



## UNDER PRESSURE AND SILENCE: VEILED MORAL HARASSMENT AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE BRAZILIAN MIDWEST



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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the repercussions of moral harassment experienced by administrative technicians in a Federal Institution of Higher Education (IFES) located in the Brazilian Midwest. The research is based on the finding that moral harassment, although widely present, often manifests itself in a veiled and silent way, making it difficult to identify and cope with. With a qualitative-quantitative approach, data were collected through a questionnaire applied to 95 employees of the institution. The results show systematic practices of humiliation, work overload, social isolation, professional discredit and attacks on dignity, seriously affecting the physical and mental health of workers. In the legal field, the analysis points to the lack of a specific federal law on the subject, although it recognizes recent normative advances, such as Decree No. 12,122/2024, which establishes the Federal Program for the Prevention and Confrontation of Harassment in public administration. It is concluded that the fight against moral harassment requires effective institutional measures, educational actions, accessible reporting channels and the commitment of leaders. The research contributes to academic debate and to the construction of healthier and more respectful work environments.

**Keywords:** Moral harassment. Administrative technicians. Public university. Occupational health. Labor legislation. People management.

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## INTRODUCTION

Moral harassment in the workplace has emerged, in recent decades, as a phenomenon of high complexity and strong impact on labor relations. Initially underestimated, today it is recognized as one of the most harmful forms of symbolic and institutional violence, capable of compromising the physical and mental health of workers, affecting organizational productivity and directly violating the dignity of the human person — a founding principle of the Brazilian legal system (BRASIL, 1988, art. 1, III). According to Hirigoyen (2002), moral harassment is a perverse form of violence that corrodes subjectivities, manifests itself through repetitive, subtle or explicit conduct, and seeks to gradually undermine the individual's self-esteem, emotional stability and institutional belonging.

In the Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES), where the ideal of autonomy, plurality and inclusion should prevail, there is paradoxically the recurrence of veiled practices of harassment directed especially at technical-administrative staff. The expectation of freedom and professional recognition is often confronted with rigid hierarchical structures, pressure environments and vertical management practices, which intensify psychic suffering (CAIXETA, 2011). In this scenario, the present study seeks to analyze the materiality of moral harassment in labor relations in an IFES located in the Midwest region of Brazil, emphasizing not only its occurrence, but mainly its emotional, social and legal repercussions.

The choice of the theme is justified by its social, political and academic relevance, considering the lack of empirical research specifically aimed at technical-administrative employees, whose experiences of occupational suffering remain, to a large extent, invisible in institutional agendas. The literature review and the data collected support the hypothesis that moral harassment assumes structural contours within public universities, requiring the strengthening of prevention policies, safe reporting mechanisms and humanized management practices. It should be noted that, although the Brazilian legal system does not contemplate specific federal legislation on the subject, the recent Decree No. 12,122/2024 represents a normative advance by instituting national guidelines for combating harassment and discrimination in the public service.

## STUDY OBJECTIVES

In view of this reality, the general objective of the present study is to understand the repercussions of moral harassment on the technical-administrative employees of an IFES in the Brazilian Midwest. To this end, the following specific objectives are defined:



1. To identify the main practices that configure moral harassment in the work environment of the researched institution;
2. Analyze the emotional, professional and social effects on victimized workers;
3. Investigate the perception of civil servants about institutional policies to prevent and combat moral harassment;
4. Discuss the applicable legal framework, highlighting gaps, recent advances, and possible protection and reparation mechanisms;
5. Suggest strategic measures aimed at promoting a healthier, more inclusive and respectful work environment.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The present study seeks to understand the dynamics of moral harassment in the public university environment, especially with regard to the impacts on technical-administrative staff in education. To this end, this theoretical framework is organized into three main blocks: (i) psychic suffering and institutionality in the IFES, (ii) conceptualization and terminology of moral harassment, and (iii) legal and social repercussions of the phenomenon.

### **PSYCHIC SUFFERING AND INSTITUTIONALITY IN IFES**

Entering a Federal Institution of Higher Education is, for many technical-administrative employees, a professional and symbolic achievement of autonomy, prestige and stability. However, this experience can be accompanied by intense institutional pressures and subjective conflicts. As Caixeta (2011) points out, the university organization focused on technical-scientific training often imposes demands that conflict with the emotional needs of the subjects, causing suffering that is often silenced. The author defines psychic suffering as a set of psychological conditions arising from real or symbolic situations, generating persistent malaise with significant emotional and relational symptoms.

