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Uncovering true state of workplace sexual harassment: Application of Operational and Subjective approaches

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Abstract

- Surveys on workplace sexual harassment have been regularly conducted in South Korea. Many of the surveys use the term ‘sexual harassment’ directly in the title and/or the questions and the criteria for victims vary. Such unstandardized methods raises a question over sampling bias and may

1) The data were collected from Seo, Y.N. & Lee, J. (2016). A study into the current state of workplace bullying in South Korea and for the preventive and reactive actions. Sejong: KRIVET

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interfere with uncovering the true state of sexual harassment. In order to address the issue, this study applied operational and subjective approaches to identify victims and the survey was conducted under the neutral title ‘Work Conditions Survey’. Data analyses revealed that the rate of subjective victims were 11.6% for females and 6.9% for males. In terms of operational victims, females were 34.4% and males 25.0%. The results indicate that both genders are likely to underestimate the extent of their victimization or are unaware of being sexually harassed. Moreover, there were noticeable proportion of men having been exposed to sexual harassments as well as women. A number of practical implications can be made. Firstly, sexual harassment is an issue that concerns both men and women. South Korean legislation and policy over sexual harassment at work have been focusing on female victims but the gender-centrism should be avoided. Protection and support should be provided for both male and female workers. Preventive education should also be enhanced to establish the right attitudes towards sexual harassment. Such actions would promote societal consensus, regardless of gender, to act together to overcome workplace sexual harassment.

- Key Word: sexual harassment, workplace, South Korea, operational and subjective approaches

I. Introduction

Workplace sexual harassment has long received public attention. Legislative · politic and public actions have been taken to address the issue. There is an anti-sexual harassment legislation in practice. Many civic organizations make effort to promote public awareness and support the victims. Public and private bodies conduct regular sexual harassment survey.

While the surveys of other forms of workplace aggression have utilized behavioral index as well as subjective feelings of the respondents to address the issue (e.g., Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001, Seo, Kim, & Lee, 2014), the surveys of sexual harassment often rely on subjective feelings only (e.g., Korea Sexual Harassment State Online Survey by Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF)).

It is true that the legal definition of sexual harassment focuses on the victim's feelings of being sexually humiliated. Yet, there can be cases in which the victims feel humiliated following sexual comments/behaviors but do not recognize it as sexual harassment. This is even more probable for men due to the social expectation of men being a dominant, strong figure in terms of sexuality. Even if a male worker recognized sexual harassment upon himself, it would be difficult for him to openly report it.

Moreover, there is also the issue of sampling bias that may occur by directly mentioning sexual harassment in the title of the survey or in the questions (Arvey & Cavanaugh, 1995). When a sensitive issue like sexual harassment is explicitly mentioned from the survey title, people who have already experienced sexual harassment or who are particularly interested in the issue are more likely to respond to the survey. In contrast, people who feel that sexual harassment is not an issue that concerns them are less likely to respond to the survey.

Aforementioned issues have an important implication to the workplace sexual harassment investigation in that they may hinder uncovering the state of the sexual harassment and leave out the victims who are afraid to report their victimization even in surveys. In order to address the issues, this paper

attempts to standardize the methods of measuring bullying and uncover the actual state of workplace sexual harassment that Korean male and female workers experience. In doing so, the paper will try and challenge the gender-centric prejudices for sexual harassment and raise an argument that both genders should be protected from sexual harassment.

II. Review of Literature

1. The definitions of Sexual Harassment

In the earlier times, sexual harassment was often perceived as an act between male perpetrators and female victims. The misunderstanding is evident in LeFontaine and Tredeau's (1986) definition that 'any action occurring within the workplace whereby the women are treated as the objects of male sexual prerogative. ... all such treatment is seen to constitute harassment, irregardless of whether the victim labels it as problematic' (p. 435).

More recent definitions begin to remove the women-men element. According to the South Korean Gender Equality and Work Life Balance Act, workplace sexual harassment refers to 'business owners/superiors/workers using positional power or in relation to work, making other workers feel sexual humiliation or aversion through their sexual comments/behaviors or giving disadvantages in employment when the target refuses to comply with sexual comments/behaviors/demands.' In line with the legal definitions, sexual harassment occurs not only to women but also to men. The perpetrators are not necessarily of the opposite sex (Seo & Lee, 2017). Man-to-man and woman-to-woman cases also occur.

