

# Media Coverage of Sexual Harassment in Malaysia: A Content Analysis Case Study

Ponmalar N Alagappan<sup>1+</sup> and Sabitha Marican<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Malaya, Malaysia

**Abstract.** This study examines the issue of sexual harassment in a printed media i.e. New Straits Times (a local English daily) and determines the evaluative direction of the media on the issue of sexual harassment from the years 2003 to 2011. The theoretical framework by agenda setting serves as the basis for analyzing the data. The findings reveal that the positioning of the issues of sexual harassment is more towards the women activist, Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) and Ministry of Human Resource (MOHR) estimation on the gravity of the issue. The women activist group feels that the MOHR is not doing enough to protect the rights of the women, in particular the need for a Sexual Harassment Act. MEF has, however, expressed reservations about the proposed legislation. Where else, the MOHR acknowledges the problem, but still prefer to work through workplace channels rather than enact legislation.

**Keywords:** Sexual Harassment, Content Analysis, Women, New Straits Times, Malaysia.

## 1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is an unwelcome or uninvited behavior or sexual natures, which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating or humiliating and may affect an employee's work performance, health, career or livelihood (Sabitha, 2007). Recognising that sexual harassment is a widespread problem, the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR), Malaysia launched the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (Code of Practice) in August, 1999. The Code of Practice is the first and only official definitive document to address the problem of sexual harassment (Bernama, 8/12/2005, p1), however, MOHR does not have the legal force to pressurize all companies to adopt the Code of Practice (NSUNT, 9/11/2008, p27 & NST, 20/07/2007, p 29).

Sexual harassment is becoming an issue that many companies in Malaysia are experiencing regularly (The Star, 06/07/2006). Moreover, recently, in a local Malay newspaper it was highlighted that 10% of the women in Malaysia are suffering from sexual harassment in the form of threats; another 10% experienced the misconduct in the form verbal harassment, while the remaining 80% were subjected to non-verbal harassment such as hand signal, lips licking, blowing kisses, winking and ogling (Haryati, 2010).

The Malaysian government is presently working towards having 55 per cent of female participation in the country's labour force by 2015 (NST, 7/5/2011, p13), as more women are beginning to enter the workforce, it sets the stage for sexual harassment threat (Ismail & Lee, 2005); there is a strong need to protect these women in the workplace; they deserve a workplace free from sexual harassment and discrimination. The women's activist groups in Malaysia have been working to bring greater awareness to the issue of sexual harassment since the 1980s (NST 20/11/2003, p6), in particular the need for a Sexual Harassment Act.

## 2. Aim and Methodology

Many people tend to rely on the media especially the newspaper to find out on what is happening around them and to form public opinion on issues. In their many forms, mass media have the potential to educate, raise consciousness, and shape public attitudes (Bullock, Wyche & Williams, 2001). This study examines how a national English daily newspaper in Malaysia i.e. New Straits Times (NST) represents the issue of sexual harassment. NST represent a purposive sample, as it is the oldest newspaper in Malaysia and has a complete online database of archived news. For the purpose of this study, the time frame period used was

<sup>+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel. : +603-79675430; Fax: +603-79675427  
E-mail-address: ponmalar.a@um.edu.my.

from 1st January 2003 to 31st December 2011. This timeframe was used to analyse the development and positioning of the issue of sexual harassment over the 9 years after the launch of the Code of Practice. Using the key word “sexual harassment” each news article from the year 2003 to 2011 was scanned. The unit of analysis encompassed of news articles, features articles, editorials, letters to editors and opinion columns.

The media coverage was explored through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of content. The quantitative method was used to measure the duration and frequency of the news reported and qualitative analysis was used to interpret the themes presented by the news articles. The most important indicators of coverage content are, of course, themes or topics, since they reflect what the media staffs perceives as newsworthy about a group (Ma & Hildebrandt, 1993). Analysing the content of the news articles, we wanted to establish and document the basic features and characteristics of the way in which the newspaper represented the issue of sexual harassment.

In creating the themes, two basic decisions were made (Gardikiotis et.al., 2004) first the themes should be mutually exclusive, that is, they should be defined in a way that coding units with similar meaning are classified into one theme; second, a decision should be made on how narrow or broad the themes should be. To minimize any subjectivity; coders were required to make judgements only on the literal meaning of each item (Ma & Hildebrandt, 1993). The news articles were coded by one author and two postgraduate research assistants who coded the news articles independently.

