

Legal Literacy for All: A Grassroots Approach to Policy Reform Against Sexual Harassment in Malaysian Workplaces

BITARA

Volume 9, Issue 1, 2026: 188-201
© The Author(s) 2026
e-ISSN: 2600-9080
<http://www.bitarajournal.com>
Received: 16 January 2026
Accepted: 15 February 2026
Published: 16 March 2026

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Abstract

Sexual harassment in Malaysian workplaces remains a persistent and multifaceted problem that undermines individual dignity, organizational effectiveness, and broader social justice objectives. Despite significant legislative developments and the recognition of sexual harassment as an actionable civil wrong by the Malaysian courts, gaps in awareness, reporting, and practical enforcement continue to impede effective protection for victims. This paper examines legal literacy as a grassroots-driven policy instrument capable of addressing these gaps through preventive, pre-incident intervention rather than relying solely on post-incident legal remedies. Drawing on qualitative socio-legal research, this study integrates doctrinal legal analysis, literature review, and empirical insights obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with employees across public and private sector workplaces in Malaysia. The findings reveal persistent deficiencies in employees' understanding of sexual harassment laws, reporting mechanisms, and available legal remedies, alongside widespread fear of retaliation and procedural complexity that discourages reporting. Existing workplace training programmes are found to be largely compliance-oriented and insufficiently participatory, limiting their effectiveness in shaping attitudes, ethical reasoning, and workplace culture. The paper argues that legal literacy must be conceptualised not merely as knowledge of statutory provisions, but as an inclusive and participatory process that integrates legal awareness, ethical responsibility, and practical application. To this end, it proposes a grassroots-driven legal literacy module designed to empower individuals to recognise misconduct, understand their rights and responsibilities, navigate reporting pathways, and uphold workplace dignity. The proposed module incorporates experiential learning methods such as scenario-based discussions, role-play simulations, and ethical reflection to foster moral agency and collective accountability. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that democratising legal knowledge through participatory legal literacy initiatives has significant potential to strengthen preventive policy reform, enhance access to justice, and contribute to the creation of safer, more dignified, and more equitable workplaces in Malaysia.

Kata Kunci: Legal literacy, Sexual harassment, Policy reform, Grassroots engagement, Workplace rights, Gender justice, Public legal education, Malaysia



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Cite This Article:

Izzatillah Abdul Hakim & Khaliq Ahmad. (2026). Legal Literacy for All: A Grassroots Approach to Policy Reform Against Sexual Harassment in Malaysian Workplaces. *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 9(1): 188-201.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual Harassment as a Workplace and Societal Issue

Sexual harassment is a global concern, with profound implications for workplace safety, employee well-being, and organizational integrity (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). In Malaysia, the issue has gained increasing attention due to rising case numbers, high-profile incidents, and legislative reforms. Sexual harassment encompasses a spectrum of behaviors, verbal, non-verbal, physical, and psychological that violate personal dignity and create hostile work environments (Employment Act 1955; United Nations Women, n.d.). The consequences extend beyond individual victims, affecting organizational culture, productivity, and public trust.

Despite legislative advances, such as the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022, significant gaps remain in awareness, reporting, and enforcement. Many victims, particularly women, face stigma, fear of retaliation, and procedural barriers that deter them from seeking justice ("Wan Azizah: Malaysians still lack awareness," 2019; Laxman et al., 2014). The persistence of sexual harassment reflects broader societal challenges, including gender inequality, power imbalances, and limited access to legal knowledge.

Legal Literacy as Preventive Policy

Legal literacy is the ability to understand, interpret, and apply legal rights. This has been increasingly recognized as a preventive tool against workplace misconduct (Zariski, 2014; Freudenberg, 2017). It empowers individuals to recognize violations, assert their rights, and participate in legal processes. Legal literacy is not merely technical knowledge; it encompasses ethical reflection, critical thinking, and the capacity to navigate complex legal systems (Canadian Bar Association, 1992; Preston-Shoot & McKimm, 2013).

