

#MeToo too in Macao: Sexual Harassment of migrant workers

Abstract

This study aims to examine the issue of sexual harassment in one of the most popular tourism destination in the world, Macao (China). As reflected in the literature, the tourism and hospitality industry in general, heavily relies on migrant workers. This is not an exception for Macao because 94.3% of the labour force in the hotel, restaurant and similar activities are non-resident workers. These migrant workers often seek better employment opportunity and higher financial benefits. As these migrants are the main source of labour force to fuel the success of the hospitality industry in Macao, their working condition and wellbeing must not be neglected. However, due to the nature of the service industry and hospitality industry, and the personal circumstances of these migrant workers, they will inevitable be put at risk of encountering sexual harassment. This study sheds light on a very sensitive issue and yet very common in the service industry. This study used qualitative methodology to explore the views of nine migrant workers from the hospitality industry in Macao and the finding shows serious risks and issues faced by these non-resident workers. As reflected in the study, organisations such as the multinational gaming operators and integrated resorts must do a lot more to protect the workers from being the silent victims of sexual harassment.

Background

The extent literature that focus on the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace began in the 1970s however research on sexual harassment in the context of tourism and hospitality is scarce. There are only a handful of papers from the 1990s and even though during the past decade more studies were published, the attention is minimal. Over the years, there are studies that look into the issue of sexual harassment from the perspective of different regions such as the Central America (Gruber, 1997; Ilies et al., 2003) and South America (Hsieh et al., 2017), Europe (Worsfold and McCann, 2000; Onsøyen et al., 2009), African country (Mkono, 2010), Australia (Kensbock et al., 2016) Asian countries such as China (Srivastava and Gu, 2009; Liu et al., 2014; Li et al., 2016), Japan (Husbands, 1992; Jung and Yoon, 2017), Korea (Cho, 2002; Jung and Yoon, 2018), Hong Kong (Coats et al., 2004), Malaysia (Ali et al., 2015) and Taiwan (Lin, 2006; Cheung et al., 2018). The findings suggest that the service industry is a strong breeding ground of sexual harassments due to the character of the service sector. The nature of the service industry requires close interactions between employee and customer or co-worker during the process of providing services (Stedham and Mitchell, 1988; Swift and Kent, 1994; Gilbert et al., 1998; Fine et al., 1999). The service industry requires a high degree of human interaction in the process of providing services, unusual working hours, sexuality and appearance are factors to enhance the experience of the customers (Gilbert et al., 1998; Aslan and Kozak, 2012; McGinley, 2012).

The interpretation and perception of what constitute as sexual harassment vary from person to person (Ellis et al., 1991; Sheffey and Tindale, 1992; Blumenthal, 1998; Gilbert et al., 1998; Agrusa et al., 2000; Timmerman and Bajema, 2000; Golden et al., 2001; Rotundo et al., 2001; Agrusa et al., 2002; Biber et al., 2002; Coats et al., 2004; Fiedler and Blanco, 2006; Limpaphayom et al., 2006). Nevertheless, there are studies that aims to identify what constitutes to sexual harassment (Paludi et al., 1991; Fine et al., 1999). One of the first studies developed a typology based on an academic environment (Till, 1980) and it was later extended to a work setting by Fitzgerald et al. (1988). It is suggested that sexual harassment can be defined along a continuum:

1) Gender harassment: This relates to using sexist statements and behaviour that put across insulting, degrading and/or sexist attitudes.

2) Seductive behaviour: This relates to receiving unwanted, inappropriate and offensive physical or verbal sexual advances.

