting would improve the situation” (Table 11B). Fear of retaliation was another barrier (25.4%). *Insufficient education* compounds the issue, leaving both perpetrators and victims unaware of what types of behavior constitute sexual harassment in the first place. Even if victims can identify sexual harassment, *the lack of reporting systems* means that few clear channels exist for raising complaints, and the perceived risk of retaliation—canceled deals, negative word of mouth—further prevents many from speaking out. Adding to these hurdles, *inadequate protection* limits entrepreneurs’ legal and institutional options to fight back against sexual harassment. Most founders do not have the time, resources, or

Table 11B
Reasons for not reporting sexual harassment.

	Overall n = 67 (100)	Entrepreneurs n = 49		Non-entrepreneurs n = 17		Other† n = 1 (1.5)
		Female n = 46 (68.7)	Male n = 3 (4.5)	Female n = 14 (20.9)	Male n = 3 (4.5)	
It was uncomfortable but not serious enough reporting	33 (49.3)	21 (45.7)	3 (100)	6 (42.9)	3 (100)	–
Did not believe reporting would improve the situation	32 (47.8)	24 (52.2)	–	6 (42.9)	1 (33.3)	1 (50)
Avoid making the issue bigger	27 (40.3)	20 (43.5)	–	5 (35.7)	1 (33.3)	1 (50)
Accepted that such things happen	21 (31.3)	14 (30.4)	–	6 (42.9)	1 (33.3)	–
Not sure where to report or seek advice	17 (25.4)	13 (28.3)	–	3 (21.4)	–	1 (50)
Worried about potential backlash from confidants or relevant authorities	17 (25.4)	14 (30.4)	–	3 (21.4)	–	–
Didn't have the time or emotional energy to report it	17 (25.4)	12 (26.1)	–	5 (35.7)	–	–
Worried about the incident becoming gossip	14 (20.9)	9 (19.6)	–	4 (28.6)	1 (33.3)	–
Fear of retaliation or harassment from the perpetrator	11 (16.4)	9 (19.6)	–	2 (14.3)	–	–
Felt that my response to the situation might not have been appropriate	8 (11.9)	6 (13.0)	–	1 (7.1)	1 (33.3)	–
Thought complying would benefit business	2 (3.0)	–	–	2 (14.3)	–	–
Prefer not to answer	4 (6.0)	2 (4.3)	–	2 (14.3)	–	–

Table 12
Consequences of sexual harassment by gender and role.

	Overall n = 81 (100)	Entrepreneurs n = 58		Non-entrepreneurs n = 21		Other† n = 2 (2.5)
		Female n = 55 (67.9)	Male n = 3 (3.7)	Female n = 18 (22.2)	Male n = 3 (3.7)	
Mental distress	51 (63.0)	35 (63.6)	2 (66.7)	12 (66.7)	2 (66.7)	–
Perpetrator's profession or affiliation viewed negatively	37 (45.7)	27 (49.1)	1 (33.3)	8 (44.4)	1 (33.3)	–
Decreased confidence as an entrepreneur/professional	25 (30.9)	19 (34.5)	–	5 (27.8)	1 (33.3)	–
Deterioration of relationships	23 (28.4)	17 (30.9)	–	6 (33.3)	–	–
Decreased motivation for work	22 (27.2)	14 (25.5)	–	6 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	–
Entrepreneurial ecosystems viewed negatively	23 (28.4)	11 (20.0)	1 (33.3)	10 (55.6)	1 (33.3)	–
Economic Harm (e.g. business suspension, withdrawal)	12 (14.8)	9 (16.4)	–	3 (16.7)	–	–
No impact	11 (13.6)	7 (12.7)	–	3 (16.7)	–	1 (50)
Physical distress or symptoms	6 (7.4)	4 (7.3)	–	2 (11.1)	–	–
Prefer not to answer	2 (2.5)	–	–	1 (5.6)	–	1 (50)

Notes. Sample size: This table includes respondents who reported experiencing sexual harassment in the past year (n = 81). Percentages in parentheses reflect the distribution of reported consequences within each gender and role category. *Categories:* Non-entrepreneurs are respondents who identified themselves as investors, mentors, or other non-entrepreneurial roles. For detailed information on the composition and proportions of non-entrepreneurs, please see Table 1: Occupation. †The "Other" gender category includes a non-binary/genderqueer participant (n = 2) Due to the small sample size and privacy concerns, this group is treated as a single category.

standing to pursue lawsuits. Unlike corporate employees, entrepreneurs act as independent agents without whistleblowing protections, making them more vulnerable and allowing misconduct to persist unchecked throughout the broader startup ecosystem.

