THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM:

EXAMINING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND EQUITY AMONG FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS ON THE SEXUAL VIOLENCE CONTINUUM IN JAPAN

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Acknowledgments

In writing this paper, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the women who took the time to respond to the survey, as well as to everyone who helped share it. We also wish to acknowledge and honor all those working to eliminate harassment in Japan.

Comments – Chika EZURE and Shiho AZUMA

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CHAPTER 1 **INTRODUCTION**

1.1. Sexual Victimization as a Rite of Passage

This study begins with the following critical question: Why is it assumed that entrepreneurs must endure sexual victimization and that overcoming it is considered a prerequisite for success?

The authors, who are entrepreneurs with registered corporations while also being current or former graduate students, have often heard throughout their careers, “If you want to succeed, you have to overcome sexual victimization.” As women entrepreneurs, we internalized these statements as inevitable. However, through this research, we realized that despite the frequent mention of sexual victimization in women entrepreneurs’ conversations, it remains largely unaddressed publicly as a social issue. Why, then, has sexual victimization remained a *hidden conversation*? This study seeks to expose this silence and encourage broader social discourse on the issue.

Pursuing this topic as an academic paper has involved significant conflict. Fearing exclusion from Japan’s close-knit entrepreneurial community, we faced harassment, even during the research process. In a society where speaking out remains discouraged, we explore women entrepreneurs’ experiences through our own voices, presenting this issue for critical engagement.

1.2. Working Environment for Entrepreneurs in Japan

In 2022, the Japanese government announced the Five-Year Startup Development Plan (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2022), in which it committed one trillion yen in support. Among the main pillars of the Plan are entrepreneurship education and network building, along with support measures for women entrepreneurs. Japanese policies for female entrepreneurs often focus on accessing funding and networking opportunities. However, to what extent do entrepreneurs' voices shape these policy frameworks? The reality is that Japan still faces persistent gender inequality (Estévez-Abe, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2024), and the startup sector is no exception. In particular, although the percentage of female entrepreneurs is on the rise (Japan Finance Corporation Research Institute, 2023), only 2% of the top 50 fundraising firms have a female founder or president, and there is a lack of understanding about projects that solve women's specific problems (Financial Service Agency, 2022).

These challenges are rooted in Japan's institutional structures. Japanese labor laws are designed to safeguard employees, not entrepreneurs. For example, employers are required to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace under the Equal Employment Opportunity Act. However, entrepreneurs are not classified as employees, so they cannot access internal compliance systems or harassment consultation services. Likewise, the country's Power Harassment Prevention Law is based on the existence of an employment relationship.

In this environment, women entrepreneurs often experience sexual victimization but lack the opportunity to raise this issue publicly, with their experiences confined to private conversations. This study aims to bring these hidden conversations into the open and to position sexual victimization as a pressing social concern. We hope our research serves as a wake-up call—

what we have witnessed is not the calm but rather the stillness before a storm—and sparks future discussion and change.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Entrepreneurs and Sexual Victimization

In 2020, a survey conducted by the startup accelerator Y Combinator revealed that a significant number of female entrepreneurs had experienced sexual harassment and coercive behavior from angel investors and venture capitalists (Y Combinator, 2018). However, many of them refrained from speaking out, fearing negative consequences for future fundraising opportunities.

These issues have also begun to surface in Japan's startup industry. In recent years, several women entrepreneurs have publicly disclosed their experiences of sexual victimization (Ichino, 2024; Nishibu, 2019). However, scholarly research addressing sexual victimization in entrepreneurial contexts remains scarce. To date, the only known academic study that broadly investigates the stakeholders involved in entrepreneurship and sexual victimization is that of Kashino (2025).

The neoliberal discourse on entrepreneurship has faced extensive critique (Bruni et al., 2004; Essers et al., 2017), and Japan is no exception. Entrepreneurs are often romanticized as bold, liberated agents under a dominant neoliberal ideology. This narrative creates a social environment in which problematic behavior is overlooked or normalized, making it difficult to raise critical questions about misconduct in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

2.2. Invisibility of Women Entrepreneurs

"The entrepreneurial mentality as a discursive practice produces the entrepreneurial subject within itself, but it is always the 'entrepreneur' (masculine), not the 'entrepreneuse' (feminine)."

(Bruni et al., 2004, p. 266)

In the field of entrepreneurship studies, women entrepreneurs have long been excluded from dominant discourses. In particular, the discourse of the *entrepreneurial spirit* legitimizes certain types of entrepreneurs while simultaneously and often implicitly excluding others (Gill, 2012). Mirchandani (1999) pointed out that gendered attitudes toward entrepreneurs are constructed on the assumption that the default entrepreneur is male.

This perspective has been common in business and organizational studies, in which entrepreneurship has traditionally been considered gender neutral (Baker et al., 1997). In reality, however, most entrepreneurship research has focused on male entrepreneurs, thus rendering women statistical minorities who are often excluded from the analysis. As a result, so-called neutrality has functioned to reproduce normative standards based on male experiences (Ferber & Nelson, 1993).

