

Sexual abuse and violence in the workplace

In February, Dame Janet Smith published her report into the culture and practices of the BBC during the years that Jimmy Savile worked there. But we know from failings in other British institutions that the BBC is not alone. Why are deferential cultures still so prevalent in large organisations and why is it still so hard to report abuse at work? **Nicole Westmarland** talks to Nicola Banning

What have you found most concerning about Dame Janet Smith's report into the culture and practices at the BBC during the Savile years?

The Smith Report¹ is a long and in-depth one, consisting of three volumes, covering over 1,200 pages. While general reports had already come out about some of the sexual violence committed by Savile and Hall, reading the detail of the assaults, often directly from the words of those who experienced them, is a harrowing task even for those of us who have counselled, interviewed, or otherwise supported many sexual violence survivors.

There is something about the juxtaposition of the character of Savile and – for those of us of a generation where watching *Jim'll Fix it* or *Top of the Pops* was a major highlight of the week – the widespread aspirations of that time to be one of the children/young people chosen to attend, that makes reading the accounts particularly jarring. We now know that so much hurt and pain were hidden

behind the highly sought after 'Jim fixed it for me' badges.

The most concerning element has to be the inability of Dame Smith to rule out something similar happening today. And the sad thing is that I know this is true. The assaults weren't a product of a different era where sexual violence wasn't taken seriously and was dismissed as 'taking advantage of someone' at worst – they still have a very real place in many of the cultures that are relevant in modern society.

What implications does a deferential culture have on people's capacity to speak out and report abuse in the workplace?

Deferential cultures – especially those where gender divisions are most stark – are highly implicated in the capacity of survivors to speak out and for their words to be heard and taken seriously. Other institutions where this sort of culture has been shown to be linked to high rates of sexual violence include the Catholic

Church, children's homes, detention centres, and the armed forces.

The report cites eight opportunities when complaints were made by victims, staff and members of the public but they weren't acted on or followed up. What is the pattern around reporting of sexual abuse/violence that managers in organisations need to wake up to?

I think there were eight very clear opportunities that weren't acted on, but reading through the report, I see multiple other opportunities which I would have classed as part of a pattern that wasn't acted on. People need to be willing to see it and hear survivors talk about it, otherwise they won't talk, or they'll start and then stop.

Survivors often use the cautious language of 'Something might have happened', 'I'm not sure', and 'It may be nothing, but...' in starting to make disclosures; and whether they continue with that conversation is largely dependent on

the reaction they are getting from the person they are disclosing to. Managers and organisations need to be much more open to creating environments where speaking out is not only possible but is encouraged and valued.

How much better understood today is rape and sexual harassment than it was in the Savile years?

In part things are far better, but in part things are the same. I think we have got much better at recognising the need to protect children from rape and sexual harassment. There seems to be a much clearer line in society that if an adult has sex with a child under the age of 16, then that is an abuse of trust and should be classed as sexual violence regardless of whether the perpetrator claims that they were consenting or not. But when it comes to young women in the 16 onwards brackets, and when it comes to adult women, I think a lot of the 'blame game' is still played. A lot of the Savile 'scandal' has been turned into a discussion about child protection – which is of course important – but which has continued to marginalise or hide sexual violence against those aged 16 or over and certainly the older women he assaulted (the oldest known survivor was 77 at the time of the assault).

How dangerous are the myths that prevail about sexual harassment and sexual violence in society and the workplace?

They are very dangerous, not just in terms of whether people feel able to report with a view to the perpetrator(s) being punished, but also in terms of how survivors make sense of what they have experienced, whether/how they talk to their friends and family about it, and the recovery journey that they may or may not take.

Dame Janet refers to a culture of 'not complaining' that existed in the 1970s and 80s at the BBC, but she refers to some staff feedback as recent as 2013 in which she cites a culture of fear that continues. Staff also expressed concerns about not being a trouble-maker or about their job security if they complained. How common is this in large organisations?

I think this is still common in some organisational cultures – again, I would look to those that are the most deferential and have the most gender and other inequalities, including ethnicity, in terms of seniority of staff. I would draw on examples such as the armed forces, the police, the prison service, and even some universities as examples of this.

Cultural change rarely happens quickly. What lessons do you think other large organisations could learn from the report about their own culture?

We do need to speed up cultural change – and having standalone, specific policies on sexual violence is an important starting point. When it is subsumed and not explicitly mentioned under other policies, such as staff misconduct, it makes survivors wonder whether or not this is something that should be brought up in the workplace. But also starting with the smaller problems that create atmospheres where it is difficult to speak out because sexual violence and gender inequality are dismissed as 'banter' is important. So, if you take the smaller issues seriously (eg no calendars of naked women in offices, no pictures from 'lads' mags' up on the

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wall, a zero tolerance to sexualised insults), then you start to build a more respectful culture in which the more serious issues of sexual violence become less acceptable.

How might organisations begin to respond differently to complaints of abuse and making disclosures?

Training is really important, not only in terms of empowering staff to know how to respond, but also in terms of sending an important message that the workplace is a place in which it is OK to make reports of sexual violence or talk about the way that unequal, sexist, in the words of the Smith review 'macho', cultures affect those working within them.

Justice Lowell Goddard opens public hearings investigating other British institutions over their failures to tackle child abuse and sexual exploitation. What do you think this further

scrutiny could mean for the culture of large organisations and how they deal with complaints of sexual abuse or sexual violence in the future?

I think this could, and will, result in widespread change. But already the tide has turned and certain forms of sexual violence against certain groups of people (particularly sexual abuse of children) can't be ignored in many of these organisations any longer. But my fear is that all of the work will focus exclusively on child sexual abuse and exploitation. This is an important focus to have, but it is also really important to recognise that sexual violence happens across the lifespan up to and including in nursing homes. In addition, we have had this recent focus on sexual abuse and exploitation but there needs to be more links drawn with other forms of violence and abuse, such as partner violence, child to parent violence, forced marriage, and violence committed under the guise of 'honour'.

References

- 1 Smith J. The Dame Janet Smith Review. 25 February 2016. [Online.] www.damejanetsmithreview.com. (accessed 13 April 2016).



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Nicole invites counsellors to join the Durham Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRIVA). Membership is free and members receive invitations to events as well as research updates. durham.criva@durham.ac.uk [@CRIVADurham](https://twitter.com/CRIVADurham)