ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The importance of organizational climate for psychosocial safety in the prevention of sexual harassment at work

Malvin Ping Chieng Tan[1] | Sharon Sam Mee Kwan[1,2] | Azizi Yahaya[1] |
Ismail Maakip[1] | Peter Voo[1]

[1]Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

[2]Centre for Workplace Excellence, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

Correspondence
Sharon Sam Mee Kwan, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.
Email: sharonks@ums.edu.my

Abstract

Objectives: Workplace sexual harassment is a prominent issue in Malaysia. Although the subject of sexual harassment has been researched for over two decades, information on how organizations could effectively prevent workplace sexual harassment is limited. The researchers investigated the importance of organizational climate for psychosocial safety of workplace sexual harassment prevention.

Methods: Purposive random sampling was utilized to recruit participants in the study. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with Malaysian employees (N = 20) from various organizations. The study applied the Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1976) to identify the participants' coping strategies in dealing with sexual harassment that occurred at their workplace.

Results: The interviews revealed that both genders were potential victims or witnesses of workplace sexual harassment. Since many Malaysian organizations do not implement any workplace sexual harassment prevention, most of the victims and witnesses tend to use passive self-coping approaches. Typically, policy and guidelines implementation would encourage employees to voice their concerns; however, we discovered that participants' motivation to use active coping strategies depended on organizational role rather than the policy and guidelines implementation. Surprisingly, we also found out that participants from zero policy organizations used active coping strategies when the sexual harassment reached intolerable levels.

Conclusion: Organizations play a critical role in helping and supporting both victims and witnesses deal with sexual harassment at the workplace. Organizational climate for psychosocial safety is therefore crucial in the primary and secondary prevention of sexual harassment at work.

KEYWORDS
coping strategies, organizational climate, policies and procedures, prevention, workplace sexual harassment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, workplace sexual harassment was considered a sensitive topic.[1] Today however there is an increasing call for justice for sexual harassment victims all over the globe. In Malaysia, workplace sexual harassment has become a sensational topic as government and non-government organizations start to pay attention to this kind of attack. Although there are legislations and guidelines pertaining to sexual harassment in Malaysia such as Penal Code Act 574 (legislation), the Employment Act 1955 (legislation) and Malaysia Code of practice on the prevention and eradication of sexual harassment in the workplace (guideline),[2] many Malaysian organizations are yet to implement these codes of practice. However, any organization that receives reports or complaints may conduct their own internal investigation under Employment Act 1955—section 81F. The investigation however may not bring any justice to the victims in terms of any forms of compensation. Another option would be to lodge a police report and file under Penal Code Act 574—section 509. Nevertheless, since there is no limited time frame for investigations under both the Employment Act 1955 and Penal Code Act 574, this would be the victim's disadvantage. To reiterate, these legislations and guidelines have limitations in dealing with workplace sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is a maladaptive[3] and unwelcome[4] sexual behavior that caused harm to a person. While an irresponsible action in any means that caused harm at workplace is considered as workplace sexual harassment.[5] Although sexual harassment has been researched for over two decades, there is yet to be a definition that clearly describes sexual harassment behaviors.[1,6] Recent sexual harassment studies have focused on power as the sexual harassment underlying antecedent[7,8]; in other words, it is counterproductive work behavior[9] as it violates organizational norms and creates elements of threat to workers and the organization. Most sexual harassment victims remain silent as sexual harassment is related to victim humiliation.[10] In addition, they also have limited decision-making power, insecurity and are vulnerable.[11] The increase in power differentials among employees in an organization contributes to sexual harassment prevalence.[12-14] It is important to explore the victims' coping strategies under little legislation protection since this could highlight the importance of organizational role in sexual harassment prevention.

