
Sexual Harassment on Campus

Many universities simply do not want the pervasiveness of sexually suggestive actions by professors to be exposed

Shortly after I arrived at a prestigious eastern university to complete the work for my Ph.D., one of professors in the department began to harass me. This harassment consisted of repeated requests for dates as well as sexually suggestive remarks made to me both in private and in front of other professors in the department. This went on for several weeks.

I made a point of procuring a copy of the university regulations concerning sexual harassment, but I was surprised to discover that there was no university prohibition on sexual relations between professors and students. Students were considered "adults" by the university and, therefore, capable of informed "consent" to such relationships. As long as this professor's repeated requests for dates were phrased politely and involved no overt threat to my situation as a student in the department, they did not fall under the heading of behavior that was prohibited.

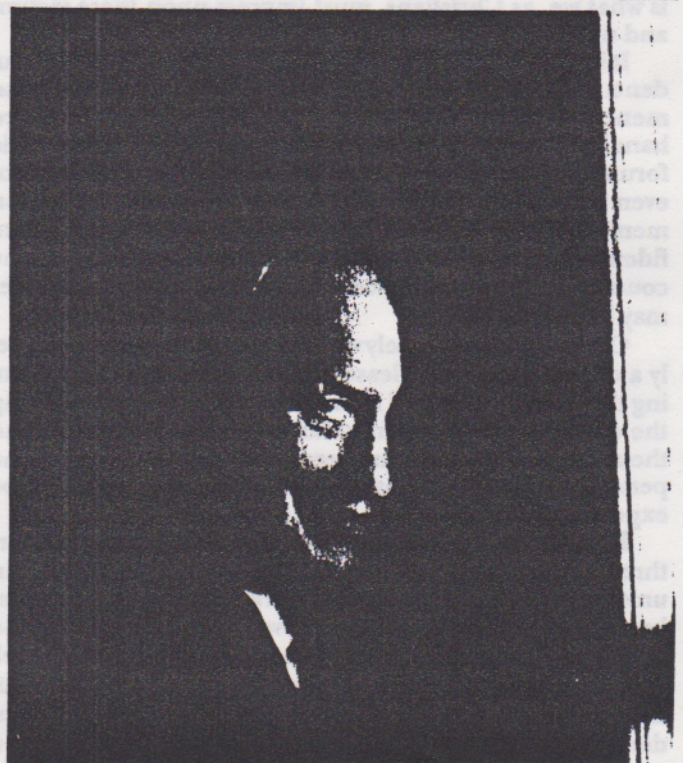
After several weeks of fending off the advances of this professor (whom I shall refer to as Bill), I turned to the chairman of the department for help. When I explained my situation to him, he seemed sympathetic. But, despite the fact that he admitted I was not the first student Bill had treated this way, he discouraged me from making a *formal* complaint. While he assured me that Bill's behavior was unacceptable, he was certain that it was not maliciously motivated. I would not want, he said, to risk the possibility of doing him any professional injury by making a *formal* complaint against him. He suggested that perhaps the best thing to do would be for him to have a "talk" with Bill.

I was anxious to resolve the problem without harming this person whose actions, for all their damaging nature, may not have been malicious. I did not consider that the chairman must have talked with Bill before, that the talk had clearly been ineffectual, and that there was no reason to believe it would work this time.

After I spoke to the chairman, Bill stopped asking me for dates, so I assumed that my problem had been solved. I was informed, however, by another professor (who could have gotten in considerable trouble with the university for revealing this information to me) that Bill repeatedly made dis-

Most cases of sexual harassment on campus are never reported. Victims usually simply drop the course of the offending professor, or accept a low grade, or worse, give in. "The statistics, could they be compiled, would be chilling," the author indicates.

by Marilyn Gaye Piety



Wallowitch

Sexual harassment seldom comes in the form of overt threats, and thus leaves the student vulnerable.

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paraging remarks about my work and intelligence in closed faculty meetings. As a result the faculty was becoming so prejudiced against me that there was a very real chance I would not receive any financial support for the coming academic year.

Counselors With No Real Authority

This university, like many, has counselors specifically appointed to handle complaints of sexual harassment. In desperation, I went to one of these counselors and explained my situation. She was distressed by my story, but I was shocked to discover that she had no real authority to do anything about it. The most she could do was suggest to the department, or to the university, that something should be done, but ultimately either of these authorities had to decide whether and how to act on her suggestion. They never did.

