

LEVEL OF AWARENESS AMONG JOHOR CIVIL SERVANTS TOWARDS SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to identify the level of awareness among Johor Civil Servants towards sexual harassment issues that occur in the workplace. This study also examined the factors that contributed to the level of awareness regarding this issue. Besides that, the steps that have been practised in the workplace in order to avoid this problem has also been discussed. 150 sets of questionnaires have been distributed to a number of government offices in Johor. The findings revealed that among the factors that lead to a low level of awareness towards sexual harassment are lacking of knowledge about it, shame, fear, not interested to know about it, never been harassed sexually, and there is no policy or enforcement on it in the government offices. This research suggests that all government offices should enforce and apply the policy in order to prevent this problem from spreading. There is also a need for campaigns on preventing sexual harassment. The government heads of department should play their role in making sure that all civil servants are aware of the danger of sexual harassment at the workplace.

Keywords: level of awareness, awareness, civil servants, sexual harassment, workplace

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a violation of a person's personal integrity and wellbeing. These incidents frequently occurred in the context of a workplace. Both genders; man and woman equally face the risk to be harassed sexually either by words, expression, touch, written words, or even body language expression. These situations are disgusting and may affect the productivity level in the organization. Due to this unpleasant scenario, top management of organizations are encouraged to draft their own policies so as to combat this issue. Some organizations take this opportunity by not only drafting the policy but to execute the policy as well as to punish the culprit. Nevertheless, this procedure must be scrutinized and the charge must be made appropriately. Unfortunately, some employees take the situation for granted. They are neither aware of the existence of the policy nor aware that they are actually involved in this problem. At the same time, there are also administrators who totally ignore and omit this issue in their work policy. This is because they consider sexual harassment as not a problem. Thus, this paper attempts to discover the level of awareness towards sexual harassment among the employees as well as the existence of the policy in their organization.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are;

- 1) To determine the level of awareness among Johor Civil Servants on the issue of sexual harassment in their workplace.
- 2) To measure their level of awareness on various forms of sexual harassment particularly in the workplace.
- 3) To measure the level of awareness among the civil servants on the existing government policy in regard to this aforementioned issue.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions of this study are;

- 1) Are Johor Civil Servants aware on the issue of sexual harassment in their workplace?
- 2) Are Johor Civil Servants aware of various forms of sexual harassment particularly in the workplace?
- 3) Are Johor Civil Servants aware on the existing government policy in regard to this aforementioned issue?

RESEARCH ISSUES

Most of the sexual harassment cases are not reported as the victims themselves did not realize that they are the victims of the case. Therefore, these serious cases can only be prevented and curbed with the presence of people's awareness on sexual harassment (Israelstam, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There are various definitions of sexual harassment noted by scholars, practitioners and policy makers based on certain factors such as social, culture and background of the country. For instance, in the United States, sexual harassment is understood as any unwelcomed sexual advances, request for sexual favors, and other verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature (US Department of State, 2013). Referring to the Malaysian context, the definition of sexual harassment by the Industrial Court in the *Fuchs Petrolube (ILR 845; Award No.692/2003)* a case referred to the Code of Practice is any unwanted conduct of sexual nature including the effect of verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological or physical harassment (Sarminah, 2013). As we are focusing on the workers at the workplace, Marican (2007) proposes the definition of sexual harassment as the unwelcome or uninvited behaviours of sexual natures that are offensive, embarrassing, intimidating or humiliating that could lead to the negative effects on their career, work performance, health or livelihood. In addition, Rajoura, Kumari and Srivastava (2012) explained that harassment could be in the forms of words, gestures or actions. In addition, those actions are meant to annoy, alarm, abuse, demean, intimidate, belittle, and humiliate the target victims.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Endut, Oon, Teng, Azmi, Ali and Hashim (2011) note that the effects of sexual harassment phenomenon towards the members of an organization have been acknowledged since the 1970s. The highlights were mainly on the incidents involving the workers at their workplaces. The facts suggest that this issue is very significant to be studied on, specifically in the Malaysian context. In reference to the issue, the society would think that this serious problem is mainly related to women as the victims. However, Wright (2013) proves that sexual harassment case has also listed male as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) workers as the victims. Thus, this issue cannot be taken lightly by the companies or the organizations. This is also supported by Cortina and Berdahl (2008) who revealed that sexual harassment has been recognized as a serious organizational problem and a violation of US law. Hence, regardless of the geographical locations, this issue should be brought into people's awareness especially in Malaysia.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the words of Sarminah (2013), sexual harassment cases in Malaysia are constantly linked to the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication for Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (Code of Practice) which was introduced in 1999. This code is meant to be used by the private sectors and companies to handle any sexual harassment cases occurred at their respective places. The existence of this code proves that sexual harassment is obviously violating an individual's safety and dignity. Sexual harassment put the victims into unwilling forceful acts. This indicates that only one party is willing to do the actions. Thus, it is different from the cases of adultery, or any playful romantic behaviour that is agreed upon by both parties. These facts clearly indicate that there is a serious need for this matter to be prevented and eradicated. In addition, Israelstam (2013) stresses that employers should be responsible in taking legal actions in every case reported by the victims. Nevertheless, the legal actions could not be implemented by the employers if the victims did not realize that they are actually the victims of sexual harassment. Hence, in preventing and eradicating these serious wrongdoing, people's awareness are what should be looked into.

