

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

by Barbara Eyles

Sexual harassment on university campuses has become a critical issue across Canada. Because of the size of the University of Alberta, harassment is inevitable and only time has halted bringing this controversy into public view. Sexual harassment can happen anywhere to anyone, regardless of position or personal gender characteristics.

What constitutes sexual harassment is very difficult to define. Sexual harassment is most often inspired by a lust for power not sexual gratification. The line between acceptable social behavior and harassment is very hazy. Personal perception plays a great part as certain comments and actions which one person may see as compliments, another may see as degrading and offensive. Specific verbal abuse, *unwelcome* remarks and jokes, taunting of people about their body or clothing, displaying pornographic or derogatory pictures, leering and unnecessary physical contact can all be examples of sexual harassment. Taken to its limit, threats or actual retaliation, assault and rape are also included.

The University of Alberta has set up the President's Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment (PACSH), to combat the problem. This committee accepts the definitions of sexual harassment adopted by the Alberta Human Rights Commission and the Canadian Association of University Teachers. Excerpts follow: "Sexual harassment is an unwanted sexual solicitation or advance made by a person in a position of authority who knows or ought to know that it is unwelcome....reprisal or threat by someone in authority after a sexual advance is rejected....sexual advances, requests for favours, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment."

PACSH is made up of nominated members, one man and one woman each from: academic staff, non-academic staff, graduate students and undergraduate students. Wide representation among the eight members is assured by having only one member from any one department and not too many members from the same faculty. The two-year terms are staggered so that half the group is always experienced. The Committee elects its own chairperson and tries to be as accessible as possible, even between academic terms. The Committee's procedures are kept flexible to help in matters of sexual harassment which overlap with problems of equal opportunity or racial bias. All committee records are kept strictly confidential.

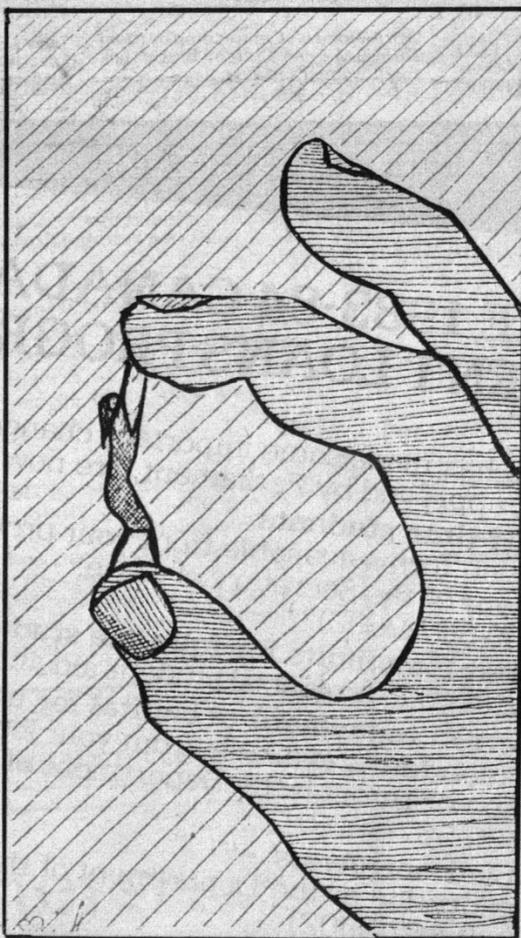
A professor falls in love with his brightest undergraduate student. The professor repeatedly invites her out, telephones her and sends her love letters. The student, who has no wish to reciprocate, is upset by his unwarranted attentions and worries about his objectivity when grading her papers if she continues to resist. Her work suffers and she considers changing departments. She is reluctant to make a formal complaint because the Chair of the department and her professor are friends and she doesn't think that her complaint will be taken seriously.

A professor calls a student to her office for a discussion about the student's up-coming term paper. While alone the professor makes sexual advances in the office which the student rejects. Thereafter the student is treated coldly, and receives a poor mark on the term paper which she feels she didn't deserve. The student is too embarrassed because of the homosexual nature of the situation to challenge her grade. She is apprehensive about making a direct complaint to the faculty for fear that it would effect her future in that faculty.

The preceding are only two examples illustrating the many forms sexual harassment can take. Sexual harassment can be initiated by a higher status person toward a lower status person, from administrator to employee or from colleague to colleague. Sexual harassment can be directed to either sex from either sex.

