



# University Public Ombudsman and their Challenges to Face Bullying at Work

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## ABSTRACT

*The public ombudsman is understood as a democratic institute that promotes dialogue between users and the organization, responding to society's complaints with a focus on improving public services. And, it can promote social control and social participation by carrying out this approach. However, the public ombudsman can face barriers imposed by the organization in which it operates — mainly because it is a communication channel that deals with sensitive matters, such as complaints of moral bullying at work. Through qualitative research and content analysis, this research aimed to identify which barriers can be imposed on Brazilian university public ombudsmen in dealing with workplace bullying. The results show that the investigated ombudsmen are faced with barriers in the academic environment that are the result of harmful conduct and practices by leaders and managers, such as lack of knowledge of the concepts of ombudsman and bullying at work, as well as the presence of corporatism. It is concluded that they need to fulfill their democratic role with excellence, have autonomy and make use of strategies to reduce the unfavorable elements and thus be able to face bullying at work.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Bullying at work. Corporatism. Organizational barriers. Public ombudsman.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) in Brazil have certain peculiarities, such as academic autonomy, appreciation of research and services provided to the community (Schwartzman, 2014). The IFES are institutions that, because they are inserted in a political context, tend to be a reflection of the scenario that the country finds itself. When democratic values are emphasized, the IFES tend to value democracy and emphasize elements such as citizenship, social control and social participation. Thus, there are important issues from a democratic perspective in universities to be considered.

The articulation between the State and society can be streamlined through the creation of democratic institutes, such as the *ombudsman*. It is seen as a direct link between citizens and the State, responding to society's complaints (Gill et al., 2020). However, barriers can appear and public ombudsmen need to face them — particularly as they are communication channels that deal with sensitive issues, such as bullying at work.

As for bullying at work, this is a topic that lacks approaches (Akella, 2020; Salin & Notelaers, 2020), including within

the scope of public organizations, such as IFES (Nunes & Torga, 2020). But it is known that their presence in public organizations can be a taboo and this makes it difficult to face the problem (CA Guimarães et al., 2016; Hirigoyen, 2012). When the organization is indifferent to situations of bullying at work, it becomes complacent with the presence of this violence in its organizational environment (CA Guimarães et al., 2016). As the conduct practiced by managers reflects on the institution's activities (Simon, 1997), it also reflects on the ombudsman. For this reason, barriers can arise and be imposed by the organizations themselves (Vismona, 2011), which makes it difficult for the ombudsmen to act. In this way, they need to be equipped with aspects that strengthen them. For example, autonomy must be present for the ombudsman to carry out its activities with freedom (Kirkham & Stuhmcke, 2020; Wille & Bovens, 2020) so that the manifestations arising from the exercise of citizenship (social control) can be reflected in the provision of services (social participation).

As it plays a relevant role in public organization — promoting aspects that support democracy (Gill et al., 2020; Wille & Bovens, 2020) —, the ombudsman must ensure the principles of Public Administration (PA). Thus, the objective of this



investigation is to identify which barriers can be imposed on university public ombudsmen in coping with bullying at work. This purpose is relevant because there are few studies that explore this relationship of coping with moral harassment within the PA from the perspective of the ombudsman. This article originates from the doctoral thesis entitled: Violence in Socio-professional Relations: Bullying in Federal Institutions of Higher Education in Brazil. The present excerpt comes from the third thematic axis (organizational focus), whose proposal is to analyze the influence of the organizational context of the IFES in Brazil in the recognition of the existence of moral harassment in the work (or bullying at work) environment from the perspective of the ombudsmen.

Taking into account the adoption of qualitative research, semi-structured interviews with the IFES ombudsmen were used as a data collection instrument. And, with the content analysis technique, which allows for systematization and categorization, it was possible to analyze the data acquired through 35 individual interviews. The categories arise with the data processing process, which, according to Bardin (2016), can be used as a criterion for categorization the thematic expression or word, that is, the meaning that the word has. With that in mind, this article highlighted the record unit (UR) *adversities, belonging to the organizational practices* category — which had the intention of analyzing, in the opinion of the ombudsmen, the influence of the organizational context of the IFES in the recognition of the existence of moral harassment. Thus, we sought to capture aspects of the conduct practiced by the directors and managers of the IFES that may represent challenges for the ombudsmen to face bullying at work.

