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FACTORS INFLUENCING SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE MALAYSIAN WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the potential risks factors associated with sexually harassing behaviors within the framework of the four-factor model of sexual harassment. The factors examined are unprofessional work environment, skewed gender ratio in the workplace, knowledge of grievance procedure for sexual harassment, sexist attitudes among co-workers, privacy of workspace, physical attractiveness, dress manner of victims, job status, and sex roles. The dependent variable is incidence of sexual harassment which was evaluated using the Sexual Experience Questionnaire developed by Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, Gold, Ormerod, and Weitzman (1988). Data were collected from 657 women employees working in Malaysian organizations. The findings showed that the predictions of the four-factor model are also largely true in the case of the Malaysian workplace. The study also found that sexual harassment behaviors are fairly widespread in Malaysia.

Keywords: sexual harassment, gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a problem that is universally faced by workers all over the world. However, most of the available research is conducted in western countries (see e.g. Crocker & Kalemba, 1999, European Commission, 1988; U.S. Merit Systems Promotion Board, 1988). There is a lack of such studies in developing countries in general (e.g. Lui, 1996; Limpaphayom & Williams, 2006) and Malaysia in particular. Nevertheless, reports in Malaysian newspapers and magazines indicate that female Malaysian employees are frequently subjected to sexual harassment behaviors by their male colleagues.

In view of the rising trend of women in the workforce in Malaysia, where almost half of them were economically active by the year 2000, considerable attention from management and policymakers on sexual harassment issues is vital. At the same time, more women are entering occupations traditionally regarded as male-oriented, such as engineering, medicine, management, etc. As such, workers are

increasingly exposed to the likelihood of sexual harassment in their workplace. The frequency of occurrences of such incidences has been found to range between 35% and 53% by available local studies (Ng, Zanariah, & Maria, 2003; Marican, 1999; Muzaffar, 1999).

The seriousness of the problem has prompted the Malaysian government to officially launch the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in 1999. Other efforts include several workshops that were conducted to enhance the awareness and to prevent incidences of sexual harassment as well as to draw out guidelines for handling such cases, if any. The government through its Ministry of Human Resources, is constantly trying to add new amendments and guidelines. For example, a newly proposed amendment to the Employment Act 1955 would make it compulsory for all employers to appoint Sexual Harassment Officers to investigate any allegations of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment guidelines for civil service employees have also been issued. These include a two-prong approach to handle sexual harassment cases – counseling the victim and punishing the perpetrator. In addition, comprehensive investigations are provided for sexual harassment complaints. Though much remains to be done in terms of the legal aspects, an atmosphere free of harassment such as unsolicited sexual overtures or innuendoes should be the right of every worker. If workers were harassed, then their morale, productivity and quality of work may be undermined (e.g. Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997, Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997; Munson et al., 2000; Rospenda, Richman, Ehmke, & Zlatoper, 2005).

Although sexual harassment is generally recognized as encompassing all forms of unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, whether verbal or physical, the Malaysian Code of Practice specifically defines sexual harassment as any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that may be perceived by an individual (a) as a condition on one's employment, (b) as an offence or humiliation, or (c) as a threat to one's well-being.

The forms of sexual harassment together with examples, have been comprehensively specified in the Code of Practice as follows:

1. Verbal (e.g. offensive or suggestive remarks)
2. Non-verbal or gestural (e.g. leering or ogling with suggestive overtones)
3. Visual (e.g. showing pornographic materials)
4. Psychological (e.g. unwanted social invitations)
5. Physical harassment (e.g. inappropriate touching)

The purpose of this study is to contribute in some way towards enhancing the understanding of the current sexual harassment situation in the Malaysian

workplace. Specifically it examines the frequency of occurrences of sexual harassment as well as identifies the potential risk factors that could lead to incidences of sexual harassment behaviors in the workplace. The behaviors identified in the survey are based on the definition specified in the Code of Practice.

