



From the Editor: A Historical Note on the Special Issue on Sexual Harassment and Discrimination

SHANNON LYNN BURTON, EDITOR, JIOA



Thank you for your interest in the *Journal for the International Ombudsman Association's* Special Issue on Sexual Harassment and Discrimination – Part One. I also want to start my comments by thanking Dr. Shereen Bingham, Professor Emeritus and former Director of Ombuds Services at the University of Nebraska at Omaha for serving as the Guest Editor for this issue. Her time and dedication in proposing this project and moving it through to completion has been valuable, not only for the *JIOA*, but for the ombuds authors who contributed and for those ombuds still examining their impact on visitors affected by these concerns and on the institutions that serve as sites of trauma. These stories bear witness to the experiences of both ombuds and visitors as they engage in the difficult conversations that may lead towards healing.

These twelve stories highlight the multiple ways ombuds engage with sexual harassment and discrimination cases. While in a different historical moment, Alice Cook, the first ombuds at Cornell University and the first female ombuds in United States' higher education, shared an "ombudsman's view" on sexual discrimination in universities in a 1972 article in the *AAUP Bulletin*. This article is notable as it is presumed to be one of the first of an ombuds describing the cases seen related to these concerns. The examples shared in Cook's article outline the struggles that many visitors faced in being heard in systems that were not initially created for them. While systems have changed and shifted, one can see the precursors of issues ombuds still address today and appreciate the ways in which ombuds raise systemic concerns. The field is now almost fifty years beyond this publication and the value of ombuds listening to visitors in this space persists. Additionally, the concerns related to sexual harassment and discrimination have expanded given the sex and gender issues of today, as well as the changes in discourse related to local, state, and federal regulations.

As an historian and ombuds, I often reflect on systemic trends, not only in the present moment, but also in relation to their evolution over the years. Given this, a question arises... what will the ombuds' impact on concerns related to sexual harassment and discrimination be in another fifty years? Alice Cook's stories and the stories contained in this Special Issue are testament to the valuable space ombuds hold in navigating the complicated power dynamics, structures and policies that surround their visitors. As such, I encourage our ombuds colleagues, researchers and others to take part in Part Two of the Special Issue on Sexual Harassment and Discrimination and analyze this collection of narratives, identify themes and patterns across stories, and continue to shed light on ombuds work in sexual harassment cases.

REFERENCES

Cook, A. (1972). Sex discrimination at universities: An ombudsman's view. *AAUP Bulletin*, 58(3), p. 279-282.