

The History and Stereotype of the Sexualization of Dancers and How Harassment is Being  
Handled in Arts Management Today  
A Literature Review

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## **Abstract**

One of the prominent issues in the dance industry is the presence of sexual assault among dancers. The issue leads to the lack of protection and policies to prevent harassment in the workplace for the arts. The research into the history of ballet will give background to why the sexualization of dancers is a stereotype today. This effort will be made by looking at books, articles, and personal accounts of cases and stories from dancers throughout history up until now. These findings and articles emphasize the missing pieces in arts management regarding protecting its employees.

## **Introduction**

This review discusses the issues within the dance industry involving sexual assault and misconduct in the workplace. This review will not explore mental health issues or inequality of gender issues within dance, though a prominent topic in the dance community today. The study goes into the core history of why this is such a prevalent issue within the industry. There have been stereotypes set in place since the birth of ballet back in the 15th century that could be the underlining reason for so much corruption in modern-day dance. From discrimination in sexual orientation, race, and the grooming of young dancers, there are many reasons for the way misconduct happens in the dance studio. What more can the management of significant dance companies do to prevent sexual assault among their dancers? Is a harassment-free dance/work environment feasible? The general findings for this review include articles, journals, and books surrounding the history of dance, to give insight into its progression or the lack of progression in society throughout the decades. There are multiple specific stories surrounding sexual harassment within dance institutions and lawsuits for grooming and assault of underage dancers. These personal accounts will be the leading research into what happens within the dance workforce.

Along with the personal accounts, the research will investigate the policies and bylaws established by major dance companies and discover if these management efforts are practical. There are limited resources surrounding the topic of sexual harassment in dance; however, using those public incidents which are documented will call for a comparison with how other organizations or sports teams handle these situations. How can these previously researched ideas and methods be implemented into the dance community and therefore be adapted to help prevent

assault in the dance studio? While the sources are limited, there is still ample evidence to conclude how management in the dance community can better protect their employees and discover why this is a relevant issue.

## **1. History of Ballet**

Starting with the very beginning is the most logical way to discover the root of an issue. *Ballet* is an old art form that dates to the 15th century. There has been a lot of growth and change from the beginning of ballet to get to where it is today. Today and in the past, ballerinas have had a stigma around them as the symbol of perfection and innocence. There is more to ballet than just the performative aspect; it can be investigated into layers of sex, scandal, and suffering behind the symbol of perfection, that is, the ballerina. Ballerinas throughout history have had to endure a lot to be able to practice their art. According to the book *Ballerina: sex, scandal, and suffering behind the symbol of perfection*, "the ballerina comes across as a feminine ideal, unblemished and ethereal, inspiration incarnate" (Kelly & Flight, 2013). The book also speaks on how the ballerina has "a kind of eternal virginity about her. She is inaccessible" (Kelly & Flight, 2013). While this was the standard for how people viewed ballerinas, there was a secret lifestyle that only prominent members of society could reach. While the idea of the untouchable, unblemished image of the ballerina was upheld, it allowed only a few to exploit these dancers despite their image. "The history of the ballerina is tarnished by institutionalized suffering, starvation, poverty, and sexual exploitation" (Kelly & Flight, 2013). While the ballerina upheld the ideal of perfection, they were sought after for prostitution because of their unblemished qualities. Ballet is viewed as an object of fascination, which led to ballerinas being viewed as objects used to satisfy their audiences and suitors. "Young ballerinas were expected to be

seductive" (Kelly & Flight, 2013). The idea was instilled in young ballerinas that if someone in the audience wanted to sleep with them, then they would ultimately be successful. The lack of payment for the dances led to the need for prostitution just to make ends meet. The statement poses the question of why these young women put themselves through these hardships just for dance. It was for prestige and, for most, the only way out of their born social standing. Having significance and being a professional dancer was worth selling themselves for the opportunities.

