

WHAT WOMEN ARE COMPLAINING ABOUT: SEXISM ON CAMPUS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the various forms of sexism on campus based on a qualitative research done in four universities in central Philippines. As the research revealed, sexism is apparent in the teaching-learning activities in the classroom, behavioral interaction on campus, school policies and programs, co-curricular activities, and student services. The challenges for women's studies are outlined and some initiatives to curb campus sexism are identified.

Introduction

Consider these forms of behavior on campus: taunting or whistling at women, following women around, ogling at women's body parts, using instructional materials depicting women in a degrading manner, using male pronoun to refer to both women and men, or cracking jokes at the expense of women.

Sexism on campus has various shades. From the subtle to explicit forms, sexism in an academic environment erodes the capacity of learners to appreciate human beings based on individual qualifications rather than on sex. As a form of discrimination, sexism is the treatment or consideration of, or making a distinction in favor of or against, a person based on sex rather than on merit. Sexism entails unwelcome conduct that unreasonably interferes with work or learning performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive academic setting.

An academic environment has to promote standards of equality and improve chances of inspiring the full and equitable participation of women in our classes. Studies on campus sexism not only expose old prejudices but also substantiate

efforts to correct forms of discrimination based on sex (Wartman, 1999).

Applying a qualitative research approach, focus discussions were conducted with groups of faculty members engaged in the practice and/or teaching of women's studies in selected campuses in Negros and Panay islands. One university in Negros Oriental, two in Negros Occidental, and one in Iloilo participated in the study. Two universities are Roman Catholic in orientation while two are Protestant in origin.

Profile of Sample Academic Institutions

All four universities are institutions open to women and men that offer primary, secondary, tertiary, and graduate programs. All four are private institutions that primarily depend on tuition revenues. The four, however, vary as to the nature of involvement in women's studies as perceived by the focus group discussion participants (see Table 1, below).

Table 1. Profile of sample academic institutions, November 2000.

Categories	Uni 1	Uni 2	Uni 3	Uni 4
Location	Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental	Bacolod, Negros Occ.	Bacolod, Negros Occ.	Iloilo, Iloilo
Religious Affiliation	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic	Protestant
Status of Women's Studies center	Has a center for women's studies	A women's studies group is in place	Structure not in place	Formed a group before; presently not in place
Budget source	External assistance	Internal assistance	No provision	From unit initiating activity
Nature of major activities	Teaching; Outreach	Outreach	Participates in activity when invited	Outreach
Source of Initiative	Faculty initiated, university-recognized	University-initiated, faculty encouraged	Responds to invitations from outside institutions	Individual interest, reported as needed
Number of discussants	9	8	3	6

Dumaguete, Bacolod, and Iloilo are cities in the central part of the Philippines, belonging to the Visayas group of islands. As is true in other islands and the entire country, most colleges and universities are privately owned. Government-financed colleges and universities account for only 20 percent of the total tertiary institutions in the country. Given the limited resources of these institutions, inclusion of new programs entails a fair level of pressure from interest groups, either from among the faculty or from the administrators. Funding allocation for women's studies concerns in a Bacolod university is made possible through the representation of a female top administrator. Grant for the women's studies center in the Dumaguete university initially came from a funded proposal penned by a group of academe-based, mission-oriented women with a community outlook. The initial funding of women-focused activities in the Iloilo university came from its mission board. The absence of an allocation in the other Bacolod university could be due to the absence of a women's studies program both at the levels of the faculty and the administration. This supports the contention that the strength (or weakness) of a women's studies initiative is determined by the level of interest and commitment of individual faculty or administrator (Abregana 1995).

Sex distribution.

There is a predominance of women in coeducational colleges and universities in the Philippines, a fact substantiated in this Visayas study. At the administrative level, there are slightly more females than males in these private institutions. However, in state colleges and universities, presidential and top administrative posts are mostly held by men (Siason 1999).

Females outnumber males in the faculty and student population. At first glance, this phenomenon may be viewed as favorable to the women sector, especially the ratio between male and female members of the faculty. A closer examination, however, will reveal that the education sector is one of the low-paying sec-

tors of the country's labor market and the Filipino woman's trait of being *matisin* (long-suffering) plays well in this work area. In the three sample universities, female full-time faculty members outnumber males while males outnumber female part-time college teachers. This suggests that males take college teaching as a secondary occupation while females are into college teaching as a primary job. In the same sample, the proportion of male students in the elementary school is higher than females (see Table 2). In the secondary level, the female students begin to outnumber males and the proportion decreases for males as the educational level increases. Could this mean that there are likely to be more females among the educated unemployed, given the fact that there are more males employed than females?

