

Understanding and Experiences of Sexual Harassment amongst University Students: A Case Study of Undergraduates in Universiti Sains Malaysia

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Abstract. It is evident that sexual harassment is prevalent in campuses worldwide. No comprehensive study has been conducted to assess the incidents of sexual harassment on campus in Malaysia. This paper is based on a case study of Universiti Sains Malaysia and assesses the understanding and experiences of sexual harassment amongst undergraduate students. The findings show that students have relatively high understanding about incidents of sexual harassment. The research suggests that prevalence of sexual harassment on campus is high and more female than male students are victims of sexual harassment. The study also shows that experiences of sexual harassment correlates with the understanding and awareness of sexual harassment.

Keywords: sexual harassment, students, understanding, perception, experience

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment as a phenomenon affecting the wellbeing of members of an organization came to be recognized in the 1970s. While it was mainly associated with situations in a traditional workplace, incidents constituting sexual harassment in structures that feature more mixed organisational relationships also came to be highlighted. One such structure is the educational institutions. Sexual harassment in a university setting worldwide is quite pervasive. In 2006, the American Association of University Women found that 62 percent of female and 61 percent of male college students had experienced being sexually harassed at their university [1]. In Japan, sexual harassment of students by teachers is so prevalent it has been given its own acronym – SHOC, for "Sexual Harassment on Campus". A research in Japan by the Women's Studies Education Network showed that about 15 percent of undergraduates, about 34 percent of graduate students, and about 36 percent of the teaching staff (both full-time and part-time) had experienced some forms of sexual harassment [2].

In 1986-1988 a group of researchers¹ in Universiti Sains Malaysia conducted a study on sexual harassment in the university campus by surveying knowledge and attitude of staff and students about sexual harassment. The study found that a substantial number of respondents believed that sexual harassment was partially attributable to the actions and responses of the victims. Since then, very few studies, mostly unpublished, on sexual harassment in Malaysian universities can be found, thus, it is difficult to gauge the problem and issues surrounding it in the Malaysian tertiary education institutions.

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The study on which this paper is based, was, thus, undertaken to investigate the incidences of sexual harassment in Malaysian universities by focusing on the case of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). For this paper, the relevant specific objectives of the study are:

- To assess the understanding and perception about sexual harassment amongst undergraduate students in USM
- To investigate the extent to which sexual harassment is experienced by undergraduates in USM
- To investigate factors moderating understanding of sexual harassments amongst USM students, particularly, whether experiences of sexual harassment contribute towards the degree of understanding of sexual harassment

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in three campuses of USM: the Main Campus (MC), Health Campus (HC) and Engineering Campus (EC). A total of 369 undergraduate students were randomly recruited as participants, comprising both male and female students having studied at the university for more than a year. A survey questionnaire was used as the main instrument, which assessed students' understanding/ perception about and gauged their experiences of sexual harassment. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire was tested in a pilot study. Questionnaires were administered by meeting students in groups in class locations, distributing the questionnaires for them to answer immediately and collecting the answers when they finished. The questionnaire contains a page explaining the research and requiring informed consents from the students before they proceeded. Data was analyzed quantitatively using the software SPSS 17.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographics of respondents

Table 1: Gender and Age of Respondents

			Age of Respondents (Yrs)			Total
			18-22	23-27	28-32	
Sex of respondent	Male	Count	84	51	2	137
		% with sex of respondent	61.3%	37.2%	1.5%	100.0%
		% of total	22.8%	13.8%	.5%	37.1%
	Female	Count	124	103	5	232
		% with sex of respondent	53.4%	44.4%	2.2%	100.0%
		% of total	33.6%	27.9%	1.4%	62.9%
Total	Count	208	154	7	369	
	% with sex of respondent	56.4%	41.7%	1.9%	100.0%	
	% of total	56.4%	41.7%	1.9%	100.0%	

As mentioned in the methodology section, respondents are chosen randomly from a determined sample size. From Table 1, about 63 percent of the respondents are female students. This reflects the gender distribution of students' population in Malaysia where in 2009, women form 60 percent of the enrolment of students at 20 public universities in Malaysia [3]. Respondents are chosen from amongst students who are in their second, year or above, of their studies. Students generally enter university at the age of 20. Most courses require students to graduate after three years, when they are 22 or 23 years old. Medical and dentistry students graduate only after six years of study (at around the age of 26 or 27 years old).

