

## The Effects of Sexual Harassment in Workplace: Experience of Employees in Hospitality Industry in Terengganu, Malaysia

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### Abstract

The issue of sexual harassment has certainly become more prominent in the last decade. As the increasing number of cases reported, many countries have taken statutory action to recognize it as an insulting conduct and at the same time to punish and prevent it. In the hotel industry particularly, sexual harassment has frequently reported as a key problem. Working in the hospitality industry often involves an employee with a number of different people in the course of delivering service. Thus, this study aims to investigate the relationship between awareness of sexual harassment in relation to the employment in hospitality industry in Terengganu. A total of 260 respondents were selected from the employees in various hotels and resorts in Terengganu. Three predictors, offensive behavior, sexual coercion, risk on human factor, were found to have medium to strong correlation with the dependent variables namely employment. The regression analysis also shows that offensive behavior, sexual coercion, risks on human factor are positively and significantly related to employment. The researcher suggests that human resource managers in the hotels and resorts should formulate, in consultation with Malaysian law and labour relations experts, in order to improve sexual harassment policies.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment; hospitality industry; employees; Terengganu;

### 1. Introduction

Sexual harassment has been identified as an ever-present barrier to career success and satisfaction for men and women (Willness et al., 2007). To date, the increasing number of empirical research pertaining to sexual harassment in Malaysia stated to be increased while findings revealed that between 35% and 53% of women have experienced sexual harassment at work (Ismail & Lee, 2005; Ismail et al., 2007). Base on the statistic from Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), the cases pertaining of sexual harassment include obscene and rape. In 2012 and 2013, there were 75 cases involving employers, and 156 cases involving the colleagues (Suryati, 2014).

According to (Ismail & Lee, 2005), the rates of cases on sexual harassment in Malaysia do not differ too much from the situation found in the United States (US). With regards to the cost, in 2005 alone, organizations in US have to pay over \$37 million in monetary benefits to the sexual harassment victims beyond the cost of litigation (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1984). The cost does not include the productivity indirect costs as well as negative attitudes towards the organization that (Willness & Lee, 2007). Sexual harassment is costly to organizations from both direct (i.e., legal costs) and indirect (i.e., low morale) perspectives. Apart from that, the organizations tend to lose valued employee with an excellent performance. Further, the organization may acquire negative image from public should victims reveal their situation.

The issue of sexual harassment has certainly become more prominent in the last decade. As the increasing number of cases reported, an aggressive jurisdictional action have been taken by many countries to recognize sexual harassment as insulting manners and at the same time to prevent the act to become worse and penalize the harasser. Besides Malaysia, a number of Asian countries have been move towards the action of consider ways to deal with the problem. For example, Philippines have approved an Anti-Sexual Harassment Act in 1995 and a guideline to encourage

zero-tolerance for sexual harassment in the workplace has been adopted by its Civil Service Commission. Likewise, Thailand has revised its Labour Code in 1998 that comprised penalties for sexual abuses by superiors.

Sexual harassment has often been mentioned as a key issue in the hotel industry. Working in the hospitality industry often involves an employee with a number of different people in the course of delivering service (Eller, 1990). The close rapport between employees and customers as well as between employees working in close physical proximity was discovered to be a trait towards the act. However, the industry's passion with physical satisfaction (Matthews, 2010; Ministry of Human Resource, Code of Practice, 1999) and the transient nature of its customers (its employees) provides opportunities for sexual behaviours that are not always welcome. Therefore, employees in the hospitality industry are experiencing more sexual interaction in their workplaces than workers in society-at-large. This situation happens perhaps given certain of its characteristics for instance uncertainty of hospitality service, surroundings of work itself, the unusual hours and the interaction of persons in the delivery service.

Employees in this industry often work long, irregular hours with alternating peak and slack times which involve night, evening and even holiday shifts. In such working conditions, the line between appropriate and inappropriate familiarity may be crossed more easily than in an office setting (Eller, 1990). Therefore, employees in the hospitality industry who often report incidents of sexual harassment possibly exposed to the act due to their age and workplace status. However, study on sexual harassment in the hotel and resort industry in Malaysia is insufficient. Specifically, for example in the state of Terengganu, no research in this area has been carried out.

