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Research paper



Understanding Sexual Harassment among Undergraduate Students' in Higher Education Institution in Malaysia

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Abstract

Gender violence and sexual harassment in higher education have been studied and reported for the past decades. This study intended to identify the problem of sexual harassment in the academic background. Specifically, the objectives of this study tend to look at the awareness of sexual harassment among students, identify the effects of sexual harassment and examine the risk factors contributed to the occurrence. Questionnaires were distributed to 351 undergraduate students in a public university in East Coast Malaysia with the return rate of 78%. The findings revealed that 58.6% of the respondent have been harassed at least once and majority of them were female. The most common form of sexual harassment experience by the respondents was offensive behaviour. Majority of the respondents agreed that sexual harassment experienced affected their emotional greatly compared to education and productivity. Unprofessional learning environment shown to be the most risk factor associated to the incidents of sexual harassment.

Keywords: *awareness; effect; higher education; sexual harassment; undergraduate student*

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is one of the utmost forms of abuse of a person's body and self-respect, nonetheless it is the least exposed. Certainly, the increasing awareness of the occurrences of sexual harassment have been viewed as a true workplace issue. The significance of this problem has encouraged the launch of the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment by the Malaysian government in 1999. According to the report from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development of Malaysia, in 2015, a total of 230 cases of sexual harassment have been reported compared to 190 in 2014 said Ahmad and Alias [1]. The increase in recorded cases is 40, but it is considered serious taking into account the case is very difficult to reveal by the victim. Director of counselling division, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Department of Malaysia, Dr Raja Kamariah Raja Mohd Khalid mentioned, it is believed that the number of victims who did not lodge a grievance was more than that and assuming it was something shameful to reveal or not notices that they actually a victim. Some of the reported cases occurred in public or private offices. Women are usually feels embarrassed and misapprehend the cases of sexual harassment and it will be worse for other problems including a more severe sexual assault to take place. The victim who has a weak character and no determination offers an opportunity for the predator to take advantage because they convinced the victims are not able to report their conducts. Since the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace has been existed for the past years, the higher education institutions also have no exception to this problem.

Sexual harassment in the academia is quite common to date. The incident has become a main issue in higher education setting across the nation since it obtained media coverage, and this has created public awareness intensely. The existence of cases of sexual harassment in educational sector in Malaysia had been disclosed by Aziz and Shamsul [2] in their empirical studies for the past years Another study had also been conducted on sexual harassment at Universiti Sains Malaysia in order to examine the understanding and experiences of sexual harassment among undergraduate students. The findings revealed that the incidents of sexual harassment reported high occurrence on campus with more female students become the victims as mention by Endut, [3]. The series of sexual harassment incident reported within an academic setting is a growing problem, however very few data presented and most cases of sexual harassment in the universities are not reported. Universities establishments around Malaysia seem to be turning a blind eye towards the incidents of sexual harassment within their institutions and only limited cases of sexual harassment has been reported within Malaysian universities. According to Kumar [4] by referring to the article appear in Malaymail online a foreign exchange student reported that he was suspected assault by other students. Regrettably, university has done nothing about the after multiple complaints has been made by the victim due to protect its reputation. As compared to male, more female is reported to experience sexual harassment and it does influence their education performance for instance trouble focused on their studies, anxiety and lower self-esteem. Little effort was done by the authorities of higher education institutions in Malaysia in the way of educating students and staff to avoid the issues though the policy and sexual harassment regulations exist in the institution. Studies of sexual harassment have been largely led in the workplace,

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still very limited studies relating to sexual harassment in education environment was identified thus far. Apart from that, many studies have been led in western countries, but very few number of research done in Malaysia related to the issue. Hence, this study aims to examine the sexual harassment experience among the undergraduate, the effects of sexual harassment to them and the potential risk factor associated to the incident. Ministry of Human Resource of Malaysia [5] had launched the Code of Practice on the prevention and eradication of sexual harassment in August 1999. The launch of this code was to highlight and outline the issue of sexual harassment at work and this effort was the upmost effort by the government. This code well defined the sexual effort by the government. This code well defined the sexual harassment as any unwanted behavior of sexual nature which can involve oral, non-verbal, graphical, emotional, or physical nuisance that perhaps:

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

The above definition conclude that sexual harassment could be viewed as sexual coercion and sexual annoyance. The code of practice also summaries five potential forms of sexual harassment which comprises of:

1. Verbal harassment for instance offensive or suggestive remarks, comments, jokes, jesting, kidding, sounds, interrogative.
2. Non-verbal/gestural harassment for example leering or ogling with suggestive connotations, licking lips or eating food offensively, hand signals or sign language meaning sexual action, determined flirting.
3. Pictorial harassment for instance showing pornographic materials, drawing sex-based sketches, or writing sex-based letters, sexual exposure.
4. Emotional harassment e.g. repeated, relentless, and unwanted social offers
5. Physical harassment e.g. inappropriate touching, patting, pinching, stroking, brushing up against the body, hugging, kissing, fondling, sexual assault.