Moving into the 19th-century sexual exploitation was the norm for 19th century ballerinas. Many wealthy men turned the famous Paris Opera Ballet into a brothel. There was even a room backstage called the foyer de la danse that was created for this sole purpose. Even though they were perfect in the public eye, they were being used for their bodies to keep their social standing. This phenomenon occurred in internationally known institutions like the Paris Opera Ballet, allowing smaller institutions to follow suit. "Sex work was part of ballerinas' realities during the 19th century, an era in which money, power, and prostitution mingled in the glamorous and not-so-glamorous backstage world of the Paris Opera. The Paris Opera Ballet, founded in the 17th century, was the world's first professional ballet company and continues as one of the preeminent outfits today. Throughout the 19th century, it raised the bar for dance—but on the backs of many exploited young women" (history.com). The wealthy male subscribers of the Paris Opera—nicknamed abonnés—were often on hand to exploit them. There were also young dancers known as petit rats that faced even harsher circumstances; they were abused and exploited and, most of the time, not even given a chance to earn a good contract with the ballet. (The Collector, 2022) During this time, clothing typically covered women's bodies. In contrast, ballet dancers wore skimpy and revealing outfits (though ballet costumes of the time, which included skirts, were much less form-fitting than today's leotards and tights). Subscribers could,

and did, go backstage to ogle women. Due to their social status, they were also free to socialize with them. The real issue is that this was the norm and created a situation in which this was acceptable. This issue will be the root cause of how dancers are viewed today because of the standards this set in the early 19th century.

Adding on to the discussion of societal views of dancers, The Collector speaks on how women vastly outnumber men in ballet, but the men still hold most positions of power. "72% of ballet dancers identify as women, yet 72% of artistic directors identify as men" (The Collector, 2022). The article explains the unequal power balance in ballet over the past decades. This article also talks about how ballerinas were portrayed in art during the 19th century. This thought could have much influence on the public's view of dancers. The idea is critical to the research because it will give more background on why this is a stereotype today. This is a consistent pattern but is slowly being shifted today. There is evidence that there is exploitation in the history of ballet that has affected today's views on dancers, even if it is subconscious.

## **2. Transitioning into today's cases and scandals about sexual harassment**

The sexualization of dancers has been a social construct that has been hidden. Although these cases have been happening for years, there is a stigma around making them known to the public. In the past few years, stories and recent charges have been brought to the public's attention. Victims are finally speaking out on these incidents. Looking at these specific accounts will help provide depth into how large of an issue this is and why there is a lack of attention and urgency to fix it.

There was a significant public outing of many sexual harassment cases in 2021. An article published by The Star circulated the dance community and caused additional attention to

be brought to the matter of assault. The article tells the stories of dancers who accuse famous choreographers from the dance convention "Break the Floor" of sexual harassment and grooming. Another article by the New York Post tells the narrative of the same dance convention that was exploited for sexual harassment and manipulation. This case is a direct example of how this issue of sexualizing dancers is still happening in the 21st century and in our communities. The article goes into detail on the allegations that were made public between the dancers and the dance convention instructors. The scale of this issue is more extensive than many think; the "Break The Floor convention now draws around 300,000 dance students, some as young as 5, to packed hotel ballrooms across the U.S. and Canada for weekend workshops and competitions." This convention was known for making teen dancers successful and getting specialized training from the best choreographers. While this was the public view, there was much more behind the scenes that was never acknowledge. Stories started to come forward, this opened the flood gate for more people to tell their stories. "A Toronto-born teen alleged a famous choreographer propositioned her for sex just hours after judging her at a 2012 Break the Floor convention. An Ottawa dancer working as an assistant for the company said the same choreographer groped him in public" (Juliet Linderman, 2022). These events can be drawn back to the beginning of dance when ballerinas were used for sex and exploitation by people of higher social standing. These young dancers saw these choreographers as so-called celebrities in the dance world that could help their future careers by becoming close to them. "All of these sources spoke on the condition of anonymity in fear of retaliation and damage to their careers in the tight-knit professional dance community" (Juliet Linderman, 2022). The realization that help is needed to move a dancer up in society has stuck around since the 17th century and created this manipulation complex around young dancers trying to elevate their careers. "Dance organizations create wide

