

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: The Effect of Perpetrator Attributes and Recipient Attributes in the Judgment of Sexual Harassment Instances

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Abstract

All socio-sexual conducts that occur in a workplace would not constitute sexual harassment. Whether a conduct is judged as sexual harassment or not would depend on a number of factors and contexts. In this article, we attempt to explore and explain how various attributes of the perpetrator and the attributes of the recipient herself influence this judgement of sexual harassment. Employing qualitative research methodology, 40 in-depth interviews and four group discussions were used in gathering information. The findings of the study clearly indicated a number of perpetrator attributes such as perpetrator's marital status, his reputation as a flirt and his organizational status as well as a number of recipient attributes and perceptions, such as the marital or relationship status of the recipient, her organizational status, and whether the recipient considers the perpetrator as a friend or not, affect the judgment of sexual harassment instances.

Key words: Sexual harassment at workplaces, perception, judgment, perpetrator, recipient.

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Introduction

All socio-sexual conducts that occur in a workplace would not constitute sexual harassment (Dellinger & Williams, 2002; Osman, 2007b; Pierce & Aguinis, 2001; Pierce et al., 2004; Solomon & Williams, 1997; Wiener & Hurt, 2000; Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 1999). While certain socio-sexual conducts at the workplace are enjoyed, accepted, or tolerated by the recipient/s, some other socio-sexual behaviours are considered offensive, uncomfortable, or harassing. The boundary line that determines whether a conduct is enjoyed, accepted, tolerated, or harassing is not clear or definite (Dellinger & Williams, 2002). This line that determines whether a conduct is sexual harassment or not is very personal and subjective (Dellinger & Williams, 2002; Wilson, 2000a).

This subjectivity, uncertainty, and confusion have become a predicament to a range of people such as judges, investigators of sexual harassment complaints, and also individual employees who experience various socio-sexual conducts at workplace. In this background, how a person actually judges whether his/her experience is sexual harassment or not (Dellinger & Williams, 2002; Priem, Walters, & Li, 2011) and what factors affect this judgment continues to be a burning issue that shadows the concept of sexual harassment even after more than 30 years of coming into being, and in spite of an abundance of research and studies done in the area.

In trying to find answers to this dilemma, many researchers have explored various factors that would affect the perception or judgement of sexual harassment. Factors such as age, gender, frequency, severity, organizational hierarchy, organizational culture, and national culture have been studied very frequently. However, many studies that have looked at these various factors affecting perception of sexual harassment have not explored them more deeply, or broadly (Terpstra & Baker, 1986). In most instances, the quantitative methodology adopted in these studies has led to a somewhat surface understanding of how these factors actually affect the judgment of sexual harassment (Arvey & Cavanaugh, 1995; Frazier et al., 1995). It is also noteworthy that many of the studies that have explored these factors have done so from an observer's point of view (Daugherty et al., 1996; Gutek, 1995; Osman, 2004) rather than from a recipient's point of view. In this background, the need to explore in-depth some important factors that affect the recipient's judgment of sexual harassment is important to properly understand the subjectivity in sexual harassment and the boundary line that determines whether a behaviour is enjoyed, accepted, tolerated, or considered harassing.

In this article, we attempt to bridge this knowledge gap and contribute to the existing knowledge of judgment of sexual harassment, by presenting a more holistic and deeper explanation about two specific and important aspects that would affect this judgment. Thus, this article will explore what attributes of the perpetrator and what attributes of the recipient would affect the recipients' judgement of sexual harassment? How and in what instances would these various attributes affect women recipients' judgement in their day-to-day lives?

Literature review

Many studies have attempted to understand how sexual harassment is perceived or judged, by exploring various factors that affect the perception or subjectivity of sexual harassment. A study of Marshall (2003), which explored how females construct the meaning/judgement of sexual harassment in their everyday lives, presents interesting findings, where she states that women use different interpretive frames (feminist politics, management philosophies and social norms surrounding sex) and objective standards (measuring their experience against the legal definition) in identifying whether their experiences are sexual harassment or not. Being a mixed method study, it sheds light on some important aspects of judgement of sexual harassment through mainly the in-depth interviews with respondents. However, here too, special attention has been given to a few main and commonly studied factors such as the frequency and seriousness of the harassing behaviour and the job-related consequences.

Wilson (2000b) in studying the social construction of sexual harassment and assault of university students has found out how university students judge sexual harassment and how that judgement varies between male and female students. However, the positivistic stance adopted in the study has not allowed the researcher to explore the complexity of thinking and behaviour of recipients of sexual behaviours and the thinking or judgement process. She strongly suggests the need for research on the social construction of sexual harassment.

In a more recent study, Denissen (2010) looks at how sexual behaviours are interpreted using a framework (micro-politics of trouble framework) which examines how women respond to sexual harassment incidents. Through this, Denissen (2010) builds the argument that recipients generally attempt to restore good relations between co-workers at the initial stages of the unwanted sexual conduct and if these initial attempts to resolve the problem fail or if the conduct is considered extreme, the conduct may be judged as 'crossing the line' (sexual harassment). While the study adopts a qualitative methodology, uses in-depth interviews, and examines how the notion is constructed, the meaning construction process in its full complexity is not explored in depth.

