

## Sexual Harassment

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Sexual harassment is one of the most complex and challenging problems confronted in any professional situation. The recent report of the SHA Committee on Women stated that 24 percent of respondents to their questionnaire on the status of women in the historical profession had experienced sexual harassment (as distinguished from gender discrimination) themselves, while a quarter of respondents had witnessed some form of harassment.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the report noted that, although none of the graduate students responding to the questionnaire reported experiencing sexual harassment, anecdotal evidence from professors and recent Ph.D.s suggested that graduate students confronted harassment regularly. The report theorized that graduate students might be less likely to report harassment, given the power imbalances in student/teacher relationships and the fear of having their careers tarnished or sabotaged. This section of the toolkit is intended as a resource to help graduate students and recent Ph.D.s navigate this difficult professional reality.

### **Harassment of graduate students.**

Confronting harassment as a graduate student can be particularly thorny, since this harassment frequently takes the form of unwanted attention from a professor or other individual who holds a more powerful professional position than the student. Students tend to confide these experiences to other students, rather than starting a formal complaint process, primarily because they fear a formal harassment complaint might damage their careers both in graduate school and when they move on to the job market.

Although confiding in fellow students can relieve the immediate feeling of powerlessness harassment causes and is entirely appropriate, it does not prevent the harassment from occurring again in the future. If you are uncertain about how to address a particular instance of harassment, one solution is to approach a more senior faculty member *outside* your home institution. Faculty members from other institutions are under no professional obligation to report your conversation to your university and are therefore at liberty to discuss the situation with you more freely. A professor may be able to talk realistically about the professional repercussions of reporting (or not reporting) harassment and can give you more perspective on effective ways to deal with the situation. If you need a point of contact for a conversation about harassment, any SAWH Executive Council or Graduate Committee member should be able to direct you toward appropriate help.

Harassment can confront graduate students in all kinds of situations: when you are a Teaching Assistant, at professional conferences, in one-on-one meetings with professors, or during off-campus encounters. Regardless of the circumstances, graduate students

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<sup>1</sup>*Journal of Southern History*, 70 (November 2004): 871–884, see esp. pp. 876–882.

should remember not to doubt the validity of any discomfort. Ask someone for advice, whether it be another student, a trusted mentor, or a faculty contact from a professional organization. Solutions will vary. Sometimes a firm rebuff will suffice; sometimes the situation must be taken to the appropriate authorities. Reporting sexual harassment will never be an easy experience. However, not reporting it can also make your life as a student tough. Simply avoiding a professor who has become a nuisance (or a threat) can be a miserable experience. Unfortunately, the reality is that many harassment situations are ambiguous and occur without witnesses. The culture of your institution will affect how the department reacts if you make a harassment complaint.

If you try to report harassment to your department and the claim is not taken seriously, remedies become more challenging. Discussing your next step with a professor (or other professional contact) outside your home institution is a good option. You can also approach authorities at your university outside of the department, if you feel the situation warrants such an action.

Different kinds of harassment often make deciding how to deal with individual cases challenging. Outside of sexual assault, harassment can take a broad array of forms: unwanted touching, quid-pro-quo offers, coarse conversation (such as dirty jokes), and gray-area cases like a professor asking you out or commenting on your appearance in a way that makes you uncomfortable. Though all are inappropriate, the severity of these types of harassment clearly differs. Although reporting an assault or physical encounter is traumatic, the criminal nature of that variety of harassment is clear. Graduate students more frequently experience situations that fall into the last category. These gray-area cases are extremely difficult to navigate. We've all no doubt heard this before, but it bears repeating: trust your gut. If you feel uncomfortable with the situation, something is probably wrong.

Professional guidelines about appropriate behavior do exist and are a useful resource when you are uncertain if a particular treatment constitutes harassment. Your home institution no doubt has a sexual harassment policy, frequently available on the institution's Web site (try searching the site for "sexual harassment policy"). Professional organizations such as the Southern Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association also provide some guidelines about acceptable professional behavior.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, certain kinds of harassment may be problems for which there are no satisfying solutions; they can be managed but never solved in any absolute sense. Again, faculty members at other institutions can be a useful resource for advice about this complicated topic.

