At first sight, sexual harassment seems like at bit of a joke. Especially to men. 'After all, it is only a bit of fun. It helps pass the day. And anyway, women like it.' Little research has been done in the area of sexual harassment at work, but what there is shows clearly that men do not take it seriously. Few of the men who replied to *Cosmopolitan*'s recent questionnaire on the issue thought that women disliked sexual advances at work, and half of them admitted to making advances there. As for whether or not women like it, 11% of women workers (full time and part time) reported that they had been the subject of persistent, unwanted advances in their work situation, so a large number of women don't like it! 61% of the women in the same survey believed that men sometimes behave badly towards women simply because they are women. Even the women of the Liverpool NALGO branch who initiated a survey amongst their members were astonished at the scale of the evidence they found: 25% of the women replying to their survey had experienced harassment in their current workplace, and 50% had experienced it at some time in their working lives. Apparently, harassment of this kind is a common occurrence for working women, but has been experienced personally and privately by the individual woman, not shared and discussed or seen as a collective issue.

Sexual harassment is used specifically to describe behaviour which relates to the women as a sexual being. For the women in the workplace is not simply an employee: she is unable to leave her gender at home, much as she might like to. Classical Marxist thought has assumed that the capitalist system makes no major distinction between a male and female worker; that as long as surplus value was being squeezed out of you, your gender was immaterial (unless the employer could pit woman against man to get the job done more cheaply: he would employ whoever would work for less wages). Although the extraction of surplus value is a constant factor, other considerations about the situation of women do mean that female employees and male employees occupy different positions in the social system. The workplace is not exempt from the effects of the primary social and cultural classification of people into 'female' and 'male'. We must, therefore, concern ourselves with how a Marxist analysis overlaps a feminist analysis, so that we can distinguish how women as women, at work, have a different experience, and different struggles, from men at work. One such struggle is against sexual harassment.

**Defining Harassment**

What then, do we mean by sexual harassment? The Liverpool survey mentioned above defined sexual harassment as 'any repeated and unwanted sexual comments, looks, suggestions, or physical contact you find objectionable or offensive, and causes you discomfort in the job', and this is similar to other definitions in current use. Initial problems often raised about the definition are that not all women find the same things offensive. Also, looks and remarks can be misinterpreted or misjudged. But these objections miss the point, for what clearly distinguishes behaviour as harassment is that it is unwanted, and repeated or persistent. It starts to look very different from the 'compliment' that some people insist it is.

Apart from the general climate in workplaces which supposes that women are unimportant and inferior, women are subject to three kinds of aggravation. The first is the one which is usually considered to be sexual harassment: pestering for sexual contact. The second is where a woman is the butt of remarks or jokes, or even physical contact, relating to her as a sexual person, either positively or negatively, but where sexual relations are not intended. The third is abuse or degrading comments which are to do with her being a woman but where a specifically sexual content is absent: the 'old bag' line. The implication here is of a woman who is not sexually attractive or whom the man sees to be past the age at which it is seemly to be sexually active. In all these cases, the man is using his own definition of the woman he is harassing as being of sexual interest or not, a prerogative men abrogate to themselves, to make judgements about women, and to be explicit about these judgements.

All three of these aggravations I would include as sexual harassment: harassment because we are women. The NCCL, in its excellent booklet on sexual harassment at work says that sexism and sexual harassment 'are part of the same phenomenon, but sexual harassment is more direct and personal'. The authors, Sedley and Benn, argue that 'an arbitrary line may have to be drawn when we are thinking about effective remedies', meaning that somewhere, a distinction may have to made between what is sexual harassment, which can be challenged through union agitation and work discipline and industrial tribunals if necessary, and sexism or a general anti-women climate which needs tackling differently. Certainly the idea of doing something about persistent pestering is easier to sell than doing something about sexism, because most people would accept that constant propositioning is inappropriate at work, and that a woman should not have to put up with it; but that jokes which embody anti-woman ideas are irritating

