

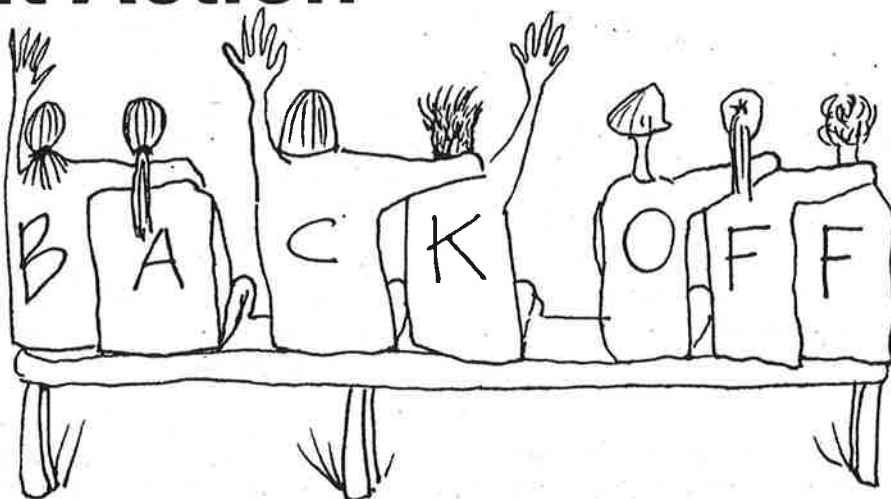
# Sexual Harassment and Nonviolent Action

Sexual harassment is behaviour of a sexual nature that is unsolicited, unwelcome and unreciprocated. It can include staring (for example, at breasts), sexual comments or jokes, sexually explicit posters, touching, promising advantages in return for sexual favours, abusive sexual language, exposing genitals or openly masturbating, grabbing and groping, rape and sexual assault. Most sexual harassment is by men against women. Probably less than a tenth is same-sex harassment and an even tinier fraction is by women against men. Sexual harassment has been pervasive for centuries. It is only in the past couple of decades, due to second-wave feminism in industrialised countries, that sexual harassment has been named and opposed in a systematic fashion.

There is an obvious connection between nonviolent action and opposing sexual harassment. The techniques of nonviolent action are designed to oppose repression and oppression; sexual harassment is one important method by which women are kept in a subordinate position to men. Many nonviolent activists have made considerable efforts to challenge sexism within themselves and their organisations, and undoubtedly many individual activists have used nonviolent action techniques to oppose sexual harassment.

Even so, there is not nearly as much linkage between these two areas as might be expected. Much of the orientation in campaigns against sexual harassment has been to pass legislation and to set up codes of conduct and formal procedures to deal with complaints. Less effort has been put into how to confront harassers on a personal level.

From the point of view of nonviolent action, most campaigns have been oriented around collective action, such as rallies and sit-ins, often against corporations or governments. Less attention has



been given to applying nonviolent action theory to interpersonal behaviour. As a result, there is little practical written material, presented from the point of view of nonviolent action, about opposing everyday sexual harassing behaviours. Likewise, the considerable literature on sexual harassment contains hardly a mention of nonviolent action as an approach to social change.

For linking these two areas, by far the best treatment that I've seen is *Back Off!* by Martha J. Langelan. It's an immensely inspiring book. It contains numerous personal stories by women who have tackled sexual harassers and succeeded.

The book provides an extended analysis of sexual harassment. It presents the accepted view that sexual harassment is about power. Three different types of harassers are analysed. First there is the predatory harasser who gets sexual thrills from humiliating women, who may become involved in sexual extortion and who may routinely harass to see how women respond: those who don't resist may become targets for rape. Second there is the dominance harasser, the most common type, who engages in harassing behaviour in order to bolster his male ego. Third are strategic or territorial harassers, who seek to maintain male privilege in jobs or physical locations, for example by harassing female employees

in a predominantly male occupation. Most harassers don't try to justify their behaviour; they don't think about it. If asked, they may say they are just having fun and don't cause any harm. A few, though, consciously seek to humiliate their victims.

Sexual harassment is about power and there are several types of harassers. So far, so good. But what to do about it? Langelan at this point refers to a long experience of women's nonviolent action against harassment, putting it into a tradition including Gandhi's campaigns and, at greater length, the US civil rights movement. However, in formulating actual anti-harassment tactics, she draws at least as much on feminist self-defence theory. According to this theory, a tactic against sexual harassment is appropriate if it reflects the realities of women's lives, if it builds on and expands women's abilities, if it increases women's mobility and if it promotes independence. Ignoring harassment or recommending that women stay at home at night do not satisfy these criteria. Langelan instead recommends "confrontation" on a personal level.

