Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Universities: Exploring Practice, Ethics, and Agency

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This paper addresses the widespread phenom enon of the sexual harassment of women in Nigerian universities, a phenomenon whose existence was officially noted more than two decades ago in the Report of the Cookey Commission (1981). Although the phrase 'sexual harassment' can be used to refer to a broad range of forms of violence that are sexualized, for many the phrase excludes the possibility of rape or other forms of sexual violence. It is primarily in recognition of commonsense understandings of sexual harassment as distinct from and generally 'less serious' than gender based violence, that I have used the two phrases in conjunction with one another in the text.

I begin by locating sexual harassment within the larger context of an overall breakdown in the rule of law and the role of the state vis-à-vis university education, with consequences for university governance and the generalized spread of corruption. The misrule of successive military regimes has affected the university system in a number of ways, through the politicization of decision-making, and the subsequent mismanagement of universities, as well as the willful under funding of the university system as a whole. One of the consequences has been a breakdown in the rule of law in universities, as in the body politic and the society at large (see e.g. Jega 1994; Hayward and Gana 1995; Ade-Ajayi 2001; Yaqub 2001). In effect, what prevails is a situation in which the vast majority of universities have been substantially decomposed, resulting in conditions that reinforce the unethical. The generalized corruption that is a pervasive feature of this scenario is manifested not only in monetary terms but also in social relations more generally and sexual relations in particular, such as those between authority figures and students (Pereira 2001).

One of the most glaring areas of dysfunction in universities is their inability to fulfill their mission of providing high-quality teaching and engagement in research, given the decline in university staff salaries, the lack of publications, the absence of communications facilities and laboratory equipment, and so on. In this context, a number of university lecturers have resorted to a range of unethical and unprofessional practices, for diverse reasons. Some of the more notorious include the flouting of admissions procedures; the sale of handouts to students; the leaking of exam questions to students for money; and, on the part of male lecturers, the exchange of sexual favours from female students for gains of one kind or another in class performance.

Even where universities have initiated changes in important areas such as administration, fundraising strategies and technological arenas, this does not necessarily entail recognition of gender discrimination and violence against women, nor a willingness to act in order to change the situation. Existing administrative and technocratic changes in university functioning seem to represent the understandable desire to survive under conditions of serious under funding coupled with market reforms. What is less clear is the relationship between the form that the institution takes under such conditions and the quality of the educational environment. More significantly, the extent to which knowledge production in such an environment will be guided by a fundamental concern with equity and the nature of the equity agenda, if any, remain unclear. Reform in the bureaucracy is not synonymous with reforming (or even transforming) social relations, particularly the social relations of gender and sexuality.

Beyond this, the extent to which universities carry out their mission as institutions dedicated to knowledge production has been questioned by struggles against gender based restrictions of academic freedom within the academy, given the gender blindness with which university missions have traditionally been pursued (see e.g. Imam and Mama 1994). Although struggles against sexual harassment and gender based violence have generally been located within broader struggles for gender equity, within and beyond the academy, very rarely have struggles for improved university governance even recognized the mal-governance inherent in the pervasive presence of sexual harassment in universities

(Pereira 2001). Struggles against gender inequity in the academy have addressed injustices at the level of the bureaucracy as well as in knowledge production. These struggles have taken a variety of forms, ranging from initiatives to transform intellectual content by introducing women's studies and gender studies across disciplines (see e.g. Mama 1996, Pereira 2003); interventions in feminist pedagogies (Odejide and Isiugo-Abanihe 1999); to administrative efforts to increase the numbers of females (more often students than academic staff) in university education.

The prevailing emphasis on broadening access to university education for female students generally leaves unanswered the critical question of what kind of institutional culture gives meaning to the formal business of universities (Bennett 2002a, Pereira forthcoming). As Bennett (2002a) points out, most discussions on gender and higher education in Africa make reference to sexual harassment and sexual violence as key sources of injury to women on campus. Whether perpetrated by male students, academic staff, or support staff - all differentially located within the institution - sexual harassment is pervasive in higher education in general. Despite this, the 'conditions of vulnerability, fear, confusion and abuse faced by survivors' (Bennett 2002a: 41) of sexual harassment and sexual violence are rarely recognized as systemically rooted in the male supremacist character of the university system (Pereira 2001). Although sexual harassment may appear to many to be an incidental feature of university life – hardly worth research effort, never mind elimination – suffice it to say that it is in what appear to be simply matters of detail that matters of substance are often unintentionally revealed.

