

An exploratory study on Sexual harassment at work place

by

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1. Background of the Research

Sexual harassment in the workplace is, unfortunately, something that women, in particular may face during their working life (Melanie McMullan, June 1994). It is a much talked about issue among employees. As research in other countries indicate, about 42-50% of women experience sexual harassment at workplace during their working life (Diane K. Shrier, Marita P. McCabe 2001). It is reported that more than 16,000 sexual harassment complaints are filed with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) each year¹. The ILO report that, surveys carried out in 23 countries has disclosed that 15% to 30% of the women polled had experienced sexual harassment by supervisors or co-workers. In 1991 a British survey revealed that 47% of the women and 14.5% of the men said that they had been sexually harassed (J.A.F. Stoner, R.E Freeman, D. R. Gilbert, Jr, 1995). Similar results can be seen in research carried out in other countries such as U.S.A, Spain etc.

Briefly defining, sexual harassment means unwelcome or unwanted verbal or physical behaviour that affects a person's employment. Nevertheless definitions of sexual harassment vary considerably, in different countries, societies, communities and organizations. However these various definitions have a similar characteristic; which is the unwanted or unwelcome nature of the act by the recipient. The ILO considers sexual harassment as a violation of fundamental rights of workers, declaring that it constitute a problem of safety and health, a problem of discrimination, an unacceptable working condition and a form of violence, primarily against women (Haspels, Kasim, Thomas, McCann, 2001).

¹ P. Brimelow, 'Is Sexual Harassment Getting Worse?'Forbs, April 19,1999, p.92

Although sexual harassment is widespread in workplaces and is an insidious act that have an immense affect on the victim's life, operations of the workplace / organization, victm's family and the society, hard data / evidence are difficult to be found. It has to be accepted that most of us have heard of the whispers and whispering that had gone on, on incidents relating to sexual harassment and sex discrimination (K.A.I. Kalyanaratne)² But how many of such incidents have come into the notice of the relevant authorities? This reluctance of victims to formally lodge complaints about their harassments may have created an environment, where the relevant parties (e.g. employers, government etc) show indolence towards the subject. Moreover the employers, government policy makers and other relevant parties should be alerted to the fact that the number of formal complaint they get does not reflect the real enormity of the problem. There can be number of reasons why women or victims choose not to make formal complains. Thus the sheer lack of evidence on sexual harassment at workplace should not be taken as an indication of the absence of such acts.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the types of sexual harassment that Sri Lanakan women face in their workplaces.
- To uncover and explore the main courses / factors that would affect women's decision against lodging a formal sexual harassment complaint at the workplace.
- To explore attitudes of Sri Lankan females towards sexual harassment at work place.

3. Significance of the study

Sri Lankan women have played an important role in the labour force of the country from the past; initially in an informal way with the family agricultural, fishery or craft related

² Daily News 16, 2001

work activities. However with the advent of the plantation sector, Sri Lankan women entered the formal labour force and since then the women employment in the country has increased rapidly. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey carried out by the Department of Census and Statistics the current employment of women in Sri Lanka is 2 million. Hence with this increase in women participation in the labour force it is of paramount importance to consider the fact that Sri Lankan women also face sexual harassment in their workplaces.

Sexual harassment is very common and has far reaching consequences, to the victim, to the company, to the victim's family, to other employees who witness harassment and more importantly to the society. Victims of sexual harassment may develop significant psychiatric, emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, somatic, and job related pathology and /or dysfunction (Diane K. Shrier). On the other hand sexual harassment in workplaces may lead to companies facing number of setbacks, such as losing good employees, suffering productivity losses due to de-motivated, discontented and unhappy employees and damage to the goodwill of the company.

With the increase women participation in the labour force, Sri Lankan women can be at a greater risk of being targets of sexual harassment, and facing negative consequences as discussed above. Hence by probing deeper into the matter, the researcher hope to rouse the relevant parties to the types of sexual harassment that Sri Lankan women maybe facing and also to the fact that number of factors are possibly discouraging women to acknowledge sexual harassment that they have experienced.

