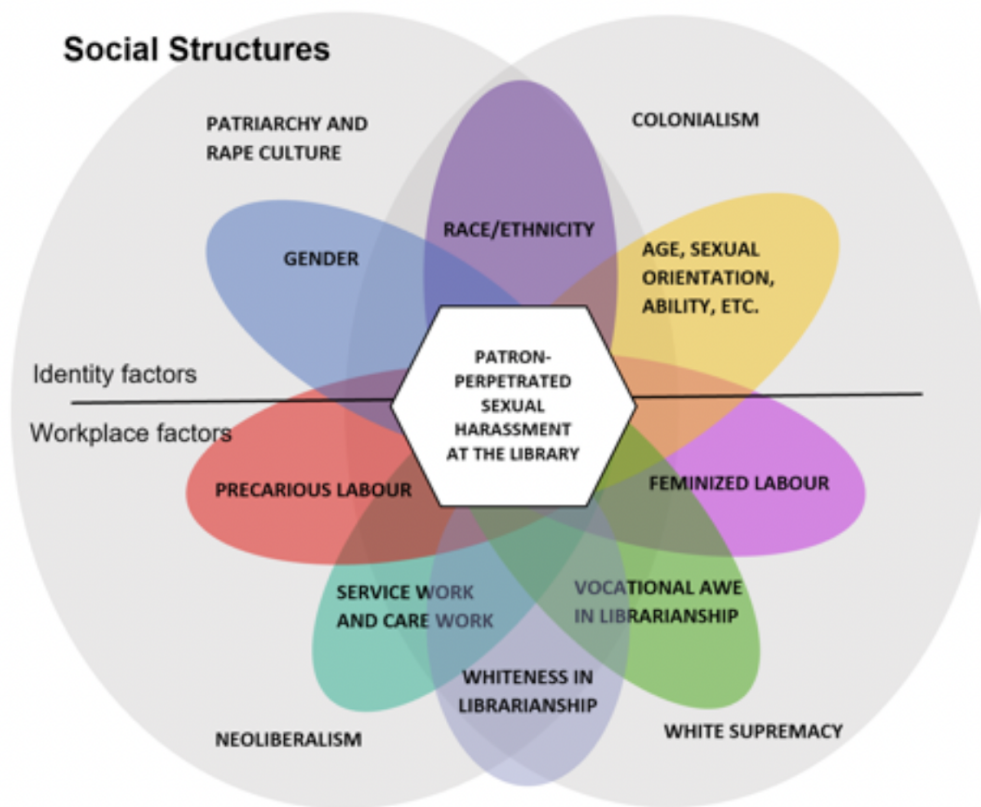


## Patron-Perpetrated Sexual Harassment in Public Libraries

Patron-perpetrated sexual harassment (PPSH) refers to sexual harassment perpetrated by patrons, visitors, or customers of an establishment towards staff members. In the context of public libraries, PPSH is sexual harassment from library patrons towards public librarians. PPSH is an umbrella term and includes not only sexual harassment but sexual assault and rape as well.

Sexual harassment in libraries is severely under-researched, and rarely openly discussed. Professional bodies have historically been silent on the issue of sexual harassment in libraries, despite indicative evidence that many librarians have experienced sexual harassment at work.

The diagram below provides a summary of the various contextual factors that play a role in PPSH in libraries. Many of the workplace factors are not unique to libraries. Hospitality, nursing, and retail share many of these factors, and there is substantial research showing all three experience high rates of PPSH.



