



“FIT IN OR F#\$@ OFF!”: THE (NON) DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN RURAL WORKPLACES

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In this paper we consider the complexities associated with the internal workplace disclosure of sexual harassment for rural employees. We acknowledge the existence of certain accompanying ‘special issues’ for rural women and predict that these elements (such as the traditionally conservative bush attitudes about violence against women, the added cultural dimensions of small-town gossip and self-reliance and the impact of isolation) would have some impact on the inclination of rural women to report workplace sexual harassment. To test that hypothesis, a sample of female employees and a sample of employers from different areas considered as ‘rural’ were interviewed. In defining ‘rural’ for this purpose we adopted a social constructionist approach. We report on participants’ experiences and attitudes about making an internal sexual harassment complaint. We discuss the barriers to disclosure that respondents perceive. We identify the types of rural workplaces (occupation, rurality, gender ratios) which tend to utilise sexual harassment policies and offer training, and we consider the impact of these on the likelihood of reporting. We also investigate whether other variables, such as the type of harassment experienced, employees’ attitude about what constitutes sexual harassment and reporting, age, seniority and/or education affect reporting. We conclude that disclosure practices could be improved by the implementation of visiting sexual harassment consultants/officers who would visit rural communities to educate, hear complaints, help with the development of policies, provide advice referral to counseling mediation and provide follow up.

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a complex phenomenon. Whilst the effects of workplace harassment can be psychologically, physically and professionally damaging for its victims, the Australian Human Rights Commission has found that over time there has been a ‘gradual decline’ in ‘how offended and intimidated a person is likely to feel as a result of being sexually harassed’.¹ One suggestion is that this may be indicative of an increased acceptance of sexual harassment as a norm.² It is understood that victims of sexual harassment will often prefer to ‘put up with it’ rather than ‘making a fuss’;³ targets may not want to risk their credibility being critically examined under the microscope by workplace colleagues, for example.

We considered this general tendency in combination with added complexities of rural living, such as relative isolation, employment shortages, the prevalence of gossip in small towns,⁴ the bush ethos of self-reliance and the tradition of gender role segregation in the bush. We were interested in whether these types of factors are likely to impact the ability or willingness of the rural victim to disclose the experience of workplace sexual harassment to a trusted senior in the workplace. We reflected on the potential for accompanying risks such as not being taken seriously, being seen as lying or overreacting and being subject

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Working Without Fear: Results of the Sexual Harassment National Telephone Survey 2012*, ch 5.1 (c) <<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sexualharassment/survey/chapter3.html>>

² Ibid.

³ C MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women - A Case of Sex Discrimination* (Yale University Press, 1979) 40.

⁴ See, for example, C Eacott and C Sonn, ‘Beyond Education and Employment: Exploring Youth Experiences of their Communities, Place Attachment and Reasons for Migration,’ (2006) 16(2) *Rural Society* 199, 208.



to work or community gossip. We were also conscious of the tendency for sexual harassment to sometimes be 'hidden' and its propensity in other circumstances to infiltrate a workplace culture as a norm. We recognise that both possibilities may have the effect of creating further distressing complexities for the rural harassment victim, particularly in the context of the accompanying rural issues described in this paper.

For example, in the context of rural communities, the 'lack of adequate social security provisions means that the hardships experienced by many farm families have translated into extreme poverty'.⁵ This type of hardship often necessitates that the woman secures a second job outside of performing her farm and home duties to sustain a reasonable standard of living for the family. One of the most important issues facing rural communities is unemployment.⁶ The security of women's paid employment could be jeopardised by disclosure and therefore they may elect to 'grin and bear it' if faced with sexual harassment at work. Accordingly, one study on gendered violence towards rural nurses found that 'there is a culture of non-reporting, denial and minimisation of the importance of such episodes both by nurses and management'.⁷

Other disclosure issues that may be exacerbated for rural women can be extrapolated from the available literature that has identified intricacies for rural victims in the related area of domestic violence.⁸ Both sexual harassment and domestic violence are considered parts of what is described as a 'continuum of violence' by some academics⁹ and are conceptualised as indicative of gender power inequities that permeate all parts of society including the public sphere and workplaces.¹⁰ It should be noted, though, that whilst sexual harassment and domestic violence are forces in the same 'continuum', sexual harassment in the workplace occurs in the public sphere (the workplace) rather than the private (the home). There are specific associated implications with the internal disclosure of workplace sexual harassment which are different from the reporting obstacles associated with domestic violence, such as the potential with the former for the loss of good relations in the workplace, a potential loss of income and the possibility of being subject to workplace gossip and slander.

Despite these differences though, we can gain some insights from research into other areas of gendered crime in rural areas. Findings indicate that rural women who fall victim to violence and domestic abuse face an assortment of concerns that city-based victims may not, and which are a function of their geographical isolation.¹¹ These concerns include having to navigate the complex relationships between individuals and also between organisations and community in rural areas, and also having to overcome a blurred line between the workplace and the private sphere. The strong possibility of being subject to community gossip is another factor in deciding whether to seek assistance, as is the fear of being seen to break the traditional rural value of being self-reliant.¹² Simply being able to source local assistance in the event that one does choose to report violence is highly problematic for rural victims of gendered harm.¹³

Other specific issues for women in remote areas include those described by Katzen in contrasting rural and urban Aboriginal victims:

⁵ M Alston, 'Violence Against Women in a Rural Context' (1997) 50(1) *Australian Social Work* 16.

⁶ See, eg, E Barclay et al, *Crime in Rural Australia* (Federation Press, 2007) 102.

⁷ R Green, R Gregory and R Mason, 'It's No Picnic: Personal and Family Safety for Rural Social Workers' (2003) 56(2) *Australian Social Work* 94, 96 citing J Fisher et al, 'Violence and Remote Area Nursing' (1996) 4(3) *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 190; K Kelly, 'Responding to Job Related Trauma in Remote Areas: Only Fools Would Rush In' (Paper presented at the 4th Biennial Australian Rural and Remote Health Scientific Conference, Toowoomba, Queensland, National Rural Health Alliance 1998).

⁸ S Saunders and P Easteal, 'Sexual Harassment in Rural Australia: Predicted Nature, Reporting, Employment Policies and Legal Response' (Paper presented at the National Rural and Regional Law and Justice Conference, Warrnambool, 19-21 November 2010).

⁹ See eg, A M Thomas and C Kitzinger, *Sexual Harassment- Contemporary Feminist Perspectives* (Open University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ R Thorpe and J Irwin (eds), *Women and Violence - Working for Change* (Hale & Ironmonger, 1996).

¹¹ See eg, Alston, above n 5; M Alston, *Women on the Land: The Hidden Heart of Rural Australia* (University of NSW Press, 1995) 143.

¹² See, eg, Eacott and Sonn, above n 4, 208.

¹³ Green, Gregory and Mason, above n 7, 96.



