

More inequality, more violence acceptance? Investigating the link between economic inequality and tolerance of gender-based violence

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Abstract

Beyond its well-documented health-related effects, economic inequality has significant sociopsychological consequences. This research examines how perceived economic inequality is associated with tolerance of gender-based violence through status anxiety and sexualization processes. Across three studies involving Italian heterosexual women, results showed that higher levels of perceived economic inequality, combined with a low socioeconomic status, were associated with increased status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization. These psychological factors, in turn, predicted greater tolerance of gender-based violence, particularly in terms of minimizing male behavior. Study 1 ($N = 300$) provided correlational evidence of these relationships. Through an experimental design, Study 2 ($N = 218$) confirmed the role of perceived inequality and low socioeconomic status in reinforcing these dynamics. Study 3 ($N = 211$) replicated the effect of inequality and status on attitudes toward gender-based violence using an implicit measure. By revealing the psychological mechanisms linking perceived economic

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inequality and socioeconomic position to violence acceptance, this research underscores the urgency of addressing economic disparities to drive social change and highlights potentially harmful adaptive strategies that women may adopt in response to unequal social and economic contexts.

KEYWORDS

gender-based violence, perceived economic inequality, sexualization, socioeconomic status, status anxiety

Public Significance Statement

This research shows that perceived economic inequality can shape how women respond to gender-based violence. In more unequal contexts, especially among women with fewer economic resources, women may be more likely to normalize or downplay men's behavior due to increased status anxiety and sexualization processes. These results suggest that policies aimed at reducing economic inequality may also help prevent the social normalization of violence against women.

Economic inequality has been rising globally, with significant consequences for individuals and societies (Oxfam, 2024a). Empirical research has consistently shown that greater income disparities are associated with lower well-being, increased psychological distress, and reduced life expectancy (Rufrancos et al., 2013; Vezzoli et al., 2023). Accordingly, a well-established finding in the literature is that in more unequal societies, people of lower socioeconomic profile experience worse health and are more likely to suffer from certain diseases, anxiety, and depression (e.g., Kunst et al., 2005; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). In addition, a few reports indicate that in economically unequal communities, gender-based violence and tolerance of this phenomenon are more prevalent, with power imbalances and financial dependency—particularly among women—exacerbating these patterns (e.g., Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021; United Nations Women, 2021). Gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender and includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, most often perpetrated against women by intimate partners or family members (United Nations Women, 2021). It encompasses a wide range of behaviors, from harassment and coercion to severe forms of violence such as sexual assault and femicide and is widely recognized as a major public health and human rights issue.

Despite the relevance of this data, experimental research on economic inequality has primarily focused on its health-related outcomes, while its broader sociopsychological consequences, specifically regarding gender-based violence, have remained unexplored. To address this gap and contribute to societal and policy debates on such an important and sensitive issue, I conducted three studies to investigate whether economic inequality is associated with greater tolerance

of gender-based violence among heterosexual women. Additionally, I aimed to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying this link.

Economic inequality and tolerance of gender-based violence

Economic inequality not only influences access to resources but also shapes social interactions, affecting how individuals deal with power dynamics and interpersonal relationships (Piff et al., 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). While many reports have focused on the impact of poverty on women's vulnerability to abuse—showing, for instance, that low-income women are more exposed to intimate partner violence due to financial dependence and limited autonomy (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2024; European Anti-Poverty Network, 2019)—there is scarce empirical data directly connecting economic inequality to gender-based violence. Theoretical and comparative reports suggest that inequality can foster cultural climates that normalize and legitimize violence. For example, countries characterized by high income disparities and gender inequality tend to report higher rates of intimate partner violence and lower levels of institutional protection for women (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2025a, 2025b; United Nations Women, 2021). In such contexts, traditional gender norms that position men as dominant and women as subordinate may be more rooted, and hierarchical social structures more rigid (Jewkes, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Accordingly, the EIGE (2025b) notes that in unequal societies, women are less likely to label coercive behaviors as violent and more prone to accept victim-blaming narratives, indicating that inequality may contribute to the normalization of abuse.

While these patterns suggest a link between economic inequality and gender-based violence, understanding why this relationship exists requires further exploration. Research suggests that individuals who feel powerless in the face of structural inequalities often adopt beliefs that legitimize existing social hierarchies, perceiving them as stable and unchangeable (Jost et al., 2004). This may lead women in unequal societies to develop attitudes that justify or minimize gender-based violence, particularly if economic dependence on male partners reduces their perceived alternatives to existing relationship dynamics (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Accepting certain forms of violence as “normal” may serve as an adaptive strategy, reducing cognitive dissonance between structural limitations and personal agency (Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Friesen, 2011). Importantly, these individual-level processes may scale up to shape cultural climates and institutional responses. Prior research showed that where tolerance of violence is widespread, trust in protective institutions tends to decline, while social support for victims weakens (Heise, 2011). This suggests that economic inequality not only affects interpersonal relationships but also undermines collective capacity to challenge gender-based violence, reinforcing cycles of inequality and abuse.

Yet it is crucial to recognize that inequality operates not only at the structural level but also as a subjective experience. Indeed, individuals may feel disadvantaged even in the absence of extreme material deprivation, and this subjective condition—that is, the belief that one is worse off than others—can significantly shape attitudes and behaviors (Smith & Hou, 2014; Blake & Brooks, 2019a). Vezzoli et al. (2023) found that in a representative Italian sample, perceived inequality, but not objective inequality (measured through the Gini index, a coefficient calculated based on the distribution of income or wealth across a population, and ranging from 0, indicating perfect equality, to 1, indicating maximum inequality), was significantly associated with lower subjective well-being and that this effect was mediated by economic vulnerability and anger toward inequality. Similarly, a recent large-scale cross-national study across 71 countries reports that perceived economic inequality predicts individual well-being more strongly than objective indicators like

the Gini coefficient (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2026). Also, previous research indicates that it is the subjective perception of inequality rather than objective inequality which predicts important outcomes such as happiness and health (Adler et al., 2000; see also Jetten et al., 2020). Therefore, examining subjective experiences of inequality offers a valuable lens to understand how macro-level disparities are internalized and potentially translated into individual attitudes, emotional responses, and interpersonal dynamics.

Of relevance to the present research, Blake and Brooks (2019b) highlighted the role that perceived economic inequality plays in increasing status anxiety (i.e., the concern about one's relative social standing) and self-sexualization (i.e., the tendency to publicly express behaviors typical of soft-core pornography, such as wearing sexy, revealing clothing) among heterosexual women. They experimentally demonstrated that manipulating income inequality in a role-playing task, and thus inducing subjective experiences of economic disparity, indirectly increases women's intentions to wear revealing clothing and that it does so by increasing women's anxiety about their place in the social hierarchy. These behaviors may reflect survival strategies through which women navigate competitive and hierarchical environments. In contexts of high perceived inequality, conforming to sexualized aesthetic norms can offer a limited form of agency or protection, allowing women to adapt to social insecurity and power imbalances in ways that enhance their chances of social inclusion or stability. Given that several studies have established a link between self-sexualization and tolerance of sexual harassment (Choi & DeLong, 2019; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998), I believe this line of research offers a compelling perspective that could help explain why economic inequality may be associated with greater gender-based violence acceptance.

Combining all these aspects, the aim of the current research is twofold. On the one hand, I intended to empirically examine the link between perceived economic inequality and tolerance of gender-based violence, also using an experimental design. On the other hand, I aimed to deepen the analysis of this association by considering the mechanisms potentially involved in the process, namely, status anxiety and sexualization processes.

The role of status anxiety and sexualization processes

One of the key psychological responses to inequality is status anxiety (Delhey et al., 2017; Melita et al., 2021). In highly unequal societies, individuals—particularly those in lower socioeconomic positions—may experience heightened status anxiety due to perceived instability and social comparison (García-Sánchez et al., 2024). When economic disparities are pronounced, people are more likely to judge their self-worth in relation to others, leading to increased concern about social positioning and fear of falling behind (Jetten et al., 2017). Status anxiety is amplified by the visibility of wealth differences, which makes status distinctions salient and reinforces a sense of competition for limited resources (Jetten, 2019).

For women, the effects of status anxiety can be particularly strong, as economic inequality often overlaps with gendered expectations and structural barriers. In contexts characterized by inequality, whether structural or perceived, women with fewer resources may feel greater pressure to conform to social norms that emphasize physical attractiveness as a means of gaining status or securing stability, and therefore as a way to survive within constrained social and economic conditions (Blake & Brooks, 2019b). This pressure may manifest in self-sexualization, a behavior in which women emphasize their physical appearance and sexual appeal (Blake & Brooks, 2019a, 2019b). In societies marked by high economic inequality, or when inequality is perceived,

where access to resources is uncertain and status competition is heightened, self-sexualization can become a way to navigate social hierarchies. Blake and colleagues (2018; Blake & Brooks, 2019b) found that areas with poorer women have more sexy selfie posts on social media in the United States. Crucially, they experimentally demonstrated that perceived inequality increases women's anxiety about their place in the social hierarchy and this, in turn, increases women's intentions to wear revealing clothing. This tendency can be further reinforced by cultural norms that tie women's worth to their appearance rather than their competencies or achievements (Moradi & Huang, 2008). These dynamics are not limited to the individual level but can contribute to maintaining broader systems of inequality. As Ridgeway (2011) argues, gendered expectations and appearance-based hierarchies help stabilize unequal social structures, making them appear natural and legitimate. In this sense, the psychological processes examined here can be understood as micro-level mechanisms that sustain macro-level patterns of gender inequality and the normalization of violence.

Over time, repeated engagement in self-sexualization may lead women to develop a sense of enjoyment of sexualization, which refers to the degree to which individuals derive pleasure from being sexualized and receiving appearance-based attention (Erchull & Liss, 2013). Liss and colleagues (2011) found that women who frequently engage in self-sexualization tend to report higher enjoyment of sexualization, as they internalize cultural messages that equate their worth with physical attractiveness. Similarly, Strelan and Hargreaves (2005) showed that women who frequently view themselves from an external perspective and prioritize their physical appeal were more likely to derive self-esteem from appearance-based validation, reinforcing behaviors that align with societal beauty standards. By embracing and even deriving pleasure from sexualized attention, women may feel a greater sense of control or empowerment within restrictive gender norms (Calogero, 2013). However, this perceived agency is often illusory, as enjoyment of sexualization has been associated with stronger adherence to traditional gender roles and has contributed to reinforcing attitudes that perpetrate women's mistreatment (Moscatelli et al., 2021).

Building on these arguments, the present research was designed with the hypotheses that higher levels of perceived economic inequality were associated with increased status anxiety and heightened self-sexualization, both of which have been partially documented in the literature (e.g., Blake & Brooks, 2019b; Blake et al., 2018; Delhey et al., 2017). In extending these findings, I further assumed that experiences of economic inequality might also be linked to a greater enjoyment of sexualization. Although previous research mainly suggests that enjoyment of sexualization may emerge as a consequence of increased self-sexualization, it is also plausible that living in more unequal contexts directly reinforces the perceived value of sexualized self-presentation, as social environments characterized by stronger status competition may increase the salience of appearance-based forms of social validation (e.g., Melita et al., 2021). Accordingly, the present research examined whether perceived economic inequality may also be associated with enjoyment of sexualization more directly. Finally, in line with the considerations discussed above, I examined the indirect association between perceived economic inequality and tolerance of gender-based violence through status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

To test these assumptions, I conducted three studies focusing on Italian heterosexual women. Italy represents a relevant context for this investigation due to its relatively high levels of economic

inequality and persistent gender-based disparities. According to Eurostat (2025), Italy's Gini index is .322, making it the fourth most unequal country in the European Union in 2024 in terms of income distribution, after Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Latvia. The income gap is also reflected in distributional data: at the end of 2022, the richest 1% of Italians owned wealth equivalent to 84 times that of the poorest 20% of the population (Oxfam, 2024b). These structural disparities are compounded by widespread economic vulnerability, with over 23% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and more than 60% of households report difficulties making ends meet (Eurispes, 2025; ISTAT, 2025). Importantly, this economic context intersects with enduring gender inequalities, especially in relation to gender-based violence. About one in four ever-partnered women in Italy has experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence by a current or former partner (Eurostat, 2021), and over 100 femicides are recorded annually, mostly perpetrated by intimate partners or family members (EIGE, 2025a). These figures, combined with high levels of underreporting and the persistence of traditional gender norms (see Grembi et al., 2024), make Italy a critical setting for investigating how economic inequality may shape women's tolerance of gender-based violence.

