BULLIES AT WORKPLACE:
A CASE OF PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES

Dr. Sabitha Marican

ABSTRACT

Salah satu bentuk buli yang wujud di tempat kerja ialah pengganggu seksual. Buli gangguan seksual di tempat kerja merupakan tingkah laku tersirat tidak produktif yang boleh membawa kos yang signifikan ke atas sasaran atau organisasi. Gangguan seksual ialah tingkah laku yang tidak diundang, tidak diminta, tidak dibalas dan seringkali berulangan. Oleh yang demikian pengganggu seksual adalah tingkah laku tersirat yang boleh membawa kos yang signifikan ke atas sasaran atau organisasi. Gangguan seksual ialah tingkah laku yang tidak diundang, tidak diminta, tidak dibalas dan seringkali berulangan. Oleh yang demikian pengganggu seksual adalah tingkah laku tersirat yang boleh membawa kos yang signifikan ke atas sasaran atau organisasi. Gangguan seksual ialah tingkah laku yang tidak diundang, tidak diminta, tidak dibalas dan seringkali berulangan. Oleh yang demikian pengganggu seksual adalah tingkah laku tersirat yang boleh membawa kos yang signifikan ke atas sasaran atau organisasi.

INTRODUCTION

To succeed in this economic environment, organisations must be able to inspire all levels of employees to be innovative or risk being overtaken by more nimble and creative competitors. In a hyper-competitive global economy, where competition is no longer limited by geography or industry, new formidable competitors can arise seemingly overnight (Hamel, 2000). In such an environment, one of the surest ways for an organisation to fail is to tolerate workplace sexual harassment bullying. Bullies not only stifle productivity and innovation throughout the organisation, they too, rob their organisation of their most important asset in today's competitive economic environment - precious human capital.

Bullying and Sexual Harassment

Bullying or ‘victimisation’ is a form of harassment that is destructive by nature and occurs for many reasons, where anyone may be a target for unwanted behaviour. Bullying often involves a persistent pattern of negative acts which, although appear trivial in isolation; cumulatively it gradually eats away the self esteem and confidence of the ‘target’. In this paper bullying is specifically focused on sexual harassment in the workplace.
Although sexual harassment has a long history as a problem for women (Weeks et al., 1986; Robinson, Billie, Franklin & DuHon, 1993), it only recently received a label to make it visible. However, only within the past few decades has it been transformed from a mostly unexplored private ill to a public and social problem. Sexual harassment is a new name describing an old problem. The term sexual harassment itself did not exist in the English language before 1976 (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979). The phrase was created as a way to name certain male behaviours intended to vitiate and denigrate women (Farley, 1978). Nevertheless men too have been victims of sexual harassment at workplace (Study confirms both, 2000, Yusri, 2001; Zaiton, 1990).

Type of Sexual Harassment Bullies

There are two main types of sexual harassment which are Quid Pro Quo and Poisoned Environment. In Quid Pro Quo, the sexual harasser is typically an authority figure who abuses power either 1) to solicit sexual favours from an individual in return for professional or academic reward or advancement and/or 2) to threaten professional or academic reprisals for non-compliance to sexual demands (Konrad & Gutek, 1986).

Meanwhile in a poisoned environment, the sexual harasser is typically an authority figure (like a residence manager or a middle manager) who condones, actively or passively, a sexualised milieu in which colleagues tell sexist jokes, brag about sexual exploits, ask unwelcome intimate questions, pin sexually explicit calendars on their walls, rate members of the group on a sexualised scale, have discussions about sexual activities or pursue one another romantically (Letchumanan, 1997). The victims of the poisoned environment are individuals who feel uncomfortable in this milieu, or who are offended by the behaviours that characterise it, especially if or when their complaints, or other more subtle signs of discomfort, are met with indifference, ridicule, or pressure (peer or hierarchical) to put up with it.

When is it Construed as Sexual Harassment Bully?

