

PHILIPPINE NATIONAL BANK (PNB): AT THE FOREFRONT OF ADDRESSING WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT



PBCWE Member since: 2019



8,880



34%



66%

Challenge

In the Philippines, it has been reported that one in seven women experience sexual harassment at least once every week. Past surveys also suggest that sexual harassment is prevalent in the workplace but underreported due to fears of reprisal. The banking industry, in particular, has been known to have a work environment that can be hostile towards women because of beauty standards for hiring frontline employees like tellers and because of a majority of men in upper management positions.

In 2019, the Philippines passed new legislation known as the Safe Spaces Act that expanded the definition of sexual harassment to include acts committed in public spaces and online platforms, offenses committed by peers and subordinates, as well as transphobic and homophobic slurs. Aside from addressing other gaps in the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act of 1995, the new law also outlined additional responsibilities for employers to prevent and penalize sexual harassment in the workplace. This prompted many companies, including PNB, to revisit policies on anti-sexual harassment (ASH).



Strategy

PNB has been taking measures to provide its employees with a safe and respectful working environment that not only upholds their rights but is also conducive to their career development. In adherence to national laws and a strict moral and ethical code, the bank strengthened its ASH policy and its implementation to clear any misconceptions about sexual harassment at the workplace and any apprehensions for taking action.

PNB recognizes that a zero-tolerance stand against sexual harassment can help preserve its corporate image and manage reputational risk arising from cases that can become highly publicized. Similar to managing other operational risks, PNB has proactively set up policies and systems to avoid any incidence of sexual harassment and to respond quickly and fairly should these occur.

Actions

PNB did more than update its ASH policy on paper. It has taken its campaign against sexual harassment up a notch by sending a strong message that the policy is in force and serves to protect not only the interest of the bank but also the welfare of its people.

Establishing parameters

In its ASH policy, PNB clearly identifies what acts constitute sexual harassment and may be reported, in accordance with the law. These cover light to serious to very serious offenses – anything from green jokes to malicious touching or other acts. By defining what is acceptable and not, PNB aims to make all personnel more sensitive about their behavior towards others. The policy applies not only to permanent employees but also to temporary, probationary, or contractual employees and even job applicants, service personnel, and student trainees.

PNB has also established whistleblowing channels such as a hotline and an email through which persons can report violations of company policy, including sexual harassment, with an assurance of confidentiality to the greatest extent possible. The procedures to be taken after filing a report have also been detailed so that the bank can take immediate action upon receipt of a complaint and employees know what to expect and rightfully demand. For example, complaints must be investigated and decided on within ten days, unless there are special circumstances. There is also close coordination with the parties involved.

Raising awareness

PNB has continued information campaigns on its ASH policy to build awareness on the issue and trust in the system – both of which are necessary for the policy to work. Aside from incorporating the policy into new employee orientations, reiterations are done through emails highlighting essential provisions, signages posted in conspicuous places around offices and branches, sessions on ASH in training programs, and updates during meetings and other discussions. Employees are also given access to an online portal where they can read about the policy in detail.

Forming a dedicated committee

PNB has formed a Committee on Decorum and Investigation (CoDI) to exclusively investigate and address cases of sexual harassment.

As required by the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act as amended, majority of the members should be composed of female members and chaired by a female officer, specifically, the Head of the Industrial Relations Department (IRD). A labor union representative also serves in the committee.

PNB holds the CoDI in high esteem for their probity, integrity, and most importantly, commitment. Given the prescribed period when cases are to be resolved, the CoDI members who are ranking officers with full schedules still manage to attend hearings and execute their responsibilities despite their full schedules. Sometimes, this means coming up with creative ways to skip scheduled appointments without disclosing the reason. Depending on the complexity of a case, committee meetings may be scheduled daily and run from morning to as late as midnight. Sometimes hearings are purposely scheduled during ungodly hours as an extra measure to conceal the identity of persons involved and to protect the confidentiality of the case.

“When there is a case, we abide by the policy on what to do. We invite people or witnesses who can provide more insight on the case and allow each party to explain their side,” shared a CoDI representative. “It is our obligation and responsibility to the bank to observe fairness and due process.”

PNB has also defined procedures for cases when a bank officer or other prominent official is involved. Decisions by the CoDI are reviewed and confirmed by the relevant committees of the PNB Board of Directors, if the case involves a Vice President or a higher ranking official. This sends a clear message that PNB attaches primary importance to the safe and healthy working environment of all personnel.

“Sexual harassment may seem trivial, but it goes against the very dignity of men and women,” emphasized IRD Head Atty. Maryknoll C. H. Ibrahim.