While Study 1 was exploratory, Studies 2 and 3 were preregistered. Study 1 aimed to examine the associations between perceived economic inequality, status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and tolerance of gender-based violence, while also exploring correlations with participants' socioeconomic status (SES). Additionally, I tested the indirect effect of perceived economic inequality and SES on tolerance of gender-based violence through status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization.

In Study 2, I experimentally manipulated both economic inequality and participants' SES using the *Bimboola* paradigm (Jetten et al., 2015; Salvador Casara et al., 2023), an experimental procedure where participants have to imagine their life in a fictional society characterized by high (vs. low) levels of economic inequality. Moreover, their SES within this society was manipulated, assigning them to either a low or high socioeconomic position, which determined their access to resources. This study aimed to experimentally test whether exposure to high economic inequality combined with a low socioeconomic position would influence the psychological mechanisms identified in Study 1.

Finally, Study 3 aimed to replicate and extend the previous findings by employing an implicit measure of attitudes toward gender-based violence. Using the same experimental manipulation as in Study 2, this study tested whether the previously observed relationships would also emerge when assessing tolerance of gender-based violence through an implicit measure. I expected to find the same effects, anticipating that women in the high inequality and low SES condition would also exhibit greater implicit positive attitudes toward gender-based violence.

In all studies, tolerance of gender-based violence was measured across four distinct dimensions, reflecting two key forms of justification: minimization of male behavior ("he did not mean to" and "it was not really rape") and woman-blaming ("she asked for it" and "she lied"). These dimensions capture common narratives used to excuse or downplay acts of gender-based violence, which have been widely documented in the literature (Martini et al., 2022; McMahon & Farmer, 2011). On this basis, I expected that all dimensions would follow a similar pattern in relation to perceived economic inequality, SES, and the psychological variables under investigation. Figure 1 shows the overall model under investigation across the three studies.

Participants involved in the present research were recruited via Prolific Academic, with filters in place to ensure that all participants were heterosexual women residing in Italy and fluent in Italian, and that no individual took part in more than one study. All the studies were conducted after receiving ethical approval from the Commission of the Department of Psychology for min-

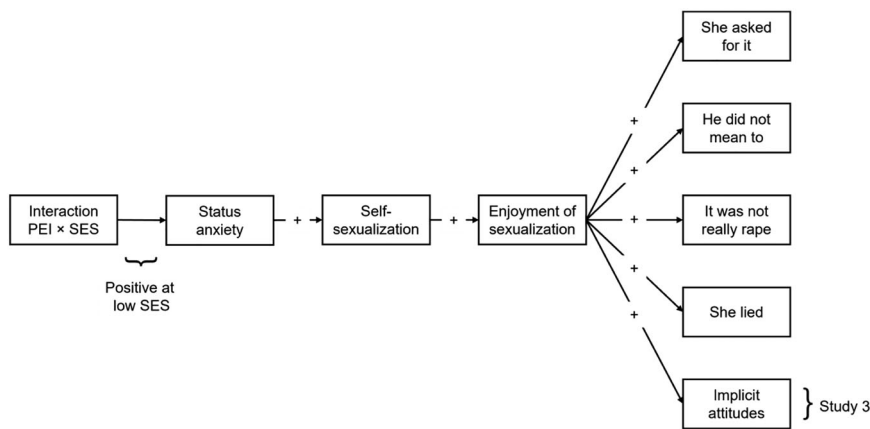


FIGURE 1 Schematic representation of the model tested across the three studies. PEI = Perceived Economic Inequality; SES = Socioeconomic Status.

imal risk studies at the University of Milano-Bicocca (approval no. RM-2023-697). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before each data collection. For all three studies, data, syntax for the analyses, the “Supplementary Material” document, the items, and the experimental manipulation used in Studies 2 and 3 are available on the project’s OSF webpage: <https://osf.io/wh3ax>.

STUDY 1

Study 1 aimed to examine whether higher levels of perceived economic inequality were associated with increased status anxiety (H1), self-sexualization (H2), enjoyment of sexualization (H3), and tolerance of gender-based violence (H4). Additionally, I tested whether lower SES was associated with higher levels of each of these variables, formulating four corresponding hypotheses (H5–H8). As a further exploratory analysis, I also examined the indirect effect of high perceived economic inequality, combined with participants’ low SES, on tolerance of gender-based violence through greater status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization (H9). Since this study was designed in an exploratory manner, it was not preregistered.

Method

Participants and procedure

Data were collected online using the Qualtrics survey web system and Prolific Academic. Participants were paid £1,50 for a 10-min study. I aimed to collect at least 250 respondents. Schönbrodt and Perugini (2013) suggest that this sample size ensures the stability of correlations and a power of .80 for correlation as low as .17, as determined by a-priori power analysis conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). A sample of 300 Italian heterosexual women ($M_{age} = 31.58$, $SD = 10.33$; age range: 20–66; see the “Supplementary Material” document on OSF for demographics) consented to participate and completed the survey. All participants correctly answered the attention check question (i.e., “Please answer 2 to this question”).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire began with informed consent and concluded with demographic questions, followed by a debrief and a thank-you message. The scales are presented here in the order they appeared in the questionnaire. The order of items within each scale was randomized. Responses were provided on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Perceived economic inequality. I used the Perceived Economic Inequality Scale (Valtorta et al., 2024) and asked participants to indicate their agreement with seven statements (e.g., “Today, in Italy, there is a lot of economic inequality”). The fit of the model with a single factor was good ($\chi^2[14] = 36.10$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .073, 90% CI [.044, .102]; CFI = .970; TLI = .956; SRMR = .033) and the items are consistent ($\alpha = .85$; $M = 4.24$, $SD = .57$).

Status anxiety. Status anxiety was measured with five items from Day and Fiske (2016; e.g., “I feel anxious that I will be stuck in my social position for life”). The fit of the model with a single factor was excellent ($\chi^2[5] = 8.83$, $p = .116$; RMSEA = .051, 90% CI [.000, .104]; CFI = .995; TLI = .989; SRMR = .014), with good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$; $M = 3.23$, $SD = .99$).

Self-sexualization. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with 14 statements adapted from McKenney and Bigler (2016) that were selected for their relevance to the present study (e.g., “I like to wear clothing that makes me look hot”). The fit of the model with one factor was acceptable ($\chi^2[77] = 241.00$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .084, 90% CI [.072, .096]; CFI = .939; TLI = .928; SRMR = .036) and the items are consistent ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 2.50$, $SD = .78$).

Enjoyment of sexualization. Participants indicated their agreement with eight items (e.g., “I feel proud when men compliment the way I look”; Liss et al., 2011). The fit of the model with one factor was good ($\chi^2[20] = 59.00$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .081, 90% CI [.057, .105]; CFI = .980; TLI = .972; SRMR = .022), with excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 2.40$, $SD = .97$).

Tolerance of gender-based violence. I used the Italian version of the Measure for Assessing Subtle Rape Myth (Martini et al., 2022) and asked participants to indicate their agreement with 22 statements covering four dimensions, namely, “she asked for it” (e.g., “If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped”; $\alpha = .89$; $M = 1.26$, $SD = .52$), “he did not mean to” (e.g., “If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally”; $\alpha = .95$; $M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.01$), “it was not really rape” (e.g., “If a girl does not physically fight back, you cannot really say it was rape”; $\alpha = .95$; $M = 1.27$, $SD = .63$), and “she lied” (e.g., “Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys”; $\alpha = .89$; $M = 1.35$, $SD = .53$). Results from a CFA confirmed that the items saturated on the four dimensions ($\chi^2[203] = 521.00$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .072, 90% CI [.065, .080]; CFI = .947; TLI = .939; SRMR = .047).

Demographics. I measured participants’ age, SES, educational level, working status, and political orientation. For measuring SES, I employed the MacArthur ladder (Adler et al., 2000). An image of a ladder with 10 steps was used to represent the socioeconomic status of Italians. The highest step signifies the wealthiest individuals, while the lowest step represents those in the most disadvantaged positions. Participants were asked to choose one of the 10 steps to indicate their own socioeconomic position ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.45$). Educational level was assessed asking participants to choose among six options (*less than high school*, *professional diploma*, *high school diploma*, *bachelor’s degree*, *master’s degree*, and *doctorate*). Most participants reported having a master’s degree (34%), a high school diploma (33%), or a bachelor’s degree (29%). Working status was assessed asking participants to indicate their status among five options (*employed*, *unemployed*, *retired*, *full-time university student*, and *employed and university student*). The majority were employed (46%)

or full-time university students (24%). Finally, political orientation was assessed from 1 = *extreme left* to 9 = *extreme right* (Kroh, 2007; $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.58$).

Results

Correlations

To test my main hypotheses (H1–H8), I conducted correlation analysis. As shown in Figure 2, perceived economic inequality was positively associated with status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and two of the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence, namely, “he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape.” Notably, perceived inequality was negatively correlated with the “she asked for it” and “she lied” dimensions. Regarding demographic variables, the results indicate that the respondents who positioned themselves on the lower rungs of the social ladder reported higher status anxiety and self-sexualization. Also, these participants, as well as those unemployed or retired, indicated higher scores on the “he did not mean to” and “it

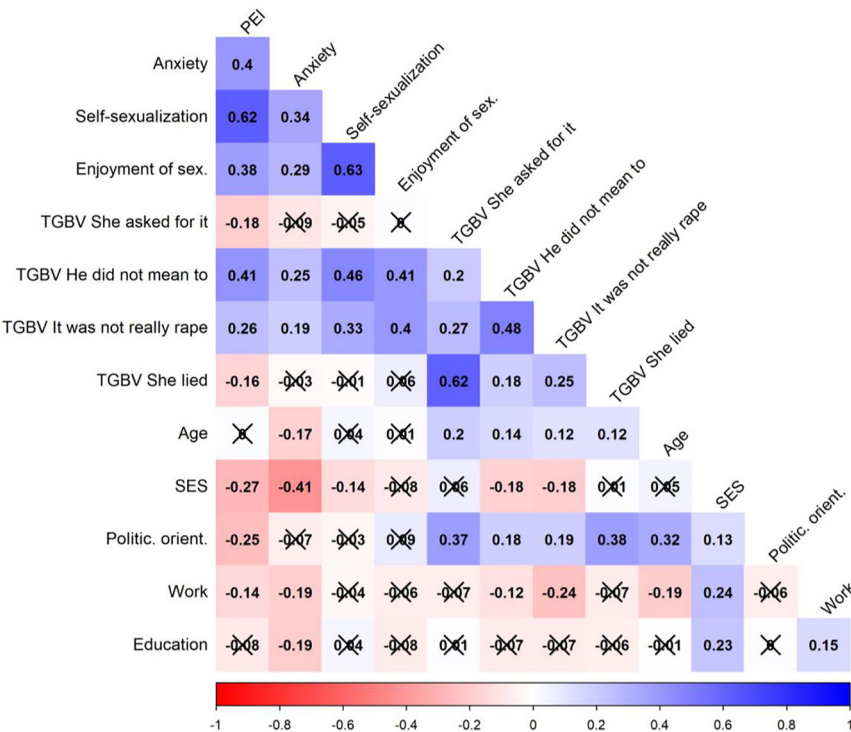


FIGURE 2 Correlations between the variables considered in the study (Study 1). PEI = Perceived Economic Inequality; TGBV = Tolerance of Gender-Based Violence; SES = Socioeconomic Status. Work: 0 = Inactive (unemployed, retired), 1 = Active (employed, full-time university student, employed and university student). Education: 0 = Low (less than high school, professional diploma, high school diploma), 1 = High (bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, doctorate). Correlations with work and education were estimated using point-biserial correlation. An “X” over the cell indicates a non-significant correlation ($p > .050$).

was not really rape” dimensions. Finally, older participants and those with stronger right-leaning political attitudes reported higher levels of tolerance of violence across all four dimensions of the scale.

