

# Women executives and their struggle with sexual harassment: A multiple case study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives** This exploratory study is aimed at discovering Filipina women executives' personal experience with sexual harassment.

**Methods** This is a multiple case study with a qualitative approach. With non-probability convenience sampling, we selected five women executives from the capital region of the Philippines for in-depth interviews. For data analysis, we used a thematic analysis method.

**Results** The four types of sexual harassment – physical, verbal, cyber, and non-verbal – were all evident in our study. One major theme found through the cross-case synthesis was the calling for proactive actions.

**Conclusion** Filipina women executives have personal experience with all types of sexual harassment. Neither their inner drive for excellence nor their exceptional career achievements prevent sexual harassment from happening to them and around them. Thus, women executives call for sufficient and effective sexual harassment prevention education programs.

**Keywords** Women executives, multiple case study, gender equality, the Philippines, sexual harassment prevention education

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goal number 5, gender equality, is a global effort to abolish every form of discrimination against people of all genders. Countries have been struggling with gender inequality, as their deep-rooted patriarchal cultures and ideals have ostracized women for centuries. Predetermined gender roles and the lack of efficient policies both contribute to the gender gap that exists in all countries (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Gender inequality is present in many forms, such as stereotypes, harassment,

## Highlights

- ▶ This is a youth-led research study. Youth researchers took all initiatives and made all decisions throughout the entire research process.
- ▶ The multiple case study design enables cross-case synthesis and analytical generalization while grounding the investigation of the research topic in real-life context.
- ▶ This study promotes the notion that while celebrating nations' achievements closing the gender gap, the other side of the coin – women's ongoing struggle with sexual harassment – needs to be properly addressed.

and discrimination. For industries such as business, law, technology, and other male-dominated sectors, gender inequality is a hindrance to women's growth and the company's holistic development. It was recently found that women in higher status occupational positions have a high likelihood of experiencing gender and age discrimination (Rosigno, 2019). Existing studies on this topic exhibit two tendencies: (1) using large surveys that lack in-depth analysis, and (2) missing female perspective, specifically the perspective of women executives. In this study, we will investigate women executives' personal experience with gender discrimination using a multiple case study method. We recognize the complexity and breadth of the topic of gender discrimination.



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In this study, we will focus on sexual harassment, reasoning it is an under-researched but highly relevant topic. We decided to study the Philippines because the principal investigator of this study is a young woman who lives in the Philippines. This study set out to answer the following research question: To what extent do women executives experience sexual harassment at various times in life?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Gender equality achievements in the Philippines

Although no country has yet to achieve full gender equality, according to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index, several countries were able to close 80% or more of their gender gap, while the Philippines is ranked 17th on the list of 156 countries for its achievement of closing 78% of its gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2021). The Women in Business Report shows that Filipina women occupy 48% of senior leadership roles in the industry, which increased by five percent from 2020 (P&A Grant Thornton News, 2021). Additionally, a study conducted by Unite et al. (2015) shows that while more chairpersons and senior executives in publicly traded firms are males, evidence also shows that key positions held by women are slowly increasing. The Philippines has the third highest number of senior female executives in the world; 4 out of 10 senior executive roles in the country are filled by women (Unite, 2015).