That the sources of sexual harassment of female students are differentiated – they include different categories of male staff as well as male students - suggests that analysis should take cognizance of this configuration. In this paper, I draw attention primarily to abuse that involves male academic staff and female students, whilst recognising the broader context of sexual harassment and violence emanating from other sources both within and beyond the university (see Pereira forthcoming). The rationale for this is twofold. First, it highlights the participation of key authority figures in the abuse of female students. Secondly, it affords an examination of hitherto ignored processes and structures that need to be radically changed if universities are to become institutions capable of generating knowledge for social transformation.

There are three parts to the paper. The first part explores concepts such as power, responsibility, and authority, with a view to understanding the ways in which these are intertwined with issues of agency and ethics in gendered institutional practices. The second part of the paper addresses the theme of sexual harassment and gender based violence in universities more directly, and the convergence within it of disparate discourses of violence, relationships of exchange and appropriate relations between authority figures and students. Finally, the paper examines the space for transformation of the academy by examining initiatives and strategies taken to address sexual harassment and gender based violence, within Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa.

Exploring Power, Recognition, Practice

A key question in the current context of university education in Nigeria is what motivates lecturers to stay in the system. The 'brain drain' is the public manifestation of a large proportion of academic staff choosing to exercise the exit option. Some of those still within the university system may have chosen not to exercise the exit option but there seem to be very few that fall into this category in the present context. For those with no exit option, the motivation appears to be that of maintaining a minimal level of security, in the form of the expectation of a monthly salary, shelter and an institutional base. Given the pronounced lack of commitment on the part of the Obasanjo administrations (1999-2003, and 2003 to date) to continue to support public university education, it seems increasingly likely that the motivation to stay in the university will be accompanied by a very real lack of commitment, on the part of academic staff, to knowledge production and learning.

In this scenario, it is fair to say that the ethical space in universities is characterized by the widespread notion that 'lecturers cannot be expected to behave ethically in unethical contexts'. The argument is often expressed in this form: 'If the powers-that-be consistently break the rules and get away with this, who am I to do otherwise?' The implications for practice are that one should 'do what everyone else does', which is to disregard the rules. The barometer of ac-

ceptable practice thus becomes not its appropriateness, the principles underlying such practice or even its legality - but simply its ubiquity. This is ironic, given that universities are ostensibly institutions supporting critical thought and action, which ought to be exemplified in the thought and practice of their staff.

The non-adherence to rules is reinforced at all levels of the institution, not simply by individuals but in processes and structures, thereby becoming systemic. Challenging this situation is not only extremely difficult but also risky. Intertwined in all this and regardless of the actual extent to which rules are adhered, there is the recurring expression across the university system of the male dominance of the prevailing order, and the subordination of most categories of women within it.

It is also the case, however, that some lecturers resist the status quo, whether by not selling exam results, by continuing their efforts to teach students appropriately, and if they are male, refusing to engage in either sexual corruption or sexual harassment of female students. This resistance is not only an indication that the dominance of the unethical is incomplete but that dominance can be subverted through the exercise of agency. Agency is used here in the sense of making decisions and taking action. As Mann (1994: 14) points out, however, 'the very idea of what it means to act has become difficult to pin down'. She defines 'agency' as:

> ... those individual or group actions deemed significant within a particular social or institutional setting. While we are accustomed to thinking in terms of distinct forms of agency, as in economic, ethical or sexual agency, I emphasise that there are also three distinct "dimensions" of agency operative either together or apart within the context of individual actions. Individual agency is always associated with one or more of the following dimensions: motivation, responsibility, and expectations of recognition ...

> At the same time, it is necessary to recognize the differential value accorded to women's agency, relative to that of men.

> ...women have been oppressed by in-

stitutions and relationships that have privileged male agency over female agency ... equity for women will require major transformations in these institutions (Mann 1994: 160)

The emergence of women's studies and gender studies, not only in Nigeria but elsewhere in the region (see Mama 1996, Imam et al. 1997), is a manifestation of women's agency in transforming the kind of knowledge produced within and beyond institutions such as universities.

In relation to students, the responsibilities inherent in the knowledge producing function are those of strengthening the intellectual capacities of all students – female and male - to the extent that this is possible, with a view to promoting their intellectual development and freedom. The sense in which the term 'responsibility' is used here is distinct from its usage in the notion of contractual responsibilities of men (not women) in liberal theory. I explore this point further below.

