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## Sexual harassment: a predictor to job satisfaction and work stress among women employees

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### Abstract

This study examines the predictions on sexual harassment experience towards job satisfaction and work stress among female employees at three universities in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. A questionnaire consisting of four sections has been used for this research. The four sections measured sexual harassment experience, job satisfaction, work stress and respondents information. A total of 1423 participants were selected through simple random sampling technique. Results show that more than half of the sample has had sexual harassment experience. Female employees aged between 26 to 39 years, married, and having length of service less than 5 years had more sexual harassment experiences. Another result showed a significant negative relationship between sexual harassment experience with job satisfaction and significant positive relationship between sexual harassment experience with work stress. Results also indicate that sexual harassment can be a predictor of job satisfaction and work stress.

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*Keywords:* Sexual harassment, job satisfaction, work stress, age, length of service and marital status.

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### 1. Introduction

In present days, sexual harassment has become a global problem. 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 an enormous body of research discussing sexual harassment in the workplace; primarily because sexual harassment negatively impacts employees on the personal level. For example, workplace sexual harassment has been shown to be responsible for undermining job satisfaction and affective commitment (Shaffer, Joplin, Bell, Lau & Oguz, 2000; Shupe,

Cortina, Ramos, Fitzgerald & Salisbury, 2002); as well as responsible for negative psychological conditions such as stress, depression and decrease productivity (Cortina, Huerta, Magley, Pang, and Torges, 2006).

The previous research reported that more women employees are victims compared to male employees. Approximately, 40 to 70 percent of sexual harassment victims are women. The victim's characteristics are single mothers, single women, young women, low educated group, new workers, unmarried, supporting staff group such as clerk experienced more sexual harassment compared to senior workers, the highly educated and those holding administrative and professional posts (Gutek, 1985; Renzetti & Curan, 1999).

There is still a lack of similar studies in developing countries in general (e.g. Lui, 1996; Limpaphayom & Williams, 2006) and Malaysia in particular. The seriousness of the problem has prompted the Malaysia government to officially launch the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in 1999. The previous study on sexual harassment in Malaysia focused more on the private sector compared to research in higher learning institutions and other sites such as factories, private companies and organizations (Hishamudin et al., 2003; Ishak et al., 2004; Ismail et al., 2007; Rohani, 2005; Syukran, 2004).

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:

- a. Verbal (e.g. offensive or suggestive remarks)
- b. Non Verbal or gestural (e.g. leering or ogling with suggestive overtones)
- c. Visual (e.g. showing pornographic materials)
- d. Psychological (e.g. unwanted social invitations)
- e. 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 in public higher learning institution of Malaysia. Specifically it examines the level of experience sexual harassment as well as identifying the prediction of sexual harassment with job satisfaction and work stress in the workplace.

## 2. Research method

A questionnaire survey was used for gathering the primary data for this study. The survey focused on women employees who had experienced sexual harassment by male colleagues at workplace. The research design used is simple random sampling technique. The questionnaires were distributed and subsequently collected from female employees in the faculty's office (clerk, tutor, lecturers and professors in 3 (three) higher learning institutions in the Klang Valley Malaysia. A total of 1423 questionnaires were completed.

The questionnaire comprised of four sections that assessed the sexual harassment experience of the respondents in the workplace, job satisfaction, work stress and demographics of respondents.

The sexual harassment experience was measured using the Sex and the Workplace Questionnaire developed by Gutek (1985) which was made up from 8 questioning items related to verbal and non

verbal sexual harassment. The marking scheme was rather simple for it only uses 3 scales, ranging from 1 for “never” to 3 for “ever”. Alpha reliability is 0.85.

Work satisfaction was measured using *Occupational Stress Indicator Questionnaire* from Cooper, Sloan and Williams (1988), which includes 22 positive questioning items. To measure the work satisfaction, the technique used was a six scale, ranging from 1 for “very unsatisfying” to 6 for “very satisfying”. Alpha reliability is 0.96.

Work stress was measured using the *Job Stress Survey* questionnaire from Spielberger and Vagg (1992), which consist of 30 positive questioning items. To measure work pressure, a scale of 1 to 9 was used based on the degree of stress resulting from sexual harassment at work place. Alpha reliability is 0.85.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Level of sexual harassment

The research findings shows a majority of 750 women employees experienced sexual harassment at an average degree (52%), high degree (25.9%) and low degree of sexual harassment (21.4%).

