

# SHREWS Unite

*By Carole-Anne Reed, Leslie Russell, June Larkin and Marion Beauregard*

**According to Ms. magazine (May/June, 1991), the fastest growing demographic group in Canada may be the SHREWS — a group of Toronto women located at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (O.I.S.E.), who have banded together to fight sexual harassment, both within and beyond their academic institute.**

O.I.S.E. SHREWS have taken a leaf from the book of the black power movement which, with the "black is beautiful" slogan, succeeded in reclaiming the term "black" from the pejorative sense in which it had been used against them, to a positive affirmation of group membership and resistance to discrimination.

In a parallel way, the term "shrew" has traditionally been used to prevent women's resistance to male domination by branding the female resister as humourless and unfeminine. SHREWS at O.I.S.E. have reclaimed the term and use it as defined by Kramarae and Treichler's *A Feminist Dictionary*: "someone who is quick to see connecting links." SHREWS are making those previously ignored links between sexual harassment and other forms of male violence against women: first, sexual harassment is unwelcome — it is done against our will — and secondly, it is a public action. Even though sexual harassment often occurs in private, it is in a context of habitual and systemic discrimination against women. Placing sexual harassment on a continuum of violence links it to other forms of violence (e.g. sexual assault, battering, pornography, etc.) in its intent to intimidate and control. A continuum erases the distinction between what is typically deemed "normal" and "aberrant" male behaviour.<sup>1</sup> These women cleverly use the term SHREW as an acronym: Sexual Harassment Resisters Every Where.

It was, naturally enough, an incident of sexual harassment that originally brought the SHREWS together. At a departmental orientation meeting at O.I.S.E. in the fall of 1988, a female faculty member informed the students that although sexual harassment was a problem at O.I.S.E., as it was at all educational institutions, O.I.S.E. students did have some protection under the University of Toronto Sexual Harassment Policy. (O.I.S.E. is the graduate school for the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto.) As she spoke, a number of male faculty members laughingly trivialized her comments in an apparent attempt to embarrass and silence her.

Following the meeting, a number of female students and faculty members shared with each other their feelings of intimidation and anger over the incident, and decided to organize a caucus to pressure the Institute to expedite the development of O.I.S.E.'s Sexual Harassment Policy. Shortly after this, the first meeting of the Women's Sexual Harassment Caucus (later renamed Women's Caucus Against Sexual Harassment) was held, with representation from the student body, staff and faculty in attendance. It was at this meeting that the deleterious effects of sexual harassment upon the well-being of women (academically and otherwise) were discussed. It became apparent that the implementation of a policy, while important, would not fully address the needs of most women experiencing harassment.<sup>2</sup> Caucus members, therefore, agreed to expand their focus beyond the policy to also include components of education (with respect to the prevalence and serious nature of all forms of harassment) and support (for those who are targets of harassment).

## **Shrewish Tactics**

The Caucus is perhaps best known for the development and dissemination of the *What to do in a Sexual Harassment Emer-*

*gency poster* [see p. 61]. Since its debut in January of 1990, 2,500 copies have been distributed to universities, colleges, businesses, and women's groups across Canada and the United States. Orders for the posters are often accompanied by written testimony from women who have experienced harassment: "Thank you for helping to bring this issue out in the open by letting the victim know it is the harasser who is in the wrong, not the victim" (Colorado); "We feel that your poster is a very important and... succinct device in preventative education" (Maine); "I have now been reminded of the steps in dealing with this problem and will make sure I follow through with all of them" (Vancouver, B.C.). Harassment is experienced as a "common problem" (Lennoxville, Quebec), but one that we can work to overcome: "I believe, as you apparently do, that knowledge is power" (Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario). Recent orders from Japan and France suggest that the Caucus is developing an international reputation.

O.I.S.E. SHREWS developed the SHREW button as a way of publicizing their resistance to sexual harassment and as a means of recruiting new SHREWS. When wearing our buttons we have been approached by potential SHREWS at conferences, in stores, at public events, and on the street. Our tendency to hand over the buttons to interested and supportive persons (in addition to orders we have received) has necessitated two re-prints of the SHREW button. SHREWS sporting the third edition button are the newest members of a rapidly increasing group of women and men who actively resist and publicly protest sexual harassment.

The poster and button were developed with the assistance of a small-scale research grant from the Ontario Women's Directorate. Revenue generated from the sale of the posters has provided the Caucus with the funding necessary to produce a French translation of the poster, which should be available this Fall.

### The SHREW Educational Kit

A recent project undertaken by the Caucus is the development of an educational kit on sexual harassment for high schools. The kit, which is currently being tested by educators across Canada, is designed to help students and teachers identify sexually harassing behaviours, understand the negative impact of sexual harassment, and develop strategies for its elimination.

The kit is divided into two sections: activities and information. The activity section consists of individual and group exercises that provide background information about sexual harassment and encourage participants to use their knowledge and personal experiences to suggest individual and collective strategies for dealing with sexual harassment.

