

SEXUAL HARASSMENT:

YORK UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE

Ann B. Shteir

L'Université York à Toronto a ouvert un centre pour servir les étudiants, le personnel et les professeurs qui veulent porter plainte contre tout harcèlement sexuel.

Le rapport présenté par le "Sexual Harassment Committee" de York et qui recommande que le centre soit établi est le premier dans l'histoire des Universités canadiennes.

L'auteure du rapport [et de cet article] dit qu'il y a des dangers particuliers pour l'étudiant harcelé par son professeur et qu'un tel harcèlement crée un environnement négatif. Elle nous présente plusieurs définitions du terme harcèlement sexuel."

Sexual harassment is yet another way of looking at the pervasive sexism of society and culture. The phenomenon of sexual harassment is not new. What is new is that in our day, sexual harassment has been increasingly highlighted as a problem which needs discussion and remedy.

In April, 1980, the Presidential Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment was formed at York University to examine how someone might bring a complaint of sexual harassment. The committee, made up of faculty, staff, and students, met over a two-year period to educate itself about sexual harassment and to consider complaint procedures. Recognizing that the issue is a sensitive and complex one for any institution, the committee issued a preliminary report in September, 1980, to encourage discussion within the York University community. This report, the first of its kind from a Canadian university, received wide notice and we received many requests for it from across the country. The final report of the committee, reflecting further work and thought,

has now been published in booklet form.*

In the report we recommended the establishing of a Sexual Harassment Education and Complaint Centre. President H. Ian Macdonald accepted this recommendation, and the centre will open in September, 1983. It will work to educate the York University community about sexual harassment and will serve any student and member of staff or faculty who wants to pursue a complaint.

The committee recommended two kinds of complaint procedures: an informal kind using mediation and a formal kind involving investigation and decision about sanction and remedy through the Office of the Vice-President (Employee and Student Relations). The report contains many details essential for procedures which are fair both to the complainant (the person lodging the complaint) and the respondent (the person against whom the complaint is brought).

The committee gave special attention to sexual harassment involving teacher and student because of the special dangers there. While not wanting to discourage the beneficial aspects of teacher-student friendship, we also believe that teachers should think carefully about the implications of being involved with their students sexually. One section of our final report, "Guidelines on Conduct for Members of the University," addresses this matter. In our report we developed the following definition of sexual harassment:

Sexual harassment is unwanted sexual attention of a persistent or abusive nature, made by a person who knows or ought reasonably to know that such attention is unwanted; or implied or expressed promise of reward for complying with a sexually oriented request; or implied or ex-

pressed threat of reprisal, in the form either of actual reprisal or the denial of opportunity, for refusal to comply with a sexually oriented request; or sexually oriented remarks and behaviour which may reasonably be perceived to create a negative psychological and emotional environment for work and study.

Our extending the definition of sexual harassment to include gender harassment (e.g., sexism in the classroom) is very important because it allows us to get at the many everyday subtle forms of harassment. Public education on this issue must emphasize these subtler forms.

The work of the York University Presidential Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment has met with a mixed response in its home territory, welcomed by many, seen as a threat by others, with various pertinent concerns raised about how to protect civil liberties while trying to alter old patterns of behaviour.

The committee is gratified to have been able to open discussion on sexual harassment at our university, and we are glad to know that our reports have helped other groups wanting to encourage discussion about sexual harassment at their own institutions. But, of course, the topic of sexual harassment still needs to be aired much more widely — at universities, colleges, and high schools.

Ann B. Shteir, associate professor of Humanities at York University, chaired the Presidential Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment, work she began while Advisor to the President on the Status of Women.

**Copies are available for \$2.50 from Office of the Assistant Vice-President, S104 Ross Building, York University, Downsview, Ontario, M3J 2R7.*