NAVIGATING SEXIST HUMOR: FROM TOLERANCE TO CONFRONTATION

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This article examines attitudes toward sexist humor across diverse contexts in order to better understand the motivations underlying joke-telling, the consequences for targeted groups, and the strategies individuals may employ to address and confront such humor. Drawing on a review of the literature on disparagement humor, the paper critically engages with the normalization of sexist humor and its consequences at individual, organizational, and societal levels. Building on existing research, the study conducts a secondary data analysis to explore gendered perceptions of tolerance toward inappropriate humor – such as sexually suggestive jokes in university classrooms – using data from the 2022 Gender-Based Violence Barometer. In addition, an analysis of individual-level data from the 2024 Flash Eurobarometer 544 on Romanians' perceptions of gender stereotypes shows that men's comments about women's appearance in the workplace are perceived differently by male and female respondents. The paper concludes by advocating for policy initiatives that support the reporting and confrontation of inappropriate humor in institutional contexts, such as classrooms and workplaces, in order to prevent prejudicial norms from becoming institutionalized. Finally, drawing on the ethics of humor approach advanced by authors such as Smuts (2010), the article calls for greater reflection on the moral foundations of amusement and the ethical criticism of humor.

***Keywords**: disparagement humor; gender; sexism; gender-based violence.*

INTRODUCTION

Humor plays a significant role in society and within organizations, serving multiple social and psychological functions. One of its most important contributions lies in its ability to foster in-group cohesion and strengthen solidarity bonds. Shared laughter can reduce social distance, ease tensions, and create a sense of belonging among group members. In organizational settings, humor can enhance teamwork, improve morale, and facilitate communication by softening hierarchical boundaries and making interactions more informal and approachable. At the same time, humor is not inherently benign. Its social power also means that it can

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CALITATEA VIEȚII, XXXVII, nr. 2, 2026, pp. 99–114, https://doi.org/10.46841/RCV.2026.02.01

reinforce existing inequalities and reproduce harmful norms. When humor relies on stereotypes or targets specific social groups, it may contribute to the normalization of prejudice rather than its critique. In these cases, humor functions as a subtle mechanism of exclusion, allowing discriminatory attitudes to be expressed in a socially acceptable form or qualified as "just an innocent joke."

One major category of inadequate or harmful humor is represented by sexist jokes. These jokes frequently rely on stereotypical representations of women and men, portraying women as intellectually inferior, overly emotional, or primarily valued for their appearance, while reinforcing narrow and rigid expectations of masculinity (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Riquelme *et al.* 2023, 2025). In organizational contexts, sexist humor can undermine professional credibility, marginalize individuals, and contribute to hostile work environments (Gray, Knight, and Blaise 2018). Even when such jokes are not intended to cause harm, their repeated use can normalize gender discrimination and discourage those targeted from fully participating in social or professional interactions.

Importantly, sexist humor often operates through ambiguity (Thomae and Pina 2015). Because jokes are usually framed as playful or ironic, those who object to them may be portrayed as lacking a sense of humor or being overly sensitive. This further silences those targeted and protects discriminatory practices from accountability. As a result, what appears to be harmless fun can have concrete consequences for power relations, inclusion, and equality within organizations. Recognizing the boundary between inclusive humor and humor that perpetuates stereotypes is crucial, particularly in diverse social and organizational contexts. The aim of this paper is to facilitate a critical reflection on the content and effects of humor to ensure that laughter unites rather than excludes. In so doing, the paper provides a literature review on the topic of sexist humor. Furthermore, the paper uses secondary data analysis to document the gendered perceptions towards using humor with sexual meaning in the classroom as well as towards men's inappropriate comments on women's look into the workplace. Finally, a discussion of sexist humor's implications on social, organizational and individual levels is followed by recommendations regarding ways to resist and confront such disparagement humor.