In light of this, research on women entrepreneurs must expose the structures of gender-based oppression and address women's experiences—including those involving sexual harassment and sexual violence—that have historically been absent from mainstream discourse. This requires a reexamination of existing epistemological frameworks, and recognizing women entrepreneurs as legitimate subjects of research constitutes an essential starting point. Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism also provides insight here. In organizations, individuals in symbolic minority positions often face disproportionate visibility and social isolation. While

numerous scholars have noted this issue, the key question remains: How can we meaningfully represent the lived experiences of those who have been rendered invisible?

2.3. Visualizing Experience through the Sexual Violence Continuum

An important framework for understanding sexual harassment is Kelly's (1987) ***continuum of sexual violence***. Kelly argued that sexual violence should not be limited to extreme cases, such as rape or incest, but should include everyday experiences, such as sexual harassment and coercion into sexual relationships, within a continuum of sexual victimization experienced by women. Her research demonstrates that nearly all women experience some form of sexual assault, ranging from choice to pressure, coercion, and ultimately to violence.

This concept is significant because it highlights not only legally defined acts of victimization but also the experiences that the women themselves perceive as unwanted. The continuum framework challenges the victim/nonvictim binary and provides a critical perspective for visualizing sexual assault as a structural issue. Here, the term *continuum* is used in the sense of "a continuous series of elements or events that pass into one another and cannot readily be distinguished" (Oxford University Press, n.d.), allowing for a broader articulation of the diverse harm experiences of survivors.

Saito and Otake's (2020) study is noteworthy for examining the gap between legal definitions of sexual victimization and lived realities. Their research investigated experiences not legally recognized as harm but are nonetheless deeply impactful, and traced victims' recovery from such incidents.

Employing this theoretical framework in the literature highlights the existing research gaps. Current research on entrepreneurs and sexual victimization often assumes that victims have

already recognized their experiences as such. However, limited understanding may lead survivors to underestimate or fail to identify their experiences as harm, resulting in nondisclosure in research contexts. This structural silence hampers the full understanding of sexual victimization, leading to statistical underreporting and a lack of institutional support.

We draw on Kelly's concept of the continuum of sexual violence to explore the diverse forms of sexual victimization faced by women entrepreneurs. In doing so, we aim to establish a theoretical foundation for a more multidimensional understanding of harm, including silence and coercion, within the broader context of power relations.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1. The Survey Method

This study adopts the perspective of data feminism (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020), which frames statistical methods not merely as tools for quantitative description but as political praxis for visualizing inequalities and enabling social transformation. Data feminism holds that data are shaped by existing social and institutional hierarchies through questions of who collects data, what is measured, and how the findings are interpreted and communicated. Recognizing the statistical exclusion of women entrepreneurs, this study quantitatively describes structural oppression to challenge the *invisibility* of these experiences and to build a foundation for policy and system interventions. It proposes challenging dominant discursive structures and offering a step toward imagining a more just society.

The survey questionnaire included basic statistical items: age, legal status of the business, company size, and primary sources of funding (Table 1).

Table 1

Basic Statistics Questions

question	choice
Age	1. 20-29 2. 30-39 3. 40-49 4. 50-59 5. 60-69
Legal Entity	1. Co., Ltd. 2. LLC 3. NPO 4. General 5. Incorporated 6. Association 7. General 8. Incorporated 9. Foundation
Scale	1. Solo founder 2. Small-scale (5 or fewer employees) 3. Medium-scale (up to 100 employees) 4. Large-scale (more than 100 employees)
Funding Methods	1. Personal 2. Equity 3. Loan 4. Donation 5. Grant

Two types of questions were included to understand experiences of sexual victimization. First, the respondents were asked directly whether they had experienced sexual victimization, using a yes/no format to assess their self-recognition of victimization. However, such experiences are not always immediately recognized. For instance, Spring (2020) reported that survivors took an average of seven years to recognize them. To address this concern, this study also included questions based on the sexual violence continuum (Table 2).

In designing these continuum-based questions, we drew on the 2020 Sexual Harassment Survey in the UK (Adams et al., 2020), which framed sexual assault and rape within the broader context of sexual harassment, viewing gender-based harassment as part of the same structural issue. Rather than asking questions directly about sexual victimization, the survey provided specific examples of potentially harassing behavior for the respondents to indicate which experiences applied to them. Kelly (1987) defined the sexual violence continuum as "a continuous series of elements or events that pass into one another and cannot readily be distinguished" (p. 52). This study adopted a similar approach, acknowledging that respondents may not easily recognize or define their experiences as sexual victimization. The aim is to make structures of harm visible, regardless of the survivor's recognition of victimization.

This study modified some elements of the 2020 Sexual Harassment Survey. While the original excluded items on gender harassment to avoid an excessively lengthy questionnaire, our study included it as an independent item, considering it critical at the early stage of the continuum. To capture the specific manifestations of gender norms and harassment in the startup ecosystem, we included field-specific examples for each question.

