



REVIEW ARTICLE

EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ITS IMPACTS ON EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is any form of unwanted and dissenting sexual advances aimed toward another person. The drive of this paper is to understand how Ghanaian employees perceive sexual harassment in the Ghanaian work environment and how sexual harassment affects harassed employee work performance. This study adopted a qualitative research method using the semi-structured interview to collect data from 30 participants from six public and private companies. The findings of the study indicate that workers in Ghana perceived sexual harassment as demanding sexual favors from the opposite sex, touching of buttocks and or breast and kissing, superior enticing or forcing subordinate to have an intimate affair or relationship with, untoward behavior of staff towards the opposite sex or other skirmishes towards the opposite sex with a sexual connotation, any situation where a male or a female uses his or her position to make sexual advances to another person at the workplace, looking or commenting on any part of the body of which the victim may interpret as being offensive, forcing a female or male worker to go to bed with. The study further revealed that sexual harassment had negative impacts on the harassed employees' performance. The study offers some important recommendations and implications for consideration.

KEYWORDS

Employee Perception, Sexual Harassment, Employee Performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is another form of counterproductive work behavior (CWB) that is prevalent in organizations and has become a pervasive problem in the workplace today. It is a risk present in workplaces all over the world that lowers the quality of work, endangers employees' well-being, undercuts gender equality, and imposes expenses on businesses and organizations. Sexual harassment is generally defined as unwelcome/unwanted sexually determined behavior that affects the dignity of women and men in the workplace. According to the Ghana Labour Act 651 (Labour Act, 2003), sexual harassment can take many different forms, including direct or indirect activities that result in physical contact and advances, the demand or request for sexual favors, sexually explicit comments, any other unwanted physical contact, and verbal or non-verbal behavior of a sexual character. The USA Department of Defense's directive also defines sexual harassment as "Intentional sexual contact characterized by the use of force, threats, intimidation, or abuse of authority or when the victim does not or cannot consent (USA Department of Defense's, 2017a). The term includes a broad category of sexual offences consisting of the following offences: rape, sexual assault, aggravated sexual contact, abusive sexual contact, forcible sodomy (forced oral or anal sex), or attempts to commit these acts (p. 19).

Research has indicated that the victims of sexual harassment could be both men and women; notwithstanding the number of women victims of sexual harassment in the workplace is far greater compared to men (Hutagalung and Ishak, 2012). According to a study, about 40% to 70% of victims of

sexual harassment are women (Hutagalung and Ishak, 2012). NUS, reported in their "Sexual Violence in Further Education" report of data from 544 responses to an online survey that 61 percent of men and 78 percent of women students had an unwanted sexual experience at least once (NUS, 2019). The 2002 World Report on Violence and Health, for the Gender and Development Group, shows that between 8 and 26 percent of women and girls have been sexually abused, either as children or adults (WHO, 2002).

In Ghana, a study conducted by the African Women Lawyers Association on sexual harassment in the workplace and academic environment in Ghana reveals that out of 789 women respondents, 63% indicated that they had experienced some form of sexual harassment at the workplace and in educational institutions (AWLA, 2003). The BBC Africa Eye undercover report titled 'Sex for Grades' which has exposed the extent to which female students are sexually abused and harassed in some of Africa's top universities suggests that sexual harassment is a serious problem in Ghana (BBC, 2019). Similarly, Bofo (2018) cross-sectionally studied the effects of workplace respect and violence on nurses' job satisfaction in Ghana using 592 qualified practicing nurses working in public hospitals in Ghana. The results showed that more than half (52.7%) of the participants had been abused verbally, and 12% had been sexually harassed in the past 12 months before the study. Despite the prevalence of sexual harassment especially in Africa, studies indicate that cases of workplace sexual harassment are largely under-reported or unreported.

Several pieces of research have documented that sexual harassment exerts a significant negative impact or effect on employees' psychological well-

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being, job attitudes, and work behaviors, emotions such as embarrassment, shame, and depression, as well as a decrease in their self-esteem and job satisfaction, deteriorating relationships with co-workers, increased absenteeism and decreased morale, lack of commitment, disruptive family life and job loss but little or none of these researchers investigated the perception of Ghanaian workers on sexual harassment and its impacts on their performance (O'Reilly et al., 2014; McDonald, 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Gutek, 1985; Loy and Stewart, 1984; McDonald, 2012; Zhu et al., 2019; Merkin and Shah, 2014). This qualitative research is therefore conducted to narrow the research gap on Ghanaian employees' perception of sexual harassment and its impacts on their performance in the Ghanaian context. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Ghanaian employees perceive sexual harassment in the Ghanaian work environment?
2. How does sexual harassment hint at employees' work performance?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sexual Harassment