UNIQUENESS OF THE STUDY

Ismail, Lee and Chen (2007) listed several factors that are related to sexual harassment. The factors associated to sexual harassment are knowledge of grievance procedure for sexual harassment, sexist attitudes among co-workers, privacy of workspace, physical attractiveness, and dress manner of victims, job status, and sex roles. It is believed that, there are other external and internal factors that contribute to this problem to happen. This is a unique issue to be studied on as the victims might not notice that they are actually the victims of this illegal behaviour as they are not aware of the elements involved in sexual harassment cases. In the worst case scenario, the workers themselves might be the cause of sexual harassment cases happening as they are not aware of them. This level of awareness might also be influenced by the complication and difficulty in understanding the issue itself.

LEVEL OF AWARENESS

Hishamuddin et al. (2003) found that the community of small and medium enterprises in the southern, central and northern industrial zones of Malaysia possess low level of awareness in relation to sexual harassment. Besides that, the study also revealed that the cases of sexual harassment that were recorded among men are shockingly higher compared to women. However, the level of awareness on this issue might be diverse in other contexts. As for the Malaysian civil servants, the level of awareness on sexual harassment at the workplace might be influenced by the exposure given to them via the mass media. As stated by Alagappan and Marican (2013), on average only 1 article on sexual harassment per month appeared in the newspaper from 2003 to 2011 which suggests that this issue did not get the significant exposure by the media. As a result, it is hard for the public to get the information and that made them failed to have high level of awareness regarding sexual harassment at the workplace. Lower level of awareness might also cause the victims to suffer the unexpected consequences that have never been imagined by them. In the study by Unnikrishnan, Rekha, Kumar, Reshmi, Mithra and Sanjeev (2010), they found that almost half of the victims that have been identified revealed that they have been sexually harassed within a year of joining their working world. This suggests that women who are new in their working environment are ignorant of any right to report about the sexual harassment cases as they are afraid of losing their source of income.

THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON WORKERS

Ismail et al. (2007) listed few consequences in their study. Among the consequences are that the victims will experience lower level of job satisfaction, they prefer to take sick leave as an excuse for being absent from work. Other than that, they will also suffer from emotional distress that could be detected by symptoms such as anxiety, depression, irritability, anger and insomnia. In addition, a drop in the level of working performance among the sexual harassment victims has also been proved to be a severe effect of this serious problem apart from the emotional distress experienced by them (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy & Alberts, 2007).

MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY ON THE ISSUE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In reviewing the sexual harassment policy, Fang and Kleiner (1999), as cited in Isa and Samad (2012) highlighted few elements that should be included in drafting the policy. The elements are as follows;

- 1) It should be a statement
- 2) Showing a clear definition and interpretation
- 3) Containing solid procedures
- 4) Workers should be in neutral party
- 5) Emphasizing actions
- 6) Focusing on the effects and consequences

In reference to Malaysian situation, a unit known as *Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Semenanjung Malaysia* has been formed by Malaysian government under the Ministry of Human Resources. This unit is responsible in handling any claims regarding sexual harassment which may occur by way of oral, conduct, visual, physiology or even physical in the workplace. Other than that, the unit is also responsible in enforcing the provisions regarding sexual harassments at the workplace.

The enforcement has been proven when the legislators have succeeded in amending Employment Act 1955 by inserting new provisions under Section 81A to Section 81G which deals with issues of sexual harassment in the workplace on 1st April 2012.

In 2013, the government has launched and promoted a program known as '*Program Mencegah dan Membasmi Gangguan Seksual di Tempat Kerja*' as to give awareness to the public. The objectives of the program among others are to make known of their unit, to encourage employers to draft and develop policies on sexual harassment in workplace and to brief the public on what actions can be taken if these problems happen in their place of work.