Table 2

Continuum-based Questions

No	Choices
1	Negative comments based on your gender as a woman that made you feel uncomfortable
2	Displays of pornographic or sexually offensive materials which made you feel uncomfortable, including it being viewed near you
3	Unwelcome jokes or comments of a sexual nature about you or others that made you feel uncomfortable
4	Unwelcome comments of a sexual nature about your body and/or clothes
5	Unwelcome cat calls, wolf whistling or other provocative sounds
6	Unwelcome staring or looks which made you feel uncomfortable
7	Receiving unwanted messages with material of a sexual nature, e.g. by text/messaging app, email, social media or another source
8	Feeling pressured by someone to date them or do a sexual act for them in exchange for something
9	Someone making persistent and/or unwanted attempts to establish a romantic/sexual relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it
10	Someone taking and/or sharing sexual pictures or videos of you without your permission.
11	Flashing (e.g. the deliberate exposure of someone's intimate parts)
12	Someone physically following you without your permission in a way that made you feel sexually threatened
13	Someone intentionally, brushing up against you, or invading your personal space in an unwelcome, sexual way
14	Unwanted touching (e.g. placing hand on lower back or knee)
15	Unwanted, overt sexual touching (e.g. touching of the breasts, buttocks or genitals, attempts to kiss)
16	Rape and/or attempted rape
17	Any other forms of sexual harassment
18	Never experienced any of the listed behaviors.

The questionnaire also covered the characteristics of the perpetrator(s), the context in which the victimization occurred, the person(s) the respondent consulted with, and a free-text comment box. Data on victimization incidents reported by others were excluded from this study.

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies, the University of Tokyo (IRB #24-25). Prior to participating in the survey, all respondents were presented with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and participants' rights. Informed consent was

obtained electronically via an online platform, where participants were required to review and actively agree to the consent form before proceeding to the questionnaire. Geographic location data were excluded from the analysis based on the ethics review. Recognizing the time and emotional labor involved, we compensated the respondents with a 1,000-yen Amazon gift card upon completing the survey. Soliciting women's experiences of sexual victimization contributes to knowledge but also requires participants reliving emotionally taxing events, described by Hochschild (1983) as emotional labor. Considering the sensitive nature of the questions, the participants could opt out of any item, and the informed consent process allowed responses to be paused or deleted at any time.

3.2. Data

3.2.1. Method of collecting responses

The survey was conducted from March 1 to 20, 2025. The questionnaire was created using an online form and was distributed and collected through a snowball sampling method. Distribution channels included requests for cooperation through entrepreneurial communities and dissemination via the researchers' personal networks. The survey was not shared on open social media platforms to ensure that responses were obtained only from the target population and to guarantee participant anonymity.

3.2.2. Screening

During the survey period, **responses** were received from **121 individuals**. **Four respondents, who indicated their business status as "Other"** or **"Sole corporation,"** were excluded from the analysis. The **final number of valid responses was 117**.

3.3. Data Processing

Based on the 19 types of harassment experiences listed in the questionnaire, responses were categorized into the following **major classifications**:

- **Sexual violence:** Nonconsensual sexual acts or physical contact
- **Sexual harassment:** Sexually inappropriate verbal or nonverbal behaviors without physical contact
- **Gender harassment:** Discriminatory or derogatory remarks based on gender roles

The respondents who experienced **sexual harassment or sexual violence** were collectively defined as **survivors of sexual victimization**. In this study, they refer to those respondents who checked at least one item under sexual victimization based on the **sexual violence continuum** framework.

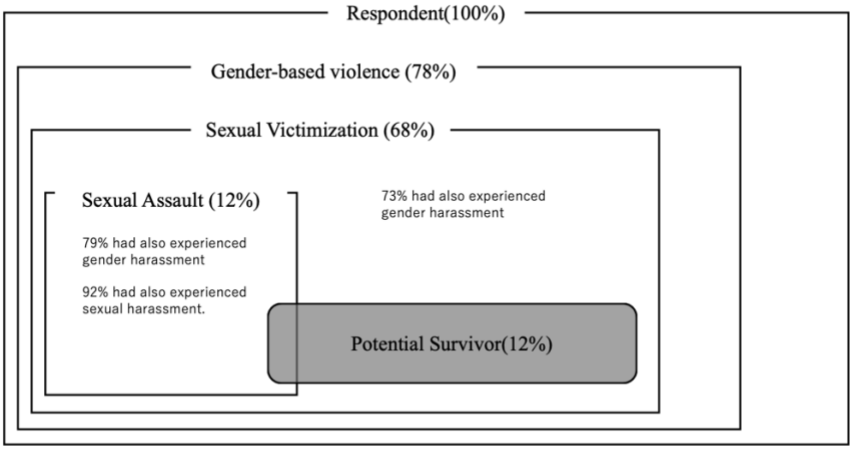
CHAPTER 4 **RESULTS**

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Most respondents were in their 20s or 30s, indicating a concentration of early-stage, young entrepreneurs (Figure A1). Approximately 80% operated for-profit corporations, while the remainder ran nonprofit organizations (Figure A2). The most common business structure was small-scale enterprises, followed by companies operated solely by the founder (Figure A3). Regarding funding, most entrepreneurs relied on personal funds, followed by those who secured equity investment or obtained loans (Figure A4).

