

Situating knowledge in silence. Tracing sexual harassment policy at the Freie Universität Berlin

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Abstract: Using oral history interviews and primary source documents from the late 1980s and early 1990s, this article positions the slow evolution of sexual harassment and assault guidelines at the Freie Universität Berlin (FU) within a global, intersectional feminist debate on power and silencing. Activists from the FU Women's Representative office, Sexual Harassment Working Group, student body, and faculty were loud in their demands for such guidelines, which had already been codified in the academic landscape of the United States. By tracing the available documentation from this time, this article paints a picture of institutional power, knowledge production, of who benefited and who did not.

Keywords: Institutionalization, Intersectionality, Power, Sexual Harassment, University

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Introduction: “Something that dumb people do”

In 2019, a widely read Berlin magazine was reluctant to accept my pitch for a feature on sexual harassment at Berlin universities because “without actual cases (= details), I’m afraid there’s no story”, the editor-in-chief at the time wrote to me.¹ When I responded that I knew of people who had firsthand experience, but I would not write anything that could potentially identify them, they responded, “We need actual cases.” With an uneasy feeling and a pit in my stomach, I found someone who was willing to go on record with their “actual” case. There I sat across from a woman in her early twenties who had come from the United States (U.S.) to do a degree at the Freie Universität Berlin (FU), nodding in a way that I hoped evoked compassion and absorbing the details of her pain as she exhaled plumes of smoke into the late spring sun. She – let’s call her Julia – recounted how a male superior in her department had sexually assaulted her. Leaning over the flimsy garden table at the Prinzessinnengarten community garden in Berlin’s Kreuzberg district, Julia strained a bit to be heard above the ever-present drone of Berlin construction to describe the sheer shock she felt. He was in a position of power over her and did what he did so casually, in front of colleagues and students. Julia had done her undergraduate studies in the U.S. and, after the traumatizing experience with this superior, recounted feeling that German academic culture significantly lagged in the will, effort, and capability to punish perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault compared to the U.S.

Julia was not alone in this impression of Germany’s higher-education system. Having shared a similar academic trajectory between the U.S. and Germany, I was shocked – but not surprised – that Julia’s story mirrored a handful of others that I had heard since moving to Berlin in 2017. When I interviewed the speaker for the *Bundeskonzferenz der Frauen- und Gleichstellungsbeauftragten an Hochschulen* (BuKoF) [Federal Conference of Women’s and Equal Opportunities Officers at Universities], Solveig Simowitsch, also for the magazine article in

1 These are direct quotes from e-mails between me, the editor-in-chief, and the managing editor at the magazine, which will remain unnamed. Neither of the two works in these positions anymore.

2019, she told me that the heads of German universities had a singular mentality about the topic: “They assume this can’t happen here, that sexual harassment is something that dumb people do, who don’t know better.”² This mentality also seemed to undergird the magazine editor’s need for “details”, the assumption being that without them, readers would not believe that it was a story important enough to tell or bad enough to care. Similarly, it is the same mentality that I, and fellow activists, have seen reinforce barriers to instituting change at the university level; if it is not a problem, then it does not require a solution. In 2024 the overlapping cultural reaches of journalism and activism began to feel like a groundhog day of colliding timelines, as in my academic research I found that this same reluctance to acknowledge the need for sexual-harassment and assault guidelines also underlay FU policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Like Julia, I also completed my undergraduate studies in the U.S. academic system, where sexual-harassment trainings are ubiquitously used by higher-education institutions receiving federal funding to meet the Title IX requirements of the Education Amendments civil-rights law passed in 1972 (Htun et al. 2022). Observations I made as an anti-sexual-harassment activist during my graduate studies in Germany built a rough scaffolding for this article, my archival research as a pre-doctoral researcher and interviews as a journalist provided the bulwark. The present paper traces how the FU’s glacial pace of instating sexual-harassment and assault guidelines stands in opposition to activists’ vocal and clear demands. I introduce the FU case study with a survey conducted by Claudia Toelle and Kristine Dreyer in 1994. Centered in literature on the production of ignorance, on how power hierarchies situate knowledge, and on what kinds of knowledge are allowed to disperse while others are silenced, this paper analyzes the FU as a case study through a global, intersectional feminist lens with the U.S. as a comparative starting point. Based on primary-source analysis, oral-history interviews, and methodological reflection, I trace the gaps in institutional response to activist demands for reform in sexual-harassment and assault policy at the FU in the late 1980s and 1990s. The sometimes diverging, often converging threads of my professional, personal, and academic life have led me to a global-historical and intersectional feminist analysis of what I did and did not find for this paper; I find that in laying these threads bare, the knots become analytically useful. The work of untangling, through the sources and my own perspective, has led me to the questions that I address in this paper: At what point does institutional silence become institutionalized silencing? What were the demands at FU and what was the response by the FU administration?

