Perception of sexual harassment among women employees: Implications for counseling services in organizations

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ABSTRACT: The objectives of this study are to determine the level of perceived sexual harassment among female employees in public universities, and to identify the differences in the perception of sexual harassment based on demographic factors such as age, marital status and position. This study was conducted in three public universities in the Klang valley area of Malaysia. A total of 1423 surveys were returned fully answered and deemed suitable for data analysis. The Utara Sexual Harassment Perception Questionnaire (USHPQ) by Sabitha (1999) was used to measure the level of perceived sexual harassment. The descriptive data of the study shows that 84.5% of the subjects perceived a high level of sexual harassment happening at their workplace, 10.9% perceived a medium level of sexual harassment, and only 4.6 percent perceived a low sexual harassment threat at the workplace. Meanwhile, with regard to the differences in the perception of sexual harassment based on demographic data, the study finds no significant difference between perception of sexual harassment among female employees at different age ranges; there is no significant difference between perception of sexual harassment among female employees with different marital statuses; however, there is a significant difference between perception of sexual harassment among female employees with different job positions. This study suggests some implications towards the counseling services offered by counseling centers in academic institutions.

Keywords: perception of sexual harassment; women employees; counseling services

1 INTRODUCTION

Sexual offenses at the workplace are no longer an uncommon occurrence. According to the Statistics of the Malaysian Royal Police Force on sexual crime in the year 2012 and 2013, 75 cases involving employers and 156 cases involving coworkers were reported, and these cases include 69 cases of rapes and 162 cases of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment forms include verbal, non-verbal, physical and visual acts. Sexual harassment in organizations is a social phenomenon involving power and influence of upper management, the leader or the supervisor who misused or mistreat women employees to achieve sexual satisfaction, and this is clearly against the moral and ethical conduct in organizations. The anxiety and fear of losing their jobs and dignity force women employees to remain silent about any sexual harassment, especially if it was initiated by the leader or authority in the organization (Hutagalung, 2013).

Based on earlier studies, it is estimated that 40% to 70% of sexual harassment victims are women (Silverman, 1981; Curran & Renzetti, 1987; Beavais, 1986; Fain & Anderton, 1987; Persekutuan Majikan Malaysia, 1999). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature” that interferes with one’s employment or work performance or creates a “hostile or offensive work environment” (U.S. EEOC 2011). Meanwhile, the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines sexual harassment as a sex-based behavior that is unwelcome and offensive to its recipient. Sexual harassment may be in the form of Quid Pro Quo, when a job benefit, such as a pay rise, a promotion, or even continued employment, is made conditional on the victim acceding to demands to engage in some form of sexual behavior; or hostile working environment in which the conduct creates conditions that are intimidating or humiliating for the victim. However, the perception towards what actually constitutes a sexually harassing behavior may differ according to the knowledge, awareness and perspectives of individuals in various countries and culture.

This study focuses on women respondents to find out their perceptions of sexual harassment. According to Fitzgerald, Wietzman, Gold and Ormerod (1988), many women lack the understanding towards the term sexual harassment, while some research has shown that some women who were actually harassed sexually failed to label or perceive some behaviors as sexually harassing.
behaviors. This was supported by Sabitha (2003) in her research whereby 80% of women who experienced one or more sexual harassment behaviors are still vague about what constitute sexual harassment. On the other hand, Rotundo, Nguyen & Sackett (2001) found that women perceive a broader range of social–sexual behaviors as harassing. In a study by Banerjee and Sharma (2011), out of their 200 respondents consisting of both genders, only 33.5% of the respondents could completely define what constitutes sexual harassment at the workplace, and more women (43%) fully defined what constitutes sexual harassment compared with males (24%) because of gender differences in perceiving what constitutes sexual harassment behaviors. Due to more tolerant perceptions, men may unknowingly commit acts of sexual harassment upon their female coworkers. This is consistent with the findings of Powell (1986), which indicated that men perceived fewer behaviors as sexual harassment. However, the study by Azizi Yahya et al. (2010) showed a different result whereby no significant differences are found in the perception towards sexual harassment based on gender and marital status; however, significant differences were found based on educational level, location and ethnicity.

Booth (1989) defines perceived threat of sexual harassment as someone’s cognitive ability to understand and be aware of unwelcome and offensive sexual-based behaviors. The sexual-based behavior may be in the form of verbal communication, gestures, visual, psychological threat or physical touch. According to the ILO, the unwelcome and offensive nature of these behaviors is important to classify them as a sexually harassing behavior, regardless of the intention of the initiator. However, perception of what constitutes a sex-based behavior may differ from one culture to another. A physical gesture of hugging while welcoming visitors may not be considered as a sex-based behavior in one culture but may be sexually offensive in another. Similarly, such gesture among coworkers may not be perceived as sexually threatening for some but may be different for the others. According to Komaromy et al. (1993), the perceptions of a person being harassed are often different from those of the person accused of doing the harassing, and it is very subjective whose perspective is the appropriate one in determining whether sexual harassment has actually occurred.