The data collected reveal that barriers were found in the academic environment resulting from the harmful conduct of some directors and managers. Ignorance of what the ombudsman is and moral harassment, the presence of corporatism and the feeling of threat in relation to the ombudsman are some of the examples of this scenario. It was possible to conclude that the ombudsman needs to use strategies, have autonomy and be proactive and firm in its actions to reduce unfavorable elements and combat bullying at work. It is the ombudsman fulfilling its democratic role with excellence, being an influencer, promoter and instigator of good practices.

## THE PUBLIC OMBUDSMAN

The ombudsman is a channel that connects society and public administration, especially on issues of maladministration (Wille & Bovens, 2020). The literature (Levine-Finley & Carter, 2010; Wille & Bovens, 2020) mentions that the ombudsman is a dialogue channel, which aims to build the relationship between the actors. It is through it that professors, technicians, students direct praise, complaints, suggestions and complaints to the sectors of the IFES.

The public ombudsman has some essential specificities for its performance — since it is a participatory institution

based on democratic aspects. The first of these is (a) *secrecy*, which assures the user that their identity will not be revealed and protects them from any reprisals they may suffer when they make a complaint (Levine-Finley & Carter, 2010), as in the case of moral harassment. For example, Levine-Finley and Carter (2010) state that organizational leaders at the Harvard Medical School pressured the ombudsman to report cases of sexual harassment, but secrecy ensured that the case was not violated.

(b) *impartiality* must be unquestionable as the ombudsman receives complaints from users (Wille & Bovens, 2020). The ombudsman must adopt neutrality and this favors the conduct and solution of the fairest manifestation, avoiding the imbalance related to the attributions that the ombudsman must have (Gill et al., 2020).

(c) *transparency* helps the ombudsman fight fraud, corruption and injustice in the AP (Gill et al., 2020; Wille & Bovens, 2020). Transparency in the Brazilian PA guarantees access to information and favors social control and social participation (Cardoso, 2010).

(d) *autonomy* is fundamental for the ombudsman to strengthen democracy because the ombudsman needs to have autonomy to be able to carry out its activities with freedom and efficiency, without the influence of any power (Kirkham & Stuhmcke, 2020; Wille & Bovens, 2020). Lyra (2016) says that one of the limitations that the ombudsman can have is autonomy (political, administrative and financial) and that “dramatic reports have been published about the lack of commitment of the rulers in relation to the ombudsman” (p. 108).

Another specificity is the participation of the ombudsman in (and) *decision-making*. For Wille and Bovens (2020), the ombudsman must have ways of relating its work to political decisions and formulations, helping to reinforce its importance, promoting social participation. For example, if the ombudsman identifies that bullying at work is a recurrent problem, the organization can recognize that this phenomenon is a problem and, therefore, proceed with other measures, including new public policies on this topic.

(f) *mediation* assists the ombudsman in conflict resolution, involving the ability to listen and empathize (Levine-Finley & Carter, 2010; O'Brien & Seneviratne, 2017). Mediation can be a non-judicialized way of seeking a solution to a conflict, where the ombudsman provides a less legalistic solution (O'Brien & Seneviratne, 2017).

However, ombudsmen may encounter problems or *barriers*, which, in general, originate from the institution's own internal units, even in terms of its organizational structure (Vismona, 2011). Resistance to ombudsman activities within universities can be represented by some examples: the culture of authoritarianism and the lack of transparency (eg: information requested from management units is not sent to the ombudsman); corporatism (eg: students' complaints may

not result in anything) (Lyra, 2016); and the view that the ombudsman is a threat (eg, lack of knowledge of the role of the ombudsman) (Vismona, 2011). Cardoso (2010) reinforces that in this scenario, the recognition of the difficulties aims to stimulate the capacity that the ombudsman may have to propose changes to those problems that the user faces — such as bullying at work.

Lyra (2009) points out that an autonomous ombudsman can contribute and reinforce democracy at the institutional level to the extent that its performance can weaken corporatism, whose practice involves an exclusively individualistic interest to the detriment of the construction of citizenship. It is noticed that the public ombudsman needs to have autonomy and must not compromise with situations of silence or omission (Lyra, 2009). At this point, the behavior of the ombudsman cannot be one of alienation — even more so when observing that Weber (2004) understands alienation as one of the elements of power, marked by the isolation of the individual in relation to the formulation of a decision or a conformism of his own behavior — which in the case of the ombudsman, can mean the absence of autonomy in their actions.