Grassroots and Participatory Approaches

Traditional top-down approaches to legal education often fail to reach marginalized groups or address the lived realities of diverse workplaces. Research also shows that grassroots legal empowerment i.e. programs that equip everyday people to know, use, and shape the law has consistently increases one's legal knowledge (Schuler & Kadigmar-Rajasingham, 1992). Grassroots and participatory frameworks, by contrast, democratize legal knowledge and foster collective action. Community-driven initiatives such as peer-led workshops, focus groups, and participatory training modules have demonstrated effectiveness in raising awareness, building trust, and promoting behavioral change (Goodwin & Maru, 2017; Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal literacy is a multifaceted concept, encompassing knowledge of laws, critical engagement with legal systems, and the ability to assert rights and responsibilities (Zariski, 2014; Korpiola, 2018). Comparative studies highlight its importance across professions such as teachers, doctors, social workers and its role in promoting access to justice and social empowerment

(Canadian Bar Association, 1992; Freudenberg, 2017).

Sexual harassment is defined under Malaysian law as any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature be it verbal, non-verbal, visual, gestural, or physical that is offensive, humiliating, or threatening (Employment Act 1955; Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022). Both acts reflect statutory emphasis on “any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature” and this can be seen too in the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace’s operational taxonomy. In Malaysia, generally, the laws have elaborated the elements of sexual harassment quite thoroughly and this shows the unwavering commitment and dedication of the government in making Malaysia a safer place. The results of the continuous efforts can be seen for example, when the Malaysian laws thoroughly stipulated that verbal forms include sexual jokes, comments about body or attire, and repeated propositions; non-verbal/gestural forms include lewd sounds, suggestive looks, or hand signals; visual forms include sending or displaying sexualized materials (including through workplace ICT systems); physical forms range from unwanted proximity or touching to assault; and digital harassment involves obscene or menacing communications via network services or applications.

The issue and sexual harassment in Malaysia have also been recognized by the trial and apex Court particularly in landmark case i.e., Mohd Ridzwan bin Abdul Razak v Asmah binti Hj Mohd Nor [2016] 4 MLJ 282 (“The Asmah Case”). a senior manager at Lembaga Tabung Haji lodged an internal complaint that her superior had subjected her to persistent, sexually oriented misconduct by uttering vulgar remarks, dirty jokes, rude emails, and repeated propositions (including offers to be a “second wife”). Although the inquiry committee found insufficient evidence for disciplinary action, HR issued a strong reprimand, after which the superior sued her for defamation, and she counterclaimed for sexual harassment.

The High Court dismissed the defamation claim and awarded the defendant RM100,000 in general damages and RM20,000 in aggravated/exemplary damages for sexual harassment; the Court of Appeal affirmed, describing the conduct as a “persistent and deliberate course of unreasonable oppressive conduct spiced with sexual hallmarks”, thereby canvassing key elements of sexual harassment: unwelcome sexualized conduct, severity/pervasiveness, workplace power imbalance, and adverse psychological impact.

On further appeal, the Federal Court squarely addressed the question whether Malaysian law recognizes a civil cause of action for sexual harassment and answered yes, recognizing a standalone tort of sexual harassment and upholding damages; an outcome later noted by practitioners and commentators as doctrinally pivotal because it creates a direct civil redress pathway against harassers independent of statutory employer inquiries (Foo, 2016). Although the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace 1999 is not legally binding, the courts’ analysis in the Asmah case closely reflected its conduct-based criteria. The courts examined whether the impugned behaviour constituted unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature and assessed its impact on the complainant’s dignity, psychological well-being, and work environment. In doing so, the Federal Court articulated and applied the constituent elements of sexual harassment and ultimately affirmed sexual harassment as an actionable tort under Malaysian common law.

While Malaysia has made important strides in the legal recognition and enforcement of sexual harassment laws and included the establishment of institutional mechanisms such as the Tribunal for Anti-Sexual Harassment under the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022; challenges

in effective implementation persist until today (Rohime et al., 2025). Scholars have noted that despite these formal legal reforms, gaps in enforcement, public awareness, and institutional coordination continue to hinder access to justice for victims (Rohime et al., 2025).

