Sexual harassment awareness training at workplace: Can it effect administrators' perception?

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Abstract

Sexual harassment at work is an unwelcome or uninvited behavior of sexual nature, which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating and affects an employee's work performance, health, career or livelihood. One major problem in dealing with sexual harassment in organizations is its perceptual nature. Men and women generally differ in what they perceive to be sexual harassment. This paper is based on an experimental study that was carried out in a public organization, to assess the effect of training on variables related to sexual harassment. Findings indicated that training has significant effects on the perception of sexual harassment, whereby both male and female have significant increase towards perception of sexual harassment. Results also indicated that respondent's awareness towards attitude towards women also increased after training. Finally the paper will outline some pertinent steps that can be taken to develop an effective training program to overcome sexual harassment at workplace.

Keyword: Perception, Sexual Harassment, Attitudes and Training, Public Administrators.

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Introduction

Sexual harassment at work is an unwelcome or uninvited behavior of sexual natures, which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating or humiliating and may affect an employee's work performance, health, career or livelihood. Occurrences of sexual harassment are not a new phenomenon in Malaysia, but only quite recently it has been recognized as unruly and demoralizing organizational problem. The issue regarding sexual harassment caught the public eye when the Ministry of Human Resources in Malaysia came up with a Guideline For Sexual Harassment in the Workplace 1999 (Kementerian Sumber Manusia, 1999). Since sexual harassment in Malaysia was only recognized in 1999, it is difficult to determine the pervasiveness accurately at workplace.

Occurrence of Sexual Harassment in Malaysia

Through past studies (Sabitha, 1999, 2005a, 2006), results have indicated that sexual harassment has taken place on a larger scale than is generally acknowledged, and that the consequences to the victims can be quite dramatic and severe (Sabihta, 1999, 2005b) such as consequences in terms of both psychological stress and loss of tangible job benefits. In the past such unwanted sexual comments and advances have been taken for granted in the workplace. It was regarded as so much a part of normal working life that few people, apart from the victim, are aware of its happening.

According to the guidelines by Ministry of Human Resources in Malaysia, sexual harassment is seen in accordance to the two main legal criteria, whereby the definition is quite similar to the one developed in the United States. The first looks at harassing behavior in purely contractual terms sometimes called quid pro quo harassment. It means in order to obtain a job, win promotion, or gain access to training opportunities or other benefits the granting of sexual favors becomes a contractual term, either explicitly on implicitly. Failure to comply may lead to non-employment, denial of training and promotional opportunities, demotion, poor work assignments, or dismissal.

The second is related to the creation of hostile working environment that is sexual annoyance where there might be no direct contractual dimensions involved. It is where there may be no clear contractual gain or penalty, but where a pattern of behavior based on sex develops and creates an uncomfortable and hostile work situation for the victim. Such behavior has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with a person's performance on the job or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment. Despite these guidelines, sexual harassment remains an occupational hazard for workers in an organization. This was evidenced whereby there were 32 cases were referred to Ministry of Women, Family and Community (Department of Women's Development, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2005). Other than the reported cases, there were cases reported in the papers, and brought to the Ministry of Human Resources and the police which are not reflected in the data. Hence the cases only reflect the tip of the iceberg of the real problem.

Men, Women and Sexual harassment

Riger (1991) stated that the variable that most consistently predicts variation in people's definition of sexual harassment is the sex of the rater. In fact there is considerable literature

shows that researchers have found a number of differences with the most consistent findings on sexual harassment being gender differences in perceptions of incidents (Booth-Butterfield, 1989; Tannen, 1990; Malovich & Stake, 1990).

However one major problem in dealing with sexual harassment in organizations is its perceptual nature (Popovich, Gehlauf, Jolton, Somers, & Godinho, 1992) because men and women generally differ in what they perceive to be sexual harassment (Dunwoody-Miller & Gutek, 1985; Reilly et al., 1992; Riger, 1991). Findings indicated that women have broader definitions of sexual harassment than males, have more negative attitudes, are less tolerant and consider teasing, looks, gestures, unnecessary physical contact and remarks to be sexual harassment (Mazer & Percival, 1989; McKinney, 1990, Sabitha, 2005a), and see it as a more serious problem (McKinney, 1990).