3.2. Understanding about sexual harassment

Respondents were asked 18-item questions on their understanding or perception about sexual harassment. Statements about situations of sexual harassment were given and students were asked to rate their agreement as to whether a statement consisted of a situation of sexual harassment. A scale of 1 to 5 was used, with 1 indicating lowest understanding or perception that an incident consists of sexual harassment and 5 indicating the extreme reverse. Based on the students' responses, a total score mean was calculated. Figure 1 is a histogram explaining the understanding or perception about sexual harassment using total scores. Figure 1 shows a negative skewness (scores clustered to the right at the high values) of total scores, at a value of -

0.701. This indicates that there is a high understanding of sexual harassment amongst this group of sample. From the scale of 18 items, the minimum total score is 18. The neutral score is 54 and the highest score is 90. The mean of the total score is 63.7, which is higher than the neutral score, thus indicating that the respondents generally have high understanding of incidents of sexual harassment and are able to identify such incidents. Furthermore, based on the calculation of the frequency of total scores, the percentage of respondents with scores more than 54 is 78 percent. This shows that an overwhelming number of respondents understand and are able to perceive situations of sexual harassment.

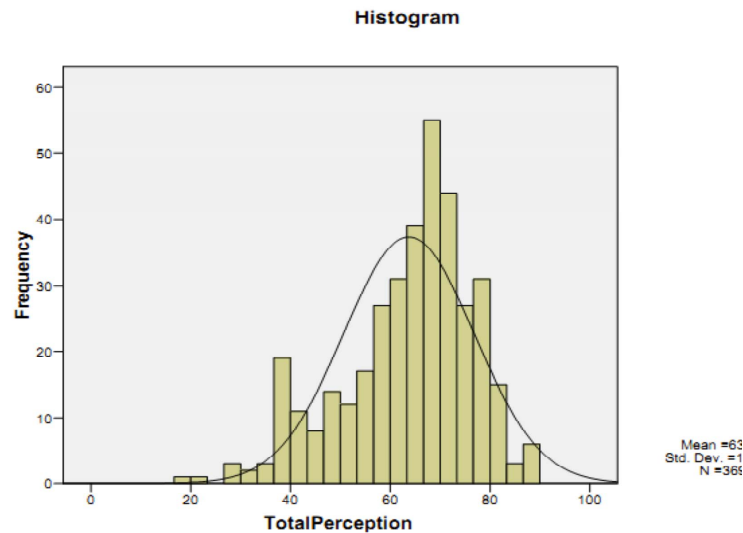


Figure 1: Histogram of total score for understanding or perception about sexual harassment.

Figure 2 depicts respondents' understanding of the incidents by gender (green line = female; blue line = male) and age. At first glance, it appears that female students understand sexual harassment incidents better than male students. However, a statistical analysis show there is no significant difference between the perception of male and female students. The difference is very small with eta squared value of 0.052 in the means which implies only 5.2 per cent of the variance in sexual harassment perception was elucidated by gender.

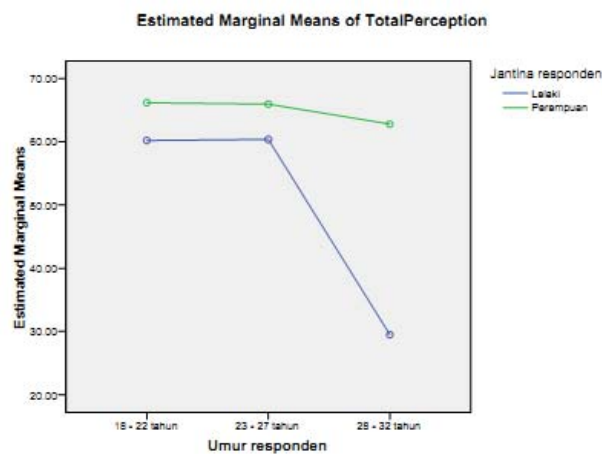


Figure 2: Respondents' understanding about sexual harassment by gender and age.

3.3. Experience of sexual harassment amongst students

This study also investigates students' experience of sexual harassment on campus by asking them to respond to questions about their encounter with specific situations of sexual harassment. Table 2 is a cross-tabulation of their experiences of sexual harassment with gender. Responses are coded into 0, indicating no experiences of sexual harassment and 1, indicating their experiences with sexual harassment of at least one time.

