



Quantifying the #metoo Narrative: Incidence and Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Academic Libraries

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The recent #metoo and #timesup movements have shifted the national narrative about workplace sexual harassment, finally bringing it into the light to be recognized and combatted. What is the place in this narrative for libraries? Social science research suggests that female-dominated professions experience a high degree of sexual harassment in the workplace, not only from coworkers but also from clients.¹ Do libraries fall into these patterns seen in other fields? Anecdotal evidence suggests that librarians experience sexual harassment, but the most vetted and widely-used tool for measuring incidence and prevalence of harassment had not been applied in the library context. A research team of librarians and social scientists recently administered a survey to academic librarians to measure how widespread sexual harassment is within our field.

Literature Review

The #metoo movement has received criticism for painting very different harassment behaviors with one very broad brush, grouping unwanted invitations for dates into the same bucket as rape.² Any conversation related to workplace sexual harassment must employ substantially more nuance in order for research around the issue to be productive. Academic literature related to sexual harassment provides these nuanced definitions to encompass a variety of severities of harassing behaviors. The severity and type of sexual harassment depend on both the nature of the harassment as well as its frequency and persistence. Less severe behavior must be more frequent or persistent in order to constitute harassment. For example, in most cases one unwelcome request for a date would not be defined as harassing behavior, while numerous requests over a short period would. Conversely, more severe behavior need be neither frequent nor persistent to constitute sexual harassment; any form of sexual assault or explicit sexual coercion need happen only one time to be defined as sexual harassment.

Women in organizations that are tolerant of sexual harassment are significantly more likely to be harassed, even when data are controlled for the influence of the harassment victim herself.³ According to a meta-analysis conducted by Willness et al., harassment by colleagues is more likely to occur in masculine-associated fields (e.g. mechanics) with fewer women in the workplace, rather than feminine-associated fields which have a higher concentration of women in the workplace.⁴ Institutional context has been widely demonstrated to have a strong influence over whether harassment occurs, because institutions that are permissive of sexual harassment create

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an environment where harassment is neither reported, nor believed or punished when it is.⁵ A recent systematic review of research related to harassment among the staff in higher education found high rates of harassment of various kinds in higher education, with sexual harassment being most common.⁶

The vast majority of research related to sexual harassment in the workplace focuses, not inappropriately, on sexual harassment among co-workers. Fewer studies directly measure and assess sexual harassment by clients or customers, despite evidence that client sexual harassment is also widespread.⁷ A 2007 study by Gettman et al. explicitly measures the effects of harassment by clients/customers.⁸ That study found that client power and gender context have a strong influence on the severity of sexual harassment by customers in industries in which women have to spend time with customers in order to do their jobs.⁹

Surprisingly little evaluation of sexual harassment in libraries exists, given that what little research is available suggests that sexual harassment of librarians is pervasive. An informal survey of librarians conducted in the early 1990s found that 78% of survey respondents reported experiencing frequent sexual harassment at work, mostly by customers, who are also frequently called “patrons” in libraries.¹⁰ Manley reported that when he shared the results of his survey at professional gatherings, most librarians expressed genuine surprise that the number wasn’t higher. Another, much more recent informal survey in 2017 was distributed on social media in response to a firestorm resulting from women publicly naming a man they considered a serial sexual harasser.¹¹ That survey received 250 responses detailing stories of harassment, many of them in public libraries, and many of them by patrons, though harassment by colleagues also was represented in those survey results. This anecdotal evidence, along with other articles describing widespread sexism in the field, suggests widespread harassment in the industry of libraries.¹²

Despite the evidence that harassment in libraries is widespread, to the knowledge of the authors, no formal wide-spread survey using established tools to measure sexual harassment has yet been conducted in the industry.¹³

Methodology

After a thorough search of existing sexual harassment literature, the authors decided to use the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) for our study. First developed in 1995 by Fitzgerald, Gelfand and Drasgow, it was created “to yield a conceptually grounded, psychometrically sound instrument for assessing the incidence of sexual harassment in organizations.”¹⁴ A 2007 meta-analysis found that 59% of published articles about sexual harassment in the workplace used the SEQ.¹⁵

Although not without its critics, the SEQ has been tested and validated by researchers.¹⁶ It asks people to self-report whether they have experienced 54 different behaviors drawn from three different realms: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion.

