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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 16  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 10

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September 1989

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### Recommended Citation

Dhooper, Surjit Singh; Huff, Marlene B.; and Schultz, Carrie M. (1989) "Social Work and Sexual Harassment," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1912>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol16/iss3/10>

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# Social Work and Sexual Harassment

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*Ninety-seven members of the Kentucky chapter of National Association of Social Workers were surveyed about their knowledge of and experience with sexual harassment in their work places. Fifty-one percent knew of sexual harassment of female social workers and 18% knew of similar harassment of male workers. Twenty-six percent had themselves been victims of sexual harassment. Verbal harassment was the most common followed by a combination of verbal and physical harassment in the form of sexy jokes and unwanted touching. A majority of the victims resorted to either avoidance, defusion, or reason in dealing with their harassers. Young workers from small agencies with few years of employment viewed the problem of sexual harassment as serious. A majority of respondents, irrespective of their gender and education, were ignorant of the provisions of the Civil Rights law pertaining to sexual harassment. Implications of the findings for social work are discussed.*

Despite heightened awareness of the illegality of sexual harassment in the work place, several studies show its wide prevalence. The Merit report (Mathis & Prokop, 1981), for example, showed that out of approximately 23,000 federal employees surveyed, 42% of female workers and 15% of male workers reported being sexually harassed. In other studies percentages of working women reporting sexual harassment have ranged from 40 to 85 (Wymer, 1983). Only two studies of sexual harassment

of social workers in human services agencies have been reported in the literature. These (Judd, Block & Calkin, 1985; Maypole, 1986) have shown that human services agencies are not free from this problem. Thirty-eight percent of a sample of social work field instructors representing health and human services agencies throughout Colorado (n=112), surveyed by Judd and his associates and 27% of a sample of members of the Iowa chapter of National Association of Social workers (n=319) studied by Maypole, reported having experienced sexual harassment.

Both these studies have thrown some light on different dimensions of this phenomenon. Judd and associates have described the frequency and type of sexual harassment, its effects on the emotional and behavioral functioning of victims, and organizational responses to it. Maypole tested a number of hypotheses derived from power theory: (a) Women consider sexual harassment more serious than men do; (b) women in direct service positions, in small agencies, with less than ten years of employment, and with salaries less than \$20,000 view sexual harassment more seriously than their more powerful counterparts in supervisory/administrative positions, in large agencies, employed for more than ten years, and with high salaries; and, (c) women who are unmarried or divorced, under 44 years of age, and have a BSW degree consider sexual harassment more serious than those who are married, are over 44 and have an MSW degree. His findings supported most of these hypotheses.

These studies have highlighted the need for more knowledge about sexual harassment of social workers in their places of employment. The study reported here addresses that need. Besides replicating the Maypole study, our aim was three-fold: (a) to discover the extent of the problem of sexual harassment of social workers in Kentucky in their places of employment; (b) to gather data on the opinions of social workers in Kentucky about the nature and seriousness of this problem, their familiarity with the relevant Civil Rights law, and the institutional arrangements in their places of employment for dealing with the problem; and, (c) to learn about the type and source of sexual harassment as experienced by individual social workers, and their response to that experience.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

In the spring of 1987, a random sample of 227 members of the Kentucky chapter of National Association of Social Workers was drawn from the membership roster. The sample constituted 25% of the total membership of the chapter (N=908). These members were sent a questionnaire along with a letter and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Ninety-seven (43%) completed the questionnaire.

The respondents represented a cross-section of the social work population in the state of Kentucky. The sample was compared with the total NASW state chapter population on a few demographic variables for which information was available from the state chapter office. It was found to be representative of the population. The distributions of our sample and the population among the four age groups (24 and younger, 25–44, 45–64, and 65 and older) were quite similar. Whereas 8, 64, 20 and 8 percent of our sample were in these groups respectively, the corresponding percentages for the population are 10, 61, 23 and 4. In terms of education, the percentages of MSWs in the sample and population were almost the same, 71 and 69 percent respectively. The racial and gender distributions of the sample and population are also similar. In the sample 97% were white and 80% were female whereas 94% are white and 75% were female in the population.

The age range of our respondents spanned over forty years with 8% in the '24 & under' and another 8% in the '65 & over' categories. The majority (64%) were between 25 and 44 years. Slightly more than half (56%) were married and the remaining were either single, separated or divorced. In terms of their education, 71% had an MSW degree. Fifty-six percent were in direct service, 27% were in supervisory/administrative positions, and the remaining included community organizers, social work students and those who were unemployed at the time of the study.