EVIDENCES FROM THE LITERATURE

Historical examination of philosophers' and other social thinkers' comments on humor shows that humor is often pictured as problematic in relation to joke teller's morality, being associated to 'problems with a person's character, such as having a propensity to feel malicious pleasure, becoming vulgar, acting immodestly, and behaving like a buffoon' (Smuts 2010, 335). Beyond this moral argument related to one's character, humor expressions have different styles. The literature distinguishes between positive styles of humor (*i.e.* affiliative and self-

enhancing) that benefit the self or others, and negative humor (*i.e*. aggressive and self-defeating) that have detrimental consequences on self or others. People adopt different humor styles depending on their psychological attributes such as optimism, perceived locus of control, and happiness (Ford, Lappi, and Holden 2016). The adopted humor style can have implications on interpersonal relations within organizational contexts and beyond. For instance, affiliative humor is likely to foster more positive relationships with colleagues, while self-enhancing humor can improve one's image in front of others and potentially attract greater respect, sympathy, and other symbolic or material rewards. In contrast, individuals who engage in self-defeating humor may use this type of humor as a subordinate adaptive strategy to reduce hostility in contexts marked by group competition (*e.g*., women may invoke stereotypes about women's lack of mathematical ability to signal that they are not competing with male colleagues in situations requiring such analytical skills). Likewise, individuals who predominantly use an aggressive humor style-such as sexist humor-tend to denigrate or criticise others in an attempt to assert their superiority, often showing little concern for others' well-being.

Different theoretical approaches have been employed by scholars in social sciences to study sexist humor, including the social identity theory (Tajfel *et al.* 1971), and the power differential approach that foregrounds the hierarchical status relation between joke tellers and the audience (Sev'er and Ungar 1997). Sexist humor is a form of negative humor and consists of amusement involving derogatory language and belittling directed most often at women by men in an attempt to signal their superiority. It is less often recognizable as sexism because humor is usually appreciated for its cohesive effect on those sharing its content and laughing together. Research also suggest that sexism disguised in humor is less often confronted because of the ambiguity it carries (Mallett, Ford, and Woodzicka 2016). However, sexist humor has proven negative consequences on the interpersonal relationships in organizational contexts since the negative affects (*e.g*. disgust, anger, frustration) it elicits in humor recipients inhibits the latter to initiate or maintain collaboration with humor initiators (Bouckaert *et al.* 2025).

In their review article, Woodzicka and Ford (2010) found that the research in this field has often documented the role of gender and attitudes towards women as moderators of the sexist jokes' enjoyment. A common theoretical framework used in this respect was the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) which posits that groups are in competition over resources, including symbolic resources such as recognition and the need to signal superiority in relation to out-groups. Studies investigating the role of individual characteristics in predicting the likelihood of appreciating sexist humor and engaging in repeated joke-telling show that men who score higher in hostile sexism are particularly likely to find such jokes amusing and to share them with others, thereby contributing to the spread of disparaging views about women (Thomas and Esses 2004).

Studies in social psychology show that people's exposure to sexism expressed through serious statements *versus* playful jokes elicits different reactions, and individuals are not equally capable of recognizing and responding to sexism in both contexts. For instance, Mallett and her colleagues (2016) in their experiment with 134 women exposed to sexist humor, and another group of 194 women exposed to more blatant sexist content found that women exposed to sexist humor did not immediately perceive the joke teller as sexist and therefore do not react by expressing disagreement. The above authors also show that women confront sexist incidents in less than half of the situations they face because they fear isolation and negative evaluation by colleagues and superiors in the workplace.

