AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Workplace harassment has become a silent epidemic in Malaysia. Yet there is an insufficiency of research on this issue. Through the use of archival evidence, alongside contemporary voices of experience, understandings of the harassment to nature work are summarized and reviewed. Initially, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted, to allow the researcher to identify the existence of the circumstances. This paper explored the emergence categories and form of workplace harassment in the Malaysian context. The exposure to workplace harassment is all-embracing in various setting. The results are discussed with reference to other studies. The research also demonstrates that harassment is a serious problem in Malaysian workplace and needs to be addressed on policy.

Keywords: Workplace, Harassment, Malaysian

INTRODUCTION

There is a small quantity of information in the literature about the phenomenon of workplace conflict such as harassment and bullying in Malaysia. The unreliable information would suggest that the problem is rife but it is rarely discussed in public. Research has demonstrated that the consequences of such behavior can lead to both short and long-term mental health problems. Many of the consequences are related to the effect of prolonged exposure to high levels of pressure. The unmanageable social situation for these individuals may consist not only of severe psychological trauma but also of an extremely prolonged stress condition that seriously threatens the individual's socio-economic existence, productivity, job security, marital problems, etc.

Thus far, limited concrete evidence is available to support these assumptions. The employees in Malaysia often have less understanding and their justices about workplace harassment than in Western society. Malaysian employees experience the phenomenon but avoided reporting or confronting because they are intimidated and fear that the phenomenon will deteriorate (Macintosh, *et al*., 2010). Research to date has tended to focus only on personal well-being of alleged victims including stress, anxiety, insomnia, long working hours, depression, burnout etc. This focus has meant that the etiology of workplace conflict such as harassment and bullying in Malaysia is not well understood, including its category, dispersal, and causes.

METHOD

Data collection

The data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews in a separate meeting place for each participant. Participants were provided with these settings in order to facilitate a safe and supportive environment to talk in depth about this sensitive issue. Interviews were held with 12 individuals from Malaysian communities who reside in Northern Ireland for work and study. All real names were modified to protect participants' confidentiality. Most of the participants who volunteered to take part in the study were over 25 years old and had worked for at least three years in Malaysia. The participants explained perfectly their own experiences and witness of the phenomenon.

ANALYSIS

The evaluation of the data sticks to the established procedure of narrative analysis. This method may perhaps help in identifying, analyzing and reporting summaries (themes) within data. Labov and Waletzky (1997) articulated that narrative analysis focus on the ordinary stories people tell as a way to share everyday experiences. To begin with, the researcher viewed the 12 interview transcripts to identify items that pointed to the existence of potential themes. This involved a case by case analysis, followed by a cross-case analysis of shared themes. In this interview, the aim is to explore these issues in simplistic pattern through how victims

experience workplace harassment conduct at work. The purpose of this analysis was to present a superficial explanation of the relevant issues and themes which capture the views and experiences involved among Malaysians. The analysis revealed a variety of themes and will be centered on the objectives of the study. The themes that emerged during the analysis of each participant's transcript were compared to portray what were felt to be the most significant experiences. For this analysis, first of all, the researcher looked for items within the interview transcripts that pointed to the existence of potential themes. The emerging themes were ordered in preliminary lists, which were later put into correlated clusters.

Harassment Context

Harassment is a multi-dimensional concept which is defined in different ways by researchers. Harassment may involve bullying, mobbing, victimization or make unreasonable demands on others whether directly or indirectly. Frequently the unwanted conduct relates to the person's identity referring to definitions from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Labour Relations Agency (2006), for example, his/her gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and age. Most of the interviewees in this study focused on two types of harassment based on gender and ethnicity. Participants have defined harassment in their own words and according to their experiences. Previous research supports that gender and ethnicity based harassment at the workplace is very common. For example, Fain and Anderson (1987) found that women with low power and status are more likely to be harassed. What is more surprising is that women in a higher position are often more vulnerable to discrimination (Rudman & Glick, 1999). These significant factors have affected occupational and psychological outcomes of the victims.

FINDINGS

Three themes labelling different forms of workplace harassment were identified from the analysis of the transcripts. The form and catergory of harassment experiences by the participants shown in Table 1.