There are also other studies, which have frequently looked at various specific factors that affect the judgement of sexual harassment such as gender (Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Gutek & O'Conner, 1995; Frazier et al., 1995; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001), ethnicity (Reese & Lindenberge, 2005; Timmerman & Bajema, 1999), age (McCabe & Hardman, 2005; Pickerill et al., 2006; Reese & Lindenberge, 2005), the gender role ideology of the respondent (McCabe & Hardman, 2005), race (Buchanan, Settles, & Krystle, & Woods, 2008; Welsh et al., 2006), marital status, educational level (Pickerill et al., 2006), position of the harasser (Frazier et al., 1995; Sheets & Braver, 1999), severity of harassment (Marshall, 2003; Ng & Othman, 2002), the position of the perceiver (Reese & Lindenberge, 2005) and frequency of harassment (Buchanan et al., 2008; Gutek, 1985). Furthermore, a wealth of studies exists on the cultures' effect on the perception and judgement of sexual harassment, where it is stated that sexual harassment would depend on attitudes and norms of countries, societies and cultures

(Barak, 1997; Barr, 1993; Bernstein, 1994; Gee & Norton, 1999; Hardman & Heidelberg, 1996; Limpaphayom, Williams, & Fadil, 2006).

Though not as frequent, factors such as prior socializing between the perpetrator and the victim (Dougherty et al., 1996), continuation of harassing behaviour (Osman, 2007a; Marshall, 2003), intention of the perpetrator (Timmerman & Bajema, 1999; Timmerman & Bajema, 2000), resistance of the recipient (Osman, 2007 b), nature of the behaviour (Dougherty et al., 1996), race and citizenship (Welsh et al., 2006) and physical setting of the incident (Dougherty et al., 1996) are also studied in understanding perceptions of sexual harassment at workplaces. Table 1 gives a brief explanation of the effect of these various factors on the judgement of sexual harassment.

Table 1: Studies on factors affecting the perception and judgement of sexual harassment

Factor affecting construction of the meaning of the term sexual harassment	Main findings	Sources
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Males tend to perceive less behaviours as sexual harassment while females perceive more behaviours as sexual harassment. Females have a broader understanding of the term sexual harassment at workplaces. 	Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Frazier et al., 1995; Gutek, 1985; Haspels et al., 2001; McCabe & Hardman, 2005
	<p><u>A different but equally accepted finding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no considerable difference in the manner that sexual harassment is perceived between genders. 	Baker, Terpstra, & Cutler, 1990; Dougherty et al., 1996; Pryor et al., 1997; York, 1989
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In general females and males differ in their definitions of sexual harassment, but the difference is small and occurs only under certain conditions. 	Gutek, 1995, Gutek and O'Connor, 1995
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As age increases acceptance and tolerance of sexual harassment decreases. i.e. older people are less tolerant of sexual harassment. 	Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Haspels et al., 2001; McCabe & Hardman, 2005; Pickerill et al., 2006;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Older females are more likely to be aware of and sensitive to sexual harassment. 	Reese & Lindenberge, 2005
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Younger respondents tend to tolerate and accept sexually harassing behaviours more than older people. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Older adults seem to have a broader definition of sexual harassment than younger adults. 	Gutek, 1995

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Educational level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educated women were more likely than less educated women to indicate that certain behaviours constitute harassment. 	Gutek, 1985; Maeder, Wiener & Winter, 2007; Pickerill et al., 2006
Civil status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Divorced females are less likely than married females to perceive quid pro quo harassment as harassing. Married office professionals perceive non-persistent requests for dates as more severe than do single office professionals. 	Gutek, 1985; Nielsen, 1996; Pickerill et al., 2006
Prior awareness of sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When a person is aware of the issue (e.g., through media, publicity), they tend to identify more behaviours as sexual harassment. 	Brewis, 2001; Jaschik-Herman & Fisk, 1995; Pickerill et al., 2006; Wiener et al., 2005
Demographic factors of the recipient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographic factors such as age, marital status, children, industry and being previously harassed, do not have a considerable effect on the perceptions of sexual harassment. 	Nielsen, 1996
Gender role of the respondent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respondents high on femininity tend to tolerate sexually harassing behaviours less than respondents with high masculinity. 	Foulis & McCabe, 1997; McCabe & Hardman, 2005
Prior experiences of sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When a person has experienced sexual harassment earlier, they tend to identify more behaviours as sexual harassment. 	Dougherty et al., 1996; Foulis & McCabe, 1997; McCabe & Hardman, 2005
	<p><u>Exceptions to the general</u></p> <p>Perceptions of sexual harassment are not influenced by the recipients' past experiences of harassment.</p>	Nielsen, 1996
Recipient's occupational status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recipient's occupational status can affect judgments on sexual harassment. 	Haspels et al., 2001; Maeder et al., 2007; Reese & Lindenberge, 2005
Recipient's personality	Individuals' perceptions towards their experiences (whether their experiences are sexual or non-sexual harassment) are dependent on their personality.	Crow et al., 1995
Prior socializing between the harasser and the victim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Males' potentially harassing behaviour toward a female is evaluated more negatively when the pair had not previously socialized. 	Dougherty et al., 1996