On the other hand men typically do not find the same behaviors to be offensive and label teasing, looks, gestures and comments as "normal" interactions between males and females (Johnson, Stockdale & Saal, 1991). Men label fewer behaviors at work as sexual harassment and they tend to find sexual overtures from women to be flattering, whereas women find similar approaches from men to be insulting (Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Gutek, 1985). Similarly Konrad and Gutek stated (1986) men were four times more likely to be flattered by sexual overtures and four times less likely to be insulted. According to Riger (1991) men generally do not perceive the behavior to be offensive and, therefore, they do not see it as a crime or problem. Hence an overall pattern that men and women tend to differ in what they perceive to be sexual harassment.

Attitude towards Women and Sexual Harassment

Malaysia is traditionally is still a patriarchal culture. According to past research, the patriarchal values and attitudes of both men and women pose the greatest challenge in resolution and prevention of sexual harassment. In fact Powell (1986) emphasized that the impact of gender role needs to be explored further, mainly because his research findings indicated that men high in masculinity perceived fewer behaviors as sexual harassment than did men low in masculinity,

According to Malovich and Stake (1990), men and women with traditional sex-role orientations are more willing to tolerate unwelcome sexual behavior and less inclined to label it harassment than persons with non traditional orientations or the negative impact of the. As found by Shortland and Goodstein (1983) subjects who had more egalitarian attitudes (Spence & Helmreich, 1973) were found to be less likely to see harassing situation as violent as those with less egalitarian views. Similarly research by Koss, Leonard, Beezly and Oros (1985) found that men who have adversarial attitudes towards women have been consistently more involved in sexually aggressive actions towards women than those with egalitarian attitudes.

Sexual Harassment Complaints

Most studies indicate that women are the majority of victims of sexual harassment (Gutek, 1985). It is an exception when men are sexually harassed (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1993,

Sabitha, 2004). One of the reasons was because men were less likely to report incidents when they face sexual harassment (Konrad & Gutek, 1986, Sabitha, 2003). According to Vaux (1993) the situation maybe those men are constrained by the `sex role' they are supposed to fit. As in prior studies (Sabitha, 2005a) the respondent indicated that they would be in more trouble, if they shared their sexual harassment problem with their colleagues, and worst still if they have to tell their family.

Wayne, Riordan, and Thomas (2001) found that individuals were less tolerant of women's harassment of men. This means man's experience towards sexual harassment should be given an equal emphasis as they too face harassment at workplace. Similarly, women also face various repercussions when they complain (Sabitha, 2003; 2005b), whereby they felt that nothing can be done, it will be trivialized, ridiculed or even transferred as form of reprisals. But again effort to promote them to complain them should be encouraged, because research has shown that relatively more women than men believed that they would report sexually harassing behaviors (Baker, Terpstra, & Larntz, 1990).

Sexual Harassment Training

In today's environment, organizations and their supervisors should look seriously into training as a way to curb sexual harassment at workplace.Training is important and efforts to overcome sexual harassment cannot be based on legal rights alone. The goal must be both to deal with sexual harassment incidents effectively and to prevent the occurrence of future incidents. According to one of the frequently quoted studies conducted by Beauvais (1986), the group became more sensitized to sexual harassment issues and sexual harassment behaviors following the workshop. In particular, male participants reported extensive changes in attitude, which illustrates a difference between the sexes in perception of sexual harassment.

Hence educational intervention represents a proactive approach towards the elimination of ignorance as a reason for unacceptable behavior. These interventions have the basic premise that developing proper understanding of the sexual harassment phenomenon, getting acquainted with organization policies and grievance procedures, and learning possible reactions to sexual harassment attempts, should reduce its extent (Paludi & Barickman, 1990).

