

Sexual Harassment and Discrimination in Employment – Questionnaire Survey for Flight Attendants

Summary of Survey Findings

As an attempt to promote awareness of sexual harassment in the service industries, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has partnered with the Hong Kong Flight Attendants Alliance (HKFAA)¹ to carry out a survey entitled “Sexual Harassment and Discrimination in Employment – Questionnaire Survey for Workers of Service Industries”.² The survey was carried out from late November 2013 to early January 2014. Questionnaires were distributed to 9,000 flight attendants via the HKFAA. A total of 392 completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of about 4%. The major findings revealed that nearly three-tenth (27%) of the respondents were sexually harassed in the last 12 months, while about a half (47%) indicated that they either witnessed or heard about colleagues being sexually harassed inflight. The most common harassers were the customers.

Background

2. Sexual harassment remains a common occurrence in the workplace. In 2013, the EOC handled a total of 282 employment-related complaints under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO), of which 40% involved sexual harassment (112 cases). The proportion of employment-related sexual harassment complaints was higher than the corresponding figures in previous years (viz. 32% in 2010, 28% in 2011 and 37% in 2012).

3. Workers in the service industries often express being sexually harassed by customers as well as by other staff. Among those sexually harassed victims, flight attendants have long been regarded as one of the most vulnerable groups. According to a local survey conducted by The Association for the Advancement of Feminism on 203 female workers in 2011, about 32% of the flight attendants had been sexually harassed in the workplace. In 2005, a survey of 2,000 women who worked for an Italian national airline³ found that more than one in five said they had suffered sexual harassment from passengers, whereas one in 20 had to fend off unwanted advances in the past year.

4. The consequences of sexual harassment can be costly to both employers and employees. Employers will face low staff morale, tarnished reputation and possible legal costs. Affected employees will face emotional stress, anxiety and even depression. Preventing and stopping sexual harassment in the workplace is an obligation for the employer under the SDO, under which employers can be held vicariously liable for sexual harassment even if they are unaware of such

¹ The HKFAA is a coalition of four flight attendants trade unions, namely *Cathay Pacific Airways Flight Attendants Union*, *Hong Kong Dragon Airlines Flight Attendants Association*, *British Airways Hong Kong International Cabin Crew Association* and the *Hong Kong branch of the United Airlines Flight Attendants Union*.

² Workers of several service industries (including flight attendants, workers in retails / catering / healthcare and nursing industries) were invited for the questionnaire survey. Report on workers in retails / catering / healthcare and nursing industries will be released by March 2014.

³ The Independent, UK. *Sexual harassment culture shatters illusion of high life*
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/sexual-harassment-culture-shatters-illusion-of-high-life-520279.html>

conduct. Therefore the management of business organizations should take all practicable and reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment before it occurs.

5. The current SDO does not offer protection to employees in incidents where customers sexually harassed service providers. In a review of the SDO carried out by the EOC in 1999, the EOC proposed to make an amendment to section 40(1) of the SDO to protect providers of goods, services and facilities against sexual harassment by customers.⁴ The present survey will help company management personnel realize the seriousness of the problem, with a view to urging the Government to amend the ordinance to offer comprehensive protection from sexual harassment to the service providers as soon as possible.

Key Findings

6. Altogether 236 respondents (61%) indicated that there was a policy statement in the company, whereas 38 respondents (10%) did not think so and 112 respondents (29%) had no idea about it (*Chart 1*). Based on the information released to the public^{5,6,7,8}, it is apparent that these international airlines have a policy statement on sexual harassment, yet still over one-third of the staff were not informed of the provision.

7. Regarding the content of the policy statement, the most common items included: “A clear statement that sexual harassment will not be tolerated” (41%), “How the company will deal with sexual harassment complaints” (27%), and “An assurance that no one will be penalised for coming forward with a complaint in good faith” (21%). However, only 11% of the responses indicated that there were “The names and contacts of designated staff who handle complaints” (*Table 1*) in the policy statement. These results seem to imply that either the policy statement on sexual harassment is not comprehensive or the airlines have not done enough to ensure that their employees are aware of the existence and the provision of designated staff with contact details in the policy statement. With such vital information missing, staff are discouraged to raise a complaint.