3) *Sexual bribery: Soliciting sexual activity or sexually related behaviour by promise of reward.*

4) *Sexual Coercion: Coercion of sexual activity or sexually related behaviour by threat of punishment.*

5) *Sexual Assault: physical assault and/or rape.*

From a legal perspective, sexual harassment can be categorised into two general forms (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2004): quid pro quo and hostile environment. The quid pro quo harassment relates to sexual compliance in order to retain or gain employment opportunities or benefits. The hostile environment harassment relates to an unreasonable interference of an individual which leads to affecting the work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. The definition from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2018) (EEOC) adds more detail to the concept by stating that:

“It is unlawful to harass a person (an applicant or employee) because of that person’s sex. Harassment can include “sexual harassment” or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, however, and can include offensive remarks about a person’s sex. For example, it is illegal to harass a woman by making offensive comments about women in general. Both victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex. Although the law doesn’t prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that are not very serious, harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision (such as the victim being fired or demoted). The harasser can be the victim’s supervisor, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or someone who is not an employee of the employer, such as a client or customer.”

The hospitality industry has high demand for workers and has labour shortages. Employers and organisations often require the help of international migrants (Lucas and Mansfield, 2010). As jobs opportunities in hospitality continue to grow and most migrant workers seek better employment opportunities, many organisations in the hospitality industries generate opportunities towards migrants to keep the industries at flow (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2017). The hospitality industry employs larger number of international migrants and most of the new migrants see the hospitality industry as a first option to enter the workforce market of any country (Jordhus-Lier and Underthun, 2015).

According to a recent report (United Nations, 2017), international migrants have been continuously increasing all over the world with the rate of 258 million migrants around the world in 2017, growing up from 173 million in 2000. Countries with high income accumulated 64% of the migrants while 37% went to the middle or average income countries and 4% went to the low income countries. In 2000, European countries were the top destinations for international migrants with 56.3 million, while Asian countries came at second place with 49.2 million. Northern America came at third place with 40.4 million, African countries came next with 14.8 million. Latin American countries and the Caribbean had had 6.6 million and Oceania countries had 5.4 million. But in 2017, Asian countries came first with 79.6 million international migrants meanwhile European countries had 77.9 million, Northern America 57.7 million, African countries 24.7 million, Latin American countries and the Caribbean 9.5 million and Oceania with 8.4 million (United Nations, 2017).

It is noted that some of the organisations or employers hire migrants in order to lower their expense in labour (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2017). There are employers who are profiting regardless of the violation of employment law by hiring workers who are scared to protest about their pay, working condition,

benefits which make it easier to take advantage of them (Smith et al., 2009). For instance, in the US, immigrant women who are in a bad employment's conditions have higher chance of being sexually harassed and sexually violated on the job. Most shocking sexual harassment and violence including rape. This usually happens to women who are undocumented workers with low pay and are forced to accept the abuse as part of their work because they are desperate to earn money to support their family back home (Hegewisch et al., 2011). It is unlikely for an immigrant to come forward to report sexual harassment because they fear of being deported and retaliated (Yeung and Rubenstein, 2013). Workers who are on a temporary working visas have also higher possibility of harassment and assault (Shaw et al., 2018). Although victim of sexual violence in the workplace have equal deportation protection (Hyunhye Cho, 2014; Shaw et al., 2018), many immigrants still fear of putting their visas status in danger after reporting sexual abuse. While many others simply do not know their rights because of language barrier (Smith et al., 2009; Bauer and Ramirez, 2010; Shaw et al., 2018).

Research focus

Macao is well known for its tourism, hospitality and gaming industries. The city received 35,803,663 visitors in 2018 (DSEC, 2019) and this makes Macao one of the most visited city on the planet. Moreover, over a third of the city's labour force are in these sectors. According to the Direcção dos Serviços de Estatística e Censos (Statistics and Census Service), the total labour force in the first quarter of 2019 consist of 393,600 labourers (DSEC, 2019). Out of this number, there are 56,400 labourers working in the hotels, restaurants and similar activities (14.33%) and there a 96,000 labourers working in the recreation, cultural, gaming and other services (24.39%). Non-resident workforce or migrants represent almost half (48.15%.) of the overall labour force according to the figure in the first quarter of 2019 (non-resident consist of 189,515). Among these non-resident workers, the breakdown mainly consists of labourers from Mainland China (62.1%), Philippines (17%), Vietnam (8%), Hong Kong (2.4%), Indonesia (3%), Malaysia (0.6%) and Thailand (0.5%).