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1. The Leeds Trade Union and Community Resource Information Centre are currently involved in research on sexual harassment amongst blue and white collar workers. A recent discussion led by the women involved, at a NATFHE day school, helped me shape up my thinking for this piece.
2. 'Sexual Harassment: you tell us it's not a joke' *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Oct 82.
3. 'Equal Opportunities Working Party: Report on Sexual Harassment' Liverpool NALGO.
4. 'Sexual Harassment at work' Ann Sedley and Melissa Benn, NCCL 1982.
rather than harassing. And yet when thinking about sexual harassment, people ask 'When does being friendly or funny end, and sexism or harassment begin?' The distinction being made is not between 'sexism' and 'harassment', but between 'unreasonable behaviour' and 'reasonable behaviour'. If industrial tribunals and the courts are used to process cases of sexual harassment, the courts will themselves make the distinction and establish, case by case, definitions of unreasonable behaviour: the definition will be taken out of women's hands, and put into the hands of a largely male judicial administration.

An organised workplace provides some checks on the personal power of the manager, for example by insisting on a fair sharing out of the overtime (if it is still worked) or by agreed procedures for deciding whose turn it is to be retrained. But particularly in unorganised workplaces, or where women have little say in their union, they may still experience the boss as having personal power over their working lives, and hence have more difficulty in demanding an end to unwelcome attention. Women who have had advances from their superiors can find themselves in intolerable positions, and there have been cases of women who have left their employment rather than having to put up with the jokes, the suggestive glances, or the wandering hands of a person who has such influence in their working environment.

Secondly, there is the question of relations between colleagues, apparent equals and peers. The co-worker who foists his advances on his women colleagues is using the proximity of the workplace to press his suit. In other situations in which a woman is approached in this way, eg on a dance floor, at a party, in a pub, she is usually at liberty to withdraw from the situation and the unwelcome advances. On the job, she usually cannot do that without loss of pay, and may be held responsible for disruption of work if she does. The office Romeo has a captive audience. As for the jokes and remarks and looks which she finds intrusive, and which he finds harmless fun, the fact that women are almost universally on the receiving end, indicates that the equality is more apparent than real: a power differential exists.

Finally, clients or customers provide another set of difficulties for working women. Sometimes, it is seen as part of the job to be pleasant to customers (eg barmaids, receptionists). Where the woman

Bosses, clients and co-workers
Women at work usually come across men in three positions — as bosses, as co-workers, and as clients or customers. The Cosmopolitan survey showed that of the women who had had sexual advances made to them, 60% had received them from their superiors, 63% had received them from their colleagues, and 20% had received them from clients; so harassment comes from all three groups.

The boss, of course, has power of a particular kind over the workers in his charge. He is often in a position to favour a particular worker. He may be able to offer her lucrative overtime, or a machine which is easier to operate so putting up her output if she is on piecework, or ensuring she is not delayed by difficulties with supply. She may find that she is the lucky one chosen for a sought-after training opportunity. On the other hand, he can make life difficult for her, by allocating her to a machine which constantly breaks down, or, in an office, by giving her boring and repetitive typing. A professional woman might find that her travelling expenses take ages to be processed. The ways to favour or to discriminate against an individual are legion; so the boss wields his power over the workforce.

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draws the line between the customer being acceptably friendly and too friendly is not easy to establish. She may be expected to accept remarks about her behaviour or looks that a man in the same job would not tolerate. Part of her job may be to persuade or entice people to buy goods or services, and her self presentation (sexual packaging?) is part of this. No wonder, then, that she is on the receiving end of unwanted attention!

Women in positions of authority (eg teachers) experience harassment from their ‘clients’ through the undermining of that position of authority, by remarks and comments which refer to her in intimate terms. Such a teacher is in a particularly vulnerable position. If she withdraws from the situation, she may be seen as unable to handle her work, as well as suffering the personal humiliation. Young, relatively inexperienced female teachers are probably especially at risk from these situations.