There are different definitions propounded by several scholars and government agencies across the globe to describe sexual harassment. For instance, according to the UK Employment Equality (Sex Discrimination) Regulations, sexual harassment is unwanted conduct (verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature) that intends to violate his/her dignity and/or create an environment that is hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive (Hunt et al., 2010). Sexual harassment includes deliberate or repeated unsolicited verbal comments, gestures, or physical contact of a sexual nature, which are unwelcome (U.S. Merit Service Protection Board; USMSPB, 1981). Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 1980). MacKinnon; Benson and Thomson defined sexual harassment as power and authority (MacKinnon, 1979; Benson and Thomson, 1982). MacKinnon stated that sexual harassment is about the unwanted nuisance of sexual requirements in a relationship wherein there is no equal power between two individuals (MacKinnon, 1979).

The EEOC regulatory guidelines provided that: any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment, when submission of such conduct is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition for an individual's employment, submission to, or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual or such conduct has the purpose or effect unreasonably interfering with the individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment" (EEOC, 2015).

According to McDonald, sexual harassment is "one of a range of abusive or counterproductive workplace behaviors which have hierarchical power relations at their core...[with] an explicitly sexual dimension" (McDonald, 2012). Literature suggests that sexual harassment occurs when someone demands sexual satisfaction from women especially (Barling et al., 1996). According to a study, students regarded sexual harassment as unacceptable, particularly non-consensual sexual behaviors (Hennelly et al., 2019). Other scholars have attributed sexual harassment to abuse of power, abusive behavior, and bullying (Uggen and Blackstone, 2004; Keashly et al., 1994; MacIntosh et al., 2010). However, in this present study, we define sexual harassment as any form of unwanted and dissenting sexual advances aimed toward another person

2.2 Employee Perception of Sexual Harassment

When a person becomes conscious of or develops a mental image of a situation, it is called perception (Law et al., 2011). According to a study, "Sexual harassment and other behaviors that contribute to a hostile work environment often exist in grey areas; thus, they are not clear-cut (Calafell, 2014). This instability, lack of naming, and lack of clarity give them power." A recent study conducted in UK universities revealed that students perceived perpetrators as being ignorant about what constitutes sexual consent, harassment, and assault (Hennelly et al., 2019). According to Parker, in a Pew Research Center survey, it is projected that 49% of employed women in workplaces with a majority of males think that sexual harassment is an issue there, compared to 32% of working women in workplaces with a majority of women (Parker, 2018).

Loy and Stewart assert that, even though the guidelines of EEOC are accepted at the organizational levels, there are variations in individuals' perceptions of sexual harassment (Loy and Stewart, 1984). Thus, behaviors that some women consider sexual harassment may not be

considered as such by others. That is, different people see the same behavior as differentially unacceptable (Barling et al., 1996). Loy and Stewart reported that sexual harassment tactics involved inappropriate use of power and serve to affirm male superiority in organizations (Loy and Stewart, 1984). Sexual harassment can either be verbal or physical (Loy and Stewart 1984; Schneider et al., 1997; Barling et al., 1996). While verbal harassment ranges from sexual joking to explicit propositions that place conditions upon job employment or job benefits and require the exchange of sexual favors, physical harassment on the other hand range from touching to violent assault. Examples of verbal sexual harassment include sexual messages delivered through innuendo and explicit conditional exchange of sex for economic and career benefits. Physical harassment includes manhandling such as unwanted touching (patting) and the use of violent physical force.

2.3 Effects of Sexual Harassment on Employee Performance

Sexual harassment is a disturbing workplace problem because a large number of studies have shown the negative effects of workplace sexual harassment on employee attitudes, health, and performance (Dionisi et al., 2012; O'Reilly et al., 2014; McDonald, 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2012). Some researchers reported in their respective studies that, there is a positive relationship between sexual harassment and employee detraction from productivity and performance (Raver and Gelfand, 2005; Woodzicka and LaFrance, 2005). A group researchers found that low-quality performance is one of the consequences of workplace sexual harassment (Dionisi et al., 2012). A group researchers revealed that there is a significant direct relationship between sexual harassment and work-related negative mood, and an indirect effect on several outcomes such as poor work performance, turnover intentions, interpersonal job dissatisfaction, and psychosomatic complaints which are derails employee functioning (Barling et al., 1996). The study further disclosed that female victims respond more negatively to sexual harassment than males. Fineran and Gruber, also concluded that teenagers who were sexually harassed were less satisfied with their jobs and underperformed (Fineran and Gruber, 2009).

