

# #Timesup – it's time to take action: Sexual harassment in the Pacific hospitality industry

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Lisa Sadaraka is a lecturer in the School of Hospitality and Tourism, Auckland University of Technology. Born and raised in the Cook Islands, Lisa spent many years working in the tourism industry in the Pacific before migrating to New Zealand in 2005. Her research interest focuses on the sustainability of the tourism industry in the Pacific, with emphasis on the impact of workplace sexual harassment. Lisa is the Programme Leader for the Bachelor of International Hospitality Management and teaches hospitality service management to undergraduate students.



Sexual harassment is prevalent in the hospitality industry with studies indicating that hospitality employees experience sexual harassment significantly more than employees in other industries. Studies also reveal that customers are generally the main perpetrators [1].

Like the Western world, tourism in the South Pacific has seen significant growth and is now the largest and fastest growing sector in the region [2]. However, despite tourism being the key economic driver for many Pacific Island countries, the prevalence of sexual harassment in this location is unknown. This study was conducted in the Cook Islands and investigated the sexual harassment experiences of hospitality employees, by customers. A qualitative approach was adopted involving in-depth interviews with 32 participants from across the industry. The study revealed a significant lack of awareness of sexual harassment and, given the lack of research attention in this region, it is anticipated that this problem is prevalent across the Pacific.

Consistent with previous studies [3], alcohol was considered to have the greatest influence on customer behaviour. Supporting Hayner's [4] 'moral holiday' perspective, employees were of the view that visitors behaved inappropriately simply because they were away from home and had a sense of anonymity. A key outcome of the study were the new themes that emerged on 'cause', which were unique to the study and its location. The commodification of Cook Islands culture, in particular, the sexualisation of traditional dance and costumes, was perceived to reduce the sexual inhibitions of visitors. A lack of awareness around cultural norms, the hospitable nature of Cook Islanders and titillating marketing messages were also perceived to inadvertently influence visitor behaviour.

The ramifications of sexual harassment are serious and cannot be ignored by hospitality employers and managers. The study found that employees experienced a decline in their work performance, productivity, and overall job satisfaction. These outcomes are detrimental not only to individuals, but also to organisations, as they can increase costs and impact the bottom line [5]. Of particular concern, the study found that employees were leaving the industry because of sexual harassment. In light of the current labour market pressures in the Cook Islands tourism industry [6], the implications of this are grave. The research identifies a vital need for education and training with a focus on sexual harassment awareness, cultural awareness, body language and social skills. The implementation of workplace policies and procedures on sexual harassment is also recommended.

Implementing practical strategies at an operational level may also be beneficial for managers and owners. Bystander intervention is an effective approach and involves removing the harassed employee and replacing them with a colleague, before the situation escalates. Implementing host responsibility programmes to educate employees on the responsible sale and supply of alcohol is also recommended. Paramount to addressing the issue of sexual harassment, however, is a clear and visible commitment from management. Employers have an ethical responsibility to create a safe working environment for their employees. Our people are our greatest tourism asset. We need to protect them to ensure a sustainable tourism industry, both in the Pacific and elsewhere.

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