

Theoretical Perspectives to Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace

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Abstract: *The issue of sexual harassment at workplace is a recurring problem around the globe. The influx of large numbers of women into the paid labor force over the last twenty years and their increasing involvement in workers' organizations and women's advocacy groups have heightened awareness of the extent and destructive consequences of sexual harassment. Today, sexual harassment of women at workplace constitutes an extremely important kind of violence, which has been comprehensively defined for legal purposes. Since it is a recently defined offence, there is a need to identify appropriate theoretical frameworks to highlight the causes and precipitating factors for the existence of this problem. Thus, the theme of the present research paper is to examine different theoretical perspectives to sexual harassment of women at workplace. The research paper examines five existing theories of sexual harassment, namely; Natural/Biological Theory, Sex Role Spillover Theory, Organizational Theory, Socio-Cultural Theory and Feminist Theory, to explain the phenomenon from different angles and perspectives. The introductory part of the paper throws light on the increasing problem of sexual harassment of women at workplace. Second part of the paper will discuss the five types of theoretical perspectives to understand sexual harassment of women at workplace. Finally the last section will focus on conclusion part of the paper.*

Key words: *Sexual harassment, Workplace, Theories of sexual harassment.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in the economic sector is crucial for their economic empowerment and their sustainability. One of the consequences of this increasing representation of men and women in the workplace has been the increased opportunity for conflict based upon gender differences (Browne, 2006). Therefore, of special importance is the violence faced by women when they go out for work, wherein the patriarchal workplaces at times present a highly hostile environment to them which discourage them to continue working. Views on sexual harassment have evolved since it was a widely tolerated aspect of working life, often considered as an occupational hazard which women should expect to endure. The influx of large numbers of women into the paid labor force over the last twenty years and their increasing involvement in workers' organizations and women's advocacy groups have heightened awareness of the extent and destructive consequences of sexual harassment. Therefore, sexual crimes against women have become a major dilemma of working life ever since women began to offer their labor in the market place (Fitzgerald, 1993).

Harassment and sexual harassment are recognized as a form of discrimination on the grounds of sex and, thus, are contrary to the principle of equal treatment between men and women (Numhuser-Henning & Laulom, 2012). For quite some time this kind of violence was ignored as a part of normal life. However, legally speaking, the concept of sexual harassment was coined and acknowledged in the early 1970s when some specific cases relating to harassment of women at work became prominent in the West and also in India which made evident that women needed protection at workplace. Today, sexual harassment of women at workplace constitutes an extremely important kind of violence, which has been comprehensively defined for legal purposes.

Although a myriad of definitions exist, yet there is no universal agreement on an objective definition of sexual harassment. Like many other crimes, sexual harassment is all about power, control and domination. *International Labor Organization* (ILO), 2001 defined sexual harassment as a sex based behavior that is unwelcome and offensive to the recipient. Thus, sexual harassment is not merely a problem of safety and health, and unacceptable working conditions, but is also a form of violence primarily against women (ILO, 1992). It can be found in a variety of avenues, including the workplace, education, housing and public spheres. Thus, sexual harassment of working women is an extension of evidence in everyday life and is discriminative and exploitative in nature.

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN AT WORKPLACE

Sexual harassment cannot be understood from the perspective of a single theory but it is always a combination of different predictors. Previous researchers have looked at sexual harassment using a number of frameworks including organizational approach, feminist theory, role theory and attributional models of sexual harassment. However, all these models share common basic assumptions and can be labelled as socio-cultural models of sexual harassment (Sheets and Braver, 1999). Sexual harassment of women therefore, may be understood from different perspectives, as reflected through the existing literature on the subject in the 1980s and 1990s. However, there have been five widely accepted theories of sexual harassment that attempt to explain the phenomenon from different angles and perspectives.

