SEXUAL HARASSMENT: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PERVASIVE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

Sexual harassment occurs in all occupations and industries. It is a well-known fact that sexual harassment is more ubiquitous at some workplaces than others. One example such a work place where there is an unequal sex ratio; large power differentials between women and men. However, there is limited research available on why it is more prevalent in certain work situations. The primary aim of this research is to identify characteristics of a workplace which is conducive to sexual harassment. We further explore the mutual relationship of these characteristics to help create a work environment which is resistant to sexual harassment. We claim that sexual harassment is often a gradual temptation which usually starts with the misinterpretation or misunderstanding by the harasser of the interaction required by the job as an indirect invitation of the sexual advances. We support our claim with existing research surveys. The paper is concluded suggesting how sexual harassment can be protected and prevented at workplaces in particular and the society in general.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment and Workplace.

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) at the workplace is one of the most common types of complaint of all the complaints received. SH is difficult to comprehend and define as it is for an individual to decide what behaviour is acceptable to them and what they regard as harassment. However, in generic terms SH can be defined as a gender based abuse. This abuse can take many forms, from sexually explicit remarks and banter, to harassment over the telephone or via email. Although SH has been proven difficult to report due to the lack of commonly accepted definition, a key characteristic of SH is that it is unwanted and unwelcomed by the recipient. For the same reasons, an empirical research of workplace sexual harassment is problematic [1], [2].

Furthermore, the behaviour of an individual is more likely to be seen as harassment when there is a large power differences between the victim and the harasser. This abuse of power is mostly linked with women's disadvantaged status at work and more generally, in society. It is not only recognized as an important barrier to women's career development, but also has negative long and short term effects on them. Barbara Gutek and Mary Koss [3] have done in-depth analysis of these effects in three areas; namely psychological, work-related and somatic. Their analysis showed a significant negative relationship between their sexual harassment experience and job satisfaction. Besides, authors [4] argue that SH should not be considered as an isolated negative organizational behaviour, but rather as a part of the cadre of behaviours included under the rubric of counter productive work behaviours.

Most of the existing research emphasises the reactive approach to cater SH. That is, they advocate complaint procedures, consequences for the harasser, proposing related workplace policies and seeking legal remedies. However, we argue that these policies and procedures are not sufficient to mitigate SH at the workplace. For example, bigger organizations with adequate policies and complaint procedures often have more SH cases reported. It is 41%

more likely to occur in large workplaces, followed by 33% in small workplaces and 24% in medium workplaces [5].

Although SH occurs in all occupations and industries, there is limited research available on why it is more prevalent in certain work situations. There is almost no research available which focuses on the characteristics of harasser, victims and the workplace and the relationship among them. These deficiencies in research demand further empirical investigation to identify motives behind an act of sexual harassment. Why would a harasser engage in an act of sexual harassment with a particular victim despite recognizing that it can result into severe consequences? Whether the victim's characteristics classify him/her as more vulnerable or attractive; or the harasser is unable to comprehend the consequence or sees the job interaction as a possible invitation for the sexual advances; or the workplace characteristics are conducive to encourage the SH; or is it a combination of some or all of the above characteristics?

The primary aim of this research is to identify potential victims of SH based upon the workplace characteristics and the motives of the harasser. We claim that SH is often a gradual temptation which usually starts with the misinterpretation or misunderstanding by the harasser of the interaction required by the job as an indirect invitation of the sexual advances. For instance, in the hospitality industry, being polite and having a pleasant attitude is the basic requirement of the job. While an employee might go an extra mile to earn the monetary rewards by the clients or a promotion within the organisation, a harasser (whether a client or the supervisor) may interpret it as a welcoming gesture for the sexual advances. We envisage that eliminating these misinterpretations and misunderstandings help reduce the incidences of SH at workplace. Contribution of this research is also to ascertain the workplace vulnerabilities by establishing a relationship between these characteristics. This can assist in developing a list of guidelines for a preventive SH policy focussed on potential victims and harasser.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 summarizes the related works; in Section 3, we present the research methodology; in Section 4, we list the characteristic features of vulnerable workplaces and analyse them for commonalities; Section 5 is based upon our analysis, we propose examples of best practice policies and procedures to prevent SH occurring; Section 6 summarizes the paper and highlights gaps in the research and identifies areas for future studies.

