On Campus

Raising Strong Sexual Citizens

Two social scientists discuss their groundbreaking research on consent, power, and assault on Columbia's campus.

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|
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In their book *Sexual Citizens,* Jennifer S. Hirsch, a professor of sociomedical sciences at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health, and Shamus Khan, the chair of Columbia's sociology department, take a probing yet empathetic look at the intimate lives of Columbia undergraduates and the pervasive problem of sexual assault on campus.

Your book is the result of years of research on Columbia's campus. How did you design a study on such a sprawling, controversial subject, and what sets your work apart?

Hirsch: What distinguishes *Sexual Citizens* from much of the other research that's done on campus sexual assault is the method: the book draws primarily on ethnographic research, which included more than six hundred hours of a technique called "participant observation," in which our team of researchers spent time with undergraduates in dining halls, dorms, sorority and fraternity houses, locker rooms, bars, coffee shops, and other spaces where students congregate, observing what went on and reporting on what they saw (of course, they always identified themselves as researchers). That was combined with 151 in-depth interviews with undergraduates averaging about two hours each, as well as seventeen focus groups. Our team spent three semesters deeply embedded in campus life, and we hope readers feel that reflected in the book.

The ethnographic research for *Sexual Citizens* was part of a much bigger project, the Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation, or SHIFT, which I codirected with a colleague and friend, clinical psychologist Claude Ann Mellins. SHIFT also conducted a survey of sexual practices and attitudes e-mailed to 2,500 undergraduates (which had an astonishing response rate of 67 percent) and a quantitative daily diary study that lasted sixty days and included 427 students. Our research was guided by two advisory boards — one made up of faculty and administrators and one of undergraduate students.

How do you define the term "sexual citizen," and how does it relate to sexual assault?

Hirsch: Sexual citizenship refers to people's right to say yes to the sex they want and no to the sex they don't want, as well as their understanding that other people have an equivalent right. Upholding those rights is highly relevant to sexual-assault prevention. In many instances we saw heterosexual men who were acutely aware of their own sexual needs but less attuned to their partners' rights to sexual self-determination. Clearly we have failed to educate young people on how to have sex without hurting someone else. We won't achieve effective sexual-assault prevention unless we talk to young people about sex in ways that acknowledge their sexual citizenship.

Along with sexual citizenship, your taxonomy of undergraduates' sexual lives includes two other key concepts — "sexual projects" and "sexual geographies." Can you explain?

Khan: One interesting discovery we made was that often (though not always), people committing assaults thought they were having consensual sex. So we realized we needed a better grasp on the reasons young people seek out sex. Basically, the term "sexual project" is the answer to the question "What is sex for?" And the young people we studied turned out to have many different sexual projects. Sometimes sex was for pleasure, sometimes to increase their status within groups, sometimes for a new experience or to comfort a partner. We want young people who read this book to ask themselves, "What is my sexual project going to be?" And for us, understanding the variety of young people's sexual projects and how they might lead to sexual assaults was essential.

Hirsch: The third concept, "sexual geographies," relates to the way space produces opportunities for sex and vulnerability to sexual assault. Consider campus dorm rooms, where sex and assaults often happen. There are four pieces of furniture: a bed, a dresser, a desk, and a desk chair. If students go back to a dorm room, they can't both sit in the desk chair, and if both sit on the bed, there can be a sexual connotation. One response might be, "Don't go back to someone's room unless you want to have sex." But we look at sexual assault as a public-health issue; our focus is on changing the environment. So our takeaway is, let's come up with safe spaces where students can go, say, at two in the morning, that will enable them to have the kinds of interactions that they want to have.

Is it fair to say that neither of you puts much faith in the policy of "affirmative consent" — i.e., requiring a definitive yes from each partner to continue sexual activity?

Khan: Encouraging affirmative consent is important, but it's insufficient.

Hirsch: That sort of simple educational intervention, whether affirmative consent or something else, is not really A-game public-health work. A lot of students come to campus with such an astonishing level of sexual ignorance that a session on consent is like starting with calculus when you can't even count to ten. It's a vast oversimplification of the complexity that is sex.

What else, besides your public-health perspective, makes your approach different?

Khan: Most of the attention in sexual assault has been on what to do *after* a sexual assault occurs — how to adjudicate assaults, how to punish a perpetrator. Our focus is on prevention, on reducing the likelihood that assaults happen in the first place.

Hirsch: There's so much fear in the conversation around campus sexual assault, and obviously the risks are real [in the SHIFT survey, 28 percent of women, 12 percent of men, and 39 percent of gender-nonconforming students reported being sexually assaulted after entering college]. The book includes stories of great suffering. But another way our work is different is that we come at the issue with hope and compassion. We engage in a way that doesn't simply try to scare people. If all we do is say "He's a horrible person" when we hear about a senior man in a fraternity who rapes a freshman woman after she has clearly said no, we don't get anywhere. What if we back up and ask, "Who taught him to ignore women? What kind of family raised him, and what kind of school system failed to educate him to hear women's voices, to be so unaware of the power he deployed in that situation?" Only sitting in judgment doesn't lead to solutions.

You argue that unwanted sexual contact is fundamentally about inequalities of power, not just in relation to gender but also class, race, social status, and sexual orientation, often in ways that intersect. Can you speak to that?

