

Sexual Harassment: Is it A Case of Gendered Perspective?

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Abstract

Globally, the phenomenon of Sexual harassment has always been looked from a woman's perspective. To date, almost all studies on sexual harassment look at the incidences of sexual harassment, the effects on victims and coping strategies for victims; and in most instances victims are women. There is a dire need to change our understanding of this issue. In order to obtain a more holistic view of this issue, there should be a paradigm shift where the focus should be on the perpetrators. As men are generally the perpetrators, it is about time the phenomenon of sexual harassment is looked from a male perspective in understanding what brought men to engage in the act of sexual harassment.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, gender, masculine, workplace

I. INTRODUCTION

At present, sexual harassment is known as a global social phenomenon that affects all working class, regardless of age, color, ethnicity, social status or work category. It can also occur in different setting such as academic (Mazer & Percival, 1989, Benson & Thompson, 1982), in the public (MacMillan et.al, 2000; Benard & Schlaffer, 1994; Gardner, 1985) and in workplace (Sabitha, 2002a; Dunwoody & Gutek, 1985; Stockdale, 1996). In fact, to date, many researches carried out in many countries and in many contexts, have derived different definitions for this issue. Many theorists have argued that behaviours such as sexual harassment and rape lie on a single continuum of male sexual aggression against women (Goodman et.al, 1993; Pryor, 1987; Koss et.al, 1985). Many researchers in this field have also argued that sexual harassment is about; gaining or retaining power over subordinates by those in position of power of authority. In fact, according to the gender dominance perspective, sexual harassment is a means by which men in higher positions have reinforced their privilege and maintained dominance over women at work and in society (Padavic & Orcutt, 1997; Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993).

This societal arrangement has harnessed men to be powerful actors in the labor market, and women to be targets of sexual harassment because of their lack of power (Kohlman, 2004). It reflects the underlying dynamics of gender and power in our culture (Estrich, 1991; Goodman et.al, 1993). This paper is a conceptual paper that would like to analyse how to date the issue of sexual harassment has always been looked from the women's perspective and why it is about time that this phenomenon is looked from a different dimension which is the men's perspective to help educate men that their actions are wrong in attempt to reduce the incidences of sexual harassment in society at large.

II. GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In the study of sexual harassment, comparisons across global societies are difficult (Parish, Das & Laumann, 2006; Fu, 2005; Haspels, Kasin, Thomas & McCann, 2001; Sbraga & O'Donohue, 2000; Welsh, 1999). This is due to the differences in definition and perception of each society in the world.

However, to understand the dynamics of sexual harassment, it is essential to look at trends globally to understand the severity of the matter and why it is important to explore this problem in a different perspective. The discussion below clearly shows that globally, regardless whether in the United States, Europe or Asia; the focus of sexual harassment study is primarily focused on women and in the instances of the sample comprising of both sexes, the study focused on understanding the trends and problems from the victims' perspective. This further substantiates the fact that men's views and ideas were not integrated in combating this phenomenon.

United States

Two major studies were conducted by the US Merit Systems Protection Board among US Federal Government employees. The first study, conducted in 1980, involved a sample group of 23,000 male and female employees concluded that 42 % of women and 15 % of men were victims of overt sexual harassment in the last two years (Aggarwal, 1992). Follow up study in 1988 reported that about 36,000 federal employees quit their job due to sexual harassment between 1985 and 1987 (Aggarwal, 1992). The US Merit Systems Protection Board estimated that it had cost US\$267 million for the Federal Government in replacing employees who have quit due to sexual harassment (Aggarwal, 1992). This figure itself reflects the severity of this issue when it is translated into financial means.

