

Sexual Harassment in the Service Economy

Exploring Women's Retail Work in Canada

by Karen D. Hughes and
Vela Tadic

Les auteures explorent la problématique de "client harceleur" se basant sur les résultats d'une recherche sur les femmes

Female service workers are seen as "sexual commodities" and "the actual work of women, in part, becomes the work of being and dealing with their location as sexual objects." Customers play a key part in this process.

qui travaillent dans les magasins au détail.

According to recent findings from Statistics Canada's *Violence Against Women Survey*, nearly one out of every seven women who has ever experienced sexual harassment at work has been harassed by a *client* or *customer* (Johnson). This statistic suggests a significant problem for working women; yet, within existing research and policy the issue has received relatively little attention.¹ While there is now a well-developed literature on sexual harassment, most studies have focused on employer-employee or co-worker relationships (see Weeks *et al.*, 1986 and Se'ver, 1996 for valuable overviews). In contrast, harassment of employees by *customers*—or what we refer to here as "customer harassment"²—remains relatively unexplored.

Here we briefly discuss preliminary findings from a study designed to examine customer harassment. Our study focuses on retail service work, which includes a diverse range of sales and service jobs within food, clothing, department, and other stores.³ We were interested in this type of work, in part, because of its growing importance as a source of employment for women. In Canada,

the service sector now comprises 70 per cent of the economy and employs 86 per cent of all working women (ECC; Krahn; Statistics Canada 1994). Retail service work has been a key component of this overall growth,

with women taking up a disproportionate share of such jobs (ECC 58). As a result, women now make up roughly half of all sales workers in Canada, up from 39 percent in 1982

(Statistics Canada 1995).

Retail service work is also increasingly precarious, making workers in such jobs vulnerable. Evidence from Canada, and other industrialized countries, shows these jobs to be poorly paid, highly "flexible" (e.g. part-time or casual), lacking in benefits, with low levels of union protection (Berheide; Broadbridge; McDermott). In Canada, approximately 40 per cent of retail workers are in some type of "non-standard" employment (i.e. part-time, temporary, own account self-employment, or multiple jobholding) (Krahn 40), and pay rates are amongst the lowest in the service sector (Grenon). Unionization rates are also the lowest of any industrial sector, with just ten per cent of female workers in retail and wholesale trade belonging to a union in 1991 (Statistics Canada 1994).

Another feature of retail service work which makes it an important site for study is its highly interactive, and often highly sexualized, nature. Studies have shown that dominant notions of sexuality are deeply embedded into service work (Adkins; Broadbridge; Hall; Stanko). Female service workers are seen as "sexual commodities" and "the actual work of women, in part, becomes the work of being and dealing with their loca-

tion as sexual objects" (Adkins 134). Customers play a key part in this process. In her study of the British tourist industry, Adkins found that male customers routinely harassed (e.g. teasing, jokes, deliberate touching) female service workers, and that supervisors and workers largely tolerated this behavior. Hall's research on U.S. restaurant workers also found that supervisors and workers expected female service workers to be friendlier to male customers, and to deal with various harassing behaviors on a routine basis.

A final feature of retail service work, one that we see as having great significance for the issue of customer harassment, is the emergence in 1980s and 1990s of what Du Gay and Salaman have called "the cult of the customer" (615)—a trend evident in the proliferation of "customer service" programs. With heightened competition, retailers have increasingly catered to customers, pressing their workers to do the same (Fuller and Smith). The drive for "customer service" has shaped training programs and job evaluation, and also spawned numerous "new technologies of [worker] surveillance" (Du Gay and Salaman 621). Customer comment cards, telephone surveys, toll-free lines, face-to-face inquiries, and the use of professional shoppers⁴ are just some of the techniques used to gather information on customer satisfaction (Fuller and Smith). To the extent that such practices are used, workers may be vulnerable to harassment from customers, knowing how they respond may potentially shape future evaluations of job performance.

Study details

Given the nature and employment conditions of retail service work, we felt it was an important site for examining customer harassment. The study

we undertook was exploratory and designed to address several key questions: How common is harassment from customers? What form(s) does it take? What are its consequences for female workers? And how do women workers deal with it in a work environment which so clearly privileges the customer?