A group researchers analyzed the cause and effect of sexual harassment on the performance of female employees in some selected organizations in Kogi State in Nigeria using a sample of 60 primary and secondary school female teachers (Idris et al., 2016). The results show that sexual harassment had a significant negative effect on the harassed women's work performance in organizations. Similarly, Hersch found that sexual harassment in the workplace increases absenteeism, and turnover and lowers workplace productivity and job satisfaction (Hersch, 2015). The study further revealed that the productivity and pay of sexually harassed victims, as well as of their co-workers, are expected to be lower if sexual harassment induces inefficient turnover, increases absenteeism, and generally wastes work time as workers attempt to avoid interactions with harassers. According to a study "Victims often have low job satisfaction and performance, low affective commitment, mental and physical health problems and higher intentions to leave the organization" (de Haas et al., 2009). Again, Hudson concluded that sexual harassment against employees affected physically and psychologically (Hudson, 2017).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present study examined the perception of employees' sexual harassment and its effect on their performance among selected companies in Ghana. The study adopted a qualitative research paradigm to understand how employees perceived sexual harassment influences their performance. The qualitative research method was used for the study because it helps to give contextual richness to the study setting and aids in the understanding of how the participants perceived sexual harassment in the real life (Yin, 2016). The semi-structured interview was used to solicit the research data. According to a skill that is essential for acquiring high-quality information is interviewing, which also involves deliberation, emotion control, and context adaptation (Thuesen, 2011). The main reason for choosing a semi-structured type of interview is to better understand the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of these experiences (Seidman, 2006). Semi-structured interviews provide participants more freedom to respond to questions as they see fit than a normal interview, but they nevertheless offer a better framework for comparison than a concentrated interview (Berg, 2007). The interviewees were selected from six public and private companies in Ga Hana using a Stratified and simple random sampling technique. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using theme codes, an inductive methodology was used to analyse the transcripts and field notes in order to find patterns in the data.

3.2 Participants

An employee is any person employed by any organization. Thirty (30) participants who were at least 20 years old, which comprised one head of department (HOD)/section/unit/manager and four subordinates' from each organization were selected to participate in the study. This was because any employee, arrive of the gender could sexually be harassed. The participating companies consist of a public university, a security agency firm, a ministry department, a media house, a wood processing company, and a construction company. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to organizations and purposive sampling was used for the individual participants. Presented in various strata, the organisations were divided into two strata thus, public and privately owned companies. The public organizations comprised universities, security agencies and civil services whilst the private organizations consisted of media houses, wood processing and construction firms. At random, three organisations in each stratum from both the public and private sector organisations were selected making use of the simple random sampling technique. The purposive sampling technique was used to select five respondents (one HOD/section/unit/manager and four subordinates) from each of the chosen organisations. The individual participants were purposely recruited into the study due to accessibility and their experience in their respective work environments.

3.3 Demographic Profile of Participants

Out of the respondents who were interviewed, 20 were males whereas the remaining 10 were females. Moreover, majority of the respondents (19) were between the ages of 31-41 years, 5 of them were between the ages of 20-30 years, and lastly, the remaining 6 respondents were above the ages of 41 years. In terms of status of interviewees, 6 of the respondents were HOD/section/unit/manager, and the remaining 24 were subordinates.

4. RESULTS

The research questions were to understand how Ghanaian employees perceived sexual harassment in the Ghanaian work environment and how sexual harassment affects harassed employee work performance. Both research questions were answered through the research findings.

4.1 Employees' Perception of Sexual Harassment in the Ghanaian Work Environment

The attitudes of sexual harassment among employees in Ghana were examined. According to the research, several participants believed that sexual harassment encouraged people to engage in intimate relationships or affairs with employees. Others perceived it as demanding sexual favours from the opposite sex, untoward behaviour of staff towards the opposite sex or other skirmishes towards the opposite sex with a sexual connotation. The interviewees further perceived sexual harassment as any situation where a male or a female uses his or her position to make sexual advances to another person in the workplace. Yet others perceived it as touching someone in a way that makes the victim feel uncomfortable. However, a sizable number of respondents, almost two-thirds understood sexual harassment as looking or commenting on any part of the body, which the victim may interpret as being offensive. To force a female or male co-worker to share a bed with them, for instance, or to stare at a female passionately or closely. According to respondents, female employees are more likely than male colleagues to experience sexual harassment. They argued that sexual demands are typically made by male superiors who expect sexual favours from female employees. During the semi-structured interview, several participants shared their experiences of sexual harassment. A female participant in one of the services organizations indicated that:

"I was in the office one day when my boss came from behind and kissed me. When I asked him why he did that he only replied I do not care what happens. Since then, I feel scared when he's around especially when there is nobody around."

