

Writing a Letter To... The Sexual Harasser:

ANOTHER
WAY OF
DEALING
WITH
THE PROBLEM*

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Le harcèlement sexuel est devenu, depuis ces dernières années, un problème de plus en plus important dans les campus du pays. Des professeurs et des administrateurs en ont perdu leur situation, ou ont démissionné. Les institutions ont développé des politiques et des procédures pour les plaintes de harcèlement sexuel, mais il y a peu d'écrit sur ce qui doit être fait dès les premières plaintes, ou quand il n'y a pas de mise en accusation. En fait la majorité des victimes, peut-être 99 p. 100, ne portent pas plainte. La victime se sent démunie de tout pouvoir sur la situation: elle dépend des professeurs pour ses notes et ses références futures; si elle se plaint ouvertement, elle peut être soumise à des représailles, ou être marquée de la réputation d'être dérangeante. On peut cependant l'encourager à écrire une lettre à la personne qui la harcèle: la lettre devrait décrire ce qui est arrivé, ce qu'elle ressent à ce sujet, et ce qu'elle voudrait qu'il arrive. Elle devrait garder au moins une copie de cette lettre comme preuve, au cas où elle porterait plainte. Très souvent, cependant, la lettre a l'effet désiré.

Sexual harassment has become an issue of increasing concern on the nation's campuses during the last few years Some professors have been fired, others censured or "encouraged" to resign. Staff and administration officers have not been immune — at least two presidents left their positions because they were charged with sexual harassment. Institutions as well as individuals have been sued — sometimes for several million dollars.

Institutions have been responding by developing policies prohibiting sexual harassment and procedures to deal with complaints. Much has been written about questions of due process, confidentiality, evaluation of evidence, etc. . . . Little has been written about how to deal with the issue when complaints first come to light, whether

prior to the filing of a charge or when the person who has been harassed prefers not to file a charge. The latter category includes the vast majority of victims — possibly 99 per cent. . . .

One of the most striking aspects of sexual harassment is that the victim feels quite powerless in the situation. Students rely on professors not only for grades, but for future recommendations as well as academic and career opportunities. In a very real sense, a female student's life's chances are at stake. If she complains openly, she might face retaliation which could indeed affect her future. Moreover, she is often fearful of being branded a "troublemaker". . . . Additionally, she usually has tried stoically to handle the incident(s) by ignoring it, by mentioning that she has a "boyfriend," or by other ways that generally prove ineffectual. In short, she feels helpless in the face of behaviours which make her uncomfortable or deeply upset.

However, when the victim comes to another member of the academic community for help and advice, she can be encouraged to write the alleged harasser a specific kind of letter, especially if a plain request to stop has been ignored. Writing a letter about the harassment helps the victim handle it herself — by taking an active role, she gains a sense of being in charge of what is "happening" to her — she is in control of her own destiny.

The letter itself is best described as polite, low-key, and detailed. Several drafts may be necessary because victims are rightly angry and often understandably upset. The letter should consist of three parts:

Part I tells the facts of what has happened, *without evaluation*, as seen by the writer. It should be as detailed and as precise as possible, with dates (or approximate dates), places, and a description of the incidents the writer has experienced with that person:

"On December 15, 1982, when I met you for a conference about

my work, you asked me to come to your house that evening and said it would 'help' my grades."

"Several times this semester when I have talked to you after class you put your arm around me and rubbed my back. Once you also tried to fondle my breast."

"Last week at the department party you asked me to go to bed with you."

Part II describes how the writer feels about the events described in Part I, such as dismay, misery, distrust, or revulsion, and includes the writer's opinions or thoughts about what happened:

"I am embarrassed when I see you."

"My stomach turns to knots when I come to class."

"That is why I dropped your class."

"I cannot believe that you are able to grade my work fairly."

"It's hard for me to sleep at night; I've lost ten pounds."

"This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me."

"You have made me think about transferring from the field of my choice."

"It has become very difficult for me to concentrate on my work."

Part III consists of what the writer wants to happen next. This part may be very short, since most writers usually just want the behaviour to stop:

"I want our relationship to be purely professional from now on."

"I don't ever want you to touch me again or to make remarks about my sexuality."

If the writer believes a remedy is necessary, it would be included in Part III:

"Please withdraw my last evaluation until we can work out a fair one."

"I will need a written answer as to the reference you will provide from now on."

If the writer had contributed to a possible misunderstanding, she might acknowledge it:

"Although we once were happy dating, it is important to me that we now re-establish a professional relationship, and I ask you to do so."

The letter should be delivered either in person or by registered or certified mail. . . . Where necessary, a plainclothes police officer, security guard, or other protector and/or witness could accompany the writer or arrange to be present when the letter is delivered. (The person accompanying or arranging for delivery does not need to know what is being delivered.)

The writer should keep at least one copy of the letter for herself but, in the usual case, not send copies to other people. Should the letter fail to achieve its purpose. . . the letter can later be used in support of a formal complaint or lawsuit. However, in most instances, the recipient usually says nothing but does change his behaviour. . .

In many instances, the recipient of the letter is often astonished that his behaviour is viewed in the way the writer sees it. He may also be fearful of a formal charge and worry about who else has seen the letter. The letter also seems to be extraordinarily more powerful than a verbal exchange — even harassers who may have ignored verbal requests to stop respond differently when the same request is put into writing. In any event, and for whatever reason, the letter often works.

Advantages of Letter-Writing

In addition to helping the victim regain a sense of being in control of the situation, the use of a letter in this situation has numerous other advantages:

- At this stage, it is not necessary

to address questions such as legality, confidentiality, evidence, and due process. . . .

- It keeps the incident(s) quiet. The victim's fear of exposure is minimized. . . .
- It often avoids formal charges and a public confrontation. . . .
- It provides the harasser with a new perspective on his behaviour. . . .
- It may minimize or prevent retaliation against the writer. . . .

Most importantly, the letter can be an important tool for actually ending sexual harassment, and, in fact, any kind of harassment.

The letter ought not be used as a substitute for effective policies and grievance procedures which are critical in forming a supportive framework within which the victim can help herself. Many feel that having a tough policy enormously supports the effectiveness of the letter method. It has, however, been effectively used in situations where there was no policy or procedures.

The letter must be voluntary; it must not be used when the victim is unable or unwilling to write it. Institutions can encourage victims to do so, but some may be too upset or frightened. . . .

However, taking action, whether keeping a log, talking about the incident, writing a letter, using grievance procedures, or filing other formal charges, helps the victims regain a sense of dignity about themselves.

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**This paper is based upon Mary Rowe's "Dealing with Sexual Harassment," Harvard Business Review, May-June, 1981, and is an excerpt from one of six papers on rape and sexual harassment in colleges and universities. The packet of six costs \$2.00 and is available from the Project on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges, 1818 R St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.*