DIFFERENCES IN THE USAGE OF LANGUAGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUAL HARRASSMENT AT WORKPLACE: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Sexual harassment behaviors can come in terms of visual, physical, nonverbal and verbal behavior that has great implication on the worker and the organization at large. Numerous studies indicated that sexual harassment at workplace are related to gender misperceptions. Hence the paper will bring forward data collected through questionnaires and interview using a cross sectional design from public sector workers in Malaysia. Findings indicated that there were significant gender differences exist in the choice of words used to explain the experience of sexual harassment. It was further found to be related to the attitude towards women at workplace. The results suggest that management should increase awareness towards sexual harassment through training in an effort to provide condusive workplace for their workers.

Theme: Human Resource and Applied linguistic
Keyword: Sexual Harassment, Workplace, Language, Gender and Public Administrators,
**Introduction**

Sexual behavior in the workplace is not a recent phenomenon but the concept of sexual harassment is of recent origin in this country. The term sexual harassment conveys a picture of male aggression and allows an examination of the matrix of male/female relations in the workplace (Farley, 1978). In the past such unwanted sexual comments and advances have been taken for granted in the workplace, regarded as so much a part of normal working life that few people, apart from the victim, are aware of its happening.

In reality, sexual harassment in the workplace is a problem for all, that harassment can damage employee’s prospects for gaining employment, advancement, and wages. In addition harassment can create an offensive, hostile, and intimidating work environment that interferes with one’s performances and job success.

**What is sexual harassment?**

In Malaysia sexual harassment is seen in accordance to the two main legal criteria (Kementerian Sumber Manusia, 1999). It is quite similar to the one developed in the United States. According to the Ministry of Human Resources, under the Code of practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, sexual harassment can be divided into two categories, which are sexual coercion and sexual annoyance. The first looks at harassing behavior in purely contractual terms sometimes called quid pro quo harassment. It means in order to obtain a job, win promotion, or gain access to training opportunities or other benefits the granting of sexual favors becomes a contractual term, either explicitly or implicitly. Failure to comply may lead to non-employment, denial of training and promotional opportunities, demotion, poor work assignments, or dismissal.

The second is related to the creation of hostile working environment that is sexual annoyance where there might be no direct contractual dimensions involved. It is where there may be no clear contractual gain or penalty, but where a pattern of behavior based on sex develops and creates an uncomfortable and hostile work situation for the victim. Such behavior has the
purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with a person’s performance on the job or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment.

**Gender and Sexual Harassment**

Gender is one of the strongest predictors of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1993). A review of the literature shows that researchers have found a number of differences with the most consistent findings on sexual harassment being gender differences in perceptions of incidents (Booth-Butterfield, 1984; Tannen, 1990; Malovich & Stake, 1990; Riger, 1991). Riger (1991:499) for example stated, “the variable that most consistently predicts variation in people’s definition of sexual harassment is the sex of the rater”. In addition she suggested that men generally do not perceive the behavior to be offensive and, therefore, they do not see it as a crime or problem. As a matter of fact, men label fewer behaviors at work as sexual harassment and they tend to find sexual overtures from women to be flattering, whereas women find similar approaches from men to be insulting (Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Gutek, 1985).

Most studies also indicate that women are the majority of victims of sexual harassment (Gutek, 1985). It is an exception when men are sexually harassed (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1993). Men also less likely to report sexual harassment when it does occur (Konrad & Gutek, 1996). One explanation is that men are constrained by the ‘sex role’ they are supposed to fit (Vaux, 1993).

**Attitude towards Women and Sexual Harassment**

The difference in perception towards sexual harassment is also found to be related to sex role identity. Sex role identity is one variable that has been studied in relation to understand the differences in gender perceptions. Some scientist, including Malovich and Stake (1990), posit that men and women with traditional sex-role orientations are more willing to tolerate unwelcome sexual behavior and less inclined to label it harassment than persons with
nontraditional orientations. They also implied a traditional man may not be able to recognize the negative impact of the relationships due to his traditional ideology.

