

by Sylvia Novac

Sexual Harassment of Women Tenants

There has been increasing attention given to the problem of sexual harassment in the context of the workplace, fueled by a handful of precedent-setting cases. The examination of sexual harassment in the housing context is not simply a parallel situation because sexual abuse that occurs in and around our homes threaten and violate us in unique ways.

Consider the case of one woman who had asked the superintendent in her apartment building for assistance to replace a broken light fixture. After making the repair, he pulled out his penis and suggested that she express her gratitude by sucking it. She refused and demanded he leave her apartment. He would not leave and verbally abused her. She had to leave her home and return when he had gone, knowing that he had a key to her unit and lived in the building.

The significance of safety in our home environment is of crucial concern to women. We have spoken of wife abuse and child sexual abuse mostly within the framework of patriarchal family relationships, but less frequently made the connections to our isolated and privatized housing forms as a parallel to that family model. What an irony that a woman who escapes such abuse at home may be subjected to similar behaviour as part of her rental situation!

The interaction of private property relations and gender relations takes on new meanings when coercive sexuality invades the privacy of women's homes, homes that frequently are the private property of men. In what was just a footnote to an article by American feminist law professor Catharine MacKinnon, she says, "We need to rethink sexual dimensions of property as well as property dimensions of sexuality."¹

In response to feminist advocacy groups who have flagged the issue of sexual harassment of women tenants, the Ontario Women's Directorate (OWD) is funding an investigation of the problem. In March 1989, the OWD sponsored a two-day consultation with eight women who

have expertise in the areas of violence against women, housing, and advocacy. Consensus among these women quickly resulted in a project plan that included research, community development, and law reform. We agreed on the need to promote widespread public education, grass-roots organizing, and specific legislative and policy change. To convince decision-makers to act we need to document the extent, nature, and consequences of this form of sexism in housing, and make recommendations for change.

The research project is being conducted by Sylvia Novac and Virginia Adamson, and will be completed in March 1992.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission has on record only a few complaints of housing-related sexual harassment. From tenant advocates we have learned that there is a tendency for women to keep such complaints to themselves until they are already under threat of eviction, at which point dealing with the sexual harassment in a landlord and tenant court is almost impossible and probably inappropriate.

Such cases will be followed by the researchers to document the barriers to justice faced by women. These stories, while painful, are also examples of women fighting back in the face of fear — true courage. They will contribute to a review of relevant legislation and policies, leading to practical recommendations for change, and to a greater understanding of how women cope with sexual violations.

The research will be multi-method: a provincial survey of women tenants; case studies and participatory group work (integrating consciousness-raising, experiential analysis, and direct action); and legal remedy research. Copies of the final report will be available after March 1992 from the Ontario Women's Directorate.

¹ Catharine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Volume 8, Number 4 (1983), p. 647.