

Submission 241

I work in a large law enforcement organisation. I have worked in this organisation for almost three decades and hold a middle management position.

I received an email regarding the National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in the Australian Workplaces inviting submissions about sexual harassment.

Not so long ago, I had been asked (in-confidence) to recount my experiences to assist my organisation in developing a framework to respond to sexual harassment and negative workplace behaviours. The below recounts the original request about my experiences and an articulation of some of the behaviour I have been subjected to. I hope this will be of benefit to the national inquiry.

At the time of receiving the request from a trusted person within my organisation, I must say that I was furious and angry which was wrapped up in a despair of having been down this road too many times in my career already. I said out aloud, "not again, how many times has this been done". Other women in the room responded to my sigh of frustration, "hey you read that email too...I just deleted it." I couldn't delete it, and so printed it off, and with pen in hand, left the room. I had to breathe. I had to check for the 'hidden agenda', the lack of previous outcomes, why now, who do they think they are? Was this another tyre kicking exercise where nothing will be resolved because nobody really gives a rats in the end?

I asked myself a whole heap of questions about whether I could even be bothered dealing with the crap that gets left over from such experiences. I have been previously told by women, very senior women now gone from the organisation, "we don't need to bother ourselves with doing anything about 'these things'. Get over it or get out of the job".

When I came back into the room I was asked if I was going to respond. I knew that I had to and so I discussed a few questions that I wanted to ask. I fired off an email which was responded to with such genuineness about what was being done and why. I can only ask that you try to facilitate change. I have already had one of my experiences in the public domain, and something that I am comfortable to talk about, although I don't have to anymore.

At the outset I'd like to talk about the words we use. As an organisation it seems that we refer to rape as sexual assault to make it easier to get our heads around. We change the language of everything, apportion blame to the powerless and call it all such fancy names, instead of calling it for what it is. I had been the pin up woman for surviving revolting behaviour which seemed to make it easier for so many women to share their experiences with me, although a lot of the time, when the story would be told it would be prefaced with, "my matter is minor compared with yours". None of it was minor. None of it is minor. We have just dressed it up differently and called it discrimination, negative behaviour, or sexual harassment. My going public within the organisation gave others a license to download, which horrified me but didn't surprise me. The horror came from thinking that I thought I could have changed something but it was still happening. The specifics of identity were left out because that may have then put me or the person telling me their story in the position of having to statutorily report the matter to the organisation.

Some women cannot talk or write down their experiences - even anonymously. There is a club of us. Unspoken of, unnamed who either survived or got out of the job. I know off the top of my head five women who have been raped by other employees in my organisation. I know of no policewomen who have not been offended against in the job in one way or another. It is the scale of behaviour that is different. It wasn't until I was talking with some other women that I realised how bad the problem is. We have minimalised the behaviour in order to stay doing the job that we love. Relief for many offended against only came from finding out that some of the bastards had got out of the job before us. Many more of these grubs are still around. They are up and down the food chain. They use alliances and tactics to control, and manipulate silence.

I will relay my experiences of behaviour that I thought was something I 'had to put up with'. My story is almost identical to so many others. There have been so many, many wonderful men in this job too, so I don't want this to be a kicking session in gender equality. I must admit that I can't be bothered categorising where each thing may fit in to criterion of sexual harassment, negative behaviour, or discrimination. There is no chronological order either.

- First day at a new station, and newly sworn in. I get the questions, slut, lesbian, and weird talk and where do I fit in? The best kind of slut brings her own carton. Lesbians are called dykes and weird policewomen are like your kid sister. Take your pick.
- I have had hands placed in my crouch to make sure I wasn't 'hiding' anything in there. More times than I can remember to count.
- I have been touched on my bottom, had my underwear inspected via a wedgie, had my bra undone, (still can't work out how that even was done), had hands put down my front. I had my shirt pulled up for a tit inspection. I have been bent over a desk forwards and backwards. I was told they were "only joking".
- I have been kissed by unshaved, the shaved, the stinky and more than one of the boys. It was never with consent. I have been kissed in lifts, police cars, women's toilets and even at my desk.
- I have been told that the criteria for getting a plain clothes (detective in-training) spot was "rooting the boss in the back of his Mustang."
- I have been referred to as frigid, accused of not putting out for the boys, and not dressed as eye candy.
- On an away job, I was told to lock myself in a car because I had been bought for the interstate detectives for four cartons of beer. I was given the heads up because a senior detective said I reminded him of his daughter and he wouldn't want his daughter in my situation. I woke up with some very pissed-off men licking the dew off window of the police car wanting to get in. I had both sets of keys. Lucky for me.
- I was rostered to work with a serial groper to see which one of us would last the longest before a roster request was made. He didn't touch me because I wasn't his sort, but he had a long list of victims. I'm not sure what I would have done if he had touched me.
- I have been subjected to stories where it is expected that I would laugh about it. The most revolting was a constable and senior sergeant joking about a rape complainant now having a "stinky pinky" because she had been raped by a bloke with a sexually transmitted disease. When I asked them to stop, the senior sergeant said, "what, we have to be precious around you because you reckon you've been raped. Fuck - must have been a dumb ugly cunt to rape you." Constable laughed and said, "they are all

