

Patron-Perpetrated Sexual Harassment at the Library

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Presentation Overview

- What is sexual harassment?
- Who is involved?
- Some stats
- What do we do about it? Why?
- What can/should we do about it?
- Conclusion
- References
- Questions, Comments, Thoughts

Takeaways

- Recognize sexual harassment
- Understand it is not okay
- Recognize the need for change in LIS
- Identify some things you can do to incite this change

What is sexual harassment?

What is sexual harassment?

Any **unwanted conduct, comment, gesture, or contact** of a sexual or gendered nature likely to cause intimidation, offence, discomfort, or humiliation directed by one person toward another.

(Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2017;
Government of Canada, 2016)

What is sexual harassment?

- does not need to be intentional
- is considered discrimination on the grounds of gender and is prohibited by the Alberta Human Rights Act

Patron-perpetrated sexual harassment:

Sexual harassment perpetrated by a patron of a business/organization against an employee of said business/organization while he/she is at work.

Patron-perpetrated sexual harassment

Factors at the library:

- Gendered power relations
- Feminization & sexualization of library work
- Customer vs. service-provider power relations

(Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Yagil, 2008)

What can sexual harassment look like?

- Actual or attempted rape or sexual assault
- Unwanted sexual innuendos, teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions
- Unwanted pressure for sexual favors
- Unwanted deliberate touching, cornering, or other physical contact
- Unwanted or suggestive stalking, staring, or leering
- Unwanted notes, phone calls, or display of materials of a sexual nature
- Unwanted or repeated pressure for dates or personal information
- Whistling; cat calling
- Unwelcome questions about one's personal or sexual life
- Sexual or gender-related comments about one's clothing, appearance, body
- Sexually suggestive or obscene gestures, sounds, expressions
- Unwanted discussion of or spreading rumors about a person's sex life

(United Nations Women, nd)

Examples of patron-perpetrated sexual harassment from the library

- Someone touching your hand and repeatedly telling you how gorgeous you are while you are checking their items out
- Someone leering at you from a computer or table as you walk past them
- Someone asking why you aren't wearing a wedding ring if you're so beautiful while you help them with the photocopier
- Someone asking you out on a date in front of their teenage child while signing up for a library card
- Someone asking you to move in with them during a reference interaction on the phone
- Someone asking where they can "catch [themselves] a hot girl like you"
- Someone leaving a note at the reference desk referring to the appearance of your body
- Someone asking you to take them home (or "to China") with you while you help them send a fax
- Someone answering "I'm fine, and so are you" when you ask "How are you today?"
- Someone asking if your sister is as hot as you and if either of you are single
- Someone refusing to leave when the library is closed unless you give them your phone number
- Someone offering to drive you home and winking when you ask if they need help
- Someone whistling or saying "mmm" or "damn girl" when you greet them

Library Policies

Policies around sexual harassment differ, and address it with varying degrees of specificity.

(Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Johnson, 1996)

- Many focus predominantly on employee-employee harassment
- May not include patrons, be available to patrons, or be part of patron conduct policies
- Some are vague in definition, procedure, and consequences
- Complaints often go unaddressed
- Many libraries do not have sexual harassment training for staff

Who is involved?

Who can be affected by sexual harassment?

Everyone.

Who can be a perpetrator of sexual harassment?

Everyone.

- Sexual harassment of employees by patrons occurs significantly **more frequently** than sexual harassment by coworkers (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Johnson, 1996)
- Most patron-perpetrated sexual harassment is experienced by **female employees**, and perpetrated by **male patrons** (Hughes & Tadic, 1998)

Intersectionality and Sexual Harassment

- Factors such as **race, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, age**, etc. can cause sexual harassment to be perpetrated and experienced differently (and often, more negatively and more frequently)
(Calafell, 2014)
- **Underage library workers** are particularly vulnerable to harassment from patrons, and must be given proper training
(McLain & Civitello, 2017)

Some Stats

78%

Of female library employees identify as having been sexually harassed by library patrons at work.

(Manley, 1993b)

70%

Of library employees experience patron-perpetrated sexual harassment
once a month or more.

(Manley, 1993b)

30%

Of library employees experience patron-perpetrated sexual harassment
once a week or more.

(Manley, 1993b)

11%

Of female library employees “always feel safe and secure at work.”

(Manley, 1993b)

51%

Of library employees **do not feel empowered** by administration and/or **are not sure they have the tools** necessary to address patron-perpetrated sexual harassment when it occurs

(McLain & Civitello, 2017)

Effects

How does being sexually harassed affect employees?

(Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2017; Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007)

- Shame, humiliation, anxiety, fear
- Negative physiological reactions
- Risk of physical harm and endangerment
- Decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment
- Decreased engagement, performance, and productivity
- Emotional and psychological trauma

What do we do about it?

Most instances of patron-perpetrated sexual harassment go unreported; employees often feel obligated to react to these occurrences with **independent, indirect, informal responses.**

(Good & Cooper, 2016; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007; Yagil, 2008)

Why?

Factors That Influence (Lack of) Responses

“I was torn between trying to smile and be polite because you’ve got the whole customer’s always right thing. At the same time I wanted to just tell the guy to go away. It was bizarre. Afterwards you took a big breath and laughed but at the time it was almost scary in a way because you didn’t know how to react. You didn’t want to anger the customer because then you risked a customer complaint but at the same time you wanted to get yourself out of there as quickly as possible ... by the end of the shift it didn’t seem like a big deal and I felt stupid for being scared so I didn’t tell the manager ... He could’ve had mental health issues. He could’ve just been a strange person. He could have thought he was being clever... you’ve just got to be polite and help them when you can help them.”

(comment from Good & Cooper, 2016)

Factors That Influence (Lack of) Responses

- Shame and humiliation
- Fear of retaliation (physical, verbal, professional)
- Fear of scrutiny or dismissal
- Fear of victim blaming & slut shaming
- Lack of policy knowledge
- Lack of training
- Administrative inaction

“...the general feeling is maybe you did something to invite this behavior.”

(comment from Manley, 1993b)

“... they just have more ammunition to go and complain about you.”

(comment from Hughes & Tadic, 1998)

(Fine, Shepherd, & Josephs, 1999; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Yagil, 2008)

Factors That Influence (Lack of) Responses

“... you try to distance yourself but you don’t want to seem rude ... I mean it’s your job to be friendly ...”

(comment from Good & Cooper, 2016)

- **Confrontation avoidance**
- **“Not worth the hassle”**
- **Job precarity/Lack of job security**
- **Bad previous experience**
- **Tolerance/“I’m used to it”**
- **Workplace attitudes of “the customer is always right” or “it’s your job to be friendly”**

(Fine, Shepherd, & Josephs, 1999; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Yagil, 2008)

What can/should we do about
it?

What can LIS education do?

- Facilitate critical discourse in the curriculum & in the classroom around sexual harassment and other gender-related issues that affect our field
- Provide both theoretical and practical training to prepare LIS students to address this issue in the workplace

What should library workers do?

- Identify your library's relevant policies
 - Do they exist?
 - Do they address sexual harassment by patrons?
 - Are they internal or public? I.e. Are they available to patrons?
 - Do they tell you what to do?
 - Speak up about how they do or do not protect you.

What should library workers do?

- Distance yourself from the perpetrator.
 - Never stay in a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable
 - You should not have to finish the interaction
- If you are harmed or feel threatened/afraid, leave the situation immediately, tell a colleague, and call security/the police.

What should library workers do?

- If comfortable, tell the patron to stop.
 - “That is not an appropriate question/comment. Please do not say that again [or you will be asked to leave].”
 - “I am glad to answer questions about the library, but questions about my personal life are not appropriate.”
 - “This is grounds for a sexual harassment complaint; please stop.”
 - Reference relevant policies if applicable
 - Ask your manager for a script if you are unsure of what to say or how to say it!

What should library workers do?

- Start a (digital) paper trail.
 - Complete an incident report **every time**; make note of the patron's name or identifiers if possible
 - Be specific; use words from policies
 - **Keywords:** uncomfortable, threatened, unsafe, violated, afraid, embarrassed, humiliated; assault, sexual harassment
- Tell your manager.
 - If they don't listen or don't help, tell another manager, the union, or the labour board.

What should library managers/directors do?

- Talk to your staff.
 - Surveys, Staff meetings, One-on-ones
- Implement policies, procedures, and structures that protect staff.
 - Provide sexual harassment training to all staff
 - **Explicit policies, procedures, & consequences**
 - Encourage formal reporting
 - If possible, no one works alone
 - If possible and necessary, implement security guards and cameras
 - **Act** when complaints are made

Conclusion

- Many factors make library workers particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment by patrons
- The problem is prevalent, yet under-addressed
- Social responsibility is a core library value, and anti-harassment must become a priority in LIS workplaces and education

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Questions,
Comments,
Thoughts

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