

## **Sexual Harassment: Why Men Do It? A Study to Examine The Predictors That Leads Men To Sexually Harass**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Sexual harassment is a phenomenon that has always been looked from a woman's perspective. Almost all earlier studies on sexual harassment look at the incidences of sexual harassment, the effects on victims and coping strategies for victims. There is a dire need to change our understanding of this issue. In order to obtain a more holistic view of this issue, there should be a paradigm shift where the focus should be on the perpetrators. As men are generally the perpetrators, it is hoped that an insight into background, thoughts, feelings, perceptions and attitude would help understand why this phenomenon does exist. A total of 900 male respondents were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. The major finding of the study shows that men, regardless of his position and status, view sexual harassment as a sexual act, rather than a crime that affects the victims in many ways. Therefore, men are generally ignorant to the fact that their behaviour are subject to legal action.*

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, gender, masculine, workplace

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Though, the phenomenon of sexual harassment has been discussed at large in many researches conducted in the western world for the past two decades (Osman, 2004; Welsh, 1999; & Bradenburg, 1997), however, society at large, only started to realize the seriousness of this problem when awareness is created on this subject matter (Gutek, 1985; Langevin, 1992). From the perspective of the working environment, sexual harassment is an important issue for both the individual, and the organization. In reality, sexual harassment in the workplace is a problem for all, as harassment can damage employees' prospects of gaining employment, advancement and wages. In addition, harassment can create an offensive, hostile, and intimidating work environment that interferes with one's performances and job success. This paper seeks to examine men's perception on what brings men to sexually harass. It also seeks to identify the predictors that explain the variation of men's likelihood to sexually harass.

### **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sexual harassment is an action that is not favoured, not accepted and it is done without the consent of the receiver; an action that can be in the form of verbal, non-verbal, visual or physical (Tengku Omar & Maimunah, 2000, "Workshop on Code, 1999"). It can be in the form of harassment that leaves an impact on the job status of any individuals; or in the form of threat for the receiver as the receiver feels that his or her personal space has been invaded by a sexual act (Ministry of Human Resources, 1999; Tengku Omar & Maimunah, 2000).

Many researchers believe that sexual harassment takes place because of the differing expectations between both sexes. There are also people of the opinion that sexual harassment is more prevalent in workplace that has a higher number of women workers or women engaging in nontraditional jobs (Osman, 2004). This notion is related closely to beliefs and traditional views of society in nurturing children. Some researchers see men's harassment of women in workplace as an attempt to forge human contact and to overcome boring work (Welsh, 1999). On the other hand, engaging in sexually aggressive behaviour and harassment may be an act of resistance that demonstrates opposition to women's presence in traditionally male jobs (Hearn & Parkin, 1987). Cockburn states that men's morale and solidarity in their struggle against the boss is sometimes achieved directly at the expense of women (Cockburn 1991:148).

In Mazer and Percival's (1989) study, it was found that gender role stereotypes were significantly related to attitudes to sexual harassment with respondents who endorsed sexist attitudes being more accepting and tolerant of sexual harassment. It was also found that respondents with less sexist attitudes defined more incidents of behaviour as sexual harassment. Foulis and McCabe (1997) study found that gender differences occur as a result of this conditioning and these differences influences attitudes to sexual harassment. Males perceive more situations as being sexual or potentially sexual, and so view sexual harassing behaviour as normal or appropriate; and therefore see sexual harassment as normal flirtation between men and women.

According to Abbey (1982), men who interacts with women always perceives the women behaviour as 'coming on' and always relates communication with women in a cordial manner with elements of sexuality. Therefore, men's interpretation of women's behaviour from a sexual aspect arouses problems for women as men tend to misinterpret women's cordial behaviour as women wanting to move on with a more sexual relationship (Landis-Schiff, 1996).