Women's experience of violence and their options for dealing with that violence appear to be quite different in (regional, rural and remote) areas than in the city for a number of reasons, including lack of anonymity in small communities, physical isolation, police known socially to the perpetrator (for example, they play sport together), delays in police response due to distance, different police response due to distance (for example, perpetrator more likely to get a warning than to be arrested if it is a long way to the nearest lock-up), lack of other community supports such as domestic violence workers or shelters, prevalence of firearms or other weapons, community pressure to stay with the perpetrator and, for Aboriginal women, the additional difficulty of looking to non-Aboriginal police personnel for assistance.¹⁴

In addition a small town 'culture' that includes victim blaming¹⁵ may deter most from reporting or disclosing the matter to the authorities:

The town's heavy economic and cultural dependency on a single employer - the abattoir - was, however, commonly singled out by a range of respondents as contributing to a culture of complacency about violence towards others and not just sexual violence ... Like sexual assault more generally, much of it that occurs in the workplace would remain hidden beneath the threshold of public scrutiny or visibility anyway.¹⁶

In the following paper we examine the perception of workers in bush workplaces about these and other possible barriers, which might affect their inclination to internally (informally or formally) report sexual harassment incidents. We identify the employees who are most likely to disclose sexual harassment and those least likely. We also investigate whether other variables, such as occupation, the type of harassment, degree of rurality and gender ratios of the workplaces affect internal reporting practices and beliefs. We examine the mechanisms for complaint within the rural workplaces; that is, policies and training to see if their presence or absence affects the attitudes about disclosure.

Methodology

A sample of 84 women employees and 23 employers (two men) from different parts of remote and regional Australia were interviewed by one of the researchers, Saunders.¹⁷

Rurality

While the definition of 'rural' is a term that is intuitively ingrained into the psyche of most Australian people, most academics agree that the term 'rural' is an elusive one¹⁸ and that it is 'constructed differently by different people'.¹⁹ Although it is true that 'a line must be drawn somewhere, and statistical comparisons of police and other data remain useful',²⁰ the inherent problem with the categorisation of 'rural' by population is that 'some towns may be classified as rural based on population size, density or location, but still have ready access to many facilities owing to their proximity to major population centres'.²¹

In light of these obvious complexities in capturing the definition of rural, some academics still prefer to define 'rural' as being anything that does not fall within the definition of 'metropolitan'.²² While this provides a relatively simple springboard from which to examine rural trends, we recognise that the danger is

¹⁴ H Katzen, 'Domestic Violence and Police' (Paper presented at the Through Our Eyes Conference Paper, Albury June 2000) quoted in Kaz Eaton, 'One Size Does Not Fit Most' (2001) 26(2) *Alternative Law Journal* 66.

¹⁵ R Hogg and K Carrington, *Policing the Rural Crisis* (Federation Press, 2006), 173. (Note that this was in the context of examining sexual assault).

¹⁶ *Ibid* 176.

¹⁷ The University of Canberra's Committee for Ethics in Human Research approved the project on 17 July and 19 August 2011. Protecting the anonymity of participants was the main ethical consideration in this project. Before responding to the survey, respondents were asked to read the participant information form and sign a consent form, both of which confirmed that all responses would be de-identified.

¹⁸ See, eg, Barclay et al above n 6, 1.

¹⁹ S Wendt, *Domestic Violence in Rural Australia* (Federation Press, 2009) 15.

²⁰ Barclay et al, (2007) above n 6, 3.

²¹ G Luck, *Democratic Change in Australia's Rural Landscapes: Implications for Society and the Environment*, (Springer Publishing, 2011) 4.

²² R Mason, 'Do Everything, Be Everywhere' (2008) 23(58) *Australian Feminist Studies* 485, 485.



that if the term ‘rural’ is used to classify most regions outside of the coastal metropolitan areas, ‘it may cease to have much in the way of descriptive veracity at all, despite its continuing cultural resonances’.²³

For the purposes of this research project we have defined ‘rural’ as an area at least 30 kms outside of outer boundaries of an ‘urban’ centre, with relative dispersal of residence on relatively large parcels of land and with generally less than 50,000 people. We concede that a population of 50,000 may indeed lend itself better to a definition of a ‘average-low’ rural location (as in Orange, NSW with a population of 49,000). It is important, though, to also consider the predominant view of local residents in places such as Orange (which is a proud ‘rural community’) and this involves the identification of ‘elements of rural place/landscape/society/existence which together provide an approximation of the overarching concept of rurality’.²⁴ With this tension in mind, we have designated our workplaces/locations by degree of rurality using the following population cut offs: high = 0-5000; average-high = 5001-15 000; average = 15 001-30 000; average-low = 30 001-50 000; and low = > 50 000.

Recruitment: the sample

In essence, the modern-day equivalent to the old ‘bush telegraph’ (that is, ‘word-of-mouth’) was utilised for the recruitment of participants, essentially through use of social networking tools such as Facebook and through email. The Facebook tool enabled Saunders to make contact with possible (and apparently willing) interviewees who were referred to her through the ‘private message’ box function. Rurally located friends, families, colleagues and old school acquaintances all helped in ‘spreading the word’ about this research.

Interviews took place between July and December 2011. Initially all respondents were interviewed face-to-face with Saunders travelling to rural and remote destinations in Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia and New South Wales. Not wishing to lose the ‘voices’ of the most remotely based participants, it became apparent that telephone interviews would be a good alternative. This method was also preferred by some participants who required an evening interview time. Interviews took from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on the experiences of each participant. The average length of an interview was an hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In the course of each interview, Saunders went through a list of specific behaviours with the participant. The listed behaviours were based on Australian Human Rights Commission’s descriptors of ‘sexual harassment’ and the participant was asked to comment on whether she had experienced or witnessed that type of behaviour in the course of her work. If behaviours *were* identified as having been experienced in the participant’s workplace, the circumstances and feelings surrounding that experience were explored, as was the participant’s response to that experience, *including* whether she regarded the experience as ‘sexual harassment’ or not.

As Figure 1 shows, about half of the respondents’ workplaces were located in highly rural areas.

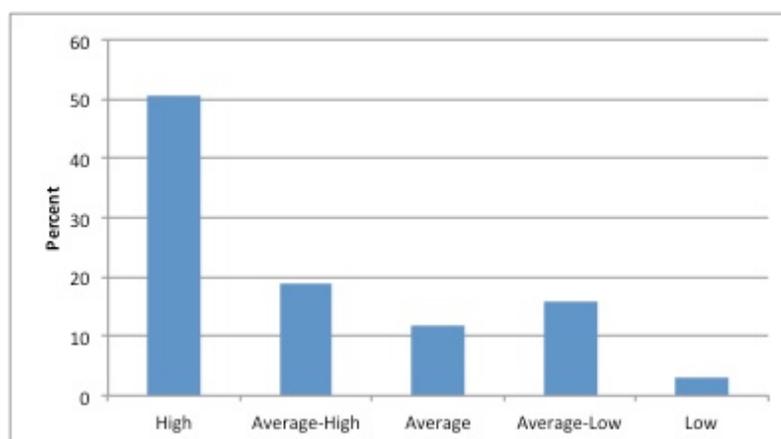


Figure 1: The degree of rurality of respondents’ workplaces (n = 101)

²³ Barclay et al, above n 6, 4.