Handling claims and reports are subjected to certain procedures in any organisation. As for *Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Semenanjung Malaysia*, the reports on sexual harassment cases can be lodged based on the following procedures;

- 1) Receiving reports from the victim
- 2) Interviewing the victim
- 3) Investigating the report
- 4) Investigating the employer and asking for the investigation in the corporate level
- 5) Receiving written report from the employer
- 6) Studying the written report
- 7) Interviewing the offender
- 8) Preparing reports and suggestions by the officer
- 9) Submitting the reports to the employer
- 10) Informing the result to the victim
- 11) Evaluating victim's satisfaction
- 12) Advising the victim to refer the case to the police/other agencies.
- 13) Case closed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised questionnaires as they are more practical for a quantitative research. In addition, this instrument is also chosen as to ease the data collecting process from a large number of respondents in a short period of time and to promote the cost effective way. Other than that, questionnaires are easy to be carried out by the researcher with limited affect to its validity and reliability. As quantitative approached is chosen for this study, questionnaires offer the best form of result that can be analysed manually or by using a software package (Ackroyd & Hughes, 1981).

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed to 150 civil servants specifically teachers and lecturers, workers in the bursary department, public services, counter services and administration offices around Johor. The questionnaires are presented in English and Bahasa Malaysia to avoid any misunderstanding caused by the language barrier that might be faced by the respondents. A set of questionnaire containing four sections namely Section A; which comprises of questions on the respondents' demographics, Section B; the awareness on sexual harassment issue, Section C; forms of sexual harassment, Section D; the awareness on policy in workplace.

FINDINGS

The findings and discussions are presented according to the listed Research Questions.

1. Demographic profile

Degree	69	46	
Masters and above	10	6.7	
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Working Background	Department		
	Bursary	17	11.3
	Customer Service Counter	7	4.7
	Administration	31	20.7
	Teacher	45	30
Public Service	50	33.3	
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Working experience	1 - 4 years	37	24.7
	5 - 8 years	41	27.3
	9 -12 years	28	18.7
	13 - 16years	21	14
	More than 16 years	23	15.3

Figure 1

Respondents are from both genders. Their age ranges from twenty years old to sixty years old. For their marital status, the majority of respondents are married (68.7%). Respondents with a degree represented nearly half of the total respondents (46%). The majority of respondents have between 5 to eight years of working experience (27.3%).

2. Are Johor Civil Servants aware on the issue of sexual harassment in their workplace? (RQ1)

No	Statements	Disagree	Agree
1.	I know what is sexual harassment <i>Saya tahu apa yang dikatakan sebagai gangguan seksual</i>	19	131
2.	I was sexually harassed <i>Saya pernah diganggu secara seksual</i>	114	36
3.	I think this issue is important <i>Saya rasa isu ini penting</i>	23	127
4.	I am interested in knowing this issue <i>Saya berminat untuk ambil tahu</i>	20	130
5.	Even though I am too busy with work, I am still concern about this issue <i>Kesibukan bekerja tidak menghalang saya untuk mengambil tahu tentang masalah ini</i>	63	87
6.	If I am sexually harassed, I am not afraid to report to the authority <i>Kalau saya diganggu secara seksual, saya tidak takut untuk melaporkannya kepada pihak atasan</i>	42	108
7.	If I am sexually harassed, I am not ashamed to report this matter to the authority <i>Kalau saya diganggu secara seksual, saya tidak malu untuk melaporkan kejadian ini kepada pihak yang sepatutnya</i>	40	110

Table 1 : Awareness of civil servants on the issue of sexual harassment

A majority of respondents knows what sexual harassment is (131). 114 respondents said that they have never been sexually harassed. 127 respondents disagree that this issue is unimportant while 130 disagree that they are not interested in getting to know about this issue. 63 respondents said that their work schedule made them have no time to think about this problem while 87 respondents disagree with this statement. A majority of respondents disagree that they would not know what to do if they are sexually harassed (102) and 108 respondents disagree that they would be too embarrassed to report the matter to the authorities.