According to past research too, if a man is unsure about how to interact with a woman and is not provided with information about the woman's likes and dislikes, he may use available social cues from peers to assess the acceptability of engaging in a sexually harassing act (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999). Peers who are part of the social structure surrounding have a disinhibiting effect on one's tendency to behave in a sexually impositional way, either through modeling or implicit verbal approval of sexually impositional behaviour (Angelone, Hirschman, Suniga, Arney & Armelie, 2005).

However, a major problem in dealing with sexual harassment in organizations is its perceptual nature (Popovich, Gehlauf, Jolton, Somers & Godinho, 1992) because men and women generally differ in what they perceive to be sexual harassment (Riger, 1991). What is dispelled by one as sexual harassment is likely to be considered an incident by the other. Popovich, Gehlauf, Jolton, Somers and Goldinho (1992) also found that gender differences existed in perceptions of sexual harassment, regardless of the form that the sexual harassment took or the consequences of such behaviour. Female raters tended to perceive the incident described as more likely to be sexual harassment, more likely to have an effect on the recipient of the harassing behaviour, and more negative than did male raters. Popovich and friends (1992) also found in their study that males generally perceived the incident of harassment to be based on attraction, as opposed to females who perceived it to be more power based.

One of the major shortcomings of sexual harassment theories in general is their tendency to address sexual harassment as an 'isolated' genderized phenomenon. Sexual harassment is a complex phenomenon and the understanding of this problem is still weak (Lengnick – Hall, 1995). Though, there is still no common definition of sexual harassment, past researchers have closely linked this phenomenon with the perspectives of organizational, sociology, cultural, political and individual (Benson & Thompson, 1982; Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; MacKinnon, 1979). The common denominator of models looking into this problem is that sexual harassment is a manifestation of the power imbalances between men and women. Not only do men want to rule, but they also take measures to legitimize their rule (Gardner, 1985; Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979). Many researchers believe that sexual harassment as a phenomenon exists because the evolution of time and modernization did not bring much change to people's expectations towards both sexes, as in how a boy has to behave, likewise as how a girl has to behave. Vaux (1993) discussed sexism as one of the several grounds on which to evaluate sexual harassment as a problem and noted that an observer's or victim's perception of harassment may well be influenced by gender consciousness.

According to Watts (2005), girls and boys with subordinate masculinities are still subject to sex-based harassment. This is because these girls are accepted as easy victims and the boys on the other side, are harassed because their behaviours are frowned upon as they believe to not behave in the norm that a man should behave. According to Watts (2005) too, the central readings to gendered power relations is a discourse which naturalizes harassment as part of male adolescent development and an aspect of boys' comparative insecurity and immaturity.

The social construction of hegemonic masculinity also implies, that men should not be caring and emotional (Lee, 2000). This is regarded as not masculine by society in general. According to Pringles (1989) in her research on male secretaries, the perceptions of both female and male colleagues of most male secretaries are that they have chosen this profession because they have 'some problem' with their masculinity. According to Hotelling (1991), culturally determined attitudes and beliefs have an effect on sexual harassment. Society defines certain behaviours for men and women as culturally acceptable and unacceptable. For women of most societies, the traditional cultural role for women is that of the wife and mother. The masculine role is that of family provider, or 'breadwinner'. The traditional view also believes that wage-earning women should limit their employment opportunities to specific female jobs such as teachers, nurses and secretaries.

These expected roles have become stereotypical ones that infiltrate many areas of life. Our cultural belief system is based on our societal attitudes and its imposed gender roles. Therefore, even if the laws have been changed, attitudes and beliefs do not change as readily. In relation to this, that is why sexual harassment has been defined as '*a manifestation of deeply held beliefs, attitudes, feelings and cultural norms*' (Brandenburg, 1997). *Brandenburg* believes that sexual harassment is closely tied to sex-role attitudes and stereotypes. The attitudes that '*boys will be boys*' as an excuse for lewd behaviour, and beliefs that blame victims who '*asked for it*' in rape myth acceptance give credence to the relationship between social attitudes and sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is also often thought as predominantly or even exclusively experienced by women (Vaux, 1993). Sociocultural explanations of sexual harassment focus on the patriarchal norms and stereotypes that confer dominant status upon men. In this view, gender is a status characteristic that accords men the power to harass women.