The above legal definitions include giving disadvantage (secondary perpetration) as the consequence of the incomppliance to the initial, primary harassment. The secondary perpetration may not only take the form of sexual harassment but go over its boundary, making it indistinguishable to other forms of workplace aggression. Therefore, within the scope of this paper, only

the primary sexual harassment will be covered and defined as ‘any comments/behaviors that cause sexual humiliation to the targeted person’ .

2. Measuring Sexual Harassment

Furthermore, the paper adapts both operational (with behavioral index) and subjective (self-reported feelings) approaches to identify sexual harassment victims. In the literature of workplace bullying, operational and subjective methods have repeatedly been used alongside each other (e.g., Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Salin, 2001; Seo et al., 2014; Seo & Lee, 2016). Operational method uses a list of typical bullying behaviors as the measuring tool. Respondents indicate how frequently they have experienced each bullying behavior (usually during the last 6 months). If at least one of them has been repeated weekly or more often, the respondent is categorized as ‘victim’ . Subjective methods relies on the respondents’ self-report and victims are identified as those who report repetitive(usually weekly or more often) and lasting (usually 6 months or more) bullying.

Unlike the above workplace bullying literature, the literature of workplace sexual harassment has not been particularly standardized (Lengnick-Hall, 1995). The time frame of victimization varies. The measurement tools or criterion of victims vary. Samples are usually obtained through convenience sampling and gender balance is unaccounted for. Many surveys directly mention ‘sexual harassment’ in their survey title. As can be seen in Table 1, the percentages of victims vary depending on the time frame, sample, method of identifying victims, and the measuring tools. In the table, KDHA (2005), Kim et al (2011), and Yoon & Park (2016) made it explicit that the survey was on sexual harassment. Only Kosis (2016) surveyed other forms of aggression along with sexual harassment and the title of the survey did not emphasize sexual harassment. Consequently, KDHA(2005), Kim et al. (2011), and Yoon and Parks(2016) reported very high rates of victims whereas KOSIS(2016) reported low rates of victims. This raises the issue of sampling bias due to the respondents being influenced by the wording of the title or questions.

Table 1. Prevalence rate of Workplace Sexual Harassment

Subject	Time frame	Sample	Operational Victims	Subjective Victims	Measuring Tool
KDHA (2005)	1 year	Dental hygienist	29.6%		13 sexual harassment acts
Kim et al. (2011)	2 years	female workers	Woman: 39.4%		14 sexual harassment acts
Yoon & Park (2016)	Since 1 st employment	Workers in general	-	Women: 52% Men: 35%	-
Kosis (2016)	1 year	Workers in general	-	Women: 4.4% Men: 1.2%	-

As observed from the above issues, unstandardized methods make it difficult to draw the clear picture of the state of sexual harassment. Results from different surveys are not comparable.

In this paper, more standardized methods that follow the literature of bullying research will be adapted. Both operational and subjective methods will be implemented to measure workplace sexual harassment with a definition in line with the definition of workplace bullying. Yet, for the sake of sexual harassment investigation, some amendments should be made since the US and other major advanced countries' legislation include one-off incidence as a case of sexual harassment (Seo, 2010).

Thus, the time frame for sexual harassment implemented is 6 months following the bullying literature (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2003; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Seo et al., 2014; Seo & Lee, 2016) but the repetitiveness aspect is removed. The operational victims are identified as those who have 'experienced at least one of the 13 sexual harassment acts at least once during the last six months'. The subject victims are those who 'consider that they have been exposed to sexual harassment at least once during the last six months'

III. Research Methods

3,000 workers, 200 each from 15 industries participated in the survey (see Table 2). The 15 industries were chosen for being the largest in the size of labour force among the 21 industries in KSIC (Korea Standard Industry Classification). They cover over 98% of the working population. Initially, Farming and Forestry was among the 15 industries but, due to the difficulty in accessing the samples, was replaced by the next-largest industry, Education Services. Quota sampling was applied so that the gender ratio of the sample represents the gender ratio reported by the Korean Working Populations Survey (Statistics Korea, 2016) and that 200 participants were obtained from each of the 15 industries. The age range of the participants was 20–81 (Mean: 43.43, SD: 11.13). Their tenure range was 3–580 months (Mean: 126.4, S.D: 110.17)