Indirect effects

To further explore the above-mentioned associations and test H9, I estimated a structural equation model in AMOS (Arbuckle, 2014) using standardized scores. The model included the interaction between perceived economic inequality and participants’ SES as the predictor, status anxiety as the first-level mediator, self-sexualization as the second-level mediator, enjoyment of sexualization as the third-level mediator, and the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence as outcome variables (see Figure 1). Error terms of the outcome variables were allowed to correlate, as they represent dimensions of the same underlying construct. A residual correlation was also specified between self-sexualization and enjoyment of sexualization, due to their strong conceptual and empirical association. Based on correlational findings, I included age, political orientation, working status, and educational level as covariates.

The model showed marginal-to-acceptable fit, $\chi^2(25) = 69.79$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .077, 90% CI [.056, .099], PCLOSE = .018, CFI = .937, TLI = .832, GFI = .965. The interaction between perceived economic inequality and participants’ SES had a significant negative effect on status anxiety ($\beta = -.12$, $SE = .06$, $p = .029$), indicating that perceiving higher economic inequality increased status anxiety particularly for participants with lower SES. In turn, higher status anxiety was associated with increased self-sexualization ($\beta = .34$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), which subsequently predicted greater enjoyment of sexualization ($\beta = .85$, $SE = .14$, $p < .001$). Enjoyment of sexualization positively predicted two of the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence, namely, “it was not really rape” ($\beta = .38$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) and “he did not mean to” ($\beta = .39$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). The effects on the “she asked for it” ($\beta = -.02$, $SE = .05$, $p = .743$) and “she lied” ($\beta = .04$, $SE = .05$, $p = .439$) dimensions were not significant.

I also examined indirect effects using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (1000 resamples). None of the effects were statistically significant (all $|\beta|s < .01$, all $ps > .050$). Despite the lack of significance, the squared multiple correlations (R^2) for the dependent variables suggest that the proposed mediational pathway may be more pronounced for the “it was not really rape” and “he did not mean to” outcomes compared with the other two dimensions. The model accounted for more variance in “it was not really rape” ($R^2 = .21$) and “he did not mean to” ($R^2 = .19$) than in “she asked for it” ($R^2 = .15$) and “she lied” ($R^2 = .15$).

Discussion

Through this study, I provided the first evidence that Italian heterosexual women who perceived greater economic inequality at the national level also reported more status anxiety (H1), self-sexualization (H2), and enjoyment of sexualization (H3). Regarding tolerance of gender-based violence, H4 was partially supported. In particular, a positive relationship between perceived economic inequality was found for the dimensions of the scale concerning the minimization of male behavior (“he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape”), whereas the relationship was reversed for the dimensions related to woman-blaming (“she asked for it” and “she lied”), with greater perceived economic inequality being associated with lower levels of victim-blaming.

In line with H5 and H6, women who positioned themselves at the lower rungs of the social ladder reported higher levels of status anxiety and self-sexualization. However, contrary to H7, a non-significant association emerged for enjoyment of sexualization. Importantly, these individuals also demonstrated higher levels of tolerance for gender-based violence, but only for the dimensions related to the minimization of male behavior, which provides partial support for H8.

Finally, although the indirect effects of perceived economic inequality and participants' SES on the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence via status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization were all non-significant, and thus H9 was not supported, the paths to the "it was not really rape" and "he did not mean to" dimensions indicated a tendency for the mediational mechanism to be more pronounced for these outcomes. One possible explanation for the lack of significant indirect effects concerns the exploratory nature of Study 1 and the relatively small magnitude of the associations between perceived inequality and the outcome variables. It is plausible that the mediational pathway proposed in the theoretical model requires stronger situational cues or contextual activation to emerge clearly. Because Study 1 relied on naturally occurring perceptions of inequality rather than experimentally induced experiences, the psychological processes involved may have been weaker or more heterogeneous across participants. From a methodological perspective, the absence of significant indirect effects may also reflect limited statistical power to detect small sequential mediation effects within a cross-sectional design. Importantly, the pattern of path coefficients and the proportion of explained variance suggest that the proposed mechanism may be particularly relevant for the dimensions that minimize male behavior, which were therefore further investigated using experimental designs in Studies 2 and 3.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, I aimed to replicate the associations tested in the previous study by manipulating economic inequality and participants' SES through the *Bimboola* paradigm (Jetten et al., 2015; Salvador Casara et al., 2023), which is detailed in the Method section. Italian heterosexual women were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: low inequality and low SES, low inequality and high SES, high inequality and low SES, or high inequality and high SES. Then, they were asked to answer the same scales employed in Study 1.

According to the previous study, I assumed that participants in the high inequality and low SES condition would report higher levels of status anxiety (H10), self-sexualization (H11), enjoyment of sexualization (H12), and tolerance of gender-based violence (H13) compared to participants in all other conditions. Additionally, I hypothesized that status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization would serve as significant mediators of the relationship between the experimental condition and tolerance of gender-based violence (H14).

Method

Participants and procedure

All aspects of this study were preregistered (<https://osf.io/ewky6>). Data were collected as in Study 1. Participants were paid £2,25 for a 15-min study. I determined the sample size through G*Power

3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) considering a small-to-medium effect size $f = .20$, with power = .80 and alpha = .05. The a-priori power analysis, considering an F -test with fixed effects, main effects, and interaction with four groups, suggests a minimum sample size of 199. A sample of 253 Italian heterosexual women consented to participate. Of these, I excluded those who failed the attention check items ($n = 35$).¹ The final sample comprises 218 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 31.78$, $SD = 10.47$; age range: 19–72), most of whom had a master's degree (35%), a bachelor's degree (32%), or a high school diploma (26%), and were employed (45%) or full-time university students (23%). See the “Supplementary Material” document on OSF for demographics.

After providing informed consent, each participant was randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. They were asked to imagine starting a new life in a fictional society called *Bimboola*, which was presented with either low or high economic inequality. Then, they were instructed to make decisions regarding essential aspects of life in *Bimboola*, such as housing, transportation, and vacations. Participants' choices were guided by their assigned SES (low or high), which determined the available options within the society (see Salvador Casara et al., 2023). After making their selections, participants were asked to complete the same measures used in Study 1 (i.e., status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and tolerance of gender-based violence) adapted to the context of *Bimboola*. In particular, each scale was presented with the following statement: “To answer, refer to *Bimboola* and your position within this society.”

For all the measurements, CFAs confirmed the expected structures, and Cronbach's alpha values indicated good to excellent reliability ($\chi^2[5] = 9.24$, $p = .100$; RMSEA = .062, 90% CI [.000, .125]; CFI = .994; TLI = .987; SRMR = .018; $\alpha = .87$ for status anxiety. $\chi^2[77] = 242.00$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .089, 90% CI [.085, .113]; CFI = .921; TLI = .906; SRMR = .042; $\alpha = .94$ for self-sexualization. $\chi^2[20] = 38.20$, $p = .008$; RMSEA = .065, 90% CI [.032, .095]; CFI = .991; TLI = .988; SRMR = .016; $\alpha = .96$ for enjoyment of sexualization. $\chi^2[203] = 448.00$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .074, 90% CI [.065, .084]; CFI = .964; TLI = .959; SRMR = .033; $\alpha_{\text{she asked for it}} = .94$, $\alpha_{\text{he did not mean to}} = .98$, $\alpha_{\text{it was not really rape}} = .99$, $\alpha_{\text{she lied}} = .93$ for tolerance of gender-based violence).

Finally, respondents answered attention check (“Please answer 2 to this question”; “What wealth level were you assigned to?,” two options; “In *Bimboola*, there is a lot of economic inequality,” 0–10 range) and manipulation check (“How poor is your group?,” 1–9 range; “How wealthy is your group?,” 1–9 range) questions. They were then asked to indicate the same demographic information requested in Study 1, namely, age, educational level, working status, SES ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.49$), and political orientation ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.56$). Finally, participants were thanked and fully debriefed.

¹ Thirty-five participants were excluded because they failed the attention check items (i.e., “Please answer 2 to this question”; “What wealth level were you assigned to?,” two options; “In *Bimboola*, there is a lot of economic inequality,” 0–10 range). In particular, three participants were excluded because they answered a number other than 2 to the first question. Also, one respondent was eliminated because she failed to remember the assigned SES (i.e., “Low wealth level” instead of “High wealth level”). Regarding the last attention check question, I recoded the responses so that answers from 0 to 5 corresponded to low inequality, while answers from 6 to 10 corresponded to high inequality. Based on this, 31 participants were eliminated. Specifically, three participants in the high inequality condition reported that there was little or no inequality, while 28 participants in the low inequality condition indicated that there was quite a lot or a great deal of inequality (for a similar procedure, see Salvador Casara et al., 2023).

Results

Manipulation check

I first conducted two *t*-tests on the scores concerning the assigned SES (“How poor is your group?” and “How wealthy is your group?”). Participants assigned to the low SES ($M = 7.02$, $SD = 2.24$) perceived their group as significantly poorer compared to those in the high SES ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 2.79$), $t(216) = 11.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.57$, 95% CI [1.27, 1.88]. Additionally, respondents assigned to the high SES ($M = 8.32$, $SD = .92$) perceived their group as significantly wealthier compared to those in the low SES ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 2.25$), $t(141.23) = 22.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.02$, 95% CI [2.64, 3.42].

I then performed a *t*-test considering the perception of economic inequality. The results confirmed that participants in the low inequality condition ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.17$) perceived lower levels of economic inequality than those in the high inequality condition ($M = 9.90$, $SD = .30$), $t(107.60) = 55.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 8.19$, 95% CI [7.39, 9.03].

Correlations

Before testing my main hypotheses, I conducted correlation analysis to examine the pattern of associations between the study variables and to assess whether sociodemographics should be included as covariates in the subsequent analyses. As shown in Figure 3, status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization were positively intercorrelated. These three variables also showed positive associations with the dimensions “he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape.” In contrast, the “she asked for it” and “she lied” dimensions were only weakly and positively related to self-sexualization. Importantly, status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and the dimensions reflecting the minimization of male behavior (“he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape”) all showed positive correlations with the experimental condition (coded as 0 = all other conditions and 1 = high inequality and low SES). Notably, the woman-blaming dimensions (“she asked for it” and “she lied”) did not significantly correlate with the experimental condition.

Regarding sociodemographic variables, age was negatively correlated with self-sexualization and positively associated with both woman-blaming dimensions. Political orientation was also positively correlated with woman-blaming, suggesting that more conservative individuals tended to endorse these beliefs more strongly. Finally, working status was positively related to status anxiety and negatively associated with the woman-blaming dimensions, indicating that women who are employed or full-time university students tended to experience higher levels of status-related anxiety, but were less likely to endorse beliefs that blame women for sexual violence.

