

Before “Sexual Harassment”:

Silence and Speech in U.S. Women’s Oral Histories

Estelle B. Freedman

Robinson Professor in U.S. History, Emerit
Stanford University
Stanford, California

Do not reproduce, circulate, quote, or cite this paper without the author’s permission.

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak today. It is a pleasure to return to Nagoya, and I am grateful to the Tokai Foundation for Gender Studies for arranging this event. As some of you know, I spent a formative summer in Nagoya in 1968 – working at the Kokusai Hoteru. I have never forgotten the kindness of the people I met then, and that hospitality has continued during my return visits. I owe special thanks to Nishiyama sensei and Takeda sensei for making this visit possible.

For the past two decades my research in women’s history has explored the changing meaning of sexual violence in the United States. In my 2013 book *Redefining Rape* I explored how legal definitions of rape transformed as part of social movements to achieve greater racial and gender justice. For the most part, in studying the political history of rape I relied on public sources such as laws, court decisions, and press accounts. Since writing that book I have been looking more closely at women’s memories of sexual assault and harassment. I have been trying to understand both silence and speech about these topics in the historical record.

My turn to investigating private stories of sexual violence took place in the wake of the 2016 U.S. elections and the subsequent expansion of the MeToo movement, which had originated in 2006. More precisely, the skeptical *reactions* I noticed as women spoke out about past experiences deeply troubled me. Critics questioned why women had not spoken up at the time. They implied—and sometimes directly asserted—that these women’s memories could not be trusted. The repeated doubts about why women had waited so long to speak out—including presumptions that the passage of time either falsified or negated their memories--

made me wonder how historical sources could help us understand both past silence and the decision to speak.¹

Neither women's delayed reporting nor the skepticism towards their retrospective accounts in recent years should have surprised me. In my historical research, I often encountered disbelief whenever women testified about sexual violence. Defense strategies in rape trials, for example, have long attempted to undermine the veracity of women's memories of assault, a practice that can discourage women from making police reports or going to trial. From personal experience as well, I had insight into the reluctance to report or even to remember. Over half a century ago, when I was in college, I did not tell anyone about my own experience of what we later termed acquaintance rape. I did not name it as rape for a full decade after it took place, and then I did not refer to it in public for almost another decade. For me, feminist analyses that framed rape as a form of sexualized power, rather than of individual shame, helped lift my silence. More recently, the cultural phenomenon of MeToo made me curious about what had produced the past cycles of self-silencing and social disbelief. Could historical research help us understand women's decisions not to speak, their delays in speaking, and the kinds of events that did or did not get reported in the past? In short, how could we place MeToo in the perspective of past dilemmas about acknowledging experiences of sexual violence?

As this overview shows, in my talk today I will first set up the research project and methods that resulted from these questions. Then I will concentrate on what I learned about women's memories of one topic--what we now call sexual harassment, in the era before it had

been named. After providing historical context and illustrating patterns in women's narratives, I conclude with thoughts on what influenced both silence and speech about sexual harassment.

Thinking About Sources

We know that public documents – legal cases and press accounts, for example -- provide only a small and unrepresentative sample of all instances of assault and harassment. In addition, these sources tend to favor formulaic narratives geared towards the legal strategies of courts or the journalistic conventions of newspapers.² Letters and diaries might reveal more private and timely responses to incidences of sexual violence. These sources, however, are more appropriate for biographical studies than broad social histories addressing trends over time, given the research obstacles to exploring a critical mass of such accounts.

I recalled another kind of source of personal experience, oral history. I had conducted several interviews in earlier projects in which the female narrators addressed sexually sensitive topics. In one case, the woman initially asked me to turn off the tape recorder when she described the sexual abuse she had experienced. At the very end of her interview, though, when I asked if there was anything else she wanted to discuss, she told me to keep the tape going. She then stated how much she had been affected by her father's sexual abuse of her.³ I became curious whether other oral histories contained such stories—of assault or harassment, and of women rethinking their own earlier silences.

Although no U.S. oral history projects have focused on sexual violence, it struck me that existing women's oral history collections could be a fruitful source for identifying sexual violence. Since the 1970s, feminist oral historians have attempted to include accounts of personal experience in interviews.⁴ In the past, it would have been a daunting task to read

through even dozens or hundreds of transcripts scattered in various archives around the country. However, over the past decade libraries have been digitizing their oral history transcripts and beginning to make some of them available online. We can now conduct searches of individual interview transcripts, and some collections enable searches across all interviews.

In 2018 I decided to test whether relevant search terms – or keywords -- related to sexual violence might help locate this topic in interviews. I experimented with a selection of digitized women’s oral history collections available online. The results produced more accounts of rape, assault, incest, and harassment than I had expected. Colleagues in the field of digital humanities suggested the feasibility of a broad textual “data mining” of digitized women’s oral history transcripts, across multiple collections, to provide a larger scale of research. For the past six years my colleague Dr. Natalie Marine-Street and I have been refining the methodology for that experiment. Finally I am reaping the benefits of this process in order to analyze the qualitative narratives of assault and harassment that our methods brought to light.

Let me be clear that the existing oral history projects I have consulted did intend to address sexual violence. Most of them recorded life histories of women, such as university graduates, workers, or activists. Their usefulness depends heavily on whether interviewers encouraged women to recollect sexual experiences. For many reasons interviews might not yield much evidence. Interviewers or narrators might be reticent about sexual topics or reluctant to revisit past sexual trauma. As feminist literary critics and oral historians have long noted, however, silence can be as revealing as speech.⁵ Even if few women provided accounts

of sexual violence, by locating a large enough number of interviews I might be able to explore a series of research questions:

- Under what circumstances did certain women did recall rape and harassment?
- What kinds of language and interpretations did they employ?
- How did these accounts change over time (by generations or by year of interview)?
- How did they differ across social groups (race, education)?