Moreover, existing legal frameworks such as the 1999 Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment remain voluntary and non-binding, contributing to underreporting and limited practical remedy (Kaur, 2012). Research further indicates that low awareness and understanding of sexual harassment laws among employees and the public correlates with persistent underreporting and social stigma, undermining the effectiveness of legal protections (Baqtayan et al., 2021). These findings underscore the need for enhanced pre-incident preventive measures, particularly through the promotion of legal literacy that equips individuals with knowledge of their rights, available legal channels, and the mechanisms for reporting and redress, thereby aiming to prevent harassment before it occurs.

Grassroots legal literacy initiatives have proven effective in other jurisdictions, particularly in empowering marginalized groups and fostering collective action (Schuler & Kadigmar-Rajasingham, 1992; Goodwin & Maru, 2017). Through the implementation of collaborative learning modules, facilitator-guided group sessions, and targeted outreach efforts within local communities, organizations have succeeded in not only raising awareness about sexual harassment but also in cultivating a sense of mutual trust and shared responsibility among participants.

These interactive and inclusive approaches move beyond traditional, compliance-based training by actively engaging employees in real-world scenarios, ethical discussions, and collective problem-solving. As a result, participants are better equipped to recognize inappropriate behaviors, understand their rights and reporting mechanisms, and support one another in fostering a safer and more respectful workplace environment. The ripple effect of these grassroots initiatives is evident in the gradual transformation of workplace culture, where open dialogue, empathy, and proactive intervention become the norm, ultimately driving meaningful and sustained behavioral change across diverse organizational settings (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative methodology for both data collection and analysis. Qualitative methods are essential for examining complex social issues, such as workplace sexual harassment, as they provide deep insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and the contextual factors shaping their attitudes and behaviors. Within the realm of legal literacy, qualitative approaches help uncover how individuals understand, interpret, and apply legal knowledge in practical settings. By integrating qualitative data collection and analysis, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Furthermore, mixed-method research often yields more reliable findings compared to relying on a single approach, making it particularly useful for gathering information from diverse sources and contexts.

The qualitative methodology adopted here aligns with normative legal research. As Hartono (1994) explains, normative legal research involves “a study of documents, utilizes a qualitative method in analyzing data, and using secondary data as the source, such as regulation, court decisions, books, legal theories, and doctrines.” In addition to normative legal research,

this study incorporates comparative research to examine and contrast legal systems or regulations across different jurisdictions. Whilst maintaining the approach as a qualitative methodology, this research also takes its opportunity to integrate and receive corroboration from interviews and focus group discussions with employees in government and private sectors (Berg, 1995; Hartono, 1994).

The sample includes men and women aged 25–55, representing diverse organizational contexts. Ethical research principles i.e., confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation, and minimization of harm are strictly observed (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013; Orb et al., 2001). The primary aim of conducting surveys and interviews is to gather objective and reliable data that supports valid inferences and informed decision-making. The collected information will undergo critical analysis, as inquiry-based learning plays a crucial role in addressing and resolving questions. (Hart, 2018)

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Based on the research and analysis made, this research suggests that there are persisting gaps in legal literacy regarding sexual harassment. Many employees are unaware of their rights, reporting procedures, or available support services ("Wan Azizah: Malaysians still lack awareness," 2019; Laxman et al., 2014). Current approach on sexual harassment can be seen from its post incidents measures where the government has established a tribunal specifically to cater sexual harassment suits and making harassment a criminal offence under the penal code. However, this research argues that there are further improvements that can be made pre-incident; where instilling awareness, providing education about legal rights, and clearly defining acceptable and unacceptable workplace behaviors would be a vital tool in preventing the incident from happening at the first place.