In addition, the organizational culture of the IFES, marked by bureaucracy, hierarchical rigidity and asymmetric power structures, can intensify isolation, professional devaluation and the absence of effective listening channels, which favors the perpetuation of moral harassment practices. These institutions, although they form critical thinking, sometimes reproduce authoritarian logics that limit dialogue and organizational health.

### **2.2 MORAL HARASSMENT: CONCEPTS, TERMINOLOGIES AND TYPOLOGIES**

The literature on workplace bullying is vast, but it still has conceptual inaccuracies.

According to Hirigoyen (2002), moral harassment consists of an insidious form of violence that is expressed through gestures, words and repetitive actions, whose objective is to emotionally destabilize the victim and erode their dignity. This author differentiates harassment from *bullying* and *mobbing* — the first being more associated with individual attacks and the second with collective or organizational persecution. Bradaschia (2007) reinforces these distinctions by highlighting that *bullying* tends to manifest itself through physical or sexual aggression, while moral harassment is characterized by its subtlety and persistence, making it difficult to report and prove it.

In Brazil, Margarida Barreto (2005) is one of the main references in the field. The author defines moral harassment as "a subtle, repetitive, rights-violating violence with multiple damages", whose consequences affect both the physical and psychological well-being of the worker. For her, it is a systematic practice with the intention of subjugating, humiliating and emptying the subjectivity of the other, imposing continuous suffering until the rupture of the employment relationship.

Leymann (1990), in his seminal study, understands harassment as a "hostile and unethical communication" that occurs systematically, usually for six months or more, with the potential to cause psychosomatic and social damage. In addition, Einarsen et al. (2004) define the phenomenon as the set of actions that reduce the worker's ability to defend himself through exclusion, intimidation or repeated disqualification from his or her functions.

The terminological multiplicity — psychoterror, emotional violence, psychological torture, among others — reveals not only the nuances of the phenomenon, but also the need for greater conceptual standardization that allows for more precise and effective institutional actions.

## LEGAL REPERCUSSIONS AND NORMATIVE PROTECTION

From a legal point of view, the Brazilian legal system still lacks specific federal legislation that typifies moral harassment in labor relations. In its absence, normative analogies have been used, such as article 216-A of the Brazilian Penal Code, which deals with the violation of dignity through repeated conduct. Recently, Federal Decree No. 12,122/2024 brought an important milestone by instituting the Federal Program for the Prevention and Confrontation of Harassment and Discrimination within the scope of direct, autarchic and foundational public administration. The decree recognizes both moral and sexual harassment, in its vertical and horizontal forms, and proposes management committees to monitor and prevent abusive practices in the public service, including universities.

In addition, the Federal Constitution of 1988, in its article 1, item III, enshrines the dignity of the human person as the foundation of the Republic, which should be interpreted as a nucleus of protection in labor relations (FONSECA, 2007). In this sense, article 483 of the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) authorizes the indirect termination of the contract in situations of repeated abuse by the employer, and it is also possible to hold the aggressor civil, administrative, and criminally liable.

The Public Prosecutor's Office of Labor (MPT), in accordance with its constitutional attribution, has the legitimacy to file public civil actions in defense of harassed workers, claiming collective reparations and the implementation of institutional policies to combat harassment. In the same way, unions – although weakened in their representativeness in recent years – still play a strategic role in mediating conflicts, welcoming victims and pressing for healthier work environments (CHIARELLI, 2005).

Jurisprudence has also evolved in the recognition of moral harassment as a violation of the worker's integrity. The Regional Labor Courts, for example, have issued decisions that reaffirm the employer's obligation to repair moral damages resulting from systematic and repetitive abusive practices that compromise the dignity and health of employees.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study adopts a mixed approach, with a qualitative-quantitative emphasis, structuring itself as a descriptive and exploratory research of empirical character. Its main objective is to understand the manifestations of moral harassment in the institutional environment of a Federal Institution of Higher Education (IFES) located in the Midwest region of Brazil, as well as its repercussions for technical-administrative staff in education.

