***WHISPERS FROM THE BUSH: The Workplace Sexual Harassment of Australian Rural Women***
**Skye Saunders; The Federation Press, 2015; 220 pages; $59.95**

This book, a self-proclaimed 'work of the heart', is an exploration of the nature, perverseness and reporting trends of sexual harassment in rural Australian workplaces. The findings are based on 107 interviews with rural employees and employers and analysis of 68 adjudicated workplace sexual discrimination cases. The result is a gripping account of a 'double silence' – the shame and stigma that surrounds sexual harassment, and the specific geographical, cultural and social factors of rural Australia that operate to isolate and gag female victims.

Saunders paints a dismal picture of the life of a rural woman at work, under siege from a 'cultural epidemic' of sexual harassment. She describes a pervasive hostility towards women in the workplace, fostered by the 'rampant maleness' of Australian bush mythology and traditional male dominance in the workforce. Pornography, verbal harassment and physical sexual harassment are used as tools to remind women where their place is. Cultural and community norms minimise offensive acts. Faced with few employment options, geographical isolation, inadequate support services and the threat of corrosive small town gossip, women feel their only option is to 'suck it up' – keep quiet and tolerate abhorrent behaviour.

The research is a case in point of the ineffectiveness of 'good law' (including the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)*) when it comes up against entrenched subcultures where harmful norms are allowed to thrive. This is particularly alarming in Saunders' findings on the attitudes of rural employers and senior managers. Despite these groups being responsible for providing safe workplaces, the research revealed a widespread failure to have, or implement, sexual harassment policies and a genuine lack of understanding of which behaviours constitute sexual harassment.

While such ignorance of basic legal responsibilities is concerning, employer attitudes worsened when asked how they would respond to a sexual harassment complaint; 80 per cent of employers said that the best response to sexual harassment was to ignore it. Another striking finding was the attitude of female co-workers to victims, with two-thirds blaming the victim for sexual harassment. Saunders' delicate examination of the issues entangled in these findings illuminates the fraught nature of masculinity-saturated workplaces where women sometimes adopt the attitudes of the dominant group as a survival mechanism.

Yet it is the voices of the women and the stories they share – vivid, jarring and poignant – that make this study so compelling. Saunders used qualitative, in-depth interview techniques grounded in feminist theory and travelled great distances to speak with participants in their homes, cafes or local pubs. As well as producing insightful personal narratives, this research method overturns the stifling status quo around sexual harassment – rather than being silenced or spoken about, women talk about their experiences in their own words.

This book is the beginning of a greater endeavour. A more thorough examination of the concept of 'reporting' would be useful to this field, given the tension between the urgency of making reporting a systemic norm and the individual consequences women face for doing so. Saunders readily acknowledges the limitations of convenience sample selection, and notes a larger study would provide a strong foundation for a campaign to foster cultural change through education.

This book fills a gap in the existing body of knowledge around sexual harassment. It illustrates how dimensions of gendered harms can be better understood through applying a geographical and cultural lens. Were it not for this study, the low levels of reporting and few adjudicated cases could be interpreted to mean that sexual harassment was experienced similarly by both rural and city women. Yet it is starkly clear there is a long way to go to give rural women the safe working environments they are legally entitled to. This book has left me with a deepened understanding of the complex and powerful dynamics rural women negotiate, and a profound appreciation of the courage required to turn a whisper into a shout.

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