OUT OF BOUNDS
SEXUAL HARASSMENT FROM PATRONS IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

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I sometimes think about the term "frontline workers" and what it says about how we view individuals who work directly with the public. These workers interface with people, witnessing and attending to their needs firsthand, but the term "front line" carries a bit of cynicism. It evokes a battle, a sense of danger, a necessary hardening. Like many social work and customer service professions, circulation and reference desk workers in public libraries are vulnerable to situations that might threaten their safety and mental health. Unlike other professions, however, library frontline workers are affected by a particular confluence of factors that make us especially vulnerable to sexual harassment from the people we serve, including: the perception that libraries are feminized/feminine spaces, the majority-woman workforce, workers' trained sensitivity to providing aid in many forms, and in many cases, a lack of infrastructure to provide behavioral guidance to patrons and staff including policy, culture, and consequences. The issue of sexual harassment of library workers is rooted in cultural misogyny and deeply tied to racism, homophobia, and other forms of hate. While libraries are not exempt from this institutionalized misogyny, the effects of it touch all aspects of our culture and go far beyond the walls of the library.

This paper will review literature about the prevalence of sexual harassment from patrons in public libraries, feminist inquiry into the causes and impacts of sexual harassment on the field of librarianship, and potential paths forward to create better support systems and cultures to prevent harassment and care for workers who experience sexual harassment and violence.

Harassment can take many forms, and people of all genders can and have been harassed at work. Harassment in the library sphere is also not limited to public libraries, and not limited to interactions with patrons. That said, sexual harassment from patrons is a significant issue that is distinct from other types of harassment because of the culture surrounding public libraries and their workers. Most employees of public libraries are women, and the public perception of the library as a feminized space, or a space stewarded by women, can make some patrons feel entitled to take advantage of library workers' customer service attitude and willingness to help by violating our boundaries.

The deep root of this issue, which is institutionalized misogyny, will require deep reform across all aspects of our society, and there is not a clear solution to the issue of sexual harassment in libraries in this unjust climate. No matter how great a library's policies are, or how strong a worker's boundaries, there may be people who will continue to harass or endanger staff. The public correctly perceives that libraries generally are places with majority-female staff, and that is a critical factor to why we are often

victims of sexual harassment from patrons. I imagine the kinds of harassment that library workers face is for the most part indistinguishable from harassment faced by anyone else. What makes this issue in libraries distinct is how we have been trained (or not trained) to deal with it, the historical feminization of library work, and the opportunities for moving forward while holding on to the progressive values of librarianship.

This paper will not attempt to offer a solution to systemic misogyny (which extends to – and beyond – the field of librarianship), but I don't think that this challenge should disempower libraries from implementing changes in an effort to care for workers, acknowledge the pain and trauma caused by harassment, and cut down on the number of harassment incidents at the library.

Feminized Labor

One framework for examining the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment in libraries is the lens of gender and power. In "Reading between the Lines: An Environmental Scan of Writing about Third-Party Sexual Harassment in the LIS Literature and Beyond", Danielle Allard, Angela Lieu, and Tami Oliphant write, "Sex-role spillover—the carryover of societal gender-based expectations and power imbalances into the workplace—is often referenced as an antecedent of sexual harassment in the workplace" (417). The authors go on to tie this reinforcement of gender roles to women library workers feeling they're not justified in reporting sexual harassment. Because of a combination of sex-role spillover and a lack of clear boundaries, policies, and education on sexual harassment at work, many library workers might feel that sexual harassment is simply part of the job.

In her chapter for *Feminists among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, Shana Higgins defines what makes library work "feminized": "Not only did librarianship become, and has remained, female intensive, but also library work became characterized as 'feminine.' Feminized professions—including nursing, social work, and paralegals—are predominantly service-, support- and care-oriented, and often require more intensive affective labor" (70). This definition does not categorize feminized work as good or bad, but describes it as work performed mainly by women (or expected to be performed by women) which embodies certain culturally stereotyped feminine qualities such as care and empathy. Higgins illustrates a feminist reclamation of these values later in the chapter and ties the "feminized" aspect of library work to collaboration, community, and political engagement (83). That said, feminized work remains undervalued and unrespected, and this lack of respect combined with misconceptions

and stereotypes about what kind of work library workers do could be a factor in why library workers (and workers in other feminized professions) are subjected to sexual harassment from those outside the field.