Sexual harassment has many possible repercussions, withdrawal from classes, decrease in marks, distrust of authority and a general decline in interest in classes. These could lead to failure or withdrawing from school altogether. Those dealing with a harassment situation need significant personal energy whether they are using avoidance or direct confrontation to attempt to resolve the situation. Very often victims feel humiliation, intimidation, unwarranted guilt and shame as well as a decrease in self-confidence and ambition.

"Sexual harassment is an unwanted sexual solicitation or advance made by a person in authority."



As with the problems in identifying sexual harassment, dealing with it when it occurs is equally if not more difficult. The Association of American Colleges, (AAC) in April of 1983, said that twenty per cent of women on campuses experience mild forms of harassment, and two per cent have been threatened or bribed for sex. Out of this group ninety-five per cent of the women who feel harassed refuse to file official complaints. In seventy-five per cent of these cases when the harassment was ignored it continued or got worse. In the winter of 1982 the AAC surveyed Arizona State University and found five per cent of men and thirteen per cent of women acknowledged sexual harassment experiences. Another study done by the student government of the University of Florida found fifty per cent of its respondents experienced unwarranted sexual attention from instructors. It is not unreasonable to expect similar statistics for Canadian campuses.

In dealing with a sexual harassment situation, on the most informal level, the victim can confront the other party involved and explain that their actions or comments are not acceptable and that you find those actions offensive. If this can not be easily done, a more formal approach would be a letter written to the other party again explaining your discomfort in the situation, the fact that you do not deserve to be treated in such a manner and that a copy of that letter is being sent to the President's Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment as the first step in a lodged complaint. By writing such a letter, the complainant can gain some control over the situation and move away from the role of passive victim.

In some cases the other party may simply not be aware that their actions are offensive, and either of these steps would be enough to stop the harassment. In the cases when these measures are not enough, a call to the President's Advisory Committee should be made, for information and procedures. Incidents can be reported by contacting any member of the Committee.

The committee member will meet with you within a week, and will either suggest that you write a formal letter of complaint, or will direct you to another group for assistance. Some of the referral agencies are: Sexual Assault Center, Police, Student Counselling, Campus Security or the Office of Student Affairs. This referral system ensures that a complainant gets personal counselling.

If a person decides to lodge a formal complaint, a signed letter is sent to PACSH, requesting an investigation. A panel of three of the committee members investigate complaints. The complainant presents the panel membership and request that specific people not be on that particular panel. Within two weeks of the initial action, the complainant presents the case to the panel. At that time the panel decides whether to refer, dismiss or investigate. If a complaint is dismissed the panel must give reasons why but there are no appeal procedures within the university.

An investigation begins when one or more of the panel members meets with the person whom the complaint has been lodged against. If a resolution can not be made at that time the panel may, through the President, collect more information from files, records or witnesses, though witnesses are under no obligation to appear. After the initial hearing and investigation there may be a meeting of the two parties involved to attempt a resolution. At that meeting both parties may be accompanied by a 'friend' but not by legal council. After the investigation is closed the panel makes a full report to the President, and the President may initiate whatever disciplinary actions lie within his power.

For example, under the Code of Student Behavior, students can be disciplined by a University Disciplinary Panel for sexual harassment by being excluded from specified areas of the University, by being fined, or by being expelled. Under the agreements negotiated between the Association of Academic Staff and the Board of Governors, a Professor or another academic staff member can be disciplined for "good and sufficient cause" by being fined, having salary reduced, or being suspended/dismissed.

Aside from investigating harassment situations, the other main function of PACSH is to encourage and coordinate an education, awareness and outreach program, which is financially assisted by the University. This fall PACSH begins with 300 posters and 30,000 pamphlets with its educational campaign.

Sexual harassment is a problem in the quality of human relationships. Only in consciously trying to change cultural norms and expectations can sexual harassment and its discriminatory results be stopped. Men and women must strive to respect each other as equals, and help to destroy the negative stereotypes. Everyone can begin to fight the problem by working directly with the group that they are involved with. Discussion is the key - by checking with each other that our behaviour is not offensive we can become aware of potential harassment situations. The President's Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment can be reached for inquiries on their hotline 432-TALK. Information is also available at the Women's Centre Room 270 SUB or by contacting Barb Donaldson, VP Academic at the Student's Union.