As reflected in the literature, the tourism and hospitality industry in general, heavily rely on migrant workers. In Macao, this case is not an exception because 94.3% of the labour force in the hotel, restaurant and similar activities are non-resident workers. As these non-resident workers are the main source of labour force to fuel the success of the hospitality industry in Macao, their working condition and wellbeing must not be overlooked. However, due to the nature of the service industry and hospitality industry, and the personal circumstances of these migrant workers, they will inevitable be put at risk of encountering sexual harassment.

Tackling sexual harassment in the workplace is highly relevant and important as it has profound impact on the workforce as well as affecting the performance of each organisation. Prior to 2018, sexual harassment is not a punishable offence in Macao (Lages, 2011; Macau News, 2014). Only recently, the city's Legislative Assembly passed an amendment of the region's laws related to sexual harassment (Macau News, 2017; Zhu, 2017). Nevertheless, the new law only considers physical contact as a crime while verbal and non-contact sexual harassment are not included. For this reason, although there is progress in the city, workers are still vulnerable to many other types of sexual harassment in the workplace.

This study aims to examine the issue of sexual harassment among non-resident (migrant) workers in the tourism and hospitality industry in one of the most popular destination in the world, Macao (China). The study will explore many aspects related to their understanding of sexual harassment, their experience of sexual harassment, how they deal with issues of sexual harassments and their perception of the industry and support.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative methodology to understand how migrant workers (or non-resident workers) perceive the issue of sexual harassment. Semi-structured in-depth interview are adopted to allow participants to express their views and how they interpret the issue more deeply (Cohen et al., 2000). This research aims to explore the following questions:

- How do they perceive their current workplace in terms of sexual harassment?
- How would they deal with sexual harassment?
- How do they perceive the meaning of sexual harassment?
- Have they been sexually harassed or have they witnessed sexual harassment?
- Why did they end up working in Macao?
- How do they perceive sexual harassment law in Macao?
- How do they perceive reporting sexual harassment?
- How do they perceive their industry in terms of sexual harassment?
- How do they perceive their nature of job in terms of sexual harassment?
- What are their suggestions in terms of overcoming or tackle sexual harassment?
- How much are they aware of the support they have from their employer?

This study focuses on international migrants using snowball sampling. This is another name for chain referral sampling where the interviewer asks the current interviewee if they could refer them to her/his colleagues, friends and family that suits the criteria of the research. Moreover, this study also uses judgement sampling where a sample is chosen base on the researcher's knowledge and their judgement. At the start, we approached potential participants from our personal network based on three criteria: (1) non-resident worker, (2) work in the hospitality or gaming industry, and (3) worked in the same company for at least one year. Then we asked the interviewees to refer potential participants from their network that fit the criteria. In total, nine participants were recruited (Table 1). There were five females and four males from the hospitality industry with mixed demographic characteristics. The interview took place in various locations to suit the participants (coffee shop, park, home). Each interview took less than 60 minutes and recording for each interview were made. The information is transcribed in Microsoft Word and is then organised in Microsoft Excel for content analysis and thematic analysis to extract meanings and findings according to the focus of this study. Overall, the initial analysis generated 170 meaningful comments and created eleven clusters to allocated them (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The following section discusses the main findings derived from the study.

Subject	Gender	Age	Nationality	Position	Length of service	Company Organization	Marital Status
1	Female	25	Korean	Club Concierge	8	Hotel	Single
2	Female	23	United Kingdom	Administrative Assistant	2	Hotel	Single
3	Female	25	Philippines	F&B Agent	3	Hotel	Single
4	Male	26	Philippines	Front Office	5	Hotel	Single
5	Male	47	Philippines	F&B Supervisor	26	Hotel	Married
6	Male	50	Philippines	F&B Manager	28	Hotel	Married
7	Female	49	Philippines	Kitchen Assistant	9.5	Hotel	Single
8	Male	27	Nepal	Public Area Agent	4	Hotel	Single
9	Female	48	Philippines	F&B Manager	14	Hotel	Single

