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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AGAINST FEMALE EMPLOYEES IN EHKOFELLS AND PADELIA HOTELS, IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Sexual harassment in the work environment or at work in the hospitality industry is a serious problem that needs stringent attention. Female employees in the hospitality industry are susceptible to sexual harassment from guest, customers and co-workers. Such act affects them mentally, psychologically, emotionally and physically as well as being disregarded by the public. Female employees in particular are very vulnerable to sexual harassment, their safety and privacy may not be guaranteed when in the workplace. Hence, this paper aims to investigate sexual abuses and harassment in Ehkofells and Padelia Hotels in Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria through an ethnographic approach employing a comparative design. The study revealed that sexual harassment is a pervasive issue in the hospitality industry, significantly affecting female employees in the hotels sampled as cases in view. The findings underscore systemic failures in addressing this problem, including poor enforcement of policies, inadequate managerial support, and harmful societal stereotypes about women working in hotels. Furthermore, findings also revealed that younger ones, are the primary targets of harassment faced with verbal, physical, and non-verbal harassment from guests, coworkers, and customers. The study concludes that sensitisation, stricter policy enforcement, comprehensive intervention, cultural change that will ensure women's dignity and safety should be encouraged.

Keywords: Hospitality Industry, Sexual Harassment, Ehkofells Hotel, Padelia Hotel, Policy Enforcement.

Introduction

The hospitality industry is regarded as one of the fastest growing industry in the tourism sector today. The industry has experienced significant growth since the economic crisis of 2009, playing a vital role in global job creation. By 2022, the sector was responsible for around 330 million jobs, equating to one in ten employment opportunities worldwide (Wateri & Canken, 2022). However, it continues to grapple with challenges, notably the issue of sexual harassment against female employees, which remains a pressing concern within the industry despite its economic impact. The industry's resilience and ability to adapt are crucial for addressing such challenges while continuing to thrive economically (Wateri & Canken, 2022). Sexual harassment is a serious and ongoing problem in the hospitality industry, with female employees being particularly affected. Recent research shows that between 54% and 81% of women in this field report encountering some type of sexual harassment at work (Kolmar, 2023). This alarming statistic underscores the critical need for effective strategies to prevent and address such incidents (Kolmar, 2023). In the wake of the #MeToo movement, workplace sexual harassment has come under heightened scrutiny, resulting in greater public awareness and legislative reform. Consequently, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has recognised this issue as a global concern, emphasizing its widespread impact and the necessity for effective policies to tackle the issue (Martinmaki, de Jong, Komproe, Boelen, & Kleber, 2023; Beghini, 2021). The increased awareness has encouraged victims to report incidents more freely, leading organizations to reassess their harassment policies and practices.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a significant organizational issue beyond inherent job factors. In Nigeria, many female workers choose to suffer in silence rather than report harassment, fearing job loss amid rising unemployment rates (Etodike, Ezeh, Ogbeide, Davies & Ike, 2018; Johnson, 2016). This silence diminishes employee engagement Lian & Rho, (2020) and negatively impacts organizational effectiveness due to the emotional, financial, and social repercussions of harassment (Haruna et al., 2016).

Against this background, this research seeks to examine the prevalence of sexual harassment faced by female employees in the hospitality sector and its effects on their job withdrawal and emotional exhaustion. Understanding how sexual harassment correlates with emotional exhaustion and job withdrawal is vital for developing effective interventions. The findings inform policymakers and organizations in creating strategies that promote a supportive work environment for female employees. This is followed by the literature review, the study area section, methodology, as well as the findings and discussions. Thereafter, comes the conclusion of the study which discusses the implication of sexual harassment toward female employees in the hospitality industry; and need to prevent them for a conducive working environment.