By taking these steps seriously, stakeholders can help to foster a safer, more respectful work environment. While current training programs are predominantly compliance-based, focusing on legal definitions and reporting procedures, and while these programs raise basic awareness, they often lack participatory elements, cultural sensitivity, and integration of ethical principles (Tiwari & Sharma, 2019; Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

In addition, this research incorporated semi-structured interviews with 15 private sector employees from various industries. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and represented a range of roles and organizational sizes. The interviews revealed a strong consensus that legal literacy modules would be effective in educating employees and raising awareness about sexual harassment in the workplace. Several participants emphasized the need for practical, scenario-based training and clearer reporting mechanisms. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and confidentiality was maintained throughout. It is now a known fact that legal literacy is not only cultivating awareness in oneself but also teaching a human to be more respectful to one another. Making a comprehensive module to reflect legal literacy would be a powerful pre-emptive tool for any organization or parties.

PROPOSED GRASSROOTS-DRIVEN LEGAL LITERACY MODULE

The proposed grassroots-driven legal literacy module is designed to address the multifaceted challenges of sexual harassment in Malaysian workplaces by fostering both legal awareness and ethical responsibility among employees. At its foundation, the module introduces participants to the core principles of legal literacy, emphasizing the importance of understanding one's rights and responsibilities within the workplace. This foundational knowledge is not limited to statutory provisions but extends to the ethical dimensions of decision-making, encouraging individuals to connect legal norms with professional conduct and organizational values.

A central component of the module is the comprehensive exploration of sexual harassment, both in legal and practical terms. Participants are guided through the definitions and protections provided under Malaysian law, including the recent Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022, and are equipped to recognize the various forms that harassment can take such as verbal, non-verbal, physical, and psychological. The module not only teaches and educates the participants on the written law i.e. the acts and regulations enacted by the parliament / the government, but also touches the unwritten law principles, where rarely laymen understand and come across these principles in their daily activities. The law of tort for example is an important legal principle and subject that should be taught to the participants as this is how human minds can actually connect and establish the reason why one shall not inflict injury to others, and if such injury or tortious actions have been made, they will be repercussion and implications for the damage done to the injure party. In other way it refers to the body of law that addresses civil wrongs, allowing individuals who have suffered harm due to another's wrongful act or omission to seek compensation or remedy through the courts. Torts are distinct from criminal offenses and are primarily concerned with restoring the injured party to the position they would have been in had the harm not occurred. Common examples include negligence, nuisance, defamation, and trespass (Zariski, 2014). The module goes beyond mere compliance, indicating critical reflection on the ethical implications of harassment and its impact on workplace culture, psychological safety, and employee morale.

To empower victims and instill a culture of accountability, the module provides detailed instruction on legal protection and reporting mechanisms. Employees learn about employer obligations, internal grievance procedures, and external avenues for seeking justice, such as tribunals and civil courts. For example, a "reporting pathway simulation" can be incorporated whereby participants are given mock scenarios and must decide, step by step, which reporting mechanisms to invoke, draft an intake report, and justify their choices based on legal criteria.

This exercise is followed by peer review and facilitator feedback, enhancing procedural confidence and reinforcing knowledge of complex legal processes (Borgonovi & Burns, 2023; Valentine et al., 2022). The feedback and roundtable discussion will synthesis the questions and issues mingling in one's mind with extensive discussion and discourse from multiple points of view. This exercise would certainly help the participants in assessing real life situations so they would be able to act and react accordingly. The module also addresses common barriers to reporting, such as fear of retaliation and procedural complexity, and offers strategies for overcoming these obstacles through supportive organizational policies and transparent processes. An interesting and evidence-based insight is that fear of workplace retaliation ranks

among the strongest predictors of non-reporting, with studies showing that up to 70% of employees who experience harassment choose not to disclose it due to anticipated negative consequences (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of embedding both legal literacy and psychological safety into organizational training.

Recognizing that legal literacy is inseparable from the concept of workplace dignity, the module incorporates a robust ethical framework designed to operationalize abstract principles into practical workplace behaviors. Participants engage with the multidimensional nature of dignity, which encompasses inherent worth, earned respect, and the restoration of dignity after harm (Takala, 2022). Through guided exercises, such as scenario-based discussions and reflective journaling, learners explore how decisions in everyday workplace interactions can uphold or compromise dignity, and how restorative approaches can repair harm when breaches occur.

