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MCEWEN, CELINA; PULLEN, ALISON; RHODES, CARL  
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## PERSPECTIVES

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# SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK: A LEADERSHIP PROBLEM

Sexual violence against women in the workplace remains rife and poorly addressed. Sexual harassment is often perpetrated by leaders, managers, or supervisors as the result of abusive power relations. Recognising and addressing the cultural tolerance for sexual violence in organizations and society is one of the steps in addressing this issue. In this paper, we argue that violence is normalised through leadership practices. We suggest that leadership against sexual harassment is essential for organizational redress.

## INTRODUCTION

Workplaces have been identified as a social space where change that addresses and seeks to eliminate sexual violence perpetrated against women can be implemented and enforced through gender equity measures (Webster et al., 2018). Yet, this form of violence remains rife and poorly addressed despite legal interventions that have made sexual violence a criminal act and widespread implementation of diversity management and training (Mackay, 2018). Beyond the business case approach for diversity and punitive actions against individual perpetrators, facing head on the cultural tolerance for sexual violence in organizations, and society more broadly, is required. To properly address the scourge of violence against women at work also entails cultural and systemic change. This includes radically changing workplace cultures that facilitate sexual violence, which necessitates the explicit attention that sexual harassment is often perpetrated by leaders, managers or supervisors and the result of abusive power relations. Workplace change is the responsibility of leadership groups and tackling the fact that some leaders do play a role in enacting sexual violence is crucial.

Recent events and research in the US and Australia, such as the Harvey Weinstein trial and convictions, and the findings from the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC) national survey into sexual harassment in workplaces (Gebicki, Meagher, & Flax, 2018), show that perpetrating sexual violence against women in the workplace is still occurring. Recent studies concerning social attitudes towards violence against women (Webster et al., 2018) and leaders' attitudes towards sexual violence in the workplace (Hart, Crossley, & Correll, 2018) show a high level of acceptance and perpetration of sexual-based hostilities or misconduct against women.

### CELINA MCEWEN<sup>1</sup>

celina.mcewen@uts.edu.au  
0000-0002-3121-5114

### ALISON PULLEN<sup>2</sup>

alison.pullen@mq.edu.au  
0000-0003-1933-1582

### CARL RHODES<sup>1</sup>

carl.rhodes@uts.edu.au  
0000-0002-6571-2872

<sup>1</sup> University of Technology  
Sydney, UTS Business School,  
Sydney, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Macquarie University, Sydney,  
Australia

Although many people experience sexual misconduct in the workplace (e.g., LGBTQI+ people, men, women), in this paper, we specifically focus on the violence directed at women. We discuss forms of sexual harassment that range from unwanted sexual attention to sexual coercion, sexual assault, and sexual abuse. Although these terms have differing meanings in different contexts and countries, in this paper we use ‘sexual harassment’ to mean any form of “unwelcome sexual behaviour that’s offensive, humiliating or intimidating. It can be written, verbal or physical, and can happen in person or online” (ReachOut, 2021, n.p.). Sexual abuse is generally used to refer to a broad range of sexual activities and behaviours against people who are not able to give consent (e.g., children) (Cortina, Koss, & Cook, 2018). Sexual assault is a crime and “occurs when a person is forced, coerced or tricked into sexual acts against their will or without their consent” (New South Wales [NSW] Department of Community and Justice, 2021).

Following Özkazanç-Pan (2019), we see the need to interrogate the gender structures and systems that have facilitated sexual harassment, which shifts the emphasis away from individuals towards a structural and relational approach. The prevalence of toxic masculinity across industries and organizations are breeding grounds for practices that marginalize, silence and discipline women into routinely accepting, or tolerating, sexual violence perpetrated against them. Calling out cultural sexism is vital (Savigny, 2020), and leadership that aids cultural sexism and violence is key to its resolve. Leadership that perpetuates ‘inequality regimes’ (Acker, 2006) is a key part of addressing the gendered structures and systems that provide fertile ground for violence. However, women’s experience of violence is unequal, as bell hooks (2004) articulates in her discussions of violence towards Black women.