2 All interviews except with Julia* were conducted in German and translated by the author.

Who benefited from the knowledge that was silenced and who did not? What was said, recorded, and preserved, I argue, becomes as crucial to this investigation as what was *not*. These activists were just as aware of their U.S. counterparts as Julia and I were, the documented sources show.

The 1994 study: Modern demands and generations silenced

Working with primary-source documents that have sat in cobwebbed basements for over thirty years, I had to resist the journalistic impulse to keep pushing, keep looking for another source to piece together the story – surely, with just a few more months, I would locate the FU’s recorded responses to activist demands in the 1990s. Building on existing archival research by research-group colleagues and two years of my own documentation, the gaps tell their own story: whether intentional erasure or bureaucratic byproduct, the years of rich and active exchange among university employees, students, and activists did not immediately lead to comprehensive sexual-harassment and violence guidelines.

Flipping through dusty cardboard boxes filled with flyers, letters, meeting minutes, and newspaper clippings at the FU General Students’ Committee (AStA) archive in Dahlem, Berlin, in fall 2024, one specific document title grabbed my attention: *“Sexuell belästigt. Studentinnen berichten über ihre Erfahrungen mit Dozenten”* (“Sexually harassed. Female students report on their experiences with lecturers”). Published in the fall of 1994, the study reported on the experiences of 10 women at the FU who had been sexually harassed (Toelle/Dreyer 1994). Claudia Toelle and Kristine Dreyer conducted this lesser-known study under the purview of the then Women’s Representative, Christine Färber (Harrison/Toelle/Dreyer 2025). Toelle and Dreyer told me in an oral-history interview that they initially found it challenging to find participants because of how taboo the topic was in the early 1990s, but eventually, 10 women agreed to be interviewed about their experiences, which mostly had taken place when they had been between the ages of 23 and 25 (Toelle/Dreyer 1994).

Having sat in meetings about conceptualizing better resources and protections for students just a couple years prior, I found the study’s student responses to echo the voices of my contemporaries. The recommendations written by the researchers on what sexual-harassment measures the FU should instate could just as easily have been written in 2026 instead of 1994. Collated from what the participants themselves suggested, the study included a range of suggestions, from stronger measures, such as that all perpetrator names be made public at the FU, and less punitive ones, such as that new students receive an overview

of definitions and resources at welcome events. The study also included preventative measures with focus on education and increasing the conversation on all levels, among students, faculty, and administration, as well as protecting the anonymity of those who report sexual-harassment cases (Toelle/Dreyer 1994). One recommendation in particular made my insides tighten, a simple bullet point stating that anyone operating in a teaching capacity at the FU should be required to attend mandatory sexual-harassment training. There, in black and white, was the same request that I, along with fellow students and faculty had made at the same university over thirty years later.

By the time I sat down with Julia in 2019, I had already hit many walls in the bureaucratic labyrinth of German university administration. From across flimsy community-garden tables in Kreuzberg to weighty wooden desks in Dahlem, I sat across from people positioned at various points of the university power hierarchy, locked in debate, discussion, and explanation of Germany's inadequate protections against sexual harassment and assault. With the pages of the 1994 "Sexually harassed" report in my hands, I deflated under the emotional weight of what bonded us, those fighting the same fight across decades, the exhausted anger of generations betrayed. When the group of activists I was a part of in 2018 asked for mandatory training at the departmental level, we were met with righteous indignation and claims of bureaucratic impossibility. In my oral-history interviews with Dreyer and Toelle in 2025, they agreed with what they had found in the early 1990s to be a simple, pragmatic request, one that was shared by the participants in their study as well as others working on the topic at the time. Had these measures been instated in 1994 – built upon in combination with other protective measures and updated regularly to go beyond gendered stereotypes – an increased culture of awareness at FU could have spared countless victim-survivors.³ Friends and colleagues could have stepped into fruitful careers without the many sleepless nights, dissociated stupors, and tearful breakdowns caused by the trauma of perpetrators and their protectors.

Sources and methodology: Positioning power

After I included Julia's account in my 2019 feature, the magazine editors informed me that they would not publish my work because, in this case, Julia's superior (working in a non-tenured position) was fired from the university for his misconduct. Because he had faced repercussions, there was "not enough of a

³ The psychological impact of these experiences is well researched and documented; the long-term implications are well known (see Cipriano/Diede/Holland 2022). For discussions on the efficacy and impact of sexual-harassment trainings, see Antecol/Cobb-Clark (2003) and Tinkler/Li/Mollborn (2007).

story". I made clear that I was not willing to hunt for a "worse" case, that I did not find exploiting trauma to be ethical nor necessary.