Hirsch: We make two points broadly about the need to think differently about power. We look at power that is situational, where one student is older than another or drunker than another or considered "hotter" than another. And then there is power that reflects social advantage. Gender is clearly a form of that; most sexual assaults are committed by men and experienced by women. But gender is insufficient to understand the entirety of this issue. Race is big too. Every single one of the Black women that we spoke to had experienced unwanted, nonconsensual sexual touching. *Every single one*. That statistic cannot be understood only from a framework of gender. It illustrates the need to center race in any discussion of sexual-assault prevention. I like to think that the book is a jumping-off point for considering all kinds of inequalities.

Khan: The lack of respect for Black women's bodies was notable. And this was among Columbia students. That's not to suggest that they're exempt from racism, but they are an incredibly progressive group. Yet still we see this American context of race and power playing out in a willingness to violate the bodily autonomy of others.

The book also includes the experiences of African-American men who are afraid of being falsely accused of sexual assault. There was, for instance, an affecting story about a Black student who had a consensual sexual experience yet nonetheless felt the need to secretly record his partner afterward to have proof of that consent.

Hirsch: Black men who shared their stories described acute racialized fears of false accusation that didn't just reflect their experience as Columbia students but what it's like to be a Black man in America. The way students navigate sex and consent is inseparable from the relative privilege or disadvantage that they face in the world.

Khan: Yes, the Black men we spoke to were concerned not just about false accusations but about what it means to be accused in an American justice system that they feel is systematically biased against them.

How were you able to get students to open up to you about such intimate topics?

Khan: The way that we engaged students — as the experts on their own lives — was certainly critical to the project. For example, SHIFT's undergraduate advisory board helped us figure out how to ask questions and how to reach students in ways they would actually relate to. They helped us decode student language — what does it mean when people say "hook up," for example? — and they served as ambassadors for the project, testifying to its legitimacy. We had all kinds of students on the advisory board, from people involved in Greek life to the head of No Red Tape, the anti-administration protest group. Bringing them in was essential. And through that work, our team built relationships with many students; they spent time with them in dorms, on the bus to athletic events, in fraternity basements, and in spaces of worship. We recruited students for interviews and focus groups through student interest groups, articles in the student paper, flyers and other on-campus presence, personal referrals, and targeted e-mails.

Hirsch: But more generally, what we saw was that our research tapped into a need: students wanted to tell their stories, as a way of helping create solutions and also to feel that their experiences of suffering were recognized. It's notable how many students approached us asking to be interviewed. For example, when SHIFT sent out an e-mail about the survey to the entire undergraduate student bodies of both Columbia and Barnard, we were somewhat taken aback to receive responses from many individual students saying that they wanted to participate in a confidential interview because they had a story to tell.

Some of the students' stories are excruciating to read — and must have been even more so to hear firsthand. You note that every member of your research team experienced some form of "vicarious traumatization." What was that like?

Khan: No question, it was a lot. Jennifer and I tried to make sure our team felt supported and to acknowledge that feelings are part of research. All our weekly meetings began with a mental-health check-in where we'd spend time talking about how everyone was doing. But as painful as it was to hear and hold those stories, we are mindful of how much harder it was for the students who lived them. The broader point here is that engaging with the emotional lives of our subjects is a fundamental part of the ethnographer's job, which is to try to understand people's points of view and why they're acting as they're acting. That's also important from a public-health perspective. It's not helpful to say, for example, "Why don't these people just stop smoking?" or "Can't these obese people just eat less?" As Jennifer mentioned, we aim for empathetic understanding of how people get into the situations they're in.

You say in the book that a young woman who is not in college is probably at greater risk of assault than a college student. What are the implications of your work beyond the academic setting?

Hirsch: One of our fundamental policy recommendations is comprehensive age-appropriate sex education. Not every worker in America goes to college, so employers and policymakers need to think of sex ed as workforce development. A basic skill workers need is the ability to have respectful interpersonal interactions. Instead of thinking that clicking through a PowerPoint presentation will teach a new employee not to harass others, let's use the twelve years of education we have before that person gets the job. And sex education should be a fundamental element of the #MeToo policy agenda.

Khan: This is not just a school problem: it's an everybody problem. And for parents wondering what they can do for their own kids, I think our book provides them with a neutral narrative terrain in which they can have those otherwise awkward conversations. It's easy to imagine parents and kids reading many of the stories together. So rather than telling a child what to do, a parent can say, "Let's talk about Luci and the way she was treated by that fraternity guy. What's your take on the situation with Adam and his boyfriend? What might a good plan B look like for Charisma when she's stuck out in Brooklyn, far from campus?" Just creating that bit of distance can make communication easier.

You must have had enormous support from the Columbia administration to conduct this study and make the findings public. How did that come about?

Hirsch: I initially brought the idea for the research project to Suzanne Goldberg, the executive vice president for university life, and after that conversation, Claude Ann Mellins and I began to develop it. Suzanne is the person responsible for managing the campuses' sexual-assault response overall, both in terms of prevention and adjudication. She understood right away that this was a great opportunity for both the University and the field. And it demonstrates the power of having high-level feminist leadership. Shamus and I have been on a massive campus book tour, and I feel proud of Columbia, because not many universities have made such a substantial commitment. I mean, every campus is doing something about prevention, but it's different to lay down resources and say, "Let's figure this problem out, and let's generate a new kind of solution."

Hirsch and Khan spoke with ABC News chief medical correspondent Jennifer Ashton '91CC, '00PS on campus earlier this year. Watch the full interview:

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