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Sexual Harassment in Workplace: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

Sexual harassment in the workplace is one of the many difficulties that employees face. It negatively affects people of both genders, though prominently females. This study will work towards extending on existing studies by taking into consideration both the male and female employees and delve into understanding the affects sexual harassment in the workplace has on their mental health and working performance of those affected. In addition, the study aims to further our understanding of the various forms of sexual harassment that occur in the workplace, and to explore both the factors that may lead to its increased occurrence and measures that could help prevent it from occurring. For this purpose, a study of literature review will be carried out. The study will provide an understanding of how sexual harassment in workplace impacts both physical and mental health of employees, and preventive measures against it. Hence, it may help in attaining knowledge that may help develop the programs against workplace sexual harassment. It believe and hope that by increasing the knowledge in this field of study would contribute towards increased awareness and development of programs that could help against workplace related sexual harassment.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, workplace, mental health, working performances

1. Introduction

Those in the workforce are often met with numerous difficulties that have detrimental impact on both their working and social lives. One that stands out is the rising issue of sexual harassment in the workplace. It causes much distress and discomfort for those who fall victim to it both physically and mentally (Mental Health America, 2019). Sexual harassment in the workplace has existed in the workplace for decades. It was considered a 'workplace hazard' until the 1960's when it was first recognized as an issue that needed to be addressed by state. This gave victims of sexual harassment the means to fight back with the backing of the law, which is something many had struggled for centuries. Many decades passed since the passing of these laws, though still today we can see several high-profile sexual harassment cases on the front pages. Yet, much more go unknown as victims are still afraid to come out (Siegel, 2003). Studies also reveal that both men and women fall victim to sexual harassment, although the ratio of women who fall victim are much greater. (UN Women, 2012). Additional statistics showed despite the laws that this problem has been increasing as more women join the workforce. The motives behind such actions are many, and the consequences faced by the victims (UN Women, 2012).

Sexual harassment has only recently been characterised and identified (Glomb, 2007). According to Wasilwa (2012), sexual harassment can be best described as unsolicited acts (which include physical, verbal and non-verbal acts) of sexual nature affecting women and men's dignity at work. This problem affects both the physical performance and mental health (Collins, 2010). And the mental health of the employee (Wasilwa, 2012). There are several negative effects of sexual harassment: illnesses, lack of commitment, absences, low quality performance, and resignation (William, 2012). Both male and female employees who have experienced sexual harassment feel negative emotions such as embarrassment, shame, and depression, and a decrease in their self-esteem, job satisfaction and safety. A gap exists in the literature regarding how an employee's perception of workplace sexual harassment climate has an impact on an employee's working performances and health status. In addition, one limitation of extant research on sexual harassment in the workplace is that no research has been conducted to date considering the moderating nature of the sex of the employee on sexual harassment in the workplace. The aim of this study was to expand on current sexual harassment studies by considering both male and female employees and how harassment climate, and affects working performances and personal mental health status in the workplace.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Workplace Sexual Harassment

There are differences in the psychological and sex-based perspectives in defining sexual harassment. In the psychological perspective, sexual harassment is unwanted sexual behaviour at the workplace that is viewed as offensive or

threatening one's well-being. The sex-based perspective includes provocation and exclusion that can demean or humiliates another (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009).

Sexual harassment in the workplace may cause victims short-term and long-term negative effects. It leads to depression and post-traumatic stresses. Individuals may feel humiliated, lose self-esteem, and more. It may also lead to workplace problems like higher turnover, absenteeism, lower job-satisfaction and decreased work-performance (Barker, 2017).

Organizational chaos and job insecurity are two key factors of general harassment. It is also said that team-organization and grievance mechanisms can act as modest factors to curtail sexual harassment. However, it is proven that highly physically demanding jobs that involves minorities are more prone both general and sexual harassment (Lopez, Hodson and Roscigno, 2009).

Sexual harassment can be classified to three interrelated dimensions. Gender harassment, sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention. Gender harassment refers to a huge range of both verbal and non-verbal behaviours that insult and degrade women and are not aimed at sexual collaboration. However, unwanted sexual attention includes both verbal and non-verbal behaviours that are offensive and unwanted. Sexual coercion can be defined as the exaction of sexual cooperation in return for considering that are related to jobs (Fasting et al., 2010).

Incivility, gender harassment and sexual harassment are interrelated and associated. Nonetheless, current organizational interventions towards interpersonal mistreatment seldom consider the issues of general civility, and do not address the issue of sexual harassment as part of it. However, it is proved that these approaches are most likely limited, because interpersonal mistreatment can happen in all the general interrelated varieties. A collaborative effort aimed at the elimination of all elements that causes hostile work environment may be the most effective efficient (Lim and Cortina, 2005).

