

Understanding Sexual Harassment: Predictors and Consequences

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Abstract

Sexual harassment represents one of the most prevalent forms of dysfunctional behavior observed in the workplace today. More studies need to be done not only for understanding the issues, predictors and consequences of sexual harassment but also to identify related theories in understanding the sexual discrimination at the workplaces. More local empirical evidences are needed to understand employees' level of awareness towards sexual harassment and their experience of sexual harassment incidences at the workplace locally. It should also be noted that all companies should have their sexual harassment policy at the workplace. The sexual harassment policy should be distributed to all organizational members as to ensure the organizational members will aware that there is a zero tolerance towards harassing behavior. However, the tolerance towards sexual harassment also depends to the individual understanding. As such, this study will discuss in details the definition, predictors and consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace in order to equip women the knowledge on the nature of sexual harassment.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, predictors, consequences

1. Introduction

Just in mid 1970s, sexual harassment was accepted as a form of gender discrimination in United State of America under the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 1976, the first sexual harassment case was held in United State of America where the harasser using inappropriate language and sexually harassing female colleagues when they worked together while the first sexual harassment reported case was on 1975 in Arizona, United State (Ishak et al., 2004).

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Many countries outside of United States have claimed that they have little sexual harassment compared to the United States (Fiedler and Blanco, 2006). Dayang Sofia (2006) reported that, in United State, about 50% to 85% cases of sexual harassment had been reported. While in United Kingdom was 73% and the Asian country such as Japan has 25% reported cases.

2. Definition of Sexual Harassment

Definition of sexual harassment is too subjective. Different interpretation had been provided by several recent studies, legal bodies and code of practice of a particular organization. A number of previous researches have applied the guideline of sexual harassment definition as provide by Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission such as Foulis and Marita (1997) and a few others.

Sexual harassment is defined as:

“Any unwanted or uninvited sexual behavior which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating or humiliating. It has nothing to do with mutual attraction or friendship. (“The Sex Discrimination Act 1984: Sexual Harassment – Knowing Your Rights”)

The definition of sexual harassment cover two (2) categories of sexual harassment.

The first harassing behavior refers to sexual coercion or quid pro quo harassment. Failure to comply with the decisions may lead to non-employment, denial of training and promotional opportunities, demotion, poor work assignments, or dismissal (Sabitha, 1999). The second categories is sexual annoyance where it related to create a hostile working environment and might be no direct contractual dimensions involved (Sabitha, 1999).

In Malaysia, Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace 1999 defined sexual harassment as:

“Any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature having the effect of verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological or physical harassment:

- (i) That might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by the recipient as placing a condition of a sexual nature on his/her employment; Or

- (ii) That might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by the recipient as an offence or humiliation, or a threat to her/his well being, but has no direct link to his/her employment.”

Based on these three (3) definitions, generally sexual harassment is a kind of behavior that not being tolerated and unacceptable either in verbal or physical. Equipped with a deep understanding of the basic construct of sexual harassment definition, people will notice what is going right and not meant. As mention by U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the common sexual harassment complaint are unwelcome jokes, gestures or comments of a sexual nature, unwelcome displaying of sexually-suggestive objects or pictures, unwelcome flirting, repeated and unwanted sexual advances, touching and other unwanted bodily contact, or impeding or blocking movements.

Browne (2006) reported that many cases involve complaints that the work atmosphere is generally ‘sexualized’ – filled with sexually provocative pictures, sexual jokes, sexist comments, and the like. Because of this ‘sexualized’ atmosphere, peoples are immune with those sexual behaviors such as sexual jokes and so forth. The question is either employee is already known that the behavior is a part of sexual harassment but they just ignore it or maybe they are unrealized that actually they are being harassed.

3. Predictors of Sexual Harassment

Just there is more opportunity to the factor to be occurred, therefore the chance of occurrence of sexual harassment to be happen is high (Hodson, 2008). In order to support the concrete argument, it is essential to recognize the factors that influence sexual harassment. Among the factors that contribute to sexual harassment are individual factor, organizational factor, workplace factor and environment factor.

