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## Upfront

### **Putting Women in Their Place: Most sexual harassment aims to keep women down, not sex them up**

By Alana Conner

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## ASEXUAL HARASSMENT



if harassers aim to enforce gender roles – and gender inequality – then they will zero in on women who defy the feminine ideal. “A very quick way to bring a woman down is to sexualize her, especially in work contexts where she’s trying to be taken seriously,” she says.

David Buss, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin, says that Berdahl’s dismissal of sexual desire as a motivation for harassment is “premature.” He cites “abundant empirical evidence” showing that men harass young, physically attractive, and single women – that is, the most sexually desirable ones – more than they harass older, less attractive, married women. Berdahl counters, however, that there is very little empirical evidence linking sexual harassment to physical attractiveness. She also points out that sexual harassment “usually does not involve anything that looks like seduction, but instead involves behaviors that reject, humiliate, and demean their target.”

Studies show that sexual harassment hurts women’s work performance and mental health. Organizations that want to protect their female workers from these outcomes should not tolerate harassment, says Berdahl. She says, “Cultures that conflate gender with roles,” such as where managers are men but frontline staff are women, “are where harassment is most likely to occur,” because men in these workplaces are invested in maintaining their higher status roles.

The solution is to desegregate workplaces so that men and women are equally likely to occupy each role. Although workplaces have desegregated somewhat, they have room for improvement. “Women are still second-class citizens,” says Berdahl.

—Alana Conner

## Putting Women in Their Place

*Most sexual harassment aims to keep women down, not sex them up*

Which woman is more likely to attract wolf-whistles, body gropes, and unrequited overtures: the warm and demure office sweetheart, or the aggressive and ambitious office upstart? Jennifer Berdahl, a social psychologist at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management, finds that the upstarts, not the sweethearts, attract more unpleasant sexual attention. From her findings, reported in the March 2007 *Journal of Applied Psychology*, she concludes that “men aren’t harassing women to get into their pants, but to put them down and keep them in their place.”

Berdahl presents three studies showing that women who violate traditional gender roles get sexually harassed more than women who conform to those roles. She first demonstrates that undergraduate women who describe their personalities as more assertive, dominant, and independent report receiving more nega-

tive sexual attention – such as sexist jokes, unwanted romantic advances, and mistreatment by spurned suitors – than do women who view themselves as warmer, more modest, and more deferent. Ruling out that the more assertive women are simply quicker to cry “harassment!” she then shows that all women, regardless of their personalities, rate potentially harassing acts as equally unpleasant. Finally, she demonstrates that women who work in traditionally male occupations, such as manufacturing jobs, are harassed more than are women who work in traditionally female occupations, such as jobs in community service centers.

These findings contradict the long-held notion that men harass women to express their sexual desires, Berdahl says. If this were the case, harassers would target women who are more sexually desirable – that is, who embody the demure female ideal. But