Universal ethical principles, including justice, respect, autonomy, and the common good are interwoven throughout the curriculum, providing a moral compass for evaluating complex dilemmas and making responsible decisions (Crane & Matten, 2021). For instance, a practical exercise may involve participants analyzing a workplace harassment case from multiple perspectives, i.e, the victim, perpetrator, HR officer, and organizational leadership. This will help the participants to identify and understand actions that protect dignity, promote accountability, and foster inclusion.

Additionally, based on the analysis and studies made, this research suggests that integrating ethical reasoning with legal literacy enhances moral agency, reduces tolerance for misconduct, and strengthens organizational culture (Derry et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2022). By combining theoretical understanding, experiential practice, and ethical reflection, the module not only reinforces compliance with legal standards but also cultivates an organizational climate where respect and human dignity are central to all interactions.

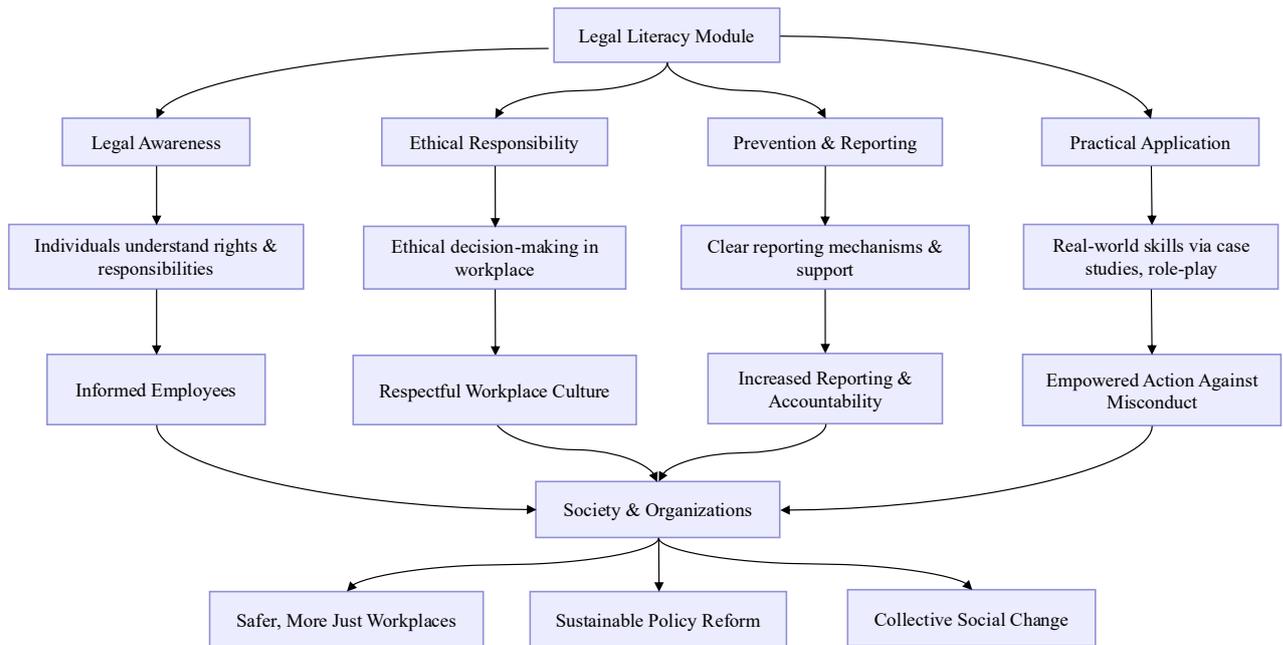
Practical application is a cornerstone of the module, with experiential learning methods such as case studies, role-play simulations, and group discussions. These activities enable participants to translate legal and ethical reasoning into real-world responses to misconduct, navigate complex dilemmas, and reflect critically on their decision-making processes. By bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, the module cultivates moral agency and professional responsibility. For instance, individuals could act out a sexual harassment response scenario in which participants are divided into small groups to play the roles of complainant, respondent, witness or human resources officer within a scripted situation. In this activity, learners need to cite legal norms that apply, actively listen during the simulation of an interview, and work as a team to decide on responses to the problem; debriefing with structured feedback from the facilitator is used to enhance learning (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025; Hsu et al., 2025).