²⁴ P Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney, *Handbook of Rural Studies* (SAGE, 2006) 20-1.

Those interviewed came from a wide variety of occupations (see Table 1). For analysis we have merged certain jobs to allow for meaningful comparison: teachers and nurses are grouped as ‘professional’; agriculture and horticulture are one category and we have aggregated those working in retail, hospitality and fast food. These categories capture most of the employment positions commonly held by women in rural areas.

Table 1: The occupations of respondents in the 101 workplaces dataset

Respondent occupation	Number	Per cent
Teaching	5	5
Nursing	13	13
Agriculture	14	14
Retail	10	10
Hospitality/Fastfood	9	9
Mining	11	11
Administration	11	11
Horticulture	15	15
Other	13	13

The occupations, which we categorise as ‘other’ include police officers, livestock veterinarians and tour guides.

Table 2 shows that almost one-third (30%) of the 101 workplaces comprised a staff-gender ratio of less than a quarter female.

Table 2: The Gender Ratio of the 101 Workplaces

Ratio	Frequency	Per cent
<25	30	31
25-50	32	33
50-75	18	18
>75	18	18
Total	98*	100.0

*Three workplaces gender ratio were unknown.

Thirteen per cent of the sample were aged under 20; one quarter were 20-25; 41 per cent aged 26-35; ten per cent were 36-46 and 11 per cent aged over 46.

Data analysis

A single individual translated the recording forms into numerical variables; this ensured that there would be no inter-coder variation.²⁵ These numerals were then analysed using PASW Statistics 19. The employee data set and employer data-set were cross-tabulated looking at reporting beliefs. The workplace data set (n=101) was cross-tabulated looking at presence/absence of sexual harassment policies and training. A Pearson’s chi-square test of contingencies was used to evaluate statistical significance. Where appropriate, a series of unplanned 2 x 2 post hoc analyses were conducted to determine where statistical difference lay. The size of the cells in the employers’ cross-tabulations (for example, more than one cell with less than five) precluded the generation of statistically meaningful tests of variation.

Caveats

The number of rural workplaces whose staff are included in this study is not large enough to be representative of rural Australian workplaces. When disaggregated by occupation for instance, 11 per cent of

²⁵ Our thanks to Sally Bradford for her invaluable statistical assistance and guidance.



respondents worked in the mines. It is unlikely that 11 per cent of females employed in rural areas are employed in the mining industry. Respondents were probably more educated than a random sample of rural employees with more than a third (35%) having a Bachelor of Arts and another 12 per cent postgraduate training.

Further, people who participated in this research were self-selected as described above. It is possible that they were more likely to have experienced sexual harassment and were keen to discuss their experiences. Therefore the results reported next should be regarded as preliminary - providing indications but not necessarily absolutes.

Who disclosed sexual harassment in the rural workplaces?

Participants were asked whether they feel comfortable with the notion of reporting sexual harassment to a more senior person in the workplace. Just over one-third (35.7%) of the 84 employees stated that they would disclose about sexual harassment. This is despite the fact that almost three-quarters had experienced sexual harassment themselves from a colleague (73.8%) or member of the community in the workplace (4.8%) and/or witnessed it (63.1%). Of the 23 employers interviewed (21 female and two males), all but one respondent reported that they had witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace while 17 of the 23 had personally experienced it.

Employee sociodemographic traits and reporting

Figure 2 shows that the level of education correlated with the likelihood of disclosing about the harassment. The more educated the employee, the more likely she would be to disclose;²⁶ those who had completed post-graduate studies were significantly more apt to report sexual harassment than those employees who had completed year 12 education.²⁷

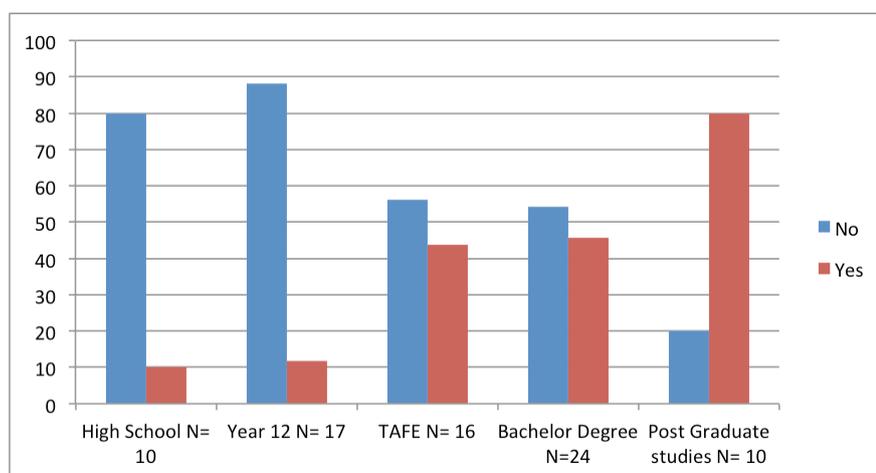


Figure 2: Level of education and whether respondent would report sexual harassment

It was indeed more common for women who had obtained a university level of education to acknowledge the significance of workplace policies in the context of reporting:

... more importantly I know that the policy is there and that I can find it to point to if I need to. Because it is so much easier being able to point to a policy and say 'your behaviour has breached this policy' than it is just to say that your behaviour has hurt me. (University graduate, age 28, Environmental Manager, female, 'low-average' rurality).

Senior-level employees were significantly more likely to state that they would disclose.²⁸ Almost three-quarters of junior ranked people would not do so, just over half of the mid-level employees whilst only one of the six senior-level people would not report (16.7%). There were no statistically significant differences in

²⁶ $\chi^2(4, N = 77) = 14.512, p = .006$, with a medium effect size, $\phi = .434$.

²⁷ This was determined by a series of unplanned 2 x 2 post hoc analyses.

²⁸ $\chi^2(2, N = 76) = 8.515, p = .014$, with a medium effect size, $\phi = .34$ more.

the likelihood of disclosure for juniors compared to those in middle management or those in middle management compared to senior management. Indeed, some participants in senior management positions did tend to confirm their perception that other staff members in the hierarchy were not necessarily likely to report incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace:

Well I have known friends who have worked in different roles in different workplaces where the workplace just did not support them when they have been sexually abused and the culture in that workplace is that it just does not get you anywhere to report stuff like that. And that is a huge barrier because quite often you are taking a risk in reporting - you are going into battle and you are generally unsure whether you are carrying any armour. (Senior Mining Consultant, age 28, female, 'low-average' rurality).

Correlating with the finding about junior-level staff, Table 3 shows that employees under the age of 25 years are less likely to report sexual harassment than those over the age of 25 years.²⁹

Table 3: Whether Respondents of Different Ages Would Report Sexual Harassment

Age of employee	Would the respondent report sexual harassment?	
	Yes	No
<25 (n=30)	23	77
>25 (n=65)	51	49
50-75% (n=17)	7	41
>75% (n=17)	3	18

One participant simply said:

As a nineteen year old working in a factory with adults, you don't feel very empowered to say things. (, vegetable export factory, age 19, female, 'high' rurality).