Another problem for women teachers is how to respond to the male colleague who approaches a young female student. She is likely to be flattered by his attention, and willing to accede to his suggestion that they spend a different kind of time together. Yet he has used the special relationship of teacher to student for his own personal ends. A more invidious aspect is the fact that he will be marking her work and hence influencing her progress. There have been several well-publicised cases in the US where a student has taken her professor to court for failing her after she has refused him sexual favours. It is to be hoped that British History Men have taken note!

The reminder
Whichever form of aggravation a woman suffers, the effect is clear: it reminds us that we are women. The function of sexual harassment at work is just that, to emphasise that we are not there simply as workers, in economic relation to the workplace, but that we are still in a particular relation to men. Our situation as workers does not override our gender classification: indeed, because we are in the workplace to earn a living, and hence may gain some economic independence, it could be even more critical to the survival of patriarchy that men forcefully remind us that we are women.

Why is it that the reminder plays such an important role? It is because a message goes with the reminder, the message that women are different, inferior, unimportant, and have a limited place in the world. If the message does not actually mean that women should stay at home, it certainly does imply that we are out in the world on sufferance. Our role in the world of work is limited. Most women in employment are either in low paid jobs, or are working part-time and without job protection (such as exists) that full-time jobs carry. This situation suits the capitalist system, because women can act as a cheap reserve army of labour, easily taken on and easily laid off.

Where women’s role at work is less limited, and hence women constitute a challenge to the whole ideological system, other forms of social control are used — notably hostility to women in general, and harassment. The Daily Mirror case, which was recently taken to an industrial tribunal, illustrates how this can happen. Two women were promoted to jobs which had previously been considered men’s jobs, and were subjected to astonishing levels of harassment. The out of court settlement involved both management and union
having to publicly state that they would ensure an end to discrimination against the women. This case raises all kinds of questions. To what extent is the management responsible for the behaviour between employees? Had the harassers previously got away with similar behaviour and so managed to keep those jobs all male? If the men had restricted their behaviour to 'sexist' remarks and actions, would they have succeeded in intimidating those women without 'harassing' them? This was perhaps an extreme case, but one which demonstrated the function of harassment very clearly: to keep women in their place. And 'in their place' has meant mainly in jobs defined as women's work, low paid and of low status.

A union issue
Many women are still not clear that sexual harassment at work is an issue which they should take to their union. Correspondingly, their unions are often not clear whether this is a relevant union issue; or, if it is, how to proceed when a complaint is made. It is, of course, rather different from the usual issues with which unions deal. As I have pointed out, it involves relations between worker and worker, not just between worker and management, and a complaint may well be made against another member of the same trade union. This is never an easy question for trade unions to deal with, and we need to be aware that as jobs are increasingly threatened, there are likely to be sectarian frictions between different groups of workers: skilled against unskilled, white against black, men against women. It is a scapegoat time.

Many unions are now taking up the issue, especially since the resolution passed by the Women's TUC 5 but it is interesting to ask why it is being taken up at this time, and also which groups of workers are giving a lead.

The unions in the forefront of this struggle are those which have experienced relatively recent dramatic changes in the workforces they organise, to include many more, and well-educated, women. These are the white collar, and particularly public sector unions. Many of the newly unionised women have been influenced by the Women's Liberation Movement.

First in the field was NALGO which issued a statement following the work done by the Equal Opportunities Working Party of their Liverpool Branch, 6 and the appalling case of two NATFHE members in Brent who were dismissed after complaining of harassment. 7 Then NATFHE's Women's Rights Panel initiated discussion and put out a statement. 8 Both of these statements give advice about how to tackle an instance of sexual harassment, and also point out the necessity for agreement between management and union that such sexual harassment will not be tolerated. ASTMS, CPSA and NUJ all subsequently adopted appropriate policies. Unions with well developed national machinery for raising women's issues have been first to recognise sexual harassment as a trade union issue and to develop national policies. Whether the national initiative is taken up at grass roots level is, of course, another matter. But it is easier to raise locally if there is already an