There were some news articles that had more than two or three overlapping themes, in such a case the coders classified the news articles based on only one theme. The focus of news articles was taken into consideration when overlapping of themes occurred. After establishing an initial set of categories, the main themes were deduced from these categories. There was a 90% consistency in the emergence of the main theme among the three coders. The news articles were found to fall within 7 key categories, reflecting the major foci of the news coverage over the period of 9 years (Table 1).

The theoretical framework provided by the agenda setting serves as the basis for discussion against the background role of the media and in this case the print media. Agenda-setting theory examines the media's effect on the perceived importance of issues held by public. In other words it refers to the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind (Yuksel, 2003). Thus, from agenda setting arises the formation of public opinions and the distribution of pros and cons of a particular issue.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

News articles on the issue of sexual harassment did not warrant a significant space in the newspaper, there was a mere total of 99 articles from the years 2003 to 2011 (Table 1). This would mean that on an average there was approximately only 1 news article in a month. The sudden increase in the news articles in the year 2010 was due to MOHR proposed amendments to the Employment Act 1955 (EA) to give legal backing to the Code of Practice against sexual harassment and the acknowledgment of sexual harassment in areas outside the workplace.

Nevertheless, most of the news articles appeared in the main section of the newspaper i.e. in the prime news section, nation and opinion/column which usually warrant the first 17 pages of the newspaper followed by the various pull outs. This showed the importance given to the issues of sexual harassment in terms of accessibility and readership, a clear indication of the salient of the issue. But, the news articles that appeared in the main section were mainly statement made by the minister and deputy minister from the MOHR or the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry; and also the publicity given to the two high profile sexual harassment cases. Media Prima Berhad is currently the largest listed media conglomerate, owns four television networks and the biggest newspaper publishing company, The New Straits Times Press. The ruling party's Malay component, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has part ownerships in Media Prima Berhad (Zaharom Nain and Wang Lay Kim, 2004) as such it was not surprising that widespread coverage was given to the ministries.

Table 1: Total Number of news articles according to the category and year

Category	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
Cause and effects of sexual harassment	1	1		1		2		1		6
Need for sexual harassment Act	1		1	2	5	2	3	3	2	19
Sensationalized sexual harassment case	13		1			6				20
Coping with sexual harassment	1		5	3	2	1	2	1		15
Employment Act 1955		3	1		2	4	1	6	1	18
Victims voice		2		1	1		1	1		6
Sexual harassment outside the workplace		1	3					11		15
TOTAL	16	7	11	7	10	15	7	23	3	99

The content analysis indicated that the centre of the media attention was on the two high profiled sexual harassment cases; one involving an official from the Malaysian Amateur Athletic Union (MAAU) who had alleged sexually harassed a women liaison officer at a recent international athletics meet (NST, 17/09/2008, p62). The news articles carried out the inquiry into the case by MAAU and the outcome of the case, only one news stories had highlighted the dissatisfaction of the outcome as it was just a mere international ban for the official involved (NST, 19/09/2008, p62) however, there were no follow up stories that deliberated the outcome of inquiry, such news appears not to have drawn the attention of the newspaper.

The second high profile case involved senior politician alleged interference in a sexual harassment case involving a high ranking expatriate of a pharmaceutical company based in Penang. The new articles basically carried the investigation done by the State Anti-corruption Agency on the issue and the findings of the investigation which in total were 13 news stories. According to Ban & Adams (1997) this is the kind of coverage that is usually promoted by the newspaper as sensational or dramatic story-telling that is newsworthy.

The next equally attention-grabbing theme was the crucial need for a Sexual Harassment Act. These were mainly letters to the editor from the various women activist groups who have been fighting for an Act to amend the Penal Code to give legal cognizance to sexual harassment and impose a legal duty and liability on employers to ensure that sexual harassment cases are dealt with properly (NST, 21/07/2010, p8). The women activist groups felt that despite all the endeavors to recognize sexual harassment as a serious issue, yet politicians, MOHR and the public fail to comprehend the gravity of sexual harassment (NST, 9/11/2009, p18), sexual harassment is frequently downplayed and treated lightly, where perpetrators are regarded as one of the lads and victims labeled as troublemakers (NST, 5/12/ 2003, p9). Unlike rape and domestic violence, sexual harassment has only recently been articulated and recognized as a social problem.

