

A STUDY ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY OF MALAYSIA

Siti Rapidah Omar Ali
Faculty of Business Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Terengganu
23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia
Tel: 609-8403983/ 6017-9572859 E-mail: sitirapidah@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Siti Hajar Wan Mohammad
Faculty of Business Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Terengganu
23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia
Tel: 609-8403815/6019-5734099 E-mail: sitih249@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Sabiroh Md Sabri
Faculty of Business Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Terengganu
23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia
Tel: 6012-2992725 E-mail: sabir707@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Fatanah Jislan
Faculty of Business Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Terengganu
23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia
Tel: 609-8403815/6016-3330349 E-mail: fatanah@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Nur Shafini Mohd Said
Faculty of Business Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Terengganu
21080 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia
Tel: 609-6216600/6019-9459047 E-mail: nurshafini@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Abstract

The problem of sexual harassment in workplaces is known as a serious issue and can be considered as an occupational hazard and a violation of human rights. Although most of the studies on sexual harassment have been conducted in the west, such behaviour has been acknowledged by many sectors in Malaysian many years back. Many researches reveal that hospitality industry particularly is more likely than other industries to have problems with sexual harassment due to the nature of the jobs in the hotel. Indeed, the hospitality industry may be possible to experience sexual harassment because of its characteristics, such as long and unusual working hours, the interaction of persons in the delivery of service and the need to satisfying guests'. This study is conducted to gain an understanding of the issue of sexual harassment in the hospitality industry in Malaysia. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to examine the types of sexual harassment experienced by employees in the hospitality industry, to determine the effect of sexual harassment to the victims and to identify the risk factors that contribute to the act. A modified self-administered questionnaires designed by the DEOC Task Force on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment, USA was used as the main data collection instrument in this study. A total of 260 questionnaires were distributed to male and female employees working in various hotels and resorts in Terengganu. The respondents were selected using quota sampling technique. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency and percentage.

Keywords: sexual harassment, hospitality industry, employees, Malaysia

1. Introduction

A phenomenon of sexual harassment in the workplace came to be recognized since 1970s and considered as global phenomenon that affecting the wellbeing of members of an organization. Sexual harassment has been identified as an ever-present barrier to career success and satisfaction for men and women (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). There has been a rising amount of research conducted on sexual harassment in Malaysia and the findings indicate that between 35 percent and 53 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment at work (Ismail & Lee 2005 and Ismail, Lee & Chen, 2007). ILO technical report (2000) indicated that the scale of sexual harassment in workplaces has also "increased considerably" during the last two decades.

According to the statistic from Royal Malaysian Police, there are 2023 cases being reported in 2006 and 1646 cases had been settled while the remaining are under investigation. Ismail and Lee (2005) revealed that the rates of occurrence of sexual harassment in Malaysia do not differ too much from the situation in the United States. In western country, sexual harassment perceived as a very costly matter to the organization both direct (i.e., legal costs) and indirect (i.e., low morale). In 2005 alone, organizations have a cost of over \$37 million in monetary benefits to sexual harassment victims beyond the cost of litigation (Equal Employment Opportunity). This cost does not include the indirect costs of lost productivity and negative attitudes towards the organization that victims of sexual harassment generally exhibit (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). Apart from that, the organizations tend to lose valuable employees with good job performance, and could experience from a negative public image should victims go public with their situation. Indeed, the issue has certainly become more prominent in the last decade. As the increasing number of cases reported, many countries have taken legislative action to recognize it as abusive behavior and at the same time to punish and prevent it. In fact, to date, besides Malaysia, many progresses have been made in a number of Asian countries to institutionalize ways of dealing with the problem. In 1995, the Philippines passed an Anti-Sexual Harassment Act, and its Civil Service Commission adopted guidelines to promote zero-tolerance for workplace sexual harassment. Thailand amended its Labour Code in 1998 to include penalties for sexual violations by superiors.

2. The Definitions of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of sexual nature (Aluede, 2000; Cohen, n.d). Sexual harassment at workplace can involve "sexual advances or requests for sexual favors whereby submission to such conduct is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of employment; or whereby such conduct has the effect of substantially creating an intimidating or hostile working environment" (Kompipote, 2002).

