

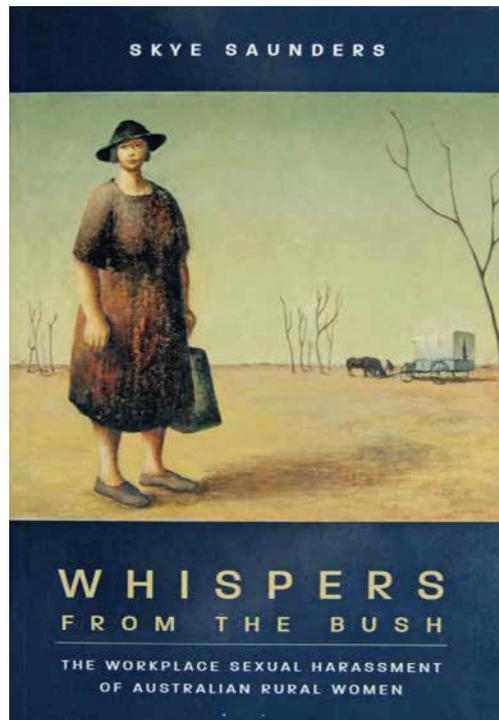
# Book review:

## *Whispers from the Bush*

Authored by Skye Saunders

**Review by: Megan Lawton**

Director, Legal Advisor & Management Consultant  
Vivid Advice



Well it's been described to me as the 'fit in or f off' policy. You have probably already heard about that in other interviews today! ...And if you don't fit in your gunna find it hard to find a job... So I think women would feel the pressure.

The author, Dr Sky Saunders hails from Orange NSW and worked in a Canberra-based legal practice in employment law. In this fertile soil germinated her passion and interest that blossomed into her research and this book. Whilst what she uncovers is no surprise it is never the less gold. It is thus unfortunate that this gold is hidden beneath extensive explanations of legitimising the methodology, examples of questionnaires and explorations of constructs that seem to apologise for the stories that are captured in the interviews. The very style of the work suggests that the words of women are not to be believed without their first being couched in some acceptable or appropriate academic jargon.

Saunders is now an academic at ANU, described as an expert on the issue of sexual harassment in rural Australia. Saunders' research captured in this work succeeds in quantifying what we have all known for some time—sexual harassment and discrimination continue on in rural and remote workplaces seemingly unaffected by the evolution in laws and policies that govern workplace behaviour.

Whilst many will criticise the research as being limited in scope (only 107 participants) and also question the methodology of the information gathering technique (in-depth face-to-face interviews), the findings are

undeniable evidence that many rural workplaces are hostile to women. Almost three quarters of employees surveyed had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace by a colleague or member of the community, with only 36% saying they would report sexual harassment. Of the employers surveyed (23) all but one reported they had witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace while 17 of the 23 had personally experienced it.

Saunders explores the historical landscape in which these behaviours sit, our notions of a sunburned country being no place for a woman, set the scene the many micro-assaults and violence the women report. Evaluation of 68 sexual harassment cases also tentatively identifies some trends, suggesting that rural employers are more likely to be found liable than their urban counterparts, but where the judicial officer finds against the complainant it is not uncommon to comment upon the complainant's credibility.

Saunders' work is a call to action for sustained efforts to achieve enduring cultural change. Her research continues to inspire, seeing the recent launch of a documentary, *Grace Under Fire: Workplace Sexual Harassment in the Bush*. Saunders has shone a light on a stark reality, the harm it causes and our complicity in it. In the words of a female manager, refusing to acknowledge a serious sexual assault:

We don't get, like 'rape' so much—(pause)—although we have had a rape... one girl woke up and found her workmate in her bed with her. And now her life is ruined, I guess.