

# Harvard men and Harvard women

Sexual harassment comes out from the ivy

by Patricia A. Vigderman

"There is no feature of the American economy," wrote John Kenneth Galbraith in 1969, "so sound as that which causes attractive young women to work, far below their talent, for deserving older men, in order to put their husbands through graduate school." In cadences reminiscent of the opening of *Pride and Prejudice* ("It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife"), the prominent economist was thanking his typists.

Like Jane Austen's famous sentence, Galbraith's is a wide-open social comment on the immediate community, in his case, Harvard University. The little joke seems harmless, a clever tribute to four talented and hard-working women in a world of distinguished male professors and graduate-student husbands. Like any joke worth its salt, however, it reflects a wider reality, and the opinion that an Invisible Hand has beautifully organized the world for the benefit of deserving men has its darker side.

As in coal mines and on construction crews, in banks and hospitals, women's presence in universities — in a professional capacity — has sexual overtones that are quite distinct from the actual work. Any job that has been traditionally male offers powerful sexual affirmation to the men who do it. The casual teatime announcement by a tenured professor at Harvard that "No woman in the country is equipped to teach in this department" is a defense of sexual territory. What differentiates the professor's attitude from that of a coal miner is the suggestion that there is something very special about his department. What is special, of course, is that it is a Harvard department.

To be a tenured professor at Harvard is to have made it in the academic world. If Harvard does not respect women as full members of the academic community, then it is, in effect, relegating them to a secondary position in academia, and its commitment to its women students becomes questionable.

In the past few years there has been increasing evidence that questioning is in order. Some of the course-evaluation forms students fill out at the end of each semester, for example, mentioned that the Harvard environment seemed hostile to women. In 1979, government professor Martin Kilson was reprimanded for trying to kiss a freshman, and in the spring of 1982 a student charged that a visiting professor in the English department, Derek Walcott, had lowered her grade in a poetry seminar because she refused his sexual advances. After investigation, her grade was changed. (Walcott was reprimanded and subsequently wrote a letter of apology. He is currently a professor of English at Boston University.)

The most dramatic case Harvard has had, though, is the case of government-department professor Jorge Dominguez. Last

May a junior member of the government faculty, Kitty Sigmund (not her real name), filed a formal complaint with Dean of Faculty Henry Rosovsky, charging that Professor Dominguez had harassed her repeatedly over the course of the past academic year. According to Sigmund, the incidents ranged from introducing her to another senior faculty member as his "slave" to implying that his power to help her get tenure was linked to sexual favors.

That same month a graduate student in the department, Sylvia Maxfield, also filed a complaint against Professor Dominguez. She was less concerned with his attempts to kiss her than with his efforts to discourage her from working with Kitty Sigmund. Maxfield said that he characterized Sigmund to her as too emotional, too feminine in her work style, too liable to get carried away. Other graduate students had also complained, informally, about Dominguez, and all the women saw their cases as related. The university, however, advised Sigmund not to associate her case with theirs. In fact, according to Maxfield, the administration was so eager to keep the cases apart that while Maxfield was away for the summer, Sigmund was informed that she had dropped her case against Dominguez, when in fact she hadn't.

The outcome of Kitty Sigmund's case has not been officially disclosed by Harvard. She is currently on leave, doing research, and Dominguez has been replaced as chairman of the Interdisciplinary Committee on Latin American and Iberian

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Studies. His office has been moved into another building, but he is still a senior member of the government faculty, with a number of undergraduate advisees. (Several graduate students who were working with him are now working with professors at other local universities.)

Harvard's reticence in this case is current official policy, and it has caused a great deal of discomfort among government students. Many of them would like to see Dominguez replaced by someone who can inspire the trust he has lost, and they find that Harvard's silence implicitly condones his behavior. Furthermore, as one government-

department graduate student said, the case is an example "of how Harvard treats sexual harassment as a rule — they try to keep it in the family."