PAST RESEARCH ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Although sexual harassment may involve either men or women as the victim, men are not frequent victims of sexual harassment and in fact pose more as the harassers. Previous studies have shown that sexual harassment incidents frequently involve a male harasser and a female victim (e.g. Terpstra & Cook, 1985). As such, research on harassment of men is much less conducted (Gutek & Done, 2001). Even though the problem has actually existed for many decades, research on sexual harassment started off in the late 1970s. Most of the initial studies were descriptive, mainly to examine the frequency of occurrence, the characteristics of perpetrators and victims, and the effect on victims (Langley, 1999). The perceptions of sexual harassment were also examined and were found to vary by demographic characteristics such as age (Nielsen, 1996; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Terpstra, Powell, & Baker, 1986). For example, older respondents tend to perceive sexual harassment differently in that they would be more likely to regard an incidence as sexually harassing as compared to younger ones.

Later studies focused on the consequences of sexual harassment to both the organization and to the individual. This was because a number of organizations, especially in western countries, were facing lawsuits over the issue. Some companies in fact had to pay out damages in addition to incurring indirect costs such as high job turnover, rampant absenteeism, low morale as well as low productivity and excessive medical claims. Besides, women who reported sexual harassment suffered lower levels job satisfaction compared to women who have not been harassed. They tend to be absent from work using sick leave as an excuse. For the individual, it could bring adverse effects on the victim's emotional state. Emotional distress may be manifested in symptoms including anxiety, depression, irritability, anger and insomnia. All these could in turn affect motivation and effectiveness at work as well as family relations at home (Fitzgerald et al., 1997, Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1995; Gutek & Koss, 1993; Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Fitzgerald et al., 1988).

Theoretically, four models have been proposed to explain the causes of sexual harassment. These are the natural/biological model, the organizational model, the sociocultural model and the sex-role spillover model. Each of these models puts

forward a different explanation. The natural/biological model assumes that sexual harassment in the workplace is an extension of human sexuality. It is based on the idea of the natural attraction between men and women. Men's stronger sex drives and natural propensity for sexual aggression may cause them to aggressively approach women with sexual comments and intentions (Tangri & Hayes, 1997; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). According to the organizational model, the hierarchical structures in an organization as well as the inherent opportunities and positions of power and authority may give rise to a working environment that facilitates sexual aggression. This means certain individuals could exploit their power to extort sexual gratification from others. The sociocultural model, on the other hand, attributes sexual harassment to the dominant position of men over women in terms of economic and political power. Women are in fact degraded to mere vulnerable sexual objects while the traditional inequitable power relationship between both sexes prevails. Thus, women who typically have less power and control are more likely to be harassed.

The sex-role spillover model emphasises the effects of sex-role expectations in the organization. Certain behaviors are expected of workers of both genders, as men are stereotyped to be asexual and women as sexual. This sex-role spillover is even more likely to occur if women are perceived as sex objects and their sex roles take precedence over their work roles. Hence women's behavior would be interpreted as sexual even though it is not actually intended to be so. This means the sex-role spillover model suggests that harassment is more likely in organizations with skewed sex ratios, with women outnumbering men or vice versa (Tangri & Hayes, 1997; Gutek & Morasch, 1982).

THE FOUR-FACTOR MODEL OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

As each of the theoretical explanations presented above is confined to one aspect of sexual harassment, some researchers (e.g. O'Hare & O'Donohue, 1998; Fitzgerald et al., 1997) have instead incorporated several measurable factors in their models of sexual harassment. This is deemed more comprehensive and realistic as it covers the sociocultural, organizational and individual causes of sexual harassment.