One-third (32%) of the respondents had work experience of 5 years or less, almost a quarter (24%) had 6 to 10 years of

experience, a slightly larger percentage (27%) had been in social work practice from 11 to 20 years, and the remaining 13% had more than 20 years of experience. They were serving health and human service agencies of varying sizes. Six percent were in agencies employing five or fewer professionals, 21% were in agencies that had 6–15 employees, 29% were in medium-sized agencies (16–45 employees), and the remaining 44% were in larger agencies with more than 46 employees. One-third of these agencies are public. One-third (33%) of the respondents made less than \$15,000 a year.

### *Instrument*

The questionnaire developed by Maypole and Skaine (1982) and modified by them to suit a social work population (Maypole, 1986) was used for data collection. It is a comprehensive instrument which measures not only the opinions of respondents about sexual harassment and its seriousness as a problem but also seeks information on its many dimensions such as: (a) their knowledge of the incidence of sexual harassment of male and female workers in social service agencies; (b) their personal experience of harassment by a supervisor, coworkers and client; (c) the form of that harassment, and their response to that experience as victims; (d) their knowledge of the civil rights law; and (e) their agency's provision for dealing with this problem. The psychometric properties of this instrument are reported to be acceptable by Maypole and Skaine (1982).

## Findings

### *Incidence of Sexual Harassment*

Fifty-one percent of our respondents ( $n=97$ ) claimed to know of women social workers who had been sexually harassed and 18% were aware of male social workers who had been similarly harassed in human service agencies. These figures are close to the ones reported by Maypole with 53% and 14% of his sample being aware of sexual harassment of female and male workers respectively. No statistically significant differences were found between the two sexes in their knowledge of sexual harassment of female and male workers. Twenty-six percent had themselves

been the victims of such harassment, which is almost the same rate of victimization (27%) discovered by Maypole. Twenty-five social workers experienced sexual harassment, 9 of them from their supervisors, 7 from coworkers, 4 from clients, 2 from a supervisor as well as a client, and 3 others from a coworker as well as a client. These incidents had occurred both in large and small, and public as well as private agencies. Sixty percent of these agencies were large employing 45 or more professionals, 24% were small agencies which employed less than 15 workers, and the remainder were of moderate size. Sixty percent of these included such agencies as a community mental health center, a family service association, and a general hospital. Thirty percent were public agencies such as county division of social services.

Sexual harassment occurred in agencies that had adequate policy and procedures regarding sexual harassment as well as in those that did not have such mechanisms. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: "The management of your agency has made adequate provisions for dealing with sexual harassment." Of the 92% of the victims who responded to this question, 35% agreed, 39% disagreed, and 26% were not sure. Although 88% of the victims were female, males were not immune from sexual harassment. Both men and women workers experienced harassment. Maypole had found 36% of female and 14% of male workers (21% and 6% of the total sample respectively) to be victims of harassment. The corresponding figures in our study are 29% of female and 17% of male workers (23% and 3% of the sample).

### *Social Workers' Views about Sexual Harassment*

Several questions sought to understand the meanings the respondents attached to sexual harassment and motives they attributed to harassers and their victims. Seventy-five percent of our respondents agreed with the statement that "When a person sexually harasses another at work, exerting power over the other is more important than sexual gratification." Nineteen percent were unsure and only 5% disagreed. A larger percentage of respondents (90%) agreed with the statement: "Sexual harassment at work is unwanted sexual behavior toward women/men." Only 2% disagreed and 8% were undecided. Similarly, 95%

agreed that sexual harassment is emotionally upsetting to the receiver.

Eighty-six percent disagreed with the notion that sexual harassment at work is provoked by the receiver. Seven percent agreed and 6% were unsure. Opinions of the respondents became much more varied regarding the statement that, "Preserving the dominance of males over females is more important than sexual gratification in sexual harassment at work." Fifty-seven percent disagreed, 25% were unsure, and 18% agreed. A much larger majority of women than men (62% versus 41%) were in agreement with this statement. This finding is similar to that of Maypole.

In pursuance of the same theme, another statement read: "Men feel it's O.K. to sexually harass women at work." Only 32% agreed with this statement, 39% disagreed, and 29% were unsure. The agreement response rates (35% for women and 18% for men) are similar to those of Maypole (36% and 18% respectively). However, unlike his data, differences between the sexes were not statistically significant. A surprising 62% agreed that coworkers may use sexual harassment more to "put down" the receiver than to seek sexual gratification. Twenty-four percent were not sure and 11% disagreed. Again, unlike Maypole's finding, although larger percentage of women workers (69% compared with 53% of men) agreed, the difference between the two was not statistically significant.

