

**SEXUAL HARRASSMENT AMONGST UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS  
AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE EAST COAST OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA,  
MALAYSIA**

Researchers:

**Shariffah Nuridah Aishah Syed Nong\*, Asiah Bidin, Akmal Mohamad,**

**Noraida Harun and Nur Amani Pauzai**

Faculty of Law and International Relations,

Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA),

Gong Badak Campus,

21300, Kuala Terengganu,

Terengganu, Malaysia

Telephone number: 09-6687655

Faks number: 09-6687849

\*Corresponding author

Email addresses and hand phone numbers:

Shariffah Nuridah Aishah Syed Nong (*given name*) ([aishah@unisza.edu.my](mailto:aishah@unisza.edu.my)) 016-9803161

Asiah Bidin (*given name*) ([asiah@unisza.edu.my](mailto:asiah@unisza.edu.my)) 013-9802569

Akmal Mohamad (*given name*) ([akmalmohd@unisza.edu.my](mailto:akmalmohd@unisza.edu.my)) 013-9329778

Noraida Harun (*given name*) ([noraida@unisza.edu.my](mailto:noraida@unisza.edu.my)) 017-9366489

Nur Amani Pauzai (*given name*) ([nuramani@unisza.edu.my](mailto:nuramani@unisza.edu.my)) 013-9677783

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is written based on a research conducted under the funding of the University's Grant. The existence of informal complaints and reports from the undergraduate students on the incidents of sexual harassment throughout their study in campus and the absence of specific rules or policy has triggered this research to investigate the issues of sexual harassment at the university. This research is aimed at assessing the understanding of students on the meaning of sexual harassment and their perceptions, investigating the existence of sexual harassment cases at the university and identifying the needs for a policy to handle sexual harassment in campus. Questionnaires were distributed to 354 respondents representing undergraduate students from all 9 faculties. The finding of the research shows that the university students are exposed to sexual harassment whereby 14.2 percent had the experience of being sexually harassed in campus and that the perpetrator should be penalised. The research suggests the university to provide for a specific policy to deal with the matter efficiently and effectively.*

**KEYWORDS:** Sexual harassment, Education, Factors, Perception and Code of Practice.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The issue of sexual harassment in high learning institutes is not new. It has been recognised as a social problem at national as well as international level. Although the incident has been traced since 1980, the Malaysians seem to show interest on this issue around 1990s (Rohani, 2005). There is no doubt that many discussions and writings had been done either internationally or locally on sexual harassment in Malaysia in relation to the workplace. However in learning institution area, only few studies had been conducted comprehensively to assess the incidents on campus.

Why sexual harassment happens in a learning institute? Basically, it is a problem which occurs as a consequence of social relations amongst members in the society. It may happen intentionally or incidentally within this relationship whereby sometimes even the perpetrator himself/ herself does not alert that his/ her action amounts to sexual harassment. In academic field, it cannot be denied that social relation does exist among students or between students and other parties such as lecturers and administrative staff. Therefore sexual harassment is a possible incident. Among early studies on sexual harassment in academic field was those conducted by several Western researchers including Benson, D.J and Thompson (1982) and Cammaert (1985) whereby their findings disclosed the existence of sexual harassment cases between lecturers and students. In Malaysia, the incidents had been detected in the late 1980s through research conducted by Badriyah in 1988 (Sabitha, 2003) where it found out that 80% of interviewed student respondents had been harassed. A study by Zalina (1995) exposed the same phenomenon. Compared to sexual harassment at workplace, the incident which happens in institutions of higher education is more serious since it involves relationship between lecturers and students who are of imbalance power strengthened by reasons of

age gap, innocence of students, belief and respect of lecturers and gender disparity in terms of academic environment.

The existence of cases of sexual harassment in educational sector in Malaysia had been disclosed by several local researchers in their empirical studies (Ahmad Shamsul, 2005). It had psychological effect on the victims where the students became a low-esteem person with a sense of revenge and bad reputation (Mumtaz & Ahmad Shamsul, 2003). Nevertheless, there had been no prevalent research on how far this phenomenon had occurred on campus in Malaysia until recently. In 2011, a case study had been conducted by a group of researchers on sexual harassment at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) campus, one of Malaysian public institutions of higher education, to assess the understanding and experiences of sexual harassment amongst undergraduate students. The research found that students have relatively high understanding about incidents of sexual harassment and incidence of sexual harassment on campus is high with more female victims (Noraida et al, 2011). A survey conducted by Asiah et al (2008) on one of the faculty undergraduate students confirmed the incidents at the university campus. However, the absence of specific procedure in making complaints on the subject matter had caused the cases to be ignored and not reported to the university's administrative officers for necessary and further actions. Thus this research was conducted to investigate closely the sexual harassment cases which occurred within the university's campus by engaging a greater research samples. The systematic sampling used in this research enables the finding to be generalised to all of the university's populations.