There are various factors that significantly influence sexual harassment. The victims tend to perceive the less severe sexual behaviour as sexual harassment. While the harasser might regard a more severe sexual behaviour as harassment, Pryor's (1987) research on hypothetical scenarios or situations that provided opportunities for sexual harassment if the man so chose, suggest that;

*"The man who is likely to initiate severe sexually harassing behaviour appears to be one who emphasizes male social and sexual dominance and who demonstrates insensitivity to the other individual perspectives."*

Some researcher argued that power rather than sex is the key issue in sexual harassment where men use sex to get power. A man who persists in unwelcome sexual advances feels that his masculinity is being challenged. He cannot accept rejection thus believed that there must be something wrong with women. Paludi (1996) when discuss sexual harassment with men finds that often men act out of extreme competitiveness and concern with ego or out of fear of losing their position of power. Men do not want to appear weak or less masculine in the eyes of other men, so they engage in cheeky and insensitive behaviour of rating women's bodies, pinching women, making implied or overt threats, or spying on women. This study focuses to understand the dynamics that surrounds men in relations to gender, knowledge and sexual harassment. Theories that look at perception and attributions and or even the organizational structure are likely to miss the complexity that lies within this problem. For the purpose of this study, the researchers would specifically like to find out what are the predictors that influence men to sexually harass.

### **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A survey design was used in this study. A total of 900 respondents were involved in this study. They were support staff from local public universities. They were interviewed using a structured questionnaire which was developed by the researchers themselves. In other word, a face-to-face interview was conducted in a month and a half fieldwork. Familial factors, sex role perceptions, socio environment, organizational environment, men's knowledge of sexual harassment and men's likelihood to sexually harass are among the variables scrutinized in this study. The researchers have used the regression analysis to uncover the unique predictors that influences men to sexually harass.

Majority of the respondents in this study are between the age of 21 and 30 (51.5 percent). This is followed by 26.6 percent of the respondents are between the age of 31 and 40 and not many respondents are below the age of 20. The youngest respondent is of 18 years old and the oldest respondent is of 59 years old. In terms of place of upbringing, a total of 47.2 percent of respondents hail from rural area as compared to 52.8 percent from urban area. In the context of educational background, 32.4 percent have completed their SPM, 14 percent are diploma holders, 21 percent are bachelor holders and 2.6 percent have postgraduates' degrees/ PhD. As for occupation, majority of the respondents (45.1 percent) respondents fall in the category of Administrative Assistant followed by Technicians which form 28.4 percent of the respondents. The third highest majority of the respondents work as clerks which form 12 percent of the respondents.

In terms of working experience, a total of 77.3 percent respondents have less than 10 years experience as compared to 22.7 percent of respondents who have worked over 10 years. There were only 1.1 percent of respondents who have worked over 31 years. The minimum year of experience is one year as compared to the maximum year of experience of 36 years. As for salary scale, 23.9 percent of respondents fall in the category of RM2001 – RM4000 salary as compared to 69.8 percent respondents who earn less than RM2, 000. A total of 4.9 percent respondents earn more than RM4000. The minimum salary of a respondent in this study is RM750.00 and the maximum salary is RM5000.00. As the key area that is looked in this study is the relationship of men's marital status and his likelihood to sexually harass, out of the 900 respondents interviewed, a total of 48.9 percent respondents are married, 0.7 percent is divorced, 2.3 percent are widowers and the balance of 48.1 percent is single.