As put forward by current theory and research, employee perceptions towards sexual harassment is related to organizational tolerance of sexual harassment (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow 1996), beliefs about leaders' stances on the problem (Pryor, Giedd, & Williams, 1995), or concerns about procedural justice (Rudman, Borgida, & Robertson, 1995) rather than the mere objective existence of formal rules and regulations. These factors routinely influence attitudes and behaviors on matters of sexual harassment, which is an issue requiring management attention (Sabitha, 2005a; 2007).

Objective of the study

The primary purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of a training intervention to affect changes in perceptions of both men and women concerning sexual harassment. Specifically they are to identify the following,

(a) Does training have effect on perception of sexual harassment?

(b) Is there a gender difference towards perceptions of sexual harassment before and after training?

(c) Is there an effect on perception of sexual harassment due to training intervention regarding awareness on attitudes towards women?

Method

This study used an experimental design consisting of an experimental and control group. Perception of sexual harassment was operationalized as the ability to perceive behaviors as acts of sexual harassment. Utara Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (USHPQ) (Sabitha, 1999) was used to measure the participants' level of perception towards sexual harassment. The questionnaire was a version of the Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (SEQ) (Ellis et al., 1991I Fitzgerald, et al., 1988) adjusted to suit the Malaysian participants. The questionnaire consists of verbal, non-verbal, visual and physical forms of sexual harassment behaviors.

A total of 126 participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental group. Each training session was begun by greeting the participants by an official from the organization and the researcher. The participants were reminded that their participation was on voluntary basis. The questionnaires were distributed during working hours that was conducted in a room provided by the organization.

In the first phase both the groups were requested to complete USHPQ. They were asked to perceive sexual harassment from the opposite sex at their present workplace. In the second phase the participants in the experimental group were instructed to view a training video on sexual harassment. The training video presented several vignettes that depicted different forms of sexual harassment and a lecture on sexual harassment and attitude towards women. Meanwhile control group received no treatment. After this phase both the groups were requested again to complete the questionnaire on perception of sexual harassment. A total of 95 respondents participated in the study voluntarily. The data collected was analyzed using General Linear Model (GLM) and content analysis.

Description of the Training Program

The training was designed for approximately two hours based on several principles that it is to be relatively brief yet intensive, so that it would be welcome by management (Enke & Sudderth, 1991). Further the information was based on recent information about the sexual harassment phenomena in Malaysia, as proposed by Thompson (1991) that information must be current. The training included various techniques such as live and video modeling, simulation games, role playing, and structured small-group discussions which found to be effective means in social skills acquisition as suggested by past findings

(Ballard & Glynn, 1986; Bandura, 1986; Crookall et al., 1988; Dowrick & Biggs, 1983; Maier, 1989; Taylor & Schneider, 1989).

Since, curbing sexual harassment at workplace cannot be based on new or reinforced legal rights alone, the training included information on changing attitudes with respect to the role of women at work and how they are treated and valued as workers. Other information imparted in training was the various definitions of sexual harassment and facts and stereotypes related to sexual harassment, describing victim friendly complaint procedures, coping techniques. As to not to ignore the fact that men also experience harassment, the video includes cases of men being harassed by women. Feedback from both genders added to the combined educational experiences as well.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the respondents

The population of the study consisted of 41.1% men and 58.9% women. Majority of them were Malay (90.5%), and only a minorities (Chinese: 2.1%: Indians: 5.3% and others: 2.1%). In terms of marital status, 64.2% of the respondents were married; 33.7% were single, and 2.1% were widows.

Effects of training on Gender and Perception of Sexual Harassment in Control and Experimental group

Findings of the study using as shown in Table 1, analysis using GLM repeated measures showed that there is a significant difference in the perception of sexual harassment after the respondents were exposed to training in the experimental group ($p < 0.005$). Hence this result implies that training has a positive impact on increasing individual's perception towards sexual harassment.

