

# Sexual Harassment: From the Personal to the Political

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author explores, through her personal experience, the sexual politics that underlie sexual harassment. Through the documentation and analysis of the incidents of sexual harassment that she experienced over four months, she discusses the impact of sexual harassment on women's lives. She demonstrates how women's experiences of sexual harassment are sifted through a patriarchal filter, and argues that theories developed from women's versions of their personal experiences are an essential step to usurping male dominance. In keeping with the belief that "the personal is political," she stresses the need for feminist researchers to affirm their connection to other women by examining their own experience as part of the research process.

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet exposé, l'auteure, à la lumière de son expérience personnelle, les politiques sexuelles qui sous-tendent le harcèlement sexuel. À l'aide de la documentation et de l'analyse d'incidents relatifs au harcèlement sexuel dont elle a été victime pendant quatre mois, elle examine les effets du harcèlement sexuel sur la vie des femmes. Elle démontre comment les expériences des femmes en ce qui a trait au harcèlement sexuel sont modifiées par une approche patriarcale. En outre, elle soutient que les théories élaborées d'après les expériences personnelles racontées par les femmes sont une étape essentielle pour usurper la dominance mâle. En accord avec la croyance que ce qui est personnel est politique, elle insiste sur le besoin de la part des chercheuses féministes d'affirmer leur lien avec les autres femmes en examinant leurs propres expériences comme faisant partie du processus de la recherche.

It's 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 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 emotions 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.

(cited in Houston, 1988, p. 44)

**S**EXUAL HARASSMENT BY MEN IS SOMETHING with which I cope on a daily basis as part of the backdrop of my life as a woman living in a sexist society. Although some of my experiences of harassment are extreme versions of men's sexualized behaviour, committed perhaps by "sex-crazed perverts," most of my experiences are small, mundane

and cumulative incidents committed by ordinary men. The stereotype of the lecherous professor, the office Romeo, or the masked rapist does not reflect the reality of sexual harassment as I have experienced it.

The male intrusions that permeate my life demand that I adopt a posture of constant vigilance, for whether I choose to react against, join in, ignore, or avoid these incidents, I must somehow respond because I know that even the more mundane sexual violations can escalate into violence (Randall, 1987; Wise & Stanley, 1987). As Parker (1986) asserts, "Sexual harassment is a major intrusion into one's personal space, an encroachment that demands attention, a humiliating experience and occasionally a situation fraught with danger" (p. 331). The insults, the patronizing put-downs, the degrading comments, and the invariable threat of violence disempower me and keep me in my place—that is, subordinate to men.

In this paper I wish to explore, through my personal experience, the sexual politics that underlie sexual harassment. I want to share my experiences with other women who may be silenced by male interpretations of their realities. As a white woman, I recognize that I am protected from the racism embedded in much of the sexual harassment experienced by women of colour. I further realize that, as a heterosexual woman, I may experience sexually harassing behaviour differently than lesbians who risk additional abuse for failing to conform to heterosexual norms. My location as graduate student, however, places me in a contradictory position in respect to my experience of sexual harassment. While my impoverished economic condition limits my access to the protective measures available to many middle- and upper-class women (for example, the use of taxis or cars instead of walking or using public transportation), I also study in a feminist environment where I work primarily with women and where sexual harassment is clearly recognized as a social problem. It follows, then, that most of my sexually harassing experiences occur outside of the academic setting.

While the specific context of our lives as women accounts for the variation in our experience of sexual harassment, each harassing incident is an expression of the male domination we all share. The documentation of my lived events of sexual harassment over a four-month period is an attempt to understand my personal experience as part of an institutionalized system of male dominance. In keeping with the tenet that the personal is political, I wish to begin where we all must begin: with ourselves.