Sexual

There are several different types of workplace discrimination. A common type that many of us are

familiar with is gender discrimination. This can include several different categories including sexual harassment. We often think of gender discrimination as something practised against a female, these types of incidents may impact on males too. It is commonly believed that men and women interpret each other's behaviour in different ways and this can lead to a series of misunderstandings and even sexual harassment at the workplace. The specific types of harassment experienced by women participants in this study range from inappropriate verbal coercion, such as insistent phone calls, incessant compliments and numerous invitations for dates, to physical coercion, such as touching, kissing or even attempts at assault. In the following extract, Participant 2 described how she worries about the way her perpetrator acts and takes advantage of her in the office:

Participant 2 (gender harassment-sexual)

"*He frequently by chance - came into contact with....always at the same spot that is my buttocks.*"

In addition, there is a high tendency for newly employed and younger females to be harassed by the powerful males, as recounted by the interviewees. In those cases, the typical target would have an introverted personality and is frightened to report the misbehaviour of her or his superiors for fear of losing her or his job (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). Regardless of age, ethnicity and religious background, participants admitted that they suffered at the hands of individuals of both identical and different ethnicity- there was no pattern.

Position

Researchers have consistently found that men feel awkward receiving instruction from female supervisors (Fairhurst, 1993). However, although prejudice against women leaders in America seems to have lessened significantly in recent years, employees still appear to prefer male rather than female bosses (Eagly, 2007). This is not the case in Asian cultures. Malaysia is one of the countries which still continue to rely on traditional gender roles. In this study, the Malay males still maintain the view that women should occupy lower managerial positions than men. The participants (female) confessed that as leaders, they have to cope not only with the pressures of male competitors, but also the psychological difficulty that

comes from gender prejudice - whether overt or covert. Here is an example of gender-based harassment of a well-educated female who made the following comment:

Participant 11 (gender harassment-position)

"…*The culture is different…. the mainly is ..Malay Culture and being in a Malay culture, men find...it's very hard to take instruction from woman regardless of the position of the woman. So I happened to be in a higher position………..he found it threatening and then he would refused to do......it or he replied he said things back to me which is not nice sometimes.*"

Supporting this phenomenon, Sarachek, Hamid and Ismail (1984) reported that the Malaysian Chinese are more receptive to women in the workplace than are the Malay men. It was also found that Malaysian male, middle-level managers and professional respondents, regarded women as being more emotional and less capable of bearing work pressures than men. In some ways, it can be said that the Malaysian male has a rooted belief (and proclaimed by Kanter 1979, as mentioned in Bingham, 1991) that women's emotions prevent them from managing effectively. So, there is a cultural difference in the perception of women bosses at work.

Ethnicity

Shaffir, Stebbins and Turowetz (1980) were right when they noted, 'When focusing on the personal and social dimensions………one discovers that various aspects of field research are regarded as stressful and anxiety laden' (p. 28). The quote relates to this study regarding the ethnic harassment issue which is quite sensitive and some participants showed signs of reluctance to discuss it at the beginning of their interview. However, others agreed to talk about it but, were wary of their comments being recorded and the possibility of them being shared with others 'who may or may not take offence at them'. These summarized principal discriminatory issues among the various ethnic groups as described by participants are: 1) Recruitment (Drydakis & Vlassis, 2010) 2) Insensitive expression (Hitlan, *et al.*, 2006), 3) The wage gap (Schafgans, 1998) and 4) Gossip and slander (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001).

Recruitment

Until recently, there has been a cultural competition between Bumiputra (indigenous) and other ethnicity workers. This has been mediated by the competition between the public and private sectors. Each one of these sectors tend to be dominated by a particular ethnic group; the public sector is monopolised by the indigenous people of Malaysia, while the private sector is mostly comprised of the minority cultures. Minority groups claim that the Bumiputra group monopolizes the public sector, while Bumiputras claim that those minority groups control the lion's share of private business in the country. An example of this would be the hiring of people from a particular ethnic group while this group is also in the majority within the given organisation. Most participants agreed about this issue. Participant 11 stated that most of the multi-national companies in Malaysia prefer to hire the Chinese because Muslims' religious practices are too intense and restrict social activities. However, there are not many empirical studies to date that have looked at this issue. Therefore, the true extent to which this practice is popular in multi-ethnic Malaysia is unknown.

