

Sexual harassment: the hidden problem

One of the big problems in opposing sexual harassment is lack of suitable procedures for dealing with complaints and for disciplining harassers.

In October, a document proposing a policy for ANU on sexual harassment, and suggesting procedures for handling alleged cases of sexual harassment, will be brought before Council. This document has been prepared following advice from the Committee Against Sexual Harassment which was formed over a year ago by a group of women and men from different areas of the university who were concerned about the problems of sexual harassment on campus.

Case 1: A student in a university college was continually harassed by several men from that college over a long period of time. Students made indecent suggestions to her in the lift and when she collected her mail. They also made unwanted visits to her at all hours of the day. One student stood outside her door very late at night and shouted obscene remarks to her.

Case 2: A technical officer developed a fixation on a particular typist in the same department. He stared at her persistently and followed her around, creating a very intimidating environment. Eventually he had to be transferred.

**By Jane Elix and
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These are two examples of the many instances of sexual harassment which have occurred at ANU. We have changed details to preserve anonymity.

There are a great many difficulties involved in acting against sexual harassment. The greatest of these is ignorance on the part of many people in the University about sexual harassment, and the inclination of many others to ignore the problem in the hope that either it will go away, or that it will cease being brought to their attention. One of the main aims of the Committee Against Sexual Harassment has been to spread information about sexual harassment so that members of the university community become aware of the problem and take initiatives to solve it.

One of the objections with which the Committee Against Sexual Harassment is faced is that there are few statistics to show the extent of sexual harassment at ANU. This objection would be valid if we were discussing a problem as uncomplicated and unemotional as athlete's foot. But we are discussing emotionally charged incidents which directly infringe on our sexuality, a part of our lives which is generally considered to be intimate and personal.

It is impossible to expect women who have been harassed to talk comfortably about the experience, and it would be unrealistic to expect male harassers to come forward to the committee and freely admit their exploits. The size of the problem will not be fully realised until information about sexual harassment is available in all areas of the University, and there are impartial procedures for handling complaints of sexual harassment.

A woman in our society is taught that part of her worth is in her attractiveness to men. A man in our society is taught that part of his worth is his ability to dominate women. Throw them together in the workplace and the woman is almost inevitably going to suffer sexual attentions from men to whom she is not attracted.

She is faced with an extremely difficult and embarrassing problem — whether to reject these attentions or to suffer in silence. Both solutions place her in an uneasy position. If she rejects the man she is likely to incur his anger, and because men are, in general, in higher positions in the university, she may risk losing her job. If she suffers in silence, enormous mental and emotional stress can build up which may cause her to leave her job anyway.

Women need their jobs for many reasons: self-respect, intellectual challenge or, more basically, money for survival. Jobs are not easy to obtain and many women cannot just leave their jobs and get others. Similar considerations apply to women students. In order to obtain their degrees, they are likely to put up with sexual harassment rather than leave university. Sexual harassment is an important factor in causing many women to leave their jobs, especially young women at crucial stages in their careers.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is entirely different from what might be called 'normal courtship rituals'. The definition adopted by the Committee Against Sexual Harassment is:

Sexual harassment covers a range of unsolicited behaviour which constitutes a verbal or physical affront of a sexual nature against another person. Such behaviour may range from unwelcome comments, gestures or actions of a sexual nature, to unwanted and deliberate physical contact, to subtle or explicit demands for or offers of, sexual favours. Such behaviour is of particular concern in an academic community where students and staff work in an environment of dependence and trust. Such harassment may occur between students, between staff and students, between members of staff, or between members of the public and members of the University community.

Normal mutual attraction between men and women is obviously excluded from this definition. The essential quality of the sexual advance that constitutes sexual harassment is that it is *unsolicited* and *unwelcome*.

Sexual harassment is certainly involved when career benefits are offered for sexual favours. But there are many other types of sexual harassment as well. Women may not even be consciously aware that they are being harassed by, for example, the supervisor or lecturer who frequently stands too close, or touches them unnecessarily, but may only be aware of feeling uncomfortable, ill at ease and embarrassed when these incidents occur. There is a gradient of different types of sexual harassment:

(1) *Staring*. 'Aggressive' stare concentrating on breasts and hips.

(2) *Sexual remarks*. Ordinary conversations and situations turn uncomfortable and embarrassing when men insert remarks with double meanings. Dirty jokes. Describing sexual fantasies in front of women.

(3) *Derogatory or demeaning remarks*. Commenting on breasts, bum. Using the words 'pet', 'love', 'sweetheart' and so on.

(4) *Touching*. Pinching, squeezing, tickling, hugging, kissing, massaging, putting things down women's shirts, snapping or undoing bra straps, bumping or brushing into women, leaning over them and breathing heavily when they are typing or reading.

(5) *Sexual advances made out of sight*. In lifts, corridors, stairways — especially after hours when most employees have left.

(6) *Open sexual harassment*. Asking

women out and offering rewards such as flexible working hours, promotion, holidays or better marks. Open grabbing at women's breasts, or between the legs, stroking her thighs or trying to kiss her.

(7) *Rape*. Sexual violence of all kinds.

Sexual harassment continues to occur for many reasons. In addition to the general lack of awareness that this type of behaviour is wrong, male harassers often receive both overt and covert support from their fellow workers or students.

Procedures for unbiased mediation and redress have been inadequate or nonexistent. In many places in the past, complaints have not been taken seriously by administrations. In fact, the harassed person is often labelled the trouble-maker, and it is she who is transferred rather than the harasser. The main reason for this is that the harasser is often the person's teacher, supervisor, or a member of higher management — and management usually sides with the person with more status or power.

Because of the inadequacy or non-existence

of any support or means of redress for a person who has been sexually harassed, some people have felt impelled to take action themselves against well-known harassers. These actions have included circulating petitions for the removal of a lecturer who persistently harassed his female students, putting up posters identifying a harasser, using graffiti in women's toilets and on prominent buildings to name harassers, and phoning or writing anonymously to harassers and their friends. These actions express the frustration of people who feel the lack of effective procedures to deal with blatant and persistent harassers.

Members of the education collective of the Committee Against Sexual Harassment are available to give talks and hold discussions with interested groups and individuals, and to provide copies of the proposed ANU policy on sexual harassment. Contact Sue Drakeford, 952658 home; Jane Elix, 810674 home, 492009 work; Deborah Hope, 887672 home; Brian Martin, 485426 home, 494445 work; James Shaw, 474258 home, 433366 work.