ENDING SEXUAL ABUSE IN UNIVERSITIES

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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BIOGRAPHIES OF EVA TUTCHELL AND JOHN EDMONDS

Eva started out as a secondary school teacher and then worked for many years as an education adviser working with all age groups on gender issues.

Her book *Dolls and Dungarees* is recommended reading for primary school teachers. She has researched attitudes of teenage boys and published guidance for schools and colleges on disordered eating.

John was General Secretary of the GMB trade union for 17 years where he increased the representation of women throughout the union. He also served as TUC President. More recently John has focused on environmental issues, a more inclusive system of education and equal rights for women. He is a Visiting Fellow of King's College, London and a Visiting Professor at Durham University Business School.

Unsafe Spaces is the third book that Eva and John have written together. Their first, *Man Made: Why so few women are in positions of power*, is based on interviews with 115 successful women and was published in 2015. Their second, *The Stalled Revolution: is equality for women an impossible dream?*, studies the two most successful campaigns for women's rights in the twentieth century – Votes for Women and The Women's Liberation Movement – and suggests a pathway to a more equal and fulfilling society.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

During the coronavirus lockdown the dearest wish of most of us was to get back to 'normal'. But as time passed, the mood has changed. Rather than looking backwards, we began to realise that we should try to create a way of life which is better than the one we left behind. In our research we discovered that, for many people at university, 'normal' means a life blighted by sexual harassment and abuse. The number of incidents is shamefully high and most universities are not coping well. Universities should forget about 'normal' and be more ambitious. They have an obligation to ensure a greater level of safety for their students and their staff.

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PREFACE

We had no idea that sexual abuse was such a serious problem in higher education until, in the course of researching our previous book, *The Stalled Revolution*, we visited a London university. During our conversation with a member of the teaching staff, we were told that sexual harassment and abuse was very common on the campus – the word she used was 'rife'. When we expressed our shock, she suggested that we talk to a junior lecturer who had been assaulted by a senior colleague. Caroline (not her real name) was brave enough to tell us what happened to her, and her story is one of the many we tell in Chapter 2.

Once we began to research, it soon became apparent that sexual harassment and abuse in universities is far more prevalent and many of the incidents are much more serious than we had imagined. We decided that this largely unknown scandal needed to be exposed and solutions had to be found.

Our research has three main elements.

We **read everything** we could find on sexual abuse in universities. There was less than we expected although fortunately we were assisted by the valuable work of a few very distinguished scholars.

We made a **Freedom of Information (FOI) request** to all universities in England and Wales asking for the procedures which are used when complaints of sexual harassment and abuse are made. We also studied their policies. All 102 universities provided the information we asked for and we are very grateful for their cooperation.

The third element of our research is the most important. We conducted scores of **interviews** with people from all parts of the university community – students, academics, support staff, managers, administrators, Principals, Vice Chancellors and many victim/survivors. A number of organisations, including University and College Union (UCU), Universities UK (UUK), the Office for Students (OfS), the National Union of Students (NUS) and several Student Unions, were of great assistance.

We gave a **guarantee of confidentiality** to everyone we interviewed. We wanted to give victim/survivors a chance to speak without opening them to unwanted publicity and intrusive scrutiny. We also wanted to allow others, including very senior people, to speak freely without fear of adverse effects on their careers or their institutions.

Some interviewees have given us permission to use their names but, even in these circumstances, we have been cautious and only used a name when we are absolutely certain that the person concerned has taken full account of possible consequences. All the quotations are, of course, authentic and we identify what was said to us directly by using double inverted commas. We use single inverted commas for other quotations.

Early in our research we encountered a series of dilemmas about the language we should use. During the interviews we were told about a wide range of sexual misconduct. When we are sure of the nature of the abuse we use the specific term; we have avoided euphemisms as they can minimise the seriousness of the offence. Unfortunately, there is no word or phrase in common use to cover the whole spectrum of sexual misconduct including offensive language, sexual harassment, unwanted touching, stalking, unwanted sexual advances, sexual assault and rape. In this book we have used the term ***sexual harassment and abuse*** when we are referring to the complete range of sexually offensive behaviour.

