

# UNSAFE SPACES

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# UNSAFE SPACES

Ending Sexual Abuse in Universities

By

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India – Malaysia – China

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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 Wayne 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.