As Carol Hagemann-White posits, when writing about violence especially, a "neutral" stance does not exist. To claim one would ally with the perspective of the dominant group, the perpetrator. Emotionality in this work, she writes, does not stand in the way of sound research but does require a high degree of classification, reflection, and commitment to ethics (Hagemann-White 2016). Jill Lepore argues that those who investigate the lives of others operate only under the "illusion of distance", be it as microhistorians, biographers, or journalists (Lepore 2001, 140). My work is guided by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism's Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma mission on trauma-aware journalism as well as the intersectional feminist goal to give voice to silenced narratives, those from actors with less institutionalized power, less agency. I do not believe that these stories require input from those who dominate the media landscape and historiography; they have said enough.

This also means that I will not be describing acts of sexual harassment or violence, as this is often used as a way to relativize certain acts over others. Describing details of sexual harassment and violence can reproduce harm. For this approach, I draw on advice across disciplines, such as from literary critic Elaine Blair, who has written on the meaningful goal of avoiding a "voyeuristic reading", from senior journalist and editor Jina Moore on exploitative storytelling, and from Julie Wheelwright on "bearing witness" (Blair in Wheelwright 2025; Moore 2011; Wheelwright 2025).⁴

Tracing the accounts by those who are not included in this dominant narrative also involves excavating the process of silence and silencing – of producing ignorance and knowledge – and therefore of power. Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, in their 2008 edited volume "Agnotology. The making and unmaking of ignorance", ask who benefits from certain forms of knowledge being obfuscated, intentionally or unintentionally, and who suffers. Ignorance does not just *happen*, they argue (Proctor/Schiebinger 2008); it can be intentionally designed and orchestrated, thinning the line between ignorance and – I argue – active silencing.

4 Important work has been done on the political nature and power of naming violence when it arises, as one way to counteract the erasure that has kept stories hidden and voices silenced (Frazer/Hutchings 2020). Equally, vibrant and important debates about the terms used to describe gendered violence are ongoing; this discussion gets all the more complicated when discussing one form of gendered violence between sources in various languages. Nuanced differences exist in legal, activist, and scholarly definitions. Kathrin Zippel (2006) describes how these culturally framed differences also shape how guidelines and protections are enshrined, and by what mechanism. For the purposes of this paper, the translated source term from the 1994 study will be used: sexual harassment and assault.

Within the intellectual discussion of agnotology⁵ – expanded to gender studies and popularized by Londa Schiebinger – Nancy Tuana and Marilyn Frye question how ignorance production reifies certain structures of power (Frye 1983). Tuana posits that existing scholarship is prejudicial and gives “cognitive authority” to certain groups that have access to knowledge decided by a sexist, classist, ageist, racist, ableist, and androcentric world. Feminist epistemologies help us break out of these limitations, she states (Tuana 2006). “If we are to fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of factors that account for why something is known, we must also understand the practices that account for not knowing.” (Tuana 2004, 195) The inverse is also true, Tuana argues, building on Frye’s work: systems of oppression construct and maintain ignorance (Tuana 2004). This case study of the FU during the late 1980s and early 1990s shows that those with the most power remained silent, deafeningly so. Their silence led to ignorance, accidental or manufactured, and a glacial change to the status quo.

Contextualizing comparison: A “legal-regulatory route” versus “statutory-corporatist path”

As an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I rolled my eyes at the online sexual-harassment training that we were required to take as students – what was the point? Like Harvard University’s 2018 decision to adopt mandatory sexual-harassment and discrimination training for students, the types of online courses I had to take made enrolling in classes contingent on a perfect quiz score (Halper 2018a). Although they seemed to me to be an unnecessary and awkward waste of time – as, arguably, most things often do to an 18-year-old – online training courses are a way for federally funded institutions to abide by Title IX of the Education Amendments civil-rights law that bans discrimination based on sex in education programs (Htun et al. 2022). Since its passing in 1972, Title IX has become embedded in the nuts and bolts of U.S. universities; every federally funded university must have at least one Title IX coordinator (United States Courts n. d.). Gender sociologist Kathrin Zippel (2006) outlines how the U.S. may have come to be a “forerunner” in codifying sexual-harassment and assault policy, but cases are often navigated through a “politics of fear” under which employers prioritize avoiding litigation over gender equality.

5 I would like to express my deepest thanks to Sarah Bellows-Blakely for introducing me to this concept. It has further been applied to gender-studies investigations by Bellows-Blakely (2023; 2025).

There is no clearly defined race to an agreed-upon finish line. Between Germany and the U.S., Zippel (2006) specifies, feminist goals and methods have diverged, adapting to cultural differences and pragmatic enforcement. Reporting sexual-harassment case numbers can both illuminate and problematize any U.S.-centered progress narratives, as some surveys report an increase over recent years – parsing if this is due to elevated comprehension of the issue or the political climate of perpetrator impunity is beyond the scope of this paper (Cantor et al. 2015). Julia and I agreed that although online sexual-harassment quizzes felt perhaps performative, maybe ineffective, they still at least imbued us with a clear understanding of an essential terminology that we found lacking in Germany.