3.1 Individual factor

Referred to the demographic factors of neither perpetrators nor the victims themselves. It covers the gender, gender role, age, gender role stereotype, experience of employees and a few others.

The perpetrator always being referred to males and the victims always referred to females. Despite this is a common perception of peoples about the gender roles on the occurrence of sexual harassment (Sundharesh and Hemalatha, 2013), a few recent studies had proved it such as reported by Gutek (1985) and Evelyn et al. (2007). As noted by Charney & Russel, 1994 (cited in Foulis & McCabe, 1997), it may be argued that males, who are usually the perpetrators of this type of behavior, are carrying out behavior that they consider to be appropriate for their gender role. Ellis and Symons (1990) also reported that men are fantasizing about twice as many different partners per day as did women. This shows that males are more attracted towards sex and potentially high to act as sexual harasser. However, contra with result studied by Woods et al (2009) where behavioral types such as gender harassment was not reliable with cross-versus intraracial sexual harassment.

Women also might be the main element as the individual factor which contributes to the occurrence of sexual violence. As cited in Margaret A. Lucero, Robert E. Allen & Karen L. Middleton (2006), traditional role men fulfill masculine roles such as being the initiator of sexual activity, while women behave in accord with feminine roles such as being sex object (Stockdale, Visio, & Batra, 1999). Koss et al. (1994) also reported that most perpetrators are male and most victims female. Besides gender, the level of individual's self esteem and sexual believe also will predict the occurrence of workplace sexual harassment (Dekker and Barling, 1998).

3.2 Organizational Factor

Organizational attention and tolerance towards sexual harassment also give a big impact to the occurrence of sexual harassment cases. Without full attention and behaved perfunctorily towards the sexual harassment issue, the potential harasser tend to do sexual harassment is high. Organizations facilitate sexual harassment through power differentials that occur from the hierarchical structures (Tangri et al., 1992 in O'Hare and O'Donohue (1998).

Recent studies had discussed which is organization factor could be the one of the predictor of sexual harassment such as O'Hare and O'Donohue (1998).

They reported that contact with the opposite sex on the job, sexual ratio between men and women on workplace, occupational norms, job function, jobs alternative, and availability of grievance procedures may contributing to the incidence of sexual harassment.

These also support by Dekker and Barling (1998) where the worksite, broader culture of organization, availability of sexual harassment policy and grievance procedure could be the organizational predictor of workplace sexual harassment. In a research done locally by Ishak et al. (2004) also support that in the organizational structure through the hierarchical and authority, someone will use his power and status such as the supervisor level to fulfill his sexual needed and satisfaction.

3.3 Work Environment Factor

As O'Hare and O'Donohue (1998) commented that characteristics of the work environment such as sexist attitudes among co-worker, unprofessional work environment, and skewed sex ratios in the workplace are associated with the occurrence of sexual harassment in worksite. An unprofessional work environment is when the employee does something that informal and not a part of the job. Sexual harassment also might be happen either in male dominance or female dominance. In the same study, it reported that those female employees will experience more sexual harassment in imbalance number of male and female. Contra with a research done by Ohio State University (2008), it reported that female employee experienced more sexual harassment in work group with balance of female and male workers. Regardless the ratio of gender in a workplace, it still being one of the factor that can contribute towards the occurrence of sexual harassment in the workplace.

3.4 Job Related Factor

Job related perspective is referring to the nature of the job that may encourage the occurrence of sexual harassment in the worksite. Because of young women are defined as (hetero) sexually attractive, they are the preferred workers in certain serving jobs (Williams et al., 1999). Hodson et al. (2008) found that the characteristics of a person's job also influenced the likelihood and type of harassment.

In other research, Browne (2006) reported that a number of female clerks filed charges of sexual harassment. Some male customers were misunderstood and interpret the friendliness of clerk such as smile and make eye contact as flirtatious behavior which led to sexual comments, propositions and stalking.