Effects of the experimental manipulation

To test whether the experimental manipulation affected status anxiety (H10), self-sexualization (H11), and enjoyment of sexualization (H12), I ran a series of 2 (inequality: low vs. high) $\times$ 2 (SES: low vs. high) ANOVAs. Based on the correlation results, working status was included as a covariate in the analysis on status anxiety, whereas age was included as a covariate in the analysis on self-sexualization. As for tolerance of gender-based violence (H13), I ran a MANOVA with the

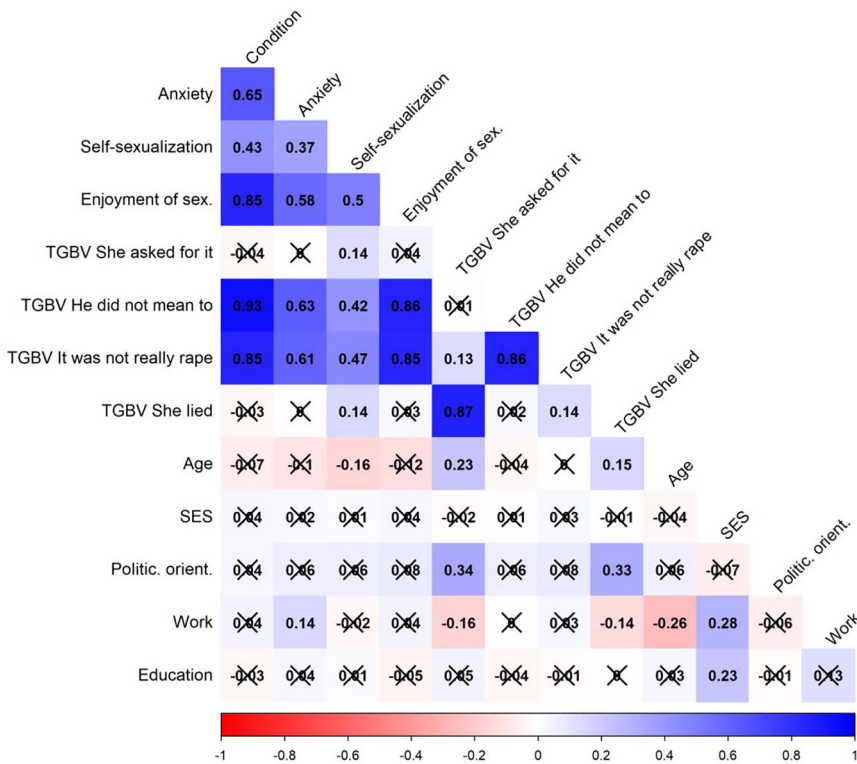


FIGURE 3 Correlations between the variables considered in the study (Study 2).

TGBV = Tolerance of Gender-Based Violence; SES = Socioeconomic Status. Condition: 0 = All the other experimental conditions, 1 = High inequality and low SES. Work: 0 = Inactive (unemployed, retired), 1 = Active (employed, full-time university student, employed and university student). Education: 0 = Low (less than high school, professional diploma, high school diploma), 1 = High (bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctorate). Correlations with condition, work, and education were estimated using point-biserial correlation. An "X" over the cell indicates a non-significant correlation ($p > .050$).

experimental condition as a predictor and the four dimensions of gender violence as the outcomes.² Age, political orientation, and working status were included as covariates in this model, given their significant associations with the "she asked for it" and "she lied" dimensions.

Status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization. As indicated in Table 1, I found a main effect of economic inequality for all the variables, suggesting that participants in the high inequality reported more status anxiety ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.33$), self-sexualization ($M = 2.34$, $SD = .88$), and enjoyment of sexualization ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.10$) than those in the low inequality ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.03$ for status anxiety; $M = 2.01$, $SD = .80$ for self-sexualization; $M = 1.74$, $SD = .56$ for enjoyment of sexualization). Also, I found a main effect of SES, indicating that participants assigned to the low SES group reported greater status anxiety ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .92$),

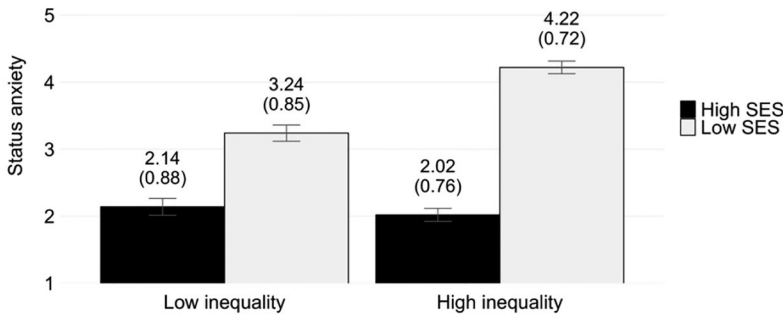
² For tolerance of gender-based violence, as for status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization, I preregistered to conduct separate ANOVAs for Studies 2 and 3. However, since tolerance of gender-based violence was reliably composed of four distinct dimensions, I decided to conduct a MANOVA in both studies, allowing me to consider all four dimensions simultaneously.

TABLE 1 ANOVAs for status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization (Study 2).

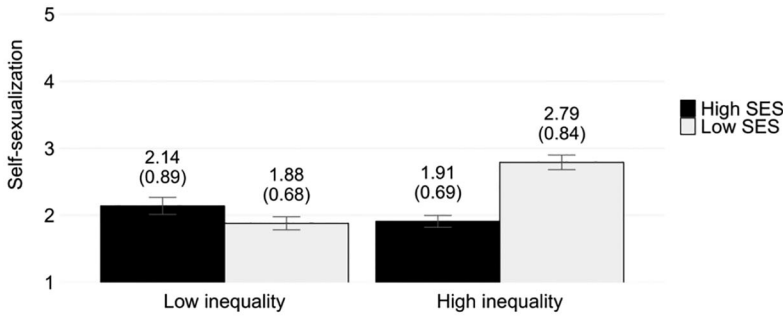
Status anxiety						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	14.78	1, 213	< .001	.07	.02	.14
Main effect of SES	227.30	1, 213	< .001	.52	.43	.59
Interaction effect	26.61	1, 213	< .001	.11	.04	.19
Working status	4.58	1, 213	.034	.02	.00	.07
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	40.31	1, 213	< .001	.16	.08	.25
<i>High SES group</i>	.87	1, 213	.352	.00	.00	.04
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	44.74	1, 213	< .001	.17	.09	.26
<i>High inequality</i>	228.78	1, 213	< .001	.52	.42	.59
Self-sexualization						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	9.16	1, 213	.003	.04	.01	.10
Main effect of SES	9.34	1, 213	.003	.04	.01	.11
Interaction effect	27.96	1, 213	< .001	.12	.05	.20
Age	4.33	1, 213	.039	.02	.00	.07
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	34.07	1, 213	< .001	.14	.06	.22
<i>High SES group</i>	2.56	1, 213	.111	.01	.00	.06
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	2.27	1, 213	.134	.01	.00	.05
<i>High inequality</i>	38.81	1, 213	< .001	.15	.08	.24
Enjoyment of sexualization						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	150.28	1, 214	< .001	.41	.32	.49
Main effect of SES	217.34	1, 214	< .001	.50	.41	.58
Interaction effect	158.77	1, 214	< .001	.43	.33	.51
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	306.69	1, 214	< .001	.59	.51	.65
<i>High SES group</i>	.06	1, 214	.809	.00	.00	.02
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	2.08	1, 214	.150	.01	.00	.05
<i>High inequality</i>	415.71	1, 214	< .001	.66	.59	.71

Note: Working status: 0 = Inactive, 1 = Active.

Panel A



Panel B



Panel C

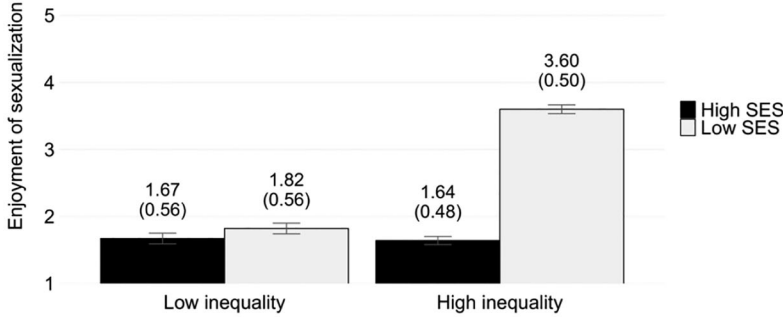


FIGURE 4 Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for status anxiety (Panel A), self-sexualization (Panel B), and enjoyment of sexualization (Panel C) as a function of the experimental manipulation (Study 2). SES = Socioeconomic Status. Error bars are standard errors of means.

self-sexualization ($M = 2.38$, $SD = .89$), and enjoyment of sexualization ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.03$) compared to those assigned to the high SES group ($M = 2.07$, $SD = .82$ for status anxiety; $M = 2.01$, $SD = .79$ for self-sexualization; $M = 1.65$, $SD = .52$ for enjoyment of sexualization).

Notably, for all the considered variables, I found evidence of the significant interaction effect inequality $\times$ SES. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 4, participants in the low SES group reported

more status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization when they were exposed to high compared to low inequality.

Tolerance of gender-based violence. Significant multivariate main effects were found for inequality, Wilks Lambda = .31, $F(4, 208) = 115.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .69$, 95% CI [.62, .73], and for SES, Wilks Lambda = .25, $F(4, 208) = 154.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .75$, 95% [.69, .78] on the combined dependent variables. Importantly, the interaction effect between inequality and SES was statistically significant, with Wilks Lambda = .28, $F(4, 208) = 131.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .72$, 95% [.65, .76].

Follow-up univariate ANOVAs were used to examine individual dependent variable contributions to main and interaction effects. As shown in Table 2, for the “she asked for it” and “she lied” dimensions, the effects of inequality (all means were between 1.22 and 1.36), SES (all means were between 1.21 and 1.38), and their interaction (all means were between 1.21 and 1.40) were not significant.

Statistically significant effects were found for the “he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape” dimensions (see Table 2). As for the main effect of inequality, I found that participants in the high inequality reported more tolerance concerning both dimensions ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.30$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.24$ for “it was not really rape”) than those in the low inequality ($M = 1.37$, $SD = .45$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 1.33$, $SD = .66$ for “it was not really rape”). A similar pattern emerged for participants assigned to the low SES group ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.24$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.18$ for “it was not really rape”) compared to those assigned to the high SES group ($M = 1.29$, $SD = .38$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 1.25$, $SD = .58$ for “it was not really rape”). Regarding the interaction effect, I found that participants in the low SES group reported greater tolerance on both dimensions when they were exposed to high compared to low inequality (see Figure 5).

Indirect effects

To test H14, namely, the indirect effect of the experimental manipulation to the four dimensions of gender-based violence through status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization, I estimated a structural equation model in AMOS (Arbuckle, 2014) using standardized scores.³ Since the experimental manipulation was a categorical variable with four conditions, I created three dummy variables using the condition of interest (high inequality and low SES) as the reference category, and the other three as comparison groups, following standard dummy coding procedures for categorical predictors (dummy 1 = high inequality and low SES vs. high inequality and high SES; dummy 2 = high inequality and low SES vs. low inequality and low SES; dummy 3 = high inequality and low SES vs. low inequality and high SES). Additionally, as in Study 1, error terms of the outcome variables were allowed to correlate, as they represent dimensions of the same underlying construct. A residual correlation was also specified between self-sexualization and enjoyment of sexualization. Based on correlational findings, I included age, political orientation, and working status as covariates.

³ For testing indirect effects, I preregistered the use of PROCESS for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) for Studies 2 and 3. However, PROCESS does not allow multiple dependent variables to be modeled simultaneously, and since the tolerance of gender-based violence construct was found to be reliably composed of four distinct dimensions, I decided to test the model using a structural equation model in AMOS (Arbuckle, 2014), allowing me to consider more dependent variables together. For Study 3, I also used this approach to include the implicit measure of attitudes toward gender-based violence as an additional outcome, providing a more comprehensive view of the model.

