

Sexual harassment:



photo by susan barley

Lucy Jordan, a Capitol Campus student and Chairperson of the Task Force Against Sexual Harassment, recently was moderator of a forum focusing on sexual harassment. The forum was held last Saturday, May 5th at Harrisburg Area Community College.

by roz powell and lucy jordan

A forum focusing on sexual harassment was held Saturday, May 5 at the Harrisburg Area Community College. The program sponsored by the Harrisburg Women's Center's Task Force Against Sexual Harassment, HACC's Women in Management program and the Harrisburg Unitarian Alliance, was attended by approximately 60 people.

Dr. James A. Odom, President of HACC, welcomed the audience and panel. He noted the small number of men in attendance and emphasized the importance of each person taking the knowledge gained from the forum and passing it on to two or three other people. It is in this way, according to Dr. Odom, that the impact of a program of this nature can be multiplied.

The forum centered around the research and documentation of Ms. Lin Farley, author of the book "Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job." Ms. Farley, originally scheduled as the keynote speaker was injured in an automobile accident in Oregon and was unable to appear. The panel made up of Dr. Lee Barker, Minister of the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Andrea Bromberg, head of the Women in Management program at HACC, Mary Gaul, Business Agent for the Pa. Social Services Union, Thelma Johnson, Regional Director of the Pa. Human Relations Commission, Dan Sawyer, Director of the Bureau of Affirmative Action and Ellen Yacknin, attorney, Pa. Legal Services, with litigation experience in the area of sexual harassment did a far more than adequate job of compensating for the gap created by Ms. Farley.

Andrea Bromberg gave a definition of sexual harassment drawn from the work of the New York City based group, Working Women United Institute. Roz Powell, Secretary-Treasurer of Harrisburg's Task force and Lucy Jordan, Chairperson of the Task Force and the moderator of the panel gave a synopsis of the book "Sexual Shakedown." Ms. Jordan is a graduate student at Capitol Campus.

Sexual harassment can be defined as "any unwanted sexual advances, looks, jokes, innuendoes, etc. from someone in the workplace which makes you uncomfortable and/or cause you problems on your job. It is being judged by your looks or your body rather than your ability, experience or job performance when you seek a job, promotion or raise." (Working Women United)

It appears to take two major forms. First, sexual approaches by a superior backed up by economic threats (or grade threats in an educational institution). Second, attacks on a woman's reputation and creation of an unsatisfactory psychological environment at work by competitive and/or malicious coworkers. Usually they go hand in hand, with the superior actually instigating harassment by coworkers or by refusing to take action on poor working environments as further back-up for sexual compliance.

It is important to note that what constitutes sexual harassment does not involve any component of passion. (Passion on the job had better be resolved by both parties before their careers are damaged).

It was restated over and over by different panelists and by the literature on sexual harassment, that sexual harassment is an abuse of power. It is an abuse of power perpetrated for economic reasons, political reasons, both internal and external, and (Sawyer, see below) by attitudinal stances held by persons wielding authority that demand deferential and submissive behavior on the part of subordinates.

For women, this attitudinal stance, upheld and ingrained in our cultural values, means sexual submission. Sexual harassment is therefore a massive assault on a woman's self-image as a human being with skills and knowledge that can be utilized on the job market, with an attempt to restructure that self-image in terms of the male dominated cultural value of woman as sex object.

What is being done to counter this blatant abuse of power? Groups like New York's Working Women United Institute and Harrisburg's Women's Center's Task Force Against Sexual Harassment are forming.

The goals of these groups are similar. Harrisburg's Task Force first provides immediate support of a woman undergoing the crisis and emotional trauma of sexual harassment. The Task Force holds meetings every Monday, 7:30 p.m., room 305, YWCA, 4th and Market Streets, Harrisburg Here an opportunity to discuss the frustrations and agonies of sexual harassment with other women undergoing or having undergone the same ordeal is provided.

An essential support service is referral to sensitized lawyers, counselors and doctors. Information on and referral to governmental agencies such as the Pa. Human Relations Commission and the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is given along with advice on contacting union representatives.

A second goal of the Task Force Against Sexual Harassment is educational outreach to enlarge the referral list of sensitized professionals, to develop public awareness of the problem, to aid management and union personnel in developing grievance procedures and to open channels in governmental agencies.

This is accomplished through the Task Force's Speaker's Bureau and a growing research library in the areas of model grievance procedures, the scope and nature of sexual harassment and the impact of sexual harassment on the individual and society.

New York's Working Women United Institute goes further by providing information to policymakers and to legislators and by keeping a "brief bank" to track legal developments in the area of sexual harassment. Harrisburg's Task Force also provides assertiveness training and alternative coping mechanisms to women utilizing their resources.