



Is Sexual Harassment an Issue in Malaysia? Level of Awareness among Workforce

Shadiya Mohamed S. Baqutayan^{1*}, Amir Salah², Juliah Jusman¹, Shazila Sharudin¹, Sunita Muhamad¹, Ahmed Saleh³

¹Perdana Centre, Razak Faculty of Technology and Informatics,
University Technology Malaysia (UTM), MALAYSIA

²Financial Mathematics,
Brunel University, LONDON

³Dessau International Architecture Graduate School (DIA),
Hochschule Anhalt (FH), Desau, GERMANY

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30880/jts.2021.13.01.001>

Received 05 November 2020; Accepted 15 December 2020; Available online 20 Jun 2021

Abstract: The world has accomplished advancement in health workforce and wellbeing under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); the goal comprises a healthy working environment and covering issues of harassment under human rights legislation. Nevertheless, the employees continue to suffer harassment in every part of the world. The SDGs' objective is to ensure that there is an end to every issue. Undeniably, many governments and organizations claim to be tackling workplace harassment, and there are still a few billion employees who are the victims of harassment. This issue will not be solved unless awareness is given and policies introduced; therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the level of awareness in the Malaysian government and private organizations. A research instrument, namely, a questionnaire, was used for 150 respondents and yielded a response rate of 52% (78). The results revealed that the work environment is concerned about safety matters for the workforce and has an adequate level of awareness on sexual harassment; therefore, the correlation tests revealed a significant correlation between workplace environment and awareness of sexual harassment among Malaysian staff. In conclusion, the organization should enforce the policy to establish a more conducive workplace favorable to the employees.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, issues in Malaysia, awareness level, workplace harassment

1. Introduction

Almost half of the employees or workforce in Malaysia are women, and the number keeps increasing yearly. Therefore, the attention needed from management, organizations, and policymakers regarding sexual harassment in the workplace is crucial (Ali, Basir & Mohamad, 2017). However, sexual harassment in the workplace is not a new phenomenon, especially in today's global world as more quotas are given to women with an expanded apportionment in the work stead, and few organizations have an undeniably higher ratio of female employees rather than males (Isa & Samad, 2012). Previous research stated that there were many cases of employees experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. However, they were never reported (Burn, 2019). The hidden toll of stigma and fear of negative implications or perceptions from others, which lead to the silence of shame, explains the theory of underreporting cases

of sexual victimisation (Laxman et al., n.d). This theory emphasizes that people require sympathy in facing shame, and perhaps social stigma will be sharing with others as human feeling and looked like normal, though because of self-doubt (Marican & Rahman, 2012).

Every workplace in Malaysia has its procedures and policies on sexual harassment complaints and action, but the awareness of such actions remains unclear. Thus, this research aims to investigate the workforce's awareness level based on the impact on victims and the organizational response in addressing issues involved. It will support the relevant organization to improve the current policies for controlling sexual harassment at the workplace. This research's main objective is to determine the awareness level of workplace sexual harassment among the workforce in Malaysia as evidence. Then, to examine the factors of awareness level, the second objective is to identify the correlation between the studied variables, namely the workplace environment and awareness level of workplace sexual harassment. Therefore, quantitative research has been proposed in this research work, using an observation instrument with a set of questionnaires. The structure of this research paper comprises the background of the research study of the related works according to the literature review methodology used for this research work results and findings generated from the data as well as the discussion of their interpretations and significance. Finally, the relevant conclusions are drawn.

2. Literature Review

This section will discuss the previous research works, including the definition of sexual harassment in the workplace among the workforce.

2.1 Definition of Sexual Harassment

The issues on workplace sexual harassment have sparked a social interest that causes the public to raise (a few) eyebrows due to women's increasing participation rate in the workplace. There are various definitions of sexual harassment by researchers and policymakers based on different factors such as culture, social, and background of the place or workplace. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW) defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome or unwanted verbal, non-verbal, physical or visual conduct based on sex or of a sexual nature, the acceptance or rejection of which affects an individual's employment" (Hersch, 2015).

