

# Sexually harassed, assaulted, silenced, and now heard: Institutional betrayal and its affects

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## Abstract

This work explores the processes of sexual violence and its consequences, within an organizational context through a detailed examination of a professional woman's experience. By centralizing Sofia's lived experiences, we demonstrate how acts of institutional betrayal occur when an organization protects a perpetrator and silences and further traumatizes a victim/survivor. Outwardly this organization purports to champion gender equality, but inwardly they reflect the values and misogynistic norms present in parts of the Australian culture. We lay bare the multiple ways inequity regimes intersect with the disadvantage experienced by Sofia as a junior employee, a migrant, and a woman. We detail and account for Sofia's story through a process of listening deeply and writing differently to illustrate how sexual harassment in the workplace is not confined to a victim/survivor-perpetrator dichotomy but is embedded within organizational structures, policies, processes, and employees themselves. We explore how power relations silenced both victim/survivors and bystanders who spoke out and failed to disrupt the status quo or hold the organization to its purported gender equality values. We describe Sofia's battle for justice within this organization and provide a conceptual framework that highlights how reluctant

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acquiescence is shaped and how systematic silence and silencing of victim/survivors was maintained.

#### KEYWORDS

gender, inequity regimes, institutional betrayal, sexual harassment, silencing

## 1 | INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

This paper explores the lived experiences and effects of workplace sexual harassment and assault that was worsened by the organization's response, which was multiple acts of institutional betrayal. Internal inequity regimes perpetuated ongoing, unchecked sexual harassment against a woman we call "Sofia." This paper examines the experience of Sofia a young, migrant woman who was isolated from colleagues, undermined professionally, and ultimately silenced within the organization, making her ongoing employment untenable and continues to affect her self-esteem and professional relationships today.

Workplace sexual harassment, like rape or other forms of sexual violence, is formed and influenced by race, social status, gender, and citizenship and thus cannot be fully understood or examined without considering their impacts (Welsh et al., 2006). Throughout this paper, we question how effective the existing organizational solutions are, in particular "anti-harassment" policy protections and grievance procedures. We are not the first to question the effectiveness of such interventions, Dobbin and Kalev (2020) find that despite grievance procedures and "anti-harassment" policies, rates of workplace sexual harassment have remained stubbornly high since the 1980s.

In Australian workplaces, sexual harassment is "persistent, prevalent and under-reported" (MacDermott, 2020, p. 531). Australian research in this area has typically overlooked the experiences of migrant women (Howe, 2016). This cohort of women are more likely to be in precarious employment and experience other vulnerabilities such as, insufficient English proficiency, racial bias, and disparate cultural expectations that can contribute to a greater likelihood of experiencing work-based sexual harassment (Castañeda & Zavella, 2003; Clark, 2004; Coşkun, 2018; Gülçür & İlkaracan, 2002; Pei et al., 2021; Runge, 2011).

We untangle these inequities through considering the complex power relations and the top-down policies and bottom-up practices that silenced Sofia, strengthened the inequity regimes that protected the perpetrator and betrayed, belittled and retraumatized the victim/survivor (Acker, 2006). Through the paper, we use the language and construct victim/survivor to acknowledge the complexity of the experience and that there is at the same time vulnerability and victimhood in the experience but also agency in the wake of trauma.

We depict how a structured *silence* and *silencing* of sexual harassment and assault is strengthened through relations and practices, which we position as an inequity regime (Acker, 2006; Duffy et al., 2022) that betrays Sofia. We use the term "inequity regime" to be consistent with recent work by Duffy et al. (2022) that highlights how our thinking has evolved from wanting the same for everyone (equality), to recognizing and supporting differences by striving for equity. Acker (2006, p. 443) positions regimes as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that construct and reproduce class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations." In neoliberal organizations (like Sofia's employer), the inequity regimes bestow an advantage on some employees—most often straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied men—and disadvantages others (Morley, 2013). These inequities are deeply sensed, and their powerful affects accumulate as does their heaviness over time. Power in our positioning is relational, always in flow, shifting, moving, and fluctuating. In the case of sexual harassment and assault, gendered power relations intersect with other relational differences (woman, junior staff, migrant, English as a second language).

This paper responds to Sofia's desire for her story to be known and explored in a space where it is respected. Through this act and artifact, the betrayals leveled against her are no longer veiled by the organizational practices that silenced her and others. We have deliberately taken time to go slow, sitting often and uncomfortably with Sofia's

voice and the manifold fragments of her story. A feminist ethic of care underpins our approach (Gilligan, 1995), and it is our hope that through our writing feminist research differently, others may similarly be open to reporting, analyzing, and becoming affected by research encounters (Fotaki et al., 2014) such as this.

Sofia contacted us after becoming aware of an ongoing research project we are undertaking into workplace sexual harassment and assault. Sofia was made aware of our project through her colleague who had acted as an employee advocate for her during the time she was liaising with human resources (HR) and making her formal complaint. For more than a year, we talked with Sofia in person and on zoom. Initially our coming together was to pause, to sit with, and to listen. And so, we listened, we witnessed, we believed, we felt, and continue to be affected by the layered, heavy unabating trauma of her workplace experiences, and we promised to share her story in the way we know how.

Our approach to writing in part responds to Gilmore's et al. (2019) challenging academic writing principles. We position Sofia's lived experience as socially constructed and deeply gendered (Yarrow & Pagan, 2021). We understand how through difference and multiplicity in doing and writing research "it is possible to touch vulnerable flesh and invoke new political and ethical practice" (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 4). We position our storied approach, accompanying narrative analysis and discussion as a part of a resistance against the tacit allowances granted to perpetrators and to contribute to breaking the unethical and deeply damaging silences, surrounding workplace sexual harassment and assault. Through Sofia's experiences and our collective sensemaking, we contribute to speaking out and making visible the formal and informal systems, relations, and practices that protect perpetrators and further silence victim/survivors.

