

## “You’re So Hot!”: A Content Analysis of Sexual Harassment Among Hotel Employees

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**Abstract.** A major issue facing the hospitality industry is that of sexual harassment and the explosion in the number of sexual harassment lawsuits being filed. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of empirical research on sexual harassment in Malaysia and the findings indicate that between 35 percent and 53 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment at work. Organizational culture represents the norms of appropriate behavior and values held by members of a particular organization. The hospitality industry is particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment problems. Thus, it is important to determine the understanding of sexual harassment among Malaysian working women and to determine if they recognize the behaviors or act that constitute sexual harassment. Since there are no constitutional guidelines on sexual harassment in Malaysia, sexual harassment as a term can lead itself to widely differing explanations.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment, female, hotel employees, Malaysia

### 1. Introduction

In Malaysia, various surveys and empirical studies have shown that sexual harassment is common in the workplace. According to Ismail and Lee (2005) the rates of occurrence of sexual harassment in Malaysia do not differ too much from the situation found in the United States. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of empirical research on sexual harassment in Malaysia and the findings indicate that between 35 percent and 53 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment at work (Marican, 1999; Kunju Pillai Laxman et al., 2003; Barathi, 2003; Ismail & Lee 2005 and Ismail, Lee & Chen, 2007).

The study by Ismail and Lee (2005) and Ismail, Lee & Chen (2007) shows that female employees experience at least one form of sexual harassment. Recent qualitative studies have also highlighted how organizational culture contributes to employees' willingness and ability to label sexual behaviours as sexual harassment (Welsh, 1999). Organizational culture represents the norms of appropriate behavior and values held by members of a particular organization (Welsh, et. al., 2002). The hospitality industry is particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment problems (Anders, 1993 & Coeyman, 1998 in Lin, Y.H., 2006).

The problem of defining sexual harassment, as in for example, a pat on the shoulder or back could be construed as friendly in some industries for instance the hospitality industry. In short, what constitutes sexual harassment may be subjective based on an individual's perception or organizational context in which the respondent works in (Welsh, 1999).

In Ng and Jamilah Othman's (2002) study, the women generally perceived verbal, visual or non-verbal forms of sexual harassment to be "less serious", but reported that they would make a complaint if the incident became physical. Despite the heightened awareness about sexual harassment, differing perceptions exist, with the issue continuing to be highly contested.

Human resources specialist Maimunah Aminuddin, who co-authored the book, *A Guide to the Malaysian Code of Practices on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*, said many people will think there is no harm in

dirty jokes, or making comments about another's body shape, or even what one did with one's husband the night before. According to Maimunah Aminuddin,

"both men and women need to be educated on how painful and harmful sexual harassment can be. They need to know exactly what sexual harassment is, many don't even know that they are a victim of sexual harassment" (New Sunday Times, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2008).

Relatively little work has been done, in particular on the perception of Malaysian women towards sexual harassment or coercion in hotel industry. Past research has also shown that working women do differ on what they consider to be sexual harassment.

In Malaysia, sexual harassment studies have been were mainly conducted among the government employees and workers in manufacturing industries and no studies relating to hospitality industry have been identified thus far. It is therefore the intention of this study to at least partially fill this gap in literature.

## **2. Sexual Harassment in Malaysia**

Recognising that sexual harassment is a widespread problem, the Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia launched the *Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace* in August, 1999. The launch of this code of practice was the first official attempt by the government to define and address sexual harassment in the workplace.

### **2.1. Definition of Sexual Harassment**

The Malaysian Code of Practice on Sexual Harassment in the workplace has defined sexual harassment as: "Any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature having the effect of verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological or physical harassment:

1. that might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by the recipient as placing a condition of a sexual nature on her/his employment or

2. that might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by the recipient as an offence humiliation, or a threat to her/his well-being, but has no direct link to her/his employment. "

Based on the above definition sexual harassment may be viewed as comprising two parts i.e. sexual coercion and sexual annoyance.

The Code of Practice outlines five possible forms of sexual harassment and provides examples of such behaviour. These are:

1. Verbal harassment e.g. offensive or suggestive remarks, comments, jokes, jesting, kidding, sounds, questioning.

2. Non-verbal/gestural harassment e.g. leering or ogling with suggestive overtones, licking lips or eating food provocatively, hand signals or sign language denoting sexual activity, persistent flirting.

3. Visual harassment e.g. showing pornographic materials, drawing sex-based sketches or writing sex-based letters, sexual exposure.

4. Psychological harassment e.g. repeated, relentless and unwanted social invitations,

5. Physical harassment e.g. inappropriate touching, patting, pinching, stroking, brushing up against the body, hugging, kissing, fondling, sexual assault.

### **2.2. Objective of Study**

The aim of this study is to identify the most common forms of sexual harassment experienced according to the Code of Practice, among female hotel workers in Malaysia. Because sexual harassment is endured predominantly by women, in this study, it is assumed that women are the victims and men the perpetrators.