Sexual harassment (SH) is commonly defined as a social problem to the people and mostly happened in the workplace. Although many scholars have researched workplace sexual harassment issues, however, SH cases still happen. People are easily exposed to harassment such as on public transportation and any public places, education institutions and athletic area, in own-houses, social events and gatherings, and online groups. There are several ways of sexual harassment conduct, such as phone conversations, face-to-face communications, texting or messaging, e-mail, and social media, which can be transferred through the display of materials or objects presentation or interfering the personal boundaries belongings.

SH had been defined by Harvill (2006) in research as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature". From the Malaysian context, the definition of sexual harassment is about any unwanted conduct regarding sexual nature. It will cause the impact of visual, verbal, non-verbal, physical, or psychological harassment (Sarminah, 2013) among the workforce in the workplace. Marican (2007), in his research, stated that sexual harassment definition which is uninvited or unwelcome behaviors of sexual natures that are embarrassing, offensive, humiliating, or intimidating, which consequence negative effects on work performance, career, livelihood, or health. Rajoura, Kumari & Srivastava (2012) clarified that sexual harassment-related to forms of words, actions, or gestures. Furthermore, the actions are 'annoying', humiliating, abusive, alarming, belittling, intimidating, and demeaning to the 'victims' of harassment.

2.2 Type of Sexual Harassment

Human Rights Act has been created under Human Rights Commission. The act has categorized two types of sexual harassment as "a request for sex together with an implied or overt promise of preferential treatment or a threat of negative treatment" or "sexual behavior, language or visual material which is unwelcome or offensive and either repeated or significant enough to have a detrimental effect on the person subjected to it".

Employers or organizations had their responsibility for providing a safe work environment to employees or the workforce. Code of Practice and Eradication for workplace sexual harassment, in Malaysia, was established by the Human Resources Ministry in 1999 and applied voluntary basis. It provides a practical guideline for organizations or employers to start internal mechanisms to overcome the issues regarding workplace sexual harassment. The code explains sexual harassment as staring and gazing at another person, unsuitable conversation such as talking about one's sex life, intentionally touching any part of the body of another employee or colleague (Choudhary, 2017).

2.3 Awareness among Workforce

Rakesh Choudhary (2017) mentioned that most of the women are aware of law and procedure, have knowledge but no enforcement in their workplace, and step taken by the employer to aware. Sarminah (2013) stated that sexual

harassment cases that happened in Malaysia were continually linked under the Code of Practice (CoP) on the Prevention and Eradication for Sexual Harassment in the workplace. The code for sexual harassment cases determines violating the individual's dignity and safety. The workforces as victims are unwilling to report based on the code in acts reported by Israelstam (2013). Furthermore, employers should respond to the legal actions based on the case reported by victims. Then, legal actions sometimes are not be concerned by employers towards victims as well. Sometimes the workforces do not realize that they are were the victims of sexual harassment. The employer's actions can prevent and eradicate the serious wrongdoing related to sexual harassment and increase awareness for all workforces to look into this matter.

Hishamuddin et al. (2003) investigated the Malaysian community enterprise and revealed a low level of awareness of sexual harassment. Unnikrishnan et al. (2010) described that the victims were identified and revealed that they were sexually harassed after a year of joining the organization or come to the working world. This previous research suggests that women as new workforces in the working environment should not ignore any right and important for them to submit report related to the sexual harassment cases and cannot be afraid of losing the position or losing the source of income.

Ismail, Lee, and Chen (2007) reported that several factors were related to sexual harassment; these factors as knowledge of complaint procedure and sexual harassment, sexist attitudes co-workers. Every employee should have his or her privacy in a secure workplace. Among the factors that lead to the occurrence of sexual harassment is the physical attractiveness of female workers, the way the victim dresses, the victim's employment status. There are external and internal factors that contributed to the occurrence of sexual harassment in many workplaces. The issue becomes unique if the victim does not notice that the victim is indecent and does not realize the victim is involved in sexual harassment because there is no direct harassment. A rather severe case scenario is involving the employee. If the issue occurs unconsciously, the level of awareness will then be very complicated, and the employee will never understand the significance of this issue (Cheung, Goldberg & King, 2017).

SH can influence the workplace's achievement by imperiling employees' perception of an individual safety component, creating decreased employee satisfaction (Nixon, 2002; Laxman et al., n.d). The result showed lower satisfaction with higher absenteeism and turnover and lower employee productivity, with lower morale impact of decreased likelihood in terms of innovation and commitment. Their research suggested to the organizations for those subjected involve in sexual harassment to be charged with added expenses and legal charges such as fines, compensations, and penalties.

