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What's Wrong with Sexual Harassment

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The term "sexual harassment" covers a wide range of activities and behaviour. At the extreme we have cases in which men blatantly force themselves upon women, using their power to establish coercive conditions such as loss of a job, a demotion, or a reassignment to work conditions that are intolerable as penalty for a failure to be cooperative with sexual demands. Within the university, the extreme cases include making sexual overtures to women students with coercive conditions attached such as failure in a course, failure to be recommended for graduate school or for a job, or simply making sure that the student is not free to pursue her own work in the way she chooses.

I take it we agree that these behaviours are highly offensive to us all, that they are not in contention, and that it is simply a matter of trying to figure out the measures we can take to eliminate these situations on campus. I want to discuss a form of behaviour about which there appears to be some doubt that it should even be counted as sexual harassment. Examples of this behaviour are captured by the following descriptions:

> When I was about sixteen...I had real moments of anxiety. In elevators and on the subway men would sometimes look me over with a sort of aggressive, superior little smile. I would always try to stand in quiet corners or look for a family and then stand with them as if I were one of their kids.[1]
>
> I was discussing my work in a public setting when a professor cut me off and asked me if I had freckles all over my body.[2]
>
> A professor cut me off in mid sentence and suggested that my sweater looked "big enough for the two of us."[3]
>
> Class time is taken up by some professors with dirty jokes which...often happen to be derogatory to women (*i.e.*, referring to women by a part of her anatomy, portraying women in jokes as simple-minded or teases, showing...women as part of the decoration on a slide used to spice up a lecture.)[4]
>
> A young woman was recently interviewed for a teaching job in philosophy by the academic chairman of a large department. During most of the interview...she reported, the man stared fixedly at her breasts. In this situation the woman is a bosom, not a job candidate...because the direction of his attention she is discomfited, feels humiliated and performs badly. Not surprisingly, she fails to get the job.[5]
>
> It is a fine, spring day, and with an utter lack of self-consciousness I am bouncing down the street. Suddenly I hear men's voices. Catcalls and whistles fill the air. These noises are clearly sexual in intent and they are meant for me; they come from a group of men hanging about a corner across the street. I freeze. As Sartre would say, I have been petrified by the gaze of the Other. My face flushes and my motions become stiff and self-conscious. The body which, only a moment before, I inhabited with such ease now floods my consciousness. I have been made into an object.[6]

We all, women and men alike, recognize these familiar scenarios. Our responses to them may differ. What do men say about such incidents? There is little sociological work done on this question, but from the work that has been done and from my own experience I know the following to be common answers men give to the question "why do you do it?":[7]

(1) it alleviates boredom;
(2) it gives me a feeling of youthful comradery in discussing this with other guys;
(3) women like this sort of attention, it makes them feel good;
(4) it is a lot of fun and it does not hurt anyone.

Very few men admit they do it to anger or humiliate women and most disavow any intentions of this sort. A good number, it seems to me, think that it has nothing to do with women at all, "It is something men do to impress other guys."[8]

To assess these "justifications" or explanations for the behaviour we need to consider two direct questions. Is this form of behaviour wrong? If it is wrong, why is it wrong? My own short answers to these questions are: Yes, it is wrong, and it is wrong because it involves a form of unacceptable sexual objectification.

Following Sandra Bartky we can define sexual objectification in the following way:

> A person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual function are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as though they were capable of representing her.[9]

As Bartky notes, sometimes one might want to be thought of as "a sexually intoxicating body," but the identification of a woman with her sexuality becomes a problem when "such identification becomes habitually extended into every area of her experience."[10] As Bartky puts it,

> To be routinely perceived by others in a sexual light on occasions when such a perception is inappropriate is to have one's very being subjected to that compulsive sexualization that has been the traditional lot of women...[11]

Thus, one way of objectifying women is to make us the object of a kind of perception. There are two crucial features of the perception which make it a form of harassment. First, it is unwelcome; it occurs independently of what we want, it is done against our will. However, this condition alone would not make it an unacceptable form of harassment for we do not in general think that others are harassing us if they have thoughts or perceptions of us that we do not like or want them to have. The crucial difference between the cases I mention and these more general cases of people perceiving us in an undesirable way is this. The examples I mention are all cases in which we have not just an unwelcome perception of a woman, what we have is a public *action* that is more than a way of perceiving. We have an action which males use as a way of maintaining their dominance. The perception is forced on girls and women. Consider again what Bartky says.