Table 1: Comparison of Sexual Harassment Perception between experimental and control group

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Effect		Value	F	Error df	Sig.
Time	Pillai's Trace	.802	315.456 (a)	78.000	.000
time * Group	Pillai's Trace	.751	235.135 (a)	78.000	.000

Design: Intercept+time * Group Within Subjects Design: time
Time is pre and post training
Group is control and experimental group

Effects of Training and Gender

Referring to Table 1, from the gender perspective, data obtained from GLM indicated that there is a significant increase in the perception of sexual harassment for both male ($p < 0.005$) and female ($p < 0.005$) respondents in the experimental group. In the control group, there was no significant increase in the perception of sexual harassment for neither the male ($p < 0.061$) nor the female respondents ($p < 0.0922$).

The GLM plots for the findings shown in the following Diagram 1 and 2, indicates that the experimental group for both men and women that have undergone training showed a significant improvement in the understanding towards sexual harassment. Further analysis using independent t-test, which is a stringent test for differences, showed that there is a significant difference between men and women before ($t(59) = -.9623$, $p < 0.05$) and after training ($t(58) = -7.929$, $p < 0.05$).

Diagram 1: GLM Score Plot for Men's Perception Sexual Harassment
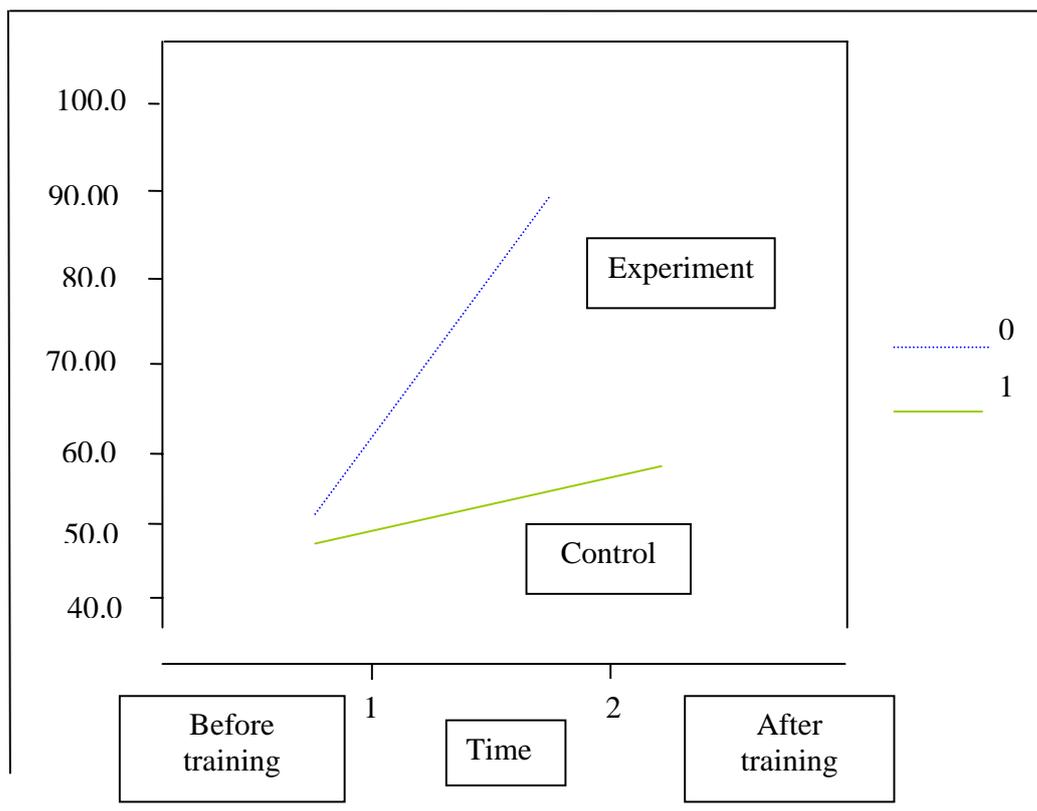
This can also be observed from the mean score for women (Diagram 2) is much higher than for men in the experimental group (Diagram 1). These findings implies that, although the perception of men and women increased significantly after training, but the perception of women is still significantly differ and higher compared to men's perception of sexual harassment.