### Violence and sexual harassment against Filipina women

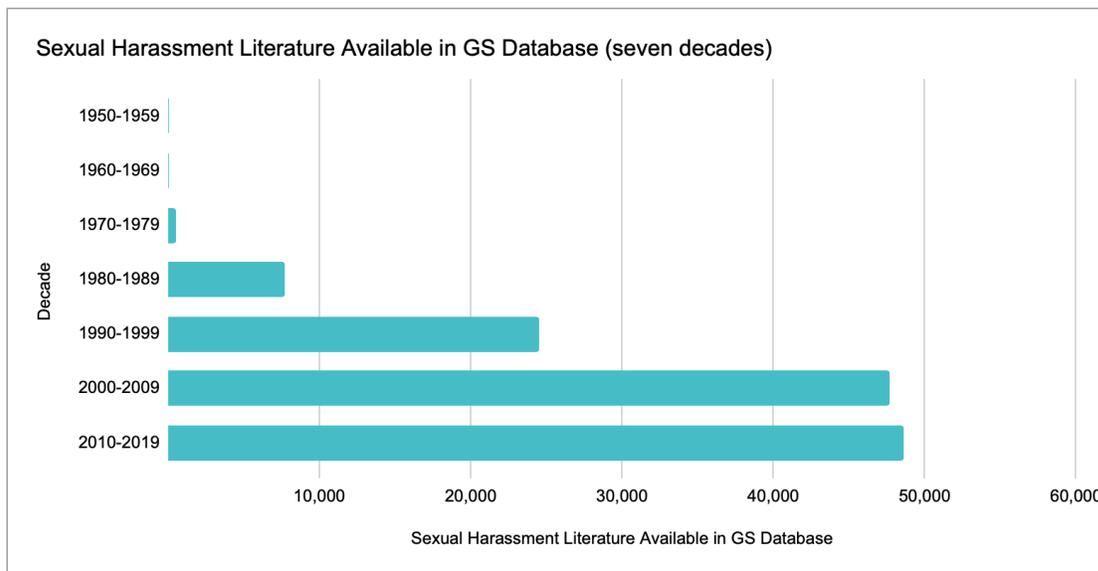
These notable achievements, however, cannot mask the underlying gender equality issues that the Philippines continues to deal with. Research finds that the women of this country still struggle with domestic violence, discrimination in the workplace, and sexual harassment despite the increase of women in the workforce. For example, as stated by Anonuevo (2000) and Ordinario (2020), the recorded number of cases wherein women were sexually exploited in 2018 rose by 55.2% in 2019. According to Mumford et al. (2020): “Measurement of sexual harassment since the 1980s has focused on workplace settings, where approximately 60% of women are victims. Compared with men, women are nearly 3 times more likely to report unwanted sexual experiences without contact, more than 2 times more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact, and 13 times more likely to be raped.”

### Research development on the topic of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a relatively neglected area of study. To outline the history of research development on the topic of sexual harassment, we conducted searches on Google Scholar (GS), the largest academic search engine with more than 100 million pieces of academic literature (Yue & Peng, 2021). See Figure 1. Despite the visible increase of sexual harassment studies since the 1980s, the growth of research in this area of study has slowed down considerably. This is especially concerning given the complex risk factors in the online environment escalated by the social media boom over the past two decades. The focus of sexual harassment studies has been changing as well. In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus of sexual harassment studies was mainly on law, policy, and regulation. Starting in the 1970s, there was an increase of studies investigating psychological matters accompanied by sensitivity training for various careers. In the 1980s and 1990s, more researchers began to investigate crossfield issues such as race and LGBT in relation to sexual harassment. While online sexual harassment gained some attention in recent years, the research development in this area has yet to exhibit an accelerated speed.

### Reactive versus proactive

Studies found that rather than being proactive in prevention education, sexual harassment in workplace as well as school and university is only addressed after instances of assault have grown (Moyer & Tankersley, 2012; Elshaer et al, 2019; Micale, 2021; Weinstock, 2021). Organizations and society in general, have a problematic knee-jerk reaction to sexual harassment complaints (Smith, 2018). Despite of the increase of workplace sexual harassment training programs in recent decades, research found these programs to be ineffective and lack psychological and emotional impact (Pryor & Meyers, 2000; Okun, 2017; Keyton et al., 2018; Tweedt, 2021). Some studies pointed out that instead of mandated workplace sexual harassment training, developing programs that teach children and youths about sexual harassment and help them develop skills for recognizing potential sexual harassment behaviors as well as non-consensual acts could potentially reverse the rising trend in school and workplace sexual harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Nielsen, 2021; Hermawan & Wulandari, 2022).



