



# Pervasive Vulnerabilities

Sexual Harassment in School

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# Chapter 1: Learning Sex in Schools: Sites of Pervasive Vulnerabilities

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“I think that if there was more of an opportunity for somebody to talk to, if I felt open enough to go to someone to say this is what is going on. That would have helped.” Jocelyn

“Puberty which gives the man the knowledge of greater power, gives to woman the knowledge of her dependence.” (Ussher, 1989, p.18)

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This work represents a culmination of over ten years of research in which we have sought to examine sexual harassment within the context of young adolescent women’s lives. We hope, through this work, to offer a contribution to the work of ending harassment and abuse of young women. Throughout this text we utilize the term ‘sexual harassment,’ it is deliberate and should serve to remind us of its existence within the lives of young women. However, it is perhaps necessary for the authors of this text to elaborate a bit on what we recognize as sexual harassment. We could use the ‘textbook’ definition of the sexual harassment provided by the EEOC and cited in this chapter of the book. However, for the purposes of what you will read from our participants, we view sexual harassment as any behavior directed at an individual that highlights sexual difference, gender inferiority or creates an uncomfortable, unsafe or hostile environment. As you will read in the proceeding chapters, there is a great deal of this that goes on in young women’s lives. From name calling (daily), to ogling and cat calling in public spaces, to grabbing young women’s buttocks in the middle of class, to more violent acts of sexual aggressions such as dating abuse, rape and molestation, sexual harassment is pervasive in the lives of young women. The voices you will hear in this book share very personal accounts of their experiences with sexual harassment in contemporary settings. In the proceeding chapters, stories of women who experienced labeling in school reflect on how those experiences shaped their adulthood, young women recently out of high school reflect on their experiences with harassment (and in some cases abuse), young men who share their perceptions of harassment, from both a heterosexual and homosexual context of experience, and finally, teachers who work with middle and high school students elaborate on their perceptions of their students’ sexuality and harassment within their school. Our final chapter will elaborate on the ways in which harassment can be eradicated through a complex discussion of the sexist, gendered nature of harassment itself. Before we share our participants’

stories, we feel it is imperative to provide some contextualization to our work. In this chapter, we provide an introduction to the history of sexual harassment, a review of literature on sexual harassment, discussion of prevalence of harassment both peer and teacher harassment. We also provide a brief discussion of media and youth culture, and a brief glimpse into the current discourse surrounding harassment and sexuality education, including cyberbullying, bullying, and sexual orientation. Of course, throughout the book interwoven in each chapter, we rely on other studies as well to highlight all of these pertinent issues and to examine the pervasive vulnerabilities of young women.

### **History of Treatment of Sexual Harassment in Schools: Policy and the Reality of Sexual Harassment in Schools**

Although sexual harassment has existed in schools (just as elsewhere in society), it has not always been recognized by that name, or even recognized as a problem. Prior to the 1970s, when Johnny pulled Sally's hair, it was written off as "boys will be boys." After Title IX legislation passed, things changed. Title IX states: "*No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance...*" (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d., para. 1).

Of course, legislation must emerge from somewhere, and the same is true of Title IX. This legislation emerged as a result of pressure generated from the Women's Movement. The term "sexual harassment" was coined in the 1970s by feminist activists. Crouch (2001) cites Lin Farley as one of the earliest feminists to coin the term. In her work at Cornell University, in which she held discussions with groups of women concerning working conditions, she found emerging from these discussions a common theme involving harassment. This led to the formation of Working Women United in 1975 with the established goal of addressing 'sexual harassment.' In the first survey on sexual harassment distributed by Farley in 1975, sexual harassment was defined as "any repeated and unwanted sexual comments, looks, suggestions, or physical contact that you find objectionable or offensive and causes your discomfort on the job" (Crouch, 2001, p. 42). Crouch notes that this definition is very similar to the definition that is used today in common discourse and that is used by the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission):

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment,

unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.(para. 1)

Catherine MacKinnon went on to elaborate the earlier notions of sexual harassment and in her work, "Sexual Harassment of Working Women" (1979), she offered the distinction between "quid pro quo" harassment and "hostile environment" harassment. The former involves a sexual exchange as a condition of employment, while the latter involves a persistent presence of harassment within the working environment. The earlier work of these feminist scholars and the expanding concept of sexual harassment have led to legislation regarding sexual harassment. Although, according to Brandenburg (1997), there is still debate present regarding how sexual harassment should be regulated, with some arguing that it is purely an issue of a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and others arguing that it should be pursued as tort law as invasion of privacy or assault. Nonetheless the feminist movement changed public attitudes. For example, the general public today shows acceptance of the following, once deemed radical, feminist views: equal pay for equal work, belief that women should be able to become educated to any level they desire, and belief that no job is fundamentally a woman's job or a man's job. Unfortunately, along with these changes came a belief that we have achieved sex equality. Clearly, as this book will show, there still remain large issues of sexual inequality as women continue to be victimized by harassment. You will see this in the stories of the young women, the middle aged women, the teachers and the young men presented in this book. Clearly, sexual equality has not been achieved, despite the strides that have been made, and of course, it should be strongly noted that progress has been made.

Of course one extremely important piece of legislation for addressing sexual harassment has been Title IX legislation. Title IX was put in place to guarantee equal access to educational resources, and the early years of its application (1970s and early 1980s) focused on equalizing funding of athletics, particularly in high schools and colleges. By the early 1980s, applications of Title IX were extending from athletics toward sexual harassment complaints. In 1981 the Office of Civil Rights of the US Department of Education, established guidelines for addressing sexual harassment. According to their established definition sexual harassment is: 1) sexual in nature; 2) unwelcome; and 3) denies or limits students' ability to participate in or benefit from schools' education program. As this is the body responsible for enforcing Title IX in the schools, it was mandated that all schools receiving federal monies must have a sexual harassment policy (Yaffe, 1995). Clearly the trajectory of the applications of Title IX legislation was toward expansion from limitations in athletics to broader sexual discrimination in schools.