From the methodological point of view, the study is characterized as a case study, according to Gil (2007), as it allows for an in-depth and contextualized analysis of a specific institutional reality. Descriptive research, according to Gil (2008), aims to observe, record and describe characteristics of a phenomenon in a target population, being effective to investigate complex organizational dynamics, such as those involved in moral harassment.

The universe of the research comprises about 2,100 technical-administrative staff of the IFES analyzed. The technique of non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used, justified by the accessibility and availability of the participants (HAIR et al., 2005). To ensure statistical accuracy, a sample calculator with a confidence level of 95% and a sampling error of 8% was used, which indicated the need for 92 respondents. The survey, however, exceeded this goal, totaling 95 participants, which ensures adequate representation.

Data collection took place between June 23 and July 26, 2024, through an online questionnaire with 29 closed questions, structured on a multiple-choice scale, made available via *Google Forms*. The instrument was constructed based on categories that are recurrent in the specialized literature, such as task overload, professional disqualification, isolation, public ridicule, among others. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, expressed in relative and absolute frequency, with subsequent tabulation and thematic categorization.

The following is the distribution by sex and age group of the participants:

**Figure 01 – Frequency Distribution**

Masculino	Feminino
46	49

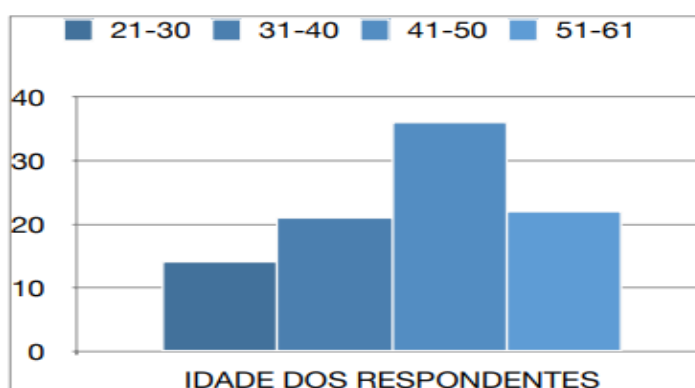


Tabela 1-1				
Idade	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-61
IDADE DOS RESPONDENTES	14	21	36	22

Source: prepared by the authors

Complementing the quantitative dimension, a qualitative approach was also adopted through the technique of interpretative document analysis, as proposed by Sá-Silva, Almeida and Guindani (2009), with the objective of contextualizing the collected data in the light of the institutional reality, the current legislation and the specialized literature. This methodological combination allows interpreting both the meanings attributed to the experiences of bullying and the emerging statistical patterns.

The research observed the ethical principles for studies with human beings, with emphasis on the electronic signature of the Informed Consent Form (ICF) by all



respondents. In addition, the processing of personal data fully followed the provisions of the General Law for the Protection of Personal Data (Law No. 13,709/2018), ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and non-traceability of responses.

The possibility of bias resulting from self-reporting is recognized as a methodological limitation, since the data were obtained exclusively through the respondents' perception, without triangulation with hierarchical superiors or administrative records. Still, the consistency of the patterns identified gives the study validity. For future research, it is recommended to include in-depth interviews, analysis of institutional documents, and observational data as triangulation strategies.

Table 1 shows the relative frequency of reported harassment practices, organized by type of behavior and frequency of occurrence.