In 1988, Working Women magazine conducted a sexual harassment survey of Fortune 500 manufacturing and service companies in the US. The study disclosed that at least 15% employees had been sexually harassed within the last 12 months (Aggarwal, 1992). In 1990, the study undertaken by the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division showed that 85% of female lawyers and 78% of male lawyers had experienced one form of sexual harassment (Tengku Omar & Maimunah, 2000). A report published by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW) on a national survey of 2,064 public school students found that 83% of girls compared to 79% of boys reported having experienced sexual harassment (Cummings & Armenta, 2002). In Seattle, a study of city employees found that more than one-third of all respondents involved in the study (579 respondents) were sexually harassed in the previous 24 months of employment (Gutek, 1985). Dunwoody-Miller and Gutek (1985) found that 20 percent of California State civil service employees reported being sexually harassed at work in the previous 5 years from the date of the research. Gutek (1985) in her study on American women suggested that up to 53 percent of women had been sexually harassed some time in their working life.

Europe

In England, the first major account of sexual harassment was catapulted to the public through the effort of Farley's book *Sexual Shakedown : The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job* (1978) that was published with the aim to bring sexual harassment to public attention and make people aware of sexual harassment as a social problem. In United Kingdom too, in 1976, over 9,000 women responded to a survey on sexual harassment conducted by Red Magazine. More than 92% of these respondents reported that they perceived sexual harassment as a problem whereby 9-10% respondents reported that they had personally experienced one or more forms of unwanted sexual attention at the workplace (Dunwoody-Miller & Gutek, 1985).

A study carried out in Sweden reported that 17 percent of about 2,000 women surveyed in 1988 stated that they tolerated obscene language, sexual innuendoes, groping, lewd suggestions and outright rape attempts in the workplace. In Germany, a poll carried out in 1990 in Frankfurt found that 25 percent out of 9,000 women surveyed reported sexual harassment. Another survey in 1992 disclosed that two thirds of women reported being regularly harassed, but nearly 50 percent of their male colleagues did not think their behaviour was offensive (Earle & Madek, 1993). Finland, a nationally representative Women's Safety study reported that 19.6% of women experienced a range of harassment behaviours over a one year period (Heiskanen & Piispa, 1998). In a French National Survey on Violence Against Women, which asked about the incidents both at work and in public areas occurring in the last year, 15% of the women reported some form of harassment (Jaspard, 2001). In Italy, 24.4% of women between the ages of 14 and 59 reported at least one type of sexual harassment in the last three years (Sabbadini, 1998).

Asia

China had only recently begun to undergo a sexual revolution (Farrer, 2000; Sha, Xiong & Gao, 1994). Along with public concern about the new modalities of sexual behavior, media reports suggest that the perceived growth of sexual harassment or *xing sao rao* has also risen in salience as a societal focus, leading to serious counter-harassment efforts by the government (Fu, 2005).

In the year 2000, using data from the Chinese Health and Family Life survey, a study was carried out to see the prevalence of and risk factors for sexual harassment in China. It was the first study to use a general population sample to examine all types of harassment in an Asian country. The dataset was a stratified probability sample with 3,821 participants, and was nationally representative of China's adult population aged 20–64. In total, 12.5% of all women and 15.1% of urban women reported some form of harassment in the past year (Parish et.al, 2006).

Sexual harassment in India is also regarded as a serious issue which has always been not reported due to social stigmas. A survey conducted by the Gender Study Group among students in the University of Delhi found that most women respondents felt that harassment constituted male behaviour that could be overlooked and ignored; it amounted to sexual harassment only when it crossed the threshold of their tolerance (*Report on Sexual Harassment*, 1996). The report of a study conducted by the gender study group of the Delhi University showed that 91.7 per cent of all the inmates of women's hostels and 88.2 per cent of all the women day scholars had faced sexual harassment on the roads and within the campus (*Report on Sexual Harassment*, 1996). Sexual harassment of women is rampant in India and most of it is unreported. It is high time the government passes a special legislation for it and for the redressal of sexually harassed women, wrote well-known lawyer and activist Indira Jaising in a manual on laws relating to sexual harassment at the workplace (*Report on Sexual Harassment*, 1996)

Sexual harassment is known as 'seku hara' in Japan. In 1989, the first sexual harassment study was undertaken by a group known as Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Network. They collected data from 70 complainants and found that out of this, 40 had left their jobs due to their experiences. Their harassers were mostly married men with responsible jobs. A report compiled by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation revealed that 40 percent of working women said that they had experienced some form of sexual harassment. Out of this, 2 percent reported that they were forced to have a relationship (Samirah, 1999).

