

# Graduate + Professional Education of Women 1974 AAUW

## THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

### THE SATURN'S RINGS PHENOMENON

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The minutiae of sexism are usually not actionable; most are such petty incidents that they may not even be identified, much less protested. They are, however, important, like the dust and ice in Saturn's rings, because, taken together, they constitute formidable barriers. As Saturn is partially obscured by its rings, so are good jobs partially obscured for women by "grains of sand": the minutiae of sexism.

#### Why is Progress So Slow for Women in Educational Institutions?

As we design the 1970's and 1980's, one of the questions we face in educational institutions is "why is it so difficult to provide equal opportunity for all?" An administrator cannot fail to see the statistics.

In the last few years in this country, wage gaps have widened between men and women at most educational levels. Only one or two percent of top policy-making positions are held by educational administrators who are women. Few tenured positions are held by women. Painstakingly we authorize salary equity reviews, running five or six regression equations using different criteria. How can we find the salaries of women faculty catching up? We study the analysis of administrative promotions throughout the institution. If we are beginning to succeed, we find our women only a few years older than the men, at promotion. If we are beginning to succeed, we find that the promoted women are supervising only a few more employees than the men, that only three-quarters of the promoted women had superior educational qualifications. If we are succeeding particularly well, we find the wage gap has narrowed, instead of widening, between men and women who are promoted.

But why is affirmative action so slow? Much can be made of high unemployment levels, of budget cutbacks, shifts in demand away from education. There are also other problems. Many women do not want top jobs (although they want recognition for what they do). Many men will actively fight the law of the land and try to keep women out of top jobs. Some women still are so ambivalent that they fail to do good work. All these points are important and need thoughtful consideration.

## Saturn's Rings: The Minutiae of Sexism

In my job I find also another factor at work--a problem which does not lend itself to legal redress or even to improvement in time of economic promise, and which occurs with frequency at the best and most humane of institutions. The minutiae of sexism appear to me a major problem for women in educational institutions. Saturn's rings, if one lived inside them, would appear as random encounters with dust and ice. Perhaps the dust and ice would even appear so scattered as not always to deserve defense against them. But the objective eye which observes from a distance will see that many grains of sand taken together obscure the planet, and create formidable barriers.

### A Typology of Sexism

Dozens of complaints from men and women come into my office every week. (At MIT I'm one of the ombudspersons handling grievance procedures for men and women, for faculty, staff, and other employees, and for students.) One can make a rough typology of the women's complaints about sexism, working categories which help in deciding what to do. As I think of my job, I think of four major categories of sexism:

1. Illegal acts of a sexist nature.
2. Unconscious slights against women, including the "invisibility" problem.
3. Conscious sexism, including harassment, exploitation, provision of poor service to women.
4. Psychiatric problems, manifested in sexist behavior, with direct and indirect effects.

Of course these categories overlap in many ways but in general they describe somewhat different problems. Of these, problems in the first category appear to be comparatively rare. In my institution they are not critically important once they have been identified; the administration gives short shrift to illegal discrimination. Problems in the other three categories are, however, more important in my opinion and it is these I have called Saturn's rings.

Invisibility, harassment and sexist psychiatric problems affect women in educational institutions in many ways. They directly injure professional women, although sometimes subtly and sometimes without their being aware of it. They injure all other women around the profession--tilting the atmosphere and creating additional concerns for faculty and administrators to handle. They create barriers that require additional energy to cross, especially for students and women who start out in entry positions. In addition, I believe that in the long run such difficulties tend to deprive women of the women mentors, women colleagues and male mentors who would otherwise have been available.

### Invisibility and Other Unconscious Slights

A woman may become aware of her invisibility only slowly because it is hard to identify. We say she is invisible when her name is mysteriously

missing from a list. Hers are the announcements and invitations which fail to come, the reservations which were not made, the pages which were not typed, the vacations which were not planned by her boss. It is her work which by mistake is not properly acknowledged, not reviewed, not responded to, not published, her opinion which is not asked for. Women are not alone in being invisible; perhaps the most poignant writing on this subject comes from a distinguished work on racism:

"I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me.

"Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality." These are the words of Ralph Ellison in his most famous book, Invisible Man.

Invisibility and other unconscious slights are difficult to identify. If it is only you who are addressed by your first name, are you sure it's sexism? How can you be sure your paper was not turned down because it was poor? Is your office space more noisy only by accident? Even if you are sure there was a slight, what is to be done? Imagine you are the only top administrator whose office is not in the main building; you have been given space in the Home Economics Building. Can you protest when you don't believe an insult was intended--and besides there isn't very much space? (And what does one do with unintended insults that are still insulting?) Imagine that a woman professional who was supposed to do a job for a certain department copped out, and now the department somehow simply doesn't consider contracting the job to another woman, even though the subject matter directly concerns women. How do you describe what you think is going on?