Resistance of the recipient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any type of resistance from a victim/recipient will increase perceptions of sexual harassment 	Osman, 2007 b
Intention of the harasser	When the recipient or the onlookers see the harassing behaviour as intentional, it is seen more as harassing when compared with an instance which is thought as unintentional.	Timmerman & Bajema, 1999; Timmerman & Bajema, 2000
Harasser's organizational status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a behaviour is perpetrated by a superior, such behaviour has a greater chance of being perceived as sexual harassment than a behaviour perpetrated by a peer. 	Dougherty et al., 1996; Frazier et al., 1995; Sheets & Braver, 1999; Stockdale et al., 1995
Intention of the harasser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the recipient or the onlookers see the harassing behaviour as intentional, it is seen more as harassing when compared with an instance which is thought as unintentional. 	Timmerman & Bajema, 1999; Timmerman & Bajema, 2000
Severity of harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More severe behaviours such as physical behaviours are more confidently identified as sexual harassment as compared to less severe forms of behaviours such as jokes and looks of a sexual nature. 	Barr, 1993; Johnson et al., 1997; Marshall, 2003; Ng & Othman, 2002; Osman, 2007a
Nature of the behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Male's potentially harassing behaviour toward a female is evaluated more negatively when it involves verbal comments. 	Dougherty et al., 1996
Physical setting of the incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Male's potentially harassing behaviour toward a female is evaluated more negatively when the behaviour occurs in a work setting (versus social setting). 	Dougherty et al., 1996
Continuation of harassing behaviour	<p>Continuation of a harassing behaviour</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> following resistance, confirms to the observer that harassment is occurring and results in it being perceived as more severe. 	Osman, 2007a; Marshall, 2003
Organizational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the harassing behaviours are common in the workplace or when the workplaces are 'sexualized', less behaviours would be perceived as harassing. 	Dellinger & Williams, 2002; Gutek, 1985;

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Females are more tolerant of those behaviours in these work settings. In white-collar organizations, men are more tolerant of sexual harassment than women. 	
Organizational tolerance for sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the recipients of unwanted behaviour perceive their organization as more tolerant of sexual harassment, there is less chance of the behaviour to be labelled as sexual harassment. 	McCabe & Hardman, 2005
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural norms of service organizations would not allow employees to see themselves as victims of sexual harassment. 	McCabe & Hardman, 2005
Race and citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Race and citizenship of the recipient affect how she defines sexual harassment. 	FolgerØ & Fjeldstad, 1995
Ethical ideology (business ethics) of individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethical ideology has an effect on employees' ability to identify verbal sexual harassing behaviours that occur in superior subordinate interactions. 	Welsh et al., 2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This effect is present for nonverbal behaviours. 	Keyton & Rhodes, 1997

Source: Authors' construct after review of literature

In studying these various factors, much of the research has employed white females of developed countries as their respondents, giving a very limited understanding of how other types of females (non-white females of developing or under-developed countries) judge sexual harassment. At the same time, the positivistic stances employed by much of these prior research has led to a very limited understanding gained about how, in what instances, and why, these various factors actually affect the judgement of sexual harassment. Similarly, much of this research has used observers' perceptions in deciding whether a conduct is sexual harassment or not (Daugherty et al., 1996; Gutek, 1995; Osman, 2004), rather than exploring how actual recipients perceive and judge sexual harassment. As O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2009) state, most explored factors in understanding how sexual harassment is perceived or judged during the last decade are observer characteristics such as observer gender. Thus, the need to explore more in-depth, two very important aspects, namely harasser characteristics/factors as well as recipient characteristics/factors that influence the judgment about whether a conduct is sexual harassment, should be understood.

Methodology

The main study on which this article is based explored the meaning of the construction process of the notion 'sexual harassment at workplaces'. It was based on the social constructionist philosophical premise, and employed the grounded theory strategy of inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Chamaz, 2001, 2003, 2005). Purposive sampling at the initial stages of data collection and theoretical sampling in the successive stages was employed. Data was collected using in-depth, person-to-person interviews and focus group discussions and the respondents were approached employing the snowball technique.

The present article draws information from 40 individual, in-depth, person-to-person interviews and four focus group discussions of 4-5 respondents each. These respondents represented the three main ethnicities of Sri Lanka, with 49 Sinhalese, 7 Tamils, and 6 Muslims. 52 of the respondents were between the age group 20 to 35, while 10 were above 35 years of age. 15 of the respondents were married and 47 respondents were unmarried. Data was qualitatively analyzed through a meticulous process of coding and categorizing.

Findings and discussion

How perpetrator attributes affect the judgement of sexual harassment

As O'Leary-Kelly et al (2009) presents in their review of research on sexual harassment during the past decade, very few recent studies have looked at the characteristics of the harasser that might influence the judgement of sexual harassment. According to them, two such characteristics explored in the recent studies were the race of the harasser and remedial accounts by the harasser. Even these two characteristics were explored from the points of view of observers of harassment, rather than recipients. In addition to what O'Leary-Kelly et al (2009) present, the one harasser characteristic that has been studied the most, is the harasser's organizational status (Dougherty et al., 1996; Frazier et al., 1995; Sheets & Braver, 1999; Stockdale et al., 1995).

However, in this article we present three perpetrator/harasser characteristics/attributes that affect the judgement of whether a conduct is sexual harassment or not as a) perpetrator's marital status, b) perpetrator's reputation as a flirt, and c) perpetrators organizational status.

Perpetrator's marital status: While prior researchers have explored how the marital status of the recipient affects her own perception of sexual harassment (Gutek, 1985; Nielsen, 1996; Pickerill et al., 2006), the marital status of the perpetrator has not been explored. As the respondents of the current study indicated, the marital status of the perpetrator is an important aspect that affects their decision about whether a conduct is sexual harassment or not. As was revealed, when the perpetrator of a sexual behaviour is married, the respondents tended to perceive that behaviour as more unwanted,

unwelcome, harassing, or offensive, whereas a similar behaviour perpetrated by an unmarried perpetrator would not be seen in that manner.

Priyani, is a 29 year-old, unmarried, Accountant, working for a private organization. Priyani's explanation about different experiences she has had in one of her earlier workplaces clearly indicates how similar behaviours of the same person is seen from different standpoints because of the change in the marital status of the perpetrator.