This academic artifact is a form of activist scholarship, a provocation, and a disruption to the norms governing what and how organizational researchers are permitted to write (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015). The countless iterations of this piece have been shared and crafted with Sofia, who has actively shaped her representation. No content has been included without her expressed, affirmative consent. By adopting the deeper conceptualization of "voice," we move beyond the limitations of interpreting voice as a state of absence or neglect, instead we interrogate the practices that construct and maintain silence and the significance of the "silent space."

While extant studies (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Dobbin & Kalev, 2020; Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Hart, 2019; MacDermott, 2020; Vijayasiri, 2008; Welsh et al., 2006) have provided insights into the structures that foster silence within institutions and workplaces, the deeply ingrained practices silencing people like Sofia remain underexamined. There is a substantial body of research (Australian Government, 2021a, 2021b; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; MacDermott, 2020) that establishes the scale of the problem through comprehensive quantitative work; however there is a gap in our detailed understanding of individual experiences.

Leading from Ford et al. (2021), we unpack how once Sofia began to voice her discontent, she was silenced by actors within and external to her workplace. Calder-Dawe (2015) emphasized that the "unspeakability" of sexism is more than an absence of talk, it is a structured silence that confines what is said and when, or that we find ourselves reluctant to speak out about it at all (p. 90–91). By locating, naming, and problematizing this formal and informal silencing, it might be subverted and practically challenged. A focus of which we return to in the closing of the paper.

We take up a subjective interpretivist philosophical position, framing gender as socially constructed (Butler, 1990). Like the work of Yarrow and Pagan (2021), our paper weaves together a dialog between ourselves and Sofia and the relevant extant literature. We extend the work of Liu (2022), who explored a single case of sexual harassment in detail and the victim/survivors' actions after her employer compounded the injustice of her sexual assault by attempting to silence her. Our decision to deeply consider one example draws focus to the outsized impact of citizenship, race, positional power, and gendered imbalances within the organization in this example. However, we want to stress that those categories are not necessarily more relevant or important than others universally. Therein lies the complexity inherent in understanding workplace sexual harassment; it differs depending on the context and the unique constellation of the stakeholders, norms, and policies involved. Together these fractured pieces tell an important story, underpinned by our conceptual framework of the institutional betrayal shown in Figure 1, bolstered by Acker's (2006) inequity regimes.

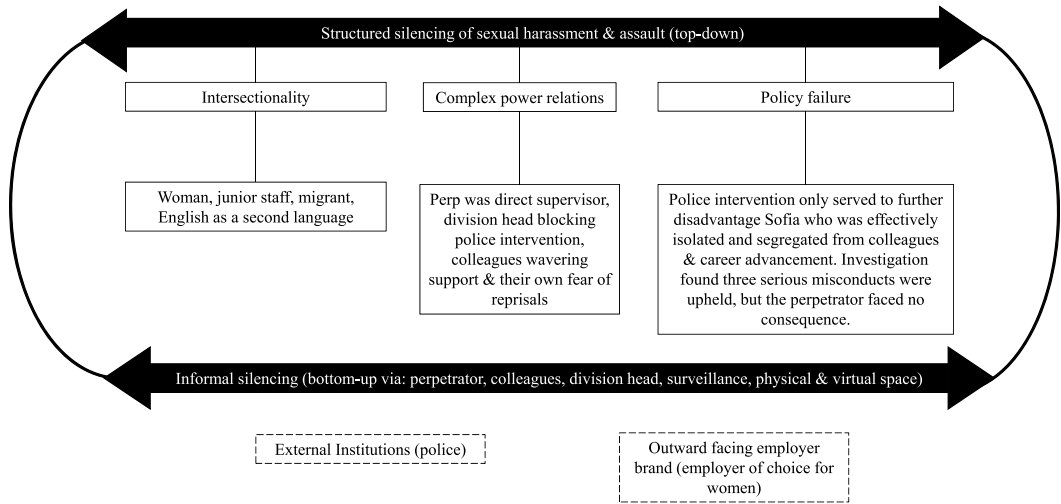


FIGURE 1 A deconstruction of systemic institutional betrayal.

We will first detail our researcher positionality statement and explain how this work came to be, followed by a brief overview of Figure 1. Next, we will outline the nature of Sofia's workplace; the details are obscured to retain her anonymity. However, the power relations described accord with her experiences. Here we will detail how gendered power relations served the perpetrator and disempowered Sofia. We will then explore the marginalization and series of institutional betrayals leveled against Sofia. Finally, we elucidate the policy failures emanating from a policy framework that upon reading, removed from context, appears reasonable, and potentially effective but failed to keep Sofia safe at work. We explicate how, from the top-down and the bottom-up victim/survivors are betrayed and silenced, how perpetrators are protected, and the status quo strengthened.

## 2 | RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY STATEMENT & HOW THIS WORK CAME TO BE

We recognize our dynamic positionality within this research that serves as both a lens through which we understood Sofia's experience and informs how we have analyzed the gendered power dynamics inherent to her lived experiences (Rose, 2020). We do this in the face of masculinist academic conventions which we at once yet paradoxically resist and advance (Helin et al., 2021; Rhodes et al., 2018) to legitimize our critical qualitative scholarship (Deutsch, 2004; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Etherington, 2007; Miller et al., 2015). We have taken care to continually engage in reflexivity and self-scrutiny as researchers with the aim of centralizing awareness of the relationship between us and Sofia who is a familiar, but different "other" (Bourke, 2014; Chiseri-Strater, 1996; Pillow, 2003). Critical feminist approaches recognize how knowledge is shaped through experience (McLaren, 2002). We share our personal experiences as we did with Sofia to "embrace our own emotions of vulnerability and powerlessness" (Law, 2016, p. 532). Reflexivity in research requires us to critically examine our multi-layered research subjectivities and our "positionality and our roles in research" (Law, 2016, p. 531), which we value, hold, and yet remain watchful of, to ensure we are not ourselves perpetuating violence through this undertaking (Pullen, 2006; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015).

In this section, we identify our shared gender, age, junior workplace status, and common experience of workplace sexual harassment. We ask what boundaries do we have to navigate in view of our different country of origin and mother tongue? Are there any taken-for-granted barriers in negotiating these boundaries? We hope to inform these questions as we explain how this paper came to be, our time spent with Sofia and her advocate (Simon) as well as our own "positions" (Bourke, 2014, p. 3), and the subjectivities we embody.