**Table 01 - Relative frequency of harassment**

A	B	C	D	E	F
Pergunta	Nunca	Por vezes	Mensalmente	Semanalmente	Diariamente
1- Foi exposto a uma carga de trabalho excessiva	20,0%	24,2%	7,4%	13,7%	34,7%
2- Não lhe davam qualquer ocupação ou tarefas, foi excluído ou "colocado na prateleira"	60,0%	28,4%	1,1%	1,1%	9,5%
3- Pediram-lhe trabalhos urgentes sem nenhuma necessidade	26,9%	33,3%	11,8%	7,5%	20,4%
4- Recebeu tarefas muito inferiores a sua capacidade ou competências profissionais.	52,7%	25,3%	7,7%	3,3%	11,0%
5. Recebeu tarefas que exigem experiência superior às suas competências profissionais.	38,9%	16,8%	4,2%	8,4%	31,6%
6. Retiraram-lhe equipamentos/instrumentos necessários para realizar o seu trabalho	34,3%	29,0%	8,6%	10,8%	17,2%
7. Foi obrigado a realizar trabalhos perigosos ou especialmente nocivos à saúde.	48,4%	16,1%	2,2%	2,2%	31,2%
8. Recebeu críticas exageradas ou injustas sobre o seu trabalho ou esforço	10,8%	47,3%	11,8%	7,5%	22,6%
9. Houve supervisão excessiva de seu trabalho	21,3%	33,0%	19,1%	6,4%	20,2%
10. Foi humilhado ou ridicularizado em relação ao seu trabalho	43,6%	42,6%	4,3%	0,0%	9,6%
11. Mandaram-lhe cartas de aviso/advertência	78,9%	20,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,1%
12. Mudaram-no de setor para o isolar	65,3%	29,5%	4,2%	0,0%	1,1%
13. Não o cumprimentavam nem falavam consigo.	44,0%	44,0%	3,3%	1,1%	7,7%
14. Limitaram as suas possibilidades de falar com outras pessoas	57,4%	37,2%	0,0%	1,1%	4,3%
15. Impediram outras pessoas de falar ou estar consigo	68,8%	25,8%	0,0%	1,1%	4,3%
16. Ignoravam a sua presença na frente dos outros	37,9%	35,8%	4,2%	1,1%	21,1%
17. As suas opiniões e pontos de vista eram ignorados	12,8%	52,1%	7,4%	1,1%	26,6%
18. Impediram-no de se expressar.	56,8%	33,7%	2,1%	1,1%	6,3%
19. Disseram que você tem uma doença mental.	73,7%	18,9%	2,1%	0,0%	5,3%
20. Fizeram-no parecer estúpido	29,8%	29,8%	8,5%	3,2%	28,7%
21. Deram a entender que você tem problemas psicológicos	59,6%	25,5%	1,1%	1,1%	12,8%
22. Ameaçaram-no verbalmente	60,0%	37,9%	1,1%	1,1%	0,0%
23. Utilizaram o telefone para o aterrorizar	62,8%	30,9%	4,3%	2,1%	0,0%
24. Gritaram consigo ou insultaram-no	39,4%	36,2%	11,7%	7,4%	5,3%
25. Ridicularizaram-no em público	35,1%	43,6%	7,4%	2,1%	11,7%
26. Falaram mal de si em público	21,3%	36,2%	7,4%	4,3%	30,9%
27. Foi alvo de ataques com base nas suas convicções políticas	41,9%	37,6%	5,4%	2,2%	12,9%
28. Foi alvo de ataques com base nas suas crenças religiosas	66,0%	20,2%	3,2%	0,0%	10,6%
29. Fizeram piadas com base nas suas origens ou nacionalidade.	40,4%	29,8%	5,3%	5,3%	19,1%

Source: prepared by the authors

The descriptive analysis of the questions revealed critical indicators. For example, 34.7% of respondents reported being exposed to excessive workload on a daily basis, while 31.6% said they received tasks that require experience higher than their qualification. Practices of public embarrassment also stand out: 28.7% said they were often ridiculed or treated as "stupid", and 30.9% were the target of mean comments in public. Perhaps the



most alarming data is the finding that 31.2% reported performing tasks that are dangerous or harmful to health every day.

The results also indicated the occurrence of discrimination based on religion, politics and ethnic origin, although in a smaller proportion. More than 10% said they suffer daily attacks based on their religious beliefs. Regarding ethnic-cultural diversity, 19.1% reported being the target of jokes about their origins or nationality every day.

Such evidence reveals a work environment permeated by systematic practices of moral harassment, whose trivialization seems to be rooted in the institutional culture. The difficulty of objectively classifying harassment, combined with the cultural rootedness of the punitive hierarchy, constitutes an obstacle to the adoption of effective policies. The subjectivity of the reports and the absence of clear legal frameworks make it difficult to hold harassers accountable and, above all, to effectively protect victims.