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) [6] defined sexual harassment as:

"Any undesirable action of sexual advances, sexual favor request and other physical or verbal conduct of a sexual form create sexual harassment when this behavior effect individual's employment directly or indirectly, interfering with individual's job performance, intimidating or violent job environment".

Sabitha [7] in her study described sexual harassment as an unwanted action related to offensive sexual form lead to embarrassing or threatening that may affect individual's job performance, profession, well-being or live hood. Both gender; male and female applies to this definition.

1.2 Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Sigal, J argued that sexual harassment in academic settings is rampant in many countries and reported worst in the western countries such as United States, Australia, Netherlands, Germany, Canada and many more [8]. There are different categories of sexual harassment in the universities. It can originate from lecturer to student; student to lecturer and student-to-student. The student-to-student sexual harassment is common and prevalent in secondary schools and tertiary institutions. As supported by Ashgar, et.al [9], this may take different forms such as verbal, non-verbal, physical, and written Power dynamic forces in academic world exposed the opportunities for people to abuse the victim. The condition where strong authority connection between lecturers and students for example will allow this to happened.

As reported by New York Times [10], a Dr. for the United States gymnastics team and Michigan State University, pleaded guilty to seven sexual assault involving more than 130 women and girls, including many gymnasts, have accused him of abusive sexual behavior. Moreover, Beritaharian.com. [11] reported that more than half of university students in Australia faced sexual harassment in 2016 and seven percent of them were sexually assaulted at least once. The study was published in the Australian Human Rights Commission's report on behalf of 39 universities in the country which examined more than 30,000 students after several years of group activity to determine the degree of the problem. Women face three-time higher sexual assaults than males and almost twice as much threat of disturbance, whether on campus, on a university trip or college campus permitted by the institution. The report also said nearly a third of the disruption occurred in universities or in study rooms, while one in five attacks occurred at a university or social council. Most of the victims including international students did not report the incident they experienced with most victims claiming that the university did not provide a clear guideline on what to do and where they could refer for help.

Sexual harassment is not only rampant within the western countries but many others. Documented cases of sexual harassment on university campuses also reported in Egypt, such as Cairo University and Assiut University in Middle East. In addition, approximately 18 percent of 221 students surveyed from a few universities in Lebanon were experienced sexual harassment by their professors stated by MENAFN [12]. Sexual harassment by professors in Tunisia is usual even though Tunisia is one of the most liberal Arab states said Lynch [13]. Likewise, Norman, Aikin and Binka [14] mentioned, in a university in Ghana, 61% of female students in the medical schools were sexually harassed by their professors. Cultural prohibitions surrounding sexual actions in Asia countries make it hard to gain evidence of sexual harassment in educational institutions. But, a current report shows that few Asia countries such as South Korea, Bangladesh and Pakistan was faced sexual harassment among within their tertiary education.

Leach [15] in his study revealed that the countries with weak learning systems, low responsibility, great level of poverty as well as gender disparity reported higher incidents of sexual harassment. Mamaru, Getachew, and Mohammed [16] mentioned that, students, especially female who experienced sexual harassment whether physically and nonverbally harassed, suffered from emotional pain. In addition, sexual harassment also contributed to the important psychological effect as well as on the academic performance of the students said Julie [17]. Further, Durmus claimed that the victims of sexual harassment normally develop feeling of embarrassment, sorrow, anger and anxiety [18]. They also suffer from fear and trauma said Taiwo, Omole and Omele [19]. Sexual harassment can also have an overwhelming influence towards the victims' education. As reported by Quaicoe-Duco [20], the academic performance of the victims affected because they find it very tough to focus on their academic pursuits. This has caused low contribution from the victims and they tend to avoid unwelcome attention from lecturers.

2. Methodology

310 set of questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate students in a public university in East Cost of Malaysia involving three campuses. A total of 273 of the questionnaires were returned with the response rate of 78%. The respondents were selected using quota sampling technique. A modified self-administered questionnaire designed by the DEOC Task Force on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment, USA was used as the main data collection instrument in this study. Descriptive analysis on the awareness of sexual harassment experienced, factors contributed to the incident as well as effect of sexual harassment were analyzed.

3. Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Respondents' profile

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	99	36.3
Female	174	63.7
Age		
18-21	236	86.4
22-25	37	13.6
Ethnicity		
Malay	271	99.3
Others	2	7
Program		
AC110	19	7.00
BM114	9	3.30
BM118	28	10.3
EE110	11	4.0
EE111	20	7.3
EE112	16	5.9
HM110	20	7.3
HM111	6	2.2
HM112	15	5.5
HM115	28	10.3
EH110	33	12.1
EM110	6	4.8
BM242	13	2.6
BM244	7	4.8
CS110	15	2.2
CS244	8	2.9
CS247	6	2.2
Semester of study		
Part 1	14	5.1
Part 2	64	23.4
Part 3	32	11.7
Part 4	86	31.5
Part 5	64	23.4
Part 6	12	4.4
CGPA		
4.00-3.50	43	15.8
3.49-3.00	122	44.7
2.99-2.50	70	25.6
2.49-2.00	26	9.5
< 2.00	1	4

The total of 273 respondents were selected systematically from the undergraduate students' indicating all program offered by the university. Table 1 displays more than half of the respondents were female (63.7%) while the remaining were male. Majority of the respondents were from the age of 18-21 years old. In the context of ethnicity, almost all of the respondent was Malay. The respondents were from semester 1-6 respectively. Nearly half of the respondents were obtained CGPA of 3.49-3.00. 58.6% of the respondent reported to experienced sexual harassment and peers were the main proprietors followed by staffs, lecturers, and others. As expected, most of the proprietors were male. Concerning awareness towards sexual harassment, 57.5% of the respondent rate intermediate level of awareness. Almost half of the respondents revealed that they have been harassed at least once. More than half of the respondents not sure about the presence of policy on sexual harassment in the institution. 48 questions in the questionnaire that describe the awareness towards sexual harassment experienced was adapted from the DEOC Task Force on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment, USA. Descriptive analyses on the awareness towards sexual harassment experienced were examined.

Table 2: Awareness of Sexual Harassment Experienced

Items	Overall Mean Scores
A. Offensive Behaviour	
I was repeatedly being told sexual stories or jokes that were offensive to me	2.78
I always shown gesture or body language of sexual nature which embarrassed or offended me	2.58
I was whistled, called, or hooted in a sexual way	2.33
I was stared, leered, or ogled in a way that made me feel uncomfortable	2.77
I have attempted into unwelcome discussion of sexual matters	2.04
I received offensive remarks about my appearance, body, or sexual Activities	2.43
I have been shown crude and offensive sexual image or picture and remarks, either publicly (for example, in your workplace) or to you privately	2.33
I have been exposed to the harasser physically in a way that embarrassed or made me feel uncomfortable	2.00
I have been received an offensive sexual messag-es/images/videos through a communication device.	2.27
Items	Overall Mean Scores
B. Unwanted Sexual Attention	
I have been continuously asked for dates, drinks, dinner, and others even though I said "No"	2.18
I have been touched in a way that made me feel un-comfortable	2.24
I have received unwanted attempts to stroke, fondle, or kiss me	1.96
I received attempt to establish a romantic sexual rela-tionship with me despite my efforts to discourage it	1.82
I was approached or cornered in a way that was un-welcome and discomforting	2.18
C. Sexual Coercion	
I felt like I was being bribed with some sort of reward or special treatment to engage in sexual act.	1.76
I feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative (for example, by mention-ing an upcoming promotion)	1.73
I have been treated badly for refusing to have sex	1.57
I have been offered a better treatment if I was sexually cooperative	1.62
I am afraid I would be treated poorly if I didn't coop-erate sexually	1.72

Table 2 shows the respondents' awareness of kinds of sexual harassment experienced namely offensive behavior, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Offensive behavior revealed to be the most common form of sexual harassment acknowledged by the respondents. Offensive behavior describes the conduct such as making offensive jokes, remarks, or gestures as well as being stared, ogled, leered, or being whistled or hooted in a sexual way. The most frequent existence of offensive behavior found are jokes or sexual stories that offended the victims. The nine items included show the average means score between 2.00 - 2.78.

Table 3: Effects of sexual harassment to the respondents

Items	Overall Mean Scores
A. Education	
It caused me to avoid certain areas within the campus	2.93
It threatened my education opportunities	2.82
It created an offensive learning environment	3.05
It created a hostile learning environment	2.96
I feel that my education performance rating was unfairly lowered	2.73
I have considered changing course/campus	2.57
B. Productivity	
It affected my productivity/education perfor-mance	2.78
I was always late for class	2.47
I always absent to class	2.38
I feel that it has changed my learning pattern in a significant way	2.61
Learning process became unpleasant for me	2.73
C. Emotional	
I was embarrassed	3.19
I feel negative about my institution	2.90
I was stressed	3.15
It lowered my level of confidence	3.07
I was afraid	3.09

The effects of sexual harassment to the respondents were identified in Table 3. The effects were determined by means of education, productivity and emotional. Among the three categories of effect, sexual harassment reported to greatly influenced respondents emotionally. The most agreed statement by respondents was they become upset and embarrassed due to the act with the mean score of 3.19 and 3.18. While effect of sexual harassment towards education and productivity stated the average mean score of 2.47-3.05.