In recognition that we do not exist within a static time and place (Kusenbach, 2003), we acknowledge that our research has taken place in a post #metoo world. During the writing of this article, the legal battle between Amber Heard and Johnny Depp took place both in a United States courtroom and via social media, with a substantial upswelling of support for Depp and a disturbing and violent demonization of Heard (Tiffany, 2022). Workplace sexual harassment is in and out of the Australian media due to an accusation of rape occurring in our national parliament that resulted in a mistrial and ensuing enquiries and public debate about the treatment of women in Australian workplaces and gender equity more broadly (Duffy & O'Shea, 2022).

Personally, we are engaged in research and writing on the topic of workplace sexual harassment. All authors have experienced workplace sexual harassment over the course of our careers. Researching sexual harassment has been a cathartic experience and has helped at least one of the authors to shift the blame and shame of her experience, carried for more than a decade from her own shoulders to where it belongs—with the perpetrators. As authors, we are co-transformed by deep listening, care, and time engaged in this pursuit together. We are buoyed by Sofia's fortitude and resilience and yet are intensely aware of the damage the violence perpetuated against her has had and continues to have on her personally and professionally. We have developed a bond and deeply value our relationship of trust and care.

When we initially met with Sofia, it was not with the goal of writing or producing a pre-determined outcome. It was our goal to listen to her story to gain a deeper and nuanced understanding of our research context. Prior to our meeting one of the research team had been briefed in detail by Sofia's colleague and employee advocate, Simon (with Sofia's expressed consent). This author had a lengthy phone conversation with Simon, during this call he shared his involvement and his personal and professional impressions of the case. In his 30-year career Simon had never witnessed or heard of such a severe case of institutional betrayal. Simon provided affidavits and other supporting documentation he had produced and collected relating to the case which he and Sofia consented to be shared with the research team. The research teams details were supplied to Sofia by Simon. Sofia immediately reached out, an initial meeting was arranged and our relationship with Sofia began.

We are certain that our ongoing research in workplace sexual harassment has influenced our interactions, how we engaged with her experiences and the questions we asked. Sofia's race, gender and migrant status were visible at the scale of her body and could be heard in the accent that shapes her voice. However, through our lens, we perceived the impact and importance of her race, gender and migrant status beyond the micro (interpersonal level) and we perceived its potential influence at the organizational (meso) and societal level (macro).

Sofia shared with us more than a years' worth of documents she had compiled, including email correspondence with HR, her division head, the perpetrator, police affidavits as well as her personal correspondence about the matter with colleagues. With us, Sofia labored over these documents frequently leveling fault at herself for not having the English to adequately convey the seriousness of her claims in emails and allied written correspondence. She compared her competence in spoken English to his and found herself wanting. Her perpetrators eloquence in English and his ability to recruit powerful allies to manipulate events in his favor were in part the reason she eventually gave up on legal proceedings. The emotional cost was simply too great. Sofia's emotionality remained raw as tears frequently welled in her eyes as she recounted the injustices perpetuated against her.

It is unlikely Sofia would have engaged with us to the extent that she did if we did not listen and accept her story. Did we listen and accept her story because we are skilled qualitative researchers who are trained to illicit stories? Or because we, as victim/survivors understand her experience in some way, or because we are researchers with knowledge of likely conditions and circumstances of workplace sexual harassment? We cannot unpick those components of ourselves rather we acknowledge and make them known.

Wiederhold positions researchers who conduct their studies in familiar environments or those with background knowledge of their participants as "insiders" or "researchers at home" (2015, p. 606). The research team is comprised of researchers born in Australia and China, all of whom have worked within professional Australian organizations, and all are actively interested in subjects that concern gender equity within institutions. The author of Chinese origin was able to bring lived experience of being a migrant to the project. All authors identify as victim/survivors of workplace

sexual harassment, and all are juniors in their respective workplaces. Taking this information together, we are all insider-researchers (Chavez, 2008).

We are mindful that conducting a study that highlights issues of difference may contribute to the further marginalization of study participants (hooks, b., 1990). Not only may our own biases influence Sofia, her response and our observations and interpretations but so too may the nature of our original project. We have sought to overcome these challenges by co-creating this piece with Sofia. We prioritized constructing a psychologically safe space so that Sofia could veto, clarify, and edit as she needed. While we acknowledge that there is a power differential to be overcome in our relationship, we have sought to surmount this by affirming to her regularly that this is her story and that at any point it can be withdrawn from publication. We explicitly asked Sofia if she would like to withdraw the paper before submitting and after the first, second, third, and final reviews. Sofia was insistent that the paper be published. Throughout our written analysis, we have represented Sofia's experiences using italicized vignettes. We will now discuss Figure 1.

### 3 | INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL: THE INEQUITY REGIMES THAT ENABLE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT TO EXIST UNCHECKED

The figure shown above is a visual representation of how an employees' experience of sexual harassment and assault is silenced and how victim/survivors are led to reluctant acquiescence (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). We use the term sexual harassment to describe sex-based harassment, including sexual coercion and unwanted attention of a sexual nature but also gender-based harassment that verbally and non-verbally conveys hostility devoid of sexual interest (Collinson & Collinson, 1996; Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Lim & Cortina, 2005; McDonald, 2012). This positioning emphasizes how sexual harassment is "first and foremost about gendered systems of power" (Chawla et al., 2021). *Quiescence* involves an active and deliberate withholding of voice; in contrast, *acquiescence* is a passive and resigned silence, an acceptance of the status quo, and ultimately a perceived inability to challenge it (Fernando & Prasad, 2019).

*Residual rules* further inform our conceptualizing of Sofia's experiences. Residual rules are social norms that are taken for granted and so are accepted (Scheff, 1966). Thus, behaviors such as workplace sexual harassment remain unremarked on or unchallenged because they are rendered ordinary. Although seen, these incursions are so common that they are weaved into the very fabric of workplaces (Garfinkel, 1967). This is "how silences are produced, both passively and actively" (Plester et al., 2022, p. 60). However, this conceptualization does not take us far enough, for while there were active and passive discourses and practices constructing the silence, it did not remain unremarked upon or unchallenged. Gendered power relations are enabling domination, which is why we adopted inequity regimes as a research lens.