Organizations play an important role in maintaining a healthy organizational climate for their employees. Organizational climate includes the organizational role of such policies and guidelines implementation, the organizational support and the organization behavior towards sexual harassment.[15] Past studies discussed the importance of employees' well-being in tackling workplace issues. Changes that occur in the organization would also affect employees' behavior.[16,17] Nevertheless, there is limited identification of effective organizations in the context of sexual harassment due to lack of information or understanding of the attacks in terms of its nature, patterns, effects, and interventions.[18] Although the topic has been studied for over two decades, there is still a dearth of critical information on the organizational effort to mitigate the prevalence of sexual harassment at the workplace.[19]

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the organization in preventing sexual harassment when there was no legislation support. Although past studies suggested that organizational tolerance on sexual harassment in effect supported sexual harassment, these research studies did not explain clearly the relationship between the organization and sexual harassment.[20] Our study utilized the qualitative method as it enabled us to explore the relationship[21] between organizational roles and sexual harassment. By interviewing victims and witnesses, we were able to explore the information in-depth such as the types of behavior considered as sexual harassment, the motivation behind victims' and witnesses' coping strategies, and organizational influence. Our study was aimed at examining the influence of organizations on workplace sexual harassment in Malaysia and identifying (a) the types of workplace sexual harassment faced by victims and witnesses, (b) the guidelines or procedures (if any) in Malaysian organizations, (c) the coping strategies used by victims and witnesses, and (d) which organizations might influence the manner in how their employees cope with workplace sexual harassment.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Participants and procedures

We relied on networking to find volunteers for this research study. Those who agreed to become study participants were contacted to set the time and venue for their interview sessions. The participants were briefed on their right to withdraw from the study at any given time. Informed consent was obtained from the participants with the purpose of the study explained by means of a participation information sheet before conducting the interviews.

Purposive random sampling was used to select participants. The interviews were conducted once the participants' employment status and age (between 18-55 years old) were confirmed, and an appointment was made for the interview based on an agreement between the researchers and participants. 20 Malaysian employees from various Kota Kinabalu organizational settings in Sabah, Malaysia were chosen. The sample comprised both genders, female (n = 12, 60%) and male (n = 8, 40%), since men and women could potentially be victims or witnesses of workplace sexual harassment. 85%

TABLE 1 Types of sexual harassment

No.	Participant	Gender	Age range	Victim	Victim/ witness	Witness	Never encounter	Types of sexual harassment
01	P1	Female	26-31			✓		Physical
02	P2	Female	26-31		✓			Physical and verbal
03	P3	Male	38-43			✓		Physical and non-verbal
04	P4	Male	26-31		✓			Verbal, non-verbal, and multimedia
05	P5	Male	32-37		✓			Physical, verbal, non-verbal, and multimedia
06	P6	Male	20-25				✓	-
07	P7	Male	38-43				✓	-
08	P8	Female	20-25	✓				Verbal
09	P9	Female	32-37				✓	-
10	P10	Female	32-37	✓				Verbal, non-verbal, multimedia, desire for intimacy
11	P11	Female	20-25		✓			Verbal
12	P12	Male	26-31			✓		Physical and verbal
13	P13	Female	50-55		✓			Physical, verbal and desire for intimacy
14	P14	Female	26-31			✓		Verbal
15	P15	Male	44-49			✓		Verbal
16	P16	Female	20-25			✓		Physical, verbal, desire for intimacy
17	P17	Female	26-30		✓			Physical and verbal
18	P18	Female	32-37	✓				Verbal, multimedia
19	P19	Female	50-55			✓		Verbal
20	P20	Male	38-43			✓		Verbal, non-verbal and desire for intimacy
Total				3	6	8	3	

of the participants (n = 17, 85%) were either victims (n = 3, 15%), witnesses (n = 8, 40%), or both (n = 6, 30%). The sample ethnicity consisted various ethnic groupings in Sabah namely Malay (n = 6, 30%), Chinese (n = 5, 25%), Dusun (n = 2, 10%), Bugis (n = 4, 20%), Tidung (n = 1, 5%), Bisaya (n = 1, 5%), and Minang (n = 1, 5%). Their marital status was evenly distributed at married (n = 10, 50%) and single (n = 10, 50%).

2.2 | Interview

Participants were briefed on the confidentiality and purpose of the interviews beforehand. The interview was based on 13 semi-structured questions which had been adapted from Kwan, Tuckey and Dollard (2016) and modified to address the objectives of the study. The questions explored organizational policy and procedure implementation, participant sexual harassment experiences, and coping strategies that were used. Interviews, recorded with the participants' permission, were transcribed

and translated using the back-to-back translation approach. Participant identity confidentiality was achieved by using representative codes: participants were represented by the letter 'P' followed by their number and then the hyphen (-) to refer to the number/sequence of the sentence in the transcripts. For example, [P3-20] represented the third participant and the twentieth sentence in the respective transcript.