- *Gender Hostility*—“Crude verbal, physical, or symbolic behaviors that convey hostile, offensive, and misogynist attitudes.” This is the most common form of sexual harassment, reported in most surveys by at least 50% of respondents, and frequently far more. Gender hostility comprises both sexist hostility (degrading comments about one’s gender that are not related to sexual cooperation, e.g. women can’t be good leaders,” and “sexual hostility” indicating verbal and nonverbal hostile behaviors that are explicitly sexual, such as telling sexual stories.¹⁷
- *Unwanted Sexual Attention*—“Verbal and nonverbal behavior” of a sexual nature that is unwelcome and unreciprocated. This is the second-most common form of sexual harassment, reported in most surveys by at least 20-25% of respondents.
- *Sexual Coercion*—“Classic instance of quid pro quo” in which the target is bribed or threatened with

work-related consequences to pressure the target into sexual cooperation. This is the most extreme, and perhaps because of that, the least common form of sexual harassment, typically reported by 5-10% or less of respondents.¹⁸

Strikingly, the SEQ intentionally does not use the phrase “sexual harassment,” as that wording is seen as loaded.

The authors used a variant of the SEQ which asked participants whether they had ever experienced each behavior, and if so, was it from a co-worker, a library patron, or both. When a participant answered in the affirmative, she was then asked to provide information about the library at which the behavior happened. This information was used to analyze whether library type correlated with sexual harassment events.

Following the example of similar studies, we asked participants to limit responses to the most recent five years.

The survey invitation was sent out over various academic library email listservs, primarily operated by ALA. The invitations clearly stated that academic librarians should complete the survey regardless of whether they had experienced sexual harassment or not, and that it was meant for all genders and positions in academic libraries.

The survey ran for 24 days, opening on April 2, 2018, and closing on April 27, 2018. It focused on the past five years of employment. Over the 24 days that the survey ran it received 690 responses. Of those responses, 15 respondents began the survey and then declined to participate after the first screening question. That first question was designed to allow prospective participants to opt out of the survey after reading a description of what the survey would cover. Sixty-two respondents proceeded from the first screening question, but then did not answer any of the remaining questions. A total of 613 respondents completed the survey bringing the completion rate for those who began the survey to 88.8%.

Results

Characteristics of Individuals

The survey collected data about each respondents' gender, race, and age. Gender was measured with two questions consistent with the guidelines suggested by The Williams Institute to identify transgender individuals.¹⁹ The first question asks respondents to indicate the sex they were assigned at birth (male or female) and the second question asks about respondents' current gender identity (male, female, transgender, or do not identify as female, male, or transgender). Cross tabulation of these variables permits identifying cisfemales, cismales, transgender men and women, and other gender minorities. Nearly 98% of respondents identify as cisgender (85% cisfemale and 13% as cismale). Respondents who identified as transgender men, transgender women, or some other gender minority were excluded from analyses due to insufficient numbers of observations. Race is measured using a single question asking respondents to self-identify their race as: white, Black/African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. Individuals could select any combination of these responses to indicate a multiracial identity. Most respondents in the sample (89%) indicated they were white and the remaining eleven percent indicated they were either a racial minority, biracial, or multiracial. Age was self-reported in years. The average age of respondents is 41.54 years with a range of 22 to 75 years old. Nearly three quarters of the sample (74.6%) is less than 50 years old and more than half of the sample (49.8%) is less than 40 years old suggesting that the sample is disproportionately young.