At the heart of structured silencing are the complex power relations that are enacted and cloaked in multifaceted ways. While sometimes hierarchical, positional authority is but one dimension, men's dominance in Australian workplaces is another (Duffy et al., 2022). We extend the work of others who have posited how it is the interweaving effects and complicity of multiple third-party actors (e.g., HR, colleagues, direct supervisors) who silence victim/survivors (Fernando & Prasad, 2019) through both top-down formal policies and bottom-up practices.

Formal policies encouraging victim/survivors to report their abuse often serve to confine victim/survivors after they speak out by legitimizing rather than challenging harassing behaviors. A formal organizational investigation of Sofia's complaints found that three serious misconducts had occurred. Despite policy indicating a suspension is the appropriate response for one misconduct, the perpetrator faced no consequences. Through this network of power and other relations, organizational betrayals are invisibilized, voices are stymied, and reprisals leveled at bystanders who speak out, which when observed by co-worker's may serve to silence their own complaints (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Having observed Sofia's experiences of speaking out (followed by bullying, exclusion, ongoing violence, and harassment), her colleagues retreated to the shadows, fearful of becoming targets themselves which in turn, created a complicity reinforcing Sofia's reluctant acquiescence.

In the case of informal practices, the silencing is active (the perpetrator was Sofia's direct supervisor), purposeful (the division head blocked police intervention), and a covert process of reluctant acquiescence (colleagues wavering support owing in part to a justifiable fear of personal reprisals). Workplace practices can be "institutional betrayals," that is, actions and inactions that worsen and perpetuate the trauma, distress and harm that victim/survivors experience (Smith & Freyd, 2013, 2014). The action and inaction of other external stakeholders (i.e., the police) can strengthen or unsettle the silencing of employees who speak out and further legitimize organizational and societal tolerance of these behaviors.

We have included the outward facing employer brand in Figure 1 since the organization actively promotes its status as an "employer of choice for women." The discord between how the organization positions itself externally and how their internal responses to gender-based issues created an experience of cognitive dissonance for the victim/survivor. "Employer of Choice for Women" is a voluntary recognition program that aims to promote an organization's active commitment to gender equality (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2021). This cognitive dissonance has been discussed by others, such as Gilbert et al., who problematized how "the mainstreaming of gender equality initiatives can obscure the deeply problematic gendered discourses and norms that lurk beneath equity value statements" (2021, p. 2).

#### 4 | IT'S THE CONDITIONS THAT MAKE THE THIEF (OR PERPETRATOR): COMPLEX POWER RELATIONS

Sofia is a highly educated professional who works in a male dominated sector. Her workplace is characterized by significant power distances. Our telling of her story will include her direct supervisor and perpetrator (man), her division head (woman) and relations with her colleagues (men and women), the employer brand (employer of choice for women) and interaction with police (men and women). Wide gaps existed between subordinates and the superiors in her workplace who maintained budgetary control, decision making authority and agenda setting which shaped the work, professional development, and promotion of subordinates like Sofia. In combination, this hierarchical positionality and a hyper competitive workplace environment (re)produced a culture where junior women employees lacked an established presence within a masculinized competitive hierarchy (Piderit & Ashford, 2003) rendering them vulnerable to power differentials and abuse of this difference.

*I can control you. You cannot get rid of me. I am the one that signs off on your probation.*

As one of few women in her work unit, Sofia's appointment was widely celebrated. During the selection process Sofia's immediate supervisor and her division manager heralded the institutions commitment to provide women with career development opportunities (and their celebrated status of the employer of choice for women). However, the perpetrator sowed the seeds of harassment against Sofia from the beginning. He expressly used his supervisory authority and its privileges to dominate Sofia. As an expert in his field, a longstanding team member with powerful allies and as an esteemed professional internally and externally Sofia's supervisor considered himself untouchable. He was emboldened over time to engage in more egregious harassing acts against Sofia.

*It started out small. He was her boss; he began making excuses to see her by visiting her office more frequent than normal and arrange unnecessary meetings with her. Sometimes he would lie about industry events to have dinner with her, requesting her to dress up. She kept it professional and focused on work. He told her; you need to do whatever I say so I can protect you. He started touching the small of her back, she told him not too. It escalated. He would touch her breast, her bum, she told him no. He said, I am your boss, you need to do what I say, no-one can touch me.*

The perpetrator's predatory behaviors were openly tolerated or in the words of, Pruitt et al. (2021) acted as "status silencing" a term that describes how "the status of a dominant individual becomes a context which renders the story

of an individual with a subordinated status untellable or untold” (p. 95). This way of thinking positions toxic masculinity as a mode of power and dominance that creates “institutional norms of silence” (p. 95). As Sofia learned, it is dangerous to expose and report toxic masculinity. This often has the effect of silencing those who experience it, rendering it invisible, and creating internal conflict for those who do not wish to be, but who ultimately feel complicit through their silence (Pruit et al., 2021).

Sofia made an appointment to disclose her experience of sexual harassment to her division head (and the direct supervisor of the perpetrator). Initially the division head presumed that Sofia had wanted to discuss how the perpetrator sexually harassed another junior colleague publicly at a work event the night before. When Sofia advised that she was instead disclosing her own experience of sexual harassment the division head's response was to sidestep dealing with the issue and change Sofia's line of reporting. Promises were made that he would be spoken to and would not contact her again, but instead he was back in Sofia's office that very afternoon continuing to harass and play on her vulnerabilities. Simply put, he did it and continued to do it because he could (Doyle, 2021):

*I said to him, use me for professional gain. I am good at my job. I can be useful to you and your career, I am married with a baby, I just want to do my job. I am in Australia to develop my career, not to have an affair with a married man.*

Prior work has illuminated how immunity from consequences is more prevalent in organizations where subordinates are dependent on their superiors' good will for favorable assessment, career progression, continued employment, and so forth, as was Sofia's situation (Firth-Cozens & West, 1990). A hierarchical power imbalance existed between Sofia and the perpetrator; however, structural power is only one manifestation of how the gendered power relations are made visible by her supervisors' sexually harassing behaviors (Dougherty, 2006). Drawing from his positional power over her, he made threats of negative work appraisals and disclosed that without compliance, her ongoing appointment was at risk. Consequently, Sofia's reluctant acquiescence was further shaped (Manley et al., 2016). Smith and Freyd's (2014) work prompts us to consider how Sofia's harasser used power and fear together with trust and dependency to perpetuate his violence.

