

# Sexual harassment of Washington women journalists

by Katherine C. McAdams and Maurine H. Beasley

*Eighty percent of the respondents, women journalists in Washington, report sexual harassment is a problem for women journalists in general, and 60 percent say it has been problem for them personally.*

In view of recent interest in the issue of sexual harassment, this study was undertaken to determine the extent and nature of the problem among women accredited to the daily press gallery in the U.S. Capitol. Researchers received reports from 102 women journalists about their personal experiences with sexual harassment and how their employers handled reports of complaints of sexual harassment. The goal of the study was to provide descriptive information about the climate from women journalists in Washington and to suggest directions for further study and discussion.

## Background

Sexual harassment of women in the workplace is as old as the paid employment of women. Yet it has failed to be perceived as a significant public issue until relatively recently. Although outlawed under the 1964 Civil Rights Act, sexual harassment was not specifically addressed by the federal government until 1980. That year the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission issued guidelines that defined sexual harassment as:



*...unwelcome or unsolicited verbal, physical or sexual conduct that is made a term or condition of employment, is used as the basis for employment or advancement decisions, or has the effect of unreasonably interfering with work or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.<sup>1</sup>*

It was not until the fall of 1991 that sexual harassment became a major topic of public discussion after Anita Hill, a law professor, made accusations of verbal sexual harassment against Judge Clarence Thomas, a nominee to the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Hill charged that Thomas had harassed her while serving as head of the EEOC. Although Thomas was confirmed as a Supreme Court justice, media attention to the sexual harassment issue increased dramatically. For example, the February 1992 issue of *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* listed 91 articles on sexual harassment that appeared from Oct. 11, 1991 to Jan. 16, 1992. In contrast, there were 13 articles listed under this heading in 1989 and only eight in 1985.<sup>3</sup>

## Literature review

While scholarly studies have dealt with sexual harassment in the workplace, research certainly has not been exhaustive. One reason lies in the difficulty of determining what constitutes sexual harassment from the standpoint of both academics and the general public. This is illustrated by the work of James Gruber, who pointed out problems in the labeling of harassment experiences and lack of comprehensive categorizations for different types of harassing experiences.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some academic researchers have faced confusion surrounding the issue similar to that reported by businesses that contend sexual harassment "lies in a murky gray world of innuendo and social attitudes they feel they can't control," according to the *Washington Post*.<sup>5</sup>

Some studies have dealt with experiences of professional women. A survey of 97 social workers found that 51 percent of respondents reported sexually harassing experiences among professional social workers, with verbal harassment the most common form.<sup>6</sup> Of a total of 122 women members of the Eastern Sociological Society responding to a survey, 54 percent reported mild to severe sexual harassment.<sup>7</sup> Studies also have considered sexual harassment of women in male-dominated occupations. Barbara Gutek and Bruce Morasch found that women filling formerly male roles were seen as *role deviants* and treated differently than male counterparts, but that the women who experienced this treatment perceived it as directed at them as individuals not as work-role occupants.<sup>8</sup>

Journalism, once almost totally male, is changing into an occupation of women on the lower rungs of the professional ladder as far as newspapers are concerned.<sup>9</sup>



To date, only one study of sexual harassment among women in newsrooms has been conducted. It resulted in dismaying findings.

The study, commissioned by a newspaper business publication, *NewsInc.*, found that 44 percent of newsroom women, primarily managers, reported being sexually harassed - more than twice the percentage of women who reported being harassed at work in general in a *Newsweek*/Gallup poll.<sup>10</sup> The study was based on 199 responses from 236 women, chiefly older, management women at relatively small newspapers, contacted in various newsrooms by Belden Associates.<sup>11</sup>