With the release, this past October, of "Unwanted Attention: Report on a Sexual Harassment Survey," the issue is no longer just in the Harvard family. Late last February, Associate Dean of Faculty Sidney Verba and two Harvard seniors, Christina Spaulding and Joseph DiNunzio, conducted a survey to determine just how disruptive sexual harassment is to Harvard's academic enterprise. Forms were mailed to all the undergraduate Arts and Sciences faculty, 1000 graduate students, and 2000 undergraduates (50 percent male and 50 percent female). The report's 70 pages of graphs and analysis and 83 pages of verbatim testimony and comments explain and detail the results.

Although the survey makes careful distinction among the different types of behavior that can be considered harassment, Dean Verba points out in a cover letter to the final report that "the full range of events is of concern since, as the report shows, even seemingly trivial events can be damaging." That range includes:

1) sex-stereotyped jokes, references; examples, or depictions (the slide of a nude slipped whimsically into an art history lecture on a different topic); 2) teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions of a sexual nature (continual references to the frigidity of a student who had turned down a teaching fellow's advances); 3) unwanted sexually suggestive looks and gestures (constant leering at a student, followed by sitting next to her and rubbing his leg against hers); 4) unwanted letters or phone calls of a sexual nature; 5) unwanted leaning over or cornering; 6) unwanted pressure for dates; 7) unwanted touching; and 8) unwanted pressure for sexual activity — from someone in a position of authority over the woman.

When all these categories were included, the survey found widespread incidence of sexual harassment: 49 percent of nontenured women faculty, 41 percent of women graduate students, 34 percent of undergraduate women, and 32 percent of tenured women faculty reported some form of harassment. In the categories considered serious — unwanted calls and letters, physical contact or pressure for dates, and pressure for sexual activity — the survey found that one of every five women in the senior class had experienced such an incident at some time during her four years at Harvard.

The main question now surrounding the Harvard report is how its findings will affect university life. For the moment it has greatly heightened awareness of the issue, but that doesn't mean Harvard's current policies and procedures will automatically change. Many male survey respondents report great doubt about the very idea of sexual harassment. Indeed, perhaps the most significant point the report makes is how

greatly men and women at Harvard differ in their perception of this issue.

Men tend to see it as an issue of sexuality (and thus none of the university's business); on the other hand, women at all levels are likely to see it as an issue of power (and thus an appropriate matter for university policy). Although a small percentage of men report some incidents of teasing or suggestive looks, the overwhelming majority of those who report incidents of

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harassment are women, many of whom say they put up with unwanted sexual attention from those in authority over them for fear of reprisal.

The personal responses from men range from expressions of support for the survey, to questions about females' seductive behavior, to fear that a strong university policy would have a "chilling effect" on faculty-student relationships, to fear of false charges, to anger and resentment at what they see as unwelcome intrusion in private life.

"Relations between faculty and students must be attractive and (possibly) sexual," reads one comment from a tenured man. "One can't learn or teach unless there exists some vital, perhaps physical, concern with mind and/or person[ality] of the instructor and student. OTHERWISE, is the teacher a computer?"

This rather Reichian view is not typical, though the confusion of warmth and liveliness with sexuality is not unique. More typical is the opinion that the issue is being made too much of — that sexual harassment really is only a minor problem. "Much of the harassment bit is due to the feminist hysteria," writes another tenured professor. "The university should be as alert to abuse of harassment charges as to actual harassment."

Although there are undoubtedly instances of misinterpreted intentions and simple disappointment among the reports from women, there are also a great many descriptions of incidents that clearly have no more place in a university than cheating on exams or falsifying credentials.

"I was naive," reads one anecdote, "perhaps too receptive to what I perceived to be professorial interest similar to what I had experienced at my

undergraduate institution . . . I could not believe anyone in his position of authority or of his age could behave so stupidly." As for the impact on her: "Extraordinary pressure during oral exams, to the extent that other professors present halted the exam and reprimanded the offender. Even so, my recognition that he was taking out his revenge in this way destroyed my composure and clarity of thought."

Mixing sexuality with academic and professional matters may seem inevitable in a situation where men and women work closely together. The evidence of the survey suggests that a new look at this premise would be of great benefit to women, particularly those in subordinate positions.