Sex-based harassment is accomplished, in part, with the complicity of numerous third-party actors within the organization rather than being an act committed by individual perpetrators alone (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). A “slippery slope of sexual harassment” is aided by bystanders who may be colleagues and supervisors who fail to intervene (Chawla et al., 2021, p. 558). This was Sofia's experience and what we in part conceive of as an institutional betrayal. What happened to her was made possible by her perpetrator's positional power, his immunity from consequences, the tolerance of his behavior by the division head, the lack of collective action from bystanders who observed or experienced similar harassment, and the inequity regime perpetuated by the way the institution enacted their sexual harassment policy.

## 5 | INTERSECTIONALITY: SYSTEMS, CONVERGENCE, AND COMPLEX RELATIONS

*Sofia moved to Australia to take what seemed at the time, a dream job. Full of optimism about her new role in a progressive organization, she was excited about her future and the mark she could make. English is her second language, and her parents and husband are looking after her young daughter in Toyko. She aches to be apart from her family, but as an only child, her parents invested so much in her education; she wants to make them proud and forge a successful career for herself. Besides, Australia has a much better time difference with Toyko than her prior appointment in London did.*

Engaging with intersectional theorizing, Stasiulis asks—“Which social relations in the seemingly dizzying array of differences should be accorded particular salience or significance in any given theoretical framework is impossible



to predict a priori" (1999, p. 378). It has been argued that it is necessary to examine race, gender, class, and other intersecting differences to understand harassment (Browne & Misra, 2003; Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Chafetz, 1997; Collins, 2000; Teixeira, 2002; Welsh et al., 2006). The work of Kalof et al. (2001) highlights that sexual harassment is about power, and so by virtue of these relations, less powerful people including women, minorities, and younger individuals are often more vulnerable to harassers.

While one interpretation, intersectional analysis is not simply about variabilities or categories but dynamics and lines of force (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1024). In this article, we draw on intersectional analysis as a further and fundamental heuristic device to name, frame, and explore gendered power relations. In this circumstance, the contextual power dynamic is relevant to sexual harassment and assault in the workplace (Cho et al., 2013). Further, Welsh et al. (2006) problematize the tendency for sexual harassment research to invisibilize citizenship through focusing on the experiences of citizens living in their home country. This was apparent in Sofia's situation as were the difficulties she perceived owing to English being her second language:

*I thought Australia had zero tolerance for sexual harassment. How wrong I was.*

Being new to the country, Sofia had little knowledge of the Australian legal system and institutional norms. Her knowledge of workplace complaint processes or what was reasonable in terms of an institutional response from her employer or the police was lacking. Sofia's migrant status in Australia was linked to her employment, and so the power her supervisor (also her perpetrator) held over her was heightened. His positional power rendered him responsible for signing off on her probationary period. In the case of Sofia's workplace, white male bodies numerically and culturally dominated the office and managerial ranks (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Liu, 2017). The entanglements of her citizenship status, English as a second language, and gendered power relations initiated her silence at the beginning.

Sofia's experience shows how her citizenship status further shaped her isolation and compounded the effects of her more junior status and gender in reducing her institutional power. Overwhelmingly, women who experience sexual harassment have been found to report symptoms consistent with depression, stress, anxiety, and impaired psychological well-being (Johnson et al., 2018). However, the value in acknowledging and making visible the intersectional nexus that further underpinned Sofia's vulnerability is that how organizations understand and approach identity has key implications for the effectiveness of broader equity initiatives as well as sexual harassment policies and interventions. Without making inequities visible and interrogating how they intersect with power, discourses, and norms they are inherently more difficult to articulate and address (Sullivan & Delaney, 2017).

## 6 | POLICY FAILURE

*Sofia read the policy. It seemed 'reasonable' to her. It said if there was a serious misconduct, the person responsible would be suspended. The internal investigation found him guilty of three serious misconducts and yet he has retained his position. The police brought an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against him. Sofia lodged a copy with Human Resources. This order excluded them from being in meetings or at workplace events together. However, the AVO secured by Sofia for her own protection was weaponized against her. The AVO isolated her and blunted her career trajectory. Sofia felt bullied by the division head who turned the police away and actively silenced her complaint. Due to his seniority, his perceived value to the division head and the institution's unwillingness to recognize the damage he was causing Sofia, she, not he the perpetrator was the one excluded from meetings and workplace events.*

It seems reasonable to expect that if you have been harassed it is your harasser who will face punishment, not you the victim/survivor. However, in Sofia's experience she found danger in the place where she expected safety. Formally reporting her experiences to HR made her circumstances worse and resulted in feelings of cognitive dissonance.

Negative consequences for one's career are an outcome consistent with work by Hart (2019), who through experiments found that women who report sexual harassment risk negative stereotyping, and may be perceived of as "less moral, warm, and socially skilled," which can hamper their career progression (p. 534).

Sofia also felt frustrated and thwarted by the asymmetry of information, purportedly to preserve confidentiality but served to protect her perpetrator. When her perpetrator stalked and assaulted her in the workplace carpark, it was likely captured on security footage. However, to access this footage, a request needed to be made within a certain timeframe (4 weeks). Sofia requested to view it herself but was denied due to "confidentiality" issues. Sofia reminded HR on multiple occasions of the urgency of her request. They stalled and did not request the footage until the window of time had lapsed, meaning the footage was deleted and a vital source of evidence lost. For Sofia, the organization response felt deliberate and malicious and consistent with the work of Smith and Freyd (2014), who found that institutional betrayal can occur by omission of protective, preventative action, or as in this case, a lack of responsive institutional actions. Even without this evidence, HR found the perpetrator guilty of three misconducts. When Sofia requested a copy of the report, her request was denied, and again confidentiality reasons were cited.