2.3 | Analysis

Data were analyzed using Grounded Theory methodology.[22] Concept formulation was achieved by comparative method. Open coding[23] has been analyzed manually to access the key points. Axial coding[23] began after all the key points have been identified and grouped into categories. Selective coding[23] began by grouping the categories identified into themes. The peer-review approach was used to recheck the main themes and the key points identified to achieve data analysis validity. The

data were then reviewed by an independent scholar. The identified data were subsequently used to explain the coping strategies of the victims and witnesses in Malaysian organizations.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Types of sexual harassment

Five types of sexual harassment—physical, verbal, non-verbal, multimedia, and desire for intimacy—were identified (Table 1). Physical sexual harassment pertains to actions such as touching, rubbing, or groping without permission of the from the other party. Verbal sexual harassment refers to acts of uttering sexual terms to a person or telling jokes or anecdotes that are sex-oriented. Non-verbal sexual harassment on the other hand involves actions such as obscene hand gestures, eating food provocatively, or whistling. Actions such as sending emails or messages or showing pictures containing images or information of a sexual nature may be considered multimedia sexual harassment. Desire for intimacy sexual harassment involves invitations, dates, or physical intimacy repeatedly by the perpetrator on the victim. Many of the victims or witnesses had experienced several types of sexual harassment. Gender factor did not determine the type of sexual harassment with both men and women equally at risk of facing any kind of sexual harassment at the workplace.

3.2 | Implementation of sexual harassment prevention procedures or guidelines in the organization

Based on the findings, many organizations did not establish sexual harassment prevention procedures or guidelines in their organizations. More than half of the participants (n = 14) stated that their organizations did not have sexual harassment prevention procedures or guidelines. For example, *"…There isn't any policy, guidelines or procedures…"* (P16-128). Two participants stated that they were unsure if their organizations even had sexual harassment prevention procedure or guidelines: *"…I have read it before, but I cannot remember…"* (P7-44); and *"… Erm? It seems has been implemented…"* (P8-62). However, two participants stated that their organizations did have for sexual harassment prevention: *"…Yes. There are clear regulations…"* (P14-40); and *"Generally, we refer it as Higher Policy Notebook…"* (P15-51).

3.3 | Participants' coping strategies

In our findings, we identified two types of organizations, respectively, supportive organization and unsupportive

organization. The identifications are based on the information provided by the participants. We themed the types of the organizations and then have been verified by the independent scholar. The organizational supports refer to sexual harassment prevention interventions by the organization such as policy implementation, counselling for the victims, investigation of sexual harassment allegations, sexual harassment prevention course. Therefore, an organization that provides support is considered as supportive organization and the oppositely for an unsupportive organization. Victims and witnesses coping strategies vary according to their organization's supportiveness. We have identified active and passive coping strategies respectively. Active coping strategies refer to actively combating sexual harassment action such as reporting, a voice out, and strike. While passive coping strategies refer to non-resistant action such as silent, ignoring, and acquiescence. In addition, we have categorized victims and witness coping strategy (refer Table 2) as successful when sexual harassment has been tackled, less successful when sexual harassment is still happening but less frequent, and unsuccessful when sexual harassment is still happening and nothing has changed.

3.3.1 | Supportive organization

In our findings, victims and witnesses from supportive organizations were more inclined to use active coping strategies. Organizations that regularly monitored of their employees' conditions would encourage them to report to the management any incident of sexual harassment. For example, *"…We need to take action…"* (P7-45) and *"…Yes, my employer will take action"* (P8-40). The participants were encouraged to voice out when they were confronted with sexual harassment. For example, *"…There was intervention carried out by the organization and the victim will be referred to counseling…"* (P9-24); and *"…I will voice out … I will report to my supervisor…"* (P9-43). The colleagues were also more likely to help the victims, the coping strategies changing from passive to active. For example, *"…My colleagues always helped me…"* (P13-82).