This study utilizes the four-factor model developed by O'Hare and O'Donohue (1998) to identify the risk factors of sexual harassment. Such a multifaceted approach is necessary in view of the sociocultural differences among the three main ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese, Indians/others – of Malaysian workers. For example, certain forms of sexual behavior may be considered harassment by one group but non-offensive by another less conservative group. Moreover, a woman could also risk herself by how she dresses. The dressing style generally

differs between the Malays and non-Malays. Malay workers, due to their religious dress code, generally wear loose and long clothing together with the Muslim headscarf, or "tudung", while western fashion is preferred by the non-Malays. In addition, the environment of an organization such as sex ratios, sexist attitudes and available workspace could also be regarded as facilitating occurrences of sexual harassment.

The risk factors and their related hypotheses are described as follows:

Factor 1: Motivation

The motivation dimension examines the variables which originate from the victim that could serve as a motivator for the harasser. For example, physical attractiveness of victims may be the motivating force for harassment. Certain male workers would thus be tempted to establish social or sexual relationships with their female co-workers, or give unwanted sexual attention. Thus, it is hypothesized that women who are physically attractive will be more likely to experience sexual harassment compared to those who are less attractive.

Factor 2: Overcoming internal inhibitions against harassment

This factor refers to the values, such as morality and sympathy, of the harasser. An individual with low moral values may not regard harassment as seriously wrong or immoral, and thus feels uninhibited from sexually harassing someone else. Hence the absence of good values could be a contributory factor to sexual harassment.

However, as this study focuses on the kinds of behavior (e.g. offensive jokes or remarks, unwanted sexual attention, and display of sexist materials) experienced by female workers from their male colleagues, Factor 2 which relates to the harasser is not included.

Factor 3: Overcoming external inhibitions against harassment

Several external factors present in the working environment could contribute to sexual harassment in the workplace. These include:

Privacy of workspace

A working environment with much privacy provides a greater opportunity for harassment since their co-workers are less likely to witness the harassment. Therefore it is hypothesized that women who are working in highly private environments are more likely to experience harassment than those whose workspace are more open.

Knowledge of grievance procedure

Organizations with proper grievance procedures and policies for sexual harassment are expected to report a lower incidence of harassment. This is because such a system, if formally instituted, with punishments duly meted out to offenders, would serve to deter potential harassers.

Sexist attitudes

Organizations are more likely to report higher levels of sexual harassment if sexist attitudes prevail, as female employees are perceived as sex objects and as inferior to males.

Unprofessional working environment

A working environment characterized by vulgarism, alcohol consumption, disrespect among employees, and employee involvement in non-work activities, would facilitate sexual harassment. It is hypothesized that women who work in an unprofessional climate have a greater tendency to suffer harassment compared to those in a more professional environment.

Skewed gender ratios

A staff strength with an extremely unbalanced ratio of males to females is expected to report more cases of sexual harassment. This is consistent with the sex-role spillover model where the work role of women workers in a highly skewed sex distribution will be outweighed by their sex role.

Factor 4: Overcoming victim resistance

This factor refers to the ability of a victim to recognize and in turn stop any behavior towards harassment. The related variables are sex-role and the job status of the victim.

The sex-role factor assesses the extent of masculinity or femininity of a victim based on the traditional stereotyped masculine and feminine personality traits. Women who exhibit more of the feminine traits are expected to be subjected to more harassment than those who fall under the masculine category.

Regarding job status, it is hypothesized that women employees who hold lower positions with less power and authority are more likely to experience sexual harassment. This is because any resistance on their part could be met by threats of retaliation for not being cooperative, or by promises of reward for engaging in sexual behavior.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey was used for gathering the primary data for this study. The survey focuses on women as the unit of study as they face the risk of being sexually harassed more frequently than men. The latter instead pose more likely as harassers. In view of the multi-ethnicity character of the Malaysian workforce, the intention of this research is also to find out differences in the risk of sexual harassment, if any, with respect to ethnic group and dressing style.