Image 1

Categorical Breakdown of Harassment, Sexual Victimization, and Recognition

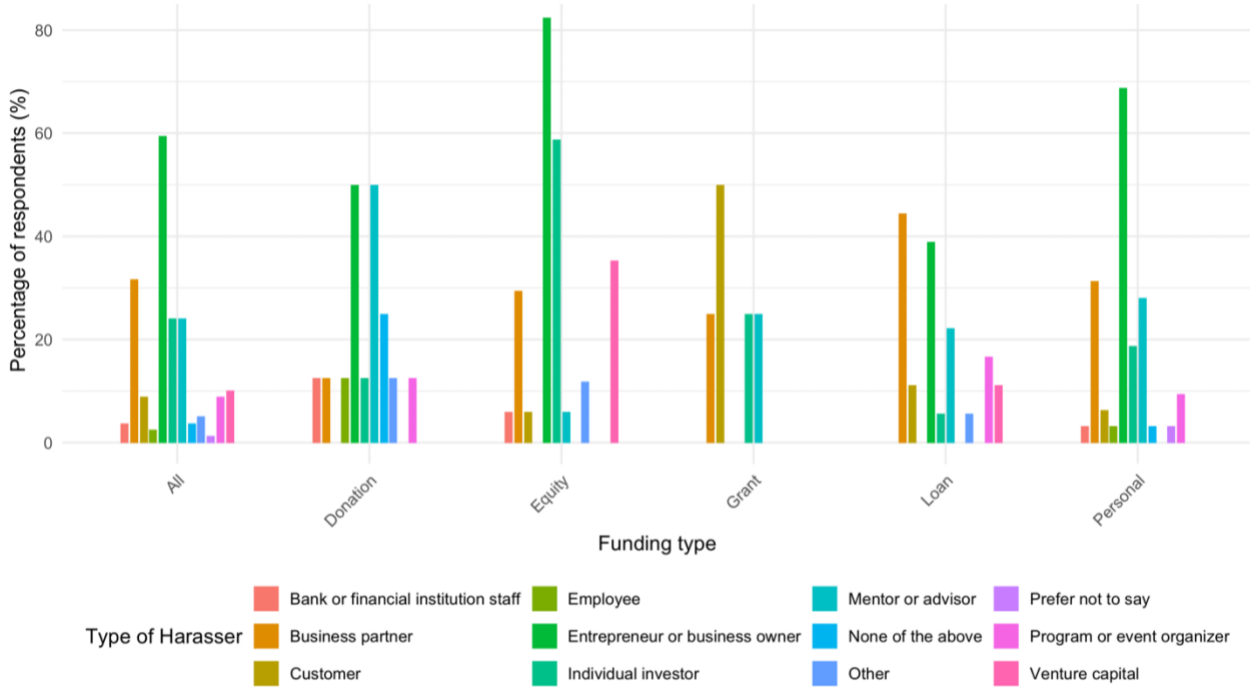


Among the survey participants, **78% (91 individuals)** reported experiencing gender-based violence, including gender harassment, sexual harassment, or sexual violence. Furthermore, **68% (79 individuals)** reported **sexual victimization** (either sexual harassment or sexual violence), and **12% (14 individuals)** were **survivors of sexual violence**. Among those who had experienced sexual harassment, 73% also reported gender harassment. Among sexual violence survivors, 79% had also experienced gender harassment and 92% had experienced sexual harassment. Notably, **12% (14 individuals)** of sexual victimization survivors did **not recognize** their experience as victimization, highlighting latent survivors.

4.2. Perpetrators

Figure 1

Incidence of Sexual Harassment and Assault by Company Funding Type



The most reported perpetrators of sexual victimization were **entrepreneurs**, accounting for **59% (47 individuals)** of all cases, followed by **business partners** (25 individuals), and **individual investors or mentors** (19 individuals). While media coverage has primarily focused on the asymmetrical power dynamics between entrepreneurs seeking funding and venture capitalists or investors holding that funding, **nearly 80% of victims with fundraising experience reported harassment or sexual victimization by fellow entrepreneurs**.

Regarding the types of misconduct by perpetrator category, across all top four perpetrator groups, the most frequently reported behavior was **"Unwelcome jokes or comments of a sexual nature about you or others that made you feel**

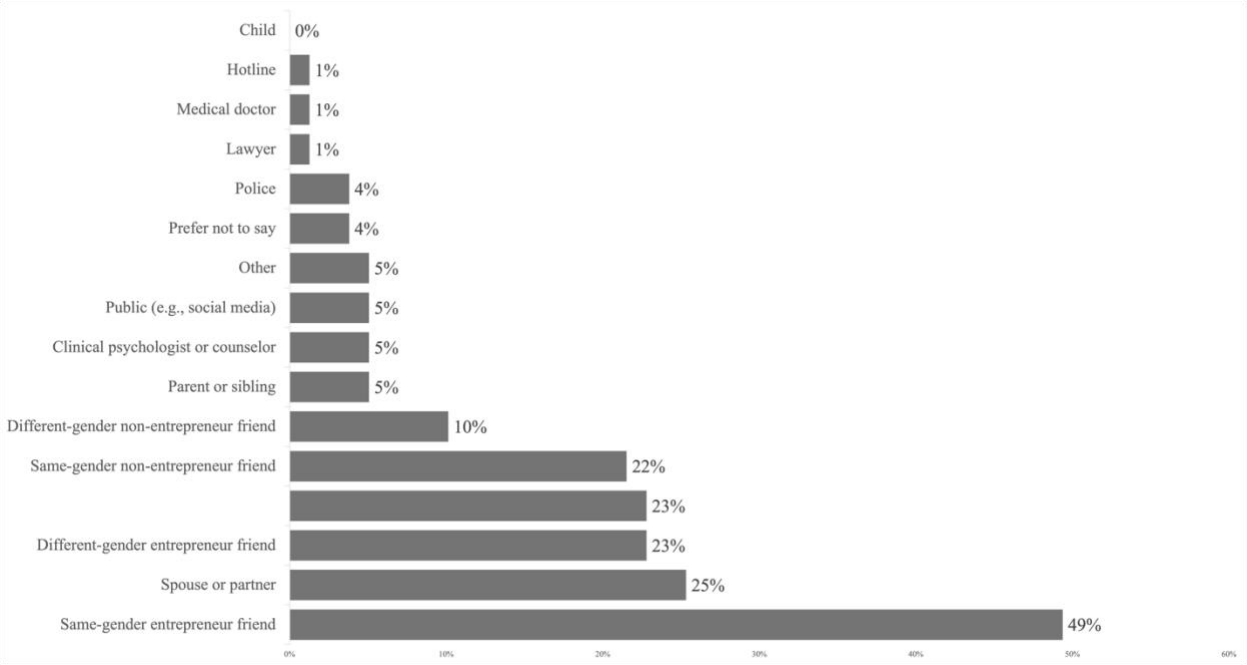
uncomfortable," followed by **"Unwelcome cat calls, wolf whistling, or other provocative sounds."**