3.3.2 | Unsupportive organization

Self-solving strategies and passive coping strategies in which victims and witnesses from unsupportive organizations would use to ignore the harassments and act normal (Table 2). For example, *"…I just ignored…"* (P5-49). Another coping strategy used was the victims would remain silent. For example, *"…I stayed silent…"* (P11-78). The third coping strategy the victims used was sought colleagues' support. For example, *"…my colleagues helped me handle that customer. That's*

TABLE 2 Participants' coping strategies

Participant	Organization	Victim	Coping strategy	Witness	Coping strategy	Status
P1	Unsupportive	Passive	Silent	Passive	Ignore	Unsuccessful
P2	Unsupportive	Active	Voice out	Passive	Silent	Successful
P3	Unsupportive	Passive	Silent	Passive	Silent	Unsuccessful
P4	Unsupportive	Passive	Ignore	Passive	Silent	Unsuccessful
P5	Unsupportive	Passive	Ignore	Passive	Ignore	Unsuccessful
P6	Unsupportive	Never encounter				
P7	Supportive	Active	Report	Active	Report	Successful
P8	Supportive	Active	Report	Active	Voice out & report	Successful
P9	Supportive	Active	Report	Active	Report & voice out	Successful
P10	Unsupportive	Passive–active	Change attitude	Active	Voice out	Successful
P11	Unsupportive	Passive	Ignore Report	Passive	Silent	Unsuccessful Successful
P12	Unsupportive	Passive	Silent	Active	Report to the boss but on action taken Preserve	Unsuccessful Unsuccessful
P13	Supportive	Passive–active	Voice out Acquiescing (profit)	Active	Peer support	Successful Unsuccessful
P14	Supportive	Active	Report	Active	Report	Successful
P15	Supportive	Active	Company policy	Active	Report	Successful
P16	Unsupportive	Passive–active	Silent Peer strike	Passive–active	Silent Voice out	Unsuccessful Successful
P17	Unsupportive	Passive	Ignore Give advice	Passive	Silent	Less successful
P18	Unsupportive	Passive–active	Silent–voice out	Active	Peer support voice out—threaten	Less successful
P19	Unsupportive	Passive–active	Silent Report	Passive	Ignore	Unsuccessful
P20	Unsupportive	Passive–active	Silent Report	Passive	Silent	Unsuccessful

*Status refers to the effectiveness of the coping strategies in combating sexual harassment. The term 'successful' means the sexual harassment has been tackled and no longer happened. The term 'less successful' means the sexual harassment is still happening but less frequent. The term 'unsuccessful' means the sexual harassment is still happening (ongoing) and nothing has changed.

why I didn't quit my job…" (P13-51). Another victims' coping strategy is the acquiescing approach. In this instance, the victims would try to accept the fact that sexual harassment was normal. For example, *"…just laughing or smile…"* (P17-49); and *"…that female worker didn't complain and looked happy because of commission purpose…"* (P13-62). The last coping strategy used was suppressing emotions that this could lead to a stressful working environment for them. For example, *"…I felt ashamed to leave the office…"* (P4-90) and *"…I quit my job because I got a better job…"* (P10-93).

The findings pointed to many of the witnesses demonstrating a tendency to use passive coping strategies such as ignoring or remaining silent because they were afraid to confront the perpetrator, or they did not want to get involved in the business of others. For example, *"…He does not dare to voice out, … he does not want to get involve…"* (P1-34); and

"…they are aware… they don't want to get involve…" (P19-50). Even when the incidents became frequent, the witnesses interpreted these situations as normal. For example, *"…the staff do not feel pity because this issue always happens…"* (P17-75). When sexual harassment reached intolerable levels, both victims and witnesses turned to active coping strategies. For example, *"…I will be straightforward…"* (P2-22); *"we strike…"* (P16-126).