### **Harassment of recent Ph.D.s and junior faculty.**

Unfortunately, every year tales surface of sexual harassment on the job market. In an already-tense job interview or campus visit, you may feel terribly vulnerable, and it is important to realize that sometimes people take advantage of your situation. Often these sorts of incidents may simply be inappropriate behavior and not full-fledged harassment,

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<sup>2</sup>The American Historical Association's Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct (adopted in 2005) is available online at <http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/ProfessionalStandards.cfm>.

which is rare in the short time you are with search committees. If something seems inappropriate, be sure to consider that important information when you are making job decisions. For example, the American Historical Association discourages job interviews in hotel rooms, although they continue to take place with regularity. If you are interviewed in a hotel room, your interviewers should have arranged a business-like space with chairs. Interviewing a job candidate while stretched out on a hotel bed is inappropriate. Comments about your appearance are inappropriate as well, unless they are the most innocuous sort of pleasantries.

On-campus visits are confusing and often amazingly intimate. Search committees often plan many events and individual conferences for you, and there is plenty of time to get to know each other in casual settings. For example, you might find yourself late at night after a dinner in a hotel bar with someone who seems keen on your joining the department. Your best rule of thumb is to watch your alcohol intake and that of your host. It is entirely appropriate to let your host know that you are ready to call it a night. If someone makes you uncomfortable by commenting on your appearance, or by crossing the sociability line, you could let the head of the search committee know what happened. Most university sexual harassment policies extend to the employee selection process. You might decide to wait until a decision on the job offer has been made, but most search chairs would appreciate knowing of the inappropriate behavior of their colleagues. Moreover, your action might put a stop to serial bad behavior.

Most institutions have a policy on sexual harassment and some have a separate policy on teacher-student consensual relations. Be sure that you read these as soon as you join the institution, since they vary dramatically among universities. Most of the sexual harassment policies are written with graduate and undergraduate students, rather than junior faculty, in mind. Sexual harassment of junior faculty by senior faculty is not uncommon, however, and it is infinitely complicated by the relative permanence of the employment relationship. In other words, one is often stuck with one's colleagues.

As a faculty person (albeit a junior faculty person), you are an adult in the eyes of your colleagues, even if you still feel like a student. Consensual relationships are common among faculty members, even among junior and senior faculty members. The key word is consensual. If there is a power differential in which one person will be responsible for supervision or evaluation of another, it cannot be consensual. Therefore, if a junior faculty person is in a consensual relationship with a senior faculty person, the latter must excuse him or herself from voting on matters that affect the junior person's career.

For example, it would not be inappropriate for a senior colleague to invite you to dinner, nor would it be inappropriate if a mutual romance developed. Unlike private companies, most universities do not have a policy against dating colleagues, nor do most have a nepotism policy. However, the same situation can turn into sexual harassment if a senior colleague's actions are not welcome.

If you find yourself being sexually harassed by a colleague or a member of the administration, make it very clear that the attention is unwelcome. Most often that is all

that you need to do. However, if the sexual harassment continues, you should reiterate to the person that it is unwelcome and that if the behavior (describe the unwelcome behavior to the person) continues, you will take it up with the chair. Then do it.

If you are unsure about a situation, but feel uncomfortable, get advice from senior women colleagues or the administration. Many universities have a women's faculty forum. Seek out someone who is involved with the organization and ask if there is someone you can talk with about sexual harassment. If your university has a dean assigned to gender equity issues, that's a good place to start. If it does not, it probably has a dean assigned to diversity issues, and that person usually has experience with sexual harassment.

The most important thing to remember is that, in whatever professional situation you find yourself, you should set your boundaries and ask that others respect them. Sexual harassment is an ongoing problem in life, no matter what your profession or your rank in it. At the same time, universities must provide the tools to stop it. Most women historians have experienced similar situations and will be glad to offer you advice and counsel.

Finally, do not put yourself in situations with students or colleagues that *they* might construe as sexual harassment or might use against you for their own vendettas. Ask colleagues whether they feel comfortable shutting their doors when meeting with students. At some universities, this is common and means that you and the student are deep in conversation. At others, it is cause for raised eyebrows.

When you are a professor, it is never appropriate to have a sexual relationship with a student over whom you have supervisory responsibility—or over whom you might in the future have supervisory responsibility—even if the relationship is consensual. That includes verbal or physical conduct as well as requests for sexual favors, once or repeatedly. Be absolutely sure that your emails are completely businesslike, even if a student is crossing boundaries of teacher/student discourse. You will find that many students enjoy flirting with their professors. Don't do it. Over time, you will teach hundreds, even thousands, of young people, and one or two of them will not be emotionally healthy. If you believe that you are dealing with a student who is inappropriately emotionally entangled with you, do not keep it to yourself. Tell a colleague and tell your chair. If it does not resolve itself, you and your chair should go to your university's counseling center and get advice.

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