In neither country was the trajectory of legal, feminist, or political evolution on sexual harassment and violence completely unidirectional. When the U.S. began codifying sexual harassment as sex discrimination in the late 1970s, followed by Australia and Canada in the 1980s, civil-rights activists were able to apply the relatively open legal system's focus on the individual to legal rights for marginalized groups (Zippel 2006). The U.S. took what Zippel defines as a "gender-sameness" approach, modeled on contemporary race theory, according to which gender should not count in regard to equal access in the public sphere, whereas postwar West Germany built on the existing public-policy understanding of "gender difference", which meant that women were defined first and foremost by dependent domestic roles. Zippel investigates how the U.S.'s definition of sexual harassment crossed the Atlantic and ultimately took on different meanings when applied through the avenues of German criminal and labor law (Zippel 2006).

Modern-day Germany adopted the European definition of sexual harassment, understood as a violation of "dignity", while the U.S. codifies sexual harassment as discrimination, based on concepts of personhood. Both definitions delineate sexual harassment as "unwanted" behavior, but the way that these definitions are enforced in policy diverges (Zippel 2006). Because, as Zippel outlines, activists in the U.S. were able to harness the courts for their feminist aims in the 1970s, these spaces have remained the primary regulatory organs – usually through civil-rights litigation and punitive damages to punish employers who violate the law, through a "legal-regulatory route". This depends on people's filing complaints to keep their employers accountable, whereas Germany's "statutory-corporatist" pathways place trust in employers by assuming they will create policies in accordance with the law and in collaboration with unions (Zippel 2006). The implications of these approaches can vary in how they affect

workers within different employment contexts; in Germany, the responsibility of enforcement is decentralized among individual employers instead of being monitored by specific legal bodies. This dependence is exemplified in the decades-long battle to instate sexual-harassment and violence guidelines at FU; sources show that even after the democratic bodies within the university structure had passed guidelines, ultimate power rested in the hands of the university president to enforce them. As an employer, it was up to the president's discretion to decide what was appropriate.

Sexual harassment and assault in FU feminist discourse

Primary-source documentation paints a vivid picture of a rich dialog between feminist activists on West-German university campuses during the early 1980s. Some of the key actors at FU brought what they learned in the U.S. to West Berlin, expanding the nodes of communication across global channels. First as a graduate student and then later as a professor, Dagmar Schultz advocated the need for sexual-harassment guidelines at FU as early as 1982 (Deutschlandfunk Kultur 2020). Referencing women's studies in the U.S., she described how everyday sexism in German universities upheld patriarchal control within academia and society and criticized the lack of quantitative data available on sexual harassment at the time (Börgerding/Schmid 2024). In 1986, Schultz and Hagemann-White published a survey on the working conditions "from the perspective of those affected" (Hagemann-White/Schultz 1986). In order to further research on sexual harassment, however, funds had to be secured at the institutional level. As relevant in the 1980s as it is today, the financing of certain research plays a central role in what knowledge is silenced and what knowledge is allowed to be uncovered and dispersed. As Schiebinger, Proctor, and Tuana argue – and as any scholar researching within the realm of gender studies especially is well aware of – funding, after all, is power (Schiebinger 2008; Tuana 2006).

In her poignant and nuanced account of experiencing sexual assault by a superior in front of colleagues, Asli Vatansever (2023) untangles the threads of intersecting power dynamics in cases such as these. In the moment, rejecting the perpetrator could have risked her job, her legal status permitting her to stay in Germany, and future funding. The perpetrator operated with the confidence of impunity, while Vatansever navigated the mental gymnastics of how to safely extricate herself without risking offending him. "Full professors in Germany indeed possess virtually the same rights over their precarious juniors as a feu-

dal lord did over his serfs", she writes (Vatansever 2023, 149). Within academia, perpetrators and those who protect them can hide behind the transitory flow of short-term work contracts and a student body that will move on after graduating. I have seen this play out in real time, as my dedicated colleagues in fighting sexual harassment were forced to make pragmatic decisions and I, after vastly overstaying my welcome, was quietly removed from the relevant e-mail thread. German bureaucracy is notoriously slow, which, I argue, further protects offenders, as it can take years for justice to be served. For those with the boon of permanent positions to shield them, sometimes, all they have to do is wait.

