

Sexual Harassment against Women at Workplaces and Its Impact on their Motivation

Article by Chibwe Florence Mulenga
Texila American University, Zambia
E-mail: chibwe.mulenga908@gmail.com

Abstract

Workplace sexual harassment against women is a recurring problem around the globe and is costly to workers and organizations. This is becoming a major problem and is being considered a gender-based violence issue which is leading to the number of working women being fewer leading to gender inequality. Different nations have taken measures to deal with the consequences of such a problem. Sexual harassment at work can have very serious consequences both for the harassed individual as well as for other working women who experience it second-hand and also impact their motivation. The consequences to the individual employee can be many and serious. Therefore, this report attempts to outline these impacts/consequences. This paper explores sexual harassment in the workplace within organizations in Zambia. Different articles and reports were reviewed to that purpose. This information is considered particularly timely as it reflects the current position in Zambia. The expected outcome of this paper is the development of policies and creation of awareness which will help to stop the perpetrators of sexual harassment against women in the workplace.

Keywords: *gender, inequality, violence, motivation, harassment*

Introduction

The main aim of this piece of writing is to outline the impacts of sexual harassment against women at workplaces and its impact on their motivation. It will begin by thoroughly defining the term sexual harassment in the workplace and its different forms, followed by an outline of the impacts it has on women's motivation.

A recent case in Zambia is still under investigations where two women are claiming being sexually harassed by a named Permanent Secretary in the Government where they work. Local Government and housing Permanent Secretary (PS) Bishop Eddy Chomba's arrival at his new posting has been rocked by allegations of sexual harassment by two women spoken to by the news house. The Watchdog has heard from two women who describe a culture of abuse and sexual advances in exchange for favours by the Man of God. The two women who elected to be anonymous say Bishop Chomba repeatedly harasses them for sex in exchange for gifts, money and trips abroad on Ministerial duties.

"One day whilst in his office, he directly asked me for a sexual favour. I told him I'm qualified and experienced and I do not need to open my legs for him to seek any form of gratification. I then stood up to leave his office and left him stunned. He grabbed my hand and wanted to kiss me but I pushed him away," said one victim speaking on condition of anonymity.

"For me I'm fed up of his unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that has explicitly affect my employment. The PS's conduct has unreasonably interfered with my work performance and has created a hostile and offensive environment," added another.

The two said they have decided to expose him in the hope that he would stop pestering them for sexual favours and tapping their backsides. The two victims allege that PS Chomba's sexual harassment at times takes a more subtle form. Instead of being propositioned for sex, the two victims have been receiving suggestive late-night texts or sexually-charged comments. "We know of a woman in another department where his invitations to meetings have somehow turned into dates. This man hides behind the Bible to take advantage of us.

The former PS Amos Malupenga was never this promiscuous because he respected his females under his charge. This man is too randy for our proximity,” another independent source in the Ministry of Local Government said.

Sexual harassment is unwelcome sexual behaviour, which could be expected to make a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated. It can be physical, verbal or written. Sexual harassment is not consensual interaction, flirtation or friendship. Sexual harassment is not behaviour that is mutually agreed upon (Equal Opportunity Act, 2010). Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination that consists of three types of harassing behaviour; the first being Gender harassment, which is verbal and nonverbal behaviours that convey hostility, objectification, exclusion, or second-class status about members of one gender. Second, unwanted sexual attention which is unwelcome verbal or physical sexual advances, which can include assault and third, sexual coercion which is when favourable professional or educational treatment is conditioned on sexual activity. The distinctions between the types of harassment are important, particularly because many people do not realize that gender harassment is a form of sexual harassment (McCann, 2005).

Sexually harassing behaviour can be either direct (targeted at an individual) or ambient (a general level of sexual harassment in an environment) and is harmful in both cases. It is considered illegal when it creates a hostile environment (gender harassment or unwanted sexual attention that is “severe or pervasive” enough to alter the conditions of employment, interfere with one’s work performance, or impede one’s ability to get an education) or when it is quid pro quo sexual harassment; when favourable professional or educational treatment is conditioned on sexual activity (ibid).

It can also consist of undesired and unnecessary physical contact such as touching, caressing or assault. Furthermore, it entails compromising invitations, requests or demands for sexual favours, as well as explicit or implied threats of dismissal, and refusal of promotion, if sexual services are not granted (Wonani, 2010).

Workplace sexual harassment is costly to workers and organizations and is legally prohibited in more than 75 countries. Sexual harassment is covered in the workplace when it happens: at work, at work-related events or where people are carrying out work-related functions or between people sharing the same workplace. A single incident is enough to constitute sexual harassment – it doesn’t have to be repeated. Men experience sexual harassment but it disproportionately affects women, especially in the workplace. The Australian Human Rights Commission reported that 1 in 5 women experience sexual harassment in the workplace at some time (Hersch, 2015).

According to a study conducted by Wonani (2010), on ‘Awareness on Women Workers and their Rights in Zambia’, the extent of sexual harassment is not known in the majority of organizations, because no one wants to talk about it or deal with it. Most organizations do not have a sexual harassment policy. Some organizations mentioned sexual harassment in their code of conduct, but this was not well defined, nor was the procedures for redress clearly spelt out. Study respondents did reveal that sexual harassment was going on in their organizations, and some of them were victims of this harassment. However, they were not willing to give further details because they felt it was embarrassing and it was a very sensitive topic.

It was noted that sexual harassment is experienced right from the point of seeking employment through to recruitment, promotion and contract renewal. Sexual harassment was more prevalent amongst male superiors and female subordinates, particularly those in the lower ranks who were desperate for survival and without a bargaining position. The greatest challenge that women workers have is when top management is involved in sexual harassment, because they have almost no room for recourse in the organization.