The news articles had highlighted the fact that only a few companies (about 1%) had incorporated the Code of Practice into their workplace policies (NST, 21/11/2005, p18) and it was this lukewarm response that led the women activist to press for separate Sexual Harassment Act in 2001 (NST, 21/11/2005, p18). Without a legal definition of sexual harassment, no one will know the full extent of the problem (NST, 29/3/2009), the Act would create awareness of all workers, regardless of whether they are in the public or private sector. The newspaper had done two 3 pages feature article in 2007 and 2009 that had emphasized that fact that many women were reluctant to complain as there is no clear anti-sexual harassment policy or legal redress mechanisms in companies in Malaysia (NST, 9/3/2009, p14).

The next theme was Employment Act 1955 (EA) which were basically statements made by the minister and deputy minister of MOHR and Women, Family and Community Development Ministry on the suggested amendments to the EA. Sexual harassment would become an offence punishable by law when it is incorporated into the EA (NSUNT, 09/11/2008, p27). On the other hand, news stories also highlighted the limited exceptions in the EA by women activist groups i.e. it only applies to employees earning below RM 1,500 and only covers strict employer-employee relationships and only applies to the private sector in Peninsular Malaysia and the amendment only punishes the employers and not the sexual offenders (i.e. the individual employees or harassers), who will be dealt with separately under the Penal Code (NSUNT, 09/11/2008, p29). Whereas in, reality today's workplace, includes workers such as contract workers, consultants and trainees who may not be protected under the act (NST, 15/9/2008, p24).

It was also noted that the news articles had indicated that MOHR had recognized the problem and need for remedial action, but prefers to work through workplace channels rather than enact legislation (NST, 21/11/2005, p18; NST, 20/07/2010, p19), unfortunately, when the Employment Act (Amendment) Bill 2010, was tabled for second reading, it was withdrawn (NST, 18/12/2010, p.16) since then, there has not been any conclusive report on the proposed Employment Act by the newspaper, except for one news from the ministry of Women, Family and Community Development that the new amendments will be tabled again.

The next theme was coping with sexual harassment issues; which mainly featured informative information or explanation from women activist groups and MOHR on the various possible avenues of complaints despite the absent of an Act, whereby the victim can lodge a police report or complain to the Labour Department, secondly, on how to recognise a sexual harassment act and finally what are the preventive measure that can be taken by women to protect themselves. These news articles helped to create an awareness among all parties concern i.e. the police and employers who are handling the charges of sexual harassment to be professional as the issue dealt with is sensitive in nature ( NSUNT, 11/09/2005, p4). The newspaper had run three main feature articles addressing sexual harassment as general issue, presenting causes for its occurrences, coping and recommendations for solving the problems.

The new stories also featured the disconcert of the women activist groups by the view of then Deputy Human Resources Minister that sexual harassment in the workplace was not serious, which only reflected the lack of understanding of the complexities surrounding sexual harassment which amount to the flippant dismissal which should be the key concern of the MOHR (NST, 20/7/2007, p29). It does not help when even the deputy minister human resource and parliamentarians members treats it lightly, what more the general public (NST, 12/8/2007, p18).

Then again, the news articles also focused on the Malaysian Employers Federation (hereafter MEF) opinion that sexual harassment cases in the workplaces are generally under control as companies have their own procedures for such cases (NST, 19/08/2004, p2). By doing this, the media in fact steers the readers to understand the importance of news issues in different ways.

The subsequent theme was sexual harassment outside the workplace i.e. as an act of community violence. There were quite number of news articles especially in the year 2010 that highlighted the need educate teenagers especially students on how to recognise what is sexual harassment, followed by the issue of protection for women from sexual harassment when they travel on public transport especially during peak hours, condemning sexual harassment of women in public transport.