Despite the limits of action that an ombudsman may face — such as resistance to changes that are proposed for the improvement of the institution —, the importance of raising awareness, educating managers (and users), humanization and rights stands out. that involve organizational culture (Gill et al., 2020; Wille & Bovens, 2020). The user must be able to point out the discrepancies in the PA through the ombudsman (social control), so that changes focused on improving services (social participation) are no longer negligible.

## BULLYING AT WORK

The first records in the academic world about the term bullying at work emerged between the 80s and 90s, when it was observed that there were situations in organizations similar to bullying (physical aggression and threat) practiced by children and adolescents in schools (SV Einarsen et al., 2020). The phenomenon was *conceptualized* by Heinz Leymann (1990) as a type of violence, in which the victim is harassed and subjected to situations of humiliation and injustice in a systematic and lasting way.

Hirigoyen (2012) recognizes that the phenomenon involves “small perverse acts [that can be] so commonplace that they seem normal” (p. 19). According to the author (2012, 2016), the practice of these apparently innocent acts develops a feeling of insecurity and rejection in harassed people. The author understands that there are abusive and systematic behaviors against the dignity and integrity of the worker, putting him in danger and degrading the work environment. Therefore, workplace bullying is a type of violence that affects socio-professional relationships (Boudrias et al., 2021; Djurkovic et al., 2020; SV Einarsen et al., 2020).

The *materialization of the phenomenon* occurs through the

occurrence of acts, notably, actions considered negative and that are repeatedly practiced against an individual. These actions, in general, do not occur in isolation, but are practiced systematically (SV Einarsen et al., 2020). The literature identified some of the conducts: the boycott of work information necessary for its execution; the devaluation of professional activity; and, ignoring the person’s presence at work (Hirigoyen, 2012). Djurkovic et al. (2020) record about the behavior of jokes (jokes) that happen in the Australian work environment that, going beyond the limits of being acceptable, are considered moral harassment — “aggressive, rude and insulting jokes . . . are now less tolerated in the workplace” (p. 19).

In the same line mentioned by Leymann (1990) on the *consequences* of those who suffer from bullying at work, Hirigoyen (2016) reports the emergence of problems in the perspectives: physics; Social; and, psychological. Examples given by the authors are: physical fatigue, sleep disorders (physical); the victim’s isolation in the work environment, professional (social) stagnation; panic, depreciation of self-esteem, including suicidal ideation (psychological). The presence of moral harassment in the work environment can also have consequences for the organization, among others, staff turnover, absenteeism, worker demotivation, splitting of the work team, reduced performance in the service, lack of teamwork cooperation (SV Einarsen et al., 2020; CA Guimarães et al., 2016; Hoel et al., 2020).

Finally, the literature (SV Einarsen et al., 2020; Hirigoyen, 2016; Salin & Notelaers, 2020) recognizes *specificities* of the phenomenon: (a) *direction*: it can occur in different directions of the organizational hierarchy. That is, from the hierarchical superior to the subordinate (downward vertical), from the subordinate to the hierarchical superior (upward vertical) or between peers (horizontal); (b) *types*: interpersonal and organizational bullying (Akella, 2020; SV Einarsen et al., 2020). While the interpersonal presents personalized attacks for the same person or group (SV Einarsen et al., 2020), organizational bullying is characterized by violence within the organizational structure and work management (promoted by the hierarchy or organization), which can be an indicator of precarious work; and, (c) *temporality*, which is characterized by the repetition of actions that take place over a long period of time. The action is never sporadic (SV Einarsen et al., 2020).

## METHODS

The adoption of the *qualitative research method* allowed exploring and understanding the meaning of what an individual (group) gives to a social problem (Creswell, 2014).

For Vergara (2010), the research must be developed in a place that can provide enlightening elements about the studied phenomenon. Thus, the *field research* took place in the IFES in Brazil. It was used to acquire information and knowledge about the problem to which an answer was sought. That



in the present case, the question is: what barriers can be imposed on university public ombudsmen in dealing with bullying at work?

