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Sexual Harassment at the Workplace - Digging into the Cyprus Reality

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Abstract

Over the years there has been considerable research in fields such as international business, investigating the degree of sexual harassment at the workplace, however, research in the Republic of Cyprus has been very limited. The study aims to shed light on the prevalence, forms, and impact of sexual harassment, thereby contributing to the understanding of gender dynamics in Cypriot workplaces. A representative sample of 527 female employees from different age groups, professions, and educational backgrounds participated in the study. The main findings highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment in Cypriot workplaces, with specific attention to the various forms it takes – including verbal, physical, and online harassment. The results demonstrated that 68.9% of females indicated that have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment. However, 51.1%, the majority of participants did not report sexual harassment to the human resources/management or the authorities. The most common reasons that prevent victims from reporting the incidents are so it won't become an issue, out of fear of being stigmatized or the possibility of an impact to their career. The study's outcomes underscore the urgency of fostering safe and inclusive workplaces, emphasizing the importance of implementing effective prevention strategies, reporting mechanisms, and support systems.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Workplace, Physical, Cyber

1. Introduction and Background

Sexual Harassment (SH) constitutes a serious problem for contemporary societies and has long been an issue that has attracted the need for legal regulation in order to protect the victims of such unlawful and illegal actions. Several advanced societies such as Australia have been pioneers in this, establishing a solid and comprehensive framework in order to protect the victims, with the 'Sex Discrimination Act 1984' (AHRC, 2021). The Act defines that "Sexual harassment is an unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which makes a person feel offended, humiliated and/or intimidated, where a reasonable person would anticipate that reaction in the circumstances." Further, the Act provides several examples that distinguish the different types of sexual harassment; such as the unwelcome touching and sexually explicit physical contact (physical harassment), requests for sex and intrusive questions about a person's private life or body (verbal harassment), and sexually explicit emails or SMS text messages (cyber harassment). These different types of sexual harassment provide the appropriate basis for further examination as the rapid development of technology and social media have reshaped the way that sexual harassment is practiced and experienced, calling for a new approach in order to effectively confront the specific problem and unlawful practices (Schenk, 2008; Reed et al., 2019, Reed et al., 2020).

The European Union (EU), as the world's largest union of states has also paid exceptional attention to the concept of SH and through its legislation has identified that "Any form of unwanted verbal, non-

verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature occurs, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment” (EIGE, 2021). The United Nations (UN) has also focused on the issue and has developed specific principles in order to enable individuals that have gone through any form of discrimination, especially those that have suffered sexual discrimination, to come out and speak about the problem. In order to achieve protection, the UN have also established specific projects that will enable people from different places around the world to freely speak about it, and hence, provide them with the appropriate protection (UN, 2008).

2. Contextual Framework

2.1. The Legal Framework

The EU constitutes a pioneer towards the confrontation of sexual harassment with the Resolution 2017/2897 to have a major impact on the Union’s policies, as not only it clearly identifies the problem, but also provides some important statistical insights such as the fact that 90% of the victims are females (women and girls) and only a minor 10% are males. In addition, the Resolution identifies that SH occurs in several places but the workplace is one of the most common places, having an impact on the physical and mental health of the victims, calling for an effective problem confrontation. Furthermore, the Resolution focuses on several international agreements, such as that of the Istanbul Convention, and calls for the member states and all the other countries that have signed the Convention to implement the appropriate measures in order to protect all victims, with focus on the female ones. Importantly, the Resolution calls for the protection of the Whistleblowers, as this protection could potentially empower victims to report incidents and target the existing problem in order to come out and speak about the indeed existing problem. Finally, the Resolution calls for zero tolerance, as this will give the appropriate message not only to the perpetrators that carry out such unethical and illegal actions, but also to those that may wish to protect them.

The Istanbul Convention (2011) is another important legal framework, focusing on confronting violence of all forms, against women, including those that fall within the sexual dimension, such as SH, rape, and forced marriages. The Convention’s preamble clarifies that all these lead to serious inequalities between men and women, and this is transferred at levels of the women’s lives. Grans (2018) supports that the Istanbul Convention has contributed massively towards the protection of women at all places, including domestic work, triggering further interest from several other countries across the world to focus not only on the specific issue, but most importantly, towards the broader concept of Human Rights. Ironically, the Republic of Turkey, the country that in 2011 hosted the talks and the approval of the Istanbul Convention, has been the very first and only country to withdraw from it, leading to serious concerns over the willingness of the particular country to emphasize in abolishing abuse against women.