TABLE 2 Follow-up univariate ANOVAs for the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence (Study 2).

“She asked for it”						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	1.01	1, 211	.317	.01	.00	.04
Main effect of SES	.79	1, 211	.375	.00	.00	.04
Interaction effect	.69	1, 211	.406	.00	.00	.04
Age	8.66	1, 211	.004	.04	.01	.10
Political orientation	26.79	1, 211	< .001	.11	.04	.20
Working status	1.92	1, 211	.167	.01	.00	.05
“He did not mean to”						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	399.92	1, 211	< .001	.66	.58	.71
Main effect of SES	517.20	1, 211	< .001	.71	.65	.76
Interaction effect	478.47	1, 211	< .001	.69	.63	.74
Age	.24	1, 211	.624	.00	.00	.03
Political orientation	.94	1, 211	.333	.00	.00	.04
Working status	1.85	1, 211	.175	.01	.00	.05
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	866.22	1, 211	< .001	.80	.76	.84
<i>High SES group</i>	1.76	1, 211	.186	.01	.00	.05
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	.35	1, 211	.553	.00	.00	.03
<i>High inequality</i>	1113.97	1, 211	< .001	.84	.80	.87
“It was not really rape”						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	171.79	1, 211	< .001	.45	.35	.53
Main effect of SES	226.60	1, 211	< .001	.52	.43	.59
Interaction effect	141.45	1, 211	< .001	.40	.30	.48
Age	1.71	1, 211	.192	.01	.00	.05
Political orientation	1.74	1, 211	.189	.01	.00	.05
Working status	.02	1, 211	.881	.00	.00	.01
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	308.81	1, 211	< .001	.59	.51	.66
<i>High SES group</i>	.75	1, 211	.386	.00	.00	.04
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	4.54	1, 211	.034	.02	.00	.07
<i>High inequality</i>	406.38	1, 211	< .001	.66	.59	.71

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

“She lied”						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	.32	1, 211	.575	.00	.00	.03
Main effect of SES	.52	1, 211	.470	.00	.00	.03
Interaction effect	.38	1, 211	.537	.00	.00	.03
Age	2.94	1, 211	.088	.01	.00	.06
Political orientation	24.45	1, 211	< .001	.10	.04	.19
Working status	1.67	1, 211	.198	.01	.00	.05

Note: Working status: 0 = Inactive, 1 = Active.

TABLE 3 Indirect effects of the experimental condition on the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence through status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization (Study 2).

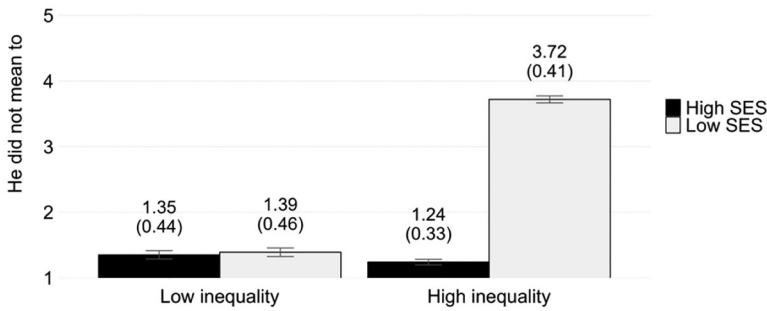
Outcome variable	Condition	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	90% CI	
					Lower	Upper
She asked for it	Dummy 1	−.13	.05	.006	−.23	−.03
	Dummy 2	−.05	.02	.004	−.10	−.01
	Dummy 3	−.11	.04	.007	−.19	−.02
He did not mean to	Dummy 1	−.12	.03	.002	−.18	−.06
	Dummy 2	−.05	.01	.001	−.08	−.03
	Dummy 3	−.10	.03	.002	−.16	−.06
It was not really rape	Dummy 1	−.23	.05	.002	−.32	−.13
	Dummy 2	−.09	.03	.001	−.16	−.05
	Dummy 3	−.20	.04	.001	−.29	−.13
She lied	Dummy 1	−.08	.05	.078	−.19	.01
	Dummy 2	−.04	.02	.078	−.08	.01
	Dummy 3	−.07	.05	.079	−.17	.01

Note: Dummy 1 = high inequality and low SES versus high inequality and high SES; Dummy 2 = high inequality and low SES versus low inequality and low SES; Dummy 3 = high inequality and low SES versus low inequality and high SES.

The model showed poor fit, $\chi^2(27) = 235.20$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .189, 90% CI [.167, .211], PCLOSE = .000, CFI = .886, TLI = .670, GFI = .894. However, the hypothesized paths were significant and partially in line with the theoretical model. Compared to the reference condition (high inequality and low SES), all other experimental conditions were associated with lower levels of status anxiety (dummy 1: $\beta = -.81$, $SE = .12$; dummy 2: $\beta = -.34$, $SE = .13$; dummy 3: $\beta = -.71$, $SE = .13$; all $ps < .001$). In turn, status anxiety positively predicted self-sexualization ($\beta = .37$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), which subsequently predicted greater enjoyment of sexualization ($\beta = 1.54$, $SE = .24$, $p < .001$). Enjoyment of sexualization was positively associated with all four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence, namely “he did not mean to” ($\beta = .25$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), “it was not really rape” ($\beta = .48$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$), “she asked for it” ($\beta = .27$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$), and “she lied” ($\beta = .18$, $SE = .07$, $p = .010$).

Indirect effects were further examined using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 1000 resamples. As reported in Table 3, results revealed that the indirect pathways were

Panel A



Panel B

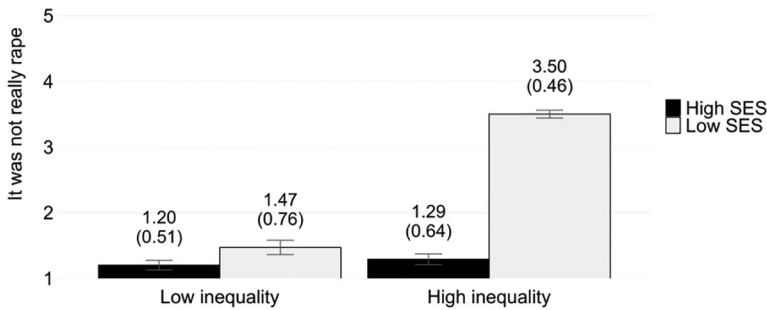


FIGURE 5 Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for the “he did not mean to” (Panel A) and “it was not really rape” (Panel B) dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence as a function of the experimental manipulation (Study 2).

SES = Socioeconomic Status. Error bars are standard errors of means.

statistically significant for three of the four outcome variables, namely, “he did not mean to,” “it was not really rape,” and “she asked for it.” In contrast, the indirect effects on “she lied” were not statistically significant for any of the three dummy variables. Partially in line with Study 1, the model explained a greater proportion of variance in “it was not really rape” ($R^2 = .73$) and “he did not mean to” ($R^2 = .87$) compared to “she asked for it” ($R^2 = .22$) and “she lied” ($R^2 = .14$).

Discussion

By experimentally manipulating economic inequality and participants’ SES, I replicated the main findings of Study 1. Italian heterosexual women in the high inequality and low SES condition reported higher levels of status anxiety (H10), self-sexualization (H11), and enjoyment of sexualization (H12). Regarding tolerance of gender-based violence, I partially supported H13, as I found significant effects for the minimization of male behavior, but not for woman-blaming. I also observed indirect effects, where imagining life in an unequal society with low SES led to the minimization of male behavior through the mediation of status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization. The indirect effect was not significant for the “she lied” dimension,

providing partial support for H14. An additional noteworthy aspect of the findings concerns the differences in explained variance across the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence. The model accounted for a substantially greater proportion of variance in the dimensions referring to the minimization of male behavior than in those reflecting explicit victim-blaming. This pattern suggests that the psychological processes examined in the present research may be more strongly related to narratives that downplay or minimize male responsibility than to beliefs that directly attribute blame to female victims. One possible explanation is that minimizing the perpetrator may represent a subtler and more socially acceptable form of tolerance of gender-based violence compared to explicit victim-blaming, which may be more strongly constrained by social desirability concerns. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the overall fit of the structural model was relatively poor. This suggests that although the variables included in the model are significantly associated with each other, the full sequential structure proposed in the theoretical model may not fully capture the complexity of the relationships among these constructs.

Despite the relevance and consistency of the current findings, Study 1 and Study 2 relied on explicit measures, which, while useful, are susceptible to social desirability biases, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as attitudes endorsing violence (Greenwald et al., 2009). Study 3 was specifically designed to further replicate my results through the use of an implicit measure of attitudes toward gender-based violence.

STUDY 3

Through Study 3, I intended to replicate the associations examined in the previous study by also employing an implicit measurement to assess attitudes toward gender-based violence, namely the Gender Violence Implicit Association Test (GV-IAT; Ferrer-Perez et al., 2020), the details of which are provided in the Method section. This study was an exact replication of Study 2, except for the addition of the GV-IAT.

According to Study 2, I assumed that participants in the high inequality and low SES condition would report more status anxiety (H10), self-sexualization (H11), enjoyment of sexualization (H12), tolerance of gender-based violence (H13), and implicit positive attitudes toward gender-based violence (H15) compared to participants in all other conditions. Additionally, I hypothesized that status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization would mediate the relationship between the experimental condition and both tolerance of gender-based violence (H14) and implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence (H16).

Method

Participants and procedure

All aspects of this study were preregistered (<https://osf.io/mv2a6>). Data collection procedures were identical to those in Study 2. Participants received £3.70 for a 25-min study, and the sample size was determined based on the same parameters, with an a-priori power analysis indicating a minimum of 199 participants. A sample of 251 Italian heterosexual women consented to partici-

pate. Of these, I excluded those who failed the attention check items ($n = 40$).⁴ The final sample comprises 211 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.17$, $SD = 10.74$; age range: 20–67), most of whom had a master's degree (41%), a bachelor's degree (29%), or a high school diploma (23%), and were employed (51%) or full-time university students (22%). See the “Supplementary Material” document on OSF for demographics.

I manipulated economic inequality and SES with the *Bimboola* paradigm as in Study 2. Thus, after providing informed consent, each participant was randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions and asked to complete the scales used in the previous study measuring status anxiety ($\chi^2[5] = 6.00$, $p = .306$; RMSEA = .031, 90% CI [.000, .104]; CFI = .999; TLI = .998; SRMR = .007; $\alpha = .96$), self-sexualization ($\chi^2[77] = 212.00$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .091, 90% CI [.077, .106]; CFI = .947; TLI = .938; SRMR = .033; $\alpha = .96$), enjoyment of sexualization ($\chi^2[20] = 66.80$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .105, 90% CI [.078, .134]; CFI = .977; TLI = .968; SRMR = .020; $\alpha = .97$), and tolerance of gender-based violence ($\chi^2[203] = 450.00$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .076, 90% CI [.067, .085]; CFI = .951; TLI = .944; SRMR = .047; $\alpha_{\text{she asked for it}} = .84$, $\alpha_{\text{he did not mean to}} = .96$, $\alpha_{\text{it was not really rape}} = .99$, $\alpha_{\text{she lied}} = .67$).

The scale assessing tolerance of gender-based violence was counterbalanced in order with the GV-IAT, an indirect measure evaluating the strength of cognitive associations between two concepts (non-violence vs. gender-based violence) and an evaluative dimension (positive vs. negative). It requires participants to complete various tasks and compares response latency to different pairings of the concepts of interest with target stimuli (words related to non-violence and words related to gender-based violence). The GV-IAT was developed using IATgen (<https://iatgen.wordpress.com/>), a tool that allows the administration of implicit measures through Qualtrics (Carpenter et al., 2019), with the structure, stimuli, and categories being derived from Ferrer-Perez and colleagues (2020). The reliability of this measure was found to be excellent, with a split-half reliability coefficient of .90.

