Power and Dignity

Sexual Harassment on Campus in Hong Kong

Abstract

This is a pioneering study of sexual harassment on a local university campus. It comprises two stages: panel discussions among single-sex undergraduate and post-graduate student groups, followed by a questionnaire survey. The study aims at drawing out the perceptions of sexual harassment held by students, their experience of the problem on campus, their reactions and responses to it, and their expectations of institutional intervention into the problem. In this study, we discover that a significant gender gap exists in the perception and experience of sexual harassment. This has arisen from the fact that sexual harassment of one form or other is a common experience among women, but not so among men. Furthermore, sexual harassment is found to be closely related to the existing structure of gender relationships. In this structure, two prominent features stand out, namely, power and dignity. Power is not only present in the institutional context, whereby a victim (student) is confronted by someone who is her or his superior (teacher). It also exists in a more subtle way, in the predominance of a male-centred culture, in which jokes about a woman’s body, for example, is considered a common and harmless pastime. Male power is also crystallised in the commonly-accepted ‘predator-prey’ relationship in cross-gender courtship, so much so that for many of our respondents, ‘courtship advances’ (on the part of men) constitutes a grey area in the definition of sexual harassment. In same-sex harassment among men, power is again a major element, as such behaviour seems to contribute to the establishment of a pecking order. As a corollary, victims or potential victims see the harm as residing in the deprivation of one’s dignity, both on an individual level and on behalf of one’s gender group (for women). Cross-cultural comparisons are also made in this analysis, wherever possible.

Introduction

This is the first comprehensive study of sexual harassment on university campus in Hong Kong. The idea first emerged during informal discussions among members of the Gender Research