Sexual Harassment in the Library:
Understanding Experiences and Taking Action

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Sexual harassment in libraries exists, but it has not been comprehensively studied. In the wake of the #MeToo movement and shared anecdotal experiences, library staff members at the University of California, San Francisco were empowered to address this issue in our library. This paper will present the results of our survey of sexual harassment experiences of our staff and, in an effort to encourage other academic library workers to spearhead similar efforts in their own environments, will document our process of developing anti-sexual harassment efforts in our library.

Introduction

Sexual violence, including sexual assault and sexual harassment, is prevalent in the United States. According to data from national studies, 81 percent of women and 43 percent of men have experienced sexual harassment,[1] while 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men have experienced sexual assault.[2] Within academia, more than 50 percent of women faculty and staff and 20-50 percent of women students encounter or experience sexual harassment.[3] A 2018 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine suggests that academic environments are at an especially high risk for sexual harassment because of male-dominated and isolating environments, hierarchical relationships, and organizational tolerance for sexually harassing behavior.[3]

No large-scale study of sexual harassment in academic libraries has been conducted. A recent *Book Riot* article[4] collected data from library workers nationwide in an informal online survey and identified sexual harassment as a problem across library types, highlighting a range of sexual harassment behaviors including verbal and physical harassment. Additional recent work includes presentations and articles by librarians at Waukegan Public Library[5-6] and an ongoing survey about sexual harassment in academic libraries from researchers at Radford University and William & Mary.[7] Despite the prevalence and immediacy of this issue, no published studies measuring sexual harassment in libraries exist. In addition to the lack of published literature on this topic, anecdotal evidence shows that library-wide conversations and efforts to address sexual harassment are rare.

Inspired by the #MeToo movement, library workers at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Library planned a discussion-based event about sexual harassment in libraries, open to all staff and co-led by a librarian and library assistant. During the preparation for this discussion, one staff member shared their experiences of sexual harassment, which included multiple types of harassment from staff and members of the public that was happening on a daily basis. This staff member had not previously felt comfortable disclosing this information to anyone and was unaware of reporting options available to her. Realizing that our colleague was not alone in her experience, we decided to survey our library staff to understand their experiences of sexual harass-

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ment within our library environment. We felt that collecting data would allow us to understand the scope of the issue in our library and would help us advocate for change among our library administrators and staff. The aim of this study was to explore workplace sexual harassment experiences of UCSF Library employees.

Methods
Survey Instrument
We used Qualtrics, a secure, web-based survey application to create and distribute an online survey. Because of University of California (UC) guidelines around mandated reporting, which state that all employees with supervisory responsibilities must report incidents of sexual harassment among UC employees,[8] it was necessary to ensure anonymity of the survey. The survey was shared via an anonymous link and participants were instructed not to share any potentially identifying information such as names, job roles, or departments. Contact information for the UCSF Campus Advocacy Resources & Education (CARE) office, our university's sexual violence prevention office, was shared with participants for additional support.

The survey included five parts: 1) which sexual harassment behaviors participants have experienced at UCSF Library, 2) who participants have experienced sexual harassment behaviors from (measured in user categories, e.g., UC staff, library staff, members of the public), 3) how participants feel UCSF Library and the University of California has supported them with regard to their experience of sexual harassment, using the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire Version 2[9], 4) how UCSF Library can address sexual harassment in the future, and 5) demographic information. The full survey instrument can be accessed in Appendix 1. The Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire is an existing tool that measures the feelings around "wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g. sexual harassment) committed within the context of the institution".[9] Sexual harassment behaviors listed in the survey were selected through an iterative process involving feedback and piloting from our library administration, CARE advocate, and library employees who self-identified as having experienced sexual harassment. We were unable to collect certain demographic information, including racial identity and age, because of the lack of diversity among our staff members which would have prevented anonymity of responses.

This study was approved as exempt research by the University of California, San Francisco IRB (#18-24276).

Data analysis and Data Sharing
Data cleaning was completed by one author (JBW) using Microsoft Excel. Univariate analysis was completed using Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel. To ensure anonymity and compliance with University of California guidelines around mandated reporting, we did not share raw data; instead, a summary report of results was created and shared with all UCSF Library employees (Appendix 2).