### Beginning with Ourselves

"The world as it is constituted by men stands in authority over that of women. It is that part of the world from which our kind of society is governed and from which what happens to us begins" (Smith, 1987, p. 33). Because the experiences of women are sifted through a patriarchal filter and adapted to fit existing male-developed theories, what women have come to know as "reality" is a distortion of their lives. When women's direct ex-

periences of sexual harassment are viewed through a patriarchal lens, men's harassment of women takes on a male interpretation (Wise & Stanley, 1987). The sexually harassing behaviour that is degrading, demeaning, humiliating, and infuriating to women is re-defined as "a joke," "natural male-female behaviour," "a misinterpretation," or "just a bit of fun." Women who reject these male interpretations are often punished. As Ramazanoglu (1987) writes:

It is my contention that I am not a crank, I am not a freak, I am not an unprofessional, I am not a totalitarian fascist determined to impose my will on others, I am not sexually deprived, I do not seek revenge on men, but I am labelled as these (and worse) to my face and behind my back, because of my lack of deference and my persistent failure to accept my "proper place" as a subordinate female in a patriarchal, competitive and hierarchical system. (p. 62)

The enforcement of male interpretations on women's experiences is another form of men's control over women. Developing theories induced from women's everyday lives is a crucial step to usurping male authority (Smith, 1987). The power to name, the power to define, the power to interpret must begin with ourselves, with the exploration and sharing of women's mutual realities.

Feminist researchers have focused on the documentation of women's versions of their realities as a means to understanding women's oppression. Yet few researchers have examined the events of their own lives. By neglecting to locate themselves in the research, feminists may commit the crucial "sin" of the scientific method—the objectification of the research participants. If the lived experience of the researcher is not integrated into her examination of women's experiences, her research may become a study of the "other." This distancing between the researcher and her participants is not, I suggest, a deliberate process of objectification but rather a coping mechanism used by the researcher as protection from the reality of her own oppression. Rice (1989) discusses how women have distanced themselves from their own pain by focusing on the struggle of the "other":

I have realized how rare it is for any of us as women and as thinkers and researchers to talk about our personal experiences of oppression. It seems to me that our stance is almost one of having transcended the dirt of oppression, our chosen voice often the voice of authority speaking from behind the site of pain and deprivation, and our sight one that is blinded to our wounds. What a rare and also courageous act it is then, for many of us to risk descending into the bitter oppression that constitutes the veiled and ugly memories which we often hide from ourselves through our academic work. (p. 17)

I chose to document personal incidents of sexual harassment because it is an exercise I have asked other women to do. I felt I needed to experience for myself the process of identifying and recording male violations so that I could better understand the process of my participants. In my personal notes I expressed the pain of confronting my own oppression.

*...most curious to me was the difficulty I had in writing down my own experiences—a task I had often asked other women to do. My continual procrastination in documenting my incidents resulted I'm sure in the loss of valuable information. This was always a methodological concern in this project and I reprimanded myself constantly for being "uncommitted" to my own research. I felt particularly guilty because last year when I asked eight women to document their experiences of sexual harassment for a one-week period, at least half the women (two of whom are feminist activists) failed to do so. The "lack of commitment" on their part as participants in my study, I concluded, attested to their failure to recognize sexual harassment as a serious problem for women. However, I believe my reluctance to record the sexually harassing behaviours that permeated my daily life (and probably the reluctance of the women in my former study) was a coping strategy. Reliving, through the documentation of my experiences, the incidents where I was perceived as an inferior "object," surveyed as a piece of "male property," or reduced to a "slut" rendered me at times powerless, terrified and defeated.*

As a feminist researcher, I cannot study the oppression of women from a distance separating myself from the continuity and similarity of our common experiences. I must start with an exploration of the personal events that have provided the impetus for the research I undertake. I must be aware, as Adrienne Rich has pointed out, that "I did not choose this subject, it had long ago chosen me" (Rich, 1986, p. 15). By generating a theoretical perspective that speaks and arises from our own experiences, we can challenge the patriarchal interpretations of our lives (Rice, 1989). Using my personal experience as raw data, I will demonstrate how the distortion of women's "realities" of sexual harassment contributes to the maintenance of male power.