Adaptive Burden Choices. As Table 12 shows, victims adopt various strategies in response to sexual harassment, facing mental distress (63%), decreased confidence (30.9%), diminished work motivation (27.2%), and business suspension or withdrawal (14.8%). While these statistics highlight the severe impact, they do not fully capture the complex dilemmas victims face in responding to harassment, with each option carrying risks. One common response is *resigned endurance*, where victims tolerate inappropriate behavior to maintain professional relationships, inadvertently normalizing harassment. Others choose *costly confrontation*, directly challenging or refusing perpetrators' advances—only to incur litigation expenses, face public condemnation, or lose critical resources and opportunities through canceled partnerships. Ultimately, some founders opt for *ecosystem exit*—dissolving their ventures or entirely avoiding Japan's startup scene due to accumulated trauma and persistent discrimination. Because many founders' personal and professional identities are deeply intertwined with their ventures, confronting harassment can threaten essential capital and networks. Such decisions have lasting impacts on both individual careers and the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem, as continued abuse drives out valuable talent and stifles innovation.

5. Discussion

5.1. A cyclical framework of sexual harassment in Japan's entrepreneurial context

Based on our findings, we propose a cyclical process *framework* that explains the manifestation and persistence of sexual harassment in Japan's entrepreneurial context. This context is marked by significant gender disparities and weak victim protection mechanisms (Fig. 3).

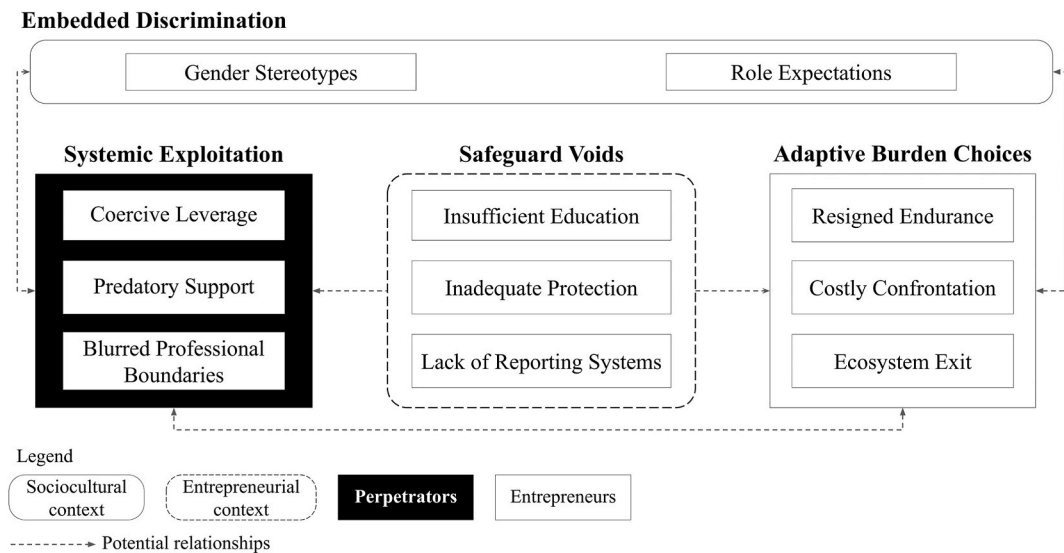


Fig. 3. Cyclical framework of sexual harassment.

Our framework's core element, *Embedded Discrimination*, transcends gendered assumptions in entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2019; Bullough et al., 2022) by highlighting how biases manifest as explicit sexual harassment within the cultural context in Japan. This is rooted in entrenched gender stereotypes and role traditions (Dalton, 2021; Nemoto, 2016), reflected in Japan's persistently low global gender equality rankings (The Economist, 2024). Such discrimination fosters power imbalances and normalizes gender-based biases, creating a fertile ground for harassment and shaping other framework components like *Systemic Exploitation* and *Adaptive Burden Choices*.

Systemic Exploitation exposes nuanced power imbalances in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly among those who hold (and can therefore withhold) critical resources, such as investors, mentors, advisors, and members of ESOs. Specifically, investors leverage power asymmetries by demanding sexual favors in exchange for vital funding or support. Similarly, mentors and ESO staff can also perpetrate harassment, despite being viewed as supportive figures (e.g., Clayton, 2024). Cultural norms discouraging formal reporting (Dussich, 2016) and blurred professional boundaries (Nemoto, 2016) further amplify this vulnerability for female entrepreneurs (Guzman and Kacperczyk, 2019).

The third component, *Safeguard Voids*, highlights the absence of protective mechanisms inhibiting sexual harassment (Dalton, 2021). The lack of formal reporting mechanisms, along with imbalanced power relationships and the cultural emphasis on social harmony, create a climate of fear and silence (Gobel and Miyamoto, 2024). The absence of specific legal penalties and protections in Japan (Civil Code of Japan, Goto, 2023) is particularly impactful for entrepreneurs operating outside traditional employment structures.