Information on these questions was gathered from two main sources: (1) a survey of 60 female retail workers about the prevalence, nature, and effects of customer harassment; and (2) in-depth interviews with three women about their experiences in retail sales. All of the women surveyed or interviewed worked in small retail outlets in malls or street locations (e.g. flower, gift, book, or speciality shops). As an additional source of information, we also surveyed 20 security workers employed in these same malls. They offered useful insights given their role in handling formal/informal complaints from workers about customer harassment.

Most of the women surveyed were young and single (never married, separated, or divorced), with 80 per cent under the age of 29.⁵ Security workers, in contrast, were slightly older (average age of 28), mostly single (85 per cent), and predominantly male (80 per cent). The three women we interviewed had all worked in retail service jobs for a number of years, and had experienced customer harassment at some point in their working lives. They included: Sophie (a 35-year-old single woman, with 15 years of experience in retail sales, who is currently a supervisor of a gift store; Brianna (a 22-year-old single woman who, for the past five years, has worked at a flower shop); and Tara (a 27-year-old single woman who has worked in retail for ten years, and for the past four years at a bookstore). We include their views, alongside the summary of survey find-

ings, in the discussion as follows, in order to provide illustrative (not generalizable) examples of customer harassment.

Prevalence of customer harassment

While the 1993 Statistics Canada *Violence Against Women Survey* found that 13 per cent of female workers have been harassed by customers, this figure is an average for *all* workers and likely underestimates the incidence for "front-line" service workers who deal predominantly with customers (e.g. sales clerks). Our study suggests fairly high rates of harassment for women in retail sales. We asked: "Have you ever received any unwanted sexual remark, looks, suggestions, or physical contact from customers that caused you discomfort?" Two-thirds of the 60 female workers reported having experienced some form of customer harassment at the retail location where they worked. Of these, 40 per cent had experienced repeat incidents by the same individual over varying periods of time (e.g. once a week, once a month).

Two-thirds of the 60 female workers reported having experienced some form of customer harassment at the retail location where they worked. Of these, 40 per cent had experienced repeat incidents by the same individual over varying periods of time.

Amongst those women experiencing harassment, 85 per cent had been harassed by male customers, with just 15 per cent indicating harassment from both women and men, and none reporting harassment solely from female customers. Men's predominance as harassers is striking given the gender profile of customers. Only five per cent of the women surveyed char-

acterized their stores as having a predominantly male clientele, with the majority reporting either a mixed clientele of men and women (50 per cent), or female customers only (45 per cent).

While we cannot generalize from these findings, given the small size and specific nature of the sample, it is clear that customer harassment is a common feature of retail service work in these locations. This impression is reinforced by information provided by security workers and the three women interviewed. Nearly two-thirds of the security workers surveyed were aware of incidents of customer harassment in the shopping malls where they worked. A majority had learned of these either through formal reports filed with the security office, or through informal reports to themselves or co-workers. The women we interviewed also felt that customer harassment was fairly routine. As Tara remarked: "I've worked in retail for a number of years so I've dealt with a number of difficult customers. You always have them." Brianna's experience was similar: "Just another story, around here it happens a lot."

Nature of customer harassment

Because harassment can take many forms—from verbal innuendoes to inappropriate physical contact—the survey asked women about customer's specific behavior. The most common forms of customer harassment were staring and leering, experienced by 26 per cent of women, followed by

flirting and sexual remarks (24 per cent) and obscene phone calls (18 per cent). Other behavior included the presentation of offensive materials (13 per cent), touching and grabbing (eleven per cent), and propositions for sex (nine per cent). It is important to note that, in practice, many of these harassing behaviors (e.g. touching, staring, verbal comments, notes) may occur together. For instance, Brianna, noted a common problem with male customers *both* staring and getting unnecessarily close—in her words, getting “... right up to you, close, staring at your breasts and butt.” These behaviors may occur together at a single point, or may comprise a series of acts by the same individual that are ongoing over time.