Another element to library work that is often performed by women is emotional labor - a concept described by Hope Reese, author of *Emotional Labor*, as "editing your emotions in order to have an effect on the emotions of other people" (para. 10). Emotional labor can be a critically important way to connect with others and to make patrons feel safe and comfortable in the library. However, emotional labor is often also used as a strategy to deescalate experiences of harassment, reinforcing uncomfortable behavior in patrons. Allard et al. write, "Feminist scholars suggest women employed in service work frequently perform emotional labor as a means to pacify aggressive customers and prevent violence and sexual advances" (418). Passing on these feelings of safety and comfort to potentially violent or dangerous patrons saps energy from the workers and empowers patrons to ask (and expect) more than what library workers are trained to give.

I did not learn about how to deal with sexual harassment in library school, nor was I warned to expect it. In emotionally and mentally preparing for sexual harassment at work, frontline library workers must manage a complicated balance between protecting our boundaries, staying safe, and moving through our jobs with confidence and not fear. This need for self defense is complicated by the fact that if workers come to expect harassment, or internalize a belief that harassment is just part of the job, patrons may come to feel comfortable that they will not face repercussions for harassing us. On the other hand, if library workers are not adequately prepared for the reality that we may be victims of sexual harassment at any moment, we may not have the tools, resources, and responses ready to take care of our emotional and physical needs in traumatic situations.

Fobazi Ettarh's influential piece about vocational awe has helped distill some clarity around the self-characterization many library workers implicitly ascribe to. She describes the historical ideal of white womanhood that came to be associated with librarians: "missionary-mindedness, servility, and altruism and spiritual superiority and piety" (pt. 2). This depiction, though not necessarily described in this way, has haunted the field of librarianship, reinforcing the cultural picture of what a librarian looks like (and doesn't look like). While this description of a librarian does not reflect the field currently, it has grown into the idea that librarians are selfless if not virtuous, and that our jobs are innately important to society.

Looking at the values of librarianship through the lens of vocational awe can explain how so many library professionals struggle with burnout and job creep (taking on additional job responsibilities beyond your job description), and Ettarh argues that vocational awe is one reason that some issues within librarianship have remained unchallenged or unexamined. These unclear boundaries within library workers internally may also be reflected in unclear boundaries with patrons.

Despite the fact that the cultural, stereotypical image of a librarian was built on a model of white womanhood, women of color are still more likely to be victims of sexual harassment at work (Rossie 5), and members of the LGBTQ+ community are also at great risk of experiencing sexual harassment ("Poll finds a majority…"). The whiteness of the field of librarianship and the held-over ideal of white womanhood librarianship has dragged down white women and women of color alike, creating a culture that does not account for workers' needs, safety, or comfort.

The more progressive values of librarianship, still tied up in vocational awe but not necessarily associated with whiteness, also can contribute to unclear boundaries with patrons. In her article "#TimesUp on Harassing Your Public Librarian", Katie MacBride writes, "[public librarians] believe the library should be open to all and we want patrons to feel comfortable asking for information about almost anything. You want information about sexually transmitted infections? No problem. Books on tantric sex? Right this way. We stay open, friendly, and approachable because we want you to know that we won't judge your information needs … Librarians fiendishly guard patrons' right to do everything that makes sexual harassment so prevalent in public libraries— right up to the point where it becomes harassment" (pt. 3). Librarians are trained to provide humanizing and thoughtful service and radically free access to library materials to everyone, regardless of their identity or level of need. However, librarians are not trained to be social workers, and it can be tough for frontline workers and patrons alike to decide the limit of what is reasonable for a library worker to be able to help with. Sexual harassment can be overt or subtle, and it can come on the heels of a legitimate question. It can be hard to trust our instincts that tell us a comment has crossed a line when we're trained to be sensitive to cultural or generational differences and we want to assume positive intent.