Policies encouraging victim/survivors to report their abuse can overlook the complex organizational structures and discourses that silence victim/survivors after they speak out (Ford et al., 2021). Sofia's employment in a hyper competitive hierarchical institution with a high-power distance constructed and strengthened a culture of silence. Sofia often expressed a feeling that she was disposable, saying, *Why would I matter? More people who could replace me graduate in my field every year.*

Organizational efforts to promote reporting sexual harassment can be riddled with strategic ambiguities that serve the interests of the organization rather than the victim (Ford et al., 2021). Clair (1993b) revealed how formal reporting mechanisms can bureaucratize sexual abuse and neglect its deep and ongoing effects. Neglecting sexual harassment and assaults substantial emotional and psychological effects commodifies the incident and cuts off the conversation (Clair, 1993a). Or in Sofia's experience invited other forms of institutional harassment that oppressed her, such as bullying and the ongoing ordeal to move through the complaints progress. By the time the investigation began, she was crying every day. Sofia felt exhausted when she reached the end of the investigation, especially since there were no consequences for the perpetrator. Sofia thought she must be to blame for what happened and her self-worth was at an all-time low.

Sofia's perceptions and experiences draw attention to the policies and governance protocols underpinning disclosure and complaint frameworks. Policies are not innocuous documents, they are imbued with power (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). The governance processes and mechanisms derived from policy can also contribute to and sustain silencing (Manley et al., 2016). Sofia was materially silenced when she was precluded from attending meetings and events important to her division and her role in favor of her perpetrator. Dougherty and Smythe (2004) found it is complex to effectively intervene when there is an established culture of sexual harassment. Sofia was obstructed by the insidious culture of impunity that allowed sexual harassment to flourish.

Sofia has since left the institution. Her position became untenable, and she sought an external opportunity. In recognition of her talent and diligence, she was promoted. She is now mostly away from her tormentor and safe from his criminal behavior, however the emotional toll remains, and a deeply felt sense of unsafety lingers. Sofia remained in the industry and has experienced great personal discomfort and distress when present at industry events where both her perpetrator and former division head are present. In anticipation of future events, she is stressed, not knowing if they will be present.

*Whenever I see him or hear his voice, I feel sick. I start to sweat and my body shakes. My face turns red. I must leave. I'm not sure I will ever be ok. In my new workplace I keep to myself. I find it hard to trust people, including colleagues and especially executive teams. It affects my work collaborations with them. I wish I felt better. I'm not sure when.*

The sexual harassment policy and its application at this institution operated in a way that perpetuated a victim/survivor's trauma and protected her perpetrator. It strengthened inequitable gender power relations and disincentivized

others from coming forward and formally reporting harassment they have experienced or witnessed. The organization is left exposed to future reputational damage and ongoing harm to its workforce by failing to discipline or remove a staff member who is enacting predatory and damaging behavior against his colleagues. Returning to the conceptualization of an inequity regime as interrelated policies, actions, meanings, practices, and processes that construct class, gender, and racial inequities within institutions (Acker, 2006; Maxwell et al., 2019). Sofia's story accords with this conceptualization and, while it stands as one woman's experience, it richly contributes to intersectional understandings of how sexual harassment can manifest and how institutions who purport to support women can, through their policies and practices harm, oppress and silence them.

## 7 | SILENCE AND SILENCING

At the broadest level, silence in work settings refers to employees' disinclination to speak out. It is antithetical to voice (Donaghey et al., 2011), which involves having "a say" over matters that affect one's work (Dundon & Rollinson, 2011). While silence, voice, and speaking out draw attention to organizational silence, Ford et al.'s (2021) deeper and more nuanced concept of "reluctant acquiescence" helps to understand how Sofia responded to organizational silencing.

Sofia spent a terrifying evening running and hiding from her perpetrator (and then was sexually assaulted when he caught her), Sofia described having no other avenue but to report her harassment and assault to police. During her police interview, the female officer expressly told Sofia not to go to the media, warning her against public action, saying "you don't want your child googling this in a few years' time." Following the report, the police attended Sofia's place of employment with the intention of speaking with the perpetrator, the Division Head intercepted them and took them to her office. She told Sofia, she had advised the police that it was a workplace matter, and she would ensure it didn't happen again. Contrary to these assurances, he was back in Sofia's office taunting her, telling her "Nothing can happen to me" that same day, his confidence bolstered by the day's events. Despite formal complaints against him, his taunting and the bullying and harassment continued to escalate.

The responses from Sofia's colleagues varied. In sharing her experiences and seeking advice from a male colleague, he implied that the harassment was her fault.

*He said, "Do you know Sofia, that women in other countries cut their faces so they are no longer beautiful to catch men's attention?"*

Sofia described how her colleague's remarks made her second guess if she had somehow unknowingly invited her supervisor's advances. She reflected on her clothes, her appearance, her manner, and her interactions with other colleagues. They had eaten dinner together on his invitation more than once, however the invitation was for "a working dinner." Sofia advised that it's not uncommon in her country of origin for colleagues to share food together without it being interpreted as a desire for a sexual relationship. The dinner bill was split, and both traveled independently to and from where they ate. For Sofia *they were just eating food together*. She perceived it as a *friendly opportunity* and something she had done regularly with colleagues before.

Another junior employee witnessed Sofia being chased and stalked by her perpetrator. She wrote to the division head reporting what she had seen. Over the coming weeks, Sofia watched in dismay as her only ally was also silenced. The division head snubbed Sofia's colleague in meetings, publicly put her down, and effectively sent a message to the entire division—oppose the status quo and you are on the outer. Sofia felt *shame and blame* while watching this unfold, she felt she had implicated her colleague and felt responsible for the minefield she now had to navigate. Other women in the team who had been subject to sexual harassment by the same perpetrator said to Sofia: "Why would we speak out? Look at what is happening to you." This interpersonal silencing of sexual harassment shows how gendered power relations are reified and maintained through network silencing affects (Hershcovis et al., 2021; Pershing, 2003). Collectively, the perpetrator, the police, the division head, and bystanders silenced Sofia and, by virtue of their actions are complicit in maintaining an unsafe workplace.

