For the Field

Sexual Violence Awareness in the Library Workplace

An audio recording and PowerPoint of the workshop are available online.

In Fall 2018, a group of MLIS students developed a workshop to deliver to students in the LIS program at Western University. The goal of the workshop was to raise awareness of the prevalent issue of sexual violence in the library workplace. The aim was to provide students with tools and resources they could use to recognize sexual violence, as well as offer strategies to help protect themselves when they enter the workforce.

Inspiration

The inspiration behind this workshop came from a research project the authors recently completed on the silence surrounding sexual violence in the library workplace. The #TimesUp and #MeToo movements have given sexual violence and protection against sexual harassment in the workplace a public platform (Eisenstein, 2018). These movements are important to libraries because sexual violence has been a long-standing problem in the library workplace (Easton, 1977; Manley, 1993; McGrath & Goulding, 1996; Pease, 1995). A prime example of this issue is the case of Melvil Dewey, who is credited with being the “Father of the Modern Library.” However, he was also a documented serial sexual harasser of the women employed around him (Wiegand, 1996). The fact that his misdeeds are seldom attached to his name demonstrates the lack of discourse surrounding sexual violence within the library workplace. Despite

current societal movements and historical evidence, little academic research has been conducted on the perpetuation and often invisible issue of sexual violence in the public library workplace specifically.

In recent years, libraries have begun to break the silence through blogs, articles, and presentations. At a recent American Library Association (ALA) Conference, Amanda Civitello and Katie McLain (2017) held a discussion titled, “It’s Not ‘Just Part of the Job’: Breaking the Silence on Sexual Harassment in the Library,” opening up a dialogue in the library sphere. In response, other librarians have begun to talk about this issue. DeWitt (2017) commented on the fact that “few library workplaces openly talk about sexual harassment policies” despite how often the issue arises (para. 2), and she emphasized the need for employers to establish policies (if they have yet to), as well as participate in the conversation. This underrepresentation of sexual violence in library settings was part of the inspiration behind this workshop, as we aimed to connect this issue to the LIS student experience, as well as foster discussion and awareness among new professionals in the library field.

In addition, Carlton (2017) and Jensen (2017) have both cited concerns over incidents of sexual violence experienced by library workers, particularly for LGBTQ+ persons and people of colour in the library. Carlton (2017) also raised the concern that incidents of sexual violence occur not just to librarians but also volunteers and underage staff (para. 5). Von Stackelberg (2018) highlighted the nature of library staff as accommodating people who put such a high value on equal access that it makes them reluctant to refuse service to any patron, even those who engage in inappropriate behaviour (para. 7). As future librarians, we believe it is vital that students know how to

access resources and are prepared to address issues of sexual violence and harassment in their workplaces. There is a need to continue the discussion and take the necessary steps to try to protect our colleagues. We recognize that libraries are reacting to issues of sexual harassment in the workplace, and we want to raise awareness so students at FIMS can start to take a proactive stance regarding these problems upon entering the workforce.

Workshop Feedback

The workshop we designed contained several elements intended to give participants tools to respond to sexual violence in the library workplace. We began with a definition of sexual violence in its various forms, and discussed the accommodation culture of the service industry and the ways in which this makes librarians and library staff particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. We also situated libraries in the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements. Next, we discussed ways to respond to sexual violence in the library workplace and demonstrated how to find workplace, provincial, and federal policies aimed at protecting workers from sexual violence. Finally, we concluded the workshop with several case studies to foster further discussion around possible ways to respond to such incidents.

We were pleased to see the high interest and attendance at our workshop (18 attendees) as this shows the importance of helping students develop these tools. At the end of the session, we gave participants feedback surveys to gain insight into what they learned from the workshop and how it could be improved. Over 85 percent of participants noted that the workshop helped to increase their understanding of sexual violence. Over 90 percent felt better prepared to protect themselves against sexual

violence in the workplace. All participants who completed the survey would recommend the workshop to their peers. Participants noted that the most helpful aspects of the workshop were the resources, information on finding policies, and the discussion surrounding sexual violence in the library workplace. Suggestions for future sessions included addressing unsupportive management, increasing the visual appeal of the slides, and extending the scope to include examples of policies and resources outside of Ontario.

Looking to the Future: Next Steps

We are hopeful that in the future, workshops raising awareness of sexual violence in the library workplace will become integrated into the MLIS program. We believe this integration would play a valuable role in preparing students to respond to sexual violence by giving them the proper tools and resources. Our submission to ELIP includes a podcast discussion on the content of our workshop in the hopes of reaching a wider audience. The LIS community can also visit our newly designed website (launched in March 2019), which we created to provide a platform offering definitions, resources, and regularly updated blog posts related to sexual violence in LIS workplaces. In addition, we plan to incorporate new voices and perspectives by inviting guest contributors to help us expand this all-important conversation.

To learn more, visit Shelving Silence on Sexual Violence at

<https://shelvingsilenceonsexualviolence.home.blog/>

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