



# Ombuds Work on Sexual Harassment Cases: The Power of Our Stories

SHEREEN G. BINGHAM

## ABSTRACT

As illustrated by the #MeToo movement, sexual harassment remains a significant problem in society. The ombuds is a valuable resource for addressing this concern. In this special issue of the JIOA, experienced organizational ombuds anonymously share narratives of assisting with sexual harassment cases while protecting the identities of their visitors and organizations. The stories illuminate the nature of sexual harassment situations, a range of ombuds practices, and the principles and reasoning that guide ombuds work.

## KEYWORDS

ombuds, sexual harassment, narratives, stories, confidentiality, standards, practice

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The #MeToo movement has made the public aware of a reality that ombuds know all too well: Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem, one that occurs throughout the United States and in every country of the world. Steeped in inequitable power relations, the problem has long defied efforts to prevent it (Clair et al., 2019; Senthilingam, 2017). Nearly two thirds of the world's economies have legal protections against it, and a range of approaches to diminishing it, such as policies, grievance procedures, trainings, and social media campaigns, are in use around the globe (Cobb, 2014; Kurian, 2019; World Bank Group, 2018). Yet the problem persists, impairing people's psychological and physical health, fulfillment, productivity, and the organizations in which we work and learn (McDonald, 2012).

Within the ombuds profession, and increasingly beyond it, we know organizational ombuds can be a useful resource for assisting people with sexual harassment concerns. Many dedicated professionals have devoted their expertise and creativity to bring the ombuds role in sexual harassment cases into the light. They have provided legal analysis, research studies, articles, videos, webinars, tool kits, social media posts, conference presentations, and more. The International Ombudsman Association (IOA) and related professional associations, as well as commentators and researchers, have repeatedly explained how and why visiting the Ombuds Office is an appropriate option for people grappling with sexual harassment situations (e.g., Dobbin & Kalev, 2020; Howard, 2020; IOA, 2020; Rowe, 1996, 1990). This is particularly the case when ombuds adhere to the IOA Standards of Practice, based in principles of confidentiality, informality, neutrality, and independence (Berman, 2016; Pappas, 2016).

However, the value of the organizational ombuds in addressing sexual harassment is still underrecognized. That's partly because ombuds' interactions with their visitors are confidential, off-the-record, and outside an organization's formal investigatory and grievance processes, as the IOA standards require. Remaining confidential, while essential to the ombuds role and effectiveness, complicates the task of raising awareness and understanding of both ombuds practices and the value they bring to organizations. Professionals who view sexual harassment and its remedies through a narrow legal or policy perspective of mandatory reporting and investigation have sometimes misunderstood, disregarded, or undervalued ombuds work. They have not grasped, for example, that ombuds can have an important role in creating the conditions that enable those who have been sexually harassed to come forward with formal complaints. Ombuds need as many ways as possible to publicly share what they do and why their work is useful in specific circumstances, while simultaneously protecting the identities and confidentiality of their visitors and organizations. This special issue of the JIOA helps to address these needs.

In this special issue, anonymous organizational ombuds share stories of their experiences working with visitors on sexual harassment cases and candidly reflect on their practices. The authors' narratives are educational, thought-provoking, and often intense; they reveal and particularize the role, challenges, and value of the organizational ombuds in responding to sexual harassment. The collection of stories not only shines light on sexual harassment situations; it illuminates a range of methods for addressing them. It also illustrates principles and reasoning that guide ombuds practices and shares lessons learned. The goal of this forum is to elevate understanding, reflection, and lively discussion about the nature of ombuds work both within and outside the profession.

Twelve experienced ombuds submitted stories for the forum and all twelve stories have been published here. The authors are a diverse group in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and location in the world. These authors are all intentionally anonymous. They have altered or omitted names and other nonessential details as needed to protect the identities of their visitors, organizations, and other parties. Consequently, the authors are receiving no public recognition for publishing their stories. The individual authors and I are the only ones who know their identities, and I recognize this as both a privilege and responsibility. The ombuds who contributed stories are due



our wholehearted thanks and appreciation. Without their generosity and expertise, there would be no special issue at all.

The twelve narratives do not, of course, describe all the possible approaches and methods ombuds may use when responding to sexual harassment. For example, the stories do not describe use of mediation (Gadlin, 1991) or the “generic approach” (Rowe, 2021). Nor do they represent the whole range of sexual harassment situations that are brought to ombuds for assistance. However, by focusing on one important type of problem – sexual harassment – through the lens of twelve different experiences, the stories provide contextualized, multi angled, deep understanding of ombuds’ responses to sexual harassment cases. A partial list of questions and issues addressed in the narratives includes:

- Why is ombuds confidentiality essential in sexual harassment cases? How is it different from allowing harassment to be “swept under the rug”?
- How do ombuds help visitors and bystanders who are uncertain or fearful about making a formal report?
- How do ombuds assist when visitors want to stop the harasser without notifying their organization?
- Why is ombuds neutrality important in sexual harassment cases? How does the ombuds express it?
- How do ombuds prevent their own emotions and biases from negatively influencing their work in sexual harassment cases?
- What can ombuds do to assist an alleged perpetrator of sexual harassment?
- How can ombuds help when different cultural understandings may be fueling the harassment?
- How do ombuds work with bystanders in sexual harassment cases?
- What can ombuds do to help the organization prevent “serial” harassers (who harass multiple people) and department cultures that foster sexual harassment?
- What is the impact on the ombuds of working with sexual harassment cases?
- If an organization’s sexual harassment policy and procedures are inadequate or unfairly applied, how can an ombuds help?