Sofia's experience aligns with prior research that has found employees are reluctant to report incidences due to concerns about the reactions of co-worker's, the mishandling of past reports, fear of job loss, and concerns about reputational damage following reporting (Butler & Chung-Yan, 2011; Fielden et al., 2010; Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Vijayasiri, 2008). All these fears were realized in Sofia's circumstance. Other work has found reporting can be damaging in that it amplifies the harmful effects of the experience of sexual harassment itself (e.g., Bergman et al., 2002; Dobbin & Kalev, 2020). This was also the case for Sofia. Not only did the perpetrator continue his behavior, but he was emboldened to taunt Sofia further. Knowing that he would not face consequences, he said he would shift his attention to someone else and so begets an unbroken cycle of harassing behaviors (Terry, 2012). Since leaving her workplace and securing a new appointment, the damages are deeply felt and enduring (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). Requests by colleagues to lunch, dinner, or even a coffee render a pit in Sofia's stomach.

*I'm not sure I will ever be over this. My friends are telling me to stop talking about it and just get over it. I just can't.*

## 8 | WHAT SHOULD ORGANIZATIONS DO?

Organizations have the power, autonomy, and agency to take action to reduce the likelihood of workplace sexual harassment occurring. A positive duty to prevent workplace sexual harassment has recently been written into Australian law (Human Rights Commission, 2020). We are cognizant of the comprehensive literature that explores workplace interventions (Bergman et al., 2002; Buchanan et al., 2014; Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Chawla et al., 2021; Clark, 2004; Collinson & Collinson, 1996; Dobbin & Kalev, 2020; Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Fielden et al., 2010; Ford et al., 2021; Hershcovis et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2018; McDonald, 2012; Pei et al., 2021; Vijayasiri, 2008). Against the backdrop of this legislative enactment, scholarship, and Sofia's experiences, we perceive a need for organizations to take three key actions. The first is to expand the focus of any anti-harassment education programs to include perpetrators. Second is to genuinely acknowledge their own internal institutional gender inequities and their need to do better in this regard (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Welsh, 1999). Finally, leaders must be firm and unwavering in their commitment to change (McEwen et al., 2021). Every organization is different, and we would encourage organizations to co-create the change by collaborating with subject matter experts as well as a diverse range of their own employees.

This paper has articulated the inequity regimes that were operating in Sofia's workplace. Figure 1 is a useful depiction of the process. To dismantle and prevent a similar process operating internally, organizations need to redress internal gender inequities by considering the representation of traditionally marginalized groups at decision-making levels within the organization; if their policies and practices enable marginalized groups such as carers and parents to be supported in their career, they can determine if they have a gender pay gap and seek to eradicate it. While not cure-alls, these actions would go some way to reducing the complex power relations and organizational inequities that create a culture that fosters workplace sexual harassment. This is not a process that will ever be "done" but one that must be ongoing, iterative and co-created with a diverse group of employees.

We call for an expanded focus on workplace sexual harassment programs to overcome the policy failure depicted in Figure 1. We would encourage a trauma informed approach that seeks to minimize further harm to victim/survivors (Bloom, 2010; Sperlich et al., 2021). We implore organizations to include perpetrators in their sights, rather than the current singular focus on grievance procedures for victim/survivors, which have been shown to have the opposite effect and make the situation worse for victim/survivors (Dobbin & Kalev, 2020). While not the focus of this article, there are technological interventions (apps, notably Vault) that enable employees to record and if they wish to lodge, all the pertinent information about an incident that may help remove criticisms about timeliness or completeness of information (Duffy & O'Shea, 2022). As explored throughout this paper, the existing institutional mechanisms to respond to workplace sexual harassment and assault combined with the workplace culture served only to empower

Sofia's perpetrator and disempower Sofia. To disrupt and dismantle these power relations, the focus needs to shift from victim/survivors alone, to encompass would-be perpetrators and perpetrators themselves. We have not specifically suggested that bystanders have a responsibility here, because although bystanders in Sofia's case strengthened the inequity regime, bystanders were themselves subject to the uneven power dynamic that enabled the inequity to continue.

Doyle (2021) usefully compares workplace sexual harassment to drink driving campaigns. The focus of efforts to stop drink driving do not focus on the victims reporting and policing the criminal behavior themselves, but instead focus on communicating to would-be perpetrators that they should not drink and drive, and if they are caught drink driving they will be punished. It is not victims of drink driving who have the responsibility to police and sanction perpetrators behavior but police who have a mandate to seek it out and uphold the rules that serve to punish people who drink and drive. While an organization is a different context, letting would-be perpetrators know that it is not acceptable to sexually harass or assault colleagues, punishing those who do, routinely publicizing de-identified examples of incidences including punishments could be a productive way to reduce and hopefully eliminate workplace sexual harassment. However, the impact of this approach hinges on a bold and unequivocal managerial commitment.

There is a substantial body of literature that points to the pivotal role of leadership in creating a culture that permits workplace sexual harassment to occur. This paper can serve as an example for what managers should not do. They should not sidestep the issue; they should not turn a blind eye to employees breaking the rules, and they should uphold their organization's policies. Lee (2018) found that with a passive leader, both men and women were more likely to experience workplace sexual harassment. An extensive study of the US military found that an explicit anti-harassment message from leaders was essential (Buchanan et al., 2014). A recent study found that an inclusive leadership style reduced negative workplace behaviors such as workplace sexual harassment (Perry et al., 2020). McEwen et al. (2021, p. 5), encourage leadership as a political act against violence and suggest that:

*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.*

There are actions organizations can take to create a safe and productive workplace for all employees and undermine a culture of impunity, institutional betrayal, policy failure, and silencing.