Today I focus on interpreting the qualitative narratives that addressed *sexual harassment* before that term was named in the U.S. in the early 1970s. Sexual harassment refers to unwanted and/or coercive sexual behavior that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work or educational environment based on sex. It also included the “quid pro quo” requiring sexual favors in exchange for educational or work opportunities.

Here is the language from the U.S. guidelines:

Before I explore the accounts of sexual harassment in the interviews, I will explain briefly the methodology for locating these accounts – I can answer questions about the methods after the talk.

Digital Humanities Methodology and Quantitative Overview

In 2018, Dr. Marine-Street and I created the **Stanford Oral History Text Analysis Project (OHTAP)**. We began by contacting archivists at a handful of universities that housed women’s oral history collections and requested copies of the digital files.⁶ The first batch of transcripts totaled almost a thousand interviews. Over the next year we acquired a total of over 2400 interviews, from eight institutions around the U.S. The interviews had been conducted between

1972 and 2018, with the earliest interviewees born in the early twentieth century.

Demographically, the interviews include almost equal numbers of Black and white women. For all races, the data overrepresents more highly educated women, who are more likely to have oral histories.

We employed a methodology for large-scale textual analysis of the interviews. Computer science students developed a program we call Winnow which we hope other scholars will build upon to search keywords about any topic with large sets of interview transcripts. Through iterative searches of our interviews, we refined the terms and located approximately 2,000 discrete references to sexual assault and/or harassment. These accounts appear in 18 percent of the interviews. That figure is by no means representative of the historical experiences of sexual violence. Rather it is a measure of how many, and which, women in the oral histories we accumulated referred to this topic.

The narratives included a range of stories. Some went back generations in family memory, such as stories of the rape of enslaved forebearers passed down in Black families (“My father's father was a white man. His mother had been raped, you see, on the plantation”). Some referred to childhood sexual assault (“I actually was terrified throughout the rest of my childhood about the prospect of being raped or assaulted after that incident”), and to the coming to consciousness of repressed memories (“It was traumatic. I had repressed it, and because we were talking about it in this group I remembered it, but . . . I wasn't ashamed of it anymore because every single woman in the group, every one, had either been raped or abused in some way, every woman.”).

Using a qualitative coding program (and many student interns), we were able to identify over 400 of these excerpts in 150 of the interviews related to the subject of sexual harassment.

The references to sexual harassment occur within eight percent of all the interviews.⁷ To measure change over time, we looked at both the birth year of interviewees and the year the interview took place. Looking at the data by the year when the interviews were conducted, we found peaks in the frequencies of sexual harassment speech in three historical moments: in the late 1970s, just after the term sexual harassment originated; after the testimony of Anita Hill in the 1991 U.S. Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas; and during the recent #MeToo movement.⁸ Looking at cohorts by the birth years of interviewees, we find, for more references to assault or harassment for each birth cohort. But looking separately at assault and harassment, and adding the factor of race, complicates the data. For example, a greater proportion of African American than white women mentioned sexual assault across cohorts, but note (left graph) a steeper increase in white women's speech for later birth cohorts. For the smaller number of references to about sexual harassment, neither race nor birth cohort provides as clear a pattern.

Exploring Sexual Harassment Narratives

I can elaborate on the methodology in the discussion period, but I want to concentrate for the rest of the talk on the *qualitative* potential of oral histories. I want to privilege women's voices as I map silence and speech about sexual harassment from the 1930s to the 1970s.

My central questions are:

- How did women understand what we now call sexual harassment *before* that term had appeared in the mid-1970s?
- What can oral histories reveal about the language, memories, and legacies of unwanted, coercive sexual behaviors in settings such as schools and workplaces?

Let me begin with one interview excerpt that raises recurring themes, and then I will map the broader findings. (Note that I usually refer to narrators by first name and last initial, unless they were public figures.)

During an oral history interview conducted in 2012, 86 year-old Rose L. recalled an incident during World War II, when she worked at a naval air station in California. The white, 17 year-old daughter of immigrants, she recounted what she called “a pretty good eye opener”:

Rose: Well, my boss told me one day, “Come with me.” Out at Moffett in Hangar One, and I went with him. We went up some stairs, and I thought, “I don’t know what we’re doing going up these stairs; I don’t know what we’re doing going up here.” But I went with him. Should I tell you?

[Interviewer]: Sure, yes.

Rose: So we went down this hallway, we were on the second deck on the side, and it was. . . kind of semi-dark and we walked down this aisle and he came to this doorway and he took a padlock—there was a padlock on it—and he [took] a key out of his pocket and he opened it up and he swung the door open and I’m looking over his shoulder. There was nothing in that room but a bed under the window, and I took off on one hot trot. And that was the end of that. I went back down to my bench and sat at my desk, and he came down and not a word was said ever again.

Until, that is, the final moments of her oral history. Rose recognized that “it was wrong. It was uncalled for. It shouldn't have happened” . . . It hurt, sometimes it hurt, but we just kind of put

it out of your mind and just kept doing whatever you had to do.” She also expressed pride at her younger self: “I was old enough to be able to handle it, and I was only seventeen.”⁹

Rose L.’s account speaks to the staying power of painful, private memories, despite public silence. It also echoes two central motifs that pervade these narratives: first, women assumed individual responsibility for sexual harassment, and second, rather than depicting themselves as victims, women frequently emphasized their ability to resist and to manage men. I think that these recollections provide insight into the disincentives to remembering and naming past sexual violence in this era when women lacked formal redress.