In Malaysia, the Human Resources Ministry has launched the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace in August, 1999. Besides it is implemented as a practical guideline for employers to establish an internal mechanism to handle problems of sexual harassment at the workplace, it also acts as a guideline to employees, trade unions and other relevant parties on the protection of the dignity of men and women at work. According to the Code, sexual harassment include the following behaviours:

Unspoken:

- gaping and staring at a person
- inappropriate facial expressions, including blowing kisses and winking
- inappropriate display of items and décor, including T-shirts with sexual message or pictures, calendars and other pictures

Spoken:

- calling a person by a pet name, e.g. "Honey", "Sweetheart", "Sayang"

- spreading gossip and making open comments about an employee's personal life
- inappropriate sounds and comments, e.g. kissing sounds, comments about an employee's body or dress
- inappropriate conversation, e.g. talking about an employee's sex life

Physical

- purposely touching any part of the body

According to the United States Supreme Court and the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission 1984, there are two types of sexual harassment are acknowledged:

1. **Quid Pro Quo** – a situation in which a supervisor offers a job promotion or raise in return for sexual favours, or threatens disciplinary action if the victim do not fulfill his advances. In this situation, the sexual behaviour does not have to be physical and it is illegal even if the 'offers' is merely understood and never stated outright. For example, a supervisor might give the best work assignments to employees who flirt with him.
2. **Hostile Environment** – where an employee engages in unwelcome sexual behaviour that creates hostile or abusive work atmosphere for any other employee. Such behavior includes the employee who repeatedly makes sexual jokes in front of a colleague even though he knows she does not like it is sexually harassing her by creating a hostile environment.

In more recent study, Sabitha (2008) defines sexual harassment as an unwelcome behavior or sexual nature which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating or humiliating and may be affect an employee's work performance, health, career or live hood. This definition applies to both gender and addressed the effects of sexual harassment on the victims. Sexual coercion is defined as 'sexual harassment that results in some direct consequence to the victim's employment', mainly within a superior-subordinate position whereas sexual annoyance is seen as 'sexually-related conduct that is offensive, hostile or intimidating to the recipient, but has no direct link to any job benefit, which may occur by an employee against a co-employee or a client to an employee. The other type of sexual harassment is known as hostile environment.

According to Matthews (2010), hostile environment is described as demeaning and unwelcome sexually related behavior that is offensive, hostile or intimidating to the victim. This annoying behavior creates offensive working environment that might affect the victim's ability to continue working but has no direct connection to any job benefits.

3. Sexual Harassment in Hospitality Industry

Hospitality industries can be considered as one of the biggest service industries. Work in the hospitality industry often involves an employee with a number of different people in the way of delivering service (Eller, 1990). Close relationships between employees and customers, as well as between employees working in close physical proximity were believed to be the contributor aspects or attributed to the sexual harassment in the hospitality area.

Employees in the hospitality industry are experiencing more sexual interaction in their workplaces than workers in society-at-large. This situation happens perhaps given certain of its characteristics, such as ambiguity of "hospitality service," the unusual hours and conditions of work as well as the interaction of persons in the delivery of service. Employees in this industry often work long, irregular hours with alternating peak and slack times which involve night, evening and even holiday shifts. In such working conditions, the line between appropriate and inappropriate familiarity may be crossed more easily than in an office setting (Eller, 1990).