#### Conscious Sexism, including Harassment, Exploitation, Provision of Poor Service to Women

Harassment is not ordinarily actionable. It is the department head who says "If she is given tenure, I will see that she is so miserable that she goes." It is the teacher who refuses to learn a young woman's name or calls her by the name of another blonde, or by his own cute nickname for her. It is the professor who systematically humiliates his female students about their appearance or the department head who loads on extra work to prove a woman can't succeed in that job or because he knows she will not refuse.

If you gently ask a man about harassment, many men will say "But I harass everyone." I believe such a person differentially threatens female staff and

students. First, because the "general" harassment often takes specifically sexist form when applied to women: "My God, your analysis sounds just like a housewife!" Second, because most women in this society are socialized more than men to respond to disapproval with excessive dismay and loss of self-esteem. Third, in a traditionally male environment there will be so many more men than women that harassing behavior which is sexist, but very common, is less likely to be identified and stopped. Such behavior is in fact likely to be generally supported, like the telling of dirty jokes to embarrass or get rid of women in a laboratory. In addition, because women are so few, they are obvious; they cannot be inconspicuously mediocre, they are convenient scapegoats when there is trouble. And finally, in traditionally male environments, we know from the work of Astin, Bailyn and others, that women have a particular need for male mentors and supportive male colleagues. (There is nothing odd about this. I believe that men in traditionally female environments, like child care centers, also thrive better with female mentors and supportive female colleagues.) Considering all these points together I believe that men who "just harass everybody" in fact create a particular injustice for women around them.

Conscious exploitation and poor service are frequent. They are not always malicious, just damaging. Such behavior is "conscious" or nearly conscious in the sense that, once pointed out, the person involved will at once recognize the error. Take the vice president of a college who basically knows his or her secretary is doing the work of an assistant to the vice president. Would the secretary receive a major promotion if she were a man? Take the foreign student who is the only student on her large research team who is not eligible for Work-Study money and who therefore is not paid. Would the professor make some other arrangement for her if she were a man? A man and a woman come into similar jobs in a school system. He makes a major fuss about fringe benefits and a rug for his office. She is well-socialized and makes no fuss. Will she be given the same fringe benefits and rug? A professor has a student who needs some data. Will she work as hard to get data for a woman student as for a man?

Conscious exploitation can be particularly difficult to address where women are being exploited as a class, especially if the exploitation is socially acceptable. Perhaps the most frequent examples occur with respect to pornography. Consider the case of the seminar invitation showing a woman with swaying breasts under water; or the frequent use of pornographic materials and illustrations in medical school and science classes. Poor service also affects women as a class. Probably the most pervasive example has to do with our use of language. For instance, consider the widespread disinclination to change the use of the generic "man" in speech--"Come to the lecture on Technology and Man!"--despite growing research evidence that use of the generic "man" in fact influences our behavior in ways that leave women out.

### Psychiatric Problems Manifested in Sexist Behavior

Clearly, invisibility, harassment, exploitation and poor service lie on a continuum, shading into one another. At the most anguishing end, the continuum shades into psychiatric problems which in my opinion differentially affect women. Obviously educational institutions have people with psychiatric problems; these problems involve and impinge upon both men and women. But I believe that many of the psychiatric problems of men affect women more than men



and it is for the same reasons that I believe "general" harassment hits women harder than men. A hostile and aggressive man may paw, pinch, and lean against women as he will not do with men; (rape of women is thought to be at least ten times more frequent than rape of men). Realistic fear of such offense will often constrain women as they consider night-time jobs at good pay or staying late at the office. And one finds men who deliberately use such fears to keep women out of good jobs. As with lesser harassments I believe many women are differentially sensitive to male rage (and depression) with consonant loss of self-confidence. Consider the case of the professor who berated a seventeen-year-old student who came to her first class accompanied by a male student she'd just met. "Young woman," he thundered, "you are seducing him already! Young man, nothing in skirts deserves the attention you should be giving your studies!" I suspect this young woman was probably worse affected than if the situation had been reversed. Had a woman professor thus berated unknown first year students, she might just have been thought an old witch.