In all groups except mentors/advisors, the third most common behavior was **"Unwanted touching (e.g., placing hand on lower back or knee)."** In the case of mentors and advisors, **"Someone intentionally brushing up against you or invading your personal space in an unwelcome, sexual way"** and **"Receiving unwanted messages with material of a sexual nature (e.g., via messaging apps, email, social media, etc.)"** were also frequently reported.

4.3. Recognition, Reporting, and Consultation Behavior

Figure 2

Means of Disclosure among Respondents Who Had Experienced Sexual Victimization



Recognition of the experience and subsequent consultation behavior constitute the final stages of the sexual violence continuum. Among those who experienced sexual harassment or

sexual violence, **about half reported consulting a female entrepreneur friend**. Additionally, **59% of the respondents stated that they had heard about experiences of sexual victimization from acquaintances**, suggesting that sexual violence is a socially widespread phenomenon. By contrast, **very few respondents reported consulting public or professional support services,** such as the police, hotlines, counselors, or lawyers. Notably, **22% of the respondents indicated that they had not consulted anyone** about their experience.

CHAPTER 5 BE SILENT: UNCOVERING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENTREPRENEURS AND SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

5.1. Hidden Power Relationships among Entrepreneurs

Among cases of sexual victimization between entrepreneurs, sexually explicit jokes were most frequently reported, followed by unsolicited physical contact. These behaviors, often perceived as trivial or commonplace, can serve as entry points into more serious forms of sexual violence. The findings (Section 4.3) show that 73% of the individuals who experienced sexual harassment also faced gender-based harassment; among those reporting sexual violence, 79% had also experienced gender-based harassment and 92% had experienced sexual harassment.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that sexual victimization among entrepreneurs, which has been overlooked until now, has not been harmed, but rather that it has not been made visible. In addition, the past reports have often referred to sexual victimization of entrepreneurs by VCs and business partners, where power relationships can easily occur （Benner, 2017; Oka,

2023; Williams, 2017）. Given the neglect of sexual victimization among entrepreneurs in the media and academic discourse, a detailed analysis is needed to explore the processes behind such conditions. The following section will examine the realities of sexual victimization experienced by women entrepreneurs.

5.2. Normalization and Invisibility of Sexual Victimization

Approximately 20% of individuals who experience sexual victimization do not recognize themselves as victims. In cases involving adult victims, one reason cited is the discrepancy between their actual experience and their internalized image of what such victimization entails. In particular, sexual violence perpetrated by acquaintances does not fit the common image of a sudden assault by a stranger, causing delays in recognizing it as sexual harm (Shioiri & Mishima, 2020). This suggests a tendency to minimize or downplay sexual harassment.

This study also includes cases that reflect such patterns.

> After every online meeting, I'd get a phone call, and we'd chat for hours (about 80% of it was about relationships). During a casual conversation after a mentoring session, I was told things like, "Invite me to a home party." I wasn't sure if it was something I could call sexual harassment, and it made me uncomfortable, but I wondered if I was just being too sensitive, which made me take some time before consulting someone about it. As a student entrepreneur, I honestly feel like I stepped into society without fully understanding what sexual harassment even was. I don't really know how to protect myself or even what situations are appropriate for self-protection. (Early 20s, Nonprofit organization, Small-scale, Self-funded, translated by the author)

The respondent in this case recognized the victimization after some time had passed. Younger entrepreneurs, particularly student entrepreneurs, may accept such behaviors without question, leading to a delayed recognition of the victimization.

Other responses showed that some individuals did not recognize what constituted sexual victimization or did not view such situations as problematic:

> Honestly, I didn't really feel that bothered by it. It was in the context of a natural conversation, so I thought, "I guess this is just how it is. They're speaking in a fun way, so it's fine." (Late 20s, Corporation, Small-scale, Self-funded, translated by the author)

The respondent acknowledged the victimization but reported experiencing "flirting, teasing, and sexually suggestive comments at drinking parties (Table 2)" without feeling bothered. This feeling of ambivalence is a noteworthy point. Despite recognition of sexual victimization, the lack of discomfort indicates normalization, with nearly 70% of female entrepreneurs reporting similar experiences. The respondent herself appears to accept these behaviors.