One activity, for example, reads: "Your school has just been declared a harassment-free environment. List five ways that your school will be different." A group of Grade 11 students generated the following responses:

- Students would be able to concentrate on their work.
- Students would be comfortable with teachers.
- Students would become as one (i.e. less conflict and fighting, more respect).
- Better student-teacher relationships.
- No one would make rude comments or jokes to anyone, or put anyone down.
- Students could walk down the hall without hearing rude comments.
- People would be able to wear what they want.
- People could talk to one another in a joking way.
- You could feel that you are someone special.
- Teachers will respect each other.
- The school would be like a big family.
- School will have a better name and reputation (i.e. attract more students and teachers).

The information section of the kit includes a bibliography on sexual harassment, a sample letter that could be sent to a harasser, and a poster and SHREW button. Feedback received to date has been overwhelmingly positive. One high school teacher remarked:

*I used the kit with a Grade 12 Special Education class. I did a 70-minute period with them and found the kit materials very helpful. The students were really keen by*

*the end and complained that we needed more time to pursue this further and to discuss the issues raised.*

A particularly poignant comment came from a teacher who praised the effort of the Caucus, but requested that the kit be adapted for use with elementary students as she has had to deal with male students of that age threatening to beat up female students for refusing to be their girlfriends.

### Promoting SHREWS

Members of the Caucus have facilitated numerous educational workshops on sexual harassment and have been invited to present SHREW work at conferences across Canada and in the United States. Caucus members have written and published papers in various feminist periodicals, and have given interviews for both broadcast and print media. Within O.I.S.E., the Caucus played an important role in the

## What to do in a Sexual Harassment Emergency

- 1. KNOW:** If something that is said or done to you makes you feel uncomfortable, know that respectful flirtation and compliments don't make you feel uncomfortable, but sexual harassment does.
- 2. SAY:** Simply tell the person, "What you are doing makes me uncomfortable." Perhaps describe in words *what is happening while it is happening* — for example, "You have your hands on my shoulders" or "This is the third time today that you have brushed against my body when you walked by."
- 3. FIND:** Obtain a definition of sexual harassment, circle the part that describes what the harasser is doing to you, and leave it in the harasser's mailbox; or, write a description of what the harasser is doing and deliver it to the harasser's office.
- 4. TELL:** Your co-workers should be told what is happening to you, because most harassers have more than one victim.
- 5. REPORT:** Find out if your workplace, institution, or employee association has a sexual harassment officer, and report the incident to them.

For copies of this poster:

Women Students' Sexual Harassment Caucus  
Department of Applied Psychology  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
252 Bloor Street West  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6

This project has received financial support from the Ontario Women's Directorate.

development and implementation of the Harassment Prevention Policy in the fall of 1990, and plans to be involved when the Policy is set up for review and revision. The Caucus was also instrumental in lobbying the administration to hire a Harassment Officer.

Another strategy that has yielded positive results is the Honourary SHREW Campaign. Women who have come forward with personal experiences of harassment, and professionals and/or activists who deal with the issues, have been invited to be colleagues-in-struggle. This is seen as a means of establishing a network of shared interests and mutual support among individuals and groups working in the area. It is also a creative way to develop important potential resources which could have a critical impact on the public acknowledgment and profile of harassment issues.

Many Honourary SHREWS have written back thanking the Caucus for so naming them, sometimes sending copies of articles or a book that they have written on the issue. One noted feminist scholar responded:

*I am delighted to be an Honourary SHREW. I am sure that both the poster and the SHREW button will prove effective and contribute to an awareness of sexual harassment as symptomatic of the intimidation which women experience society-wide.*

Thus, the efforts of the Caucus and its Honourary SHREWS indicate the degree to which women are ready to work shoulder-to-shoulder with each other to continue to resist the harassment that attempts to undermine the quest for equality for all. As the editorial in the May/June 1991 issue of *Ms.* stated: "Clearly, there will be no taming these shrews."

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that males can be victims of sexual harassment, just as females can be perpetrators. However, as males are most often the perpetrators and women are generally the recipients, the following text is written with that in mind.

<sup>2</sup> The process of filing a formal complaint often becomes another instance of victimization, as individuals deal with the long process and the negative reactions to their complaint. Women who resist male domination are viewed as unnatural and deviant. Males, on the other hand, often

view policy or legislation as an infringement upon their rights. They label reaction to male violence as a female assault upon the rights of men.

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*To enquire about resources, please write: Women's Caucus Against Sexual Harassment, OISE, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6.*

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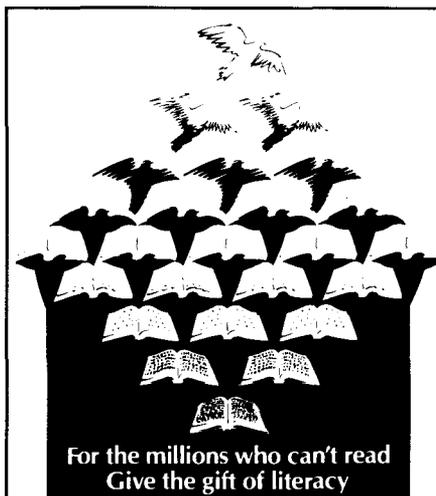
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### CALL FOR PAPERS

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