

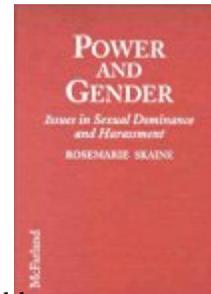
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Rosemarie Skaine. *Power and Gender: Issues in Sexual Dominance and Harassment*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1996. xx + 460 pp. \$48.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-0208-3.

Reviewed by Michael Harvey (Washington College)  
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This book is not an easy read. A long, indifferently edited study of sexual harassment in the contemporary American workplace, much of it must be slogged through. Too often the book feels as if it has been culled rather than written, with much of it coming off as a massive cut-and-paste operation that inserts many studies, perspectives, assertions, and data into a single volume. The choppy prose often accentuates this feeling. But for anyone willing to make the effort, the book contains a lot of useful information, including some fascinating primary research in the form of interviews and personal observations. It will be useful as a resource for professionals who must deal with sexual harassment issues, and for anyone interested in exploring the topic in depth. And even general readers may appreciate the energy of the book's many stories, for Skaine can tell a compelling story—as in her sharp review and analysis of the Tailhook scandal.

The book's organization is straightforward (even if the actual writing often is not). Skaine begins with chapters on the definition, history, and theoretical framework of sexual harassment. These early chapters bear the characteristics of the whole work: a weighty mass of information presented but not synthesized. Thus the opening chapter, on definitions, presents several perspectives: "operational," sociological, socioeconomic, and legal (the controlling legal definition is that formulated by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], which Skaine sensibly starts with). But these perspectives on sexual harassment are presented sequentially, with little connection between them. Along the way, Skaine writes carelessly—for instance, making the unduly sweeping claim that "the first victims of sexual harassment through economic intimidation were female slaves in American colonial times" (p. 13). There's

no citation for this claim that sexual harassment was a New World invention. In general, history is not one of the book's strong suits—it is situated solidly in the post-Tailhook, post-Hill-Thomas hearings environment of mid-1990s America.

Skaine's chapter on the theoretical framework of sexual harassment is another culled effort. It does not present a single theoretical approach, but skims a diverse assembly of sociologists and other theorists exploring questions of power, gender, class, and oppression. To these, it adds a hodgepodge of recollections, impressions, anecdotes, quotations, and solitary facts. To a sympathetic reader, the effect will be rather like crafting a stained-glass window—the whole picture of a vast sexual harassment problem that is part of the daily experience of oppression for millions of American women is what attracts attention, not the innumerable little pieces of raw material. But how Skaine puts the bits and pieces together is a clumsy and skepticism-arousing process. The lack of flow is an especially big problem—again and again throughout this book, one sentence follows another and the reader is left wondering what connection was just made ("I believe Anita Hill. She did not care for Clarence Thomas's political positions relevant to African Americans"). When Skaine does cite an authority, it is often to make a point of mind-numbing blandness: "Peter Berger says we are located in society in space and time," she says, with an unhelpful citation to Berger's *Invitation to Sociology*. To be fair, in some ways Skaine's writing style works well. What it lacks in rigor and smooth handling of its material, it makes up for in passion and personal commitment to the topic. There is something real and appealing about a student of sexual harassment willing to speak of and defend her "bias," her ability to perceive discrimination and harassment.

The chapter on the legal dimensions of sexual harassment (co-written with James Skaine, as is one other chapter) is constructed in the same fashion. It presents all the key legal texts that have carved out sexual harassment as a body of law, from Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed “sex discrimination” in the workplace, to the 1991 Civil Rights Act. The chapter also surveys key court decisions through 1993, the most significant of which was the 1986 Meritor decision that expanded the legal definition of sexual harassment. The treatment of these laws and decisions is cursory but adequate. The chapter concludes with a collection of precedent-setting decisions written by the EEOC, the government agency charged with overseeing disputes about discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace.

The strongest part of Skaine’s book lies in the many stories she tells. These dramatize how harassment typically occurs at the intersection of private motives and institutional interests. The stories cover both actual harassment and, interestingly, cases of the falsely accused. One falsely accused man, a college teacher, watched his academic career savaged by the accusation of a single student and the zeal, perhaps ideologically driven, of his college administration to pursue the accusation. More typical is the story Skaine tells of a woman driven out of a company by her manager’s ongoing sexual harassment, compounded with a tremendously hostile work environment. In both cases, the striking fact is how the pain of harassment or false accusation is compounded by the power of an institution, whether a school or a company.

The middle chapters of the book constitute a kind of field report on sexual harassment in the American workplace: in business, in religious institutions, government, education, and the military. Probably the best of these chapters treats sexual harassment in education. Here Skaine is on familiar territory, presenting many gripping stories and considerable data that should be useful to schools wanting to improve their sexual harassment policies. The chapter on sexual harassment in government focuses on the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings as well as the cases of Senator Robert Packwood and President Clinton. The book feels dated in its relatively strong faith that President Clinton is a victim of false charges of sexual harassment (by Paula Jones). Today few people could muster the kind of enthusiasm for Clinton that Skaine shows in this book—as when, discussing

those falsely accused of sexual harassment, she opines, “My ‘gut feeling’ is that the present allegations against President Clinton may help this group.”

The chapter on sexual harassment in the military focuses on Tailhook, the infamous 1991 Navy convention at the Las Vegas Hilton during which women—many of them Navy officers—were physically accosted and assaulted. Skaine skillfully tells the story of the “gauntlet” and the convention’s more ordinary depravities—strippers, streakers, porn, and so on. The tale has been told before, but Skaine’s narrative makes compelling reading. She also analyzes the Navy investigation and subsequent investigations into the episode. As one reads, it becomes ever clearer that sexual harassment is a complex phenomenon with deep roots and staying power. Through her stories and analysis, Skaine wisely urges us to understand sexual harassment not simply as the acts of individual harassers, but as the product of individual actions combined with culture and institutions.

Skaine concludes with chapters proposing strategies for dealing with and preventing sexual harassment. These chapters will be particularly useful to professionals looking for a handbook for constructing an effective anti-harassment policy environment. Her final chapter asks whether the “utopia” of a society free of sexual harassment can ever be achieved. Perhaps, she suggests. I have my doubts, but more to the point I’m not sure it’s helpful to frame the issue in such millenarian terms. Would we ever ask, “Can robbery or homicide ever be abolished?” Sexual harassment is a crime, and the most we should ask is that it be uniformly recognized as such. We can never root out the darker corners of the human soul, at least not without extreme violence to our belief in privacy and individual rights. But we can expect our institutions—government, the military, religion, business, and education—not to tolerate sexual harassment and not to perpetuate an environment in which it persists. Rosemarie Skaine’s book will help us continue to reform our institutions, and to change our expectations about the American workplace.

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