

Sexual Harassment among Hotel Employees in Malaysia: The Risk Factor and Effect

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Abstract: The present study aims to identify the relationship between all the variables which can be categorized into 3 namely awareness towards sexual harassment, effects of sexual harassment and risk factor contributing to sexual harassment. A modified self-administered questionnaires designed by the Defence Equal Opportunity Council (DEOC) Task Force on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment USA was used as the main data collection instrument in this study. A total of 260 respondents were selected from the employees in various hotels and resorts in Terengganu. The correlation analysis results indicate that a high incident of offensive behavior will have the strongest impact on the productivity, employment and emotions of the hospitality employees in Terengganu. It indicates that both body language and other offensive communication action should be of concern to managers and supervisors. The multiple regression analysis reveals that the changes in the employment, productivity and the emotional well-being are influenced by a combination of predictors (independent variables). More works need to be done to ensure that physical working environment, behavior, body languages and communications that may lead to sexual harassment should be monitored and controlled. Knowledge into action that may trigger sexual harassment behavior should be tough to all employees and proper complaint procedures should be exercised effectively.

Key words: Sexual harassment, hotel employees, risk factor, effect of sexual harassment, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment has been recognized as a phenomenon disturbing the members' wellbeing of an organization since 1970s. For the past two decades, it becomes a universal issue and increased significantly (Hajdin, 2002; Crouch, 2001). Even though, the occurrence of sexual harassment reported in Malaysia is limited, but the cases are quite common in the United State of America (USA). In certain work condition, sexual harassment revealed to be more prevalent for instance where there is sex ratio is imbalanced where male-dominated environment and the large power gap between women and men. Although, the incidence of sexual harassment might happen to women or men but studies show that women are more vulnerable and at risk of sexual harassment. As reported in the local Malay newspaper recently, it was highlighted that 10% of the women in Malaysia are suffering from sexual harassment in the form of threats. Another 10% experienced the misconduct in the form verbal harassment, while the remaining 80% were exposed to non-verbal harassment such as hand signals, lips licking, blowing kisses, winkling and ogling (Ariffin, 2010).

According to the statistics produced by the Malaysian Labor Department between 1999 until 2010, about 297 cases were reported and solved. Still, several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) feel that many companies prefer to ignore or cover up the cases of sexual harassment in their organization.

The growing trend of women enters into the workforce in Malaysia which having 55% of female participation in the country's labor force by 2015 require the considerable attention from the management and policy makers towards the issue of sexual harassment. There is a need for every woman in the workplace to be protected and free from sexual harassment and discrimination. Apart from that, more women are entering occupations which traditionally regarded as male-oriented such as engineering, medicine, hospitality and many more increasingly exposed to the likelihood of sexual harassment in their workplace. One of the major employers in the Asia Pacific Region is the hospitality and tourism industry.

What is sexual harassment: Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia has launched the Code of Practice on

the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the workplace in August, 1999. The launch of this code of practice was the first official attempt by the government to define and address sexual harassment in the workplace. According to the code, sexual harassment can be defined as unwanted conduct of sexual nature having the effect of verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological or physical harassment:

- That might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by the recipient as placing a condition of a sexual nature on her/his employment
- “That might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by the recipient as an offence or humiliation or a threat to her/his well-being but has no direct link to her/his employment

Five forms of sexual harassment and examples of such behavior outlined in this Code of Practice are as follows:

- Verbal harassment (e.g., offensive or suggestive remarks)
- Non-verbal/gestural harassment (e.g., leering or ogling with suggestive overtones)
- Visual harassment (e.g., showing pornographic materials) based letters, sexual exposure.
- Psychological harassment (e.g., repeated insistent and unwanted social invitations).
- Physical harassment (e.g., inappropriate touching)

According to the United States Supreme Court and the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission 1984, there are 2 types of sexual harassment which are acknowledged as: Quid Pro Quo-a situation in which a supervisor offers a job promotion or raise in return for sexual favors or threatens retaliatory action if you do not comply with his advances. In this situation, the sexual behavior does not have to be physical and it is illegal even if the ‘offers’ is merely understood and never stated outright. For example, a supervisor might give the best work assignments to employees who flirt with him.