Like the women surveyed, those we interviewed also noted many different types of harassment, from “minor things you can control” (Brianna) to far more serious incidents that required security and police involvement. Brianna, for example, had faced various types of harassment in her job, including staring and leering, touching and grabbing, as well as receiving offensive materials. In the last case, “... one guy gave me a piece of paper with his phone number in it and a condom rolled into it.” Her worst experience involved a man who stared and followed her around the store, eventually falling to the floor to look up her skirt. In contrast to Brianna, Tara’s experiences were far less numerous and less extreme. Yet, she too noted a common problem with inappropriate touching and grabbing from male customers:

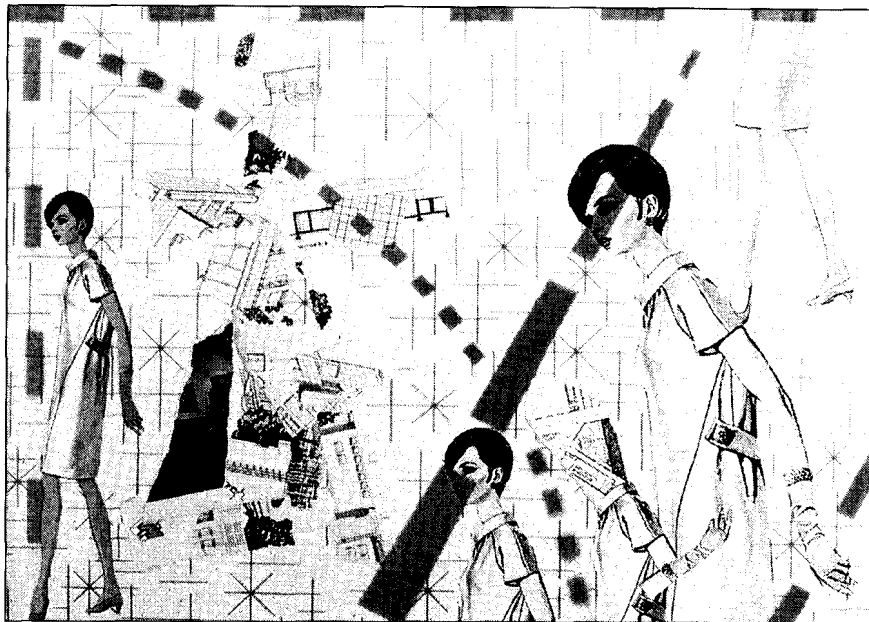
... they'll put their arms around you or they'll put their hands on your back and rub it up and down. And I have no idea if it's specific overtures for any purpose but it's very uncomfortable coming into your personal space, totally unnecessary for the sales interaction.

While customer harassment appears to be common, many of the women surveyed were reluctant to identify

cording to their own sense of personal space and appropriateness. Behaviors are harassment when they feel “inappropriate” or “uncomfortable,” or when they begin to cross “one’s personal space.”

Effects on female retail workers—personal and job-related

If customer harassment is relatively common in retail service work, how does it affect women workers in their personal and working lives? Most common were feelings of embarrassment (20 per cent), anger (16 per cent), worry (16 per cent), fear (14 per cent), illness (nine per cent), as well as danger (eight per cent). Less common was the tendency to feel unaffected by it



Sonja Andic, “Intervals and Paths,”
collage on plastic with spray paint, 32 x 43.5 cm, 1997

various incidents as “harassment” *per se*. This tendency has been noted by other researchers in relation to employer and co-worker harassment (Gutek and Koss; Ring). Thomas and Kitzinger argue that the very pervasiveness of sexualized exchanges between women and men in everyday life operates to minimize and discount sexual harassment as a “problem.” This may be particularly true in retail service work where the emphasis on providing friendly and helpful customer service creates added layers of ambiguity. As one survey respondent noted in additional written comments, the nature of service work makes it difficult to know when harassment is occurring: “You become self-conscious—maybe you’re not being harassed or maybe you are.” Survey responses suggest that workers come to define harassment ac-

(three per cent), to view it as something to deal with (five per cent), or alternatively to feel either flattered (four per cent) or guilty (two per cent). These responses—especially the more common ones such as embarrassment, anger, fear, and illness—suggest many parallels with women who have experienced co-worker and employer harassment (Gutek and Koss).

