

# MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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## ***SEXUAL HARASSMENT:*** *Building Awareness on Campus*

### Transcript

**Interviewer:** Is sexual harassment on campus a problem?

**Male Interviewee #1:** No, I don't think there really is a problem. I've never been harassed.

**Man (at Congressional hearing):** If she is lying, then I think you can help her prove that she was lying.

**Female Interviewee #1** I had one English teacher when I was in high school, that would like, like after he would have a conference with me or something, he would like, hit me in the ass.

**Clip Narrator:** Michael Douglas, Demi Moore.

**Michael Douglas Character:** Sexual harassment is about power.

**Male Interviewee #2:** Sometimes it's people saying that they were sexually harassed, but there really weren't, because they know they can use it.

**Newscaster:** For days now, charges that naval aviators sexually harassed female colleagues.

**Male Interviewee #3:** I don't think sexual harassment is a big problem in the campus.

**Newscaster:** Senator Packwood has been under siege since last fall, when more than two dozen women came forward to say that the Oregon republican had improperly forced sexual attentions on them.

**Female Interviewee #2:** I used to work in one of the dining commons, and older men we worked with were just gross. They were just gross, and they were our bosses so we wouldn't say anything.

**Senator Ted Kennedy:** I don't think that this country is ever going to look at sexual harassment the same tomorrow as it has, any time, in its past.

**Female Interviewee #3:** When I feel ashamed about being a woman, that's when I'm being harassed.

**Female Naval Officer:** My message is – don't tolerate it. No woman should be ashamed to come forward and say, "I've been wronged."

**Jean Kilbourne** (narrator, creator "Still Killing Us Softly"): Hello, I'm Jean Kilbourne. When Anita Hill testified in front of Congress, and the nation, that she had been sexually harassed by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, many of the senators didn't believe her. A lot of ordinary Americans were skeptical, as well, believing women make up events that they call harassment. This reaction came as no surprise to the many women who had been fighting for years to get the issue of sexual harassment recognized as a legitimate problem. However, because of the media attention paid to the Hill/Thomas hearings, sexual harassment was placed firmly on the American agenda. Since those hearings in 1991, other well-publicized incidents have kept sexual harassment in the limelight. At the Navy Tail Hub Convention, officers assaulted and harassed dozens of women. As a result of the controversy, the secretary of the Navy had to resign. A short time later, female congressional staffers accused Senator Bob Packwood, not only of repeated sexual harassment, but also of intimidating them to keep silent. These events, as well as books, movies, and television shows, have now made sexual harassment an issue that everyone knows about. Sexual harassment isn't just a subject for movies and television. It's a serious issue that we all have to think about. It is relevant to everyone's daily life. Sexual harassment can occur anywhere – in the workplace, as well as on college campuses. We all have a responsibility to know what sexual harassment is, how it relates to us, and what we can do about it. That's the purpose of this program.

**Female Interviewee #4:** I think that's the problem, too. Like, what exactly is sexual harassment? What is the definition? That's a very good question.

**Kilbourne:** Many of us are confused about what sexual harassment really is. It can easily get mixed up with other important issues, like sexual assault, discrimination, and abuse. Sexual harassment, however, has a fairly limited and specific definition. This definition applies equally to work environments and to school situations. Sexual harassment is defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as "a form of sex discrimination which violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964." Sexual harassment can take many forms, including speech, pictures, and physical contact. Title VII defines it as "any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. When submission to, or rejection of, this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment." We talked with some people familiar with the issue about what this means on campus.

**Prof. Janet Rifkin (University of Massachusetts Ombudsperson):** The less typical manifestation of sexual harassment is the quid-pro-quo form of that, where there's an overt offer of "have sex with me, and I'll give you such-and-such a grade." Although, I have seen some cases involving problems of that nature, they are the rarer

example of it. More typically students run into difficulties with faculty members, who could be teaching assistants, that is graduate students as well, whose behavior is such that it creates a hostile and offensive working environment for the student. It makes it hard for them to function in that classroom context.