These mechanisms of power were understood by activists at the FU in the early 1990s and by the women who were surveyed in two pivotal studies conducted at the time. After Schultz's initial inroads in the mid and late 1980s, it took until 1991, when Christine Färber took over as the university's first full-time *Frauenbeauftragte* (Women's Representative), that such studies were again made possible (Tomberger 2021).⁶ In 1992, Färber's office headed the "*Dokumentation der zentralen Frauenbeauftragten der Freien Universität Berlin, Sexuelle Diskriminierung und Gewalt gegen Frauen an der Hochschule*" – a study for "documentation by the Central Women's Representative at Freie Universität Berlin on discrimination and violence against women" at FU with 1,300 questionnaires distributed and 272 responses received (Pätzelt 1992). This study found that most of the respondents who reported having experienced sexual harassment were young women working under temporary contracts or studying at the university, with the perpetrators primarily superiors with full-time contracts. Half of the respondents reported being sexually harassed on campus (Pätzelt 1992). The study specifies that a "considerably higher" number of women also described witnessing incidents of sexual harassment, which the authors argued showed the pervasiveness of the issue and a clear need to address the topic on the administrative level (Pätzelt 1992, 119).

The aforementioned 1994 "Sexually harassed" study, carried out by Toelle and Dreyer, focused on the aftermath of cases, which varied in type of sexual harassment, in whether the women had reported their harasser to university officials, and in whether or not they had felt supported in that process. The respondents in this study all described a clear awareness of their positionality within the broader FU hierarchy. One of the questions asked what they wished

6 The Berlin Higher Education Act mandated Women's Representative offices at all West-Berlin universities in 1986, and, after reunification in 1990, at all Berlin universities. Interestingly, primary sources and oral-history interviews with former employees of Humboldt University and FU show that sexual harassment was more of a priority among feminists in West Germany than in the former German Democratic Republic. Färber's change of priority for the office appears to represent the West-German feminist focus on sexual harassment and violence.

had been different in their situations; all of the answers referenced access to institutional “power”, whether this would have translated to power in being able to stop the incident, someone in a higher institutional position to have demanded repercussions, or the Women’s Representative with more acting power to sanction the perpetrator (Pätzelt 1992). Now as then, the Women’s Representative (today named Gender Equality Officer) is listed as the first point of contact for victim-survivors and can offer confidential counseling and advice on reporting, but they do not have institutionalized sanctioning power themselves. Indeed, as Heike Pantelmann and Sabine Blackmore have chronicled, while the Gender Equality Officers are often the only actors within university settings to have any knowledge of how to handle cases of sexual harassment and assault, they can only advise those involved, must defer to executive boards or human-resources departments, and often are not even privy to case outcomes (Pantelmann/Blackmore 2025).

Researchers at other Berlin universities also shared an academic interest in pursuing quantitative data on the topic during this time. Angelika Wellnitz-Kohn headed a sexual-harassment survey in 1992 at the Berlin School of Economics and Law (FHW), which recorded that eighteen percent of the 228 women surveyed had been sexually harassed at the FHW (Wellnitz-Kohn 1992). While the “Documentation” study emphasizes how taboo the topic was on the FU campus, the FHW survey foregrounded a need for more education on the definition of sexual harassment and the many subtle forms it can take (Wellnitz-Kohn 1992). One side of this conversation was meticulously documented and preserved,⁷ while the other provides a comparatively glaring absence. The FU’s administrative response to these energetic efforts by feminist scholars to quantify results and their demands for clear sexual-harassment guidelines was much harder to trace. As Theo Jung writes on practices of omission, “[l]istening to silences, we become more attentive to the spaces in which they resound” (Jung 2021, 17).

The FU administration: Silencing in slowness

Despite my rather desperate requests to university librarians and former employees who worked at the FU in the early 1990s as well as the enduring patience of my oral-history interviewees, I was not able to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of the university’s response to calls for sexual-harassment guidelines. Toelle and Dreyer, who conducted the FU’s 1994 “Sexually harassed” study, could not remember if there had been much of an institutional reaction, if any. Both

7 Special thanks to Wendy Stollberg and Corinna Tomberger of the FU Women’s Representative Office as well as to the FU General Students’ Committee (AStA).

agreed that this could have been due to their temporary positions at the university at the time. The primary contact point for the study, and the person who would have presented the findings to university officials, would have been the FU Women's Representative at the time, Christine Färber. Unfortunately, Färber passed away in 2018, and tracking down her internal office records from this time has not been possible.

In this space of silence, however, one key researcher who worked on Färber's 1992 study remembered significant "stumbling blocks" to the work being carried out. Psychologist Käthe Schmid conducted the quantitative-survey portion of the 1992 study (Börgerding/Schmid 2024). In an oral-history interview with a former member of the "Fixing the System" research group, Schmid recounted that she had been the one to approach Färber after comparing the state of sexual-harassment research in Germany to that of the U.S. Although the survey was initially funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation, when Schmid requested subsequent funding for a subsequent qualitative study, it was not granted. Indeed, the Hans Böckler Foundation is not credited (Pätzelt 1992). In carrying out the study, Schmid had not faced open, obvious opposition, she said, but at some point, it had become clear that certain institutes at the university were boycotting the survey. "Questionnaires that had been laid out disappeared", said Schmid, "then we had to bring them back" (Börgerding/Schmid 2024). While Schmid did not claim that this opposition had come from the administration, it speaks to the sense that Toelle, Dreyer, and Schmid share in their recollection and which is also described in both studies: sexual harassment and assault were not exactly welcome topics.