Students who become the objects of romantic attentions of a professor are often caught in a see-saw of emotions. They are sometimes unsure whether their situation would actually be considered "harassment," but they almost always feel exceptionally vulnerable and experience a desire to strike out at the source. This see-saw of emotions is usually magnified in the situation of a Christian who often fears that to take action against his or her harasser would be to violate a sacred duty to make his or her life an expression of Christ's love, in patience and forbearance. There is an important difference, however, between striking out against an individual and taking action to alleviate an injustice. This is what we, as Christians, must impress upon these victims and upon ourselves.

It is very difficult to get statistics on the proportion of students harassed by professors because, as one sexual harassment counsellor explained, "[m]ost of the cases are handled informally without going to court or to a public forum." Thus, no records of these cases are kept. It is not even possible to get a picture of the average case of harassment because complaints of harassment are usually confidential. This confidentiality is often interpreted by the counselor as meaning that no details concerning these cases may be revealed.

One might legitimately wonder why all the secrecy? Surely a counselor could release general information concerning the form most sexual harassment takes without violating the confidentiality of particular cases. The answer behind the secrecy is that many universities simply do not want the pervasiveness of sexual harassment on their campuses to be exposed.

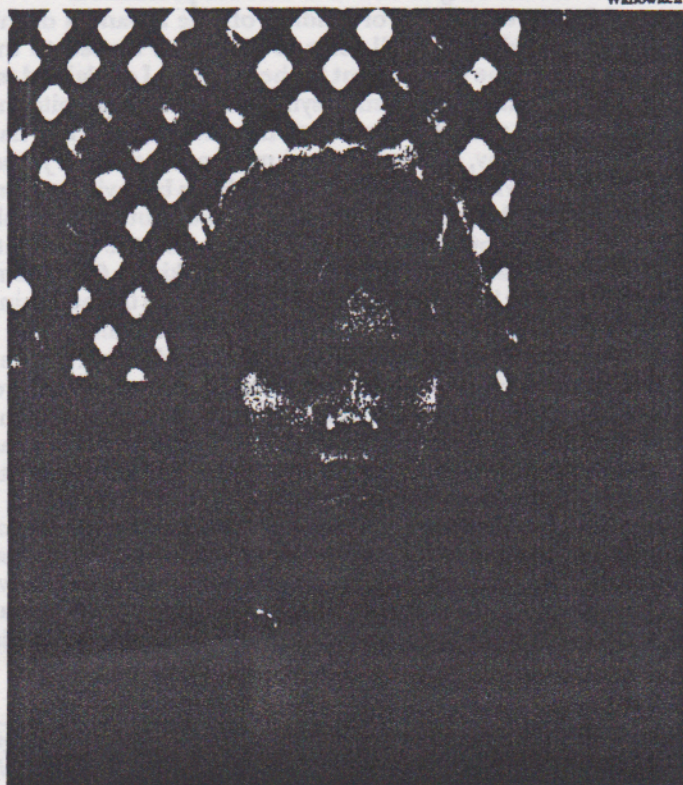
Harassment very seldom comes in the form of overt threats or promises and yet that is how it is often defined in university policies. The kind of harassment, most common based on my research and interviews with both graduate and undergraduate students, as well as established scholars, seldom involves such overt threats. The absence of threats, however, only makes this harassment more, not less, dangerous and destructive. That is, it leaves the student in a vulnerable position, afraid to confide his or her problem for fear of being labeled "paranoid."

Often, an investigation of any alleged harassment can only be undertaken "if the complainant agrees to be identified." But imagine an insecure college freshman agreeing to be identified as bringing a complaint of harassment against a professor who has not even overtly threatened him or her! It almost never happens, and universities hope that the absence of such formal complaints will be interpreted by the public as reflecting an absence of harassment.

Policies Protect Universities and Employees

Sexual harassment policies are, more often than not, set up to protect universities and their employees — that is, the *harassers* rather than the *harassees*. This has been allowed to happen because good people have consistently sent the message to universities that they do not care to know what goes on within their walls. The only time most people ever really come to appreciate the inadequacy of more university policies on sexual harassment is when they, or someone they know, have become victims of it, and then it is too late. One professor I spoke to, who was also the chairman of his department, explained that few professors in his department were completely free of the stain of such harassment. Thus, when a particularly bad case arose, he was unable to get any of the other professors to support the victim because they were so afraid that the accused would turn around and point the finger at them.

