Whispers from the Bush: The Workplace Sexual Harassment of Australian Rural Women

BY SKYE SAUNDERS

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By Anne Gorman

Remote and regional Australia is often depicted in popular culture as a place of male power and domination, which has become its iconic identity. Women are painted as 'alien others' with all the attendant consequences of disempowerment this inevitably brings. This is the central theme of *Whispers from the Bush: The Workplace Sexual Harassment of Australian Rural Women*, by Skye Saunders.

An early entry from her research serves to highlight this central thesis, illustrating how brutal and entrenched this culture can be in rural and remote workplaces. One woman explained:

> 'I had asked for access to a bathroom once a month when I had my period. They got me access to a Toyota so I could drive away to a toilet. So the entire crew knew exactly when I was cycling every single month.'

She goes on to relate that when whole crew knew she had driven away, they urinated on her boots. Worse still, she was eventually raped by a man she trusted.

While there have been studies on gendered harm in rural areas, there is a relative absence of literature on the specifics of sexual harassment and its impact in rural workplaces. Skye Saunders' research has filled that gap, presenting a publication that is not only easy to read but treads new ground in this sensitive and challenging area of research.

The aims of the publication are succinctly presented in chapter 2:

> 'to fragment the silence surrounding the experience of sexual harassment in Australian rural workplaces…to elucidate the nature of pervasiveness and reporting of sexual harassment in rural Australian workplaces…and to examine the impact of cultural forces in the bush that weaken the effect of Australian legislation as a regulator of the gendered harm.'

There can be no doubt this publication achieves all it sets out to do with great clarity. It employs a combination of both qualitative and quantitative analysis to its subject area. The 'whispers from the bush' are voices taken from 107 in-depth interviews with rural and remote participants; 84 rural-based employees, and 23 rural-based senior managers from both NSW and Western Australia. Elements of traditional doctrinal research together with intensive review of relevant literature are skillfully integrated.

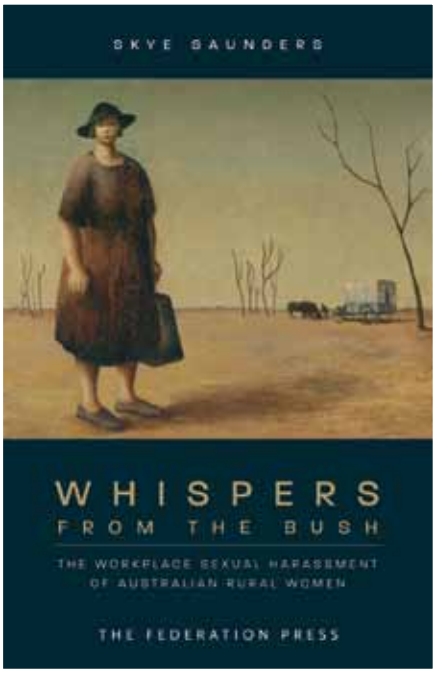
Rural workplaces as defined in this research, are places of 'saturated masculinity' with a 'deeply engrained culture of maleness threatening to women.' Saunders' research has brought her to the conclusion that there is 'a cultural epidemic of harassment' in such places.

Chapters 5 and 6 will be of special interest to legal practitioners, as Saunders draws on research and case analysis of Australian judgments in sexual harassment matters. In particular, chapter 6 involves a statistical analysis of 68 workplace harassment cases from both urban (57) and rural (11) settings heard across Australia between 2005 and 2010. The most significant finding is the percentage of cases from rural settings upheld by the courts (78 per cent or 8 out of 11) as compared to those from urban settings (40 per cent or 23 out of 57).[1] This difference may suggest that the attitude and lack of action by rural employers may be significant and that in rural settings 'a subculture of "saturated masculinity" powerfully works against its [the law] application.' Like most of the material in this book, Saunders' depth of analysis, is essential reading for practitioners in this field.

In chapters 10 and 11 the author points to a way forward, calling for a large-scale prevalence study on the issue of harassment in rural workplace settings. In addition, the author also makes a plea for legislation to be drafted in plain English, so that it is easy to understand.

Finally, Saunders outlines three ways that we may be able to alter the present situation.

First by changing 'minds and hearts' to reinvent 'male behaviour in the rural space'; second by altering the processes to 'recognise, educate and empower employers and senior managers to eliminate workplace sexual harassment'; and lastly, by empowering and assisting 'rural women to reject all forms of sexual harassment and support one another in this process.' ■



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The drover's wife c.1945
oil on canvas 51.5 x 61.5 cm
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Note: 1 Skye Saunders and Patricia Easteal, '*Sexual Harassment Cases in Rural Australia: Predicted Nature, Reporting, Employment Policies and Legal Response*' (Paper presented at the National Rural Regional Law and Justice Conference, Warrnambool 19-21 November, 2010).

Anne Gorman has worked in both the Commonwealth and NSW Governments. She has been involved in teaching at the tertiary level and practised as a management consultant for 35 years. In 2015 she published her first memoir the 'Country Wife' and is currently working on her second untitled volume. PHONE (02)9363 9193 EMAIL a-gorman@bigpond.co