Hostile Environment-where an employee engages in unwelcome sexual behavior that creates hostile or abusive work atmosphere for any other employee. The employee who repeatedly makes sexual jokes in front of a colleague, even though he knows she does not like it is sexually harassing her by creating a hostile environment.

According to Sabitha (2008), sexual harassment is an unwelcome behavior or sexual nature which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating or humiliating and may be affect an employee’s work performance, health, career or

live hood. This definition applies to both gender and addressed the effects of sexual harassment on the victims. Sexual coercion is defined as ‘sexual harassment that results in some direct consequence of the victim’s employment’ mainly within a superior-subordinate position. Whereas, sexual annoyance is seen as ‘sexually-related conduct that is offensive, hostile or intimidating to the recipient but has no direct link to any job benefit which may occur by an employee against a co-employee or a client to an employee. The other type of sexual harassment is known as a hostile environment. Matthews further stated that hostile environment is demeaning and unwelcome sexually related behavior that is offensive, hostile or intimidating to the victim. This annoying behavior creates an offensive working environment that might affect the victim’s ability to continue working but has no direct connection with any job benefits. In Malaysia, 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 in hospitality industry: Sexual harassment is a major concern facing by all the hospitality industry and the increasing number of sexual harassment lawsuits being filed (Agrusa *et al.*, 2000). Close relationships between employees and customers also as between employees working in close physical proximity seems to be the trait of harassment in hospitality. This situation happens perhaps given certain of its characteristics for the instance uncertainty of hospitality service, surroundings of work itself, the unusual hours and the interaction of persons in the delivery service. From the industries also encompass with physical satisfaction of its customers and perhaps its employees, it offers opportunities for sexual conduct that are not always welcome (Pritchard and Morgan, 2006). The limitations between the pleasant interaction and allegations of harassment are difficult to be determined and these become the common issued faced by the employees in the hospitality service and broadly recognized as a particular difficulty in resolving problems. (Guerrier and Abid, 2000). The hospitality industry attracts and supports sexual behavior (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009) and around one in 4 employees are possibly to be harassed (Poulston, 2008). Multiple irregular stressor are experienced by victims who are sexually harassed which will influence their wellbeing in the future and ultimately decrease the job performance in an organization (Burton and Hoobler, 2006; Sandvik *et al.*,

2007). Victims of sexual harassment may as be ashamed (Lin, 2006) and suffer from various psychological, emotional as well as physical disturbs (Theocharous and Philaretou, 2009) which eventually force them to leave their job. Hence, this event signifies a major problem for both the victims and the industry they are hassled. Although, several studies on sexual harassment were conducted in Malaysia, however study on sexual harassment in the hotel and resort industry in Malaysia is inadequate. Specifically, forexample in the state of Terengganu, no research in this area has been carried out. Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between awareness of sexual harassment, risk factor contributed to the incident and the effects towards the victim.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to examine the forms of sexual harassment experienced by employees in the hospitality industry, the effect of sexual harassment to the victims and the risk factors contribute to the act. A sample of 260 questionnaires was distributed to male and female employees in various hotels and resorts in Terengganu. A modified self-administered questionnaires designed by the DEOC task force on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment USA was used as the main data collection instrument in this study. The questionnaire consists of 4 different sections which identify the form of sexual harassment experienced and the effects of sexual harassment to respondents. The risk factors contributing to sexual harassment were also identified. The respondents were selected using quota sampling technique.