Literature review

Several factors contribute to the susceptibility of female employees in the hospitality industry to sexual harassment. These include the nature of interactions with customers, existing power imbalances, the prevailing culture within the industry, and economic considerations.

a. Customer Interactions: The customer service landscape in the hospitality sector typically entails close physical interaction, individualized care, and a strong emphasis

on customer satisfaction. This environment can unfortunately foster situations where unwanted sexual advances or comments may occur (Strenio & Chowdhury, 2021)

b. Industry Culture: In certain hospitality environments, a culture that normalizes or even endorses specific forms of sexual behavior can exacerbate the marginalization of female employees, making them feel unsafe and disrespected (Ram, 2018)

c. Economic Factors: Low wages, limited job security, and a high turnover rate in the industry can exacerbate the vulnerability of female employees to sexual harassment, as they may feel they cannot afford to lose their jobs or report harassment without facing financial hardship (Poulston, 2008).

d. Objectification: The hospitality industry often relies on the physical appearance of female employees to attract customers and guests in order to create a desirable atmosphere. This objectification can contribute to culture where female employees are viewed as objects of desire rather than professionals deserving of respects.

e. Stigma and Fear of Repercussion: Female employees in hotels may be reluctant to speak out about harassment due to concerns about being labeled as troublemakers or losing their jobs. This fear can further perpetuate a culture of silence and allow harassment to continue unchecked.

There are several factors that contribute to female employees being prone to sexual harassment in the hospitality industry. A study by Cortina and Berdahl (2008) noted that the hierarchical structure of the hospitality industry, where women often hold lower-ranking positions than men, can create power imbalances that make it easier for harassment to occur. Additionally, the prevalence of customer service roles in the hospitality can put women in situations where they are more likely to be subjected to inappropriate behavior from customers. This leads to harassment and disrespect from men (Daly, 2017). Smith and Brown (2018) averred that the ransient nature of many hospitality jobs, with the constant interaction of the newly co-workers and supervisors, can create lack of accountability for perpetrators of harassment. This can make it more difficult for women to report incidents and seek help.

Another contributing factor highlighted by (Rupp, Baldwin, & Bashshur, 2017) is the culture of the industry, which may normalize or even condone certain types of behavior. In a fast-paced, high-pressure environment like hospitality, there may be an increased tolerance for inappropriate conduct Smith and Brown (2017; 2018), making it harder for women to speak out against harassment. Sexual harassment against female is like a cankerworm which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the society. Literature indicates that it occurs in every society, organizations, workplace and institutions across the globe (Oni, Adeniji, Osibanjo, & Heirsmac, 2014; Moore, 2018).

Additionally, service workplace is largely populated by women, especially at the lower levels (Aaron & Dry, 1992; Hamilton & Veglahn,1992). These service employees tend to be young and have little formal education, thereby making their position at the workplace weak and feeling less confident while dealing with people (Schneider & Dimito, 2017). Consequently, they rely on their referent power – socially attractive and friendly to the customers and guests, but in turn, making them susceptible to sexual harassment because of lack of legitimate, coercive, reward or expert power (Aaron & Dry, 1992). Female employees in the hospitality sector (hotel) particularly the waitresses are usually instructed to wear short skirts to attract opposite sex which obviously make them prone to sexual harassment (Ramakrishnan, 2019),

a clear indication that more women experience sexual harassment in the hotel industry than individual in a larger society.

Furthermore, O'Connel & Korabik (2000) averred that women in hotel industry are the most sensitive to sexual harassment because their status is viewed as lower than that of the guest. Such degrading perception allows some guests and customers take it as a privilege to abuse female workers without any iota of fear of the consequences. Interaction with guests, especially receptionists, bar tenders, guest room attendant and waitresses contribute to female employees' vulnerability to sexual harassment. The employees who are also working in public areas such as restaurant, swimming pool, and lobby can get help easily for a hostile incident. Figueroa-Domecq, et al (2015) supported this notion by exerting that female employees in the hospitality sector are at risk to sexual harassment; making it the most pervading form of violence against women (Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995). It does not only take place amongst the co-workers within the organisation, but also can be committed by customers on the female employee. Nigeria, is not left out as cases of sexual harassment against female and escapes abound in all spheres of life including the higher institutions; not excluding recent cases in banking sector and some of the churches (Onoyase, 2019). This simply makes women the target of sexual abuse in almost every organisation.

