

Gender Harassment towards Undergraduate Students in Private Higher Learning Institutions in Klang Valley

AMBIKAI S THURAI SINGAM^a

MANIMEKALAI JAMBULINGAM^b

MUHD IQBAL MAK MUR^c

aTaylor's University

bTaylor's University

cTaylor's University

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyse the level of awareness and perception of gender harassment among the under graduate students in the private higher learning institutions in Klang Valley. A primary research was conducted to collect data on the beliefs and perceptions of gender harassment at the private higher learning institutions. This study aims to explore how these students perceive gender harassment, identify the consequences of gender harassment and also analyse whether the institution is aware and sensitive towards such conduct and the possible action that could being taken.

Keywords: harassment, gender, higher private learning institutions

** Corresponding Author e-mail: ambikai.sthuraisingam@taylors.edu.my
Any remaining errors or omissions rest solely with the author(s) of this paper.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Gender harassment, a sub-division of sexism, continues to be problematic as it exhibits sexist beliefs in a more socially acceptable manner that is difficult to identify. What separates gender harassment from other forms of sexism is the motivation behind the sexist acts. Gender harassment may be used to cue women that they are inadequate, out of place and unable to perform at the level of men. The associated experience of stereotype threat could set off a cascade of negative outcomes in victims' unwanted sexual attention and coercion leads to bad outcomes.

Gender harassment in an academic student population has been minimally researched. To date, it has only been studied in this population as a sub-category of sexual harassment. As a result, while frequencies of gender harassment in student populations have been documented, the specific outcomes that gender harassment produces have not been studied apart from the other sub-categories within sexual harassment in this population (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Huerta et al., 2006). Acts of sexism, such as gender harassment, are not always hostile in nature but may be benevolently motivated (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Ambivalent sexism theory recognizes that sexism is neither purely motivated by hostile nor benevolent feelings but is rather a mix of both. As parts of ambivalent sexism, both hostile and benevolent sexism function to enforce and justify patriarchy and traditional gender roles. Although studies have shown that religiosity is strongly correlated with gender inequitable attitudes (Seguino 2011), little research exists on gender harassment in academia. While a handful of studies have documented gender based discrimination among faculty members at Christian institutions (Christerson, Hall, & Cunningham, in press; Garlett, 1997; Hall, in press; Hall, Christerson, & Cunningham, 2010; Hall, Cunningham, & Christerson, 2008; Ingersoll, 2003; Kim, Anderson, Hall, & Willingham, 2010; Sequeira, Trzyna, Abbott, & McHenry, 1995; Walker, 2001) no research was identified regarding the beliefs and perceptions

towards gender harassment in a private university student population such as the one used for this study.

Henceforth, the limitations towards this study in academia has been a drive for this study to determine the perception of students towards gender harassment, the consequences of such conduct and action that can be taken by the university.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The manner students experience their campus environment influences both learning and developmental outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Negative campus climates, those in which students experience harassment and/or discrimination, hinder educational attainment and positive outcomes. Conversely, students who experience a campus as supportive are more likely to experience positive learning outcomes (Milem, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006, in press; Umbach & Kuh, 2006). Recent research indicates harassment based on social group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) remains a problem on college campuses (Rankin & Reason, 2005), likely negatively affecting the outcomes of a college education. Research also indicates that students experience campus climates differently based upon social group membership (Chang, 2003; Miller, Anderson, Cannon, Perez, & Moore, 1998). Lim and Cortina (2005) elaborated on the relationships among gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. They explained that “unwanted sexual attention, as the name suggests, represents unwelcomed, unreciprocated behaviours aimed at establishing some form of sexual relationship. One could argue that sexual coercion is a specific, severe, rare form of unwanted sexual attention, involving similar sexual advances coupled with bribery or threats to force acquiescence” (p. 484). In stark

contrast, gender harassment communicates hostility that is devoid of sexual interest. Gender harassment can include sexually crude terminology or displays (for instance, calling a colleague a “cunt” or telling a sexually graphic joke about her), but these behaviours differ from unwanted sexual attention in that they aim to insult and reject women, not pull them into a sexual relationship. In colloquial terms, the difference between unwanted sexual attention/coercion versus gender harassment is analogous to the difference between a “come on” versus a “put down” (Fitzgerald, 1995). Obviously, the perception of a campus climate plays a large role in students' educational experiences and outcomes. The importance of the role of students' perceptions of educational environment has been well established. Empirically supported student development and environmental theories indicate that students from different social groups likely perceive campus environments differently (Chang, 2003; Evans et al., 1998; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Therefore, our conviction of campus ethos should incorporate differences based on social identity group membership.