Another study based on an experimental design shows that perceptions of threatened masculinity elicit greater amusement among men who score higher in precarious masculinity beliefs when they are exposed to sexist jokes targeting women and gay men (Connor, Ford, and Banos 2017). The social identity theory (Tajfel *et al.* 1971) posits that people need to affirm a positive identity about their belonging to a social group, and this need becomes even more salient when their identity is challenged in inter-group encounters that led people to categorise the others as inferior. Building on this theoretical frame, Connor and her collaborators (2017) show that disparagement humor is used to restore threatened identities, as in the case of men who perceive masculinity as a fragile status (*e.g.* men approving statements such as „It is fairly easy for a man to lose his status as a man", or "It is embarrassing for a man to have a job that is usually filled by a woman"). According to Connor *et al*. (2017), men who hold precarious manhood beliefs enjoy sexist humor more than men who had lower scores of such masculinity beliefs. Their experiment measured the manhood beliefs and the upholding of hostile sexism by 166 heterosexual male participants, who were subsequently asked to rate the funniness of five different jokes, including sexist and anti-gay jokes. Their results showed that stronger hostile sexism was positively associated with higher ratings of the funniness of sexist and anti-gay jokes, which served a restorative function in response to perceived masculinity threat.

At societal level, sexist humor is found responsible for perpetuating prejudices against women and reinforcing gender stereotypes (Ford *et al.* 2013). In a paper based on the analysis of 284 sexist jokes published on internet, a study found that there are different categories of women targeted by sexist humor, including wives, mothers-in-laws, and girls, and that intellectual and moral attributes (*e.g.* „hatefulness" and „stupidity") are more salient than physical characteristics (Nayef and El-Nashar 2014). In their analysis, the above-mentioned authors explain how the violence against women is reinforced through sexist jokes that picture women as inferior and subordinate to men. Sexist jokes are often condoned for being just inoffensive amusement. However, these jokes reproduce the underlying sexism that is often oriented towards women. Therefore, such jokes

become an effective means of reinforcing discrimination against women (Nayef and El-Nashar 2014).

Another important finding from the literature evidences the link between gender of the joke teller and the attitude towards the sexist joke. Using an experiment-based study with 101 participants exposed to three different scenarios concerning the sex of the joke teller, Parrott and Hoop (2020) found that men reported greater enjoyment of sexist jokes and perceived them as more acceptable than did women. Additionally, the authors found that sexist humor was perceived as more acceptable when the joke teller was a woman than when the disparager was a man or when the joke teller's gender was unspecified (Thomae and Pina 2015).

Other results of the literature on sexist humor emphasise the relevance of social and organizational contexts in which sexist humor is enacted. Building on the power differential framework, a study conducted at the University of Toronto among 377 students and 83 teaching staff (Sev'er and Ungar 1997) employed a questionnaire to assess participants' acceptability of gender-based humor using a rating scale ranging from funny to hostile (including stereotypical, derogatory, offensive, and pornographic). The findings indicate that male students were the most tolerant of gender-based humor, whereas female faculty members found such jokes the least acceptable; male faculty members and female students occupied intermediate positions. The aforementioned authors also examined variation in levels of acceptability among professors and students across three contexts: the classroom, social gatherings, and family parties. Their findings suggest that acceptability is more constrained in the classroom than in social gatherings or family parties, a difference attributed to the heightened power differentials present in classroom settings. One important conclusion of the study above is that socio-political socialization and attitudinal orientations such as pro-feminist beliefs better explain differences in the level of tolerance towards gender-based humor than sex and age categories.

One strategy to fight sexist humor is the intentional use of subversive humor, which functions to expose, critique, and destabilize gender-based power asymmetries. Recent research (Riquelme *et al.* 2023) addresses the ways in which women can use subversive humor as a means to challenge patriarchy and its attending traditional gender roles. The above study builds on prejudiced norms theory, which posits that people exposed to disparagement humor in every-day life and work contexts become accustomed to a culture that trivializes the serious consequences such humor has on the targeted group. As a result, individuals are more likely to accept and tolerate, rather than confront and reject, this type of negative humor because the prejudiced social norms becomes embedded in their cultural or organizational context (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Sexism and gender violence against women are therefore more likely to manifest in contexts that condone, tolerate, and accept sexist humor. Riquelme *et. al* (2023, 16209) define

"subversive humor against sexism as a confrontation tool used by women to evince, question, and challenge patriarchal ideology and gender discrimination.' They contend that this strategy is effective when women intentionally use humor to challenge oppressive situations and expose the irrationality of stereotypes about women through playful statements.