Thus, it provides research opportunities for exploring key human resource challenges facing the hotel industry, one of which is sexual harassment, from a Malaysian perspective. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between awareness of sexual harassment namely; offensive behavior, sexual coercion, and risk of human factor on the employment of organization.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section looks at the various definitions of sexual harassment, sexual harassment and employment, sexual coercion, offensive behavior and risk of human factor.

### *2.1 Definitions of sexual harassment*

A study by Sabitha (2008) describes sexual harassment as an unwelcome behaviour or sexual nature which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating or humiliating and may be affect an employee's work performance, health, career or livelihood. This definition applies to both gender and addressed the effects of sexual harassment on the victims. However, Gilbert et al. (1998) points out that individual has different perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment and a definition is almost impossible to construct. Thus, sexual harassment is something difficult to define.

However, Tsai and Kleiner (1999) defined sexual harassment as a condition where the undesirable sexual behavior of a coworker or supervisor affects employee's performance at work or creates unpleasant or threatening working environment. This might happen when the victims denied request for sexual favors from the perpetrator and probably consequence in retribution which affect the victim's working condition. According to Worsfold and McCann, (2000), Biswas and Cassell (1999) and Eller (1990), it is commonly agreed that sexual harassment is pervasive in the services industry, particularly in the hospitality industry. This might due to the uncertainty of communication during the service delivery, extraordinary working hours and conditions, high extend of human interface, the need of the employees to look attractive, the perceptions of customers towards the services where they can take a moral holiday and the sexuality is part of the job (Hall, 1993; MacKinnon, 1979; Prus & Vasilakopoulous, 1997; Purcell, 1996; Wood & Kavanagh, 1994).

### *2.2 Sexual harassment and employment*

It is imperative to address the impacts of sexual harassment on the organization and the individual. Gilbert and Guy (1998) argued that sexual harassment can cause high turnover, poor working relationship as well as affect the financial cost of the organization. Other scholars which have agreed with these impacts include Gutek (1985), Sandroff (1992) and Schneider et al. (1997). According to Poulson (2008), sexual harassment cost employers in many ways including legal and monetary costs, increase worker absenteeism and worker sick-days, staff turnover consequence to raise cost of hiring and training new staff, adverse public reaction, employees' productivity reduced and low morale. In respect to this, Barling et al. (1996) stated that the incident of sexual harassment offer direct effect such as negative feelings towards job

which lead to job dissatisfaction, turnover intentions, emotional effect for instance insomnia, headaches and gastric problem.

As sexual harassment will affect various element of employees' employment, the act also perhaps will affect organization's success as well. The most frequent variables disclosed in the sexual harassment literature are job satisfaction. Besides, reduce in job satisfaction also greatly influenced by sexual violence and harassment in the workplace (Ironson, 1992; Lapiere et al., 2005; Mueller et al., 2001; Munson et al., 2000). Willness et al., (2007) further stated that, due to the employees' experience sexually abusive at work may greatly reduce the employees' attachment and commitment to their organization. In this situation, the organization is responsible for the incidents of sexual harassment among their employees by implementing strict no-harassment policies because the harassed employees often expect the organization to support and protect their rights. If the superior fail to consider the action, such displeasure may lead to anger towards the organization (for failing to protect them or tolerating such behaviours) and the perpetrator. As a result, it may consequent lack of involvement and attachment from the employees towards the organization (Willnesss et al., 2007).

The incidents of sexual harassment have also been related to withdrawal from the organization (Gruber, 2003; Magley et al., 1999; Loy & Steward, 1984). Withdrawal is usually measured by two different constructs, work withdrawal (being late, neglectful, avoiding work tasks) and job withdrawal (turnover, or intention to leave organization (Hansch & Hulin, 1990). Worker productivity with reduce the quantity and quality of work, lessen the willingness to cooperate and work with others as well as low level of productivity is another cost of sexual harassment (Lengnick, 1995). Worse case, some of the victims have been found to be aggressive and reactive as well as task avoidance (Gruber & Smith, 1995).