Table 4: Risk Factor Contributing to the Sexual Harassment

Items	Overall Mean Scores
Educational Environment	
Learning Privacy provides a greater opportunity for harassment (co-workers are less likely to witness the harassment)	3.24
Unprofessional learning environment (e.g.: disrespect among peers, staff and lecturers involved in non-learning activities) would contribute sexual harassment	3.49
Characteristics of the nature of course itself can contribute to sexual harassment (e.g.: learning/working for long and irregular hours)	3.16
Institution with no proper complaint procedures and policies related to sexual harassment is more vulnerable to the occurrence	3.47
Unequal gender ratio where male/female dominate the workplace is expected to report more cases of sexual harassment	3.23
Abusive power by lecturer/instructor/staff (e.g.: student with less power and authority are more likely to experience sexual harassment)	3.33
Human Factor	
Low moral values of the harasser (e.g.: the harasser may not regard harassment as immoral) contribute the harassment	3.71
Victims who are physical attractiveness are more likely to involved in sexual harassment	3.19
Sexist attitude of the victims (e.g. organizations/institutions are more likely to report higher levels of sexual harassment if sexist attitudes exist)	3.08
Women are viewed as sex objects and regarded as inferior to men can create a climate more conducive to the domination of women through sexually harassing behavior	3.23

Table 4 shows the nine items related to risk factor contributing to sexual harassment. These factors then were categorized into two; factors related to education environment and human factor. Overall mean scores for both categories were high with the mean score of 3.08 and 3.71. Respondents' perceived that human factor contributed significantly to the incidents of sexual harassment. Low moral values of the harasser cited as the most leading factor towards the act with the mean score of 3.71.

4. Conclusion

Findings discovered that there are occurrences of sexual harassment incident among undergraduate students. With 58.6% of students stated to be harassed, it was a worrying number and caution for the management and authority of the university to take preventive steps in order to evade the incident to occur. As predicted, females were more likely to receive sexual harassment than males and male were the main proprietor as reported in the finding. The three variables namely offensive behavior, unwanted sexual attention and sexual
coercion become important predictors that may build challenges towards lead to sexual harassment occurrence. Findings displayed that, offensive behavior stated to be the most common form sexual harassment experienced by the students. Sexual harassment described to greatly influenced respondents emotionally compare to their productivity and education. As revealed in the finding, human factor considerably contributed to the occurrence of sexual harassment.

5. Limitation

This study was carried out among Diploma and Bachelor Degree students in a public university in East Coast of Malaysia. All findings from this study merely used to provide understanding and knowledge of a university only. It cannot be concluded that students in other institutions experience the same except if there are factors and conditions like the place of study as it has been conducted. The respondents were limited to the students for academic session of January-April 2017 only. Thus, the findings are not generalized to the other students in for other academic session.

6. Recommendation

It is recommended that, specific internal rules and procedures in university should be considered in dealing with the cases of sexual harassment. Initiative ought to be implemented by top management in every higher education institution particularly in Malaysia to provide support for the victims. Some universities have their own initiative to adopt certain policies and procedures in dealing with the cases though there are no legal requirements for the higher education in Malaysia to have a specific internal policy. It is also suggested that a clear statement should be developed by the management of the university concerning the acceptable behavior on campus. Communication instrument must be clearer and established regularly to reinforce awareness of procedures to everybody in the university as well as the procedures for reporting the incidents. Formal complaints and informal reports should be treated promptly with fair procedures for the parties involved. As this study only emphasis on the undergraduate students' in a public university in Malaysia, the need for more comprehensive studies conducted in other public and private university campuses to further measure and compare the problems of sexual harassment in the education environment.

7. Recommendation for future research

This paper aids as an initial point for further research in this area. Future research should consider other recommendations. As only one institution is involved in this study, it limits the generalizability and exploration of the findings. Hence, it is vital for the future research to make a study from different institutions or industry in order to determine the occurrence of the sexual harassment experience. Further, to obtain more accurate result, it is recommended that the method of collecting data should not solely based on distributing
questionnaire. Future research may need to consider using the qualitative techniques such as interview to obtain better information on the topic.

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