Although women have often been depicted as less capable of producing and disseminating humor, their role is crucial in developing and confronting sexist humor and patriarchy through subversive humor. This approach represents one strategy for confronting sexism while reducing the risk of further penalization of women. We are currently witnessing the proliferation of feminist satire communities and comedy magazines online, such as *WhoHaha* and *The Syndrome Mag*, which aim to raise awareness about gender equality through the creation and dissemination of anti-sexist humor. One illustrative example of subversive humor against sexism is: "Behind every successful man is a woman. Behind every successful woman is a man asking who's watching the children."

Other, more direct strategies for confronting sexism involve expressing disapproval through polite or assertive statements, which may, at times, escalate the situation with no effect on sexism contestation. In their research, Riquelme *et al*. (2023) ask whether subversive humor targeting sexism can be conceptualized as a distinct category of humor, rather than merely a variant of man-disparagement humor that ridicule men instead of challenging patriarchy and women's oppression. Their research employed an experimental design using 45 comic vignettes that represented different types of humorous stimuli (*i.e*., subversive humor, man-disparagement humor, and neutral humor). These vignettes were presented to a group of experts in psychology, sexism, and/or humor studies. The experts were asked to read the comics and classify each joke according to its perceived type of humor. Subsequent analysis of their categorizations yielded an adequate Content Validity Index, thereby supporting the conceptualization of subversive humor against sexism as a distinct category of humor. The results of their experiments in which a sample of students rated the funniness and aversiveness of a book containing different types of comics also showed that respondents who appreciated subversive humor targeting sexism were more likely to support collective action for gender equality (Riquelme *et al.* 2023). Similar research conducted recently in Spain (Riquelme *et al.* 2025) has investigated the potential of feminist humor to foster attitudinal change and raise awareness of gender inequality. The study suggests that feminist humor can enable critical reflection on sexism by reducing oppositional responses that such messages might elicit if communicated in more serious forms. An earlier study also suggested that feminist humor is associated with both men's and women's higher motivation to involve in collective action oriented toward gender equality even when they have low endorsement of feminist agenda (Riquelme *et al.* 2021). The authors define collective action as a behavior that can be expressed either through individual actions (*e.g*., signing a petition) or

through group activities (*e.g.*, participating in a public demonstration), with the aim of restoring justice in response to unfair treatment of an oppressed group or another issue of public concern that threatens the common good. Apart from exposure to feminist humor, the literature also identified several other factors that explain one's involvement in feminist collective action, namely endorsing feminist beliefs, drawing inspiration from a feminist mother, taking classes in women's studies, or being a victim of sexist discrimination (Liss, Crawford, and Popp 2004).

This literature review provides an overview of the various detrimental consequences that sexist humor can have at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. At the same time, it highlights empirical evidence from multiple studies in different national contexts showing that subversive humor targeting sexism can be used to challenge sexist attitudes, motivate engagement in collective action for gender equality, and raise awareness of gender discrimination through humor. Unlike more openly confrontational responses to sexism that can trigger backlash, feminist humor appears to be more effective in attracting members' support and gaining media coverage in the fight against patriarchal ideology. Next, we illustrate gender differences in attitudes toward inappropriate jokes with sexual meaning in the classroom and toward men's sexist comments about female colleagues' appearance in the workplace, using secondary datasets that capture such variation in samples of Romanian respondents.

GENDERED ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEX JOKES IN THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

Several studies have documented the frequency and types of humor teachers use in the classroom (Neuliep 1991; Wanzer *et al.* 2006), as well as the relationship between teachers' types of humor and students' learning outcomes (Gorham and Christophel 1990). Humor is generally used to make communication more effective and to attract sympathy while at the same time facilitating learning. However, not all humor categories are adequate, and the adequacy is also contingent on the context. Most inappropriate categories of humor in the classroom are those transgressing widely shared norms such as jokes with a sexual meaning and the humor promoting hostility towards others, including sexist and racist jokes (Wanzer *et al.* 2006). The distinction between what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate humor is important for guiding future research and adds another nuanced layer to understanding the consequences of humor in organizational contexts, including educational institutions. As such research is particularly lacking in Romania, we document next the acceptability of jokes with a sexual meaning in the university classroom.

