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Naming patron-perpetrated sexual harassment in libraries

Abstract or Résumé:

Patron-perpetrated sexual harassment (PPSH) is increasingly recognized as a significant problem in the field of library and information studies (LIS) but is often described and treated as “unfortunate” and “part of the job.” The results from a large-scale survey (505 responses) where participants described incidents of PPSH in the workplace support widely held public statements that define PPSH as a form of gender-based violence (GBV), insisting that it must be named and treated as such. Naming PPSH as sexual harassment and a form of GBV has important implications for library workers, library workplaces, and the broader field of LIS.

1. Introduction

#MeToo has brought increasing recognition within the field of LIS to the pervasiveness of patron-perpetrated sexual harassment (PPSH) of library workers (DeWitt, 2017; Jensen, 2017). While some library workers have been calling attention to this issue (Civitello & McLain, 2017; DeWitt, 2017; MacBride, 2018; von Stackelberg, 2018), PPSH has largely been overlooked in the profession and in LIS education (Allard, Lieu, & Oliphant, 2020; Oliphant, Allard, & Lieu, 2020). Structural factors such as a neoliberal “customer” orientation, the feminization of librarianship, and the field’s professional value of universal access make library workers vulnerable to PPSH while also making it difficult for individuals to counter. Library workplaces are subject to provincial or federal law and usually have in-house policies, reporting procedures, and patron codes of conduct. However, our survey findings suggest that too often PPSH is framed as a “controversial” topic with proposed solutions such as “setting boundaries” that can result in policies that do not sufficiently address PPSH in libraries. Thus, behaviour that would not be acceptable if it came from a colleague is treated as acceptable from a “customer.” We suggest that the field of LIS, understood broadly here to include practitioners as well as educators and researchers, is hesitant to name and treat PPSH as sexual harassment. Drawing on our analysis of 505 survey responses describing incidents of PPSH, we argue that PPSH is indeed a prevalent and significant form of sexual harassment that has dimensions specific to librarianship that must be explored and understood in order to effectively oppose it.

2. Literature Review

Provincial and federal legislation regarding sexual harassment govern library workplaces. The *Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Act* states that sexual violence “exists on a continuum from obscene name-calling to sexual assault” (Government of Alberta(a), n.d.). The Canada Labour code defines sexual harassment as “any conduct, comment, gesture, or contact of a sexual nature that is likely to cause offence, humiliation to any employee, or that might be perceived by that employee as placing a condition of sexual nature on employment” (Government of Canada, 2016). Sexual harassment “can encompass discriminatory comments, behaviour, as well as touching. . . [and] may take the form of jokes, threats, comments about sex, or discriminatory remarks about someone’s gender” (Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.).

The Government of Alberta defines GBV as “violence that is committed against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender” (Government of Alberta(b), n.d.) and notes that sexual violence including sexual assault and sexual harassment is one of the most common types of GBV in the province. All forms of sexual assault and sexual harassment are “persistent forms of gender-based violence that are rooted in gender inequality” and disproportionately affects women (Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.; Plan International Canada, n.d.). Situating workplace sexual harassment as a form of GBV acknowledges that workplace sexual harassment is tied to and a result of social structures that perpetuate and uphold gender inequality and consequently, that feminized workplaces are often sites where GBV proliferates. Globally, it is widely acknowledged that all forms of GBV, including sexual harassment, are human rights violations. Legislation outlines employer responsibilities to provide policies that protect and support employees who experience sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace. Given that legislation and in-house policies are in place to protect and support library workers, the recognition that GBV disproportionately affects women and especially those with intersecting identities, and that LIS is itself a feminized profession, our research project asks: why is the conceptualization and treatment of PPSH in libraries as sexual harassment and therefore GBV not adequately acknowledged in the field of LIS? This paper explores one aspect of this question by asking: what do descriptions of incidents of PPSH in libraries tell us about library workers’ experiences of sexual harassment, and consequently GBV, in library workplaces?

3. Methodology

A survey was sent to library workers (including librarians, supervisors, library assistants, pages, etc.) across Canada and garnered responses from some library workers in the United States. The survey is a part of a larger project exploring PPSH in libraries. Presented here is our analysis of respondents’ descriptions and experiences of PPSH. To analyze our data, 505 incidents were copied from Google Forms and imported into Google Docs. Each incident was numbered, read through several times, and analyzed using open coding to develop themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each member of the research team contributed to the coding process by reading the incidents and developing codes.

4. Findings

The majority of survey responses came from Alberta library workers (40%), followed by Ontario (29%), and the United States (11%). Eighty-three percent of respondents worked in public libraries, 22% in academic libraries, and 8% in special libraries. Ninety-one percent of respondents identified as female, 7% male, and 3% gender non-conforming. Ninety percent identified as white, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, 4% Hispanic or Latinx, and 1.5% Black. Ninety-three percent of respondents reported experiencing a harassing behaviour by a patron in-person and 80% reported harassment over the phone or online. Eighty percent of respondents described an incident of PPSH with just three incidents where the perpetrator was identified as female. Overwhelmingly, PPSH is committed by males against female staff. The preliminary themes emerging from our analysis include: types of harassing behaviours, settings where PPSH occurs, factors unique to LIS that contribute to PPSH, and countering or refusing PPSH.