opportunities for adults to single out a child, groom them and then get them alone to abuse them sexually," she said. "The dance world is not like it is different from any other world; it is just that they have been able to keep their secrets longer" (Juliet Linderman, 2022). The situation was a steppingstone for victims to come forward because this was the first significant case to be announced to the public on a global scale. This case drew attention to this issue and allowed the media to get more involved, leading to more investigations. Russell Geyser, the new CEO of Break The Floor, published a new code of conduct. It banned inviting students to hotel rooms and said instructors should not call students their "daughter" or "son." Moreover, it encourages discretion online regarding "Religion, Social Justice, Discrimination, Politics, Love and Romance, Abuse, Mental Health, Bullying, and Terrorism." The new code of conduct also says educators are considered mandated reporters regarding suspected child abuse: "If you witness anything concerning, it is your duty to report it to the appropriate authorities" (Juliet Linderman, 2022). This new code is not a fix but a prominent statement that should have been applied from the start. Why did this have to be announced when this should be common knowledge? The takeaway from the case is that the management of Break The Floor should enforce a series of repercussions and boundaries among the staff. Overall, the management turned a blind eye to the issues happening before them. Although these situations were in hidden circumstances, that is not an accusation just now to investigate the problem; instead, to realize that the issue should have been taken more seriously and the protection of the dancers should have been its ultimate mission.

Since the scandals were made public, Geyser has released many new procedures and policies in the employee handbook that are publicly listed on the website.

New Steps from Break The Floor | Keeping Dancers Safe



<https://breakthefloor.com/keepingdancesafe/>

1. Creating a diverse advisory board of dance industry professionals to help guide the company's future direction, creating a more inclusive and safe experience for everyone.
2. Continue to work with the advisory board and individual advisors to continually update and strengthen our policies.
3. At our events, communicate with all students, teachers, and parents about how best to discuss or report anything they feel is inappropriate behavior.
4. Requiring all employees to undergo Mandatory Reporter training (added as part of the onboarding process).
5. Creating a new hotline allows anonymous reporting of incidents or allegations. All complaints and concerns received will provide immediate, thorough, and objective claims investigation. We will then take any appropriate disciplinary action, including termination of employment or immediate separation and cancellation of any business-to-business relationship with third parties for those who are determined to have engaged in inappropriate behavior.
6. Updating contracts with all faculty and staff to reflect updated company policies.
7. Consulting with industry leaders for age- and socially appropriate competition guidelines, including music, costumes, concept, and choreography choices.
8. Creating custom training to include all staff, faculty, and production crew.
9. Requiring management to regularly update, implement, and communicate any changes to our new policies to our clientele via our websites, social media accounts, direct mailings, or other communication methods.
10. Gathering input and feedback from you! Please do not hesitate to contact our H.R. staff if you have ideas or thoughts on how we can improve our dance culture.

11. Operating in a way that provides a safe environment for everyone and creates positive changes in an industry overdue for change.

While the other articles touched on sexual harassment and exploitation of dancers, the Pointe Magazine article talks specifically about accounts of assault in present-day dance companies like the Dusty Button case and the actions of grooming young dancers. "Dusty Button, a former Boston Ballet star who once appeared on the cover of Pointe, and her husband, Mitchell Taylor Button, a former dance teacher, were accused by five dancers in multiple states. In at least two of those cases, they allegedly used their position of power in the dance community to earn the trust of their victims, ultimately conditioning them for abuses, including rape" (Leavey 2022). It is admitted in this article that, "the dance community needs systemic change in addition to individual action to protect dancers" (Leavey 2022). This is the central issue in the culture of silence that is dance. "There is a lack of a third-party member for artistic staff when faced with charges. There is a lack of clear protocols for reporting abuse and inappropriate behavior" in dance. (Leavey 2022)

The main issue is the aftermath and damage that such cases cause to the victims. The dance community needs to work hard to reconcile the damage that has been done. This is based on figuring out how directors and choreographers can rebuild trust with their dancers. "Not only must the dance community work to reconcile the damage that has been done, but it needs to rebuild the foundation on which ballet stands. Directors and choreographers should be trained to build healthy, trusting relationships with their dancers and can identify any possible red flags in

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<sup>1</sup> View the National Ballet of Canada's Protocols and Policies regarding these issues, page 17.

their dancers' other relationships. If dancers begin to see these changes, perhaps one day they will feel safe and fully supported in their ballet companies again" (Leavey).