**Leda Cooks Ph.D (Professor of Communication):** I think there's a number of similarities between campus and workplace environments, especially with regard to sexual harassment. Some of the similarities are that you have a situation of power imbalance, and we talk a lot about sexual harassment between faculty and students, but there's many other kinds of power imbalances that exist on the campus. Certainly between graduate students and students, or between graduate students and faculty, and even among faculty, that there are power imbalances. So, we are looking at, basically, your typical organization, much in the same way the workplace is an organization with hierarchies and with very typical kinds of ways of communicating.

**Kilbourne:** Although both men and women can be targets of sexual harassment, in the vast majority of cases, over 90 percent, it is women who are the victims. In our society, men have more power than women. And popular culture teaches men that women should be viewed primarily as sex objects. Sexual harassment is a complex problem, because it's tied up with issues of power and sex. Problems can arise in all areas of campus life – in relationships between students and professors, between co-workers on campus, and between students themselves. Forcing unwanted sexual attention on someone, or making a situation so uncomfortable that a person can't work or study, is unfortunately, pretty widespread. Let's take a look at how complicated sexual harassment really is.

**Male Interviewee #4:** So, I wonder if, at some point, when I am trying to be kind of friendly and forward, if I may actually be overstepping some boundaries.

**Male Interviewee #5:** You feel the need or the urge to compliment someone in a professional situation, you're just extra careful that there are no, you try and compliment their work rather than complimenting them. Because usually when you compliment them, things have connotations and can be taken the wrong way.

**Kilbourne:** If someone feels that they can't function in a place because of the way they are made to feel by unwanted sexual attention, they are being sexually harassed. It doesn't matter if the person who is engaging in this behavior doesn't mean to make the other person feel bad, what matters is the impact the behavior has on the individual who is receiving the attention. The impact, not the intent of the behavior, is what's important.

**Prof. Janet Rifkin:** Whether or not sexual harassment exists, or the behaviors constitute sexual harassment, is measured by the impact that it has on the person who is experiencing the behaviors. Intent is not relevant in sexual harassment, and that is a very hard concept for people to buy into, and that's one of the reasons why there's so much controversy about this.

**Leda Cooks Ph.D:** And I think one of the things that we need to take into consideration here, too, is that people may harass or may be seen as harassers because of their, just the way that they're been, our entire society, the way they've been socialized, our cultural environment, and that this is all part of the equation. It's not always, "I'm doing this because I'm on a power-trip." It may be that "I'm doing this not even realizing I'm doing this." It may be even an unconscious behavior that doesn't make it all the less irritating or offensive, but I think we also have to take into consideration that some people have been socialized in an environment that says that "women are inferior."

**Kilbourne:** Because our behavior can affect other people in ways that we don't anticipate or intend, we have to become more sensitive to the way we make other people feel. We have to examine our own behavior, and make sure we act respectfully, and that we act appropriately to the situation we are in. How do we know when we're crossing the line from friendly, or even flirtatious behavior, to what could be perceived as sexual harassment. The answer lies in becoming aware of how our behavior is perceived by other people.

**Prof. Janet Rifkin:** One of the best questions to ask yourself, if you're assessing this, is whether or not you'd want said to a member of your own family, what you've said to a student, for example. How would you feel, if the comment that you made, or the behavior that you engaged in, towards somebody else, was leveled at somebody in your own family. You can also ask yourself, another way is, how would I feel if it was reported, if what I did was reported in the newspaper. The campus newspaper or the local newspaper, or was made public in some way.

**Marcia Boumil, Attorney (sexual harassment expert):** Students, teachers, employers, employees, need to conduct themselves in a manner that's appropriate to the context, and they need to be sensitive to how their comments, their suggestions, their inquiries, are being taken by the persons to whom they're directed. And, you need to be particularly aware of those comments which are, make some kind of sexual reference, and you need to be aware of how they're being taken by the persons to whom they're directed, and you need to be willing to stop when either told to do so or when it becomes apparent that the comments are not being appreciated.

**Pepé Le Pew (cartoon clip):** Ah, my little darling. It is love at first sight, is it not? No. (Kiss sounds) Do not come with me to the Kasbah, we shall make beautiful musics together, right? *C'est l'amour. C'est toujours. C'est l'amour.* (Kiss sounds) Huh?

