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“You Feel Like You Don’t Have the Freedom to Do Your Work”: Exploring Fijian Women Journalists’ Experiences of Sexual Harassment

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ABSTRACT

The topic of violence against women in journalism has received growing attention in scholarship, especially in terms of digital forms of harassment. At the same time, many women journalists continue to experience direct forms of harassment in the pursuit of their work. Focusing on the Pacific Island nation of Fiji, this study contributes to scholarship on sexual harassment in journalism by examining the experiences of more than 40 journalists, employing both a standardized survey and in-depth interviews. Our findings demonstrate how widespread sexual harassment is, with colleagues and superiors, as well as politicians and businesspeople the most frequent culprits. Women journalists report a harrowing range of cases, and the results show that inadequate safeguards contribute to sexual harassment’s wide-ranging effect on their personal and professional lives.

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Introduction

The safety of journalists has received increasing attention in global scholarship in recent years. With journalists exposed to a whole range of different types of violence, numerous studies have begun to document the nature of such violence and its effects (e.g., Carlsson and Pöyhtäri 2017; Cottle, Sambrook, and Mosdell 2016; Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez 2017; Larsen, Fadnes, and Krøvel 2021). This is important because of evidence that “direct and indirect forms of violence hamper journalistic professional practice, produces a chilling effect upon colleagues and, ultimately, limits press freedom and the right to information” (Brambila and Hughes 2019, 1). Of notable concern has been the role that harassment—defined as any “unwanted abusive behavior” (Miller 2021, 4)—plays in impacting journalists (e.g., Chen et al. 2020; Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020; Waisbord 2020).

Scholarship has examined different manifestations of structural violence within the field of journalism. Prominent areas of concern are the prevalence of sexual harassment targeting women within newsrooms (Brambila and Hughes 2019; Jamil 2023; North 2016)

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as well as freelance journalists (Harris et al. 2020) or even structural gender discrimination (e.g., Jamil 2020). This continuous and often invisible experience of sexual violence, which is part of the sexual violence continuum (Kelly 2013), remains a pressing issue in journalism, and it persists in numerous countries and media systems. Yet, there are still some understudied regions of the world, such as the Pacific Islands region, which has also more generally received little attention in global scholarship.

This article reports the results of an in-depth study of sexual harassment experienced by women journalists in Fiji. While small by global standards, the country plays a leading role in the Pacific Islands as its second-largest economy (after Papua New Guinea) and it being the base of important regional governmental, economic, educational and media institutions. Further, Fiji provides an interesting context given it is a patriarchal society but more than 50% of its journalists are women. Based on a standardized survey of 42 former and current women journalists, as well as in-depth interviews with 23 of them, we find that sexual harassment is concerningly widespread in Fiji and has worrying consequences.

Discrimination of Female Journalists

Journalism has long been considered a male-dominated profession (North 2016), even though recent years have seen some change, with increasing numbers of countries and newsrooms experiencing a surge in women joining the profession, narrowing the gender gap (Byerly and IWMF 2011; Hanitzsch et al. 2019). However, this numerical progress has typically not resulted in women being less disadvantaged, with the news industry still largely dominated by male norms and standards. In many countries, “hegemonic masculinity” (North 2016, 61) “maintain[s] and create[s] organizational cultures that keep women subordinated and marginalized” (Pease and Velazquez 1993, 342). Gender hierarchical relations can still be found, keeping the journalistic field male-connoted and structured by corresponding social practices (Klaus and Lünenborg 2013). Given that the female gender is accordingly perceived as a deviation from the norm when gender is addressed communicatively (Scholl 2008), a gender-stereotypical habitus still operates in journalism (Bourdieu 1980; Weish 2003). This leads to a power imbalance between men and women that discriminates against women in the workforce (North 2016; Weish 2003).

This discrimination manifests in a variety of ways, which includes the silencing of women (Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020) and the fact women are much less likely to be in leadership positions even where gender balance is increasing (Eddy et al. 2022). Women journalists’ careers are constrained by the hegemonically male workplace culture (North 2009; Ross 2014; Van Zoonen 1998), a lack of equal opportunity policies (Byerly and IWMF 2011; Robinson 2005; Ross 2014), a lack of workplace flexibility for women with childcare obligations (MEAA/IFJ 1996; North 2012), as well as the allocation of lower-prestige soft news stories to female journalists (North 2016; Ross and Carter 2011; Van Zoonen 1998). As in many other professions, there is also a large gender pay gap in journalism (Byerly and McGraw 2020).

Another important form of discrimination is sexual harassment in journalism. The term sexual harassment itself is somewhat recent and was first used by the feminist Catherine Mackinnon in 1979 (North 2016; Thornton 2002). It covers any unwanted conduct of sexual nature (North 2012; Rego 2018), including physical acts, verbal behavior, gestures,

written or graphic material, psychological or emotional harassment (e.g., Barton and Storm 2014; Gruber 1992; North 2012; North 2016; Till 1980).

In the following, we discuss existing scholarship on sexual harassment in journalism in a global context and in the Pacific Islands, as well as the consequences that sexual harassment may have for affected female journalists.