Table 2. Working Population and Survey Sample

Subject	Population (Unit: ,000)		Sample (Unit: individual)		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Manufacturing	3,194	1,348	140	60	200
Construction	1,588	138	184	16	200
Wholesale and retail	2,018	1,718	108	92	200
Transportations	1,276	149	179	21	200
Accommodation and hospitality	831	1,379	75	125	200
Publishing, Media and Information Services	542	213	143	57	200
Finance and Insurance	362	420	93	107	200
Real Estate and Rental	353	211	125	75	200
Science and Technology Services	717	366	132	68	200
Facility Administrations and Support Services	685	572	108	92	200
Public Administrations·Military and Social Services administrations	603	298	133	67	200
Education Services	596	1,202	67	133	200
Public Health and Social Services	328	1,399	38	162	200
Arts, Sports and Leisure related services	218	180	109	91	200
Associations, organizations, Repaid and other individual Services	617	637	99	101	200
Total	13,927	10,229	1,733	1,267	3,000

The survey was conducted in April-May in 2016. To identify operational victims, 13-item workplace sexual harassment measure was used. The measure contains 1 factor. The single factor explains a total variance of 65.1% and has an Eigenvalue of 5.856. Chronbach' s alpha was .947.

Operational victims were identified as those who ‘experienced at least one of the 13 sexual harassment acts at least once during the last six months (prior to the survey)’ . The 13 acts are commonly occurring forms of sexual harassments reported by the experts (see Appendix 1). The subject victims were identified as those who ‘consider that they have been exposed to sexual harassment at least once during the last six months (prior to the survey)’ . The definition of sexual harassment was also given under the question (see Appendix 2). In order to avoid sampling bias, the survey was titled ‘Work Conditions Survey’ , a neutral term that applies to all workers, not just to sexual harassment victims.

IV. Results

In the analyses of the data, weighting was applied in order to represent the whole working population of the 15 industries. The operational and subjective victim rates were shown in Table 3. Overall, the rates of operational victim were higher than the subjective victim rates indicating that many of the respondents are unaware of being sexually harassed despite having experienced sexual harassment acts and felt humiliated. The result raises question over relying on self-report in identifying sexual harassment victims and also highlights the need to raise awareness for the specific behaviors that construe as sexual harassment. What was also notable was that, although lower than female workers in general, male workers also reported considerably high victim rates. The result uncovers the state of men’ s victimization and challenges the traditional prejudice that sexual harassment is usually targeted at women.

Table 3. Operational and subjective victims by industry and gender (unit: %)

Subject	Operational			Subjective		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Manufacturing	22.1	43.3	28.5	7.1	11.7	8.5
Construction	27.2	-	28.5	8.7	-	9.5
Wholesale and retail	24.1	40.2	31.5	5.6	9.8	7.5
Transportations	27.9	-	30.0	8.4	-	9.6
Accommodation and hospitality	30.7	33.6	32.5	5.3	12.8	10.0
Publishing, Media and Information Services	23.8	28.1	25.0	5.6	17.5	9.0
Finance and Insurance	34.4	28.0	31.0	7.5	8.4	8.0
Real Estate and Rental	25.6	42.7	32.0	10.4	17.3	13.0
Science and Technology Services	16.7	50.0	28.0	7.6	11.8	9.0
Facility Administrations and Support Services	27.8	38.0	32.5	5.6	21.7	13.0
Public Administrations·Military and Social Services administrations	28.6	29.9	29.0	8.3	13.4	10.0
Education Services	26.9	21.8	23.5	7.5	8.3	8.0
Public Health and Social Services	23.7	24.7	24.5	5.3	8.6	8.0
Arts, Sports and Leisure related services	33.9	35.2	34.5	10.1	17.6	13.5
Associations, Organizations, Repair and other individual Services	17.2	34.7	26.0	3.0	8.9	6.0
Average Victim Rate	26.0	34.6	29.1	7.1	12.9	9.5

*Cells with less than 20 responses were suppressed.

Moreover, in some of the industries, the victim rates for females were well above 40% (i.e., manufacturing, wholesale and retail, real estate and rental, and science and technology services). These industries are mostly dominated by male workers and workers tend to work together for long hours. They may have been the contributing factors for the high victim rates.

Table 4 reveals another, previously overlooked, aspect of workplace sexual harassment. Unlike the traditional, prejudiced view that sexual harassment is usually done by the opposite gender, the gender of main perpetrators reported by the male victims were mostly males (85.6%). Female perpetrators were reported by both male and female victims and higher for female victims (22.0%) than for male victims (14.4%). The result suggests that both men and women can be perpetrators of sexual harassment and sexual harassment by the same gender should not be overlooked.