2.4 Workplace Sexual Harassment

A study by Isa & Samad (2012) investigated the level of relationship between the level of awareness of employees regarding the definition of sexual harassment with the factors of age, work experience, position, and gender in the workplace. Their study's second focus is to examine the level of awareness of employees of a company, namely SAJ Holding Sdn. Bhd. Against sexual harassment in the workplace. Nonetheless, this study intends to consider the workforce population in Malaysia. It is not limited to one company to obtain more accurate as decided Malaysia as evidence for this research work.

Based on Worsfold and McCann (2000) research, a smaller number of respondents (employees) realized that there are policies related to sexual harassment in their organization and proved that a level of respondents' awareness of the policy of sexual harassment is low. These findings indicate they had a low level of awareness of sexual harassment and emphasized the organization's policies. This is due to the lack of policy implementation and communication between employees while in the organization. However, their research is different from this research as they focused on the policy of sexual harassment provided by their organization.

In a recent study reported by Isa & Samad (2017), female workers have an attitude towards sexual harassment and the effects of sexual harassment towards them. The results showed that demographic factors such as educational status, marital status, ethnicity, work experience, and work environment influenced their attitude because of sexual harassment. 63% of respondents stated that they felt threatened, and most (69%) were university graduates, and (75%) were college graduates. In another study, they reported that divorced women workers would often face sexual harassment in ethnic contexts; the results show that white people will be more organizations on sexual harassment compared to black people and from Asia (respondents are referring to employees). Besides, women who are at risk of having sexual harassment at work are 30 years of age and younger, unmarried, and those who are newly divorced, whether widows or widowers.

Ismail et al. (2007) reported that the consequences of their research are the victims having lower experience level and influence the job satisfaction, which they intend to take sick leave and always absent for work involved in sexual harassment in their workplace. They also suffer from emotional and detected a few symptoms, such as anger, irritability, anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Because of the sexual harassment cases, the working performance level also drops (for the sexual harassment victims). It is proved that the severe impact on the serious problem apart, such as emotional distress experienced (Marican & Rahman, 2012).

3. Methodology

The activities and the steps followed to conduct this research is as follow:

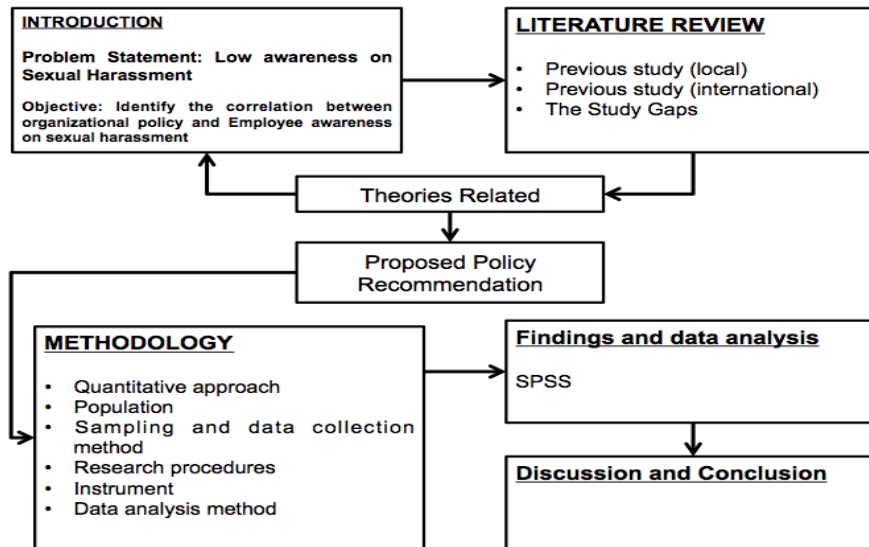


Fig. 1 - Research Design

The study is purely based on primary data obtained from survey questionnaires adopted from different research papers; using Google Docs and information from other journal articles on the subject matter. The survey focuses on the sexual harassment situation in Malaysia's workplace, and the focus is on employee awareness who works in government and private sectors. This research intends to find out employee awareness level towards their working environment on sexual harassment. The study's data sampling covers employees, both male and female, from the different workplaces in Malaysia, including private and government offices. The quantitative method was applied to the sample, where the probability sampling technique was less biased. Google link was used, and on simple random sampling technique was applied. The target population includes 150 (male and female) staff from different government and private organizations; the sample is yielded a response rate of 52.0% (78 respondents). Thus, this research aims to examine the awareness level of sexual harassment, and there were a few variables identified for this research work. Awareness level is the dependent variable (DV). To examine the relationship with respondents' demographic, such as the marital status, workplace sector, gender, and workplace environment is the independent variable (IV) for this research work. The data were analyzed using SPSS, and the findings were indicated in the results sections.