Harassment is an inappropriate behaviour, actions, comments or physical contact that is unsolicited, unwelcome and causes offence to the recipient; essentially it is an attack on someone's dignity at work. Forms of bullying can be both unpredictable and more subtle, and although bullying usually involves wearing down an individual over a period of time, it does not preclude the possibility of a single act of bullying occurring (Grimm & Wozniak, 1990). The harassing behaviour may be of a minor nature. The behaviour intimidates, offends or makes people feel uncomfortable because of a reason, either directly or indirectly, related to their gender, race or disability. It is a form
of discrimination, as an individual will have been treated less favourably on these grounds and as a result suffers a detriment in their employment (Sabitha & Zakiyah, 2003; Gaton, Sawyer, Baird & Ozmon, 1982).

Harassment takes many forms and can be directed at individuals as well as a group of individuals. Hence harassment does not need to be directed personally at an individual but can be something that is observed or overheard and considered to be offensive. It is important to remember that whatever form harassment takes, it is not the intention of the perpetrator but the deed itself, and the impact on the recipient which determines what constitutes harassment. As put forth by past researchers that for harassment to occur there does not have to be an intention to offend or harass (Gutek & Dunwoody, 1987). It is therefore by its very nature “experiential” which means that the same behaviour may be interpreted in different ways by different people. The “experiential” factor is a key contributory factor in why individuals may often come forward at a later date only as a result of someone else’s complaint, the individual themselves may have not have come forward in the past because of confused feelings and a self-belief of ‘paranoia’ (Sabitha & Azmi, 2004; Sabitha & Shamsul, 2004).

Bully Cases

There is nothing new about sexual harassment. According to the study by University Sains Malaysia which was conducted in ‘large organisations in Penang (‘Harassment is rampant’, 1995) revealed that approximately 80% of the women are sexually threatened at work. Meanwhile according to the Human Resources Ministry there are only 110 known cases of sexual harassment reported by the victims between 1997-1999. In all the 110 cases reported to the ministry involved male superiors as the offenders. However, the numbers of cases that have been brought up to the Industrial Court are very few indeed. Among the reasons is that it has been largely dismissed as a trivial problem that has no serious repercussion. The irony is that studies show that it has real implications on productivity, efficiency and employee turnover.

Meanwhile the data obtained from the Royal Malaysian Police from year 2000 to 2006 showed the prevalence of such behaviour at work (Table 1).
Cases Reported to the Police

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<td>86</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>119</td>
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Table 1: Sexual Harassment Cases at the Workplace, 2000 - 2006

Note: 2006 as at August 2006
Source: Malaysian Royal Police, Bukit Aman

As for the female victims, reports from the past have indicated that almost half of female workers have reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment on the job (Sabitha, 1999). Thus sexual harassment is an important issue for women; especially as there is a dramatic increase in female labour force participation in Malaysia. That is from only three percent of female in labour force in 1960, rising to 34% in 1987, and almost reaching 50% at present. Because of the increasing number of women participating and contributing to the building of the nation and strengthening of the nation's economy, efforts must be taken to mitigate such occurrence.

Effects of Sexual Harassment Bullies

Individual incidents may seem too trivial to warrant attention, or the person subjected to harassment may seem unaffected. On the other hand, if the behaviour continues over a period of time and it is not addressed, such behaviour can undermine the standard of conduct within a work area (Gutek & Nakamura, 1983). This is mainly because workplace harassment bullies' offensive, belittling or threatening behaviours are directed at an individual worker or group of workers. It is detrimental because bullying is a form of abuse, and bullies - and unenlightened employers - often go to great lengths to keep their targets quiet, using threats of disciplinary action, dismissal, and gagging clauses (Haavio - Mannila & Kandolin, 1988)

Meanwhile in the case of women especially, the economic reality is that they cannot just leave a workplace where they are being sexually harassed. In reality women do not want their livelihoods threatened. They are serious about work and do not enjoy experiencing sexual harassment. In sum sexual harassment is a traumatic experience. The personal suffering and injury resulting from harassment is an aspect of working life that women share.
with very few men. Different survivors, respond differently (Koss, 1990). It may be with anger, sadness, vulnerability, repression or a range of possible reactions. What is important to remember is that all feelings are valid.