As a positive step, the government had introduced a "Ladies Coach" in commuter trains to help curb cases of sexual harassment (NST, 5/5/2010, p19). The newspaper also carried stories on the member of the parliament discussion on the issue of in-flight sexual harassment and it being attributed to the uniforms wore by the air-stewardesses (NST, 15/4/2005, p12). In this way, the news articles had communicated a larger depiction of what is sexual harassment.

The next two themes of the cause and adverse effects of sexual harassment and victim's voice is of significant importance but was not portrayed significantly by the newspaper. News stories on the adverse effects of sexual harassment portrayed the anguish faced by the victims and their families. The focus of the news stories were on the number of women an over-whelming majority have been sexually harassed and the impact of the harassment on the emotion and physical health of the victim. The newspaper had also lay

emphasis on negative impact of sexual harassment on creating a hostile work environment, reducing productivity and the moral of the organization. But, such a news story appears not to have drawn much attention of the newspaper.

What is of significant here is that the voice of the victim's is not heard through the news articles. The news articles did not communicate to readers the plight or negative experience of the victim, the six articles were mainly letters to the editor, drawing the attention to the need for a Sexual Harassment Act in order to protect victim's of sexual harassment such as themselves. If the media had chosen to emphasize by frequently mentioned these issues, it would have perhaps increased the salience of these issues among the reading public thus gaining the public sympathy and much needed support for a Sexual Harassment Act.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Readers or viewers may be limited in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of the stories they read or the images they view without direct personal experience or specific background knowledge of an issue (Bullock, Wyche & Williams, 2001). The selection of news articles that are featured and highlighted tells the readers the gravity of the issue of sexual harassment and in this way it sets/fixes the agenda on the issue of sexual harassment. Generally, news articles on sexual harassment had mainly featured the view of MOHR and the women activist on the proposed amendments to the EA and need to for a sexual harassment Act. It is without doubt, that the issue of sexual harassment has many vital and basic issues that needs sorting out, the news stories had indeed highlighted some of these issues i.e. underreporting of sexual harassment which needs immediate action and it mirrors the problems faced by the victim.

The media had steered the readers to understand the importance of news issues in different ways. The newspaper had addressed the issue of sexual harassment as a general issue in the society presenting the issue in a neutral way by highlighting the different views of the parties involved, allowing its' readers to decide on the importance of the issue and the need for action, if any.

#### **5. References**

- [1] Sabitha, M. Sexual Harassment Training at Workplace: A Gender Perspective. In Rosnah Ismail et.al. (eds) *Women at Work: Perspective on Workplace and Family*, Sabah: Penerbit UMS. 2007, pp 135-151.
- [2] Hariyati Ariffin (2010, September 9) Wanita derita dalam diam. *Berita Harian*, retrieved on the 10/07/2012 [http://www.bharian.com.my/bharian/articles/Wanitamenderitadalamdiam/Article/index\\_html](http://www.bharian.com.my/bharian/articles/Wanitamenderitadalamdiam/Article/index_html).
- [3] Ismail, M.N. & Lee, K.C. An Empirical Investigation of Sexual Harassment Incidences in the Malaysian Workplace. *The Journal of American Academy of Business*, 2005, 7: 202-207.
- [4] Bullock, E.H., Wyche, F.K. & Williams, R.W. Media Images of the Poor. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2001, 57(2): 229-246.
- [5] Ma, Jianming & Hildebrandt, Kai. Canadian Press Coverage of the Ethnic Chinese Community: A Content Analysis of the Toronto Star and the Vancouver Sun, 1970-1990. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 1993, 18(4): open journal system.
- [6] Gardikiotis, A., Martin, R., & Hewstone, M. The representation of majorities and minorities in the British press: A content analytic approach. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 2004, 34: 637-646.
- [7] Yuksel, Erkan. A second level Agenda-Setting study in Turkish parliamentary elections. (Online, accessed 27th January 2007) <http://cim.anadolu.edu.tr/pdf/2003/22.pdf> (2003).
- [8] Zaharom Nain and Wang Lay Kim. Ownership, Control and The Malaysian Media in Who Owns The Media. Pradip N.Thomas and Zaharom Nain (eds) (2004) Southbound: Penang.
- [9] Ban,Hyun & Adams,R.C. L.A.Times coverage of Korean Americans before, after 1992 riots. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 1997, 18(3/4): 64-78.