3.1 Instrument

This section discusses the results based on the research instrument's collected data with data analysis, which has been analyzed using a statistical tool. Then, the discussions from the findings will be described as well. The questionnaire items will be measured based on the 5-Likert-scale; For construct workplace environment (Section B) with Score 1 for "strongly disagree", score 2 for "disagree", score 3 for "neutral", score 4 for "agree", and score 5 for "strongly agree". The detail as followed:

- i. Strongly disagree : Respondent strongly disagree with the statement
- ii. Disagree : Respondent disagrees with the statement
- iii. Neutral : Respondent neither agree nor disagree with the statement
- iv. Agree : Respondent agrees with the statement
- v. Strongly agree : Respondent strongly agree with the statement

Section C is the construct of awareness level of sexual harassment and the 4-Likert-scale used as follows; score 1 for "not at all aware", score 2 for "slightly aware", score 3 for "moderately aware", score 4 for "very aware", and finally score 5 for "extremely aware". The detail as followed:

- i. Not at all aware : Respondent not at all aware of the harassment-related issue
- ii. Slightly aware : Respondent slightly aware of the harassment-related issue
- iii. Moderately aware : Respondent moderately aware of the harassment-related issue
- iv. Very aware : Respondent very aware of the harassment-related issue

2.5 Reliability Test of Instrument

Table 1 shows the result of reliability from the pilot test (Cronbach Alpha score as the measurement) based on the instrument consisting of questionnaires. There were three sections in this questionnaire. For Section A, the demographic information of respondents, Section B consisted of 7 items for the workplace environment construction, and Section C (awareness level) contained ten items. The Cronbach Alpha scores for Section B and C are .894 and .896, respectively.

Table 1 - Reliability analysis

Section	Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach Alpha
B	Workplace environment	7	.894
C	Awareness level	10	.896

4. Findings

The findings were elaborated as follow:

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Based on the respondents' demographic information, a descriptive analysis has been conducted. Table 2 presents the results of the descriptive statistics of respondents' demographic information. The results showed that more than 50% of the respondents were female (gender), which is about 75.6%, 78.1% is working in the government sector (workplace sector), the age range of 36 to 45 years old (age) about 69.2%, and 78.1% is married respondents (marital status). The distribution of the sample is spread evenly among management executives (62.8%), supporting workers (23.1%), and non-management employees (14.1%).