**TABLE 1: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS**

Variable	Category	N (900)	(%)
Age	≤ 20 years	28	3.1
	21–30 years	464	51.6
	31–40 years	239	26.6
	41–50 years	141	15.7
	≥ 51 years	28	3.1
	Ethnic Group	Malay	695
Chinese		65	7.2
Indian		112	12.4
Others		28	3.1
Upbringing Place	Rural	425	47.2
	Urban	475	52.8
Marital Status	Single	433	48.1
	Married	440	48.9
	Widow/er	21	2.3
	Divorced/Single	6	0.7
Education Level	SRP/ PMR	33	9.4
	SPM	344	32.4
	STPM	105	11.7
	Certificate	80	8.9
	Diploma	126	14
	Bachelor	189	21
	Master/PHD	23	2.6

TABLE 1 : Continue

Occupation	Executive Technician	64	7.1
	Clerk		
	Unit Head	256	28.4
	Driver	112	12
	Officer	2	0.2
	Security	3	0.3
	Assistant	10	1.1
	Accountant	30	3.3
		11	1.2
	Assistant	3	0.3
	Director	3	0.3
	Supervisor	406	45.1
	Administrative Assistant		
	Working experiences	≤ 10 years	
Between 11 – 20 years		427	15.3
		238	5.3
		148	1.1
Between 21 – 30 years		87	
≥ 31 years			
Salary	≤ RM 1000	23	25.7
	Between RM 1001 – RM 2000	605	44.1
		167	18.6
		48	5.3
		57	4.9
	Between RM 2001 – RM 3000		
	Between RM 3001 – RM 4000		
	Between RM 4001 – RM 5000		

#### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

To determine the unique predictors that influence men’s perception on men’s likelihood to sexually harass among respondents, the methodology employed in this paper is basically the multiple regression analysis. The following regression equation was estimated between men’s likelihood to sexually harass and predictors that influence men’s perception:

$LSH = b_0 + b_1Dis + b_2SRP + b_3SE + b_4OE + b_5KSH + \epsilon$  where LSH stands for likelihood for men to sexually harass, SRP for sex role perceptions, SE for social environment, OE for organizational environment and KSH for men’s knowledge of sexual harassment. Table 2 exhibits the statistical summary result from the regression analysis. The F value (42.248) and p value (0.000) show that this model is significant at alpha value of 0.05. The R-squared of 0.191 implies that the five (5) predictors explain about 19% of the variation in the LSH.

**TABLE 2: REGRESSION MODEL**

Variables	b	Beta	T-value	Sig.
Constant	2.951			
Familial factors	-0.033	-0.044	-1.426	0.15
Sex roles perceptions	-0.282	0.141	-4.445	0.00
Social environment	0.197	0.322	9.865	0.00
Organizational environment	-0.371	0.106	-3.479	0.00
Men's knowledge of sexual harassment	-0.050	0.226	-7.183	0.00
F Statistics				42.248
R <sup>2</sup>				0.191
Significant model				0.000
N				899

The estimate of the model coefficients for  $b_0$  is 2.951,  $b_1$  is -0.033,  $b_2$  is -0.282,  $b_3$  is 0.197,  $b_4$  is -0.371 and  $b_5$  is -0.050. Therefore, the estimated model is as below:

$$LSH = 2.951 - 0.033Dis + 0.282SRP + 0.197SE - 0.371OE - 0.05KSH + \epsilon$$

From Table 2, all variables are significant at alpha = 0.05 level of significant except for variable familial factors (t-value = -1.426, p value = 0.154). The largest beta coefficient is 0.322 which is for social environment (SE). This means that this variable makes the strongest unique contribution in explaining the LSH, when the variance explains by all other predictor variables in the model is controlled for. It suggests that one standard deviation increase in SE is followed by 0.322 standard deviation increase in LSH. The Beta value for men's knowledge of sexual harassment (KSH) is the second highest (0.226), follows by sex roles perceptions (SRP) with 0.141 in the third place, and lastly, organizational environment (OE) with 0.106.

## V. PREDICTORS THAT INFLUENCES MEN TO SEXUALLY HARASS

### A. Socio Environment

The results of the multiple regression analysis show that socio environment is the strongest predictor in determining men's likelihood to sexually harass where ( $\beta = 0.322$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). The findings of this study is critical as it further substantiates past studies that social environment plays an important role in perception of an individual. In the context of this study, men are the respondents' and taking into consideration that globally, men have always been seen as the perpetrators of sexual harassment, it is important that the social environment dimension is understood seriously in attempt to curb the phenomenon of sexual harassment.