A picture of the FU administration's overall response to the call for sexual-harassment guidelines begins to come into focus when we consider the primary-source documentation that does exist, from the FU's Sexual-Harassment Working Group, Women's Representative office, and outside media coverage. One sexual-assault case had made West-German headlines several years prior to the 1992 and 1994 studies: in June 1987, FU gynecology students came forward with reports of serial sexual harassment and assault by professor Horst Lemtis (Goy 1989). Lemtis counter-sued one accuser for defamation, which was overturned.⁸ Medical students had submitted multiple complaints against Lemtis to FU President Dieter Heckelmann prior to the overturned defamation case, but, in res-

8 While the U.S. is stereotyped as using the courts to legislate discrimination cases, as outlined in Zippel (2006), Germany criminalizes "insults and attacks on honor" in §§ 185–200 of the German Criminal Code (StGB). This means that the burden of proving "substantial factual accuracy" is put on the defendant, making it easy for perpetrators to claim reputational harm if victim-survivors speak up in sexual-harassment or assault cases – the burden is on the accuser, who in these cases is still often met with a counter-suit (Funk 2026).

ponse, Heckelmann stated that he had found “no evidence of misconduct” (Goy 1989, 102). The university quietly sent Lemtis into early retirement (AStA 1988). In 1989, Petra Hörig, a member of the FU’s Sexual-Harassment Working Group, which had been founded four years earlier, wrote to President Heckelmann demanding the university instate guidelines for dealing with sexual-harassment cases (AStA 1988). The judge in the defamation case had clearly validated the allegations of the students, wrote Hörig, and reified the urgent need for university policies to better support those affected by sexual harassment and to prevent future incidents (AStA 1988). President Heckelmann responded that he had doubts about the “practicality” of creating such guidelines (AStA 1988).

Heckelmann’s successor, Johann Wilhelm Gerlach, does not appear to have been any more proactive in codifying sexual-harassment guidelines at FU (Frauenreferat 1993b). Students continued to have few options for recourse in sexual-harassment and assault cases; only Section 4 of the Berlin Higher Education Act on universities’ duty to “maintain” and “improve” students’ living conditions and circumstances, as well as students’ “right to study”, applied in these cases (AStA 1994). The FU as an employer had a “duty of care” to its employees and was obligated to take action when allegations were brought – this “statutory-corporatist” method translated to a vague legal framework for students and employees, noted in a 1997 newsletter from the *Zentraleinrichtung zur Förderung von Frauenstudien und Frauenforschung* (Central Office for the Promotion of Women’s Studies and Research) that more specific guidelines were needed (AStA 1997).

The FU’s Sexual-Harassment Working Group had indeed been successful in forging such guidelines, but the process to get them approved by FU President Gerlach was arduous. A statement from the FU’s Lesbian-Affairs Department of the Student-Body Council accused Gerlach of boycotting the Guidelines on the Representation of Women, which included a pledge to create preventative measures against sexual harassment and violence at the university. The guidelines had already been approved by the Academic Senate and was approved unanimously by the Board of Trustees in July 1992. The Lesbian-Affairs-Department statement outlines that Gerlach had already attempted to block this passage and, after failing, claimed “legal concerns” to “water them down beyond recognition” (Freie Universität Berlin 1993). It took until March 1993, with the final approval of the Senate Administration for Science and Research to finally institutionalize the guidelines (LaKoF/Koreuber 2001). Heckelmann’s published answer to the Lemtis case and Gerlach’s slow adoption of the Guidelines on the Representation of Women set the scene for the uphill battle that the Women’s Representative office and the Sexual-Harassment Working Group faced (Frauen-

referat 1993b). This quiet opposition, often in the form of bureaucratic apathy, is all the more telling – then, as now – when dissecting how active the debate on sexual harassment at the university was at the FU during this time.