**Figure 1** Sexual harassment literature available in GS database from 1950 to 2019

## METHODS

### Research Design

In this study, we employed an exploratory multiple case study with a qualitative approach. This design allows in-depth examination of individuals' experience and thought process while enabling cross-case synthesis and analytical generalization (Eisenhardt, 1989; Baxter & Jack, 2008, De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; & Ponelis, 2015). With this research design, we were able to generate an understanding of sexual harassment in real-life context while evaluating the personal experiences and subjective beliefs of Filipina women in regard to how they are treated based on their gender.

### Participants

We contacted women around the National Capital Region of the Philippines through non-probability convenience sampling. The participants were contacted via google email. These emails were taken from referrals of colleagues and business contacts. The emails contained the description of the study and a brief overview of what being a participant would entail. Once the participants had agreed to the one-hour interview, consent forms were sent out by the researchers and signed by the participant.

To ensure that this process remained unbiased, we followed set criteria for each participant and only

reached out to those who fit these standards. The participants were picked based on occupation, designation, sex (female), and nationality. The participants were sourced from different companies, although they are all still in the business industry. These women ranged from ages 24 and above and all graduated from higher-level education. These participants were all high-standing, as they either took executive positions in their company or founded a business of their own. Participants were taken from all around the National Capital Region of the Philippines. To display the case studies, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and no specific company names were mentioned.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were contacted via email and sent a link to attend a zoom video conference for the interview. A participant consent form with detailed data privacy information was signed by the participants prior to joining the interview. Each interview was recorded and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes. We began the interviews by explaining the purpose of the study to the participants. The participants were informed that they may opt to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

While the interview was ongoing, we took note of the answers of the participants using the application Google Document. Notable moments during the

interview were timestamped for future use. We revisited these timestamps when needed to obtain direct quotes or analyze the tone of the participants. When a participant made a point comparable to another participant, we timestamped this as well. Common themes and patterns were discovered across the researcher's notes and timestamps.

Once all the interviews were over and the notes were complete, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. We compiled all the completed transcripts and began to create a list of provisional codes. The main focus of this process was participants' personal experiences with sexual harassment and their thoughts on future prevention. Credibility and confirmability of the codes were established through multiple rounds of analysis. After coding all transcripts, we created a table displaying grouped and organized codes. This visual presentation was then used for identifying patterns and themes. Additional themes were discovered and processed whenever necessary.

## RESULTS

### Case 1: Samantha

Samantha is a 68-year-old woman who has lived in the Philippines her whole life. After studying in a high-profile university in Manila, the capital city of the Philippines, she earned a degree in AB Economics and took on many executive courses throughout her career. For the majority of her career, she worked in two business units. Admirably, she became CEO of both companies by the time she retired. As head of the company, she had many responsibilities that rested on her shoulders. This included managing the company's profit and loss, creating loyal customers, and remaining competitive amongst other similar businesses.

The first instance she experienced was at a cocktail party during the first few years of her career. Her group of colleagues was having drinks, and one of her male colleagues held her back and sexually caressed her. Naturally, as she was sitting down with him standing behind, she responded by hitting his stomach with her elbow. The man who harassed her laughed it off and hid his embarrassment as he exclaimed, "oh my, you're strong!" The second instance occurred when she was already an executive. The man was a very big client and harassed her as she was showing him around the office. She chose to laugh and play it off as a joke in order to not offend him.

When around him, the most she could do was maintain a distance. There were also a few similar instances with women in the rank and file in her industry that she had heard of.

Notable Quotes:

"The role of women has been underestimated for eons. The more we get to know about a woman's physique, the more we realize how much potential women truly have."

### Case 2: Pamela

Pamela is a 24-year-old who earned a bachelor of science in Biology in one of the top-ranking universities in the Philippines. She became a founder and chief-growth director in a digital marketing agency. Her company helps business start-ups and individuals build their online branding by creating their branding strategies and unique identity.