As the title of my talk indicates, I periodize my analysis “before ‘sexual harassment,’” by which I mean before the naming of sexual harassment. We know that unwanted and coercive sexual behaviors, as well as sexual taunts in public spaces, long predate that naming.

Over the twentieth century, however, expanded interactions between men and women on streets, in schools, and in workplaces created greater opportunities for sexual encounters.¹⁰ By the late 1960s, second-wave feminist consciousness-raising unleashed personal stories of unwanted sex. New equal rights laws in the U.S. (CRA 1964) enabled women to begin to report discrimination. In 1972 Title IX of the Education Act extended the act to educational institutions. Working women began to use the term sexual harassment to complain about intolerable sexual pressures, and books appeared in the late 1970s using that term in their title. By the late 1980s, several U.S. court rulings established sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination.¹¹

Although most of the women interviewees came of age before the use of the term sexual harassment, keep in mind that the interviews took place after the term first appeared in

the 1970s. Thus, we often located narratives when women framed their earlier unnamed experiences in the context of the subsequent legal category or contrasted past silence with later naming.¹² In a 2006 interview, for example, a white woman who had been a college student in the early 1940s referred to a professor who

had, I suppose the term would now be sexually harassed me. In other words, he made – when I was in his office – he made a very explicit, indecent proposal, and in fact, partially undressed himself. And I said, ‘No, thank you, very much.’¹³

A few of the interviewees also invoked the new terminology.¹⁴ One of them often asked former World War II workers questions such as “I wonder if there was anything that today we would call sexual harassment?” -- sometimes getting negative replies and sometimes drawing out rich stories, such as that of Rose L.¹⁵

Patterns of Remembering: Minimizers and Identifiers

While most interviewees and narrators did not address sexual harassment, I found that those who did placed their experiences within two frameworks. In one pattern, the *minimizers* doubted that harassment happened at all, or they acknowledged that it affected others but not themselves. In the second pattern, women clearly *identified* incidents of sexual harassment and sometimes provided detailed depictions, especially when they entered previously male-dominated work or educational spaces.

On close examination, these minimizers and identifiers often overlapped. Women occasionally shifted from minimizers to identifiers within an interview. Members of both groups stressed women’s personal responsibility for avoiding harassment, especially in describing the years before the mid-1960s. Most narrators relied on individual forms of resistance, sometimes

with a sense of pride for having avoided or managed unwanted advances – as did Rose L. Even women who expressed regret for having been harassed incorporated the dominant social message that it was their personal problem and considered it their fault. This recurrent motif of internalized responsibility may help explain why sexual harassment remained private for so long. The very pride expressed for evading coercive sex could make it even harder to remember, or it could discourage a self-incriminating revelation of unsuccessful resistance or reluctant acquiescence. Let's begin with those I call the Minimizers

A white female journalism student on the brink of World War II illustrated the minimizer approach when she recalled “no harassment at all. They just accepted us.”¹⁶ Another woman, who served in the Air Force during the Korean War, pointed to separate women's barracks, far from male soldiers, to explain why she “could not remember being harassed like they say they are now or anything.”¹⁷

Even narrators who denied experiencing offensive sexual behaviors regularly pointed to the ways in which women avoided harassment. When asked about men's attitudes towards women in uniform, a Naval Reservist acknowledged that “Some tried to take advantage of you” but they were not “pushy” if you knew “how to talk to them.” “If you said, ‘No,’ then they left you alone.”¹⁸ A Marine Corps reservist, Roberta T., stated that none of her group of friends “ever got harassed, sexually harassed or anything,” even while travelling on a cross-country troop train filled with male soldiers. “Isn't that amazing?” she mused, “I guess I must have scared them.”¹⁹

Roberta's T.'s explanation echoed in interviews in which other white women explained how they avoided attracting men's attention. College graduates invoked personal style, and

particularly attire, to explain their immunity, implying that women who dressed too provocatively invited trouble. A 1950s graduate of the all-women's Pembroke College acknowledged that there was "some sexist harassment or derision" when she took classes with men at Brown University, but she felt personally exempt as a science student: "We were serious students. We wore lab coats that weren't terribly sexy, I guess."²⁰ Asked if she had ever been harassed, a white southern professional woman replied, "Oh, I've heard about it but I did not have any personal experiences. Too many professional suits I guess, I don't know."²¹ Like the vets who felt protected by military protocol or their personal style, these women hinted that they had avoided what others endured.

This perspective recurred in minimizers' comments about managing men at a time when the professions and business remained old boys' clubs. Women who aspired to membership in that club often had to navigate sexual landmines. Even narrators who minimized the problem of harassment revealed a range of self-conscious avoidance strategies in these settings.

One interview conducted in 1985 illustrates well the burden of responsibility that professional women internalized to maintain their safety. Charlotte M. was one of the few women teaching at Yale University in the 1960s, before the school admitted female undergrads, back when – she recalled -- "there were no toilets for women" except in the library. Of the sexual attention of male colleagues, she stated, "these things are not difficult to manage."²² Yet subsequent examples in her narrative highlight the challenges of working in male-dominated professional spaces. Sometimes, Charlotte explained, she had to "try not to see somebody too much for a few days, just to, you know" -- here she paused, then continued: "But it really wasn't hard. I mean, nobody's going to rape you."²³

Professor M. set a high bar for misconduct -- violent assault. Yet she also admitted a time when she “got sort of caught by surprise” by a male colleague who, she then realized, “went after women.” She still stressed women’s responsibility for managing men’s “flirtatious behavior.” “You were certainly free”-- she paused before concluding, perhaps choosing her words carefully -- “to keep it at a certain level, without it pushing past that level.”²⁴ Her construction of freedom, which stressed individual responsibility for evading harassment or assault, insinuated a failure of will on the part of those women who had not avoided unwanted sexual attention.