Table 4. The gender of main perpetrators reported by the victims (unit: %)

Subject	Male Victims		Female Victims	
	Male Perpetrator	Female Perpetrator	Male Perpetrator	Female Perpetrator
Manufacturing	90.3	9.7	80.8	19.2
Construction	94.0	6.0	-	8.7
Wholesale and retail	76.9	23.1	81.1	18.9
Transportations	92.0	8.0	-	8.4
Accommodation and hospitality	95.7	4.3	71.4	28.6
Publishing, Media and Information Services	70.6	29.4	-	5.6
Finance and Insurance	90.6	9.4	70.0	30.0
Real Estate and Rental	87.5	12.5	93.8	6.3
Science and Technology Services	90.9	9.1	79.4	20.6
Facility Administrations and Support Services	90.0	10.0	82.9	17.1
Public Administrations-Military and Social Services administrations	78.9	21.1	85.0	15.0
Education Services	-	65.5	34.5	7.5
Public Health and Social Services	-	67.5	32.5	5.3
Arts, Sports and Leisure related services	70.3	29.7	81.3	18.8
Associations, Organizations, Repair and other individual Services	-	88.6	11.4	3.0
Average Rate	85.6	14.4	78.1	22.0

*Cells with less than 20 responses were suppressed.

Table 5 shows the average frequency of exposure to the 13 sexual harassment acts for both male and female respondents during the 6 months prior to the survey. The figures were computed based on the participants' frequency of exposure to each sexual harassment act. When a participant reported weekly exposure, it was converted into the number of weeks during 6 months (26 times). Monthly exposure was converted into 6 times and daily exposure was converted into the number of working days during 6 months (130 times). Once or twice during 6 months was converted into 1.5 times. The frequency of exposure for each sexual acts were summed and divided by the number of participants to compute the mean frequency.

Participants with no exposure to the harassment acts were also included in the analysis. Despite having lower victim rates than female workers, males reported a higher average frequency of exposure. This indicates that, given that the person is a victim, males are exposed to greater frequency of sexual

harassment than females. While the society has been picturing men as the dominant figure in sexuality, they also have been suffering a serious extent of sexual harassment.

Table 5. Average frequencies of exposure to sexual harassment acts by gender

Subject	Female	Male	Both
Comments that undermine one's sexuality (e.g., Man up and deal with it. Women's right place is in the kitchen.)	1.07	0.78	0.90
Undermining comments about one's work ability in relation to one's gender (e.g., Women/man can never do a job properly.)	1.05	0.75	0.88
Sexual metaphor or sexual appraisal about one's outlook	0.99	0.67	0.81
Physical contacts upon the body parts that are relatively far away from the centre of one's body (hand, shoulder, knee)	0.88	0.66	0.75
Pressure to serve alcohols for Superiors/peers/clients	0.71	0.50	0.58
Comments that contain sexual innuendo about oneself	0.47	0.70	0.60
Sexual joke, phone calls, and/or tests	0.44	0.62	0.54
Physical contacts upon the body parts that are relatively close to the centre of one's body (upper arm, chest, hip, thigh)	0.35	0.48	0.43
Comments that contain sexual innuendo about one's relationship with partner	0.35	0.65	0.52
Display of sexual drawing, photos, or videos	0.34	0.58	0.48
Gossips about one's personal sex life	0.25	0.44	0.36
Deliberate exposure and display of body parts	0.22	0.36	0.30
Demands or suggestions for sexual relationship	0.21	0.56	0.41
Total Frequency of Exposure	7.32	7.75	7.57

*Time frame of exposure: 6 months.

*Based on the data of all response (including respondents with no exposure).

V. Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, the survey was conducted under the neutral title, 'Work Conditions Survey', in order to avoid sampling bias. The resulting figures for victims were in between the greatly fluctuating rate of victims reported by the previous, unstandardized surveys. By standardizing the definition of sexual harassment and methods of identifying victims, this study made it possible to make comparisons between gender and industries as well as providing a

clearer picture of workplace harassment in South Korea.

That the operational victim rates were far higher than the subjective victim rates across the genders and industries shows, despite having been exposed to sexual harassment acts and felt humiliated, many workers did not recognize it as sexual harassment. The finding implies how unreliable it can be to rely on subjective methods to survey workplace sexual harassment while the awareness level is low for the specific sexual harassment acts. People may know of the explicit, obvious acts but have difficulty recognizing less explicit ones. In using the operational method with behavioral index, more detailed picture can be drawn for the true state of workplace sexual harassment. Awareness can be raised over what kind of behaviors construe sexual harassment.