There were no statistically significant differences in their opinions when the respondents were classified into subgroups in terms of their age, marital status, education, job position, salary, years of employment, and the size of their agency. Regarding the statement that "Men feel it is O.K. to harass women at work," although 59% of the male respondents compared with 35% of female respondents disagreed with the statement, the differences between the two groups did not attain statistical significance. The following were the only exceptions. Age and years of employment were found to be associated with the opinion about sexual harassment being provoked by the receiver ( $r=.19$ ,  $p=.035$  and  $r=.23$ ,  $p=.012$  respectively). More young workers with few years of employment tended to disagree with this notion.

*How serious is the problem of sexual harassment?*

Opinion about the seriousness of sexual harassment was measured on a seven-point scale, 1 representing "Not serious at all," and 7 indicating that it is an "Exceptionally serious problem." Three-fourths (76%) of our respondents considered it either not serious or only moderately serious. This is surprising in view of the fact that 26% had themselves been victims of sexual harassment. Their perception of seriousness was found to be inversely associated with age ( $r = -.23$ ), years of experience ( $r = -.27$ ) and size of the agency ( $r = -.32$ ), all statistically significant at .01 or lower levels. These associations suggest that older workers with long work experience in large agencies do not consider this problem as serious. Conversely, relatively young workers with short employment history and in small agencies view the problem more seriously. Maypole had found age, education, and years of employment significantly influencing his respondents' assessment of the seriousness of this problem. Education did not seem to make a difference in our sample. We also did not find significant differences between male and female workers in their opinion about the seriousness of the problem.

A majority of our respondents were not familiar with title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Only 46% knew of the legal protection against sexual harassment provided by this law. This lack of knowledge was found to be associated with age, job position, and salary. Of those who were familiar with the provisions of the law, the majority were likely to be 45 and older, in supervisory positions, and with salaries over \$20,000. For example, whereas 78% of direct service workers did not know the relevant provisions of the law, 76% of the supervisors did, and those in the 'Other' category (community organizers, unemployed workers and students) were equally divided between those who did know and those who did not. These differences were statistically significant ( $X^2 = 15.11$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $n = 91$ ). Similarly, 65% of those making less than \$20,000 were not aware of the provisions of the Civil Rights Act whereas 61% of those making more than \$20,000 were familiar with those provisions. This was another significant difference ( $X^2 = 5.51$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .018$ ,



n=85). As compared with 60% of those in the younger group (44 or younger), only 31% of the older (45 and over) group were ignorant of the law. This difference was also statistically significant at .01 level ( $X^2=6.57$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $n=94$ ). Sex or education did not seem to make a difference. More male (56%) than female workers (44%), and more BSWs (54%) than MSWs (46%) were knowledgeable about the law but these differences were not statistically significant.

Despite this lack of knowledge, did the respondents consider their agency to be adequately prepared to deal with the problem of sexual harassment? They were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: "The management of your agency has made adequate provisions for dealing with sexual harassment." Eighty-six (about 90%) of them responded to this question, 41% of them agreeing, 29% disagreeing, and the remaining 30% being unsure. Again none of the demographic variables were significantly associated with these responses.

### *Experience of the Victims*

Of the 25 victims, nine (36%), all female, experienced sexual harassment from their supervisors/superiors who were male. In five of these cases harassment was verbal in the form of sexy jokes or asking for unwanted dates; in three cases it took the form of unwanted touching and/or kissing, and in one case it culminated in unwanted intercourse with consent of the victim. In four cases the supervisor also resorted to such tactics as creating a chilling atmosphere, threatening reprisals, and altering the job of the supervisee. Two other female workers (8%) were harassed by their male supervisor as well as three clients, two male and one female. Harassment by the supervisor involved both sexy jokes and unwanted touching, and whereas one of the male clients did not go beyond making sexy jokes another male and a female client tried to indulge also in unwanted touching.

Seven (28%) victims, five female and two male, were subjected to sexual harassment by their coworkers of the opposite sex. In five of these cases, harassers did not go beyond making sexy jokes or asking for unwanted dates. In three (12%) other cases, one male and two female workers experienced harassment at the hands of their coworkers (one male and two female) and

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Victims (n = 25)*

Characteristic		N	%
Sex	Female	22	(88)
	Male	3	(12)
Ethnicity	White	24	(96)
	Black	1	(4)
Age at Harassment	Under 24	5	(20)
	25-44	18	(72)
	45-64	2	(8)
Education	B.S.W.	4	(16)
	M.S.W.	21	(84)
Marital Status	Married	14	(56)
	Not Married	11	(44)
Primary Duties	Direct Service	15	(60)
	Administration/Supervision	8	(32)
	Others (Students/Unemployed)	2	(8)
Years of Employment	Fewer than 5	6	(24)
	6-10	10	(40)
	11-15	3	(12)
	16-20	2	(8)
	21 and more	4	(16)
Agency Size	Under 5 employees	1	(4)
	6-15	5	(20)
	16-25	2	(8)
	26-35	3	(12)
	46 and more	14	(56)

clients (two male and one female). In two of the three situations involving coworkers as well as clients, harassment was limited to sexy jokes. One coworker and one client tried to force unwanted touching/kissing. One of these victims experienced harassment from another female worker. In the remaining four (16%) cases the victims were female and their harassers were all male clients, two of whom tried unwanted touching. Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of victims.

Table 2

*Type of Sexual Harassment and Victim Response  
by the Source of Harassment*

TYPE	SOURCE					
	Supervisor		Coworker		Client	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Verbal Harassment	5	(46)	7	(70)	5	(56)
Unwanted Touching	1	(9)	2	(20)	1	(11)
Verbal & Unwanted Touching	4	(36)	1	(10)	3	(33)
Unwanted Intercourse	1	(9)	—	—	—	—
Totals	11	(100)	10	(100)	9	(99)
RESPONSE						
Avoidance	3	(27)	5	(50)	1	(11)
Defusion	3	(27)	3	(30)	3	(33)
Reasoning	3	(27)	2	(20)	3	(33)
Confrontation	—	—	—	—	1	(11)
Combination of Responses	2	(19)	—	—	1	(11)
Totals	11	(100)	10	(100)	9	(99)

Thus we find that 25 out of 97 social workers (88% female and 97% white) experienced sexual harassment. The majority of these victims were between 25 and 44 (72%), MSWs (84%), in nonsupervisory positions (68%), and with less than ten years of employment (67%). Fifty-six percent were employed in large agencies. Fifty-six percent were married.

These workers were harassed by 30 individuals, of whom 11 (44%) were their supervisors, 10 (40%) were coworkers, and 9 (36%) were clients. All supervisors were male and the receivers of their harassment were all female. Of those experiencing harassment from coworkers, 3 (30%) were male. Whereas all male workers reported being harassed by their colleagues of the opposite sex, one of the female victims was harassed by a female coworker. All the receivers of harassment from clients were fe-

male workers although their harassers included both males and females. With the exception of one case of unwanted sexual intercourse, most harassment in majority (60%) of cases was verbal. In the remaining third (35%) cases it involved either unwanted touching, fondling, kissing or a combination of sexy jokes and unwanted touching. Table 2 displays type of harassment by its source and the victim's response.

*How did the victims respond to the situation?*

Victims used the following approaches in dealing with the harassers in almost an equal number of situations. In nine (30%) situations they avoided or ignored the harasser, in nine others they tried to play down the harassment by joking about it, and in eight (27%) situations they informally reasoned with the harasser. One used a combined approach of ignoring the harasser and joking about the harassment, and another tried combining ignoring and reasoning with the harasser. In only two situations did the victim resort to direct confrontation but in no case was a formal complaint made. Maypole had found larger proportions of the victims in his study using avoidance with supervisors, defusion with coworkers, and reasoning with clients. Our data did not show such a pattern in responses to harassment but the use of confrontation in his study also was found to be minimal. A majority in each group of situations, in our study, six (67%) of those who avoided/ignored, six (67%) of those who made light of the harassment by joking about it, and seven (87%) who reasoned with the harasser found these approaches effective. So did the two who confronted the harasser. Combined approaches worked in one case and did not in the other.

The numbers in these categories being small, it is hard to interpret these findings with confidence. Nevertheless, the general tendency to avoid confronting the culprit is obvious. Confrontation was used in only two out of 30 situations. A look at the responses to another question illuminated this situation somewhat. The question sought to know whom the victim had turned to during his/her experience of harassment. Over a third (36%) had kept it to themselves and had not reported to anyone, others had told such individuals as their spouse, friend, co-worker, and (in 20% of cases) also their supervisor.