Given the indications of more widespread experiences of harassment, why did so few women mention it and others minimize the effects in interviews about the era before naming? One explanation is simply that the practice remained rare, especially when fewer women worked for wages and still did so largely in gender-segregated jobs. The interviews, however, raise other factors that could contribute to unreported accounts.

Oral history can evoke both nostalgic and painful memories. When narrators filter the past they apply not only more recent terminology but also their deeply held, and sometimes idealized, constructs of people and institutions. For example, the mechanism psychologists refer to as betrayal blindness, by which we protect those abusers we depend upon, could have operated retrospectively in memory. For the first women entering male-dominated professions, when male mentors and colleagues necessarily played a critical role in their careers, narrators could have remembered more strongly their positive than negative experiences.²⁵

Selective memory can protect a narrator from uncomfortable recollections, as the reflections of a medical school professor about her training during the 1960s suggest. In a 2015

interview, a white physician, Sarah D., reported that she “never really saw gender as an issue.”

However, her female colleagues often did. As she explained:

My friend Karen . . . who was a trainee at the same time I was, reminded me of the day we came to Stanford. The room where the residents sat had lots of posters of Playboy pinups, posters of these braless calendar girls all over the walls. I didn't remember, but Karen told me we walked into the residents' room [and] said, "Take those down or we're going to put male nudes up on the wall." I said, "Karen, did we say that?" She said, "Yes we did, and they took them down." [laughter] So there probably was an environment of what today we'd call harassment . . . but I don't remember it bothering me.

Listen to Sarah's thoughtful explanation for not remembering:

Maybe I just don't put those things on my main menu. Maybe I just don't let them bother me. If they bothered me, I didn't put them in long-term memory.²⁶

She had successfully suppressed the distressing memory, but simultaneously she had temporarily lost the memory of the two women's cooperative, and successful, resistance to unwanted workplace sexual imagery.

Identifiers in Educational Settings

The second group of narrators, who I call “identifiers,” included women who recalled experiences in educational settings. Some felt resentment directed towards them for usurping male privileges as well as behaviors that sexualized them as a form of marginalization. A white undergrad during the 1960s, Wanda S. remembered a professor who both created a hostile climate and demanded sexual favors. She reported that he

sexually harassed all the women, wouldn't keep his hands off of us, [and] how you responded clearly affected your grade . . . there was no Title IX, there was no sexual harassment law, there was nothing. There was literally nothing that could be done.

Wanda did report the incidents to the department chair, and then to an unresponsive dean, who told her “that’s what you get if you’re going to be out in the world.”²⁷

During the late 1960s and 1970s, the embrace of “sexual liberation” by younger Americans reshaped assumptions about female consent, as admonitions to “make love, not war” encouraged sexual experimentation. Opportunities, and pressures, to have sex expanded, while the availability of oral contraception undercut fear of unwanted pregnancy as one reason to reject sexual intercourse. While many women experienced these changes as liberating, others found them troubling. Interviews with white and Black women coming into adulthood in this period more frequently addressed harassment, using terms that pointed towards later critiques of sex discrimination.

Several incidents detailed by a former Stanford undergraduate illustrate the confluence of these trends. Nannette G. described “an environment of daily sexual harassment.” When miniskirts became fashionable, she recalled, “I felt that the way I dressed attracted attention and it was unwanted attention.” Then she became a feminist and a lesbian.

I started wearing comfortable clothes that felt so good and so safe . . . One of my [male] classmates said to me, after I had started wearing these clothes, . . . “You know I liked you a lot better when you were wearing miniskirts.” . . . I just looked kind of horrified and I felt just invaded.

Unlike narrators who earlier had attributed their safety to sensible clothing, a college woman in this era might face ridicule for seeking a protective appearance.²⁸

Recollections of legal education frequently described classroom harassment as a way to pressure women students to leave the program. In the 1930s, one of the handful of women in her law school explained that professors “made me recite all the rape and seduction cases in the book in front of all those men,” while the male students stamped their feet and whooped.

“You see how people get to be feminists,” she reflected in her 1982 interview. Accounts of humiliating women law students by rape case recitations appear frequently enough over the decades to presume that law faculty considered them an acceptable rite of passage. Even after law schools lifted their gender quotas in the late 1960s, female students continued to face this humiliation. The first Black woman admitted to the University of Virginia Law School recalled that “whenever a woman got a question it had something to do with you know somebody being raped or some domestic crime.”²⁹

Sexualized hostility could be even more blatant in professional training. In 1974 Margery S. was one of seven women among 38 medical school graduates of the University of North Carolina. She was on her surgery rotation, assisting in preparation with several male residents.

We started the surgery before an attending [physician] came . . . And as they were doing the stuff, you know pulling the retractions and other things, they were trying to make [this] guy’s blood squirt at my breasts. They were sort of being competitive in terms of who could hit me closest to my nipple. . . . The guy ended up dying.”