The objectives of this study are two-fold:

a. to determine the level of perceived sexual harassment among female workers in public universities and
b. to identify the differences in the perception of sexual harassment based on demographic factors such as age, marital status and position.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in three public universities in the Klang valley area of Malaysia. A total of 1800 sets of survey were distributed using random and purposive sampling to female workers, in both academic and administrative positions at these universities. As a result, 1423 surveys were returned fully answered and deemed suitable for data analysis.

The Utara Sexual Harassment Perception Questionnaire (USHPQ) developed by Sabitha (1999) was used to measure the level of perceived sexual harassment among the subjects. This questionnaire consists of 40 items to measure four different forms of sexual harassment behaviors, namely verbal (20 items), non-verbal (7 items), physical (11 items) and visual (2 items). To rate each item, participants were required to rate their level of perception using the following Likert scale rating: 1 = Non-disturbing, 2 = A little disturbing, and 3 = Very disturbing. The total score of perception of sexual harassment was then categorized into three levels of scores interpreted as low (40–67 points), medium (68–95 points) and high (96–120 points). Respondents are also required to fill in a demographic form to specify their age, marital status, position at the workplace and level of education.

3 FINDINGS

The demographic data show that 70.1% of the respondents aged between 26 and 50 years old, with a majority (63.9%) holding administrative positions and the remaining (36.1%) holding professional positions. In terms of marital status, 64.8% of the respondents were married, while 35.2% were either still single or widowed. The majority of the respondents (n = 532, 38%) attained only certificate level of education and minority of the subjects (n = 84, 5.9%) attained doctorate level of education (PhD). The statistic data on the perceptions of sexual harassment level indicated that 84.5% of the subjects perceived a high level of sexual harassment happening at their workplace, which was highly disturbing for them. 10.9% perceived a medium level of sexual harassment, and only 4.6 percent perceived a low sexual harassment threat at the workplace.

In terms of the differences in the perception of sexual harassment based on demographic data, the following findings were obtained:

a. There is no significant difference between the perception of sexual harassment among the female employees at different age ranges [F(2, 1420) = 0.955, k > 0.05].
b. There is no significant difference between the perception of sexual harassment among the female employees with different marital statuses \[t(1,1401) = 0.392, k > 0.05].

c. There is significant difference between the perception of sexual harassment among the female employees with different job positions \[t(1,1421) = -2.337, k < 0.05].

4 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

To interpret these findings, some of the limitations of the study must be taken into consideration. First, the small number of the samples limits our ability to generalize this finding to all the higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The finding may or may not be representative of the scenario of sexual harassment in Malaysian higher learning institutions. Second, since only females’ perceptions of sexual harassment were taken into consideration, the data do not represent the perception of male counterparts at the study locations. Lastly, perceptions of sexual harassment may not be equal to the actual experience of sexual harassment; therefore, the implications for counseling services may or may not be the same for perceived and experienced sexual harassments.

From these findings, it is obvious that most women employees in the three academic institutions experience a high level of perceived sexual harassment based on their rating of the sexual harassment behaviors in the USHPQ. This finding supports the study by Alfred Marks Bureau (1991), whereby 87% of the respondents identify certain behaviors, such as display of sexual interest, luring up and down at woman’s body and showing interest in personal sexual life, as sexual harassment. Additionally, majority of the female employees involved in the study are highly aware of the sexual harassment behaviors in terms of verbal, non-verbal, physical and visual acts regardless of their age and marital status. In terms of percentage, the result of the study shows that women workers aged above 50 years perceived sexual harassment only as a minor disturbance. These workers are considered mature enough to handle any sexual advances made towards them and are not preoccupied with these sexually offensive behaviors at work. According to Robert and Newton (1987), women workers at this age do not really pay attention to the attempts of sexual harassment. This finding is inconsistent with the study by Nielsen (1996), Fitzgerald and Ormerod (1991), and Terpstra, Powel and Baker (1986) who found differences in the perception towards sexual harassment based on age and length of service whereby workers who are elder and have been in the service for a longer duration tend to perceive certain behaviors as a sexually harassing behavior when compared with young and new workers.

With regard to marital status, there seems to be no significant difference in the perception of sexual harassment between married, single and widowed employees. This finding contradicts the study by LaFontaine and Tredeau (1986) on 160 women in traditional male occupations, which shows that married workers and older respondents reported a lower level of harassment when compared with single and younger respondents. Additionally, this study shows that female employees in the professional positions display more awareness towards sexual harassment behavior, thus regarding more behaviors as sexually offensive and may lead to sexual harassment. This is comparable with the study by McLaughlin, Ugen and Blackstone (2012), which found that relative to non-supervisors, female supervisors are more likely to report harassing behaviors and to define their experiences as sexual harassment. According to Crull (1982), popular characterizations portray male supervisors harassing female subordinates or staff from lower positions, but power-threat theories suggest that women in authority may be more frequent targets. In relation to this, the high scores on perceived sexual harassment of these professional staff are therefore justified.