When I was working in the audit firm, he used to come behind me. He came behind me for about one year. Would call me, drop me off after work, send me cards. He was interested in me. For some reason I didn't like him. So I told him so... then he got married to this girl. He even invited us to his wedding...He assigned us various tasks at the wedding and we all helped him. Then we associated and spoke with each other normally...

This explanation of Priyani indicates that, even though she had not responded to this person's interest in her, she had not been offended or angry by his behaviour and thus has not considered his behaviour harassing. However, recently, she had come in contact with him again and he had started to show his interest in her again. For Priyani, this interest now, is very harassing.

We are not working together now. He is now married and has kids...When this funeral came about (a funeral of a friend), I phoned and told him about the funeral as he knew my friend very well. He wanted me to go to the funeral with him. He tried very hard to get me to go with him. I dodged it saying that I was too busy and had a lot of work to do and that I was not sure when I would go. I went alone. From the time I arrived at the funeral, he started calling me on my cell phone. Somehow, he came to the funeral while I was there. And he made sure that he left the funeral with me. He offered me a lift. On the way, he started telling me stuff, and started coming on to me again...I really don't like it...it makes me very angry, why is he coming after me now? He has a wife and a kid!

Time and time again, Priyani stated that he is a married person now. Thus, it is apparent how the same behaviour (showing interest, phoning, offering lifts) perpetrated by the same person is judged differently mainly because of the marital status of the perpetrator. There were a few other respondents too who were very quick to highlight the marital status of the perpetrators in explaining harassing instances they have experienced or observed, indicating how marital status can affect perceptions.

...The way he looks at me, talks to me. ...stares at me... You can guess what sort of a person he is. Sometimes, even when you have your back to the person, you can feel him looking at you. He would always pass me by even when it is not necessary... He is a married person. To me, he should not be like that...(Tharanga, a 27-year old unmarried government sector employee)

I was earlier working for X company. Next to me there was this peer, a man,...

This man was flirting with this woman (another peer) working on his other side. He was married, and has a kid too. He would do various things to her. Touch her and pat her. We too could not say anything. Because, he sort of shows that he is doing those for fun ... He is married and has a kid too... (Madavi, a focus group respondent, who is an executive of a private organization)

There are certain people whom we know are married and have grown up children. Their unnecessary influences are not only verbal. There are instances when they even touch you. ... like, pretending it to be a mistake. Or else, sometimes they touch you or tap you unexpectedly. There are things like that. (Mali, a 42 year old, unmarried cooperative society employee)

Some people try to get too close unnecessarily...go behind (pursue) somebody, with those (sexual) intentions. I have heard a lot of married people do that (Sanduni, a 24 year old, clerk, working for a private financial institution)

These respondents did not directly state that the marital status of the perpetrator affects their judgement of a behaviour. However, the manner in which the respondents always highlighted the fact that the perpetrators were married, that married people should not perpetuate such behaviour, and that those behaviours made them feel uncomfortable, did indicate the relationship between the marital status of the perpetrator and the judgement of their behaviours as harassing by the recipients. Why this is so might be because of the recipients' assumption of the intentions of the perpetrator. When a married person shows interest in another person, or perpetrates some behaviour such as staring, joking, touching, or patting, there is a greater tendency for the recipient to perceive the intentions of the perpetrator as sexually oriented. On the contrary, the same behaviour perpetrated by an unmarried person might be perceived as honest and non-sexual oriented interest towards the recipient, or as general social (non-sexual) behaviour at workplaces. In other words, it can be supposed that the marital status of a perpetrator indirectly reflects his sexual intentions and when the behaviour is seen as sexual, it can be seen more as uncomfortable, offensive, or harassing than a behaviour that is seen as non-sexual.

Perpetrator being a flirt: A rather interesting and unique finding of the present study was the relationship that was found between the perpetrator's reputation as a flirt and the recipients' judgement of a behaviour as sexual harassment. It was evident that, when the perpetrator of a behaviour is a known flirt in the organization, the respondents tended to judge that conduct as more uncomfortable, offensive, or harassing.

A number of respondents stated how the behaviours of known flirts in their workplaces have made them uncomfortable or offensive.

I have this experience with a director at X company. This director once asked me to stay after work to take down some notes. There were very few people in the premises at the time. Most had gone home. I was very scared and was about

to faint...He was well known in the company for such behaviour... (Kimali, a 30-year-old married respondent, working as a temporary lecturer at a government university)

There was this guy, who was known as '**kukula**' (a flirt). When I was new to the job, he told a friend of mine and me that he would help us get permanent jobs in the Ministry and asked us to give our CVs to him. And he used to tell us unnecessary things when we passed him by at work. Then, some people told me that he talks about me a lot, and told me to be careful. After that I was very stern with him and avoided him... (Thanu, a 28- year-old unmarried government sector, temporary employee, and a focus group participant)

The interview with Samantha, who is a 30- year- old, bank employee, working for a private bank, clearly illuminates how a behaviour of a flirt would be perceived.

Interviewer: Tell us about an incident at the workplace that made you really very uncomfortable, offended, or angry?

Samantha: I was on a fixed term contract with this particular company. When the contract period was over, I was taken into the permanent cadre and was assigned to the marketing department. At that time, the others told me that the Marketing Manager is a flirt. They told me that it is sufficient for anybody to be near him or just pass him by to get a bad reputation or a rumour started. I was really very scared of him... But, actually he is a very nice person. He would help anybody. But, it is his character which was not good... We had sales outlets at various places. There was an outlet at Kalutara. I was new to the department and he told me, 'Samantha, since you are new to this department, you have to go to Kalutara to learn about the business. Get ready to go there with me'. Then, I really got scared. I would be all alone and with his reputation I was devastated.