Table 2. Sex distribution in three universities* (as of 1st semester, 2000-2001)

Categories	Male		Female		N
	f	%	f	%	
Administrators	55	47.41	61	52.89	116
Total College faculty (FT/PT)	429	43.38	560	56.62	989
College Part-time	200	52.77	179	47.23	379
College Full-time:	229	37.54	381	62.46	610
Professors	8	33.33	16	66.67	24
Associate Professors	24	40.00	36	60.00	60
Assistant Professors	64	31.68	138	68.32	202
Instructors	133	41.05	191	58.95	324
Total student population					
Elementary	1932	55.87	1526	44.13	3458
High School	1339	48.69	1411	51.31	2750
College	8357	38.22	13507	61.78	21864
Graduate studies:					
Master's level	235	32.19	495	67.81	730
Doctorate level	31	28.44	78	71.56	109

*One university in Bacolod was still in the process of ranking its faculty. Since data set for full-time college faculty was not disaggregated by rank, this university was not included in this summary.

However, one has to admit that, based on figures, campuses are definitely women's world. Yet, despite their number, women continue to be pestered with behaviors that demean their status, classroom instruction that trivializes the role of women, curricula that either make women invisible in the training of life skills or propagate exclusion of women in decision-making. If education is life itself, and if women are not fully and fairly depicted in educational content and strategies, then education at best can only be half of life. In this state, education promotes a segmented view of the world and can only claim to laying the groundwork for the attainment of half-truths.

Sexism in Visayan Campuses

Campus sexism, as operationally defined by the four groups, refers to forms of behavior that demean the status of women students in particular. Sexism, the group acknowledged, may also apply to men but the group felt that this phenomenon is most pervasively experienced by female students by virtue of their sex.

The use of non-inclusive language in the statement of university's mission and vision, in the classroom, in instructional materials, and in the day-to-day conversations on campus is identified as a dominant form of sexism in an educational setting. In an environment that rests heavily on written and oral communication, the use of sexist language certainly alienates more than half of the campus population.

Gender tracking in the advising of courses to take or to shift to is another. Some teachers have observed that female students are usually discouraged from taking male-dominated courses like Electrical Engineering. When females insist on being there, they usually have no available support system as they generally receive comments like "I told you so."

The group also observed that while most of the staff of counseling services and the student personnel division are females, many of them need training on feminist or inclusive approaches to ensure that the student programs and services are sensitive to women's concerns.

On campus, female students experience being whistled at, blocked at doorways or passageways by males who force their attention on them, stared at when walking down corridors, or become victims of voyeuristic activities when using toilets. These behaviors make campuses less women-friendly for the female population.

Inside the classroom, teachers often refer to female anatomy in commenting on or illustrating concepts. Theories and concepts presented usually are from the male perspective. In most cases, women's perspective is deemed invisible in classroom instruction. Dirty jokes at the expense of women abound.

Specific examples.

Forms of sexism in classroom setting were identified. The sections that follow outline the groups' observations.

Content of lesson or topic is itself sexist and is left unbalanced. For instance, in the presentation of Freud's theory on psychosexual development, the professor does not devote equal time to a feminist critique of Freud and explain his failings. Sexist theories in an introductory class need to be balanced because for many students this may be their first exposure to learning about issues of gender in society and they are not getting a fair portrayal of what human development really is.

Learning strategies are not suited to differences in learning styles of men and women. Studies have shown that women tend to take awhile to think and require longer reaction time before replying to questions.

Non-adoption of inclusive language is reported.

Course material is not balanced in its use of masculine and feminine pronouns.

Examples or illustrations in class put women at a disadvantage as evidenced in the use of sexually aggressive humor or jokes; commentary about a female student's body or appearance; or, reference to female anatomy in making explanations or comments.

Co-curricular activities can also be sexist. The objectification of women in campus beauty contests is reported. With the drive for equality between sexes, some campuses sugarcoat their beauty pageants with programs that supposedly extol women as epitome not only of beauty but also of intelligence. Yet, the very fact that the pageant zeroes in on female students does not seem to strike the organizers that the activity is by its very nature sexist.

Then there is the matter of campus policies. Some campuses deal with students who get pregnant out of wedlock by advising them to take a leave from school supposedly to "rest and take care of the baby inside". This practice seems to suggest that pregnancy is a sign of physical weakening or even sickness and therefore the female student has to stop schooling. Meanwhile, the male responsible for the pregnancy usually escapes sanction and if he also happens to be a student, he is allowed to continue with his studies. Some campuses that tend to see a connection between pregnancy and evening activities address the issue by imposing curfew on female students. In one campus, for instance, the student organization bars female students from the place of activity by midnight.

Male teachers inviting female students to dinner before release of grades, giving women bonus points for donning swimwear in beach excursions, or asking women to make individual poses for a photograph collection are some off-campus activities labeled as forms of sexism.

Participants in the focus group discussion also made

a note on the matter of subtle sexism. Subtle sexism is pervasive and oftentimes goes unchecked. It gets tolerated and accepted. However, it erodes ability to seek balance and equality in gender relations. This failure to seek balance in “small things” can lead to the same stance in “big things.”