RESULTS

Among all of the respondents, about 59% were female and 41% were male. More than 50% of the respondents were in the age group of 21-30 years while 22.3% were in the range of 31-40 years of age. Only 11% of the respondents were in the age group of 41-50 years and 10% of them were below 20 years. The respondents' ethnicity was classified based on the main ethnicity found in Malaysia. Most of the respondents were Malay, followed by 16% Chinese. Only a small percentage of the respondents (2%) were Indian and the small portion of the respondents did not indicate their ethnicity. In term of education level, more than half of the respondents (57%) have completed secondary school,

almost 39% were university graduates, about 4% primary school and the rest have no formal education. As for working experience, almost 44% of the respondents have <3 years working experience while another 27% have 4-9 and more than 10 years working experience respectively. More than half of the respondents (59%) were single and another 36% married. Only 5% of them divorced and the rest widowed. Respondents were from various departments and positions. About 50% of the respondents have a high level of awareness towards sexual harassment while another 30% with medium awareness towards sexual harassment. Another 9.2% of respondents have low and very low level of awareness. More than half (52%) of respondents agreed that their organization has a policy for sexual harassment. Another 26% of them revealed that no sexual harassment policy in their organization while the rest 22% of them did not sure whether such policy exist in their workplace. About 53% of respondents were experiencing sexual harassment, while working with the hotel and another 47% never been harassed.

Correlation analysis: Table 1 demonstrates the correlation analysis of the existence of any significant relationship and the strength of the relationship. The correlation analysis was conducted between all the variables which can be categorized into 3 categories which are 1:

- Awareness towards sexual harassment
 - Effects of sexual harassment
 - Risk factor contributing to sexual harassment.
- Awareness towards sexual harassment is further included "offensive behavior, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion"

The second category includes effects on employment, productivity and emotion and the category include risk factors on working environment and human factor. The correlation analysis revealed a mixed result. In the general, the awareness of sexual harassment (offensive behavior, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion) had a low to moderate association with productivity, employment and psycho-social of the hotel employees. This is shown by the correlation value (r) range of 0.256 and 0.485. The awareness of sexual harassment (offensive behavior, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion) had the same effect on the risk of working environment as shown by the correlation value (r) of 0.206-0.416. However, the risk on human factor was

Table 1: The correlation analysis of all variables

Parameters	Collection	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Offensive Behavior (A)	Pearson Correlation	1						
Unwanted Sexual Attention (B)	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000						
Sexual Coercion (C)	Pearson Correlation	0.716**						
Effect on Productivity (D)	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000						
Employment (E)	Pearson Correlation	0.419**	0.719**					
Effect on Emotion (F)	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000					
Risk on Working Environment (G)	Pearson Correlation	0.402**	0.413**	0.348**				
Risk on Human Factor (H)	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000				
	Pearson Correlation	0.485**	0.423**	0.265**	0.677**			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.000			
	Pearson Correlation	0.459**	0.393**	0.256**	0.643**	0.598**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.000	0.000		
	Pearson Correlation	0.412**	0.342**	0.206*	0.269**	0.324**	0.376**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.019	0.002	0.000	0.000	
	Pearson Correlation	0.044	0.004	-0.091	0.122	0.226**	0.061	0.412**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.622	0.965	0.305	0.166	0.010	0.494	0.000

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 2: Regression analysis of the predictor variables on the effect of sexual harassment

Dependent variables	Predictors	R ²	Standardized coefficients	t-values
Beta value				
Effect on employment	Offensive behavior	0.291	0.463	6.169
	Risk on human factor		0.237	3.164
Effect on productivity	Offensive behavior	0.289	0.282	3.308
	Sexual coercion		0.297	3.490
	Risk on human factor		0.202	2.657
Effect on emotion (psychosocial)	Offensive behavior	0.202	0.450	5.700
Effect of sexual harassment	Offensive behavior	0.309	0.393	0.730
	Sexual coercion		0.182	0.088
	Risk on human factor		0.200	0.076

not influenced by awareness of sexual harassment. Furthermore, the effect on productivity, employment and psycho-social was weakly influenced by the risk of the working environment as shown by the correlation value (r) of 0.269-0.376 and effects on employment was only influenced by risk on the human factor. Similarly, the risk on human factor also had a weak relationship with the risk of the working environment as shown by the (r) 0.412.

