PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT – FOCUS ON MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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Sexual harassment has been recognized as a problem not only among workers in the workplace but is also a rising problem among the youth. Youth may not fully understand what constitutes sexual harassment. Therefore, they can be easily victimized. This study aims to identify the degree of awareness of sexual harassment and the different perceptions of sexual harassment among undergraduates in Malaysia; across gender and ethnic groups. The findings indicate that although the overall level of sexual harassment awareness is moderate among undergraduates in Malaysia, female undergraduates have a better understanding of what sexual harassment is as compared to male undergraduates. Culture and religion do influence perceptions of sexual harassment as there is a significant difference in the perceptions of sexual harassment between Malay, Chinese and Indian undergraduates.

Keywords: Perception, Sexual harassment, Youth, Gender, Ethnicity, Malaysian undergraduates.

Introduction

Sexual harassment is generally defined as unwelcome attention of a sexual nature, occurring through verbal or physical interaction and is considered a form of gender-based violence. Such harassment can take physical forms (such as a pulling at clothing, rubbing up against another person, or grabbing), as well as verbal forms (such as sexual comments, jeers, rumour spreading, or sexual jokes). Sexual harassment has been recognized as a problem that is universally faced by workers in the workplace.

Many studies have been conducted with regards to sexual harassment experienced by workers, both female and male. Unfortunately, there is also a rising problem of sexual harassment among the youth. Youth are defined as those between the age of 15 to 24 and the majority of them are still schooling or completing their tertiary education. Youth today, being the Y generation, live in a complex world, very much influenced by information, technology and media. As they are using the internet in greater numbers than ever before, they are exposed to all sorts of sites, images and information, making them misinformed and vulnerable to media-based myths about sexuality and sex role behaviors. It is also common to see images of sexual behavior on TV and on the big cinema screens and informal sexual activities are made possible by social networks (sexting) such as Facebook and twitter.

Apart from the media, youth also learn unhealthy or unrealistic ideas about sexuality from their peers. Sexual messages and behavior the youth witness affect their lives more than most adults realize. Youth are vulnerable as they do not quite understand what defines sexual harassment and therefore, are easily victimized by the harassers. The lack of awareness or ignorance of what constitutes sexual