**Kilbourne:** Victims of sexual harassment are never to blame. Harassment makes people feel confused and powerless. In work situations, a woman is often afraid that if she confronts or reports a harasser, she will lose her job. Most of the time, however, especially on campus, ignoring sexual harassment is the worst way to deal with the problem. There are things that all of us can do to make it less likely that we will become victims of sexual harassment. Recognizing and understanding dangerous or uncomfortable situations, and drawing limits early on in relationships at work and at school, can help reduce the likelihood that we will be harassed. To avoid becoming victims, we need to be assertive and aware.

**Leda Cooks Ph.D:** The ways that I think people can avoid being harassed by other people are not to assume that you are in a kind of subordinate position, but to assert yourself. And I know that people have been telling women to assert themselves for ages, and every time a woman asserts herself it's termed "aggressive behavior," and this is a big issue for women. But I think increasingly that more assertive behavior is seen as confident in our society, and that women who speak their own mind, and I am talking about women in this case because I think it is particularly an issue for women, here, that women who kind of make it clear, from the start of a working relationship or relationship with a faculty member on campus, that you have certain boundaries and you expect people to respect those boundaries, that you can avoid harassment.

**Kilbourne:** We also talked with a psychologist familiar with the issue, about how one can deal with unwanted sexual attention.

**Joel Friedman, Ph.D (psychologist, lecturer):** You might start by sort of backing away, creating space, remove his hand from wherever it's fallen, don't smile, don't engage in small talk, don't be friendly, don't respond to any compliments. Be cold, unresponsive. He should get the message right away. It may also be necessary for you to say something. And comments which are directed at the behavior are the most helpful. Comments like, "It bothers me when you touch me that way, please stop." Or, "I don't like when you look at me that way, please stop."

**Kilbourne:** But sometimes, no matter what you do, no matter how confident and assertive you are, harassers just won't stop. If this happens, you have to know what to do. Most of the time, sexual harassment doesn't go away by itself.

**Prof. Janet Rifkin:** The first thing that somebody should be encouraged to do is to tell the person whose behaving that way not to do it. That's a hard thing to do, but I think that the resources on a campus should be brought to educate people to be able to say "no" in a way that feels comfortable and that's possible. Even if a person can't say "no," it's important that they can talk to somebody about what's happened, somebody other than the person who's done it. That can be difficult, if for example, that person is her advisor, or his advisor, but somebody who doesn't have direct authority over that person. So, the student may want to go and talk to another faculty member or a department chair, or somebody in the administration. And, to report it informally. If that doesn't feel comfortable for the person, a third option would be for the student to write a letter, a very clear letter, to the faculty member, specifically stating what it was that she objected to and what she wants him to stop doing.

**Kilbourne:** Again, sexual harassment can occur between anyone on campus. Students can have equally difficult problems with other students harassing them.

**Prof. Janet Rifkin:** I think some of the same strategies that I'd advise somebody to use if sexual harassment takes place between a students and a faculty member, I would advise those people to use that in a student-to-student problem as well. You need to tell somebody about it, you need to try to find a way to tell the other student

to stop doing what he's doing, and if that doesn't work, you need to tell somebody who's in a position of authority.

**Kilbourne:** No one should feel that they have to deal with the problem of sexual harassment alone. Utilize all the resources available on campus, talk to anyone you feel comfortable with who might be able to help you. This could be a dean, the department chair, a counselor, a professor whom you trust, your resident assistant, or even your friends. Reaching out for help and support is often the first step in dealing with a problem.

**Female Interviewee #4:** If you are a target of sexual harassment, what's most important is that you respond in a way that makes you feel empowered and in a way that makes the harassment stop. Every situation is unique. There is no general prescription for how to behave when confronted with sexual harassment.

**Female Interviewee #5:** I think fate is fate, because I believe in fate, and if two people are meant to be together, then they should be together. It doesn't matter their age, it doesn't matter if they're a professor or not. I think it's very inappropriate for students and faculty to be involved in intimate relationships when they're, certainly when the student is in a professor's class. That's pretty out of control. And I think it's also very difficult, even if a student is a major in that person's department.