MY STORY: I am a young dance woman in a dance company with a male director with a history of harassment and trauma. Therefore, I feel that with the help of these multiple accounts, I can partake in the conversation and share my knowledge on the topic. Growing up in dance, I have gotten a first-hand account of how dancers are frequently sexualized and viewed as objects. None of these accounts surprised me when they finally came to light. From a young age, dancers have unnecessary pressure to perform to the best of their ability, and most of that time, it is at the command of a teacher or choreographer. As a young dancer, the primary source of satisfaction is making your mentors proud; in this case, that can even mean exploitation to move up in the dance world, aka society. Reading into dance history and seeing that this kind of behavior is engraved into the art form not only gave some clarity onto why this is happening but also confusion on why this issue has not been controlled in present-day organizations. "Dance organizations create wide opportunities for adults to single out a child, groom them and then get them alone to sexually abuse them," "The dance world, it's not like it's different than any other world, it's just that they've been able to keep their secrets longer" (Press, 2022). My main concern is that if other "worlds" have the same issues and most likely have found systems to control this kind of behavior, then why hasn't the dance community fully adopted these concepts?

### **3. The turning point and identifying the holes in dance management**

Dancers feel they cannot speak out on these issues because it will jeopardize their chances of a professional career, career growth, or a good reputation. Dance is a very individualized profession; the drive and dedication to the art form are very personal. Dancers tend to internalize many feelings; it is engraved from a young age to have discipline and execute what is being asked. This is where the most significant danger for the art form and harassment issues are born. Dancers tend to internalize, and the stigma of keeping it to themselves ultimately causes issues. The companies' mentors, teachers, and artistic directors can break this stigma by getting dancers to talk about their internalized emotions. The book *Turning Pointe* by Chloe Angyal brings attention to this issue and how dancers must take accountability for themselves instead of receiving help from the people in charge. This book discusses how the new generation of dancers is saving ballet from itself. The book opens with how dancers must take matters into their own hands. This reading emphasizes the holes in dance's leadership/management level to be discovered. The lack of support for dancers and leaders/people in power not acknowledging the issues. "There is so much work to be done to make the ballet ecosystem a place that welcomes all children and takes care of all adult artists" (Angyal, 2021, p.246). This book also speaks of gaslighting in dance studios that involves "health" and "strength." "Ballet companies should also welcome unionization for their dancers: union protections helped to keep dancers' bodies healthy and rested and dished some of the extreme power imbalances between dancers and management" (Angyal, 2021, p.249). Companies should be prepared to provide mental health coverage to their dancers and should work to destigmatize mental illness in their ranks" (Angyal, 2021, p. 249). The book gives many other excellent examples of ways dance companies and management can

improve how they are run to protect their dancers and make dance a safe and healthy environment.

In a journal of social psychology, an element describes this phenomenon in dance, breaking down different aspects of social constructs like the objectification theory and perceptions of attractiveness/sexualization. (Nezlek et al., 2014) Also, the addition of imaging and social media in this theory has worsened things. The journal has limitations because it did not explore how these might affect people at different stages in their lives and how cultures might react to these actions. This journal speaks on the Objectification Theory. "This leads to (or represents that) people are perceived as objects, merely physical bodies, rather than as complete persons." This research was not done directly for dance but can be used and adapted to compare this theory and how dancers are perceived. Dancers begin to think of themselves less as people and more as objects; this becomes dangerous when the body used in the art forms is not separated from the emotional contents of the person it is attached to. The separation of work and personal life is blurred in art, especially in dance, because emotions and appearance are in one singular vessel. When people want dancers to perform for them, they are in control of the art form; the choreographers have control of the physical body to work and mold in the choreographic process but need to separate that realm from how the dancer thrives as an individual and not just an object to mold. Speaking on the perceptions of attractiveness and sexualization, which has already been discussed and is very present in dance, is a conceptualization created over time by different variables, attractive, desirable, and sexual. It has been established that ballerinas were objects of desire in the early stages of ballet, which has unconsciously trickled down into societal views today. Dancers themselves have not adopted this

sense of objectification, but a concept placed on them unknowingly is so deeply rooted that it is hard to separate.

