

Sexual Harassment in the Science Fiction & Fantasy Communities

Survey Results

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The science fiction and fantasy community has a problem: sexual harassment and sexual predation by men.

I put up a [survey](#) recently on the subject. The results, while not surprising, were nonetheless sobering. Of 948 respondents:

- 23% had been sexually harassed at a convention.
- 33% had witnessed sexual harassment at a convention.
- 37% had a family member, friend, or colleague who had been sexually harassed at a convention.

The numbers for the online community were worse:

- 32% had been sexually harassed online.
- 62% had witnessed sexual harassment online.
- 41% had a family member, friend, or colleague who had been sexually harassed online.

The respondents' detailed description of their experience graphically described the problem. Of the 396 people who responded to the request for details about their experiences:

- 236 had been the victim of verbal harassment.
- 145 had been the victim of physical harassment (groping).
- 29 had been victim of threats of rape and/or violence.
- 3 had been the victim of a man masturbating themselves in front of the respondent (in each case a woman).
- 5 had been the victim of a sexual assault at a convention.

In many cases the harassers are prominent figures: the award winner who likes to use his fame as a lever with which to lure under-age women to his hotel room for sex; the best-selling author who likes to lure young women and under-age women to his hotel room for BDSM sessions—when confronted about this behavior, he claims that since there's no penetration, it doesn't count as statutory rape; the award winner who imitates Isaac Asimov's serial groping behavior; the award winner who uses his fame to pressure young women to sleep with him; the anthology editors who demand sex from female authors in exchange for being published in the anthologies; the small press owners who demand sex from female authors in exchange for being published by the press; the editor who targets children.

In some cases the harassers are known within the industry and to their colleagues to be harassers, but no action is taken against them. One book editor harassed his authors; complaints to the editor's superior were not forwarded on to the publisher's Human Resources department, and nothing was done to prevent the editor from continuing to harass his authors.

Some of the victims of harassment refuse to go to specific conventions any more, whether because of that convention's weak anti-harassment policies, the weak response by the convention's staff to complaints about harassment, or because a harasser is a regular participant of that convention. Some of the victims refuse to go to any conventions now, because of their negative experiences. Some of the

victims are no longer comfortable at conventions unless they are in the presence of a male partner or friend or group of friends. Some of the victims have developed PTSD as a result of being harassed.

Solutions to this problem are not simple. Both WisCon and Readercon were the sites of recent notable cases of harassment, and both toughened up their policies and procedures as a result of their initial failures to properly handle the situations. But it is arguable that convention policies are better at punishment than prevention. Ultimately, what is going to solve the problem of harassment is, first, the strict enforcement of anti-harassment policies by conventions—still a problem, as some convention organizers and runners feel that to publicize anti-harassment policies is to make more of the problem than it is, and that one-size-fits-all anti-harassment policies don't allow for nuance and personal judgment in dealing with cases of harassment. Second, more victims must report harassment after it happens. There are obvious reasons why victims of harassment don't come forward: feeling shock and shame at what happened, feeling that they won't be believed or taken seriously, feeling that nothing will be done about it, feeling that anti-harassment policies won't do enough, and feeling that conventions won't handle their complaint in a sensitive and understanding fashion. Thirdly and most importantly, more witnesses, especially more men, must intervene when harassment is taking place and put a stop to it. Many of the survey's respondents told stories of being harassed in public and no one stopping the harassment or letting the harasser know that what they were doing was unacceptable. Men in particular are reluctant to stop other men from bad behavior. This needs to end. Men must be more proactive in preventing harassment from taking place and stopping harassment when it occurs.