Types of harassing behaviours

Our respondents identified a range of harassing behaviours from patrons as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of harassing behaviours

Examples of PPSH			
Actions	“Patron took photos of me in the library, in my car, found me on social media and left sexually harassing voicemails”	Respondents reported receiving “gifts,” graphic computer printouts, letters, emails, and poems	Multiple times being asked out on dates and followed
Non-verbal gestures	“A man wearing cut off shorts would spread his legs, exposing his genitals to me. I was underage at the time”	“it escalated to him masturbating in the stacks while I was shelf reading in the next aisle.”	Hundreds of incidences of staring, leering, ogling, and following
Verbal comments	“I was told ‘You would look good with breast implants’” Hundreds of instances of being asked personal questions	“an older fellow made a "rape" related joke implying that it was a good thing he can run very fast in order to catch me.”	“While shelving materials a man said ‘that’s how I like to see a woman -- on her knees.’”
Name-calling and intimidation	“sweetheart,” “honey,” “blondie,” “beautiful,” called pet names and nicknames	“I was a fucking cunt, a privileged white bitch cunt” “bitch” [multiple times]	“Was called "a stupid woman, just like all women” “stupid fragile little girl”
Physical touching or contact	“Was bent over shelving when a male patron smacked my bum with a book.”	“a "handsy" guy would often try to touch my hair, rub my shoulders, hug me, etc.”	“I was followed into the parking lot and sexually assaulted by a patron”

Many of the above behaviors occur in combination. Reactions to these behaviours range from being “irritated” to “terrified.”

Settings in which PPSH occurs

Sexual harassment happens in-person, online, and over the phone; it takes place in, and sometimes outside, the library workplace. One respondent was sexually harassed at a grocery store by a man who recognized her from the library. Others were followed to appointments, on their lunch breaks, or when they left work. Importantly, often the perpetrator would (a) approach the library worker when they were alone or isolated and/or (b) try to isolate the library worker by asking them for help finding an item in the stacks or other areas away from the service desk.

Factors unique to LIS that contribute to PPSH

Vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) endemic to library work, and library workers’ desire to uphold the value of universal access has implications on the ways PPSH manifests, is tolerated, and is addressed. The nature of the library as a community space also means that patrons can be at the library (and access library workers) as often as they want, for as long as they want. Consequently, PPSH in libraries can be chronic, can last for *years*, and often escalates over time. A patron followed a library worker daily:

Eventually, his behaviour escalated: he followed me as I exited the building at the end of my shift and when I went to wait at a nearby bus stop, he asked me which bus I was taking home.

LIS’s service orientation can create issues. Several incidents were described where patrons deliberately or otherwise misunderstood library workers’ professionalism.

I was super friendly and helpful, which can be misconstrued by some patrons, especially those who might not typically get attention . . . [from] someone who looks them in the eyes, smiles, is kind, and is happy to help them and share some banter.

And, many library workers hesitate to report PPSH because they do not want a vulnerable patron (e.g. someone with mental health issues) to be banned or otherwise lose access to library services.

Countering or refusing PPSH

To counter or refuse PPSH many library workers attempted to respond professionally: “your comments are inappropriate” or “I will not answer personal questions.” However, refusals can quickly escalate as library workers became targets for anger and threatening behaviour. Others “brushed it off,” told a coworker, supervisor, reported, or called security or the police (often as a last resort). Some noted the frustration they felt when they were unable to “prove” PPSH. “The situations that make me feel most uncomfortable are the ones I cannot properly prove were wrong.”

5. Conclusion

Our findings indicate that PPSH in libraries is undoubtedly sexual harassment, and therefore a form of GBV, according to provincial, federal, and other definitions of these terms--it must also be named as such in LIS. Indeed, multiple forms, expressions, and acts of sexualized violence are described in our findings and are taking place in all corners of the library, and sometimes outside of the library. LIS must also recognize the unique factors that make library workers especially vulnerable to PPSH including library values of customer service and universal access that also contribute to the feminization and consequent devaluing and deprofessionalization of the field (Revitt, 2020). When PPSH in libraries is inadequately acknowledged and not named as sexual harassment, library workers are marginalized and their well-being, engagement, productivity, and feelings of safety at work are diminished. Resistance to naming PPSH as sexual harassment is a serious problem because it impedes: (1) the field's theoretical understanding of feminized professions; (2) the ability of library workplaces to enact policies and procedures to prevent sexual harassment, support library workers, and to hold perpetrators to account; and, (3) most importantly, it diminishes the significant impacts of PPSH on library workers. LIS as a field is concerned about social justice but we do not always enact it with our own staff (who may have already experienced GBV). Naming PPSH and GBV in libraries is a commitment to supporting the workplace rights and human rights of *all* workers including library workers.

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