## Need for investigation

Other evidence exists that sexual harassment is a widespread problem for women journalists. In 1991, complaints surfaced at three metropolitan newspapers. Women at the St. Petersburg *Times* detailed complaints of sexual harassment and inequities, forcing management to institute reforms.<sup>12</sup> A similar report at the Tampa *Tribune* also led to management action.<sup>13</sup> In Kansas City, a deputy national editor resigned from the Kansas City *Star*, citing harassment.<sup>14</sup> The previous year an award-winning editorial writer filed an harassment and discrimination suit against the San Diego *Union*.<sup>15</sup> In Washington, women reporters and editors at the Washington *Post* complained of sexual harassment by a *Post* columnist, Juan Williams, who wrote in defense of Thomas against Hill's allegations.<sup>16</sup> The newspaper investigated and took disciplinary action against Williams.<sup>17</sup>

The incident raised questions about sexual harassment against women journalists in the nation's capital. Dianne Lynch-Paley examined the degree to which gender was perceived to be an issue in covering the capital by surveying 184 women newspaper reporters accredited to the Congressional press galleries. Of the 79 who returned questionnaires (representing a 43 percent response), 50 percent believed that gender affected their ability to perform professional tasks by reducing their status and access to sources.<sup>18</sup> Lynch-Paley did not ask questions pertaining specifically to sexual harassment.

As an extension of Lynch-Paley's work, the present study surveys women newspaper reporters accredited to the Congressional press galleries to determine if they personally have experienced harassment from sources, co-workers or supervisors.

## Method

A survey questionnaire for women in the Washington press corps was designed, including questions to determine if sexual harassment was perceived to be a problem, if members of the press had actually experienced such

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harassment and what circumstances in the journalistic workplace protected women from sexual harassment.

The following definition of sexual harassment, which parallels in layman's terms the EEOC definition, was printed in italic on the survey form:

*For the purposes of this survey, sexual harassment is defined as any physical or verbal contacts that make the workplace inhospitable for women.*

At the conclusion of the two-page, front-and-back questionnaire, respondents were asked to sign their names if they would be willing to participate in further research on harassment or on related topics.

The names of 275 women were obtained from the current Congressional Directory listing of persons credentialed as members of the daily newspaper press galleries. In mid-January, the surveys were mailed, along with an addressed return envelope. Three weeks later, a reminder post card was mailed. This initial mailing yielded 61 responses, many with long personal comments attached.

In the first week of March, researchers sent a follow-up mailing to all 275 sample members. This mailing included a second copy of the survey, a letter of thanks to those who already had answered and, for those who had not responded, a plea for cooperation and a **stamped**, self-addressed envelope.

This second mailing produced 41 more responses. Therefore, the researchers obtained surveys from a total of 102 respondents out of 275 possibilities - a response rate of 37 percent.

## Characteristics of the sample group

The average sample member was in her 30s, with about 13 years of experience as a journalist. She was most likely to be single, without children, and hoping to change fields in the next five to ten years. Statistical information on sample members is shown in Table 1.

As the table indicates, some three-fourths of the sample group was between the ages of 30 and 50. About 55 percent of respondents were women in their 30s, and another 18 percent were women in their 40s. Years of experience for the sample group ranged from one to 61 years. Most worked for men as their direct supervisors, and most worked in fairly large news organizations.

## Results

Of the 80 percent who said that harassment was a problem for women journalists, a clear majority said they had personally experienced some kind of

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harassment on the job. Sixty percent of the respondents said that harassment had been a problem for them as individuals.

Analysis indicated that women who had and had not experienced harassment were alike in most respects. The two groups were equally ambitious, judging by their responses to questions about career aspirations, and they were equally likely to be working in relatively large news organizations. All but a few women who reported having problems wrote about the nature of the harassment, with most mentioning inappropriate comments, touching and propositioning.

Of those who reported some form of harassment, 20 percent said they had been harassed by both co-workers and news sources. About 40 percent reported being harassed by a co-worker only; another 40 percent cited only news sources.