We describe people who have endured sexual harassment and abuse as ***victim/survivors***. This is a clumsy term but we regard it as appropriate. People brave enough to speak to us about their ordeal are undoubtedly survivors but they also deserve to be called victims to emphasise their suffering and to avoid the common implication that they are complicit in the offence.

For similar reasons we use the term ***complainant*** to describe a person who has submitted a report of a sexual harassment and abuse and the phrase ***alleged perpetrator*** to describe the person whom the complainant has accused. It was suggested to us that we might instead use 'reporter' and 'respondent'. We decide against these terms as they are imprecise and tend to diminish the seriousness of the alleged offence.

When writing about complainants and alleged perpetrators and in other circumstances where the sex of the person is unknown we have tried to be **gender neutral**. Although fair, the weakness of this approach is that it tends to obscure the fact that, in the vast majority of incidents, the victim is a woman and the perpetrator is a man. For reasons that we explain later, it is impossible to give precise numbers but, on the basis of the data which are available, it is likely that women are the victims in over 90% of cases. Our decision to be gender neutral also causes occasional clumsiness in the language.

Early in our research we decided not to indulge in a 'blame game'. We give the names of the relatively small number of universities who are doing well, but we decided **not to name (and shame) universities** which are doing badly. In fact there are a large number of universities whose performance is poor and naming a few of the worst would be invidious and might tend to encourage complacency in the rest.

In any event naming and shaming usually produces a defensive response and our motive in writing this book is not to get into a series

of rows with universities but to press them to improve their performance. We write in the hope that, once universities better understand the gravity of the problem, they will address it more urgently and effectively than most have so far managed.

Many people helped us with information, ideas and opinions. We are particularly grateful to: Mags Alexander, Vicki Baar, Sally Barnes, Pauline Barrie, Anna Bull, Helen Carr, Rita Donaghy, Judy Dyson, Debbie Epstein, Michael Gold, Jayne Grant, Christina Green, Dan Guinness, Pierre and Etienne Hallien, Martha Jephcott, Susanna Jones, Linda Kirby, Sara Lasoye, Margaret Littlewood, Christine Megson, Amy Moran, Liz Nichols, Alison Phipps, Jack Rowland, Jan Royall, Amanda Sackur, Allan Savage, Heather Sevigny, Pam Taplow, Marinette Urvoy, Karli Wagener, Fiona Waye and Tom Wilson. Our Editor, Kim Chadwick, has given us great encouragement.

We agreed not to name our interviewees, but many of them will find their views and experiences described anonymously in the following chapters. Thanks to them all.

We also offer heartfelt thanks to the many victim/survivors who described their ordeal and its effects to us. For a number, this was the first time that they had told anyone.

We end with an offer. We have collected a great deal of detailed information about every university in England and Wales. If any university wishes to discuss these matters with us, we would be very happy to meet their representatives, in private if necessary. At the very least we could tell them about the practices and techniques which other universities have used, with some success, to reduce abuse and improve the culture of the campus.

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A Scandal Concealed

The story of sexual abuse in universities is long and often unedifying.

Fifty years ago, many universities had their 'Dirty Dick' or 'Lester the Molester' who seemed to spend a good part of their time touching or propositioning women staff and students. Other men mostly grinned indulgently at these antics. Women who complained got little support. 'It is just the way he is', was the normal response, as if an inclination to prey on women is as excusable as short sight or deafness.

In Oxford University the behaviour of two predators has passed into legend. The Principal of Lady Margaret Hall is said to have stormed down to Corpus Christi College and demanded that Eduard Fraenkel, a celebrated classical scholar, be stopped from chasing after her women students.

Then there is the behaviour of the prominent historian Norman Stone. His obituary records that he did not visit Oxford often to do any teaching but

> '…on the occasions when he did appear… Stone became notorious for groping his female students …'[1]

Not just in Oxford, but in many universities sexual misconduct came to be regarded as so common and so amusing that it found a

niche in fiction. In his introduction to a late edition of *Lucky Jim*, David Lodge remarks that a common theme of the so-called 'campus novels' was

> '…the taboo subject of sex between staff and students'.[2]

Whether taboo or not, readers seemed to appreciate the humour and few offered a word of censure. No wonder universities felt under no pressure to deal with the real-life miscreants in their midst.