From Table 2, the percentage of respondents who had experienced sexual harassment on campus at least once is quite overwhelming, at 75.1 percent. Of all respondents who had experienced sexual harassment at least once, 104 (37.5 percent) are male and 173 (62.5 percent) are female. These findings, thus, indicate that female students are more likely than their male counterparts to experience sexual harassment on campus. This may be due to the higher percentage of the population of female students in university compared to male students. The results are also comparable to the findings of several studies outside Malaysia about incidents of sexual harassment on campus based on gender. As mentioned earlier, the American Association of University Women, for example, found that in 2006, 62 percent of female students in the United States reported having been sexually harassed at their universities [1]. In Australia, the National Union of Students found that 86 percent of female students have experienced sexual harassment [4]

It should be noted that the total number of incidents of sexual harassment that the respondents had reported to the survey as having happened to them is 1286. Of these incidents the respondents reported that in 980 (76.2 percent) cases, the perpetrators are only male.

Table 2: Undergraduates' experiences of sexual harassment on campus.

			Experience		Total
			0	1	
Sex of respondent	Male	Count	33	104	137
		% with sex of respondent	24.1%	75.9%	100.0%
	Female	Count	59	173	232
		% with sex of respondent	25.4%	74.6%	100.0%
Total		Count	92	277	369
		% with sex of respondent	24.9%	75.1%	100.0%

3.4. The relationship between experiences and understanding of sexual harassment

It has been shown that female students scored highly for both understanding and experience of sexual harassment. Can it be concluded that female students understand sexual harassment better because they experience it more than the male students? A two-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of gender and experience of sexual harassment on the degree of understanding of sexual harassment amongst respondents.

Males who have no previous sexual harassment experience have low understanding about sexual harassment behaviour. Females who have no previous sexual harassment experience are still able to perceive incidents of sexual harassment. Females who either have had sexual harassment experience or have had experienced sexual harassment at least once illustrate high level of understanding of sexual harassment behaviour in comparison to males.

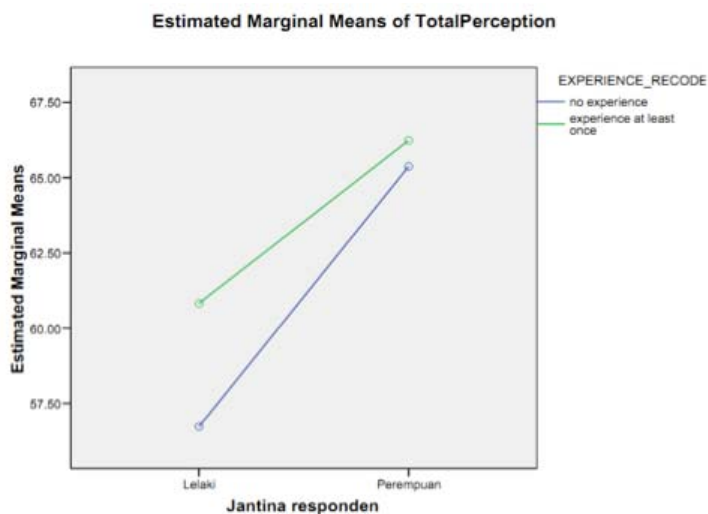


Figure 3: Gender, experience of sexual Harassment and understanding of sexual harassment

4. Conclusion

This study has attempted to highlight the issue of sexual harassment on campus in Malaysia by presenting a case study of the Universiti Sains Malaysia. The study has revealed that students generally understand sexual harassment behaviour. This is important for them to be able to identify situations of sexual harassment if it happens to them, and thus, to seek help. On the other hand, as the research discovers, high understanding may also be associated with a high degree of experience of sexual harassment. This is a cause for alarm for university administration and the university governance must take increased steps to prevent incidents sexual harassment. Furthermore the research also ascertains that female undergraduates continue to prevalently experience sexual harassment. This means that campus life may be a somewhat unsafe environment for women and measures must be taken to eliminate such risk. It should be noted, however, male students are now also reporting having experienced sexual harassment, even though at a much lower rate than female students. The low reporting amongst male students may be due to remaining cultural-based association of sexual harassment with female victims and male perpetrators. This may be detrimental to male students since their problems may not be acknowledged. In conclusion, more comprehensive studies need to be conducted to further assess the risk factor for women and men in sexual harassment incidents and to understand in a deeper manner, the lived experience of sexual harassment amongst both women and men.

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