Another young female employee spoke of a similar reluctance to report rude comments of a sexual nature in the workplace:

I mean, it is not a constant thing, it's just sporadic, but I think it is inappropriate. And being a junior physio I can't exactly ... yeah. It's a bit of a 'don't rock the boat' situation, I think. (Junior physiotherapist, age 23, female, 'average' rurality).

On the other hand, one male employer perceived that the impact of 'Generation Y' in the workplace is significant in effecting change in terms of acceptable workplace practices:

...when you have younger females, well their background would be not to put up with it. Whereas my background - my generation - is that you sort of hear it and then laugh it off. And really, I think that it is a generational thing. Perhaps I shouldn't. You shouldn't be isolating people by generation. But, what is tolerable to me is probably not tolerable to a, um, female in her twenties ... And I guess that when you get a bit more mature you just roll with it. (Livestock Manager, age 60, male, 'average' rurality).

This generational issue was a recurring theme: another senior manager (this time female) from a different state said the following of 'Gen Y' in the context of talking about the harassment:

I have certainly had conversations with people who are younger and new to the industry. The Gen Y'ers, as we call 'em, just don't tolerate it (harassment) and are more eager to speak up about what suits them or what they want than my generation. When I started work I had a gratefulness for a job. Whereas people I employ now - that is not the way that they think at all! (Mining consultant, age 38, female, 'low' rurality).

It is perhaps important, though, to counterbalance this perspective with the commonly made remark that:

It is often the older ones - the older blokes - that you have to watch. (Livestock vet, age 45, 'average' rurality).

²⁹ $\chi^2(1, N = 95) = 6.34, p = .012$, with a small effect size, $\phi = .26$.



Other sociodemographic factors such as marital status or ethnicity did not have an effect on likelihood of reporting. However, we would note that four of the five Indigenous respondents who replied to this question answered that they would not report as compared to 50 to 60 per cent of the Anglo and Anglo-British respondents. One participant of an Indigenous background reported having been subject to unwanted staring or leering in the workplace on an ongoing basis. When asked how that behaviour made her feel she said:

I'd usually just sort of think 'Why would you do that?' and that is about as much thought as I would give it at the time. (Aboriginal Health Worker, age 24, 'low' rurality)

The same participant was later asked whether - in her mind - the experience of sexual harassment is impacted by one's status as an Indigenous Australian. She answered:

Um... I'm not too sure, I s'pose ... I believe Aboriginal people usually take it more to heart. That's just my thought. They would probably - like - how do I say it - (long pause). It'd be something they'd keep thinking about after. (Aboriginal Health Worker, age 24, 'low' rurality)

About aspects of the workplace and disclosure

Neither the state/territory in which respondents were employed nor the degree of rurality of the workplace had a statistically significant effect on disclosure. Sixty per cent of those from the most remote places would not report; 77 per cent from average to high; 50 per cent from average and 60 per cent of those 15 employed in average to low rurality would not disclose. This finding was somewhat counter-intuitive and unexpected but can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that many of the remote area women who were interviewed were employed in the mining industry or as nurses or teachers employed by the government. Were it not for this factor and the accompanying higher quality of policies and training mechanisms that are a feature of these occupations (discussed below), we might have expected the number of people from very remote places who would *not* be inclined to disclose about harassment to have unfortunately been significantly higher. One senior manager in mining made the following comment in support of this possibility:

I think it is fair to say that since I started in mining there is a lot less tolerance of harassment from a corporate management level. So if you went to larger mining companies you would be less likely to see harassment than if you went to a smaller company. (Environmental Scientist in Mining, age 38, female, 'average-high' rurality).

Indeed, although also not statistically significant, a higher proportion of 'professionals' and those that work in mining would report (see Table 4).

Table 4: Whether employee respondents from different occupations would report sexual harassment

Occupations	Would the participant report sexual harassment?	
	Yes	No
Professional (n=14)	57	43
Agriculture/Horticulture (n=20)	30	70
Retail, hospitality and fast food (n=16)	31	69
Mining (n=10)	60	40
Administration (6)	33	67

Despite whether they had experienced acts of sexual harassment in the workplace, it was quite common for women in mining to affirm the excellent sexual harassment policies that were a feature of their workplace:

Yes, the mining company is pretty strong in that. Definitely, the policies are part of site induction and they have posters up and you have access to a HR person if ever you need to talk to someone. (Environmental Scientist in Coal Mine, age 43, female, 'average' rurality).

Does the proportion of women in the workplace affect whether the respondent would talk to someone in the workplace about the sexual harassment? According to our sample, the answer is 'no'. About an equal proportion of women in predominately male workplaces (72%) would not disclose as females in predominately female workplaces (67%). Some women made comments about the nature of work in a female-



dominated workplace, which suggest that the absence of male figures in the rural workplace can create some level of disharmony in itself:

I suppose that everywhere you work you get a bit of unhappiness but I think in nursing you're always gonna have narkiness because it is such a female dominated working environment. Girls just tend to be bitchy. (Laughs). I think that not having a balance of a few blokes scattered throughout the workplace, it really makes it bitchy at times- really narky. (Remote-area nurse, age 30, female, 'high' rurality).

Decision to report also did not vary significantly by percentage of women in senior roles. In addition, the number of staff in the workplace did not emerge as a significant variable, although more women (42%) in smaller workplaces (1-15) would report in contrast to 29 per cent in medium (15-45) sized and 27 per cent who had staff in excess of 45.

Experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace and reporting

Whether they had experienced sexual harassment by a colleague did not affect (to a statistically significant degree) respondents' views on disclosure. Sixty-nine per cent of the 62 who had been the target of harassment would not make a disclosure and 59 per cent of the 22 who had not experienced harassment indicated that they would *not* generally be inclined to report sexual harassment if ever they *did* experience any of the behaviours explored in the interview. Witnessing also did not emerge as significant. Fifty-one respondent employees reported that they had indeed witnessed sexual harassment. Forty-three per cent of these employees would report it while 28 per cent of the 25 who had *not* witnessed sexual harassment indicated that they would report it if ever they did witness it.

Respondents' views about disclosure also did not vary significantly based on the type of harassment (see Figure 3).