3.4 | Influence of organizational support on participants' coping strategies

We also looked into the relationship between the organizational support and the policy implementation (Table 3). We found out that victims' and witnesses' coping strategies

TABLE 3 Implementation of policy and support in organization for sexual harassment prevention

| No. | Organization | Participant | Organizational support | | | Employee | | Coping strategy | Success rate |
			Intervention	Take action	Awareness	Support	Awareness		
01.	Organization with policy	P7, P9, P14 & P15	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Active	Successful
		P2	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	Passive	Unsuccessful
02.	Organization without policy	P8, P13	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	Active	Successful
		P16	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	Active	Successful
		P17	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	Active	Less successful
		P18	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	Passive	Less successful
		P1, P3, P4, P5, P10, P11, P12, P19, P20	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	Passive	Unsuccessful
		P6	✗						

related to the organizational support and policy implementation. However, organizational support plays a more important role compared to the policy implementation. As victim and witness used active coping strategies if there are organizational support and colleagues support with or without policy implementation. Likewise, there is colleagues support if there is organizational support. Nevertheless, an organization with both organizational support and policy implementation ensures a better result in combating workplace sexual harassment.

3.4.1 | Unsupportive organization with policy implemented and without voice

The actions taken by the employees in an organization when faced with sexual harassment were related to the organizational role. Since not all the organizations in this study had implemented policies and guidelines, participants' coping strategies in the face of sexual harassment also differed according to the role of their organization (Table 3). In practical terms, the implementation of policies and guidelines was crucial in combating workplace sexual harassment; in fact, some employees who chose to remain silent did so due to a vague awareness of policies on the issue. Another reason was that the employees did not want to cause any future problems, which might be likely if they were to report the incidents to the management. The employees lacked any proper introduction of policies and guidelines pertaining to sexual harassment and its prevention in the organization. Lack of action and awareness implementation by the organization in turn created a low level of awareness among the employees. For example, *"…the organization never organize any activities to tackle sexual harassment…"* (P2-28); and *"…I think there are policies. However, I don't really understand about it…"* (P2-29). From these statements, it could be concluded that Participant 2 was unsure of the organization's guidelines and policy implementation. However, there were rules in the organization that focused on matters such as employee attire.

3.4.2 | Supportive organization with policy implemented and with voice

This scenario was a direct contrast in organizations that implemented sexual harassment policies and guidelines and at the same time provided support for their employees. We found that these participants either never encountered or had successfully dealt with sexual harassment at their workplace. In these organizations, the management took an active role in helping and supporting the employees by conducting investigations and providing sexual harassment prevention related courses. This resulted in employees

supporting each other. Workers in this type of organization also proved to be more disciplined as they were aware of their own responsibility and the organizational rules and regulations on sexual harassment. For example, *"…there are sexual harassment notices for we as the government servant."* (P9-50); and *"…the department head or higher authority will investigate when the victim launch a report…"* (P9-54).

Participant P7 stated that although he cannot remember the content, but he is aware that there were sexual harassment prevention notices; although the organization did not circulate these publicly, the workers and organizational management were aware of their responsibility. Besides, there was a committee that continuously monitored the well-being of the employees: *"…Yes, there must be [guidelines and procedure]…"* (P7-43); *"…I had read it before, but I cannot really remember…"* (P7-44); *"…victim will be given counseling session and the organization will take action…"* (P7-46); and *"…There is a committee monitoring the organization condition…"* (P7-47).

3.4.3 | Unsupportive organization with zero policy and without voice

For organizations that neither implemented any policy and guidelines nor supported their workers, the employees would either ignore the harassments or remain silent. Also, the employees were not very supportive toward of each other in combating sexual harassment at the workplace. For example, other employees would just ignore or be silent even when their colleagues were being sexually harassed. When organizational support was absent, lack of co-worker support and low awareness of sexual harassment issues, victims and witnesses tend to use self-solving coping strategies rather than report the incidents to their employers or management. For example, *"…I think the organization not even aware or don't even care. So, there is no action. Maybe there is, but I am not sure because…I did not see my organization carry out any action…"* (P5-55); and *"…They (victim, witness and perpetrator) also acted normal. Doing nothing, so I will be over-reacted later if I am resentful, angry,. Right? So how can I be angry?* (P5-59).