The prevailing attitude at Harvard seems to be that change will come, but not tomorrow. Associate Dean of Faculty Phyllis Keller notes that the Faculty Council is currently reviewing procedures: "Specifically, they are looking at the confidentiality issue again," she says. "But discussions have just begun." Her impression is that the situation is pretty much the same in most universities. "Five years ago, very few schools had clear policies; now most of them have. The frequency of the experience probably hasn't changed. What has changed is the feeling that the university should police this behavior. Women are more self-confident about their right to insist on freedom from harassment, and demand that the offender's behavior change."

There is some evidence that Harvard is beginning to take more notice of this demand. Shortly after the survey responses were completed, Dean Rosovsky sent a letter to the entire faculty that attempted to clarify and strengthen the university's position on sexual relationships between people of unequal status in the university. Informally called the "incest taboo" letter, it states quite explicitly, "Amorous relationships that might be appropriate in other circumstances are always wrong when they occur between any teacher or officer of the University and any student for whom he or she has a professional responsibility. . . . It is incumbent upon those with authority not to abuse, nor to seem to abuse, the power with which they are entrusted."

In his letter, Rosovsky warns of the possibility of formal action against the teacher or officer should a student complain, and explains the complaint process. There are several levels at which complaints are dealt with, and it's possible that the process can culminate in a charge of "grave misconduct"; that, in turn, might be taken before a university hearing panel, which could consider revoking an offender's tenure.

According to Dean Keller, no case of sexual harassment has ever reached this point. Most cases are settled informally, and even the most serious cases have been dealt with privately, between a dean and the offender. Indeed, the contrast between the

to hear a woman say that," comments Rowe.

And then there are traditions like Registration Day Movies, which emphasize how MIT is a university for men. The movies are a biannual event, shown at MIT by a student organization, and intended to draw the whole campus together. They are always hard-core pornography.

According to Margery Resnick, associate professor of Spanish and housemaster in MIT's only all-female dormitory, women students in general are reluctant to protest this venerable tradition. Students at MIT work in teams or with partners. It is therefore essential for women to be accepted by their male peers, and perhaps because of this, women are unwilling to be identified as radically different from them. Women in this situation, who are aware that their feelings are alien to those who dominate their institution, usually just want the problem to stop; they do not want to draw attention to themselves.

The most successful strategy that Mary Rowe has devised for these women is the personal letter from the woman to the harasser. Men who hear "no" as "maybe" and "maybe" as "yes," Rowe says, usually get the message right when they see it in writing.

This strategy often offers relief to an individual woman, but its confidentiality and informality do not foster community awareness. In general, women who decide to make a formal complaint do so not only to help themselves, but also to protect other women from similar experiences. The letter strategy is no help in identifying chronic harassers, nor does it acknowledge the discriminatory nature of sexual harassment.