There is no formal record anywhere that Bill has ever sexually harassed a student, let alone that he is a chronic



Students need support to deal with the subtlety of sexual harassment.

harasser. He has now taken a job at another university, but his behavior has not changed. Several months ago I received a letter from the sexual harassment counselor with whom I had spoken at Bill's former university asking if I would be willing to support a woman whom Bill was harassing at this new university. It seemed this woman was considering making a formal complaint against Bill. However, to make a strong case, she needed the testimony of other women he had harassed.

Unfortunately, this woman eventually decided *not* to make a formal complaint. She explained that she was afraid of stirring up trouble and possibly prejudicing the rest of the faculty against her by taking such an action. The difficulty is that her fears were well-founded. Faculties do not like students who make trouble. Even if her complaint was ultimately successful — i.e., even if it eventuated in some censure of Bill — she might never again receive any professional support from anyone on the faculty of her department.

It would appear that the concern of the university is not with the emotional or even professional well-being of its students and graduate students. It is a disappointing thing to realize, but it should not be any great surprise. One "institution," however, is concerned with the welfare of others — the church. Christians are to be "the light of the world," and one of the ways in which we are to radiate this light is through insuring, "in the spirit of gentleness," that our neighbors' basic rights and freedoms are preserved.

Churches Can Help Correct Problems

Individual churches and their members can do a great many things to help correct this problem. Any church may, as a collective, solicit information from local colleges and universities concerning their sexual harassment policies. Parents or grandparents may also write to their child's or grandchild's school and request a copy of that school's sexual harassment policy. Many schools still do not have a formal policy prohibiting the sexual harassment of students. Furthermore, many existing policies are inadequate; therefore, it is important to read any information from the schools quite carefully. If the policy in question indicates that harassment must involve *overt* threats or promises of reward, it is inadequate. If it only allows an investigation into reported cases of harassment when the victim agrees to be identified, it is inadequate.

No one wants academe to be given over to witch hunts where any anonymous allegation of impropriety can ruin a career. The fact is, however, that under many existing sexual harassment policies, the professors' rights are far more well protected than the students. One formal complaint of impropriety is far from enough to get a tenured professor dismissed.

However, one instance of such "impropriety" can be enough to injure a student *substantially*. It can cause a considerable degree of emotional distress and can demoralize the student to the extent that his or her grades will suffer. Perhaps more importantly, it can create a fear and suspicion of authority that may stay with the student for the rest of his or her life.

If the school from which parents have requested information (and they may request this information in person as well as in writing) either does not have a policy concerning sexual harassment or has an inadequate policy, anyone can exert pressure on the school to draft such a policy or to revise existing policy. A person can do this by expressing concern to both the dean of the college or university in question and to local newspapers.

Persons who attended a college or university may exert considerable pressure upon the institution by suggesting that they will discontinue support if the school does not adopt a responsible sexual harassment policy and by informing the school that they will encourage other alumni to do the same. Church persons can put similar pressure on church-related colleges and universities. Most colleges and universities are responsive to public concerns — if those concerns are made apparent to them — because so much of their funding comes from the public. So few people, however, really *know* what goes on in most colleges and universities. That is why sexual harassment on college and university campuses is so pervasive.

Records Help Relieve Anxiety

The best thing for students to do if they find, or even suspect, that they are the object of such harassment (and this is advice every church ought to provide for its young members as well as other individuals in the community) is to make some record of the relevant event or events. This record does not have to be elaborate; a note or two jotted down in a calendar on the date of the event is enough. Such a record will help to lessen the anxiety that the event may have caused. If the student is lucky, there will be no more events to record and the note will simply be forgotten. However, if there is another event, even something as apparently innocent as a professor standing uncomfortably close to the student in a line or in the hall, it should be recorded. In this way it becomes possible to establish whether a pattern is emerging.

If such a pattern becomes evident, the student should go to see a university counselor. Again, many universities have counselors who are appointed specifically to talk to students who have complaints about sexual harassment. If a particular university does not have such counselors, it will have counselors appointed to deal with other student problems such as depression and test-anxiety, and the student may speak to one of them.

There is no risk involved in seeing a counselor. The counselor will simply listen to the student's story and give advice on how to pursue the matter. It is important to remember, however, that these counselors are often under pressure from their college or university to seek an *informal* solution to the problem and that such informal solutions are often unsatisfactory.

Students Need Support

Apart from exerting pressure upon various colleges and universities to adopt responsible sexual harassment policies,

one of the most important things we can do is to encourage young people to be open about such experiences and to support them when they do confide in us. Students need our support because the subtlety of most harassment often leaves them feeling confused, vulnerable, and even guilty.