- (1) **Natural/Biological Theory:** Those who belong to the Natural School interpret sexual harassment as a natural sexual attraction between people. According to this model, men have stronger sex drives, and are therefore, biologically motivated to engage in sexual pursuit of women. Thus, the harassing behavior is not meant to be offensive or discriminatory, but is merely the result of biological urges. Its assumptions include a natural, mutual attraction between men and women, a stronger male sex drive, and men in the role of sexual initiators. Biologically men have strong physiological urges for sexual activity hence may exert coercive powers towards women in order to satisfy the sex drive, whereas the other version proposes that, naturally men and women have mutual sexual attraction hence they both are responsible for sexual acts at workplace. This implies that a person may not have an intention of sexual harassment but still would involve in the act owing to the motivation provided by the opposite sex attraction which is a natural attribute, thus harassing behavior may not necessarily be interpreted as offensive or discriminatory. Therefore, according to this model the concept of sexual harassment is a mistaken one because the relevant interactions are most appropriately viewed as courtship behavior. A key strength of the natural/biological perspective is that it acknowledges the innate human instincts potentially driving sexually aggressive behavior (Tangri et al. 1982).

However, this explanation has found little support and has been criticized on a number of grounds. It lacks exploratory depth since it is extremely difficult to design studies that test the theory's core assumptions. Moreover, the theory does not provide any core strategies for sexual harassment prevention. Thus, this framework has had little influence on mainstream thinking about sexual harassment.

- (2) **Sex Role Spillover Theory:** This theory is based on the proposition of irrelevant gender-based role expectations that individuals bring to the workplace in guiding their interactions with women. Men hold role perceptions of women based on their traditional role in our culture. When women take jobs outside of these traditional areas to work in the male dominated workplace, men rely on these gender-based expectations when interacting with women therefore, perceiving women in their gender role over and above their work role. The result of the inappropriate expected role is male behavior which is perceived to be sexually harassing. On the other hand, in the female dominated workplace, sex role and work role overlap therefore; higher level of sexual inappropriate behavior is not reported. Therefore, men are more likely to sexualize their experiences, including work experiences, and are therefore, more likely to make sexual remarks or engage in sexualized behavior, thus accounting for the fact that women experience more sexual harassment than men (Barbara Gutek, 1982).
- (3) **Organizational Theory:** Proponents of this theory propose that one of the central concepts that helps to explain sexual harassment is power (Cleveland &Kurst, 1993). This theory proposes that sexual harassment results from the opportunities presented by power and authority relations which derive from hierarchical structures of organizations (Gruber, 1992). The structural and environmental conditions found at the workplace provide opportunities for harassment or implicitly encourage harassment on the basis of workplace norms, gender bias, and imbedded power relations between men and women. Men have traditionally held the organizational power inherent in management and supervisory positions, whereas women are likely to be employed in subordinate positions. Since work organizations are characterized by vertical stratification, individuals can use their power and position to extort sexual gratification from their subordinates, thus relating sexual harassment to aspects of structure of the workplace that provide asymmetrical relations between supervisors and subordinates. Therefore, this perspective emphasizes that the structure of organizational hierarchy invests power in certain individuals over others that can lead to abuse. Thus, sexual harassment is all about expression of male power over women that sustain patriarchal relations.
- (4) **Socio-Cultural Theory:** Socio-Cultural theories examine the wider social and political context in which sexual harassment is created and occurs. According to this perspective, sexual harassment is a logical consequence of the gender inequality and sexism that already exists in society (Gutek, 1985; Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997). This theory asserts that women's lesser status in the larger society is reflected at the

workplace structures and culture; consequently, male dominance continues to be the rule. Historically cultures and societal norms have socialized men into roles of sexual assertion, leadership, and persistence whereas women are socialized to be passive, submissive and gatekeepers. These social/cultural roles are played out at the workplace, and sexual harassment is the result. Therefore, sexual harassment is a way for men to express dominance and hence they are more likely to be the perpetrators; whereas due to intrinsic physical weakness and submissive behavior, females are the most possible victims. Thus, sexual harassment is only one manifestation of a much larger patriarchal system in which men are the dominant group reflecting the larger society's differential distribution of power and status between the sexes. A woman is perceived as an object of enjoyment under the prevalence of patriarchal culture in the society. The perpetrators of sexual harassment have no regard for women as an equal human being. Therefore, molesting women is a part and parcel of male idea of fun in the society.

