SUBTLE FORMS OF VIOLENCE:

SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF FEMALE FACULTY AND TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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Since the 1970s, there is an increased recognition of sexual harassment as a social issue, and accumulating knowledge on the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace, its causes and consequences. Although there are unresolved debates about what does or does not constitute sexual harassment, it is indeed becoming more and more clear that sexual harassment is a pervasive, serious form of violation of a person's right to a safe working environment. Moreover, there is substantial literature showing that in vast number of cases, victims are women. Therefore, sexual harassment is perceived as social control of women by aggression against their gender (Hemming, 1985).

In spite of an increasing awareness, the images that are conjured up by sexual harassment are still quite stereotypical. Harassment is often, and erroneously, confused with courting behaviour (Hemming, 1985). Popular media caters to such stereotypical images by repeatedly refurbishing scenarios between blonde, young, and gifted in physique rather than in mind "secretaries" being chased around by older, powerful bosses. In popular media depictions, the bosses generally mean no harm, and the women are not really offended. These popular images capture a kernel of truth in the sense that the vast majority of working women in Canada are indeed employed in secretarial/service positions (Statistics Canada, Labour Force Statistics, 1992), and thus constitute a large proportion of those who are vulnerable for harassment. Stated differently, women are the workers, not the bosses in the vast majority of cases. However, these stereotypical images in the popular media hide the fact that sexual harassment hurts and injures. These myths also hide the fact that all women, regardless of their socioeconomic position or personal achievements are vulnerable, and do experience varying levels of harassment in their working lives. Moreover, some men also experience harassment, although the incidence of the latter is rare. In a major study of the U.S Merit System Protection Board files, 42% of women and 15% of men reported having been sexually harassed at work in the preceding 24 months (Tangri, Burt and Johnson, 1982). In a smaller survey in Thunder Bay, Canada, 83% of women considered sexual harassment on the job to be a serious problem. Likewise, a 1981 Women in Trades questionnaire found that 92% of women felt that they were sexually harassed on the job (Kadar, 1982: 171). Therefore, the women will be the exclusive focus of this study.

The most powerful challenge to the well established (and well guarded) stereotypes about sexual harassment was, no doubt, the charges by Anita Hill against Clarence Thomas. Maybe, for the first time, North American public saw that none of the highly desirable characteristics that Professor Hill possessed (intelligence, education, academic excellence) were an insurance to a safe environment for women. Similarly, audiences also saw that men who were highly respected in all other dimensions of their lives were not necessarily immune to saying or doing things that created a hostile and degrading workplace for their female workmates. Although these dimensions were lost on the all white, all male senators conducting the hearings, they were not necessarily lost on North American women.
Professor Hill's courage to challenge the blinding androcentrism, and her insistence on exposing entranced male bonding at much cost to her privacy, and despite attacks on her personal integrity, brought her recognitions and honours. It also created a new urge to ferret out sexual harassment in places which one would expect to be beyond these things. University campuses are examples of the latter, and a number of studies address sexual harassment at universities (Benson and Thomson, 1982; Kenig and Ryan, 1986; Powell, 1986; Pryor, 1987; Pryor and Day, 1988).

For the purposes of this paper, what needs to be emphasized is that sexual harassment creates a chilling environment which degrades, dehumanizes, and assaults women's intellectual or physical well-being. In this sense, it can be perceived as an insidious form of violence (Hemming, 1985; Grahame, 1985). What also needs to be emphasized is that challenges against sexual harassment may bring women torment through trials by unaware or insensitive men in power positions. Consequently, most forms of sexual harassment remain hidden, in spite of the growing attempts to shed light on this issue.

In the following pages, I will discuss the unique situation of female faculty and teaching assistants, and provide a literature review on power-based models of harassment. The models are "organizational" and "patriarchal." I will then discuss different conceptualizations and definitions of sexual harassment, leading to the strategies utilized by those who are harassed. My goal is to show how these issues may be particularly problematic for female faculty and teaching assistants, as specific dilemmas may arise from incongruencies between their occupational and educational standing and gender.

Female Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Universities offer a small but growing number of academic women considerable power. Although the representation of women varies dramatically from faculty to faculty, and in spite of the fact that most women occupy more junior ranks in relation to their more senior male colleagues, almost all faculties by now have a number of women as professors. Moreover, there are large numbers of female teaching assistants employed across the universities. These aspects form a fertile ground to study the experiences of women, as faculty members or teaching staff who are, by definition, occupying sometimes status congruent (female faculty/female students) sometimes status incongruent (female faculty/male faculty as peers) and sometimes status reversed roles (female faculty/male students). Since sexual harassment is about power, and exploitation of power advantages, there is a need to explore the so far basically ignored experiences of female faculty and teaching staff in relation to their male colleagues, male peers and male students (see Grauerholz, 1989).