Results
The survey was completed by 33 respondents (53% response rate) including 16 women, 11 men, and 7 that did not respond or prefer not to say their gender. 48 percent of respondents had experienced sexual harassment while working at UCSF Library, and the majority of these people (63%) were women (Fig 1). All but one of the nine sexual harassment behaviors listed on the survey had been experienced at UCSF Library, with making inappropriate comments, commenting on your appearance, and repeated staring happening most frequently. Of note, each physical harassment item on the survey had been experienced by at least one UCSF Library staff member (Fig 2). Members of the public, UCSF Library staff, and affiliate staff that work in the library building were the most frequent exhibitors of sexual harassment (Fig 3).

FIGURE 1
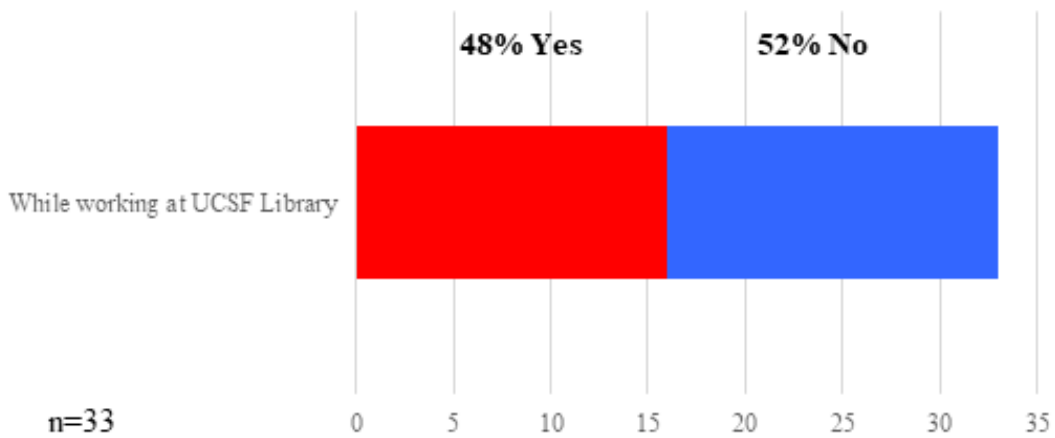**Number of Staff Members Who Have Experienced Sexual Harassment While Working at UCSF Library**

FIGURE 2
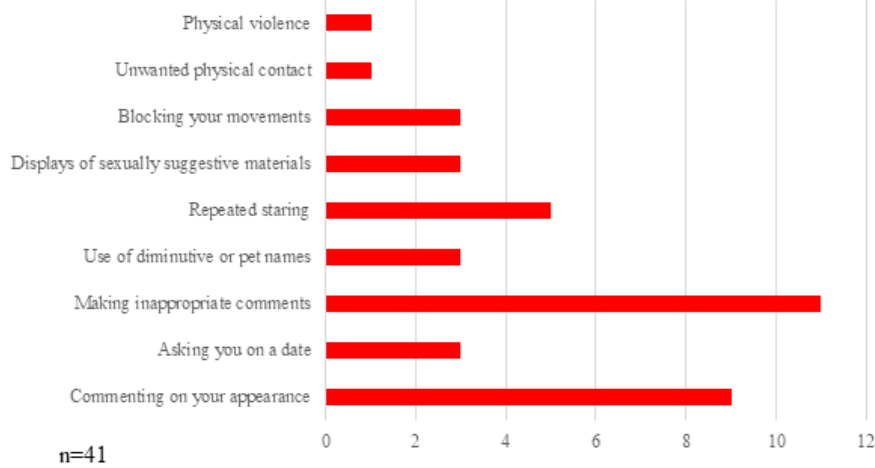**Sexual Harassment Behaviors That Have Occurred At UCSF Library.**