### **Sexual Harassment: The Reality**

#### *The Prevalence of Sexual Harassment*

Although women have always been aware of the male intrusions that permeate their lives, sexual harassment has only recently been identified as a problem. Typical definitions of sexual harassment that are limited to the behaviours experienced by women in the academic/workplace do not include the multitude of other forms of sexual harassment to which women are exposed in virtually every setting of their daily lives (Randall, 1987). Randall argues that:

Sexual harassment must be seen to include the whole range of intrusive behaviours that are imposed upon women in all spheres of life and on an everyday basis or else we lose from its scope and make invisible the many ways that women are threatened and sexually intruded upon by men. (p. 8)

Over a four-month period, I documented 51 incidents of sexual harassment (many of these incidents involved multiple violations, i.e., whistles, catcalls, and degrading comments). The intrusions I encountered occurred in three settings: (1) the academic institute; (2) public places (i.e., restaurants); and (3) the street. My most common experience of harassment was street harassment (36 incidents),

while the academic setting was the location in which I had documented the fewest (5 incidents). It would seem that the tendency to view sexual harassment solely as a problem of the academic/workplace may deny or minimize its occurrence in other aspects of women's lives (Wise & Stanley, 1987). Although sexual harassment in the academic/workplace setting is not uncommon, for many women sexual harassment on the street is an everyday occurrence. In her study on women's experience of male violence, Liz Kelly (1987) found that a substantial number of women reported having experienced unwanted sexual attention at work (42%). However, the most common form of harassment reported by women occurred on the street. The lack of systematic, empirical documentation of the various settings in which women experience male intrusive behaviour is a gap in current feminist writings. To date, absent from most feminist analyses of sexual harassment is the recognition that women are harassed on the streets, in public places and in their homes, *as well as* in the academic/workplace setting (Randall, 1987).

Given the prevalence of sexual harassment in all aspect of women's lives, those who assume that the implementation of a sexual harassment policy in the institutional setting will resolve the problem of sexual harassment ignore the fact that "sexual harassment is simply what women's experience of life within a sexist society consists of for much of the time" (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 62). For some women, sexual harassment "happens so much it's almost a background of what going out the door seems to mean" (Kelly, 1987, p. 53). Other women have reported that sexual harassment is so common that they "could not remember many specific events" (Kelly, 1987, p. 126). From my own experience there were times when so many incidents had occurred I couldn't recall the details to record them accurately.

*Tuesday, September 19—In a 40-minute run Joan and I counted six incidents. I could only remember the details of four to write them down. They were particularly upsetting because of what happened last night. Between 7:00 last night and 7:00 this morning I had 10 incidents—and many of those hours I spent "trying" to sleep.*

Of the 10 incidents I encountered in that twelve-hour period, one was in a public place, two were in the academic setting, and seven were incidents of street harassment.

Because we live in a society where sexual harassment is part of the fabric of women's lives, it is important that we look beyond the academic/workplace setting to identify not only the variety of settings but also the multitude of ways that sexual harassment intrudes on women.

### *The Forms of Sexual Harassment*

Sexual harassment by men falls on a continuum ranging from violent and threatening behaviour to behaviour considered more subtle, common and often "typical." However, as Stanko (1985) points out, the parameters of "typical" male behaviour have been constructed from a male perspective rather than from a women's experience. As a result, definitions of sexual harassment that go beyond overt sexual assault, by including the patting, leering, and assaulting behaviours that demean women, are considered a violation of male privilege (Ramazanoglu, 1987).

Because the more common intrusions that are re-defined as natural (and hence acceptable) male behaviour are characterized as "normal," women who encounter these forms of harassment often attempt to ignore them. This became a problem in my own documentation even though I strove to be vigilant about the harassment to which I was exposed.

*Sunday, August 27—I feel I'm getting more tolerant of the whistling and the catcalls. Initially when writing this diary these incidents made me angry, particularly because they happened so often. Now I feel I've almost accepted them as "typical" male behaviour and on some occasions I neglect to document them.*

The harassment that had become so familiar (whistling, catcalls), I was accepting as part of the backdrop of my life, and I began to tune it out.

*Sunday, September 10—I was running ... three men went by me in a truck and two of them*

yelled out the window, "Hello." I looked down and continued running.

*Sunday, September 17*—I was running. Two men drove by and whistled at me and made catcalls. I just continued running.

As Wise and Stanley (1987) point out, most sexual harassment does not involve extreme or "sledgehammer" male behaviour but consists of smaller, cumulative intrusions that are limiting, demeaning and disempowering. However, the more infrequent but threatening "sledgehammer" behaviours that women experience render every male intrusion a violent threat because of the fine line that divides threatening and non-threatening behaviour. The following scenarios demonstrate the ease with which this line can be crossed and how seemingly non-threatening male intrusion can turn violent.