Sexual harassment at university settings seems to be not as widespread as sexual harassment of working women in general. However, if a study carried out at Berkeley is any indication, it is not as rare as one might think. Benson and Thomson (1982:241) report that out of 111 non-transfer students, 31 reported sexual harassment by at least one male instructor. The same study found 24 of 158 transfer students reporting sexual harassment in their original universities. The total of 55 Berkeley women reported close to 100 incidents of sexual harassment. Osborn (1992) reports comparable numbers for Canadian Universities.

More in line with the current focus, Grauerholz (1989:793) reports that 47.6% of female professors claimed to have experienced a variety of sexually harassing behaviours from their male students. Of those, 60% reported more than one incident. The author attributes her findings to the dynamics of power, authority and gender.
Dictionary definitions of power include concepts like "ability to act," "physical strength and force," and "control, influence, and authority." Early social psychological definitions also utilize these aspects, but add the capacity to affect the quality of other person's outcomes (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Other social scholars have included a dimension of power which gives the powerful the control over scarce resources, and the ability to punish the powerless through threats of depriving them from access to resources (Sherif, 1982). Thus, the social psychological definitions signify that power is not a commodity, not something one has or doesn't have, but a dynamic emerging from the interaction of unequals. Power is a process, through which the powerful can subjugate the powerless, without fearing much resistance to such an abuse of power. As Grahame (1985: 121) summarizes "Power is in part the ability to subvert another person's will to one's own. To exercise such power is to do violence to that other person."

A. The organizational-power model of sexual harassment:

The organizational-power model argues that institutions have vertical power structures which contribute to sexual harassment (Fain and Anderton, 1987; Tangri, Burt and Johnson, 1982). According to this model, women are much more likely to be harassed simply because they occupy the lower rungs in the vertical power structure of the organizations. The model also predicts that men can also be harassed (by women or other men) if they are low in the power hierarchy. In that sense, it is not gender at all, but occupational standing which makes them targets.

B. The patriarchal-power model of sexual harassment:

According to this model, sexual harassment is a manifestation of the power imbalances between men and women. Not only men rule, but also take measures to legitimize their rule (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979; 1981). It should be noted that the patriarchal-power model, like the organizational one, sees the cause of harassment in power imbalances. However, unlike the organizational model, the patriarchal-power model asserts that all men are potential harassers, regardless of the rungs they occupy in hierarchical organizations.

Patriarchal-power model also subsumes an abstract dimension of power that the organizational model underemphasizes: the institutionalization of power. In general, three central considerations are relevant to people's evaluation of power: its source, the manner in which it is employed, and its effects (Lips, 1991). These are extremely important concepts since they allude to "persons" as holders of power, to their idiosyncratic ways of exercising or abusing it, and to outcomes of this transaction on a one-to-one basis. However, what goes well beyond these individualized conceptualizations is the "institutionalization of power" where norms, mores, and sanctions deify some and silence others. In patriarchal systems, the problem is more entrenched than an isolated abuser, but encompasses all those who prefer to trivialize the abuse, those who ignore it, those who see it as unavoidable, and of course those who see it as elicited and deserved. Traditional responses to harassment further victimize the victim, by questioning her motives and behaviours rather than those of her male perpetrators. These institutionalized power structures, as seen in Clarence Thomas's senate hearings, do everything possible to preserve the status quo from blame and responsibility, and make social change slow, painful, and prolonged. Men close ranks to defend one of their own.

C. Implications of these two models to the study of sexual harassment on campuses:
Universities, like most large corporations, have a rigid power hierarchy, and this power hierarchy is intertwined with gender. In countless ways, power is unidirectional, and androcentric. If the organizational model of sexual harassment is applied, female administrators who occupy peripheral positions to their male counterparts, female faculty who are junior in relation to their senior male colleagues, female teaching assistants who work with a disproportional number of male faculty, and almost all female staff are vulnerable. Female students are especially vulnerable to almost every other rung in this hierarchy. However, the source of vulnerability is their occupational/educational standing, not their gender. The latter becomes an issue only because it overlaps with their lack of power. It is indeed from such a model that most sexual harassment related research at universities have been instigated (for examples, see Dzeick and Weiner, 1984: "The Lecherous Professor," Benson and Thomson, 1982; Hughes and Sandler, 1986; Paludi, 1990; Malovich and Stake, 1990; Mazer and Percival, 1989; Popovick et al., 1986; Pryor and Day, 1988, Reilley, Lott and Galloghy, 1986; Reilley et al., 1982; Valentine-French and Radtke, 1989). In the same vein, the guidelines set by the National Advisory Council on Women's Education Programs in the United States, see harassment as the authority to emphasize sexuality or sexual identity of a student in a manner that prevents or impairs that student's full enjoyment of educational benefits, climate or opportunities (Till, 1980).