8. In view of personal encounters with sexual harassment among the respondents, almost three out of ten (27%, 106 respondents) indicated that they had been sexually harassed in the past year whereas 73% of them had not (*Chart 2*). Of 239 counts of allegation, the most common alleged harassers were customers (59%). The common forms of sexual harassment in descending order are physical sexual behaviours (100 counts), non-verbal sex cues (76 counts), oral/textual/electronic messages (44 counts) and hostile environment (19 counts) as shown in *Table 2*. Other alleged harassers in descending order are cabin crew seniors, colleagues of same rank as

⁴ *Equal Opportunities Commission's legislative amendment proposal related to the scope of protection against sexual harassment under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (Cap. 480)*, LegCo Paper No. CB(2)658/07-08(01). <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr12-13/english/panels/ca/papers/ca0617cb2-1324-4-e.pdf>

⁵ Cathy Pacific Airways Limited, *Sustainable Development Report 2009*. http://downloads.cathayairways.com/cx/aboutus/sd/2009/documents/growing_a_winning_team.pdf

⁶ Hong Kong Dragon Airlines Limited, *Supply Chain Sustainability Code of Conduct*. <https://www.dragonair.com/content/dam/ka/about-us/environment/PDF/CSR-KA-Code-Of-Conduct-en.pdf>

⁷ United Continental Holdings, Inc., *United's Ethics and Compliance Principles*. <http://ir.unitedcontinentalholdings.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=83680&p=irol-govconduct>

⁸ British Airways, *Corporate Responsibility Report 2008/09*. http://www.britishairways.com/cms/global/pdfs/environment/ba_corporate_responsibility_report_2008-2009.pdf

well as cockpit crew members. An overall rate of 6.5 cases of sexual harassment per victim was also noted. It was relatively rare that sexual harassment occurred in the form of a hostile environment or it came from cabin crew juniors.

9. Almost half (47%) of the respondents witnessed or heard about colleagues being sexually harassed when they were working on the same flight in the past year, whereas 53% did not (*Chart 3*). Similar pattern was observed as those personal sexual harassment cases. Of the 583 counts of allegation ever witnessed or heard, they were mostly committed by customers (51%). The forms of heresay sexual harassment included physical sexual behaviours (207 counts), non-verbal sex cues (207 counts), oral/textual/electronic messages (116 counts) and hostile environment (53 counts) as revealed in *Table 3*. The other alleged harassers in descending order are cabin crew seniors, colleagues of same rank as well as cockpit crew members.

10. When the sexually harassed victims were asked of the actions taken, a quarter (25%) of the 104 respondents did nothing and another quarter (25%) only told colleagues/relatives about it, whereas a half (50%) had taken actions of reporting/ lodging a complaint (*Chart 4*). Of the 119 counts of action taken (including telling colleagues/relatives about the incident of sexual harassment), the victims mostly reported it to senior colleagues (41%), but rarely made a formal complaint to the company (3%), reported it to the police / EOC (2%), or took legal action (1%) (*Table 4*). The main reasons for the inaction included: “Did not think it could help” (17%), “Did not want to worsen the situation or ruin the relationship” (16%), “Considered that the procedure of complaint was complicated” (15%), and “No spare time or energy to take action” (14%) as revealed in *Table 5*. There were other reasons such as “Took it as the norm of the job” (8%), “Did not get immediate support from seniors or colleagues” (8%), and “Afraid of revenge” (7%). It is worrying to note that even though sexual harassment commonly exists, a general reluctance to seek help still prevails in the working culture given that staff are filled with such negative or pessimistic feelings.

11. In general, 58% of the respondents indicated that their seniors were supportive when complaints of sexual harassment were raised by their cabin crew whereas 11% negated and 31% did not know (*Chart 5*). In terms of the forms of assistance provided by the seniors, the main categories included: “Transfer the victim to serve other passengers so that s/he will not face the harasser again during that flight” (22%), “Report the complaint of sexual harassment immediately to the captain during the flight” (20%), and “Assist the victim in lodging a complaint inflight” (19%) (*Table 6*).