Characteristics of Institutions

Respondents provided information about specific characteristics of their current position and institution and had the opportunity to report these characteristics for up to five previous positions. Respondents indicated the

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Respondents' Positions and Institutions

	Mean (SD)	% (N)
Time Spent with Patrons	48.55 (26.31)	
Academic Nature		
Doctoral		48.5 (481)
Masters		23.6 (234)
Baccalaureate		19.4 (192)
Associate		7.8 (84)
Institutional Setting		
Rural		6.8 (66)
Town		22.7 (221)
Suburban		18.9 (184)
City		51.7 (504)
Type of Institution		
Public		63.7 (618)
Private		36.3 (352)

percent of their time spent interacting with library patrons using a sliding scale that ranged from none to 100%. The average amount of time spent interacting with patrons in all positions was approximately 49% with approximately 60% of the sample reporting they spend 50% or less of their time interacting with patrons. Respondents also reported about three characteristics of institutions at which they were currently or had been employed: 1) academic nature of the institution (i.e. Doctoral, Masters, etc.), geographical setting (i.e. rural, suburban, etc.), and type of institution (public or private). Table 1 contains the characteristics or positions (time spent with patrons) and institutions. Nearly half of respondents indicated they were either currently employed or had been employed at a Doctoral granting institution. The majority of respondents indicate that their current or previous appointments were in institutions in a city context. Finally, nearly two thirds (63.7%) of respondents indicate current or previous employment in public institutions.

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment by Dimension

As Table 2 indicates, gender harassment is the most frequently reported experience with sexual harassment in the sample. Further, the prevalence of specific dimensions of sexual harassment declines as the severity or intensity of the behaviors experienced increases with the exception of sexual assault. Whereas a very small proportion of the sample reports experience with sexual coercion or sexual bribery, a sizeable proportion (35%) indicate experience with sexual assault at the hands of either a patron, co-worker, or both. A more detailed analysis of this dimension of SH suggests that nearly all (99%) of experiences in the sexual assault dimension are characterized by “deliberate touching that made the respondent uncomfortable” rather than “fondling, or attempted or forced sexual intercourse”. One striking feature of Table 2 is the obvious discrepancy between some dimensions of sexual harassment and the global measure of sexual harassment. Specifically, 78% of the sample indicates experience with gender harassment and 64% indicate an experience with seductive behavior, but only 21% of the sample indicate experience with sexual harassment more generally. The discrepancy between the specific dimensions of sexual harassment and the global measure may suggest that individuals who experience gender harassment or seductive behavior do not necessarily characterize these experiences as sexual harassment.

TABLE 2
Prevalence of Sexual Harassment by Dimension

	% Reporting any Experience (N)
Gender Harassment	78.1 (746)
Seductive Behavior	64.4 (549)
Sexual Bribery	2.4 (20)
Sexual Coercion	1.5 (12)
Sexual Assault	35.2 (298)
Sexual Harassment	21.2 (178)

Sexual Harassment Perpetrators

The following data reflect the number and percent of the sample who have experienced a specific behavior within the gender harassment and seductive behavior scales. It is important to note that typically the scales are treated globally not as individual items. In order to compare sexual harassment from patrons with sexual harassment from co-workers we looked at the respondents' current job. This snapshot will allow us generalize what types of sexual harassment are most likely to come from patrons and what types of sexual harassment are most likely to come from co-workers.

Gender harassment is defined as generalized sexist remarks and behavior and addressed with seven questions. Table 3 shows the responses to these questions. In the gender harassment scale, co-workers are more likely to engage in explicit remarks, whether they be suggestive stories or offensive jokes, crude sexual remarks, or seductive remarks about appearance, body, or sexual activities. Co-workers are also more likely to make sexist remarks and treat someone differently based on their gender. In the gender harassment scale, patrons are more likely to stare, leer, or ogle in a way that makes someone feel uncomfortable.