Sexual harassment is very difficult to report and prove hence the few cases being reported everywhere especially in rural areas as reported in the table attached.

In addition, Sexual harassment remains a persistent problem in the workplace at large. Across workplaces, five common characteristics emerge: Women experience sexual harassment more often than men do. Gender harassment e.g., behaviors that communicate that women do not belong or do not merit respect, is by far the most common type of sexual harassment. When an environment is pervaded by gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion become more likely to occur; in part because unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion are almost never experienced by

women without simultaneously experiencing gender harassment. Men are more likely than women to commit sexual harassment. Co-workers and peers more often commit sexual harassment than do superiors. Sexually harassing behaviors are not typically isolated incidents; rather, they are a series or pattern of sometimes escalating incidents and behaviors. (ibid). If it persists, this is what is eventually turning into Gender based violence and has now added to the list of sexual offences. Gender-based violence is defined as “any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed gender differences between males and females”. (IASC, 2005). Gender-based violence limits participation of the victims in the development process at individual, community and national level.

This chapter presents information on various forms of gender-based violence cases prevalent in Zambia. The UN Declaration (CEDAW, 1979) defines violence against females as any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

Having looked at the definition and forms of sexual harassment against women in the workplace, it is imperative to outline the different impacts it has on their motivation. Sexual harassment at work can have very serious consequences both for the harassed individual as well as for other working women who experience it second-hand. The consequences to the individual employee can be many and serious. In some situations, a harassed woman risks losing her job or the chance for a promotion if she refuses to give in to the sexual demands of someone in authority. In other situations, the unwelcome sexual conduct of co-workers makes the working conditions hostile and unpleasant, putting indirect pressure on her to leave the job. Sometimes, the employee is so traumatized by the harassment that she suffers serious emotional and physical consequences and very often, becomes unable to perform her job properly.

According to data compiled by Equal Rights Advocates, a women’s law centre in the U.S., 90 to 95% of sexually harassed women suffer from some debilitating stress reaction, including anxiety, depression, headaches, sleep disorders, weight loss or gain, nausea, lowered self-esteem and sexual dysfunction (Advocates for Human Rights, 2003).

The consequences to working women as a group are no less serious. Sexual harassment has a cumulative, demoralizing effect that discourages women from asserting themselves within the workplace, while among men it reinforces stereotypes of women employees as sex objects. Severe or pervasive sexual harassment in certain types of businesses creates a hostile or intimidating environment that causes women to leave their jobs and look elsewhere for work or discourages them from seeking those jobs in the first place. The effect on the morale of all employees can also be serious. Both men and women in a workplace can find their work disrupted by sexual harassment even if they are not directly involved. Sexual harassment can have a demoralizing effect on everyone within range of it, and it often negatively impacts company productivity on the whole (ibid).

Furthermore, when an employee has experienced an incident of sexual harassment, or worse a steady campaign of harassment, their output will be affected. Research closely associates sexual harassment with job dissatisfaction and disengagement. Extensive research shows that sexual harassment takes a toll on women’s professional well-being. This is true across a variety of industries, from academia to the military to the Fortune 500. Studies have considered a range of professional well-being outcomes, in particular, job satisfaction, organizational withdrawal, organizational commitment, job stress, and productivity or performance decline. Other ways sexual harassment affects women in the workplace are tardiness, absenteeism, and project neglect as well as employee distraction. One study of 262 women who had reported being harassed found that nearly 75 percent of them felt that the effects of the harassment undermined their job performance.

In particular, these women cited decreased motivation to work and an inability to concentrate on their work due to the presence of sexual innuendos. Case material from the same study suggested common patterns of harassment behaviour and reactions to it. Incidents of sexual harassment typically threaten a woman's job security and violate her physical privacy. Mental and physical stress symptoms, as well as diminished productivity and self-confidence, are a common reaction (NCBI, 2005).

Conclusion

Workplace sexual harassment is costly to workers especially women, as they are the most affected, and organizations and is legally prohibited in more than 75 countries. Women who are sexually harassed have lower job satisfaction/motivation and suffer a range of negative psychological and physical health consequences. Sexual harassment reduces individual and group productivity, yet survey evidence shows that workplace sexual harassment against women is quite common. It is also substantially underreported, in part because women are justifiably concerned that reporting may lead to retaliation and an even worse work environment. Strong workplace policies prohibiting sexual harassment, workplace training, and a complaints process that protects workers, especially woman, from retaliation seem to offer the most promise in reducing sexual harassment.

References

- [1]. *Wonani, C. (2010)*, Rapid Assessment on Raising Awareness on Women Workers and their Rights in Zambia; International Labour Organization, Lusaka.
- [2]. *Ngo, J (2019)*, *Zambian Watchdog reports on Bishop Chomba, the case of sexual harassment in Zambia*
- Hersch, J. (2015)*, *Sexual harassment in the workplace*; IZA World of Labour, Tennessee.
- [3]. *McCann, D. (2005)*, *Sexual Harassment at Work: National and International Responses*; International Labour Office, Geneva.
- [4]. Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (2003) <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/svaw/harassment/explore/4effects.htm>, accessed [03/10/2019].
- [5]. National Centre for Biotechnology Information (NCBI). (2005), *Sexual versus nonsexual workplace aggression and victims' overall job satisfaction: a meta-analysis*; U.S. National Library of Medicine, Rockville Pike.
- [6]. <https://humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/home/our-resources-and-publications/ea-practice-guidelines/item/562-guideline-sexual-harassment-complying-with-the-equal-opportunity-act-2010>.