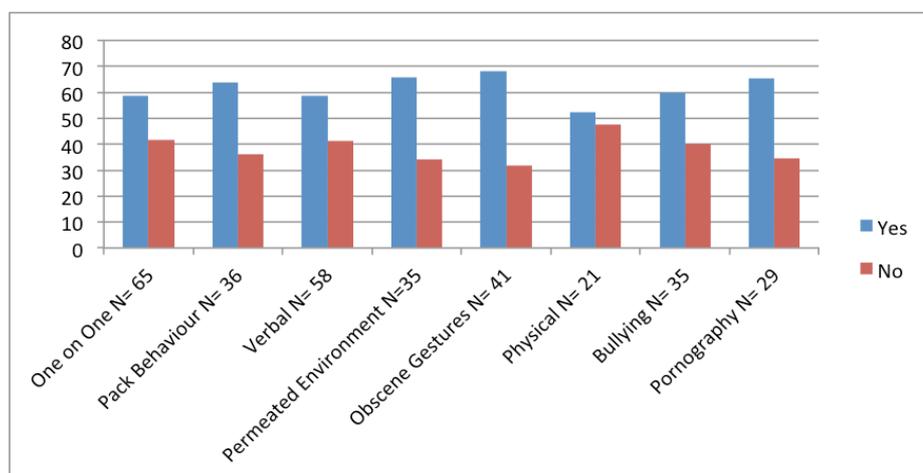


Figure 3: The Type of Harassment by whether the Respondent Would Report

It is interesting that a slightly smaller proportion would report physical harassment than the other harassing behaviours. For instance, one participant who had reported being rubbed on her torso on multiple occasions in the 'very rural' workplace was asked whether she had been inclined to ask the perpetrator to stop:

I have been thinking about how to do that. But I haven't really figured out how to in a tactful sort of way. (Engineer, age 30, female, 'high' rurality).

Possible contributors to non disclosure

Figure 4 depicts the responses to the question about perceived barriers to internal formal or informal reporting. Note that many of these are not unique to rural workplaces.

Quite a few people were concerned about possible negative consequences of reporting. A number of participants referred to fear of their employer or senior manager 'joining in' with the harassing behaviour if it



were drawn to their attention by way of a formal report. One woman spoke about this in the context of her work as a jillaroo:

When I was out mustering some of the guys were joking about how big some of the cow's teats were and how they compared to some of the women's boobs on the station. (Station hand, age 25, female 'high' rurality).

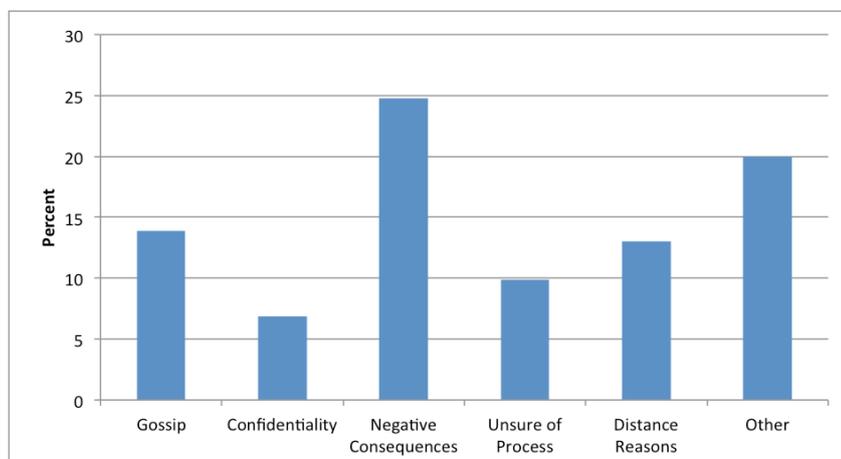


Figure 4: Employee respondents' perceived barriers to reporting (n=89)

When asked whether she felt inclined to report this discussion to a senior person in the workplace, she replied:

No. I think that none of the girls working on the station would tell the manager because they would be unsure as to whether the manager would join in - because that is the way that the manager did things. He would join in. (Station hand, age 25 years, 'high' rurality).

A remote-area nurse based in an Indigenous community shared similar concerns about the reluctance of 'management' to intervene in the event of a sexual harassment complaint:

In my experience, management aren't interested in dealing with harassment stuff. I mean, obviously there are differences in management but in my experience I don't think management are all that interested in dealing with what might be seen as being a bit of a petty complaint. I don't think they take it seriously because they have so much difficulty staffing these areas anyway that if they took up and ran with every petty complaint that was made they risk losing staff members. And they can't afford to do that. (Remote-area nurse, age 29, female, 'high' rurality).

It is likely though that the rural setting and small size of the community do correlate with the high number concerned about confidentiality and gossip. One participant captured commonly held concerns about gossip and about community perceptions in her consideration of the barriers to reporting for women in small communities:

I reckon in a smaller environment or in a very small town where it might be hard to find a job or where there is a lot of local small town gossip - I think that sort of thing would make it extra hard for women to report sexual harassment. And depending on where people sit, too - like, would you report it if you had a partner who said 'well you are a tart and you would have deserved it'? So I think it depends on the woman's own network and support environment. (Road Safety Officer, age 49, female, 'average' rurality).

One interesting shared attitude that also emerged in the context of under-reporting is summarised in one woman's response to a question about how she felt about the prevalence of rude joke-telling in the shearing shed in which she worked:

Put it this way, I ... ,if it's ... it probably sounds weird but I'd probably feel more comfortable if it is in the workplace than if it's not, because if it's in what I call my 'private space' I definitely feel a bit more vulnerable. For example, if we were working in the shearing shed, the shearers would often tell a dirty joke or talk about how people ... yeah. It doesn't worry me, it's just water off a duck's back. (Shed Hand, age 40, female, 'high' rurality).

So in the rural context, workplace sexual harassment can be viewed as a 'safer' form of harassment than might be the case in the 'private' or domestic sphere. Perhaps this is attributable to the workplace setting imposing certain boundaries for sexually harassing behaviour - the perimeters may be spatial, terrestrial and/or psychological. It may be that these limits may provide for a somewhat less fearful experience than other settings in which women are vulnerable to victimisation. However, the specific workplace composition, dynamics and setting will largely contribute to this sense of safety - or lack of.

Another barrier to reporting might well be lack of knowledge about what constitutes sexual harassment. None of the beliefs about what constitutes sexual harassment had a significant effect on reporting. If a person did regard a certain type of behaviour as sexual harassment they were *slightly* more inclined to report it. For instance, 46 per cent of the 26 people who thought that sexual banter constituted sexual harassment would report as compared to 30 per cent of those who did not see it as harassment. Half of those who thought that pornography was sexual harassment would report compared to a quarter of those who did not. One female engineer spoke of her boss' tendency to tell sexually-themed jokes frequently throughout the day and for other colleagues to take his lead and join in. She was asked how she felt about this banter and responded:

That is just the way that they behaved. And I copped it on the chin. I probably copped it on the chin because it involved the boss who was in a position of power. In a lot of workplaces it happens, I know, and at the end of the day you have to make sure that you get on with people. The guys and their jokes - I guess that is part of it, really. (Heavy Engineer, age 40, female, 'high' rurality).

Twenty-nine percent of 28 employee respondents did not consider pornography to be sexual harassment; 57 per cent of the employer sample shared that view. One employee participant mentioned the existence of 'certain calendars' in her engineering workplace. When asked about how explicit the calendars might be she quickly responded:

Oh, nothing serious! Just topless. Yeah, only topless. (Viticultural Engineer, aged in mid-30s, female, 'high' rurality).

It transpired in the course of the interview that the respondent neither regarded the calendars as pornographic nor as constituting sexual harassment.