Participants completed the GV-IAT in seven blocks. The first block included 20 practice trials, where participants categorized words related to non-violence (e.g., *support*, *respect*) and gender-based violence (e.g., *harass*, *assault*) into the groups “non-violence” and “gender-based violence” using the “E” key (left) and the “I” key (right). In the second block, also consisting of 20 practice trials, participants sorted words into “negative” (e.g., *terrible*, *horrible*) and “positive” (e.g., *wonderful*, *excellent*) categories. The third block was a congruent combination task, where words corresponding to both the target concept (non-violence/gender-based violence) and the attribute concept (positive/negative) appeared paired together on the screen (non-violence/positive, gender-based violence/negative) and included 20 critical trials. The fourth block followed the same structure as the third block but included 40 critical trials. The fifth block consisted of 20 practice trials and was identical to the first block, except the categories were reversed in their position on the screen, and thus, the associated keys were swapped. The sixth block was an incongruent combination task, where words corresponding to both the target concept (non-violence/gender-based violence) and the attribute concept (positive/negative) appeared paired together on the screen (non-violence/negative, gender-based violence/positive),

⁴ I used the same procedure adopted for Study 2 (see Note 1). One participant was excluded because she answered a number other than 2 to the question: “Please answer 2 to this question.” All participants correctly recalled the assigned SES (“What wealth level were you assigned to?”, two options). Regarding the last attention check question (“In *Bimboola*, there is a lot of economic inequality,” 0–10 range), 39 participants were eliminated. Specifically, two participants in the high inequality condition reported that there was little or no inequality, while 37 participants in the low inequality condition indicated that there was quite a lot or a great deal of inequality.

and it included 20 critical trials. The seventh block followed the same structure as the sixth block but included 40 critical trials. Within all blocks, the words were presented in random order. Additionally, half of participants completed the GV-IAT as described, while the other half completed a counterbalanced version of the GV-IAT, with the order of congruent and incongruent blocks reversed to reduce order effects (Nosek et al., 2005).

Finally, respondents answered the same attention and manipulation check questions as in Study 2 and provided the same demographic information as in the previous studies, namely age, educational level, working status, SES ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.32$), and political orientation ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.50$). They were then thanked and fully debriefed.

Results

Manipulation check

I conducted the same analysis as in Study 2. Participants assigned to the low SES ($M = 6.74$, $SD = 2.41$) perceived their group as significantly poorer compared to those in the high SES ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 2.48$), $t(209) = 12.40$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.70$, 95% CI [1.39, 2.02]. Additionally, respondents assigned to the high SES ($M = 8.22$, $SD = 1.23$) perceived their group as significantly wealthier compared to those in the low SES ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 2.19$), $t(169.98) = 20.79$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.81$, 95% CI [2.44, 3.20].

Also, the results confirmed that participants in the low inequality condition ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.69$) perceived lower levels of economic inequality than those in the high inequality condition ($M = 9.80$, $SD = .61$), $t(113.94) = 32.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.88$, 95% CI [4.35, 5.44].

Correlations

As shown in Figure 6, and similarly to Study 2, status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization were positively intercorrelated. These three variables were also positively associated with the dimensions “he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape,” while “she asked for it” and “she lied” were positively associated only with self-sexualization and enjoyment of sexualization. Importantly, status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and the dimensions reflecting the minimization of male behavior (“he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape”) all showed positive correlations with the experimental condition (coded as 0 = all other conditions and 1 = high inequality and low SES). In contrast, “she asked for it” and “she lied” did not significantly correlate with the experimental condition.

The implicit measure of attitudes toward gender-based violence was significantly associated with the experimental condition, status anxiety, and self-sexualization, but not with enjoyment of sexualization. This suggests that participants in the high inequality and low SES condition, who reported higher status anxiety and greater self-sexualization, also expressed more accepting implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence.

Regarding sociodemographic variables, age was negatively associated with enjoyment of sexualization and positively associated with both the woman-blaming dimensions. In addition, more conservative participants were more likely to endorse woman-blaming beliefs. Also, working status was positively associated with self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and the GV-IAT score. This suggests that women who were employed or full-time students reported higher lev-

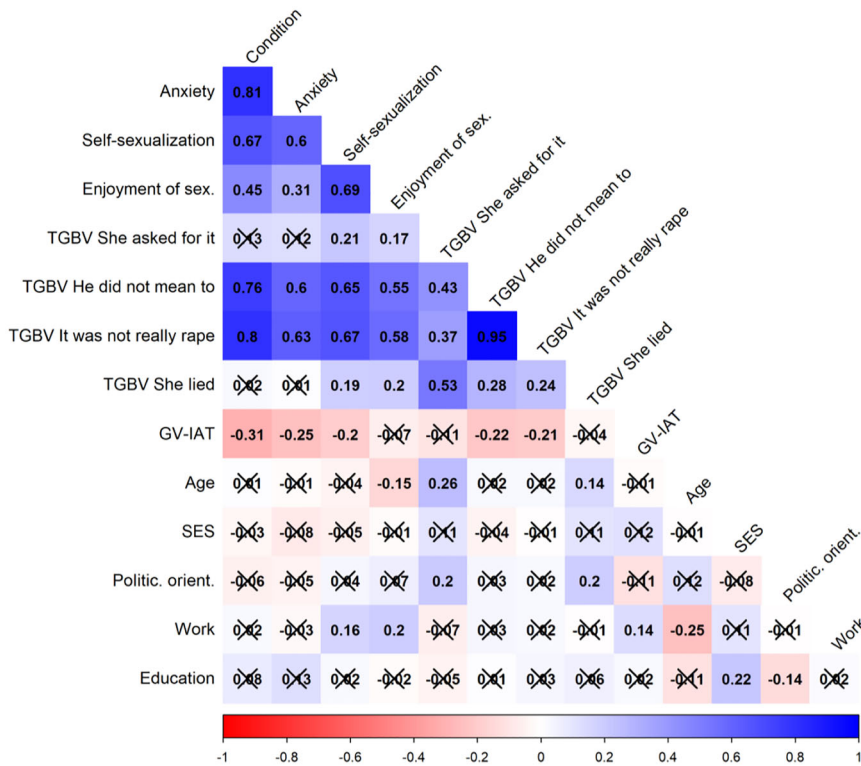


FIGURE 6 Correlations between the variables considered in the study (Study 3). TGBV = Tolerance of Gender-Based Violence; GV-IAT = Gender Violence Implicit Association Test (higher scores indicate a stronger negative implicit attitude towards gender-based violence); SES = Socioeconomic Status. Condition: 0 = All the other experimental conditions, 1 = High inequality and low SES. Work: 0 = Inactive (unemployed, retired), 1 = Active (employed, full-time university student, employed and university student). Education: 0 = Low (less than high school, professional diploma, high school diploma), 1 = High (bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctorate). Correlations with condition, work, and education were estimated using point-biserial correlation. An "X" over the cell indicates a non-significant correlation ($p > .050$).

els of self- and enjoyment of sexualization but were less likely to show positive implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence.

Effects of the experimental manipulation

To test the effect of the experimental manipulation on status anxiety (H10), self-sexualization (H11), enjoyment of sexualization (H12), and tolerance of gender-based violence (H13), I conducted the same analysis performed in Study 2.² Based on variable-level correlations, working status was included as covariate for self-sexualization, age and working status for enjoyment of sexualization, age and political orientation for tolerance of gender-based violence.

In addition, I ran a 2 (inequality: low vs. high) $\times$ 2 (SES: low vs. high) ANOVA on implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence to test H15. The implicit data were processed using the scoring method by Greenwald et al. (2003). On this basis, three participants were excluded from the anal-

ysis due to having over 10% of their trials with response times shorter than 300 ms.⁵ Note that a higher score indicates a stronger implicit association between gender-based violence and negative categories, as well as between non-violence-related stimuli and positive categories. Working status was included as covariates in this model.

Status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and GV-IAT. As reported in Table 4, I found main effects of inequality and SES. Participants in the high inequality reported more status anxiety ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.56$), self-sexualization ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .97$), and enjoyment of sexualization ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.14$) than those in the low inequality ($M = 2.36$, $SD = .86$ for status anxiety; $M = 1.89$, $SD = .64$ for self-sexualization; $M = 1.95$, $SD = .83$ for enjoyment of sexualization). A non-significant main effect of inequality was observed for implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence ($M = .99$, $SD = .42$ for high inequality; $M = 1.07$, $SD = .29$ for low inequality). Also, participants assigned to the low SES group reported greater status anxiety ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.15$), self-sexualization ($M = 2.61$, $SD = .96$), enjoyment of sexualization ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.14$), and positive implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence ($M = .95$, $SD = .42$) compared to those assigned to the high SES group ($M = 1.81$, $SD = .76$ for status anxiety; $M = 1.93$, $SD = .70$ for self-sexualization; $M = 2.19$, $SD = .99$ for enjoyment of sexualization; $M = 1.11$, $SD = .28$ for the GV-IAT).

Importantly, participants in the low SES group reported more status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and positive implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence when they were exposed to high inequality compared to low inequality (see Table 4 and Figure 7).

Tolerance of gender-based violence. As for tolerance of gender-based violence, significant multivariate main effects were found for inequality, Wilks Lambda = .51, $F(4, 202) = 47.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .49$, 95% CI [.38, .56], for SES, Wilks Lambda = .60, $F(4, 202) = 34.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .40$, 95% [.29, .48], and for the interaction effect, Wilks Lambda = .61, $F(4, 202) = 32.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$, 95% [.28, .47].

As shown in Table 5, for the “she asked for it” and “she lied” dimensions, the main effect of inequality (all means were between 1.16 and 1.31) and the interaction effect inequality $\times$ SES (all means were between 1.13 and 1.38) were not significant. The main effect of SES was not significant for “she lied” ($M = 1.17$, $SD = .25$ for high SES and $M = 1.19$, $SD = .27$ for low SES) but significant for “she asked for it.” Participants in the low SES ($M = 1.33$, $SD = .44$) reported more tolerance on this dimension than those in the high SES ($M = 1.23$, $SD = .35$).

Statistically significant effects were found for the “he did not mean to” and “it was not really rape” dimensions (see Table 5). As for inequality, I found that participants in the high inequality reported more tolerance concerning both dimensions ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.17$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.22$ for “it was not really rape”) than those in the low inequality ($M = 1.45$, $SD = .42$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 1.10$, $SD = .30$ for “it was not really rape”). A similar pattern emerged for participants assigned to the low SES group ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.12$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.22$ for “it was not really rape”) compared to those assigned to the high SES group ($M = 1.45$, $SD = .56$ for “he did not mean to”; $M = 1.20$, $SD = .53$ for “it was

⁵ The GV-IAT data were processed using the scoring method suggested by Greenwald et al. (2003), with the procedure automatically performed by the IATgen tool. This method involves: (1) using data from blocks 3, 4, 6, and 7; (2) removing trials where response times exceed 10,000 ms; (3) excluding participants if more than 10% of their trials have response times shorter than 300 ms; (4) calculating one overall standard deviation for all trials in blocks 3 and 6, and a separate standard deviation for trials in blocks 4 and 7; (5) calculating the average response time for each trial in blocks 3, 4, 6, and 7; (6) computing the mean difference between the averages from blocks 6 and 3, and between blocks 7 and 4; (7) dividing each mean difference by its corresponding standard deviation; and (8) calculating the D score as the average of these two ratios.

TABLE 4 ANOVAs for status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence (Study 3).