Additionally, the perception of the public, guests has it that guest's satisfaction is the prime objective of any hotel industry, thereby considering them as the prime area of concern in the business. Satisfied guests add to the business growth and sustainability through word of mouth publicity and repeat visit. Consequently, hoteliers pay close attention to the guest to attain their highest level of satisfaction. Conversely, some of these guests and customers are perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault against female employees in the hospitality industry(hotel) giving room for the public and male coworkers to disregard them. Female employees are prone to sexual harassment and abuse due to the susceptible nature of female employees in the hospitality industry. This act leads as being perceived as prostitutes by their male counterparts and the public.

Some researchers noted that female employees are often perceived as being more nurturing, empathetic, and attentive, leading to enhancing guest experience (Kusluvan, 2003); however, these rare qualities lead to exploitation and sexual harassment (Strenio and Chowdhury, 2021). For Vettori & Nicolaides (2016), it is agreed that sexual harassment is pervasive in the service industry, particularly in the hospitality industry round the globe because they are physically weaker; making it easier for them to be victims.

The susceptibility of sexual harassment to female workers in the hospitality service call also be associated with unusual hours and conditions at workplace, the interaction of persons in the delivery of service, as well as the importance place on appearance (Woods & Kavanagh, 1994). Sexiness is part of the job itself as flirting with customers is encouraged as being part of the service style, showcasing a thin line between selling the service and selling sexuality. These unethical behaviours highlights why McDonald & Thompson (2016) averred that inappropriate behaviours from male guests towards female workers project them as prostitutes empowering gender power dynamics present in the hospitality industry where female employees are vulnerable to objectification and mistreatment. The perception of

female employees as prostitutes not only undermines their professionalism and expertise but also puts them at risk of exploitation and harm.

It is noted that the negative impacts of sexual harassment affect not only the victims but also the organisation (McDonald, 2011) as this leads to decreased job satisfaction, psychological distress, and reduced productivity (Akinfala & Tunde, 2017). Commitment and performance at workplaces in the hospitality service should be optmise; and creating a safe and respectful environment encouraged to minimise harassment. It is crucial for the success and growth of the industry at large. Other impacts include individual well-being and performance being affected, reduced job satisfaction, lower organisational commitment, decreased productivity, as well as work attrition indicating consequences associated with sexual harassment (Idris, Adaja, Audu, & Aye, 2016: Lindquist and McKay, 2018) in the hospitality industry.

In conclusion, it is crucial for the hospitality industries, particularly hotels, to pritotise the safety and well-being of female employees as well as abuse, harassment, and discrimination prevalent in the industry effectively.

Study Area

Nigeria as a country is in West Africa and made up of 36 states including the Federal Capital Territory located in Abuja. The Igbo group is in South-Eastern Nigeria; and they comprise five major state –Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enigu, and Imo. Nsukka people primarily inhabit Enugu state; however, they can also be found in other regions across the country. This distribution highlights their presence beyond their traditional geographical boundaries. Finally, Nsukka as a local government of Enugu State, Nigeria embodies varieties of businesses that makes it outstanding and popular in the state. These businesses are clothing, cash crop business, foodstuffs, transportation as well as hospitality business of which is the central part of this study.

Nsukka town embodies varieties of hospitality industry that attract people from far and near to visit and to patronize. The town has over 27 standard hotel rendering quality services to guests and customers. Consequently, Ehkofells and Padelia hotels are among the standard and reputable hotels in Nsukka which attract the attention of visitors due to the quality and standard service they render to them. They maintain their authenticity and their aesthetical features are mind-blowing. Ehkofells Hotel and Suites is a modern luxury hotel, located along Obollo Road, after Beach Junction, Nsukka, Enugu state, Nigeria. This hotel guarantees a warm reception and excellent hospitality services to satisfy guest. The rooms are uniquely furnished featuring a king size bed, flat screen TV, armchair, work desk with chair, telephone and an adjoining modern bathroom with heaters and showers as well as air conditions. On the other hand, Padelia Hotels is a luxury boutique hotel located in Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria and established in December, 2023. The hotel offers a serene environment with a focus on providing an idyllic experience against a picturesque backdrop. The hotel has elegantly designed accommodations and aims to immerse guests in comfort and style, making it a premier choice for travelers in the area.