Of some concern are the 41 per cent of employees and 68 per cent of employers who express various levels of justification for not treating sexual harassment as a serious behaviour. One female manager shared her experience of a male colleague having regularly exposed his genitals to her and to other people whilst underground in the mines. She identifies the behaviour as being designed to 'shock' or to cause the recipient to feel 'uncomfortable' but then refers to the behaviour as 'a reflection of him,' ultimately citing this as the reason for not reporting:

I have experienced a man physically exposing himself to me. And not just to me - to anyone else who was around. Repeatedly. Countless times ... This was an underground person who was in middle management. So when I would be underground he would often be too. There seems to be an old-school group of men who believe that women don't belong underground. And I've even heard it said that women are bad luck underground. And there is a group of men who think that it is funny to try to shock you underground. Or make you feel uncomfortable ... I would ignore it! I certainly never did anything about it! ... To me, if someone wants to show themselves it is more a reflection of them than a reflection of me. (Environmental Advisor in Mining, age 36, female, 'high' rurality).

Additionally, although not statistically significant, belief that a woman contributes to her own victimisation could contribute to low reporting (60% of 62 employee respondents; 83% of 18 employer respondents held such a viewpoint). This feeling was elucidated by another participant when asked about what the major barriers to reporting sexual harassment would be for rural women:

It would be yourself for a start. In order to get work and to be accepted - as I said to you, my biggest worry was not that I was in the wrong but that I would be perceived badly. If you are confident within yourself then you would have no worries but it is how you perceive yourself that counts too. (Farm Contractor, age 40, female, 'high' rurality).



Again despite not being statistically significant, another barrier to reporting may come from the 69 per cent of (52) employees and 61 per cent of (18) employers who believe that sexual harassment is just about 'boys being boys'. Participants who held this attitude tended to retain a certain 'distance' from the sexual harassment experience. Sometimes, in this context, participants would make comments which would essentially normalise or trivialise such behavior or would indicate some reluctance to move beyond the perimeters of simple 'acceptance'. One female who was employed as a geotechnical engineer for a mining company described having experienced unwanted physical touching, rude jokes, sexual banter and exposure to various types of pornography in the workplace. She maintained that it was preferable not to report these behaviours, despite describing her feelings of discomfort in experiencing the harassment:

I know it sounds bad, but you do get used to it. It's again - 'boys being boys' or 'men being men'. Because it is a male dominated environment that is just how they are. It feels like, I suppose, you have to accept it ... The way I see it, it is their workplace - oh that sounds very wrong! But it does just seem like it is their workplace. (Geotechnical engineer, age 26, female, 'high' rurality).

Lack of policies

Another major obstacle to reporting could be the lack of sexual harassment policies with a clear complaints path. Half of the workplaces evidently do not have these policies or, if they do, the respondents are not aware of their existence. About three-quarters of the employees who work without a policy would not report. Half of the employees who have a sexual harassment policy in place would not report. Although not statistically significant, there is an indication here that the presence of policies encourages reporting.

However, even having the policies may not be enough. One police officer commented on the harassment policies in place in the police force, although she did highlight an accompanying concern:

There are definitely policies in place but those policies don't protect you from the wrath of other members of the force ... And you're dealing with guys that have worked together for a really long time - close-knit inside and outside the station. (Police Officer, age 33, female, 'average' rurality).

There are also perceived 'sensitivities' inherent in reporting when (as identified in the next quotation) the person doing the physical touching is also the complaints officer to whom harassment grievances would ordinarily be received:

Yes, policies are a useful tool and it is important for organisations to have policies. But in and of themselves they are not worth anything if they are not referred to and followed. There have been some serious complaints about staff members and bullying and stuff and I am not convinced that the policies on bullying are taken seriously. The person who is actually the one who I have observed touching legs and making comments is actually the officer in charge of the complaints. (Nurse, age 32, female, 'high' rurality).

Another participant spoke of the possibility of gossip outweighing the potential effectiveness of workplace policies in the event that rural women reported incidences of sexual harassment:

You have to think 'what would be the consequences?' What would the backlash be like? What would people's opinions be afterwards? Was she right to do it/was she wrong to do it? You know. People are just - the guys just look at it as fun. Fun and banter. Whereas girls may not see it that way. So they would say 'it's just fun' and then a girl complains, procedures are followed and so forth - then it may look bad on her part because she took it to a wrong level or it wasn't meant in that way. But that is the same for anyone, really. (Mining engineer, age 26, female, 'high' rurality).

Certain occupations were more likely to have policies: professional occupations as compared to retail/hospitality/fast-food occupations³⁰ and mining in contrast to agriculturalists/horticulturalists.³¹ Nine out of 10 mining workplaces had policies and seven out of eight professional workplaces as compared to only four of 17 retail and ten of 27 agriculture. There were no differences in the likelihood of having sexual harassment policies in place for any other pair of occupations. In addition, workplaces with 45 people or

³⁰ Post hoc test - $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 9.035$.

³¹ Post hoc test - $\chi^2(1, N = 37) = 8.194$.



more were significantly more likely to have a sexual harassment policy in place than workplaces with 15 people or less.³²

Forty-one workplaces involved travel; 61 per cent had sexual harassment policies as compared to only 38 per cent of the 42 workplaces in which travel was not a feature of the job. Therefore, when travel is required within the workplace, there are more likely to be sexual harassment policies in place.³³

Rurality, the proportion of women in the workplace and the proportion of senior women did not have a significant effect on presence/absence of policies.

Lack of training

Having sexual harassment policies in place increases the likelihood that there will also be sexual harassment training in the workplace.³⁴ However, only 17 per cent of the rural workplaces in our sample offered training about sexual harassment. Almost two-thirds (64%) of those without training would not report as compared to 54 per cent whose workplaces do have training. Similar to policies, the professional occupations were more likely to have sexual harassment training in place than the mining occupations, however this difference was not significant. Differences in the likelihood of having sexual harassment training in place for any other pair of occupations or by size of staff were not statistically significant although 17 per cent of small workplaces did have training compared to 30 per cent of medium and half of the larger ones.

One woman described the remoteness of her position and her real concern about lack of training in the existent harassment policies:

Yes there are policies. You hear about them once when you first join. But they get forgotten, don't they? Once they believe that you have had your induction they conveniently forget about it. They don't even remind you like they should. It is like thinking about safety - they need to remind people. (Rangeland Manager, age 31, female, 'high' rurality).

Another woman emphasised the presence of visual reminders about safety issues in the shearing sheds, but never any reminders about sexually harassing behaviour:

Yeah, even in the shearing sheds there is no way that you would see a billboard about sexual harassment. You would see one about not lifting the wrong way so as to protect your back. But not about sexual harassment. No way. If you are out here working the deal is that you have to deal with what goes with that. (Shed hand, age 30, female, 'high' rurality).

The existence of training in workplace sexual harassment policies was not affected significantly by the proportion of women in the workplace, the proportion of women in senior workplace roles, the state or territory within which the workplace fell and its degree of rurality. And, unlike policies, travel as a part of the job did not correlate very significantly with training (24% of the jobs with travel had training as opposed to 10% of those without travel).