Job-related consequences are another important concern. While the most commonly reported job-related impact of customer harassment was *no effect* (41 per cent)⁶ many workers experienced important short- and long-term consequences. Two of the most common worked-related effects were avoiding or ignoring male customers (20 per cent) and being less friendly to customers (16 per cent). Both of these pose considerable di-

lemmas for female workers, given their potential to negatively influence worker's sales levels and commissions, as well as customer and employer evaluations of service provision.

On the surface, the fact that many women reported no job-related effect suggests that customer harassment has little impact on their working lives. At a deeper level, however, it may reflect a tendency to normalize harassment as "just part of the job." Brianna hints at this, noting that over time "you toughen up and take crap." For many workers however, there were adverse consequences, particularly in their ability to provide friendly, outgoing, customer service. The women interviewed also noted that they avoided customers, were "more cautious with people" following harassment episodes. Recalling one incident, Tara remarked: "After that, for the rest of the shift, and for a little while after, it was business only...." Clearly, customer harassment hampered her outgoing style and attempts "to develop a connection with the customer," making it difficult to perform well on the job.

Dealing with customer harassment

From research on employer and co-worker harassment (Gutek and Koss), we know that women favour individual and indirect, over direct or institutional responses. Such responses are less effective than a direct response; yet, most women rarely "tell the harasser to stop" and are instead "more likely to ignore the harassment, joke about it, or evade the harasser [especially] when the harassment is mild" (Gutek and Koss 37, 41).

We asked women how they dealt with harassment and what, if any, factors shape their response (e.g. fear of being reported, other customers in store, etc.). Like other women, they appear to favour individual and indirect responses. Overall, the most common response was to ignore incidents (29 per cent), or to discuss

them outside of work with friends or family (24 per cent). Other individual, indirect responses included playing along or joking about the situation (14 per cent), discussing episodes with co-workers or others in the mall (7 per cent), or changing shifts (three per cent). Despite the preference for indirect, individual responses, however, institutional responses were not absent—in fact, the third most common response was to report harassment to management or security (18 per cent). Yet, direct responses were extremely rare, with just a few cases where women directly told harassers to stop (five per cent).

Given the current environment in retail service work, it is easy to understand why workers respond as they do. As Tara remarked, with "... the 'customer is always right' policy, you've got to grin and bear a lot...." Amongst the women interviewed, a key consideration in dealing with harassment was a desire to avoid direct confrontation with customers that might lead to complaints against the worker. Another consideration was a desire to avoid disturbing other customers in the store. As Sophie explains:

you try to play along with them for a bit as long as it keeps it on a friendly level ... you don't want to make it more than it is and when other customers are in the store, you want to make them feel all right about being in the store, even though there's that person there.

Echoing these views, many survey respondents noted in additional written comments how considerations of "customer service" deterred a direct response. As one woman remarked, "In this economy the amount that you make during your shift is a direct reflection upon your ability to sell and assist customers." Other comments suggest that customer considerations outweigh all others—"the customer is always right," "[we] cannot offend or be rude to them," "they are the customer and we cater to them" and "customers come first."

Conclusions

The tendency to privilege the customer in this way means that customer harassment is an important, and potentially growing, problem for working women. As such, the issue deserves a more explicit, and prominent, place in future research and policy agendas on workplace harassment. Following Weeks *et al.* who has shown how employer-employee and co-worker harassment came to be recognized as a "legitimate public issue" in the 1980s, we believe that customer harassment must undergo a similar problematization within academic research, and within public conscience, before workers will have the means to deal with it effectively. Future research which documents the prevalence and nature of customer harassment, and the impact of policies in mediating such behavior, will be invaluable for bringing change about.

The authors have contributed equally to this paper, and are grateful to the women and men who participated in this study. They also thank Kerri Calvert for library assistance, and Harvey Krahn and Graham Lowe for their comments on an earlier version of the paper.

Vela Tadic is a graduate of the BA honours program at the Women's Studies Program at the University of Alberta. Her honours thesis examined the issue of customer harassment.

Karen Hughes is an assistant professor of Women's Studies and Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta. Her research focuses on gender, work, and economic restructuring.