Changes

Fortunately, in the 1970s the Women's Liberation Movement campaigned for a change in the way women were treated and Britain became rather less forgiving of sexual abuse. Universities changed too. Many more women were admitted as students, and some universities slowly began to look less like upper class boys' clubs and more like the community outside the campus.

Had this revolution been completed, perhaps universities would have developed the scholarly ethos of equality and mutual support which many hoped for. But universities have never entirely shed their gender bias. A sense of male entitlement still seems important in judgements about the value of research and in the appointment of senior academics.

If universities had changed more radically, perhaps sexual abuse would have withered away. But it never did. Instead, sexual misconduct in universities just faded from public view. It never seemed to appear on the political agenda. We asked a senior Minister who was in the Education Department during the early years of this century whether the issue of sexual abuse in universities had been brought to his attention. He told us that, as far as he could remember, it had never crossed his desk.

Even the scandals surrounding Savile, Weinstein and other notorious predators across society did not prompt much debate about what was going on in higher education. To awaken interest, the National Union of Students (NUS) conducted the first ever survey into sexual abuse in universities.

The results, published in 2010, were startling. A total 3,833 incidents were reported by 1,210 women. One in seven had suffered serious physical or sexual abuse; over two-thirds had suffered groping, flashing or unpleasant comments; a quarter had suffered unwanted sexual contact like kissing or touching; one in eight reported stalking. The NUS summed up the results by concluding

> '…higher education is not a safe place for women.'[3]

Surprisingly even this damning judgement did not produce much reaction in the media. Reports appeared in a few newspapers but there was little follow-up.

The change came in 2014 when *The Telegraph* commissioned its own survey and, in a series of powerful articles, demonstrated that sexual abuse was widespread in universities. Using the evidence from its survey, the newspaper approached Sajid Javid, then Business Secretary, and Jo Johnson, then Universities Minister, to demand that they deal with the problem. For more than six months nothing much happened, so *The Telegraph* threatened to run a campaign attacking the two ministers for ignoring a matter of great public importance. At that stage, Johnson wrote to Universities UK (UUK), the organisation representing universities, asking it, 'to take action to address the issues involved.'

The Telegraph regarded Johnson's initiative as feeble. It commented:

> "He's not publicly spoken about his commitment for change, and so far has achieved no concrete action."[4]

Nevertheless, feeble or not, UUK was rather affronted by Johnson's approach. Although a taskforce was set up apparently in response to Johnson's letter, UUK insisted that it was already tackling sexual abuse and that the taskforce was part of its ongoing programme.

Taskforce report

In 2016, the UUK Taskforce published its report:

> *Changing the culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students.*

The report concluded that the high incidence of sexual harassment and abuse in universities was 'unacceptable' and that universities should adopt a policy of zero tolerance. It drew attention to the 'positive action' which was being taken in a number of universities, but acknowledged that work to reduce sexual abuse was not 'systematic'.

The report made a range of recommendations,

> '…including (the greater involvement of) senior leadership, adopting an institution-wide approach, encouraging positive behaviours, working with the students' union and having effective governance, data collection and staff training.'

The Taskforce published 14 case studies and said it wanted to,

> '…facilitate the sharing of good practice across the university sector'

A Serious Problem

It was not difficult for the taskforce to reach the conclusion that universities had a serious problem and were not coping very well.

The Telegraph article which spurred the government into action had made very worrying claims. Nearly a third of female students, polled by the research organisation YouthSight, said they had been the victim of 'inappropriate touching or groping' and around 1 in 20 had experienced more intimate but unwelcome advances or been pressurised into sexual activity. Meanwhile one in eight male students had also been subjected to groping or unwanted advances.[5]

Public Health England commented on *The Telegraph* article by declaring that the situation was 'unacceptable.'[6]

Sarah Green, director of the End Violence against Women Coalition, was even more explicit.

> 'We currently have a situation where women in the workplace are accorded more protection than young women who live as well as study at university… This cannot be allowed to continue.'[7]

Meanwhile, a major scandal was developing in Sussex University, and it began to attract media attention at about the time the Taskforce was drafting its conclusions.