### 2.3 *Sexual coercion*

Sexual coercion is defined as "sexual harassment that results in some direct consequence to the victim's employment", mostly between a superior and subordinates whereas sexual displeasure is seen as "offensive sexually conduct, hostile or threatening to the victim, but has no direct effect to job benefit, which may take place between employee and co-worker or a client to an employee (Zarizana & Ccilia, 2001). The sexual coercion behavior may also refer to any job-related benefit on sexual cooperation such as special treats and bribes. Although it is almost universally recognized and labeled as harassment, it is perhaps not paradoxically, also the least common (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991).

### 2.4 *Offensive behavior of sexual harassment*

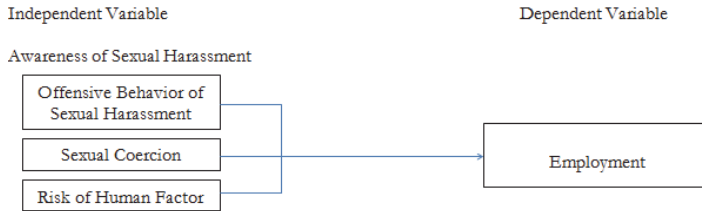
Offensive conduct usually occurs in hostile environment pattern of harassment and this sexually related behavior may not be relevant to job-related outcomes. Any act of oral or bodily conduct in sexual form, undesirable sexual advances, sexual favors request by the harasser and other oral or bodily conduct in the sexual form that not affected or interfere with employees' job performance as well as construct a hostile, threatening or offensive working environment. For instance offensive behavior engage include comments of someone's appearance or lifestyle, sexually comments about someone's body, insinuation, diricule, leering and deliberate unwanted physical contact (Gardner & Johnson, 2001).

### 2.5 *Risk of human factor*

The characteristics of the employees itself is believed associated with the occurrence of sexual harassment. Relaxed attitude and perception of employees and superior may also worsen and encourage incident of sexual harassment to happend. According to the study by Stevens (2001) and Yeung (2004), hospitality employees perceived theft as a more serious people. Besides, the risk of human factor associated with the act of sexual harassment can also influenced by power that someone possesses. Those who have power over others will use these advantages to sexually harass. The hierarchy is very highly regarded in the hospitality industry where so synonymous with power and seniority. Those who have a higher position will have more power over subordinates. Besides, the role of servers is to serve customers which power is perceived as evident in customer-server relationship. As those in service position (such as food and beverages staff) serve both managers and customers, they are therefore seen as more likely exposed to abuse which al lof who are in positions to abuse their power (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005).

Organization-personality similarity is another factor contributed to the act of sexual harassment. The employees' personalities are the possible cause of sexual harassment in hospitality. Some hospitality worker's personalities may be seen can attract sexual attention, which in order to maintain a professional façade, is not always defied. When sexual attention from a customer is rewarded with a smile, or passively tolerated, the behaviour is reinforced and may be

repeated with other workers, some of whom may be less tolerant (Lashley, 2000).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework of Relationship between Independent and Dependent Variables

## 2.6 Hypotheses development

H1: Offensive behaviour of sexual harassment positively influences employment.

H2: Sexual coercion positively influences employment.

H3: Risk of human factor positively influences employment.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

The study aimed specifically to investigate the influence of offensive behaviour, sexual coercion, and risk of human factor on employment. To achieve the objective of the study, a quantitative correlation research design was used to investigate the relationship between the two types of variables.

### 3.2 Instruments

Respondents were required to answer each item using five-Likert scale, ranging from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

### 3.3 Sampling frame

A comprehensive list of number of all employees in various hotels and resorts in Terengganu, Malaysia serves as the sampling frame in the study which is 260 employees.