¹A handful of studies have addressed customer-employee relationships with respect to harassment or the "sexualization" of women's work (see for example Adkins; Folgero and Fjelstad). However, a recent and extensive review of the harassment literature, aimed at identifying "glaring omissions" and putting forward a research agenda for the 1990s, fails to

mention the issue of customer-employee harassment at all (Fitzgerald and Shullman).

²Drawing on established definitions of sexual harassment, we define "customer harassment" to include a range of similar behaviors that are initiated by actual, or potential, customers who come into, or by, the store of the worker. The customer may be purchasing something, may have purchased something in the past, or may be perceived as a potential customer. Harassing behaviors include inappropriate verbal comments and/or physical actions that are not necessary for the sales interaction, and/or are specific to the worker's physical and/or personal self. Customer harassment may be an isolated incident, a series of incidents over a period of time, or infrequent incidents by one or more individuals.

³We define retail service workers as those holding "sales" or "service" jobs within the retail trade sector. Our analysis draws on the Economic Council of Canada's typology of services which distinguishes between: (1) traditional services (retail trade, accommodation/food/beverage, amusement, recreation, personal services); (2) dynamic services (transportation, wholesale trade, finance/insurance/real estate, business services); and (3) nonmarket services (education, health, social services, public administration).

⁴Professional shoppers are employed by management to pose as customers and to monitor worker performance. Fuller and Smith note the extreme use of this technique by two firms in their study, where shoppers were wired "so that all interactions were picked up by microphone" (6).

⁵Because information was gathered at the workplace, it was necessary to keep the written survey very short. We therefore asked only a few questions about worker's demographic background, so that the majority of questions could focus on customer harassment. It is important in future research to study more varied groups (for example, groups of younger and older women, women of diverse

ethnicities, etc.) and to gather more detailed demographic data.

⁶It is possible that respondents reporting "no effect" may have interpreted this question as referring to permanent, long-term effects on themselves as workers.

References

- Adkins, L. *Gendered Work: Sexuality, Family, and the Labour Market*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1995.
- Berheide, C. White. "Women in Sales and Service Occupations." *Women Working: Theories and Facts in Perspective*. Eds. A. Stromberg and S. Harkess. Mountaintop: Mayfield Publishing, 1988.
- Broadbridge, A. "Images and Goods: Women in Retailing." *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Ideology*. Eds. N. Redclift and M. T. Sinclair. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Du Gay, P., and G. Salaman. "The Cult[ure] of the Customer." *Journal of Management Studies* 29.5 (1992): 615-633.
- Economic Council of Canada (ECC). *Employment in the Service Economy*. Ottawa: Economic Council of Canada, 1991.
- Fitzgerald, L., and S. Shullman. "Sexual Harassment: A Research Analysis and Agenda for the 1990s." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 42 (1993): 5-27.
- Folgero, I. S., and I. H. Fjelstad. "On Duty-Offguard: Cultural Norms and Sexual Harassment in Service Organizations." *Organization Studies* 16.2 (1995): 299-314.
- Fuller, L., and V. Smith. "Consumer Reports: Management by Customers in a Changing Economy." *Work, Employment and Society* 5.1 (1991): 1-16.
- Grenon, L. "Are Service Jobs Low-Paying?" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 8.1 (Spring 1996): 29-34.
- Gutek, B., and M. P. Koss. "Changed Women and Changed Organizations: Consequences and Coping With Sexual Harassment." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 42 (1993): 28-48.
- Hakim, C. *Key Issues in Women's Work: Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment*. London: Athlone Press, 1996.
- Hall, E. "Smiling, Deferring, and Flirting: Doing Gender by Giving 'Good Service.'" *Work and Occupations* 20.4 (1993): 452-471.
- Johnson, H. "Work-related Sexual Harassment." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 6.4 (Winter 1994): 9-12.
- Kemp, A. *Women's Work: Degraded and Devalued*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994.
- Krahn, H. *Quality of Work in the Service Sector*. General Social Survey Analysis Series, No. 6. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1992.
- Krahn, H. "Non-Standard Work on the Rise." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 7.4 (Winter 1995): 35-42.
- McDermott, P. "Domestic Labour in the Retail Sector: Department Store Work." *Maid in the Market: Women's Paid Domestic Labour*. Eds. W. Giles and S. Arat-Koc. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing Co., 1994.
- Ring, L. "Sexual Harassment and the Production of Gender." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.1 (1994): 129-166.
- Sev'er, A. "Mainstream Neglect of Sexual Harassment as a Social Problem." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 21.2 (1996): 185-202.
- Stanko, E. "Keeping Women In and Out of Line: Sexual Harassment and Occupational Segregation." *Gender Segregation at Work*. Ed. S. Walby. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988.
- Statistics Canada. *Women in the Labour Force*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1994.
- Statistics Canada. *Women in Canada: A Statistical Report, 3rd edition*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1995.
- Thomas, A. M., and C. Kitzinger. "It's Just Something That Happens": The Invisibility of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace." *Gender, Work and Organization* 1.3 (1994): 51-61.
- Weeks, E., et al. "The Transforma-