In addition to her role in this company, she is also an associate writer and researcher for an organization that advocates for women's rights. She lobbies for gender parity in various locations in Metro Manila.

She has personally witnessed her female colleagues suffer from unequal treatment and acts of sexual harassment. She was unable to go into specific detail, however, she has seen many of these instances and claims that these situations never end well. Even if "justice" had been served, the damage had been done and her female colleague had this on her reputation permanently.

Notable Quotes:

"The beauty of being a woman striding in a man's world means that you can always be a starter."

"The essence of being a woman is knowing you have the power to build and thrive on your own success."

### Case 3: Maria

Maria is a 52-year-old woman who, like our other case study participants, studied in one of the top universities in the Philippines. She took up BS Economics and graduated from a well-known local Law school. As vice president of public affairs in her company, she works with government units and engages with many stakeholders.

Going into her work as a lawyer, she definitely recognized the field as male-dominated. There were colleagues who would often make sexist jokes, especially when drunk. She was around 30 years old

when she was working as a human resources member. She dealt with an instance involving a senior manager who sent out emails with provocative content and sexual images. These emails were sent to multiple groups of women. When one of these female colleagues reported it to Maria, the senior manager was suspended and only had some benefits taken away. When confronted about the situation, he claimed that it was simply a joke. He had a good track record, and the behavior was quite unexpected. Surprisingly, this happened a second time in less than a year. He sent more of these sexual emails to another group of female colleagues. These females were in the rank and file below him. Again, he claimed that there was nothing wrong with what he did. The second time resulted in him being officially terminated from the position. Maria personally filed his termination, and he left the company for good.

Notable Quotes:

“The system for gender equality is already in place, it is up to us to enact on this.”

#### Case 4: Jessica

Jessica is a 47-year-old woman who studied film at her university. Later on, she chose to go into advertising, as she wanted a creative and spiritually fulfilling career. She has worked with big brands to help build their reputation and sales further. Aside from her work as a head in advertising, she has taken on the role of a life coach.

When she started in the industry around her 20s, she had witnessed many cases of sexual harassment and men making sexual remarks. Many of these men have commented about women’s clothes and body parts. These sexual jokes were insensitively made in the workplace. When she turned 40, her work as a life coach has connected her with women who have also experienced severe cases of sexual assault. As a life coach, she focuses on helping people handle their emotions and break down the barriers that prevent them from emotionally healing. Not long ago, one of her cases dealt with a 20-year-old woman who was gang-raped by her friends. She was left on the street and walked home naked. It made her feel unworthy, traumatized, angry, and she was victim-blamed. Jessica helped her get through her trauma, and eventually, she learned self-acceptance. Now, Jessica works to help more and more people who face challenges like these

in order to become better individuals.

Notable Quotes:

“Gender equality stretches beyond policies; it is heavily influenced by our nation’s culture and history.”

#### Case 5: Alyssa

Alyssa is a 41-year-old woman who finished with a bachelor of fine arts and a major in visual communications. Throughout her career, she has held many positions in the creative industry such as a freelance graphic designer, digital editor, production assistant, and studio manager. She is also an educator in an organization that teaches young individuals about marketing and entrepreneurship.

During her early 30’s, she came out as part of the LGBTQ+ community. She was hesitant to come out at first because of the stigma that surrounded those LGBTQ+ in the Philippines. However, she became confident enough to openly express her sexuality as her business prospered. Now, she heads the company together with her female partner. She believes that people of all genders, including the LGBTQ+, deserve to be heard. Her Catholic school convinced her that being LGBTQ+ was a “ticket straight to hell.” Now, she works on inspiring others and giving them the courage to be open about their sexuality.