Supervisory status increases the chances of women's harassment. For instance, women in upper-management and women that work in organizations with small number of women in the supervisory roles may experience more sexual harassment. Also, women supervising many workers have higher chance of falling victim (McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone, 2012). Although, demographics such as gender, age, education levels, and marital status may also lead to sexual harassment (Manuel, 2017). When women are exposed to bullying, there are many long-term health issues. Though for men, there are no long-term health issues as men tend to leave the job in such cases, while women often stay (Eriksen et al. 2016),

2.2. Effect of Sexual Harassment on Working Performances

No matter how big or small the sexual harassment incident is, it requires employer or employee to respond appropriately. Sexual favour has become something exchangeable for a higher position. Most of the victims have quit their current job due to serious sexual harassment in the workplace. It also leads to low productivity, change of careers, low job satisfaction and emotional trauma (Aloka, 2009). The effects of falling victim may last many years (Berdahl and Moore, 2006). A study discovered that sexual harassment reduced work-efforts, stopped the completion of tasks causing victims to be less productive. Victims also tend to become more anti-social, affecting their work relations (Estes and Wang, 2008).

If the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace is being ignored, the company's image will suffer as well. But there some cases the victims blamed themselves instead of the other party, causing them to be discharged (Goba-Malinga, 2011). Victims are often dissatisfied in keeping their jobs (Barker, 2017) showcase high levels of absenteeism and sometimes voluntarily leave the company, increasing the turnover rate (Sims, Drasgow and Fitzgerald, 2005; McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone, 2017).

This is due to the lack of job satisfaction that takes place as a result of such incidents (Lim, Cortina and Magley, 2008). A research by Antecol and Cobb-Clark (2006) also implied that victims of sexual harassment are more likely to leave the organization due to job satisfaction. In fact, a study showed that around 2.8 million people have resigned from their organization due to the occurrence of sexual harassment. Major causes include the build-up of stress, illnesses and injuries resulting from it, leading to problems and destabilization in the organizational environment (Hutagalung and Ishak, 2012).

2.3. Effect of Sexual Harassment on Health Mental Status

It is perceived that sexual harassment has a psychological and physical impact on employees (Campbell et al., 2008; Einarsen and Nielsen, 2014; Krieger et al., 2008). However, it depends on its intensity. The probable consequences of sexual harassment are thus considered. Hence, multiple cases that discuss individuals who refuse to acknowledge that have been wounded in some way or another or they have been a target of by sexual harassment. Individuals may worry that others will not be convinced by their rendition of what happen (Campbell, Dworkin and Cabral, 2009).

2.3.1. Consequences of Sexual Harassment on Those Who Are Harassed

2.3.1.1. Consequences of Emotional and Psychological

A study by Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers (2009) showed victim involvement in sexual harassment and the impact of those experiences in workplace in several different ways. Victims expressed feeling upset, threatened, frustrated and numerous other negative feelings. Additional research also produced similar findings identifying added negative feelings in both genders, including self-blame, humiliation, decreased self-esteem, loss of self-confidence and damage to interpersonal relations (Lim, Cortina and Magley, 2008). In the Bryant-Davis, Chung and Tillman (2009) study 45% of the

harassed women felt mistrust and 30% feel anger. Feelings of helplessness and insecurity were reported by 1 of 10 respondents. The Chechak and Csiernik (2014) study reported that 10% of the employees complained about depression and nervousness together with 15% shown distrustfulness. The negative psychological issue of sexual assault has been widely studied.

Firstly, lowered self-esteem. Research describe that self-esteem is a crucial aspect of one's well-being (Shannon, Rospenda and Richman, 2007). Research also indicated a connection between sexual violence with reduced self-esteem (Gruber and Fineran, 2008). Gruber (2008) found that victims of harassment reported reduced self-esteem as compared to non-victims. However, a study by Einarsen and Nielsen (2014), discussed that employees in big companies exposed to strong sexual violence in the past often blamed themselves, causing lower self-esteem.

Secondly, depression is a frequent experience amongst victims of sexual harassment (Campbell et al., 2008). Some victims were twice more likely to be diagnosed with depression than victims of physical violence (Bryant-Davis, Chung and Tillman, 2009). An additional study reported that 30% individuals with previous trauma had major depression (Stockdale, Logan and Weston, 2009).

Thirdly, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Encountering violence can have harmful effects on victim's health (Stockdale, Logan and Weston, 2009). Victims with histories of being a sexual harassment victim have depression and significantly elevated levels of PTSD (Einarsen and Nielsen, 2014).

Fourthly, victims have high chances of conducting substance abuse. Campbell (2008) have reported that PTSD functions as a mediator which abuse compromises victim's physical health through their physiological impacts. By understanding the bio-psychological mechanisms by which PTSD affects health expands on this discussion (Stockdale, Logan and Weston, 2009), and evidence points towards hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. The stress triggers both a chronic and acute stress response, which levels up negative feedback in the HPA axis, reducing cortisol levels, leading to dysregulation of the HPA and hormonal disruption (Krieger et al., 2008).

Lastly, suicidal tendencies, which range from infrequent to extreme thoughts of death (Einarsen and Nielsen, 2014; Lim, Cortina and Magley, 2008). A study in USA discussed that victims had a highest risk of suicide after exposure to sexual harassment (Gruber and Fineran, 2008). Additional consequences of sexual harassment included muscle pains, headaches, exhaustion, nausea, sleeping disruptions and headaches (Street, 2008; Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers, 2009).