tion of Sexual Harassment from a Private Trouble to a Public Issue." *Sociological Inquiry* 54.2 (1986): 432-455.

Zemke, R., and D. Schaff. *The Service Edge: 101 Companies That Profit from Customer Care*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.

Sonja Andic lives and works in Toronto. Her collages are created from found and re-cycled paper. Her most recent show was at the Queen's University Wo-men's Centre, and she has had two covers for *Off Our Backs*. Andic is currently designing collage for a book in progress by Pierre Lefebvre entitled *Game*. Her designs are on display at her website: www.interplay.com/sonyoo.collage/

Whatever your **BEEF,** Parliamentary Names & Numbers helps you get your message herd

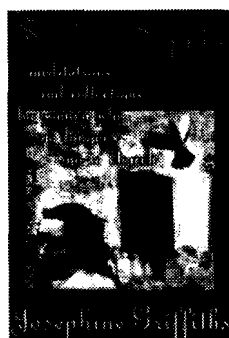


Parliamentary Names & Numbers

Your comprehensive and
inexpensive guide to
governments in Canada.
In print or online only
\$45/year

Parliamentary Names & Numbers
c/o Sources, 4 Phipps St., Ste. 109,
Toronto, ON M4Y 1J5
Phone: (416) 964-7799
Fax: (416) 964-8763 E-mail:
subs@sources.com WWW:
<http://www.sources.com>

New from NOVALIS



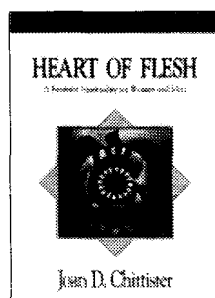
Seeking Sophia

Meditations and Reflections for Women
Who No Longer Go To Church

by *Josephine Griffiths*

"If people like Griffiths would return to institutional Christianity, the church might have a chance to survive the 21st century."—REV JOHN SHELBY SPONG

2-89088-890-X **\$27.95**



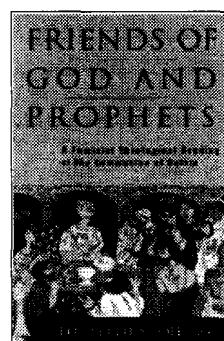
Heart of Flesh

A Feminist Spirituality
for Women and Men

by *Joan D. Chittister*

"Chittister has moved feminism beyond mere power struggles to its rightful place as 'Gospel 101.'"—RICHARD ROHR

2-89088-954-8 **\$29.95**



Friends of God and Prophets

A Feminist Theological Reading
of the Communion of Saints

by *Elizabeth A. Johnson*

"This is the book many women on the edge have been waiting for."

—MARY MALONE, ST JEROME'S UNIVERSITY

2-89088-956-4 **\$29.95**



Searching the Scriptures

edited by *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*

The monumental two-volume landmark in biblical studies, which look at the Scriptures with "different eyes."

Vol.1: A Feminist Introduction

0-8245-1701-6 **\$37.95**

Vol.2: A Feminist Commentary

0-8245-1702-4 **\$44.95**

*Novalis is now the Canadian distributor for Orbis,
Trinity International, Continuum
and many other scholarly and trade publishers.*

Ask for our latest catalogue.

CALL 1 800 387-7164 • NOVALIS • 1 800 204-4140 FAX