## 9 | CONCLUSION & REFLECTIONS

Making sexual harassment visible and finding a space where it can be meaningfully addressed is difficult (Duffy & O'Shea, 2022). We know that women are far more likely to endure ongoing sexual victimization in silence than they are to report it, Sofia's story goes some way toward explaining why this happens and exposes the process of workplace sexual violence (Fielding, 2018). Sofia's disappointing and damaging experience reporting her harassment to her employer and involving the police is consistent with the experience of others. Ahmed (2017) described that when reporting her own experience of harassment, she became the location of the problem, just like Sofia did. Research cited in Dobbin and Kalev (2020) finds that 58% of women who had been harassed in the workplace said that not being believed is a major problem. By complaining about sexual harassment, Sofia was then subject to bullying and silencing that further oppressed her. This experience is consistent with broader research that has found that women who complain suffer long-term consequences in the form of worse career outcomes and poorer mental health than those who keep quiet (Dobbin & Kalev, 2020).

Ahmed (2017) describes this phenomenon more poetically, stating the gap between what is meant to happen and what does happen is a densely populated place. We find that in Sofia's case, it is populated with institutional betrayal and the omission of adequate protective, preventative, or responsive institutional actions' (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Sofia is certainly not alone in this experience, according to Dobbin and Kalev (2019), people who file sexual harassment grievances frequently face retaliation and infrequently see the perpetrators face consequences. Dobbin and Kalev (2020) cite a study of federal workers in the US that found that two-thirds of women who reported their perpetrators were then harassed, taunted, demoted, or fired by their perpetrator or their perpetrators allies. This lack of consequences contributes to building and affirming a culture that allows workplace sexual harassment and assault to occur and keep occurring. Doyle (2021) suggests that perpetrators do it because they *can* and they can because an organizational culture of permissiveness allows it to happen. In Sofia's circumstance, it was clear that her perpetrator perceived that he would get away with it, and he did.

This conclusion is similar to those drawn in recent work by Liu (2022). Liu (2022) explored a case of successful online activism in response to a grievous act of sexual violence committed at Alibaba in China. The victim/survivor (Ms. Zhou) refused to be silent when her superiors failed to take her complaint seriously and uphold company policy. In response, Ms. Zhou shouted her demands in Alibaba's canteen while distributing leaflets detailing her rape and the inaction from management. Ms. Zhou and other staff mobilized their voices online and created an open letter with a list of demands that received 6000 signatures in a day. In the wake of this public defiance, the perpetrator of the rape was fired together with the managers who had failed to act. Ultimately, Liu concludes that while this case was successful in achieving some level of justice, it shows the pervasiveness of deeply embedded sexist attitudes and how their embeddedness in workplaces is unlikely to change in any meaningful way. The perpetrator acted within a culture of permissiveness and had it not been for the victim/survivors' persistence (not the internal systems that are said to enact sanctions), the perpetrator would have prevailed.

For some women, particularly those from marginalized groups, the workplace environment can be unsafe. Complex power relations strengthen and legitimize the marginalization of groups who deviate from the norm, propagating inequity regimes. A culture of silence was reified because those employees who remain, like Sofia's colleagues, may be less likely to report their own experiences of harassment or others they witness due to their reluctant acquiescence. The policies fail. Challenging the status quo is dangerous and so the practices legitimizing sexual harassment persist and victim/survivors are silenced. Through visibilizing reluctant acquiescence, we have shown what happens in the gap between what is meant to happen and what *does* happen. In the case of Sofia's workplace, violations of trust and dependency were perpetuated by a self-reinforcing system comprised of ineffective policies, sexism, colleagues, supervisors, and HR.

Through this exploration of the multifaceted nature of silence and silencing, we have centralized third party complicity in strengthening inequity regimes. The very policies and practices written and enacted to *protect* employees legitimized an unsafe status quo for an already marginalized woman. We expose the labor victim/survivors that are burdened with and observe this in the example analyzed by Liu (2022), but note that this labor was unrecognized in Liu's work. In Sofia's case, this involved first questioning one's own role in the situation, then trying to repel the perpetrator, avoid him, stop him, report it to the division head, report it to HR, report it to police, and fight for her position within the team. This is all a part of the weighty emotional and financial toll all borne by the victim/survivor not the perpetrator.

By heroing Sofia's experiences of sexual harassment and assault in her workplace, we have done something her workplace failed to do. We have taken time and listened deeply, and we have co-constructed a safe physical and psychological space where Sofia has been "heard." By her own account *she has absolutely nothing to hide or to be ashamed of*, through this work, she has been able to begin to reconcile her experiences. Dobbin and Kalev (2020) state that the evidence is indisputable, our current system of dealing with workplace sexual harassment does not work, and Sofia's experience bears this out. The current system of sexual harassment reporting further disadvantages victim/survivors through its use of confidentiality rules, a high bar of evidence and punishments that fail to deter perpetrators as they are not enacted (Dobbin & Kalev, 2020; Doyle, 2021). For victim/survivors, it is lose/lose. We urge organizations to seek to include programs that target perpetrators, redress gender inequities and for management to commit to eradicating workplace sexual harassment and assault publicly and staunchly.

Through our writing, we are not only breaking silences and exposing injustice, but we are also imagining how a different and fairer future is possible. While theory is vital for the continuation of our collective understanding, in this

moment, there is legislative enactment, unprecedented public discussion and consciousness of sexual harassment in the workplace, but theory is not enough. As Rhodes et al. (2018) remind us, academic activism “serves to politicize scholarly work by democratically disrupting political consensus in the name of equality.” They make the argument that academic activists can usefully “act in the name of equality whilst resisting and contesting an academic administration whose police actions have attempted to eliminate such forms of democratic practice from the political consensus” (2018, p. 139). Our activism as gender scholars is one means to contribute to the politicization of theory and to do so with the tools of critical thought. This task requires us to embody and enact politics that can unsettle the very structures that we live and work in.

We have exposed, interrogated, and shared Sofia's story. By conceptualizing workplace sexual harassment as both an institutional betrayal and an inequity regime, we have contributed to new theorizing of workplace sexual harassment and its effects on the cause of gender equity. We urge gender scholars to continue this work and challenge power and silence by exploring real and meaningful solutions that disrupt the status quo. We encourage further work that seeks out and shares the stories of organizations who have reduced or perhaps eliminated sexual harassment or assault in their workplace. So much may be gained by scholars who can explore detailed examples, deconstruct the workplace policies and practices that have generated safer, more equitable places of work.

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