We use the nationally representative survey of the 2022 Gender-Based Violence Barometer conducted by IRES institute using computer-assisted telephone interviewing. We test the association between respondents' gender and the variable measuring the attitude towards sex jokes in the university classroom.

In the original sample, half of the participants have been asked, in a passive voice, to rate how severe is that students *are told jokes* with sexual meaning by professors in the classroom, while the other half received the question phrased in the active voice (i.e. how serious is that a professor makes jokes with a sexual meaning in the university classroom?) (see *Table no. 1*). The original items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very serious to 5 = not serious at all. The distribution of responses to these questions varied depending on whether the items were phrased in an active or passive voice (*Table no. 1*). Survey operators have been instructed not to read the middle answer but to mark it only if spontaneously given by respondents. No respondent has provided it. Respondents tended to express greater concern about jokes with sexual content in the classroom when the question was phrased in the active voice, which places emphasis on professors' language and conduct within the university's organizational setting. Specifically, 69.4% of respondents rated such content as very serious when the item was phrased in the active voice, compared to only 50.1% when it was phrased in the passive voice.

Table no. 1

Attitude towards sex jokes in the university classroom by active/passive wording

How serious you find that	Students are told jokes with a sexual meaning in the university classroom (Passive voice)	Professor makes jokes with a sexual meaning in the university classroom (Active voice)
Very serious	50.1	69.4
Quite serious	31.6	25.0
Somewhat serious	15.1	5.2
Not at all serious	3.1	.5
N	*740*	*648*

Source: 2022 Gender-Based Violence Barometer, *N=1388.*

Subsequently, we combined the answers to this question and the combined variable for the pooled sample has been transformed into a dummy to capture whether participants perceive such jokes as unacceptable= 0 (respondents who originally rated these jokes as serious and very serious) or acceptable =1 (respondents who believe that this is somewhat serious or not serious at all). We wanted to further check whether attitudes towards such content vary by gender.

A cross-tabulation (*Table no. 2*) showed a clear association between gender and attitudes toward the acceptability of sex jokes in the classroom. While the majority of both men and women considered sex jokes unacceptable, men were more likely than women to find them acceptable (17.3% *versus* 7.4%). Standardized residuals indicated that men were significantly overrepresented among those who found sex jokes acceptable, whereas women were significantly underrepresented,

suggesting a meaningful gender difference in attitudes. A chi-square test of independence revealed a significant association between gender and the acceptability of sex jokes in the classroom, χ^2 (1, N = 1360) = 30.72, p < .001. The association was small to moderate in strength (φ = .15) but clearly indicated that men were more likely than women to consider sex jokes acceptable in the classroom.

Table no. 2

Acceptability of sex jokes in the classroom by gender

Acceptability of sex jokes in the classroom		Men	Women	Total
Unacceptable	Count	565	627	1192
	Expected Count	598.6	593.4	1192
	% within gender	82.7%	92.6%	87.6%
	Std. Residual	-1.4	1.4	
Acceptable	Count	118	50	168
	Expected Count	84.4	83.6	168
	% within gender	17.3%	7.4%	12.4%
	Std. Residual	3.7	-3.7	
Total	Count	683	677	1360

Source: 2022 Gender-Based Violence Barometer, *N=1360.*

These findings show that a majority of Romanian respondents express concern about the use of sex jokes in the classroom, although the active versus passive phrasing of the question generates some differences in the percentages of those who rate such humor as rather serious. In the pooled sample, we can notice significant differences between men and women with respect to their attitudes towards sex jokes in the university classroom indicating that women are less likely than men to consider this type of humor as acceptable. Future research can take these attitudinal orientations into consideration and further investigate the relationship between teachers' gender and the type of humor used by female and male teachers in the classroom, as well as students' perceptions of the appropriateness of this type of humor.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXIST REMARKS BY MEN IN THE WORKPLACE