One respondent described her harassment as "sexual innuendo; flat-out comments on appearance and sexuality; attempt to intimidate by leering at breasts, etc. -

**Table 1:** *Characteristics of the sample group*

	Percent
<b>Age</b>	
twenties	19
thirties	55
forties	18
fifties and over	7
<b>Year of Professional Experience</b>	
0-5 years	18
6-10 years	19
11-20 years	50
21 or more	11
<b>Marital Status</b>	
single	47
single, children at home	0
married, no children	18
married, children at home	34
<b>Supervisor</b>	
male	66
female	33
<b>Response in first/second mailing</b>	
first mailing	61
second mailing	39
<b>Reported size of office staff</b>	
under 25	37
25-99	36
100-499	19
500 or more	6
<b>Reported size of organization</b>	
Under 25	1
25-99	9
100-499	24
500 or more	43
answered only on office size	23

N=102



occasional brushing up or touching.” Another noted talk of sex, propositions, invitations to join in sex.”

A third cited several incidents: (#1) Fellow employee repeatedly discussed a *crush* he had on me - despite being told to stop; (#2) Source grabbed my leg under the table during an interview with his boss; (#3) Recently during an interview on a cable TV show, the host mentioned my *single* status - no personal information was given on the other guests. He also mentioned my legs in interview trying to be funny. (My employer had to request that his comment be edited out of the show!)”

“An important source often invited me for dinner even though he knows I’m married,” a fourth reported. “At daytime meetings he would often turn discussion to his sexual exploits, such as the time he claims he had sex with a neighbor who was nine months pregnant (with her husband’s baby!)”

Harassment and the quality of life

Researchers used a set of five statements to assess quality of life in the work environment for each respondent. The statements shown in Table 2 were posed, and respondents were asked to indicate with a score on a scale of 1 to 5 whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. A score of 1 would indicate strong agreement; a score of 2, agreement; 3 would indicate neutrality or undecidedness; and a score of 5 would indicate strong disagreement.

Respondents felt more positive about their peers and about comfort in the work-place than about management. About three-fourths of responses indicated neutral or positive reactions to workplace comfort and to treatment by male peers at work, while only 8 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly

Table 2: Means for quality of life evaluation variables		
Statement	Mean	
Men and women are treated equally by managers in my workplace.	3.33	
Male employees treat women peers as equals in my workplace.	2.80	
My workplace is equally comfortable for women and men employees.	2.82	
Potential for sexual harrassment in my workplace has been reduced because of increasing numbers of women in the office.	2.50	
I would like to see some changes in my workplace to enhance the climate for women.	2.25	

(1=strongly agree and 5=strongly disagree)



agreed that men and women were treated equally by managers in their workplaces.

About 80 percent of the respondents said they would like to see changes in their workplaces to enhance the climate for women, or at least would not mind such changes. This was the statement most likely to receive a response of "agree," while the statement that men and women are treated equally generated the most disagreement. The mean response for this item was 3.7, or disagree. Other items received mean responses of below 3, indicating a fair amount of satisfaction with peers and comfort on the job.

### Not a problem

Only 18 respondents unequivocally responded "no," that sexual harassment was not a problem for newswomen. In most respects, this group was like fellow respondents. That is, in terms of age, marital status, size of employing organization, and other characteristics, no differences could be found to explain this rather dramatic difference in sentiment. The "no" group was equally divided among those whose employers had a policy of dealing with harassment and those who did not.

The "no" group did differ on the quality of life variables. They were significantly more satisfied than the other group with equality of treatment in their workplaces and were less likely to want changes to enhance the climate for women. These differences raise a chicken-or-egg question: Does a better work environment inhibit sexual harassment, or does a lack of harassment make for a better environment?

Some interesting inconsistencies were found in responses of the "no" group. After saying that harassment was not a problem, two of the respondents described proceedings against harassers in their workplaces. Another said in later comments in her survey that "...things are better now than they have been," a statement that indicates more than "no" problem with harassment. Yet another explained herself when she said that sexual harassment as generally defined was not a problem to her, but that she felt harassed by poor maternity benefits.