Outcome of making a disclosure

Figure 5 illustrates what happened in the 25 cases in which the employee disclosed about the harassment.

The following comment from a granary manager is illustrative of the type of management response which may lend itself to an outcome of 'nothing':

Yes, I have had complaints from the girls at the grain stand. Like they might say 'that truck driver has just sworn at me' and I might have to remind 'em that they were made aware of it when they took on the role. But it is just not easy for me to change the workplace behaviour itself - that is a whole other thing and you can't just change the behaviour like that. (Senior Manager, Grainary, 21, 'high' rurality).

³² Post hoc test – $\chi^2(1, N = 54) = 8.14, p = .004$

³³ $\chi^2(1, N = 83) = 4.34, p = .037$, with a small to medium effect size, $\phi = .23$

³⁴ $\chi^2(1, N = 75) = 20.76, p < .001$, with a large effect size, $\phi = .53$,



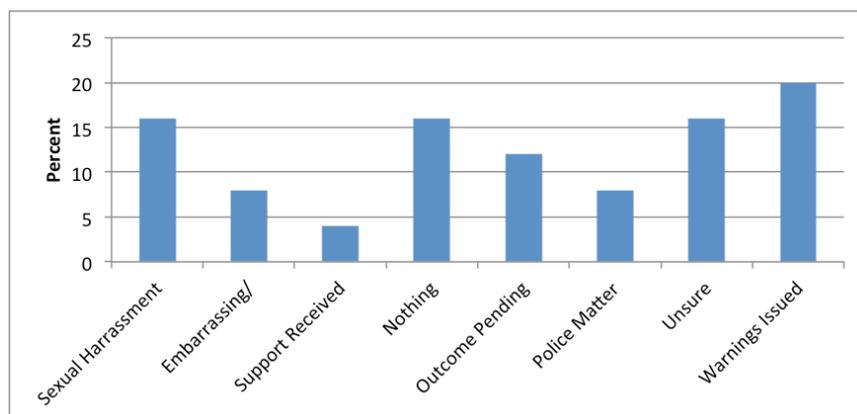


Figure 5: The Outcome of Sexual Harassment that was Reported (n=25)

And the following revealing quote from the same interview provides further insight into the possible reasons for less-than-favourable outcome, also shedding light on the extreme complexities of power in the workplace relationships:

I would say to them that they need to learn to cope with it. You just need to be cut out for it and some girls are obviously not ... You need to be assertive but not aggressive. If you are aggressive you just hear 'em say 'Geez, she is a cranky bitch'. If you are just assertive they will take your shit and make friends with you. You just need to show 'em you are not a weak little girl who needs looking after. So the girls are generally happy to accept that when I tell it to 'em, I guess. (Senior Manager, Grainary, 21, 'high' rurality).

Indeed, the distinction that is drawn here between 'assertiveness' as distinct from 'aggression' is apparently understood by the participant (despite the difference being somewhat objectively elusive). There is also an implicit point referred to where assertion morphs into aggression and justifies the 'cranky bitch' response of which she speaks. It is implicit that this perimeter of 'acceptable' behaviour is defined by the perpetrators of the behaviour.

Another employee respondent spoke of having repeatedly experienced being touched on her shoulders and multiple attempts to 'give her neck a rub' and indicated that she had reported this behaviour to her (female) supervisor:

She kinda said 'Oh yes, that happens'. Even though she knew that there were two other girls that it happens to as well. I just don't think people take it seriously out here. (Customer Service Officer for Livestock Agency, age 55, female, 'average' rurality).

Almost half of the employers (11) had received complaints of sexual harassment. Many of these respondents showed a level of uncertainty in how to deal with sexual harassment complaints. There were, however, some reflections which recognised that complaints might have been better handled. One senior manager spoke of her decision not to intervene when she knew that pornographic emails were being circulated in the workplace:

I think when I consider them now I think 'that was probably quite naïve, especially since it was at a time when I was managing. There is a possibility that I should have - not necessarily formalised the complaint but made an extra effort to acknowledge that it was inappropriate behaviour. And maybe the colleague who received it could have been affected but because of the friendly nature of the whole team we brushed it off. I was probably naïve because I didn't ask how it made her feel as opposed to waiting for her to raise it further as an issue. But because she didn't raise it further we didn't make a big deal of it. (Senior Manager of Travel Agency, age 30, female, 'average' rurality).

Concluding Remarks:

'I guess it's just a bit of a different mindset in a rural community ...'

The nature of 'rurality' is such that 'supplies of goods and services, and opportunities for social interaction, are concentrated'.³⁵ It evokes notions of 'distance' and 'isolation' in that the norm is often 'having to drive hundreds of miles over pot-holed, dirt roads'.³⁶ Rurality also carries other (often demoralising) burdens, which are not associated with the 'urban', such as the preponderance of 'flies, snakes, spiders, scorpions and other pests, as well as floods and drought'.³⁷ Significantly, in the context of other forms of gendered harm in the bush, 'the greater distances from support services, medical care and police services all impact on whether victims will feel able to disclose'.³⁸

Against the backdrop of these types of specifically 'rural' issues, we were interested to find a relatively high percentage of people who felt that if harassed that they would feel comfortable disclosing to a senior person in the workplace. However, it is important to consider the possibility that the sample of women who volunteered to participate in interviews may naturally be women who are more inclined to vocalise their thoughts and are better able to confidently talk about incidents of workplace sexual harassment. It is also likely that our respondents had higher levels of education and more seniority than a random sample of rural workers. Indeed, our research has shown that the profile of the rural woman who is most likely to report sexual harassment in the workplace is well-educated, older, Anglo and in a relatively senior position.

Although not statistically significant, our research also suggests that rural women are more likely to think that they would disclose if they belong to a professional or mining occupation. Interestingly, the participants' voices have collectively expressed that the sexual harassment policies in mining and in professional or government positions tend to be extensive and thorough and this may account for the higher degree of reporting confidence expressed by women in these types of roles. It is, however, important to note, in this context, that the Australian Human Rights Commission's most recent national telephone survey led to the finding that 'targets of sexual harassment were most likely to be a professional worker (21%) or a clerical worker (17%)'.³⁹

Related to this is the concerning finding that employees under the age of 25 years are significantly less likely disclose about sexual harassment than those over the age of 25 years; in fact, 77 per cent of the under-25 cohort would *not* report. This is interesting in combination with the somewhat disparaging remarks made by some senior managers about the insistence of 'Generation Y'ers' to 'Speak up' about their workplace rights. It may be that their more junior status results in less empowerment and plays a part in whether younger staff members feel able to report incidents which make them feel uncomfortable in the workplace. There was a tendency for younger participants to urgently and earnestly speak of 'not wanting to rock the boat' by reporting harassment, for fear of risking their employment, their reputation, their social fabric and so on.