fucked in the head these bitches”. You don’t forget that stuff too quickly. I took it to a manager, asked him to fix the problem. I was labelled a ‘dog’ until one left and the other was promoted. I was asked by the manager if I was happy with the outcome of “his chat”. No, I wasn’t but it was too late by then.

- I had a boss (senior sergeant) leave Black Label Penthouse in the meal room in the watchhouse. Every day I would pick them up and put them in the men’s toilet. I was told by the boss that they were his property and he didn’t want them pissed on or jacked off on in the toilet. The magazines were to stay on the meal room table. When an Inspector came through the watchhouse, I pointed out that it wasn’t right to have such reading material in the watchhouse meal room. I was told I didn’t have to read them but if I was so offended he would get them put away. I turned up for nightshift, and whilst doing cell inspections, found every revolting picture plastered up on the perspex inside every cell. It was too dangerous to take them down whilst there were prisoners in the cells, so on every cell inspection, I tried to ignore the pictures and the prisoners who chose to gratify themselves in my company. My boss turned up before my shift finished the next morning and told me if I fuck with him he will destroy me. He told me he “was personal friends with [REDACTED] and every other [REDACTED] up the food chain that could make my life hell”. Not words that I would ever use but it conveyed the message clearly. I knew he did have those connections, so I backed away and shut up. I went relieving in another section and I never went back. I loved the job, but not that boss.
- I was raped in the job by another police employee, but by the time it did the rounds of the rumour mill, I had been pole dancing, and was naked on a table asking for it. I was told it could have been worse, and later found out through freedom of information laws that I was some ‘medicated psychiatric loser’ with no credibility. No names were given as to who supplied that information, but it was a commissioned officer who apparently knew me well. I was able to have that removed from the file. I kept the original report for a long time because I found the irony of still having possession of my issued firearm, along with every other accoutrement - fascinating - given that I was some psycho duck looney with a credibility issue.
- I have had a pen poked in the back of my head because I didn’t hear a boss calling me. I was reviewing a recording that he had asked me to check and at the time I had headphones on. Silly me. I was asked to make a complaint by management because they wanted to get rid of him. My response was never again. I had learnt my lessons well.
- I was invited to a dinner with [REDACTED]. There were about twenty of us. [REDACTED]. Between main course and dessert, he relayed a story about “the gecko”. An inspector who used to peer through the female barrack accommodation and how bad it must have felt for those young women - but none of them said anything. There had been a conversation about reporting and why the reporting rates were so low for sexual harassment matters. I asked, “well sir, if you knew about the gecko, then so did everyone else. If you didn’t do anything about it, then how could we expect these young women to do anything.” I have never forgotten the response, “I expect so.” I was kicked so hard under the table. Perhaps it was deemed by others to be insubordination, too rude, too out of scope for someone in my position to ask such a question of the boss of my organisation. I have not had a meal with [REDACTED] since but that is okay.

It is not the 'old days' either. We cannot minimize our stories by saying that is what used to happen. If we don't learn from our history, we are destined to repeat it. There is still the perception that senior women in my organisation got their positions on their knees rather than being all good women wanting to do a good job. Senior women in my organisation are deemed 'ball busters' rather than women who took chances to make a difference for all of us. Men and women. I lead and manage where and when I can. I have the safest of workplaces now and I am blessed to have a boss with credibility and integrity. I am not sure that I want to leave the safety of my workplace any time soon and so I accept where I am in the organisation. I still love being a police officer. I just don't love my organisation anymore. I am committed and still engaged. I will continue to do my bit.

Policing can be dangerous. However, when I am of the opinion that the organisation *itself* is more dangerous to me than the community I serve, I think we can safely say we have a serious problem.