In view of this, it is imperative to invest in structured and continuous institutional actions, such as the creation of safe reporting channels, annual training plans on harassment and interpersonal relationships, and the effective engagement of senior university management. Without institutional commitment and consistent public policies, efforts to cope with them will tend to be punctual, insufficient and made invisible by the current organizational culture.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The collected data show the systematic presence of moral harassment practices in the work environment of the Federal Institution of Higher Education analyzed, directly affecting the mental health, dignity and performance of administrative technicians. The analysis reveals that work overload and unproductive pressure are among the most recurrent forms of institutional violence. About 34.7% of the participants reported being exposed to an excessive workload on a daily basis, while 13.7% experience this condition on a weekly basis. In addition, 20.4% stated that they receive tasks classified as "urgent" with no real need on a daily basis, and 31.6% reported the daily assignment of tasks incompatible with their professional competencies. Such practices characterize a scenario of unjustified accumulation of functions, directly compromising the physical and emotional well-being of workers. For Hirigoyen (2002), chronic overload associated with excessive control and the absence of organizational planning is one of the most common and subtle forms of moral harassment in institutions.

Regarding exposure to risks and technical devaluation, 31.2% of the respondents stated that they performed dangerous or harmful tasks on a daily basis, while 17.2%



indicated receiving unfair criticism and 22.6% reported suffering excessive supervision with the same frequency. These data reveal an authoritarian management model, sustained by rigid hierarchical relations, institutional distrust and systematic blame. According to Caixeta (2011), this type of environment compromises the professional identity of civil servants, especially when abusive practices are normalized and associated with institutional productivity.

The survey also showed high levels of social exclusion in the workplace. Approximately 21.1% of respondents reported being ignored in the presence of third parties, and 26.6% said their opinions and contributions were disregarded on a daily basis. The symbolic invisibility of the worker's ideas and presence constitutes a sophisticated form of relational violence. As Einarsen et al. (2004) point out, isolation and repeated silencing reduce the feeling of belonging and aggravate anxiety and withdrawal in the work environment.

Another critical aspect identified refers to the practices of public humiliation. About 28.7% of participants reported being treated as "stupid" every day, 30.9% said they were publicly defamed with the same frequency, and 11.7% indicated being ridiculed in front of colleagues and superiors. Barreto (2005) states that moral harassment, when it manifests itself through repeated public constraints, takes the form of psychological torture. In these cases, symbolic violence compromises the subjective integrity and social reputation of the worker, with significant impacts on their self-esteem and capacity for resistance.

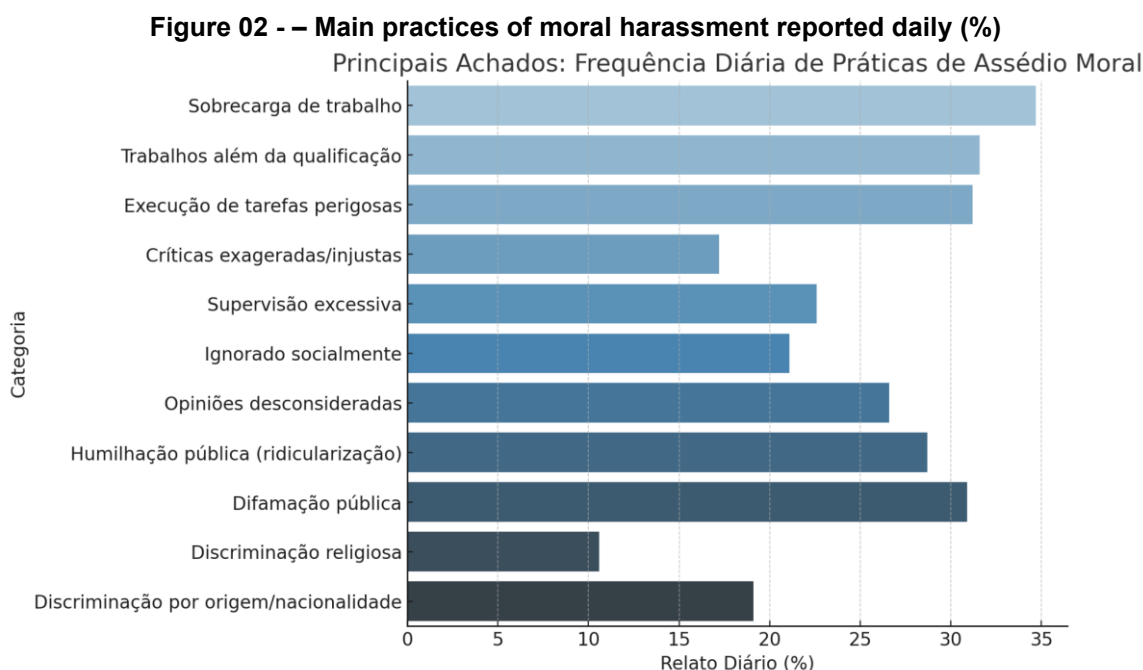
Recurrent manifestations of discrimination based on religious beliefs and ethnic-cultural origins were also recorded. Attacks for religious reasons were reported daily by 10.6% of respondents, and 19.1% said they had been the target of jokes based on their nationality or origin. Although these proportions are numerically smaller, their daily presence evidences the institutionalization of intolerant practices, in direct contradiction to the constitutional principles of human dignity and equality (BRASIL, 1988, art. 1, III and art. 5). Hirigoyen (2002) points out that identity-based aggressions are particularly serious, as they directly affect the deepest values and beliefs of individuals.