Samantha went on to explain how after this incident, a rumour started in the company about how she had gone on this sales promotion trip with this manager (even though she had not gone) and how they had stayed in a hotel. While this incident provided interesting information about a behaviour that would constitute sexual harassment, we were also interested in understanding the behaviour and character of this Manager who had a reputation as a flirt to really gauge whether Samantha felt uncomfortable with him due to his reputation or because of his actual behaviour.

Interviewer: How did he behave with you normally?

Samantha: Well...he was very nice, as I told you. Would help you a lot.

Interviewer: Were there any instances, other than when he asked you to accompany him on this sales promotion visit, when he behaved inappropriately with you?

Samanthi: Well...No, actually. I always made sure that I did not cross swords with him a lot. When you really think about the situation, it wasn't even him who started the rumour...

All these respondents appeared to have got scared and uncomfortable by mere requests or statements of perpetrators because of the perpetrators' reputations as flirts, rather than their behaviours per se. In many of these instances, it was even difficult to find any sexual intent or offensiveness.

How the reputation of a perpetrator as a flirt can affect the perception of a behaviour very clearly emerged in a focus group discussion as well. The four respondents of this focus group were lecturers and friends working in the same government university. During the focus group discussion, flirtatious behaviours of a certain person (Dr. X) were discussed. The respondents were narrating various experiences they themselves and others they know of have had with Dr. X.

Though I specialized in the Finance stream as a graduate, I applied for a position in the Economics department when I applied for my job here at the university. I don't like Finance much. So in the interview, they (interviewers) asked about my preference for a department and I stated that I wanted to join the Economics department. And, I was selected for the Economics department. Dr. X (who was a member of the interview panel) would always tell me when he sees me, 'why didn't you select Finance, I would have definitely selected you if you stated Finance as your preference'. I initially thought that he said this genuinely and that he was being nice. But after hearing about these incidents (Dr. X's flirtatious behaviour) I now feel that he would have said these with an ulterior motive. When I knew this, it frightened me. (Mallika, a 27- year- old, unmarried, focus group respondent)

A number of other respondents also stated how they are careful in dealing with known flirts in their organizations.

If I get to know a person is like that (a flirt), I would behave accordingly with him. I wouldn't stop interacting with them or anything, but I will be more cautious. (Ann)

When I was working at the X corporation, there was this person, an executive...We know that this person is a flirt. So we made sure that we did not interact with him, unless it is a must. We won't go in his vehicle even in an emergency. Others also advised us about him, telling us to be careful of him. Especially they tell us not to go in his vehicle with him, like take a lift from him. Because you have to pass a stretch of jungle to reach the office, and he can do something in that lonely stretch....Sometimes, we see him when we come to town. Sometimes, when we are in the bus halt we see him in town. But, we just avoid him, fearing that he would offer to give us a lift. (Rani, a 37- year- old, married, clerk, working for a government institute)

In all these instances, it appears that respondents judge and pre-judge the intention of the perpetrator through his reputation. Even when the behaviour the recipients experience from these flirts are not overtly sexual in nature, the recipients appear to perceive them as covertly sexual in nature, due to the perpetrators' reputation as flirts. Consequently, recipients tend to perceive these behaviours of flirts as unwanted and uncomfortable or offensive.

Perpetrator's organizational status: As in numerous studies which have identified perpetrator status as a factor that affects the construction of the meaning of sexual harassment (Dougherty et al., 1996; Frazier et al., 1995; Sheets & Braver, 1999; Stockdale et al., 1995), we too identified perpetrator status to have an important effect on the judgement of sexual harassment. Many respondents stated how certain behaviours of superiors would be considered harassing or uncomfortable.

Boss telling a sexual joke to secretary would be bad... (Shamina, a Tamil, 29- year-old unmarried government sector employee).

...It is fun sometimes, when it happens among friends. But, if he (boss) said it, then it might be seen as harassment. But among friends it is ok. However friendly we are, we still have this distance and respect for a boss... (Shammi, a Sinhalese, 37- year- old married, private sector employee).

Further, when asked what the respondents understand as 'sexual harassment', many stated that behaviours perpetrated by superiors to be sexual harassment. This indicates that for many of the respondents, the term sexual harassment at the workplace itself meant behaviours perpetrated by superiors, revealing how the perpetrator status can affect the identification of sexual harassment.

It (sexual harassment) can be an unwanted proposal. The superior mainly, can ask you to do something that you did not expect. Well....like we might go to get some work done from the boss, but he might touch you unnecessarily. Something like that... (Champa, a 34- year- old, married, private sector employee, who works as an executive in a financial institution).

It is (sexual harassment is) something that happens from a superior. I don't have any experience of this. But, what comes to my mind is normally a superior coercing an employee in a lower position to fulfil his wants and needs. (Roja, a 24- year-old, unmarried, Tamil, executive, who works for a private sector institute).

A superior or somebody, coercing a person by promising something. Promising to give something. It maybe a lie or it may be to mislead. (Malani, a 40- year- old unmarried, government employee).

It is clearly evident from the above statements that, when the perpetrator holds a higher position, there is greater chance of the behaviour of the perpetrator being considered as harassing. This is specifically so because of the power differentials

between the two parties (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993). Here, the recipient would perceive the superiors' organizational power as possibly bringing about negative consequences for her by rejecting his advances.