Sexual Harassment of Female Journalists in a Global Context

Numerous studies have shown how women are discriminated against and disadvantaged across various occupations and eventually even become targets of sexual harassment, including in health care (e.g., Acquadro Maran, Varetto, and Civilotti 2022), varying leadership positions (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012), as well as journalism (North 2016). These issues are particularly evident in what are considered male-dominated industries (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012). In journalism, the “feminization of journalism” (Klaus and Lünenborg 2013, 79) has brought with it a spotlight on the working conditions of women journalists and their experiences with sexual assault in the workplace. As a result, incidents of sexual harassment have become more public. An increasing number of women journalists have begun to detail their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace in autobiographical accounts (e.g., Carlson 2017; Haussegger 2005; Trioli 1996). Further, cases of sexual harassment have been reported more prominently in the mainstream media (e.g., Leaver 2014; Lorenz 2023; North 2016). In general, however, sexual harassment has been an issue that media coverage portrays as happening in other industries (e.g., Toscano 2014), while news reports rarely raise attention to incidents within the media’s own ranks (Jamil 2020; Koirala 2020; North 2009; Walsh-Childers, Chance, and Herzog 1996).

Existing scholarship suggests that the problem of sexual harassment is concerningly widespread. A survey of nearly 1000 women in the news media across the globe showed two-thirds had experienced some kind of intimidation, threats, or abuse in the workplace (Barton and Storm 2014). Half of the surveyed female journalists stated they had specifically experienced sexual harassment in the work context, with 14% even reporting they had experienced sexual violence at work (Barton and Storm 2014). Perpetrators included both people inside news organizations and outside, such as news sources. The most common perpetrators included superiors, co-workers, interviewees, government officials, police officers, and subordinates (Barton and Storm 2014). However, only about one-fifth of cases were ever reported (Barton and Storm 2014) and organizational policies to protect personal safety or provide emotional support or professional counseling to targets of harassment or workplace violence were rare. Thus, sexual harassment of women journalists often remains unrecognized and unaddressed (Hersch 2015). These findings are supported by a number of other, more recent studies (e.g., Boateng and Lauk 2021; Jamil 2020; Miller and Lewis 2022; Strang et al. 2013; Zhong, Kebbell, and Webster 2020).

Consequences of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is primarily about power, not sex, which leads women to see sexual harassment as the price they must pay to work in a male-dominated industry (North

2016). Consequently, sexual harassment is often endured and accepted by women, with the vast majority of cases neither reported nor addressed (North 2016). Reasons for this include that those affected do not see a benefit in reporting the incident, they fear victimization, feel they can handle the situation themselves or that they consider the experienced harassment as not serious enough to report it formally (North 2012; North 2016). Ultimately, this results in a spiral of silence: By remaining silent about their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, a kind of “muzzling effect” (Neuwirth et al. 2007) occurs. Hence, when those affected by sexual harassment feel their concerns are unimportant or not significant enough to be heard, they withdraw and silently endure the situation, leading to a vicious cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to escape from (Neuwirth et al. 2007).

This is a phenomenon that continues today, as Møller Hartley and Askanius (2021) show when they discuss patterns of silence around sexual violence in the context of the #metoo movement. Thus, there is still a “code of silence” (Olsen 2021), or even “culture of silence” (Møller Hartley and Askanius, 43) around sexual violence against women, which makes it difficult for women to report incidents. However, just because women rarely report sexual harassment, this does not mean these incidents have no consequences for those affected. Several studies have found that sexual harassment in journalism can have both emotional and psychological effects (e.g., Barton and Storm 2014; McDonald and Charlesworth 2013), with many female journalists placing blame primarily on themselves when such incidents happen (Barton and Storm 2014). Possible consequences of sexual harassment include the lowering of women’s self-esteem, that they feel undermined in their workplace, do not see themselves as equal participants in the organization, and may suffer from serious depression (McDonald and Charlesworth 2013; North 2016). For example, more than half of female journalists surveyed in Australia reported they had experienced psychological trauma as a result of workplace harassment with lasting impacts on their work (North 2012). Almost one-quarter had left a job in the media as they felt they had been discriminated against in their chances for promotion (North 2012). Despite the serious situation of everyday sexual harassment of women in journalism, it is especially women who can help and support each other, eventually increasing success among colleagues (Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020), with women confronting discriminatory behavior and employing and sharing strategies to survive in hegemonic male cultures (North 2009).

Sexual Harassment of Female Journalists in Oceania

In line with the global growth of studies into sexual harassment in journalism, there has been some increased attention in the Oceania region, albeit with a predominant focus on the largest country, Australia (e.g., North 2012; North 2016; Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020). As early as 1996, an industry report found there was a significant and alarming level of gender discrimination in Australian newsrooms, with sexual harassment regarded a systemic problem (MEAA/IFJ 1996). At a rate of 57%, sexual harassment in Australian newsrooms was about twice as common as in the general workforce (Australian Human Rights Commission 2004; North 2012). Roughly 10 years ago, North (2012) showed that sexual harassment in the workplace had increased between 1996 and 2012.