2.2. Physical Sexual Harassment

Physical Sexual Harassment (PSH) constitutes the worst form of Harassment as the harasser moves beyond visual and oral actions. According to the Council of Europe (2021) “Instances of physical harassment include: giving someone a massage around the neck or shoulders, touching another person’s clothing, hair, or body, hugging, kissing, patting, touching or rubbing oneself sexually against another person.” PSH is identified to a higher level in low and middle-income countries as the working women are exposed to difficult conditions without the appropriate protection, lack of code of conducts, and most importantly, lack of sound national legal framework that will protect the victims from such unethical actions (Chan et al., 2008; Ranganathan et al., 2020).

2.3. Verbal Sexual Harassment

Verbal sexual harassment refers to sexually suggestive remarks including kissing sounds, smacking lips, spreading rumors about a specific person, and sexual comments about a person’s clothing, looks, and

anatomy (Aware, 2022). Female university students in several low-income countries are facing serious problems in terms of verbal sexual harassment leading to serious distress in their personal lives and their families, as well as to their ability to successfully complete their degrees. Even worse, a substantial percentage of these female students is forced to drop-out from their university programs, leading to further problems such as the inability to increase their working potentials (Mamaru et al., 2015; Agardh et al., 2022).

2.4. Non-verbal Sexual Harassment

Non-verbal sexual Harassment has long been a subject of discussion in regards to the relationships between male and female employees at work, enabling the understanding of behavior, in which both male and female employees may express similar behaviors based on their personality characteristics (Simpson et al., 1993). The most recent, extensive research has found that the non-verbal sexual harassment has been spreading into most businesses, industries, and countries, revealing the problem's extension which calls for deep identification of the roots and causes in order to effectively confront it to the highest possible level (Karami et al., 2021).

2.5. Cyber Sexual Harassment

Cyber Sexual Harassment (CSH) has massively increased during the last few years, leading to a new environment against vulnerable individuals. According to the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE, 2022) is defined as any action which encompasses "Unwanted sexually explicit emails, text (or online) messages, inappropriate or offensive advances on social networking websites or internet chat rooms, threats of physical and/or sexual violence by email, text (or online) messages, hate speech, meaning language that denigrates, insults, threatens or targets an individual based on her identity (gender) and other traits (such as sexual orientation or disability)."

3. The Facts

3.1. The Situation in European Union

SH facts in the EU reveal its dark side, and lead to the obvious opinion that the Union needs to go a long way before it reaches some positive results. The reality in the EU can be considered as a serious one as recent research has revealed that the level of SH that women have suffered since the age of 15 is at an extremely high level. Sadly, advanced economies and societies of the Nordic region, such as Sweden and Denmark have championed the list with 81% and 80% respectively (Statista, 2023).

3.2. Reporting Sexual Harassment

Despite the high incidents of SH in the workplace, few are reported. Fear of being stigmatized and judged negatively or being blamed are some of the main reasons, along with fear, doubts and shame that harms the victims' self-esteem. Power and hierarchy in the medical workplace are one of the main reasons of limited reporting of SH incidents not only by the victim but also by other witnesses. Sexual discrimination at the workplace leads to a significantly higher level of women having to change their jobs as they feel that they become victimized and they do not receive the appropriate protection by their employers. (Acquadro Maran et al., 2022).

3.3. The Republic of Cyprus Reality

The ROC, as a full EU member since May 2004, follows the common European legislation in order to ensure that all employees are protected at their workplaces. This entry into the EU and the alignment with the relevant legislations, has enabled the country to develop parallel policies that will improve the overall protection in the country (EIGE, 2021). During the last decades several sexual harassment cases at the workplace have been brought before the Courts of Justice in the ROC. Under the Cyprus Common Law,

the competent court for such cases at the workplace is the 'Industrial Disputes Court', and the Courts have proceeded to some important rulings that are based on four criteria '(a) to what extent the behavior is unwanted (b) the nature of sexual behavior (c) the creation of an intimidating, hostile, humiliating or offensive environment (Tofaridou, 2019).