This research is aimed at assessing the knowledge and understanding of undergraduates on the meaning of sexual harassment, investigating the perceptions of the students on sexual harassment at public institutions of higher education, analysing the existence of such cases on campus and determining the university's need for a policy to overcome sexual harassment incidents. The research is important as it supports and strengthens the recommendation made by the Malaysian government for every organisation to have sexual harassment code of practice. Malaysia unlike other countries such as United States, Australia, France, New Zealand and Sweden has no specific legislation to deal with sexual harassment. In 1999 the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resource issued the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (Code of Practice 1999) with the aim to provide guidelines to the employers on the establishment of in-house mechanisms at the enterprise level to prevent and eradicate sexual harassment in the workplace. Malaysia believes that since the problem arises out of general workplace relationships involving personal behaviour of people within the enterprise, the most effective way of dealing with it is to tackle it at the workplace itself so that it can be confronted on the spot and nipped in the bud. Besides that, the Malaysian Public Service Department (MPSD) through Service Circular No 22 / 2005 had laid down guidelines for the purpose of educating as well as preventing the members of society, especially to the public officers, from committing wrongdoings at workplace which may be categorised as sexual harassment. The Circular treats it as an immoral act and a breach of personal values of a public officer and recognises it as one of the prohibited acts under Rule 4A of the Public Officers Regulations (Conduct and Discipline) 1993

where the wrongdoer may be faced with disciplinary action. Therefore, it is hoped that this research is able to be a cornerstone towards the drafting of a code of practice or policy at the university in order to educate the students as well as to prevent and eradicate such incidents.

## 2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is an exploratory study utilising quantitative approach. It was conducted in both campuses of the university where a total of 354 undergraduate students from all faculties were systematically selected as respondents, comprising both female and male students. A survey questionnaire was used as the main instrument to assess the student's understanding and perception as well as experiences of sexual harassment. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire was tested in a pilot study with *cronbach alpha* value of 0.884. Questionnaires were distributed by two appointed enumerators who then contacted with the representatives of each programmes under every faculty at the university. The data was analysed using the software SPSS 17.

Questionnaires were drafted by the researchers based on those used in previous research by Sabitha (2003) with necessary modifications to accord with the research objectives. Questionnaires were divided into 5 categories comprising of the following:

- A: Background of respondents
- B: Knowledge and understanding of sexual harassment
- C: Perception of respondents towards sexual harassment
- D: The leading factors
- E: Actions taken against the harassers.

Category A consists of questions on the gender, age, name of programme and faculty whereas B has a combination of ticking and writing down the answers within provided spaces to evaluate how far the respondents know and understand the meaning of sexual harassment, the sources of knowledge and experiences in attending related talks/seminars. Meanwhile category C comprises of likert scale questions with 5 likert to assess the students perception on sexual harassment at public institutions of higher education as well as at the university itself including the negative effect of sexual harassment, the need for a university policy, appropriate actions taken by university and staff who manage to play effective role in preventing sexual harassment. Category D requires the respondents to determine the factors which lead to sexual harassment using 5 likert questions besides laying down specifically the main factor which leads to sexual harassment at the university. Category E provides for actions taken by respondents should they were sexually harassed.

### 3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1 The profile of the respondents

**Table 1:** Gender, age, year of study and grade of respondents

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	82	23.2 %
Female	272	76.8 %
<b>AGE</b>		
18-20 years	150	42.4 %
21-23 years	159	44.9 %
Above 23	45	12.7 %
<b>PROGRAMME</b>		
Degree	186	52.8 %
Diploma	166	47.2 %
<b>YEAR OF STUDY</b>		
Year 1	109	30.8
Year 2	119	33.6
Year 3	106	29.9
Year 4	20	5.6
<b>CUMULATIVE GRADE PERCENTAGE AVERAGE (CGPA)</b>		
3.67 - 4.00 (excellent)	28	8 %
3.00 - 3.66 (good)	208	59.4 %
2.33 - 2.99 (medium)	104	29.7 %
2.00 - 2.32 (minimum achievement)	9	2.6 %

As mentioned earlier, the respondents (total of 354) were systematically selected from undergraduate students representing all programmes offered by the university. Table 1 shows that about 77% of the respondents are female students. This reflects the recent gender distributions of student's population in Malaysia where the Prime Minister of Malaysia during the opening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> global conference of Women Deliver 2013 had pointed out about 75% of university students enrolled were females (retrieved from <http://www.eduicon.com>). Respondents from both level of programmes; diploma and degree were chosen from amongst students who were in their first, second, third and final year of their studies. Data on the age of respondents shows that majority of respondents were between 18 to 23 years old. Diploma students normally enter the university at the age of 18 and finish their study after 2 to 3 years while the degree students generally enter the university at the age of 20 and graduate after four years when they are 23 years old. Medical and surgery students graduate only after 5 years at the age of 24. CGPA of the respondents shows that the students' achievement is relatively good with nearly 70% obtained CGPA of 3.00 and above.

