



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG  
MALAY FEMALE ADMINISTRATIVE AND DIPLOMATIC OFFICERS**

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**FEM 2006 7**



**SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG MALAY  
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**By**

**NOOR AZIMA AHMAD**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Science**

**March 2006**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia  
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the  
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**Chairman : Associate Professor Jariah Masud, PhD**

**Faculty : Human Ecology**

With forecasted participation rate of 45.8 per cent in 2005, Malaysian women have contributed significantly to the development of the Nation. Thus, their well-being and basic human rights to have a safe and conducive workplace should be assured: including from sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is noted by the United Nations as a form of discrimination and violence against women in various conventions that Malaysia has acceded to; primarily the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Literature on sexual harassment suggests that one in two women would experience some forms of sexually harassing behaviour during her working life.



This is a qualitative research involving 16 female respondents working in the public sector. Observation is mainly drawn from interviews with the respondents. In the interest of triangulation, informal interviews with their friends and colleagues were also conducted. Besides that, key informants also provided required background information. It is a study of power relations between the harassers and the victims at public workplaces. The research examines the incidences and reactions to sexual harassment and the types of coping strategies employed by the respondents who are in the subordinate positions in the organizational structure. The central argument is that the issue of power and powerlessness is embedded in the work culture which oppresses women's rights to have a safe and conducive working environment. The study also seeks to examine the factors influencing the types of coping strategies used by the respondents.

Findings revealed that no one reported a one-time harassment. Instead, all the respondents faced numerous types of harassment for a considerable length of time. As for types of coping, a number of coping strategies were simultaneously used by the respondents as they saw fit and most effective at that particular time. Some coping patterns emerged. While there are some respondents who were empowered enough to stand for their rights, most preferred to keep quiet as to avoid further complications and repercussions at the workplace. This supports previous

studies that women tend not to seek advocacy intervention. Only in severe harassment cases that they did so. Respondents in this study avoided advocacy-seeking since previous cases reported to higher authority yielded no favourable response. There are some exceptional cases where respondents went along with the harassers due to several factors, including childhood upbringing and family background. The main factors influencing their decision on coping strategies were power differential, socialization and background, severity, personal empowerment and personality, and office environment.

The study concludes that sexual harassment is an intricate form of sexual violence and is mostly all about men in power and un-empowered women. To minimize incidences of sexual harassment at public workplaces, people need to have basic respect to others as found in the tenets of all religion. Besides that, more gender sensitivity courses should be conducted, with massive awareness campaign on the Sexual Harassment Guideline introduced by the PSD in August 2005. Only then, more harmonious and safer working environment could be achieved in the public sector.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi sebahagian keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**GANGGUAN SEKSUAL DAN STRATEGI DAYATINDAK DI KALANGAN  
PEGAWAI WANITA PERKHIDMATAN TADBIR DAN DIPLOMATIK**

Oleh

**NOOR AZIMA AHMAD**

**Mac 2006**

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Wanita Malaysia telah memberikan sumbangan yang signifikan kepada pembangunan negara dengan jangkaan 45.8 peratus penyertaan dalam tenaga kerja pada tahun 2005. Disebabkan sumbangan yang sangat signifikan, hak asas mereka untuk mendapatkan suasana kerja yang sentiasa menggalakkan penyertaan mereka dan suasana selamat amat perlu diberikan perhatian: termasuk daripada gangguan seksual. Gangguan seksual telah diklasifikasikan sebagai salah satu daripada bentuk diskriminasi dan keganasan terhadap wanita di dalam pelbagai konvensyen oleh Pertubuhan Bangsa-bangsa Bersatu. Ini terutamanya di dalam Konvensyen Penghapusan Segala Bentuk Diskriminasi Terhadap

Wanita (CEDAW) yang ditandatangani oleh Malaysia. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa seorang dalam setiap dua orang wanita akan mengalami pelbagai jenis gangguan seksual sepanjang kerjaya mereka.