At the very least, to the extent that we are all peculiarly sensitive to psychiatric disorders in the opposite sex, women in traditionally male environments will be differentially affected. This is true simply because there are more men than women in these institutions. Women are therefore more likely to experience psychiatric illness from the opposite sex and are more likely to experience such illness from people with power. Some of these problems spill over onto normal male-female relationships as well. Because some men importune women and betray wives, and because some women are seductive and betray husbands, other men find it difficult to take on women proteges, and other women find it difficult to seek a male mentor or even to seek advice in the same way men do. In the same way, because some men are pathologically afraid of competition from women--to the extent of serious impotence, pathological denial or aggression, other men may become abnormally sensitive to "normal" competitive behavior in women. They may, for example, prevent girls from joint athletics with boys or countenance unequal athletic facilities for college women. Because some women are unreasonably disturbed by competition between men and women, they will withdraw from a job ladder or discourage their daughters from positions of influence.

Thus I include psychiatric problems with sexist manifestations into the minutiae of sexism which tilt the atmosphere against women in educational institutions. Although some psychiatric problems are major and actionable matters, most sexist psychiatric difficulties simply add to the day-to-day minutiae. Men who expose themselves, who won't take no from an intended date, who threaten and harass obscenely by telephone, who pick on handicapped women, who lie repeatedly to women, who go into rages or withdrawal on apparently little provocation, or who try to arouse a woman's guilt or worry about her care for her family or her femininity, rarely get to court. And most would not be better off if they got to court. They are simply sick in ways which I believe affect women more than men in educational institutions.

#### The Effects of the Minutiae of Sexism

Any comprehensive paper on this subject should look at the matter in broader perspective. What of the minutiae of racism, in some ways similar in form and origin and which affect at least a fifth of women in paid employment in addition to sexism? What of the general depersonalization of work relations over

200 years of American history? In the course of my work at this job, I have come to see almost as many men as women; men also are slighted and ignored and treated in an inhuman fashion. What of the more specific difficulties which are always introduced in power relationships between unequals; how much petty sexism is really just caused by women being at the bottom of the hierarchy? What about sexism in women which affects both men and women? And finally, what about effects on men as well as women? What happens to men who look at other human beings without seeing them, who harass and exploit and render poor service, or who vent certain kinds of illness differentially on women? All of these questions need sober and serious study and we are just beginning to ask the questions as they relate to the condition of women in educational institutions.

### The Effects on Women

With respect particularly to women, I believe that the minutiae of sexism constitute a special problem for reasons which apply to all women some of the time, and to some women all of the time:

1. Invisibility and treatment only as a "female" arouse self-doubt in women, and sometimes an inability to cope, either as a woman or as a professional. They also interfere with women being seen as promotable. Finally the treatment of any woman as "just a female" injures all women because they are also female. Thus a sexist slight to a secretary will also injure students and administrators who are female, by the process of (unintended) role-modelling, if the slight was in public, and by reinforcing poor habits in the offender.
2. The forms of sexism and sex-role stereotyping are so specific to each sex that each sex doesn't know what the other faces. This means women are in some ways isolated from men by their experience, as men are also isolated from the experience of women. Communications are always slow and difficult in such circumstances.
3. Many women in educational institutions need to spend disproportionate time and soul on the problems of other women that may not otherwise be attended to. Moreover, nurturant behavior is so rare in paid employment, and sufficiently sex-stereotyped, that our rare women faculty and administrators often need to spend a disproportionate amount of time taking care of men as well as women. Few begrudge this time but it constitutes an extra work-load for many women.
4. Women need either to cope with slights against themselves or develop a considerable shield--a "denial" of such experience--both of which processes take energy.
5. Direct exploitation of individuals may mean that promotion is postponed or denied. Where promotion has been postponed or denied to a woman who was competitively qualified for an available position, she has obviously been wronged. She may also have her time so taken up with routine work that she has no chance to prepare for advancement in the traditional way.

6. Self-doubt, some isolation from men, the need to cope with slights, and exploitation, make it harder to have good judgment about other humans, and contribute to errors ranging from paranoia against men to an inability to hear slights against other women.

### What Should Be Done about the Minutiae of Sexism?

I believe that the Saturn's Rings phenomena described in this paper are complex and deeply rooted in our lives. Our first need is to recognize and understand what is going on, in the individual instance and in wider perspective. Easier said than done . . . To identify and understand each petty occurrence is wearying and difficult; an understanding of the vested interests involved takes thoughtful, prolonged, and compassionate study.

Women must themselves learn to recognize and analyze the tilted atmosphere--and cope with it. Since denial is often easier, this requirement is not lightly made. The requirement is also in some cosmic way unjust; to require the victim to begin redress of grievance itself constitutes "unequal opportunity." But I think there is no choice.

Coping well with the tilted atmosphere means many things. It means learning to discriminate between behavior from others which is supportive and behavior which is not. It means making visible the invisible, refusing to accept conscious slights, finding medical help for people who need it. It means building support among men and women for each other. This is most effectively done by communicating and fostering those areas where men and women stand to gain by getting rid of sexism. I believe these areas are many.