It appears that what men believe about women often affects how they relate to them. More specifically, a number of studies have shown that men’s behavior towards women as well as their perceptions of and responses to women’s actions are mediated by their basic attitudes towards women. For example, Shotland and Goodstein (1983) found that subjects who had more egalitarian attitudes according to the Attitudes Towards Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1972) were found to be less likely to see the situation as violent than those with less egalitarian views.

Conservative views of women were highly correlated with beliefs that women are responsible for preventing rape (Field, 1978). Other studies by Koss, Leonard, Beezly and Oros (1985) found that men who have adversarial attitudes towards women have been consistently more involved in sexually aggressive actions towards women than those with egalitarian attitudes.

Method

This empirical study was conducted in a large public sector organization. Questionnaires were distributed to 266 respondents during working hours that participated in the study voluntarily. For the purpose of qualitative data the respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire their respective correspondence address and phone numbers if they agree to be interviewed by the researcher.

Two instruments were used in this study. The Utara Sexual Harassment Perception Questionnaire – USHPQ (Sabitha, 1999) was used to measure the perception of workers towards sexual harassment. The questionnaire consists of verbal, non-verbal, visual and physical forms of sexual harassment behaviors. This instrument obtained high reliability score when used among public administrators (Sabitha, 1999), factory workers (Mazlinda, 1999/2000), and students (Sabitha, 1999b). Respondents were asked how each behavior
effects them at workplace. Possible responses were varied on a four point scale from one (not disturbing) to four (very disturbing).

Second, sex role identity was measured using Attitude Towards Women Scale (AWS) that was constructed by Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1973). A number of studies have substantiated the validity of this measure by finding that women score more liberally on the AWS than men (Beach & Kimmel, 1976; Doyle, 1975;Etaugh, 1975)

**Findings**

The population of the study was 61.3% men and 38.7% women. Majority of them are Malay (96.2%), and only a minority were Chinese (1.5%) and Indians (1.5%). The return rate for this study was 98.8%. Meanwhile 94.7% of the respondents were married, on only a small number were single (2.6%) or widow (2.7%).

**Gender and perception of sexual harassment**

The following Tables 1 and table 2 show the comparison between male and female perception towards sexual harassment. The study indicated that female respondent have higher mean score than male respondents. Table 2 also indicate that female respondents have higher tendency to perceive sexual harassment behaviors as disturbing compared to male respondents.

<p>| Table 1: Comparison between Gender and Perception of Sexual Harassment |
|---|---|---|
| N | Mean | Sd |
| Men | 163 | 116.26 | 18.6110 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High PSH</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low PSH</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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(N=163) (N=103) Phi value= 0.42

Table 2: Perception of sexual harassment and Gender

Sexual harassment and Gender based Language

Interviews were conducted with the male and female respondents to examine the differences in words used to describe their experiences towards sexual harassment. Results indicated there were differences in the choice of words used in describing their experiences towards sexual harassment. The following words are amongst the words extracted from the verbatim of twenty female respondents. The words were like; hate, disgusted, felt cheap, felt like a slut, afraid, I want to hit their faces, helpless, trapped, humiliated, ashamed, is a shameful act, unruly, a bully, felt dirty, hopeless, horror, shocked, sickened, outrageous, sad, frightened despicable, disgraceful, lost my dignity, low self esteem was most often used in describing their experience of sexual harassment.

The following is one of the verbatim from a female respondent in the study,
“I feel humiliated when he comes to me that way. I feel like I have no dignity. Just because I am a woman he thinks he can do as he wishes. I feel dirty when he tries to hold my hand. At times I feel like crying out loud, but the problem is he always does that to me when there is no one around us. So I do not have witness ... and I am afraid I will be blamed for what happened”.

On the other hand the male respondents who have faced sexual harassment describe their experience in a different way. The following is one of the verbatim from male respondents who were harassed by a woman.

“...When the first time she came on to me, I was surprised and tongue-tied, it was really unexpected for women to behave that way, but I just take it as a joke...”

