

Sexual harassment against female labors in Semarang

Falasifatul Falah & Inhastuti Sugiasih
Sultan Agung Islamic University, Semarang, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: One of problems that female labors have to face in their workplace is sexual harassment. This study is aimed to reveal female labors perception and experiences of sexual harassment in their workplace and to reveal the psychological effects of those experiences, also their expectation of the condition of workplace which supports female. This is a qualitative study conducted in Kaligawe, an industrial urban area of Semarang, the capital city of Central Java, Indonesia. Subjects of study are 30 female labors: 25 labors were deeply-interviewed while five female labors were engaged in the focus group discussion. The result shows that all of 30 subjects have ever been victims of sexual harassment in their workplace. Some subjects perceive the experiences of being victims of sexual harassment as negative experiences that distract their mental and emotional condition and lower their work motivation and satisfaction. Sexual harassment in workplace has happened because of the policy of work management that less supports the rights of female labors, also the lack of awareness and assertiveness of the labors. This study recommends improving the gender awareness, women rights and labor rights in workplace which should imply to the change of the work system and policy.

1 INTRODUCTION

Women in developing countries, including Indonesia, have been being main targets of the world industrialists to supply their need of employees. The assumption the industrialists build is that they may pay women less than men. Human Development Report 2003 shows statistics that, in the year 1995 to 2001, the number of female employees by economic activity in Indonesia, particularly in agriculture and services, is more than the one of male employees. It also reveals that female work time in Indonesia is 109% of Indonesian male's. Nonetheless, the same source expose that estimated earned income of Indonesian males is 1,987 while Indonesian males have approximately double (3,893) (Human Development Report 2003). Moreover, working women also face another form of unfair gender treatment in their workplace, such as becoming objects of sexual harassment by their male counterparts or their superiors. According to Nasikun (1998), working women in developing countries have been objects of three stages exploitation. In societal stage, women become victims of discrimination, inequality in capitalism and patriarchal system. In this stage, working women have to face hard-to-solve dichotomy problems. As women living in society, they have to follow social rules, such as to keep "women's dignity". Otherwise, as employees, they have to obey the rules in their workplace, which are contrary to social rules, for example leaving home in the night, working privately in a closed room with men who are not their *muhrim* (family member), and wearing provocative working clothes (Sumarni, 1999).

There are thousands of women working as labors in LIK (*"Lingkungan Industri Kecil"*, means "Small Industrial Environment"), an industrial district located in Kaligawe, an industrial urban area in Semarang, the capital of Central Java, Indonesia. These female labors have to face double pressures: as labors, the lowest position of working women in industry, and as women, who always have to meet the gender problems, including sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is a form of violence against women. It is defined as undesirable sexual treatment without permission or interest of the person who becomes it's object, including undesirable sight, showing pornography, symbols by lips, movements of hands or body, touching, embracing, kissing, and rape (Sumarni, 1999).

The other forms of sexual harassment are "dirty jokes" that delivered offensively, hurt or embarrassing a person, interrogating a person to reveal her sexual activities or privacy, and asking for sexual service as reward for working business (Fakih, 1999).

This study is conducted in Semarang in the year 2003 and 2004. The aim of this study is to reveal female labors perception and experiences of sexual harassment in their workplace and to reveal the psychological effects of those experiences, also their expectation of the condition of workplace which should supports female labors.

2 METHOD OF STUDY

This is phenomenological study, one of traditions in qualitative study, which describes "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon, [in which the phenomenologist needs to] explores the structures of consciousness in human experiences" (Polkinghorne in Creswell, 1997).

The method of data collecting is in-depth interview. According to Reinharz (1992), interview focus typically on a particular experience or phenomenon. Subjects of in-depth interview are 25 women working as labors on several local industries in LIK, Kaligawe, Semarang.

Additional data collecting method is focus group discussion, originally called focused interviews (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). One of the advantages of focus group discussion is that it allows subjects to "react to and build upon the responses of other groups members. This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that not might be uncovered in individual interviews". The focus group engaging five female labors working in the same area.

Data analysis and representation follows the research traditions for phenomenology: Creating and organizing files for data (data managing); Reading through text, making margin notes, forming initial codes (reading, memoing); Describing the meaning of the experience for researcher (describing); Finding and listing statements of meaning for individuals, grouping statements into units (classifying); Developing a textural description "What happened", developing a structural description, "How" the phenomenon was experienced, developing an overall description of the experience, the "essence" (interpreting); Presenting narration of the "essence" of the experience (representing) (Creswell, 1997).

In addition, as a women-centered study, this qualitative study is also using feminist standpoint, which is "grounded in women's experience, including emotions and embodiment" (Hekman in Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Generally, all of subjects in this study have admitted that they have ever been being objects of sexual harassment in their workplace, or on the way to their workplace, or when they were on the way home from their workplace. Some labors going to their workplace on foot, some riding bicycles, some using public transportation such as local bus. Whatever the type of the transportation the labors take, all of them imply that they have ever been sexually harassed mostly happened in the evening or night. While in the workplace environment, that harassment often happened in the break time.

In fact, some of the women first did not admit that they have been victims of sexual harassment. However, when they were asked, "Have you ever been treated like that (mentions a practical form of sexual harassment)?", then the subjects confirmed that they have.

For example, a female labor was asked, "Have you ever been being object of sexual harassment?"

Then, the woman answered confidently, "Never".

The interviewer then continuing with other form of question, "By the way, have you ever seen a man touch a woman's part of body without the woman's desire and permission?"