Before her success, she had unfortunately experienced many cases of sexual harassment. When she was in elementary school she lived in a compound with her extended family. In that household, she experienced sexual harassment by three different people. At 7 years old, one of the residents in her cousin’s house unsolicited showed her his genitals and asked her to do the same. At 10 years old, she caught both her cousin and uncle peering in on her in the shower. At 12 years old, she was in the theatre and sat beside an old man. She felt the old man’s hands on her chest and because she was so young, she did not understand what was happening. She was with her aunt and asked her aunt what the old man was doing. Her aunt scolded the old man, and he went away. When she was in grade 5, she used to commute to school. As she was walking, there was a man on a motorcycle who asked her “Miss! Where is the basketball court?” she then pointed to the end of the street. He once again went, “Miss, miss! look at this look at this!” She was shocked as his genitals were sticking out. When she was in high school, she had to commute again. A man

sat beside her and started to masturbate while holding her chest at the same time. She left, and the man followed her asking what time she would finish school because he wanted to pick her up. In her late twenties, one of her coaches made sexual advances on her asking her to meet up with him and wear a short skirt. In her 4th year in high school, she went to confession during her Catholic school's retreat. She apologized for having a relationship with people of the same sex. The priest started asking her detailed questions about what she would do with the girl. He would ask "Did you kiss her?" "Did you touch her breast?" She answered because she did not think the priest had malicious intentions. After the confession, the priest hugged and kissed her. It was later in life when she realized what had really happened. When she had her own business already, a company hired her team to organize their event. The company was a big brand in the Philippines. At that time, it was very male-dominated with 90 men and around only 10 women. The men were quite inappropriate, and the atmosphere was very tense, as they made her, and her team feel uncomfortable.

Throughout her life, many people have challenged her sexuality. They have always claimed "you haven't tried men." These moments made her feel weak and insecure. She felt as if she was not empowered. Fortunately, she has not experienced cases as severe as these for quite a while. She has regained her confidence and takes pride in the person she turned out to be.

Notable Quotes:

"Sexuality is not something you should hide. It is not a weakness. It is a unique personality that you should embrace."

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to discover the extent to which women executives experience sexual harassment at various times in life. Participants of our study agreed with the statement that the Philippines has made tremendous progress in closing the gender gap. Unfortunately, at the same time, experience of four common types of sexual harassment – physical, verbal, cyber, and non-verbal – was found among the participants. These four types of sexual harassment align with the framework developed by Kahsay et al. (2020). In the context of this study, physical sexual harassment can be described as unwanted touching,

fondling, hugging, or kissing. Verbal sexual harassment includes offensive comments, inappropriate sexual remarks, intrusive questions, or offensive critiques about women's bodies. Cyber sexual harassment includes sending or receiving of sexually explicit texts or photos, indecent exposure, or offensive advances on the internet. Lastly, non-verbal sexual harassment includes inappropriate staring, stalking, or showing of explicit photos.

Mamaru et al. (2015) found in their study physical sexual harassment to be the least prevalent, as women have less tolerance for this behavior and are likely to fight back the harasser. In our study, however, physical harassment was found to be the second most mentioned form of sexual harassment. Similar with Mamaru's study, women in our study are also found to be likely to fight back if they experience physical sexual harassment. However, one of the participants who was sexually groped during her childhood, was not aware that what she was experiencing and thus, did not know how to respond.

Mamaru's study found that verbal sexual harassment is the most prevalent sexual harassment reasoning that most victims of verbal sexual harassment do not report the offenses, thus, and the perpetrators are often left unpunished and reinforced. Verbal sexual harassment is also one of the most impactful, as social learning theories suggest that sexual remarks thrown around easily influences others to mimic this behavior and make the same remarks (Choi & Lee, 2017). One of the participants in our study stated that men are generally good at delivering their sexist remarks in the form of jokes, which makes women feel compelled to laugh along to make things less awkward for themselves and others around.