One may well ask what might be the source of principles for an ethical code in the Nigerian university system, given that such a code does not currently exist. By definition, an ethical code will apply to all those within the system – that is, those who have not chosen the exit option, regardless of their commitment to university education. It is my contention that, at the very least, a code of ethics for university staff cannot be contingent on 'what everyone does' or even the functioning of the institution. Such reasoning would lead to the argument that it is only when universities are said to function effectively that individual staff can be held responsible for their actions. On the contrary, the imperative for being held responsible for one's actions is an important safeguard in the maintenance of effective institutions.

More significantly, an appropriate code of ethics for scholars has to be located in the *power* invested in the institutionally inscribed responsibilities of knowledge production and learning. Power is conceived of here in the Foucauldian sense, as being diffuse and pervading localized structures and processes, as opposed to being concentrated, for example, in the institutions of the state. The power invested in knowledge production is that of determining what one teaches and how one teaches students within the limits of prescribed curricula and institutional facilities, as well as producing what is thought of as knowledge through research.

The institutional authority that flows from this power is often wielded as if it were personal authority. The masculinist character of institutions such as universities is reflected in the predominantly male constitution of academic staff, and the progressive thinning-out of women as one moves up the academic hierarchy. The wielding of institutional power in sexualized ways by male lecturers is an abuse of that power. Whilst this would appear to be a self-evident statement, the tremendous resistance to recognizing this basic point is testimony to the stakes invested in preserving, if not consolidating, the masculinist ethos of 'educational' institutions as well as the society at large.

For scholars, the power inherent in the knowledge producing function carries with it certain *responsibilities*, which cannot be made contingent upon the bureaucratic functioning of the university or the institutional capacity to support knowledge production. My argument is that responsibility can be addressed at two levels. The first is that of being a necessary counterpart to power: where there is power, there is responsibility, to paraphrase Foucault. The basis for making statements about the relationship between power and responsibility may be located in values such as those embedded in feminist struggles as well as struggles for human rights and democracy. These include the use of power in its positive sense to bring about gender equality, social justice and to further an agenda for equity that recognizes and addresses the full range of social divisions that exist in the society.

Earlier I indicated how the exercise of responsibility is a key feature of agency. Responsibility as a necessary counterpart to power (the principle) is distinct from the actual exercise of responsibility (the practice), the latter being a manifestation of agency. This will necessarily differ amongst individuals and groups. Of relevance here are the actual values and practices of men and women in universities, given the contemporary context of institutional decay.

The erosion of institutional capacity seriously compromises the capacity of the individual to realize his/her power to produce knowledge. As the counterpart of institutional power, the responsibilities that accompany institutionally inscribed powers remain, however, even when the institutional capacity to exercise those powers is diminished. We may think of this as an ethical principle, one that is rarely articulated explicitly in the contemporary university system. Its existence is currently more often evident in its breach than its observance. One of the questions raised by this recurring breach is the extent to which it is ethical to remain in a destabilized institution that does not provide staff with the capacity to function as intellectual beings or to exercise their intellectual power.

The reality is that most of those who stay are less likely to view the question in ethical terms than in terms of survival. Ultimately, the un/ethical character of practice is critically shaped by the exercise of agency in negotiating institutionally configured powers and responsibilities. Although responsibility is intrinsic to institutionally derived power, the extent to which individual men and women scholars fulfill these responsibilities in rapidly changing times is a reflection of the choices and decisions that they make, the factors supporting those actions and importantly, the options open to them. For the social and political theorist, this means paying attention to shifting patterns of actions and transactions by women and men within particular discourses and institutions. One would also have to follow the complex ways in which motivations, responsibilities and notions of recognition change and eventually result in reconfigured institutions and communities (Mann 1994).

Within institutions, men and women interact within hierarchically organized social structures in accordance with differential ways of recognizing and mis-recognising one another. The generalized non-recognition of women and their achievements, in masculinist institutions and systems such as the university system, is accentuated by the actual mode of recognition. In the Lacanian sense, recognition is the ongoing process of making meaning of one's self, through which individuals are constituted in language - in the symbolic order - and the gaze of the Other - the imaginary order, particularly the image of the body (Lacan 1981).

