

Whispers from the Bush

The workplace sexual harassment of Australian rural women



Skye Saunders

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As I sat down to review Dr Skye Saunder’s book, I was reminded of a recent conversation with a colleague, who I’ll call ‘Jill’. We were talking about workplace bullying. Jill told me that at her very first job as a courier driver, she recalls being called to the office by her boss. She was one of two female drivers — the other being ‘Jacq’. Their work uniform was, like the blokes’, khaki shorts and shirt, nothing overtly sexy. When Jill got back to the depot, all of her male colleagues, about 20 or so, were standing in a line, apparently waiting for her. The boss asked her to go and stand in front of them. When she asked her boss, what was up, he said, ‘Oh, we just want to see who has the best legs, you or Jacq’. The men laughed heartily. Jill was speechless. Puzzled. Silenced. As she recalls, they weren’t a bad bunch of men. But she still found the experience bizarre, confronting, and somehow incongruent. Even if she could have found the words then to articulate what it was that she found so distressing and uncomfortable about the whole experience, what could she do? Where could she go? Certainly, not to her boss.

Most women, either at or away from work, have had an experience

like this, where they are objectified, often with humour, and treated as somehow ‘other’. In the foreword to Skye’s book, former Chief of the Australian Army, David Morrison, comments on this ‘otherness’ when he observes that “often in hyper-masculine environments, like armies, the ‘other’ is defined by being weaker physically, not drinking ‘like a man’, being more introverted or intellectual, and of course [being] female.”

Morrison further remarked, when reflecting on his time as head of army, “[s]adly, it had become clear... that the tribal culture, through which we had sought to build small teams capable of enduring combat, had become distorted, misinterpreted and abused’... women had been robbed of that irreplaceable component of their individual human personal identity — their dignity and self-respect...”

In my view, he hit the nail on the head when he commented that the causes of sexual harassment, bullying and domestic violence are varied and complex but stem, in the main, from gender equality — and that in the bush particularly, the extraordinary contributions of Australian country women are masked by the prevailing male-dominated culture of rural Australia.

Dr Saunders is currently a Senior Lecturer and Acting Director of the ANU Legal Workshop. Her passion for this topic, and particularly the plight of rural working women confronted by sexual harassment, is was inspiring. Like Skye, I hail from a rural background, so her book resonates strongly with me. That said, the book will also appeal to a much wider audience and should be mandatory reading for male (and female) employers. It provides a great list of practical recommendations for

addressing and reducing the serious harms caused by sexual harassment in Australian workplaces, and particularly in rural workplaces.

Whispers examines the nature and prevalence of sexual harassment at work in rural and remote areas of Australia. In writing the book, Skye travelled across the nation to interview 107 rural employees and employers about their experience of, and exposure to, sexual harassment. She identified a clear ‘blame the victim’ mentality on the part of both employers and (female) co-workers in respect of sexual harassment, and also found it was a phenomenon which is largely minimised or hidden by silence, distance and an atmosphere of ‘saturated masculinity’. Skye’s book addresses the special characteristics of the bush and the impact of those qualities on the occurrence and reporting of sexual harassment. It also provides a good analysis of the nature, pervasiveness and manifestations of sexual harassment in rural Australia, as well as of litigated sexual harassment complaints, and explores ways to ‘re-invent’ male behaviour in the bush.

I will close by paraphrasing and quoting further from David Morrison’s very apt summary of *Whispers*. Dr Saunders allows us to “hear the previously unheard voices and see the previously unseen desperation” that accompanies sexual harassment in the Australian bush — “carefully researched and wonderfully written... a clarion call [for us] to listen with compassion and without judgment [and] to play our part in making Australia a better place for all.”

Allison Ballard

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