Methodology

The study employed a comparative research design to ascertain and extract authentic information form Ehkofells and Padelia Hotels. The rationale behind it is to compare and

identify the level of sexual harassment against female employees in both hotels. The participants who understand the topic of inquiry were selected using purposive sampling technique. A total number of 30 participants were interviewed from both hotels targeting participants who are the female workers, the guests, customers and co-worker. Hence, in conducting this research, a comparative and purposive selected sample were target with the expectation of increasing the depth (compared to breadth) of understanding (Palinkas, et al, 2015). In this study, the researchers focused on the selection of criteria to our topic where the subject needs to be women, who have been in the hospitality industry for at least more than one year and the age must be at least 18 years and above.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings for addressing sexual harassment in both Ehkofells and Padelia Hotels in Nsukka, Enugu State. It is important to note that the findings of this study are subjective. This simply means that other researchers could have chosen different concepts to suit their worldview. The findings also suggest that the participants acknowledged the sexual harassment of female staff indicating that several factors contribute to the vulnerability of female employees in these hotels studied and suggested some strategies for addressing the menace. The origin of harassment was traced to organizational failures and societal stereotypes, while the vulnerability of female employees was linked to power imbalances and victim-blaming narratives. The findings are discussed thus:

Sexual Harassment on Female Employees

The data indicates that several factors contribute to the vulnerability of female employees in these hotels. A recurring theme in the responses is the stereotype that women working in hospitality are promiscuous. Respondent 8 from Ehkofells Hotel explained that, "Many guests come in with the mindset that women working in hotels are promiscuous, which makes it easier for them to justify their actions." Similarly, Respondent 2 from Padelia Hotel emphasized that male guests often view female employees as gullible and easily exploited.

Furthermore, young women, particularly those aged between 18–25, were identified as the primary targets of harassment. This age group is perceived as less likely to report incidents due to fear of retaliation or losing their jobs. Respondent 6 from Padelia Hotel noted that perpetrators often prey on younger employees because they are less experienced and more hesitant to confront authority. In addition, data collected highlighted how inappropriate dressing was often blamed for harassment, as noted by Respondent 3 from Ehkofells Hotel. However, other respondents, such as Respondent 5, rejected this notion, arguing that harassment persists regardless of how female employees dress. These contrasting views underline the complexity of societal perceptions surrounding victim-blaming and gender roles.

4.2.3 Perception of the Public, Guests, and Co-workers on Female Employees

The perception of female employees by guests, customers, and co-workers significantly influences the prevalence of harassment. Respondents across both hotels reported that female employees are often stereotyped as being willing participants in inappropriate behaviour. Respondent 10 from Ehkofells Hotel stated that "The stereotype that women in hospitality are open to advances contributes to their harassment. It's a toxic perception that management has failed to challenge."

It is no longer news that co-workers also play a role in perpetuating harassment. For instance, Respondent 4 from Ehkofells Hotel recounted an incident where a male colleague cornered her in a storage room, reflecting how harassment is not limited to external actors. Moreover, Respondent 7 from Padelia Hotel noted that male co-workers often engage in non-verbal harassment, such as inappropriate glances, which create an uncomfortable work environment.

In addition, guests were frequently described as the primary perpetrators, with Respondent 5 from Padelia Hotel recounting how a male guest grabbed her arm while delivering towels to his room. Such incidents highlight the power dynamics at play, where guests feel entitled to behave inappropriately towards female workers because of their perceived status and importance to the hotel's revenue.

Government Policy and Hospitality Industry Intervention

The findings revealed significant gaps in government policies and hospitality industry regulations aimed at curbing sexual harassment. Respondents consistently expressed frustration over the lack of enforcement and accountability. Respondent 9 from Ehkofells Hotel remarked by noting, "Policies are useless if they're not enforced. Perpetrators should be prosecuted, and victims should receive counseling and support." Moreover, the hospitality industry itself was criticised for prioritising profits over employee welfare. Respondent 3 highlighted how management often sides with regular guests, downplaying complaints to avoid losing their patronage by these customers and guests (Respondent 3, Padelia Hotel). This prioritisation of financial gain over employee safety undermines any efforts to address harassment effectively in this country.