4. Methodology

This study aims to examine the forms of sexual harassment experienced by employees in the hospitality industry, the effect of sexual harassment to the victims and the risk factors contribute to

the act. A sample of 260 questionnaires was distributed to male and female employees in various hotels and resorts in Terengganu. From the 260 questionnaires distributed, a total of 130 were completed and returned representing a response rate of 50%. The respondents were selected using quota sampling technique. The questionnaire consists of four different sections. Section A requested information on the background of respondents, Section B in the questionnaire identifies forms of sexual harassment respondent's experienced. Section C obtains data on the effects of sexual harassment to respondents and Section D establishes risk factors contributing to sexual harassment. Respondents were required to rate their agreement or disagreement with the statements using a scale of 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

5. Findings and Discussion

Among all of the respondents, 59% were female and 41% were males. More than 50% of the respondents were in the age group of 21-30 years, while 22.3% were in the range of 31-40 years of age. Only 11% of the respondents were in the age group of 41-50 years and 10% of them were below 20 years. The respondents' ethnicity was classified based on the main ethnicity found in Malaysia. Most of the respondents were Malay, followed by 16% Chinese. Only a small percentage of the respondents (2%) were Indian and the small portion of the respondents did not indicate their ethnicity. Pertaining to education level, more than half of the respondents (57%) have completed secondary school, 39% were university graduates, 4% primary school and the rest have no formal education.

As for working experience, 44% of the respondents have less than three years working experience, while another 27% have 4-9 and more than 10 years working experienced respectively. More than half of the respondents (59%) were single and another 36% married. Only 5% of them divorced and the rest widowed. Respondents were from various department and positions. 50% of the respondents have high level of awareness towards sexual harassment, while another 30% with medium awareness towards sexual harassment. Another 9.2% of respondents have low and very low level of awareness. More than half (52%) of respondents agreed that their organization has policy for sexual harassment. Another 26% of them revealed that no sexual harassment policy in their organization while the rest 22% of them did not sure whether such policy exist in their workplace. 53% of respondents were experienced sexual harassment while working with the hotel and another 47% never been harassed.

Analysis on Forms of Sexual Harassments Experienced

18 items in the questionnaire that describe form of sexual harassment was adopted from the DEOC Task Force on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment, USA. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine sexual harassment experienced by the respondents. Three different forms of sexual harassment experienced for instance offensive behavior; unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion were examined. Table 1 shows the result of the respondents' experienced on all the items.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on forms of sexual harassment experienced

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Overall Mean Scores
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	
A. Offensive Behavior						
1. I was repeatedly being told sexual stories or jokes that were offensive to me	23.1 (30)	29.2 (38)	19.2 (25)	21.5 (28)	6.9 (9)	2.60

2. I always shown gesture or body language of sexual nature which embarrassed or offended me	33.1 (43)	23.1 (30)	15.4 (20)	23.1 (30)	5.4 (7)	2.45
3. I was whistled, called, or hooted in a sexual way	29.2 (38)	33.8 (44)	22.3 (29)	10 (13)	4.6 (6)	2.27
4. I was stared, leered, or ogled in a way that made me feel uncomfortable	26.9 (35)	30 (39)	25.4 (33)	16.2 (21)	1.5 (2)	2.35
5. I have attempted into unwelcome discussion of sexual matters	33.1 (43)	31.5 (41)	20 (26)	12.3 (16)	3.1 (4)	2.21
6. I received offensive remarks about my appearance, body, or sexual activities	34.6 (45)	31.5 (41)	20 (26)	11.5 (15)	2.3 (3)	2.15
7. I have been shown crude and offensive sexual image or picture and remarks, either publicly (for example, in your workplace) or to you privately	31.5 (41)	29.2 (38)	20 (26)	0 (0)	19.2 (25)	2.27
8. I have been exposed to the harasser physically in a way that embarrassed or made me feel uncomfortable	32.3 (42)	28.5 (37)	19.2 (25)	19.2 (25)	8 (1)	2.28
B. Unwanted Sexual Attention						
9. I have been continuously asked for dates, drinks, dinner, and others even though I said "No"	27.7 (36)	33.8 (44)	15.4 (20)	21.5 (28)	1.5 (2)	2.35
10. I have been touched in a way that made me feel uncomfortable	30 (39)	31.5 (41)	18.5 (24)	16.9 (22)	3.1 (4)	2.32
11. I have received unwanted attempts to stroke, fondle, or kiss me	37.7 (49)	36.9 (48)	15.4 (20)	6.2 (8)	3.8 (5)	2.02
12. I received attempt to establish a romantic sexual relationship with me despite my efforts to discourage it	44.6 (58)	30.8 (40)	16.9 (22)	5.4 (7)	2.3 (3)	1.90
13. I was approached or cornered in a way that was unwelcome and discomfoting	36.2 (47)	37.7 (49)	16.9 (22)	6.9 (9)	2.3 (3)	2.02
C. Sexual Coercion						
14. I felt like I was being bribed with some sort of reward or special treatment to engage in sexual act	45.4 (59)	30 (39)	16.9 (22)	5.4 (7)	2.3 (3)	1.89
15. I feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative (for example, by mentioning an upcoming promotion)	44.6 (58)	29.2 (38)	19.2 (25)	4.6 (6)	2.3 (3)	1.91
16. I have been treated badly for refusing to have sex	52.3 (68)	21.5 (28)	17.7 (23)	4.6 (6)	3.1 (5)	1.99
17. I have been offered a speedy promotions or better treatment if I was sexually cooperative	46.9 (61)	23.8 (27)	23.8 (33)	5.4 (7)	2.3 (2)	1.94
18. I am afraid I would be treated	44.6	23.8	23.8	5.4	2.3	1.97

