

Sexual Harassment at Its Intersections

ASA Sexual Harassment Working Group

The ASA sexual harassment working group (HWG), of which I am a member, was organized nearly two years ago following allegations of sexual harassment, including of women of color, at our annual meetings. We understand that sexual harassment and predatory sexual behavior in academia are not necessarily best treated as the work of a few bad actors, but rather are systemic issues that need to be dealt with as such. And while sexual harassment involves all persons on the gender spectrum as victims and perpetrators, for purposes of this essay I will discuss women, who make up the vast majority of victims (NAS 2018).

The HWG purposely adapted an intersectional angle – to ensure an inclusive approach to harassment. The group is composed of sociologists who share my concern that ASA should be doing more to prevent sexual harassment from occurring. Our charge is to advise ASA Council on policy and procedural matters, how to better support victims, and to educate our membership. We have written a series of articles in *Footnotes*, conducted webinars and workshops at the ASA meetings, and created a video on how bystanders can intervene (see bit.ly/bystandervideo).

Sociology is not the only discipline to acknowledge the problem of sexual harassment. A February 2017 survey by the American Political Science Association (APSA) looked for instances of sexual harassment at its recent conferences. Their list of violations range from being “stared, leered, or ogled” to being bribed with some *quid pro quo* to engage in sexual behavior.” APSA explains that the data are needed “to address the issue of sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances at our annual meetings.” No surprise that more women than men reported at least one incident of sexual harassment. In most categories, women reported more instances: 1) feeling put down (42% women and 22% men); 2) inappropriate language or looks (30% women and 10% men); inappropriate sexual advances (11% women and 3% men) (Sapiro and Campbell 2018).

With sexual harassment and its intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in mind, I’ve been thinking quite a bit about the safety of women and girls of color — in departments, the office, at professional meetings, in the home, and on the streets. My concern was recently heightened while watching the A&E six-hour documentary that chronicled sexual assault and kidnapping charges against R & B singer R. Kelly over a 25-year period. As far as authorities can tell, *all* of Kelly’s victims during those years were girls of color. According to the documentary, most of his underage victims were lured by fame and promises of music careers. Some may recall Kelly secretly marrying the late singer Aaliyah who began as his mentee when she was only 15 years old and he 27. Or heard about the video showing Kelly urinating on a 14-year-old girl. After Kelly’s acquittal on 14 counts of child pornography charges in 2008, at least one white male juror remarked that he did not like the way the victims talked and looked while testifying, leading him and other jurors to conclude that they were not believable. While Kelly and his victims are not associated with ASA, we might regard his many victims as canaries in the coal mine for the regard — and disregard — women of color’s issues are accorded in U.S. society. It is difficult to imagine a similar legal scenario if R. Kelly’s victims were white girls and women.

A conversation with a Black woman sociology graduate student whom I met some years ago at a sexual assault advocate training session underscores the need for the discipline to regard all women as potential victims and address the issue of sexual harassment beyond our meetings. The student stated to the group of about 20 other women that she was “uncomfortable” with a professor in her sociology department, specifically with him staring at her breasts and making comments on her personal appearance. Further, according to the student, this professor habitually commented on other grad students’ body parts, hair, and otherwise engaged in behavior that is, at best, unprofessional. She was too afraid to report this professor’s behavior. And who can blame her? Intersectionality informs us that she may have more to lose than others given her status within the university power hierarchy as a graduate student, as well as her age, gender, and race.

For students of color it is even more difficult to speak up and seek support. Kaitlin Boyle and Ashleigh McKinzie find that 33 percent of graduate or law students have experienced a hostile sexual environment (2018). This experience was not equally shared among students, with higher rates of sexual harassment reported by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual women and by multiracial students. It should perhaps not come as a surprise that these underrepresented groups experience higher rates of adverse sexual experiences given scholars have documented that sexual violence “maintains and creates power asymmetries” (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut and Johnson 2018).

The toll this sort of harassment takes is long lasting and can have devastating impact on careers. Graduate students in these groups report higher rates of depression and anxiety, much of which can be explained by their experience of sexual harassment (Boyle and McKinzie 2018). It is worth noting that some students who have been warned by their networks about individuals, groups, or departments that exhibit sexually exploitative behavior may seek to maintain their safety by avoiding these people and environments. In doing so, these students may miss out on important academic and career resources—networks, mentoring, and research opportunities. From this perspective, the effects of sexual harassment reach beyond a singular moment or action, shaping people’s professional experiences and careers.

If our goal is to prevent sexual harassment of our members at our meetings and in academia overall, we would do well to consider the experiences of women of color whose victimization is often ignored. My study of African American women in a law enforcement agency was one of the first to consider that this group of women also experiences sexual harassment in sometimes qualitatively different ways. For example, on her first day on the job at a patrol station, one participant quoted her training officer: “I don’t like women [on the job] and I especially don’t like *Black* women.” He proceeded to make her life, according to her, a “living hell.” One hundred percent of the women with whom I spoke did not report incidents because of fear of retaliation in the forms of denial of promotions and escalating harassment, particularly by men who carried weapons. In at least two cases, women reported that colleagues retaliated against them by not responding to their calls for emergency backup putting their lives in danger.

The women in my study, like R. Kelly’s young victims, often feel that they have little recourse but to endure the harassment. Many turn to ASA for support because they do not trust their own institutions to handle the issues. Ultimately, what is our obligation to the young Latinx woman in graduate school or the Black woman who described her professor’s behavior to a room full of

strangers, or the assistant professor who simply wants to present her research at our meetings? HWG is attempting to address the concerns of all members — unlike authorities from Atlanta to Chicago who dismissed R. Kelly’s victims — to enable ASA to better support victims now and in the future and to prevent harassment from occurring.

References

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