From the U.S. to Germany: Loud calls fall on deaf ears

Holding the U.S.'s comparatively fast codification of university sexual-harassment guidelines up to Germany's is not entirely new; many women working at the FU have actively formed and partaken in this comparison. Their well-documented meetings, minutes, and correspondence often referenced U.S. university guidelines as a model for the policies they wished to implement at FU. In their 1987 newsletter, the Sexual-Harassment Working Group described having submitted a definition of sexual harassment to the FU to push for formal recognition of sexual harassment as a valid problem, something that had "long been standard practice at all American universities" (AStA 1987). West-German feminist lawyer and co-founder of the feminist legal journal "Streit" Alexandra Goy wrote in 1989, "There is still a long way to go before there is a legal provision linking sexual harassment in the workplace to the payment of damages and compensation for pain and suffering and 'awareness training' for managers, as is the case in the US" (Goy 1989). After a journalist from German public-service television broadcaster ZDF contacted her about the topic, Petra Hörig wrote to another member of the Sexual-Harassment Working Group in 1994 that "[s]omehow, Anita Hill has still won, the whole world is talking about the topic of sexual harassment" (AStA 1992), referencing the 1991 televised U.S. Supreme-Court hearings by which Anita Hill brought Clarence Thomas's sexual-harassment misconduct to a global audience.

Often in communication and collaboration with the FU employees advocating for sexual harassment guidelines, students also actively took part in the feminist debate. As early as 1984, the FU Student Council organized a discussion at the now-defunct *Frauencafé Furiosa* on campus on the topic of "sexism at the university and violence against women". The FU Student Council and women's-student-council initiatives worked together to try to get sexual harassment and violence prioritized on the university's agenda over the next several years, including a planned survey among women students about their experiences (Unknown authors n.d.). The boxes of primary-source documentation from various student groups contain numerous references to the previously mentioned case of gynecology professor Horst Lemtis, including clips from national media coverage as well as a letter that Lemtis himself sent to the Steglitz clinic in which he complained that he was being "massively attacked by feminists at the FU"

for using the same approach to teaching that he had always used (Frauenhochschultag 1987). Beyond the discussion at the FU, there is evidence that the FU Student Council built alliances with student councils at other universities, specifically on the topic of sexual harassment and violence; in April 1993, universities in Fulda and Wiesbaden jointly invited student-body councils from all over the country to a two-day workshop on sexual violence (Frauenreferat 1993a). In response to student demand, and in line with their own prioritization of the topic, the Women's Representative office organized a lecture series on the topic during the winter semester of 1991/1992, which is referenced several times in the available documents (Pätzelt 1992). As part of the lecture series, FU Working Group member Edith Püschel spoke on the "psychological consequences of discrimination and sexual assaults on female students", in which she focused "primarily on the responsibility of the university and its employees toward those in their care" (AStA 1994). These records show that strong demands for sexual-harassment guidelines existed at FU, yet these demands took several years to be met, and even then, were met only with significant resistance.

Students, employees, and the "whole world" might have been talking about sexual harassment, but the transnational movement did not seem to prompt action by FU President Gerlach or following generations of administrators. After the delay in instating the 1993 guidelines, what the university ended up passing was fairly minimal: the guidelines included promises to inform employees about proper case procedure, construction alterations to buildings deemed "dangerous", so-called "self-awareness education" opportunities, at least one self-defense course per semester, and access to the legal right to counsel from the Women's Representative (Frauenreferat 1993a). The FU's most recent guidelines were last updated in 2020, and although the definition of sexual harassment has been widened significantly since 1993, the enforceable repercussions still give university management a wide array of consequences to choose from on a case-by-case basis: a hearing, mandatory participation in anti-discrimination training (for the perpetrator, only after a case has been reported), a verbal or written explanation, written warning or reprimand, and initiation of disciplinary proceedings. A ban from university premises, expulsion, and criminal charges appear as the most stringent of sanctions (Freie Universität Berlin 2020). Preemptive training is offered but not mandatory. The 2020 FU guidelines are significantly more comprehensive than those from 1993. However, it is worth noting that two large American universities that have been documenting their internal debates on sexual-harassment guidelines since the 1970s, Columbia University (2013) and Cornell University (2026), provide specific offices and offi-

cially responsible for handling complaints and deciding consequences, whereas FU leaves it up to “relevant university authorities” (Freie Universität Berlin 2019, 4). In my experience dealing with this topic on the activist level, vague language left to broad interpretation provides precisely the opportunity for dangerous gaps to remain and allows acts of silencing to thrive.

While the fact that studies on the prevalence of sexual harassment at FU were conducted at all in the early 1990s demonstrates an institutional recognition of the need to at least diagnose the problem, these studies do not appear to have made a discernible impact on the university administration, and neither did national media coverage of harassment and assault cases nor the very active cries for guidelines from FU employees and students. In this way, the FU’s slow and quiet response to what has proven a resilient and consistent demand for university guidelines, including protective and preventative measures, evokes Proctor’s definitions of ignorance, at best as a “lost realm” and at worst a “strategic ploy” (Proctor/Schiebinger 2008). If we extend a certain benefit of the doubt to university administration in the early 1990s, it is possible to argue that faulty record-keeping or bureaucratic red tape could have led to the delay in initially instating sexual-harassment and assault guidelines and then updating them in the following decades. Yet, the university presidents during that period also demonstrated reticence, even active hindrance.