Status anxiety						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	63.59	1, 207	< .001	.24	.14	.33
Main effect of SES	323.20	1, 207	< .001	.61	.53	.67
Interaction effect	119.16	1, 207	< .001	.37	.27	.45
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	185.24	1, 207	< .001	.47	.38	.55
<i>High SES group</i>	4.17	1, 207	.042	.02	.00	.07
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	22.60	1, 207	< .001	.10	.03	.18
<i>High inequality</i>	465.57	1, 207	< .001	.69	.63	.74
Self-sexualization						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	63.10	1, 206	< .001	.23	.14	.33
Main effect of SES	51.63	1, 206	< .001	.20	.11	.29
Interaction effect	41.96	1, 206	< .001	.17	.09	.26
Working status	9.14	1, 206	.003	.04	.01	.11
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	108.12	1, 206	< .001	.34	.24	.43
<i>High SES group</i>	1.02	1, 206	.315	.01	.00	.04
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	.22	1, 206	.641	.00	.00	.03
<i>High inequality</i>	104.15	1, 206	< .001	.34	.24	.42
Enjoyment of sexualization						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	33.62	1, 205	< .001	.14	.06	.23
Main effect of SES	6.52	1, 205	.011	.03	.00	.09
Interaction effect	19.65	1, 205	< .001	.09	.03	.17
Age	3.61	1, 205	.059	.02	.00	.07
Working status	6.93	1, 205	.009	.03	.00	.09
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	54.64	1, 205	< .001	.21	.12	.31
<i>High SES group</i>	.87	1, 205	.352	.00	.00	.04
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	1.63	1, 205	.203	.01	.00	.05
<i>High inequality</i>	27.30	1, 205	< .001	.12	.05	.20

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)**Implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence**

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	3.41	1, 203	.066	.02	.00	.07
Main effect of SES	10.49	1, 203	.001	.05	.01	.12
Interaction effect	7.71	1, 203	.006	.04	.00	.10
Working status	5.05	1, 203	.026	.02	.00	.08
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	11.19	1, 203	.001	.05	.01	.12
<i>High SES group</i>	.42	1, 203	.519	.00	.00	.03
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	.10	1, 203	.759	.00	.00	.02
<i>High inequality</i>	20.14	1, 203	< .001	.09	.03	.17

Note: Educational level: 0 = Low, 1 = High; Working status: 0 = Inactive, 1 = Active.

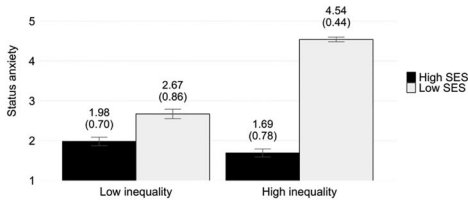
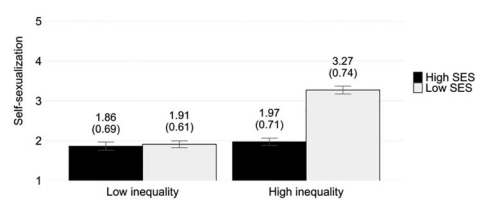
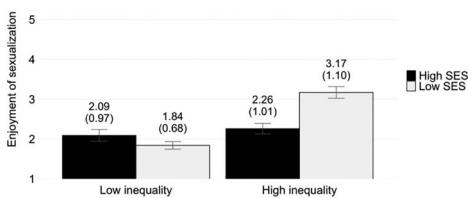
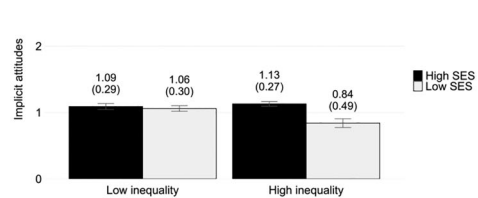
Panel A**Panel B****Panel C****Panel D**

FIGURE 7 Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for status anxiety (Panel A), self-sexualization (Panel B), enjoyment of sexualization (Panel C), and implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence (Panel D) as a function of the experimental manipulation (Study 3).

SES = Socioeconomic status. Error bars are standard errors of means. In Panel D, lower scores indicate more positive implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence.

not really rape"). Regarding the interaction effect, I found that participants in the low SES group reported greater tolerance on both dimensions when they were exposed to high compared to low inequality (see Figure 8).

Indirect effects

To test H14 and H16, namely, the indirect effect of the experimental manipulation to the four dimensions of gender-based violence and the GV-IAT score through status anxiety, self-

TABLE 5 Follow-up univariate ANOVAs for the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence (Study 3).

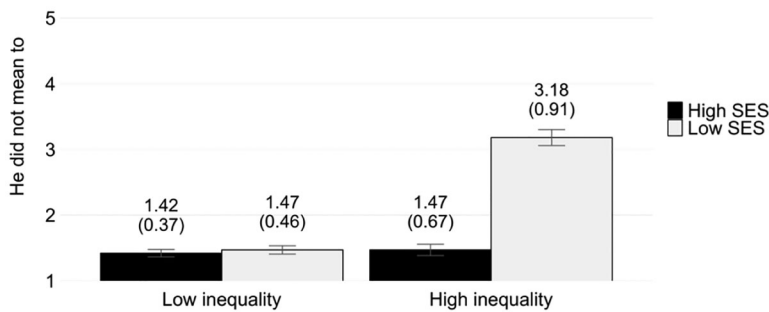
“She asked for it”						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	3.02	1, 205	.084	.02	.00	.06
Main effect of SES	3.89	1, 205	.050	.02	.00	.07
Interaction effect	.26	1, 205	.608	.00	.00	.03
Age	12.02	1, 205	.001	.06	.01	.13
Political orientation	8.62	1, 205	.004	.04	.00	.10
“He did not mean to”						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	94.94	1, 205	< .001	.32	.22	.41
Main effect of SES	96.56	1, 205	< .001	.32	.22	.41
Interaction effect	83.32	1, 205	< .001	.29	.19	.38
Age	.01	1, 205	.933	.00	.00	.01
Political orientation	3.21	1, 205	.075	.02	.00	.06
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	185.34	1, 205	< .001	.48	.38	.55
<i>High SES group</i>	.18	1, 205	.673	.00	.00	.03
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	.22	1, 205	.643	.00	.00	.03
<i>High inequality</i>	200.32	1, 205	< .001	.49	.40	.57
“It was not really rape”						
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	164.07	1, 205	< .001	.45	.35	.52
Main effect of SES	121.06	1, 205	< .001	.37	.27	.46
Interaction effect	94.52	1, 205	< .001	.32	.22	.41
Age	.41	1, 205	.841	.00	.00	.03
Political orientation	3.02	1, 205	.084	.02	.00	.06
Simple effects						
Effect of inequality						
<i>Low SES group</i>	264.18	1, 205	< .001	.56	.48	.63
<i>High SES group</i>	4.56	1, 205	.034	.02	.00	.08
Effect of status						
<i>Low inequality</i>	.73	1, 205	.394	.00	.00	.04
<i>High inequality</i>	239.50	1, 205	< .001	.54	.45	.61

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

“She lied”	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Main effect of inequality	1.77	1, 205	.184	.01	.00	.05
Main effect of SES	.77	1, 205	.383	.00	.00	.04
Interaction effect	.85	1, 205	.356	.00	.00	.04
Age	3.22	1, 205	.074	.02	.00	.06
Political orientation	8.19	1, 205	.005	.04	.00	.10

Panel A



Panel B

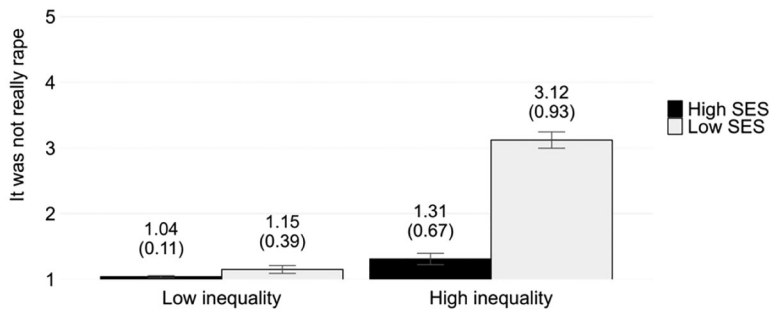


FIGURE 8 Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for the “he did not mean to” (Panel A) and “it was not really rape” (Panel B) dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence as a function of the experimental manipulation (Study 3).

SES = Socioeconomic Status. Error bars are standard errors of means.

sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization, I estimated a structural equation model in AMOS (Arbuckle, 2014) using standardized scores.³ As in the previous study, I created three dummy variables using the condition of interest (high inequality and low SES) as the reference category, and the other three as comparison groups. Additionally, as in Studies 1 and 2, error terms of the four variables concerning tolerance of gender-based violence were allowed to correlate, as they represent dimensions of the same underlying construct. A resid-

TABLE 6 Indirect effects of the experimental condition on the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence and implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence through status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization (Study 3).

Outcome variable	Condition	β	SE	p	90% CI	
					Lower	Upper
She asked for it	Dummy 1	-.05	.03	.026	-.12	-.01
	Dummy 2	-.03	.02	.028	-.08	-.01
	Dummy 3	-.04	.02	.026	-.09	-.01
He did not mean to	Dummy 1	-.09	.03	.001	-.15	-.04
	Dummy 2	-.05	.02	.001	-.10	-.02
	Dummy 3	-.07	.02	.001	-.12	-.03
It was not really rape	Dummy 1	-.09	.03	.001	-.16	-.04
	Dummy 2	-.05	.02	.001	-.10	-.03
	Dummy 3	-.07	.02	.001	-.13	-.04
She lied	Dummy 1	-.08	.03	.002	-.15	-.03
	Dummy 2	-.05	.02	.002	-.10	-.02
	Dummy 3	-.06	.03	.002	-.12	-.02
GV-IAT	Dummy 1	-.01	.02	.485	-.06	.03
	Dummy 2	-.01	.02	.485	-.04	.02
	Dummy 3	-.01	.02	.460	-.05	.03

Notes: Dummy 1 = high inequality and low SES versus high inequality and high SES; Dummy 2 = high inequality and low SES versus low inequality and low SES; Dummy 3 = high inequality and low SES versus low inequality and high SES.
Abbreviation: GV-IAT, gender violence implicit association test.

ual correlation was also specified between self-sexualization and enjoyment of sexualization. Based on correlational findings, I included age, political orientation, and working status as covariates.

The model showed good fit, $\chi^2(36) = 72.12$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .070, 90% CI [.046, .093], PCLOSE = .083, CFI = .977, TLI = .942, GFI = .956. Compared to the reference condition (high inequality and low SES), all other experimental conditions were associated with lower levels of status anxiety (dummy 1: $\beta = -.97$, $SE = .10$; dummy 2: $\beta = -.60$, $SE = .10$; dummy 3: $\beta = -.77$, $SE = .11$; all $ps < .001$). In turn, status anxiety positively predicted self-sexualization ($\beta = .60$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), which subsequently predicted greater enjoyment of sexualization ($\beta = .53$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). Enjoyment of sexualization was positively associated with all four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence, namely, “he did not mean to” ($\beta = .28$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$), “it was not really rape” ($\beta = .28$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$), “she asked for it” ($\beta = .17$, $SE = .07$, $p = .012$), and “she lied” ($\beta = .25$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$).

As shown in Table 6, the results concerning indirect effects revealed significant pathways for all four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence, but not for the GV-IAT score. Notably, the amount of explained variance was relatively low for GV-IAT ($R^2 = .13$), as well as for the items “she lied” ($R^2 = .10$) and “she asked for it” ($R^2 = .11$), while it was higher for “it was not really rape” ($R^2 = .68$) and “he did not mean to” ($R^2 = .60$).