Beyond the observed gender differences in attitudes toward inappropriate jokes in university settings, we further examined gender differences in Romanians' attitudes toward sexist comments in workplace environments. In order to do so, we have used the data of the Flash Eurobarometer 544[1] that are available in Leibniz

[1] European Commission, Brussels (2025). Flash Eurobarometer 544 (Gender Stereotypes – Violence Against Women) (ZA8820; Version 1.0.0) [Data set]. GESIS, Cologne. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14492

Institute for the Social Sciences (GESIS) public repository. We have filtered out cases that referred to non-Romanian respondents and the resulting sample was N=1007 respondents. The variables of interest are gender and the perceptions of acceptability of men's making suggestive comments or allusions about a female colleague's appearance at work. We have run a bivariate analysis through crosstab and found that men's and women's views differ significantly in respect to the acceptability of sexist comments directed at women's look in the workplace.

The chi-square test examined gender differences in attitudes toward men making suggestive comments or allusions about a female colleague's appearance at work. The results indicate notable differences between male and female respondents. A higher proportion of women (76.9%) than men (65.6%) reported finding such behavior unacceptable. Conversely, men were more likely than women to consider such comments acceptable under certain circumstances (30.8% *vs.* 22.0%) or fully acceptable (3.5% *vs*. 1.1%). The standardized residuals suggest that women were overrepresented among those who found the behavior unacceptable, whereas men were overrepresented among those who considered it acceptable under certain circumstances and fully acceptable. These findings indicate that men display greater tolerance toward suggestive comments in the workplace, while women are more likely to reject such behavior outright.

Table no. 3

Men and women's view regarding the acceptability of sexist comments on women's look at work

What do you think about men making suggestive comments or allusions about a female colleague's appearance at work?		Men	Women	Total
I find it unacceptable	Count	315	405	720
	Expected Count	343.2	376.8	720.0
	% within GENDER	65.6%	76.9%	71.5%
	Std. Residual	-1.5	1.5	
I find it acceptable under certain circumstances	Count	148	116	264
	Expected Count	125.8	138.2	264.0
	% within GENDER	30.8%	22.0%	26.2%
	Std. Residual	2.0	-1.9	
I find it acceptable	Count	17	6	23
	Expected Count	11.0	12.0	23.0
	% within GENDER	3.5%	1.1%	2.3%
	Std. Residual	1.8	-1.7	
Total	Count	480	527	1007
	Expected Count	480.0	527.0	1007.0
	% within GENDER	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Flash Eurobarometer 544 (2024), *N=1007* Romanian respondents.

The analysis of these data from the Flash Eurobarometer 544 on Gender stereotypes and Violence against women examined whether gender is associated with attitudes toward men making suggestive comments or allusions about a female colleague's appearance at work. The findings indicate a statistically significant relationship between gender and perceptions of this behavior, $\chi^2(2, N = 1007) = 18.24$, $p < .001$. Although the effect size (Cramér's $V = .13$) is small, the association is consistent and meaningful.

Women were significantly more likely than men to consider such behavior unacceptable, whereas men were more likely to regard it as acceptable under certain circumstances or fully acceptable. While the majority of respondents overall rejected the behavior, the gender gap suggests differing interpretations of what constitutes inappropriate or harmful conduct in the workplace. These differences may reflect variations in lived experience. Women are more likely to experience sexualized comments and gender-based objectification in professional settings, which may heighten awareness of the cumulative harm such behaviors can produce. What may be perceived by some as harmless humor or casual commentary may be interpreted by others as reinforcing unequal power dynamics or creating a hostile work environment.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings align with research on subtle sexism and the normalization of gendered humor. Suggestive comments about a colleague's appearance often function similarly to sexist jokes: they may be framed as playful or complimentary but implicitly reinforce gender stereotypes and reduce women to their physical appearance. The fact that a notable proportion of men consider such behavior acceptable under certain circumstances suggests that contextual justifications – such as tone, intent, or perceived familiarity – may mitigate perceptions of harm. However, research on subtle sexism indicates that intent does not eliminate impact. Therefore, even if the initiator of a sexist joke is unaware of or does not intend to cause harm, this does not prevent the detrimental effect on the targeted group and, more broadly, on intergroup relations. Even seemingly minor or joking remarks can contribute to broader patterns of exclusion, discomfort, and professional marginalization. Gendered comments can function as a way to assert dominance or reinforce hierarchical norms. Individuals may tolerate or engage in such behavior to align with peer expectations or workplace culture.