The organizational framework is probably capable of predicting a large number of harassment situations at campuses. However, the model is not adequate in different scenarios since it assumes that those who lack power cannot harass those who are higher in rank. In real life situations, however, not only male superiors or male peers of women, but even those who are lower in the work hierarchy are potential harassers and perpetrators. More specifically, the conceptualization of harassment cannot be confined to top down models of harassment. Harassment goes beyond the issue of protecting female students from predatory male faculty. In addition, female teaching staff and faculty themselves may fall prey to sexual harassment. The organizational model would be mute on those cases where female academics are vulnerable to harassment from their superiors, peers, as well as their male students. Similarly, female graduate students may suffer harassment from instructors, other graduate students, or students they teach. The reverse-harassment can only be understood through the patriarchal-power model, where gender is the explanatory factor in predicting who will harass whom (Backhouse and Cohen, 1981; Grauerholz, 1989).

University campuses where the occupational power of women is blossoming may also form a stage for rampant reverse-harassment of female faculty and teaching staff by students, although empirical knowledge in this area is lacking.

Definitions of Harassment:

There are different definitions of what constitutes sexual harassment. For example, Backhouse and Cohen (1981) see sexual harassment as a means for men to subordinate women in the workplace and in education. Others see it as a form of sexual discrimination (Ginsberg, Korenski and Galloway, 1977). In Canada, similar attempts to define harassment have taken place. For example, the Alliance Against Sexual Harassment (AASH) definition states:

Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexually based or sexually oriented practice which creates discomfort and/or threatens a woman's personal well-being or functioning (mental, physical or emotional). Sexual harassment includes verbal abuse, jokes, leering, touching or any unnecessary contact, the display of pornographic material, the invasion of personal space, sexual assault and rape, or any threat of retaliation or actual retaliation for any of the above (cited in Kadar, 1982).
Grahame (1985) defines sexual harassment as a:

persistent or abusive unwanted sexual attention made by a person who knows or ought reasonably to
know that such attention is unwanted. Sexual harassment includes all sexually oriented practices and
actions which may create a negative psychological or emotional environment for work, study, or the
buying or selling of services. It may include an implicit or explicit promise of reward or compliance.
Threats may take the form of actual reprisals or denial of opportunity for work, study, the purchase
or sale of services (Grahame, 1985: 112)

In 1989, the Supreme Court ruled sexual harassment as:

the gamut from overt gender based activity, such as coerced intercourse, to unsolicited physical
contact, to persistent propositions, to more subtle conduct such as gender based insults and taunting,
which may reasonably be perceived to create a negative psychological and emotional work

The scope of above definitions include all acts and pressures women may experience, from those in
managerial or supervisory positions as well as those who are peers, or under their supervision. The
focus is on the gendered funnelling of such acts which are generated by men and directed towards
women. Correlates of Male Harassment of Women:

A number of large survey studies on sexual harassment has tried to formulate typologies of male
harassers (Tangri, Burt, Johnson, 1982; Gutek et al. 1980; Jensen and Gutek, 1982). They are found to
be generally older than their targets, somewhat unattractive, married, and superior in education and
occupational rung in relation to their targets. The proportional representation of women in the
workplace was also found to be a factor. Pioneer women in traditionally male dominated fields are
particularly subject to harassment since they do not have the support systems, since they are seen as
challenging the status quo and thus "deserve" to be put into place, and since they represent "all"
women (Kanter, 1977). The proportional representation may be particularly relevant to the
harassment of female faculty since in a vast majority of the disciplines, they are still severely
underrepresented. In Kanter’s terminology, female faculty at University settings are still "token." A
token woman must display competence and prove herself to superiors, compete with peers and
regulate those she supervises for a successful career. All of these require a refusal to fall into
stereotypical role behaviour, and deem her as deviant in her career aspirations and deviant in sex role
behaviour. As social psychological literature clearly demonstrates, deviance conjures up attempts to
control the deviant. Sexual harassment is one of the many tools used by men to control women
(Hemming, 1985; Kadar, 1982).

Effects of Sexual Harassment:

The documented effects of sexual harassment are as varied as the definitions of sexual harassment.
However, there is a growing consensus that victims of harassment suppress inner feelings, take time
off work, ask for transfer, and even leave work (Pryor and Day, 1988). Doug Baldwin, senior vice-
president of Imperial Oil estimates costs to his company to be close to $8 million a year in
absenteeism, employee turnover and lost productivity (quoted in Canadian Human Rights Annual
Report< 1992:47)

Psychological effects of harassment may include depression, tension and irritation. More severe
reactions such as sleeplessness, substance abuse, physical or mental health problems, and
interpersonal relationship difficulties are also possible (Crull, 1982; Hadjifotiou, 1983). The objectification the victims suffer may serve as a blow to their self-image and self-confidence (Pryor and Day, 1988).