### **2.3. Limitations**

Various limitations of the study must be considered when evaluating the results and their generalizability. First, the sample only consisted of a group of hotels in two states in Malaysia. Secondly, the participants used in this study were considered convenient samples based on the hotels' willingness to participate and as such were susceptible to sampling bias, thirdly, the relatively

## 2.4. Methodology

The participants for this study include Malaysian female employees working in hotels in the state of Pulau Pinang (Penang) and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The study focuses primarily on female employees because women are the most likely victims of sexual harassment. The selection of respondents was based on the hotels' willingness to participate in the study. The female employees were required to complete a questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously. Five hundred questionnaires were distributed and a total of 305 were returned, representing a response rate of 61%.

The female hotel employees were asked to list the words or sentences that have been directed to them, making them feel sexually harassed. The respondents were given the liberty of writing their answers in languages other than English. This was done with the view of eliciting a more accurate answer that could have otherwise been hampered by poor English proficiency. This view was confirmed when the majority of the responses were in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia. Respondents are asked to define the responses were in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia. Respondents are asked to define sexual harassment. Content analysis was conducted and the responses were categorized according to forms of sexual harassment outlined by the Code of Practice. The respondents' answers are presented verbatim.

## 2.5. Findings

The findings reveal that the female hotel employees were subjected mostly to verbal harassment (50%). The tone and phrases and sentences cited by the respondents show a level of distress from not knowing how to react to these form of harassment.

They suffered from offensive or suggestive remarks such as "*badan you seksilah*" (your body is sexy), "big spotlight", "*I suka tengok you pakai skirt*" (I like to see you in skirts) and "dreamt of you". The respondents were also subjected to comments, jokes, jesting, kidding, sounds, and questioning that are considered as verbal harassment: "can I sleep with you?", "do you want to do your own business?", "*eh, betulkan baju kau, nampak dada kau, putihnya dada kau*" (eh, adjust your blouse, I can see your chest, it is so fair) and "kiss me".

The next most common type of harassment faced by the respondents is physical harassment (22%). The female hotel employees said that they were often physically harassed in various ways, such as their bra strap being touched from behind, persistent and inappropriate or unwarranted touching of arms and body, rubbing against the respondent, and touching of her breasts and bottom.

Following close to physical harassment is psychological harassment (17%) where the respondents were subjected to repeated, relentless and unwanted social invitations: "former manager ask me for dating with him", "how much shall I pay you if you spend one night with me?", and "*ajak keluar berdua walaupun telah berumahtangga*" (invite me for a date even though I am already married).

Nonverbal or gestural harassment is also experienced by the respondents, although not as frequently (8%). This form of harassment under the Code of Practice usually involve "leering or ogling with suggestive overtones, licking lips or eating food provocatively, hand signals or sign language denoting sexual activity, persistent flirting." The respondents revealed that they experienced harassers who held or ate their food provocatively, "persistent flirting", "showing a body language", "*merenung atas bawah*" (staring up and down), and "*menjilat bibir*" (licking his lips).

The least common harassment experienced by the respondents is visual harassment (3%). Some of the forms of visual harassment that they faced were "zip zap his zipper in front of you", show me naked photo", and "*tanggal baju atau seluar di depan saya*" (removing his clothes or pants in front of me).

Table 1 illustrates the frequency and types of sexual harassment faced by the hotel female employees.

Table 1. Sexually harassment categories faced by female hotel employees.

Type of sexual harassment	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Verbal harassment	67	50
Physical harassment	30	22
Psychological harassment	23	17
Nonverbal/gestural harassment	11	8
Visual harassment	4	3

### 3. Conclusion

The findings show that in the hotel industry the respondents were most commonly subjected to verbal harassment 50 per cent, followed by physical harassment 22 percent and psychological harassment 17 percent. This clearly supports the previous studies that female employees are subjected to at least one form of sexual harassment and that verbal harassment being the most common one. The findings also indicate that the awareness female employees on what constituted sexual harassment appears to be the same as that of the findings of studies conducted in the west.

Due to the informal environment of the hotel industry and close contact with co-workers and customers offering an opportunity for increased socialization and interaction with their male colleagues; this would probably explain why female employees experienced mostly verbal harassment. The attitudes and norms regarding social-sexual behavior may be somewhat different than that of females working in other industries (Terpstra & Baker, 1987). This is supported by Lin, Y.H. (2006) that the informal nature of these industries' workplaces often causes the line between work and social interaction to be easily blurred. This would explain why the female employees are subject to the verbal harassment.

As stated by Li and Lee-Wong (2005, p702) "what is agreed upon is that coarse language, flirting and staring are generally not considered harassment". Telling dirty jokes, making sexually discriminating remarks and commenting on an individual's figure or sexual features might be common practice among the working environment in the hospitality industry (Lin, Y.H., 2006). It is also said that sexual jokes are used as means of killing time in the hospitality industry (Agrusa et.al, 2002). This may also be explained by the fact that sexual harassment is widely accepted in the hospitality industry (see Poulston (2008, p239) who states that "amongst mature hospitality academics, there is a strong ethos of "get over it" and "it's just part of the industry", echoing comments from hospitality employees.

There is always the strong influence of a more modern and western "culture" and the demands of modern life in the hotel industry. Thus, there is a need to educate female employees in the hotel industry of the difference between sexual harassment and appropriate social behavior and interaction i.e. what constitutes or comprises verbal sexual harassment and how to deal with the harassment effectively.

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