



SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT THE WORKPLACE AGAINST FEMALE DOCTORS, AN IMPEDIMENT TO GENDER EQUALITY

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Background: There are different forms of violence against women which include domestic violence, sexual violence (rape) and sexual harassment at the workplace. Sometime negative things occur at the workplace. The United Nations Development Fund for women defines sexual harassment as unwelcome or unwanted verbal conduct based on sex or of a sexual nature, the acceptance or rejection of which affects an individual's employment. This even occurs amongst doctors. Workers especially women are harassed verbally, psychologically, physically and sexually especially by senior colleagues.

Aims/Objectives: To investigate the occurrence of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Place, measures and strategies to prevent it, and existence of policies on Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Place among female doctors.

Methodology: This is a pilot study conducted in 2013 during an international forum for female doctors. It is across sectional survey in which an 18-item questionnaire was used. Participation was voluntary.

Results: The survey consisted of thirty-three female doctors from eight countries. Respondents that have been sexually harassed at the workplace are 9 (27.27%), in the form of verbal, unwanted touch, gestures and rape. Six (18.18%) of respondents have been shown items of sexual nature at the workplace, 4 (12.12%) have received SMS and email from someone at work which are sexual in nature, 16 (48.48%) aware of policies and a reporting system for sexual harassment. Eight (24.24%) of respondents who reported sexual harassment faced retaliation. Employment decisions or benefits were tied to sexual harassment by some respondents.

Conclusion: Sexual harassment which is a menace at the workplace exists and doctors are affected. Not all health facilities have policies and a reporting system against it.

KEYWORDS: Sexual Harassment, Violence, Policy, Female Doctors

INTRODUCTION

Negative behaviours sometimes occur at the workplace. Sexual harassment at the workplace is a negative behaviour that occurs at the workplace. There are various forms of violence against women and harassment that occur at the workplace and sexual harassment is one of them. Other forms of harassment that occurs at the workplace are psychological harassment and bullying. Female doctors are sexually harassed by male doctors, other health workers and hospital staff, patients and patient relatives. In every human society, there is interaction between males and females therefore some form of sexual attraction is expected¹. Throughout the world, people working often report general and sexual harassment at their work place therefore it is a serious global issue^{1,2,3}. It is a form of gender discrimination that contributes negatively to the culture of any workplace^{3,4}. Employers abuse their authority to seek sexual favours from their female colleagues and subordinates. Sometimes promising promotions or other forms of career advancement or simply creating an untenable and hostile work environment. Sexual harassment is being recognized as a violation of human rights and human dignity which undermines equality and access to opportunities between men and women therefore it is a major obstacle of gender equality development and peace³. The United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UNCEDAW) defines workplace sexual harassment as such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour as physical contact and advances, sexually centered remarks, showing pornography and sexual demands whether by words or actions⁵. It is usually from someone with a higher power or at a vantage position to a less privileged person¹. At the international level, the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace has been taken seriously by the United Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO)⁶. Sexual harassment involves the interpretation of a verbal, nonverbal or physical action against another person and may refer to an action that is not mutually agreed upon that is not mutually agreed upon or reciprocated by another individual⁷. There are significant differences with regards to the perception of sexual harassment between genders in several circumstances⁸. Victims of sexual harassment are almost always women which shows that this is a society in which women generally lack power relative to men^{4,8,9}. Sexual harassment is experienced by many hospital staff and it can influence the quality of medical services that is provided⁸.

In a study carried out in Canada on sexual harassment of female doctors by patients, more than three quarters (77%) of the female doctors surveyed reported that they have been sexually harassed⁹. A survey of dental students reveals that 34% of the respondents had been sexually harassed¹⁰. In various studies the incidence of sexual harassment against female doctors was 8% in two hospitals in Taiwan and 6.8% among female dentists in a Nigerian hospital¹¹. The aim of this study is to estimate the prevalence of the experience of sexual harassment in a cohort of female doctors attending an international conference.