Saito and Otake (2020) found that victims often fail to recognize their victimization, a point supported by the current study. Third parties, such as friends or support organizations, can help victims recognize and accept their experiences, but such processes were often absent in this study.

The difficulty in recognizing victimization and accessing support is discussed in the next section.

5.3. Silence on Sexual Victimization and Women Entrepreneurs

Among the respondents who experienced sexual victimization, **20% did not seek consultation**. Five main factors prevent survivors from consulting others: lack of information, lack of physical means, distrust in potential confidants, cultural or customary taboos, and the survivor's own strategic decision to remain silent for self-protection (Saito & Otake, 2020).

5.3.1. Lack of information

Regarding the lack of information, as mentioned in the previous section (5-2), the lack of information on sexual harassment leads to a situation where people fail to recognize the damage and do not seek advice. In Japan, employers are required to educate their employees to understand harassment, but entrepreneurs have little opportunity to receive such education. Another issue is the lack of opportunities to learn about sexual violence in Japanese school education (Asai, 2018), and if those around them have a similar level of knowledge, it may be difficult for them to recognize what has happened to them as harassment. As such experiences have become normalized among stakeholders, including entrepreneurs themselves, discussions tend to remain within peer circles, and pathways to report incidents outside the ecosystem are largely closed off. The respondents expressed uncertainty about when, to whom, what, and how they should disclose their experiences.

5.3.2. Lack of physical resources

A major issue is the lack of consultation services tailored to the entrepreneurial environment. An example of a support service for sexual victimization is Japan's nationwide one-stop support centers for victims of sexual crimes and sexual violence. However, these general services may

not fully understand the unique challenges that entrepreneurs face, leading to hesitancy in seeking help. Furthermore, a study on entrepreneurship events in Japan found that 70% of organizers had not implemented any preventive measures against sexual violence, and only 50% had provided related staff education (Nonprofit Corporation Pillow, 2024).

5.3.3. Concerns about who to consult

Even when there is someone to consult, victims may hesitate if they do not trust the person. In this regard, one particularly telling comment was shared:

> Even if I told someone, I felt they might say, "Aren't you overthinking it?" "Aren't you being too self-conscious?" or think I was bragging about being attractive, so I found it hard to talk to anyone. Even while discussing business matters, I'm constantly thinking about how to defend myself at the same time.
>
> *(*Early 30s, Corporation, Small-scale, Funded by loan, translated by the author)

This case shows the respondent's reluctance to speak up, fearing that the harm would be denied or minimized. In a Ministry of Justice's (2021) qualitative survey on experiences of sexual violence, it noted that victims often avoid seeking help because they fear being disbelieved. Garrett and Hassan (2019) corroborated this, highlighting the role of distrust in preventing disclosure. Moreover, the comment about "thinking about how to defend myself [from sexual harm] even while discussing business" suggests how, for women entrepreneurs, concerns about sexual victimization are closed tied to their business activities.

5.3.4. Taboos of culture and customs

Cultural and customary taboos, particularly those unique to entrepreneurs, can significantly influence their decisions. One respondent shared a friend's experience with sexual harassment:

> My friend consulted me about sexual harassment. Apparently, the potential compensation for suing for sexual harassment is less than what one might have to pay if sued for defamation, which effectively silences women and makes me feel the law doesn't work. Ideally, one should take it to court, but anyone who speaks up is said to be socially ostracized. It's obvious that such a society, where no one benefits in the end, only becomes a zero-sum society, filled with paranoia and eroding trust among its members." (Early 30s, Corporation, Sole corporation, Self-funded, translated by the author)

This shows that when the perpetrator is well known, victims may be unable to speak out due to fear of being sued for defamation. This is particularly relevant for entrepreneurs, whose media exposure and public image are directly tied to their corporate identity. A notable example is the well-known case of journalist Shiori Ito. The perpetrator, Mr. Yamaguchi, filed a counter-lawsuit for defamation in response to her public statements (Toyama, 2022). This incident has made the term "defamation" closely associated with reporting sexual violence, deterring victims from seeking help or making accusations.

5.3.5. Protect themselves through silence

One respondent, who reported experiencing sexual harm from a client, did not seek help despite the involvement of a business partner with a vested interest.

> It happened in my early 30s, just after starting my business, when I still had very few jobs. I was invited to dinner under the pretense of receiving a work order, and then taken to a hotel. At the time, I couldn't firmly refuse, and I had no one to talk to about it. (Early 40s, Corporation, Medium sized, Loan funded, translated by the author)

Despite clear sexual violence, this person did not report the incident, demonstrating *self-navigation through silence*—a strategy of self-protection through nondisclosure. The mention of "under the pretense of receiving a work order" suggests that the fear of losing the business deal influenced the respondent's reluctance to refuse. In addition, the absence of someone to consult made reporting impossible.

This issue can also be explained through the lens of fear of consequences (Garrett & Hassan, 2019). It aligns with findings on why survivors do not report sexual violence. Their common reasons are job loss, reputation damage, retaliation, and further harm. This is especially true when the perpetrator holds power, like a superior, mentor, or public figure.