Enumerators were employed to administer the questionnaires to female employees working in several organizations in urban Klang Valley of Malaysia. The enumerators first approached the supervisors or heads of departments to obtain permission for their staff to be included in the survey. An official letter ensuring confidentiality of responses was also submitted to them. A prearranged date and time was agreed upon for the data collection in the organization. As sexual harassment is a sensitive topic, the convenience sampling method was used (see e.g. Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Only female workers who agreed to complete the questionnaire were included in the sample. The questionnaires were distributed and subsequently collected from the participants. A total of 657 questionnaires were completed.

The questionnaire comprised of three sections that assessed the sexual harassment experience of the respondents in the organization, the characteristics of the organizational environment, and the personality traits and demographic data of the respondents.

A multi-item instrument known as the Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) developed by Fitzgerald et al. (1988) was adopted for assessing the extent and types of sexual harassment. The SEQ consists of 19 items that can be categorized into three types of sexual harassment – Gender Harassment, Unwanted Sexual Attention, and Sexual Coercion. Five-point response scales were used, ranging from 0 for "never" to 4 for "many times"). The revised SEQ (Fitzgerald et al., 1988) yields alpha reliabilities ranging from 0.75 to 0.89.

Likert scales were used for measuring the work environment – professional atmosphere, the extent of sexist attitudes, awareness of the grievance procedure, privacy of workspace. For gender ratios, an objective measure, participants were asked to report the percentage of female workers in their working environment. To estimate the gender skewness for analysis, this value was subtracted from a value of 50%. The absolute value of the difference (ranging from 0 to 50) represented a balanced ratio if the value is close to zero and an uneven ratio if it is closer to 50, indicating the dominance of one gender.

The variable "professional atmosphere" was measured on a seven-point scale to denote the frequency of the following behavior on the job – use of obscene language, use of alcohol, display of disrespectful behavior to co-workers, expected to perform menial activities not formally a part of the job, inappropriate display of emotion such as crying, losing one's temper, and unauthorized use of company time and resources for personal use.

Sexist attitudes were gauged by seven-point scales on two questions – the extent of severity of sexist attitudes and behaviors displayed by male co-workers, as well as the extent to which women are viewed as inferior by their male colleagues.

The individual factors are the sex-role, physical attractiveness, and job status of participants. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), developed by Bem (1974) was employed to measure the sex role of respondents. It consists of 60 personality traits – 20 are stereotyped as feminine (e.g. gentle, affectionate, compassionate), 20 are stereotypically masculine (e.g. independent, ambitious, dominant), and 20 are non-gender related items (e.g. happy, truthful). A seven-point scale ranging from 1 for "never true" to 7 for "always true" was used. The BSRI scores were computed by obtaining the difference between the femininity scores and the masculinity scores. High positive scores represented a more feminine role while high negative scores indicated a more masculine role.

The physical attractiveness of participants was gauged based on their self-ratings of attractiveness according to seven-point scales that range from 1 for "unattractive at all" to 7 for "extremely attractive". Self-ratings of the dressing style of women were obtained based on "never sexy at all" (such as always wearing long and loose dresses) to "always sexy" (e.g. always wearing tight or revealing dress or mini-skirts). The job status of participants was measured by their education level.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

A total of 657 questionnaires were completed. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The breakdown shows that over half of the respondents are Chinese, and are rather youthful (aged between 20 and 29 years old). The distribution of the sample is fairly even in terms of the highest educational status attained – degree-holders and non-degree holders, the amount of income earned, as well as marital status – never been married and married.

Table 1
Demographic profile of the respondents

Characteristics		Percentage
Ethnicity	Malay	37.1
	Chinese	52.4
	Indian/others	10.5
Age	Below 20 years	4.0
	20 to 29 years	52.6
	30 to 39 years	32.9
	40 years and above	10.5
Educational level	High School Certificate	20.2
	Diploma	23.6
	University Degree	56.2
Annual income	Below RM10,000	16.1
	RM10,000–RM19,999	20.5
	RM20,000–RM29,999	27.4
	RM30,000–RM39,999	19.0
	RM40,000 and above	17.0
Marital status	Never been married	56.2
	Married	43.2
	Widowed/divorced	0.6