Other studies from the region have examined violence against women in Melanesia and primarily focus on cultural causes, development interventions, and the links between constructions of masculinity and violence (Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020), recognizing a power imbalance between men and women and a “troubled masculinity” (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012, 74). This ultimately leads to gender-based violence, which is still a reality across Oceanian countries, many of which are patriarchal societies (Ellsberg et al. 2008; Heard et al. 2020; Mitchell and Bennett 2020; Onyeke 2010; Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020). As a consequence, women in journalism face challenges such as difficulties in advancing to middle and senior management or their voices being silenced either by having their content reproduced by men, female reporters not getting credit for their stories, or not getting access to sources in the first place (Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020).

In Papua New Guinea there have been significant concerns about workplace culture and the insufficient handling of sexual harassment reports (ABC International Development 2018). Respondents to a survey of broadcast, print and online media in the country noted “safety concerns, lack of managerial and organizational support for effective safety practices and extensive accounts of harassment and sexual harassment in the experiences of women journalists” (ABC International Development 2018, 2). These fault lines could be linked to women’s weaker status in the male-dominated industry, with the report noting that the organizations’ failure to implement and enforce appropriate policies made women feel that safety was not the highest priority (ABC International Development 2018).

In Fiji specifically, there has been very little research on the role that sexual harassment plays in the country’s news media, even though women represent nearly half the journalistic workforce (Singh and Hanusch 2021). The Fiji Women’s Rights Movement conducted two broader reports in 2002 and 2016, which showed a fairly high incidence of sexual harassment against female workers in general (33% in 2002, 20% in 2016). The 2016 report surveyed 1000 women across various sectors in Fiji’s employment hubs of Suva, Nadi, Lautoka and Labasa and found various manifestations of sexual harassment (Fiji Women’s Rights Movement 2016). Half the respondents experienced more than one type of sexual harassment, with younger women and women in junior/middle management most likely to be affected. While 62% of respondents mentioned their employer had a sexual harassment policy, the rest stated that such a policy either did not exist or they did not know of its existence. This resulted in a staggering 82% of the sexual harassment cases being left unreported. Of those women who did report sexual harassment, 13% were told to deal with it themselves, meaning they received no support from the workplace in dealing with the incident or taking future action against perpetrators. In only half the cases (51%) was the offender disciplined, warned, suspended or fired (Fiji Women’s Rights Movement 2016). Studies related to specifically journalism have highlighted that female reporters often fear for their safety while working and that management and organizational support for effective safety practices to prevent sexual harassment is lacking (Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020). Crucially, many organizations fail to adopt, implement, or enforce better support for women. This results in threats and violence remaining a daily problem for many female journalists in the Pacific region (Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020).

While research is increasing in both the larger, more developed countries of the Global North (Baker and Rodrigues 2022; North 2016; Posetti et al. 2021), as well as in the Global South (Baker, González de Bustamante, and Relly 2023; Blumell, Mulupi, and Arafat 2023; Boateng and Lauk 2021; Jamil 2020; Jamil 2023; Sreedharan, Thorsen, and Gouthi 2020), there is still a lack of comprehensive evidence from the Pacific Islands region. For this reason, we focus on Fiji, the second-largest country in the region, to better understand the phenomenon and contribute crucial evidence to the global debate about sexual harassment in journalism.

To do so, we developed the following three research questions:

RQ 1: What is the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment against female journalists in Fiji?

RQ 2: What is the impact of sexual harassment on the professional and personal lives of those who are targeted?

RQ 3: How do Fiji media organizations deal with cases of sexual harassment? What are the reporting mechanisms, if any, and how effective are they?

Methods

To address the research questions, we applied a mixed methods approach, combining a standardized survey with in-depth interviews. Given the complex and sensitive nature of sexual harassment, this mix of methods allowed us both a broad overview of the extent of the problem in Fijian media, as well as the opportunity to probe in-depth specific cases of harassment. In order to reach a broad population, and due to the relatively small number of Fijian journalists overall (Singh and Hanusch 2021), we decided to include both current and former journalists. We used non-probability purposive sampling, whereby researchers use professional expertise, institutional knowledge and industry contacts to select samples and information-rich case studies related to the problem under investigation (Ayhan 2011). Because of social distancing measures in place at the time as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the research was conducted online.

First, we distributed an online survey via Google Docs in early August 2021 to the potential respondents we had identified. Participants were provided with an information sheet containing details about the nature and the purpose of the survey. They were guaranteed complete confidentiality, with the option of withdrawing from the survey at any time of their choosing. Ethical clearance was received from the University of the South Pacific (SPACE 11/21).

Measures

The questionnaire included definitions of sexual harassment in different forms, based on the ILO guidelines (International Labour Organisation 2019). Sexual harassment was thus defined as any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, including: *Physical*: unwelcome touching in a sexual manner — kissing, patting, pinching, glancing or lustful staring; *Verbal*: unwelcome comments about the private life or a body part or person's appearance, sexually suggestive jokes and comments; *Gestural*: sexually suggestive body language and or gestures, repeated winks, gestures with fingers, and licking lips;

Written/graphic: the display of pornographic materials, sexually explicit pictures, screen savers or posters, harassment via emails and other modes of electronic communication; *Psychological/emotional*: persistent proposals and unwelcome requests, unwanted invitations to go out on dates, insults, taunts or innuendo of a sexual nature. The questions for both the survey and the in-depth interviews were developed from the extensive literature discussed earlier.

Sample Parameters

The survey was live between August 3 and December 11, 2021, and received a total of 42 valid responses during that time. This included 20 current, as well as 22 former journalists, a response rate of 33%. The mean age of our respondents was 33.2 years ($SD = 8.09$), and a median age of 32. Respondents had worked in journalism between one and 30 years, and on average 8.3 years ($SD = 6.67$, median 7 years). These figures are in line with recent research on journalists in Fiji in general (Singh and Hanusch 2021). The vast majority of respondents worked in print journalism (80.5%), while 39% also worked in online and 34% in broadcast journalism (multiple mentions were possible). Seven in ten (71.5%) of our respondents were based in Suva, the country's largest city and most dominant media center. When asked how knowledgeable the respondents thought they were about sexual harassment, after reading the definitions of harassment, three-quarters (76.2%) said they were either a lot or completely knowledgeable. A further 19% felt they were somewhat knowledgeable, while 4.8% said they were only a little knowledgeable.

The in-depth interviews took place between October 7 and November 10, 2021. A select number of respondents who had completed the standard survey were approached to take part in the in-depth interviews. Of the 23 respondents, there were 13 current and 10 former journalists. The interview sample included senior, mid-career, and junior-level journalists to provide a good cross-section of work experience and viewpoints. The youngest respondent was 22 and the oldest 51 years of age. They had worked in Fiji's major news media organizations and were able to speak authoritatively about the subject matter, based on personal experiences.

Local Context

While small by global standards, Fiji has the Pacific Islands region's largest and most varied media system, which includes two newspapers, two commercial TV and one commercial radio stations, as well as a state-owned national broadcaster (Singh and Hanusch 2021). While a level of press freedom persists, this has repeatedly come under pressure following a series of military coups that started in 1987, with the most recent occurring in 2006 (Singh 2021). There are only around 100 journalists in the country, yet this is considerably more than in many other Pacific Islands nations (Singh and Hanusch 2021). Women have represented around 50% of the journalistic workforce for quite some decades (Layton 1992; Singh and Hanusch 2021) indicating that our survey sample—while perhaps comparatively small overall, actually covers quite a large number of the population of women journalists. In general, Fijian journalists are young by global and even regional standards, with the average age just 33 years and a correspondingly

short experience of roughly eight years. Journalists are also well educated, with nearly nine in ten receiving some tertiary education, even if only half have actually completed a tertiary degree (Singh and Hanusch 2021). While there are substantial numbers of women in the journalistic workforce in the broader Pacific Island region, they are still disadvantaged in terms of power. The most recent study found that one-third of Fijian women journalists were in some kind of managerial role—which was actually far more than any other country in the region (Singh and Hanusch 2021).

In general, the news media in the Pacific Islands are affected by a range of cultural, political and economic challenges. These include small advertising markets, limited profit margins, low salaries, high staff turnover rates, and a typically young, inexperienced and underqualified journalist corps (Singh 2020). The military coups have left a damaging and lasting impact on the media sector. They triggered a brain-drain in various professions, including journalism, and led to harsher restrictions on the news media, culminating in the punitive Fiji Media Industry Development Act in June 2010. This act, which was repealed only recently in 2023, was blamed for a chilling effect on journalism and fostering a culture of self-censorship (Singh 2020).

Fiji is a male-dominated society with a patriarchal culture, and research into the construction of gender norms in the militarization of Fiji through the coups is said to have accentuated these traits, including intimate partner violence (Tagicakibau 2018). The brutal murder of Fijian journalist and women's rights advocate Losana McGowan in a domestic violence incident in 2015 shocked the nation. The Fijian Media Association president at the time, Ricardo Morris, stated that Ms McGowan's death was confronting for all journalists who report on domestic violence cases on a daily basis. He added that her death showed the existence of domestic violence in the industry and the need for colleagues to support each other (International Federation of Journalists 2015).

Results

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Experiences of sexual harassment were staggeringly common among our respondents. More than eight in ten (83.3%) said they had been sexually harassed at their workplace, with 59.5% saying it had occurred more than once. Only 16.7% said they had never experienced sexual harassment. The most common form of sexual harassment in the workplace was of a verbal nature (Table 1). All of the respondents who had experienced any of the five forms of harassment said they had experienced such unwelcome comments. Gestural sexual harassment was also common, and, particularly concerning, four in ten respondents said they had experienced physical sexual harassment.

Because we were particularly interested in the extent to which journalists experienced sexual harassment from fellow employees, we asked respondents whether any colleagues

Table 1. Forms of sexual harassment in the workplace ($N = 35$).

Verbal	100%
Gestural	60%
Physical	42.9%
Written/Graphic	28.6%
Psychological	27.8%

had made direct sexual remarks to them or told jokes or stories to them which they found offensive. Four in five (81%) said that this had been the case. Indirect offensive sexual remarks or jokes or stories told within earshot of respondents were also common at 73.8%. Journalists at the same level of seniority were the most frequent culprits of such behavior, with 57.1% experiencing direct remarks and 61.9% indirect remarks from journalists employed at the same rank. Worryingly, however, sexual remarks are also frequently made by superiors. Nearly half (45.2%) had experienced direct remarks, and 33.3% indirect remarks of such nature from their boss or immediate supervisor. Only 9.5% of respondents reported direct sexual remarks from junior colleagues, though nearly twice as many (16.7%) reported indirect remarks from this group.

By far the most common manifestations of sexual harassment were comments about their dress and appearance, but also crude, sexual jokes (Table 2).

Of those who had experienced sexual harassment, all said they had received comments about their dress and appearance, and only two had not been told crude, sexual jokes. These incidents were affirmed in our in-depth interviews. One respondent recalled that she and her female colleagues were frequently subjected to jokes of a sexual nature and told to “chill” when they expressed disapproval. Another respondent felt this kind of behavior had been normalized, leaving her disillusioned with her work. Junior journalists felt particularly vulnerable as they did not know about sexual harassment, were new to the workplace, desperate to fit in, and under pressure to produce news stories on a daily basis. One respondent said she tolerated the jokes in an attempt to maintain good work relationships, but this only led to jokes becoming more sexual in nature over time. Another respondent said:

I had accepted it as the norm ... lighthearted moments to share laughter given the Fijian style of joking and spoiling each other. At times it does get physical. They would do it jokingly. I would get hugs from the back and when I resisted, he told me to just relax; it's just a hug.

Nearly half of respondents were also subjected to inappropriate touching, and the same number had been the subject of inappropriate texts and phone calls. One respondent said: “He would always hit my butt ... it became more frequent, slap and grab, bump my boobs, intentionally walking to me, brushing up and ass grabbing, but no poking.” Another said that despite her telling her colleague she was not interested, “he kept pushing until the day he started sending nude photos of his private parts to me, thinking it would arouse me.”

Even the promise of work-related benefits in exchange for sexual favors appeared to be not completely out of the question. Two respondents had been offered a promotion, another two a salary increase, and yet another two had been lured with the promise of a new job offer. Nine respondents also reported having been offered exclusive stories

Table 2. Manifestations of sexual harassment in the workplace (N = 35).

Comments about dress and appearance	100%
Crude, sexual jokes	94.3%
Inappropriate touching	45.7%
Texts and phone calls	45.7%

or interviews in exchange for sexual favors. The insidious nature of such proposals is illustrated by one respondent telling of how the CEO of a company behaved toward her when on assignment:

Before the interview the CEO started admiring my appearance, my Fijian *buiniga* (hair) and so forth. He did ask for my number which I gave. From that time until December 2017, this CEO started asking me over the phone about my private life. He requested me to go out for dates and have sex with him to get money and a front-page story.

Another respondent talked of the time she was sent to interview a senior member of the government who had said he would talk only to her:

Upon arriving there, I was taken into his office where the blinds were down and where I sat through an hour of questions about who I was sleeping with, whether I had a boyfriend and remarks about my looks, my legs and it followed with a proposal of a long-term sexual relationship.

A former journalist said it was actually quite common that newsrooms would strategically use the fact that some interviewees preferred female journalists in order to get stories. "This often happens when the company you work for is trying to get a particular story and seems futile. Women are then used as weapons to lure men and at the end get the story."

Sexual Harassment on Assignment

For Fijian women journalists, being sexually harassed while they are out on the job reporting is also a very common experience. Nearly three in five (57.1%) respondents said they had faced such harassment either sometimes or often. Only six journalists (14.3%) said they had never experienced sexual harassment while on assignment. The two most common types were similar to harassment in the workplace (Table 3). All respondents reported having been verbally harassed, with three in five reporting gestural harassment. Like in the workplace, around one-quarter also reported having been the target of written or graphic harassment. The levels of psychological and particularly physical harassment were, however, much lower.

The most frequent offenders of sexual harassment while on assignment were business people and politicians—powerful figures in society who were evidently trying to abuse their positions (Table 4). More than half of respondents reported harassment from one of these two groups, but community leaders were also the culprits in one-third of respondents' cases, with athletes and religious figures less frequently involved. Other minor mentions included members of the public, defense force personnel, farmers, and journalists from other media companies. One of our interviews even revealed that a journalist, who had been sent to an isolated location to cover an event, was molested by a security guard under the pretext of helping her.

Table 3. Forms of sexual harassment in the workplace ($N = 36$).

Verbal	100%
Gestural	61.1%
Written/Graphic	25%
Psychological	8.3%
Physical	5.6%

Table 4. Sources of sexual harassment while on assignment
(*N* = 36).

Businessmen	58.3
Politicians	52.8
Community leaders	33.3
Athletes	16.7
Religious figures	5.6

In our in-depth interviews, respondents expanded on these incidents, with one respondent talking about how in 2015 she interviewed a permanent secretary whose eyes “locked on my cleavage,” and a government minister who “sat so close to me, putting his hand around me.” She said she felt angry at the lack of respect for her as a journalist, and as a woman. Another journalist encountered a senior government ministry official who insisted on being interviewed outside his office and proceeded to grope her during the interview. Following that incident, she felt too traumatized to write the story.

Respondents particularly recalled incidents during the early stage of their careers. One journalist was sent to cover formal events and functions, where she experienced men rubbing against her, handshakes that took longer than necessary and invitations to after-event rendezvous. Another respondent only had four months of experience when she went to interview a manager at a major multinational corporation in Fiji, who asked that they go somewhere else to talk privately, then proceeded to ask her about her private life, while inviting her for drinks. When she declined, he stopped responding to her questions, and broke off all contact. Another journalist recalled feeling “very uncomfortable,” when a “respected” religious leader started calling her “darling”: “I ignored it at first, because some old people call young girls dear and darling, but he said he really feels good talking to me, and I don’t think he meant it in a polite way.”

Such behavior was commonly reported during our interviews, and many sources even tried to take things further. One respondent said she would be invited on dates, and also received inappropriate messages. One person she interviewed stalked her for months on Facebook: “This type of thing would happen perhaps once a month ... and I was a journalist for years. There were other young female journalists looking up to these men and they treated them in the same way.” Respondents recalled frequent offers of gifts and propositions. One was offered expensive gifts by a “very well-known personality”: “He asked me what kind of outfits I liked. He invited me for (the Hindu festival) Diwali and offered to buy me a dress for the occasion.”

Difficulties for women sports journalists in terms of sexual harassment from sources have already been detailed in the literature (Everbach 2018; Hardin and Shain 2005; Schoch 2013), and it appears this is no less the case in Fiji. Female sports journalists, both photographers and reporters, were the prime targets of certain male athletes, sports officials and fans. One respondent recalled facing comments of a sexual nature on almost every sports assignment, from both players and spectators. Likewise, another said she would get Viber messages from players, and even management, including “sexting.” Some athletes would ask to be interviewed at their homes, where she would be offered drinks. Yet another recalled being groped at a volleyball match by some men who made lewd comments: “I cried in the van as I was shocked. The guys said to suck it up as it was part of the job.”

Reporting Sexual Harassment

While being harassed appears to be a common experience for Fijian female journalists, far from all actually report such behavior, with 45.7% of respondents saying they reported any incidents of workplace harassment. While this means not even half the cases were reported, it is still a much larger number than reported in previous studies in other countries. For example, a study across various sectors of Fiji had shown only 18% of those who were the target of sexual harassment had reported it, while in relation to journalism this number has also been reported to be as low as 20% (Barton and Storm 2014) or, in the case of Australia, even only 13% (North 2012). In terms of sexual harassment experienced while on assignment, however, only one-fifth (19.4%) of our respondents reported the case. The main reasons for not reporting sexual harassment vary, with the most common reason feelings of shame or embarrassment, followed by fear of reprisals or victimization (Table 5).

But a lack of confidence in the reporting system was particularly relevant as a reason for not reporting harassment in the workplace. Less frequent reasons were that respondents said they had been too busy to report the harassment, or felt it was not serious enough.

This was despite the fact the vast majority of respondents (85.7%) said their organization had a sexual harassment policy. Yet when asked how aware their fellow employees were of this policy, one-third (33.3%) said they had zero or little awareness, while just over half (52.8%) said they had at least adequate awareness. Three-quarters (76.2%) said they knew how and where to make sexual misconduct complaints, but many felt their workplace did not have sufficient safeguards against sexual harassment. One-third (36.6%) felt their workplace had none or only few safeguards, while 29.2% thought there were a lot of safeguards in place. Only 16.7% of respondents said their organization provided stress counseling in such cases, and a mere 9.5% said their workplace had never held training on the topic of sexual assault and misconduct. This indicates that guarding against sexual harassment is not a priority for many workplaces.

When sexual harassment had been reported, 32.1% of respondents said they were not satisfied with the management response at all, and a further 17.9% were only a little satisfied. One in five (21.4%) were moderately and 10.7% fully satisfied. The most common response to reports of misconduct against fellow employees was a warning (52.9%). Suspensions or contract terminations were very rare, which may explain why complainants were often not satisfied with the response.

Again, our interviews shed further light on these aspects. In a number of cases, the lack of reporting mechanisms, or the lack of knowledge that they may exist, discouraged those affected from lodging complaints. Concerns that their complaints would not be treated

Table 5. Reasons for not reporting sexual harassment.