Regression analysis: The regression analysis revealed a mixed result as shown in the regression Table 2. The independent variable effect on employment was affected by 2 predictors namely offensive behavior shown by the employees' superior and risk on human factor faced by the employees. On the other hand, the effect on productivity is significantly influenced by 3 predictors which include offensive behavior, sexual coercion and risk on the human factor. The third regression was conducted on the dependent variable on emotion and psychology of the employees. In the third regression revealed that the dependent variable is only influenced by one predictor variable which is offensive behavior. The final regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictor variables that significantly influenced the dependent variable, which effect of sexual harassment on hospitality employees. The regression analysis revealed that the

dependent variable is affected by 3 predictors which are offensive behavior, sexual coercion and risk of human factors on the employees.

In general, all the regression analysis revealed that the relationship between the predictors and the dependent variables was weak as revealed by the R² value between 0.202 and 0.309. This means that the changes in the dependent variables can be predicted by the changes in the predictor variables between 20.20% and 30.90%. The result indicates that >60% of change in the dependent variables is explained by other unexplained variables.

DISCUSSION

Based on the correlation analysis, the researchers argue that awareness of sexual harassment had a mixed relationship with the productivity, employment and emotional state of the respondents. The productivity of the employees is mostly influenced by unwanted sexual attention and least influenced by sexual coercion and productivity was influenced the most by offensive behavior and least affected by sexual coercion. Similarly, the respondent's employment was perceived to have amoderate and significant correlation with offensive behavior shown by the staff and least affected by sexual coercion. In terms of emotional well-being, the authors

discovered that it was dominantly affected by offensive behavior and least influenced by unwanted sexual behavior. These results indicate that a high incident of offensive behavior will have the strongest impact on the productivity, employment and emotions of the hospitality employees in Terengganu. It indicates that both body language and other offensive communication action should be of concern to managers and supervisors.

The productivity, employment and emotional state of the employees are significantly correlated to the working environment of the employees indicating that careful design and layout of the working facilities, having proper complaint procedures and distribution of authority between gender is critical in minimizing the incident of sexual harassment. The human factors or traits of the offenders have a low correlation with the employment of the hospitality employees. The multiple regression analysis indicates that the changes in the employment, productivity and the emotional well-being are influenced by a combination of predictors (independent variables). Employment was influenced by offensive behavior and human factors while productivity is influenced by three predictors namely offensive behavior, sexual coercion and human factors. Changes in the emotional wellbeing of the employees are significantly predicted only by the changes in offensive behavior. Furthermore, the overall effect on sexual harassment is significantly influenced by 3 predictors; offensive behavior, sexual coercion and risk on human factors. These 3 predictors are the most important variables that may create challenges in the productivity, employment and emotional state of the employees due to the threat of sexual harassment. In light of this revelation, it is also discovered that there are other factors as revealed by the low r square value that may motivate the act of sexual harassment and create negative effects on the employment, productivity and emotional state of the hospitality employees.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that offensive behavior, sexual coercion and risk on human factors are 3 most important variables that may create challenges in the productivity, employment and emotional state of the employees due to the threat of sexual harassment. It is also revealed that 3 are other factors that may encourage the act of sexual harassment thus create negative effects towards employees in terms of employment, productivity and emotional well-being. Thus, it is believed that further efforts need to be done to ensure that physical working environment, behavior, body languages and communications that may lead to sexual

harassment should be monitored and controlled. The needs of other efforts from the top management of the hospitality industry for instance education and training program pertaining to the awareness of sexual harassment to the employees are essential. Yet, all employees should be well-informed and proper complaint procedures should be exercised effectively in the organization.

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