This special issue arose in the context of narrative theory, research, and practice (e.g., Clair, et al., 1996; Muir & Mangus, 1994; Wood, 1992). Appreciation for the power of narratives to give voice to experiences, especially of marginalized individuals and groups, has flourished in recent decades, and especially in the wake of #MeToo. Publications, broadcasts, social media, and other forums have enabled victims and survivors of sexual harassment to publicly share their experiences, educating their communities about the nature of the problem. One such forum was a special issue of *The Journal of Applied Communication Research* (JACR), published in 1992. Predating #MeToo’s recent surge in social media by over twenty-five years, JACR published a collection of communication academics’ own sexual harassment experiences, demonstrating narrative’s capacity to empower survivors and let their voices be heard (Eddie, 1992; “Our stories,” 1992; Wood, 1992). That innovative publication in the field of communication was a model for this issue of the JIOA.

Many professions have published survey results, interviews, and stories of sexual harassment experiences written by victims and survivors within their own fields. In contrast, the focus of this special issue is not on ombuds’ own experiences with being sexually harassed. However, that focus is not meant to imply that we should complacently assume the ombuds profession is a harassment-free zone. Like other professionals, ombuds may be victims or harassers in their own workplaces as well as at ombuds conferences and training events (Adams & Rasch, 2020). In fact, the Call for Papers for this issue drew inquiries from two ombuds who were each interested in submitting their own stories as survivors of sexual harassment on the job. As Adams and



Rasch advise, it is incumbent upon the ombuds profession to look thoroughly inward and establish exemplary sexual harassment policies, practices, and methods for reporting and receiving support.

While our forum is not designed to give voice to sexual harassment survivors, the authors' stories may be empowering in different ways. In the context of this anonymous forum, the authors were able to publicly share, perhaps for the first time, their own detailed stories of assisting in sexual harassment cases. These narratives are lived experiences that demonstrate the ombuds' expertise and ingenuity. However, these are not glossy, frictionless case studies with always tidy endings, intended to make the ombuds appear flawless and unflappable. To the contrary, the stories reveal the ombuds' human emotions, uncertainties, and internal struggles as they help visitors navigate the complexities, risks, and enigmas that often arise in sexual harassment cases.

The narratives also reveal how ombuds can empower people who are struggling with sexual harassment situations. Responding as an individual to sexual harassment can be fraught with fears, uncertainty, and stress. Power inequities and organizational cultures that tolerate sexual harassment make responding especially dangerous and complex for people whose status and power in the organization are low (Bingham, 1991; Bingham & Battey, 2005). Many organizations are not perceived as safe or trustworthy places for people to speak openly or publicly about their concerns. And despite an organization's intentions to be fair to all parties, many internal impediments dissuade people from seeking and receiving assistance (Rowe, Wilcox, & Gadlin, 2009).

However, ombuds offices serve to eliminate the barriers that deter people from seeking help by offering a context where it is safe to come forward (Rowe & Bendersky, 2002). By guaranteeing a confidential, off-the-record environment, ombuds provide a place for their visitors to talk about sexual harassment experiences without fearing they will forfeit privacy, lose control over actions taken on their behalf, or suffer retaliation. Ombuds can also help visitors understand the available organizational resources that obligate a harasser to cease harassment. Direct communication with a harasser may be more effective when organizations have clear policies, procedures, and consequences for wrongdoing that individuals know about and can readily utilize (Bingham & Burleson, 1989; Bingham & Scherer, 1993).

Ombuds follow the IOA Standards of Practice with all their visitors, whether they are victims or survivors, harassers, alleged harassers, or other parties. Bystanders, for example, may make referrals to the ombuds office, accompany a victim there, or visit with the ombuds on their own (Rowe, 2018, 2020). Because ombuds may work with parties in all these roles, ombuds develop a perspective from which they can better understand individual experiences. Regardless of their roles or circumstances, an ombuds listens to people, helps them analyze their situations and reactions, supports them in thinking through the available options and implications, and provides space for them to express feelings and make decisions about what to do.

Our collection of narratives may also be empowering to ombuds as a result of the authors' engagement in reflective practice. Reflective practice is a learning experience that professionals in a variety of fields use to increase their knowledge, skills, and quality of work. Lang (2019), for example, offers a guide to reflective practice for dispute resolution professionals that involves systematic reflection, questioning, insight, continuous learning, and improvement. The practice can occur alone or in reflective practice groups. As the authors in this forum tell their stories, they reflect on their communication with visitors and other parties and the reasoning behind their actions, and share significant lessons learned. In turn, this forum provides the opportunity for readers – new, aspiring, and experienced organizational ombuds and others outside the profession – to explore the ombuds stories and reap valuable lessons of their own.



Publication of these narratives is not the end of the story. Part two of the special issue is yet to unfold. The JIOA encourages readers to mull over these narratives, discuss them, critique them, apply what you learn from them and – perhaps most of all – use them as data for your own research. Part two of the special issue will comprise research studies written by ombuds and other researchers who venture to analyze this collection of stories using qualitative or quantitative (content analysis) methods. By identifying and interpreting patterns that emerge across the narratives, research can further elucidate organizational ombuds work with sexual harassment. I hope the narratives in this forum will inspire others as much as they have inspired me.

It is useful at the conclusion of any project to reflect on how it could be improved. I wish I had been able to persuade more ombuds to submit stories to this forum, including more stories involving male visitors, as well as visitors who experienced sexual harassment at the intersections of sexism, racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and other modes of oppression (e.g., Biaggio, 1997; Calafell, 2014; Richardson & Taylor, 2009; Robelo & Cortina, 2014; Scarduzio, et al., 2018). Future forums of this kind, whether focused on sexual harassment or another type of problem, should include more narratives portraying more diversity and additional approaches to ombuds work.



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