

Women in rural workplaces struggle against the 'boys club' that leads to harassment

Written by Lucie Newsome, Lecturer, Business School, University of New England

A [culture of male dominance](#) in rural Australian workplaces is a [key explainer](#) for the high rate of sexual harassment.

Women in rural Australia experience workplace sexual harassment at alarming rates. Researchers Skype Saunders and Patricia Easteal [interviewed 84 female employees](#) from regional and remote areas of Western Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia and New South Wales. They found that 73% of rural women had experienced sexual harassment at work. This is compared to 25% of women Australia-wide.

Only [35.7% of those surveyed](#) said they would disclose incidents of sexual harassment. A culture of self-reliance, the effects of small town gossip, fewer employment opportunities, a workplace culture of victim blaming and geographic isolation from services (such as police and medical care) prohibited the reporting of sexual harassment.

Read more: [***When sexual assault victims speak out, their institutions often betray them***](#)

Gender roles in rural Australia follow traditional patterns and this culture sets rural women as [outsiders in the workplace](#)

[Research](#) argues that women in regional workplaces, traditionally dominated by men, face a range of behaviours that signal to them they do not belong and are intruding on male spaces. Sexual harassment is the most powerful of these.

Read more: [***Change is possible when sexual harassment is exposed***](#)

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41% of the [agricultural workforce](#) are female but in mining, only [16% of mining employees are women](#)

In workplaces where there are few women, women are more visible and they are [more likely to experience hostility](#)

. Sexual harassment against women is more prevalent in male-dominated sectors such as mining and agriculture.

The impact of sexual harassment in rural workplaces

In rural towns where the line between private and public spheres is blurred, women's reporting of sexual harassment and discrimination can [endanger their position](#) in the social fabric of their communities.

For women seeking career progression in male-dominated sectors of rural Australia infiltrating the network of the "boys club" is seen as important. For example, one participant [in a 2016 study](#) stated that her career success depended on "drinking with the boys" at rural functions. She believed that opting out of events such as these would inhibit her career advancement.

Studies by [Barbara Pini](#) and [Beatrice Dunfield](#) found that women's access to leadership positions in agribusiness and agriculture was stifled by lower self-esteem due to systemic gender discrimination. In addition to sexual harassment Pini argued that workplaces did not support the balancing of work and family. She found leaders did not perceive female employees to have adequate skills and abilities and where there was culture of bullying, it inhibited women's access to leadership positions.

Read more: [***Rape culture: why our community attitudes to sexual violence matter***](#)

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Sexual harassment in the workplace is a real threat to regional communities. Women are significantly [more likely to leave small towns](#) due to the limitations in employment opportunities.

As women leave rural areas the [opportunity to disrupt masculine culture](#) and create greater levels of respect for women in the workplace declines.

Sexual harassment in rural areas is strongly associated with workplaces that have a strong masculine culture, where dominating and excluding women through threatening behaviour is normalised.

The key to combatting this is dismantling ideas of masculine and feminine work spaces. One example of this is that men will work in sectors that have traditionally required physical strength, such as mining, and that women will play support roles in “soft” skill areas.

If we do away with this culture it will be an important starting point for creating safe workplaces free of sexual harassment.

While the statistics on sexual harassment in rural Australia are shocking, gender roles in rural Australia are in a state of renegotiation and reconstruction. That can continue if employees of both genders are committed to change.

Lucie Newsome does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/women-in-rural-workplaces-struggle-against-the-boys-club-that-leads-to-harassment-92507>