*Wednesday, June 7*—[A man] began to walk closely behind me, then finally beside me. He said in a low voice, "Nice day, eh?" He made me uncomfortable and I didn't want to converse with him so I turned to cross the road. He stopped and watched me... When I saw him turn and resume walking, I began to walk up the street again. He was walking very slowly and I knew I would catch up with him at the light so I slowed down. When I saw the light was green I picked up my pace and crossed the road. He stood on the corner and shouted, "Want to fuck, slut?" He seemed in a rage... I pretended to ignore him but walked quickly into the Board of Education building which was two buildings away. He followed me and when I went in the front door, he came right up to the door and started pacing back and forth... He finally left but stood across the road watching the building... I didn't know what to do. In some ways, I wanted to keep him in sight so if we did call the police he would still be there—but I also wanted to hide from him. When I left the building three hours later, I kept checking behind me as I walked home.

*Friday, August 11*—A large man was standing at the corner where I was going to cross... He approached me and said, "Can I keep you company?" I said very emphatically, "No!" and walked down the street to cross. He said in a louder voice, "I just love women!" I moved farther down the street. He yelled, "Come

here!" I crossed the street on the green so I would be ahead of him. I kept looking behind me on the way home to ensure that he wasn't following me.

The possibility that a more common form of male sexual harassment (i.e., catcalls) may be a sign of impending violence results in women having to monitor all male intrusions to ensure their own personal safety.

*Sunday, July 9*—Two men in a "scooped" up car were hooting and hollering out the windows as they drove quickly by me. They made me nervous so I ran further off the highway. About two minutes later, they came back and continued yelling at me... It appeared they had turned around to go by me again. I noticed there was no one else around and I was afraid they would come back again. I feared they might try to grab me rather than just harass me. I turned around and ran back...

Although the more extreme "sledgehammer" forms of sexual harassment are not uncommon, most sexual harassment consists of the common, mundane, everyday male intrusions that Wise and Stanley (1987) describe as "dripping tap" behaviours. The "dripping tap" behaviours that permeate women's lives "wear (women) down by always sounding in our consciousness so that we can never get away from them" (p. 114). Using Wise and Stanley's categories, I divided my incidents into "sledgehammer" and "dripping tap" behaviours. My decision to label an incident "sledgehammer" was based on my response—I placed any intrusion that I had perceived as "frightening," "terrifying" or "extremely upsetting" in this category. For example:

*Saturday, May 27*—A man was walking close behind us—not unusual but he seemed to be following too closely. When I turned around he made a comment like, "Wait girls." He seemed drunk and disoriented and started mumbling to us. We got frightened and my friend approached a man coming the other way and asked if he could stop and talk to us ... because we were being followed. The man who was following us turned to make comments as he walked by us ... his voice had an angry tone ... to ensure (he) wouldn't follow us ... we went home a different way.

*Wednesday, September 18—I was standing by the window eating pizza when a drunk man came into the shop. I was the only woman in the place... The drunk man approached me and leaned close mumbling words I couldn't make out. I heard "baby" and "woman." He was breathing on me. His breath smelled of liquor and I was afraid he might get sick on me... I moved to the corner of the counter... He came to the corner and stood close to me, brushing against me...*

*Thursday, September 21—I was walking home from the subway (at 11:30 p.m.). Two men drove by and did a U-turn in their car. One man stuck his head out the window... I was terrified when they did the U-turn because I thought they were going to grab me...*

Most of my experiences (42) fell into the "common" or "dripping tap" category, while fewer (9) were the more "extreme" or "sledgehammer" kinds of behaviour that most persons would readily identify as sexual harassment. The more common (and hence "typical") male encroachments included: catcalls (defined as noises, hooting, or uninterpretable sounds), whistling, leering, gestures and comments. Many of the incidents consisted of more than one form of harassment. For example:

*Saturday, August 12—I was running with my partner's daughter ... A man came out of his house held the door open and shouted, "I like that!" and followed up his comments with a wolf whistle.*

*Sunday, September 17—Two men drove by and whistled at me and made catcalls.*

Identifying the ordinary, everyday incidents of male sexual harassment is problematic because we have yet to develop the language to name the intrusions that are considered by male standards as "acceptable" or "normal" behaviour. As Dworkin (1987) points out:

male sexual discourse (has become) ... our language. It is not a second language even though it is not our native language; it is the only language we speak, however with perfect fluency even though it does not say what we mean or what we think we might know if only

we could find the right word and enough privacy in which to articulate it even just in our own minds. (p. 134)

Throughout the four-month period I hesitated, doubted, and justified my documentation of male "leering" to ensure that I was not (as I have been told) overreacting to "some guy just looking at me." I recorded what made me feel uncomfortable and what I believed was a sexual objectification or survey of my body. As I continued to document and examine my experiences, I began to develop a language that allowed me to describe what was happening to me.

