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PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Why Women Still Like Clinton



Paula Jones is seen as a pawn in a war between powerful men. Women judge women more critically.

By DEBORAH TANNEN

In the wake of Paula Jones' decision to pursue her lawsuit against President Clinton, we are once again caught in a swirl of back-and-forth discussions about sexual harassment. Along with the lingering puzzlement about why each new allegation by a woman against the president did not lower his approval ratings (quite the opposite, they seemed to drive them further up) and about why women are still supporting the president in greater numbers than men came the question: Why aren't more women rallying to the cry of sexual harassment?

One answer that is given more weight by Judge Susan Webber Wright's decision to throw out the case is that women know it can be a war cry in a political battle, played out in a ritualized drama of conflict that I call the argument culture, in which the adversarial nature of our public institutions is exaggerated and abused.

Sexual harassment ceased being a women's issue the moment it began to be taken seriously. If an accusation of sexual harassment can destroy a man's career, then women can be used as pawns in fights between men. In an academic department, for example, a man who was locked in a power struggle with another man made the rounds of women in the department, asking if they had ever been treated by his rival in a way that could be construed as sexual harassment. They all answered no, and the man gave up.

But many people, men as well as women, believe that Paula Jones was used in just this way by political opponents of the president. And women may feel this betrayal more keenly, both for its exploitation of the woman in question

and for its debasing of the very serious problem of sexual harassment.

As the independent counsel investigation proceeds, women also may feel more keenly the betrayal of Monica Lewinsky by a supposed friend who secretly recorded her intimate conversations about personal problems; such conversations

are the bedrock of so many women's friendships.

Exasperated with public opinion, lawyers and pundits claim that Starr's investigation isn't about sex; it's about a pattern of lying. But equally exasperated average citizens feel it is about sex, and women have more reason than men to recoil at the dragging of unwilling women into court to testify about their private lives. This is a form of torment

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that is only being visited upon women in this investigation. Men are being forced to testify about their conversations with the president. Women are being forced to testify about their sex lives.

Women and men alike resist jumping on the bandwagon of what they see as a concerted effort by political opponents to discredit the president. But women are somewhat more likely than men to feel protective of someone they see being ganged up on.

With regard to Kathleen Willey's account, there are other reasons why women were more suspicious of her from the start. For one thing, women have their own experiences of unwanted

sexual advances to refer to, while men don't. When men project themselves into the scenario Willey described, they are likely to ask, "Is it plausible to me that a man in a position of power, finding himself alone with a woman he has reason to believe might respond favorably, would make a pass at her?" It is easy to see why many men might easily answer this question, "yes."

But women who measure Willey's account against their own experience ask, "Does this ring true to me, given how I think I would respond?" And there are numerous points on which women can answer "no." Some I have heard are: "She says that in an earlier encounter, she believed he was trying to lure her to his room for inappropriate contact. When a man does that to me, I don't forget it; I make sure not to be alone with him in the future." Another is: "She said she was worried that someone might come in. That's what you worry about if it's consensual sex. If he were doing something she didn't want, she'd only be thinking, 'How can I get out of here?'" Some say, "I would have slugged the guy; I don't care who he is."

None of these lines of reasoning are necessarily right; people react differently to similar situations. The point is that women think they can judge other women's credibility in this way, even though their judgments may be off.

Many people's continuing support of Clinton despite the charges of unwanted sexual advances says less about their definitions of sexual harassment than about their conviction that such allegations can't be evaluated apart from the context in which the allegations surface. In the current instance, the larger context is the ratcheting up of attack in the intertwined institutions of politics, law and the press and how that interferes with the running of the country at the same time that it corrodes the spirits of its citizens.

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