When Margery told the attending physician what had happened, he seemed skeptical but then said it was unacceptable. Subsequently, however, she recalled, he “made it really, really hard for me.” She failed that rotation, but had a successful career and contributed to the women’s health movement.³⁰

Along with hostile educational environments, female graduate students faced quid pro quo demands from faculty. While at Howard University Law School, Sharon P--later a successful politician--had to extricate herself from the office of the faculty member who would confirm her scholarship because, she explained, he presented “clear pressure . . . in both his physical conduct and his verbal statements that there was -- this was a quid pro quo.”³¹ Graduate students found these overtures so unsettling that some left school, as did the future poet and

playwright Ntozake Shange. In the early 1970s she transferred to Boston University. “That's where I was first sexually harassed in school, but there wasn't a name for it then,” she explained. “There was nothing you could call it.” She felt so frightened by a professor’s advances that she dropped out, later calling it “a turning point” that kept her from pursuing a Ph.D.³²

Identifiers in the Workplace

In the workplace, as in schools, interviews across the century included the bitter lessons of losing or leaving jobs due to sexual harassment. Historically, African American women had higher rates of labor force participation than white women. The intersecting hierarchies of gender and race made them particularly vulnerable to harassment as well as assault. In a 1974 oral history interview, Modjeska S., then age 75, explained that when her paternal grandmother had been a teenager “after freedom” she was “evidently the victim of circumstances” while working as a nursemaid for a white family in Columbia, South Carolina. The head of the household impregnated her, resulting in the birth of Modjeska’s father. That family story influenced his decision to move his own young family from the city of Columbia to the countryside, she explained,

Because, at that time, he said that there was nothing for a young girl to do if she had to help the family out, except work as a nursemaid for white families. And he said that he wasn't going to have his daughters working in one of those homes. You see, that stayed with him.³³

From the Jim Crow South through the Great Migration, many other Black servants faced sexual pressure from male employers. Born in 1915, Pleasant H. recalled that as a young girl

I used to help a lawyer and, you know, some of them...when he started getting fresh, I quit and went somewhere else. Because, see, at that age, I began to mature; and as I said, men are just like pigs or dogs, they didn't figure I had enough problems.³⁴

Historian Darlene Clark Hine has suggested that the threat of inter-racial rape (or the stigma of intra-racial rape) motivated many Black women to migrate north. Hine also argues that in order “to accrue the psychic space” needed in their struggle to attain moral respectability, Black women developed a public “culture of dissemblance” that downplayed sexual trauma.

Evidence from oral histories reveal that despite public reticence, Black women privately acknowledged their vulnerability to sexual threats in stories passed down through kin.³⁵ Minnie H. provided a clear example of migration in response to harassment in an account handed down over two generations.³⁶ Because both the father and son in the southern white family where her grandmother worked were constantly “making advances,” her great aunt had “sent the money” to bring her sister north “because they didn't want [her] raped or violated or whatever.”³⁷

Professionally trained and northern Black women also faced sexual harassment. An incident recalled by a graduate of Rutgers University identified a sexual quid pro quo long before the law identified it. In 1938 Alice A. was looking for a teaching job.

An outstanding minister in the New York area had interviewed me, and I think of today, of sexual [pause] harassment. I went to see him about a job, and he propositioned me. So I said that I'd never get a job that way. So he wanted to know [pause] how'd I think a lot of the teachers got their job. I said, "Well I don't know how they got their job." But I said, "I'll never get one that way." And I remember coming home, and I was bitterly disappointed, almost in tears.³⁸

Along with retroactive naming, her narrative reveals the residual hurt felt, in her case almost 60 years after the event.

Over the twentieth century white women increasingly sought jobs in a workforce largely segregated by race and gender. By World War II hiring decisions for white female office workers often assessed applicants' sexual appeal as much as their skills, while popular culture generated risqué jokes about men's pursuits of secretaries.³⁹ A recent college graduate in the late 1930s offered a casebook account of a hostile work environment. Dorothy M. sought a job to support her husband's theological training but lasted only six weeks in the office of a Chicago credit company because of a male employee's suggestive language and dirty jokes. "And I was the brunt of them," she recalled, "and he was a short fellow who smoked big cigars and thought he was life's joy for women." Like other women workers who had the choice, she responded to harassment by quitting. When her boss asked her to return to the job, she declined.⁴⁰

Narrators such as Rose L. provide insight into why women did not report these encounters at the time. At one job she witnessed verbal harassment but thought, "Men are men, okay? . . . You just shut up. It was wrong but it was one of those things that happened . . . There was no place for us to go anyway. Who the heck cared?" The work culture and lack of recourse normalized these behaviors. As another wartime worker explained, "you never reported somebody being aggressive toward you . . . You just accepted, yes." Her avoidance strategy was "I was very snappy. I snapped back at them."⁴¹

Like other service women, Maggie G. distinguished between the need to put up with harassment at the time and standards that evolved later in her lifetime. A Chinese American woman who joined the Women's Air Service Pilots, she noted in her 2003 interview,

There was a lot of sexual harassment, but we just accepted it. . . [Now] You wouldn't accept it, the nonsense that I even went through when I started working . . . But that's the way society was.

When asked if “there was no recourse, then,” Maggie G. affirmed, “Oh, of course not. You gave in in order to continue.”⁴² One Boeing aircraft factory worker offered a graphic account of the forms of harassment.

[With] no sexual harassment law back there . . . you had to be really careful. Guys like to feel you up, get you in a corner. [Men] weren't used to working around women then. They would pinch your bottom, then squeeze your breasts; they would get you in a corner and try to kiss you. I mean really they were ravenous beasts . . . I mean you'd never put up with it now.⁴³

Nor would she likely have mentioned these events retroactively during her interview if the legal redress instituted decades later had not legitimized her complaints.

Changing Attitudes

After the mid-1960s, women interviewees seemed more willing to stand up to sexual hostility in the workplace. During their adult lives, the 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed sex as well as race discrimination in employment, allowing women to bring legal claims against their employers. By 1974 women workers and feminists had coined the term sexual harassment, which the media soon adopted.