While this academic journal does not directly relate to dance, there are many theories to discuss and see if they apply to these issues in dance. "Self-objectification refers to the tendency for people to perceive and value their bodies from a third-person perspective by focusing on physical and observable attributes" (Nezlek et al., 2014). Dance is a visual art form, and observable attributes are part of the job. As a dancer, I know what I am using my body for. My body is used for artistic expression, and others are viewing a large part of that. However, when self-objectification comes into the realm of being considered in a "sexually objectifying manner," is where the rights of a dancer become obscured, and abusive authority powers can take over. As a result, hostile work environments are created and accepted due to manipulation. This can transition the conversation to the effects of the media; I see media, mainly social media, as the root of these ideals. This journal does not entirely blame the media for self-objectification but blames broad social norms. Many of these said cases have started through social media because it is an accessible outlet and directly allows connection with "untouchable" people. I want to see how companies are placing limitations on social media, knowing that this can be an invasion of privacy. However, in what ways can companies use the law to protect their employees and find safe and effective ways to regulate this behavior? So far, these general issues have been touched on, and the overall stereotypical view of dancers has been discussed. This next journal gives relevant examples of sexual harassment and worker abuse in dance employment to see where the lack of attention is in arts management. The discussion on how human resources should be involved during the rehearsal process, or in this case, the lack of human resources within dance companies. It is difficult to name another job besides one in this industry that expects intimate

touching and behavior between colleagues daily. This can come from close partnering techniques, sexually overt topics, and comments from authorities directed at the human body. There is a "tension between legal standards and the realities of theatrical workplace power dynamics" (Kaufman, 2019). "This calls for performers to adhere to reporting standards or confront harassers directly" (Kaufman, 2019). However how often and how inattentively is this being enforced? The fact is that H.R. is not used to disrupt uncomfortable situations. "Putting aside the frequency of sexually charged activity in dance workplaces, there remains the question of the hierarchies of abuse in employment settings" (Kaufman, 2019).

#### **4. Efforts arts management can implement into policies and overall employee protection.**

Now it is the time to discuss what to do when faced with sexual harassment. In terms of this review, this question is being asked to the management of dance studios and companies. The journal by Pittman helps to describe the terms of hostile work environments, the scope of employment, vicarious liability, and more. This journal advises risk management tips that schools, colleges, and organizations should be enforced. This will be used as a guideline to see if dance companies are following suggestions or regarding these procedures.

##### Terms that should be known by management:

- Hostile work environment: sexual harassment occurs when the workplace is permeated with the conduct of a sexual nature, which has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

- Quid Pro Quo: indicates that a person receives or is promised something in return for something he or she promises, gives or does. Occurs when a subordinate's employment opportunities are conditioned upon entering a sexual relationship with a superior.
- Scope of Employment: activities in which an employee engages in carrying out the employer's business reasonably foreseeable by the employer. The employer is liable for the torts of their employees committed within the scope, actual or apparent, of their employment.
- Sexual harassment: unwelcomed sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of sexual nature when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment.
- Title VII: Civil Rights Act of 1964. Protection against employment discrimination based on an employee's race, color, sex, religion, or national origin.
- Vicarious Liability: The imposition of liability on one person for the actionable conduct of another, based solely on a relationship between two persons.

It raises the question of what happens when no tangible employment action is taken, and there is no defense for the victims. The primary defense element is if the employer used reasonable care to prevent and correct the offending behavior. Some things arts management could apply to their organizations include avoiding negligence. "An employer is liable if it knew or should have known about sexual harassment and failed to stop it" (Pittman 2005).

To transition into what is being done against sexual harassment in the arts community, The Justice Law Collaborative collective is doing some of the work to protect artists. This collective is dedicated to helping survivors of assault in the dance community and their families hold abusers accountable. This firm investigates individuals, teachers, and choreographers in claims