Participant P5 above stated that his organization did not even care about the sexual harassment issues. Without organizational support, the employees tend to keep silent although they knew sexual harassment was wrong and harmful because the employees had no voice in the organization and their effort could be meaningless in their organization. Another reason may be related to the fact that they needed their jobs and doing something out of the norm such as reporting to the management might jeopardize their livelihood.

3.4.4 | Supportive organization with zero policy and with voice

Nevertheless, organizations with zero policy or guidelines but willing to take action would encourage a better success rate in combating workplace sexual harassment. This would also indirectly encourage employees to work together in combating sexual harassment. In some cases, the sexual harassment issue could be resolved with support from the organization and its employees. For example, *"…My boss cannot hurt the customer's feelings. So, he asked my colleagues to help me."* (P13-77); *"They will inform me if that customer (perpetrator) come to the shop and asked me to hide…"* (P13-82); and *"…I felt more comfortable during work, happier, not afraid…"* (P13-88).

Participant P13 reported that she felt confident and happy although her organization did not have any workplace sexual harassment prevention in place related to her employer and her colleagues that helped and supported her a lot.

3.4.5 | Unsupportive organization with zero policy but with voice

Our study also found that without any primary support from the organization, employees would use active coping strategies such as reporting to the management, giving warning to the perpetrator or going on strike in the office when situations reached intolerable levels. In addition, the tendency to use active coping strategies would be greater if there were support from colleagues. However, we found out that the success rate still depended on the organizational role assumed in the issue, as long as the organization willingly to take responsibility to manage the issue. Another factor that influenced the success rate was related to the organization's action against the perpetrators. When the consequences were not severe, then the perpetrators would not be afraid. However, it could still minimized the prevalence of sexual harassment in the organization. For example, *"…Yes, only warning letter will be issued by the management. The management aware of his attitude and he is famous at the headquarters. Only verbal sexual harassment happened. So the management consider this matter is harmless. Therefore, there is no other action taken by the management…"* (P17-70).

In cases such as that which occurred in P17's organization, this warning letter in itself was not considered a threat by the perpetrator. Therefore, sexual harassment still persisted. Nevertheless, since the victim was brave enough to confront the perpetrator, the sexual harassment's prevalence also decreased.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our study is the first to explicitly focus on the organizational scenario of workplace sexual harassment among Malaysian employees who were either victims or witnesses. The findings provide an in-depth understanding of how sexual harassment affects employees and the importance of organizational involvement in preventing sexual harassment at the workplace. With the cultural belief which views women as more vulnerable to sexual harassment and men more likely the perpetrators, men are often excluded from sexual harassment research studies.[24] Our findings, however, showed that both men and women are just as likely to face workplace sexual harassment. We also found that both genders faced combination of several types of sexual harassment.

Malaysian guidelines and legislations have limitations in dealing with sexual harassment as the perpetrator's criminal liability is not clearly stated[21] and victims need concrete evidence before they could lodge a report.[25] The process of victims defending themselves from sexual harassment itself is also unclear, lengthy, and not promising. This suggests that Malaysian organizations have low awareness[26] and low legislation protection[24] against workplace sexual harassment. From the results, we found that most of the participants' organizations do not implement sexual harassment guidelines or policies. The results also suggested that the organization's response to incidents of workplace harassment determined the participants' response in that organization.[27]

Past research studies showed that sexual harassment is related to many negative effects such as humiliation,[28] depression,[29] absenteeism and turnover,[25] the current results pointed to many of the victims and witnesses used passive coping strategies to deal with their harassment as they fear losing their job and dignity. With the lack of organization involvement in addressing the sexual harassment issue, other workers would ignore and side-step the issue itself as they had limited decision-making power. Many victims and witnesses hesitated to report the harassment because they perceived non-action from their organizations.[30] Therefore, organization involvement will encourage the employees to employ active coping strategies when facing sexual harassment.

Nevertheless, different perspectives of sexual harassment either of it as a threat or an opportunity[31] will also influence a victim's coping strategies. This study showed that while some victims choose to accept being sexually harassed since this might lead to a better output like promotion, others perceived it as a threat. Sexual harassment intolerance could happen in organizations when management does not take action and the victims could no longer withstand the pressure. Confrontation is then used to deal with the issue[32] with the victims and witnesses voicing out to the perpetrators such as warning or threatening to report them to the authorities. Some victims or witnesses reported to the employer when the issue became serious as they were unable to tolerate the attacks any further. These show that sexual harassment tolerance has limitation.