Based on the interviews conducted with 20 male respondents the following are the common words used to describe their feelings towards sexual harassment. The words that were extracted from the male respondent’s verbatim are shocked, unexpected, surprised, very advanced, naughty, awkward, too modernize, bad joke, uneasy, not normal, brave, disturbed, unexpected, not pleasant, confused, puzzled, baffled, kidding, uncomfortable, not at ease and complex behaviour. Hence in summary the choice of words used to describe feelings towards harassment showed that women has a greater depth of emotion involved in describing their feelings compared to men.

**Why the differences**

According Tannen (1990) conducted research on the communication patterns of men and women. She found that males and females employ different methods to communicate; and, that oftentimes problems occur because males and females do not understand the messages being conveyed by the opposite sex. Tannen denoted that women need to learn to be more direct in articulating messages and more explicit in expressing to men what is unacceptable behavior. More important, though she stressed that men need to improve their ability to
decode females’ nonverbal cues, that they need to understand that just because a women does not verbally say “NO!” to advances does not mean she consents to continued actions.

According to Booth-Butterfield (1984: 40), males seem to learn to ignore much of what they hear and to require the communicator to prove the “value” of what is being said before they actually listen. This translates into the workplace, suggests Booth-Butterfield, where “men may not be aware of emotional messages from their peers. Male employers may not listen for subtle feelings, not hearing hurt and frustration until much damage has occurred in the relationship “. Similarly, Dunwoody-Miller’s and Gutek’s (1985) findings revealed that men seem less sure than women whether or not an incident is sexual harassment and they are less likely than women to label any sexual harassment incident at work as sexual harassment.

Another reason for gender differences might be due to the threshold towards SH. According to Saal, Johnson and Weber (1989), they postulated that males have a lower ‘threshold’ than females in interpreting friendly behavior as sexual. This means that as women’s interpersonal behavior varies on a continuum ranging from unfriendly and distant to friendly and outgoing, men are quicker than women to label increasingly friendly behavior as sexy or sexually motivated.

The threshold phenomenon may apply to Abbey and Melby’s (1986) work. Based on the hypothesis, males and females will have diverse perceptions of sexual intent due to nonverbal cues. Abbey and Melby (1986) studied the stimulus effects of three non-verbal cues: touch, eye contact, and interpersonal distance. As had been assumed, 1) male and female responses differed sharply along gender lines in their perceptions of behavior, and 2) males rated the female target higher on sexual traits than females did. In all three studies, males perceived the target as flirtatious, sexy, and more seductive than did the women. Also, in the distance and eye-contact studies, males saw the target as more promiscuous and they were more sexually attracted to her than were the females to male targets. In sum, males tended to see more sexuality in females than women did, and this occurred with minimum of cues” (pg. 297); men tended to misinterpret women’s friendliness as an indication of sexual interest.
Attitudes Towards Women and Perception of Sexual Harassment

Analysis employing Bivariate Elaboration table, using Attitude Towards Women as a test factor, showed that only men and women with liberal attitudes towards women showed have relationship with perception of sexual harassment. The following Tables 3 and 4 show the relationship between gender, perception of sexual harassment and attitude towards women. Respondents who have tendency to be having traditional view towards women have almost no relationship with the perception of sexual harassment.

**Table 1: Comparison between Gender and Perception of Sexual Harassment**

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<td>Women</td>
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<td>133.85</td>
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**Table 2: Perception of sexual harassment and Gender**

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The information found in this study, that men who hold traditional views of women perceive less sexual harassment and have more tolerant attitudes toward it, parallels the findings of a number of studies on men’s attitudes toward women. Stockdale (1983) stated the non-acceptance of feminist attitudes about sexual harassment is associated with the tendency of men to sexually misperceive and distort women’s friendly behavior as sexiness.

Most studies indicate that men with conservative attitudes towards women are less likely to classify aggressive actions toward women negatively and/or are likely to believe that the women are complicit in aggressive actions directed towards them. For example, Shotland and Goodstein (1983) found that subjects with traditional views towards women were more likely to see the victim in a rape scenario as wanting sex. Similarly, Muehlenhard, Friedman and Thomas (1985) found that men with traditional values were more likely to justify date rape than those with egalitarian views toward women, and Burt (1980) found that men who believe in traditional female roles are more likely to believe rape myths than those who do not.