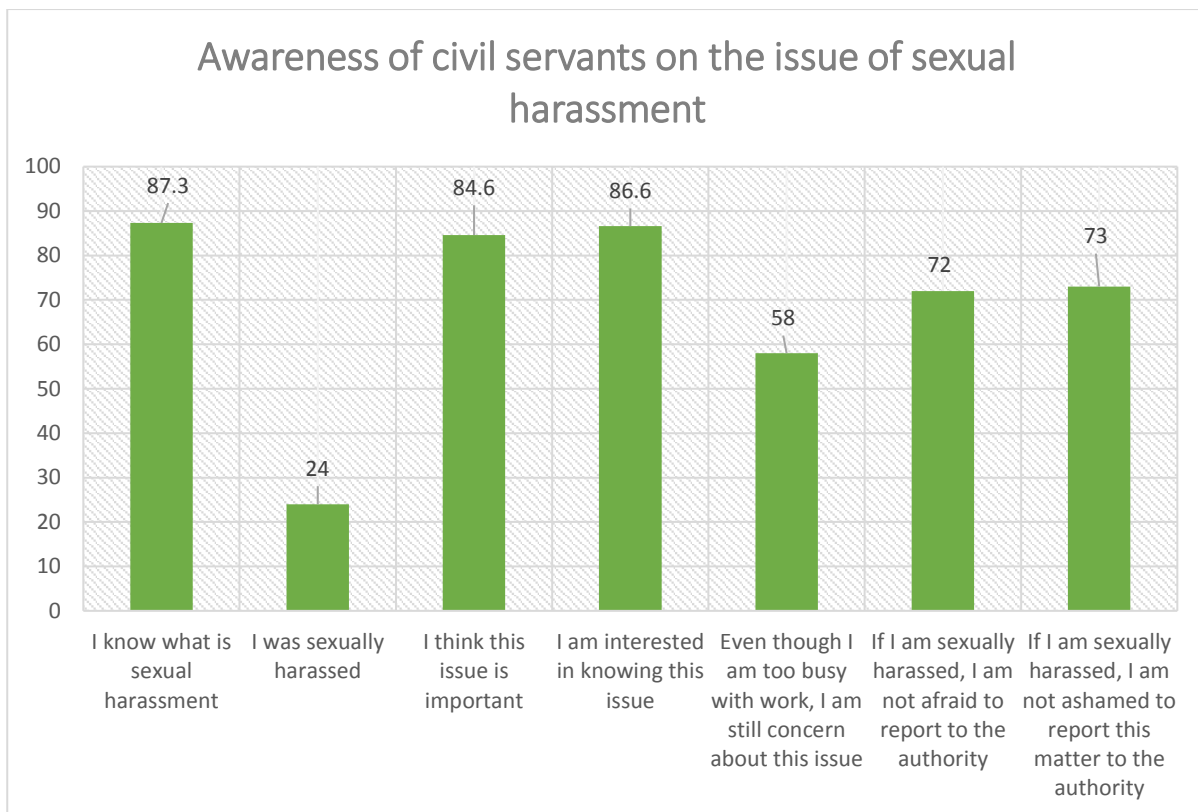


Figure 2 : Percentage of Awareness Level Among Civil Servants on Sexual Harassment Issue

Based on Figure 2, it is proven that majority of the respondents know what is sexual harassment (87.3%). Other than that, more than 80% of the respondents believe that sexual harassment is an important issue and they are interested to know about it. The findings also show that the respondents are neither ashamed (73%) nor afraid (72%) of reporting sexual harassment cases upon being the victims. 58% of the respondents are concerned about this issue regardless their hectic workload. Out of 150 respondents, only 24% declared that they were sexually harassed at their workplace.

3. Are Johor Civil Servants aware of various forms of sexual harassment particularly in the workplace? (RQ2)

No	Forms of Sexual Harassment	Yes
1.	Physical Touch <i>Sentuhan fizikal</i>	64
2.	Direct Conversation <i>Perbualan secara langsung</i>	42
3.	Phone Conversation <i>Perbualan Telefon</i>	24
4.	Emails <i>Emel</i>	20

Table 2: Forms of sexual harassment

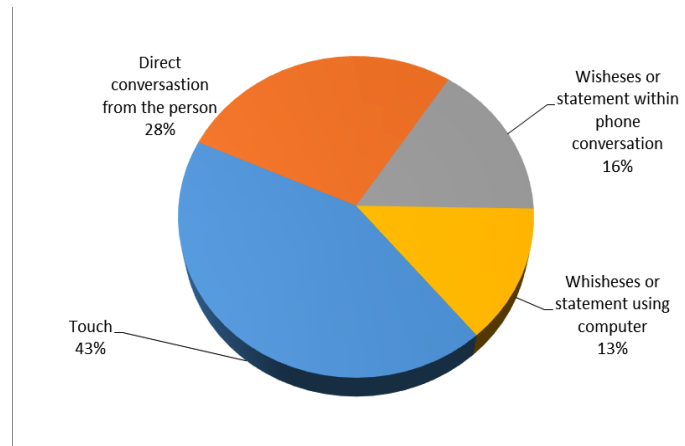


Figure 3 : Percentage of Forms of Sexual Harassment

Figure 3 portrays forms of sexual harassment identified by the respondents. Sexual harassment can come in many forms. 43% of respondents said that they are aware that sexual harassment could happen in the form of physical touch, direct conversation 28%, phone conversation 16%, and emails 13%.