The findings also revealed the need for comprehensive training and awareness programmes which the Respondent from Padelia Hotel emphasised that sensitisation programmes for employees and guests are essential to challenging harmful stereotypes and fostering a safer work environment (Respondent 6, Padelia hotel). Furthermore, Respondent 7 in the same hotel suggested that government agencies collaborate with hospitality regulators to create and enforce stricter anti-harassment policies.

Discussion

The study addressed the objectives through detailed accounts from respondents, revealing the systemic nature of sexual harassment in Ehkofells and Padelia hotels. The findings of this study resonate with some of the factors identified in the literature such as interaction with customers, existing power imbalances, the prevailing culture within the industry, economic considerations, objectification, and stigma and fear of repercussion (Foster, 2015; Ram, 2018; Strenio & Chowdhury, 2021). The paper confirms that these issues are more prevalent in any study area where there are female workers. In addition, being gullible, power imbalances from guests to co-workers made it more difficult for women to report incidents and seek help. This also supports Rupp, Baldwin, & Bashshur (2017) views on condoning certain types of behaviour from the guests, co-workers, to employers which may seem normal to the actors at the expense of their victims. Therefore, the safety of these female workers needs to be taken seriously.

With respect to guest, public and co-worker perceptions on female employees, it is a known fact that gender inequality has placed women at the mercy of men in our society and the hospitality industry is not left out emphasizing the need for cultural and institutional change. While guest, public and co-workers perceived female employees as being more nurturing, empathetic, and attentive to enhance the guest experience as supported by (Kusluvan, 2003), these powerful qualities seen in women have made them prone to sexual harassment which should not be so. This observation is consistent with Strenio & Chowdhury (2021) who points that these same qualities can also lead to exploitation and sexual harassment.

Lastly, the gaps in government policy and industry intervention highlighted an urgent need for enforcement and employee-focused reforms to curb harassment effectively and promptly in the hospitality industry and other sector alike. The study also highlights that the government and the hospitality industry have failed to effectively address sexual harassment, as evidenced by the lack of reliable policies and mechanisms to protect female employees.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that sexual harassment is a pervasive issue in the hospitality industry, significantly affecting female employees in Ehkofells and Padelia hotels in Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeira. The findings underscore systemic failures in addressing this problem, including poor enforcement of policies, inadequate managerial support, and harmful societal stereotypes about women working in hotels. Female employees, particularly younger ones, are the primary targets of harassment, often facing verbal, physical, and non-verbal harassment from guests, coworkers, and customers. This research has made significant contributions to understanding and addressing sexual harassment in the hospitality industry, particularly in Ehkofells and Padelia hotels. One of its primary contributions is the provision of empirical insights into the nature, prevalence, and consequences of sexual harassment against female employees. Through firsthand accounts from employees, the study sheds light on the specific forms of harassment encountered, the vulnerable demographics, and the systemic failures that perpetuate this issue.

These findings stress the need for comprehensive interventions, including stricter policy enforcement, sensitization programs, and cultural change to ensure the safety and dignity of women in the hospitality sector. The need for policy advocacy by identifying gaps in existing institutional and government frameworks. It offers actionable recommendations for addressing these shortcomings, such as the importance of stricter enforcement, employee sensitization, and establishing effective reporting mechanisms. Furthermore, by integrating qualitative and quantitative data, the study enriches the theoretical discourse on workplace harassment and gender dynamics, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by female employees.

Additionally, this research serves as a tool for creating awareness about the vulnerability of female employees in the hospitality industry. It highlights the urgent need for cultural and institutional reforms to foster safer workplaces, thereby contributing to the broader conversation on gender equity and workplace dignity. Further investigation to deepen the understanding of sexual harassment in the hospitality industry is crucial. Future research could focus on examining the psychological and emotional impact of harassment on female employees, including its effects on mental health, job satisfaction, and overall performance.

Exploring the role of organizational culture and leadership in preventing harassment is also necessary. .Such studies would provide valuable insights into the long-term consequences of harassment on individuals and organizations.

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