FIGURE 3
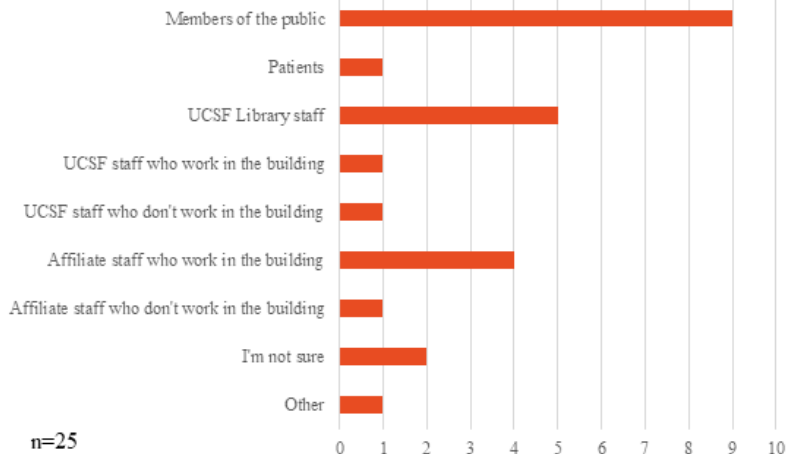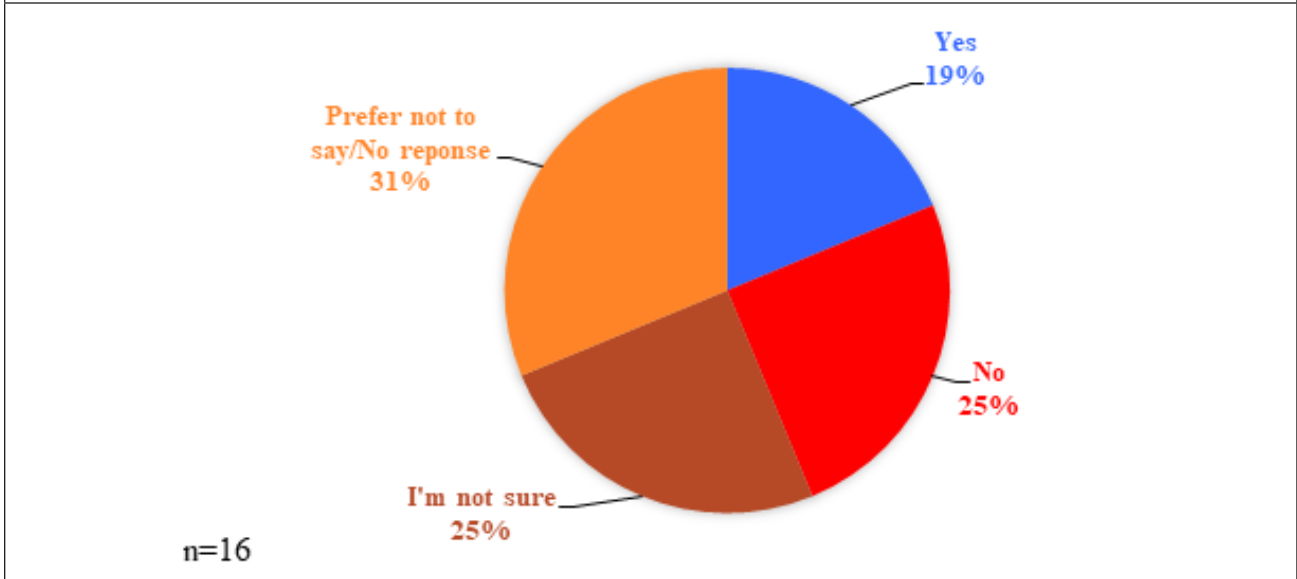**Exhibitors of Sexual Harassment Behaviors Toward UCSF Library Staff Members**

FIGURE 4
**Number of Staff Members Whose Experiences of Sexual Harassment
at UCSF Library Have Affected Their Work**

Prefer not to
say/No reponse
31%

Yes
19%

No
25%

I'm not sure
25%

n=16

Among participants who experienced sexual harassment, only 25% felt that these experiences have not affected their work (Fig 4). Most participants who experienced sexual harassment did not make a report or prefer not to say (81%) (Fig 5). Among respondents who made a report, institutional betrayal scores were low, indicating overall support from UCSF and UCSF Library. Three questions asked about the perceived importance of addressing sexual harassment at UCSF Library. Most participants (78%) consider this issue to be very important, and almost all think UCSF Library considers this to be important or very important (88%). However, many (43%) think the University of California, San Francisco, considers this issue to be less than important.

