

Women, Power, and Rape Culture: The Politics and Policy of Underrepresentation

By Bonnie Stabile and Aubrey Leigh Grant
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The #MeToo movement made considerable strides in raising awareness of the continued widespread nature of sexual harassment and assault. As we take stock of progress made, it is imperative to memorialize our fight—for the purpose of reflecting on how far we have come in creating gender equity—as well as how far we have yet to go. *Women, Power, and Rape Culture* documents women's struggle to advance within American government. The book argues that a central factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in government is the normalized culture of sexual harassment and assault by powerful men in those spaces.

In *Women, Power, and Rape Culture* the authors, Bonnie Stabile and Aubrey Grant, expand their prior work together on gender equity in the government arena. Their previous research examining the impact of fake news on women in politics and the role of the rape myth in the media in sexual assault policy provided a clear entrée into the topic. The book takes a wider breadth, providing dedicated discussions on sexual harassment and assault in each branch of the U.S. government, with an added discussion focused on higher education. Each of these chapters is motivated and informed by a theoretical application and empirical analysis.

In their examination of the executive branch, the authors draw on text data extracted from former president Donald Trump's Twitter feed. Their analysis eloquently summarizes the incendiary and gendered language Trump used throughout his campaign and presidency to characterize his female political opponents as unintelligent, unattractive, emotional, incompetent, and untrustworthy. The authors make the case for how these insults constituted harassment and contributed to the delegitimization of the first woman in the United States

to win a presidential nomination by a major U.S. political party, Hillary Clinton. Publicly casting female politicians with gendered terms mobilizes a culture of sexism against them leading to political losses, with simultaneous losses for gender equity.

In a chapter on higher education, the authors use the concepts of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007) and the social construction of target populations (Schneider and Ingram 1993) to expose the inadequacy of policies to protect women from sexual harassment and assaults on campus. The authors' interviews with campus sexual assault advocates surface the limitations of Title IX. Although Title IX has long been the primary mechanism for addressing sexual assault on campus, it was never intended for such use. Its initial limitations were only exacerbated by Trump-era Title IX regulatory changes that centered on men's rights. The authors argue that the lack of protection from sexual assault on campus leads to lower educational attainment and reduced professional success that would otherwise propel women into positions of political power.

Moving to the judiciary, the book concentrates on U.S. Supreme Court justices whose confirmation hearings were marked by accusations of sexual harassment and assault. Recounting the experiences of Anita Hill, who courageously testified at Clarence Thomas' confirmation hearing, and Christine Blasey Ford, who dared to speak out at Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearing, sets the stage for understanding how male political elites who perpetrate and downplay sexual harassment and assault can actively undermine policy efforts to achieve gender equity. Through their analysis of Thomas and Kavanaugh's Supreme Court decisions and opinions, the authors show how both have systematically undermined women's rights in their rulings. These rulings

contribute to further silencing women and actively create barriers to advancement.

In their final analysis of the legislative branch, the authors draw on Kingdon's multiple streams framework (Kingdon [1984]1995) and data on sexual harassment and assault on Capitol Hill. Providing a thorough inventory of complaints against named and unnamed legislators on both sides of the aisle, the authors argue that these experiences of sexual harassment and assault prevent women from achieving their fair share of representation in Congress. They also provide a useful summary of the evolution of the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995 from its initial inception to its #MeToo era reform, passed in 2018. Horrifyingly, prior to the 2018 reform, any congressional employee wishing to file a complaint of sexual harassment had to first undergo 30 days of counseling and 30 days of mediation, constituting a 60-day "cooling off period." Championed by U.S. congresswomen and roused by the #CongressToo movement, the reform improved the process considerably. And, in the years since the #MeToo movement, we have seen a significant increase in female representation in the U.S. Congress, even if women remain underrepresented relative to the proportion of the U.S. population.

Overall, *Women, Power, and Rape Culture* provides an impressive compendium of data documenting the issue of sexual harassment and assault in government and politics. With this book, no one can deny the widespread nature of the problem or claim that we have come close to solving it. The book usefully highlights the many ways in which policy and law have tried, but continue to fail, to protect women from sexual harassment and assault. Importantly, the government falls short of protecting women from these experiences because the elite men who dominate our government are too often those who perpetrate harassment to begin with.

Most research on sexual harassment comes from the business context and academic research on sexual harassment and assault in the government remains sparse. This book provides a strong foundation and is a must-read for anyone seeking to do work in the area. There are some important ways this work can be furthered. First, the authors center their discussion on the experiences of women ha-

arrassed by men. However, we know that sexual harassment and assault does not just affect women. Female politicians have been accused of sexual impropriety, as the authors note, and male politicians have been accused of sexually harassing and assaulting other men. Better documenting these instances can extend the salience beyond sexual harassment and assault being a women's issue. Second, while the book does much to report the problem, solutions remain elusive. By virtue of their argument, the authors suggest that greater female representation in government is the answer. The literature tells us that while proportionate representation is necessary, it is insufficient. More research is needed to explicitly lay bare the links between sexual harassment, gender representation, and gender equity such that we can harness our collective agency to break them down.

While the average student may find the book's academic arguments challenging to traverse, advanced students seeking to understand gender disparities in government will find it useful. For instance, both women's rights activists and women working in the legislative, executive, or judicial branches of government seeking to advocate for greater protections will find the book to be a beneficial read. Importantly, the book will corroborate government employees' personal experiences of harassment and assault in the field. The book will also provide readers with an informative summary of 1) the state of policy and legal affairs regarding sexual harassment and assault, including current shortcomings, and 2) quantitative and qualitative evidence ready to wield in support of further reform. In this respect, *Women, Power, and Rape Culture* is a rewarding read for anyone seeking to equip themselves to become a source of change toward greater female representation and gender equity in government.

References

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