Insensitive expression

A few participant stated that they felt harassed and unhappy when management communicate with harsh words as a result of their wrongdoing. As we know that communication between an employer and employees is crucial to the effective functioning of any organisation, the lack of proper understanding between members of staff and the management has resulted in a number of established malpractices. Any discrepancies in the work relations between superiors and subordinates can lead to the company's low productivity, decreased motivation and morale of its employees (Johnson & Indvik, 2001).

Inevitably, the communication about sensitive issues such as verbal harassment is always problematic for both sides. Participant 1 confirmed that her employer always has a negative view about Bumiputra employees. She mentioned that her superiors quite often at work meetings downgraded and stigmatised the Bumiputra as a lazy ethnicity. She felt emotionally hurt by these negative remarks and she believed that there could be many more people who are equally affected. Alatas (1977) has cited in his book that, 'It has led to certain discriminatory practices in the employment of Malays-a number of employers have avoided Malays because they believe them to be lazy.

This idea derives its origin from the colonial image of the Malays' (p. 17).

The wage gap

Two of the participants believed that they were being subjected to wage discrimination. In addition, they mentioned that it is senseless to pay one employee less than another, based on personal characteristics, such as ethnicity. Participant 7 has offered another perspective on this matter as:

Participant 7 (harassment-wage gap)

"…..*As I mentioned firstly, Malaysian are very multi-racial. …they'll be a lot of .... indirect disagreement in the background…so this is taken out..in a…..a… implementation of work through everything which is human nature… so one thing is salary adjustment….salary differences…*"

Discrimination on the basis of wages is widespread around the world and Malaysia is no exception. Both the indigenous and the minority population complain that they suffer from discrimination in the labor market. However, through her research, Schafgans (1998) suggests that there is no robust evidence to conclude that the wage gap between Chinese and Malays is due to ethnic discrimination. The little empirical evidence that exists about this issue is contradictory and thus unreliable. We cannot draw a conclusion about the wage gap due to limited research on this issue in Malaysia.

Gossip and slander

Gossip can sometimes be seen as a means to increase social functioning by providing an informal atmosphere that facilitates the information flow (Stirling, 1956). Nevertheless, in most cases, gossip is a destructive practice that can create mistrust and suspicion among colleagues, reduce people's productivity and perpetuate nasty rumors (Kauppinen & Tuomola, 2008). In this case, a number of participants mention that when they were the subject of the rumours they felt reluctant to work with the individuals who they believed were participating in the gossip. As a result, participants agreed that the situation led to a breakdown of trust among colleagues and the demise of teamwork. Slander, on the other hand, is more intentional – it targets specific people and it aims to cause harm to them; and it can result in people resigning from their jobs. For instance, Participant 4 shared an experience that forced her to resign from her position:

Participant 4 (harassment-gossip and slander)

"*….I was just asking I think I have the right to ask and she was not happy with that….. So she…keeps the grudge on me…. telling bad things to my Boss. Boss came and wanted to see me… I have no idea what it is about but actually I found out those things was created by the lady Boss. I was very hard to defend myself. I better leave the job.*"

It can be said that gossip and slander are both forms of overt discrimination because their ultimate goal is to 'eliminate' people from their positions at work (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliott, 1999).

Seniority

An additional aspect which is not part of identity but voiced by participants is seniority and position. As far as age is concerned, the matter is linked to seniority in Malaysia. The majority of participants have voiced that young and newly recruited employees are more likely to be discriminated against. The more senior a person is, the more powerful position he/she will hold in the organisation.

CONCLUSION

This survey provided a number of Malaysian an opportunity to share their personal stories about workplace harassment. The ability of Malaysian employees to work in their accustomed way is obviously compromised when they experience harassment and bullying. These result have shown that various categories and form existed. Thus far put a new insight on the survey findings and expanded the understanding of workplace harassment among Malaysian workforce. Additional research is needed to fully comprehend the phenomenon and develop effective strategy to eliminate the behaviour.

Table 1. Form and category of workplace harassment experiences by the participants.

Workplace harassment	Gender	• Sexual • Position
	Ethnicity	• Recruitment • Insensitive expression • The wage gap • Gossip and slander
	Seniority	

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