Next, we outline the nature of sexual harassment against women, before examining examples of women’s violence in high profile cases, which illustrate how intersectional inequality surfaces and demonstrate the need to call out violence. In the final part, we discuss the need for leadership to include overt and systemic action against sexual violence in the workplace.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK

Based on US and Australian data, sexual harassment in the workplace is still common practice despite policy reforms and well-established gender equality schemes and strategies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016; US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2019; Nason

& Sangiuliano, 2020). In Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has been administering a Personal Safety Survey (PSS) that includes questions about gendered and sexual violence. The 2016 PSS shows that close to 10.6% of the most recent incidents of sexual assault or sexual threat perpetrated by a man against a woman in the last 10 years occurred at work and 12.5% of the perpetrators were an employer/manager/supervisor/co-worker (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

The AHRC initiated a national survey into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces (Gebicki et al., 2018). The results of this survey show that “one in three people (33%) have experienced sexual harassment at work in the last five years. As with lifetime sexual harassment, women were more likely to be sexually harassed in the workplace than men” (Gebicki et al., 2018, p. 8). Also, the survey found that:

- 25% of perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace acting on their own were the victim or survivor’s direct manager or supervisor (11%), another manager or supervisor at work (8%) or the head of the workplace or organisation (e.g., the CEO, business owner or similar) (6%);
- in 47% of cases where there was more than one perpetrator involved a direct manager or supervisor (21%), another manager or supervisor (16%) or the head of the workplace or organisation (10%);
- 22% of single witnesses of acts sexual harassment in the workplace were the victim or survivor’s direct manager or supervisor (12%), another manager or supervisor at work (6%) or the head of the workplace or organisation (4%); and
- in cases of multiple witnesses, 42% included the victim or survivor’s direct manager or supervisor (16%), another manager or supervisor at work (16%) or the head of the workplace or organisation (11%).

These findings need to be examined in the light of—and in a way confirms—the fact that “One in five people who were sexually harassed at work said the behaviour was common (20%) in their workplace” (Gebicki et al., 2018, p. 9). The figures correlate other findings from several recent national surveys that highlight the extent of sexist views in Australia. For example, a national survey on social attitudes towards gender equity found that 53% of the surveyed population believed that in Australia sexism was most

widespread in the workplace, after in politics (58%) but ahead of in the media (42%) and advertising (33%) (Evans, Haussegger, Halupka, & Rowe, 2019). Another national survey on attitudes towards violence against women and gender equity found that 14% of Australians believed that men are better leaders in politics and work (Webster et al., 2018).

Furthermore, although only indicative of what may be seen as accepted practices and culture, a review of the 58 submissions made to the AHRC's National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces by individuals—accessed on 8 July 2019 and made public on the AHRC's website<sup>1</sup> alongside 131 submissions made on behalf of organisations—highlights how common and normalised sexual and gender-based harassment is at work. A search of these submissions for the occurrence of the stem terms 'boss', 'director', 'leader', 'manager', 'executive', 'CEO', 'senior' and 'supervisor' revealed that 25 individuals reported sexually-motivated or sexist behaviours perpetrated by staff in management position (e.g., unwanted sexualised comments, lewd jokes, groping, rape), 18 reports of lack of support or poor response from management when reporting such misconduct (e.g., not acting on complaints, isolating staff who complain, blocked staff who complain from promotion), and 8 reports of management's implicit support or acceptance of objectifying sexual attitudes and behaviours towards women (e.g., blaming the victim for the perpetrator's actions). Although, data were not available on other forms of difference, this brief search also showed that most perpetrators were men (only 6 out of the 58 individual submissions were about female perpetrators) and the victims were mostly women (5 men out of 58 individuals).

In these submissions a review of references to the social movement 'MeToo' and '#MeToo' highlights the mixed impact the movement had in victims. Although it is not possible to generalise from the individual submission, we can see that, for some of these individuals, the movement had a negative impact, including retraumatisation (e.g., "I haven't thought of that incident in more than years, but I got to re-live the trauma of that attack and its personal and career ramifications when the #MeToo campaign gained momentum here 12 months ago") and confirming the lack of action from those in positions of responsibility or care and the impunity of perpetrators (e.g., "All the MeToo talk is cheap. You tell women to report sexual harassment to HR. HR does an 'alleged' cover up investigation."). On the other hand, we can also see that the movement helped victims not wanting to use

the formal reporting channels to informally disclose incidents (e.g., "I have tried to communicate these things in the MeToo movement but I lack the courage") and support them to formally report incidents, such as through a submission to the AHRC, as exemplified by the following quote:

#MeToo's international spotlight on the sexual misconduct and abuse of power by individuals in positions of authority, and the high-profile allegations of sexual misconduct raised against those in the media industry here in Australia, has undeniably been a catalyst for giving (predominantly) women a voice and the ability to speak about behaviour that should never happen, let alone in a workplace.