Kajian kualitatif ini melibatkan 16 orang responden wanita yang bekerja di sektor awam. Data diperolehi terutamanya melalui temubual dengan responden. Untuk mengesahkan dapatan, temubual secara tidak rasmi juga diadakan di kalangan rakan-rakan baik dan teman sekerja responden. Selain itu, pemberi maklumat utama juga turut memberikan maklumat asas kepada kajian. Kajian ini melihat hubungan kuasa antara pelaksana gangguan seksual dan mangsa di tempat kerja di sektor awam: meneliti insiden-insiden gangguan seksual yang berlaku dan reaksi terhadap perkara tersebut, di samping jenis-jenis strategi dayatindak yang digunakan oleh responden yang kebanyakannya berada di dalam posisi yang lebih rendah di dalam struktur organisasi tersebut. Tumpuan ialah bahawa isu kuasa dan ketiadaankuasa di dalam budaya kerja menyebabkan hak-hak pekerja wanita untuk mendapatkan tempat kerja yang selamat dan kondusif diketepikan. Kajian juga cuba melihat kepada faktor-faktor yang menyebabkan sesuatu jenis strategi dayatindak digunakan oleh responden.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa tidak ada seorangpun responden melaporkan gangguan seksual yang hanya berlaku sekali. Sebaliknya, semua responden telah menghadapi pelbagai bentuk gangguan yang berulang-ulang dalam tempoh yang panjang. Pelbagai jenis strategi dayatindak telah digunakan pada masa yang sama oleh responden mengikut kesesuaian pada ketika tersebut. Beberapa corak dayatindak telah diperolehi dalam kajian ini. Walaupun ada responden yang telah berani menegakkan hak masing-masing, kebanyakan memilih untuk berdiam diri untuk mengelakkan komplikasi yang lebih buruk di tempat kerja.

Keadaan ini menyokong hasil kajian-kajian terdahulu bahawa wanita mengelak untuk membuat laporan dan mendapatkan bantuan secara rasmi. Hanya di dalam kes-kes yang dirasakan terlampau serius strategi dayatindak membuat laporan ini digunakan. Keadaan ini berlaku kerana terdapat kes terdahulu yang dilaporkan kepada pengurusan tertinggi tidak menampakkan hasil yang diharapkan. Terdapat juga kes-kes istimewa di mana responden menggunakan situasi tersebut untuk kepentingan diri disebabkan sejarah hidup dan keluarga. Faktor-faktor utama yang menyebabkan sesuatu pemilihan dayatindak ialah kerana perbezaan kuasa, sosialisasi dan pengalaman, tahap kes-kes gangguan, tahap pengupayaan diri sendiri dan personaliti, dan suasana tempat kerja.



Kesimpulannya, gangguan seksual ialah satu jenis keganasan seksual yang amat sukar diperincikan, dan selalunya melibatkan warga kerja lelaki yang berkuasa dan warga kerja wanita yang kurang pengupayaan diri. Untuk mengurangkan kes-kes gangguan seksual di tempat kerja awam, semua pihak harus mengamalkan rasa hormat kepada hak orang lain seperti yang diajarkan oleh semua agama. Selain itu, lebih banyak kursus kepekaan gender harus dilaksanakan, dengan makluman dan kempen kesedaran yang lebih meluas mengenai kewujudan Garis Panduan Mengendalikan Gangguan Seksual Di Tempat Kerja Dalam Perkhidmatan Awam yang diperkenalkan oleh Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam pada bulan Ogos 2005. Hanya dengan itu, persekitaran kerja yang lebih selamat dan harmoni dapat dicapai di sektor awam.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.**

This study would not have been a reality without the assistance, support and *doa* from various people. To the Government of Malaysia for granting the study leave, financial assistance and providing required information, especially for dedicated personnel at the PSD: The late Tuan Haji Ramli, Pn. Maziah, En. Ruhaidi, En. Hasman and Pn. Normala. To En. Azman, Pn. Ainunnazli, and Pn. Zamiah of HAWA for their supports. To key informants and respondents who took time to help me.