The woman then answered, "Of course I have. Even I, myself, have some experiences being touched by men without my desire and without my permission. It was really uncomfortable. I was feeling embarrassed and angry, but I did not know what to do".

It means that many women do not know that the undesirable sexual treatments people doing against them are forms of sexual harassment. They say that the treatment are undesirable, uncomfortable and hurt, however they think that those actions are "normal behaviors of males towards females", and many of them think that they, as females, should take that without complaint.

The forms of sexual harassment against them are undesirable and annoying whistle, sexual or porn words, seduce, asking for sexual relationship, touch, embrace, kiss, intended touch to certain parts of body such as thigh, bottom, breast; intended rub of the perpetrator's genital to the subject's body (this form of sexual harassment usually happened in a public transportation when the women on the way to workplace or on the way home after working). All of these treatments happened without the subjects permission.

The perpetrators are various. Some strangers the women meet on the way, the male counterparts in their workplace, friends of the women's colleagues, supervisors and management leaders.

Most of the women admit that they feel uncomfortable, angry, hurt by sexual harassment. Some women response against sexual harassment, by hitting, refusing verbally, or threaten the perpetrators.

A labor reveals her experience, asked for dating and having sexual relationship by a manager in the company where she is working. This woman says to the *Boss* that he may have her if he would give her two or three houses. The labors of course did not really ask for houses as reward for sexual service. What she told to her *boss* is essentially a refuse.

Nonetheless, not every woman has courage to refuse sexual harassment like that, particularly when they were harassed by a superior who has power of the labor's position as employee. They also feel powerless because the perpetrators are physically stronger than them.

Some subjects perceive sexual harassments as something they have to take a grant, even though they feel uncomfortable by those treatments. Some female labors working in the night say that sexual harassment is an unavoidable risk they have to receive when they decided to work in the night. Some even think that they become objects of sexual harassment because of their own faults.

Few of the subjects think rationally that sexual harassment happened because of abnormality of the perpetrators, this help them to avoid negative feeling. Some women have been annoyed for a while, then emotionally recovered, even having feeling that they have had "adjusted" or "adapted" to sexual harassment. Some others confess that the experiences of being objects of sexual harassment are psychologically traumatic. Several labors are afraid to pass the street where they have ever been harassed. One woman put her clothe (which she was wearing when it happened) in foamy water for three days, to "vanish the bad memory" of this experience.

Some subjects tell that sexual harassments have affected their feeling and emotion, making them unforcomtable in workplace, and lower their work motivation. However, most of the labors say that their main purpose of working is for making money. While money, for them, is something that really valuable for survival, and it is not easy to have. Consequently, sexual harassment, for these female labors, then is perceived as a job risk, a consequence that they have to take, even though by force, should they want to keep their job.

As a labors say, "I'm only a pity labor, but this job is very important to me and my family because I have no other skill to get other job. If I loose this job, I will not be able to buy food for my children and my family will not be survived. That is why I have to keep this job, whatever the risks, even if I have to be objects of sexual harassment".

Most labors say that they do not dare to report the perpetrators to their superiors. The labors think that reporting them is useful, even risky for the female labors to keep their job. Most of them say that there is no rules or policy in the workplace that could prevent or solving the problem of sexual harassment.

However, subjects hope that companies or work management give more attention to employees. More specifically, they want more protection for female labors when working because they believe that women always been victims of sexual harassment. All subjects agree that sexual harassment should be vanished.

4 CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that female labors tend to be objects of sexual harassment in the workplace, or on the way working. The perpetrators of sexual harassments are their male counterparts and superiors in the workplace, also strange men they meet on the way working. Some labors perceive the experiences of being victims of sexual harassment as negative experiences that distract their mental and emotional condition and lower their work motivation and satisfaction. Nonetheless, many labors, even though feeling uncomfortable of being victim of sexual harassment, thinking that it is a job risk or consequence that they should take for granted, when they decided to work. They feel powerless because the value of the job for them is more important than defending themselves.

Sexual harassment in workplace has happened because of the policy of work management that less supports the rights of female labors, also the lack of awareness and assertiveness of the labors.

This study recommends improving the gender awareness, women's rights and labor rights in workplace which should imply to the change of the work system and policy. Information about forms of sexual harassment should be socialized toward female labors. All males and females in the workplace should be taught about women's rights and gender awareness. It is also important for the work management to have policy and rules which protect women's rights.

REFERENCES

- Creswell, J. W. 1997. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing Among Five Traditions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Fakih, M. 1996. *Analisis Gender & Transformasi Sosial*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Nasikun. 1998. Tantangan kaum perempuan di era global awal millenium ke III. Paper presented in *Seminar Sehari 25 Tahun Pusat Penelitian Kependudukan Universitas Gadjah Mada, 20 April 1998 (unpublished)*. Yogyakarta: Pusat Penelitian Kependudukan Universitas Gadjah Mada.
- Ramazanoglou, C. & Holland, J. 2002. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. London: Sage Publications.
- Reinharz, S. 1992. (Chapter 7) Feminist oral history. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*: 126-143. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, D. W. & Shamdasani, P. N. 1990. *Focus Group Theory and Practice*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Sumarni, D. W. & Setyowati, L. 1999. *Pelecehan Tenaga Kerja Perempuan*. Yogyakarta: Pusat Penelitian Kependudukan Universitas Gadjah Mada & Ford Foundation.
- Human Development Report 2003.