TABLE 3
Summary of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators—Gender Harassment Scale

	% Reporting any Experience (N)
Have you ever been in situation or experience where a co-worker or library patron:	
...habitually told suggestive stories or offensive jokes?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	28.7% (190)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	47.9% (91)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	27.4% (52)
○ % who had this experience with Both	24.7% (47)
...made crudely sexual remarks, either publicly (e.g., in the office) or to you privately?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	22% (146)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	47.3% (69)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	32.2% (47)
○ % who had this experience with Both	20.5% (30)
...made seductive remarks about your appearance, body, or sexual activities?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	23.9% (155)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	51.6% (80)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	24.5% (38)
○ % who had this experience with Both	24.7% (47)
...was staring, leering, or ogling you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	32% (212)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	18.9% (40)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	58% (123)
○ % who had this experience with Both	23.1% (49)

TABLE 3 Summary of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators—Gender Harassment Scale	
	% Reporting any Experience (N)
...displayed, used, or distributed sexist or suggestive materials (e.g., pictures, stories, or pornography)?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	11.6% (77)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	20.8% (16)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	72.7% (56)
○ % who had this experience with Both	6.5% (5)
...frequently treated you “differently” because of your gender (i.e., ever been either favored, slighted, or ignored)?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	40.4% (268)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	37.3% (100)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	13.1% (35)
○ % who had this experience with Both	49.6% (133)
...frequently made sexist remarks (e.g. suggesting that women are too emotional to be scientists or to assume leadership roles)?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	26.4% (175)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	50.9% (89)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	19.4% (34)
○ % who had this experience with Both	29.7% (52)

Seductive behavior is defined as experiencing inappropriate and offensive, but essentially sanction-free sexual advances and is measured with nine questions. Table 4 shows the responses to these questions. In the seductive behavior scale, patrons are more likely to engage in inappropriate and offensive sexual advances. The most common advances include giving unwanted attention and invading privacy (e.g., continually calling, asking for dates, etc.). In the seductive behavior scale, co-workers are more likely to attempt to draw someone into an unwanted discussion about one’s sex life.

TABLE 4 Summary of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators—Seductive Behavior Scale	
	% Reporting any Experience (N)
Have you ever been in situation or experience where a co-worker or library patron:	
...made unwanted attempts to draw you into a discussion of personal matters (e.g., attempted to discuss or comment on your sex life)?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	26.4% (175)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	40.6% (71)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	36% (63)
○ % who had this experience with Both	23.4% (41)

TABLE 4
Summary of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators—Seductive Behavior Scale

	% Reporting any Experience (N)
...engaged in unwelcome seductive behavior towards you (e.g. made suggestive remarks, offered to give you a backrub)?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	13.7% (91)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	40.7% (37)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	47.3% (43)
○ % who had this experience with Both	12.1% (11)
...you received unwanted attention from a co-worker or library patron?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	34.2% (227)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	19.4% (44)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	60.4% (137)
○ % who had this experience with Both	6.9% (46)
...attempted to establish a romantic sexual relationship despite your efforts to discourage him/her?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	8.9% (59)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	25.4% (15)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	59.3% (35)
○ % who had this experience with Both	15.3% (9)
...“propositioned” you?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	7.2% (48)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	22.9% (11)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	60.4% (29)
○ % who had this experience with Both	16.7% (8)
...invaded your privacy (e.g., continually calling you, asking for dates, “dropping by,” etc.)?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	15.7% (104)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	26.9% (28)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	60.6% (63)
○ % who had this experience with Both	12.5% (13)
...made you a target of sexual insinuations, innuendos, etc.?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	11.9% (79)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	46.8% (37)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	38% (30)
○ % who had this experience with Both	15.2% (12)

TABLE 4
Summary of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators—Seductive Behavior Scale

	% Reporting any Experience (N)
...made crude or offensive sexual remarks about you to others?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	7.4% (49)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	57.1% (28)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	22.4% (11)
○ % who had this experience with Both	20.4% (10)
...spread sexual rumors about you?	
• % (N) of individuals who reported this experience in their current job	2.9% (19)
○ % who had this experience with a Co-worker	73.7% (14)
○ % who had this experience with a Library Patron	15.8% (3)
○ % who had this experience with Both	10.5% (2)