2. Literature Survey

Sexual Harassment has been widely researched in the past; however, the research classification and quantification regarding SH incidences differ widely. This is mainly because of the varied wording of the definitions used in the questionnaires, as well as different sample populations and research methods [6]. Researchers, such as Guteket. al [3] have introduced methodologies and procedures to conduct survey and gather the research data which are popular and used widely.

In literature, SH is mainly referred as an abuse of power [7], [8] and is generally considered as men exercising this power over women [9]. Sexual harassment is differentiated from sexual assault. Where sexual assault is a clear and direct physical attempt, sexual harassment is a gradual temptation which is often ambiguous and difficult to articulate. Examining the complaints procedure in the Ministry of Defence, Rutherford et al. [10] found that respondents were three times more likely to make a formal complaint if the behaviour involved sexual assault than for other forms of sexual harassment. It may be due to the fact

that sexual assault is usually easy to identify and report, whereas individuals have different perceptions of sexual harassment.

There are three basic types of interventions that can be implemented by an organisation to prevent or deal with sexual harassment; prevention, responding when it does occur, and follow-up into a complaint of sexual harassment. Usually preventative actions include the formation and adoption of a sexual harassment policy, training and awareness raising, monitoring and evaluation. Responses to sexual harassment when it has occurred include the complaints procedure within an organisation and the identification of effective strategies for dealing with sexual harassment. Following an investigation of a complaint of sexual harassment, rehabilitation of the person who has been harassed, including support and counselling where required, is essential. Others will need to be reintegrated, including the harasser and any witnesses or other colleagues who have been affected.

Most of the research is reactive and focused on designing SH policies to deter potential harassers and encourage those who experience sexual harassment to report it [11]. Grossman [12] advocates that clear definition of prohibited sexual conduct can control SH. While, other researchers [13] argue broadening the definition of SH by defining the workplace hostility for SH advances. They also suggest other solutions to control SH at workplace by establishing grievance procedure, monitoring the workplace, providing psychological counselling and taking remedial actions (Lekha et al.) [13]. Deadrick et al. [14] support an approach where staff and trade unions are consulted while designing SH policies and procedures. It is thought that the most effective approach dealing with SH is to confront and negotiate with the harasser e.g. asking/telling them to stop, and advocacy seeking e.g. reporting the behaviour to a supervisor or outside agency. However, such actions can be very difficult to take, particularly when the person doing the harassment is a manager, as is often the case. Researchers, such as Thomas [15], [16], [9] suggest taking a consultative approach involving multiple stakeholders when designing and implementing sexual harassment policies and procedures.

Byers and Rue [17] and Laxman et al. [13] state that organizations must train their staff to raise awareness and clarify any misconceptions regarding what constitutes sexual harassment. Takeyama and Kleiner [18] suggest that training must be based upon role-playing where participants are able to practice their interpersonal skills and individuals learn through observation rather than from direct experience. A study by Antecol and Cobb-Clark [18] about sexual harassment training in the US government saw that the majority of respondents found that the training had increased their sensitivity regarding the issues. Although evidence suggests that training can be effective, its quality and the underlying culture of the organisation are both crucial. If the training provided does not aim to address sexual harassment in an appropriate way, then it may do more harm than good. The study of harassment in a British Fire Brigade [19] highlights this.

It is found that reporting can be an effective and efficient way to stop sexual harassment - 45% of respondents indicated that the sexual harassment stopped after they made a formal report or complaint. The decision whether or not to report sexual harassment can also be a complex and difficult one for an individual. Confusion over whether or not experienced behaviour actually is sexual harassment can also be an obstacle to reporting. Reports [5] suggest that only one in five respondents who were sexually harassed made a formal report or complaint. This is in spite of the fact that formal reports or complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace were resolved quickly in most cases and with high or extremely high levels of satisfaction amongst the majority of complainants. As reported by [5], there

may be a correlation between the low rates of reporting and the significant number (29%) of people who reported have experienced negative consequences as a result of making a formal report or complaint.