This paper reviewed how various theoretical frameworks can be employed to analyze sexist humor, its underlying mechanisms, and its broader social consequences. According to prejudiced norm theory, when sexist statements are framed as humor, they are less likely to be critically scrutinized or socially sanctioned. Their perceived harmlessness and amusement thereby obscure and legitimize the underlying hostility or disparagement they convey. Those who are

not the direct target consider it as not that serious and therefore refrain from challenging it because the harmful consequences are not directly or immediately visible, while those who are the direct target are discouraged to confront sexist humor because of fearing being labelled as too sensitive or lacking a sense of humor. As a consequence, the sexist humor contributes to the persistence of subtle sexism in organizational contexts, even when organizations have formal regulations to combat overt discrimination. A study comparing men with high and low levels of sexism investigated the effects of their exposure to sexist humor on the activation of their negative stereotypes about women (Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion 2001). Participants were asked to read and evaluate the offensiveness of a vignette in which a male manager addressed a female employee using a pet name that conveyed inappropriate intimacy in a workplace context. The experiment showed that men's approval of sexist humor was higher in contexts where the perceived local acceptance of sexism was greater. However, this effect was mediated by the level of sexism endorsed by the male participants. Specifically, those who scored higher in sexism reported lower levels of negative affect after reading the sexist vignette, as the perception of more permissive normative climates regarding sexism appeared to legitimize the expression of their attitudes in accordance with their beliefs. The results indicate therefore that personal tolerance to sexism is more likely to lead to sexist attitudes and behaviors among men (but not among women) when the norms of societal tolerance of sexism are present (Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion 2001).

Likewise, organizations should promote clear norms emphasizing respect and professionalism. Aside of clear rules and regulations, organizations should raise awareness of how comments about women's appearance may undermine inclusivity by organizing co-creation events with different stakeholders such as artists, activists, and different categories of employees. People's attitudes and behaviors do not fully align with formal rules once such rules condemning discrimination are adopted. Much more efforts are needed to challenge sexist humor and normalize respectful communication. Addressing social norms of what is deemed acceptable and encouraging bystander intervention can also reduce the inappropriate jokes and sexist comments within organizations and beyond.

Drawing on evidence from the literature (Riquelme *et al.* 2025, 2023), this paper calls for considering the opportunity to encourage feminist humor in organizations and, more broadly, to recognize it as a form of subversive humor against sexism that can lead to social change. In doing so, organizations must thoughtfully select subversive jokes and provide adequate training to raise awareness among employees about various other forms of disparaging humor targeting men or transgender people. Without proper attention to these aspects, humor can reproduce or reinforce other forms of gender discrimination. Likewise, organizations should be cognizant that feminist humor may, in some cases, be evaluated by audiences as less humorous and more aversive than other forms of

humor, due to its explicit critique of sexism underpinning a feminist agenda. Gender of the joke teller also plays a role in the way the feminist joke is interpreted, contingent on the weaker or stronger feminist identification of the audience. Romanian society appears not yet sufficiently prepared to embrace a feminist agenda, as feminism is frequently constructed as a threatening or destabilizing ideology. This perception is rooted, in part, in its association with the communist' s ideological legacy, which continues to shape public attitudes toward gender equality discourses. As a result, feminist initiatives are often met with skepticism or resistance, reflecting broader historical and socio-political tensions surrounding equality policies. As put by Oprică (2008, 36): "Many call feminism a "socialist" ideology and, as such, call upon the Romanian people's sensitivity to communism in order to discredit feminist ideology with one simple catchphrase".