Sexual harassment blocks a woman's opportunities by chilling her environment, threatening her personhood, and reducing her from a person to a sexual object. Especially for female academics, sexual harassment may indeed be taxing in terms of long-term career prospects, and may isolate them from intellectual networks.

Responses to Sexual Harassment:

In the existing literature, how women handle sexual harassment appears to be varied. Gruber (1989) has attempted to subsume reactions to harassment under four typologies: avoidance, defusion (sic), negotiation, and confrontation. There is a considerable consistency in the literature that the commonest response to sexual harassment is doing nothing, and hoping that it will just go away. Literature also shows that sexual harassment rarely goes away without some form of intervention. Defusion represents a slightly more active attempt to deal with the situation than avoidance. Defusive attempts include going along, being a good sport, making a joke of it, all of which are attempts to restore some working equilibrium without conflict or confrontation. Gruber's third as well as fourth typologies, negotiation and confrontation, are more assertive attempts to find a resolution. Both involve pointing out to the harasser the objectionable nature of his behaviour. The difference is in the level of assertiveness, and in the willingness to pursue the matter further in more public realms or willingness to take the matter to litigation. In sum, negotiation may be "asking" the harasser to stop, whereas confrontation may be "telling" him to do so.

As common sense will dictate and as the accumulating sociological knowledge in the area supports, the more vulnerable the woman, the more likely that she will chose a passive response strategy, which may include no response at all. Vulnerability could be a woman's age (too young), experience (unexperienced), qualifications (low on formal education), and need (dependent on the particular job), and alternatives (transferability of skills). Type of response may also depend on the perceived position of the institution on such issues and the availability of or lack of support systems.

In all the above discussed dimensions, the female university educator's position may be unique. On one hand, since they may be perceived as pioneers in traditionally male dominated academe, they may act as lightning rods for males who want to preserve their gender-based privileges (Hemming, 1985). Female faculty may also attract free-floating hostility from their male peers who may hold power in interactions with other females in their lives (wives, daughters, students, etc.), and thus reluctant to share power with their peers. Female faculty may also receive harassment from their male students who negatively react to female power instead of having power over females. In all of these dimensions, female academics may be targets of harassment not because they lack power and prestige, but precisely because they have power and prestige which is "incongruent" with their traditional gender status.

How female academics react to sexual harassment may also be a function of the aforementioned dilemmas. On one hand, Universities in general are at the cutting edge of heightened awareness of current social issues such as sex discrimination. Most universities provide legitimized bodies to address/mediate/resolve conflicts that arise in these very sensitive areas. The above stated points combined with the occupational prestige of the female educators may seem, on the surface, to give female faculty all they need to take assertive, confrontational strategies to tackle sexual harassment
situations. At a deeper level, however, female academics may be harnessed by a whole set of factors unique to their occupation. As ambitious women, who are competing for jobs, promotions, grants, tenure, etc. etc., they may expect themselves just as they may be expected by others to have "control" over their occupational lives. Being the target of even very mild forms of sexual harassment may signal lack of control. Female academics may be reluctant to admit let alone publicize such experiences. Again, as educators, they may expect themselves and be expected by others to have control over their teaching environment. Even mild forms of disruption, especially of a sexual nature may question their competence in the eyes of those who evaluate their performance. Among all other demands in their lives, such ruptures may take on a special toll on academic women, and may lock them into silence rather than encouraging them to openly demand the harasser to stop.

Since September 1990, the sexual harassment office of the University of Toronto has been publishing annual reports about the contacts they receive. Between March and August of 1990, there were 388 sexual harassment linked contacts with the harassment office, and an additional 34 other harassment contacts. For the 1991-92 academic year, the sexual harassment related contacts are reported as 983 (and 27 other harassment contacts). What is disheartening is that of these large numbers of contacts, only 17 have lead to formal complaints, and of the 17, only a single complainant was a faculty member (respondent, a graduate student). Although the annual report does not indicate the gender of this particular pair, it does point out that 16 of 17 cases were harassment of women by men (University of Toronto, 1990-91 and 1991-92 Reports).

What really is happening in our midst is anyone's guess. Taking the University of Toronto as an example, 983 contacts, where only 17 lead to formalization for the largest university in Canada may suggest that universities are indeed safe places for female faculty and teaching assistants. Although very appealing, such a positive scenario may hardly represent the experiences of female educational workers. What is more likely is that sexual harassment is still a subtle violence against women in general and academic women in particular. Moreover, the latter may still lack a voice to challenge it, due to the prestige of the positions they hold. To study the voices of female faculty which may not be heard in official statistics for a variety of reasons, and seek the reasons behind the silencing processes must be a goal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