### 3.2 Knowledge and Understanding of sexual harassment

In Part B, the respondents were asked 8 questions on their knowledge and understanding on the meaning and concept of sexual harassment. Finding shows that majority of respondents know the terms of “sexual harassment” whereby 96.6% admitted to have heard of the words previously. Most of them became aware of the terms during secondary school (68.4%) while 29.2% had already knew it during primary school. The research finds out that there are variety of sources of information on the sexual harassment including communications with friends, talks and seminars, television, internet, newspapers, parents and other family members. The finding is significant as it shows that nowadays students can easily access to any information through variety of mediums including on sexual harassment. Relating to the meaning of sexual harassment itself, 87.4% of the respondents claimed that they knew the meaning. However, some of the definitions given by them indicates an element of misunderstanding of its true meaning. For example, several respondents defined sexual harassment as molest, rape, sodomy, gay, lesbian and physical touching.

Respondents were also asked about their experience of sexual harassment both in and outside campus. The result shows that nearly 31% of them had the experience of being sexually harassed outside campus including the shopping complex, public transports, bus stations, recreational park and night market. Amongst the harassers are jobless males, teachers, foreign labourers and family members. Meanwhile a total of 14.2% had been harassed in the campus such as at the hostel area, cafeteria, academic buildings and classes where the harassers are the security guards, administrative staff, classmates, lecturers and construction workers. Out of 65 harassers, 83.1% are males while the remaining 16.9% are females.

### 3.3 Perception of respondents towards sexual harassment

**Table 2** : Means of perception of sexual harassment at the university and other universities

Item	N	Mean value	Standard deviation
Perception of sexual harassment at higher learning institutions and the university itself	7	4.0532	0.53717
Harasser should be punished	353	4.6969	0.71622
The university should have own code of practice	352	4.4006	0.84819
Sexual harassment gives negative effect	352	4.3381	0.89756
Victim faces problem in academic	351	3.9943	0.95617
Students of institute of higher learning are exposed to sexual harassment	354	3.8729	0.93300
Students of the university	353	3.6147	0.97060

manage to overcome sexual harassment			
Students of the university are exposed to sexual harassment	354	3.4661	0.99587

In Part C, a total of seven questions with 5 likert scale are prepared, namely 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree and 5=strongly agree. With reference to Table 2 above, the research finds that most of the respondents agreed that generally graduates of institutions of higher education in Malaysia and specifically graduates of the university itself are exposed to sexual harassment (M=4.0532). Item that the harasser should be punished obtains the highest mean value of 4.6969 followed by the urged for the university to have its own code of practice (M=4.4006). Respondents were not sure on two items namely, whether the students of the university are exposed to sexual harassment (M=3.4661) and whether they manage to overcome the problem if it happens to them (M=3.614).

The respondents were also asked to give appropriate and suitable suggestions in order to prevent the occurrence of sexual harassment in campus. Among the suggestions submitted are to increase related talks and seminars about sexual harassment from time to time, enforce the existing dress code in the campus, increase religious awareness programmes, provide clear guidance on combating sexual harassment as well as a specific venue for receiving harassment complaints and also to take disciplinary action against the harasser once found guilty. Besides that, the respondents also gave opinion on who could play effective role in preventing sexual harassment in campus. Some suggested the university's counsellor and Centre of Islam while others viewed the security guards, the students' associations and the administrative officers.

### 3.4 The leading factors

Part D relates to the contributing factors which lead to the commission of sexual harassment in the university. Seven questions were asked based on 5 likert scale questions similar to Part C and several other questions were open ended questions.

**Table 3** : Means of the factors leading to sexual harassment

Item	N	Mean value	Standard deviation
Factors leading to sexual harassment	7	4.0750	0.61916
Victim's personality	354	4.2853	0.81797
Gender	354	4.2119	0.89555
Harasser's attitude	353	4.1671	0.83791
Encouraging surroundings	354	4.1638	0.85242
Existence of opportunities	353	4.1558	0.86015
Intention	352	3.9716	0.87007
Power relationship	352	3.5625	1.00231

The above Table 3 indicates that the victim's own personality has the highest mean value 4.2853 and followed by gender factor (M=4.2119), the harasser's attitude (M=4.1671), encouraging surroundings (M=4.1638) and existence of opportunity (M=4.1558). Meanwhile the intention and power relationship factors obtained less than 4 score. This shows that the occurrence of sexual harassment in the campus is not intentionally planned by the harasser but it happens due to the other factors including the victim's personality and attitude, the surrounding circumstances and the existence of opportunities.