In the Asian region too, several countries have adopted legislation to address sexual harassment as well. For example, Sri Lanka amended its Penal Code in 1995 to include sexual harassment, defined according to an 'unwelcome' standard. The law states whoever, sexually harasses another person, or by the use of words or actions, causes sexual annoyance or harassment to such other person commits the offence of sexual harassment (*Action Against Sexual Harassment at Work in Asia*, 2001). Elsewhere, Bangladesh enacted the Suppression of Violence Against Women and Children Act in the year 2000. This law states that if any male, trying to illegally satisfy his carnal desires, abuses the modesty of any woman or makes any indecent gesture, his act shall be deemed to be sexual harassment (*Action Against Sexual Harassment at Work in Asia*, 2001).

The Philippines also has an Anti-Sexual Harassment Act, introduced in 1995, to prohibit sexual harassment by anyone having authority, influence, or moral ascendancy over another. A survey conducted in the Philippines reported that 17 percent of 43 unionised and 291 non-unionised establishments had records of cases pertaining to sexual harassment (*Action Against Sexual Harassment at Work in Asia*, 2001). In the Republic of Korea, a study conducted by an Assembly Member of the Democratic Party and the Law Consumer Union of 567 public officers (345 men, 222 women) in Seoul in October 2000 found that almost 70 per cent of women stated that they had experienced sexual harassment. Another survey conducted by the Korean Institute of Criminology in 1999 found that 64 per cent of the women respondents said they had been subjected to verbal harassment, 35 per cent reported physical harassment, 34 percent had experienced visual harassment, and 25 per cent had been forced to attend to men at dinner parties (*Action Against Sexual Harassment at Work in Asia*, 2001).

GENDER & SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Literature on sexual harassment behaviour at works reveals interesting paradox. That is, women are perceived as using sex to their advantage and gaining profit (Fu, 2005; Fiske & Glick, 1995; Bargh & Raymond, 1995; Lipman-Blumen, 1984; Quinn, 1977). On the other hand, men are not perceived as sexual at work. Men usually display more sexual behaviour and benefit from it. However, according to Abbey (1982), men are more likely than women to perceive the world in sexual terms (Terence, Logan & Peters, 2004; Gottfried & Fasenfest, 1984; Davies, 1982). Men are also more likely than women to mistake friendliness for seduction and find the office is a little too exciting with women around (Sabitha, 2002c; Abbey, 1982). Interestingly, men view it differently as according to Gutek (1985), men suggest that sex is present in male-dominated workplaces whether or not women are actually present. This "floating sex" takes the forms of posters, jokes, and sexual metaphors for work, comments, obscene language and the like.

The relationship seems obvious that the more men the more sexualized the work place. The literature on sexual harassment shows a consistent pattern of gender differences, such that women perceive a broader spectrum of behaviours as sexual harassment than men do (Rotunda, Nguyen & Sackett, 2001; Blumenthal, 1998). In addition, men perceive sexually harassing experiences as less severe, less upsetting, less inappropriate, less bothersome, and less threatening than women do (Cochran, Frazier & Olson, 1997; Berdahl, Magley & Waldo, 1996; Marks & Nelson, 1993). Men have also been found to be more tolerant, or accepting, of sexually harassing behaviours in general than are women (Sabitha, 2002b; Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Reilly, Lott, Caldwell & Deluca, 1992).