Several students to whom I spoke actually confided to their parents or to other adults that they were being made "uncomfortable" by the behavior of one of their professors. They found, however, that they received little support. Unfortunately, we are sometimes inclined to characterize the vague feelings often expressed by victims of harassment as

expressions of paranoia and thus ultimately the problem of the student rather than of the professor or the college or university. We need to assure students that it may not be their fault if they feel "uncomfortable" around a particular professor and that we will support them if they decide to make a formal complaint.

The Christian community can do a great deal to help eradicate sexual harassment in academe. It is time we accepted the responsibility for reacting to this pervasive injustice. Although more subtle than other injustices, it is not less devastating to its victims. ■

Sexual Harassment in Church and Society in the U.S.A.

All human beings, both male and female, are created in the image of God, and thus have been made equal in Christ. From the beginning God intended us to live out our equality in relation with one another. Yet, in our human brokenness we have given greater value and power to men than to women. Jesus was sent into this world that we might experience whole relationships with each other and God. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, RSV). Still both the church and the society condone and ignore personal and institutional abuse of women.

Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexual advance or demand, either verbal or physical, which is perceived by the recipient as demeaning, intimidating or coercive. Sexual harassment must be understood as an exploitation of a power relationship rather than as an exclusively sexual issue. Sexual harassment also includes the creation of a hostile or abusive working environment resulting from discrimination on the basis of gender. The successful 1986 Supreme Court case of *Meritor Savings Bank et al v. Vinson* substantially broadened the legal definition of sexual harassment, holding that it is a violation of federal anti-discrimination laws and saying that companies may be liable for the behavior of one employee. This decision upheld the 1981 guidelines of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which holds employers liable for all forms of sexual harassment from clients and customers. From the EEOC guidelines it is clear that the employer bears an affirmative responsibility to maintain a work-place free from sexual harassment, to investigate quickly and impartially any charge of sexual harassment and to take action against all offenders.

At the work-place, at one extreme, sexual harassment is the demand for sexual compliance coupled with the threat of firing if the person refuses.

On the other, it is being forced to work in an environment in which, through various means, the person is subjected to stress or made to feel humiliated because of one's gender. Sexual harassment is behavior which becomes coercive because it occurs in the employment context, thus threatening both a person's job satisfaction and security. This critical problem affects all persons regardless of job category or description, age, race, economic or educational background.

It affects women who are church professionals as well as those who work in secular occupations. Sexual harassment has been documented in United Methodist churches, agencies and institu-

tions, including seminaries. It is becoming clear as statistics emerge that whatever their occupation, women share a common problem — the possibility of sexual harassment. Men can also be the victims of sexual harassment.

National surveys done by the Working Women's Institute, *Redbook Magazine* and an independent study in Illinois from 1975 through 1980 found that from 59 percent to 88 percent of all women surveyed responded that they had been made to feel humiliated or threatened by sexual harassment in their present place of employment. A 1981 survey of crises experienced by United Methodist women revealed that even without being provided a definition of sexual harassment, one out of every eight respondents reported that she had been harassed on her job.

It is clear from currently available data that the Church suffers from the sin of sexual harassment in ways which mirror the society. However, more current research is needed. The Christian community has a responsibility to deal resolutely with the issue of sexual harassment. It demeans and destroys the dignity of the victim. Rather than affirming women as whole persons as Jesus did, it reinforces the idea of women as sexual objects. It challenges women's humanity, undermining their self-esteem, job satisfaction and self-confidence; and, it keeps women at lower status in the work force.

Therefore be it resolved that The United Methodist Church stands in opposition to the sin of sexual harassment in the Church and the society at large, and calls upon the Church at all levels to:

1. Produce educational resources to assist United Methodists in understanding the issue of sexual harassment;
2. Develop clear policies and procedures related to sexual harassment establishing grievances procedures for victims and penalties for offenders;
3. Monitor federal, state and local legislation, advocating for just laws which will help to eradicate sexual harassment;
4. Model in its own life an environment of hospitality where there is not only an absence of harassment but the presence of welcome, respect, and equality.

And be it further resolved that a United States survey be conducted by the General Council on Ministries to determine the extent of sexual harassment and the policies and procedures to deal with it inside our own Church structures, including all related agencies and institutions. The findings and recommendations of this survey will be reported to agencies, annual conferences and local churches by December 1990.

— Adopted by the 1988 General Conference