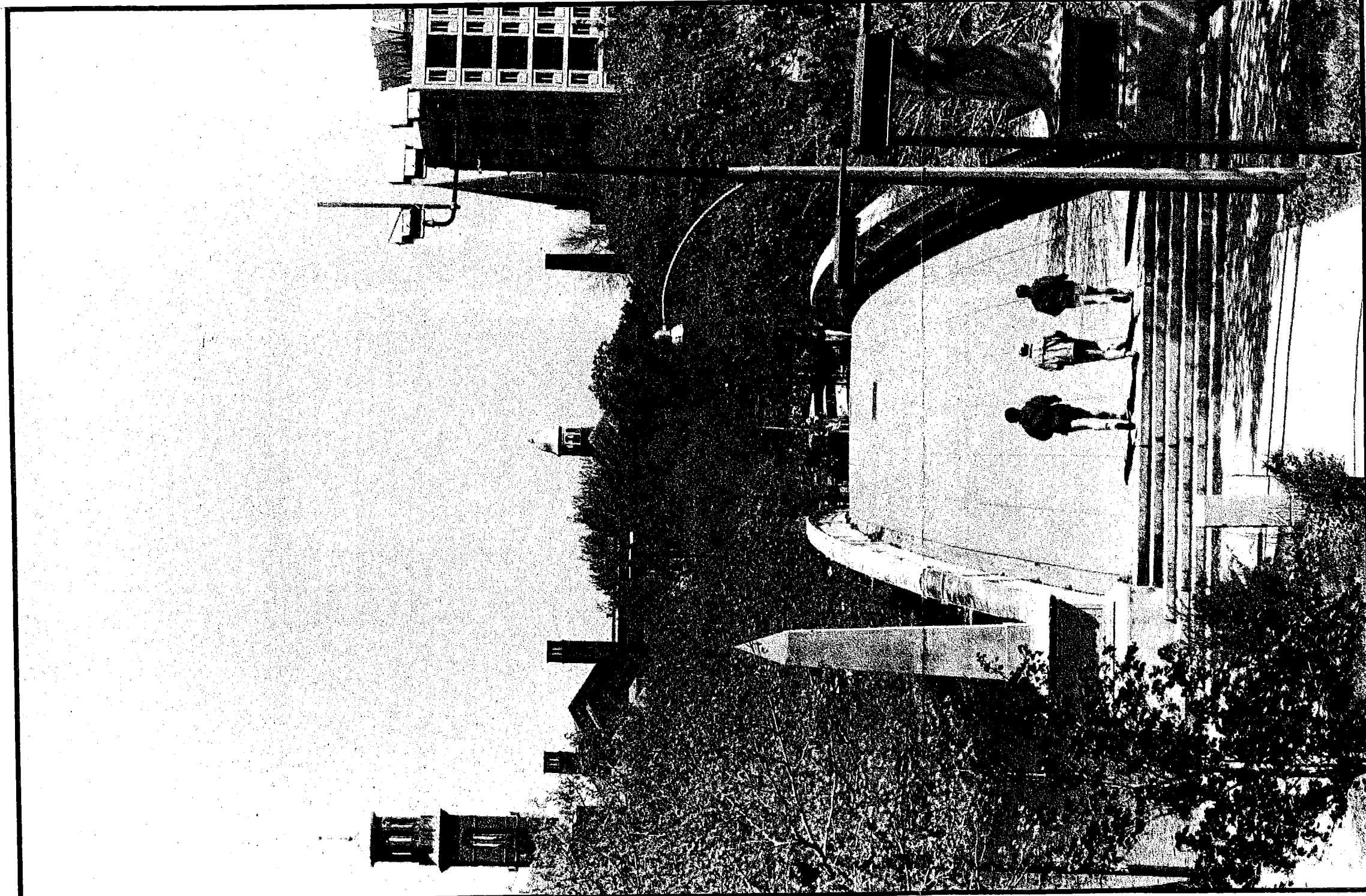
Phyllis Crocker, who worked with the New Haven Law Collective in the late '70s on the class-action suit brought against Yale University for failing to provide a grievance procedure to deal with sexual harassment, criticizes the letter strategy for its lack of deterrent effect. She says that rather than expressing the community's opinion of the offender's behavior, the letter procedure merely lets him know he's picked the wrong woman. Crocker suggests that there be public reports on the sanctions imposed in cases of harassment, even if the names of the parties involved are withheld. "By clearly and adamantly condemning this conduct," she says, "university administrators can refuse to allow the issue of sexual harassment to be trivialized."

One example of clear condemnation took place at Brandeis University two years ago, when a professor was accused of linking his support of a student's plans for study abroad to sexual favors. A panel composed of five members of the Brandeis community (chosen by the student, the professor, and the administration) heard both sides and submitted its recommendation to the dean of faculty. The professor was fined \$2000 a year from his pay for the next 10 years and removed from the chairmanship of the department; he can never be chairman again. He was also removed from all undergraduate committees, and a letter was placed in his permanent file.

Herb Hentz, assistant to the president for affirmative action at Brandeis, whose office handled the case, says it was never officially made public, but adds that "the grapevine functions well." At an "rate, it was not a private matter between a professor and a dean.

In 1983 the term "sexism" and the concept of sexual discrimination are both well established; there are even

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directness of Rosovsky's letter and the extreme confidentiality of the actual process is striking. On the other hand, both the letter and the Harvard Student Handbook define sexual harassment as a form of "unprofessional behavior," a phrase that conjures up judgment by private code rather than public law.

Not surprisingly, those who question the university's practice of ensuring confidentiality also question this definition. They ask why sexual harassment is not specifically defined as illegal and why there is no publicly articulated punishment. "To say that the punishment is a private matter between the professor and the dean," says Chris Spaulding, "protects the professor and gives the impression that both he and the university are above the law."