Discussion

Trends with gender, age, type of institution, and time spent with the public became evident throughout the various dimensions of sexual harassment that the survey measured. It was found that women were more likely than men to experience sexual harassment. Librarians that spent a significant amount of time with patrons were also more likely to experience sexual harassment. The data collected indicated that age was a factor. Librarians who reported experiencing sexual harassment had a median age of approximately 37. It was also found that librarians who work at public institutions are more likely to experience sexual harassment than those that work at private institutions. Logic would dictate that the reason sexual harassment is more common at public institutions is due to the fact that academic libraries at public colleges and universities see more public patrons than their private counterparts. However, when the data is broken down by sexual harassment perpetrators it reveals that it depends on the type of harassment and opportunity to commit said harassment. Explicit remarks were more likely to come from co-workers. Leering and ogling at librarians is more likely to come from patrons. Both of these examples could be due to an opportunity effect where co-workers have more opportunities to interact and thus engage in conversations with an individual while patrons might not have as many opportunities to speak with an individual, but have more opportunities to stare and engage in brief interactions that make them uncomfortable. Gender harassment and seductive behaviors were the most commonly experienced types of sexual harassment.

The data collected from one question in particular drove home why a survey like this is needed in academic libraries. In the global measure question respondents were asked, “Have you ever been in a situation where a co-worker or library patron sexually harassed you?” More than three-fourths (83.1%) of participants responded no. However, 77.4% responded yes to at least one survey item. This offers the perfect illustration of how some behaviors that are characterized as sexual harassment are frequently expected as “part of the job.”

Thinking about sexual harassment as “part of the job” seems to be common in other female dominated professions. In a recent article in the *American Journal of Nursing*, Roxanne Nelson says sexual harassment is underreported amongst nurses despite many medical facilities having zero tolerance policies in place.²⁰ The American Nurses Association (ANA) has a new initiative in place that they hope will encourage those who experience sexual harassment to report it and not see it as “just part of the job.” The Director of Nursing Practice and

Work Environment at the ANA, Seun Ross, also suggests that sexual harassment be taught beginning in nursing school so that it is evident that it should not be tolerated and to eliminate the stigma and fear of reporting it.²¹ While data is lacking in sexual harassment amongst nurses in the United States, studies have been conducted in other countries. In a study conducted in Australia, 60% of female nurses and 68% of student nurses experienced some form of sexual harassment over a two-year period.²² Another study conducted in Israel found that 62% of registered nurses experienced sexual harassment.²³

This survey makes it clear that sexual harassment is a problem in academic libraries. The harm done by sexual harassment to victims, as well as to their workplaces, is extremely well documented in nearly every published article on the subject. This harm to career success and satisfaction for women comes in the form of “decreased job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, withdrawing from work, physical and mental ill health, and symptoms of PTSD.”²⁴ Additionally, organizational climate “figures prominently in facilitating these occurrences” by influencing the likelihood of reporting, perceptions of whether or not reporting would be taken seriously, and likelihood of sanctions.²⁵ These harms are costly to the workplace as well as to the targets of harassing behaviors, and additionally they are harmful to other members of the organization who are not the targets.²⁶ As Willness explained, “we know that organizational factors are fundamental, and therefore, we should move toward identifying the organizational policies and procedures that are most critical for preventing the conditions that create a favorable organizational climate for SH. This in turn should lead to decreased occurrences of SH.”²⁷ Working to reduce sexual harassment is not only a legal obligation in many jurisdictions because it constitutes a form of gender-based discrimination, but a good business decision, since sexual harassment has so many negative repercussions for group productivity, turnover, absenteeism, and health care costs.²⁸

Existing research demonstrates clearly that harassment in the workplace is a large-scale problem.²⁹ Beginning with this clear understanding that workplace sexual harassment has gradations in both nature and severity, and that those gradations matter in how the both victim and the institution can and should respond, the authors hope this study galvanizes academic library administrators and managers to seek ways to address the prevalence within our field.

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