

Malaysia: Sexual harassment in universities: Who cares?

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In the last two months, we were confronted with disturbing news of sexual harassment. These ranged from the “rape joke” on 17-year-old Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam, demeaning period spot checks on female students, sexual harassment and assault on Cindy Ong for years during her time as a national swimmer, on Universiti Malaya student ‘Soleil Ching’ (not her real name) by her associate professor, and recently, reports of sexual harassment of female students at a Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) hostel.

For the victims and their parents, the incidents are traumatic. This harrowing experience is compounded by the feeling of anger and frustration due to the lack of empathy shown by those in authority who fail to take the right and decisive action.

The prevalence of these cases, coupled with the victims’ willingness to speak openly, revealed the disturbing extent of sexual harassment cases in this country. All Women’s Action Society (Awam), in their recent survey in April on sexual harassment, recorded 125 cases of period spot checks, 108 cases of bullying, and 88 sexual harassment incidents.

It is pertinent to note here that the gravity of sexual harassment cases in local universities is serious. Cases were known to have been swept under the carpet and complainants were instead demonised and portrayed as troublemakers.

Hostel spot checks similar to that as reported in USM are also common in other universities. As demonstrated by the USM incident, procedures as to how these spot checks are to be conducted were already in place. However, they were often abused and violated.

Spot checks were supposed to be conducted by staff of the same gender. Most hostels even put up signs prohibiting the presence of persons of the opposite gender in the building and vicinity. Whether these rules are strictly observed is rather questionable.

Here I would like to relate to an incident that took place a few years ago at a public university. It was personally related to me by the victims who had already graduated.

Some female students reported that a male stranger managed to slip into their dorms and inappropriately touched them at night when they were sleeping. They also reported that this intruder also stole their undergarments from their drawers. The incident was reported to the university’s top management for them to investigate.

The response from the university was preposterously shocking. Through their “investigation”, the university claimed the intruder was the husband of one of the students who was searching for his wife, but got lost and accidentally entered the wrong dorm.

How this could have taken place is indeed a mystery that only the university could explain. Apart

from issuing the finding of their investigation, the university also pledged to install CCTV cameras in the female student hostels. After a few years, the cameras are still nowhere to be seen. Following the issuance of the report by the university, no students dared to complain again.

Another case that was related to me was that of a senior male lecturer who sexually harassed a female student by consistently sending her text messages inviting her to go out on a date. He was ignored by the student. Despite this, he was brazen enough to invite the student to his office so that she could be given another chance to improve her exam grade.

The student was aware that the lecturer, through his actions, lacked moral value and integrity. The best she could do was to ignore him and at the same time try not to antagonise him. Her course results were in his hands and the university's top management would most likely be on his side.

This is the main reason why most university students would rather suffer in silence. Complaints made on incidents like this would be viewed negatively by the university as this would be seen as an attempt to "mencemarkan nama unversiti" - tarnish the image of the university.

In one university, it was reported that there were some rich old men looking for younger wives and they were eyeing university students as prospective candidates. There would be someone in the university who would do the introduction.

Apart from this, there were also cases of male students who look feminine and suspected of having different sexual orientations being harassed by the hostel officers.

They complained their rooms were constantly raided in their absence, apparently in search of evidence of their sexuality. Most of these students would not want to complain and just accepted this act of harassment as they did not want to have their studies jeopardised.

Female staff members are also not spared from this form of harassment. Their promotion, contract extension, annual performance appraisal, and such are dependent on appraisals made by male office bearers and the top management.

Some of these victims have lodged complaints to the top management, but no action was apparently taken against the harasser. Police reports were also made, but the police would consider this an internal issue and would push the case back to the university.

With no action taken by the university, the harassers were emboldened to continue with this despicable act with impunity.

The victims, on the other hand, would vindictively be discriminated against with the intention of sounding a warning to others who dare to complain. In a case where the victim made a police report, the victim was asked to retract her report by her vice-chancellor.

She was then transferred out of her department and no further action was taken against the harasser. It was a double tragedy for the victim. More sexual harassment cases continued in that department.

The cases illustrated above highlight the attitude adopted by universities on sexual harassment cases. They are seen as a taboo subject, which should not be mentioned let alone acknowledged of its existence. If this were to be allowed to continue, sexual harassment would eventually become an unwanted embedded culture of our universities.

There is an urgent need for the Ministry of Higher Education to initiate the necessary steps in

criminalising sexual harassment in universities. Stern action must be taken against the perpetrators. There is also a need to have the right leadership at the universities who are willing to take the appropriate action against such acts.

The Sexual Harassment Bill should be passed as soon as possible by Parliament.

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development should play a more proactive role by giving a safe space for victims and encouraging them to report their cases. Non-governmental organisations like Awam could assist the ministry in helping the victims.

If we continue to have NFA or “no further action”, universities would no longer be a safe place for our future generation to study or work at.

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