Empirical studies from various professional education contexts show that role-play and simulations increase the understanding of legal concept, promote motivation among learners, as well as foster an internalization of profession responsibilities since they put the learner into real-world situations that require taking on and reflecting over relevant legal activities (Hsu et al., 2025; Abd Samad, Abd Hamid, Abdul Halim, & Mahmud, 2025)

Finally, the module emphasizes the collective dimension of legal literacy by encouraging organizations to embed legal awareness and ethical principles into their culture, policies, and

leadership practices. Through strategic planning exercises, group projects, and peer review sessions, participants are empowered to design and implement workplace initiatives that promote accountability, transparency, and dignity at all levels. The overarching goal is to transform legal literacy from an individual competency into a shared organizational value, thereby supporting sustainable policy reform and the creation of safer, more just workplaces across Malaysia.

Figure 1: The Legal Literacy Module in Combatting Sexual Harassment esp. in the Workplace



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively address sexual harassment in Malaysian workplaces, a multi-pronged policy approach is essential, grounded in both empirical evidence and best practices from global scholarship. First, organizations should institutionalize legal literacy training by mandating regular, participatory workshops for all employees. Such training should be tailored to the specific needs of different sectors and cultural contexts, as research demonstrates that context-sensitive legal education significantly improves awareness and compliance (Freudenberg, 2017; Korpiola, 2018). Studies have shown that participatory learning environments foster greater engagement and retention of legal knowledge compared to traditional lecture-based formats (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Second, legal literacy must be integrated into onboarding and professional development programs. New hires should receive comprehensive instruction on workplace rights, reporting mechanisms, and ethical principles, ensuring that legal awareness is embedded from the outset of employment (Preston-Shoot & McKimm, 2013). Continuous professional development further reinforces these competencies, supporting a culture of lifelong learning and ethical practice (Suhaimi & Yaakob, 2021).

Third, the promotion of grassroots engagement is vital. Organizations should support community-driven initiatives, peer-led workshops, and participatory learning opportunities that democratize legal knowledge and empower employees at all levels (Schuler & Kadigmar-Rajasingham, 1992; Goodwin & Maru, 2017). Evidence from women's empowerment programs and legal aid clinics indicates that grassroots approaches are particularly effective in reaching marginalized groups and fostering collective action (Schuler & Kadigmar-Rajasingham, 1992; Bertenthal, 2018).

Fourth, reporting mechanisms must be enhanced to simplify procedures, protect confidentiality, and provide robust support services for victims and witnesses. Research highlights that complex or opaque reporting systems deter victims from coming forward, while streamlined, transparent processes increase reporting rates and organizational accountability (Albiston & Sandefur, 2013; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). Confidential counseling and legal aid should be readily available to support those affected.

Fifth, organizations should monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of legal literacy programs using surveys, feedback, and performance metrics. Ongoing assessment enables continuous improvement and adaptation to be changing workplace dynamics (Tiwari & Sharma, 2019). Studies in organizational learning emphasize the importance of feedback loops and data-driven decision-making in sustaining program impact (Kaptein, 2008).

Finally, fostering ethical leadership and organizational accountability is crucial. Leaders must model ethical behavior, promote transparency, and institutionalize values of dignity and respect throughout the organization (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Kaptein, 2008). Research in business ethics underscores the role of ethical leadership in shaping organizational culture and reducing misconduct (Treviño et al., 2003; Kouchaki & Smith, 2022). By embedding these principles into policies and everyday practices, organizations can create safer, more just workplaces and drive meaningful policy reform.

CONCLUSION

Legal literacy is a transformative grassroots instrument for policy reform against sexual harassment in Malaysia. By empowering individuals with knowledge, ethical competencies, and participatory learning, Malaysia can advance toward workplaces that are safe, dignified, and just. The proposed legal literacy module and policy recommendations offer a roadmap for government and institutional reforms that are inclusive, sustainable, and effective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research was carried out using the research grants of ISTAC project ISTAC25-021-0023 which is thankfully acknowledged.

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