The "no" group was distinguished in one other way: Members signed their names to their surveys, indicating willingness to be contacted for further questions, at nearly twice the rate of other respondents. Nearly half of this group indicated that they would cooperate further, as compared to only a fourth of respondents who answered that sexual harassment was a problem.

### Other areas of concern

Many comments on the questionnaires indicated a greater concern for other areas of perceived inequality than harassment, including discrimination

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in assignments, perceived preference of some sources for dealing with male reporters, and authoritarian, hierarchical, male-dominated management.

One woman gave an account of discrimination in assignments:

*After covering the Panama Invasion and spending two Christmases in War zones, I expected to have - and briefly did have - an inside track on assignment to cover the Persian Gulf war. But senior editors repeatedly delayed sending me to follow my two male colleagues to the Middle East and finally sent a third white male. Later I found out that senior editors had balked at sending me, with one suggesting that I might be too much of a feature writer (I have a reputation as one of the paper's best writers) for the hard news of the war and another - obviously looking for reasons not to send me - asking one of my colleagues in the Gulf whether women were having any problems in the combat pools. Both concerns ignored my own track record as a 'war correspondent' and the very obvious presence of women in the combat pools.*

Another woman said, "In my office now, subtle but pervasive sex discrimination is the greatest problem."

"In office, male bosses tend to overlook women (including me) for tougher assignments," a third respondent said. "News sources talk to men, call on men first in most press conferences, briefings."

"Nearly every male boss I've ever had has been very controlling. If you don't play their way, you're out," a fourth woman commented. This and other responses alluded to the power of news executives. The question then becomes to what extent news organizations use their power to protect employees from sexual harassment.

## When harassment happens

More than half of the respondents said that their organizations had written policies pertaining to sexual harassment. The survey showed that organizations of all sizes are equally likely to have policies and that the majority require that harassment complaints be handled by an employee's immediate superior. A total of 41 respondents with policies reported that complaints were handled by the immediate supervisor of the person making the complaint. Nineteen reported that harassment complaints were handled by personnel other than the immediate supervisor, most often through the organization's personnel department.

For the 37 respondents who said they had no written policies, procedures in cases of sexual harassment seemed locked up in the proverbial black box. When asked how an incident of harassment was handled in their workplaces, a third of the respondents said they did not know, while another third

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replied, "It's not handled" or "You're on your own." Others said they thought their supervisors would handle complaints.

Overall, knowledge of procedures for dealing with sexual harassment was less than widespread. More than 20 percent of respondents said at some point in their responses to the survey that they weren't sure or did not know what procedures were for handling sexual harassment issues in their offices.

Respondents also were asked how organizations handled harassment from outsiders - from sources or their employees. Here an even greater majority indicated lack of knowledge. More than half, 55 percent, said they did not know, and another 24 percent said such abuses were not handled, again with comments such as "You're on your own." It should be noted, however, that some respondents said they wanted it that way, indicating that they believe it is up to

**Table 3:** *Respondent reports of how harassment is handled within workplaces*

	N
<b>Source report of harassment</b>	
appeal by an individual	19
litigation by an individual	3
group appeal or action	21
group litigation	6
<b>Employer response</b>	
ignored report	4
forum held	19
discussion among upper level staff	19
reprimand issued	18
committee took action	8
an executive took action	10
a policy was developed	10
<b>Responses of male colleagues</b>	
negative attitude	12
feeling that policies are adequate	14
feeling of overall support	15
active support role	4
<b>Responses of women colleagues</b>	
negative attitude	3
feeling that policies are adequate	1
feeling of overall support	18
active role in requesting action	9



each individual women to prove she can handle incidents of this type if they occur.

Respondents reported reactions of male colleagues in their organizations to policies dealing with sexual harassment fell into three categories in about the same proportion: Men were likely to be negative, to think present policies were adequate or to be supportive. Only four respondents, however, said that a male co-worker had taken an active supporting role in the bringing of a complaint. Women colleagues were more likely to be supportive, according to respondents, nine of whom noted women co-workers had taken active roles in supporting complaints.