Filipina women are prone to verbal sexual harassment; Daantos (2020) conducted a collocational analysis and concluded that the Philippine President, Duterte's, representation of women is sexist. The President's highly publicized sexist statements such as "shoot the female rebels in the vagina", "if you happen to have raped three women, I will own up to it" and calling female leaders "incompetent", "ignorant", and "dumb." It was recommended by one participant that more women should be included in the political system of the Philippines. Politics in the Philippines is largely run by males. From the year 1998 to 2016, it was reported that only 16.1 percent to 21.44 percent of public offices were women. This is lower than the

estimated 30 percent minimum necessary for a minority group to influence decision-making (Philippine Commission on Women, n.d). Several men with high positions in the Philippine justice system are known to be verbally disrespectful toward women. Thus, their actions influence the behavior of other men in the Philippines.

The rise in technology has consequently led to a higher potential for cyber bullying and sexual harassment. Cyber sexual harassment can result in severe emotional consequences including anger, fear, hatred, sorrow and disappointment (Arafa et al., 2017). Cyber sexual harassment is present in our study, and it is often downplayed in the Philippines. One participant mentioned that the reason that Filipina women often "cool" about cyber sexual harassment is because otherwise they may be frowned upon.

Non-verbal sexual harassment may cause psychological distress on many levels; the least of which affects females' desire for educational achievement and makes them less productive (Mamaru et al., 2015). Non-verbal sexual harassment, such as being peeked in on in the shower, was also found in our study.

Our cross-case synthesis returned a major theme: calling for sufficient and effective sexual harassment prevention education programs. Participants indicated that some of their encounters of sexual harassment would have been prevented had they had adequate knowledge on sexual harassment. Sexual harassment prevention programs will help increase the awareness and decrease the rates of sexual harassment cases, which will generate positive impact on equality and inclusivity for youths, professionals, and virtually all types of organizations (NASEM, 2018). Participants of our study stated that the culture of the Philippines contributes to its rates of sexual harassment; this misogynistic culture can only be changed through consistent education in the right direction (Kumashiro, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment, along with its personal, psychological, and moral implications, is a complex subject (Prekel, 2001). In the Philippines, sexual harassment and assault cases on women are still not handled efficiently. All five women executives who participated in our study reported cases of sexual harassment that they have personally experienced or

witnessed. They claimed that the Philippines has a long way to go in terms of solving this issue, with effective sexual harassment prevention education highlighted as a potential solution.

Research on sexual harassment in the workplace is still in its infancy, but according to the European Union, 40– 50% of women experienced sexual harassment or unwanted sexual behavior in their workplace (Kahsay et al., 2020). In the Philippines, business industries have been doing well in implementing gender equality policies in their workplaces, which may be the effect of the increase in women's representation in executive positions, as well as women being given the right to own enterprises. Moreover, this study found that the underlying issue behind sexual harassment and gender discrimination was the lack of effective education. Our study is significant as it sheds a light on the need for and the potential effect of education and prevention rather than punishment and reaction. Adequate sexual harassment prevention education will be beneficial and create a more sexually-aware generation of youths. Parent education programs should also include a component of sexual harassment prevention education.

In conclusion, despite the achievement in closing the gender gap, discrimination and sexual harassment against women are still prevalent in the Philippines. Centuries of discrimination have compounded over the years; now it is difficult to break free from this androcentric mindset. While more and more Filipina women take executive positions, the collective calling for adequate sexual harassment prevention education is louder than ever. Achieving sustainable development goal number 5 is not impossible; with awareness through education and proper government intervention, society can become a safer place for women in the workplace and in their communities.

Due to the scale of this multiple case study, only Filipina women were included. Gender-based studies are heavily impacted by nationality. This is because the traditions and culture of a country very likely determine the way men and women are treated in society. Thus, the way women are perceived will differ per area. In the Philippines, as explained in the background of the study, the gender gap has slowly been closing. This means that the results of the study may not apply to countries with more severe gender disparity.

It is advisable that future research examine the available tools and resources for sexual harassment

prevention education. The effectiveness of prevention educational programs in both private and public institutions should also be assessed. Through these studies, new tools and resources for sexual harassment prevention education may be looked into and further developed. Additionally, future research may also explore different ways to incorporate effective prevention educational programs into schools and communities.

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