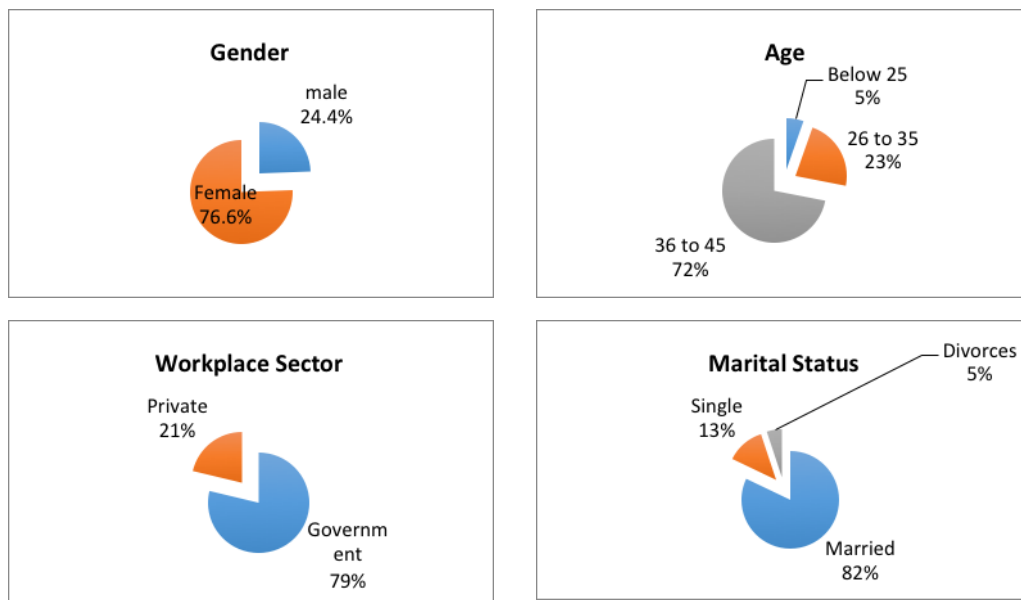


Fig. 2 - Descriptive statistics on demographic information of respondents.

Furthermore, lastly, the position of respondents in their workplace is indicated in the following table.

Table 2 - Descriptive statistics on demographic information of respondents.

Information	Category	Frequency	Valid Percentage (%)
Position	Management/Executive	49	62.8
	Supporting Employee	18	23.1
	Non-management Employee	11	14.1

4.2 The Workplace Environment and Awareness Level of Sexual Harassment

Table 3 presents each item's mean scores in Sections B, C, and D (questionnaires). These sections (B, C, and D) are related to the construct of organization environment, individual level of awareness, and organization action towards sexual harassment.

Table 3 - Mean scores for Section B, C, and D

Section	Construct	Item	Mean
B	Organization environment	B7: Management at my workplace encourages staff to respect each other	4.17
		B8: Management at my workplace supports staff who concern about each other	3.86
		B9: The corporate culture at my workplace reflects consideration of others	3.81
		B10: Corrective actions would be taken if I reported a problem with my immediate supervisor.	3.78
		B11: Corrective actions would be taken if I identified a problem to upper management.	3.78
		B12: My immediate supervisor treats me with consideration and respect	4.03
		B13: My co-workers/colleagues treat me with consideration and respect	3.95
Total:			3.91
C	Level of awareness	C14: I know where to report a problem of sexual harassment, unfairness, or abuse.	3.99
		C15: I would expect no reprisal against me if I reported an incident of sexual harassment, unfairness, or abuse	3.82
		C16: I know what to do if sexual harassment happened to me	3.88
		C17: I know what is sexual harassment	3.88
		C18: Sexual harassment is an important issue	3.99
		C19: I am interested in knowing this issue	3.81
		C20: Even though I am too busy with work, I am still concern about this issue	3.94
		C21: If I am sexually harassed, I know where to report to the authority	3.87
		C22: If I am sexually harassed, I have the rights to report this matter to the authority	3.87
		C23: I know about the policy regarding sexual harassment	3.83
Total:			3.88

The mean score for the workplace environment is 3.91, while 3.88 for the awareness level of sexual harassment in the workplace. DV of awareness level comprises a high mean score (out of 5.00), which shows that the awareness level of workplace sexual harassment is high among Malaysia's workforce, either government or private sector.

Other than that, the t-Test result of the workplace environment and awareness level between gender shows that the p-value was recorded at .564 and .901, respectively. Therefore, it shows that there was no significant difference between gender and workplace environment. It was the same with the DV of awareness level, where there was no significant difference between gender. The t-Test result of awareness level and workplace sectors also shows no significant difference between government and private sectors for the awareness level of workplace sexual harassment in Malaysia with a recorded p-value at .665.

ANOVA test of awareness level and marital status shows that the p-value is recorded at .757 and revealed no significant difference between awareness level and all marital status (single, married, and divorced). ANOVA test of awareness level and job position also reported the p-value is recorded with .517 and revealed no significant difference for all job position and awareness level (Management/Executive, Compliance/Human Resources and Non-Management Employee/Part-time).

5. Discussion

The correlation test had been conducted to identify the relationship between DV of awareness level and IV of the workplace environment. There is a significant relationship between the awareness level of the workforce and the workplace environment. The workplace environment is one of the factors that impact the awareness level among Malaysian workforces.

The result had been obtained from the data analysis and statistics, as discussed in the previous section. The results proved that the level of sexual harassment awareness is high among the workforce in Malaysia. Consequently, there is a

significant, positive, and strong relationship between the awareness level of workplace sexual harassment and the workplace environment. If the workplace environment is less concerned about sexual harassment, the awareness level of sexual harassment also decreases.