Another notable finding is that a considerable proportion of males are also exposed to sexual harassments, and on average, a male victim is exposed to a greater frequency of sexual harassment than a female victim. The seriousness of harassment by the same gender (male-to-male, female-to-female) was also evidenced. The finding clearly contradicts the earlier gender-centric prejudices (e.g., LeFontaine & Tredeau, 1986).

From the above discussions, a number of practical implications can be drawn. Firstly, in order to move away from the short-sightedness of gender-centrism, policy and legislation as well as the movement by civil groups should act in line. Focusing too much on the gender issue of sexual harassment has been causing friction between different genders and hindering the formation of societal consensus to overcome sexual harassment. They should focus on protecting and supporting the victims and stopping perpetrators regardless of their gender. Many of the women's support group have been providing the easy-to-access support channels for female victims and raising awareness. They should be able to share their experience and competency to establish the support channels for victims of both genders and promote the societal awareness that both genders can be perpetrators as well as victims.

The preventive sexual harassment education can also play a very important role. It is a legal obligation for public and private organizations in South Korea to provide the education to their employees. Until now, many of the contents of the education feature greatly more female victims and male perpetrators than vice versa. In doing so, they may have been unintentionally creating the prejudice that men are perpetrators and females are victims. Although, statistically, greater percentage of females are victimized than men and vast majority of the perpetrators are men, it should not be overlooked that both genders can be victims as well as perpetrators. The education should highlight that sexual harassment is not a male-female issue but a perpetrator-victim issue. Male victims, as much as female victims, should be protected and given the channel to appeal for their suffering.

Many contents of the education also (both online and offline) fail to provide the detailed behavior types of sexual harassment or they describe examples of obvious cases only. While there is an undoubtable consensus that sexual harassment is wrong, many workers are unaware that what kind of acts construe sexual harassment. As seen from the above results, many experience sexual harassment acts and feel humiliated and yet, fail to recognize that experience as sexual harassments. Detailing the cases of sexual harassment is necessary, including the less obvious behaviors as well as the obvious ones.

Moreover, it is important that people within the top management receive the education and raise their sensitivity and awareness over the issue of sexual harassment. Even if a victim and/or witnesses report a case of sexual harassment, it is often up to the attitudes of the top management how well the cases are handled. In some cases, the highest management may cover for the perpetrators who are with a greater organizational state and blame the victims with lower a organizational state instead. In order to change the organizational culture towards sexual harassment, the top management should hold the right attitudes.

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Appendices

1. Operational measure of Sexual Harassment

Q: How often have you experienced the below acts and felt a sense of humiliation during the last 6 months?

	Someone making:	Never	1-2 times in 6 months	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
1	Physical contacts upon the body parts that are relatively far away from the centre of one's body (hand, shoulder, knee)	①	②	③	④	⑤
2	Physical contacts upon the body parts that are relatively close to the centre of one's body (upper arm, chest, hip, thigh)	①	②	③	④	⑤
3	Demands or suggestions for sexual relationship	①	②	③	④	⑤
4	Comments that contain sexual innuendo about oneself	①	②	③	④	⑤
5	Comments that contain sexual innuendo about one's relationship with partner	①	②	③	④	⑤
6	Gossips about one's personal sex life	①	②	③	④	⑤
7	Sexual metaphor or sexual appraisal about one's outlook	①	②	③	④	⑤
8	Sexual joke, phone calls, and/or texts	①	②	③	④	⑤
9	Display of sexual drawing, photos, or videos	①	②	③	④	⑤
10	Deliberate exposure and display of body parts	①	②	③	④	⑤
11	Pressure to serve alcohols for Superiors/peers/clients	①	②	③	④	⑤
12	Undermining comments about one's work ability in relation to one's gender (e.g., Women/man can never do a job properly.)	①	②	③	④	⑤
13	Comments that undermine one's sexuality (e.g., Man up and deal with it. Women's right place is in the kitchen.)	①	②	③	④	⑤

2. Subjective measure of Sexual Harassment

Q: How often have you experienced sexual harassment during the last 6 months?

- Never 1-2 times in 6 months
 Monthly Weekly Daily

※ Sexual Harassment: any comments/behaviors that cause sexual humiliation to the targeted person