- (5) **Feminist Theory:** During the early 1970s, feminist groups like the National Organization for Women and Working Women's Institute began zealously to raise awareness of the problems of unwanted sexual attention on the job. According to the feminist perspective, sexual harassment is linked to the sexist male ideology of male dominance and male superiority in the society. Therefore, feminists' theories view sexual harassment as the product of a gender system maintained by a dominant, normative form of masculinity. Thus, sexual harassment exists because of the views on women as the inferior sex, but also sexual harassment serves to maintain the already existing gender stratification by emphasizing sex role expectations (Gutek, 1985).

Connell (1987; 1992; 2002) posits that gender gender-based inequalities and discrimination are maintained and negotiated through interrelations among differently gendered (and therefore differently privileged) subjects within a larger gender system. Therefore, his theory of gender discrimination acknowledges multiple masculinities and feminities and takes account of the subjective experience of gender and harassment within a larger gender system. MacKinnon (1979) maintained that women's inferior position in the workplace and society in general, is not only a consequence, but also a cause of sexual harassment. For him, gender and sexuality are similarly identified as systems of power and domination, with adult men wielding sexual power to assert and maintain dominance over women. Therefore, men and women are likely to experience and perceive sexually harassing behaviors differently because of gender inequality and culturally prescribed expressions of sexuality. Extension of male dominance in society includes organizations, where the phenomenon is thriving (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979). Sexual harassment, hence, is viewed as an inevitable consequence of cultural experiences; therefore it would apply to many different settings including the workplace.

A main strength of feminist theory has been the logical synthesis of gender issues, patriarchy and dominance towards an explanation of sexual harassment, that is, there is some evidence of unifying power. Furthermore, feminists focus on gender inequality in the workplace has often been credited with bringing the issue of sexual harassment to light.

RELEVANCE OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

An interpretation of these theoretical perspectives reveals that both biologically as well as socio-culturally, men happen to have always occupied a dominant position over women in societies, of which the workplaces are only a part. Considerable data have been accumulated confirming that harassment is widespread in both the public (Culbertson, Rosenfeld, Booth-Kewley & Magnusson, 1992; Fitzgerald et al. 1997) and the private sectors and it has significant consequences for employee health and psychological well-being (Fitzgerald, 1993; Schneider, Swan & Fitzgerald, 1997). Therefore, the vulnerability of women as a weaker sex has traveled towards workplaces, where it is considered natural and normal for men to be responding sexually towards women as colleagues, subordinates and superiors.

As stated earlier, sexual harassment is a multidimensional problem. Therefore, it is difficult to focus only on one theoretical framework to draw conclusions to examine the persistence and precipitating factors of sexual harassment of women at the workplace.

III. CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment is a recurring problem around the globe. It is an action that is not favored, not accepted and it is done without the consent of the receiver; an action that can be in the form of verbal, non-verbal, visual or physical (Tengku Omar & Maimunal, 2000). In simple terms, it is a sexually-oriented conduct that may endanger the victim's job, negatively affects the victim's job performance and undermines the victim's personal dignity by creating a hostile work environment. Though the definition of sexual harassment is clear and much research work has been performed, yet in the absence of rigorous qualitative and longitudinal designs, the dynamics of gender, power and harassment remain poorly understood (McLaughlin, Uggem & Blackstone, 2012).

To reduce the risks of sexual harassment it is essential to first understand the nature of the problem and its causes. As men are generally the perpetrators, it is hoped that an insight into background, thoughts, feelings, perceptions and attitude would help understand why this phenomenon does exist. Thus, complex models which focus on interaction of multiple factors are needed to understand the concept of sexual harassment. Hence, to conclude we can say that the ability to truly understand sexual harassment lies in understanding how different variables interact with one another to produce different types of sexual harassment at workplace.

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