The respondents were also asked to give their independent views on the leading factors. Among the factors summed up were the indecent clothes of students opposing the university's dress code like wearing tight shirts and trousers or sexy, uncontrolled social interactions between male and female students and surrounding environment of several particular places in campus which are dark, quiet and unsafe.

### 3.5 Actions taken against the harassers

Part E of the questionnaires requires the respondents to specify according to priority, the actions that would be taken by them if they are harassed. A total of 8 actions were provided; (i) face the harasser and explain to him, (ii) give warning to the harasser, (iii) tell friends about the harassment made by the harasser, (iv) make report to the university's top management/Department of Student Affairs/Students' Association/Faculty, (v) tell their mentors/academic advisors, (vi) inform the lecturers, (vii) report to the counsellor and (viii) remain quiet/do not take any action. The finding shows that the main action that will be taken by the respondents is giving strict warning to the harasser. It is followed by making report to the university's administrative officers and informing mentors. Meanwhile the two last actions taken by them will be to encounter face to face with the harasser and explain to him and also to remain silent without taking any action.

The last question asked was whether the respondents are willing to make written reports if they are harassed. In response to this, majority of them (92%) answered positively while 8% gave opposite answer.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to highlight the issue of sexual harassment at university in Malaysia by presenting a case study of one of the public universities in the East-Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The study revealed that although majority of the students claimed that they knew about the meaning of sexual harassment but their overall responses to the questions posed shows their lack of knowledge, misunderstanding and confusions. There are even students who have never attended any talks or seminars on the harassment issues. It is clear that the main reason which caused the misunderstanding is the lack of exposure on the part of the undergraduates towards sexual harassment issues. This finding supports previous



finding by Sabitha (2000) that there are respondents who actually experience the harassment but do not realise that it is sexual harassment. Ishak (2001) added that plenty of people are still blurred about the true concept of the harassment because it is abstract.

The research also revealed that the university students are exposed to sexual harassment due to various reasons including the existence of opportunity which is caused by boundless social interactions between males and females and also the inappropriate attire. Findings by Azizi (2001) and Sbraga and O'Donohue (2000) supports the indecent dressing as one of the main factors leading to the harassment. Therefore the university should enforce the existing dress code to all male and female students so that the risk of sexual harassment in campus can be reduced. In terms of actions taken by the victim, the respondents strongly agreed that disciplinary action should be taken by the university against the harasser as an effective measure. Even though the main action forwarded by the respondents appears to be to give strict warning to the harasser, in reality it is not practical. This is because of the negative implications that may arise due to the warning such as continuous harassment, feeling of scared, unsecured and uncomfortable throughout the period of study, especially when the harasser has the authority relationship with the victim like lecturer and student. Previous study at international level by Vohlidalova (2009) proved that remain silent is the most frequent strategy used by the students. Moreover, the lack of understanding by the students has caused them to take no action against the harasser. As a whole, all parties who are related to the students play significant role and should be responsible in preventing the occurrence of sexual harassment as well as solving related issues.

Furthermore, the research also ascertains that the university should have its own code of practice to overcome the issues of sexual harassment in campus. Several other public universities in Malaysia already have theirs which are available both in hard copy as well as on line. Although the respondents viewed that they can handle the problem of harassment by their own, in reality, laws and regulations are still relevant and strongly needed. This is due to the fact that not every single person is able to manage his/her problem by himself/herself especially when facing with sexual harassment incident. In addition, laws are a formal preventive mechanism and thus they are needed to solve the issues effectively. The finding of this research that 14.2 % out of 354 students had been harassed was not a small number. It confirms the existence of sexual harassment cases in the university and the number may become larger in the future if it is not handled effectively. Due to the fact that most of the students did not understand the true concept and meaning of sexual harassment, it is highly probable that the actual number of cases is bigger than the research result. Fatimah (t.t) observed that this situation may happen due to the hesitation or shyness of the victim to make report, feeling afraid of misunderstanding an action as sexual harassment, non existence of appropriate channel to make report and the harasser is a person with authority.

Finally, it is hope that the finding of this research will provide a strong justification for the university's students to have a code of practice to overcome sexual harassment in campus. It cannot be denied that the university bears the responsibility of providing safe and conducive circumstances to all of its staff and students. The existence of the code or policy will be an un rebuttable evidence of the university's concern towards the protection and welfare of the university's students as its main clients.

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