The following comments of some of the victims provide some understanding of this general tendency to defuse the situation rather than confront the harasser. One female worker compared sexual harassment in the business world with social work situations and comforted herself with the belief that harassment is much greater in business. Another thought that, to a degree, it came with the territory and was therefore not completely avoidable. A third had found the experience very frightening and intimidating. She was afraid of "making waves" and losing her job. Still another thought that harassment by the supervisor would be very difficult to prove. Her advice was that a victim should request a transfer or begin hunting for another job. Another, who used confrontation as her major approach also recommended a change in job.

### Summary and Discussion

The incidence of sexual harassment in work places of social workers in Kentucky is almost the same as found in Iowa (Maypole, 1986) but lower than that of Colorado (Judd, Block & Calkin, 1985). Twenty-six percent of our sample and 27% of those studied by Maypole had experienced sexual harassment. Sexual harassment occurs in social work agencies of all sizes and types. Although the majority of victims are female, male workers are not completely free from this experience.

A majority of our sample of 97 social workers in Kentucky viewed sexual harassment as unwanted sexual behavior which is emotionally upsetting to the victims and is not provoked by them. Although larger percentages of women than men workers subscribed to the opinion that sexual harassment is a reflection of a desire of males to dominate females or a coworker to "put down" a colleague rather than the desire for sexual gratification, these differences were not statistically significant. These findings are similar to those of Maypole (1986).

Fifty-one percent of our respondents knew of sexual harassment of female workers although a smaller number (18%) knew of similar harassment of male workers. This figure is slightly lower than the one reported by Maypole but is similar to that of Judd and associates (1985), 50% of whose sample were aware of others being sexually harassed. However, a large majority

(76%) of our respondents did not consider the problem of sexual harassment as very serious. Only young workers with few years of employment and from small agencies viewed it as serious. Being young, inexperienced and less secure in their job positions, they possibly considered themselves more vulnerable. Besides the informality of small work places which is likely to discourage the establishment of strong guards against sexual harassment, employees of small work places are also not legally as well protected as those in larger organizations. Under the protective wing of Title VII of Civil Rights Act of 1964, sexual harassment is considered sex discrimination, and the law applies to work places with 15 or more employees.

A majority (54%) of our respondents were found to be ignorant of the provisions of the Civil Rights law pertaining to sexual harassment. Similarly, 59% either did not consider their agencies adequately prepared to deal with sexual harassment or were not sure about it. The percentage (41%) who considered their agencies adequate in this regard, is smaller than the 53% reported in the study by Judd and associates (1985).

Twenty-five (26%) workers experienced harassment from 30 individuals. Twenty-three (92%) of the victims were female and 24 (80%) of harassers were male, and with one exception harassers and victims were of opposite sexes.

Making sexy jokes and asking for unwanted dates were the most common forms of sexual harassment (in 57% of situations), followed by unwanted touching or kissing as well as sexy jokes (40%). There was one case of unwanted sexual intercourse. A vast majority of victims resorted to either avoidance or defusion or reasoning as the major approach to dealing with harassment. Only in two cases did the victim resort to confrontation. None chose any form of legal recourse.

Sexual harassment is a generic term converging a wide range of behaviors from sexy jokes to sexual intercourse. In surveys of the type reported here, these behaviors are given equal weight with the result that the findings provide only gross indicators of the problem. Thus there is the need for more in-depth exploration of the problem of sexual harassment. Similarly, more research with larger samples is needed to understand the relationship between sources of harassment and patterns of re-

sponses as well as the relative effectiveness of those responses. The general tendency to avoid confrontation, also needs to be further investigated. Is it because social workers lack confrontational skills, or is it because social workers in a poor state like Kentucky with fewer employment opportunities are afraid to risk their jobs, or is it because confrontation involves the possibility of the victims' experience becoming public and his/her becoming an object of gossip and ridicule? Such questions remain unanswered.

Individual worker's efforts to deal with sexual harassment need to be supplemented by formal well-publicized institutional arrangements. In a majority of the cases either the agencies did not have an adequate provision for dealing with this problem or the victims did not know of them. It seems that both undergraduate and graduate students in school of social work are not learning enough about sexual harassment in human service agencies and what to do about or how to cope with it. This gap in the professional training of social workers needs to be addressed. Social workers should be made aware and responsive to this problem. Harassment is a problem in human relations and as such can be remedied through legislation, policy, education and greater respect for the value that each of us places on our life at work (Judd et al., 1986, p. 21). The National Association of Social Workers should use its resources on these approaches to the problem of sexual harassment.

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Volume XVI, Number 3

September, 1989

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