Further, bullying is an inefficient way of working, resulting in disenchantment, demoralisation, demotivation, disaffection, and alienation. Bullies run dysfunctional and inefficient organisations; staff turnover and sickness absence are high whilst morale, productivity and profitability are low (Crain & Heischmidt, 1995; Jensen & Gutek, 1982). Several reports have documented the high cost of sexual harassment, such as decreased morale, absenteeism, decreased job satisfaction, performance decrements, and the damage to interpersonal relationships at work. Other work related consequences included individuals who quit, were fired, transferred, or were reassigned because of unwanted sexual harassment (Reilly, Calduell & Deluca, 1992).

In fact the impact of harassment extends beyond the individual experience of particular worker and affects the working conditions of the individual generally. According to the study by Merit Systems in 1987, Fitzgerald and Ormerod (1993), found that over thirty six thousand federal employees left their job due to sexual harassment in the two-year period covered by the study. In an Australian study, 34% of bullied victims took time off work. The average time taken was 50 days, including 28 days on paid sick leave. Almost one-quarter resigned or retired, and organisations incur costs in replacing those staff as well as losing valuable experience (Hamel, 2000; Abbey, 1982). Thus prosperity is illusory and organisations with sexual harassment bullies are a bad long-term investment.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

In Malaysia, though sexual harassment issue has been talked about, there is very little research available on this topic and what exist is mostly foreign. Further, not only do lack the institutional mechanisms to deal with sexual harassment at the workplace, but also the media review (Asia Meon, 1990; Ahmad Fawzi, 1999; Asniera, 2001; Amree Ahmad, 2001; Ex bank Manager, 2000; Gayathry, 2000; Laila & Shyfulddin Ahmad 2000; Nazura, 2000; Noor Hazani Musa, 2000) has shown that the act of reporting of sexual harassment is not a common practice in Malaysian culture.

Thus the objective of this paper is to understand behaviours that are considered as sexual harassment bullies, profiles, experiences and how victims of sexual harassment bullies cope with sexual harassment at the workplace. The findings can provide guidance regarding the roles and responsibilities in relation to the acceptable standards of behaviour within the working environment. It
also provides guidance on the processes within the workplace available to staff which are aimed at addressing and resolving issues in relation to the unfair treatment of staff in the public sector.

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The following discussion is based on various research findings conducted by the author regarding sexual harassment experience, how victims cope with sexual harassment, demography of sexual harassment bullies, complaints mechanisms towards sexual harassment bullies and effects of sexual harassment on victims.

**i) Sexual Harassment Experiences**

A number of studies have been conducted by the author that depicts the various aspects of sexual harassment experiences of the victims (Sabitha, 1998, 2005; Sabitha, Sharrifah & Maznah, 2004). The following are verbatim transcription of several victims' experiences obtained through personal interviews.

**Respondent 1:**
There is no limit to the types of misconduct that may be committed by employees. Workers are creative, devious and ingenious when it comes to finding new ways to exploit workplace...

**Respondent 2:**
I want to resign from this place. I am scared of my boss. Once he came so close to me when I was cleaning up my work area, and invited me for dinner. When I refused he held both my hands and pulled me towards him. I struggled and try to run away. I dare not to tell my husband about it. I am afraid that he will do something rash. I am afraid my husband will come to office and attack him. But this is not the first time; my boss has done to me...deep inside I despise him.... Previously he has patted on my back. Once he even pinched my buttock, and I feel so embarrassed and dirty I did not tell anyone. I feel humiliated, degraded, cheap...I feel ashamed and embarrassed that why it should happen to me...I feel angry....but I need this job.

**Respondent 3:**
"I was asked consistently to stay late for no apparent reason. When I asked him, if this was necessary he just smiled and said that if you want to have a "good career" in this department., with a grin on his face....I hate it....I just wish I can do something about it....it is really making me go crazy...."
Respondent 4:
"I have been disturbed just too many times. In terms of accidental brushing, lustful stares, bottom pinching, and wandering hands. I cannot do anything, because he will do it when he calls me alone to his office to take down notes for his meetings. I feel like shouting, but I am afraid that people will say that I am imagining thing, because he portrays himself as the soft-spoken gentlemen. On top of that he is already married and have kids, it makes it more difficult for me to prove that he is doing what he is doing...for all I know I will be the one be blamed for what happened.... worst still then, my behaviour will be the one that will be put under the 'microscope'...."