Faced with a complaint, the respondents said, management usually took action - and with more than one approach. The most common combination within the office appeared to be an open forum to consider the issue in general, followed by discussion among upper-level executives and finally a reprimand of the employee initially charged with harassment.

Thirty-two of the respondents reported working in organizations where formal complaints of sexual harassment had been made and described the processes of dealing with them. This total, however, does not indicate the number of complaints because several questionnaires may have been returned from each of the organizations involved. But these records of proceedings do provide some insights into typical responses to complaints of harassment. The most commonly reported form of complaint was that made by a group of women, followed closely by charges made by individuals.

Complaints appeared as likely to be brought in organizations that had policies against sexual harassment as in those that did not. Complaints came about equally from women of all age groups and all types of marital status. Complaints reported appeared to be unrelated to respondents' voiced concerns about harassment being a problem for women in journalism as a group or for themselves individually. (Apparently some respondents reported complaints they knew about, but they did not consider sexual harassment a significant problem.)

One interesting question arises outside the scope of this study: Do complaints cause policy to be written? The researchers suspect that this may be the case because of the nature of responses shown in Table 3, where reports were made of 19 upper-level discussions, 10 executive actions and 10 policies being developed. There is no way to tell, however, what policies existed prior to the complaints and reactions.

### **Women managers: An oxymoron?**

When asked what changes needed to be made in news organizations to enhance the climate for women, 33 respondents - a third of the sample - specifically suggested having more women in management.

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"We need more women in management as editors and publishers before things will really change," one woman said. Another called for "more women in management," along with "more respect for women and better pay." Another commented there was a "need for more women in upper management to understand and respond to concerns of female employees."

Two-thirds of the respondents work for male supervisors. Because the number of women in journalism has been rising steadily since the 1970s, one might expect to see more women working for women. But it appears that the fears of some researchers may have come true - that women have somehow become stuck at the lower and middle levels rather than rising to the top.<sup>19</sup>

The voiced aspirations of the sample group suggest that these women may be considering alternatives to climbing the career ladder in journalism. When asked what they wanted to be doing in five years, 29 percent said they wanted to be in the same job, and 10 percent wanted to leave journalism entirely. Goals outside journalism varied, but the will to leave was resolute with this group. Other respondents had goals within the journalism field, but only 6 percent said they would like to be managers in five years.

The number voicing management aspirations increased when the question changed to "What do you hope to be doing professionally in 10 years?" Some 18 percent mentioned management, but this figure was surpassed by the number wanting out of journalism entirely - 21 percent. Still a popular choice was staying in the same job, the response given by 16 percent of the sample group.

It is ironic that these responses came from the group that longs for more women in management. Where will women managers come from, if not from such a rich talent pool as this sample? These responses suggest that changes in roles may occur very slowly, if at all.

Although no question specifically addressed the subject of women's roles, several respondents volunteered comments on the role conflicts women face. One said, "Women should not be expected to do certain things. ... For instance, one woman manager is expected to drive to meetings, drop off men, then spend the first part of the meeting looking for a parking spot. [We] need more awareness."

Another said, "I am exhausted from trying to juggle all my roles and getting **no** credit while the men who put a picture of their kid on the wall and tell jokes about them, but never go home or do any housework, think they are **good** fathers and get lots of praise! Until last month there were only **two** women with children at home working here. The other woman makes enough money to have a **full-time** housekeeper. I don't. So is having children and a career in journalism mainly for those big names we see in magazines all the time?"

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## Conclusions

This study reveals the existence of sexual harassment as an issue for women members of the Washington press corps. Although the response rate was relatively low for a mail survey (37 percent), it was a satisfying return rate from an elite group and the percentage of respondents identifying sexual harassment as a problem was high (80 percent).

There is no doubt that individuals define harassment differently, with some women perceiving more harassment than others in sexual innuendos, comments on their appearances, requests for dates and sexually explicit language. As one respondent put it, "Situations vary greatly ... . Also, women occasionally are the source of annoying sexually related behavior that affects both men and women." Yet the number of women who did respond to this survey and report examples of blatant instances of sexual harassment cannot be overlooked.