> While it is true that for these men I am nothing but, let us say, "a nice piece of ass," there is more involved in this encounter than their mere fragmented perception of me. They could, after all, have enjoyed me in *silence*...I could have passed by without having been turned to stone. But I must be made to know that I am "a nice piece of ass", I must be *made* to see myself as they see me. There is an element of compulsion in the encounter.... The encounter described seems less the spontaneous expression of a healthy eroticism than a ritual of subjugation.[12]

Harassment of this sort, then, is a way of ensuring that women will not feel at ease, that we will remember our role as sexual beings, available to, accesible to men. It is a reminder that we are not to consider ourselves equals, participating in public life with our own right to go where we like when we like, to pursue our own projects with a measure of security.

Now many men declare, as I have noted, that (a) they have no notion that women do not like this form of behaviour; (b) that they think it does not harm anybody; and (c) that they do not intend it to be humiliating. They are also often defensive about being asked why they engage in such behaviour. I want to address each of these responses in turn and demonstrate their inadequacy since the muddled "thinking" that they represent interferes with a significant change in behaviour of otherwise well intentioned men.

First, let us consider the I-had-no-notion-women-didn't-like-it response. The idea that women do not like this form of harassment appears novel to men often, not because they have another image of women's response but because they have not given it any thought at all.[13] I think it is fair to say that men do not ask women how they feel about such behaviour, and in my experience, when they are told they do not want to hear the response. The National Film Board of Canada produced a prize winning film on pornography called *Not A Love Story*. The film was remarkable because it did attempt to explore women's feelings about pornography, both women involved in the industry and those not directly involved. In the film there is a sequence in which Robin Morgan, a well known feminist, is interviewed and in the course of explaining her feelings about pornography she cries. Robin Morgan's tears in that interview capture the sadness, the frustration, the anger, the hurt that many women experience in response to pornography. Every male reviewer of that film that I read, chastised her for her tears. They complained that the film makers made a mistake in leaving that sequence in, that

this was another case of women not being able to think rationally about the issue of censorship and free speech; that Morgan was too emotional in her comments, that the film would have been more effective without the interview. I think their responses to that sequence characterize many men's attitudes—they will not ask women what they think and feel about pornography or sexual harassment of the sort I am describing; and when they do hear a response they do not like, they will not listen. The simple reply to "I had no idea women didn't like it" is this: "Then *ask* women and *listen* to what they say."

The second response, the I-don't-think-it-harms-anybody response, has some surface plausibility with any single given incident. However, as with many of our actions, although there appears to be no harm associated with our own particular action, we neglect to take account of the fact that our action occurs in a context in which every incident helps to build the habitual and systematic reminder to women that we are seen primarily as sexual beings. Thus, individual remarks, in such a context, do involve an exercise of power. There are, despite men's disclaimers, penalties attached to the so-called innocent remark which gives them a coercive power. It is because we have created a climate in which women's bodies are routinely objectified and women are continually threatened with sexual assault that every incident of allegedly harmless sexual objectification becomes coercive and effectively perpetuates this climate.

Adrienne Rich reminds us of the dangers of this climate to women in educational terms: "our bodies and our minds are inseparable in this life, and when we allow our bodies to be treated as objects, our minds are in mortal danger."[14] Further she notes,

> The undermining of self, of a woman's sense of her right to occupy space and walk freely in the world, is deeply relevant to education. The capacity to think independently, to take intellectual risks, to assert ourselves mentally, is inseparable from our physical way of being in the world, our feelings of personal integrity. If it is dangerous for me to walk home late of an evening from the library, *because I am a woman and can be raped*, how self-possessed, how exuberant can I feel as I sit working in that library? How much of my working energy is drained by the subliminal knowledge that, as a woman, I test my physical right to exist each time I go out alone?[15]

Now, I know that sexual harassment, especially the forms I am talking about, and rape are not the same thing, but it is not extreme to link them, or to suggest a linkage as I seem to in quoting Rich. The reason that sexually objectifying remarks are not harmless, even single incidents, is because they occur in a context in which women are subjected to other forms of coercion. Our sexual objectification is a constant reminder to us of our vulnerability to others, to their objectifying perception and their power. In short, every incident of sexual harassment of the sort I am discussing feeds on the fear of rape.

If you have doubts about my concerns about the coercive contextual power of individual cases of street harassment ask yourself why it is that women who attempt to harass men in retaliation are never successful. I have tried this, and other women I know have tried it, and our common experience is that we cannot make those same tactics work for us. Why is that? It is because the men, who act as though our sexual comments which are intended to humiliate them, or at least to put them off, can take them as some sort of sexual invitation or challenge which they are only too glad to meet. Men are able to respond to the comments in this way precisely because they are not in a context in which they are habitually and systematically sexually objectified. Fear of sexual assault is not their daily companion as it is for women. If men did live in such a context, women could easily prey upon their fears and anxieties, women could easily dominate them with sexual remarks of the sort men pass out daily to women.

