Unawareness and Unfamiliarity about the Issue 'Sexual Harassment at the Workplace': A Case of Sri Lankan Working Women

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Sexual harassment at the workplace is an issue that has gained a lot of awareness around the world during the last four decades. While the few studies that do exist in Sri Lanka have indicated a high prevalence of the problem in Sri Lankan workplaces (e.g. Adikaram, 2005, 2010; Wijayatilake and Zachariya, 2001), whether employees are actually aware of this issue and the concept of sexual harassment at workplaces in Sri Lanka still remains a mystery. Prior research clearly indicates that when people are aware of the issue, more behaviours would be considered as sexual harassment, than when they are unaware of the issue (Brewis, 2001; Pickerill, Jackson, and Newman, 2006). This identification of behavior as sexual harassment, in turn, will determine how people construct the meaning of the term and how they react to such behaviours.

Thus, the main intention of the present paper is to explore how aware and familiar women employees of Sri Lanka are about the issue of 'sexual harassment at the workplace', as well as how knowledgeable and aware they are about the various legislations and anti sexual harassment policies that exist in the country and their organizations.

The main study from which this article is drawn, explored the meaning construction process of the notion of 'sexual harassment at workplaces', based on the social constructionist philosophical premise, and employing the grounded theory strategy of inquiry (Chamaz, 2003). Data for the present study was collected through 40 individual interviews and 4 focus group discussions of 4 to 5 respondents each. Purposive sampling at the initial stages of data collection and theoretical sampling in the successive stages was employed. The data analysis started simultaneously with data collection and thus with the first interview. In line with the process specified in the grounded theory approach, data were collected and analyzed in two main stages as open coding and selective coding (Charmaz, 2003).

The study revealed that although there is an increased consciousness and lack of tolerance regarding violence against women in Sri Lanka in the recent past (Jayaweera, 2002), respondents awareness about various forms of violence are clearly not sufficient. Some respondents have not even heard of the term 'sexual harassment at work places'. Some have heard of the term, but not relating to workplaces. Some respondents were very quick to assume it to be sexual harassment in buses, because, that maybe the most common and frequent harassment of a sexual nature they had faced. There were also a number of respondents, who thought sexual harassment means more severe behaviours of a sexual nature such as physical acts. Few respondents were also of the view that sexual harassment is rape or sexual assault.

It was thought worthwhile to delve deeper and uncover why these respondents are not aware of the issue. Generally, publicity given to the issue is found to heighten people's awareness and sensitivity about the issue (Pickerill et al., 2006). As research indicates, in many Western

countries, which are considered to have individualistic cultures, much concern exists about women's rights and extensive discussion appears in the media about the issue of sexual harassment (Sigal et al., 2005). On the contrary, it is stated that in collectivist cultures less publicity is given to the issue, and discussion of the issue in the media is low due to their concern about social harmony and group cooperation. As publicity on issues such as sexual harassment can harm these collectivist beliefs, open discussions of the issue are avoided. Having a collectivist culture, it appears that, in Sri Lanka, publicity given to the issue is very low.

In Sri Lanka when and if publicity is given to the issue, it is about more severe incidents of harassment such as rape or assault than everyday occurrences of sexual harassment. Attesting this fact, when talking about their understanding and awareness of the notion of sexual harassment, many respondents stated about the rape and assault incidents they have read in newspapers or heard/seen on television. Furthermore, issues such as sexual harassment being considered a taboo in cultures such as Sri Lanka, and the existence of cultural norms expecting women to confirm to feminine identity by showing sexual ignorance and not speaking freely about sex, sexuality, and eroticism, (Tambiah, 1996) might also have led to this unawareness.

It was also interesting to note that the respondents were also unaware and thus were not knowledgeable about the law that prohibits sexual harassment in Sri Lanka (Penal Code (Amendment) Act No.22 of 1995). At the same time, almost all the respondents whose organizations had anti sexual harassment policies stated that they were not aware of the contents of the policies, and sometimes even the existence of the policies.

All in all, the study indicated respondents' unawareness and unfamiliarity with the whole issue of sexual harassment. This, in turn, clearly has significant implications for the way in which they construct the meaning of 'sexual harassment'. There is a greater possibility for respondents to identify and think of a few behaviours as constituting sexual harassment as well as not to acknowledge and label instances of sexual harassment even when they experiences them. Furthermore, with this unawareness and ignorance, victims will tend to overlook and be passive when reacting to many instances of sexual harassment.

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