In one case, a male bureaucrat made a suggestive remark about a female colleague during a meeting. She was the only woman there, along with a dozen men. She looked him in the eye and just

said "What did you say?" Her stern looks silenced everyone until, after a seemingly interminable fifteen seconds, she broke the tension by referring to their work. None of the men ever made such a comment around her again (p. 174).

Other challenges are more daunting. When construction workers made comments about the appearance of a woman walking by, she immediately addressed them firmly but not aggressively, saying "Don't harass women! I don't like it, no woman likes it!" After responding this way for over a month - she was exceptionally persistent - one of the men stopped another before he yelled, saying to him "Don't say anything - she won't like it." After that she was not bothered again by any of them (pp. 228-229).

Other cases involved collecting information to file a formal complaint, pursuing claims through various organisational channels supplemented by mobilising support, collecting signatures on a petition, and suing the owner of an apartment building whose manager harassed numerous tenants.

When it comes to direct encounters, Langelan says that appeasement and aggression aren't so effective, or are actually counterproductive. Assertiveness is not enough. In confrontation, a woman immediately specifies the abusive behaviour, publicly describes it as harassment, and holds the harasser responsible for it (p. 106). According to Langelan: "A woman who engages in a clear, principled confrontation confounds not only the harasser's sexist expectations, but the entire social pattern of male dominance and power behind his decision to harass. She does not act like a docile, compliant victim and does not passively accept the status quo. Faced with sexist aggression, she does not relinquish her rights - she reclaims them as a matter of principle. In the process, she makes it

*personally difficult for the harasser to continue his behavior; she also creates the beginnings of a new social structure, one in which harassment is no longer a cost-free game for men. And because most confrontations take place in public settings, she educates everyone else around her as well. A good confrontation can be a dramatic piece of street theater, with a clear and compelling message for the audience. Each time a woman confronts, she turns up the pressure on the old social structure, weakens the old patterns of expected behavior and the old social norms that excuse and condone harassment. Like the aggregate effect of harassment, the cumulative effect of women's acts of confrontation can change the social and political structure. Where harassment abridges freedom, confrontation expands it."* (pp. 82-83).

Langelan gives lots of information and examples about how to proceed. In a confrontation, a woman names the behaviour, holds the harasser accountable, makes direct honest statements, demands that the harassment stop, says that all women should be free of sexual harassment, sticks to her own agenda, uses appropriate body language, responds at the appropriate level and ends the interaction on her own terms (pp. 115-125).

While Langelan's analysis is clear and insightful, the highlight of the book for me is the success stories. Told in the first person, there are stories of children resisting harassers; there are cases in the workplace, in male-dominated jobs, in public areas; there are cases involving ministers, landlords, burglars and rapists. There are cases showing what men can do as allies of women. There are stories of confrontations by groups of women. Few of these stories fit the ideal model of a confrontation. In some, women relied on formal procedures. In others, women became verbally aggressive and, in Langelan's view, probably were less

effective as a result. Langelan provides valuable commentary about each story, relating it to the principles she has laid out.

My colleague Rebecca Albury pointed out to me a major risk in focussing on success stories of women confronting harassers: it may support a "blame-the-victim" orientation. The responsibility seems to be put on women to stop harassment; those who are unable or unwilling to confront harassers or who are unsuccessful in their efforts can be made to feel guilty for their inadequacies. Instead, institutions and society generally, and men in particular, should be making efforts to establish an atmosphere in which harassment is widely detested. How to do this effectively is not so obvious, though, and it will not happen overnight. It seems to me that empowering women to use confrontation when they want to can be one important measure among many taken against harassment. One of the features of confrontation, as described by Langelan, is that accountability is immediately sheeted home to the harasser. So there is some potential for counteracting any implication that responsibility falls on the woman.

The method of confrontation definitely belongs in the pragmatic school of non-violent action: it is action designed to stop the harassment by making the costs to the harasser greater than the benefits. A different approach might put more emphasis on changing the attitudes of the men who harass. Langelan devotes relatively little attention to persuasion. Confrontation may lead to changed attitudes, but its main focus is on behaviour, namely on ending the harassment.

*Back Off!* is essential reading for campaigners against sexual harassment. It provides an initial bridge between feminist self-defence and nonviolent action theory. Most of all, it is a wonderfully inspiring account of and by women who have stood up for themselves.

Brian Martin

#### Reference

Martha J. Langelan, *Back Off! How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1993).

NVT

## Thank You

To the people who edit and put together NVT, thank you! It's a great mag, and I love that we have an Australia-wide nonviolence magazine/journal. Thanks for keeping on doing it.

Love, Karen Rosauer