Gender harassment is not a method by which one attempts to gain sexual cooperation, but rather a behavior that conveys sexist attitudes about a gender (Lim & Cortina, 2005). Swim, Hyers, Cohen, and Ferguson (2001) further categorize gender harassment, stating that it can consist of sexual objectification, gender role prejudice and stereotyping, Acts of sexism, such as gender harassment, are not always hostile in nature but may be benevolently motivated (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Ambivalent sexism theory recognizes that sexism is neither purely motivated by hostile nor benevolent feelings but is rather a mix of both. As parts of ambivalent sexism, both hostile and benevolent sexism function to enforce and justify patriarchy and traditional gender roles, demeaning and derogatory comments.

The faculty should be trained to recognize acts of gender harassment so that they can both monitor their own words and behaviors and discourage gender harassment in the student body. Likewise, faculty members might instigate small processing groups, role playing, and experiential activities both in and outside of classes to help students become more aware of the harmful effects of sexism on their campuses. Psychology classes, which often focus on interpersonal functioning, might find integration of these activities both applicable and augmentative to the information already being presented in their lectures (Eliason, Hall and Anderson, 2012).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative method and about 100 undergraduate students participated to investigate the level of awareness on gender harassment among under graduate students in private higher learning institutions in Klang Valley. A primary research was conducted to collect data by distributing questionnaires on the perceptions of gender harassment at the private higher learning institutions. The respondents were distributed with questionnaires comprising three sections namely questions relating to awareness of gender harassment, questions relating to occurrence of gender harassment and questions on action to be taken by the institution on the occurrence of gender harassment. It also aims to analyse and explore the level of awareness and perception of gender harassment among these undergraduate students. This study aims to explore how these students perceive gender harassment and also analyse whether the institution is aware and sensitive towards such conduct and the actions that should be taken against such wrongdoers.

4 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Among the 100 respondents, 60% were male and 40% were females who were aged between 17 to 20 years. 55% of the respondents are realized that their institutions have gender inclusive culture and 45% of them stated that their institutions do not have gender inclusive culture. The first section of the questionnaire was asked on the awareness towards gender harassment. Figure 1 shows that 68.3% respondents are sensitive towards gender harassment and approximately 83% – 85% respondents agree that they lack of awareness and education on gender harassment and need more informal education on gender harassment. Further, 93.3% agree that they need formal education whereas about 87% perceive that exposure of adolescents to poor values and unethical behaviors may make them to develop disrespect towards the opposite gender.