5.4. Silence through Sympathy

Thus far, the discussion has focused on cases in which individuals did not seek support. However, even among those who did, many consultations did not lead to formal support. About 49% of those seeking help consulted another woman entrepreneur, and 59% heard of similar experiences from fellow women entrepreneurs (Section 4.4). By contrast, connections with formal support systems, such as lawyers, psychologists, or the police, remained limited.

The survey findings suggest that nearly 70% of the women entrepreneurs reported sexual victimization, and nearly 60% had heard similar stories from peers. This creates a structural tendency for the consultations to be dismissed or downplayed as commonplace. Saito and Otake

(2020) argued that full acknowledgment of the victimization is necessary to connect victims to support. However, when the person consulted is also a survivor, responses like, “That happened to me, too” or “It’s just something that happens in the startup world” often result in shared experiences without meaningful action. This creates *empathetic silence*, in which empathy paradoxically inhibits further action.

CHAPTER 6 **CONCLUSION**

Do we have to *overcome sexual victimization in order to succeed*? This study revealed the widespread sexual victimization among entrepreneurs, its severe impacts, and its underreporting in the media and academic research. The starting point for this research was the observation that, despite frequent conversations among women entrepreneurs about these experiences, sexual victimization remained unrecognized as a problem. This study aims to bring these realities to light and foster broader social discourse.

The research used Kelly's (1987) continuum of sexual violence, and the data collection was informed by data feminism (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020), recognizing women entrepreneurs' statistical exclusion. By quantitatively describing structural oppression, this study challenged the notion that such harm is nonexistent, and built a foundation for critical system and policy interventions. Three main findings emerged:

(1) Approximately 70% of women entrepreneurs reported experiencing some form of sexual victimization.

(2) The most frequent perpetrators of sexual harassment were other entrepreneurs.

(3) The most common source of support was other women entrepreneurs.

The analysis revealed a complex interplay of discourses and social systems surrounding entrepreneurs (Chapter 5).

Hidden power dynamics among seemingly equal peers can create environments ripe for sexual victimization (Section 5.1). Behaviors such as inappropriate jokes or physical contact are also difficult to identify as harm, both legally and by the victims themselves (Section 5.2).

The data highlighted the hidden conversations among women entrepreneurs that initially motivated this study. Among the respondents, 49% cited another woman entrepreneur as their source of support, while 59% reported having been confided in about sexual harassment (Section 5.3). These findings suggest that peer-to-peer empathy can lessen the seriousness of harm with responses like, "That happened to me, too" or "That's common in startups." The study examined this empathetic silence, in which empathy becomes a barrier to institutional support or legal action (Section 5.4). In environments where sexual victimization is normalized, harm is often reduced to a *shared experience* instead of a ground for systemic intervention. For transformation to occur, empathy must be the starting point, not the endpoint.

The limitation of this study is sampling bias. The respondents, recruited through the authors' networks, skewed toward younger entrepreneurs in their 20s and 30s, with a margin of error of around 10%. Future research should further investigate power dynamics among entrepreneurs and help develop more effective harassment countermeasures. Additionally, sexual victimization is not exclusive to women entrepreneurs. It can affect men and individuals of other gender identities. Further research reflecting diverse identities and positionalities is vital.

In conclusion, this study highlighted sexual violence within entrepreneurship and examined how limited awareness, visibility, and access to support systems perpetuate harm. Moving forward, concrete institutional responses are needed, such as specialized support systems

within entrepreneurial communities, dedicated consultation services, and gender-based education. Overcoming empathetic silence requires solidarity that transitions from storytelling to systems and from empathy to structural change.

Conflict of Interest Matters

After data collection, a potential for policy recommendations emerged within the funding organization, the nonprofit corporation Pillow (representative director: Ezure). In accordance with research ethics, the data interpretation was primarily undertaken by co-author Azuma, who had no conflict of interest with Pillow. We hereby state that the analysis and conclusions of this research were conducted independently by the authors and that the study is clearly separate from any policy advocacy activities undertaken by the funding organization. The research content or conclusions were not influenced by the presence or absence of financial support. Therefore, there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

On the other hand, it should be noted that in conducting this study, the authors, as entrepreneurs ourselves, faced inherent ethical conflicts in taking on this research as researchers. Efforts were made to separate the entrepreneurial and academic roles, but these complexities are difficult to make visible externally, highlighting the ethical challenges of insider research.

Future studies involving entrepreneurship and practice-based research must incorporate perspectives from those directly involved, with careful attention to conflicts when these individuals also hold leadership positions. This presents a critical issue for the future development of entrepreneurship research.