It is also important to note that the percentage of women who were reporting sexual abuse in a face-to-face interview almost doubled when women were able to report their experiences anonymously [20]. Many people dealt with the situation themselves, either by telling the harasser that the harassment was inappropriate or to stop the harassment (women: 14%; men 16%). Many perceived that the harassment was not serious enough (women: 13%; men: 18%). Another reason for not reporting is that victim feels that harasser was too senior (women: 10%; men 5%). An equal proportion of women and men believed it was easier to keep quiet than to make a formal report or complaint or seek support or advice. More women (4%) than men (1%) felt that they might get fired if they made a formal report or complaint or sought support or advice about sexual harassment or could not trust the people to whom they would be required to submit a report or complaint of sexual harassment (women: 4%; men: 2%).

In examining the complaints procedure, it is found that the results of the investigations into the complaint are not found satisfactory by all the complainants. In the Ministry of Defence, Rutherford et al. [10] found that majority of the respondents were dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled and over half of the respondents who had made a formal complaint stated that there had been negative consequences as a result of filing a complaint, with 64% considering leaving the Services [10]. Authors [5] found that more people experienced negative consequences such as victimisation and demotion as a result of reporting sexual harassment.

The high number of prevailing SH cases in certain workplaces suggests that there are definite gaps between policy and practice which we suggest to be addressed in future studies. The researches have been conducted on the characteristics of victim, harasser and the workplace related to sexual harassment. Researchers [21], [22] have identified the characteristics of male sexual harassers and examined the motives behind sexual harassment. However, the relationships among these characteristics have not been investigated. It is also seen that there is a dearth of research available in literature examining the effects of SH within companies whereas the examination and comparison of intra-workplace data is also required to be done.

3. Methodology

This research is based upon the information primarily gathered from a survey report published by [5]. While the survey utilizes other instruments and literature available, the survey is mainly focused upon the reports and data published by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). The survey focused on employees who had experienced sexual harassment by male colleagues at workplace in different industries. The research design used is simple random sampling technique. A questionnaire survey was used for gathering the primary data for this study. The questionnaires were distributed and subsequently collected from employees. A total of 289 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.

We used the survey to extract the information relevant to the characteristics of the victim and harasser. After analysing the industries and the workplaces the data is related to, we list the common characteristics of the workplace and then grouped them in the relevant categories. The analysis and the conclusion drawn in given in the next Section.

4. Analysis and Recommendations

Sexual harassment is more likely to occur in some industries than the others. For example, it is observed [5] that the health and community services has the highest number of instances (14%)of the reported cases, followed by accommodation, cafe, restaurant (11%), retail industry (11%), and education industry (10%). These top four industries in which sexual harassment occurs have not changed across the different surveys over the number of years, although the order has changed slightly across each survey wave. However, there is limited research available which examines the causes of these higher reported incidences in certain type of workplaces. Also, it is useful to research the relationship between sexual harassment and other characteristics of workplace, victim and harasser. This research output can be useful for constructing the workplace sexual harassment policies and procedures. Additionally, the results can also be of great importance for the legal authorities while making regulations for the vulnerable segments of the society.

Authors [5] classify sexual harassment as physical and non-physical in nature. Examples of physical sexual harassment are unwelcomed touch, inappropriate physical contact and actual or attempted assault. On the other hand, sexually suggestive comments, questions, emails, jokes, SMS, inappropriate staring, repeated invitation to go on dates or invading the personal space are classified as non-physical harassment.

According to a survey [5], sexual harassment, whether physical or non-physical, was most likely to occur once with only 36%. It was next most likely to occur for a period of less than one month 15%, sporadically 14% or for a period of between one to three months in 12%. In a small proportion of cases, sexual harassment lasted for more than one year 5% or was ongoing 6%. Higher percentage of less-frequent harassments cases confirm that when unwelcomed advances are discouraged at the initial stages; the harassment generally stops there.

We assert that SH is mainly a gradual attempt which is typically seen as a misinterpretation of the interaction required for the job and if discouraged, the harasser is warned and usually doesn't attempt again. It can be confirmed by the data accumulated by Clarrie [5]. According to them, the most common types of behaviours reported were sexually suggestive comments or offensive jokes (55%), intrusive questions (50%) and inappropriate staring or leering (31%). The actual physical attempt of sexual assault is very low (women: 5%; male: 9%). We claim that a sexually suggestive attempt is actually a prelude towards the actual or attempted physical assault. The harasser usually attempts with an ambiguous but suggestive gesture to verify whether his further actions will be welcomed.