Only last fall, Assistant Dean of Faculty Marilyn M. Lewis, in a memorandum to the faculty council, defended the policy of

threatening way against them, but there is no way for them to characterize the effect.

If sexual harassment is not too sensitive an issue that it's difficult to report, increasing awareness is clearly part of the agenda. Although the "incest taboo" letter does not satisfy the criticisms surrounding confidentiality, it does raise the issue of exploiting authority for sexual advantage.

According to Mary Rowe, assistant to the president of MIT and a national authority on sexual harassment in universities, the letter is a landmark statement. "There's nothing else like it anywhere in academia," she says. The crucial weapons in combating sexual harassment, in her experience, are awareness and easy access to help. Fostering awareness, however, is an endless process, made more difficult by the endless variety of situations in which harassment occurs. A definition of sexual

harassment that encompasses everything that may come up is almost impossible. "Just when I think, 'Now I've heard everything,' something else comes up," Rowe said. One woman on the West Coast called her for help because a professor always sat on the floor sketching her ankles when she came to talk in his office. "The majority of Americans might think that was harmless," she says, "but the woman was terribly upset."

As the authors of the Harvard report stress, in dealing with sexual harassment it is important to start with the victim's perception of the damage. When men occupy the senior-management positions — as is the case at both Harvard and MIT — management's lack of experience with the problem tends to make it insensitive. It's quite common, for instance, to hear a male manager joke mildly, "Gee, I wish somebody would harass me." "It's very uncommon

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federal law and guidelines intended to curb both. Nevertheless, "we are now at about 1958 in terms of women's equality, compared to where we are on racial issues," said Dean Verba. "It's a transition period." There is no other area in the university in which it is deemed acceptable to be 25 years behind the times, though, and the survey has certainly provided the concrete data for change.

Before the survey was done, says assistant professor of sociology Stephen Cornell, the prevailing attitude was that the problem was overstated, the creation of people with a political axe to grind. And many men will still be reluctant to see themselves as harassers and their everyday behavior as harassment, he says. "Instead of being sensitized themselves to the problem," he speculates, "they will be sensitized to seeing that other people have a problem."

Cornell's misgivings were echoed by another, highly placed, source at Harvard who declined to be identified. "Many male faculty members think the survey is silly and childish," he said. "The liberal idea that education will change them doesn't make much sense. Harvard is still very decentralized and very male dominated."

This seems to be the heart of the matter. The policies to deal with confidentiality, awareness, and access to help will perforce defer to men's feelings, within a surrounding cultural environment that reinforces the status quo. "Can there be freely wanted, welcome, or appropriate leers, requests for sexual favors, kisses, or pinches, given a student's dependence on a professor for everything from grades to psychological and professional support?" asks Phyllis Crocker.

According to the report, "junior faculty and students — who are particularly likely to be exposed to and bothered by [sexual] remarks and jokes — say that such comments are demeaning and undercut their sense of professionalism [making] full participation in the intellectual enterprise difficult."

What kind of a policy can address this slippery problem? "Adjudication," said Dean Verba, "is a very blunt instrument for dealing with remarks. It's a matter of changing community norms. You can't legislate it."

Community norms are nevertheless very often crucially affected by the opinions and feelings of those in powerful positions. Whether women are considered over-sensitive to apparently normal human interaction depends entirely on who says what normal human interaction is. Several comments in the survey address this problem. One, from a female graduate student, reads: "I think the overwhelming problem is that the tenured faculty is predominantly male — when more than three percent of the tenured faculty are women, the problem will significantly decrease. My experience has been that sexual harassment involves political power, much more than natural, biological attraction between the sexes."

Dean Verba pointed out that Harvard has doubled the size of its tenured female faculty in the past half-dozen years. And just last month the university granted tenure to two women professors. However, the entire Harvard Arts and Sciences faculty, tenured and untenured, is still less than eight percent female, and authority is indeed inevitably associated with maleness. Regardless of whether the males in question consciously connect their sexuality to their authority, the women they work with certainly do. □