of abuse. It speaks on the fact that 40-50% of athletes have experienced some harassment in their lifetime. The collective describes more in-depth the grooming process involved with young dancers and their instructors. Investigating and reading into the bylaws and policies of a dance company will give further insight into current policies being used in dance. This is the board of directors' code of conduct and ethics for the National Ballet of Canada. "This Code is intended to set out basic principles and provide a clear and broad understanding of the appropriate conduct expected of us; to provide guidelines, which may be changed from time to time; to promote understanding of what is considered acceptable and unacceptable conduct and behavior; to provide mechanisms on reporting non-compliant conduct; and to further foster a culture of honesty, integrity and accountability within our Company." One aspect that the National Ballet of Canada also adds that is critical to preventing harassment issues is that This Code also applies to individuals and the employees and representatives of companies that are contracted to provide services to the company, including, but not limited to, freelancers, independent contractors, guest artists, service providers, and consultants ("Third Parties"), who are required to abide by the provisions of this code when providing the contracted services or interacting with Employees or Volunteers." It states that all relationships among persons in the workplace must be business-like and free from bias, prejudice, and harassment. The company will comply with the Ontario Human Rights Code and prohibits any form of unlawful discrimination or harassment based on race, ancestry, place of origin, color, ethnic origin/identity, disability, citizenship, creed, sex (including pregnancy and breastfeeding), sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status, and record of offenses. In addition, the company does not tolerate workplace harassment (including sexual harassment) and will treat all incidents

seriously. Violation of any of these rules may cause disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

The research will be able to see what is in the foundation of dance companies regarding harassment and discrimination. Are the dancers being protected by the best effort through leadership? There are also policies on workplace violence and conflicts of interest. This is where a dance company policy can be compared to a commercial industry organization. This website will be used to explore what other efforts are being made to protect its dancers.

Adaptations for Dance Companies to add to their mission and everyday activities. These concepts come from several different efforts in everyday workplace procedures to help prevent harassment that can be applied to dance companies:

#### Communication

- Asking permission before touching a fellow dancer (as a dancer or instructor)
- Confirming there is a reciprocal interest before initiating any physical touch
- Frequent check-ins with a partner to make sure everyone is comfortable
- Providing feedback when comfortable with an activity
- Giving verbal agreement to agree to a statement
- Use physical cues to communicate if you are comfortable or uncomfortable with your partner.

#### Tools and Resources from Society for Human Resource Management:

##### Human Resources

- The H.R. director will determine if an in-house investigation will be conducted or if a third party will be contracted to complete the investigation.
- Explaining [Company Name] 's sexual harassment policy and investigation procedures to all parties involved.

- Exploring informal means of resolving sexual harassment complaints.
- Notifying the police if criminal activities are alleged.
- Arranging for an investigation of the alleged harassment and preparing a written report.
- Submitting a written report summarizing the investigation results and making recommendations to designated company officials.

### Complaint Resolution Procedures

Complaints should be submitted immediately after an incident, preferably in writing.

To ensure the prompt and thorough investigation of a sexual harassment complaint, the complainant should provide as much of the following information as possible:

- The name, department, and position of the person or persons allegedly committing harassment.
- A description of the incident(s), including the date(s), location(s), and the presence of any witnesses.
- The effect of the incident(s) on the complainant's ability to perform his or her job, or on other terms or conditions of his or her employment.
- The names of other individuals who might have been subject to the same or similar harassment.
- What, if any, steps the complainant has taken to try to stop the harassment.
- Any other information the complainant believes to be relevant to the harassment complaint.

Discipline / Confidentiality are also critical components to ensuring that trust is kept or regained between management and dancers. Effective communication allows for prevention, and the correct reporting protocols allow for follow-through. All these efforts listed are elements of the curriculum, organization's curriculum, handbook studio, or dance organization.

## **Conclusion**

The consensus after reading the harassment accounts in dance is that harassment comes from the lack of protection at the forefront of the issue and aftermath of charges or reports. These findings and articles emphasize the missing pieces in arts management regarding protecting its employees. The missing piece is the open conversation in the dance studios between fellow dancers and authorities. The research explains why this is an issue today and how other findings not involving dance specifically can be adapted into arts management. The gaps in the evidence reveal themselves in the period between the harassment and the victim finally coming forward. This is where management is quiet and ultimately can make more of a conscious effort to close the gap between the incident and the statement, because the victims are too ashamed to come forward. I would like to continue to investigate dance companies processes for these kinds of claims. In the past things have not been dealt with timely and this is where management can step up and act fast. Every scenario is different, especially with sexual assault cases, but with the concrete history of dance stereotypes, protection of dancers should be at the forefront of the mind of anyone with the power to protect. All the research correlates into a familiar narrative to answer the research question, is a harassment-free dance/work environment feasible? What more can the management of significant dance companies do to prevent sexual assault against their dancers?

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