

Brave woman takes on sexual harassment

A story that gripped the imagination of the American people. But women felt the real issue was hijacked.

The names of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas are not ones the American society will easily forget as they were imprinted on the minds by a very powerful media - one that digs in and blows up whatever side it pleases. In this case, many of the mainstream, male-owned newspapers and TV stations leaned over to sympathise with the accused, a high profiled judge, Mr Clarence Thomas.

The protagonist in the story is Anita Hill, today a law professor at Oklahoma University, who worked as an assistant to Thomas at the Department of Education and later at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). This was during the years 1981-1983.



A student giving emotional support to Anita Hill during the hearing.

When Clarence Thomas was nominated as a judge to the country's Supreme Court by President George Bush, Anita Hill disclosed that she had been sexually harassed by Thomas during the years she had worked for him. The FBI investigated her charges and the case was brought to the Senate, whose duty it was to approve or disapprove of the nomination.

What followed in the mainstream press, and by members of the Senate was an intensive probing into the integrity of Anita Hill, leaving the actual person under question, Judge Thomas' credibility virtually unscathed.

Hill claimed that Thomas used to talk about sex to her, giving graphic descriptions about pornographic films he liked. She said he also described his own

sexual prowess to her. He tried to press her to go out with him. She refused.

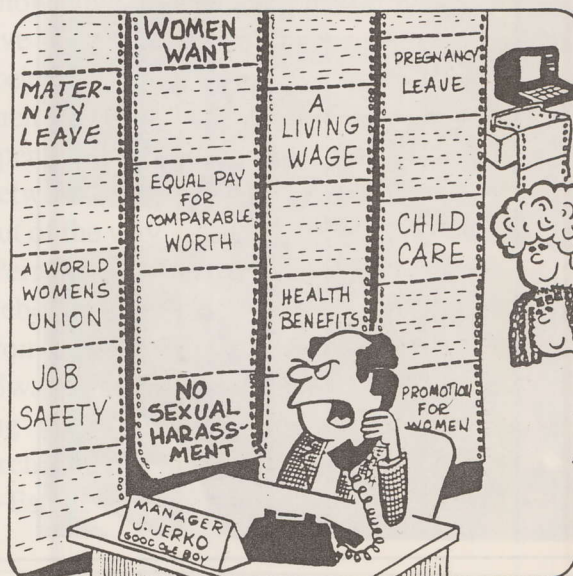
In the spring of 1983 Hill could not stand the verbal harassment any longer and found herself another job. Because of their similar professions, Hill had contact with Thomas on various occasions. During one such meeting Thomas told her that if she ever told anyone of his behaviour it would ruin his career.

After two weeks of questioning the two parties, in late October, 1991 the 98 percent male Senate approved Thomas as a judge to the Supreme Court. They voted 52 to 48 to confirm his appointment. Of the two female senators, Republican Nancy Kassebaum voted for Thomas.

In feminist circles the Hill v. Thomas events were closely monitored, hundreds of petitions were drawn up and thousands of dissenting voices were heard. One of the many questions voiced was why certain information such as photocopies of Thomas' credit card transactions with a pornographic video shop was not accepted as evidence.

Many people also felt the issue became a struggle between the Democrats (who mainly believed Anita Hill was telling the truth) and the Republicans, who favoured the Bush nominee.

Speaking from a womanist point of view, Carol Greitzer, Councilwoman of New York City, had this to say: "We've lost the battle of the Supreme Court. But now millions more understand something about the nature of sexual harassment. Already, harassment complaints to the Human Rights Commission have risen fivefold."



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