An anecdote from Eric Klinenberg's *Palaces for the People* explains the extent to which library workers are asked to perform job duties outside our areas of expertise: "According to a security guard at a branch I frequented, one day a heroin addict collapsed of an overdose at a table and had to be rescued by paramedics, and another day someone defecated on the floor. These problems are inevitable in a public

institution that's dedicated to open access, especially when other institutions, from methadone clinics to homeless shelters and food banks, routinely turn away–and often refer to the library!–the very people who most need help" (45).

A Path Forward

No formal surveys have been published as of 2023 about the prevalence of sexual harassment by library patrons, but there are a few informal surveys as well as ample anecdotal data in the form of articles and social media posts that support the fact that this kind of harassment is widespread. In 1992, Will Manley informally surveyed subscribers to *American Libraries* and reported that 78% of women library workers had experienced harassment by a patron (68). Kelly Jensen's 2017 article in *Book Riot*, "The State of Sexual Harassment in the Library", outlines another informal data-gathering mission on social media that received 250 responses from library workers sharing their disturbing and illuminating experiences with sexual harassment (para. 31).

Amanda Oliver's book *Overdue: Reckoning with the Public Library* shares high profile stories of female library workers being stalked and murdered as well as personal narratives of harassment in the DC Public Library system (153). This book is singularly critical of public libraries in a narrative aimed at non-academic readers, and it has helped shed light on the frustrations many library workers face, as well as the potential outcomes of repeated experiences of harassment (in the case of the author, PTSD). While this book does not represent all library workers, it helped to deepen the discussion following the #MeToo movement and share stories of library patron harassment outside the library world.

Many changes must be made at every level of the public library to protect, train, and advocate for staff who have experienced, and likely will again experience, sexual harassment from patrons. Frontline library workers are the most vulnerable to sexual harassment, and often, they have the least power in their organizations. A public library's administration has a great responsibility to prioritize workers' safety and create a culture of boundary enforcement and deep listening.

In their article "In Pursuit of Antiracist Social Justice: Denaturalizing Whiteness in the Academic Library", Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Eannace Lazzaro write that in a 2012 survey by Knapp, Snavely, and Klimczyk, 30% of library staff respondents reported experiencing some form of derogatory harassment, "yet most respondents did not directly address the negative behavior, instead avoiding the issue or feeling

embarrassed. [The authors of the study] connect this to the concept of 'cross-race interpersonal efficacy': in other words, that people are not comfortable or proficient at interacting with people outside of their own racial or ethnic group, which can lead to poor conflict resolution around issues relating to race" (263). Though this article focuses on racial dynamics of academic libraries, the points on reporting harassment reflect other informal studies in public libraries. It's important to remember that race plays a role in whether people are willing to report harassment, and in discussing sexual harassment of public library staff, other forms of injustice and institutional and implicit racism can intensify and escalate conflict.

Even if a public library can afford to hire on security guards or install security-related technology, this method of managing security incidents should be handled very carefully. In "No Holds Barred: Security and Policing in the Public Library", Ben Robinson writes about the negative effects a reliance on policing and security can have on patrons who are people of color, and that in some cases, "accounts of violence against library workers and patrons have been accompanied by several stories of security and police overreach in libraries" (para. 3). In developing radical boundaries and safety for all people in a library, a reliance on security or police can in fact create an environment that is less safe or less comfortable for people of color, which goes against some of the values of librarianship and may do more harm than good in the long run.

In addition to equity-based practices on a large scale, public libraries have a responsibility to focus on immediate actions that can prevent sexual harassment and support and advocate for library staff who have been or may be victims.

One action libraries can take is to advocate for strong personal and professional boundaries. Discussions of personal autonomy and safety can and should be woven into MLIS program discussions on ethics and the current state of the field of public librarianship. Graduate programs, in preparing students to enter the job force, have a responsibility to educate students on how the historical ideals of librarians and librarianship (as well as culturally-ingrained misogyny) has led to a current epidemic of sexual harassment. In teaching future librarians how to improve the field and reform outdated practices, instructors must include teachings on this issue which is in dire need of change. Beyond library school, the culture and policies at public libraries must encourage advocacy and boundary-setting so employees feel supported and prepared to handle issues of sexual harassment. Because frontline library staff often don't have institutional power, it is up to a library's leadership to strongly embody values of boundaries and safety, communicate policies clearly, and listen empathetically to

victims of harassment to ensure workers feel seen and supported when issues of sexual harassment arise.