To my Chairperson, Associate Professor Dr. Jariah Masud for steering me to the right path when I was lost, for giving me freedom to grieve when I really needed it, for prodding me when I was lax, for reminding me to be robust when I was down. To my Committee Member, Dr. Maznah Baba for her endless support and motivation when I was feeling low. Without their assistance, comments, and sharp eyes, this academic writing would not be realized. Not forgetting all my lecturers, FEM and SGS's personnel. To new friends I made along this passage especially Zura, Marziah, Ben, Benny, Kak Ijah, Kak Adib and Lita. To all my friends who are always there for me: MSO and Kak Imah, Kak Ti, Kak Yan, Kak Jam,



Sal, Shimah, Ati, Hairul, Eni, Raja Deraman, Shahrullizam and Toantowee. To Kak Farid, my best friend: For laughing and crying with me, for pushing me on, for listening to my ramblings, for constantly praying for me and guiding me closer to The One. From the bottom of my heart: Thank you everybody. My life is richer because of all of you.

Especially to my parents who always believe in me and never once question choices I made in life. This is for you Mak. To my siblings and their spouses, especially to my sister Azizah who is pursuing her doctoral studies abroad. To Amirul, Amizal, Anis, Ain, Ammar, Danish, Diana and Damina. I hope all of you will grow up believing that learning is a life-long process, pray you will be well-rounded Muslims and towering Malays. I love all of you. To Mus who taught me to be strong and, to always concentrate on the positive aspects of everything. I know you would have the widest smile on your face upon seeing me completing my quest. Some people come into our lives and make such an impact that we are never ever the same when they leave us.

Above all, I thank God for all that I have today. I pray to God to make all of us happy, grant us health, award us wealth, and most of all, to bestow upon us paradise.



I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 27 March 2006 to conduct the final examination of Noor Azima Ahmad on her Master of Science thesis entitled "Sexual Harassment And Coping Strategies Among Malay Female Administrative And Diplomatic Officers" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



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**NOOR AZIMA AHMAD**

Date: 14 June 2006

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UN	United Nations
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations against Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
PSD	The Pubic Service Department
ADS	Administrative and Diplomatic Service
INTAN	Institute of Public Administration
DPA	Diploma in Public Administration
HR	Human Resource
SUB	Under Secretary



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background to the Research

Malaysia has been recognized as one of the fastest growing developing countries over the past two decades (ILO, 1993; Adler, 1994). Apart from the recession periods (1984-1985), the Malaysian economy has expanded tremendously since the 1970s with forecasted real GDP growth of 5.0 - 6.0 per cent in 2005. This is achieved by the labour force of 10.3 million in 2005, including more than 900,000 in the public sector. Malaysia has progressed with an impressive record of only 3.4 percent unemployment rate in 2004, and forecasted at 3.5 percent in 2005 (Department of Statistics, 2005). The rapid economic development has been attributed to the contribution of women with participation rate of 47.7 per cent in 2003 and forecasted at 45.8 percent in 2005 (Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia, 2005).

Studies have shown that with increased participation rates of women in the workplaces, especially in sectors traditionally dominated by men, incidences of sexual harassment towards women would be unavoidable (Riger, 1991; Sabitha, 2003). Although harassers and harasees come in



both sexes, the great majority of situation involves one or more male harassers and a lower-rank female harasee (Foulis & McCabe, 1997; DuBois, Knapp, Haley, & Kustis, 1998; Welsh & Gruber, 1999). Hence, *she* is therefore still very much the proper pronoun when sexual harassment is discussed (Wagner, 1992; Stockdale, Visio & Batra, 1999).

Several countries around the world have legislated sexual harassment as a serious misconduct (Levesque, 2000). It violates the well-being of workers; presenting negative impact on one's emotional, social, and physical well-being (Powell, 1993; Labig, 1995; Kinney, 1995; Fitzgerald, Dragow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Harned, Ormerod, Palmieri, Collinsworth, & Reed, 2002). Studies have shown that absenteeism tends to increase among employees who are sexually harassed, work attitudes adversely affected, and productivity drops (Rosenberg, Perlstadt, & Phillips, 1993; Culbertson & Rodgers, 1997; Dorfman, Cobb, & Cox, 2000).

