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Barriers to Reporting Sexual Harassment

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Nicole Pietsch is Coordinator of the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC). The Coalition works toward the prevention and eradication of sexual assault. Its membership includes 25 sexual assault centres from across Ontario, offering counselling, information and support services to survivors of sexual violence, including childhood sexual abuse.

Since 1998, Nicole has assisted women and youth living with violence, including immigrant and refugee women and survivors of sexual violence. In recent years, Nicole has worked with youth and adult survivors of violence who are incarcerated, those living in an institutional setting, and Deaf youth. Nicole has a particular interest in the ways in which social constructs of sex, gender, age and race inform Canadian social policy, including law.

Nicole's written work has appeared in York University's Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering, the University of Toronto's Women's Health and Urban Life, and Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme.

In 2013, her fiction *Sideshow of Merit*, addressing traumatic re-enactment and systemic cultural reproduction of sexual violence, was published under New Adult Fiction by [namelos press](http://www.namelospress.com).

In May 2015, her intersectional analysis of the "Slutwalk" movement, "*doing something*" about "COMING TOGETHER": *The Surfacing of Intersections of Race, Sex and Sexual Violence in Victim-Blaming in the SlutWalk Movement*, was published in an edited collection by Demeter Press.

Barriers to Reporting Sexual Harassment

Given that the root causes of sexual harassment include power inequities and patterns of discrimination¹, it makes sense that certain groups are more vulnerable to being targeted than others.

It also means that *reporting sexual harassment* can be harder, or lead to more complex consequences, for some people too.

Here are some examples of reporting barriers.

In situations of harassment, the perpetrator is usually known to the victim.

Acquaintances, friends, co-workers or colleagues are more likely to use tricks, verbal pressure, threats, negative consequences, or victim-blaming rhetoric (i.e. “You know you wanted this”; “If you tell about what happened here, you will be in trouble”) during episodes of sexual coercion and harassment². This impacts a victim’s ability to resist or report what happened. He or she may blame him/herself, or feel responsible for the harassment.

There can be repercussions to disclosing sexual harassment.

Often, victims do not disclose sexual violence because they are embarrassed or do not want anyone to know³. Harassment survivors often worry that once they tell their story, everyone in the community, workplace or school will know⁴.

On the other hand, many fear (or find) their disclosures will not result in helpful outcomes. As was noted in the Ghomeshi case, one CBC employee “raised her concerns with a supervisor, but that the conversation went nowhere”⁵.

Last, those who experience sexual harassment – especially in work and school settings -- fear reprisal or retaliation from the harasser, colleagues or their employer.

Many sexual harassment victims minimize or ignore their experiences for realistic reasons.

In workplaces, both women and men can experience sexual harassment – but “women tend to be more vulnerable to it because they often hold lower-paying, lower-authority and lower-status jobs compared to men”⁶. For this reason, women can easily get trapped in situations where they feel they must endure harassment for the sake of keeping their job.

¹ Ontario Human Rights Commission. *Sexual harassment in employment (fact sheet)*. Online: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/sexual-harassment-employment-fact-sheet>

² Hakvag, H. *Does Yes Mean Yes?: Exploring Sexual Coercion in Normative Heterosexuality*. Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme. Volume 28, Number 1. York University Publication: 122

³ Thompson, M., Sitterle, D., Clay, G. & Kingree, J. (2007). Reasons for not reporting victimizations to the police: Do they vary for physical and sexual incidents? *Journal of American College Health*, 55(5), 277-282.

⁴ Dylan, A., Regehr, C., & Alaggia, R. (2008). *And justice for all? Aboriginal victims of sexual violence*. *Violence Against Women*, 14, 678- 696.

⁵ CBC News. November 4, 2014. *More workplace allegations made against Jian Ghomeshi*. Online:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/more-workplace-allegations-made-against-jian-ghomeshi-1.2822962>

⁶ Ontario Human Rights Commission. *Sexual harassment in employment (fact sheet)*. Online: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/sexual-harassment-employment-fact-sheet>

Studies also show that different women deal with sexual harassment differently. This includes denying it, minimizing, or ignoring it completely. Some examples:

Race and citizenship

- The immigration status of women employed as Live-in Caregivers in Canada is connected to their employment: “some women report living like prisoners in their employers’ homes, having no friends, and being threatened that their employer will turn them in to the Immigration and Naturalization Service”⁷. These women often minimize or ignore workplace harassment out of necessity.
- A Canadian study found that Black women who faced racial harassment in their day to day lives, “found it difficult to separate sexual harassment in the workplace from sexual and racial harassment in society at large”⁸. For these women, sexual harassment at work or school was connected to racial discrimination in their day to day lives.

Young women and women exposed to past sexualized violence

- Sociologist Heather Hlavka analyzed forensic interviews conducted with 100 youths between the ages of three and 17 who may have been sexually assaulted in the past.
- She found that the young women experienced “forms of sexual violence in their everyday lives⁹”, yet learned to mislabel these episodes as normal, non-violent experiences.
- “They grab you, touch your butt and try to, like, touch you in the front, and run away,” a 13 year-old girl states in the study: “but it’s okay, I mean... I never think it’s a big thing because they do it to everyone”¹⁰.

These examples show how incidences of sexual harassment can be minimized by victims. This in turn leads to reporting barriers.

Myths and misconceptions about sexual violence make it hard for survivors of sexual harassment to share their stories.

Social misconceptions include the myth that innocent men are commonly accused of sexual violence, and women lie about it to get revenge¹¹. These [myths](#) can create a climate in which sexual harassment is minimized and perpetrators are excused for their actions.

⁷ Welsh, S., Jacquie Carr, Barbara MacQuarrie and Audrey Huntley. “I’m Not Thinking of it as Sexual Harassment”: Understanding Harassment Across Race And Citizenship. *Gender & Society*, Vol. 20 No. 1, February 2006 87-107: 91.

⁸ Ibid, 97.

⁹ Sociologists for Women in Society. April 2014. *Girls View Sexual Violence as Normal*. Online: <http://www.socwomen.org/pr2-sex-violence-norm/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sexual Assault centre Kingston. *Busting Myths*. Online: <http://www.sackington.com/Default.aspx?pagelD=857971>; And The Learning Network. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women A Resource Document*. May 2012: 14.