4. Research Methodology

An extensive literature review has been collected in order to ensure scientific background, enhance the research credibility, and enable avoiding pitfalls (Snyder, 2019). This aims towards the development of Hypotheses and enables assumptions' testing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The Target Population was 613 female employees between the ages of 18-60, working in the ROC, in both product and services industries in various employment positions. The Sample Size is five hundred females, with an expected response rate to be at least 60%, as this is essential in order to ensure the appropriate participation and provide the relevant credibility (Davies & Hughes, 2014). The clarified identification of the Target Population constitutes a major challenge, refers to all the elements that will be included in the study, and must have homogenous characteristics ("Target Population," 2008). A Stratified Sampling procedure has been used in order to ensure equal possibility of participation and enable reducing the sampling error ("Stratified Sampling," 2010) Sampling Error is defined to the 5%, despite that this could range between 2-5% in most human and medical sciences (Bryman et al., 2019; Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016).

4.1. Ethical Considerations

In full awareness of the nature of the study an online survey was distributed in order to ensure anonymity and full confidentiality in an attempt to collect an honest sample. A consent form was provided to ensure participants were fully aware of the nature of the questionnaire and that they consent to participate by filling in the questionnaire. Additionally, the consent form informed participants that they were free to withdraw at any time before submitting the questionnaire, in case they felt any type of discomfort.

5. Findings

The distributions of sexual harassment against women at the workplace is presented in Table 1. Unwanted touching was indicated by 19.9% of females. Verbal remarks of a sexual nature (including 'jokes') directed towards the participant or in their presence were indicated by 53.3% of participants. Persistent and unwanted invitations of a sexual nature were indicated by 12.5% of females. Gestures of a sexual nature, including exposure of any private parts were experienced by 7.0% of females, whereas lustful staring at you or a part of your body were experienced by 22.8% of females. Messages of a sexual nature sent to them via e-mail, direct messaging or on social media were experienced by 7.2% of females. Stalking – online or physically (23.0%), sexual coercion: where a person promises or hints at enhanced career prospects in return for a sexual favour, or threatens adverse career impact if they did not respond favourably (3.0%) indicated by females. Only the 31.1% of females indicated that have not experienced any sexual harassment. Concluding, the 68.9% of females indicated that have experienced at least one sexual harassment.

Table 1. Distributions of Sexual Harassment against women at the workplace, within categories of demographic variables.

		I have not experienced any sexual harassment.			
		No		Yes	
		n	%	n	%
Educational level	Other	6	85.7%	1	14.3%
	Lyceum/ Technical school	60	73.2%	22	26.8%
	College	81	73.0%	30	27.0%
	Undergraduate degree	117	69.2%	52	30.8%
	Master's degree	85	63.4%	49	36.6%
	PhD	12	57.1%	9	42.9%
	Total	361	68.9%	163	31.1%
Age	18 - 25	83	69.7%	36	30.3%
	26 - 35	98	69.5%	43	30.5%
	36 - 45	77	64.2%	43	35.8%
	46 - 55	71	76.3%	22	23.7%
	56 +	34	63.0%	20	37.0%
	Total	363	68.9%	164	31.1%
Nationality	Other	50	78.1%	14	21.9%
	Cypriot	163	57.4%	121	42.6%
	Greek	22	62.9%	13	37.1%
	Other E.U. country	66	91.7%	6	8.3%
	British/UK	28	84.8%	5	15.2%
	Russian	34	87.2%	5	12.8%
Total	363	68.9%	164	31.1%	
District	Nicosia	69	67.0%	34	33.0%
	Limassol	82	80.4%	20	19.6%
	Larnaca	43	57.3%	32	42.7%
	Paphos	127	65.1%	68	34.9%
	Famagusta	38	79.2%	10	20.8%
	Total	359	68.6%	164	31.4%
Area	Rural	139	71.6%	55	28.4%
	Urban	175	64.8%	95	35.2%
	Total	314	67.7%	150	32.3%

Table 2. Distributions of Sexual Harassment against women at the workplace, within categories of work-related variables.