Even within this new climate, oral history recollections for this period incorporated the theme of women's individual responsibility to manage men, sometimes differentiating between the strong women who could handle harassment and others who could not. I want to take the time to report one incident described by a woman scientist for the way it captures the sexual culture of the 1960s and how professional women responded.

In her interview, Dr. Lucy S. generally minimized the problem of harassment. She remembered vividly, however, one of the “difficult experiences” she faced, when her

confidence wavered momentarily. A white woman, Lucy had just received her Ph.D. in biology when she had the honor of presenting a talk at a weeklong scientific retreat to a predominantly male audience.

I remember it was at night. It was in the days of miniskirts. It was rare to have women around, and there I was. I got up on the stage to start my talk, and my [lapel] mic didn't work. I said, "Should I take it off?" And some guy--I'll never forget this--in the audience said, "Take it off. Take it all off."⁴⁴ And there I am, standing there alone on this stage, at night, in a dark room, with the light on me, and all these men. I burst into tears. I had never done that before. The tears were just streaming down my face.

Suddenly it got quiet in the room, and these guys had realized that they had crossed some terrible barrier. I sniffed and wiped my tears away, and I said, "Are you done, and are you ready to hear some science?" I took a deep breath, and I gave my goddamn talk. And that was the worst experience I had ever experienced.

The closing lesson she drew when she commenting on the story in her interview reaffirmed her belief in the importance of individual strength: "I figured if I could get through that, hey."⁴⁵

Sheer will, of course, did not always suffice, and several interviewees pointed to the need for support from other women, such as female supervisors. Though rare before the 1970s, women managers potentially troubled organizational gender hierarchy. In an incident that she recalled vividly half a century later, Shirley M., illustrated this point. One of a handful of Black women working in reservations at TWA airlines in the mid-1960s, she realized why her supervisor never assigned her the desirable day shift.

he would come around and touch you. Well you know men did that right? . . . Oh, and I said, "Don't touch me," and the young girl next to me she says, "Well he, you have to." I said, "No I don't have to, I don't have to," so I never got on days. And I'm wondering, I said, oh, that's 'cause I told him, "You don't put your hands on me."

Shirley waited until two women managers were present and then complained in front of the offensive supervisor: "You haven't put me on days because I wouldn't let you touch me." To her surprise, the company eventually demoted him. As the interviewer interjected,

“That's pretty good for that time period.” Shirley M. agreed, “For that time” -- that is, when neither law nor culture had identified sexual harassment as a form of workplace discrimination.⁴⁶

Conclusion: Why Historical Silence?

Through both speech and silence, patterns of memory emerge from oral histories with implications for understanding the reluctance of women to speak privately or publicly about sexual violence. Whether they minimized harassment or identified with it, women who spoke about the period before the formal naming of sexual harassment typically invoked personal responsibility and emphasized individual forms of resistance. Recurrent motifs of having to accept unwanted advances and having no recourse, along with hints about suppressing memories, provide insight into why most of those interviewed never mentioned sexually harassing behaviors.

A sense of inevitability, resignation, embarrassment, or fault for not avoiding the experiences of harassment could be powerful disincentives to remembering or retelling what had occurred. At the same time, the enduring nature and depth of the memories that some women shared disclose the lasting effects of past harassment, recalled even after long silences. These memories also vividly describe how seemingly petty, as well as overtly aggressive, sexual encounters functioned to limit workplace and educational equity for women in the era before the identification of sexual harassment.

The women who did remember sexual harassment that occurred before it became illegal also revealed an impressive range of resistance strategies. They snapped back, ran away

from the boss, evaded the professor, walked out on the job, and located male or female supervisors to back them up. For a few, harassment contributed to a lifelong determination to fight discrimination. While memories of internalized responsibility and lack of institutional accountability dominate these narratives, the recollections attest to the dignity and ingenuity of the women who faced down harassment in the era before feminists named, or laws prohibited, these unwanted and discriminatory behaviors.

Endnotes

¹ On the “memory wars” debate over the recovery of repressed memories see Janice Haaken, “The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychic Trauma,” *Signs* 21, no. 4 (Summer, 1996), 1069-1094 and Sue Campbell, *Relational Remembering: Rethinking the Memory Wars* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

² Recent crime data estimates of national underreporting of rape/sexual assaults include figures of 40 percent reported in 2017, falling to 25 percent in 2018. Rachel E. Morgan and Barbara A. Oudekerk, “Criminal Victimization, 2018,” U.S. Justice Department Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin September 2019, NCJ 253043 <https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/cv18.pdf>. A 2015 survey found that one in five women and one in 14 men in the U.S. experience rape during their lifetimes. S. G. Smith et al, “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey” (2018); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/2015data-brief508.pdf>. According to a 2018 survey, 81 percent of women and 43 percent of men experience some form of sexual harassment during their lifetimes. Stop Street Harassment, “The Facts Behind the MeToo Movement,” A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault, <https://stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Full-Report-2018-National-Study-on-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault.pdf>

³ Estelle B. Freedman, “‘Turn Off the Tape’: Dilemmas of Sexual Silences in Women's Oral History,” Paper presented at the Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, Sacramento, CA, April 13, 2018.

⁴ On women’s oral history, see Sherna Berger Gluck, “Women’s Oral History, the Second Decade,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7, no. 1 (1983): 1–2, and Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York and Cambridge: Routledge, 1991). For a rare project that focused on sexual violence, see Theresa de Langis, “Speaking Private Memory to Public Power: Oral History and Breaking the Silence on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence during the Khmer Rouge Genocide,” in Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki, Franca Iacovetta, eds., *Beyond Women’s Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 155-69.

⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 53; Rodney G. S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” *Archivaria*, September 25, 2006, 215–33; and Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, eds., *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). On the distinction between “silence” and “reticence,” see Lenore Layman, “Reticence in Oral History Interviews,” *Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 218.

⁶ The corpus includes the following collections: The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, *Rosie The Riveter WWII American Homefront Project*; Brown University, *Pembroke Center Oral History Project*; The HistoryMakers, Chicago; Rutgers University, *Rutgers Oral History Archives*; Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, *Black Women Oral History Project*; Oklahoma State University *Inductees of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame Oral History Project*, *Oklahoma One Hundred Year Life Collection*, *O-STATE Stories*, *Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project*, *Women of the Oklahoma Legislature*, and; *Oklahoma Native Artists*; Smith College, Sophia Smith Collection, *Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project*, *Activist Life*, *Alumnae Oral History Project*, *Voices of Feminism*; Stanford University *Alumni Interviews, Faculty and Staff and Miscellaneous Interviews, Nurse Alumni Interviews*; University

of North Carolina, Southern Historical Collection *The Long Civil Rights Movement: Gender and Sexuality, The Long Civil Rights Movement: The Women's Movement in the South, and Southern Women*.

This project would not have been possible without the collaboration of Dr. Natalie Marine-Street. We benefitted from a Digital Humanities Fellowship from The HistoryMakers (Chicago), and from Stanford University support through a School of Humanities and Sciences Cultivating Humanities Grant at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research, student internships through the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA) and the Program in American Studies, and guidance from the Center for Interdisciplinary Research and the support of the Stanford Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA).

⁷ Overall, about five percent of Black and seven percent of white women referred to topics coded sexual harassment. In comparison, around 17 percent of Black and 11 percent of white interviewees referred to sexual assault.

⁹ Rose L. interview, Rosie the Riveter, Bancroft Library.

¹⁰ For historical examples, see Kerry Segrave, *The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace, 1600 to 1993* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Co, 1994); Mary Bularzik, "Sexual Harassment at the Workplace: Historical Notes," *Radical America* (Sept 1978), 24-43; Daniel E. Bender, "'Too Much of a Distasteful Masculinity': Historicizing Sexual Harassment in the Garment Sweatshop and Factory," *Journal of Women's History* 15:4 (2005): 91-116; Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 109-201; Kimberly Jensen, "A Base Hospital Is Not a Coney Island Dance Hall," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26:2 (2005), 206-235; and Julie Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). On changing sexual standards, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), esp. Chapters 12-14.

¹¹ Lin Farley, *Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978); Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) and "The Logic of Experience: Reflections on the Development of Sexual Harassment Law," *Georgetown Law Journal* 90, no. 3 (March 2002): 813-834; Carrie N. Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 1st edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 27-48; Laura W. Stein, *Sexual Harassment in America: A Documentary History* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999). Legally sexual harassment is a civil offense related to discrimination typically charged against an institution for failure to address complaints adequately; rape is one of a range of sexually related criminal offenses charged against individuals. Key cases include *Barnes v. Costle*, 561 F2d 983, 989 (D.C. Cir. 1977); *Alexander v. Yale* 459 F. Supp. 1 (D. Conn. 1977); *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* 477 U.S. 57 (1986); and *Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools*, 503 S. Ct. 60 (1992).

¹² Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 94-123. On personal testimony, see Alexander Freund, "Confessing Animals": Toward a Longue Durée History of the Oral History Interview," *Oral History Review* (2014) 41:1, 2 and Suzanne Diamond, *Compelling Confessions: The Politics of Personal Disclosure* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011). On the politics of speaking out about sexual violence, see Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 2 (January 1, 1993): 260-90 and Tanya Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

¹³ Joyce R., interview by Derria Monique Byrd, March 22, 1995, in *Brown Women Speak: Pembroke Center Transcripts*, Pembroke Center, Brown University at Providence, RI (Hereafter *Brown Women Speak*, Pembroke Center). See also: Kristie M., interview by Jesse Marmon, May 29, 2006, in *Brown Women Speak*, Pembroke Center, and Sarah D., interview by Laurie Pantell, January 3, 2015, in *Stanford Historical Society Faculty and Staff and Miscellaneous Interviews*, Stanford Historical Society, Stanford University at Stanford, CA (Hereafter *Faculty and Staff*, SHS, Stanford University).

¹⁴ On oral history as a co-construction of interviewer and narrator, see Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* and Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). On the gender of interviewers, see Dana C. Jack and Kathryn Anderson, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," *Women's Words: Oral History and Feminist Methodology* (1991), 11-26

¹⁵ Edythe E., interview by Sam Redman, January 24, 2011 and Marilyn P., interview by Sam Redman, April 19, 2011, in *Rosie the Riveter*, Bancroft Library. On men interviewing female subjects, see Alistair Thomson, "Moving Stories, Women's Lives: Sharing Authority in Oral History," *Oral History* 39, no. 2 (2011), 73-82.

¹⁶ Barbara K., interview by Kurt Piehler and Donovan Bezer, March 3, 1998, in *Rutgers Oral History Archives*, Rutgers University at New Brunswick, NJ (Hereafter *Rutgers Oral History*).

¹⁷ Marie S., interview by Tanya Finchum and Jason A. Higgins, June 27, 2014, in *Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project*, Edmon Low Library, Oklahoma State University at Stillwater, OK (Hereafter *Spotlighting Oklahoma*, OSU).