poorly if I didn't cooperate sexually	(58)	(31)	(31)	(7)	(3)	
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Offensive Behavior

Offensive Behaviors refers to behavior such as making offensive jokes, remarks, or gestures as well as being stared, ogled, leered or being whistled or hooted in a sexual way. Table 1 (part A) shows item 1-8 determined offensive behavior. Offensive behavior was cited as the most common kind of sexual harassment experienced by the respondents. Amongst the items found in the offensive behavior category, sexual stories or jokes that offend the listener were found frequent occurrence of sexual harassment. All eight items show average mean score between 2.15 – 2.60. These scores indicated that only average of the respondents received this kind of sexual harassment while working in the hotel.

Unwanted Sexual Attention

Unwanted Sexual Attention includes the attributes such as; attempts to establish a romantic sexual relationship despite efforts to discourage it, threats or bribes to a person in order to have sexual favors and making attempts to touch, stroke, fondle or kiss the victim. Table 1 (part B) shows five items determined unwanted sexual attention behavior. For this category, the harasser's determination to ask for dates, drinks, dinner and other even though they were refused by the victims of sexual harassment lead the items in the unwanted sexual attention category. It also can be concluded that all five items show only average and low mean score for the behavior. The mean scores between 1.90 and 2.35 implies that the respondents received this kind of harassment was low.

Sexual Coercion

Sexual Coercion, such as job benefits (or losses) contingent on sexual cooperation, was reported in lower proportions. Table 1 (part C) shows five items concerning sexual coercion behavior. The mean scores of sexual coercion category were between 1.89 – 1.99 reported the least common types of sexual harassment experienced by the respondents compared to the previous two categories. This section reports lowest percentage and mean score and the most often mention by the respondents was they had been treated badly for refusing to have sex.

Analysis on Effects of Sexual Harassment To Respondents

This study also attempts to discover the effects of sexual harassment to the victims. Effects of sexual harassment to respondents are divided into three categories which is employment, productivity and emotional. Table 2 shows the result of the study.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on effects of sexual harassment to respondents

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Overall Mean Scores
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	
A. Employment						
1. It caused me to avoid certain areas within the workplace	16.2 (21)	23.1 (30)	27.7 (36)	20.8 (27)	12.3 (16)	2.90
2. It threatened my employment opportunities	16.2 (21)	18.5 (24)	41.5 (54)	15.4 (20)	8.5 (11)	2.82
3. It created an offensive working environment	13.8 (18)	17.7 (23)	41.5 (54)	13.1 (17)	13.9 (18)	2.94
4. It created a hostile working environment	14.6 (19)	17.7 (23)	30.8 (40)	25.4 (33)	11.5 (15)	3.02
5. I feel that my performance rating was	19.2	16.9	46.2	15.4	2.3	2.65