Frequency of Sexual Harassment

In order to analyze the frequency of sexual harassment, as well as the various risk factors according to the three types of sexual harassment (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion), the scales for each item in the SEQ were first combined into dichotomous scores (0 for never, the values 1–4 were collapsed to the value 1 for one or more times). For the individual participant, the scores of each type of sexual harassment were calculated by summing up the collapsed scores, which eventually produce scores ranging from 0 to 6 on the gender harassment and sexual coercion scales (as six items are used to measure each of these scales), and from 0 to 7 on the unwanted sexual attention scale (measured by seven items). The overall measure, total harassment, was subsequently derived by summing up the scores for these three types of sexual harassment, producing values ranging from 0 to 19.

The percentage of respondents who have experienced the various types of sexual harassment are presented in Table 2. Gender harassment appears to be the most common (for example, as much as 52.4% of the sample have experienced offensive jokes) among the three forms of sexual harassment. This is followed by

unwanted sexual attention (between 4.9% and 21.6% of the respondents) and then sexual coercion (3.5%–8.2%), which comprises the most serious types of sexual harassment. These findings are in-line with those of other studies such as Ng et al. (2003). Thus, sexual harassment prevails in the Malaysian workplace in the form of mostly verbally- and visually-offensive sexual behavior, as well as offers for dates, drinks, etc. Threats, bribes, and bad treatment are rarely employed to coerce women workers.

Table 2
Frequency of sexual harassment experience

Sexual harassment experience	Never (%)	Once/more (%)
Gender harassment		
Offensive jokes	47.6	52.4
Offensive sexual remarks	82.3	17.7
Remarks about your body or sexual activities	74.0	26.0
Staring, leering and ogling	68.2	31.8
Display or distribute sexist materials	83.1	16.9
Sexist remarks	76.3	23.7
Unwanted sexual attention		
Attempt to discuss sexual matters	81.1	18.9
Unwanted sexual attention	83.0	17.0
Attempt to establish a romantic/sexual relationship	88.4	11.6
Continue to ask for dates, drinks, dinner	78.4	21.6
Touching	80.4	19.6
Attempt to stroke or fondle you	91.6	8.4
Unwanted attempts to have sex	95.1	4.9
Sexual coercion		
Bribed to engage in sex	94.8	5.2
Threatened for sexual relations	93.6	6.4
Treated better for sexual cooperation	91.8	8.2
Had to respond positively to sexual invitation to be well-treated	91.8	8.2
Made to feel afraid of bad treatment for refusal to cooperate	91.9	8.1
Treated badly for refusal	96.5	3.5

Table 3 presents the correlation between sexual harassment and the risk factors that are likely to give rise to this phenomenon. Examining the Pearson correlation coefficients for these factors on the three types of sexual harassment, it is found that there is a significant and relatively high correlation between each of the following variables – an unprofessional atmosphere, sexist attitudes, knowledge of grievance procedure, and women's dressing style – and the incidence of sexual

harassment. These findings are in-line with the expectations of the proposed model. Thus, women who work in an unprofessional atmosphere, or among males who are sexist in their attitudes are more likely to encounter sexually harassing behaviors. Those who are more knowledgeable about grievance procedures are also more likely to interpret negative behaviors of male colleagues as being sexually harassing behaviors. The more provocative a woman dresses the more likely she is going to be sexually harassed.