Challenges for Women’s Studies

In an earlier dialogue, women’s studies practitioners and academicians presented their views on the status of education and training in the Visayas region, actions taken, and suggestions for improvement.

The status.

In upland and other marginalized communities, retention of girls and women in schools is threatened by economic difficulties. Those in Grades 5 and 6 and those in high school are prime targets for domestic work in households other than their own. Negros Oriental is identified as one of the four leading provinces that send girls and young women to big cities to work in homes or in factories.

The groups observed that textbooks and teaching materials generally remain insensitive to the particular needs and holistic educational development of girl pupils. Males continue to be depicted in a number of instructional materials as occupying choice job positions that demand higher pay for services rendered. Females, on the other hand, are generally portrayed as performing domestic and maintenance roles.

The stereotype that females do poorly than males in mathematics while females perform better than males in languages such as Filipino and English persists.

Classroom activities and students’ participation in school organizations generally follow gender tracking that do not promote achievement of women’s full potential or eliminate inequalities between sexes.

Teachers, by and large, have no systematic gender awareness programs and consequently have no notion about developing gender-fair curricula, teaching styles, and learning assessment and evaluation.

At the tertiary level, women can enter coeducational institutions and may also opt to go to an all-women institution. However, forms of discrimination are evident in the following manner:

Instructional materials continue to be presented from the male perspective. There are few textbooks that depict the contributions of women in science and technology, history, psychology, philosophy, and other fields of study.

In cases of pregnancy out of wedlock, a female student is generally advised by school authorities to take a leave from school even before she is due to deliver the baby, while the male who partnered the pregnancy is free of any sanction from the college or university.

The search for a Miss University is an annual activity in some schools. Women candidates are packaged as the "quintessential women" or as individuals with exemplary personalities in addition to their physical attributes. Nevertheless, these contests sell women, or to put it more bluntly, coopt women in a complicit process of "selling the self" in the guise of presenting women as paragons of beauty and intelligence, but really a form of commodification.

While most school counselors in the region are females, there is no systematic gender-sensitive professional school counseling and career education programs to respond to the distinct needs of women on- and off-campus and to prepare them for a life in the larger community. To address this concern, we have right now a simultaneous activity on the retraining of guidance counselors toward gender-fair counseling services. Most schools still have to finalize the code against sexual harassment on campus. At Silliman University, the policy against sexual harassment is about to be

signed by the administration, faculty union, and staff union.

In campuses where women's studies units are established, these do not enjoy institutional budget allocation. Their programs and activities are generally running on voluntary services, support from external funding agencies, or alliance with groups in other academic institutions or non-government organizations.

In effect, there is no institutionalized gender sensitivity program for faculty, staff and administrators in most colleges and universities in the region.

Some initiatives or actions taken.

Presently, actions are taken mostly by female faculty members. In some institutions, faculty members associated with women's studies movement are themselves running gender sensitivity training sessions for interested groups on-campus and off-campus.

Some faculty members have put in voluntary service in such advocacy programs in the community as prevention of violence against women, health and reproductive rights, appeal for basic services, or clamor for good governance.

Some institutions have faculty and administrators who have networked with national women's associations such as the Women's Studies Association of the Philippines (WSAP) or international alliances such as the Women's Initiative on International Affairs in Asia (WIIAA).

Some institutions have undertaken curricular development project with other schools to espouse the elimination of some gender-based issues such as family/domestic violence.

Some members of the faculty have conducted gender-oriented research topics such as the extent of gender bias in textbooks and school curricula, participation of women in community-based resource management, and economic participation of women in fishing communities.

In some campuses, students are organized to help address issues in the family and community such as wife battering, sexual harassment on campus or in the workplace, adolescent sexuality, rights of the elderly, etc.

Sobritchea (1999) reported that several organizations have expanded their educational assistance or adopted admissions criteria that have helped address gender imbalance in certain educational fields. There are some gains identified but more need to be done.

Concluding Statements

In the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Digest, a statement has been made regarding the role of educational institutions in the elimination of sexist behaviors on campus: "The nation's colleges and universities occupy roles in our culture that impose unique expectations and opportunities. They are obligated to serve as moral exemplars by embracing diversity and inclusiveness while providing an environment free of debilitating harassment. They must lead by example in eliminating gender inequities among all segments of the academic community. They have also the important opportunity to shape the future by forging an ethos of enfranchisement, equity, and care."

It further states: "Colleges and universities are expected to provide learning and working environments wherein all members of academic communities may pursue their studies, scholarship and work without bias or intimidation." Definitely, sexism on campus is inimical to this end. Campuses need to develop policies, procedures, extensive training programs, and materials that will identify and prevent sexism in educational institutions. Conferences and symposia, like what WSAP has now done, should be promoted.

In spite of some initiatives to curb this problem, and

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