Muehlenand and Linton (1987), in referring to sexual aggression, suggested two reasons why males with traditional views might perceive less and have more tolerant attitudes toward sexual harassment than those with more egalitarian views: a) traditional males may buy into the sexual script which depicts women’s never admitting they want sex and men pursuers who must overcome token resistance; b) traditional males are likely to believe that leading a man on justifies the use of force. Previous studies have found that men often imbue “normal” female behavior with sexual meaning (Johnson, Stockdale & Saal, 1991; Saal, Johnson & Weber, 1989). Therefore traditional males may feel that a woman, by her supposed sexual behavior, has provoked the sexual harassment she receives.
Consequently, men who have more traditional attitudes towards women or negative attitudes toward women or both often believe it is women who initiate sexual contact and are therefore responsible for the sexual overtures they encounter. This position takes the responsibility for aggressive sexual actions away from men and makes it easier to take the position that women, as the source of sexual provocation, get what they deserve.

Meanwhile women with less liberal attitudes towards women also tend not to perceive sexual harassment behaviors as disturbing. According to Jensen and Gutek’s (1982) findings victims of sexual harassment who maintained feminist attitudes were less likely to blame themselves for incidents of sexual harassment. According to Tangri, Burt, and Johnson (1982) this may be related to cultural sex status norms, and the feminist presumption of male dominance. Society expects and rewards males for aggressive behaviors and females for passivity and acquiescence, and the workplace is just another sphere of this society (Gutek, 1985). Hence women with more traditional attitudes tend not to perceive sexual harassment reasoning that such behavior is normal for men towards women.

**Recommendations**

The role of management is two fold that first reacting to sexual harassment and secondly providing role models for employees to emulate. Management which publicly endorse an organization’s policy against sexual harassment, while themselves practicing harassment gives the impression that harassment is allowed to those who can manipulate the system, e.g. men (or women) in power. If management responds to sexual harassment complaints by ignoring or discouraging the, in effect, the behavior is condoned.

One of the major ways to eradicate sexual harassment at workplace is through effective sexual harassment policy. Ultimately, the goal of any sexual harassment policy is to create an atmosphere in which instances of sexual harassment are discouraged. Among the recommendations to organizations and employers as to what a sexual harassment policy should include: a) a definition of sexual harassment and prohibited conduct; b) a policy statement that every employee should understand that sexual will not be tolerated; c) clear grievance and investigatory procedures; d) assurances of no retaliation; e) specific remedies and disciplinary programs (sanctions should be clear and meaningful); and f) the use of
several methods of communicating the policy to ensure maximum coverage (personnel manuals, bulletin boards, memos from the CEO, etc).

In addition training should also be given to employees. These workshops should train individuals to (Grieco, 1984), to recognize sexual harassment when it occurs and evaluate the situation, since individuals have different perceptual level. They also should be taught to take steps to decrease the likelihood that the incident will occur again. Training sessions should also focus on communication, stereotypical attitude in men as well as women. The reason that men are more often harassers and studies have shown that many harassers do not believe they are sexually harassing others (Frierson, 1989). Clearly this indicates a need for awareness training.

At the national level there should be thorough survey to establish the nature and extent of harassment in the civil service. In the meantime all civil servants should be made aware that sexual harassment at work will not be tolerated and, if appropriate, will be dealt with as a disciplinary matter.

Conclusions

Removing harassment from the workplace requires action against both individual incidents and those existing practices and attitudes at work which foster sexual harassment. Hence can management can play a major role in managing sexual harassment at workplace. That is management can act as a role model and provide enough avenues for victims to complain and indirectly controlling the effect of traditional attitude towards women flourishing at workplace. Last but not the least, it is not the sole responsibility of the management but also the employee’s responsibility to speak up and not allow them to be victimized.

REFERENCE


INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MANAGEMENT (ICM 2011) PROCEEDING