*Monday, July 10—A man stuck his head and shoulder out the window and leered at me as he passed by in a car. Leering is difficult to define but, in this case, the male passenger turned his head around to stare at me even after the car had gone by.*

*Monday, August 28—...a truck driver honked and leered at me. I looked up when he honked and he was staring at me, so he was obviously trying to get my attention.*

*Monday, September 18—He stared directly at me and kept looking me up and down—surveying my body. I turned to look at a bulletin board because he made me uncomfortable... My friend Joan would call this "a wrong kind of interested look."*

*Monday, September 18—...a group of young men drove by in a van and stuck their heads out the window to "ogle" me... I notice that I'm starting to use terms that are more specific and are more descriptive of the behaviours I am experiencing (i.e., ogling, surveying). I seem to be acquiring a language with which to express my experience of harassment.*

The most pervasive "dripping tap" behaviour I experienced was verbal comments. Some of these remarks involved blatant degradation ("Hey, fuck!"), objectification and implications of seductive or sleazy behaviour to me ("And what are you selling?"), sexual invitations ("Hey sweetie, over here!"), surveillance ("You have a beautiful body!"), and demands ("Smile! I just can't seem to get a smile out of you!"). My identification of other

comments as harassment was determined not by their content but by the context in which they were elicited. For example:

*Friday, August 11—...a man walking towards me stopped, approached me physically and said, "Hi." I kept walking.*

*Friday, August 11—[Just after the previous incident] a man ... was riding his bike down the street. He yelled, "Hi." I ignored him but he kept persisting, slowing his bike down so he could continue yelling at me (I was on the sidewalk and he was on the street). He shouted, "How are you?" I looked down and kept walking.*

Women's experiences of sexual harassment must be understood in context, for in many instances ostensibly harmless (even friendly) comments (i.e., "Hi, how are you?") are intrusions on women's private space to which men assume they have a territorial right.

Negotiating the reality, fear and confusion of sexual harassment becomes part of the everyday content of most women's lives. Women cope with sexual harassment by minimizing, forgetting, ignoring, trivializing and, in some cases, resisting the violating intrusions of men. Women must respond, however, for, in a society where women are continually threatened with sexual assault, every incident of allegedly harmless male intrusion has the potential to become an act of violence.

### *My Response to Sexual Harassment*

In my initial analysis, I classified my responses to sexually harassing incidents under three headings: (1) ignoring the incident; (2) reacting in some way to the incident; and (3) discussing/sharing the incident with another woman. However, on further reflection, I concluded that *all* responses (including ignoring) were in fact reactions to the intrusion I encountered. The impetus for this reinterpretation arose from the obvious contrast between my outward response (which in approximately half of the incidents was to "ignore") and feelings of being either upset, angry, frustrated, frightened, annoyed, uncomfortable, startled, silenced, confused, humiliated, demeaned, degraded, or embarrassed (or a

combination of these) in *every* incident, including those in which I demonstrated no visible response.

*Saturday, May 25—One man stopped to stare at me and said, "Nice." I kept my eyes down and kept running. I felt annoyed, angry, and frustrated.*

*Friday, July 14—A man who was walking the other way put out his hand to me and said, "How much?" I kept my head down and continued running. I felt angry.*

*Monday, September 11—One of the men turned to me and said, "And what are you selling?" All the other men in the bar laughed. I felt humiliated and degraded.*

As women, we often respond publicly in ways that are at odds with our emotional reactions because we choose what we believe to be the safest response (Kelly, 1987). We have also become specialists in monitoring men's behaviour and minimizing our exposure to the possibility of men's violence (Stanko, 1985). However, the psychological and physical costs of our endless vigilance and our constant violation are immeasurable. The fact that many women who have been sexually harassed develop physical and emotional symptoms that include depression, anxiety, irritability, nausea, headaches, weight loss and insomnia is evidence that "sexual harassment is one of the important ways in which inequality impacts directly on women's mental health" (Carmen, Russo & Miller, 1981, cited in Koss, 1990, p. 85).