unfairly lowered	(25)	(22)	(60)	(20)	(30)	
6. I have considered changing jobs/ department	15.4 (20)	21.5 (28)	43.1 (56)	18.5 (24)	1.5 (2)	2.69
B. Productivity						
7. It affected my productivity/job performance	13.1 (17)	16.2 (21)	40.8 (53)	22.3 (29)	7.7 (10)	2.95
8. I was always late for work	16.9 (22)	22.3 (29)	46.2 (60)	12.3 (16)	2.3 (3)	2.82
9. I always take time off work	14.6 (19)	26.2 (34)	46.2 (60)	11.5 (15)	1.5 (2)	2.59
10. I feel that my work less efficient than before the incident	11.5 (15)	23.1 (30)	48.5 (63)	13.1 (17)	3.8 (95)	2.75
11. I feel that it has changed my work pattern in a significant way	13.1 (17)	22.3 (29)	40 (52)	20.8 (27)	3.8 (5)	2.80
12. Working became unpleasant for me	11.5 (15)	16.2 (21)	49.2 (64)	17.7 (23)	5.4 (7)	2.89
C. Emotional						
13. I was embarrassed	12.3 (16)	20 (26)	49.2 (64)	16.9 (22)	1.5 (2)	2.90
14. I became upset	13.1 (17)	14.6 (19)	47.7 (62)	18.5 (24)	6.2 (8)	3.21
15. I became ill and suffered emotional and physical stress	11.5 (15)	20 (26)	34.6 (45)	25.4 (33)	8.5 (11)	2.75
16. I feel negative about my organization	11.5 (15)	21.5 (28)	40.8 (53)	21.5 (28)	4.6 (6)	2.84
17. I was stressed	11.6 (15)	20 (26)	46.2 (60)	22.3 (29)	0 (0)	3.01
18. It lowered my level of confidence	11.5 (15)	18.5 (24)	39.2 (51)	28.5 (37)	2.3 (3)	3.05
19. I was afraid	9.2 (12)	23.1 (30)	37.7 (49)	26.2 (34)	3.8 (5)	2.92

Employment

Table 2 (part A) shows six items related to effects of sexual harassment towards the respondents' employment. Average mean scores between 2.65 and 3.02 indicated that majority of the respondents neutral in their perception towards the effect of sexual harassment towards their employment. Among the six items, sexual harassment created hostile working was the most agreed by the respondents.

Productivity

The average mean score for productivity (2.59 – 2.95) in table 2 (part B) also indicated sexual harassment gives less impact to the respondents since most of the respondents neutral in their opinion. The highest mean score for this part was 2.95 where the respondents perceive sexual harassment behavior affected their productivity or job performance.

Emotional

Table 2 (part C) shows 7 items related to effect of sexual harassment towards the victims emotionally. Most similar to previous two parts, respondents' rate fairly towards the emotional effect with the mean score between 2.75 and 3.21. The highest mean score for this part was 3.21 where the respondents became upset with the incidence.

Analysis on Risk Factors Contributing to Sexual Harassment

Table 3: Descriptive statistics on risk factors contributing to sexual harassment

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Overall Mean Scores
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	
Working Environment						
1. Privacy workspace provides a greater opportunity for harassment (co-workers are less likely to witness the harassment)	17.7 (23)	10.8 (14)	18.5 (24)	42.3 (55)	10.8 (14)	3.18
2. Unprofessional working environment (e.g: alcohol consumption, disrespect among employees and employees involved in non-work activities) would contribute sexual harassment	7.7 (10)	11.5 (15)	18.5 (24)	49.2 (64)	13.1 (17)	3.48
3. Characteristics of the occupation itself can contribute to sexual harassment (e.g: working for long and irregular hours)	12.3 (16)	24.6 (32)	23.1 (30)	28.5 (37)	11.5 (15)	3.02
4. Organization with no proper complaint procedures and policies related to sexual harassment is more vulnerable to the occurrence	3.8 (5)	9.2 (12)	22.3 (29)	49.2 (64)	15.4 (20)	3.63
5. Unequal gender ratio where male dominate the workplace is expected to report more cases of sexual harassment	3.1 (4)	16.9 (22)	28.5 (37)	38.5 (50)	13.1 (17)	3.42
6. Position between men and women (e.g: women employees who hold lower positions with less power and authority are more likely to experience sexual harassment)	8.5 (11)	24.6 (32)	39.2 (51)	20.8 (27)	6.9 (9)	2.93
Human Factor						
7. Low moral values of the harasser (e.g: the harasser may not regard harassment as immoral) contribute the harassment	4.6 (6)	6.2 (8)	33.8 (44)	40.8 (53)	14.6 (19)	3.55
8. Victims who are physical attractiveness are more likely to involved in sexual harassment	2.3 (3)	4.6 (6)	25.4 (33)	56.2 (73)	11.5 (15)	3.70
9. Sexist attitude of the victims (e.g organizations are more likely to report higher levels of sexual harassment if sexist attitudes exist)	0.8 (1)	7.7 (10)	33.1 (43)	46.2 (60)	12.3 (16)	3.62
10. Women are viewed as sex objects and	7.7	12.3	20	48.5	11.5	3.44