About the *population* and the *sample*, the IFES ombudsman holders were surveyed. This is because they have the expertise and help with information as servers (teachers and technicians) seek them out to deal with problems that arise in the work environment. For Yin (2014), experts provide their perspectives on a given subject and corroborate with more sources of evidence. Regarding sampling, a non-probabilistic sample was applied, using the snowball technique. According to Babbie (2013), this is an exploratory method used in field research, in which an interviewee indicates another person to participate in the interview and, thus, successively, adding more specialists, in an accumulation process. The sample presents a total of 35 interviewees. In this case, the sample size was considered sufficient for this study because above this amount would not affect the data found. To preserve the identity of the investigated, none of them was identified by name. A codification consisting of the letter “E” (designation used for interviewee) was used, sequenced by a dozen Arabic numbers, from 01 to 35. That is, the names of the interviewees were replaced by E01, E02 to E35, at random.

*Data collection* took place through individual interviews. It is an important source of information and, in general, should be recorded (Yin, 2014). Afterwards, each interview was transcribed (Bardin, 2016) — this means that the collected data were transformed from an oral message to a written message in a reliable way. Individual and semi-structured interviews were conducted (Vergara, 2010); and, took place in person and online.

In the *treatment* and *analysis of the data*, the content analysis method was used, which is a communications analysis technique (Bardin, 2016). Vergara (2010) agrees that content analysis is related to the study of texts and oral expressions, with the development of categorization systems. The acquisition of detailed information led to the adoption of this technique — an important choice to identify which barriers can be imposed on university public ombudsmen in coping with workplace bullying, as it is believed that if they have barriers, it may reflect on coping with bullying at work. Therefore, they can affect democratic precepts, such as social control and social participation.

## RESULTS

*Adversities* registration unit was intended to check whether there are any obstacles imposed by directors or managers to public ombudsmen, so that their conduct may reflect or hinder the activities of these institutes, especially with regard to coping with moral harassment in the workplace. Few interviewees (E01, E02, E14 and E24) indicated any unfavorable elements that may be imposed by the directors or managers: “So, until today, I didn’t have any barriers” (E02); “In the current management, I don’t think

there would be much of a barrier. . . . so far, it has not proved to be like that, on the contrary” (E24).

However, 31 respondents indicate situations that hinder the activities of their ombudsmen, including the recommendations they make in dealing with bullying at work, with unfavorable elements emerging. For example: “they omit themselves. . . . These managers. . . are elected by their peers. That would make them kind of look bad. But it is a common practice, almost institutional” (E09); “Every time they receive a manifestation of moral harassment, they are the victims and I am the executioner. . . . and they are the saints” (20); “at a collegiate meeting and they sent me the minutes [saying]: . . . – We didn’t like this position of the ombudsman and such” (E23).

The ombudsman should reflect to understand the dynamics of organizations and the difficulties they may face (Cardoso, 2010), so this is an opportunity for the ombudsman to review the elements that may be unfavorable to the development of their activities. It is assumed that she can recognize and evaluate situations that she is experiencing within the IFES and that she can think of strategies that allow her to change the elements that are unfavorable. For example:

a) *lack of collaboration in the preliminary investigation* (E09 and E16): E09 reports: “none of them has the disposition, for example, to carry out a verification . . . of the conduct of that server. . . to verify if, in fact, this practice of moral harassment was undertaken, it was carried out”. E16 says: “the barriers are not doing research, [ . . . ] not handling complaints properly”;

b) *difficulty in getting answers* (E03, E06, E09, E10, E11, E16, E21, E23, E27, E29, E30, E31, E32 and E35): “They take a while to answer, I have to call and ask why who didn’t respond. Some even say: ‘– And do you have to answer?’” (E10). Danet (1978) already highlighted the “speed with which manifestations are dealt with” (p. 356) and this puts these interviewees in line with the author. In this case, there may be a personal loss because the user has expectations about the solution of his problem and for democracy, as social control and social participation may be impaired;