Wise and Stanley (1987) believe that, in considering the impact of male intrusive behaviour on women's mental health, the ways in which we "fight back" have been neglected. They propose that whether we react against, join in, ignore, or avoid what we view as a potentially sexually harassing situation, we are resisting men's wrath and power. Unfortunately, I believe that our unremitting "fight" against male violation results in a loss of control over the definition of ourselves as we confine, restrict, and adapt our behaviour in response to the threats of men. In my own experience, my most common reaction was to avert my eyes and carry on, fearful of the consequences should I choose to challenge the "rights" of men to intrude upon me.

For me, the most powerful form of resistance was discussion with another woman. This, I believe, is the genesis of women's empowerment—the sharing of our common experience. The following sequence of incidents in which Joan and I begin to identify and discuss what we are experiencing results in an understanding (and intolerance) of what is happening to us.

*Wednesday, September 13—I was running with my friend Joan ... Two men shouted, "Hey girls, can we run with you?" I was annoyed but Joan didn't say anything so I didn't either. We pretended we didn't hear them.*

*Wednesday, September 13—A man passed us and said, "Hey beautiful, gorgeous girls." Joan said to me, "I guess it would be an ego boost except for where it comes from." I responded, "The people who would give us an ego boost wouldn't be yelling at us as we run down the street." I felt good we at least discussed the incident.*

*Tuesday, September 19—Three men shouted at us ... The comments included, "Hey fuck!" Joan rolled her eyes and said, "That's awful." We discussed the fact that I was keeping track of these incidents. She said, "You should write a book—people will be shocked to hear what we put up with."*

*Tuesday, September 19—A man we passed yelled at us. Joan and I talked about it ... My anger was getting elevated because of the number of incidents and the fact that I realized Joan was also upset.*

*Tuesday, September 19—A man drove by us ... he revved his engine as he honked and stared at us. We both said "Three" because we were counting the incidents. Joan and I discussed it ... This incident actually validated me. I felt that my data on honking-staring (leering) would be challenged, but Joan also identified and was angered by these incidents.*

*Tuesday, September 19—A man in a transport truck honked at us. It startled us. Joan was very annoyed. She looked at the truck and said, "Yes, he's staring at us, that was meant for us." We were both angry and discussed*

*how people tell women that this attention is suppose to be a compliment ... Joan said she felt degraded not complimented. I said that it is ludicrous to suggest that men's purpose in exhibiting this type of behaviour is to please (or compliment) women ... because Joan and I talked about it, I felt less powerless. I think it's because having Joan there validates my experience ... It also confirms that I haven't exaggerated.*

Through the discussion of our shared events, Joan and I could develop a definition and interpretation of sexual harassment that reflected our experiences. Based on our mutual "realities," we could refute the myths of sexual harassment that result from the sifting of our experiences through the patriarchal filter: the myths that say we "like" it, we "encourage" it, and we are not "harmed" by it. We could also be angry and say that we must let other people know "what we put with." We were validated because we did not stand alone. Most important, however, we could *truly* begin to resist. We could raise the eyes that had been averted for so long and say, "Yes, he's staring at us, that was meant for us." We were becoming intolerant.

When women have developed, through the sharing of our mutual realities, a perspective on sexual harassment that arises from our real experiences, we can begin to challenge the patriarchal interpretations of male intrusive behaviour. We can begin to recognize that sexual harassment is a form of sexual politics used by men to reinforce male dominance. This will be the starting point of our resistance.