The fourth aspect, *Adaptive Burden Choices*, explores how women entrepreneurs respond to harassment, ranging from silent endurance to exiting the entrepreneurial ecosystem. While traditional workplace studies show that victims may switch jobs, even at lower salaries (Folke and Rickne, 2022), our findings reveal that harassment can also lead entrepreneurs to dissolve or withdraw from ventures, highlighting significant economic and professional losses. These responses are further influenced by Japan's collectivist and patriarchal norms (Gobel and Miyamoto, 2024). Simply increasing the number of women entrepreneurs without addressing underlying power imbalances may exacerbate harassment. This emphasizes the need for stakeholders to implement strategies that not only enhance participation but also ensure safe and equitable environments (Ahl and Marlow, 2021).

5.2. Limitations and future research opportunities

This study's relatively small sample size ($N = 197$), drawn mainly from the Tokyo area, limits its generalizability. The sensitive nature of the topic of sexual harassment may have resulted in underreporting (McDonald, 2012) and self-selection bias (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Self-reported data remain vulnerable to recall and social desirability biases (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007). Future research should integrate organizational, industry, and institutional factors (Ahl and Marlow, 2021); employ longitudinal designs (McLaughlin et al., 2017); and conduct cross-cultural comparisons (Bullough et al., 2022). Experimental evaluations of interventions are needed to identify effective prevention strategies (Fitzgerald and Cortina, 2018).

5.3. Contributions and conclusion

By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, we have uncovered indications of the extent of sexual harassment faced by entrepreneurs, particularly women; their specific vulnerabilities; and the mechanisms behind the persistence of this phenomenon. This

study has made four key contributions. First, it has demonstrated that sexual harassment in entrepreneurial contexts is a distinct phenomenon, extending beyond prior gender-gap discussions. Secondly, we have highlighted how Japan's patriarchal norms, limited legal protections, and social pressures create specific vulnerabilities and deter reporting. Thirdly, we have shown that perpetrators, who often hold power over entrepreneurs, span multiple stakeholder groups (including investors, customers, mentors, and support organizations), which reveals the need for ecosystem-wide accountability. Finally, we have proposed targeted solutions, including improved reporting channels, stakeholder education, and stronger legal frameworks to dismantle exploitative dynamics.

While our evidence is primarily from Japan, the cultural and institutional patterns identified may apply to contexts that share similar gender norms and legal constraints. Only through collective efforts—by practitioners, policymakers, and researchers—can we transform entrepreneurship into a space free from sexual harassment. This, in turn, ensures everyone is empowered to pursue their entrepreneurial visions, fueling inclusive economic growth, promoting societal well-being, and inspiring future generations of entrepreneurs.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A

We conducted our MCA analyses using R version 4.4.0 (R Core Team, 2024) with the FactoMineR package (Lê et al., 2008) in RStudio 2024.04.2 + 764 (Posit, 2024). Table A.1 details how different perpetrator types align with specific forms of harassment. Table A.2 presents the MCA dimension contributions.

Table A.1

Sexual Harassment Incidents: Perpetrator Type by Harassment Form

	Overall	Statements	QPQ	Environ.	Physical	Staring	Digital	Gender	Stalking	Violence
Investor/VC	97	26	16	14	13	10	8	5	4	1
Customer/Client	75	18	8	16	13	5	8	3	4	–
Mentor/Advisor	59	11	9	12	10	5	7	2	3	–
Support Org.	52	16	5	11	8	5	3	–	4	–
Entrepreneur	52	13	7	10	7	6	4	1	4	–
Own company	22	7	2	6	2	2	2	1	–	–
Other	14	2	2	3	3	1	2	–	1	–

Notes. Statements: Inappropriate statements/inquiries; QPQ: Unwanted relationship demands or quid pro quo; Environ.: Uncomfortable behavior in the unavoidable environment; Physical: Inappropriate physical contact; Staring: Excessive staring or uncomfortable gestures; Digital: Uncomfortable contact via digital tools; Gender: gender discrimination or exploitation, Stalking: Stalking or persistent following, Violence: Sexual violence.

Table A.2

Dimension Contribution of Perpetrators to Harassment Incidents

Perpetrator	Dim1	Dim2	Incident	Dim1	Dim2
Investor/VC	29.130	5.727	Discrimination	14.334	4.533
Mentor/Advisor	16.568	12.625	SexualViolence	12.699	4.094
Support Organization Member	2.513	3.895	QuidProQuo	8.748	0.056
Customer/Client	1.715	12.345	UnavoidableEnvironments	7.306	3.535
Own Company Member	0.073	0.509	Stalking	5.264	3.004
Entrepreneur	0.001	14.899	PhysicalContact	0.753	3.296
			DigitalTools	0.350	14.100
			StaringGestures	0.304	6.004
			Statements	0.243	11.378

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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