¹⁸ Pearl D., interview by Shaun Illingworth, January 30, 2012, in *Rutgers Oral History*.

¹⁹ Roberta T., interview by David Dunham, December 30, 2011, in *Rosie the Riveter*, Bancroft Library.

²⁰ Lois B., interview by Juliet Smith, March 27, 1990, in *Brown Women Speak*, Pembroke Center. Doris H-S never felt harassed because she grew up with "a whole lot of brothers," so she would not "take it . . . if they make a remark." Doris H-S, interview by Ramsey, April 26, 1982, *Brown Women Speak*, Pembroke Center.

²¹ Martha B., interview by Joey Ann Fink, May 13, 2011, in *The Long Civil Rights Movement: Gender and Sexuality*, University of North Carolina Center for the Study of the American South, at Chapel Hill, NC (Hereafter *Long Civil Rights Movement*, UNC). One woman recalled a sheriff stating that women could protect themselves from violence if they would "stop dressing like sluts." (Lester L., interview by Joey Ann Fink, May 11, 2011, *Long Civil Rights Movement*, UNC.)

²² Charlotte M., interview by Dorsey Baker, November 10, 1985, in *Brown Women Speak*, Pembroke Center.

²³Cf.: "[F]aculty never sexually harassed me in any way. I didn't have people jumping on me." Joanne M., interview by Tracy Allison, May 28, 2015, in *Faculty and Staff*, SHS, Stanford University.

²⁴ Charlotte M., interview by Dorsey Baker, November 10, 1985, in *Brown Women Speak*, Pembroke Center. For evidence of unreported sexual harassment of early women students at Yale, see Anne

Gardiner Perkins, *Yale Needs Women: How the First Group of Girls Rewrote the Rules of an Ivy League Giant* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2019), 104-106.

²⁵ On betrayal theory, see Jennifer Freyd and Pamela Birrell, *Blind to Betrayal: Why We Fool Ourselves We Aren't Being Fooled* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013); and Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). Even those who do speak of violence can be unreliable narrators, depending on interview dynamics and the subject's level of trauma and recovery. See Freyd and Birrell, *Blind to Betrayal*, esp. Chap. 10, on the way disclosure changes personal understandings of past events.

²⁶ Sarah D., interview by Laurie Pantell, January 3, 2015, in Faculty and Staff, SHS, Stanford University.

²⁷ Joyce R., Brown Women Speak; Wanda S., interview by Jennifer Donnally, May 10, 2010, in The Long Civil Rights Movement, UNC. Wanda would continue to challenge discrimination in her later career as a lawyer and an active feminist—a perspective that may have sharpened this memory for her.

²⁸ Nanette G., interview by Natalie Marine-Street, September 29, 2018, in Stanford Historical Society Alumni Interviews, Stanford Historical Society, Stanford University at Palo Alto, CA (Hereafter Alumni, SHS, Stanford University).

²⁹ Elaine J., interview by Julieanna Richardson, November 30, 2006, HistoryMakers. She recalled comments to white women that "You're taking up a place a man could be in." See also Sharon Pratt, interview by Cheryl Butler, July 26, 2007, HistoryMakers. See also Margery L., interview by Julie Corman, April 3, 1982, in Brown Women Speak, Pembroke Center, Nancy C.-A., interview by Juliana Nykolaiszyn, in Inductees of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame Oral History Project, Edmon Low Library, Oklahoma State University at Stillwater, OK (Hereafter Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame, OSU.)

³⁰ Margery S., interview by Jennifer Donnally, March 8, 2007, in The Long Civil Rights Movement, UNC.

³¹ Sharon Pratt, interview by Cheryl Butler, July 26, 2007, HistoryMakers. Pratt's graduating class included one black man and six white women.

³² Ntozake Shange, interview by Larry Crowe, September 12, 2016, HistoryMakers.

³³ Modjeska Monteith Simkins, interview by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, July 28, 1974, in Southern Women Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC (Hereafter Southern Women, UNC).

³⁴ Pleasant H., interview by Marcia Greenlee, November 7, 1979, in Black Women Oral History Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University at Cambridge, MA.

³⁵ Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 914-915.

³⁶ Vera S., interview by Robert Hayden, June 24, 2005, HistoryMakers.

³⁷ Vera S., interview by Robert Hayden, June 24, 2005, HistoryMakers.

³⁸ Alice A., interview by Eve Snyder and G. Kurt Piehler, March 14, 1997, in Rutgers Oral History. Ellipses in transcript, indicating a pause before "harassment."

³⁹ Julie Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), Chapters 5-6.

⁴⁰ Dorothy M., interview by Tanya Finchum and Alex Bishop, March 18, 2015, in Oklahoma One Hundred Year Life Collection, Edmon Low Library, Oklahoma State University at Stillwater, OK (Hereafter Oklahoma One Hundred Year Life, OSU).

⁴¹ Rose L. interview, Rosie the Riveter, Bancroft Library; Helen A., interview by Sam Redman, February 21, 2011, in Rosie the Riveter, Bancroft Library.

⁴² Maggie G., interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Katheryn Stine, April 9, 2003, in Rosie the Riveter, Bancroft Library.

⁴³ Josephine W., interview by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, January 1, 1982, in Rosie the Riveter, Bancroft Library.

⁴⁴The phrase evoked striptease, as popularized in a 1960s television commercial for men's shaving cream using the soundtrack of "The Stripper." Jeremy G. Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (NY: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 170.

⁴⁵ Lucy S., interview by Michela Rodriguez, in Faculty and Staff, SHS, Stanford University.

⁴⁶ Shirley M., interview by Julieanna Richardson, August 24, 2013, HistoryMakers.