c) *managers do not heed recommendations*: there are managers who have an “inertia” response (E15) when it comes to the recommendations that the ombudsman makes, that is, managers may not heed them (E15, E18, E19, E21 and E27) (eg: “if you say you are going to do a governance study here [at IFES] . . . on the effectiveness of the ombudsman’s recommendations for management, I believe the balance would not be positive” (E15)). This item will serve to improve services (Kirkham & Stuhmcke, 2020) — when a recommendation is accepted, the service provided improves (eg, changing or creating new procedures) and social participation is favored. this element is overlooked by managers, the ombudsman should seek partnerships with units or bodies that have expertise (Gill et al., 2020). and the presence of autonomy can also help reverse this barrier;

d) *unpreparedness of managers to hold the position of boss*: E03, E04, E10, E12, E17, E23, E25, E26 and E34 report such a situation. They understand that there are managers who are not qualified to manage and who tend not to assume the responsibility of being managers (e.g.: “I even make recommendations on how he has to call that teacher to talk. the teacher to talk to and harassed him” (E12); “. . . the managers, with rare exceptions, had some training in people management. . . . [this] does not facilitate the work of the ombudsman” (E13)). This type of situation seems to show the need for managers to receive preparation for the exercise of the position, because, as E12 and E23 reinforce, “few directors assume the responsibility they have in relation to the staff. . . , when, in fact, it is theirs” (E12). The interviewees’ understanding follows Salin’s (2008), given that the author states that when managers are unable to assume their responsibilities, situations of bullying at work worsen. In this way, the phenomenon can be aggravated by the unpreparedness of managers, as they are unable to deal with and dissipate the conflicting issues of interpersonal relationships;

e) *lack of knowledge of concepts about ombudsmanship and moral harassment by managers* are indicated as unfavorable elements (E04, E05, E08, E12, E13, E15, E16, E20, E22, E25, E33 and E35) (e.g.: “The ombudsman does not have the role of an internal affairs department, or the ethics committee, or anything else. . . . But this confusion or this fine line of the ombudsman’s performance with the others, it generates a certain imbroglia” (E03); “[They] have the wrong image of the ombudsman, . . . what is the role of the ombudsman? [What is] moral harassment? Knowing these concepts” (E04). Lack of knowledge about the concept of moral harassment tends to intensify situations, creating a tension in the organizational environment, because actions that could be avoided are sometimes practiced by the leadership. This shows that the training of the themes can be a path to be adopted. position themselves in line with the literature by highlighting this barrier, because managers’ lack of knowledge about the role of the ombudsman (Levine-Finley & Carter, 2010) added to their lack of knowledge about bullying at work (Hirigoyen, 2012; Salin, 2008) can bring problems to the relationship between actors;

f) *corporatism*: certain interviewees (E04, E05, E07, E09, E11, E15, E16, E17, E18, E21, E26, E28 and E32) indicate corporatism as a barrier to the activities of the ombudsman, affecting the issues of recommendations made by the ombudsman and coping with moral harassment. It is noticed in the speeches that corporatism is sometimes revealed by other practices of the managers, such as, there is a denial of bullying at work, or the discredit of the victim, or there may be an aggressive behavior with the ombudsman, or the feeling of threat that the ombudsman provokes in some managers (eg: “they collaborate if they are not from the same peer. If it is a teacher, corporatism” (E04); “The main barrier is ‘that’s not me’. It’s denial. . . . the demonstrator’s discredit” (E17);

“there is a certain corporatism in defense of professors . . . when [there is] some demand for moral harassment, . . . they try to protect the professor, okay?” (E18); “Depending on the degree of corporatism relationship it may be . . . [that] nothing happens . . . The culture of blaming the victim is indeed perversely rooted” (E15).

E15 also highlights: “The environment, it is still very masculine. . . . Then . . . the issue of gender does end up harming and mitigating the scope of the ombudsman to raise awareness, to impartially expose the facts, the arguments”. It is noted that the gender issue can give notoriety to partiality, or to corporatism, reflecting on bullying at work. The strongly male environment seems to be an unfavorable element for the ombudsman, especially when it comes to managing bullying at work and which is in line with the understanding of authors (Akella, 2020; SV Einarsen et al., 2020) who say that the issue of gender can be the cause of moral harassment. And, although authors claim that bullying at work among the female public may not be high due to the local culture (Djurkovic et al., 2020), the female public may be the preferred target of this violence (SV Einarsen et al., 2020), especially in academia (Akella, 2020).