The understanding of perception of sexual harassment is very important for counselors, although we are not measuring the actual sexual harassment experience. Studies by Crull (1981), Gutek (1985), Fitzgerald (1993), Ishak and Lai Lee (2001), Aabedene and Naisbitt (2001), Yahaya Mahmood and Zulaika (2002), Arifin and Mimi Azlina (2003), Ahmad Syukran (2004), and Rospenda et al. (2005) determine that sexual harassment has a significant relationship with motivation, job satisfaction and work stress. Sexual harassment often leads to the reduction in job satisfaction, work productivity and motivation among women workers while increasing the number of medical leaves, work absenteeism and job turnover (Hadjifotiou, 1983). The perceptions of individuals of whether an act is sexually harassing or not will indirectly have the same influence as the actual experience of sexual harassment. In any organization, the perception of sexual harassment depicts insecurity and vulnerability being felt by female workers especially, although male workers are also prone to the possibility of experiencing sexual harassment. According to a research by Crull (1982), sexual harassment is a violation of woman’s physical and personal privacy and will drain her of job satisfaction and, in many cases, her job security is threatened.

This study suggests some implications towards the counseling services offered by counseling
centers in academic institutions. Most counseling centers of higher academic institutions in Malaysia focus on counseling services, development and training programs for students. Staff are usually given counseling upon referral through the human resource department. Since more focus is given to the well-being and development of students, the concerns of female staff generated by their perceptions of sexual harassment may lack attention. Based on this study, there is a need to pay attention to the anxieties and the feelings of insecurity towards potential threat of sexual harassment among female staff in academic institutions, which may effect their motivation and job satisfaction. Counselors should be aware of these perceptions and consistently conduct educational and informative programs on sexual harassment for all staff, regardless of gender, to create awareness towards the nature and seriousness of its effect on the well-being and job performance of staff. These awareness programs will also act as part of preventive measures against sexual harassment, whereby staff who are threatened by any sexually harassing behaviors will easily identify these behaviors and proactively take necessary actions to manage the situation.

In addition to public awareness programs on sexual harassment, counselors in academic institutions should also offer individual and group counseling services to staff to share their concerns on sexual harassment. According to Crull (1982), counseling on this issue should provide the woman with an opportunity to vent and explore her feelings, discuss coping strategies, and learn about her legal rights. Individual counseling is beneficial for staff who need more personalized attention, while group counseling opens more opportunity for the staff to share their concerns about sexual harassment at the workplace, either perceived or experienced. Group counseling will also help clients to deal with some misconceptions of sexual harassment such as the belief that women should be blamed for any sexual advances made on them. As a whole, provisions of counseling sessions in the workplace setting will assist staff in managing the psychological conflicts they are experiencing as a result of their perceptions or actual experience of sexual harassment.

5 CONCLUSION

The findings show the need to attend to a high level of perceived sexual harassment among female employees in the three academic institutions based on their rating of the sexual harassment behaviors in the USHPQ. Although the study was only conducted in three universities, it may also indicate the nature of perceived sexual harassment among female employees in other universities or other organizations. This study also shows that female employees in the professional positions display more awareness towards sexual harassment behaviors, thus regarding more behaviors as sexually offensive and may lead to sexual harassment. This study suggests some implications towards the counseling services offered by counseling centers in academic institutions. Counselors in higher learning institutions are recommended to be more sensitive to the counseling needs of employees in terms of providing them with the necessary information and counseling services in relation to sexual harassment. The management, through the counseling services must give equal weight to the well-being and development of employees by ensuring a non-threatening work environment, which will induce greater job satisfaction and motivation among employees. Counselors may assess the perceptions of sexual harassment among staff from time to time and consistently conduct educational and informative programs on sexual harassment for all staff, regardless of gender, to create awareness towards the issue of sexual harassment. By providing valid and richer information on sexual harassment, staff will be able to curb and cope with any sexual harassment threat appropriately. Counselors in organizations should also provide individual and group counseling services for staff who require personal attention regarding the issue of sexual harassment. As a whole, this study implies that counseling services in the organization should add on more effort to attend issues regarding sexual harassment besides other issues arising among their employees to ensure a non-threatening and conducive work environment. This is necessary to reduce employees’ level of perceptions of sexual harassment threat at the workplace. The effort made by the management through provisions of appropriate counseling services implies quality care towards human resources in the organization.

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