Table 1 – Characteristics of the interviewees

Cluster	Comments
Definition	19
Current workplace	12
Sexual harassment in job nature	9
Sexual harassment in the industry	9
Experience of sexual harassment	26
Dealing with sexual harassment	32
Reporting sexual harassment	21
Support	14
Law	9
Suggestion for org	10
Getting employment in Macao	9
Total	170

Table 2 – Summary of clusters

Findings

Definition of sexual harassment

Out of the nine non-resident workers, 19 comments were generated related to their perception of what constitute as sexual harassment. In general, sexual harassment is widely perceived as any sexually related acts or behaviour that makes a person feel uncomfortable. These behaviours can be related to physical contacts, verbal, text, looks, requests and even transaction (willing or unwilling). Apart from the typical harassment such as physical and verbal harassment, most of the other types are not widely acknowledged by interviewees such as unwanted requests and sexual transaction.

Definition (based on 19 comments)	Meanings	Interviewees
Act	1	1
Actions	3	3
Activities	2	2
Behaviour	4	3
Forced (into a sexual situation)	2	2
Looks	3	3
Physical	8	6
Transaction (willing or unwilling)	1	1
Requests	1	1
Text	2	2
Verbal	8	6
Anything that makes a person feel uncomfortable	2	2
General view (unprofessionalism)	1	1
Unintended or misunderstanding	1	1

Table 3 – Definition of sexual harassment

Current working environment and industry

A series of questions were used to explore the perception of the non-resident workers in terms of the industry they are in. Although six out of nine interviewees mentioned that their working environment is “good”, many insights were generated once the situation is explored (Table 4). For example, when asked if sexual harassment is likely to happen in their nature of job and industry, six interviewees noted that it really “depends” on the company, environment, people and customer. Two respondents said that sexual harassment is likely to happen in their nature of job and five noted that it is likely to happen in their industry (Table 5 and Table 6). Overall, only one interviewee said that sexual harassment is not likely to happen in their job and only one mentioned that the chance is low in his industry. Interestingly, avoidance and acceptance of sexual harassment were suggested to be the way they handle sexual harassment in their respective job and industry.

Current workplace	Comments	Interviewees
Unintended or misunderstanding	1	1
Avoidance	3	3
Good working environment	8	6

Table 4 – Current workplace

Sexual harassment in job nature	Comments	Interviewees
It depends (company, environment, people, customer, situation)	5	5
Acceptance	1	1
No	1	1
Yes	2	2

Table 5 – Sexual harassment in job nature

Sexual harassment in the industry	Comments	Interviewees
Depends (nature of work)	1	1
Yes	5	5
Low	1	1
General view (issue of sexual harassment)	2	2

Table 6 – Sexual harassment in their industry

Experience of sexual harassment and dealing with sexual harassment

This study also explored the experience of sexual harassment among the non-resident workers (Table 7). Three interviewees experienced verbal sexual harassment and two experienced physical harassments. Although the experience ranges from “encountered” to “tend to” experience sexual harassment, interviewees suggested that their colleagues experience sexual harassment “often”, “many times” and “always”. It is noted that there were cases of sexual exchange, unwanted requests and even sexual assault experienced by their fellow colleagues or friends.

Experience of sexual harassment	Comments	Interviewees
Frequency		
No	3	3
Encountered	1	1
Happened	1	1
Tend to	1	1
Many (opinion)	1	1
Often (colleagues)	1	1
Always (colleagues)	2	1
Type of sexual harassment		
Verbal	7	3
Physical	2	2
Exchange (rumours)	1	1
Request (colleague)	1	1
Assault (friend)	5	1

Table 7 – Experience of sexual harassment

In terms of how these migrant workers deal with sexual harassment, although eight interviewees suggested that they will prosecute the harasser by reporting, the data suggests many other interesting insights (Table 8). For example, four interviewees would avoid turning the situation into a problem and two interviewees would accept sexual harassment to maintain their job security. It was noted that sexual harassment is difficult to handle (three interviewees), two actually resigned in the past due to sexual harassment.