How recipient attributes and perceptions affect the judgement of sexual harassment

Prior studies on factors affecting the perception or construction of the meaning of the term sexual harassment has always given prominence to recipient-related factors such as gender of the recipient (Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Frazier et al., 1995; Gutek, 1985; Haspels et al., 2001; McCabe & Hardman, 2005), marital status of the recipient (Gutek, 1985; Nielsen, 1996; Pickerill et al., 2006), age of the recipient (Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Haspels et al., 2001; McCabe & Hardman, 2005; Pickerill et al., 2006; Reese & Lindenberge, 2005) and educational status of the recipient (Gutek, 1985; Maeder, Wiener & Winter, 2007; Pickerill et al., 2006). However, many of these factors were identified from the observer's point of view, where it was explored how the recipient/victim characteristic would affect the judgement of an observer. Yet, the current study looks at how various recipient attributes would affect her (recipient's) judgement of a conduct, rather than an observer's judgement.

Marital or relationship status of the recipient: According to previous studies (Gutek, 1985; Nielsen, 1996; Pickerill et al., 2006), divorced females are less likely than married females to perceive quid pro quo harassment as harassing. Married professionals were also found to perceive non-persistent requests for dates as more severe as compared to single professionals (Nielsen, 1996; Pickerill et al., 2006). Our interviews and discussions revealed that, when the recipient of a certain behaviour is married, or is in a serious relationship, there is greater chance for her to perceive that behaviour as harassing or more severe/offensive than if the recipient is unmarried or single.

Janeesha is a 27- year- old, unmarried respondent, who works as a temporary assistant lecturer in a government university. Explaining to us what she considers as sexual harassment, she narrated an experience she had in her earlier workplace.

That was a really bad experience.... He knew that I had a boy friend. He was not married. Even knowing I had a boy friend, he used to call me often on my mobile...he would tell me 'if you need anything, come to me'. Everybody in the department knew that I had a boy friend, and this person also knew... I knew he was interested in me. He sent me flowers. And everybody was asking me who the flowers are from. My God, that was really bad.

As this statement makes clear, Janeesha had felt more uncomfortable because the perpetrator knowing that she had a boy friend had shown his interest in her.

In another interview, Waruni (a 27 year old, unmarried, executive, working for a private organization) too indicated similar perceptions to those of Janeesha.

Interviewer: What sort of behaviours would you dislike, find offensive, or uncomfortable that occur in your workplace?

Waruni: If they know that I have a boy friend, and even after knowing that, if they try to tell me that they too are interested in me, I don't like that ...

Samanthi and her husband work in two different cities. During the week, Samanthi stays in a hostel and joins her husband only during weekends. Indicating how her marital status affects her perceptions towards the behaviours of males and her judgement of sexual harassment, she had this to say;

Especially, I am here (in the hostel) and my husband is there (in a different city). So, there is more chance of people thinking of other things about me. But till today, nobody has approached me like that, or made such propositions. Many such people have spoken with me and I know what their intentions are, and then I straight away tell them off. "Today, even a married girl is not safe, with these bad men around"...like that I have told them. When you tell them to their face, they get scared and get the message. I have done this a lot.

Here too, it appears that the intentions of the perpetrator were assumed to be promiscuous or ulterior when the recipient is a married woman, whereas a similar behaviour perpetrated against an unmarried woman might be seen as a genuine interest or an honourable interest. Or else, as Niranji, indicated, it can even be the fear of rumours and fear of a bad reputation that make married women suspicious and cautious of behaviours of men.

There will be so many rumours that spread about women, especially when they are working... a woman has to carry out her duties being conscious of this possibility and should behave in a manner so that she would not be subjected to such rumours (Niranji, a 25- year- old, married, private sector employee).

Similar to the discussion on the perpetrator attributes this factor was more indicative of ambiguous behaviours.

Recipients' occupational status: The effect of the recipient's occupational status on the perception of sexual harassment at workplace has been briefly established in a few previous studies (Haspels et al., 2001; Maeder et al., 2007; Reese & Lindenberge, 2005). We confirm this finding by indicating that unwanted behaviours which are perpetrated

against a confirmed, permanent employee have a lesser chance of being perceived as harassing or as more offensive than behaviour perpetrated against a non-confirmed employee such as a temporary or casual worker.

Dilki, a 38- year- old, bank employee related how she was harassed when she was a probationer, by two of her superiors.

There was this officer who would try to touch you and fondle you. He would touch you like this (touching the breast). I got so scared. So I told my Manager when I couldn't tolerate it anymore. But then I got more trouble from the manager. He too tried to touch me...

In explaining how she felt in this instance, Dilki stated:

I was devastated. I was not confirmed also. So I couldn't do much and couldn't ask for a transfer even. Now of course I wouldn't just keep quiet. Those days, I didn't do anything because I was not confirmed. If I made a complaint it wouldn't reflect well on me at that specific juncture. Then after I got my confirmation I reported.

Several other respondents also indicated how the occupational status affects the perception of behaviours.

It has happened in the bank. Not to me. Like...it has happened to me too. But then I shouted. But the others are not like that. They are afraid. Mainly because they are not confirmed, they won't speak up. So when I couldn't bear it up any longer I went and told the manager. (Nilukshi, a 28- year- old, married, bank employee).

....If he tries to hold my hand I would shake the hand and go. I would do something depending on the context...I can't tell him anything because he is a senior of mine...They (peers) have told me to complain. But I think it is not practical. If you report it, others would get to know. Then sometimes, I wouldn't be able to work here. I am still a banking trainee. I am the lowest grade person here. (Tammy, a 21- year- old, unmarried, private sector employee, who works as a junior executive of a financial institution is another non-confirmed employee).

