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Title

It's Not Easy Being a Girl in a Man's World: The Daily Experience of Sexual Harassment for Adolescent Girls

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CSW update



Ken Wissoker spoke on "Writing for Readers" on May 7. See article by Sharon Sharp on page 15.

MAY 07



Q & A with Juliet Williams

Juliet Williams is a Visiting Professor in Women's Studies for AY 06-07 and AY 07-08. She is an Associate Professor in Law & Society at UCSB where she teaches jurisprudence, gender and law, and right to privacy, as well as courses in the Women's Studies Program. She recently talked with CSW Update about her progress into feminism and women's studies.

*Can you tell us about your family?
Where did you grow up?*

I was born in Philadelphia, which is where I grew up. My dad was—and is—a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. I always lived near the university and frankly I always loved school.

I was raised at a time when "feminist" became a commonly used popular term—not always with a positive valence—but people like my mom, who identified as progressive and who believed in equal rights, would

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BY CHRISTIA SPEARS BROWN

It's Not Easy Being a Girl in a Man's World

THE DAILY EXPERIENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT
FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

GIRLS EXPERIENCE sexual harassment every day in middle school. This harassment does not just affect a few girls—90 percent of girls share this experience. More than half of all girls have been called a nasty or demeaning name or teased about their appearance by a male. Slightly fewer girls have been told a mean or embarrassing joke about their gender or sexuality. By high school, the harassment is more frequent and more extreme. By the end of high school, one-quarter of all girls have been teased, threatened, or bullied by a male and one-half have been touched or grabbed against their wishes by a male. These findings from a recent study (Leaper and Brown, 2007) of six hundred ethnical-

ly and geographically diverse middle school and high school girls highlight the difficult and complicated world girls learn to navigate as they enter adolescence. Although a great deal of psychological research has examined women's experiences with sexual

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UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN PRESENTS

Facing Queer Frontiers

*Fresh Perspectives on Gender
and Sexuality in Film*

**TUESDAY, MAY 22
MELNITZ 2534 @ 5 PM**

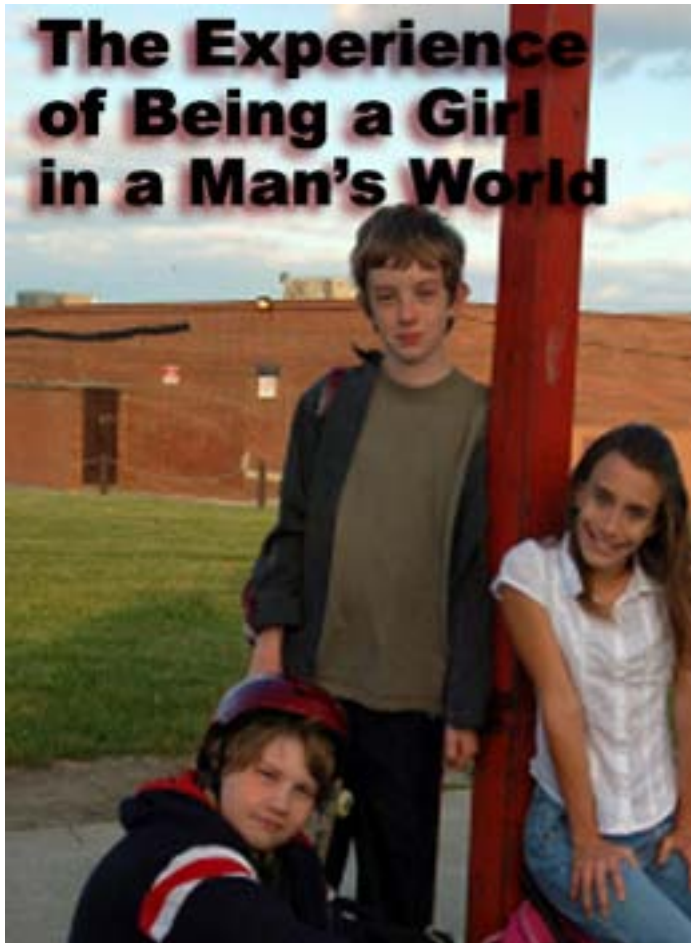
GRADUATE STUDENT PANEL FEATURING

WORD(S): TV'S NEW QUEER LEXICON
Candace Moore

THE REAL (PORN) WORLD: THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS
OF THE NEW REALITY PORN
Jennifer Moorman