Popovich and colleagues (1992) also found that gender differences existed in perceptions of sexual harassment, regardless of the form that the sexual harassment took or the consequences of such behaviour. Female raters tended to perceive the incident described as more likely to be sexual harassment, more likely to have an effect on the recipient of the harassing behaviour, and more negative than did male raters. Popovich and colleagues also found in their study that males generally perceived the incident of harassment to be based on attraction, as opposed to females who perceived it to be more power based.

In Mazer and Percival's (1989) study, it was found that gender role stereotypes were significantly related to attitudes to sexual harassment with respondents who endorsed sexist attitudes being more accepting and tolerant of sexual harassment. It was also found that respondents with less sexist attitudes defined more incidents of behaviour as sexual harassment. Foulis and McCabe (1997) study found that gender differences occur as a result of this conditioning and these differences influence attitudes to sexual harassment. Males perceive more situations as being sexual or potentially sexual, and so view sexual harassing behaviour as normal or appropriate; and therefore see sexual harassment as normal flirtation between men and women.

IV. MEN'S KNOWLEDGE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Since the focus of this study is to look at sexual harassment from the men's perspective; it is important to take note of Thomas's (1997) study; whereby in her empirical study on sexual harassment among young and older women, Thomas found that men chose to explain sexual harassment as a 'kind of behaviour that is expected of them as a demonstration of their masculinity', so that they can identify themselves in a macho way; in the presence of other men. Thomas (1997) also reported that the male respondents in her research claimed that women actually enjoyed being the object of men's attention. Sexual harassment is an act of conformity to masculine identities, rather than sexual deviances. Thomas concluded in her research that only when men resist hegemonic masculinity, can the problem of sexual harassment be truly tackled (Thomas, 1997). According to the research done by AWAM, most of the male respondents assume that sexual harassment is a 'normal' male behaviour and women have no choice but to accept it. Therefore, the research proposed that in order to eradicate sexual harassment, misconception of this phenomenon has to be changed (*Behaviour that is inappropriate*, 1997).

There has been minimal research in the area of men's knowledge of sexual harassment. Exploring this aspect of the study is crucial as it will give insights to what are the elements in men's knowledge of this phenomenon that could lead to men committing sexual harassment.

According to Folgero and Fjedstad (1995) and other researchers (Sabitha, 2002c; Lee, 2000); it is difficult to get a consensual explanation on sexual harassment because of the varied perspective this problem has been looked at. Sexual harassment have been explored from the perspective of economic and structure, ideology and psychology stress, factors of structure and ecology, legal definition, general perception, attributing factors from the victim's point and stress and psychology (Rohani, 2005; Bauer & Kleiner, 1995; Fitzgerald et. al, 1994). Others have explored sexual harassment and the relationship between power and threat, men's sexual desire and definitions that have no relations to sexual factors (MacMillon & Welsh, 2000; MacKinnon, 1979).

Another reason why there are differences in the description of sexual harassment is because of the method used to derive the feedback from the respondents (Gruber, 1997). Some researches depend solely on respondents' subjective response to define sexual harassment, whereas others use characteristics, which are more objective. Objective definition refers to sexual behaviour which is specific like sexual touching or forced sexual behaviour which had happened before. Researchers consensually agree on this and have used them as categories (Folgero & Fjedstad, 1995). However, subjective definition refers to how an individual defines and interprets the incident (Folgero & Fjedstad, 1995). For example, respondents in the survey will be asked whether they have experienced sexual harassment at the workplace or not.

In other words, it explores the perceptions of the victim of the incident (Wittemen, 1993). Results show a significant difference between objective and subjective criteria (Barak, Fisher & Houston, 1992). The relationship between objective and subjective definition is also further elaborated in a research by Husbands (1992) in Le Point, France which involves 1,000 males and female workers above 15 years. He found that 48 percent of the respondents did not find a supervisor who invites a female staff who wants a promotion, for a weekend out as an act that reflects sexual harassment. Husbands (1992) also found that 20 percent of the female respondents did not label the superior's behaviour as sexual harassment if he invites female to pose nude to get a job.