Job related factor also related with the traditional job characteristic. As such, Evelyn, Richard and Ryan (2007) reported that men in men's traditional occupation types provided the highest ratings of harassment, followed by men in neutral occupations; men in women's traditional occupation types provided the lowest ratings.

4. Consequences of Sexual Harassment

Studying harassment in the workplace is important because of the many negative consequences associated with it (Salin, 2007). European Union Commission reported that almost all people suffering sexual harassment reported negative consequences both in their private lives and relating to their job (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2003). This also support by Dekker and Barling (1998) where previous researches have shown that sexual harassment victims frequently suffer from the same type of problems associated with other major workplace stressors. Consequences of sexual harassment that been studied by various researchers were look into a few different angles. Most of the previous researches reported that sexual harassment experiences will cause the low job performance and low job satisfaction (e.g.: Darius et al., (2008); Ronald (1995); Wiley-Blackwell (2008) and Ishak and Ching (2001).

Six potential attitudinal and behavioral consequences of sexual harassment were indicated by Ronald (1995). They are less job satisfaction, and overall satisfaction with the firm, had greater intention to quit, were more likely to have personally experienced bias in the firm, less optimistic views on obtaining from the process of reporting harassment, and feel the firm are less committed to treat employees fairly.

In other findings by Rebecca and Stephan (1996), sexual harassment experience will cause the victims tend to get psychological trauma and affect the individual's emotional and psychological well-being. Besides it affects the emotion and psychological of individual, sexual harassment also will contribute to the low productivity and increase cost to the victim.

In the same study, Rebecca and Stephan (1996) commented that costs of sexual harassment are estimated to be quite high, attributable in voluntary turnover and choose to leave their jobs because of the harassment, payment of sick leave to those who miss work in an attempt to avoid further harassment, and reduced individual and work-group productivity.

Researches done in South African had proven the sexual harassment consequences give a big impact to individuals and companies as well. Some of the costs that company will bear because of sexual harassment matters are low productivity, morale and motivation of its employees. "Quid pro quo" harassment also seems to be a high overhead cost to company because the harasser spend much company money as he bound in purely contractual term of employment between him and the victim. For instance perks, hotel and travelling cost and other personal interest rather than business purposes. Sexual harassment also forces the company to suffer bad image and reputation among the staffs, customer and general public as well. Since most of the peoples noticed that sexual harassment is an illegal behavior (Takeyama and Kleiner, 1998), the incidences of sexual harassment in the workplace may tarnish the company's image. As such, many of the sexual harassment cases were not reported by the employers because it may tarnish their reputation, image and goodwill.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The attitude and tolerance of employee towards the sexual harassment issues actually will help in combating the violence from the first place. The sexual harassment issue is seems like cannot be fully eliminated. However, the initiative to reduce the case in minimal is possible if the employees and other peoples aware with the cause and effect of sexual harassment. Awareness towards sexual harassment is depends on the understanding of employee pertaining to the definition and concept of sexual harassment behavior. To what extent the employee in a workplace understand about sexual harassment is depending on several factor such as their effort to learn about sexual harassment, effort by other party to make people aware about sexual harassment for instance through campaign and also from the experience of the employees themselves. Sexual harassment experienced victim sometime they do not report the case because of some reason.

They should be encouraged to make complaint on that particular case so that organization can take appropriate action internally before it bring forward to higher legal constitutions if it is unresolved. Organizational climate and the management norm also might influence the attitude of employee towards sexual harassment.

A well administered procedure in dealing with the sexual harassment issue in a company will be able to enhance the employee awareness on company effort in order to eradicate the matter.

Future study may investigate the tolerance towards sexual harassment at different job level. Different job level such as executive and non executive level may provide different result due to different nature of job. As an example, McCabe and Hardman (2005) had conducted two studies which are comparing the result from blue collar organization and white collar organization. Consequently, the results were different in term of experience, attitude and their perception.

Besides, all organization including the small and medium enterprise should develop the zero tolerance towards harassing behavior so that the incidences of sexual harassment can be avoided earlier.

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