Finally, what are we to make of the I-didn't-intend-my-actions-to-be-humiliating response? The plea here is that since men did not intend any bad consequences they should not be held responsible for them. So who does own responsibility for the harm caused by this sort of sexual objectification? It seems to me we might charitably say that we are all "innocent and accountable."[16] We all have some responsibility to see that a climate is established in which women feel free and confident in their physical ways of being in the world, a climate in which women can be confident in their feelings of personal integrity. We all share that responsibility. How best can we exercise it?

As women we need to express our anger about our experience of harassment. We need to express our proper distrust of men because of our experiences. This requires some courage because women are often in a double bind in these matters. If we express our dislike of this form of sexual objectification, if we express our distrust of men in this regard, then men who do not engage in this type of behaviour (and some who do), often get angry. They resent not being trusted. On the other hand, if we remain silent, if we say nothing we lend credence to the view that we like it, that it does no harm.

Men, too, need to accept their share of responsibility. If they engage in this behaviour, they need to stop it. If they do not engage in it, they must ask themselves whether they condone other men doing it. Are they complicitous, or do they speak up, do they object, not as self-proclaimed protectors of women, not as benefactors of women, but simply because they do not want to live in a society in which women are sexually objectified?

We, all of us, need to challenge the two presumptions at the heart of the problem of sexual harassment: that it is men's right to have women sexually accessible to them; and that women should trust men even when men fail to take responsibility for establishing a social climate in which women can move freely without fear of sexual objectification.

Marge Piercy poignantly captures the pain women experience in not being taken seriously in a university context. Here are some lines from her poem entitled "In the men's room(s)":

> When I was young I believed in intellectual conversation:
> I thought the patterns we wove on stale smoke
> floated off to the heaven of ideas.
> To be certified of high masculine discourse...
> I walked on eggs, their tremulous equal...
>
> Eventually of course I learned how their eyes perceived me:
> when I bore to them cupped in my hands a new poem to nibble,
> when I brought my aerial maps of Sartre or Marx,
> they said, she is trying to attract our attention,
> she is offering up her breast and thighs.[17]

In closing, I am reminded of another poem, one by Adrienne Rich. In this poem a woman is in conversation with a man. He acknowledges that he *knows* that women are oppressed: he points out that *he understands* their position, that *he sympathizes* with women, that *he* feels the *guilt* of his gender, of being a man. In each case, in response to him, the woman asks one simple question: "What will you undertake?"[18]

"What will you undertake?" is the question women should ask of men they consider trusting. "What will I undertake?" is the question men should ask themselves.

NOTES

1. Cheryl Bernard and Edith Schlaffer, "The Man in the Street: Why He Harasses," in A. Jagger and Paula Rotheberg, editors, *Feminist Frameworks*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984, p. 71.
2. *The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One For Women*. Publication of the Association of American Colleges, 1818 A Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. USA 20009, p. 3.
3. *The Classroom Climate*, p. 6.
4. *The Classroom Climate*, p. 5.
5. Sandra Lee Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," in Sharon Bishop and Marjorie Weinzweig, editors, *Philosophy and Women*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1979, p. 37.
6. Bartky, p. 37.
7. Theses responses are discussed in Benard and Schlaffer, p. 71.
8. Said by an undergraduate male in a Society and Morals course in which we discussed Bartky's paper, "On Psychological Oppression."
9. Bartky, p. 36.
10. Bartky, p. 36.
11. Bartky, p. 37.
12. Bartky, p. 37 (original italics).
13. Bernard and Schlaffer, p. 71.
14. Adrienne Rich, "Claiming an Education," in *Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. New York: Norton, 1979, p. 233.
15. Adrienne Rich, "Taking Women Students Seriously," in *Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p. 242 (original italics).
16. This phrase comes from Adrienne Rich.
17. This poem is found in Piercy's collection of selected poems, *Circles on the Water*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1982, p. 80. I have adapted the poem by changing the order of two lines.
18. Adrienne Rich, "From an Old House in America," in *Poems Selected and New 1950-1974*. New York: W.W. Norron and Co. Inc., 1975, p. 243.

A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

I'd like a diamond ring, she said,
sitting across the table
in a loose, flowered dress.

The eyes looked, far-off,
to the husband who left with his secretary,
to the daughter who ran away,
to the house she was losing,
and the weight she was gaining;

her dress billowed, a ship
lost in fog, listing on shoals;

oh, for the flash of a lighthouse,
the distant twinkle of shore!

But for now,
a diamond would do.

Jill Newman Solnicki
Ontario