Respondent 5:
Well I feel that the women nowadays is too liberated and the moral is questionable....i do not know how a women can be so daring in teasing me with all kinds of word ...which I think a normal "good" women would do......

ii) How Victims Cope with Sexual Harassment Bullies

Study among sexual harassment victims (Sabitha, Sharrifah & Maznah, 2004; Sabitha, Sharrifah & Shamsul, 2004; Sabitha, 2005) found that the first or first several harassing events are often ignored by victims - especially when they are facing a hostile environment where the behaviour may be more subtle, and the harasser’s intentions are sometimes unclear. Victims may interpret or reinterpret the situation so that the incident is not defined as sexual harassment.

Research findings also indicate that many sexual harassment victims do not tell anyone about their experiences or tend to blame themselves rather than the perpetrators of the crime when faced with sexual harassment. They also wondered whether they had invited the harasser to do so. In fact one of the respondents that were interviewed about her experience commented as follows:

Respondent:
Some say that I should change the way I dress, talk... but I personally think that the way I mingle with the others in the office is just like the others. I am confused...”.

Hence their initial attempts to manage the initiator are rarely direct and many times victims end up ignoring the perpetrator.
iii. Demography of Sexual Harassment Bullies

Research results also show that anyone can be the victim of sexual harassment irrespective of whether they are peers, subordinates, bosses or clients in an organisation (Sabitha, 1999, Sabitha, 2004, Sabitha, 2005). Past reports also indicate that almost half of female workers have reported experiencing some forms of sexual harassment on the job (Sabitha, 1999 & 2001; Asiah, 1990; Baker, 1997). In terms of other demographical factors, findings based on a study conducted among public sector administrators in all states in Malaysia showed that there are no significant differences in terms of race, marital status, the age groups or education with regards to the perception of sexual harassment (Sabitha, 1999; 2002; 2005).

iv. Complaint Mechanisms and Sexual Harassment Bullies

The research on whistleblowing or complaint mechanisms indicates that if observers of wrongdoing do not perceive members of the top management to be willing to correct the wrongdoing, those observers are unlikely to view whistleblowing as a feasible action (Dossier & Micelli, 1985; Carver, 1997; Behaviour that is inappropriate (1997); Micelli & Near, 1994; Pamerlee et al., 1982; Sabitha, Mahmood & Azmi, 2004). Thus, the manner in which organisations behave when sexual harassment complaints are made may have an effect on the future behaviour of individuals and the climate of the work group in general (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Gutek, 1985; Sabitha, 2004).

Hence, confronting a harasser is not easy. Most people who have experienced sexual harassment have the same goals in mind. They want the harassment stopped, they want to keep their job, and they want to do their job as effectively as they can. The employee should assess the situation and determine whether the behaviour is unwanted. If it is unwanted, then the employee should take action to stop it. Put the harasser on notice that the line has been crossed and the behaviour is offensive. On the contrary, it is not uncommon for a victim of sexual harassment to ignore the offensive behaviour. In fact it is estimated that 46% percent of victims of harassment have tried this strategy (Sabitha, 2003a, b). However, results found that, only one out of four women that tried to ignore or avoid their harasser were successful in getting the harasser to stop. Choosing to ignore the behaviour will not make it clear to the harasser that the behaviour is inappropriate.

Among the reasons cited for ignoring is because they do not want to hurt the perpetrator. At times the aggressor’s status as the breadwinner of his family and safeguarding the image of the organisation or institution are used as arguments to suppress the woman’s complaint from going any further.
According to research (Sabitha, 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Sabitha, & Shamsul, 2004; Sabitha & Shariffah, 2004, Sabitha, 2007/2008) the main reasons why victims of harassment did not complain were the lack of confidence in organisation system and that their complaints would not be taken seriously (75%). Other reasons include the lack of trust in the organisation as being able or willing to deal effectively with harassers and the belief that an answer will not be received (17%). There are also various other consequences to be considered such as that their services will be terminated (6%), no action taken (40%), will be laughed at (47%), may get into more problems (31%), peers (13%), or top management may not be pleased with their action (20%), will be blamed back for the incidence (40%), labeled as a person causing the disturbance (40%), the harasser will be told to stop harassing (19%) or may be transferred to avoid seeing the harasser (20%), may be transferred because someone disagree with their action (13%).