Table 3
Pearson correlation of risk factors with sexual harassment

Variables	Total sexual harassment	Gender harassment	Unwanted sexual attention	Sexual coercion
Sexist attitudes	0.530*	0.440*	0.508*	0.437*
Unprofessional atmosphere	0.547*	0.506*	0.515*	0.394*
Knowledge of grievance procedure	0.538*	0.513*	0.506*	0.364*
Dressing manner	0.467*	0.351*	0.462*	0.416*
Self-perception of physical attractiveness	0.226*	0.218*	0.265*	0.145*
Sex role	0.234*	0.135*	0.265*	0.222*
Privacy of workspace	0.207*	0.118*	0.189*	0.261*
Gender skewness	0.146*	0.067	0.163*	0.169*
Education level	0.037	0.025	0.020	0.062

Note: * Correlation coefficients are significant at 1% level

There is also a significant but low correlation between the remaining factors – physical attractiveness, sex roles, privacy of work area, and gender skewness – and sexual harassment. Physically attractive women are perceived as sociable, dominant, warm and socially skilled (Feingold, 1992). Therefore it is expected that more attractive women have a higher risk of sexual harassment. The more feminine traits possessed by the worker, the more likely she will be harassed as stipulated by the model. The implication is that a woman worker needs to exhibit some aggressiveness in her personality if she wishes to avoid being sexually harassed. The more privacy being accorded to a female worker, the more likely she will be harassed by her male colleagues. Therefore, to minimize such incidents, a female worker should preferably work in full view of her other colleagues. The skewness of the gender ratios of organizational staff is not perceived as significantly correlated with gender harassment.

However, no significant correlation exists between education level and incidence of sexual harassment. In other words, women who are highly qualified are as likely to be sexually harassed as women who are less educated. This is a surprising finding that is not in-line with the expectation of the model which stipulates that sexual harassment incidence often involves workers of the lower categories.

Stepwise regression was also used to examine the relative importance of the various risk factors in influencing each type of sexual harassment. The results are presented in Table 4. A significance level of 1% was used. Two dominant factors – women's perceptions of sexist attitudes and behaviors by male co-workers as well as an unprofessional work atmosphere – emerged as the main contributors to unwanted sexual attention and to sexual coercion among the sample of workers studied. Together they accounted for 43.9% and 30.2% of the total variation in these types of harassment respectively. Thus, women perceive that they work in an environment where the belief system regards them as mere sex objects, inferior to men in terms of their capabilities and skills. They are appreciated more for their sexual attractiveness. This yields them vulnerable to being sexually harassed. An unprofessional work atmosphere also does not augur well for women in the workplace. This includes instances where employees are compelled to complete tasks beyond their job scope, display a general lack of courtesy and respect for one another, or misuse company time and resources.

Table 4
Results for stepwise regression

Gender harassment model		
	Standardized coefficients	t
(Constant)	-1.454*	-6.016
Grievance procedure	0.401*	10.788
Dressing manner	0.235*	6.289
Malay	0.267*	4.734
Never married	0.103*	3.004
Chinese	0.126**	2.223
	Sum of squares	F
Regression	497.161	
Residual	1024.996	55.682*
Total	1552.157	
Summary for gender harassment model		
R = 0.572		
R ² = 0.327		
Adjusted R ² = 0.321		

(Continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Unwanted sexual attention model		
	Standardized coefficients	t
(Constant)	-1.985*	-13.814
Sexist attitudes	0.385*	11.628
Unprofessional atmosphere	0.300*	8.628
Dressing manner	0.240*	7.144
Malay	0.114*	3.714
Sex role	0.093*	2.952
Education	-0.070**	2.195
	Sum of squares	F
Regression	694.964	
Residual	702.227	94.512*
Total	1397.191	
Summary for unwanted sexual attention model		
R = 0.705		
R ² = 0.497		
Adjusted R ² = 0.492		
Sexual coercion model		
	Standardized coefficients	t
(Constant)	-0.980*	-8.517
Sexist attitudes	0.371*	10.298
Unprofessional atmosphere	1.459*	5.343
Grievance procedure	-1.277*	-4.734
Never married	-0.152*	-4.536
Dressing manner	0.169*	4.568
Sex role	-0.150*	4.326
	Sum of squares	F
Regression	280.987	
Residual	429.101	62.536*
Total	710.088	
Summary for sexual coercion model		
R = 0.629		
R ² = 0.396		
Adjusted R ² = 0.865		

Notes: * Significant at the 1% level
 ** Significant at the 5% level

Women employees' knowledge of grievance procedures was a significant predictor for gender harassment, accounting for 24.9% of the variation in this form of harassment. As implementation of the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment is on a voluntary basis by each organization, awareness of female employees of any formal grievance procedure

would be a good contingency move on their part. Such a mechanism would provide an avenue for receiving, processing and remedying any complaints of sexual harassing behavior.