12. It is important to note that 68% of the respondents had not received any training courses on anti-sexual harassment, while only 32% were trained (*Chart 6*) mainly via “Company online self-learning course/materials” (78%) as revealed in *Table 7*. In fact, many respondents considered the anti-sexual harassment training to be not sufficient and appropriate (69%) (*Chart 7*).

13. When respondents were probed for experiences of encountering other types of discrimination and harassment in the past year, they mainly had experienced racial discrimination (18%), age discrimination (15%), sex discrimination (14%) and racial harassment (12%). The other types each constituted lower than 10%. (see *Table 8*)

14. Among the respondents, 86% were females while 14% were males (*Chart 8*). Regarding the issue of gender and sexual harassment, a higher proportion (29%) among females was sexually

harassed in the past year, when compared to 17% among males (*Table 9*). As one in every six male respondents experienced sexual harassment, men as victims should be highlighted in order to redress the gender bias that males are immuned from sexual harassment. In fact, both genders should be encouraged to voice out boldly against sexual harassers.

15. Most of the respondents fall within the age groups of 25-30 (30%), 31-40 (34%) and 41-50 (27%) (see *Chart 9*). Among these three age groups, the group between the age 25 and 30 was most vulnerable to sexual harassment in this survey (*Table 11*). The risk of sexual harassment subsides as the seniority in age and position grows. In other words, this finding seems to echo with the relationship of power and sexual harassment. The more junior in age and position they were, the more likely they faced sexual harassment from their seniors and customers.

Limitations

16. The present survey has a fairly low response rate. Overseas studies on sexual harassment in the workplace also reported low response rate which might have been due to the sensitivity of the issue and the large pool base of target respondents who were often on out-of-town duties. In this regard, caution has to be taken in interpreting the present survey data. It is worth noting that one should not interpret the results as representative nor generalize the findings to the entire population of flight attendants in Hong Kong.

Recommendations

17. The findings indicated that 27% of flight attendants were sexually harassed (6.5 cases per victim), while 47% witnessed or heard about colleagues having encountered sexual harassment in the past year. These results show that flight attendants often encounter sexual harassment in their work setting. The most common harassers were the customers. Physical sexual behaviours were noted as the most common form of harassment. The other forms of harassment include non-verbal sex cues and oral/textual/electronic messages. It is recommended that the HKSAR Government should amend the Sex Discrimination Ordinance to provide protection to service providers against sexual harassment by customers as soon as possible. In addition, customers should be educated about showing respect to service providers and the serious consequences of sexual harassment. For example, airlines can provide a leaflet about zero tolerance towards sexual harassment for customers at the check-in counter or in the pocket at the back of each seat.

18. Given the fact that these international airlines should have developed a policy statement on sexual harassment, it is somewhat disturbing to note that still 39% of the respondents were not aware of a policy statement in the company. It is likely that these airlines have not publicized the policy statement to the extent that all staff members have been reached.

19. There is a lack of thorough training on sexual harassment and only 32% of the employees had been trained. Furthermore, training materials consist of solely a non-interactive package of “Company online self-learning course/materials”. The policy statement on sexual harassment might be neither comprehensive nor transparent. Since sexual harassment in their working environment is a common phenomenon, flight attendants should be fully informed about company

policy statement on this issue, particularly during the induction training programme for new staff. At present, there is still room for improvement as 69% of the flight attendants have not received sufficient and appropriate training on anti-sexual harassment.

20. When the sexually harassed victims were asked of the actions taken against the alleged harassers, 25% chose to do nothing, while another 25% merely mentioned it to colleagues/relatives. The following are the common reasons for not reporting: “Did not think it could help” (17%), “Did not want to worsen the situation or ruin the relationship” (16%) and “Considered that the procedure of complaint was complicated” (15%). To combat the feelings of fear and helplessness, a strong corporate culture of protecting employees from sexual harassment and discrimination should be promoted in the company. All employees should be re-assured that sexual harassment is not tolerated and that employees should not feel embarrassed and intimidated for reporting being sexually harassed. The company must state in public that service providers would definitely not be penalised after lodging a formal complaint of sexual harassment. All companies have the responsibility to ensure that the work place is healthy and safe.

21. It is a misconception to consider that male flight attendants do not suffer from sexual harassment. The findings revealed that one in six (17%) male flight attendants experienced sexual harassment in the past year. In view of the prevalence of sexual harassment, the EOC will liaise with the relevant unions to jointly hold training courses on anti-sexual harassment so as to enable flight attendants in ways that they can deal with the issue more appropriately.

Tables and Charts

Chart 1

Is there a policy statement on sexual harassment in your company? (N=386)

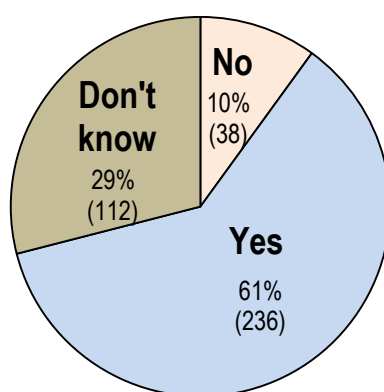


Table 1

If yes, its content includes: [Can choose more than one answer]

Item	n	% (N=547)
A clear statement that sexual harassment will not be tolerated.	223	41
How the company will deal with sexual harassment complaints.	148	27
An assurance that no one will be penalised for coming forward with a complaint in good faith.	117	21
The names and contacts of designated staff who handle complaints.	59	11
Total	547	100

Chart 2

In the past 12 months, have you been sexually harassed when you were on duty inflight? (N=387)

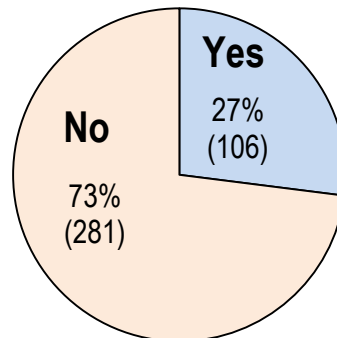


Table 2

Please indicate the categories of the harassers, the nature of sexual harassment and number of cases. [Can choose more than one answer]

Nature of sexual harassment	Subtotal (No. of counts)	Alleged harassers (No. of counts)				
		Customers	Cabin crew seniors	Cabin crew same rank	Cockpit crew	Cabin crew juniors
Physical (e.g. pulling someone's clothing or inappropriate touching [e.g. patting, touching, kissing or pinching])	100	70	15	7	6	2
Non-verbal sex cues (e.g. looking someone up and down in a sexual way)	76	49	11	8	7	1
Oral / textual / electronic messages (e.g. unwelcome dirty jokes related to sex, electronic requests for sexual favours)	44	9	14	9	9	3
Hostile environment (e.g. showing sexually obscene or suggestive photographs on mobile phones)	19	13	2	1	3	0
Total	239 (100%)	141 (59%)	42 (18%)	25 (10%)	25 (10%)	6 (3%)

Chart 3

In the past 12 months, did you witness or hear about any of your colleague(s) being sexually harassed when both of you were working on the same flight? (N=391)

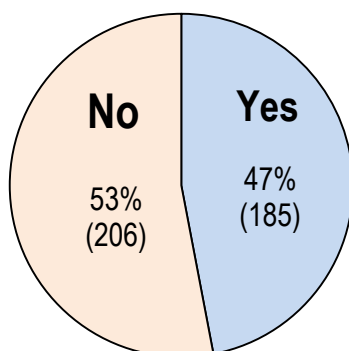


Table 3

Please indicate the categories of the harassers, the nature of sexual harassment and number of cases. [Can choose more than one answer]

Nature of sexual harassment	Subtotal (No. of counts)	Alleged harassers (No. of counts)				
		Customers	Cabin crew seniors	Cabin crew same rank	Cockpit crew	Cabin crew juniors
Physical (e.g. pulling someone's clothing or inappropriate touching [e.g. patting, touching, kissing or pinching])	207	127	37	25	13	5
Non-verbal sex cues (e.g. looking someone up and down in a sexual way)	207	112	32	26	29	8
Oral / textual / electronic messages (e.g. unwelcome dirty jokes related to sex, electronic requests for sexual favours)	116	23	29	31	19	14
Hostile environment (e.g. showing sexually obscene or suggestive photographs on mobile phones)	53	33	6	7	5	2
Total	583* (100%)	295 (51%)	104 (18%)	89 (15%)	66 (11%)	29 (5%)

Note: * A higher number of counts was noted because the same incident of sexual harassment might have been witnessed or heard about by several respondents inflight.

Chart 4

If you had sexual harassment on duty inflight in the past 12 months, did you take any action? (N= 104)

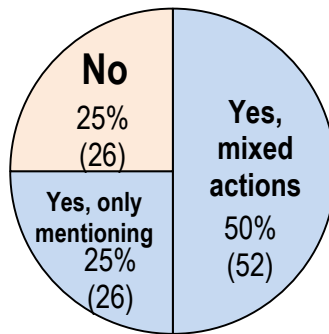


Table 4

[Can choose more than one answer]

Item	n	% (N=119)
Yes, I mentioned it to my colleagues / relatives.	26* (chose only this single option)	53
	37 (chose this option and more)	
Yes, I reported it to my senior colleagues.	49	41
Yes, I made a complaint to the company.	4	3
Yes, I reported it to the police.	2	2
Yes, I took legal action.	1	1
Yes, I reported it to the EOC.	0	0
Total	119	100

Note: * 26 cases constitute 25% of the 104 victims.

Table 5

If you took no action, what was/were the underlying reason(s)? [Can choose more than one answer]

Item	n	% (N=99)
Did not think it could help	17	17.2
Did not want to worsen the situation or ruin the relationship	16	16.2
Considered that the procedure of complaint was complicated	15	15.2
No spare time or energy to take action	14	14.1
Took it as the norm of the job	8	8.1
Did not get immediate support from seniors or colleagues	8	8.1
Afraid of revenge	7	7.1
Afraid of unfair treatment if handled by local authority of the arrival destination	6	6.1
Not aware of the complaint channels	5	5.1
Other reasons	3	3.0
I resigned after the incident	0	0
Total	99	100

Chart 5

Do you think your seniors are supportive when they receive complaints of sexual harassment from their cabin crew? (N=384)

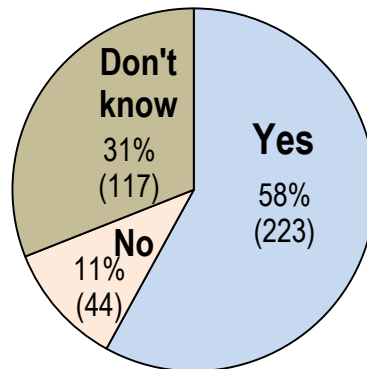


Table 6

What assistance do your seniors provide for the victims when they receive complaints of sexual harassment from the cabin crew? [Can choose more than one answer]

Item	n	% (N=729)
Transfer the victim to serve other passengers so that s/he will not face the harasser again during that flight	159	22
Report the complaint of sexual harassment immediately to the captain during the flight	145	20
Assist the victim in lodging a complaint inflight	138	19
Report the complaint of sexual harassment to Management Team Office in the company	109	15
Ask the captain to assist the victim to call police	83	11
Allow the victim not to serve the customers until s/he has calmed down	81	11
Others	14	2
Total	729	100

Chart 6

Have you ever taken any training courses on anti-sexual harassment? (N=385)

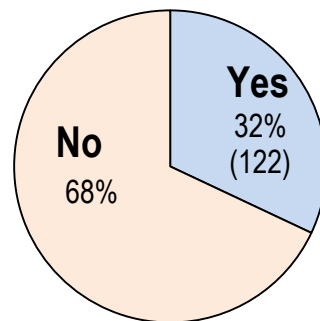


Table 7

What types of training on anti-sexual harassment have you taken? [Can choose more than one answer]

Item	n	% (N=135)
Company online self-learning course/materials	105	78
Company face-to-face training course	16	12
EOC online self-learning materials	9	7
Others	3	2
EOC face-to-face training course	2	1
Total	135	100

Chart 7

Do you think your company has provided sufficient and appropriate training on anti-sexual harassment? (N=194)

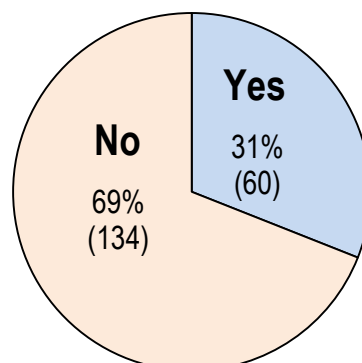


Table 8

Have you encountered the following discrimination and harassment in your profession in the past 12 months?
 [Can choose more than one answer]

Item	n	% (N=440)
Racial Discrimination (i.e. treating people less favourably on the basis of their race)	79	18
Age discrimination (i.e. treating people less favourably on the basis of their age)	66	15
Sex discrimination (e.g., only recruit / promote employees of a particular sex)	62	14
Racial harassment (e.g., engaging in name calling, which people of certain racial groups may find offensive or impolite)	53	12
Sexual orientation discrimination (i.e. treating people less favourably on the basis of their sexual orientation)	29	6
Discrimination against new immigrants (i.e. treating people less favourably on the basis of their newly settling as Hong Kong residents)	28	6
Disability discrimination (e.g., treating a person with a disability less favourably than another person without that disability)	27	6
Racial vilification (e.g., an activity in public which incites hatred, serious contempt for, or severe ridicule of a person because of his/her race)	25	6
Pregnancy discrimination (i.e. treating a woman less favourably because of her pregnancy)	23	5
Marital status discrimination (e.g., prefer to employ singles / the married)	17	4
Family status discrimination (e.g. a woman is transferred to a less favourable job after childbirth because the employer thinks that a woman with an infant will not be able to travel)	16	4
Disability harassment (e.g., name calling and mimicking gesture of people with a disability)	8	2
Disability vilification (e.g., an activity in public which incites hatred towards, serious contempt for, or severe ridicule of people with a disability)	7	2
Total	440	100

Chart 8

Your gender (N=390)

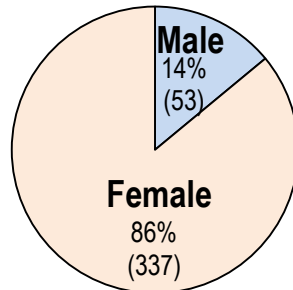


Table 9

Gender and sexual harassment (N=386)

In the past 12 months, have you been sexually harassed when you were on duty inflight?	Male	Female
Yes	9 (17%)	97 (29%)
No	44 (83%)	236 (71%)
Total	53 (100%)	333 (100%)

Chart 9

Your age (N=390)

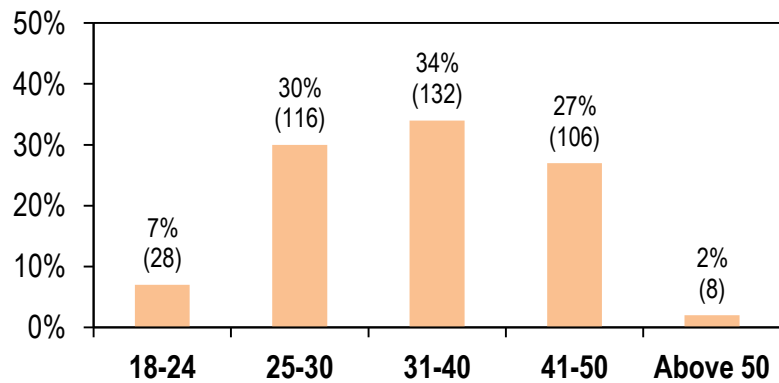


Table 10

(N=385)

Age	18-24	25-30	31-40	41-50	Above 50
Average no. of years serving as a flight attendant *	2	4	11	21	28

* Results show that age is significantly correlated with average number of years serving as a flight attendant ($p < 0.001$).

Table 11

(N=386)

In the past 12 months, have you been sexually harassed when you were on duty inflight?	18-24	25-30	31-40	41-50	Above 50
Yes	13 (46%)	44 (38%)	35 (27%)	14 (13%)	0 (0%)
No	15 (54%)	71 (62%)	95 (73%)	91 (87%)	8 (100%)
Total	28 (100%)	115 (100%)	130 (100%)	105 (100%)	8 (100%)