

# Why organisational sex abuse scandals keep happening

[David Collinson](#)

**Distinguished Professor of Leadership and Organisation, Lancaster University**

Published: November 29, 2024 4.59pm GMT

Almost every week, it seems the media reports claims of yet another sexual scandal within organisations in the public eye. MasterChef host [Gregg Wallace](#) is the latest name in the spotlight, after he denied claims from multiple women that he made inappropriate comments on the set of the BBC show. From [TV presenters](#), [musicians](#) and [royalty](#) to [religious](#), [sporting](#) and public sector leaders, the list goes on.

Explanations that frame the proven cases as isolated incidents miss the underlying pattern. It's men, typically in dominant organisational positions, who use their power and status to pursue sexual gratification by controlling and abusing women, other men, young people and even children.

Although certainly not true of most men, a considerable number bring their sexual desires into work and, in some cases, use organisational resources and relationships to enable and disguise their abusive actions, and sometimes to intimidate victims and witnesses.

I have been researching these issues for more than 40 years, including for a chapter on [men, masculinities and leadership](#) in the new [Routledge Handbook on Men, Masculinities and Organizations](#) (2024). A recurrent finding in my research is that in organisations, men's sexuality often remains dominant, privileged and unchallenged.

Men in senior positions can use their hierarchical power to initiate and conceal sexual relationships (typically with people in subordinated roles), or to engage in sexual harassment, abuse or even violence.

My research has also found that other men in senior positions may view this workplace sexual behaviour as "normal", "natural" and "inevitable", simply turning a blind eye or even blaming the victim. As well as undermining and marginalising other women and men, this gendered denialism can have damaging consequences for organisations when legal cases are lost, damages must be paid, and reputations are undermined.

My research suggests that combating workplace sexual abuse requires several interconnected interventions.

First, formalised policies and practices within the organisation are needed that treat victims' claims seriously. Formalisation needs to be backed up by workplace cultures and practices informed by values of openness, support and respect. Many cases of sexual abuse are enabled and sustained by cultures of silence in which reporting is discouraged, even stigmatised, and victims are marginalised.

Victims' scepticism that their claims of harassment will be dealt with properly remains an important barrier to disclosure. Having said that, the #MeToo movement has challenged sexual harassment and resisted the silencing effects of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). Some

abusers have been [named, shamed and convicted](#). When victims fight back, organisations need to respond professionally to their complaints.

Second, employees – especially those in senior positions – need to understand the organisational conditions, processes and consequences of workplace sexual abuse. This requires gender-specific training, challenging outdated views that sexually objectify women or perpetuate misogyny.

My research has found that male leaders can misunderstand what constitutes sexual harassment and misjudge the most effective ways to address victims' claims. Rather than deal with accusations openly and formally, some male leaders try to protect perpetrators and resolve matters informally.

The recent case of John Smyth in the [Church of England](#) illustrates how men in senior positions can underestimate or misjudge cases of sexual abuse, and either look the other way or engage in a cover-up.

### **Toxic workplace cultures**

Third, having more women in senior positions would help to challenge excessively masculine workplace cultures. Sexual scandals are particularly likely where men dominate senior positions and women are either in the minority or entirely absent from leadership. In such contexts, excessive forms of masculinity are also likely to prevail and to cloud leaders' judgment.

More women in senior positions would certainly have a moderating effect on male leaders' sexualising practices, but it's worth adding that clearly it shouldn't be the job of women to police men's sexuality.

Fourth, leaders and managers need to be more accountable, transparent and willing to undergo independent scrutiny. But herein lies another barrier to the elimination of sexual abuse, and one that is not specifically a gender issue.

Hierarchical structures confer considerable power, status and autonomy on those in senior positions. Distanced and detached from employees, leaders can start to feel all-powerful, which in turn may embolden them to pursue their sexual desires, very often with victims in subordinated roles.

A culture of deference: cover-ups allowed prolific abuse by USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar to continue for years.

This is especially the case when the CEO is also the company owner, as the [Mohamed Al Fayed case](#) illustrates. During the time he was the owner of Harrods, the Ritz hotel in Paris and Fulham football club, Al Fayed allegedly sexually abused (subordinate) women at will, enabled by his network of power and control over employees in these organisations.

Hierarchies also tend to perpetuate a culture of deference – another important barrier to disclosure. This is particularly likely when perpetrators enjoy high social status and public profile, as in the case of TV celebrities, musicians, sports stars and actors. In deferential cultures, victims can be fearful about coming forward, as they seek to protect their jobs, livelihoods and careers. Reporting sexual abuse takes courage and determination.

Overcoming sexual abuse at the organisational level requires radical initiatives in policies and practices, training, gender equality and hierarchical change. At national and global levels it also means police, judiciaries, social media companies and governments must provide effective leadership in outlawing and eliminating sexual abuse and misogyny.

This includes tackling online sites that sexually objectify women, celebrate misogyny, and publish image-based sexual abuse and revenge porn. It also involves combating the rise of AI-generated deepfake porn in all its pernicious forms.

Sexual harassment and abuse remain persistent features of contemporary organisations, raising important issues about how men enact power and control in the workplace. My research suggests that multifaceted interventions are needed that can hold accountable not only the perpetrators, but also those who collude and cover up their actions.