The reference to the body foregrounds the point that agency is exercised by embodied individuals - men and women. At the same time, the exercise of such agency (practice) is shaped considerably by institutionally and socially inscribed ways of perceiving the bodies of others. Processes such as these generally operate below the level of consciousness (see e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1962); their exposure is likely to generate considerable resistance to change on the part

of men who have so far benefited from their subterranean character.

The link between constructions of women's embodiment and their mis-recognition by men is most clearly evident in the notion that young women, in particular, are first and foremost sexual beings (unless they are reproductive beings). Embodiment is particularly significant in the sense of female students' educational experiences being critically affected by the projections of male lecturers' embodied consciousness. The dominant interpretation of women's embodiment - as either sexual or reproductive beings - is an example of how embodiment for women is experienced in ways that are quite distinctly gendered, and read by others (particularly men) in ways that may be very different from the perspective of the woman herself.

One of the reasons why the earlier discussion of power and responsibility is significant, both in general terms and more specifically, regarding sexual harassment and gender based violence, is its relationship to how men respond to contexts in which their sources of power are diminished. The institutional context of Nigerian universities, marked by a shift from the relatively affluent days of the 1970s to the impoverishment of the 1990s, provides just such an example. During this period, the masculinities associated with differing categories of men will no doubt have been destabilised. Violence itself has been a key feature in constructions of masculinity. Many of the dominant discourses of masculinity evident in a society at any one time have been forged in cultures of violence that are rooted in histories of political authoritarianism, as is the case in the Southern African context (see e.g. Morrell 2001).

The decline in economic power of academics in the Nigerian university system is likely to be experienced by many men as threats to their masculinity, which they strive to re-assert in the form of domination, if not violence. Such domination is often marked, as it were, on the bodies of those who are thought to be too 'weak' to fight back, a large proportion of whom are women. Justification for such practice is often expressed in the language of privilege and entitlement to women's bodies in the context of the dominant mis-recognition of women as primarily sexual beings, and institutional cultures that reinforce this tendency. Together these facilitate the expression of men's will in relation to women in sexualized ways, and the possibility of existence of a spec-

trum of behaviour that encompasses unwanted sexualized behaviour to gender based violence. Even when men do not themselves engage in violence against women, they often fall short of restraining themselves from the abuse of their institutional power. This is the forcefield within which sexual harassment and gender based violence occur in the university.

A Closer Look at Sexual Harassment

Ways of conceptualizing 'sexual harassment' vary according to how the phenomenon is framed. Mann (1994) frames sexual harassment in the context of recognition and mis-recognition, in the Lacanian sense. Earlier I referred to the generalized non-recognition of women as intellectual beings, and their mis-recognition as sexual beings, in the academy.

Sexual harassment situations arise when men (or women) go beyond silent or respectful forms of sexual recognition of another individual to demand interactive sexual recognition and rewards from that person. When a man is capable of inducing a particular woman to voluntarily interact with him, harassment is not present, even if improper workplace behaviour is. It is only when individuals use their institutional power to force another individual to recognize or reward them sexually that harassment occurs (Mann 1994: 184).

Within policy processes, one of the big debates relating to 'sexual harassment' concerns its definition. The phrase itself has originated in the North – the U.S., Canada, Australia, Europe – in efforts to describe the kinds of gender based derogation and violence that occur in public spaces, notably workplaces and educational institutions. The emphasis was on forms of gender based violence that were not already codified in criminal law (as were rape and sexual assault). The rationale for this was that such behaviour actually had damaging psychological and physical effects, although the prevailing tendency, in the context in which the behaviour took place, was not to recognize this as 'violence' (Bennett 2002a).

> These forms of behaviour sexualized persons without their consent or engagement, and [included] sexual touching, communication, teasing or bullying, threats and insults, practical "jokes" and so on. Many theorists suggested that such behaviours were part and parcel of cultural permission to violate women sexually, and created

environments which increased the likelihood of rape. Location within a heterosexual culture, where men have more authority than women do, made it extremely difficult to distinguish between "normal" masculine (usually) modes of flirtation and courtship, and behaviour that was criminally offensive and abusive. (Bennett 2002a: 50, my insertion in square brackets)

The situation is complicated by the recognition that sexual exchanges between female students and male academics may take place under varying relations of coercion or consent. Elsewhere, I have referred to the common practice of male staff (as well as female) discussing sexual transactions initiated by female students, whenever the theme of sexual harassment is raised (see Pereira 2001, forthcoming). Two different phenomena are being conflated here: sexual corruption and sexual harassment. It is instructive in each case to make clear the power relations involved.