**Kilbourne:** Many colleges are having to deal with the question of whether students and professors should be involved in intimate relationships with each other. Some people say that, because professors have power over students, these relationships are always unbalanced, and often exploitive. Other people say that healthy, intimate relationships can and do occur between students and teachers, and it's no one's business to prohibit relationships between adults. Most colleges have taken a neutral stance on this issue. No matter what your opinion, everyone acknowledges that it's a complex question.

**Leda Cooks Ph.D:** I don't like the way the things that I see happening on campus, with regard to trying to sanction consensual relationships, because I feel that you have to look at the boundaries between kind of the public and the private. Now the public space and the private space are really blurred, that we don't, the workspace is now the home space, and especially for, I know, for professors and being someone who is very immersed in this environment. I am rarely outside of this environment, and I think many people in organizations will tell you the same thing, in fact I know that they will, that there's increasingly, you know this is the only place where we enact and where we live. And so, to sanction relationships when you really, this is where you meet people. It's kind of like saying, "you're not allowed to engage in any," it's kind of like being in a convent for me.

**Prof. Janet Rifkin:** The problem though with consensual relationships, some work out, that's true, but often times they don't. And once the relationship becomes problematic or begins to fall apart, that very frequently leads to consequences – whether it's retaliation or some form of sexual harassment. And so, I've seen a number of cases that have come my way in which something that started off as a consensual

relationship ended up being something which would fall in the category of sexual harassment.

**Kilbourne:** Every relationship is unique, and none are easy. However intimate relationships between students and professors can bring additional problems. We can make an informed choice for ourselves only after considering the potential dangers of these relationships.

**Prof. Janet Rifkin:** If I were to give advise to a faculty member and a student who were moving in the direction of having an intimate relationship with each other, if I were allowed to advise them in that, I'd say, "don't." I wouldn't say "you can't," but I would caution them very carefully about what they're risking here. I think that the chances of getting into some kind of trouble, the chances of having some real problematic consequences for each of them are more likely than less likely. So if one is in a position to choose, I would say, "don't do it."

**Female Interviewee #2:** Most of the people who are guilty of stuff like that, like a lot of the guys that say stuff, if they really thought about it and were educated, and knew how it made you feel, they wouldn't do it. You know, like, if your brother, if you talked to your brother about it he probably would treat women better because he would understand that he loves a woman who is made to feel bad about something, and he wouldn't want to do that.

**Female Interviewee #6:** Men that I know are afraid to make any kind of comment about a person, like, you know, "That's a nice dress you're wearing." Or, "I like your haircut," if even they're a friend of yours because they're afraid it will be construed as sexual harassment. And if they knew more about it, they wouldn't be as afraid of it.

**Kilbourne:** Education and awareness are the keys to dealing with sexual harassment. Knowing what sexual harassment is, and how it can occur on campus, are the first steps in confronting and dealing with the issue.

**Marcia Boumil, Attorney:** One of the most important things that we have to all take away from the topic and the awareness of sexual harassment is that combating this problem is really the responsibility of everyone. It's a responsibility of men and women; it's the responsibility of students and teachers, employers and employees. It's a responsibility of each of us to act in a manner that's appropriate to the circumstance, to be sensitive to how our comments, how our behavior is being taken by the person to whom it's directed, and to be willing to stop when we're told to do so. So everybody has a role in combating sexual harassment.

**Joel Friedman Ph.D:** I believe that laws are necessary to provide guidelines and to provide remedies. But I believe that the real affect on the issue of sexual harassment takes place in the educational arena. Whether it be in schools and universities, or whether it be in business institutions and corporations, educating people about the affects of sexual harassment, about how to prevent it, about how people can basically live together and both have a social life and a work life, and respect one another. I think we'll go a long way in reducing the incidence of it.

**Leda Cooks Ph.D:** I think that once we come to understand sexual harassment better, that guidelines won't, we won't even need to have a conversation about guidelines. So I'm hoping this type of conversation will go away eventually, so it won't be a matter of who's violated what laws, but how can we behave in way that's respectful of everybody.

**Kilbourne:** As we have seen, sexual harassment isn't simple, but it's not a problem that is going to go away. On college campuses and in the workplace, we all have a role to play in making sure that sexual harassment isn't tolerated. I'm Jean Kilbourne.

[END]