Another significant variable was the dress manner of female workers, increasing the tendency of gender harassment by a further 4.3% and unwanted sexual attention 3.7%. The dressing manner of women in fact consistently appears in all three models as significantly increasing the likelihood of sexual harassment among the workers in the survey. This suggests that women indeed do take into account the likelihood that the way an individual dresses could put herself at risk of sexual harassment. Furthermore, the fact that the only ethnic group, Malays, emerges as significant in the results for gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention could imply that they view sexual remarks and visuals as well as unwelcome invitations more seriously than the other ethnic groups.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the predictions of the four-factor model by highlighting the fact that sexual harassment is a complex problem which is influenced by many factors. First, it was found that Malaysian women workers are sexually harassed regardless of their educational background (and by implication their job status). Second, the sexist attitudes of male co-workers and the existence of an unprofessional environment are the main contributors to sexual harassment. Third, the study found that the more sexually provocative a woman worker dresses in the workplace, the more likely she would be harassed.

The occurrence of sexual harassment in the workplace at all occupational levels incur some form of cost to companies, as the morale and interpersonal relationships among co-workers suffer. This in turn has serious implications on the team spirit and cooperation of employees. In the long-term, aggravated by the departure of competent workers, the competitive advantage of the corporation will ultimately be affected. Furthermore, sexual harassment is an indication of unequal power between male and female workers, implying women's subordinate status in the organization and society in general.

In view of the findings of this study, several recommendations could be put forward. Managers of organizations could implement some measures in the workplace to counteract the risk factors of women workers. For example, managers could lay down the rules of expected behavior, enforce the necessary discipline, rearrange the work area to allow women workers to work in full view of their colleagues, and encourage women workers to dress appropriately at the workplace.

A proper system for dealing with sexual harassment cases should be installed at the workplace. The formation of comprehensively structured in-house mechanisms by individual organizations, together with action committees representing a wide spectrum of workers in terms of levels, occupations and sex is imperative if employers are serious in their intention of circumventing the problem of sexual harassment of their female staff in the short-term. In addition, the organization should also spell out clearly the procedure of investigation of the victim and the harasser, the consequent disciplinary action that could be taken, as well as any remedial action for the victim such as counseling for either or both the individuals involved. The details of such a system should be disseminated clearly to the staff.

In the long-term, prevention remains an effective way to deal with sexual harassment, such as changing the sexist attitudes and belief system of society in general. This could be achieved through education to enhance public awareness of sexual harassment among the youths in schools and higher education institutes, as well as the working adults in both public and private organizations. The government, as the largest employer in the country with nearly one million workers, could take a major lead by enforcing clear policies and procedures on sexual harassment. In addition, it should quickly legislate the Code of Practice which was launched more than five years ago, but hitherto remains non-compulsory so that minimum standard practices could be adopted for dealing with the various aspects of sexual harassment, besides providing legal protection for women workers.

Trade unions and employee group could form action committees that are gender balanced. Besides working with employers to minimize unwanted behaviors at the workplace, they could take on functions such as receiving complaints and ensuring that these complaints are investigated and addressed. In addition, the role of society at large cannot be overlooked in terms of moral support, as it is vital for those who have been sexually harassed to remove any associated stigma and rebuild their self-esteem.

Nevertheless, it is recognized that this research focused on the workers in the urban organizations. As sexual harassment tends to be a universal phenomenon, it would be useful to extend the study to organizations located outside the Klang Valley. In this way, a more wider picture of the situation of sexual harassment in Malaysia could be obtained.

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