The distinguishing feature of sexual corruption is not so much its initiation, or otherwise, by a female student; it does not have to be initiated by the female student. What is distinctive about sexual corruption is that it involves *consent* between the two parties, and that there appears to be generalized acceptance of this climate on the part of male lecturers and female students alike. Bennett (2002a: 51) points out that in some contexts, there is 'fierce and ongoing debate about the meaning of consent between a student and a staff member'. On a number of campuses in the U.S. and in the U.K., such relationships are either forbidden or monitored by policy.

Unlike sexual corruption, sexual harassment involves *unwanted* behaviour and/or *coercion* on the part of the male academic, vis-à-vis the female student. The unethical character of sexual harassment and sexual violence is often more easily recognised than that of sexual corruption. The corruptive elements in sexual corruption are twofold. The first is that although consensual relations are involved, these take place between a figure with *institutional authority* (the male academic) and a female student, in relation to whom that authority is exercised. Given the power relations involved, sexual relations between staff and student should be precluded.

The second corruptive element is the socialized aspect of this type of relationship, such that it does not refer only to a few isolated instances but

appears to have become systemic. The fact that female students often initiate transactions simply means that they recognize, and act upon, the sexualized manner in which institutional power relations are exercised, and thereby corrupted, by male academics. The initiation of a potential transaction by a female student does not absolve the male academic from the responsibility of saying No, nor does it render the transaction any less unprofessional or unethical.

One of the first investigations of sexual harassment and violence against female students in secondary and tertiary educational institutions in Africa was carried out by the London-based human rights organization, African Rights (1994). Their groundbreaking discussion paper, *Crimes Without Punishment*, brought together a wide range of examples of sexual harassment and violence in schools and universities in 12 African countries. Information was collected through interviews, letters, newspapers, committee reports, workshop reports, amongst other sources. The paper points out that:

> Many observers in Africa ... believe that recent years have indeed seen a sharp rise in sexual violence in educational institutions, reflecting a general rise in violence against women. This is not only a serious problem in its own right, but has very important implications for women's ability to pursue their studies (African Rights 1994: 2).

The overall picture of pervasive hostility towards female students, girls and women, and towards women staff in higher education highlighted in the report, pointed to the existence of a systemic problem.

The final report of the Committee of Enquiry into Sexual Harassment at the University of Cape Town, South Africa had this to say:

> [A]n increasing number of staff members and students, primarily women, feel alienated and unsafe on campus. This is directly affecting their ability to participate fully in the academic life of the University as they find it difficult to participate fully in class and tutorials, to attend social functions on the campus, to go to the library or computer center in the evenings or at night and to work late in their offices. (cited

in African Rights 1994: 2)

In a study of sexual harassment in Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria, Imasogie (2002) highlights the character of the hostile environment in which female students are forced to survive, often exacerbated by the actions of male lecturers.

> Most female students cited intimidation and fear of academic failure as the reasons for succumbing to sexual harassment by male lecturers. Many also cited fear of reprisals not only from the harassing lecturer but also from the harassing lecturer's friends and colleagues in the faculty. Most female students chose to deal with sexual harassment on their own. Seeking counsels (sic) only from their friends who in most cases advise (sic) them to accept the harassment as normal and keep quiet about it. Some of the friends even impress it (sic) on them the advantages of dating lecturers - good grades, completion of courses on schedule and graduating with good class (sic).

> Many female students complained that while it is relatively easier (sic) to report sexual harassment from male students, to the Students' Affairs Office, they are more wary to report male lecturers as they are not sure what the outcome would be ... There was a case of a female student who was asked out by her Head of Department. She reported the Head of Department to another lecturer in her faculty. Some days later the Head of Department called her and wanted to know why she reported him to another lecturer and told her that she was behaving like a kid and wanted to know whether she was a virgin. (Imasogie 2002: 21-22)

The extent to which sexual harassment is entrenched in the university, and continues to be reproduced, is pointed to below:

> One of the lecturers interviewed, wanted to know why the researcher is wasting her time on a research on sexual harassment. He reminded the researcher that sexual harassment has existed even before the researcher entered the university as a student and would continue to exist even after the researcher has retired and that the researcher should engage in more profitable research. The lecturer boasted that he has at least three girl friends at all the levels he is teaching.

