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SYMPOSIUM

TEXTBOOK SEXISM: DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

Introductory Remarks*

Frances Olsen**

Good morning. I would like to welcome you all — students, faculty, administrators, alumnae, and others. And I'd like to give a special welcome to our out-of-town guests. We have speakers from as far east as Boston, and as far north as Edmonton, Canada.

About one century ago, there were a bunch of women teaching in academia, especially at the University of Chicago. These women believed that their success marked the end of discrimination against women in academia. They were determined to be just professors, not women professors. And so, the story goes, they were entirely even-handed and did not try to recruit and mentor women any more than men. And within a generation, the number of women professors dropped. The number of women receiving Ph.Ds dropped, and the number of women professors dropped further still, not to rise to the same level again until long after the rebirth of the American women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Over time, increased numbers of women be-

* This is a typed transcript of the introductory remarks delivered by Professor Olsen at the *UCLA Women's Law Journal Symposium, Textbook Sexism: Discrimination Against Women in Academia*. The *UCLA Women's Law Journal* would like to thank Professor Olsen for all of her constant support of the *Journal*, as well as her work and dedication in making the Symposium possible.

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came professors, in large part because of the demands of women students and also because of affirmative action.

Feminism was a mass movement of women and some male supporters during the 1970s. This mass movement played a major role in establishing women in academia and in improving conditions for women throughout the educational system. As social activism in general fell off during the 1980s and 1990s, the women's movement became quieter and less of a mass movement, less of an activist movement. During this time, academia continued to harbor feminists and, in some ways, to offer us a place to thrive. I'm reminded of those stories — possibly true, probably exaggerated — of monks, keeping learning alive during the Middle Ages in monasteries scattered throughout Europe.

The role and status of women students has been closely related to the role and status of women professors. The support has gone back and forth both ways. Sometimes students have carried much of the load. Many a tenure battle has been won for a woman professor because of the tireless work of women students and their male allies. Sumi Choi, who had wanted to be with us today, as a student at Berkeley played a major role in getting Marjorie Shultz tenure, reversing an earlier denial by the Berkeley Law School. At times, it has been the women faculty members who have spearheaded struggles to improve the situation of women students. Studies show that usually the best law schools for women students are the law schools with the largest percentage of women professors.

The situation for women students and women faculty is always intermingled. Schools have an ambience and that ambience can be more accepting of women or more hostile to women. If women faculty are given a hard time, usually women students will be also, and vice versa. As most of you know, a festering problem regarding misogyny and the role and status of women here at UCLA broke into the open in one of the first-year sections. It seems that an infantile but very vocal minority of men in the section were spending their time in class using the computer hook-ups to watch pornography on their laptop computers and to impose it on others, instead of trying to learn law. As the behavior became more aggressive and sexually harassing, some women in the class finally complained to the administration at the end of January, beginning of February. *Apparently*, until then, the administration and faculty had no idea what was going on. We should have known. The attractive, young feminist

teaching in the section in the fall had gotten unusually low student evaluation numbers, but no one in power seemed to question whether misogyny played a role. They just assumed she must have taught less well than the previous years. The predominantly male administration apparently misunderstood the situation and sent all students a gentle and tactful reminder to show healthy respect for others and to be sensitive to the risk of creating a potentially hostile, distracting, and uncomfortable environment. The dean set up a committee, he said, or assigned an existing committee to the job — to address the “proper use of computer technology” so that students will be aware of what is expected of them. And in the interim, he wanted everyone to be sensitive, to make the community comfortable for and supportive of all students. He ended with a conciliatory “we will all be better for it.”

Despite whatever may have been intended, the letter was taken as a *carte blanche* and the situation deteriorated into stronger and more open sexual harassment and verbal assaults. It is amazing how quickly there can be a switch from sexual innuendo and double entendres, trying to get women talking about sex, to open hostility — from “hey, baby!” to “bitch.” Rather than feeling reprimanded, some number of people felt empowered and validated and became more and more in-your-face and aggressive. One of the members of the *Women’s Law Journal* made an interesting observation to me yesterday. She mentioned that when some laptop computers were being stolen, the administration immediately took decisive action to encode numbers on the computers to make them less desirable objects to steal and to stop the stealing. Sexual harassment, on the other hand, is only dealt with by appointing a committee and urging people to work out problems.

All law schools have problems like this. All law schools have some infantile students and some students and professors who feel threatened by women and who lash out at women — all law schools. The difference lies in the administration and the faculty and how they deal with such behavior. And also how effectively students organize and how vocal male allies are willing to become and how well we work together and coordinate our efforts.

Much of the focus of this symposium is on discrimination against women teachers in academia. Yet, I would argue it is di-

rectly related also to questions of peer harassment and fair treatment of women students.

I've taught as a faculty member or visiting professor at some fifteen universities throughout the world, and I've seen a lot of variety and watched changes take place. Overall atmospheres can change very quickly, and the overall ambience of a school can have a dramatic effect on your own experience as an individual. Some of you heard Professor Hopkins from MIT speak when she was here on campus last term. One of the very interesting things she said, and she emphasized more at the dinner afterwards than in the public talk, was the change in atmosphere at MIT from the period when she was about to sue the school, had a complaint ready to file, to the point at which the school decided to be accommodating, to look into the matter honestly, and to make changes. And sometimes, one would think, when things get that hostile, how can you ever work them out? How can we ever be all friends again? And apparently, what happened at MIT was that, within a very short time, when the issue of discrimination against women was taken seriously and actual concrete steps were taken by the administration to change things, the whole institution changed in days. Not only did the women become less dissatisfied, but the senior women's work radically improved. They were able to focus on their science. We should always remember that little issues like discrimination against women in academia can have dramatic effects upon other things, like our knowledge of fish — I don't remember what Professor Hopkins' research is on, but something about fish. And if we have a major fish breakthrough, it may be because MIT acted in a responsible and effective way to end discrimination against women and to allow Ann Hopkins to get on with her research!

Finally, while I am speaking of ambiances at schools, I think the existence of the *Women's Law Journal* has a significant positive effect on the atmosphere at UCLA, and it greatly benefits the individual experience of so many of us. On the opposite side, a single misogynist professor and a small group of misogynous students can, if allowed to do so, significantly degrade the atmosphere of a law school. Balances shift over time, and a little bit of organizing and solidarity can make a big difference. Just as the shift between sexual innuendo and seeming attraction to "bitch" can be so quick, so too a situation that seems very disruptive and conflicted with just a little bit of a shift in the balance of power can become a situation of community, collective action, and eve-

ryone feeling really good about themselves. What it takes is a real change.

I began this introduction with a reference to academia-preserving progressive politics during the socially inactive 1980s and 90s. Well, the twenty-first century is upon us, and there is growing evidence of a rebirth of social activism. May this conference take spirit from this incipient rebirth and may it in turn contribute to the rebirth of activism throughout society. Welcome to UCLA Law School, and let the conference begin.