Diagram 2: GLM Score Plot for Women Sexual Harassment Perception
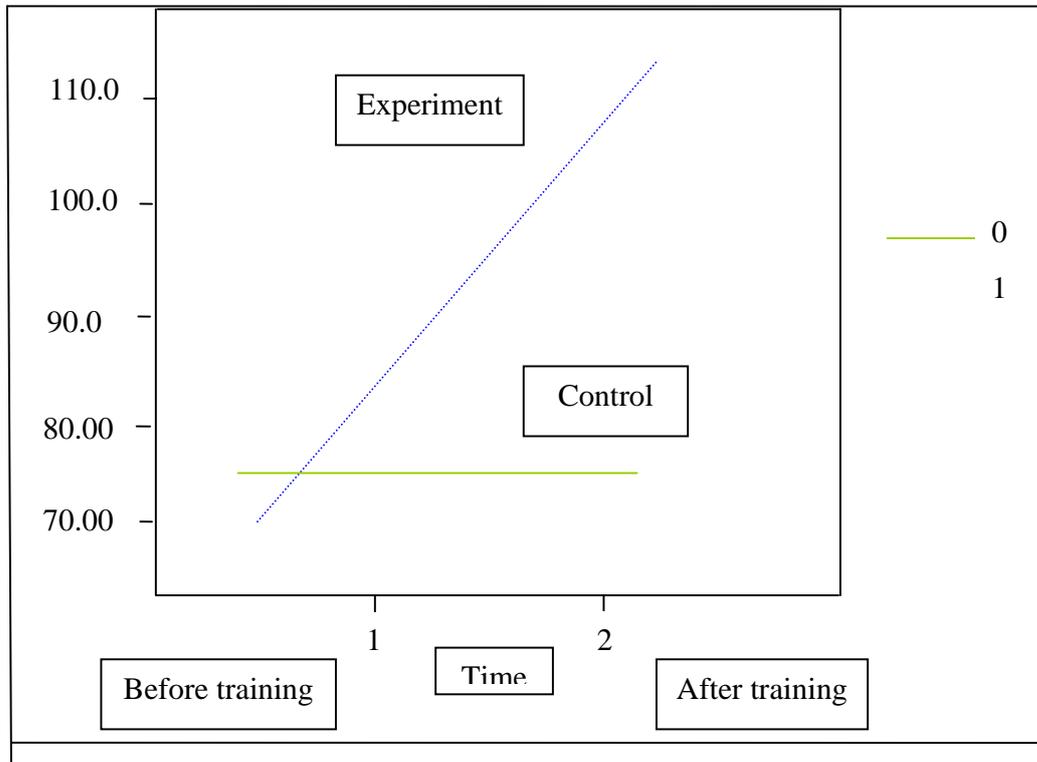
This gender difference may be that women generally see sexual harassment as a more serious problem than men. They consistently define more behaviors as harassing than do males (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Gutek, 1985; Reilly, Carpenter, Dull & Bartlett, 1982; Stockdale, 1991). Further, this may be related to communication as put forward by Tannen (1990). Tannen conducted a research on the communication patterns of men and women, found that males and females employ different methods to communicate. Often time's problems occur because males and females do not understand the messages being conveyed by the opposite sex. Tannen denoted that women need to learn to be more direct in articulating messages and more explicit in expressing to men what is unacceptable behavior.

Such behaviors carry over into adulthood and far too often males, in particular, do not realize and/or accept that being aggressive and manipulative to acquire sexual favors in an invasion of the recipient's privacy as well as a violation of his/her civil rights (Semonsky & Rosenfeld, 1994). Hence much of the research above suggests that many males are socialized to act in gender stereotypic manners, which effectively shape the perception, attitudes, and actions they have towards women and one another. In fact his study also supports my past studies (Sabitha, 1999, Sabitha, 2006) that men are less likely to perceive a behavior as disturbing compared to women.