In the US, according to a survey conducted in January 2018 of 1,000 women and 1,000 men aged 18 years and over (Kearl, 2018): "81% of women and 43% of men reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime.

- More than 3 in 4 women (77%) and 1 in 3 men (34%) experienced verbal sexual harassment;
- 1 in 2 women (51%) and 1 in 6 men (17%) were sexually touched in an unwelcome way;
- Around 4 in 10 women (41%) and 1 in 4 men (22%) experienced cyber sexual harassment;
- More than 1 in 3 women (34%) and 1 in 10 men (12%) were physically followed;
- Close to 1 in 3 women (30%) and 1 in 10 men (12%) faced unwanted genital flashing;
- More than 1 in 4 women (27%) and 1 in 14 men (7%) survived sexual assault" (p. 7).
- This survey also highlighted that:

Any slight difference in experiences across racial/ethnic groups for women was not statistically significant. Overall, among men, Hispanic men reported experiencing sexual harassment and

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/projects/national-inquiry-sexual-harassment-australian-workplaces>

assault the most for every category, while Black men reported experiencing it the least for almost every category. Difference across racial/ethnic groups was particularly significant for physically aggressive harassment (36% of Hispanic men versus 25% of White men and 18% of Black men) and for sexual assault (12% of Hispanic men versus 8% of Black men and 6% of White men). (Kearl, 2018, p. 18)

These submissions and surveys highlighted the need for change, hinted at intersecting inequalities across gender, class, and ethnic lines, and stressed the role leadership practices plays in maintaining or enacting a culture that supports abuse of power over women in the form of sexual misconduct. Also revealed is individuals' understanding of leadership practices' capacity to change systemic and individuals' abuse of women.

## CASES OF INTERSECTING INEQUALITY

To more vividly illustrate the ways in which men in leadership positions use their power to abuse women, we now turn to two highly mediated cases that helped bring much needed attention to the issue of sexual abuse and violence against women. These cases provide a horrific exemplification of the relationship between power, violence and leadership as well as the complexity of coercive practices at the intersection of differences (e.g., gender, class, age, ethnicity).

On 7 December 2017 at a US congressional hearing about sexual harassment in the workplace, Gloria Lett, Counsel at the Office of House Employment Counsel, testified to her own experiences of discrimination. In addition to explaining how sexual harassment had, earlier in her career, led her to leave a job with which she was otherwise satisfied, she also revealed some realities of the racial discrimination and abuse she had been subject to. Lett described an incident as follows:

As a woman of color, I have also experienced race discrimination in the workplace [...] I worked for a private company where a white manager brought it [sic] in a whip, which he prominently displayed in his office. And when questioned about it, he said he wanted to — quote — unquote — motivate the black employees. (Edwards, 2017, n.p.)

Lett's story is one of overt racism that chillingly echoes the extreme injustices of America's past, amplifying them into a present where White authority uses threats of violence in attempts to control African-American people. This is also a story about

leadership. Not the fairy tales of heroism that characterise so much of leadership research (Grint, 2010), but the harsh realities of what can happen when workplace authority interacts with a cultural legacy of colonialism and sexism. Lett's account is harrowing in itself but harrowing too because it represents the experiences of so many women in the workplace at the hands of men. It also shows how those experiences can be troublingly different for women of colour. It is precisely disparities like these and how leaders exploit and reproduce them to ensure their dominance that show how inequality regimes work (Cook & Glass, 2014).

The second is the case of Hollywood film producer and serial sex offender Harvey Weinstein. When Academy Award-winning Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong'o wrote of her harassment at the hands of Weinstein in *The New York Times* in October 2017 (Nyong'o, 2017) she was the first prominent Black actress to testify to being harassed by Weinstein; his other accusers were by and large White. It was in response to Nyong'o that, compared to all his other accusers, Weinstein made a very specific denial effectively asserting that she had fabricated the story. While he accepted responsibility for so many of his reprehensible behaviours, his reaction changed when his accuser was Black, resulting in many calling out his defence as racist (Wang, 2017).