To encourage men to support and take care of other people clearly benefits everyone, including the men themselves who may uncover delightful capabilities that have been long suppressed. "Seeing" all humans appropriately, regardless of sex and race, means at least doubling the talents available for all tasks. Analysis of harassment nearly always permits a closer consideration of the reasons why people harass in the first place. Encouraging men and women to provide good service to all humans, regardless of race and sex, breeds further excellence by example--and in just those areas we believe that "education" should be about in the first place. And for women to do these things is particularly important. The experience of standing up for oneself and of taking responsibility for oneself is critical for women, many of whom have been dependent for too long. So I believe there is much to gain by noticing and analyzing and dealing with the minutiae of sexism.

I have four simple principles of procedure on my own job.

First, women need to support men in their new options of homemaking, child care, flexible work schedules and hours in non-competitive jobs and in nurturant professions. In traditionally female environments, women can be and often are as sexist as men. We must always remind ourselves that men need support in their search for new options.

Second, we must take a determined stand on the issue of blacks vs. women because everyone who faces discrimination needs our support.

Third, women must organize. One woman is not "a critical mass."



And fourth, women should not just talk about problems, they must work on them. In short, don't bark. Bite!

In summary, equal progress for women in educational institutions is slow and one reason for this slowness lies in forms of discrimination that are outside legal redress. These forms, the minutiae of sexism, constitute barriers to advancement for women in the same way that individual grains of sand taken together in Saturn's rings obscure that planet. Invisibility, harassment, exploitation, poor service and deep seated psychological problems of a sexist nature all create special difficulties for women in educational institutions. These patterns must be recognized and seen in perspective in order to cope with them well.

## BEHIND SATURN'S RINGS--A FEW EXAMPLES OF DUST

Mary P. Rowe, Ph.D.

Many illegal sexist acts are hard to identify, but one is easy to observe. This is a growing tendency to pit blacks against women, to tell a black man that he didn't get a job because it was given to a woman, to tell a woman that the job she wanted was given to a member of a minority. This situation is a critical problem in higher education today.

Another grain of dust comes from the chemistry professor who called the only two black women in his class "Tweedledum" and "Tweedledee," because he "couldn't tell them apart."

Sexist insults based on sex differences are regrettably common. For example, a woman student was placed in the university infirmary to recover from an IUD perforation. Meanwhile, she had been given a take-home exam, the type which may be completed in the library. When she asked the physician if she could leave the infirmary to take the exam, he said: "You're not ready to go out and screw."

Another student, working in a laboratory, complained that she didn't feel well. One of the male students said to her: "What you need is a good hot injection." Supposedly, this is merely teasing, but it is a sexist teasing which is spreading through the traditional male environment.

As for active sexual aggression, I had two complaints in just one week. One concerned a tenured and distinguished professor, famous for pawing women's breasts in public. The other was about a teaching assistant who grabbed one of his students by her breasts from behind in public and refused to let her go, laughing hilariously.

Other dust motes relate to women's exclusion from desirable peripheral course activities. At a college observatory, women were never allowed to staff night time observations. These jobs paid well, but every time a woman applied, she was simply informed that "You're likely to get raped if you're there."



At a medical school, while interns are scrubbing for an operation, the head surgeon describes the upcoming procedure, defines the work details, discusses recent similar operations, and makes prognoses. Because the women must scrub with the nurses, they miss these critical half hours of instruction.

But women can and do fight back. Take the Great Poster War. A professor, the intake officer for his department, had papered his office with sexy posters and calendars. When the women in this department complained, he simply laughed at them. The department head, a kind and gentle person, didn't think he could do anything, but suggested that they ask for "equal time."

One of the women, Jacquelin, decided to act. She brought to the office a huge six foot poster of a nude male, described later as the "most vulgar thing ever seen in Massachusetts." (I never saw it.) She hung this on the male professor's office wall in his absence. When he and some of his male colleagues returned from a conference, the other men took one look at the thing and teased him about being gay.

In high dudgeon, the professor pulled down the poster. Jacquelin rescued the poster and put it on the wall in her own office along with a bumper sticker which proclaimed: "When I look at a man, all I see is his body."

She sat back to wait.

At the end of the day another department head who was taking some out-of-town guests on the grand tour, opened her door, saw the vulgar poster, and went into orbit. He also went to her department head. The four top managers then called a meeting with Jacquelin, which was exactly what she wanted. As a result, both poster displays were removed.

This a case where the woman who took the action was backed by a large and well organized group of women from her entire department who were prepared and ready to give her support.

We can thin out the particles from Saturn's ring if we are willing to act and to work together.

(These incidents are all real occurrences in the lives of women in New England educational institutions in 1973.)