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action notes sexual harassment as a form of violence against women and calls on member states to take measures to actively combat this act of violence. It is also in accordance to the spirit of Article 3 & 5, Universal Declaration on Human Rights that states:



‘Everyone has a right to life, liberty and security of person and no one shall be subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment’.

In Malaysia, the act of sexual harassment violates Article 8(2) in the Federal Constitution that reads “there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender ...”

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Sexual harassment has been recognized as a key issue in debates about gender relation for the past 20 years (Wilson, 2000). Numerous studies have been conducted from the extent and forms of sexually harassing behaviour (Fitzgerald, Schullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, Gold, Ormerod, & Weitzman, 1998; Whatley & Wasieleski, 2001), to how it would affect the organizations as a whole (Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997). A number of researchers consider sexual harassment at the workplace as a serious problem (Dine & Watt, 1995; Sabitha, 1999; Dorfman, Cobb, & Cox, 2000; Cecilia, Zanariah & Maria, 2003), and “maybe the single most widespread occupational hazard at the workplace” (Garvey as cited in Riger, 1991). Others view sexual harassment as the outgrowth of sexism within the society (Murrell, Olson, & Frieze, 1995) and

should be viewed as equivalent to other violent sexual assault such as rape (Gutek & Koss, 1993). Thus, an in-depth study needs to be conducted to identify incidences of sexual harassment towards women administrators in Malaysia including in the Administrative and Diplomatic Service (ADS), who are policy-makers in the Country.

Researchers (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Popovich, Gehlauf, Jolton, Somers, & Godinho, 1992; Bingham & Scherer, 1993) agree that one of the problems in studying sexual harassment is the need to understand the perception of the construct itself. This is because perception and belief are learned everyday by members of a certain group, and becomes the norms acceptable to all members within that group (Bandura, 1977). An in-depth study enables us to examine the experiences faced by the Malay victims as individuals, with different personalities, and as parts of the human ecological system, react to the incidences. The present study provides invaluable information on how personalities, cultures (in this case, the Malay culture) and socialization (Roziyah, 1994) frame one's belief and provides the framework for society to work; either inhibiting or fostering certain acts. Because of cultural expectations, victims of sexual harassment may be forced to act against their wishes, in order to maintain the status quo of the work environment. Qualitatively done, this study enables better access to the meanings of social experiences, interactions

and activities of the people involved from the view point of the victims. This is in accordance with the view that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied life that best be told narratively (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Besides identifying the types and impacts of sexual harassment, researchers (Gutek & Dunwoody, 1987; Baker, Terpstra, & Lantz, 1990) have ventured into other aspects including how the victims cope individually with the incidences and how these coping strategies affected their lives and careers. Due to various differences in past experiences and upbringing, Barry (2002) in support of Bandura, points that it is important to be aware that an event perceived as threatening by one person maybe a challenge to another, and perceived by a third person as quite normal. It is the differences in these individuals that cause differences in their individual coping responses, creating an internal subjective reaction that can never be identical for any two people. However, certain common patterns of coping might exist among these victims. Hence, the present study is an attempt to investigate the specific individual coping strategies, and patterns of coping among these respondents over a period of time within the socio-cultural complexity.



Researchers (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996; Malamut & Offermann, 2001) have also studied factors influencing sexual harassment coping strategies. The present study aims to examine the factors influencing types of coping strategies employed by the respondents who have multiple roles as individuals, workers, wives, mothers, daughters and members of the society.

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- i) what experiences the respondents face and how do they react?;
- ii) how the respondents individually cope with the incidences over a period of time?;
- iii) what coping patterns prevalent among the respondents?; and
- iv) what factors influence their coping strategies?.

### **1.3 Objective of the Study**

In general, this study seeks to explore in-depth the sexual harassment experiences among women administrators especially on their coping mechanism. In particular, this study attempts to: