

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation

Research Report Summary

WHY FUNDRAISERS TOLERATE SEXUAL HARASSMENT FROM DONORS

Jessica Rose

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Edited by **Dr Michelle Fava**

Research supervised by **Dr Lilia Giugni**



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 UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE
Judge Business School

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"This study offers a pioneering analysis of the challenges faced by female fundraisers, who - despite our romanticised view of this industry - tend to be vulnerable workers operating in a highly gendered sector. Jessica's research sheds light on the pervasive dynamics of sexual and gendered harassment, and points to possible solutions and prevention strategies, which could be exported to similarly gendered fields."

Dr Lilia Giugni, CEO of GenPol: Gender Policy & Insights & Research Associate in Social Innovation,
Cambridge Judge Business School

Key findings

Major gift fundraisers are required to cultivate close professional relationships with donors, who are often older men with high net-worth and social status. The power imbalance between donor and fundraiser, coupled with misconstrued intimacy, frequently leads to donor perpetrated sexual harassment. Donors exert a powerful symbolic influence over fundraisers and their organisations, but they do not sit within the organisational hierarchy. This makes confrontation of sexual harassment difficult.

This study identified three precursors of donor-perpetrated sexual harassment: the *legitimated power* attributed to donors; the *silencing* of organisations by donors, and of fundraisers by their organisations; and the *pandering work* involved in the fundraising role. These three factors form a climate in which fundraisers are compelled to tolerate unacceptable behaviour from donors.

Background

This study sought to understand the factors enabling this problem to persist. First-hand accounts of incidents, decisions around reporting and the resulting responses of fundraisers and their organisations enabled a close analysis of the personal experiences of fundraisers.

Most research about workplace harassment focuses on perpetrators within organisations. Gettman and Gelfand (2007) explain that it can also take place at the periphery of an organisation, or outside it, from customers, for example.

There is little existing research around donor-perpetuated sexual harassment, but we know that harassment is often found where there is a power imbalance. Fitzgerald et al (1997) have described the organisational and situational factors that contribute to this. Their study of women employed in large companies showed that organisational climate and gendered roles are critical antecedents of sexual harassment.

This research extends this understanding to introduce personal factors: elements of the personal context which encourage sexual harassment by donors. These personal factors are unique to the donor-fundraiser relationship.

Emerging themes

Our analysis of fundraisers' experiences revealed three main antecedents that influenced the continuing occurrence of donor perpetrated sexual harassment. Relationships between the donor and the fundraiser, and between both parties and the organisation, all involved power imbalances that were conducive to enabling harassment.

Legitimated power

As donors are not employed by charitable organisations, they do not have 'legitimate power', as defined by French and Raven (1959), over the fundraisers within the organisational hierarchy. However, most charitable endeavours would not exist in their current form without donors. Donors' power is legitimated by their perceived status and their ability to make or withdraw a gift. Fundraisers and organisations defer to donors, despite them being outside of the organisational hierarchy.

This 'legitimated' power enables donors to use reward and coercive power in their interactions with fundraisers. This is compounded by two notions: the *perceived status difference* between donors and fundraisers as judged by societal standards; and the *gendered power gap* between female fundraisers and male donors which is reinforced both by gendered interactions and by how female fundraisers perceive themselves.

The fundraisers in this study were well aware of this power imbalance. In instances of inappropriate behaviour, they needed to carefully balance their personal safety and dignity, with their duty to fundraise. A duty which was often seen as a moral responsibility as well as a role-requirement.

Silencing

Charitable organisations lack clear policy regarding donor-perpetrated sexual harassment. There is a lack of open dialogue, and organisational failure to adequately recognise the issue. Our results showed that, from both fundraisers' and the managers' perspectives, charitable organisations were not tackling the issue proactively. When fundraisers reported incidents, their organisations were willing to take steps to reduce harm to the fundraiser, but rarely in a way that would confront the donor. In past cases, when an organisation had confronted a donor, the relationship had deteriorated, sometimes beyond repair, presenting a financial risk. Due to such risk, organisations were reluctant to confront the issue directly. They were only willing to engage in non-confrontational harm-reduction, preserving their donor relationships. In effect, organisations were being silenced.

Organisational silencing is passed on to fundraisers. The lack of policy on reporting, the lack of open dialogue about the issue, and organisations' reluctance to confront donors directly, creates a situation in which fundraisers don't report incidences of sexual harassment by donors. In turn, the lack of reporting enabled institutional denial of the seriousness and extent of the problem.

Pandering work

In order to secure a gift, fundraisers develop an intimate relationship with the donor, which can often be misconstrued. Fundraisers perform *pandering work* with donors, which can embolden sexual harassers. That is, to maintain a positive relationship, fundraisers often entertained or tolerated the donors' wishes or preferences. Such pandering can create the illusion of a greater level of approval than is actually there. This dynamic can also set a precedent for the expectation of further complicity.

In instances where this led to inappropriate behaviour or sexual harassment from the donor, fundraisers most commonly endured the behaviour, rather than report it to their organisation or confront the donor. These choices were often tied to their emotional attachment to the fundraising cause as well as to their desire to perform well in their role. This dynamic compelled the fundraisers into pandering to donors and tolerating socially unacceptable behaviour.

These findings indicate clear situational, organisational and personal causal factors of sexual harassment, which are unique to the fundraising profession. Legitimated donor power creates a gendered power

imbalance. Financial pressures create a lack of donor accountability, resulting in effective silencing. And fundraisers' values also create pressure to tolerate inappropriate behaviour. Combined, these factors create a culture in which donor perpetrated sexual harassment can frequently occur unchecked.

Implications and future research

This study is important because it provides new insights into the role of gendered power in sexual harassment, and the organisational culture that enables sexual harassment to both occur and remain unchecked. The lessons learned from this case could be relevant to any environment in which gendered power imbalances occur, such as medical, legal, scientific research and financial sectors. These findings are of interest to fundraisers, HR managers, CEOs of charitable organisations and regulators who are in a position to enact change within the industry.

The kind of organisational culture described here, places fundraisers in a difficult position, and sometimes even in danger. There is a clear need for increased awareness and recognition of this issue from the charitable sector and the regulatory bodies that govern it, who are not providing a sufficient duty of care to their fundraisers.

With the #metoo campaign, and a growing body of research evidence demonstrating the extent and severity of the issue of sexual harassment and assault, there is increasing pressure on all industries to take a stand against this issue. A problem of this scale requires pattern-breaking culture change from the entire fundraising community. Work must be done to raise awareness, develop guidelines and implement practices that protect fundraisers from harm. Solutions may include recruiting more male fundraisers, actively working with more female donors, providing safeguarding training and implementing a code of practice for donors, or enacting organisation-wide zero-tolerance policies.

Further research into the experiences, responses and desired changes of fundraisers could inform safeguarding strategies. Their expertise constitutes a rich knowledge of the intricate relationships required to move donors through the solicitation cycle to secure critical gifts for worthy causes, and can provide valuable insights.

Directly challenging donor's bad behaviour will inevitably risk short-term losses. Long-term financial effects of zero-tolerance policies seem unlikely, but more research is certainly needed. Good communications with all parties should mitigate long-term risk.

This study was conducted using a sample of mainly white, well-educated, professionals, most of whom were women. To further explore this issue, researchers could look at a more diverse sample. Different groups such as those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ and those in lower levels of an organisational hierarchy would offer a broader range of experiences, enabling a deeper exploration into the role of power and how it is affected by intersectionality. In addition, quantitative analysis of a larger survey of fundraisers globally could test the generalisability of these findings.

References

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About the project

These findings are based on an analysis of the first-hand accounts of 17 fundraisers and managers, each with over 10 years of experience in the charitable sector, spanning three continents. Their accounts were gathered via semi-structured and informal interviews.

The research was carried out with the support of The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. It was designed and conducted by graduates of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme. The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the authors do not represent those of their employers or Cambridge Judge Business School. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at: socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk.

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Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation
Cambridge Judge Business School
University of Cambridge
Trumpington Street
Cambridge
CB2 1AG
United Kingdom

T +44(0)1223 339700

socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk

www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/centreforsocialinnovation

