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Work place sexual harassment among female health workers in grass-root level health institutions in Nepal

Sapkota Bhim Prasad¹ and Khil Prasad Bhusal²

¹Ministry of Health and Population Kathmandu, Nepal

²Everest Institute of Professional Learning (Pvt. Ltd.), Nepal

Background: Sexual harassment is an issue of occupational safety where women and men work together. It is a violation of human rights and human dignity. There is a taboo to talk about sexual harassment and most of the women did not discuss such problem openly. Prevalence of sexual harassment at workplace is very high (as suggested in a study by International Labour Organization-2004). However, a study on sexual harassment among health workers working in Government health institutions in Nepal is scarce it is believed that it is a huge problem among them. Therefore, this study was conducted among female health workers working in Kathmandu, which helps to find out their experience about sexual harassment and its impact on them.

Methods: The study was based on cross-sectional and descriptive design. Among 225 female health workers working at and below the district level of district public health office, Kathmandu (Primary health care centers, Health Post, Sub Health Post) only 200 female health workers were available during the study time. Self-administered questionnaire was used as a tool for data collection. Only 190 respondents were involved in the study due to non-response rate of 5%. Data was entered in Epi-data version 3.1 and analysed descriptively by using SPSS Version 16. Results: Almost all (96%) of them had heard about Sexual Harassment and among them, 42% had faced it in their workplace. The most frequent type (35%) of sexual harassment was verbal (passing vulgar jokes, remarks or teasing obscenely) followed by physical harassment (30%). New forms of harassment identified was sending vulgar message through cell phone and giving missed call at late evening/night (23%). None of them had complained it as neither District Public Health Officer nor Health Facility Incharge. Nursing professionals (Staff nurse and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives) were found to be victimized at higher proportions (69%). Among female health workers, 89% employed by contract and temporary appointment were found to be a victim of sexual harassment. Most of the victims of verbal harassment ignored the attempt, but that of physical harassment resist the attempt. Forty two percent of victims perceive it as usual, 36% of them were mentally disturbed and 22% of them were affected physically after harassment. All most all of the perpetrators were male. About two third (64%) of them were harassed by senior level male co-workers followed by same level male workers (23%) and male Clients/visitors of their service (13%).

Conclusions: Not exceptional to other profession, Female health workers are also at higher vulnerability to sexual harassment by their male co-workers. It affects adversely on their work efficiency, mental and physical health. It is not only the issue of occupational health and safety, but also challenging matter of professional ethics. To mitigate the problem, necessary legal provision should be amended in the existing health service act and regulation. There should be provision of refresher course to every health workers regarding their professional ethics.

Biography

Khil Prasad Bhusal has completed Masters Degree in Sciences (Bio-Statistics) from Tribhuvan University Nepal. He has been working as "Program Director" in Nepal for three years for Everest Institute of Professional Learning (Pvt. Ltd.) He is working as Biostatistician in many of the public health research. For the research Project entitled "Work Place Sexual Harassment among Female Health Workers in Grass-Root level health institutions in Nepal"

bhimprasadsapkota@gmail.com

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