Interestingly, the preponderance of men in the workplace did *not* emerge as having a significant impact on the likelihood of women's disclosure of sexual harassment incidents. This is counter-intuitive because it was expected that a majority of men correlate with a 'masculine' culture that dissuades disclosure plus does not allow for females to report to:

I guess if the senior staff are all male - and although we have some particularly good male managers - women might not feel comfortable without a female senior person to go to. So just the ratio of senior female staff to senior male staff is an issue. And also, I guess, it is a bit of a different mindset in the rural community. I guess it is a little more accepting of the old behaviours - so you know, the blokey types of behaviours are just more ingrained, I think. And they haven't caught up as quickly as in the city. (Senior Operations Officer, age 31, female, 'high' rurality).

However, in considering the broader picture in rural areas we need to contextualise workplaces as existing amidst the cultural complexities of the bush space - among which 'tolerance' may be significant - just as

³⁵ G Greenwood and B Cheers 'Women, Isolation and Bush Babies' (2003) 2 *Rural and Remote Health* 2, 2 <<http://www.rrh.org.au>>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Alexandra Neame and Melanie Heenan, *Responding to Sexual Assault in Rural Communities* (Briefing No 3, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, 2004) 11.

³⁹ *Working Without Fear*, Figure 13,5.2 (e) <<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sexualharassment/survey/chapter5.html#Heading496>>.



the Australian Human Rights Commission found in its national survey on sexual harassment. That is, given the deep and varied nature of the concerns which may arise from reporting sexual harassment, there is a need to 'be selective' in reporting sexual harassment incidents in rural Australia, as was described by one participant:

... it comes back to picking your battles. So if Joe Bloggs touched me on the chest or something like that then I might complain. But if you were going to complain every time someone stared at your chest you would know that your credibility is being damaged and you also know that nothing is going to come of that. Because if they fired every bloke who stared at my chest they would have no staff left. It is as simple as that. So you remember to only kick up a stink over the things that really matter. (Mining Manager, age 28, female, 'high' rurality).

A number of women mentioned that female-dominated environments can be quite 'bitchy' and 'narky'. Some respondents blamed other women for their own experiences of harassment, thereby doubting the genuineness of the victims' need for reporting of the harassment. This is consistent with the available literature which, for example, documents a tendency for rural nurses (operating in female-dominated environments) who report violent incidents to be blamed for their victimisation by employers and colleagues and to be seen as playing an active role in that sexual harassment.⁴⁰

The impact of women's judgement on other women in the context of reporting, though, is not restricted to female-dominated workplaces. There were numerous comments made by females who apparently felt some level of resentment towards other women in male-dominated environments for the nature of their 'conduct.' This attitude, which evidently has the potential to saturate workplace culture, in combination with other women's perceptions that 'even professionals develop a sense of tolerance for the other lifestyle - so the topless becomes OK',⁴¹ is consistent with low reporting for other types of violence against women discussed above. In order to 'dilute' this culture of blame, it would seem that a self-preservation mechanism implemented by many rural women is to adapt to the masculine features of a workplace culture and to essentially join in with the banter in (what appears to be a 'reluctant') celebration of 'the kind of fun that we can have'⁴² despite the intrinsically unwelcome nature of the 'fun.'

Certain other factors that we thought might make a difference in the likelihood of rural women reporting did not prove to be significant. This included the type of harassment experienced. It was interesting to note that a slightly smaller proportion of women would feel comfortable reporting physical acts of sexual harassment. This is perhaps unsurprising, though, because the physical acts - whilst at the most extreme end of the harassment spectrum - would reportedly tend to occur in very private locations and the touching would tend to be furtive. When combined with a general lack of witnesses, the 'my word against his' dilemma and the barriers to reporting such as the possibility of job loss, loss of community respect and so forth, it is easy to understand that 'putting up with it' is a reasonable option.

Our research has highlighted the importance of having thorough workplace harassment policies and accompanying training in those policies. These provide a confident platform upon which employees might rely on in reporting incidences of workplace harassment. This is a crucial area because, in the absence of good workplace policies, it has emerged that the default position is as described by one participant:

Well, it's been described to me as the 'fit in or fuck off' policy. You have probably already heard about that in other interviews today! (Laughs). So there is that pressure there to stay in the job, do the job. I think some women fall into the trap of becoming one of the boys. And if you don't fit in then you are gunna find it hard to find a job. And jobs are limited here and there are not really a lot of jobs outside of the mining industry here. So I think women would feel the pressure. The same for any minority group here - not just women. (Mining Environmental Consultant, female, 'high' rurality).

Training in these policies and relevant laws is also an area, which perhaps has been largely under-estimated in rural workplaces on the whole. Given that some of most interesting findings of our study include the more narrow attitudes of employers regarding what constitutes sexual harassment, it is crucial that everyone, including the management staff receive training. The importance of rural workplace education on sexual harassment policies and training at the highest management level is made obvious by the more than

⁴⁰ Green, Gregory and Mason, above n 7, 96.

⁴¹ Senior Manager in Mining, age 28, female, 'high' rurality.

⁴² Administrative officer in grainary, age 50, female, 'moderate-high' rurality.



three-quarters of employers who believe that it is best to ignore sexually harassing behavior. It is obvious that this attitude from the most senior level, as reflected by the following comment from a senior manager in mining, has the potential to be filtered down throughout the rural workplace. The result is often a sense of rural employee unease about whether to report harassment (or not):

... you can't be confident that a policy will control other people's behaviour either. That is why we have laws and goals. So no, I can't say that I am confident. I am reasonably confident that the systems in place would support me during the complaints process. But part of that is also my own assertive behaviour because I know that I wouldn't put up with any rubbish. So I have an expectation of my workplace to support me if I say that I am being treated inappropriately. Whereas I think that a lot of women who have trouble in that regard are not as assertive and don't push the system to support them. And this is one of those areas where the system will work for you - if you push it to. But it won't if you don't because it is not the path of the least resistance. (Senior Manager in Mining, female, 'high' rurality).

One respondent tied the threads of this research together in her suggestion that 'training' would be highly desirable in her workplace. She recognised the generational issues identified earlier in this paper, the problems associated with integrating women into the traditionally male-dominated workplace and the uncertainty surrounding the definition of sexual harassment:

A lot of the supervisors are from the older generation and they are men. So some of them just aren't used to working with women! And they are not very good at giving feedback and basic stuff like that. I actually wonder whether it might be worth them going through a training course. (Laughs). I don't know. Because they have been in this man's world for so long and then women come along there are some awkward moments. Because they really don't know if it is OK to crack a joke or what. And some are pretty old-school and so a class based around 'the great new world of shared workplaces' might be useful.

We therefore conclude that reporting practices could be improved by the introduction of visiting sexual harassment consultants/officers who would regularly tour rural communities to educate people about their rights in this area. Sexual harassment officers would offer tailored seminars and training sessions for rural employers and for rural employees. The training would be occupationally specific and relevant. Sexual harassment officers would also be available to spend time with individual women in confidential appointments designed to enable women to work through sexual harassment complaints, to receive advice/referral to counseling/mediation as appropriate, to provide basic legal assistance with appropriate complaint forms and to provide follow up.