Training, Attitudes towards Women and Perception of Sexual Harassment

Analysis on the written comments of the respondents indicated that there is an increase in the respondent's understanding towards the meaning of liberal attitude towards women after training (93.5 %) compared to before training (11.1 %). In fact respondents understanding on traditional attitude towards women also increased (98.8 %) compared to before training (35.5 %). Further, majority of the respondent agreed (95.2 %) that attitude towards women is related to incidences of sexual harassment at workplace in comparison to before respondents undergo training (49.2 %). The respondents also less likely to blame women for the occurrence of sexual harassment after training (50.0 %) compared to before training (38.1 %). These results are in accordance to past research whereby liberal attitudes women can reduce one to put blame on the women as the cause of the problem. (Glass, 1988; Sabitha, 2000; Sabitha, 2001; Sabitha & Khatijah, 2004; Sabitha, 2005).

Among the reasons for the change in attitude is the non-acceptance of feminist attitudes about sexual harassment is associated with the tendency of men to misperceive and distort women's friendly behavior as sexual advances (Stockdale, 1993). Most studies indicate that men with conservative attitudes towards women are less likely to classify aggressive actions toward women negatively and/or are likely to believe that the women are complicit in aggressive actions directed towards them. For example, Shotland and Goodstein (1983) found that subjects with traditional views towards women were more likely to see the victim in a rape scenario as wanting sex.

Meanwhile women with less liberal attitudes towards women also tend not to perceive sexual harassment behaviors as disturbing. According to Jensen and Gutek's (1982) victims of sexual harassment who maintained feminist attitudes were less likely to blame themselves for incidents of sexual harassment. This is in line with Tangri, Burt, and Johnson (1982) findings that this may be related to cultural sex status norms, and the feminist presumption of male dominance. Moreover society expects and rewards males for aggressive behaviors and females for passivity and acquiescence, and the workplace is just another sphere of this society (Gutek, 1985). Hence women with more traditional attitudes tend not to perceive sexual harassment reasoning that such behavior is normal for men towards women.

This was similar to the findings in Sabitha, 2006 whereby women blame other women as "bizarre" and "out of line" for complaining about sexual harassment. These women commented that they are not supposed to be sensitive and should in fact be grateful that women are allowed to work. On the overall the results from this experimental study showed that sexual harassment training can change the perception of sexual harassment at workplace by increasing their awareness on issues related to this behavior at workplace.

Managing Sexual Harassment at Workplace

Although absolute prevention of sexual harassment is an ideal, there are number of important aspects that management should emphasize as a starter in relation to training. This recommendation allows employees, regardless of gender to know how to pre-empt unwelcome behavior from anyone from inside or outside the organization, as well as how to react if such incidents occur. Based on this study, the following strategies can be followed:

Attitudinal Change and Management

In Malaysia, though there is a concern for sexual harassment incidences, the awareness of sexual harassment and the concern for policies is still low. From the year 1999 to 2007 only 67 workshops have been conducted to create awareness at workplace (Ministry of Human Resources, 2007), although the Ministry strongly encouraged such training at workplace. In order to sustain the effort to prevent sexual harassment and change attitudes, a continuing training program combining the components of theory, demonstration, proactive, and coaching would be effective. Studies of attitudes toward training indicate that strong training designs, combined with follow-up efforts and positive support from the organization leadership, can lay the basis for the most effective staff training and development programs.

Attitudinal change is important, as evidenced in the qualitative responses from past research (Sabitha, 2004). Since Malaysia is still basically a patriarchal culture, changing and reinforcing some critical cultural values and attitudes constitute the preliminary steps in sustaining a strong organizational culture with powerful behavioral norms preventing sexual harassment and identifying appropriate response as a continuing effort.

On the other hand, if management, which publicly endorses an organization's policy against sexual harassment, whiles practicing harassment gives the impression that harassment is allowed to those who can manipulate the system. This supports the findings by Gruber and Smith (1995) about women who worked in organizations with sexual harassment policies and procedures were four times more likely to report the harassment and less likely to ignore the harasser than women working in organizations with no such policies and procedures. Similarly in another study (Kremer and Marks, 1992) found that workplaces with sexual harassment policies acknowledged more cases of sexual harassment within their firms.