### **Sexual Harassment: The Politics**

Sexual harassment is an expression of sexual politics which reflects and reinforces the unequal power that exists between men and women in our patriarchal society. Wise and Stanley (1987) describe the politics that underlie men's unwanted intrusions on women:

*Life as they know it is sexual politics. Men have a vested interest in perpetuating the existence of perceived sex inequalities because ...*



they gain a lot from them; power, privilege, prestige and an entire group they can feel superior to. (p. 79)

Sexual harassment therefore serves to keep women and men in our respectable places, the places that men define as appropriate and it also of course, serves so as to bring back into line by force if necessary, any woman who departs from this or who doesn't fit in with how she's suppose to be. (p. 82)

Historically, men's control of women was achieved through our confinement to the private sphere as wives, mothers (and hence subordinates). As women attempt to move into the public sphere, sexual harassment has emerged as the primary means of maintaining power over women and ensuring that we remain permanently "in our place," that is, secondary (and unequal) to men.

Subordination has been described as a social and political dynamic that consists of hierarchy, objectification, submission, and violence (Sheffield, 1987). These factors, operating under the guise of sexual harassment (and other forms of violence against women), have become mechanisms for ensuring women's compliancy with men by utilizing the threat (and periodic displays) of male violence.

The institutionalization of sexual harassment as a means to enforce men's dominance has resulted in a re-definition of women as the public (as opposed to private) property of men. This was apparent in my own experience, for although I was harassed while in the company of other women, I was never harassed while in the company of a man. It seemed that accompaniment by a male furnished evidence of "private" ownership, while a state of "manlessness" rendered me the potential property of any male.

The taken-for-granted entitlement of men to women's bodies, which is the foundation of sexual harassment, results in the assumption that women exist for the pleasure of men, that men should be gratified by women, and/or that women in the public sphere are encroaching on male territory and

must be continually reminded that public places are not "theirs" (McNeill, 1987).

It follows, then, that women who resist sexual harassment are accused of attacking the rights of men, who are guaranteed sexual access as an adjunct of male power and privilege (Edwards, 1987). As a result, women are reprimanded and reminded (often through an escalation of male violence) that they are primarily sexual beings (i.e., "Want to fuck, slut!").

Every incident of sexual harassment is an expression of men's power, a systematic reminder to women that we are seen not as human beings but primarily as sexual objects for the pleasure of men (Houston, 1988). We enter the public world under male terms and subject to male politics.

Our resistance can only evolve by the sharing of our collective knowledge through a discourse stripped of male interpretations of our realities. Sharing our experiences of sexual harassment enables women to see our personal encounters as part of an institutionalized system of male domination and a general aspect of sexual politics (Ramazanoğlu, 1987). We must re-claim the power to name, the power to define, and the power to interpret our lived experiences of sexual harassment. In doing so we will acquire the power to resist.

## Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a form of sexual politics that entrenches male ideology by keeping women "in our place." In the words of Barbara Houston (1988):

Harassment ... is a way of ensuring that women will not feel at ease, that we will remember our role as sexual beings, available to, accessible 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 sense of security. (p. 45)

Of course, not all men sexually harass women, but the pervasiveness of the problem suggests that our social structure nurtures male behaviour that is gratified by the violation and diminishment of women (Zalk, 1990). Because much of sexual harassment is an expression of "typical" male behaviour, most men fail to recognize the harassing nature of their constant intrusions in women's lives. Although some men deliberately harass women as a means of exerting male authority, many men view sexual harassment as an extension of natural male/female behaviour and purport that the "alleged" negative impact of their behaviour on women is unintentional and often exaggerated. The perceived "naturalness" of male sexual harassment reflects how firmly entrenched is men's view of women as "naturally" inferior.

While men may dispute any harm associated with their own behaviour, they must recognize that their actions contribute to the systematic entrenchment of women's subordination. Thus, every incident of sexual harassment, regardless of its severity, is an exercise of male power and authority (Houston, 1987). Melanie Randall (1987) sums it up this way:

Sexual harassment expresses while at the same time it reinforces sexism and discrimination against women. It encompasses a wide range of behaviour and actions which serve to remind women that men are dominant in this society, and that men have a socially created and culturally reinforced sense of entitlement to invade and control women's personal space in specific, and women's lives in general. (p. 7)

To challenge male authority, women must become "the experts in the material of our own lives" (Rice, 1989, p. 15). A female perspective of sexual harassment as a violating act must supersede the traditional patriarchal belief that intrusive male behaviour is harmless. Wise and Stanley (1987) state that to achieve equality, "sexism and one of its most common expressions, sexual harassment, must be eradicated" (p. 11). I propose that exploring and sharing our mutual experiences is the first step.

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