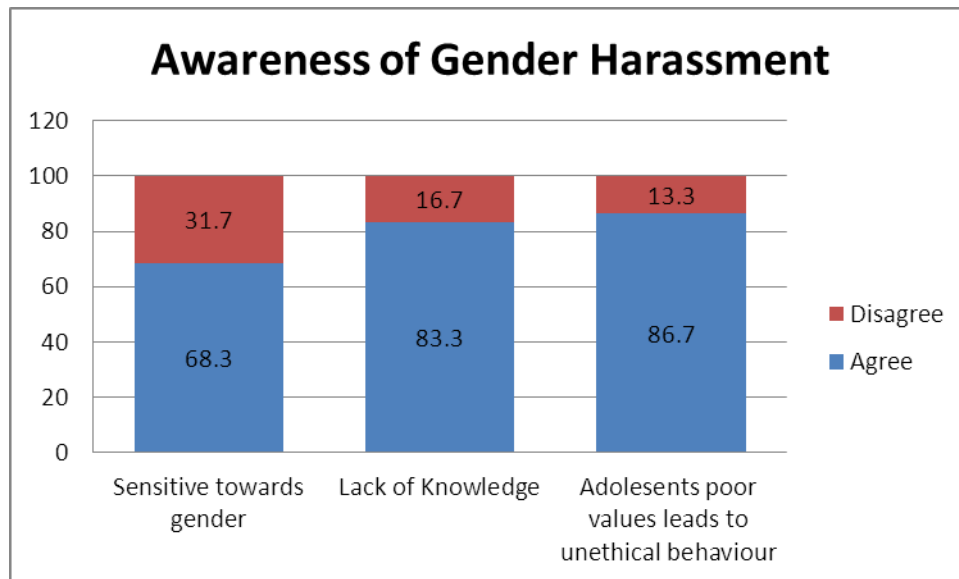


Figure 1 : Awareness Towards Gender Harassment

The second part of the questionnaire was asked on the respondents' belief with regards to occurrence of gender harassment. Figure 2 below shows that 85% of the respondents belief that occurrence of gender harassment towards them may lead to negative effects on their development. 86.7% of the

respondents' belief that adolescents' poor values develop disrespect towards the opposite gender. 83.3% of the respondents believe that gender harassment leads to stress and poor management of emotions.

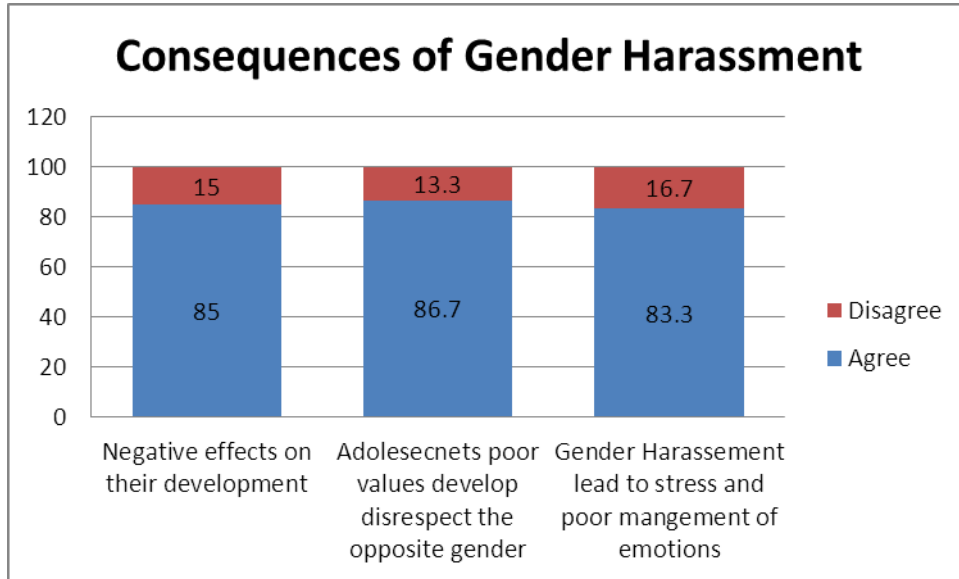
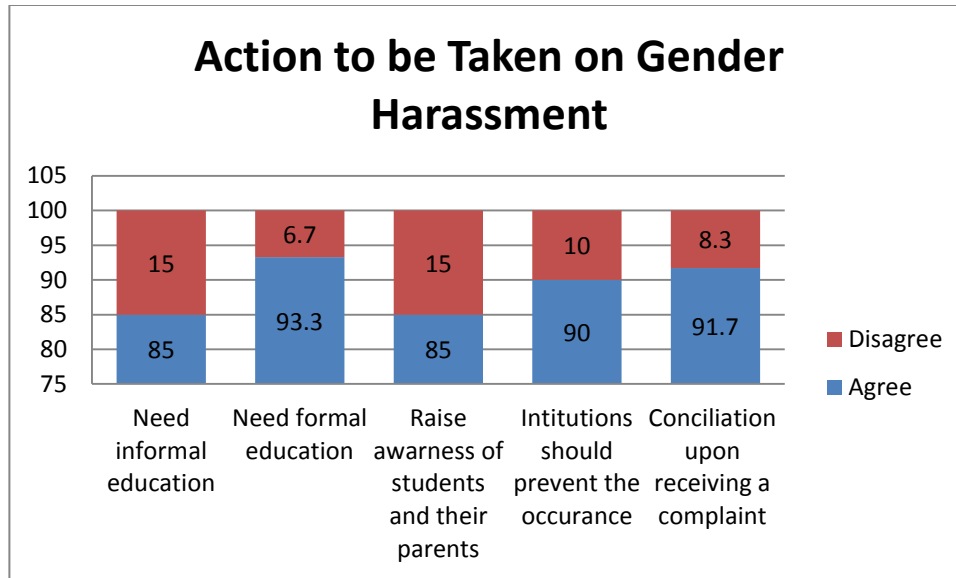


