

'Whispers from the Bush'

***The Workplace Sexual Harassment of
Australian Rural Women***

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Acknowledgements

This Thesis is a work of the heart. It would not be possible were it not for strong women- women who were not afraid to give voice to their vulnerability, transforming it into hope with their bright courage and strength.

Sharing a story of humiliation is not without pain, because it requires the re-awakening of events that can cause the soul to bleed. In the course of this research, women pushed beyond this pain and bled to share their stories with me- a stranger from a different town. I would first like to thank every woman who trusted me with her story and revealed her heart's anguish in the course of this project.

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late grandmother. Even from heaven, they have whispered words of love and strength in my ear as I have worked on this project.

From an early point in my life, my grandmother, Meems, taught me to love the bush and its people, and my own identity will forever be shaped by her example. In my memory I see her; she has made a batch of Honey Jumbles for the shearers from the Women's Weekly Cookbook and is now adding a stitch or two to the Last Supper tapestry she has been working on, musing all the while about what to make next for the church bake sale. Through her cooking she nourished stomachs and souls on the land and she was loved for her gentle practicality and endurance. She did all of this even whilst undergoing dialysis for kidney failure—twice-daily conducting the dialysis ritual herself from a tiny room in the homestead which had been transformed into a clinic in which she was both doctor and patient. Yes, my late grandmother was the embodiment of resilience at its shining best and I would like to thank her for teaching me about this by simply living her life.

My beloved mother, Sandy, was also deeply connected to the bush (having lived in the New England area and in Central Western NSW for most of her life). It was my mother's bush garden that is featured on the front page of this Thesis- and the image of the stone woman surrounded by bush has inspired my heart as I have written this work.

In the rural space, my mother was known to embrace people with an unprecedented tenderness and warmth. She lived to tend to the bruised of spirit

and to encourage the brokenhearted- even throughout the ordeal of her own battle with breast cancer. My mother passed away from secondary breast cancer in the course of this Thesis journey. She did know of this research project before she died, though, and was radiantly proud of the work. It is true to say that I still have regularly engaged in dialogue-of-the-heart with her in completing this project. I would like to thank my mama for the silver string that binds us—still.

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grown over the years. Your leadership in the rural space is something that I have observed with deep admiration ever since I can remember, Dad, and I have been proud to have heard people say of this work “You are your father’s daughter!” Thank you for your unconditional love and your wisdom- (because “Daddies know!”)

I would like to thank my sister, Heidi (my Roosies) for being my best friend. Thank you for listening (and listening some more... and some more), for adoring me with your whole heart, for comforting me, for laughing with/ at me and for being ‘my person’. As mum used to say, “You are a beautiful little encourager, my darling!”- and you are. I wish I had the words to tell you what you have done for me over the years, Heid, but Jo March says it all, really:

“Don’t be such a beetle! I could never love anyone as I love my sister!”

To my little pearls—my Summer Rose and Samuel Benjamin: your Mummy loves you all the way to the moon and back and forever after that.

Sammy (my ‘Mr Beetle’): Since your very first night on earth, I knew that my life had become somehow magical because I had a son. Little did I know how right I was! My Sweetie Beetie, my heart is so full when I watch you at kindy morning line-up and see you whisper something impishly to one of your little mates. In fact I have processed a lot of my reading about ‘mateship’ through observing you interact with other 5 year old ‘blokes’. (Speaking of, I am so proud of the Formula 1 game which you and your mates have devised- and that when you had a ‘crash’

this week and skinned your knee, the 'safety car' (Marcus) was quick to the rescue, shouting "Go, go, go!" to get you back in the race)! I love the littleness of you as I see your long eyelashes (your 'brooms') rest at night. You make me so proud, my extraordinary little Samuel.

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And finally, to my Craig- my 'Dreaming Tree'. Through the mystery of time, I do feel that I have known your heart my whole life and I know the truth in Professor Bhaer's words:

"Your heart understood mine. In the depth of the fragrant night, I listened with ravished soul to your beloved voice. Your heart understood mine."

I would like to thank you, my Darling, because in loving you, I am filled with the gift of joy. The 'fit' of your spirit and my own is a treasured mystery and I am so grateful to God for the fire that it brings to our every day. Thank you for being

the Love of My Life. In the context of this work, thank you for reading my work and for enduring my miffiness when you have gently suggested some minor changes (!) Thank you for bringing me to live in the bush again... with our Tree of Life and our glasses of wine as the sun sets. Thank you for making me pancakes for breakfast and platters for lunch and roasts for dinner. Thank you for dreaming with me and for then making those dreams a reality. I love you beyond all words. Always, your Angel Mouse.

I have come to understand the true wisdom in my mother's constant refrain as she battled breast cancer:

'It's not what happens to you but the way that you respond that truly counts.'

It is my hope that women who have been harmed by sexual harassment in remote areas will also be encouraged by my mother's words, discovering renewed strength as they respond to their own suffering.

Abstract

This Thesis examines the nature and prevalence of workplace sexual harassment in rural and remote areas of Australia. To this end, interviews were conducted with a total of 107 rural employees and employers across Australia about their experiences of gendered harm in the workplace and their attitudes towards its occurrence. Other complimentary research techniques were also implemented in this Thesis, including a comprehensive judicial case analysis of sexual harassment matters heard in Australia throughout a five-year period.

The key findings in this Thesis span areas such as:

- the impact of male-dominance on the nature and prevalence of sexual harassment within the workplace;
- - the survival behaviours adopted by many rural women in response to sexually harassing behaviour; and
- - employee and employer attitudes towards the disclosure of sexual harassment.

In the final chapters, the Thesis makes recommendations for addressing the prevalence of- and attitudinal problems towards- rural workplace sexual harassment.

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