> Some male lecturers regard sleeping with female students as part of the perks of office. Some of the male students interviewed said they would like to come back to the university to lecture so as to have the privilege of sleeping with as many female students as they want. (Imasogie 2002: 22-23)

The mission of the university as an institution dedicated to knowledge production is seriously compromised when male lecturers, through their persistent sexualized misuse of institutional authority, continually violate the bodies and intellectual freedom of female students, with impunity. That this is a wholly unethical mode of relating to female students, and an inappropriate way of socializing male students, should not require spelling out. That it has been necessary to do so is an indication of how debased individuals and systems within the institution have become.

Transforming the academy?
As early as 1984, the University of Dar es Salaam played a leading role in protesting against sexual harassment. The Forum of African Women Educators (FAWE) has consistently supported research on sexual harassment in secondary as well as higher education (Bennett 2002a). At the University of Cape Town, the work on policy development and implementation began in 1987 (Ramphele 1994).

The earliest efforts to carry out research on the practice of sexual harassment and gender based violence in universities were in Southern Africa, in the early 1990s. In South Africa, these included the Universities of Stellenbosch, Cape Town and Natal. The Universities of Botswana and Zimbabwe also engaged in research on sexual harassment. Bennett (2002a: 50) points out,

> All these institutions initiated research as a conscious feminist strategy towards policy design, a process which in most cases, took nearly a decade to complete.

Since that time, more and more institutions have carried out research on sexual harassment and gender based violence. Moreover, research as a strategy has been linked to other processes such as educational outreach and campus-based policy making. In the late 1990s, the Network of Southern African Higher Educational Institutions Challenging Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence began a Sexual Harassment Resource Audit Project aimed at assessing the resources available in tertiary institutions in the sub-region to assist them with strategies to combat campus incidents of gender based violence and sexual harassment. One of the outputs of the Project was a very useful Handbook of Resources, designed to support those working in this fraught and challenging arena (Bennett 2002b).

In May 2002, the Board of the Faculty of Law at the University of Makerere approved a Sexual Harassment Policy and Guidelines for the Faculty. An outline of the provisions permits a cursory view of the policy's content. The following issues are addressed: definition; the prohibition of retaliation; the relations between sexual harassment and academic freedom; confidentiality; frivolous, malicious and false accusations; the implementing organ; guidelines for complainants; remedies; appeals; and contacts. The Policy has its origins in the strategic planning process undergone by the Faculty in December 1999.

The general tendency to focus on policy, however, coupled with the use of language rooted in Northern based initiatives, has resulted in a lack of contextually-grounded terms and concepts. As significant as this is the recognition that these tendencies tend to eliminate critical zones of engagement between women and men, from scrutiny. The politics of heterosexual intimacy is one such zone – the relations between men and women on campus being shaped by complex configurations of hierarchy, segregation in some instances, as well as friendship, sexual economy and ways of being. This highlights the pressing need for more research on context-specific analyses of heterosexual cultures and identities in universities (see Bennett 2002a).

If transformative change is on the agenda, the complex and interlocking nature of women's oppression, mediated as these are by cultures and identities, require engagement at intellectual as well as practical levels. This has implications for struggles as well as strategies, as pointed to by Mamphele Ramphele below:

> ... those of us who take up the fight against any form of social inequity against women (be it wage discrimination, legal definitions of rights, or violence) find ourselves addressing not one issue, but a whole web of beliefs and practices which involve discrimination against people who are also women (Ramphele 1994:7).

In the specific instance of sexual harassment, Ramphele highlights the strategy of sensitising university staff themselves, as a precondition for substantive change.

In my experience of discussions on sexual harassment at UCT, there has often been a need to clear the ground – to start from scratch, as it were. This has meant taking on debates about the social construction of gender, and beginning to work towards theories accommodating experiences influenced by class, culture, race and one's identity as "male" or "female". In other words, the initiation of strategies against a form of social discrimination – sexual harassment – has led to an educational imperative. There is what one might think of as an "illiteracy" about gender; it is not generally understood as a category, something which confines the meaning of being human to particular roles and options in the interests of a mode of production which depends on social inequity. (Ramphele 1994: 8, emphasis in the original)

The question of sources of information on a subject as sensitive as sexual harassment and gender based violence is critical. An interim report of the Sexual Harassment Resource Audit Project had this to say on findings:

> What has become clear is that in the absence of statistics, research reports, and indicators measuring attitude and/or behaviour change before and after the introduction of SH [Sexual Harassment] policies, the stories of activists on campuses, their institutional memories and their practices, represent a powerful resource that cannot be ignored. (Msimang n.d.: 3, my addition in square brackets).