Dealing with sexual harassment	Comments	Interviewees
Acceptance (job security, professionalism, pretend to be fine)	3	2
Avoidance (avoid offending others, no one talks about it, ignore if witness, avoid lose face, prevent and avoid)	7	4
Difficult	3	3
Resign (two real cases)	3	1
Personal effort (precaution or support to others)	2	2
Prosecute (reporting, ask to stop, try to solve the situation then talk to someone; no superiority advantages)	14	8

Table 8 – Dealing with sexual harassment

When asked the interviewees if they would report sexual harassment if it happens to them (Table 9), the finding seems to be slightly different from their comments related to how they would deal with situation of sexual harassment. Basically, four suggested that they would report the harassment and another four indicated that they will not because they feel helpless, they want to avoid the situation due to the superiority of the harasser and to protect their job security. Moreover, it was noted that the process of reporting is long, useless (two interviewees) and difficult (three interviewees). An interviewee shockingly said that a friend was sexually assaulted and she was laid off from the employer.

Reporting sexual harassment	Comments	Interviewees
Yes	3	3
Investigate prior to reporting	1	1
No (helpless, avoid, superiority, employment security, ignore)	10	4
Not able (a friend was laid off)	1	1
Difficult	3	3
Useless	3	2
Long process	1	1

Table 9 – Reporting sexual harassment

Support, suggestion and understanding of the law

Surprisingly, out of all the non-resident workers, none of them have any understanding of the law related to sexual harassment in Macao. Moreover, out of all the interviewees, the general view related to the support they get in relation to sexual harassment is not very positive. Three interviewees noted that nothing was covered or informed to them in relation to sexual harassment in the workplace. One interviewee said that although there is training, no one really cares. Three interviewees suggested that the issue of sexual harassment was only mentioned in the employment contract and briefing, or it is only mentioned during meetings and is reminded by managers. Nevertheless, there are training activities, 24-hour security person, counsellors and HR department to support when help is needed.

Discussion

This study aims to examine the issue of sexual harassment in the tourism and hospitality industry in one of the most popular destination in the world, Macao (China). As reflected in the literature, the tourism and hospitality industry in general, heavily rely on migrant workers. In Macao, this case is not an exception because 94.3% of the labour force in the hotel, restaurant and similar activities are non-resident workers. These migrant workers often seek better employment opportunity and higher financial benefits. As reflected in this study, all of the non-resident workers are in Macao to find better employment opportunities and to earn better salary. As these migrants are the main source of labour force to fuel the success of the hospitality industry in Macao, their working condition and wellbeing must not be neglected. However, due to the nature of the service and hospitality industry, and the personal circumstances of these migrant workers, they will inevitable be put at risk of encountering sexual harassment.

As can be reflected in this study, only three interviewees did not encounter or are aware of any cases of sexual harassment. For those who have been harassed, the way to deal with the situation is to avoid, ignore and even accept sexual harassment in order to protect their job security. Although the basic understanding of what constitute as sexual harassment among the interviewees is considerably high (verbal and physical), their understanding of the law is low, their perception of organisational support towards sexual harassment weak and their optimism towards reporting sexual harassment is particularly grim.

This study sheds light on a very sensitive issue and yet very common in the service industry. Although this is not a comprehensive study that examined all the migrant workers in the hospitality industry, the finding shows serious risks and issues faced by the non-resident workers in Macao. As reflected in the study, organisations such as the multinational gaming operators and integrated resorts must do a lot more to protect the workers from being the silent victims of sexual harassment. More useful training is needed, more awareness building should be integrated, more support and system to build confidence among the workers to encourage reporting sexual harassment are essential. Most importantly, workers need to be made aware and feel that they are valued and protected. This needs to be built into the motto of the organisation they work for in order to develop more confidence to face and tackle issues of sexual harassments and to deter harassers and sexual predators to exploit any opportunities to harass hospitality workers. As one non-resident worker said:

“In my company they emphasize so much on pleasing the guest and we have to memorize it every day and we have to say that to our service staff or supervisor but they never promise anything on our side. Maybe they should add something in the motto or something protecting the employees like making us know we have rights to protect ourselves and not to swallow everything down.”

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