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Appendix

Figure A1

Age Demographic

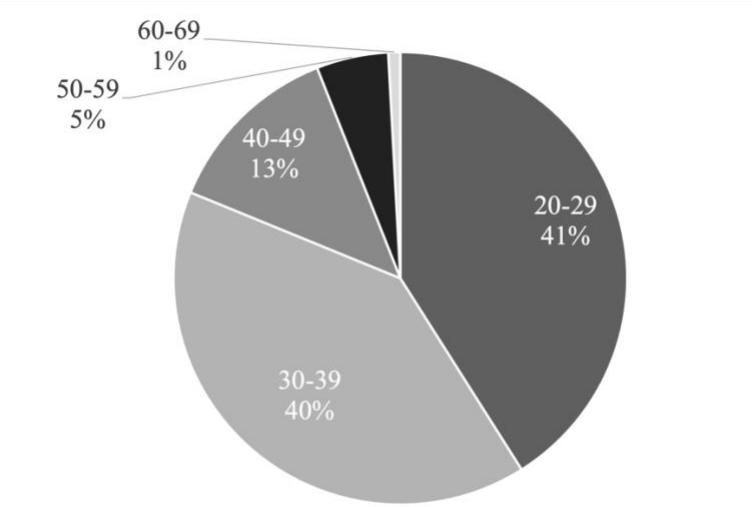

Figure A2

Legal Entity

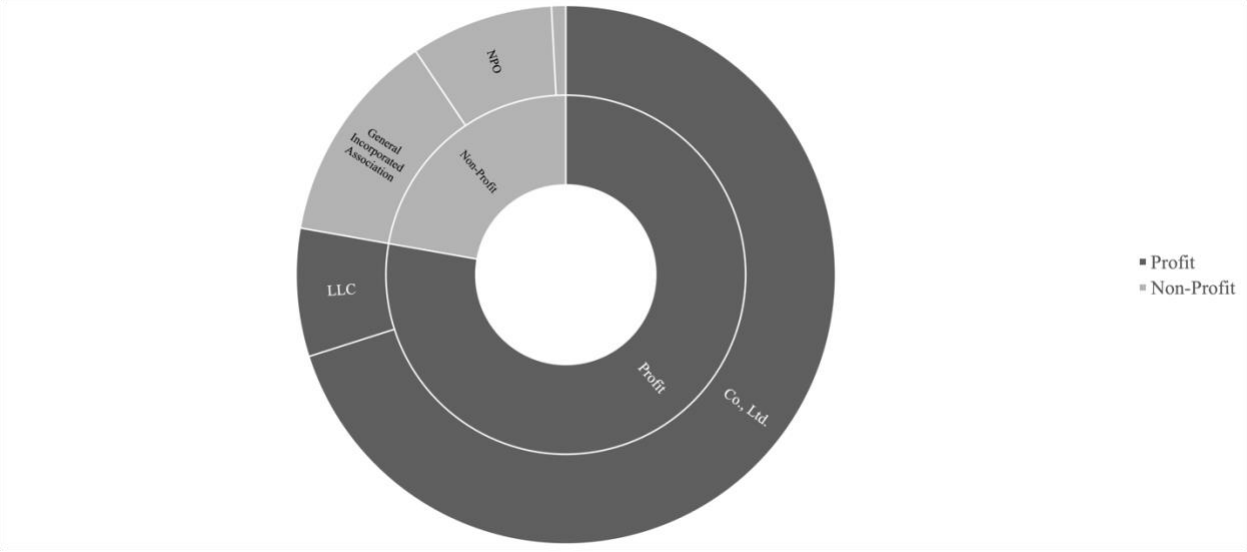

Figure A3

Funding Methods

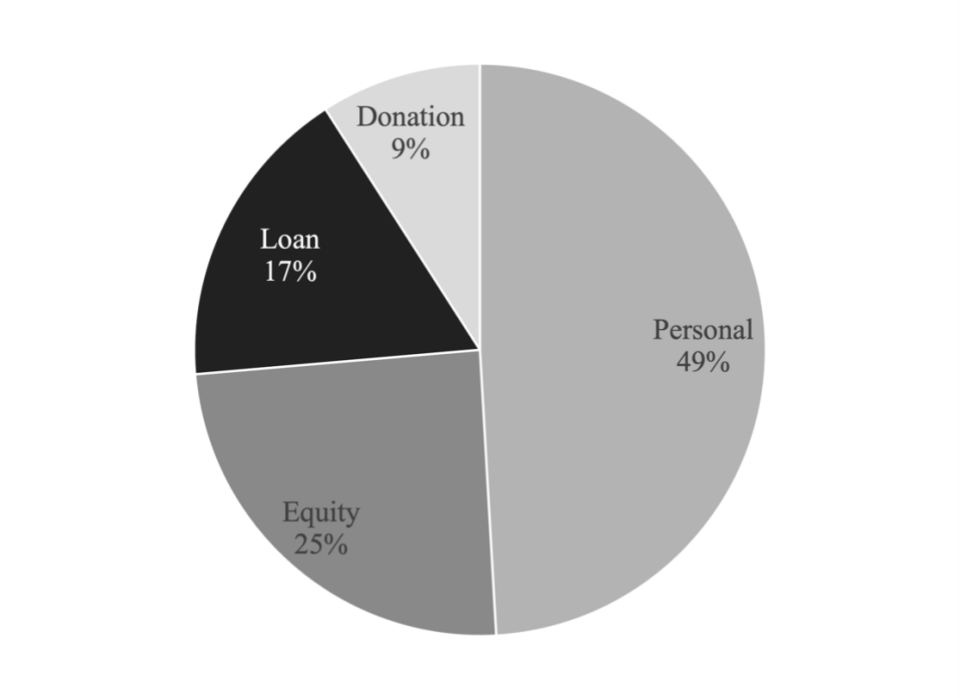

Figure A4

Scale of Companies