Research Methodology

This is a cross-sectional survey .it was carried out in 2013 during the Medical Women's International Association (MWIA) session at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York, United States of America. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women annually is yearly gathering of women all over the world to discuss about issues around women. During the programme, different non-governmental organizations make presentations and also hold parallel sessions. The Medical Women's International Association held a session during programme in 2013 and participants at the session made up population for the study. Participation in the survey was voluntary and responses were confidential. An 18-item semi structured questionnaire was self-administered to participants of the sessions which were made up of female doctors from different parts of the world.

Results

The questionnaire was administered to thirty-three female doctors who were participants at the Medical Women's International Association session at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women conference. The participants were from eight countries.

Table 1 Showing Age Demographics

Age in years	N	%
20-30	8	24.24
31-40	6	18.18
41-50	12	36.36
51-60	4	12.12
>60	3	9.09

When asked if they have been sexually harassed at the workplace, 9(27.27%) said Yes while 24(72.73%) said No. For that had been sexually harassed it was in the form of verbal request and confrontation, sexual exposure, unwanted touch and attempted rape.

Table II Questions specific to victim of sexual harassment at the workplace

Question	Response	N	%
Have you been a recipient of unwanted sexual contact while at work	Yes	4	57.14
	No	3	42.86
Have items of a sexual nature (e.g. pictures, posters) ever being displayed in your workplace	Yes	4	57.14
	No	3	42.86
Have you ever had someone follow you or urged you to go out with them after work	Yes	6	85.71
	No	1	14.29
Have you received SMS (text messages) or emails from someone at work which was sexual in nature	Yes	7	100%
	No	-	-
Asked inappropriate questions of sexual nature at work	Yes	10	30.30
	No	23	69.70
Required to engage in intimate relationship to obtain employment benefits	Yes	4	12.12
	No	29	87.88
Policy against sexual harassment available	Yes	16	48.48
	No	17	51.51
Reporting system available	Yes	17	51.52
	No	16	48.48
Victims who report sexual harassment face retaliation	Yes	8	24.24
	No	21	63.64
	Don't Know	4	12.12
Perpetrators of sexual harassment at the workplace are cautioned and/ or punished	Yes	8	24.24
	No	21	63.64
Employment decision and or benefits tied to unwelcome sexual activity	Yes	5	15.15
	No	26	78.06
	No Idea	2	6.06

Discussion

Female doctors are victims of sexual harassment. Having a formal reporting system will help prevent this. It may cause the victim to consider quitting their job. Where the victim faces retaliation for reporting, she may consider keeping quiet. In some countries, the victim is at the risk of demotion or dismissal. Sexual harassment among female doctors exists and it occurs in most countries. Women who refuse in to give to such unwanted sexual advances often run the risk of anything from demotion to dismissal. The image of those involved in sexual harassment and those of their family members are often tarnished within the immediate environment ¹. Despite the attempts of preventive measures the problem of workplace harassment has persisted and is adversely affecting the mental and physical health of working women across the globe ².

In this study some of the participants had been sexually harassed at their workplace verbally, been sent unwanted messages of sexual nature and one was a victim of attempted rape. Not all hospitals had a reporting system and this was linked to the level of development of the country. Those who indicated no reporting system, victims of sexual harassment at the workplace face retaliation, no reporting system, employment decisions and/ or benefits tied to unwanted sexual activity and the perpetrator is not cautioned or punished were from developing countries.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment at the workplace exists and even in the medical profession which is held in high esteem in most countries affected. There needs to be a policy in every health institution and ministry of health to help reduce this menace including a formal reporting system as most victims in some countries are not believed that it happened and also to prevent it from leading to rape which has its own psychological problems especially post-traumatic stress disorder. Health institutions and ministries of health should have preventive measures; perpetrators should be cautioned and even punished to prevent reoccurrence.

Limitation of the Study

The limitation of the study is that the study was conducted among a small population and only female doctors who attended the Medical Women's International Association (MWIA) session at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in 2013 were studied.

Recommendations: There is a need for all hospitals to put in place policies to prevent Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Place among female doctors, and when it occurs, the perpetrators should be punished accordingly to prevent its reoccurrence. There should be a formal reporting system for Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Place among female doctors. The study should be conducted among a larger population

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