#### 3.2. Demographics of Participants

The profile includes information about subject’s age, length of service and marital status. The total number of female workers involved is 1423 persons. According to age, the majority are between 26 to 39 years (70.1%) while a substantial minority (43.9%) have a length of service less than 5 years and 64.8% are married. A complete result is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents’ demographics

Demographics	Percentage	
Age	below 25 years old	24.8
	26 to 39 years old	70.1
	40 years old onward	5.1
Length of service	below 5 years	43.9
	6 to 10 years	20.9
	10 years onward	35.2
Marital Status	Single	33.8
	Married	64.8
	Single Mother	1.4

ANOVA one-way statistical analysis shows that there is a significant difference in sexual harassment experience based on different age [ $F(2,1420) = 3.210, p < .01$ ] and length of service [ $F(2,1420) = 7.325, p < .05$ ]. The complete results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Difference in Sexual Harassment Experience Based on Age and Length of Service

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Age				
Between Groups	127.016	2	63.508	3.210*
In Groups	28092.828	1420	19.784	
Length of service				
Between Groups	288.160	2	144.080	7.325*
In Groups	7931.684	1420	19.670	

Note: \*  $p < .01$

To further understand the significant differences in age and length of service, a Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons Scheffe was used. The findings show that there are significant differences between the mean score of the highest degree of sexual harassment experienced by employees aged 26 to 39 years and having length of service less than 5 years compared to those aged 40 years and length of service of 10 years and above. The research findings based on the *t*-test revealed a significant difference between married women who were more harassed than single women. The complete findings and information are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences in Sexual Harassment Experience According to Marital Status

Subject	N	Mean	SD	df	<i>t</i>
Single	481	9.68	3.03	1401	-5,374*
Married	922	12.77	4.64		

\* $p < .01$

### 3.3. Findings of Pearson Correlations

Table 4 presents a significant correlation between sexual harassment and job satisfaction and work stress. Pearson correlation analysis result shows a significant negative relationship between the experience of sexual harassment and job satisfaction ( $r = -.565^*$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This means that employees experiencing sexual harassment more frequently can feel lower job satisfaction. Results also showed a significant positive relationship between the experience of sexual harassment and work stress. ( $r = .646^*$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Means that more frequently employees experiencing sexual harassment can increase the job stress.

### 3.4. Findings of Regression Analysis

To further investigate the prediction of sexual harassment experience on work satisfaction and work stress, Regression Analysis was used. The study result indicates that sexual harassment variable can be a

predictor to job satisfaction and work stress variables [ $F(2,1420)=6.201, p<.01$ ]. Contribution of sexual harassment to job satisfaction is 33% and 17% for work stress. The whole contributions of sexual harassment as predictor are 50%. According to the findings, it is understood that if sexual harassment occurs more frequently, the work satisfaction will be much affected than work stress. The total contribution is 50 percent. Therefore, sexual harassment in the workplace influences work satisfaction and work stress of an individual. The complete findings and information on Regression analysis are shown in Table 5 and 6.

Table 5 Regression Analysis for Sexual Harassment Experience and Work Satisfaction

Sexual harassment experience		
	Standardized coefficients	<i>t</i>
Work Satisfaction	- 0.013	-4.415
	Sum of Squares	<i>F</i>
Regression	8577.280	24.040*
Residual	253317.893	
Total	261895.172	
Summary for Sexual harassment with work satisfaction		
$R = 0.181^*$		
$R^2 = 0.33$		
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.031$		
a. Predictor : Sexual harassment experience		
b. Dependent Variable: Work satisfaction		

Table 6 Regression Analysis for Sexual Harassment Experience and Work Stress

Sexual harassment experience		
	Standardized coefficients	<i>t</i>
Work Stress	5.808	3.288
	Sum of Squares	<i>F</i>
Regression	255484.494	26.224*
Residual	2761026.220	
Total	3016510.714	
Summary for Sexual harassment with Work Stress		
$R = 0.291^*$		
$R^2 = 0.17$		
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.081$		
a. Predictor : Sexual harassment experience		
b. Dependent Variable: Work stress		

Notes: \*  $p < .01$

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of study indicates that majority of women employees in public higher education institutes have experienced sexual harassments at moderate level, are age between 26 to 39 years old, and have length of service less than 5 years, and are married. According to Feingold (1992) these women characteristics are physically attractive and they are perceived as sociable, warm, and socially skilled. The results showed similarities with O'Connell and Korabi (2000), Rohani (2005), and Yahaya Mahmood and Zulaika (2002) studies. Furthermore, finding of this study could give negative image towards the institution involved and reflect a negative perception from public (Sabitha, 1999). Higher learning institution should be free from any sexual harassment elements, and this is similiar with Badriyah (1989) in her study that public higher education institutes or university is a place where learning and education process took place; and any sexual harassment could interfere with quality objective that has been set by the organisation.

This study finds that sexual harassment to be a significant predictor to decrease job satisfaction and increase work stress in the workplace. The results showed similarities with Fister-Gale (2003), Kronos Incorporated (2005), Merkin (2008) and Wolfe (1994) which show that there are approximately 2.8 million lost work days each year due to job dissatisfaction and stress, which made up the overall absenteeism measure, were higher for employees experiencing sexual harassment than for employees not experiencing sexual harassment. The whole contributions of sexual harassment as predictor are 50%. These findings have important implications to their dissatisfaction with their job and the costs involved due to stress-related diseases and illnesses, and injury claims are likely to increase employers medical costs. In turn, job withdrawal produces its own set of the costs. Thus, it is incumbent for employers to take note that sexual harassment are a warning sign that threatening workplace productivity and stable workforce.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study confirms that female employees in Malaysia public higher education institutes have experience sexual harassment and this situation gives a negative implications towards victims as well as the organisation. A proper system for dealing with sexual harassment cases should be installed at workplace to prevent women from being a victim. 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 university 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.

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