I have sat across heavy wooden desks from administrators who claimed ignorance of sexual harassment and assault by those in their ranks and who relied heavily on the transient nature of academia to wait out demands for real change at the departmental level. The knowledge was never buried, deleted, or intentionally destroyed, but, I argue, just as documents “can be used to conceal what they reveal” (Ahmed 2010, xviii) – as studies diagnosing the problem that never meet concrete institutional change – so, too, can performative acts of shock, surprise, or indignance force us to be distracted. I argue that the knowledge that was quantitatively collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the university level and circulated culturally through debate was not seen as useful to those on the highest rung of university power, because it threatened the status quo. Epistemologies of knowledge and ignorance need to take into account the usefulness of certain knowledge, argues Tuana, and when it is viewed as being “valuable, important, or functional” – and when it is not (Tuana 2004, 115). To trace the root of ignorance production, we must excavate what has been omitted or never produced to begin with, Tuana states, and we must focus on the “in-between cases”, where knowledge simply seems to disappear. “We must also ask the question now common to feminist and postcolonialist science studies of who benefits and who is disadvantaged by such ignorance.” (Tuana 2004,

115) Whether by intentional omission, bureaucratic delay, or accidental loss, the academic and activist knowledge of the early-1990s did not spur the immediate creation of effective sexual-harassment and assault guidelines at FU. Spanning archival research and anecdotal evidence, the historical examples laid out in this paper and stories like Julia's exemplify who was harmed by this ignorance, by the silence: the generations of victim-survivors who followed.

Conclusion: Situating silence and realms of ignorance

The 1992 and 1994 studies on sexual harassment at the FU made the problem clear, but the gap between diagnosis and action at the institutional level, both preventative and reactive, remains. Documents from the student-body-council archive show that there was not only a strong consciousness at the FU in the early 1990s that sexual harassment and violence were unregulated problems, but also that German universities were lagging massively behind the U.S. in codifying protections. Women working for the Women's Representative office and for the Sexual-Harassment Working Group made simple, clear demands, and they made them repeatedly. These internal conversations were documented and their demands published.

The biggest and most recent study on sexual harassment and violence in the EU indicates the continued need for better regulations at universities. In the first half of 2022, the EU-funded UniSAFE research project gathered survey results from 46 universities and research organizations among 15 European countries on the topic of "gender-based violence in academia and research" (Lipinsky et al. 2022, 4). Of the respondents, 62 percent – respondents of all genders – reported having experienced at least one form of gender-based violence at their institution; 31 percent reported having experienced sexual harassment. In the most recent large-scale quantitative report on the issue in the U.S., involving 33 university and college campuses, 41.8 percent of students polled reported having experienced at least one sexually harassing behavior while enrolled (Cantor et al. 2015). In one of the UniSAFE outputs, individual institutional responses were investigated. The "political willingness and support of decision makers" was shown to be pivotal in hindering or facilitating measures being put into place (Bustelo et al. 2022, 6). The report shows that the biggest barriers to reporting cases come from within the institution, specifically when resources are seen as limited and when power relations obstruct disclosure (Lipinsky et al. 2022, 6). Regardless of who was once "the forerunner" and by what yardstick, the data shows a continued need for knowledge production, its safeguarding, and action.

This article provides a snapshot of a specific period at the FU, made by the women who worked to provide safeguards against sexual harassment and assault, and not by the administrative organs with decision-making power in instating them. The story they tell feels too similar for comfort to that which continues to unfold today. The energy, emotion, and parts of ourselves that countless activists have poured into this fight across borders and timelines quite often go unseen, unheard. Until now, the interviews I conducted in 2019 had never seen the light of day. The details Julia entrusted to me were never heard. The perpetrators we sought to sanction never faced justice.

Knowledge never just *is*. As Tuana theorizes, it is always situated; so, too, is ignorance. Although cultural understandings of sexual harassment and assault have evolved a great deal in Germany over the last three decades, the available documentation at FU shows a clear and consistent diagnosis of the problem, demands for change, and silent slowness in institutional follow-up. I cannot claim to know what motivations university presidents harbored for maintaining the glacial pace of progress on this matter. From the outside, what is clear is that their slowness maintained their positions of power, their possession of knowledge. In their silence, they silenced future generations of victim-survivors who would have been emboldened and protected to come forward, maybe even prevented from experiencing sexual harassment and assault. In the “statutory-corporatist” system that trusts employers with full responsibility, slowness is silencing, and it is dangerous.

Data-availability statement

Some of the analysis in this study is based on research material collected directly by the author, which can be requested from the author if there is a legitimate interest. Other research material will not be published for ethical, privacy, or other reasons.

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