This research study has some limitations. We found out that most of the participants came from similar organizations that do not have any sexual harassment prevention measure in place such as guidelines or policies. Other than that, the participants were more likely to 'voice' about their experiences as they were volunteered to be interviewed. These suggested that the participants may share some common traits between them beyond demographics such as similar experience or similar responses. These may be the potential biases from the purposive sampling. Nevertheless, considering the sensitivity, limited information and participants' willingness of this research study, we have employed voluntary participation. In addition, we also have randomly recruited any volunteered participants from different organizations to ensure the data generalizability and thus minimizing the sampling bias.

Although this research study has limitations, but it also has strengths. Even though various past studies have researched this topic, many used the quantitative approach; this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing data through the qualitative perspective to widen the workplace sexual harassment literature. In this research study, we were able to develop an in-depth understanding of how organizational role influence the coping strategy among victims and witnesses. A further research study should also consider that sexual harassment coping changes over time. This suggests that a longitudinal research study should be considered in further exploring the understanding of workplace sexual harassment.

5 | CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment and its prevention is an important issue in Malaysia although there is no perfect solution to address the issue. Organizations play an important role to manage workplace sexual harassment incidents as legislation might not be effective.[33] Understanding how victims and witnesses cope with their sexual harassment experience is important to provide better and more effective support for them. There is therefore a need to undertake more research on aspects of organizational climate such as psychosocial safety climate (PSC), a viable predictor for detecting psychosocial risks such as sexual harassment at the workplace.

DISCLOSURE

Ethical approval: This research study was approved by the committee members of the University Malaysia Sabah and the ethics approval number is NN-2019-010. *Informed consent*: Participants were given an informed consent before the interview. *Registry and the registration no. of the study/trial*: N/A. *Animal studies*: N/A. *Conflict of interest*: N/A.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

SKSM and MTPC conceived the ideas. SKSM and MTPC collected the data. MTPC and SKSM analyzed the data. MTPC contributed to the writing. SKSM and IM reviewed the article. MTPC and SKSM discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript. SKSM, AY, IM and PV S. K supervised the project.

ORCID

Malvin Ping Chieng Tan https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2145-0476
Sharon Sam Mee Kwan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5446-9224
Azizi Yahaya https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9847-7901
Ismail Maakip https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3343-3251
Peter Voo https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3836-8375