2.3.1.2. Interference with Private Life

Other research found harassment affects the private lives of workers. In the Lim (2008) study, 8% of victims disliked sexual activities in their private lives. In Shannon (2007), 65% of the victims reported an unfavourable effect on relationships with friends and family. Of the victims, 25% had tensions in their private relationships, 15% felt antagonism towards others, 5% withdrew themselves, 13% emotional disinterest from close friends, and 7% feared physical touch.

2.3.2. Consequences of Sexual Harassment on the Organisation

A survey in Campbell and Wasco (2005) found that 17% of workers viewed sexual harassment as a 'major problem', almost 6 of 10 workers considered it to be a 'less important problem', whereas just 1% do not considered it as a problem at all. Psychological and physical effects of sexual harassment harmfully affect organizational culture (Bryant-Davis, Chung and Tillman, 2009; Lim, Cortina and Magley, 2008) by creating a stressful environment for all workers. Studies have shown that such occurrences affect all employees (Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers, 2009). Victims may believe that organizations do not care about them, building negative assumptions towards organizational behaviours and norms related to justice and fairness (Campbell, Dworkin and Cabral, 2009). The result can be a loss of confidence and loyalty to the organization and management, reducing productivity and increasing absenteeism.

Furthermore, a study by Stockdale (2009) found that harassment negative view towards workplace relationships. The examination of any objection did not only carry a financial cost, but also lead to divisions between workers (Chechak and Csiernik, 2014). In succession, all workplaces have difficulties with growing psychosomatic problems amongst workers, such as sleep problems, headaches and gastric problems. In addition, the frequency of harassment seemed to be an indicator of turnover rates of victims (Shannon, Rospenda and Richman, 2007).

2.4. What Is the Literature View on Reducing Sexual Harassment?

Several policies with the intent of tackling sexual harassment in the workplace have and continue to be laid down despite their effectiveness being based on a countries culture, norms and values (Aloka, 2009).

Many victims of sexual harassment remain silent, only a fraction acts against the perpetrators (Hall et al, 2018). Although, a survey had revealed that this culture of silence was changing and that there is an increase in the number of formal reports. The figures increased from 16% of victims, to 20%; still a small fraction of the total number of victims. Although, this indicates a positive change in culture (Birinxhikaj and Guggisberg, 2017).

Though, research has shown that reporting the incident often does not lead to it being solved. Only 45% of those 20% of who made a report indicated that it ended the harassment, and out of those 45%, only 74% were satisfied with the results of their complaints. Also, 29% of victims had faced re-victimisation and demotion because of complaining. This is one of the main reasons why 4 of 5 of such cases remain unreported. Others include the fear of losing one's job, re-victimization and the subjugation to embarrassing investigations (Birinxhikaj and Guggisberg, 2017). Hence measures need to be put in place to rectify this situation. Both governments and organizations have a role to play in efforts to tackle this to ensure the well-being of its citizens and employees (Coyle and Sumida, 2005).

Firstly, the government plays a major role through the implementation of laws to prevent future occurrences and assist victims. The UK recognized sexual harassment in the 1970s when they introduced several legislations including the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. Likewise, in the USA, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (the EEO) and Affirmative Action were put in place (Aloka, 2009). These legislations helped reduce the number of such incidents. Though, despite this, the issue still exists in countries with similar laws, hence there is a need laws to be refined and remade (McDonald, 2012).

Secondly, organizations themselves play a role in reducing sexual harassment. Research indicates that 'co-worker solidarity', 'supervisor harmony', 'workplace anonymity' and 'physicality of the work' play a role in doing so. Findings indicated that both co-workers and supervisors act as potential guardians for individuals against threats (Chamberlain et al., 2008).

Likewise, work-group solidarity and the establishment of a supportive work-group culture and environment reduces the extent to which sexual harassment is a problem as co-workers are invested towards the maintenance of each other's well-being (Benavides Espinoza and Cunningham, 2010). They are more willing to intercede in instances of harassment and help victims. Likewise, employees who are mutually supportive of one another are less likely to prey on each other. (Chamberlain et al., 2008). Other research recommends that organizations use numerous training methods divided into several stages to help reduce harassment (Jardim and Honns, 2004).

However, recent research has indicated that simply training employees on identifying and reducing sexual harassment through increased quantity and variety of training is not the most effective method of tackling the problem. As it has been seen to have negative effects combined with increased sensitivity that result in actions that go against the main intended outcomes of the training (Buckner et al, 2014). Other studies have indicated that rather than solely focusing on such training methods, organizations should give importance to motivating managers to learn. This can have a significant effect in the fostering of a climate of intolerance towards sexual harassment. The study stated that the level of organizational tolerance to sexual harassment was fully mediated by the level of motivation to learn and act (Goldberg, Rawski and Perry, 2019).

3. Conclusion

Due to the rising number of sexual harassment cases against employees, it is essential that this issue is investigated into thoroughly to attain a better understanding of its cause and effects. This will assist movements, programs and others who are working towards a solution. It would help reduce such activities, making the workplace a safer place where gender equality and the rights of all workers are respected and maintained.

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