

Sexual harassment in the work place

By **Fatahyah Yahya**

SEXUAL harassment is a form of sexual discrimination that includes sexual threats, sexual bribery, sexual jokes or comments, and touching that interfere with a person doing her job (Welsh, 1999). It refers to any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature having the effect of verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological or physical harassment.

Also included is any unwelcome sexual advance or conduct on the job that creates an atmosphere of hostility that will make some employees uncomfortable, and could lead to the creation of an environment where sexual discrimination could develop. Given this broad definition, it is not surprising that sexual harassment comes in many forms. For example, a manager implies to a woman employee that she must sleep with him to keep a job. It could be emails from co-workers of a different gender that contain sexually explicit language and jokes.

Listed in order of severity, these levels are helpful in defining the different types of sexual harassment that women may experience (Paludi, DeFour, Attah, & Betts, 1999).

Level 1: Gender harassment. This refers to verbal remarks or non touching behaviour that is sexist in nature. Examples would include being told suggestive stories or being required to listen to rude, sexist remarks.

Level 2: Seductive behaviour. Included here are inappropriate sexual advances. The individual may attempt to discuss a woman's sex life or may express sexual interest in the woman.

Level 3: Sexual bribery. This refers to the request for sexual activity in return for some kind of reward. Often offered by a superior, the bribe may be a higher grade in a course, a raise in pay, or a promotion.

Level 4: Sexual coercion. This is the opposite of sexual bribery in that an individual is coerced into sexual activity by threat or punishment. For example, when a woman is told that if she does not engage in sexual activity, she will fail a course, lose a job, or be demoted, she is being coerced. All are potentially threatening to a woman's career.

Level 5: Sexual assault. Such behaviour includes forceful attempts to touch, grab, fondle, or kiss.

One of the steps employers can take to avoid sexual harassment is by monitoring the workplace. It can be done by talking to the employees about the work environment and asking for their input. Supervisors are particularly responsible for helping to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the areas they oversee.

Several seminars or talks regarding sexual harassment issues should be conducted. This will expose the employees to and brief them about the important aspects related to it so that they will get an insight into

what should be done if they feel they are the victims of a harasser.

Besides, the employer must provide different options that employees can take to file complaints regarding sexual harassment like calling a hotline, contacting the human resource officer, or anyone in the upper management for further action.

Moreover, all employees must be well-informed that it is their obligation to report sexual harassment that they either experience or witness and all complaints will be taken seriously and acted on immediately. Besides, it is recommended that a yearly sexual harassment survey among employees be conducted for there could be some victims who feel reluctant to come forward to make a report.

The organisation counsellor must be available to provide confidential counselling to any victim who has a problem or concern with respect to sexual harassment or assault. The only role of the counselling staff with respect to any party to a sexual harassment complaint will be to provide confidential counselling and emotional support. A counselling staff member is not required to report a client's sexual harassment problem to any party without the client's consent.

In the first place, the victims are recommended to ask the offender to stop by being very firm, straightforward and clear in their request and make it very obvious

that they find this person's actions offensive.

As soon as the harassment begins, they should document everything that takes place. Make sure to note the date and time of the offence, as well as what happened. Finding a support system from other co-workers, family and friends is recommended for the victims since this case has a negative psychological effect on them.

Sexual harassment is a serious event. The victim may be a woman or a man who does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct. It is also considered as a gender-neutral offence. Men can sexually harass women, and women can sexually harass men. However, statistics show that the overwhelming majority of sexual harassment claims and charges are brought by women who claim that they were sexually harassed by men.

People of the same sex can also sexually harass each other, as long as the harassment is of a heterosexual nature.

By ignoring the situation or assuming it will stop on its own, you are leaving the offender to approach others in your office. The best solution is to understand your rights and take action.

Fatahyah Yahya is a counselling lecturer with the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development (FSKPM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas).