



Research Summary: Survey on Responses to Sexual Harassment

This is a summary of the results of a survey on sexual harassment designed to understand how individuals, particularly women and girls, would like to respond, might respond and do respond to sexual harassment. The survey was released by **The Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC)**, a not-for-profit, community-based organization in Toronto, Ontario (Canada) that prevents violence against diverse women and youth (www.metrac.org). It was distributed through partnership support of **Holla Back!**, a movement dedicated to ending street harassment using mobile technology (www.ihollaback.org). The survey was available online between October 2010 and January 2011 and 127 people responded with different response rates for each question. Survey results will help METRAC create an iPhone application to help raise awareness about and challenge sexual harassment. The application will support women and youth in “everyday” instances of sexual harassment; provide key information and community supports; and increase public awareness about sexual harassment in general.

METRAC thanks Executive Director Emily May of **Holla Back!** and the whole **Holla Back!** community for supporting this project. METRAC also thanks Sadira Crystal Mohammed, B.Sc. for her volunteer support in data analysis.

Results at a glance

- Most respondents live in the United States (64.8%), are between 25 and 64 years old (35.7%) and identified as women (92.8%).
- Many (26.3%) said they never responded to sexual harassment in a way that they “felt really proud of”, yet 30.4% of respondents identified doing something to confront the harasser.
- Street harassment: 27.3% said a physically defensive response would be “most satisfying”, but 45.4% said that no response or ignoring the harassment would be “more practical”.
- Harassment from a co-worker: one-fifth of respondents said that physically defending or telling the harasser they would physically defend themselves would be the “most satisfying” response. Nearly one-third (30.2%) said that reporting the harasser would be “more practical”.
- Harassment from a boss: 20.7% of respondents said that reporting the harasser would be “most satisfying”, and 44% said that reporting the harasser would be “more practical”.
- Family harassment: 37.7% of respondents said that the “most satisfying” response would be to respond verbally, including exposing the harasser to the family. Exposing the harasser was also viewed as a “more practical” response by 27.4% of respondents.
- Nearly one-third (32.8%) reported responding to sexual harassment “sometimes” and 77% said that when they do not respond, they are “scared it will escalate”. The majority (89%) said they would respond to sexual harassment and “put the harasser in their place” if they could do so without compromising their safety.

Demographic questions

Where do you live?

Of 125 respondents who answered this question, 81 (64.8%) identified living in the United States of America, most of which identified living in New York State (39 or 31.2%). Twenty respondents (16%) identified living in Canada. Other respondents identified living in other regions and countries including the United Kingdom, Egypt, Israel and India.

Your age?

One hundred and twenty-six respondents answered this question, 73 (57.9%) of which identified as adults aged 25 to 64 years old and 45 (35.7%) of which identified as older youth aged 20 to 24. Only five respondents (3.97%) identified as younger youth aged 15 to 19 years old.

Your gender?

Of 126 people who answered this question, 117 (92.8%) identified as women. Six respondents (4.8%) identified as men and one respondent (0.7%) identified as Trans.

Any other information about your identity that you'd like to share?

Sixty-five respondents shared “other information” about their identities. Top answers were as follows:

- 15 (23.1%) identified as “Caucasian” or “white”;
- eight (12.3%) identified as members of LGBTTIQQ2S (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirited and Intersexed) communities;
- six identified (9.2%) as “Asian” 6 (9.2%);
- three (4.6%) identified as a “person of colour”;
- two (3.1%) identified as “African-American” or “black”;
- two (3.1%) identified as “Jewish”; and
- two (3.1%) identified as “multi-racial”.

Responses to sexual harassment

Have you ever responded to sexual harassment in a way you felt really proud of?

Ninety-nine people answered this question and 26 of them (26.3%) responded in the negative.



“No, I tried to flip the bird to a guy earlier who winked at me while I adjusted my tights, but he didn't see.”

“No I haven't. I have no idea how to respond and its paralyzing in the situation. I'm totally frustrated by my inability to stick up for myself.”

“No. I wish.”

Thirty respondents (30.4%) did something to confront the person harassing them, verbally or otherwise.



“Once, in a nightclub, a random guy grabbed my butt. Instead of walking by, ignoring it, I turned around grabbed him and told him not to disrespect me like that again.”

“On the subway during morning rush, a man grabbed at me several times. The first few times, I figured it was just an accident (I didn’t want to jump to conclusions) – until I realized, no, this creep was actually grabbing my ass. I said, ‘Excuse you?!’ ... when he (inevitably) grabbed me again, I stomped on him. With my high-heeled shoe.”

“A street harasser made really rude and provocative comments. I responded by shouting and leaping to the defense of my companions to vindicate and validate their feelings ...”

“As I was making my way off the shuttle [bus], a dude grabbed my waist as he was squeezing past me. I froze, then yelled, “Do NOT touch me!” I flew off the bus, horrified, but in hindsight I am very happy I said something.”

If someone random sexually harassed you on the street, what response would feel the most satisfying? What response would be more practical?

One hundred and twenty people responded to the question about the “most satisfying” response to street harassment. Thirty-three respondents (27.3%) said that the “most satisfying” response would be a physically defensive one, and 44 (36.6%) said that the “most satisfying” response would be a verbally defensive one, including swearing at the harasser through words or gestures.

With respect to a “more practical” response, 119 people answered, 54 (45.4%) of which would give no response or ignore the harassment. Eighteen respondents (16%) would counter the harassment with verbal communication, including confronting the harasser about their actions.



“Telling them it’s inappropriate calmly.”

“Yelling, or possibly having a conversation if they aren’t driving by in their car.”