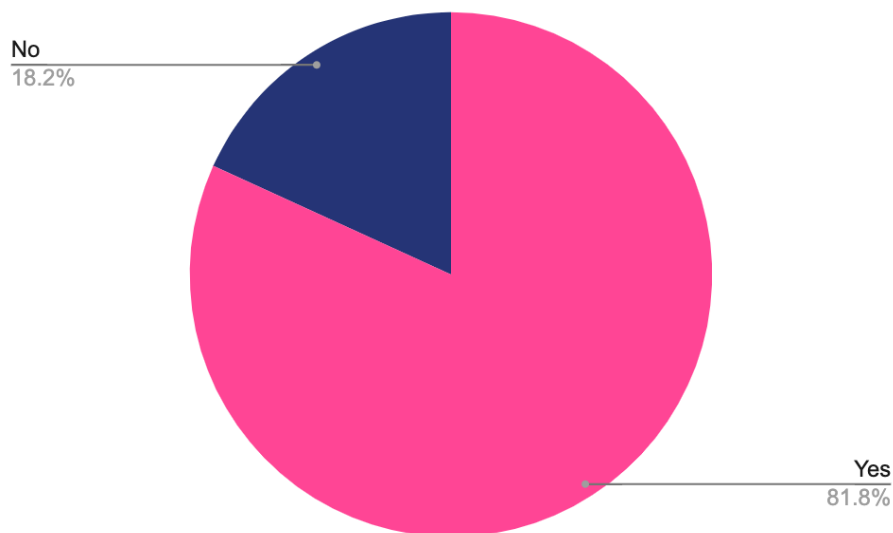
Allard, Lieu and Oliphant, 2020, p.424

## **Research and Results**

As a part of my Library and Information Studies MA at UCL, I investigated PPSH in UK public libraries over the past five years (2017-2022). This investigation primarily took the form of an anonymous survey. The survey was run for 34 days across May and June 2022 and received 143 complete responses. The survey questions on sexual harassment were taken from the UK Government's [2020 Sexual Harassment Survey](#).

The following is a brief summary of the survey results.

Did respondents experience at least one form of PPSH in the last five years?



- **81.8% of respondents** experienced at least one form of PPSH in the last five years
- **14 of the 16 sexual harassment behaviours** listed in the survey were experienced by respondents
- The most common forms of sexual harassment were experienced by around 50% of respondents. These were:
  - **unwelcome jokes or comments of a sexual nature**
  - **unwelcome staring or looks**
  - **displays of pornographic or sexually offensive material**
  - **unwelcome comments of a sexual nature about your body and/or clothes**

- Just under 10% of respondents experienced a form of sexual harassment that was not listed on the survey
- The only forms of sexual harassment **NOT** experienced by respondents were:
  - a patron taking and/or sharing sexual pictures or videos of you without your permission
  - rape and/or attempted rape
- This does not mean that these forms of harassment have never been experienced by UK public librarians. Rather, it means that they were not experienced by survey respondents in the last five years.

Gender:

- **84.6% of female respondents** experienced at least one form of PPSH in the last five years
- **56.3% of male respondents** experienced at least one form of PPSH in the last five years
- **100% of non-binary and self-described gender identity respondents** experienced at least one form of PPSH in the last five years

Ethnicity:

- **82.5% of white respondents** experienced at least one form of PPSH in the last five years
- **75% of respondents of colour** experienced at least one form of PPSH in the last five years

Age:

- **100% of respondents who were under 18 years old** when working at a public library in the last five years experienced at least one form of PPSH

**Respondent Demographics:**

- The vast majority of respondents identified as female (86%). Just over 11% of respondents identified as male, and just under 3% identified as either non-binary or self-described.

<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Female	86.0%
Male	11.2%
Non-binary OR prefer to self-describe	2.8%
Total	100.0%

- The majority of respondents identified as white (83.9%). The full breakdown of respondent ethnicities can be seen below.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Asian or Asian British	7.7%
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	1.4%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	2.1%
Other ethnic group	2.8%
Prefer not to say	2.1%
White	83.9%
Total	100.0%

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Indicative evidence strongly suggests that PPSH is widely experienced in UK public libraries. Librarians of any age, gender, and ethnicity can experience sexual harassment, however, experiences do differ across these groups.

Evidently, further research is required to fully understand sexual harassment in libraries. This includes:

- different types of libraries
- different perpetrators
- how sexual harassment experiences differ according to age, gender, ethnicity, ability
- the impact of sexual harassment on librarians

In addition, action needs to be taken within the profession. This includes:

- professional organisations acknowledging and addressing PPSH. This may include providing resources on sexual harassment training, sexual harassment policies, and support for victims
- library managers should review and update existing sexual harassment policies and training
- sexual harassment education and training should be included in the curriculum for students studying librarianship

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to get in touch.

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**Further Reading:**

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