OF COWBOYS AND COCKSMEN: 2005'S BUDDY FILMS AND
THE (TRAGI)COMEDY OF (RE)MARRIAGE EQUALITY
Maria San Filippo

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Most girls describe themselves as becoming angry, anxious, and embarrassed after being sexually harassed. Older adolescents also report being worried, being scared, and feeling guilty. Although boys often think these overtures are good natured, girls rarely report being amused or flattered.

harassment (for example, Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, 2006; Gutek and Koss, 1993; Stockdale, 1998), we often forget that girls live in a similar world.

What do girls think about this unwanted attention? Most girls describe themselves as becoming angry, anxious, and embarrassed after being sexually harassed. Older adolescents also report being worried, being scared, and feeling guilty. Although boys often think these overtures are good natured, girls rarely report being amused or flattered. With such negative emotional reactions to sexual harassment, it was particularly concerning when we examined the ways in which girls are coping with their experiences. Most frequently, girls said, after being grabbed by a boy or told an offensive joke, they either laughed about it or tried to pretend it didn't bother them. This public downplaying of sexual harassment seems to be stemming from girls' wanting to fit in with boys and not wanting to rock the boat. There is also a more ominous reason girls tend to deny their true feelings about sexual harassment—fear of retaliation. As one 15-year-old girl stated, "I knew if I said anything, I would have been messed with after school."

Although girls seem to believe it is easier to pretend that being grabbed, teased, and threatened does not bother them, there are two harmful side effects to this response. First, by denying their true emotional reactions, they are not seeking support from peers, parents, and teachers. Research (for example, Gutek and Koss, 1993) shows support-seeking is a powerful and effective way for adult women to cope with sexual harassment. The majority of adolescent girls are not using this powerful coping strategy. Second, boys who witness girls being sexually harassed are unsure of what to do. Our study revealed that there are many boys who are sincerely bothered by the way their female peers are being treated. They remarked, however, that when girls laugh it off, they assume she is unaffected. They also note that they are afraid they would embarrass their female

This problem of daily sexual harassment in middle and high schools is both bigger and smaller than most people realize. It is bigger because it affects almost every girl in school today. . . . On the other hand, it is smaller than many realize because it seems to be driven by a handful of boys.

friend by saying something. The consequences of all this denial: girls say nothing, boys say nothing, and the school norm in which the sexual harassment of girls is acceptable continues to thrive.

What can we do as adults who care about the lives of girls? We must teach girls to react to sexual harassment in an active way. They need to tell the harasser it is offensive, they need to tell a teacher or parent, and they need to seek emotional support. Our research shows that some girls do this—typically, girls whose moms are emotionally supportive and who believe that they have the power to change sexism if they try. We must also teach boys that it is unacceptable to harass girls. Schools whose first reaction to reports of sexual harassment is to separate boys and girls into separate classes need to recognize that the school norms will not be changed without directly teaching boys that this behavior is unacceptable. Fortunately, most boys know this, and are indeed bothered when other boys do it. For those empathetic boys, we need to teach them that

they should say or do something. They need to know that, regardless of the girl's reaction, she is likely bothered by the sexual harassment and would like an ally.

This problem of daily sexual harassment in middle and high schools is both bigger and smaller than most people realize. It is bigger because it affects almost every girl in school today. Our study included girls in talented and gifted classes in the suburbs of Atlanta, GA, upper middle-class girls in Santa Cruz, CA, and ethnically and economically diverse girls in urban Los Angeles. Sexual harassment affected all of them, regardless of race, economic status, or academic ability. On the other hand, it is smaller than many realize because it seems to be driven by only a handful of boys. The rest of the boys are concerned bystanders who don't know what to do to change the norm. Our next goal as researchers (a goal that can be facilitated by parents and teachers) is to help girls actively cope with the sexual harassment they experience and help boys begin the process of changing the norm.

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