4. Are Johor Civil Servants aware on the existing government policy in regard to this aforementioned issue? (RQ3)

No		Disagree	Agree
9.	I have been informed about sexual harassment by the authority <i>Saya pernah diberitahu oleh ketua atau mana-mana pihak berwajib tentang isu ini</i>	62	88
10.	There is a policy on sexual harassment in my office <i>Terdapat polisi tentang anti gangguan seksual di pejabat saya</i>	65	85
11.	If I am sexually harassed, I know what to do <i>Kalau saya diganggu secara seksual, saya tahu bagaimana untuk membuat tindakan selanjutnya</i>	48	102
12.	My employer has never conducted any campaign to prevent the issue of sexual harassment in my workplace <i>Ketua saya tidak pernah berkempen tentang aktiviti mencegah gangguan seksual di tempat kerja</i>	61	89

Table 3 : Awareness on Policy

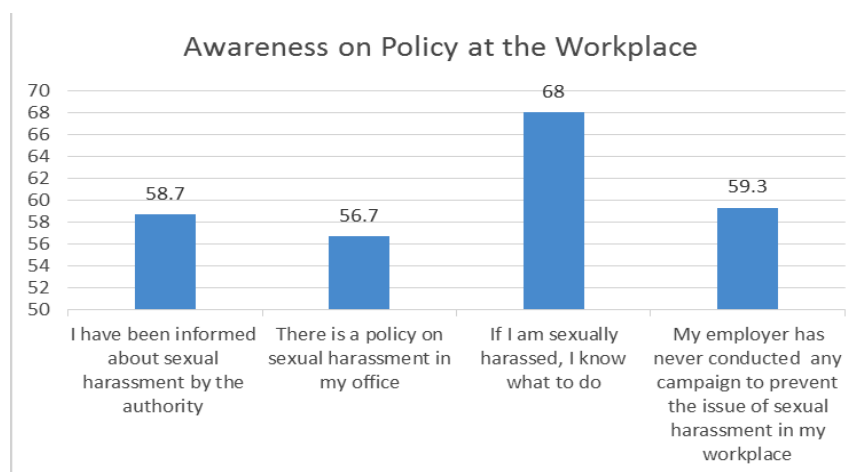


Figure 4 : Percentage of Awareness on policy at the Workplace

88 respondents disagree that they have not been informed by their employer regarding sexual harassment while 62 agree on the statement. 85 respondents disagree that there are no policies on anti-sexual harassment at their office while 65 respondents agree that there are no policies on anti-sexual harassment at their office. 61 respondents disagree that their superiors have never conducted campaigns on prevention of sexual harassment at the office while 89 respondents agree that their superiors have never conducted campaigns on prevention of sexual harassment at the office.

By referring to Figure 4, it can be seen that 68% of the respondents are aware of what should be done if they are sexually harassed. Even though 59.3% of them stated that their employer has never conducted any campaign as to prevent sexual harassment, they have been informed about the issue at their workplace. All in all, majority of the respondents (56.7%) are aware of the availability of the policy at their workplace.

CONCLUSION

It is a pleasant discovery that Johor Civil Servants are aware of sexual harassment issue, as well as the existing policy regarding the issue at their workplace. This can be the motivation for the civil servants to have a comfortable working environment as they feel protected by the existing policy. Even if it is inevitable for them to unfortunately become the victims, they at least know what are the procedures to go through.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ishak M.S (2004) suggested several methods as to prevent the problem of sexual harassment from happening at the workplace. One of the solutions is by wearing proper attire which covers all features of the body. Fiske and Glike (1995) state that sexy women contributed to the occurrence of sexual harassment problems. The other prevention is by creating a boundary between male and female workers. The supervisor may separate the task area according to their gender. Meetings and any social activities must be supervised by the authority. In fact, the technology could also be utilised by installing close circuit televisions (CCTV) at strategic places so as to create a working environment whereby every activity carried out by employees will be monitored and recorded. Last but not least, it can be prevented by providing educational information on all issues regarding sexual harassment to all employees.

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