There are also managers who have a profile focused on authoritarianism, as stated by E16, E17 and E28 (e.g.: “there are initiatives to stifle. . . . [because] there are directors who are more colonels, so to speak, than managers democratic” (E28)). It is seen that there is agreement with authors (Nunes & Torga, 2020), who say that Brazilian organizations, including universities, have managers with authoritarian behavior. The interviewees’ speeches are in line with Lyra’s (2016) thinking, as corporatism is a real situation that the Brazilian ombudsman faces, which makes it difficult to act and possible solutions for cases of bullying at work. Once again, the absence of training for those who will assume the leadership position is something that needs to be rethought, with a view to bringing losses. This strategy can eliminate the problem of lack of knowledge and show managers that practices must meet PA precepts;

g) *absence of a personal structure*: this is a limitation pointed out by E13 and E28. According to E13: “it will come up against the personnel structure”. This limitation is emphasized by E28 when he says: “what I feel would be a barrier more to acting, not having the legs to do it, you know? . . . this is a barrier”. They are in line with the position of authors who highlight the importance of having a human infrastructure in the ombudsman, given that the lack of personnel is a barrier to its activities (Vismona, 2011). This is an item that can harm some of the actions that the ombudsman could adopt and that it does not do due to the lack of a team, noting that, in several cases, it is only the ombudsman to handle all activities. The leader’s support may be a possible strategy for reversing this situation.

It was also asked whether, in the relationship between the ombudsman and managers and directors, they considered

themselves *threatened* when questioned about any complaint of moral harassment. E01, E05, E10, E18, E22, E26 and E33 understand that managers do not feel threatened by the ombudsman: “In the beginning there was a very big concern. But that changed over time and they started to see it more calmly” (E01); “They are collaborative” (E26).

However, 25 of the 35 investigated state that there are managers who feel threatened by the ombudsman. E12 reports: “It bothers me a lot when someone comes from outside and says: ‘– Look, it’s not okay, let’s try to change it?’. It’s a nuisance.” E13 states: “when you have a meeting and call the ombudsman, you expose [the] weaknesses of that unit, that person. And nobody likes it, right? Although certain situations have been pointed out, E07, E09, E15 and E29 reaffirm that when managers feel threatened, in general, this can be accompanied by other practices:

a) *the ombudsman or the ombudsman team are treated aggressively* (eg: “they feel threatened. . . . There was one person who once put his finger in my face . . . Seriously! . . . As a reaction Generally, this more aggressive reaction comes” (E07));

b) *defensive posture of the manager* (eg: “Look, generally, those who are defensive and [say] that we are there to disturb or we have nothing to do, right?” (E29);

c) *denial that moral harassment occurs* (eg: “before looking for a solution, before looking for an answer, there has to be a flood of justifications and say that none of that is true” (E15));

d) *corporatism* (e.g.: “so-and-so is my friend, so-and-so is married to I don’t know who, there’s a lot of that here [at IFES], . . . they feel threatened, it’s a reality” (E15);

e) *disqualification of the victim* (eg: “all that is extrapolation by someone who has nothing to do, by his political enemies” (E15)).

The interviewees reveal a position similar to that of some authors who discuss the difficulties faced by the Brazilian public ombudsman; especially when Vismona (2011) says that it can be a threat due to the criticism that the ombudsman presents to managers, without worrying about whether this will please them or not. the reality of what happens at IFES.

## DISCUSSION

With regard to adversities, certain situations were highlighted by the interviewees as possible barriers to the Ombudsman’s work, with a view to the recommendations it makes to managers in dealing with bullying at work. It seems clear that lack of knowledge about what an ombudsman is (not seeing it as a management instrument) harms the autonomy of the ombudsman. As reported by Levine-Finley and Carter (2010), it is essential to reduce ambiguities about the role of the ombudsman, and it is necessary to improve this identity of the ombudsman. And the lack of knowledge of what bullying at work is (does not recognize when the phenomenon

occurs), the lack of preparation of the manager to exercise a leadership position (with a lack of administrative notions, he does not want to assume responsibilities) or the practice of corporatism (denial that moral harassment occurs, aggressive behavior towards the ombudsman, blame or disrespect of the complainant, protection of peers for electoral interests, etc.), are other elements revealed during the interviews and that may be present in the interaction of the ombudsman with the leaders and managers — all this without taking into account the feeling of threat that some managers have in the face of the ombudsman’s work, jeopardizing their activities (because the weaknesses of the sector are revealed). Thus, it seems evident that adversities can have repercussions in several domains of the ombudsman, which includes issues related to moral harassment, as well as how the organization in which the ombudsman is located can influence the confrontation of the phenomenon.

