

## Reflection

### PHOEBE MORGAN

In 1979, the year that *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* was published, I was fired. I had been the front office receptionist for a small business in a large town. I was the only employee with a college degree, the only woman on the payroll, and the lowest paid worker. As such, it was my job to keep the coffee fresh and hot. I was also the only employee who did not join our clients at the local topless bar for drinks each payday. As the president handed me two weeks' severance pay, he lamented that while he liked me a lot, he had to let me go for two reasons. First, ever since I had arrived the sexual horseplay had escalated; as a result both decorum and productivity had hit an all time low. Second, I was a bad receptionist—my lack of humor and negative attitude toward men made for a chilly front office. I was Monica Lewinsky's age, living on my own for the first time and my new car payment required half of the pay I had just lost. I was devastated.

Even though the term "sexual harassment" had been coined five years prior, I had never heard it and I had no idea the law was on my side. But for the first time since college the lessons of my only feminist professor rang true. Two years before my firing I had confessed to her that feminism seemed irrelevant to my very successful (and quite brief) life. Couldn't she see the revolution was over? She replied by patiently explaining: "a feminist is not born but made, and someday, life will make you a feminist." It had indeed.

Ten years after losing that job I read the first page of *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women*. Like Yale law professor Reva Siegal and Stanford law professor Janet Halley (Shalit 1998), the experience was so profound that I can still remember the minute details of that moment. I was completing my second year of graduate school, working as a research intern in the Governor's Office of Women's Services. I was on my lunch break, sitting in the back booth of the Arizona Capitol's cafeteria. I was in a hurry to complete the week's requirements for a course on "Feminism and Justice." The professor had prefaced the assignment by asking us to consider how MacKinnon's work makes Marxism stand on its head. The more I read, the less I cared about how Marxism stood. *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* gave my trauma a name and bonded me to the millions of other women suffering similar fates (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981). More importantly, it told me exactly how the law should prohibit it and how I could have used law to regain if not my job, then my lost wages and a little of my dignity. If only I had known.

The discovery of *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* began my career in sexual harassment research. I continue to work in this area today and with each project, I consult *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women*. Like most novice researchers, I launched my career with a critique of MacKinnon's legal treatise. I sought to prove all the ways in which it was inadequate or plain wrong. Initially, I naively thought my road to a national reputation lay in joining the chorus of feminists and anti-feminists who blamed *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* for the inability of sexual harassment law to realize the book's promise. Each critique has given me a new appreciation of the book's exceptional explanatory power. Even anti-feminist Wendy Shalit (1998) admits the book succeeds at

least in articulating the irrefutable fact that most women remain unhappy about how men treat them. But, as MacKinnon's own criticisms of *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* remind us, dismantling the master's house with his own tools is an inherently conservative project and simply being right is no guarantee against failure (1995; 1991).

Once this collection becomes print, *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* will have been in print for a quarter of a century. In it, MacKinnon articulates with exceptional clarity how all women suffer from the sexual harassment of just one woman. Even today, the book accomplishes what subsequent scholars have attempted to do but failed: in everyday language, MacKinnon connects sexual violence with male domination, and then locates that nexus squarely in the workplace. She does so by drawing upon legal doctrine and case law. It has been twelve years since I first read *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women*. While I have grown well beyond the personal experience that resonated with the book, I have learned that *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* is one of those rare books you grow into, not out of.

## REFERENCES

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