Figure 2: Perception Relating to Belief

The results in Figure 3 show that approximately 85% of the respondents perceive that the institution should raise the awareness of students and their parents on gender harassment. They perceive that lack of moral choices by adults lead the adolescents into risky behavior thus impacting negative effects on their development and 85% have responded that students need formal education whereas 93.3% perceives that they need informal education on gender harassment. Further 90% of the participants perceive that institution should prevent the occurrence of the gender harassment and 91.7% agrees that the institution should arrange for conciliation upon receiving a complaint on gender harassment against the students.



5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first assumption of the study that respondents would perceive and therefore define gender harassment in different ways was confirmed. In addition, in accordance with Hall et al., we hypothesized that there would be an interaction between gender harassment and lack of knowledge on such conduct within the academic climate and college adjustment. More specifically, we hypothesized that most students are sensitive towards gender harassment and believe that lack of prudent knowledge leads to committal of such conduct. The respondents also believe that gender harassment leads to stress and poor management of emotions. The reaction of respondents appears normal because to be harassed is humiliating, eroding one's privacy, respect and self-worth, with consequences for one's psychological well-being (Benoraitis 1997)

In addition, universities should formulate appropriate policy and grievance procedures, with appropriate punishments listed for offenders. The line of reporting cases should be clearly stated, from course advisers, to heads of departments, and so on. Usually, victims of gender harassment shy away

from reporting such cases out of a feeling of shame and humiliation (Aye, 2012). The institution should therefore establish an avenue for gender harassment where professionalism and confidentiality should be entrenched to encourage victims to lodge a complaint.

Henceforth, it gives rise to ample opportunity for a further research in future to identify the platform to complaint on the occurrence of gender harassment and set sail the actions to remedy such conduct.

REFERENCES

- Benokraitis, N. V. (1997) (ed). *Subtle sexism*. London: Sage Publications
- Brooks, L., & Perot A. R. (1991). Reporting sexual harassment: Exploring a predictive model. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 15, 31-47.
- Cortina, L. M., & Berdahl, J. L. (2008). Sexual harassment in organizations: A decade of research in review. In J. Barling & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational behavior* (pp. 469–497). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Emily A. Leskinen, Lilia M. Cortina and Dana B. Kabat; *Gender Harassment: Broadening Our Understanding of Sex-Based Harassment at Work*; Published online: 27 July 2010 *American Psychology-Law Society* 41 of the American Psychological Association 2010, *Law Human Behaviour* (2011) 35:25–39
- Fitzgerald, L. F., Drasgow, F., Hulin, C. L., Gelfand, M. J., & Magley, V. J. (1997). Antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment in organizations: A test of an integrated model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82(4), 578–589.
- Fitzgerald, L. S., Drasgow, F., & Magley, V. J. (1999). Sexual harassment in the armed forces A test of an integrated model. *Military Psychology*, 11(3), 329-343.
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1997). Hostile and benevolent sexism: Measuring ambivalent sexist attitudes toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 119-135.
- Hall, M. E. L., Christerson, B., & Cunningham, S. (2010). Sanctified sexism: Religious beliefs and the gender harassment of academic women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 34(2), 181-185.
- Iyabo Abe (2012), *Defining and Awareness of Sexual Harassment among Selected University Students in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria*. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* (JETERAPS) 3 (3): 212-218
- Kristen Eliason, M. Elizabeth L. Hall and Tamara L. Anderson (2012), *Because God Said So: Religious Facets of Sexual and Gender Harassment in Christian Academia*, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 2012, Vol. 40, No. 1, 345-355

- Seguino, S. (2011). Help or hindrance? Religion's impact on gender inequality in attitudes and outcomes. *World Development*, 39, 1308-1321.
- Swim, J. K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., & Ferguson, M. J. (2001). Everyday sexism: Evidence for its incidence, nature, and psychological impact from three diary studies. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(1), 31-53.