	In the workplace	On assignment
Ashamed or embarrassed	38.9%	24.1%
Fear of reprisals or victimization	33.3%	20.7%
No confidence in reporting system	33.3%	10.3%
Too busy	27.8%	10.3%
It wasn't serious enough	22.2%	13.8%
No mechanism for reporting	16.7%	17.2%

seriously or would not be acted upon because some of the perpetrators were prominent figures, also discouraged respondents. One respondent said: “If I had a chance to report the incidents, I would have done it. I would report it if I was provided the right support to do it.” One respondent said she had to seek outside counseling since none was available at her workplace. Those who did complain felt they were not always treated seriously, especially in the case of non-physical sexual harassment, which was often passed off as joking or bantering. One respondent stated that sexual jokes and innuendos were “just normal and part of the work life.” Male supervisors treated verbal harassment as “light-hearted moments” and would join in. One respondent said she was told she needed to develop a “thick skin” as she was in the media industry.

The consequences of this could be severe. One respondent felt it was a dangerous trend that only encouraged the perpetrators: “What starts as harassment quickly escalates to assault when the perpetrators feel protected by a newsroom that puts skill above values.” In some cases, even the more serious incidents involving physical sexual harassment were dismissed when reported. The respondent who had been attacked by the security guard said she was actually blamed when she reported the incident: “They blamed me for wearing a skirt. They blamed me because I didn’t ask the driver to wait for me even though I did. They blamed me for accepting the assignment.” Another respondent added: “The higher-ups should take serious action ... they should also have the initiative to follow through with the police if the matter is reported.”

Impact of Sexual Harassment

A culture of silence exists around sexual harassment, with 42.5% of our respondents saying they had never shared their experiences as a target of sexual harassment with anyone, prior to participating in our survey. Only around one-third (31.6%) had received any form of counseling, which even though comparable to the situation in other countries around the globe (Barton and Storm 2014), points to a continuing inadequate management response. The most pronounced impact was mentally or psychologically, with 42.9% reporting a strong negative impact in this regard (Table 6). But the impact was also strongly negative on respondents’ personal (38.1%) and professional (30.6%) lives. Physical impact was mentioned less frequently, with 38.1% reporting no impact at all in this regard, although still nearly two in five reported moderate or strong negative impact.

In the in-depth interviews, respondents said they felt afraid, demeaned, depressed and demoralized. They did not feel like coming to work, and those that did turn up, found it hard to concentrate. They dreaded having to face the perpetrators again, whether they were a workmate, or someone they had to interact with in the course of their reporting.

Table 6. Impact of sexual harassment.

	M	SD	% moderate or strong negative impact
Mentally/Psychologically	2.92	1.19	52.4
Personally	2.72	1.19	45.2
Professionally	2.69	1.06	52.8
Physically	2.28	1.28	38.1

Note: Means calculated on the basis of a four-point scale, where 1 was no impact at all, 2 slight negative impact, 3 moderate negative impact and 4 strong negative impact.

One respondent said she felt “uncomfortable” and “angry” because of the lack of respect for women.

You feel like you don’t have the freedom to do your work and execute it to the best of your ability because at the back of your mind, you know that someone’s eyes are going to be on you in the most disgusting way.

One respondent who started to avoid certain assignments said it was because she felt “scared most of the time.” She felt she was not progressing at work and took to drinking as a coping mechanism. For another, the stress took a mental toll, and caused her to leave the industry: “Your mind and body just shut down and you don’t want to get out of bed.” The respondent who had been attacked by a security guard said she no longer wanted to interview men, unless it was in a public setting. She eventually quit her job.

According to one respondent, the sexual harassment she experienced affected her “whole being” — her work, her personal life and her relationships with others. At one point she refused to talk to most men because she felt unsafe around them. She resorted exclusively to phone interviews because she was frightened to meet strangers in person. A sports journalist said she became too shy and scared to even enter a sports venue. Her performance at work suffered as a result:

I recall on Sunday I was covering a football match at the National Stadium ... the sexual comments from the crowd and the reserve players shook me up. My hands were shaking so much that I couldn’t control the camera, and my footage was not the quality to be shown on national television.

Some respondents pointed out that the problem goes beyond the newsroom and is rooted in Fiji’s patriarchal society. One said she felt it started from how people had been brought up, and the mindset that women were inferior to men, with the woman’s role that of the homemaker: “When they see us out there in field, reporting on issues, I guess it’s something that bruises their egos. They objectify us for pleasure.” These views were echoed by another respondent, who also believed that it “starts from the home”: “Young boys must be taught about the right and wrong.” These responses suggest that sexual harassment could, in part, stem from deeply rooted attitudes in society and while efforts by individual sectors and organizations to counter the problem is required, the situation also calls for broader, national attention.

Discussion

Overall, our findings suggest that Fijian women journalists are acutely aware of and negatively affected by sexual harassment in their work. Within the newsroom, such violence toward women appears widespread, with colleagues and supervisors being the main culprits, harassing women verbally by commenting about their appearance or making sexual jokes and remarks. But inappropriate physical touching, text messages or phone calls are also extremely common. Outside their immediate newsroom environment, women journalists are not spared from sexual harassment either. While on assignment, many experience it primarily at the hands of politicians and business people, who are usually in a position of power. Sexual harassment has many different facets and manifests itself differently depending on the context (e.g., Barton and Storm 2014; North 2016). Yet, in all cases

it results in constraints and discrimination against women in their daily work lives (North 2016; Weish 2003).