We are professionals, but still juniors working under seniors. So we cannot say anything when they tell us those unwanted jokes and comments. We cannot do that. So in a situation like that we have to bear that up and stay. Because retaliating or telling something in return is a definite 'no' 'no'...We have to work under a senior. If we get trained under somebody who has a good reputation, it is good. Then we have a place in this profession. So, we always go to these big lawyers. Then we have to bear everything. So we have to listen to whatever they say. (Dulani, a lawyer and a focus group respondent).

As evident from these statements, the respondents appear to feel vulnerable, powerless or helpless due to their non-confirmed employee status and their dependence on seniors for their future career prospects. These feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability and helplessness would lead them to perceive and judge their experiences as more harassing whereas a confirmed employee would feel less powerless, vulnerable and helpless, and thus less harassed, as they can more confidently resort to direct ways of settling the matter such as by telling the perpetrator to stop or complaining, as Dilki has done.

Moreover, fear of job related reprisals such as non-confirmation on the job, bad performance appraisals might also lead to a non-confirmed employee to perceive her experiences as more harassing.

Recipient considering the perpetrator to be a friend: Dougherty et al., 1996 in their study have identified that the nature of the relationship between the perpetrator and the recipient affects the interpretation of harassing behaviours. According to them, when the pair has a prior relationship, a potentially harassing behaviour can be interpreted and perceived less negatively than when the pair does not have such a prior relationship.

We also found that prior socializing between the perpetrator and the recipient does affect the recipient's judgement of sexual harassment. While Dougherty et al., (1996) look at how prior socialization between the recipient and the perpetrator affect observer' judgement, the present study looked at how this relationship affects the recipient's judgement of sexual harassment. It was thus revealed in the present study that when the recipient considers the perpetrator to be a friend, there is less chance of certain behaviours being perceived as harassing. The same behaviour coming from a person who is not a friend of the recipient however would be seen as more harassing.

Even those jokes and comments, I won't consider as bad if those come from male friends...when we go to the company cafeteria to have our meals we hear others joking and commenting. Sometimes they talk about girls, or some double meaning talk. Then, it is not harassment to me. I do not take those jokes and comments seriously. The mood matters. Like these people are people I know. So it is ok then. But if it is somebody I don't have much contact with, then, yes (sexual harassment). (Nadhini, a 27- year- old unmarried respondent).

Jokes and talks of that nature (sexual nature) I wouldn't consider as harassment if they come from somebody I know. If it is somebody that I don't know, it would scare me. I would get scared... (Sunila, a 26- year- old, unmarried, clerk, working for a government institute).

Friend or not, there are certain jokes we don't like. But, then again, if it is a friend who made the joke, we would be ok about it in many instances. But, if it is a stranger telling these jokes, we would take it seriously... (Bhavani, a 26- year- old, unmarried, executive, working in the financial sector).

If I get those emails (emails of a sexual nature) from friends, I am ok. In the workplace, I have not got bad emails from people I don't know. As far as I know who the person is, and if he is not that kind of a person I am ok. (Ann, a 27- year- old, unmarried, software engineer working for a private organization).

Touching and patting...depends on the person. If it is a close friend then ok, I don't mind. But, if it is an unknown person then I don't like. I would scold them. (Sabeena, a 40- year- old, Muslim respondent, working for a private institute).

There are people whom I like and do not like. So in that sense if somebody whom I do not consider a friend tells me something personal, I do not like. (Janeesha).

If the person is well known, I will not consider an invitation to go out for a drink or lunch as harassment. It would depend on who invites... (Nilukshi).

The above statements of various respondents unmistakably indicate how many behaviours such as comments of a sexual nature, jokes of a sexual nature, touching and patting, emails of a sexual nature and invitations to go out, are all perceived as not harassing when perpetrated by a person who is considered as a friend. At the same time, these statements indicate how these same behaviours would be perceived as harassing if perpetrated by unknown people or people not considered as friends.

Listening to respondents, it was further evident why this is so. Again, the respondents appear to be gauging the intentions of the perpetrators. When the perpetrators are friends, the respondents seem to consider their behaviours as devoid of any bad or promiscuous intentions. In other words, behaviours perpetrated by friends are seen as friendly, not sexual, just normal fun among friends, or friendly gestures, without any ulterior motives. This can be the reason why a friend's behaviour has less chance of being perceived as harassing.

Champa's discussion clearly points out this fact.

There is a thing like that...When it comes to a friend, we know that person and what sort of a person he is. But, when the person is not a friend, we don't know how he is. We become cautious. We cautiously see whether he has an ulterior motive or not. (Champa, a 34- year- old, married, private sector employee, who works as an executive of a financial institution).

As some respondents stated, the control they have over the behaviour perpetrated by friends appears to be the reason for not considering such behaviours as harassing.

Jokes among friends or a friend telling a joke cannot be taken as that (sexual harassment). But if it is an unknown person telling the joke, then it is strange. And with an unknown person you feel shy. You can't also tell that person to

stop. With friends, you can tell them to stop if you don't like what they are saying. But, with a stranger, you sometimes can't tell them to stop. (Rifana, a 26-year-old, Muslim respondent, who works as a teacher in a private school).