		I have not experienced any sexual harassment.			
		No		Yes	
		n	%	n	%
Sector type	Private sector	306	70.7%	127	29.3%
	Public sector	50	61.7%	31	38.3%
	Total	356	69.3%	158	30.7%
Organization type	Local organization	310	67.2%	151	32.8%
	Multinational organization	43	79.6%	11	20.4%
	Total	353	68.5%	162	31.5%
Size of organization	0-20 people	169	73.5%	61	26.5%
	21-50 people	60	68.2%	28	31.8%
	51+ people	129	64.2%	72	35.8%
	Total	358	69.0%	161	31.0%
Type of business	Services	128	58.7%	90	41.3%
	Products	64	77.1%	19	22.9%
	Both	160	76.6%	49	23.4%
	Total	352	69.0%	158	31.0%
Current position	Other	8	88.9%	1	11.1%
	Partner / Business Owner	10	62.5%	6	37.5%
	Top manager	8	50.0%	8	50.0%
	Department manager	54	62.1%	33	37.9%
	Employee	162	67.2%	79	32.8%
	Contract worker / Freelance/ Part time	67	79.8%	17	20.2%
	Student/ Internship	46	78.0%	13	22.0%
	Volunteer	5	41.7%	7	58.3%
	Not employed	2	100.0%	0	0.0%
Total	362	68.8%	164	31.2%	

6. Discussion

The statistical analysis conducted has unequivocally brought to light the pervasive issue of sexual harassment against women in the workplace within the Republic of Cyprus. Unfortunately, the findings indicate a distressingly high prevalence of this phenomenon. It is crucial to emphasize that sexual harassment has been identified as a substantial problem in both public and private sectors, raising serious concerns about the efficacy of existing measures and the need for more effective interventions. The majority of participants did not report sexual harassment to the human resources/management or the authorities (51.1%) and chose to ignore it, so it won't become an issue. Fear of being stigmatized (35.5%) and the possibility of an impact to their career along with fear of retaliation by their harasser and the possibility that none will believe them are some of the major reasons similar to Russell et, al., (2021). This considerable hesitation of reporting SH at the workplace could derive, to some extent, from the fact that participants seem to be somewhat neutral that sexual harassment reports are taken seriously by the official authorities and society in Cyprus.

7. Recommendations

Despite the clearly negative outcomes, the statistical analysis provides a valuable insight of the reality within the Republic of Cyprus, the extent of the problem, as well as various, however, extremely valuable information of how the problem can be effectively confronted. This process cannot be the work of

the public or the private sector, instead, a comprehensive strategy should be established by the Republic of Government in order to ensure the problem mitigation. Objectives of such strategy should be both short and long-term, enabling all stakeholders to take measures in order to adjust as well as developing internal procedures that will help them confront the issue in the long term. Given that the Republic of Cyprus is a full member of the European Union (EU), the appropriate expertise and support should be required by the European Union as well as other member states. Collaboration should also be established with other non-EU countries that have established such strategies. Private organisations should also proceed towards developing internal procedures that will enable them to adjust their policies. It has been clearly evident that private organisations, even those that have in the past established formal procedures, face serious problems. Therefore, consistent training and development of strict Codes of Conduct should be put in place. Further, internal reporting procedures and mechanism, such as anonymous reporting should be established. In any case, such mechanisms should ensure that other people will not be victimised as part of any personal and/or professional revenge attitude.

8. Limitations of the Study

Lack of understanding a question may constitute an obstacle in the researcher process, however, this has been eased by the clarity of the questions. Further, lack of extensive previous academic research within the Republic of Cyprus can be considered as an obstacle due to inability to compare findings. Finally, reluctance to answer the questionnaire creates further drawbacks in the research process.

9. Disclaimer

The authors have not received any financial and/or any other support from any other party, either public or private/non-profit. The results are the work of the authors based on scientific approaches in order to provide the appropriate knowledge to all relevant stakeholders that will enable them to confront a massive social problem that extends to the workplace, therefore, leading to several consequences.

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