The respondents agree that the workplace environment plays a main role in preventing sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexual harassment is not solely an issue of individual behavior but the perceptions involved in its response to its policies, practices, and procedures. The survey's result is to seek the level of awareness and how organizations respond towards sexual harassment and their workforces.

Section B (Organization Climate) shows that most respondents agree that the organization should be responsible for the rate of sexual harassment in the workplace and protect their employees. Therefore, organization policy influences the culture and ethics towards sexual harassment at the workplace.

7. Management at my workplace encourages staff respecting each other

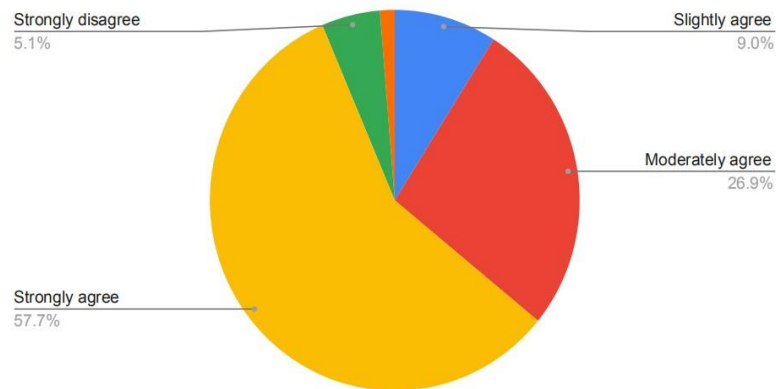


Fig. 4 - Employees responses to workplace culture

10. Corrective actions would be taken if I reported a problem (discrimination, sexual harassment, unfair treatment, etc.) to my immediate supervisor.

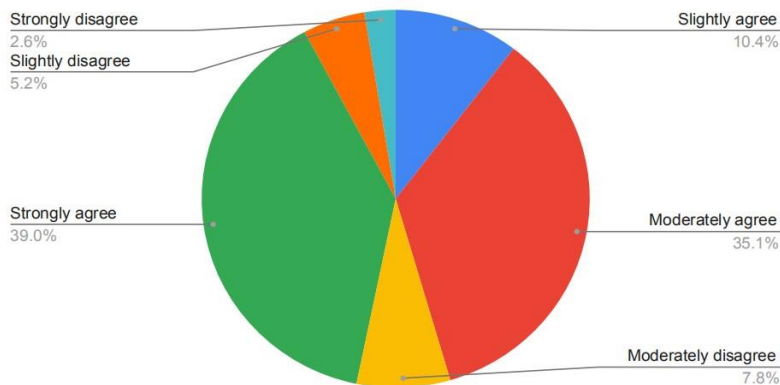


Fig. 5 - Employees responses to workplace culture

The Figure 4 indicates that 57.7% of respondents strongly agree that their management is encouraging employees to respect each other regardless of a different background or different gender. Another result in figure 4 shows that 39% of the respondents strongly agree that their management will take corrective action towards any sexual harassment cases in the workplace.

Based on the two survey results from Section B of the questionnaire, it is proven that employee' actions and responses towards sexual harassment are heavily dependent upon the organization's culture. Therefore, everyone in the organization needs to understand the importance of values that would lead to a conducive working environment where everyone could work in peace hence be productive.

Section C indicates that respondents are well aware of various actions that considered misconduct behavior. The most common form of harassment in the workplace is verbal remarks of a sexual nature (48.7%). Many would consider it a casual conversation, whereas the words are indiscreetly insulting the other party.