Meanwhile victims, who complained were 'put off' by the fact that previous cases reported to management were not taken seriously. Among the comments from the women victims were:

Victim 1:
"When I complained they said that I am emotionally unstable"

Victim 2:
"I do not think it is advisable to make any complaints. First, because no one will believe me. Even if they do, most often than not they will blame us back for what has happened"

Victim 3:
They will only laugh at me..... I will have a hard time if my wife or my family knows about what my lady colleague is doing to me....is hard to talk about it even to my men colleagues...

Based on interviews some of the victims were hesitant to use the official channels, and would rather tell a colleague or friend. Overall, the findings indicate that (Sabitha, 2006) respondents have a higher tendency to perceive sexual harassment items as disturbing when respondents view that their organisation take sexual harassment complaints seriously. Also, as hypothesized individuals working in organisations that have stronger policies and culture against sexually harassing behaviour also have a tendency to label sexual behaviours as inappropriate or disturbing. In fact, recognising sexual harassment behaviour is one of the first steps to stop sexual harassment.
v) Effects of Sexual Harassment

The employer liability for sexual harassment in the workplace is also considerable. For individuals, workplace harassment can take its toll in the forms of mental and emotional stress (Bem, 1981). The harasser may also face the cost of damage to their reputation and termination of employment or other sanction (Sabitha, 2005).

There are also other tremendous costs to the organisations. Failing to educate employees and put in place adequate policies and programmes to eliminate harassment bullies in the workplace can have serious consequences for agencies (Sabitha, 2005). Agencies which tolerate sexual harassment bullies may have difficulty attracting and retaining high performing employees and the ideas and talents these people bring with them. This is the cost of lost opportunities. Moreover, workplace harassment can affect an organisation’s effectiveness through increased employee turnover, frequent sick leave and increased dissatisfaction among workers (Sabitha, 2006). Their work performance could deteriorate and this could have a serious impact on their career prospects.

The following is the result of the effect of sexual harassment on the individuals that was obtained from a nation wide study conducted among public sector administrators (Sabitha et al., 2002; Sabitha & Sharrifah, 2004).

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<th>Effects of Sexual Harassment</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Emotional Effects</td>
<td>30.3</td>
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<td>2. Social Effects</td>
<td>20.9</td>
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<td>3. Career Effects</td>
<td>15.6</td>
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<td>4. Changes in Self Perception</td>
<td>13.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Physical Effects</td>
<td>9.9</td>
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Table 2: Effects of Sexual Harassment on Respondent

To add to the findings, the following is one of the verbatim transcription regarding the effects of sexual harassment recorded from a victim:

Victim:
"I do not want to make any complaint. Or else they will say that I am trying to make a mountain out of a mole. But this is not the first time he has done such awful things to me.... I cannot sleep at night.... I have bad dreams and nightmares... I feel miserable... I tend to shy away from people now..., I see that my career is also at stake... I feel that I am so unfortunate and why does it happen to me...".
Overall, the findings indicate that most of the victims of sexual harassment encountered adverse effects in the workplace. In this study, the victims of sexual harassment mainly suffer emotional effects, then followed by social and career effects, changes in self-perception and physical effects. In short, victims face various negative implications due to sexual harassment bullies at the workplace.

**STRATEGIES**

From the findings we can see that sexual harassment bullies exist in many forms, and the implication for the organisation and the individual is great. Among the suggested strategies to curb sexual harassment at workplace are as follows:

*Sexual Harassment Policy and Information*

One of the major ways to eradicate sexual harassment at the workplace is through effective sexual harassment policy. Ultimately, the goal of any sexual harassment policy is to create an atmosphere in which instances of sexual harassment are discouraged. Among the recommendations to organisations and employers as to what a sexual harassment policy should include are: a) definition of sexual harassment and prohibited conduct; b) a policy statement - every employee should understand that sexual harassment will not be tolerated; c) clear grievance and investigatory procedures; d) assurances of no retaliation; e) specific remedies and disciplinary programmes (sanctions should be clear and meaningful); and f) the use of several methods of communicating the policy to ensure maximum coverage (personnel manuals, bulletin boards, memos from the top management of the workplace.