Adopting a holistic approach

PNB has stitched together company policies to reinforce and complement one another. The Code of Conduct guides employees on proper workplace decorum. The ASH and whistleblower policies empower employees to report violations of the code without fear of retaliation and assures the employees the highest level of confidentiality. A mental health policy also provides for counselling when needed. Even performance appraisals cover employee behavior. All these policies serve to promote and embed a culture of integrity and respect in PNB.

Outcomes

From 2018 to 2020, five complaints in relation to sexual harassment have been filed, four (80%) of which have been resolved within the given period. The profile of complainants fit those more likely to experience sexual harassment: almost all were from persons 30 years old and below. However, their positions varied in the hierarchy. This suggests that across levels, employees are not only aware of the ASH policy but also feel adequately protected to raise a complaint.

Another finding that could be interpreted as a rough measure of employee confidence is that there were also male complainants. Although both men and women face different societal barriers and stigmas in coming forward, men also struggle with a sense of loss of masculinity and fears of being perceived as homosexual, especially if the perpetrator is a male.

Whether hearings are conducted face to face or virtually, CoDI representatives have also observed that victims feel relieved after airing their side. It has been said that the simple act of being heard begins the healing process but what is most appreciated by employees, is that cases are being addressed promptly and expeditiously, as many have expressed to the IRD.

This process of hearing out employees and listening to both sides of the story is never smooth sailing. Although there are anti-retaliatory provisions in the PNB policy, this may not prevent the perpetrator to look for other means to seek retribution to vindicate oneself from the alleged act.

PNB is being recognized in the industry for walking the talk when it comes to gender equality and ensuring a safe space of its employees. A strong ASH policy was one of many factors that paved the way for the Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE) certification of PNB, the first universal bank in the Philippines to achieve such a feat. EDGE is the leading global assessment methodology and business certification standard for gender equality.

PNB is utilizing EDGE findings to address gender gaps in corporate practices as part of its commitment to promote diversity and inclusion and exercise fairness in the conduct of its business.

Employee Experience

What place does an ASH policy have in a profit-oriented business?

“A company can become the talk of the town because of sexual harassment cases. What we are doing now helps the Bank to address issues on reputational risk,”

It can also ensure commitment and productivity among employees knowing that a sense of security and confidence in the knowledge that the company looks after the welfare of employees by ensuring a safe and working environment.”

explained one CoDI representative.

The negative impact of sexual harassment can be far and wide. Aside from the reputational damage, in the long run, businesses may find themselves struggling with turnover and recruitment as workers flee from hostile working conditions. The experience can also be traumatic for individuals and detrimental to their career prospects.

“We have heard stories from rank-and-file employees wanting to commit suicide because they feel trapped. Though they do not want to get up from bed anymore yet they are compelled to work because they are the breadwinners of the family,”

shared another CoDI member.

It is these types of situation that PNB seeks to prevent and address through its ASH policy which perfectly aligns with other company policies. Such firm statements, coupled with intense information dissemination and consistent and strong will in the implementation, have helped PNB in gaining the trust of its people and continuously living up to its motto of putting people first. Certainly, PNB is going above and beyond the letter of the law to build an equal, secure, and safe workplace that fully respects human rights.

Moving Forward

- Bystander training may be added to current programs to teach individuals how to respond if they witness inappropriate behaviors firsthand. More advanced anti-sexual harassment training on prevention may also be introduced for human resource personnel, managers, CoDI members, and other individuals whose example will set the tone for the rest of the company. Though professional mental health services are already offered by PNB, training managers and CoDI members on basic counseling skills can also be explored because they are the first touchpoints of distressed individuals.
- Work towards increased representation of women as top talents, given the increased likelihood of sexual harassment in industries with more men in leadership roles. Develop a pool of potential CoDI members.
- Consider additional support to victims, witnesses, and hearing officers who are vulnerable not only to threats from the alleged perpetrator but also to stress during and after the investigation.



Photos were taken from PBCWE Events and activities pre pandemic (2019 to early 2020)

The Philippine Business Coalition for Women Empowerment (PBCWE) was launched in March 2017 through Investing in Women, an initiative of the Australian Government. In the Philippines, IW has partnered with the Philippine Women's Economic Network (PhilWEN) to create a business coalition to pursue Gender Equality (GE) in the workplace and Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) nationwide.

PBCWE is made up of influential businesses that are large employers who will take the appropriate steps to improve gender equity in their own workplaces and to influence businesses, both in their supply chains and other large businesses, and to also become better employers of women.



PBCWE
PHILIPPINE BUSINESS COALITION
FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT



Australian Aid

INVESTING IN WOMEN
SMART ECONOMICS
AN INITIATIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT



@PBCWE



<http://www.pbcwe.com.ph>



The first universal bank in the Philippines to be certified as gender-equal after receiving its Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE) Certification.

LinkedIn's 2021 Top Companies list in the Philippines

PBCWE Member since 2019