One of the first library professionals I saw speaking directly to library management about issues of sexual harassment was Katie Horner, the Head of Circulation & Reference at the Lake Bluff Public Library in Illinois, who wrote the article "We Can Do Better — Best (And Worst) Practices for Managers Responding to Sexual Harassment Claims." This article outlines practices for library leaders on improving working conditions for women and other victims of sexual harassment, and it also provides guidance for frontline library staff on how to handle harassment situations in the moment (para. 1).

When describing what "counts" as sexual harassment and in which situations a manger must get involved or offer support to an employee, Horner puts it succinctly: "It doesn't matter who the staff member is, or who the patron is. If a patron makes a staff member feel uncomfortable, managers have a responsibility to take the situation seriously" (para. 12). With the mindset that any report of sexual harassment is valid and that a boundary of safety is crossed in any situation in which a worker feels uncomfortable, leaders can begin to enact changes in policy and culture to support their workers.

Managers have the opportunity to create patron behavior policies that are clear enough that frontline staff feel confident stating boundaries, but flexible enough for any unwelcome encounter to be shut down or redirected by the workers themselves or their managers. As a part of training, managers and staff should practice using scripts when boundaries are crossed. Some examples of scripts can be: "I don't talk about my personal life at work. Do you have a library-related question?" or "It's against our policy to use that kind of language here." Workers should also understand the reasons why each rule is in place, both to contextualize rule enforcement, but also to have measured responses prepared if patrons question the policies in the moment.

Policies should empower workers and reinforce the library's values, while keeping an eye toward equity and restorative justice. Frontline staff should also be consulted on the creation of policies that affect their safety, as they know intimately what dangers and discomfort library workers face.

When situations of sexual harassment arise, an institution should make it a priority to document in detail what happened and store incident reports. By encouraging the creation of incident reports, leadership sets the example that speaking about sexual harassment is welcome and that managers are listening and setting consequences into

motion when boundaries are crossed. Libraries should formalize a procedure, train and refresh staff on how to submit incident reports, and tweak policies and consequences when appropriate. Additionally, when sexual harassment occurs, leaders must prioritize stepping in and handling uncomfortable situations (if it's safe) when staff feel they should step away, and whenever possible, help staff to not feel alone in enforcing rules or setting boundaries. Not all library staff members have the same resources for handling issues of harassment, and leadership should help advocate for staff.

Finally, public library workers are exposed to all kinds of trauma: from the stories and experiences of patrons to the traumatic incidents that occur at work. The trauma of experiencing sexual harassment is paired with other draining forms of emotional labor which can all lead to burnout or deteriorated mental health. In her article on vocational awe, Fobazi Ettarh writes, "In the memorable phrasing of Nancy Fried Foster, patrons often approach the reference desk looking for a 'Mommy Librarian,' someone who can offer emotional support, reassurance, sociality, answers, and interventions at points of pain or need. The gendered expectations of a library profession that is majority female can certainly exacerbate the gendered expectations placed upon interactions with patrons" (pt. 3). Part of creating a system of care and concern for employees who are victims of sexual harassment should involve trauma stewardship, a concept introduced by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky which explores the intersection of deeply engaging in a helping profession with caring for the emotional toll this kind of work can take. Mental health resources like therapy should be available to public library employees and paid for by their employers, and managers should encourage caring for mental health by providing ample and unquestioned sick and vacation time, encouraging and enforcing manageable workloads, and providing resources to staff to promote wellness.

Improving library culture and making public libraries safer for staff makes them better for everyone. Public library workers deserve safety and respect, and the institution of public libraries is overdue for a critical reevaluation of why sexual harassment is such an issue, and what we can collectively do about it.

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