Weinstein's career-long record of sexually harassing and assaulting women is an example of the worst kind of abuses of power by a White male authority figure. This behaviour was enabled by the power accorded to him through his leadership position as co-chairman of The Weinstein Company. Weinstein's disturbing record of systematic abuse of women in an industry where dominant White male 'leaders' make career decisions affecting women's lives based on an assessment of their 'fuckability' (Adewunmi, 2017) is not without racist dimensions.

Gloria Lett's whip-happy manager and Harvey Weinstein were able to get away with their repeated patterns of abuse for so many decades because their behaviours have been accepted as normal in their respective institutional setting. These acts amount to an injurious form of leadership that is an accepted and dominant practice, which is supported and legitimised by complex intersecting systems of power, such as racist White ethno-nationalist views and patriarchal domination. In defending himself, Weinstein said: "I came of age in the 60s and 70s, when all the rules about behaviour and workplaces were different. That was the culture then" (Eve, 2017, n.p.). The implications of this refusal to take responsibility are that when power inequality between men and women is institutionalised the abuse of women becomes normalised. Moreover, this institutionalisation



is further cemented by the “pressure to reconstruct the story to maintain the status quo association of leadership with individual action, masculinity, and static, hierarchical notions of power and control” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 653; see also Ford, 2005). That is how inequality regimes operate and how leaders exploit them to ensure their dominance (Cook & Glass, 2014).

## LEADERSHIP AS POLITICAL ACTION AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual harassment against women, who identify or are perceived as belonging to another minority group, occurs within and through intersecting power structures. It is, therefore, crucial to understand that, in the workplace, these violent forms of discrimination and leadership practices are embedded in historically shaped inequality regimes and systems. These regimes and systems produce distinctive experiences that render some of us insignificant (Collins, 2015) through the performance and implementation of “practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (Acker, 2006, p. 443).

To tackle sexual violence and achieve equality in organizations requires disrupting the underlying conditions that reproduce privilege and injustice, including the cultural tolerance of violence. Addressing these acts of violence and organizational conditions needs a deep commitment from leadership and alliance building at all levels of the organisations, rather than an unreflexive compliance or ‘gender-neutral’ approach that fails to recognise individual needs and maintains gender inequality.

A good start is to understand how inequality regimes operate by analysing hierarchies and leadership positions within organizations. But this is not enough because in some instances, an individual focus might have the opposite effect and make particular people appear or feel more isolated, and, in so doing, provide a normative platform for oppressive behaviour in institutions that reinforce patriarchal domination through structural order. If our goal is to be able to (inter)act as equals in organizations free of violence, achieving equality in singular workplaces is only one part of the emancipatory struggle. To lead broader systemic changes, there is a need to act beyond individual violations or inequalities in isolated organizations. There is also a need to take responsibility for all our actions.

To address sexual violence in the workplace requires political change (Rottenberg, 2019) and commitment from leaders. Such a politics means enacting leadership practices that acknowledge the existence of inequality regimes and seek to challenge and transform traditional gendered relations in the workplace characterised by productive and restrictive power-based interactions. It also relies on creating shared practices or ‘community’ as exemplified by feminist movements, such as #MeToo, #ShoutingBack and Black Lives Matter (Pullen, Rhodes, McEwen & Liu, 2019). Indeed, Özkazanç-Pan’s (2019) discussion of collective feminism reminds us that “gender system change will require collective efforts, voices and scholarship that undoubtedly cross national, virtual and community boundaries when wide ranging, transversal communal action is required” (p. 1217). These forms of organising show the vital importance of building strength across axes of difference to disrupt the hierarchy, power and regimes on which inequality is perpetuated, and not only looking at the structural changes required to interrupt the re-emergence of the same behaviour in other individuals, but also calling out and/or prosecuting individual perpetrators at an organizational and national level (Teixeira & Rampazo, 2017; Teixeira, Silva, Mesquita, & Rampazo, 2018).

Some of the #MeToo claims of sexual harassment at work have led to changes, such as the increase in legal claims lodged, incidents being reported, and implementation of new training programs (Baum, 2019). Some examples of training material include *Consent Matters* for university staff and students in Australia<sup>2</sup> and the US-based *That’s Harassment* (Avin & Schwimmer, 2018). The next steps required to end the cycle of violence are for men to be held accountable for their actions against women and leaders to take responsibility for attitudinal and cultural change in organisations.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/uni-participation-quality/students/Student-safety>

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

All three authors contributed equally on all aspects of the paper - the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach; the theoretical review, data collection and analysis, and manuscript writing and revision.