The difficulties inherent in changing universities so that they become institutions in which women as well

as men may realize their intellectual potential, are immense. In this regard, the example of research-based efforts at the University of Malawi is worth exploring in some detail. Phiri (2000: 47) discusses her experiences after reporting the results of research carried out by herself and three other female colleagues between June and July 1994 at the University of Malawi. The research was on the theme of the sexual harassment and rape of female students at Chancellor College campus. The authors wanted to find out who was responsible for harassment and rape, how the women reacted, whom they reported to and whether there were sufficient support structures. Completed questionnaires were returned by 202 out of the 364 female students at the campus.

The results showed that 12.6 per cent of the students said that they had been raped. Of these, 17 per cent were raped by a 'friend', 6 per cent by others and nearly half, 48 per cent, by their boyfriends. Almost two thirds (61 per cent) of the students raped did not report to anyone. The reasons for not doing so were fear and lack of knowledge of where to report.

Sexual harassment was far more widespread than rape – 67 per cent of the female students said that they had been sexually harassed on campus. Male lecturers constituted 5 per cent of those responsible, as did boyfriends (5%). Most of the harassment was carried out by 'friends' (55%). Male lecturers were more often mentioned engaging in sexual harassment off campus (28.7%). Most students (64 per cent) shared their experience with someone but only 4 per cent went to either the College Administration or the police.

The research was reported at the annual Conference of University Research and Development, to which reporters of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) had been invited by the Research and Publication Committee of the University. Phiri was interviewed the next morning and her interview was broadcast later that day. Students demonstrated at the MBC studio the following day, attacked her house and threatened her life and those of family members. Phiri's personal car was also damaged and her college office vandalized by students.

The overall approach taken by the Chancellor College administration was to placate the students and lay the blame on the victim, Isabel Phiri. Her Department supported her, however, writing a letter of protest to the College administration in which they argued that the integrity of the university depended on academic freedom. The Vice Chancellor was one of the first to visit her damaged house and demanded that the Principal of Chancellor College should condemn the violence and catch those responsible. Staff of the College showed mixed reactions: a substantial proportion of academic staff was intensely hostile whilst a few demonstrated clear support. The media did not help matters by inaccurate reporting and misinformation; even after being corrected, clarifications were not made nor did they make any public apology. The police put in only token efforts and ten months after the event, no students were being prosecuted despite their being known to the College administration.

Nevertheless, the research did break new ground and a topic that was previously a taboo to discuss was now brought into the open. The continued debate in the newspapers on issues of rape and sexual harassment, Phiri points out, was a welcome development. The relevance of this study lies not in comparisons between the prevailing levels of sexual harassment and rape in the Malawian and Nigerian contexts. More significant are the forces at play in this particular incident and what may be learned by comparisons between these and potential configurations of such forces in diverse Nigerian institutions as well as the overall implications for change.

Much of the impetus for change has come from women and their organizations, battling against gender discrimination and advocating for societies and institutions characterized by more open and equal relations among women and men.

> ... our challenges to the assumptions underlying sexual harassment and sexual violence include the challenge to imagine a masculinity which does not depend upon the humiliation of women for its strength. It is simultaneously a call for the validation of women's right to self-determination, which challenges women and men alike. This is not a challenge to the ideas of masculinity held by any one cultural tradition. It is, rather, the challenge of democracy ...

> As institutions of tertiary education, we carry formidable responsibility for the future, a responsibility that demands taking our past very seriously. ... the

history of sexual harassment and violence in our communities has deep roots, and … it is important to recognize that the road to a society free of such violence will be a long one, full of hair-pin bends and slippery surfaces. The negotiation of our journey will take courage, imagination, and the willingness to become, in a sense, new men and women (Ramphele 1994: 13-14).

Ramphele's eloquent words are testimony to the multi-faceted struggles and strategies that are required in order to bring about interlocking transformations of selves, social relations, institutions and societies. Re-imagining masculinities and femininities, engaging with efforts to create societies free of all forms of violence, particularly violence against women, democratizing social relations and institutions – these are some of the tasks ahead of us. For those of us working in and on the Nigerian university system, the question is, are we up to the challenge?

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