Another recommendation for future interventions in organizations concerns the longitudinal monitoring of employees' and managers' sexist attitudes that could explore the impact of factors such as age, workplace culture, prior experiences of harassment, or exposure to awareness campaigns. Such studies can inform the organizational leaders about attitudinal shifts over time and can orient further interventions to foster inclusive workplaces.

Finally, the secondary analyses based on the available datasets containing relevant variables for the present study indicated that gender plays a statistically significant role in shaping perceptions of suggestive workplace comments and with respect to the use of sex jokes in the university classroom. Women are more likely than men to view such manifestations of sexism as unacceptable as they are targets of subtle forms of sexism which is normalized through sexist humor which is not effectively dealt with through formal rules condemning sexism.

A concluding remark of this paper invites us to reflect, each time we tell, hear, or laugh at a joke, on whether it conveys a derogatory image or inflicts an unjust judgment on individuals based on their gender, race, religion, or a combination thereof. Drawing on the ethics of humor approach (Smuts 2010), preventing the harmful effects of sexist or other forms of disparagement humor requires a sustained willingness to question whether our sense of humor may be morally flawed.

Ethics

This paper uses publicly available datasets, namely the 2022 Gender-Based Violence Barometer published on the Centre Filia https://centrulfilia.ro/barometrul-privind-violenta-de-gen-in-romania/and the Flash Eurobarometer 544 Gender Stereotypes – Violence Against Women) available in the GESIS repository, Cologne. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14492. Both datasets are anonymized in accordance with standard rules for the field of social sciences.

Acknowledgement

The work was supported by the Horizon Europe Framework Programme through Grant 101184092 – FERBOPO.

AI Use Statement

The author declares that Artificial Intelligence (i.e. ChatGPT tool) was used solely as supportive instrument during the preparation of the manuscript, specifically for language refinement and grammatical editing. AI tools were not used to generate original scientific content, formulate research questions or hypotheses, conduct data analysis, or interpret the results.

Conflict of interests

There are no known conflicts of interest.

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Barometrul violenței de gen 2022: Violența împotriva femeilor în România: reprezentări, percepții / Băluță Ionela, Tufiș Claudiu. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană: Dota, https://centrulfilia.ro/barometrul-privind-violenta-de-gen-in-romania/

Acest articol evidențiază atitudinile diferite față de umorul sexist în diverse contexte pentru a înțelege mai bine motivațiile care subîntind folosirea glumelor sexiste, consecințele acestor glume asupra grupurilor țintă și strategiile folosite de indivizi pentru a rezista umorului sexist. Pornind de la o trecere în revistă a literaturii despre umorul denigrator, articolul discută critic normalizarea umorului sexist și consecințele sale la nivel individual, organizațional și societal. Bazându-se pe cercetările existente, studiul realizează o analiză secundară a datelor pentru a explora percepțiile de gen asupra toleranței față de umorul nepotrivit – cum ar fi glumele cu conținut sexual sugestiv în sălile de curs din universitate – utilizând datele Barometrului Violenței de Gen (2022). În plus, o analiză a datelor de la Flash Eurobarometer 544 (2024) privind percepțiile românilor asupra stereotipurilor de gen arată că evaluările și comentariile bărbaților despre aspectul femeilor la locul de muncă sunt percepute diferit de respondenții de sex masculin și feminin. Lucrarea concluzionează prin pledarea pentru inițiative politice care să sprijine raportarea și confruntarea umorului neadecvat în contexte instituționale, cum ar fi sălile de curs și locurile de muncă, pentru a preveni instituționalizarea prejudecăților. În cele din urmă, bazându-se pe abordarea eticii umorului avansată de autori precum Smuts (2010), articolul invită la o reflecție mai profundă asupra fundamentelor morale ale umorului.

***Cuvinte-cheie**: umor denigrator; gen; sexism; violență de gen.*

Received: 27.03.2026 *Accepted: 02.04.2026*