FIGURE 5
Number of Staff Members Who Have Reported Their Experiences of Sexual Harassment at UCSF Library

Prefer not to say
31%

Yes
19%

No
50%

n=16
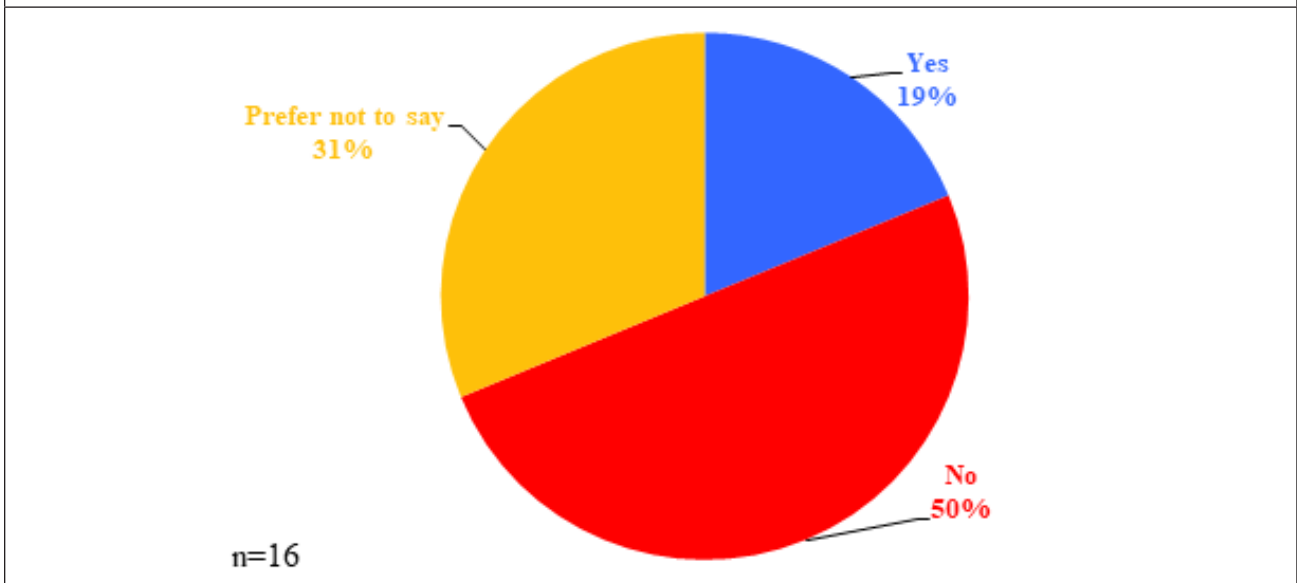
Sixteen participants shared ideas for how to address sexual harassment at UCSF Library. The most common suggestions involved training and policy changes. Training suggestions included discussions, mentoring, and formal educational opportunities around topics like definitions of sexual harassment, reporting options, and bystander interventions.

A complete summary of results can be found in Appendix 2.

Discussion

Our study revealed several important and actionable findings. First, the study showed that sexual harassment is being experienced by nearly half of staff members in our library across a range of behaviors. Second, three groups emerged as frequent exhibitors of harassment: members of the public, library staff members, and affiliate staff that work in the library building. Third, participants of the survey identified ideas for addressing sexual harassment in our library, including training around a variety of topics and policy changes.

We were asked to present our findings at a library staff meeting and obtained the support of our university librarian to create a task force around addressing the survey results. This task force was initially made up of 6 volunteer members and met monthly to determine priorities for the group and decide on actions around the survey results. The task force worked closely with our campus CARE advocate to learn about campus resources and explore training options.