Discussion

Through this study, I replicated the findings of Studies 1 and 2. Italian heterosexual women in the high inequality and low SES condition reported higher status anxiety (H10), self-sexualization (H11), enjoyment of sexualization (H12), and tolerance of gender-based violence, only in terms of the minimization of male behavior, compared to the participants in all other experimental conditions. This result partially supported H13. In addition, I supported H14 by verifying the indirect effects of high inequality and low SES on the four dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence via status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization. Notably, I found that the women who imagined their lives in an unequal society with low SES reported more positive implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence (H15) compared to the participants in all other conditions. In contrast to H16, this effect was not mediated by higher levels of status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization.

Importantly, the model accounted for substantially greater variance in dimensions related to the minimization of male behavior than in those reflecting victim-blaming, with particularly low explained variance observed for the implicit measure. This pattern suggests that the psychological processes examined in the present study are more closely associated with consciously endorsed narratives that justify or downplay male behavior, rather than with the automatic associations captured by the implicit measure.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Economic inequality has been widely studied for its impact on health-related outcomes, such as reduced life expectancy and increased vulnerability to disease (Rufrancos et al., 2013; Vezzoli et al., 2023; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). However, beyond these well-documented effects, economic disparities also shape sociopsychological processes that influence interpersonal relationships and societal attitudes. Despite the existence of reports documenting the prevalence of violence against women and its greater acceptance in more unequal societies, one area that has received relatively little attention in experimental psychology is whether and how perceived economic inequality affects tolerance of gender-based violence. To fill this gap, the present research aimed to examine the relationship between economic inequality and tolerance of gender-based violence through an experimental design, with a specific focus on the underlying psychological mechanisms.

Across three studies involving Italian heterosexual women, I provided converging evidence that higher levels of perceived economic inequality are associated with increased status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization. Furthermore, the current findings suggest that these psychological factors contribute to greater tolerance of gender-based violence, particularly in the form of minimization of male behavior. These results extend previous literature on economic inequality by demonstrating that its consequences go beyond material deprivation and health outcomes, impacting sociopsychological dynamics in ways that may reinforce gender hierarchies. Previous research has established that individuals in highly unequal societies tend to experience heightened status anxiety (e.g., Delhey et al., 2017; Jetten et al., 2017). The current work adds a tile to this picture, suggesting that anxiety may lead to behaviors and attitudes that normalize gender-based violence. Specifically, I found that self-sexualization and enjoyment of sexualization function as mediating processes through which the status anxiety induced by perceived disparities affects the acceptance of gender-based violence. This is in line with prior

findings showing that women's self-perception and social behaviors are shaped by economic inequalities, leading them to engage in strategies that may inadvertently amplify harmful norms (Blake & Brooks, 2019a, 2019b).

The experimental manipulation I used in Studies 2 and 3 further supports the causal role of perceived economic inequality and SES in shaping these processes. The women who imagined themselves living in a highly unequal society while occupying a low-status position exhibited the highest levels of status anxiety, self-sexualization, enjoyment of sexualization, and tolerance of gender-based violence. These findings suggest that the mere perception of economic disparity, even in a fictional context, is sufficient to trigger psychological and behavioral patterns that align with real-world inequalities. This reinforces the idea that economic disparities do not merely create external constraints but actively shape individual cognition, emotion, and social attitudes (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2014).

Notably, the use of an implicit measure in Study 3 allowed me to confirm that these attitudes may not simply be the result of conscious rationalization or social desirability bias but instead reflect deeply internalized beliefs. The fact that the participants in the high inequality and low SES condition displayed stronger implicit positive attitudes toward gender-based violence highlights how perceived economic disparities shape psychological realities beyond explicit awareness (Payne et al., 2017). The cognitive embedding of these associations suggests that individuals are socialized into economic hierarchies in ways that extend beyond direct experiences, reinforcing systemic inequalities through deeply ingrained mental frameworks (Piff et al., 2012). However, the fact that the indirect effect in Study 3 did not reach significance when considering the implicit measure as the outcome suggests that the psychological mechanisms examined—status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization—may play a stronger role in shaping consciously endorsed attitudes rather than automatic associations. It is possible that implicit attitudes toward gender-based violence are influenced by broader cultural narratives and early socialization processes that extend beyond the specific situational factors examined in this research.

Interestingly, the results across all studies consistently showed that the effects of perceived economic inequality on tolerance of gender-based violence were more pronounced for the minimization of male behavior than for victim-blaming. While it is concerning that economic inequality fosters attitudes that downplay male-perpetrated violence, it is noteworthy that women involved in the present studies did not internalize these justifications in ways that led them to blame other women. These results suggest the presence of a form of solidarity or “sisterhood” among women, where, despite the normalization of male behavior, they resist narratives that hold female victims responsible for their victimization. This finding aligns with research on ingroup bias and collective resilience, highlighting that shared experiences of gendered disadvantage may foster empathy and mutual support rather than division (Becker and Wright, 2011; Glick et al., 2004).

Related to this point, an important pattern that emerged in the present research concerns the differences in explained variance across the various dimensions of tolerance of gender-based violence. In particular, the proposed model consistently accounted for substantially more variance in the dimensions referring to the minimization of male behavior than in those reflecting explicit victim-blaming. The psychological processes examined here may thus operate more strongly through the normalization or downplaying of male behavior rather than through the endorsement of narratives that explicitly blame female victims. In this context, non-significant findings and variability in model fit across the studies also warrant consideration. Although many of the hypothesized associations between variables were statistically significant, the overall fit of the structural model was not consistently strong, particularly in Study 2. This suggests that while per-

ceived economic inequality, status anxiety, and sexualization processes are meaningfully related to attitudes toward gender-based violence, the relationships among these constructs may be more complex than captured by the present model. In addition, some of the hypothesized indirect effects were not consistently supported. Rather than contradicting the theoretical framework, these results may indicate that the proposed psychological mechanisms act selectively, influencing some forms of violence justification more than others.

Notably, the model showed a better overall fit in Study 3, where the implicit measure of gender-based violence was included. Although the GV-IAT was not directly associated with the experimental manipulation and showed relatively low explained variance, its inclusion may have contributed to capturing a broader attitudinal structure, thereby improving the coherence of the model at a global level. At the same time, the lack of significant indirect effects for the implicit outcome suggests that the psychological mechanisms examined in the present research may function more strongly at the level of explicit, consciously endorsed attitudes than at the level of automatic associations.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present research contributes to the literature on economic inequality and gender relations by highlighting the psychological mechanisms through which perceived inequality shapes women's tolerance of gender-based violence. Theoretically, these findings expand the focus of inequality research beyond health and material deprivation (e.g., Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010, 2017), showing that inequality also operates at the level of subjective experience, influencing women's identity, behaviors, and attitudes toward violence. By integrating status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization into the analysis, this work advances our understanding of how inequality becomes internalized and translated into gendered practices that may perpetuate patriarchal norms. Importantly, the results suggest that the processes observed cannot be understood simply as passive acceptance of subordination. Instead, they may represent adaptive strategies—forms of survival within constrained socioeconomic and cultural contexts—whereby women attempt to secure a sense of stability, belonging, or limited agency by aligning themselves with socially valued, albeit sexualized, roles.

From a practical standpoint, the present findings offer useful insights for policymakers and advocates, suggesting that interventions aimed at reducing tolerance of gender-based violence cannot be limited to addressing material inequalities alone but should also target perceptions of inequality and the cultural scripts through which women navigate them. Policies that reduce structural inequality are crucial because they shape the broader context from which perceptions arise; however, complementary strategies that address subjective perceptions—such as public education campaigns, media literacy programs, and initiatives that challenge beauty norms and sexualized representations—are equally important. In particular, interventions should focus on reducing the pressures and cultural expectations that link women's value to sexualized self-presentation. This includes promoting alternative models of status that emphasize competence, autonomy, and equal participation. Educational initiatives can foster critical awareness of how inequality shapes everyday interactions, while institutional reforms can expand women's opportunities for recognition in domains unrelated to appearance. Importantly, such efforts should not individualize the problem or place responsibility on women's choices but rather target the broader structural and cultural forces that sustain these dynamics.

Moreover, by uncovering that the effects of perceived inequality are especially visible in the minimization of male behavior rather than in victim-blaming, the findings suggest that preventive programs should prioritize challenging cultural narratives that normalize male misconduct, while simultaneously fostering solidarity among women. Overall, the present research underscores the need for integrated approaches that combine structural reforms, cultural change, and psychological awareness in order to dismantle the subtle pathways through which inequality sustains gender-based violence.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the current research sheds light on important dynamics, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample involved in the three studies focused exclusively on Italian heterosexual women, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other gender, cultural, and sexual identity groups. Future research should explore whether similar mechanisms exert influence among individuals of diverse gender identities and cultures. Given that all three studies were conducted in Italy—a context marked by relatively high economic inequality and persistent gender gaps—cross-cultural work should test whether the strength of these effects varies across settings that differ in economic inequality, welfare regimes, and opportunities for women to attain status through non-appearance-based pathways. I would expect stronger associations where inequality and precarity are higher and alternative status routes are narrower.

Second, while the experimental manipulation provides causal insights, real-world socioeconomic contexts involve complex interactions that cannot be fully captured in a controlled setting. Longitudinal studies could help determine whether these psychological processes lead to sustained changes in attitudes and behaviors over time. In addition, future experiments could be designed to increase the ecological validity of the manipulation. For instance, rather than relying on fictional scenarios, researchers could provide participants with (alleged) statistical information about economic disparities in their own country and deliver false feedback on their relative socioeconomic position compared to the national population. Such designs would allow for a more engaging and realistic experience, thereby enhancing the external validity of the findings.

Finally, future work should investigate additional factors, such as cultural norms and media exposure, which may interact with economic inequality to shape gender-related attitudes. Media environments saturated with sexualized portrayals of women may amplify the internalization of appearance-based standards, thereby strengthening the link between inequality, self-sexualization, and tolerance of violence. Conversely, exposure to counter-stereotypical narratives and role models could mitigate these effects by offering alternative pathways to recognition and status. Likewise, cultural norms surrounding family, religion, or gender roles may moderate how women interpret economic disparities, influencing whether self-sexualization is perceived as a viable coping strategy or rejected in favor of other forms of resistance. Integrating these dimensions would allow for a more comprehensive account of the sociocultural ecology within which perceived inequality exerts its psychological impact.

CONCLUSIONS

By demonstrating that status anxiety, self-sexualization, and enjoyment of sexualization serve as psychological pathways linking subjective perceptions of inequality to violence acceptance, these

findings underscore the broader social implications of disparities as they are experienced and interpreted by individuals. Although objective inequality remains a crucial structural factor, its effects may be most powerful when translated into subjective perceptions that shape daily interactions and beliefs. Thus, addressing economic inequality is not only a matter of financial justice but also a crucial step toward reducing the social comparisons and anxieties that fuel these perceptions. Policy interventions that reduce inequality may indirectly foster more equitable gender relations by transforming how individuals perceive their relative standing, thereby decreasing societal acceptance of violence against women. Moreover, public awareness campaigns targeting the links between perceived inequality, status concerns, and gender norms could help individuals recognize and challenge internalized beliefs that sustain these dynamics.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Roberta Rosa Valtorta: conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing - original draft, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, writing - review and editing.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

All the studies were conducted after receiving ethical approval from the Commission of the Department of Psychology for minimal risk studies at the University of Milano-Bicocca (approval no. RM-2023-697). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before each data collection.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data, syntax for the analyses, the “Supplementary Material” document, the items, and the experimental manipulation used in Studies 2 and 3 are available on the project’s OSF webpage: <https://osf.io/wh3ax>.

Study 2 and Study 3 were preregistered (Study 2: <https://osf.io/ewky6>; Study 3: <https://osf.io/mv2a6>).

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