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Sexual Harassment and Public Space

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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.

Sexual Harassment and Public Space

“The fact of the matter is that space is not neutral territory”¹.

A common misconception about sexual harassment is that it is a problem of attraction, sexual desire or sexual misconduct.

On the contrary, patterns of sexual harassment often reflect *cultural norms connected with space*: for example, a workplace, school environment or a public space.

In this way, sexual harassment can work to define or re-assert gender, race, age or class hierarchies within spaces in harmful ways.

Examples of this include the following:

- An Afro-Canadian woman sexually harassed by both white male and female coworkers carried the unspoken expectation that she should ‘know her place’² in the workplace
- A young man who worked on an off-shore oil rig in an all-male environment; to his harassers he “was not masculine enough” and faced sexualized harassment, feminized name-calling and an attempted sexual assault³
- In a study of 31 women who had left the combat arms of the Canadian Forces – a division where women’s participation has only occurred since the 1980s -- women described their former working environment as one where women received messages of non-acceptance, and where inconsistent and subjective performance standards were applied to women⁴.

These examples highlight that space is not neutral. Sexual harassment can be connected to broader patterns of power (for example, power over a certain work task, position, or neighbourhood block) and privilege (for example, who has historically been permitted to attend classes at a certain school, or in a particular program).

Studies have identified the ways in which sexual harassment can work to *protect one groups’ right* (e.g. to a certain space, role or position), while keeping out those from ‘outsider’ or less-privileged gender, racial or age groups.

¹ McFadden, P. *Why Women’s Spaces are Critical to Feminist Autonomy*. Isis International: a feminist advocacy organisation. Online: http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=630:why-womens-spaces-are-critical-to-feminist-autonomy&catid=127:theme-mens-involvement-in-womens-empowerment&Itemid=452

² Lester, T. 2002. *Race, Sexuality, and the Question of Multiple, Marginalized Identities in U.S. and European Discrimination Law*. Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality: Charting the Connections. University of Wisconsin Press: 87.

³ *Ibid*, 91.

⁴ David & Thomas, 1998, as quoted in: Gill, R. and Angela R. Febraro. 2013. Experiences and Perceptions of Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Forces Combat Arms. *Violence Against Women* 19(2) 269–287: 272.

This can be seen in **workplace sexual harassment** scenarios⁵ in which employer or employees' behavior re-enforces that only certain groups (i.e. a certain sex, age or racial population) ought to perform some jobs, while other groups ought to perform others.

Patterns of **street harassment** are also connected to space. Street harassment is a form of sexual harassment that takes place in public spaces: at its core is a power dynamic that reminds historically subordinated groups (e.g. women and LGBTQ people) of their vulnerability in public spaces. Street harassment can be sexist, racist, transphobic, homophobic, ableist, sizeist and/or classist⁶.

[Hollaback](#), an organization aimed at ending street harassment, agrees, stating that: “comments from ‘You’d look good on me’ to groping, flashing and assault are a daily reality for women and LGBTQ individuals,” – yet street harassment is “culturally accepted as ‘the price you pay’ for being a woman or for being gay”⁷.

Tips on Addressing Sexual Harassment

These tips can prevent sexual harassment by making your public space safer and equitable to all. These tips can also help to address incidences of sexual harassment, if they occur.

1. *When considering ways to end sexual harassment, commit to addressing the role of your work-space’s/school’s/neighborhood’s culture as well.*

This means recognizing that jokes or banter about women, LGBTQ folks, racialized folks and others are just as damaging to your space as are physical and sexualized behaviors. It also means recognizing that including women, LGBTQ folks, racialized folks and others as equals is just as helpful to your space as is a sexual harassment policy.

2. *Make a personal pledge to be a better bystander. Support others to be better bystanders.*

Hollaback says that “even a knowing look to the person being harassed can reduce their trauma and experience of isolation”. See [Hollaback’s infographic on responding to street harassment](#).

3. *If you already have a workplace/school/other policy on sexual harassment, check in to see if it’s working.*

- Is your policy visible to people at your work or school?
- Do people know where to find it? (If your policy is tough to find, it’s likely that no-one is using it.)

⁵ This definition from: Ontario Human Rights Commission. *Sexual harassment in employment (fact sheet)*. Online: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/sexual-harassment-employment-fact-sheet>

⁶ This definition from: Hollaback: You Have the Power to End Street Harassment. What is Street Harassment? Online: <http://www.ihollaback.org/about/>

⁷ Ibid

- Is your policy easy-to-understand? A good policy will not only help those who report— but in addition, help those who are considering reporting to think over what will happen if they do.
- Is your policy effective? If it stressful to use, or it fails to hold offenders accountable, people in your community will not use it.
- Commit to reviewing your policy with diverse people from your community – including women, LGBTQ folks, women of color, survivors and those who work in women’s services – every 1-2 years.