During another interview, a different female participant also shared a similar experience of sexual harassment in her organization and averred that:

"My boss pushed me to the wall and asked me to have sex with him in his office. I declined vehemently but had no avenue to report the incident. He keeps threatening to request my dismissal if I don't give in to his request. I'm not happy being here. I've given myself up to the end of the year, I'll leave if he continues."

However, one male participant shared his own experience of sexual harassment and stated:

"I always have a lot of work to do in my office. By the time I finish almost everybody has left the office. My female boss takes advantage of the situation and comes to my office most often half naked to seduce me to sleep with her. Though I haven't yielded to her demands it is very disturbing, I find it very difficult to report her behaviour. I'm hoping to get another opportunity somewhere so that I can leave. I sometimes can't concentrate on the work I'm doing. I don't understand her behaviour at all. You see I can't tell someone too; people will interpret it differently. I'm disturbed!"

This participant added that because of the high rate of unemployment, job seekers especially females 'accepted' sexual harassment and sexual favours with 'big people' in organizations to get employed. The study found out that some superiors take advantage of the situation to demand sex from such desperate job seekers. Affected victims were mostly Senior High School graduates who want to get employed and save money to continue their education, as well as National Service personnel who wanted to be maintained at current workplaces and positions. Respondents suggested that in some private organizations, salaries were negotiated on individual bases; female employees who could offer sex 'freely', have better salary structure and other fringe benefits as opposed to those who did not. Two other female respondents reported on this issue. The first of the two female respondents revealed that:

"Because I refused to sleep with a big man, employees who are my juniors enjoyed fat salaries, promotions and recognition. I applied for such benefits when I was due, but I was refused on more than three occasions. I am still waiting for my promotion; can you imagine my frustrations? This is somebody's company so you can't talk much."

In support of the first female respondent's assertion, the second who was harassed by her boss also said:

"My boss came from behind, tapped my back and held my breast. I told him I didn't like that. He retorted 'it feels nice and be ready for more, but keep your mouth shut or you are fired. I don't like what he did but I don't know where I can get a job so I can leave this place. I'm praying he puts a stop to it. But if he persists, I'll tell everybody and leave the company."

4.2 Impact of Sexual Harassment on Employee Performance

The next research question sought to find out how sexual harassment impacts victims' job performance. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the respondents were of the general opinion that sexual harassment negatively affects victims' job performance at the workplace. Many can lose concentration at the workplace and may feel unsecured. Most of the interviewees indicated that harassed employees' job performance dropped below par after the harassment. The following are some of the victim's testaments. One victim a secretary shared her experience and reiterated that:

"Any time I'm alone with my boss (the perpetrator) in the office, I make numerous typographical mistakes when typing because I fear he'll repeat what he did to me. It is affecting my performance because most of the time I'm alone with him in the office. I make one or two errors, or no error at all when the other employees are around."

Another respondent who was harassed confessed during the interview that:

"I shivered and dropped whatever I might be holding whenever I met the person who harassed me. I feel jittery whenever I see him around. I don't want to come close to him at all. It was very difficult for me to concentrate on the work I'll be doing when I recall the scene. Although it is past, whenever I remember I have mixed feelings – I become confused, angry and unable to concentrate on whatever work I'll be doing. Sometimes I want to insult him and quit the company."

These findings indicate that there is a negative relationship between sexual harassment and sexually harassed employees' job performance.

In later interviews, some respondents from the identified organizations confirmed their personal experiences of sexual harassment and some of their colleagues' experiences. They further revealed that their productivity and performance were badly affected after being sexually harassed. One of them reiterated that:

"A sexually harassed employee did not feel happy coming to work. Coming to work was more than punishment, and each time she came to work, she was moody and would not work with enthusiasm and confidence. Thus, a worried worker does not produce the best results."

One of the female interviewees also mentioned that:

"I've lost every respect I had for him after he held my breasts. Sometimes I refuse to do any work he assigns me. He can't punish me because I've threatened to let everybody know what he did to me. He's also afraid due to his position."