It was further noticeable that this factor of considering the behaviours of friends as less harassing or not harassing was more prominent with regard to behaviours such as subtle physical contacts, verbal remarks, showing or displaying pictures of a sexual nature, receiving unwanted attention and invading personal space. Conversely, this factor was less prominent for behaviours such as propositions to have sexual relationships/intimacy, overt physical contact, leering and rumours/locker room talk.

Conclusion

Though prior research has identified numerous factors as affecting the perception of sexual harassment, those factors in many instances have been narrowly explained, measured quantitatively, explored through an observers' point of view, or discussed in a mutually exclusive manner. According to O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2009), very few studies have actually examined the attributes of perpetrators and recipients in explaining the perceptual and judgmental differences in sexual harassment. The current study aptly identified these various attributes of perpetrators and the attributes and perceptions of recipients that would affect the recipients' judgement of sexual harassment at workplace. It was found out that, when a recipient judges whether a conduct is sexual harassment or not, various attributes of the perpetrator such as his marital status, his reputation as a flirt, and his organizational status, as well as her own attributes and perceptions such as her marital/relationship status, her employment status and whether she considers the perpetrator as a friend or not, all play important roles.

However, overall, it was also noted that the effect of these perpetrator attributes and the recipient attributes are stronger in instances where the behaviour is not clearly identifiable as harassing or not (in ambiguous instances). That is, when the behaviour is more of a covert nature or when the behaviour is not blatantly sexual in nature, respondents would give more prominence to these attributes of the perpetrator and their own attributes and perceptions, in understanding their experiences. It also appears that recipients use these attributes of the perpetrator and their own to gauge mainly whether the intention of the perpetrator is honest or promiscuous. If the perpetrator is married or has a reputation as a flirt, or else, if the recipient is married, holds a subordinate position, or does not consider the perpetrator as a friend, then the behaviours experienced would be seen as promiscuous or ulterior, and as such, more harassing. Taken as a whole, this study clearly depicts the complexity and subjectivity of sexual harassment by indicating the various factors that play a role in the judgement of sexual harassment.

Organizational policy makers should identify this complexity and subjectivity in the development and implementation of anti-sexual harassment policies in their

organizations as well as in the investigation process of sexual harassment complaints.

Delimitations

Sexual harassment being a very wide area of study, the need to establish certain boundaries were identified (Creswell, 2003), in order to carry out a more thorough and in-depth analysis of the selected factors. In understanding how sexual harassment is judged, it is possible to explore both males' and females' judgement of such instances. After all, sexual harassment is said to be prevalent among both males and females. Yet, the present study's focus will be exclusively on females' judgement of instances for a number of reasons.

One main reason for confining the study to females' judgement is the high prevalence of sexual harassment among females (Adikaram, 2005; Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1993; Gutek, 1985; Ryan & Kenig, 1991; US Merit System Protection Board, 1994). Though prevalent, sexual harassment among males is very rare (Berdahl et al., 1996; Fitzgerald, 1993; Gutek, 1985; Ryan & Kenig, 1991; US Merit System Protection Board, 1994).

Moreover, the effect of gender in defining sexual harassment or on perceptions/judgement regarding sexual harassment has been studied extensively (Baker, Terpstra, & Cutler, 1990; Dougherty et al., 1996; Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Frazier et al., 1995; Gutek, 1985, 1995; Haspels et al., 2001; McCabe & Hardman, 2005). The findings of these studies indicate rather contradictory findings where some studies indicate that males tend to perceive fewer behaviours as sexual harassment while females perceive more behaviours as sexual harassment, and that females have a broader understanding of the notion of sexual harassment at workplaces (Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Frazier et al., 1995; Gutek, 1985; Haspels et al., 2001; McCabe & Hardman, 2005). In contrast, some other studies indicate that there does not exist a considerable difference in the perceptions about sexual harassment among males and females, especially in regard to what constitutes sexual harassment (Baker, Terpstra, & Cutler, 1990; Dougherty et al., 1996; Pryor et al., 1997; York, 1989). A few studies also indicate that, in general, females and males differ in their definitions of sexual harassment, but the difference is small and occurs only under certain conditions (Gutek, 1995, Gutek and O'Connor, 1995). The extensive exploration of the gender's effect on the perception of sexual harassment together with the contradictory findings indicate that studying males' judgement of the meaning of the notion sexual harassment at workplace together with the females' judgement would be beyond the scope of this study. Such an exploration which would also be a comparative analysis in a single study would hinder the in-depth understanding that is sought (Hood, 2007; Morse, 2007).

Directions for Future Research

The current study has delimited the study to exploring how the Sri Lankan females' judgement of sexual harassment is affected by attributes of the perpetrator and the attributes of the recipient. Hence, studies which explore how the males judge sexual harassment and whether these same factors (attributes of the perpetrator and the attributes of the recipient) affect the judgement of sexual harassment of male recipients would undoubtedly shed more light on the issue.

At the same time, more in-depth explorations on other important factors such as attributes of the harassing experience as well as organisational and cultural factors would yield more understanding of the judgement of sexual harassment.

The industries the respondents were engaged in were not intentionally or purposefully explored in selecting the sample of the study. Thus, the industries of the respondents that were studied (unintentionally) were mainly from the education industry, banking industry, information technology industry, and travel industry. But, the importance of the industry in the judgement of sexual harassment did not emerge during open coding nor has been established in prior research. Thus, industries were not specifically explored in developing the arguments of the current study and hence the study did not have any respondents from the garment industry, plantation sector, travel industry and hotel industry. While this is not a limitation of the study whatsoever, as the intention of the study was not to generalize a finding to a population, future studies can explore the possibility of extending the theory developed in this study to these other industries.

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