REFERENCES

1. Quick JC, McFadyen MA. Sexual harassment: have we made any progress? *J Occup Health Psychol*. 2017;22(3):296-298.
2. Alagappar PN, Marican S. The issue of sexual harassment legislation in a mainstream newspaper in Malaysia. *Procedia Soc Behav Sci*. 2014;155:368-373.
3. Fitzgerald LF, Gelfand MJ, Drasgow F. Measuring sexual harassment: theoretical and psychometric advances. *Basic Appl Soc Psychol*. 1995;17(4):425-445.
4. Welsh S, Carr J, Macquarrie B, Huntley A. "I'm Not Thinking of It as Sexual Harassment": understanding harassment across race and citizenship. *Gend Soc*. 2006;20(1):87-107.
5. Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia. Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. 1999.
6. Hersch J. Sexual harassment in the workplace. *IZA World of Labor*. 2015;188. https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.188
7. Walker S. The automatic activation of sexually harassing beliefs: past experience and traits of power. *Acad Bus J*. 2014;1:90-104.
8. Conrad C, Taylor B. The contest(s) of sexual harassment: power, silences, and academe. In: Bingham SG, ed. *Conceptualizing Sexual Harassment as Discursive Practice*. Wesport, CT: Praeger; 1994:45-58.
9. Popovich PM, Warren MA. The role of power in sexual harassment as a counterproductive behavior in organizations. *Hum Resour Manag Rev*. 2010;20(1):45-53.
10. Suhaila O, Rampal KG. Prevalence of sexual harassment and its associated factors among registered nurses working in government hospitals in Melaka state, Malaysia. *Med J Malaysia*. 2012;67(5):506-517.
11. AWARE. Research Study on Workplace Sexual Harassment. D2t1lspzrjtif2.cloudfront.net. https://d2t1lspzrjtif2.cloudfront.net/ wp-content/uploads/AWARE_Research_Study_on_Workplace_ Sexual_Harassment.pdf. Published 2008. Accessed May 15, 2019.
12. Good L, Cooper R. 'But It's Your Job To Be Friendly': Employees coping with and contesting sexual harassment from customers in the service sector. *Gend Work Organ*. 2016;23(5):447-469.
13. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*. Washington (DC): The National Academies Press (US); June 12, 2018.
14. Howald N, Walker J, Melick S, Albert M, Huang S. Addressing sexual harassment in the workplace. Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. 2018.
15. Bernardi A. Using the capability approach and the organizational climate to study occupational health and safety. *Insight Into Regional Development*. 2019;1(2):138-154.
16. Cheung H-K, Goldberg C-B, King E-B, Magley V-J. Are they true to the cause? Beliefs about organizational and unit commitment to sexual harassment awareness training. *Group Organ Manag*. 2018;43(4):531-560.
17. Perry EL, Kulik CT, Field MP. Sexual harassment training: Recommendations to address gaps between the practitioner and research literatures. *Human Resource Management*. 2009;48(5):817-837.
18. Seto MC. Advancing our scientific understanding of sexual harassment. *Arch Sex Behav*. 2019;48(6):1641-1643.
19. Tinkler JE, Zhao J. The sexual harassment of federal employees: gender, leadership status, and organizational tolerance for abuses of power. *J Public Adm Res Theory*. 2019;30(3):349-364.
20. Black N. Why we need qualitative research. *J Epidemiol Community Health*. 1994;48(5):425-426.
21. Lau PH. The need for a sexual harassment act in Malaysia. *Borneo Post Online*. March 11, 2018.
22. Glaser BG, Strauss AL. *The discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine; 1967.
23. Vollstedt M, Rezat S. An introduction to grounded theory with a special focus on axial coding and the coding paradigm. In: Kaiser G, Presmeg N, eds. *Compendium for Early Career Researchers in Mathematics Education. ICME-13 Monographs*. Springer; 2019:81-100. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15636-7_4
24. Sonia R. Women want stand-alone sexual harassment law to cover all. *The Ant Daily*. 11 February, 2014.
25. Hackman JR, Oldham GR. Development of the job diagnostic survey. *J Appl Psychol*. 1975;60(2):159-170.
26. Wolff JM, Rospenda KM, Colaneri AS. Sexual harassment, psychological distress, and problematic drinking behavior among college students: an examination of reciprocal causal relations. *J Sex Res*. 2017;54(3):362-373.
27. Kwan SSM, Tuckey MR, Dollard MF. The role of the psychosocial safety climate in coping with workplace bullying: a grounded theory and sequential tree analysis. *Eur J Work Organ Psychol*. 2016;25(1):133-148.
28. Friborg MK, Hansen JV, Aldrich PT. Workplace sexual harassment and depressive symptoms: a cross-sectional multilevel analysis comparing harassment from clients or customers to harassment from other employees amongst 7603 Danish employees from 1041 organizations. *BMC Public Health*. 2017;17(1):1-12.
29. Fitzgerald LF, Drasgow F, Hulin CL. Antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment in organizations: a test of an integrated model. *J Appl Psychol*. 1997;82(4):578-589.

30. Hutagalung FD, Ishak Z, Kamaruzaman S. The Influence of sexual harassment towards job satisfaction and work stress among Malaysian women employees. *Malaysian Online Journal of Counseling*. 2013; 1(1):86-95.

31. Scheiber N, Creswell J. Sexual harassment cases show the ineffectiveness of going to H.R. *New York Times*. December 12, 2017.

32. Dillion M. Nicola Sturgeon balances genders in Scottish cabinet reshuffle. *Financial Times*. 21 November, 2015.

33. Hart CG, Crossley AD, Correll SJ. Leader messaging and attitudes toward sexual violence. *Socius*. 2018;4:1-11.