“If I felt safe enough, looking them in the eye and telling them it is not ok to harass women.”

“Help them to realize that they are putting down women, and shame them.”

If a co-worker told you, “I want to hit that”, what response would be the most satisfying? What response would be more practical?

Of the 120 people who responded to the question about the “most satisfying” response, 24 respondents (20%) would defend themselves or speak to defending themselves physically.



“Tell them you'd feel like hitting them too. In the face.”

“Dumping a drink over them, probably.”

“Ew’ and slapping them.”

Thirty-five respondents (29.2%) said that the “most satisfying” response to harassment from a co-worker would be a verbal one, including a confrontation with the harasser about their actions and/or telling them off. With respect to a “more practical” response, 119 people responded. Thirty-six respondents (30.2%) said they would report the harasser to someone else, including the employer and human resources staff. Forty-seven respondents (39.5%) would communicate to the harasser verbally, some of which would confront them about their behaviour.



“I am not interested.”

“Excuse me? That is definitely sexual harassment. Don't do that. Ever.”

“A polite rejection and dropping the issue in case I get negative attention for speaking out.”

If your boss sexually harassed you at work, what response would feel the most satisfying? What response would be more practical?

One hundred and sixteen people answered the question about the “most satisfying” response to sexual harassment from a boss. Twenty-four respondents (20.7%) said they would report the behaviour to the workplace.



“I would tell them it was inappropriate, document it and file a complaint.”

“Removing myself immediately from the situation and reporting them to co-workers/ anyone who had authority over [my boss].”

Nineteen respondents (16.4%) said that a physically defensive response would be “most satisfying”, and 18 respondents (15.5%) said that getting the harasser fired would be “most satisfying”.

With respect to a “more practical response”, 116 people answered. Fifty-one respondents (44%) would report the harasser. Nineteen respondents (16.4%) would ignore the harassment or refrain from responding, and 15 respondents (12.9%) would respond verbally in some way to try to counter the harassment.

If a family member (such as a cousin or uncle) said something sexually harassing to you, what response would feel the most satisfying? What response would be more practical?

One hundred and fourteen people answered the question about the “most satisfying” response to harassment from a family member, forty-three (37.7%) of which would respond verbally. This could include exposing the harasser to their family (21 or 18.4%).



“Yell at him and inform the entire family. Refuse to be alone with him.”
“Humiliating them publicly/verbally.”

Eighteen respondents (15.8%) said that a physically defensive response would be “most satisfying”.

One hundred and thirteen people answered the question about a “more practical” response to harassment from a family member. Thirty-one (27.4%) indicated that they would expose the harasser to family members and 18 (15.9%) said they would not respond or ignore it. Fifteen respondents (13.3%) said they would communicate to the harasser verbally in some way.



“Do you realize you just said that out loud?”

How often do you respond to sexual harassment?

Of 125 people who answered this question, the breakdown of responses is as follows:

- 37 (29.6%) said they “hardly” respond to sexual harassment;
- 16 (12.8%) rate their frequency of response as a “2” on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is “hardly” and 5 is “often”;
- 41 (32.8%) said they “sometimes” respond to sexual harassment;
- 18 (14.4%) rate their frequency of response as a “4” on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is “hardly” and 5 is “often”; and
- 10 (8%) said they “often” respond to sexual harassment.

When you don’t respond to sexual harassment, what are the reasons?

Of the 126 people who responded to this question, 97 (77%) selected the option, “I’m scared it will escalate” and 63 (50%) selected “There is no good response”. Fifty-five respondents (42.6%) chose “other”. Of these respondents, 6 (10.9%) pointed to safety issues as a reason for their non-response to sexual harassment.



“I feel at risk, vulnerable and I might be putting myself in danger.”
“Don't want to get stabbed, shot, stalked, murdered, raped, etc.”

Ten respondents (18.2%) who chose “other” indicated that they sometimes do not have the energy, time or opportunity to respond to sexual harassment.



“I don’t have the energy – happens too often.”

“Sometimes you can’t be bothered with idiots.”

“I freeze. It’s so unbelievable to me that someone would say or do those things that I just freeze up and don’t react, then of course 30 seconds later I think of all the things I should have said and done. I also have no practice or examples for what that looks like – it is a much less instinctual response for me to respond, and then the incident is over.”

If you had a response to sexual harassment that you knew would put the harasser in their place without compromising your safety, would you speak up?

All respondents answered this question, 113 (89%) of which selected “yes” and 14 (11%) of which selected “I’m not sure”. No respondents selected the “no” answer option.

If a friend who experienced sexual harassment wanted to get support, what organizations, services, phone lines, websites or resources would you suggest?

One hundred and four respondents answered this question. Thirty-seven (35.6%) said they would refer their friend to **Holla Back!** and 16 (15.4%) would refer their friend to the police. Twenty-seven people (26%) said they are unsure or do not know where they would refer a friend.



“I don’t know...I didn’t know where to go...”

“I don’t know any. I don’t think there is a good way to report sexual harassment without feeling like a ‘complainer’. It’s sad. I hate it. I wish there was something we could do. I wish men would respect women. Why is that so hard?”

Need for further exploration

- How do people not adequately addressed in this survey such as racialized women, Aboriginal women, trans people, women with disabilities and girls respond to sexual harassment? What are their unique experiences of sexual harassment?
- How do students, especially girls and young women, respond to sexual harassment in a school and classroom environment?
- What do people view as the elements of a truly successful response to sexual harassment?
- How can a person best support their friend who is dealing with sexual harassment? What response is helpful and what response is not helpful?