A policy statement by management supporting positive working relationships and committing the organisation to measures to combat workplace harassment should be distributed to all employees. Other materials, such as posters or pamphlets, could be used to reinforce the message. The following information about workplace harassment and organisational policy and procedures should be provided in material supplied to all new employees, orientation training programmes, general staff training in workplace harassment issues.

*Complaint Handling Procedures*

It is strongly recommended that organisations develop practical guidelines on complaint handling procedures (Carelli, 1988). The reason for having complaint handling procedures is to maintain a courteous workplace behaviour
and is not intended to impose unnecessary rigidities on individual workplace styles or on workplace and work related relationships and social activities. Ironically, the internal handling of a complaint has been poor due to the lack of written procedural guidance on issues such as who to contact, how complaints are investigated, gathering and assessing relevant evidence, applying the principles of procedural fairness and the correct standard of proof and record keeping. It is important to identify both the workplace-based processes and the formal reporting mechanisms available for dealing with complaints and to advise the complainant of these as well as other possible avenues of review, such as the Human Resource, as soon as the complaint is brought to attention.

Apart from that, it is important that investigations of allegations of workplace harassment maintain confidentiality with information provided only on a 'need to know' basis. Because of the sensitivity of material relating to workplace harassment, special care should be taken to protect the confidentiality of any records relating to complaint processes. Requirements in this regard should be communicated within agencies. Last but not the least, it is important to have a means of obtaining feedback from employees to prevent this from happening. Some possible means of obtaining feedback may be obtained through employee hotlines, peer-to-peer reviews, and confidential employee satisfaction surveys and similar actions.

**Gender Dilemmas and Perception**

In response to the observation that few complaints are lodged, gender dilemmas in sexual harassment policies and procedures should be emphasised. This is because men and women differ in their interpretation of the definition of harassment, and given their generally greater power, men's ideas about what constitutes harassment are likely to prevail. Attribution theory also suggest that men will be more likely to see sexually harassing behaviours as having a situational cause; thus, women are seen as provoking the behaviours (Pryor, 1985).

In addition, grievances procedures for dealing with sexual harassment should be written in gender-neutral terms to make them applicable to both women and men. However, women and men may have different reactions to the same procedures. Because women typically lack power, using a formal procedure may be seen as risky and they might prefer to use informal procedures. One of the reason is that informal sexual harassment procedures can help to try to solve problem, where formal procedure typically attempt to decide on the guilt or innocence of the alleged harasser. With informal procedure, offenders suffer few negative consequences for their actions and victims may have little to gain from complaining.
Protecting Both Parties

The next important ingredient in weeding out sexual harassment is that the guidelines for sexual harassment should be tailored in such a way that both parties, the alleged offender and the complainant, would be protected from the general public's knowledge while investigations are in progress. Apart from that investigations should be carried out discreetly so that when a false claim is lodged, the accused need not bear the brunt of malicious innuendoes or gossip by the public after the case has been cleared. There must also be protection against retaliation, neutrality and confidentiality so that victims do not fear coming into the open with their problem. There must also be punishment for those who fabricate stories.

Training

Training of all employees to ensure that everyone is aware of his and her responsibility to conduct themselves in a professional, civil, and businesslike manner (Sabitha, 2004). Top management reinforcement of the "zero-tolerance for bullying behaviour" at new employee orientation sessions can help. Employees should be taught how to recognise the first signs of the sexual harassment bullying process at the workplace.

Meanwhile, training for supervisors should include awareness raising and discussion of their responsibility for maintaining a workplace free of harassment. They too should be informed about management liability and the performance and financial costs of workplace harassment. Further issues on conflict resolution and case studies on dealing with incidents of harassment should also be treated as part of the training content.

CONCLUSION

For individuals, workplace harassment can take its toll in the forms of mental and emotional stress. Their work performance could deteriorate and this could have a serious impact on their career prospects. The harasser may also face the cost of damage to their reputation and termination of employment or other sanction. Hence failing to educate employees and having in place adequate policies and programmes to eliminate sexual harassment bullies can have serious consequences for public agencies as it prevents the productivity of the organisation. Finally to combat sexual harassment bullies, the individual concern and the organisations should work together in an effort to promote a benevolent environment for all workers.
REFERENCES