regarded as inferior to men can create a climate more conducive to the domination of women through sexually harassing behavior	(10)	(16)	(26)	(63)	(15)	
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Table 3 shows the nine items related to risk factor contributing to sexual harassment. These factors then were categorized into two; factors related to working environment and human factor. Overall mean scores for both categories were fairly high with the mean score between 2.93 and 3.70. The respondents rated high for the statement that victims who are physical attractiveness are more likely to involve in sexual harassment while the least contributing factor to sexual harassment was different position and power between men and women are more likely to experience sexual harassment.

6. Conclusion

The objectives of this study were to gain understanding of the issue of sexual harassment in hospitality industry by addressing forms of sexual harassment experience by the respondents, the effect of sexual harassment to the victims and risk factor contributing to the incident. From the findings, the study revealed that 53% of respondents were experienced sexual harassment while another 47% never been harassed and majority of them were female. Thus, it can be concluded that the number of respondents' experienced sexual harassment in hotel industry in Malaysia particularly in Terengganu is still low. Offensive behavior category tends to occur more common than other category of harassment. Since only average number of the respondents declared to receive sexual harassment, thus the impact of the act toward respondents was also marginal.

However, most of the respondents agreed that victims who are physically attractiveness are more likely to involve in sexual harassment. The low incidents of sexual harassment disclosed from this study perhaps due to the culture of Asian people who were more traditional and male perceived the act as offensive and less tolerance towards sexual harassment. As supported by DeSouza and Hutz (2002) in their study, rates of reporting sexually harassing acts in many Asian nations was low as compared to the rest of the world. In one study of Hong Kong working women, researchers determined that reported rates of sexual harassment in student and secretary samples were significantly lower than comparable United States figures (Darius and Wai, 1999). Even in the hospitality industry, where sexual harassment is known to be a problem worldwide, Hong Kong reports a lower percentage of harassment cases than reported in many other locations (Wendy and John, 2006). Compared to the nature of South American culture, which generalized as highly tolerance and open to displays and sexuality, are more accepting and even approving of sexual advances.

7. Recommendation

Though the incident of sexual harassment in Malaysia was reported lower than other countries, the needs to other efforts from the top management of these hospitality industries like education and training programmes to the employees is essential. Training sessions should be conducted regularly in order to educate the managers and supervisors about sexual harassment and explain mechanism to deal with complaints. Proper and clear guidelines and policy of sexual harassment must be set and followed in companies. Beside employers, employees also need to be exposed with the training sessions which teach employees what sexual harassment and review their complaint procedure as well as encouraging employees to use it.

Apart from that, adopting a clear sexual harassment policy also important in the organizations. The best practices for employers to prevent and correct harassment is through adopting a formal, written anti-harassment policy which describe prohibited conduct, states the employers opposition to it, and outlines potential disciplinary actions if the conduct nevertheless occurs (Grossman, 2002). In this

case, the policy must be available to all employees and all complaints should be taken seriously by the employers.

It is also important to employers to monitor the workplace from time to time by get out among their employees periodically and talk to them about the work environment. It is equally important too for the management to ask employees for their input related to their work environment.

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