Though there are many explanations for sexual harassment, however, many employers in United States use the definition outlined by EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) to describe sexual harassment behaviour (Rimalt, 2005; Rotunda et. al; 2001; Aggarwal, 1992). According to this guideline, sexual harassment is a behaviour which is not invited, requesting sexual favours or any forms of physical and visual sexual behaviour (Aggarwal, 1992). According to this guidelines too, the key to understanding sexual harassment is identifying whether the victim finds the behaviour as uninvited and disturbing (Fitzgerald, 1993). This is because in any country which has an act on sexual harassment, the basis of the complaint would be uninvited behaviour (Husbands, 1992). This is the same with Riger's (1991) view which states the basic factor in sexual harassment is harassment which is related with unwanted sexual elements. In the context of sexual harassment definition, some definition is specific and some covers a broad scope (Osman, 2004; Fineran, 2002; Crocker, 1983). This is because; sexual harassment is a phenomenon which is related to social-cultural, organizational and individual aspects. Besides this, those who have contributed to the study of sexual harassment, are people from varied background like sociology, psychology, organizational psychology and legal (Brewer & Berk, 1982).

V. SEXUAL HARASSMENT : RESEARCH GAPS

The researchers feel that one of the key weaknesses in combating the phenomenon of sexual harassment is that research on men and sexual harassment has not been as extensive as research on women and sexual harassment. However, studies by Pryor, La Vite and Stoller (1993), Pleck (1995), O'Neil (1996) and Kuhn (1984) have paved the way for more research on men's studies on sexuality and gender roles. The research on sexual harassment on men has produced findings which are consonant and at times contradictory (Gruber, 1998; Marks & Nelson, 1993; Jones et. al, 1987; Pryor, 1987). There is also less clarity about the factors which may contribute to sexual harassment or factors that may act as buffer to sexually harassing behaviour amongst men (Terence et. al, 2004; Rosen & Martin, 1998; Popovich et al., 1992). Reasons for this inconclusiveness seem to be more methodological than theoretical. For examples, there have been differences in concepts, measurement of variable, outcomes, populations studied and analytical procedures (Tangri & Hayes, 1997), thereby bringing into question the validity and generalizability of the findings.

Therefore, understanding the men's perception of men's likelihood to sexually will help to identify the factors that influences or differentiates men's understanding of sexual harassment as compared to most studies in sexual harassment which have taken into other factors like victims, models, concepts and coping strategies into consideration. There is a critical need to identify the factors that leads to men's likelihood to sexually harass. Once identified, than these factors can be used as guidelines which can later be developed or reinforced in organization and society at large through the formulation or appropriate intervention mechanism that could change the perspective of sexual harassment amongst men. Although there is previous research regarding gender and sexual harassment which takes into account men and women's perceptions and approach in dealing with sexual harassment (Sabitha, 2002a; Mazlinda, 1999/2000, Welsh, 1999; O'Donohue, 1997; Franke, 1997; Paludi, 1996; Earle & Madek, 1993; Livingstone, 1982), none of these studies have looked at men's perception solely taking into consideration the multiple variables that could lead to men's likelihood to sexually harass. Most studies have also looked at the study of sexual harassment from the descriptive models which primarily describe covariates (Tangri &

VI. CONCLUSION

There is still large amount of men who are still unclear about what is sexual harassment is all about and feels that their sexual attitude is normal for men. This is further substantiated with the fact there is no laws on this behavior in Malaysia and most organizations still do not take report made on sexual harassment seriously. Taking into considerations that there is a general lack of knowledge on the real definition of sexual harassment amongst men, it can be concluded that sexual harassment should not be viewed as a personal problem but a social problem.

Therefore, this paper proposes that men's knowledge on sexual harassment should be increased in combating this problem. Until this problem is viewed from the a victim's point of view; and analyzing sexual harassment from a woman's perspective, the issue of sexual harassment will always be seen as a problem. The perspective of men has to be incorporated in tandem with looking at means of overcoming this problem.

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