Sexual harassment at a workplace depicts the overall culture of the organisation and makes it possible for individual employees to be treated abusively or with disrespect. Hierarchical and managerial powers are central to understanding how such a culture develops and continues. As the climate of disrespect within an organisation worsens, the more likely it is for certain inappropriate behaviour to be taken for granted, leading to the creation of an incivility spiral. This is where discourteous behaviour becomes routine and regarded as normal by employees and employers.

The industries such as hospitality, retail, accommodation and food where the interaction among employees and customers is more casual and informal are usually more favourable for SH. Certain industries also have chilly climate which refers to the existence of pervasive

sexual harassment that is tolerated within the workplace (AHRC 2008: 15). It is observed that a quarter of the complaints where data were available indicated that there had been some evidence, allegations or suggestions of a chilly climate in the workplace.

The number of complaints received in Retail, hospitality industry together constitutes approximately 30% of all the complaints received [5]. We argue that the job at these work places requires pleasant personality and more casual interaction among employees and customer. Thus, the unwanted sexual advances are more likely to occur. For instance, in the hospitality industry being polite and having a pleasant attitude is the basic requirement of the job. While an employee might go an extra mile to earn the monetary rewards by the clients or a promotion within the organisation, a harasser (whether a client or the supervisor) may interpret it as a welcoming gesture for the sexual advances. Some researchers have reported an incident about the vulnerability of the room-service waitress: "I hate to go to a [guest's] room when [the] customer is there. Am I included with tile cleaning?" Similar incidences were reported by others [23].

These trends are also observed in other sectors where most of the jobs require less technically qualified or less trained individuals. For instance, in corporate sector the majority of complainants held white collar clerical roles, such as community and personal service positions or clerical and administrative jobs (55%)

The employment status and contract is a significant factor in reporting SH cases. Casual, contract and temporary employees usually are on ad-hoc basis, thus have a greater fear of losing the job. The survey data [5] reveals that they are more vulnerable and are less likely to report a case of SH at workplace. Only (19%) of casual employees made a formal complaint about a harassment as compared to those who have permanent jobs (66%). It was also noticed that women are more likely to lodge a complaint against the former employer after leaving a job. Complaint lodges by female complainant with their former workplace is (61%).We claim that casual employees are at a higher risk of harassment but are less likely to make a complaint of any unwelcoming advances of their superiors because of greater fear of losing the job.

Certain industries demand young adults, preferably attractive and pleasant female staff, for example accommodation, real estate, personal services, public administration jobs. It is reported that women and men aged 18 to 24 years are most likely to become an easy target to be sexually harassed (Women: 33%, Men: 12%).

There are certain workplaces where dominance of a particular gender makes the workplace more favourable for SH. Workplaces labelled as male or female dominant where 60 percent or more employees are men or women respectively. It is found that most of the complaints (67%) of SH against female and males are registered in a male dominated workplace. (In vulnerable workplaces, appointment of female supervisors can be a preventive approach).

Harassers tend to have low levels of self-control and self-monitoring behaviour, in other words, do not take into account the effects of their behaviour on others. They seek a particular type, who are usually women and often young, single or divorced and with relatively low levels of education and power. Perpetrators of harassment are generally male and often in a position of power compared to the position of the victim. Complainants were more likely to report that they were harassed by someone in a more senior position (66%).

5. Conclusion and Future Work

In this paper, we surveyed the popular literature on sexual harassment and found that most of the existing literature suggests response based solutions where management is advised on reporting and how to restrict the accuser of sexual harassment. Based upon the data accumulated by (ref), we propose a proactive approach exploring the common characteristic of workplace, victim and harasser. We also establish the relationship among these characteristics. We assert that SH is often a gradual temptation associated with the interaction required by the job as an indirect invitation of the sexual advances. This misinterpretation or misunderstanding can be prevented by an open and healthy work culture and ethics in the organization. We also recommend that organisations should have special policies for more vulnerable staff and educate them to speak up and report against any unwelcomed sexual advances.

The high number of prevailing SH cases in certain workplaces show that there are definite gaps between policy and practice which we recommend to be addressed in future studies. It is also seen that there is a dearth of research available in literature examining the effects of SH within companies whereas the examination and comparison of intra-workplace data is also required to be done. It is also interesting to study the consequences of the sexual harassment in the workplace; its social, psychological and monetary effects on individuals; and its impact on overall negative growth of the organisation.

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