Surprisingly, one sexually harassed gentleman also shared his experience:

"My boss complained about whatever work I did for her after I refused to kiss her. I lost the enthusiasm I had for my job. I was not happy. I sobbed within me anytime I was going to work. I wanted to leave but there was no immediate work."

5. DISCUSSION

This present study explored how Ghanaian employees perceived sexual harassment in the Ghanaian work environment and how it affects harassed employee work performance. In response to the first research question of the study, the interviewees perceived sexual harassment as superior enticing or forcing subordinates to have an intimate affair or relationship with, demanding sexual favours from the opposite sex, untoward behaviour of staff towards the opposite sex or other skirmishes towards the opposite sex with a sexual connotation, any situation where a male or a female uses his or her position to make sexual advances to another person at the workplace, touching of buttocks, breast, kissing, looking or commenting on any part of the body of which the victim may interpret as being offensive, forcing a female or male worker to go to bed with.

The findings of the majority of the respondents in Ghana agree with some study that comments of sexual nature, demanding sexual favours, kissing, touching of breasts and holding someone's buttocks, for example, were considered as sexual harassment. Nevertheless, they did not perceive holding hands or putting hands around necks and waist as sexual harassment (Loy and Stewart, 1984; Schneider et al., 1997; Barling et al., 1996). This study's conclusion was further supported by findings, which defined sexual harassment as any unwanted sexual approaches, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical behaviour of a sexual nature (EEOC, 2015; McDonald, 2012).

Regarding the second research question, the study's conclusions showed that sexual harassment had a detrimental impact on the productivity of the harassed employees. The results further revealed that most of the victims of sexual harassment lost their confidence, enthusiasm, concentration, and joy for their work, made a lot of mistakes and some even withdrew from their work completely. All these lead to poor job performance in their respective job positions. Sexual harassment in the workplace lowers workplace productivity and job satisfaction and also increases employee turnover (Hersch, 2015). One of the key consequences of sexual harassment is low-quality performance (Dionisi et al., 2012).

The result of the study is also consistent with who reported a significant negative association between sexual harassment and harassed women's work performance in organizations (Idris et al., 2016). Finally, our findings are also in agreement with the results of who reported a significant direct relationship between sexual harassment and work-related negative mood, poor work performance, turnover intentions, interpersonal job dissatisfaction and psychosomatic complaints which are relevant to optimum employee functioning (Barling et al., 1996; Hudson, 2017).

5.1 Theoretical Implication

This study makes significant contribution to the sexual harassment literature. Despite the many theoretical studies conducted on sexual harassment, this study helps researchers better understand sexual harassment and its effects on victims from Ghanaian employees' perspectives. This study is one of the few to explore sexual harassment and its associated effects on the harassed employees' performance across six different institutions/sectors (university, security, construction, media, civil service, and wood processing) in Ghana, hence bridging the gap in sexual harassment literature. The findings of the study confirm that sexual harassment in any form had severe negative effects on the harassed employee and his or her job performance. Results of the study further provide support for the assertion that unwelcome sexual advances such as touching of buttocks and breast, kissing, request for sexual favours, looking at or commenting on any part of the body which the victim may interpret as being offensive, forcing a female or male worker to go to bed with are considered sexual harassment.

5.2 Practical Implications

The main purposes of this study were to explore Ghanaian employees' perception of sexual harassment and its effect on their performance. Since

the results confirmed the prevalence of sexual harassment in the Ghanaian working environment and management should devise better strategies to eliminate this unhealthy practice from the working environment. Also, since a greater majority of the respondents of the study indicated that they feared reporting the perpetrators of sexual harassment for fear of losing their jobs or being victimized, it suggests that there are no proper and safer reporting procedures for reporting sexual harassment incidents in the Ghanaian working environment. Therefore, the ministry of employment, labor unions and other stakeholders should team up to formulate proper and secure mechanisms and procedures for channeling harassment incidents. This will help organizations to maintain their best talents even after they have been harassed.

5.3 Limitations and Direction for Future Research

Despite the success of this study, it was not exempted from some limitations. First, to answer the research questions of this present study, a qualitative research method was adopted. However, it is suggested that future studies on sexual harassment in Ghana should consider using mixed research methods. The use of both qualitative and quantitative will help better understand the impact of sexual harassment on the harassed employees and even the entire organization. Also, the study was limited to a small sample size of 30 respondents which makes it challenging to generalize the findings, it is therefore recommended that future studies on sexual harassment in the Ghanaian context use large data from different companies and different industries across the country to get the clear picture and understanding of how employees perceive sexual harassment and its effects on the victims and their organizations' performance.

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