Furthermore, the absence or the inadequate studies carried out on 'sexual harassment at workplace', in Sri Lanka reflect the continuing obfuscation and erasure of the subject. From research perspective it is clear that qualitative and quantitative studies are necessary to elicit data required to stimulate policy-oriented, social and legal based action that would prevent and redress the sexual harassment of women(CENWOR,2000).

Thus in carrying out this study it is anticipated that the research findings would provide effective stimulus and database for appropriate action in this regard by the relevant parties in the future.

4. Methodology

Since complete coverage of the whole population is considered impossible and unattainable due to many constraints such as limitation of the necessary resources, a representative sample from a cross section of industries will be used in carrying out the research. In choosing the sample of the study the researcher has looked at the major industrial sectors of the country in which the women participation in labour is considerably high (see Table 1).

▪ **Table 1**

Industry Group	Currently employed females (2002)
1. Agriculture Forestry and Fishery	789,897
2. Manufacturing	477,413
3. Wholesale and Retail Trade, Repair of Motor Vehicles, Motorcycles and Personal and Household Goods	163,883
4. Education	158,315
5. Public Administration and Defense, Compulsory Social Security	132,589
6. Financial Intermediation and Real Estate, Renting and Business Activities	36,023

Source : Quarterly Report of the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey, Second Quarter 2002, Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Interior.

In selecting a sample, which is well representative of the total population, the researcher has looked into the above major industry Groups. However, the Industry Group in which majority of females are employed (Agriculture Forestry and Fishery) will not be taken into the total population of this study as it is considered difficult to define an accurate or precise ‘Working Place’ for them and also many of the women in this major industry group is mainly self employed or come under the category of unpaid family workers. Moreover manufacturing sector will also not be taken into the population as number of research on sexual harassment has been carried out earlier by different researchers, specially in garment/ textile industry, which is the major sub section of the manufacturing industry. A sample is selected from the next two major industry groups where women participation is highest, namely **Wholesale & Retail Trade, Repair of Motor Vehicles, Motorcycles & Personal & Household Goods** and **Education**. Moreover for the purpose of comparison a sample from the industry group which has the lowest number of women participation (**Financial Intermediation and Real Estate, Renting and Business Activities**) from the above list (Table 1) is also chosen (see Table 2). Another important rationale for choosing these 3 major industries for the study is that not much research has been done in these three major industries on sexual harassment.

▪ **Table 2**

Industry Group	Sample Size
Wholesale and Retail Trade, Repair of Motor Vehicles, Motorcycles and Personal and Household Goods	100
Education	100
Financial Intermediation and Real Estate, Renting and Business Activities	100
Total	300

Thus data will be collected from a group of 300 female workers drawn from different industry groups as stated in Table 2.

Furthermore the selection of the sample will be done using a convenience method due to the nature of the topic researched. Sexual Harassment being a sensitive issue specially among Sri lankans due to many reasons such as our culture, norms, believes etc, directly or randomly approaching respondents were considered to be a futile effort as it can raise the question of accuracy of the responses, and more importantly whether corporation of the intended or randomly chosen respondents can be gained will become questionable issue. Thus initially the approached respondents will be the people known to the researcher and then the researcher will subsequently ask these respondents to recommend other people who meet the criteria of the research and also who might be willing to participate in the research. If and when such respondents are recommended, the researcher will approach them and collect the required information and ask them to recommend other persons who might fit the research design. This process will continue until the required sample is completed.

Data collection

A structured questionnaire will be developed for the purpose of collecting information on the three main objectives of the study. This detailed questionnaire will be distributed among the above mentioned sample group of females (Table 2) for the purpose of gathering data on the three objectives, namely to identify the types of sexual harassment that women face in their work places, to uncover and explore the main courses / factors that would affect women's decision against lodging a formal sexual harassment complaint at the workplace and to identify their attitudes towards sexual harassment at work place.

The data collected will be statistically analyzed using computer-tabulating techniques (SPSS - Statistical Package for Social Sciences).