Our results support previous studies' findings that, particularly in male-dominated work environments such as journalism, power imbalances between men and women can eventually result in sexual harassment (Acquadro Maran, Varetto, and Civilotti 2022; McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012; North 2016). The imbalance of power and male hegemony in the newsroom is exploited (Barton and Storm 2014; McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012), for example, by offering female journalists access to better stories or sources in exchange for sexual favors. Likewise, on assignment, the most prevalent perpetrators were particularly influential individuals, such as businessmen or politicians, who crossed the boundaries of professional cooperation by, for instance, inviting female journalists on dates or sending them inappropriate messages. Our findings are consistent with previous studies which have demonstrated that sexual harassment is primarily perpetrated by powerful male counterparts, such as supervisors, bosses, interviewees, and government officials, making it a contemporary problem for many female journalists worldwide (ABC International Development 2018; Barton and Storm 2014).

The severity of this problem is particularly reflected in the fact that respondents indicated sexual harassment had a negative impact on their well-being and life in general. Personal lives, in particular, suffered from the sexual harassment and intimidation, as did work performance. This aspect is worrying because it may lead journalists to be silenced or leave the workplace, showing that workplace harassment can have a lasting impact on job performance and cause psychological trauma (North 2012) and depression (McDonald and Charlesworth 2013).

While mechanisms for reporting sexual harassment do exist, many are reluctant to use them for fear of reprisal and victimization, motives that have also been reported in previous studies (McDonald and Charlesworth 2013; North 2012; North 2016). This hesitation is also reflected in the fact that a large proportion of our respondents had not previously spoken about their experiences of sexual harassment, which suggests a "muzzling effect" (Neuwirth et al. 2007) that makes them reluctant to share their experiences publicly. At the same time, our study has found that the percentage of those who report harassment is considerably higher than what was reported from around the world a decade ago (Barton and Storm 2014), but also broader Fijian data (Fiji Women's Rights Movement 2016). This is encouraging news which may point to a slight improvement in women's willingness to speak out. While they did not directly reference it, we suspect that the #metoo movement, which raised awareness of sexual harassment of women in the media globally, may have also encouraged at least some of our respondents to report such behavior. Overall, awareness of the problem of sexual harassment appears to be low, resulting in infrequent public allegations. In cases of reported sexual harassment and misconduct, the women we interviewed were rarely satisfied with management's response and mostly felt they were not sufficiently taken seriously.

Additionally, our respondents criticized the lack of safeguards against sexual harassment, calling them either non-existent or inadequate. There appears to be a deficiency in adequate education, as well as a reluctance to impose appropriate consequences on perpetrators. The lack of organizational support for safety practices and management support for establishing an effective reporting system to support targets of harassment and prevent sexual harassment is a problem in many countries, as previous studies have also shown (Onyeke 2010; Robie 2008; Valencia-Forrester, Backhaus, and Stewart 2020).

Conclusion

By and large, our study of the small Pacific Island nation of Fiji and its women journalists' experiences of sexual harassment confirms similar evidence from around the world, but also somewhat encouraging insights in terms of the frankness with which our respondents spoke with us, as well as the fact that nearly half reported instances of sexual harassment to management. Global data from a decade ago suggests this is a considerable increase, and perhaps the developments over recent years—including the #metoo movement—as well as the high level of awareness of sexual harassment policies available to our respondents, may be contributing to a climate that allows women journalists to become at least a little more empowered in such respects, even in patriarchal societies like Fiji. Yet, this silver lining should not take away from the key insight that sexual harassment continues to be a major problem in Fijian journalism. More than 80% of our respondents said they were sexually harassed, which is an extremely worryingly high number. As noted by previous work (North 2016), issues of power lie at the heart of this, with harassment typically committed in an abuse of such power. Fiji is a patriarchal society (Adinkrah 2001), and while women make up around half of the journalistic workforce, violence against them is still normalized by men. This demonstrates the need for addressing the problem of sexual harassment through wider, cultural shifts that recognize the size of the problem, and particularly its consequences for those who are impacted.

The stakes in addressing the problem are considerable, and go to the heart of press freedom and quality journalism. As our findings show, sexual harassment has a range of negative impacts, which first of all affect women's personal freedom to work, but as a result also the ways in which news is produced. As evident from your findings, women journalists may decide to self-censor their reporting for fear of reprisals, not cover certain topics anymore, or even leave the profession altogether. The negative impacts that our respondents experienced clearly have wider repercussions on the ways in which wider society is informed about news and current affairs.

We believe that, in particular, our dual methodological approach through a survey and in-depth interviews has illuminated the complex variety of different types of sexual harassment that threaten women journalists. Future studies might find that this approach can illuminate the situation of women journalists in relation to various forms of harassment to gain a deeper understanding. In particular, comparative studies would be highly valuable in order to further examine the relative importance of various societal-level determinants of incidents of sexual harassment and its consequences. While studies of sexual harassment have proliferated over recent years, we still have an incomplete understanding in this regard.

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