It is important to realize that ombudsmen need to seek measures to break down barriers. It is to make the unfavorable elements better known and discussed so that they can be exchanged for other initiatives more favorable to democracy — it is “to crystallize initiatives that make sense to be institutionalized” (E21). It is the ombudsman’s office that has no limitations, including the acceptance of the recommendations it makes and the facilitation of the management and prevention of bullying at work, even more so that, with the recommendations, social participation can occur.

A point to be highlighted is about autonomy and that may be one of the limitations of the ombudsman. In view of what has been said, if the ombudsman does not have autonomy, it may be sidelined, without having any kind of participation in the decision-making process. The participation of the ombudsman in units that deal with sensitive issues in the institution, such as confronting, combating and preventing bullying at work, can be understood as a crucial practice that must be accepted by directors and managers. But, according to E33, certain ombudsmen need changes in their role within the IFES: “our involvement is zero. We do not participate, there has been no involvement. . . . We are, like, kind of in the shadows. In the shade, right?

If an ombudsman remains in the shadow within the institution — without fulfilling its democratic role, emphasizing the will of directors and managers, who may have corporatist, authoritarian profiles, not practicing impersonality or transparency — it is possible that its legitimacy will be compromised. These behaviors practiced by directors and managers are able to reflect on the ombudsman and, thus, make it difficult to recognize the presence of problems that persisted in the IFES, such as, in the case of bullying at work, which is often something veiled. If the organization itself institutionalizes the practice of corporatism, it can be said that the ombudsman needs to face several adversities. It



needs to “bring light to suggestions and solutions to the issues raised” (Vismona, 2011, p. 69). It means adopting strategies that can curb adversities, so that they do not prevail in the organizational environment and the target audience can be contemplated by the coexistence of a democratic institution. When the IFES has directors and managers who do not practice transparency or who are no longer impartial, moral harassment becomes institutionalized by the organization. In this context, it is urgent to adopt strategies that can stop these practices and, then, the ombudsman can be configured with importance in this process, in particular, for being a beacon of this reality. The ombudsman must be an inducer in the process of confronting bullying at work, fulfilling its democratic role with excellence and being an influencer and promoter of good practices.

It is understood that the different situations exposed show that the organizational context, particularly, which includes the barriers imposed by managers to the public ombudsman, reflects on the way they face moral harassment in the work environment of the IFES, and this recognition is essential to curb the phenomenon — therefore, it is considered to have made a valid contribution to answering the general objective of this investigation in the light of the results obtained.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research involves two important issues: public ombudsman and bullying at work. Although the literature addresses both themes, the issue is that the presence of scientific material that addresses the two themes simultaneously is, notably, restricted. Therefore, the *contribution* is to add in the scientific community a document that interrelates, concomitantly, these subjects — that is, the perspective of the public ombudsman in the face of bullying at work. Thus, with regard to the bibliography used, there was a *limitation* of the research involving a literature that addressed the themes of public ombudsman and bullying at work concomitantly. In fact, certain publications on moral harassment were found in the researched databases that only mentioned the ombudsman’s office superficially, given that the ombudsman’s office was not the focus of these publications. However, this gap ended up being a motivation for carrying out the investigation.

Regarding *suggestions for future research*, studies are recommended that address the two themes: ombudsman; and, moral harassment. The field for these new researches is vast and may contribute to the state of the art insofar as it reduces the existing gap. It is also suggested the possibility of comparatively investigating the data of this work with other public and/or private ombudsmen. And, point to more specific factors (eg cultural) that may increase bullying. Certain interviewees indicated corporatism, authoritarianism and machismo as elements that intensify the phenomenon in universities and that make it difficult for the ombudsman to act. As E04 reinforces: “the farm culture still continues”.

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