### 3.4 Sampling technique and process

The sampling technique that has been used in this study is quota sampling technique which is a form of proportionate stratified sampling. Quota sampling ensures that certain groups are adequately represented in the study through the assignment of quota. However, Sekaran and Bougie (2010) indicated that since this is a nonprobability sampling plan, the results are not generalizable to the population. However, quota sampling becomes necessity to ensure that all the selected hotels and resorts in the population are adequately represented in the sample.

A sample of 260 questionnaires was distributed to male and female employees in various hotels and resorts in Terengganu. From the 260 questionnaires distributed, a total of 130 were completed and returned representing a response rate of 50%. The study used both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics include mean and frequency. The inferential statistics include Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient analysis and multiple regressions.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Correlation analysis

Results of the correlation analysis are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Correlation Analysis

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Offensive Behaviour	1.000			
2. Sexual Coercion	0.419*	1.000		
3. Risk on Human Factor	0.044	-0.091	1.000	
4. Employment	0.485**	0.265**	0.226**	1.000

N = 130, \*p < 0.10; \*\*p < 0.05; \*\*\*p < 0.001

To explain the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variable, correlation was use (Pallant, 2011). The relationship among offensive behavior, sexual coercion, risk on human factor, and employment were investigated using Pearson correlation coefficient. Table 1 indicates that the overall correlation value of the variables is between -0.091 to -0.485. The relationships among offensive behavior, sexual coercion, risk on human factor, and employment show that there are strong, positive correlations among the variables.

### 4.2 Regression analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the effect of offensive behavior, sexual coercion, risk on human factor and employment. The results of regression analysis are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The Relationship between Offensive Behavior, Sexual Coercion, Risk on Human Factor and Employment

Independent Variables	Organizational Performance
	Beta Coefficient
Offensive behavior	0.46*
Sexual coercion	0.17*
risk on human factors	0.23*
$R^2$	0.29
Sig. F value	0.000

Note: significant levels: \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05

The results show that offensive behavior, sexual coercion, risk on human factor explained 29% ( $R^2 = 0.29$ ) of the variance in employment. This confirms the positive relationship between offensive behavior, sexual coercion, risk on human factor and employment. Looking at the contribution of individual dimension, Table 2 shows that offensive behavior ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) have high significant influence on employment followed by risk on human factors ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and, sexual coercion ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, it can be concluded only that only offensive behavior, social coercion, risk on human factors were found to have statistical significant effect on employment. Therefore, hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 are supported.

Based on the correlation analysis, the authors argue that awareness on sexual harassment had a mixed relationship on employment of the respondents. The respondent's employment was perceived to have a moderate and significant correlation with offensive behaviour shown by the staff and least affected by sexual coercion. It indicates that both body language and other offensive communication action should be of concern to managers and supervisors.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that all the three predictors are the most important variables that may create challenges in the, employment of the employees due to the threat of sexual harassment. In light of this revelation we also discovered that there are other factors as revealed by the low r square value that may motivate the act of sexual harassment and create negative effects on the employment of the hospitality employees. In this light, we believe more work need to be done to

ensure that physical working environment; behaviour; body languages and communications that may lead to sexual harassment should be monitored and controlled. Knowledge on action that may trigger sexual harassment behaviour should be though to all employees and proper complaint procedures should be in exercised effectively. Therefore, in handling sexual harassment cases in workplace, a sexual harassment policy is highly recommended tool (Barton & Eichelberger, 1994; Gilbert et al., 1998; Fang & Kleiner, 1999).

An organization should adopt a good sexual harassment policy since it can valueable in many ways. It can act as an employee relations management, managers and employees will gain basic education on sexual harassment and it is important to lessen legal responsibilities to the organization in result of litigation against the company. Staff at all levels shoul be well communicated pertaining to the policy. When the company has a consistency of the sexual harassment policy, it may act as obstacles for harassers. A clear and certain disciplinary measures ought to be applied to all members of staff without exception. Victims and witnesses will be encouraged to make a report when there is a clear policy. The future academic endeavours might make use of the present study as a stepping-stone for further exploratory and confirmatory research towards providing some useful insights and understanding of in particular.

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