As Gruber (1990) suggested based on his evaluation of the existence of organizational policies regarding sexual harassment depended on the reports of workers. If management responds to sexual harassment complaints by ignoring or discouraging then, in effect, the behavior is condoned. Thus we can conclude that management can play a major role in managing sexual harassment at workplace by first reacting to sexual harassment and secondly providing role models for employees to emulate.

Training Approach

The reasons that men are more often harassers based on past studies have shown that many harassers do not believe they are sexually harassing others. Clearly this indicates a need for awareness training. In fact strings of studies as discussed before showed that men and women tend to view harassment differently. The sexual teasing that some men see as harmless fun may be considered harassment by many women. Sexual harassment training should be given to all employees. These workshops should train individuals to recognize sexual harassment when it occurs and evaluate the situation. They also should be taught to take steps to decrease the likelihood incidents will occur again.

Training sessions should also focus on men as well as women. A gender awareness workshop can help enlighten both sexes about how each views the behavior of the other. For example gender awareness training should focus on improving communications between men and

women employees. It also should aim to change attitudes as well as behavior. Through discussion and exercises, participants may recognize the ways in which even subtle forms of sexually related behavior can create a hostile work environment.

Further with regards to training and education, sexual harassment must be addressed not only in the legal system and in the workplace, but also at home and in the schools. Parents and teachers must teach children about sexual harassment, core values, and mutual respect. As put forth by past researchers (Howard, 1991; Livingston, 1982) a comprehensive approach whereby not only legal remedies and grievance procedures but also intervention for social organizational change is equally important.

Training and Complaint Procedures

Another aspect of training is on the processing sexual harassment complaints. Very simply, the policies themselves do not guarantee effective outcomes. Thus training on evaluating them on how well they deal with this aspect of their job should lead to uniformity in the treatment of complaints, should improve the response to all parties involved and should improve the quality of investigations. Such effort is important because they not only prevent sexual harassment, but also protect against costly litigation associated with sexual harassment claims. In short training administrators is probably the most important thing organizations can do to improve satisfaction with sexual harassment policy and procedure.

Employees will be more comfortable with sexual harassment policies if they are made aware of them and are trained on sexual harassment issues. Beyond this, satisfaction with the implementation of sexual harassment policies is almost completely dependent on how effectively supervisors react to initial complaints. As argued by Rowe and Lipsky (2001) more than half of employees and managers who are involved in a problem or conflict prefer private informal options to deal with the issue and that only approximately one tenth prefer distributive options based on rights and power (e.g., formal complaints).

Many women who experience sexual harassment chooses not to file formal complaints (Sabitha, 2005) and their common responses to sexual harassment include ignoring the behavior or telling a friend or family member (Cammaert, 1985). Hence training officials on all aspects of handling complaints can increase effective reactions. This is particularly important given the fact that organization culture and top management commitment to eradicating sexual harassment are critical to effective policy implementation as well as the creation of an environment where sexual harassment is clearly not tolerated. By responding promptly to complaints of offensive conduct, the cost of such measures will be much less than that of defending a lawsuit and paying damages if the employee wins. Further it gains the confidence and the trust of the most important asset of the organization that is their workers.

Conclusion

Prevention is the best tool for the elimination of sexual harassment. Thus a good training program will prepare workers to recognize sexual advances and developing strategies to deal with them. Hence training programs might best be utilized as a catalyst and intervention in removing harassment from the workplace. Finally it is not the sole responsibility of the

management but also the employee's responsibility to speak up and not allow them to be victimized. Meanwhile it is also the society's moral responsibility to involve in the awareness-raising sexual harassment programs. In sum, there should be concerted effort by governments, employers, employees and women's organizations to help to create zero tolerance towards sexual harassment at workplace.

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