According to Abbey (1982), men who interacts with women always perceives the women behaviour as 'coming on' and always relates communication with women in a cordial manner with elements of sexuality. Men in general tend to mistake their co-worker's friendliness for seduction and find the office a little too exciting with women around (Abbey, 1982). Therefore, men's interpretation of women's behaviour from a sexual aspect arouses problems for women as men tend to misinterpret women's cordial behaviour as women wanting to move on with a more sexual relationship (Landis-Schiff, 1996). This finding is also supported with the very fact that because many are still not clear with the definition of sexual harassment. Taking into consideration that people react based on their perceptions as cited by Husbands (1992) in his study, the respondents in this study had labeled an incident as sexual harassment based on perception also.

It has been noted that many situational, non verbal cues such as women's sexy dress and their behaviours; or not taking measures of preventing themselves of being harassed have lead men to have the perceptions of sexual willingness, even when a woman says 'No' to sex (Osman, 2004).

According to Leidig (1981), the myths surrounding societal views on sexual behaviours gives justification for the action i.e beliefs that women bring victimization upon themselves, that victims enjoy it, that women exaggerate their claims to gain attention. Because of the strong influence of these cultural myths, it becomes more difficult to educate people on the subject matter of sexual harassment. The socialization process has all led to men to believe that women must at all time conform to the patriarchal concept whereby, women should not be loud and seen, and must put her family needs before her career. Failing so, then; women can be harassed because she is not conforming to these standards set by society. From the context of the study of sexual harassment, the findings is in line with socio cultural theory which states that sexual harassment is a discrimination of society towards women (Samoluk & Pretty, 1994). Powell (1993) agrees that men are more likely than women to view the victim as contributing to their own harassment; the typical response being the sexy way she dresses; or not by being able to handle normal and harmless sexual attention as asked in the survey question in this research.

### **B. Men's Knowledge of Sexual Harassment**

The results of the multiple regression analysis show that men's knowledge of sexual harassment is the second strongest predictor in determining men's likelihood to sexually harass ( $\beta = -0.226, p \leq 0.05$ ). There has been minimal research in the area of men's knowledge of sexual harassment. The researcher believes exploring this aspect of the study is crucial as it will contribute to the body of knowledge in understanding the phenomenon of sexual harassment. Thomas in her study (1997) found that men chose to explain sexual harassment as a 'kind of behaviour that is expected of them as a demonstration of their masculinity', so that they can identify themselves in a macho way; in the presence of other men. According to the research done by AWAM, most of the male respondents assume that sexual harassment is a 'normal' male behaviour and women have no choice but to accept it (Bradenburg, 1997). The findings of this study is significant as it further endorses the fact the lack of knowledge in the area of sexual harassment will lead men to perceive that there's a high likelihood for men to sexually harass given the right "conducive" environment.

### **C. Sex Role Perception**

The results of the multiple regression analysis show that sex role perception is one of the predictor in determining men's likelihood to sexually harass ( $\beta = -0.141, p \leq 0.05$ ) According to an early sexual harassment model, the function of sexual harassment is to manage ongoing male-female interactions according to accepted sex status norms, and to maintain male dominance by intimidating, discouraging or precipitating the removal of women from work (Tangri, Burt & Johnson, 1982). Franke's (1997) more recent model views sexual harassment as a technology of sexism; that is, sexist beliefs are insidious in society, and sexual harassment punishes women who deviate from traditional gender roles. The results of this study is also supported by Mazer and Percival's (1989) study, which revealed that gender role stereotypes were significantly related to attitudes to sexual harassment with respondents who endorsed sexist attitudes being more accepting and tolerant of sexual harassment. It was also found that respondents with less sexist attitudes defined more incidents of behaviour as sexual harassment.

The results is also supported by a study by Pryor (1987) that states men who score high in sexist beliefs have a higher propensity to take advantage of their female colleagues given if the situation of the environment is conducive for the perpetrator. This conducive environment is seen as potential for men to behave inappropriately towards his female colleagues (Stockdale, 1993). Powell (1993) also argues that men who have traditional views towards sex role beliefs are not concerned about the effects of their sexual harassment behavior towards the victims. The findings of this study, though do not show that sex role perception is the strongest predictor to men's likelihood to sexually harass; as compared to many past western studies (Stockdale, 1993; Powell, 1993; Mazer & Percival, 1989; Pryor, 1987) where it shows that gender role beliefs play a strong significant role in the perception of sexual harassment; however it still influences men's likelihood to sexually harass. This reflects that in the Malaysian context; sex role does contribute too to the men's perception in men's likelihood to sexually harass but the degree of its contribution is much lesser as compared to socio environment and men's knowledge.

### **D. Organization Environment**

The results of the multiple regression analysis show that organization environment is one of the predictor in determining men's likelihood to sexually harass ( $\beta = -0.106, p \leq 0.05$ ) According to Naylor and friends (1980), organizational tolerance in sexual harassment reporting procedure will have a general influence on the ideology and awareness on sexual harassment whereby, an organization with high tolerance of sexual harassment will lead to employees with low level of awareness on the matter.



Organization's reaction in dealing with sexual harassment will also have an influence in employer's interpretation of sexual harassment (Leningnick-Hall, 1995). For example, if the management of an organization do not approve the act of sexual harassment but at the same time do not act on the complaint; then the message that is sent is that they have forgiven the perpetrator and therefore this is used as a cue that this act is not a serious act at all in organizations (Pryor, Giedd & Williams, 1995; Pryor, La Vite & Stoller, 1993). As such, if organizations do not react seriously towards reports of sexual harassment, then men in general would interpret this as an acceptable norm at workplace. Therefore, it can be concluded that the more tolerant the organizational environment, the higher the likelihood for men to sexually harass. The findings of this study is essential as it proves that in order to curb this problem, organization environment has to be sexual harassment sensitive in order for employees to understand that this is a serious issue and the organization will look into the matter if there would be a case of sexual harassment in the organization.

## VI. CONCLUSION

There is still large amount of men who are still unclear about what is sexual harassment is all about and feels that their sexual attitude is normal for men. This is further substantiated with the fact there is no laws on this behavior in Malaysia and most organizations still do not take report made on sexual harassment seriously. Taking into considerations that there is a general lack of knowledge on the real definition of sexual harassment amongst men, it can be concluded that sexual harassment should not be viewed as a personal problem but a social problem. Therefore, this study proposes that society's knowledge on sexual harassment should be increased through early education on gender sensitization and sex education. The study proposes that there is a dire need to have gender awareness training to curb this phenomenon to further grow. We are at a cultural transition which causes lots of confusion on how a man or woman should behave towards one another. Therefore, by having gender awareness training, it will help staff to understand the manner on how male-female should behave and also enforce communication ethics at workplace. Gender awareness training will also help male participants to realize on the misconception they have on sexual harassment. This is supported by Pyke (1996) who states that awareness on sexual harassment is crucial to help understand the limitations of behavior in a professional workplace relationship. One of the core elements to be disseminated in the gender awareness training is anti-sexual harassment behaviour at workplace.

Besides trainings, there should also be awareness programmes as sexual harassment is an issue that needs awareness of everyone; regardless of the employee or employer. They have to be aware of the dynamics of sexual harassment because it affects the workplace. Awareness on sexual harassment would reveal and emerge the meaning of sexual harassment in a more holistic manner. The misconceptions about sexual harassment reveal that the respondents have limited knowledge and awareness of sexual harassment. The objectification of women that occurs in sexual harassment is by no means as benign as men imply when they construct it in this way as a simple act of 'appreciation' of the femaleness. Differentiating and recognizing the acceptable and the unacceptable behaviour need knowledge and trainings among the employers and the employees.

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