The task force decided to prioritize training efforts to address the immediate issue of awareness-raising around sexual harassment at UCSF Library. The group created a series of presentations for our bimonthly library staff meetings which are attended by all employees. The first presentation summarized the results of the survey described above. The second presentation outlined definitions of sexual harassment based on the survey responses. Our goal for this presentation was threefold: to validate the experiences of our employees, to make sure everyone understands what sexual harassment looks like at our library, and to confirm that our staff will work together to create a work culture where sexual harassment does not happen. In this presentation, we stated a desire to go beyond the University of California's definition of sexual harassment in order to create a culture of respect and safety for all of our employees. Our university librarian underscored the importance of our efforts in the presentation by confirming that these types of behaviors will not be tolerated and the library would hold people accountable for their actions. Our third presentation was a collaboration with our CARE advocate who provided information about reporting options at UCSF and facilitated a group discussion to identify additional questions and suggestions around reporting, both within the library and the wider university environment.

For additional educational efforts, the task force also identified library staff onboarding as a key place to provide training on sexual harassment policies and behaviors, primarily to augment the current requirements for all staff to complete mandated sexual harassment training. We also added language to our library's website identifying anti-sexual harassment behaviors as a priority.

In addition to educational efforts for library staff, the task force also identified policies that affected members of the public, the most commonly reported exhibitor of sexual harassment behaviors in the survey. At ZSFG Library, a branch library within the UCSF Library system, we created a zero tolerance policy which was posted on our website and printed at our front desk area; staff are now able to refer to this document if sexual harassment behaviors occur. We have also developed a system whereby the person working at the front desk can step away and ask another staff member to speak to the patron about their behavior. We hope to explore and implement similar processes at the larger UCSF Library.

In an effort to extend the work being done at UCSF Library, we have expanded the existing survey project to all 10 University of California campuses. It is our hope that by understanding more about the experiences of all

UC library workers, library employees at each campus will be able to begin similar conversations and efforts to address this issue locally and systemwide.

Future work of the UCSF Library task force includes the creation of a reporting flowchart to share with library staff, continuing educational efforts around bystander training and microaggressions, and understanding and integrating into campus-wide efforts by continuing our work with CARE and the Coordinated Community Review Team of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Misconduct, to which one of our librarians was recently appointed. We are also interested in exploring future surveys to measure the impact of our work and evaluate our library culture around this issue.

Limitations

There were some limitations to our study; namely, that we focused on a small, local population in order to produce results for our individual library environment. We did not use an existing scale to measure sexual harassment in our survey, such as the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ),[10] and therefore cannot compare our results to other libraries. However, because we wanted to understand experiences of staff members at our library, rather than measure the prevalence of sexual harassment across library environments, we felt that developing a survey with the input of our library staff and their lived experiences would be more effective in measuring and addressing this issue.

Selection bias may be present in our study: while our response rate was relatively high, it may not have represented the views of all library staff members. Because of the lack of diversity in our library and the need to maintain anonymity, we were unable to ask about demographic information such as race or sexual orientation which may have yielded additional knowledge around intersectional experiences. Previous research has shown that women of color and sexual and gender minority people experience more harassment; it is crucial to consider the role of intersectionality in order to understand the scope of experiences involving workplace sexual harassment.[3] We believe that considering all pieces of a person's identity is extremely important, and the fact that many libraries are not diverse enough to include these questions in a survey without compromising anonymity is a major failing, both for our profession and future studies in this field. Some behaviors included in our survey may not have fit into the University of California's definition of sexual harassment[8] as repeated behaviors that create a hostile environment, e.g., asking you out on a date. However, we felt that even one standalone instance of a behavior that someone considers to be sexual harassment can create a hostile environment. This position has been validated with a new California law that indicates a hostile environment can be created with a single instance of a behavior.[11]

Conclusions

Forty-eight percent of library employees in our study experienced workplace sexual harassment, including a variety of behaviors from various staff and user groups. Most employees did not report harassment, but very few stated that these experiences did not affect their work. Although the vast majority of library employees consider addressing sexual harassment to be very important, many believe that our university does not consider this to be a priority. Our library's recently-formed sexual harassment task force has devoted our efforts to prevention and policy change, through education of library staff members and addressing behaviors of our users through policies and guidelines. With continued efforts, we hope to create a culture in our library where sexual harassment does not happen.

Appendix 1. Survey Instrument

Data can be accessed at https://doi.org/10.7272/Q6T43R78.

Appendix 2. Summary Report of Survey Results

Data can be accessed at https://doi.org/10.7272/Q6T43R78.

Notes

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