The interpretative analysis also shows that the typification of moral harassment in the IFES still faces important obstacles. Many abusive behaviors are culturally naturalized, which makes it difficult to report, formally identify and hold them accountable. The absence of objective legal frameworks and the prevalence of vertical relations favor the reproduction of practices of institutional violence. Added to this are the lack of effective reporting channels, the fear of retaliation and the culture of omission — elements that, according to Caixeta (2011), make up a process of normalization of institutional suffering, in which the

worker's malaise is silenced in the name of productivity and the apparent stability of the organization.

Given the seriousness of the phenomenon, the research points to the urgency of implementing structuring measures that promote a healthier and more respectful institutional environment. Among the proposals, the following stand out: the creation of a safe, confidential and accessible reporting channel, with trained professionals to properly receive and forward cases; the preparation of an Annual Training Plan aimed at promoting skills such as empathy, assertive communication, respect for diversity and coping with conflicts; and, above all, the effective engagement of senior university management, with public signaling that moral harassment will not be tolerated, accompanied by concrete actions for the prevention and accountability of abusive conduct. The absence of such measures compromises not only the well-being of workers, but also the formative mission of the university as a plural, democratic and humanized space.

By consolidating the most critical data, a set of repeated practices is evidenced that configure, on a daily basis, forms of institutionalized moral harassment. The following graph summarizes the main findings of the research, with emphasis on the most recurrent behaviors reported by the administrative technicians of the IFES analyzed.



## CONCLUSION

The present study evidenced the existence of systematic and recurrent practices of

moral harassment experienced by administrative technicians in a Federal Institution of Higher Education in the Brazilian Midwest. Through a qualitative-quantitative approach, the research revealed that behaviors such as work overload, excessive supervision, public humiliation, professional disqualification, social exclusion and religious or ethnic-cultural discrimination are present in a daily and structural way in the analyzed university environment.

Throughout the analysis, it was found that these practices not only compromise the physical and mental health of workers, but also destabilize the institutional fabric and erode the principles of dignity, plurality and respect for diversity that should govern labor relations in IFES. The findings demonstrate that moral harassment, often veiled, is sustained by a culture of punitive hierarchy, managerial omission and invisibility of suffering, making it difficult to report and hold aggressors accountable.

From a theoretical point of view, this article contributes to the advancement of research on occupational health and public management, by shedding light on the experience of technical-administrative staff — a group historically marginalized in studies on labor relations in universities. In the practical field, the results provide relevant subsidies for the formulation of more effective and humanized institutional policies.

It is recommended, especially to IFES managers, that they adopt concrete and systematized measures to confront moral harassment. Such measures include the creation of independent and permanent committees to combat harassment; the implementation of protected, accessible and reliable reporting channels; the development of continuous training programs on ethics, empathy and institutional culture; in addition to the systematic monitoring of organizational climate indicators. It is imperative that senior management assume a leading role in this process, signaling, unequivocally, that abusive conduct will not be tolerated.

Finally, it is important that future research deepens the longitudinal monitoring of this phenomenon, aiming to monitor changes, identify new patterns of institutional violence, and contribute to the construction of fairer, safer, and more respectful academic environments. Confronting moral harassment requires continuous vigilance, ethical commitment, and cultural transformation — tasks that cannot be postponed for a truly democratic public university.

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