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5 Resolution of Women's TUC 1982, moved by NUJ.
6 'Sexual Harassment is a Union Issue' NALGO 1981.
7 'Voiceprint' Haringay NATALGO undated 4 page supplement on sexism.
The workplace is potentially an environment where discipline can be imposed, and where workers, through their unions, can democratically demand that measures are taken against harassers. On the streets and at home, this is much more difficult, for the enforcers of law and order are distant from democratic control and demands. Not that insisting on such discipline on the shop floor is going to be easy! We have seen earlier that a combination of work discipline and union discipline will be called for, and this will not be easy. It will call for a high degree of organisation, which is lacking in many areas of women's employment. Additionally, if we accept that the trade unions are still largely the guardians of male working class interests, it will be quite a job to persuade them to use their strength to reprimand one of their own members: to tackle harassment from a manager or a client is going to be a lot easier. Most male trade unionists will be torn between protecting a member of their class, and wanting to maintain male power. There is no doubt that opposing harassment means challenging male power.

**Male power in the workplace**

The impetus to raise the issue now is closely linked, I believe, to publicity and ideas around male violence against women. Whilst the WLM was considering how men exerted their power — in the home, on the street — questions about how men asserted their power in the workplace were asked. Answers like sexual harassment were soon forthcoming.

The similarities between sexual harassment and violence against women are many and obvious: it is perpetrated by men on women without their consent; the woman often feels guilty, wondering if she encouraged it; she often does not want to 'cause trouble' by complaining; the man often sees it as a joke or even something on which to be congratulated. I find Sarah Benton's concept of 'The Protectorate' very useful and have used it previously in talking about violence against women. The idea is that a woman is 'safe' in the sense of not being subject to attack or harassment when she is attached to a male consort (though not necessarily safe from the consort himself!). In the workplace, it is rare for a woman to be under the protection of a partner: the workplace is thus outside the protectorate and women, both married and single, are subjected to unwanted male attention, and possibly hostility. In a very real sense, women at work are single, and hence 'fair game'. Both violence and sexual harassment at work reinforce the power men have over women, not just in a physical sense, but also structurally. Very often the man is protected by the hierarchy, or state institutions, or management.

**Strategies for opposition**

But there may be different strategies for opposing harassment and violence. There are two traditional ways of dealing with sexual harassment, but only one of them is now open to women: changing the situation by changing your job is no longer an easily available option thanks to high unemployment. The other option, putting yourself back into the protectorate by looking for a male figure (shop steward, foreman or simply another employee) to take you under his wing, is still available to women. It is, of course, a strategy that reinforces power relations.

There are others that challenge power relations. If women workers have a strong attachment to each other and a well developed sense of sisterly solidarity, a group of them can easily deal with a harasser by calling him and embarrassing him: the strongest and most effective way of tackling the problem. Some women are using methods like assertion and self-defence training to boost their personal sense of authority and confidence. Learning to sustain one's self respect in the face of hurt and embarrassment can be important in starting to tackle sexual harassment collectively.

Where numbers or work organisations do not allow a strong female identity to develop, women will have to use other strategies. The most obvious one is through either an individual or collective grievance procedure, with union backing. If other strategies fail, recourse to the courts and tribunals might become necessary and might eventually establish the right of a female employee to work unmolested. Unfortunately, like rights to equal pay, these would remain paper rights, unless enforced by shopfloor pressure.

Harassment can be a health hazard, for many women respond with symptoms of stress. The British Society for Social Responsibility in Science has described sexual harassment as 'one of the most serious health and safety risks for many women.' And a woman who is suffering harassment is unlikely to perform well, and is thus less likely to be promoted: her equal opportunities are non existent! But although both equal opportunities and health and safety aspects might tactically be useful ways of explaining why sexual harassment at work is a legitimate issue for the union, we need to take the bull by the horns and confront what is really the problem: that we live in a world which is patriarchal and oppresses women, and that whenever men and women come into contact, the power relations between them surface, to the disadvantage of women.

In this part of the struggle for women's liberation, women will be seeking allies in their trade unions, both nationally on issues of policy, and locally when agreements are to be negotiated; and especially when a particular incident occurs. Organising with women against sexual harassment at work will be a way for male trade unionists to make clear their commitment to the liberation of women, and the curtailing of male domination over their working sisters.

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