What emerges from the respondents' comments is a clear sense that women lack guidance in how to proceed to bring a harassment charge even if their news organizations have policies forbidding harassment. Women seem to be left on their own or counseled to remain silent. For example, one said, "I went to my editor and explained the situation. He told me he would stand behind me whatever I chose to do, but told me things might get ugly and there might be a day when I regretted publicizing the harassment. I decided to drop the complaint."

A third of the respondents said they believed the climate in their offices would improve if more women moved into management roles. Yet paradoxically only 6 percent of the respondents described themselves as aspiring to management in five years. The women apparently failed to recognize that they themselves represent the pool from which new women editors and managers can be drawn.

Certainly more research is needed on the specific policies that news organizations have regarding sexual harassment. Studies of the effectiveness of sensitivity training, which was called for by some respondents, could afford valuable data. Above all, the issue of sexual harassment needs to be brought out into the open so women are no longer left alone to deal with the problem.

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## Notes

1. *EEOC's Definition of Sexual Harassment*, **Washington Business**. The Washington **Post**, July 21, 1986, p. 17.
  2. See, for example, **Newsweek**, Oct. 21, 1991, cover story on Hill and Thomas and related material on sexual harassment, pp. 24-38.
  3. **Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature**, p. 45, 49, 51, 52.
  4. James E. Gruber, *Methodological Problems and Policy Implications in Sexual Harassment Research*. **Population Research and Policy Review**, September 1990, pp. 235-254. See also, John B. Pryor and Jeanne D. Day, *Interpretations of Sexual Harassment: An Attributional Analysis*. **Sex-Roles**, April 1988, pp. 405-417, and Dair L. Gillespie and Ann Leffler, *The Politics of Research Methodology in Claims-Making Activities: Social Science and Sexual Harassment*. **Social Problems**, December 1987, pp. 490-501.
  5. Sharon Warren Walsh, *Confronting Sexual Harassment at Work*. **Washington Business**. The Washington **Post**, July 21, 1986, pp. 1, 16.
  6. Surjit Singh Dhooper, Marlene B. Huff and Carrie M. Schultz, *Social Work and Sexual Harassment*. **Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare**, September 1989, pp. 125-138.
  7. *Self Reports by Women Members of the Eastern Sociological Society*. **New England Sociologist**, Fall 1978, pp. 45-57.
  8. Barbara A. Gutek and Bruce Morasch, *Sex-Ratios, Sex-Role Spillover and Sexual Harassment of Women at Work*. **Journal of Social Issues**, Winter 1982, pp. 55-74.
  9. Susan Miller, *What Women - and Their Bosses - Should Do To Keep Women Climbing Up the Management Ladder*. **The Bulletin** of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, January 1986, pp. 13-14. See also Lee Stinnett, ed., **The Changing Face of the Newsroom**. Reston, Virginia: The American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1989, p. 19.
  10. *It Does Happen Here*. **NewsInc.**, December 1991, pp. 27, 30-31.
  11. *Women Were Anxious to Talk*. **NewsInc.**, December 1991, pp. 28-29.
  12. Randy Hoder, *Women's Protest Gets Results in St. Pete*. **Washington Journalism Review**, October 1981, pp. 14-15.
  13. *It Does Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. *When No One Listens*. **NewsInc.**, p. 32.
  16. Richard Harwood, *Dirty Talk*. **Outlook**. The Washington **Post**, Oct. 27, 1991, p. C8.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Dianne Lynch-Paley, *Covering the Capitol: Is Gender an Issue?* Unpublished paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual conference, Boston, August 1991, p. 25.
  19. Lois Lauer Wolfe notes that 18.4 percent of managing editors are women in *Will You Be Around in 2036 When Management Jobs Reach 50-50 Men/Women?* **Press Woman**, February 1992, p. 18.
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