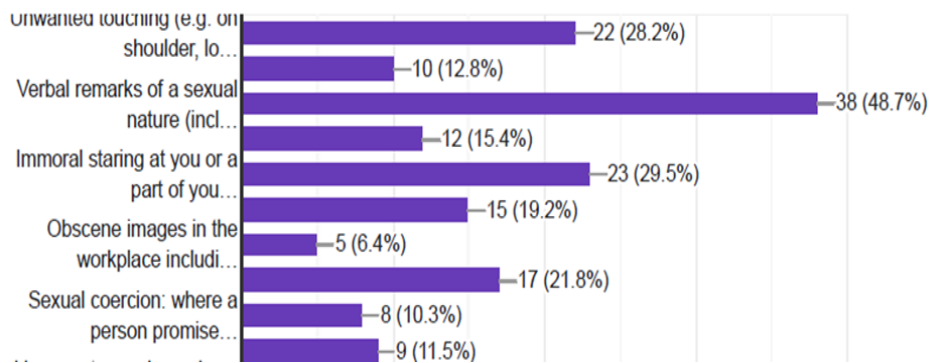


Fig. 6 - Understanding behaviors associated with sexual harassment

Even though half of the respondents (53.1%) have not experienced any sexual harassment, they know what sexual harassment is and aware of the type of misconduct behavior. The result in Figure 6 indicates that respondents perceive that 'verbal remarks of a sexual nature as a major type of sexual harassment at workplaces with a 48.7% response. The other behavior is 'immoral staring at you or a part of your body with 29.5% responses. It shows that the employees were aware of the types of sexual harassment that could happen to them hence protecting themselves from becoming the victims of such actions.

Some people cannot imagine this thing happen to them. Most respondents feel the emotional stress caused by harassment. They believe that it creates feelings of frustration, anger, and weaknesses. However, they agree that victims may experience painful feelings such as uncomfortable (25%), angry (13.3%), and afraid (10%). Therefore, sexual harassment can have serious consequences, especially to the workingwomen who experience it. Figure 7 show the result of the impact of sexual harassment on people who have experienced it. The respondents believe that sexual harassment will have caused workplace stress and affect work-related attitudes. The person will intend to react to any kind of attitude, such as avoiding certain areas within the workplace (63.6%). Other than that, the anxiety and stress at the workplace will contribute to their leaving their job entirely to seek work elsewhere (48.1%). Another impact is victims intend to change their work pattern in a significant way (35.1%), work less effectively than before the incident (24.7%), frequently take time off (9.1%), and arrive late to the office (5.2%). These situations are deteriorating and may affect the productivity level in the organization.

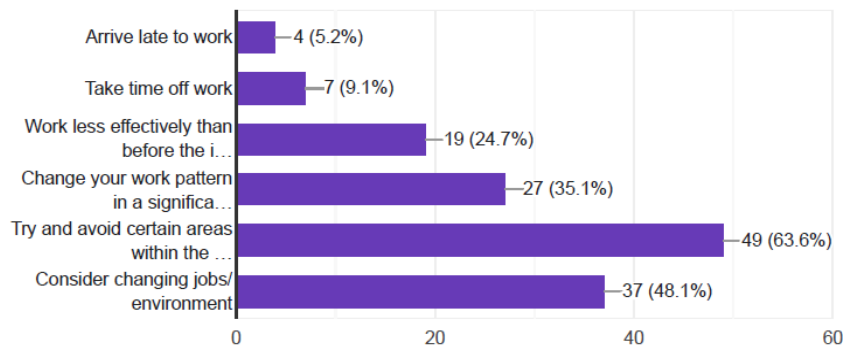


Fig. 7 - Victim working attitude at the workplace

Due to this unpleasant situation, the most organization has developed its policies to prevent this issue. Although the organization has established the policy of anti-harassment in the workplace and corrective action has been taken, individuals are still hesitant to come forth due to some reasons such as:

- Impact of their career (37.3%);
- Fear of retaliation from the harasser (26.7%);
- The perception of other people by not believing in the complaint made by the victim (26.7%);
- Fear of other people blaming the victim for the incident that occurred (24%).

The survey results in Figure 8 also shown that a very high percentage of respondents, at 83.6%, agree that their work at preventing cases of sexual harassment. They believe that they should have a responsibility to ensure their

employees are safe from this kind of threat as an employer. Even though sexual harassment can come in many forms, it must be controlled effectively in preventing sexual harassment in the organization.

