

“Not one young woman in the steerage escaped attack”: sexual harassment and assault in the steamship era, 1870-1914

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to thousands of letters and a few studies involving government investigators and journalists posing as emigrants, we have a good idea of what steerage conditions were like for European migrants traveling in steamships between 1870 and 1914. Public and private accounts describe barely edible food; uncomfortable, overcrowded, dirty sleeping areas; seasick passengers. What is rarely ever alluded to in shipboard accounts are sexual harassment and assault.

Buried within the thousands of pages of the United States Congressional Joint Immigration Commission of 1907-1910's 41 volumes is the allegation of widespread sexual assault and harassment of female passengers by male crew members, particularly on ships with “old” steerage conditions. Investigator Anna Harkner, who made 12 trans-Atlantic voyages in 1908, posing as a single Czech woman, wrote of crew members on an unidentified steamship: “They took all manners of liberties with the women, in broad daylight as well as after dark. Not one young woman in the steerage escaped attack. The writer herself was no exception.”

Given the taboo nature of the subject, especially in the 19th century, how does one deal with Harkner's report as a source of information about trans-Atlantic conditions for migrant women?

Extensive research has been made of prostitution and sex trafficking among migrant women in the U.S., South America (particularly Argentina), Great Britain, and Russian Poland, particularly within Jewish migration studies. But little appears to have been written about sexual harassment and assault, particularly onboard ship, during the migration process. This paper examines Harkner's allegations in the larger context of the mobility of Irish and Eastern European Jewish women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two groups distinguished by their tendency to travel without male accompaniment. It evaluates Harkner as a source and asks how we deal with outlier forms of evidence.

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