In December 2015 a senior lecturer at Sussex was charged with assault. He had beaten the postgraduate student with whom he was living and was convicted of the offence in the following June. The university did not suspend the senior lecturer until nine months after he was charged and only then after considerable criticism in the media.[8] When challenged, the university said, wrongly, that there was nothing the university could do until sentencing had taken place.

Many people in Sussex university were outraged by the university's apparent lack of concern. Faced with massive internal criticism, the incoming Vice Chancellor asked Professor Nicole Westmarland of Durham University to conduct a review. Her report was damning.

She exposed many examples of poor practice and said that the university had made its decisions on the basis of bad advice.

Media interest had now become intense. Newspapers were noisily researching the issue – inviting women who had been abused to contact their news desks. *The Independent* followed the Sussex case closely and was scathing in its criticism. *The Guardian* focused on the fact that the Sussex case concerned an assault by an academic on a student with whom he was sleeping. It found that abuse of this kind was common in universities. The first sentence of its article reads:

> 'The scale of sexual harassment and gender violence by UK university staff has been likened to the scandals involving the Catholic church and Jimmy Savile in accounts shared by more than 100 women with the Guardian.'[9]

Surveys

The years since 2016 have been filled with testimony from students and staff who have suffered sexual abuse. A number of important surveys have been conducted by the NUS, the Universities and College Union (UCU), national campaign groups and activists in particular universities. They all indicate that there is a major problem. Most show that the incidence of sexual abuse is high and is not diminishing.

In February 2018, the campaign group Revolt Sexual Assault, in partnership with The Student Room conducted a survey of 4,500 students and former students from 153 different institutions. It reported an appalling situation:

> 'Almost two thirds (62%) of students and graduates have experienced sexual violence at UK universities…

> This figure rises to 70% of female respondents, 48% of whom have experienced sexual assault, and 73% of respondents with a disability, where 54% have experienced sexual assault… A third of students (31%) felt pressured into doing something sexual.'

In 2019 the campaign group Brook commissioned an online survey conducted by Absolute Research. It was emailed out to thousands of students across the UK. A total of 5,649 replied and the results are based on their responses. The main conclusion is that

> '…more than half of UK university students across the country are being exposed to unwanted sexual behaviours such as inappropriate touching, explicit messages, cat-calling, being followed and/or being forced into sex or sexual acts.'[10]

The main form of abuse identified in the report is inappropriate touching. A total 49% of women said that they had suffered this abuse. The figure for men is 3%.

We also studied surveys conducted at particular universities. In one small university college over three quarters of women students replied to a Student Union questionnaire and just over half of them said they had experienced sexual assault. Another survey of a bigger cohort of students managed a response rate of close to 50%, and more than half of those replying said that they had suffered sexual harassment or assault. In 2017 *The Sun* newspaper carried out a survey in Durham University and, under the headline *Campus Sex Shame*, reported that:

> 'A shocking 48 per cent of female undergrads at Durham claim to have been attacked.'[11]

The NUS's 2010 report[12] had found that some students were being sexually abused by university staff. In 2017 the NUS conducted an

online study in conjunction with the campaign group 1752[13] to explore this issue more fully.

A total of 1,839 current and former students took part. 4 out of 10 current students had experienced at least one instance of 'sexualised behaviour' from staff. Women were twice as likely as men to have suffered such sexual misconduct. Gay, queer and bisexual women were particularly likely to have been touched in a way which made them feel uncomfortable. Postgraduate students were more likely to suffer abuse than undergraduates.

Accuracy

There are differences between the results from these various surveys but they all reach the same conclusion: each survey shows that a very large number of students have suffered sexual abuse at universities. Sir Michael Barber, Chair of the Office for Students (OfS), described the survey results as, 'disturbing'.[14] This might be a careful understatement. Taken at face value, the survey results suggest that universities face a problem which is so serious that it could reasonably be described as an emergency.

The reaction of the universities to the survey results has varied significantly. Coventry University used the research carried out by the NUS[15] to reinforce its call for urgent action. On the other hand, the majority of universities made no public comment on any of the surveys. A few have cast doubt on the figures. One major university questioned the validity of the polling methods used in one of the national surveys and refused to circulate the questionnaire to its students.

The important question is whether these surveys give an accurate picture of sexual abuse in universities. One obvious concern can be dismissed very quickly. Surprise has been expressed in some