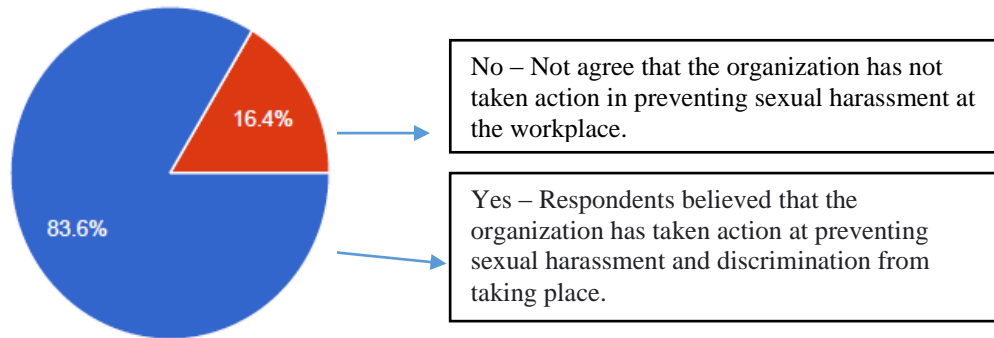


Fig. 8 - Employee perception of sexual harassment prevention at the workplace

In Section D, the questionnaire's outcome is to get insight into the workplace in Malaysia policy towards sexual harassment to protect the interest of its employees.

23. How does your organization tackles the sexual harassment cases?

76 responses

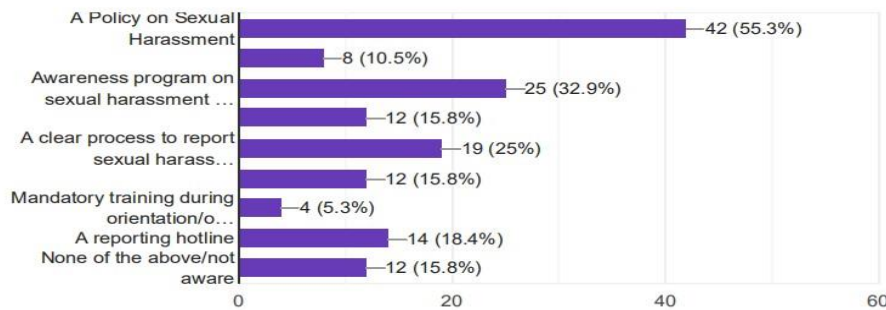


Fig. 9 - Organization preparedness in handling sexual harassment

There are several ways in which an organization can instead foster a climate of harassment prevention. Thus, based on the result shown in Figure 9, more than half of the respondents (55.3%) stated that their organization has a policy on sexual harassment to tackle the issue. They believed that organizations should highlight a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment or retaliation against reporting the cases. The results were followed by 32.9% who acknowledge that their organization has conducted an awareness program on sexual harassment for all employees, including senior management. Other than that, 25% of respondents said their organization has a clear process or procedure to report the cases. It has been highlighted in the previous research that organizations must address sexual harassment cost heavy consequences, and it must continue identifying corrective action to ensure that organizations promote prevention and accountability.

Based on the result that has been discussed above, the mean score is high, which shows a high and good awareness level of workplace sexual harassment among the workforce in Malaysia. Thus, employers should concern and increase awareness among employees to ensure a safe workplace for the workforce. Furthermore, it can reduce or avoid any incidents of workplace sexual harassment to happen.

6. Conclusions

Sexual harassment can be considered an 'occupational hazard' and may cause a violation of rights and dignity in the workplace. Therefore, at the organizational level, it is a responsibility for management to have the provision a safe workplace and ensure a harassment-free environment, which is considered an integral part and based on organizational policies. This sense of security will ease employees or the workforce to work effectively and efficiently. From this research work through the survey questions, the data was gathered regarding sexual harassment among the workforce. There are different forms of sexual harassment, such as behaviors, actions, and any forms associated with sexual

harassment. However, the discussed results revealed that the awareness level of sexual harassment is high among Malaysia's workforce.

The discussion, as mentioned above, improves the significance of this research. In the era of global competition, this matter is found highly important to the employers to concern on the safety matters for employees such as sexual harassment and need the employee retention strategies that can avoid any crime of sexual harassment happen in the workplace and reduce substantially. For future research works, the researcher suggests research be conducted with qualitative methodology and aims to obtain the results through in-depth view and the most common type of harassment faced among the workforce in their workplace and the level of sexual harassment in the workplace the other important variables as well.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), who gave me this golden opportunity to write about this topic. My sincere thank to my co-authors who kindly provided valuable and helpful comments for this paper. Thank you all.

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