**Legacies of #MeToo in the UK film and television industry: A qualitative study of workplace justice mechanisms to address sexual harassment**

# Introduction

The 2017 #MeToo movement – building on Tarana Burke’s earlier campaign – led to a global outpouring of experiences of sexual harassment and violence. However, feminist critiques have pointed out limitations that have inhibited its legacy, such as its focus on celebrities and white, heterosexual, cisgender, young women’s experiences (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, p. 8); the danger that visibility is taken as a solution to the problem of sexual violence (Zarkov & Davis, 2018, p. 6) and that speaking out is in itself transformative (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2022); that it has led to a ‘backlash’ that re-entrenches rape myths (Moro et al., 2023); and that it has created a binary divide between formal (usually criminal) justice processes and informal justice-seeking on social media (Karlsson, 2024).

In line with Karlsson’s critique, this article argues that a further limitation – both within the popular #MeToo movement as well as with much of the academic literature that analyses it – is under-engagement with victim-survivors’ experiences of workplace justice mechanisms in addressing gender-based violence. While these mechanisms differ between jurisdictions, common factors include civil legal protections for employees and other workers, such as equalities, health and safety, employment law, and other requirements that pertain to employers’ obligations to prevent or respond to sexual harassment or harassment on the basis of sex and provide a safe workplace. Provisions against victimisation also aim to protect employees or other workers[[1]](#endnote-1) from being adversely affected for reporting sexual harassment or other forms of discrimination. Such workplace rights are an important legacy of feminist battles since the 1970s (Zippel, 2006).

However, academic research into this industry has tended to focus on workers’ ‘DIY’ or informal strategies for negotiating sexual harassment in the workplace rather than exploring how employers are meeting their legal and ethical responsibilities to address sexual harassment (as outlined below). This focus – while important – risks perpetuating a lack of awareness of workers’ legal rights, erasing earlier feminist struggles, and reifying the ‘frame of futility’ that Banet-Weiser and Higgins have described around media depictions of reporting sexual harassment in the workplace (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023). It also moves the spotlight away from employers’ and regulators’ legal and ethical responsibilities to prevent and respond to workplace sexual harassment (and legislators’ responsibilities to introduce appropriate provisions in this area). Instead, as Andersson et al. (2024) argue, in order to move beyond binary framework of ‘formal, procedural justice provided by state institutions and alternative, informal or community responses to sexual violence’, the role of employers and workplace cultures and practices should form an important part of justice responses to #MeToo.

Such an approach requires hearing the perspectives of those who have attempted to navigate these mechanisms. Therefore, in order to contribute to such a discussion, this article explores the ongoing legacy of #MeToo by analysing workers’ perceptions of workplace provisions for addressing sexual harassment in the UK film and television industry. While the 2017 #MeToo movement began in the US film and television industry in the US, it also had a significant impact in the UK industry, leading to media coverage, public scrutiny, and new guidance for the film and television industry in efforts to tackle the issue (BFI, 2018; Tabbara & Calnan, 2022; The Film and TV Charity, 2023). Therefore, due to the film and television industry’s centrality in #MeToo and ongoing coverage of emerging scandals in the years following #MeToo, it could be expected to be at the forefront of progressive change in tackling sexual harassment compared to other sectors. In addition, as with the broader creative industries, working conditions in this industry involve factors that enhance the risk of sexual harassment, including power imbalances, gender inequalities, and high numbers of freelance workers. These risk factors for sexual harassment also extend to challenges in prevention and response, as the deregulation of the UK industry in the 1990s has shaped an industry that is ‘characterised by short term contracts and precarity’ (Swords & Johns, 2023b, p. 626). The UK film and television industry therefore has strong drivers to incentivise action on this issue, amidst substantial challenges in doing so.

Amidst ongoing revelations of sexualised abuses of power within the industry (BBC, 2025; Channel 4, 2024; Davies, 2025; Mulcahy, 2023), this article draws on analysis of interview data from 18 people working or studying in the UK film and television industry who had experienced and/or spoken up about sexual harassment and violence at work since December 2017 in order to explore workers’ perceptions of industry prevention and response mechanisms for sexual harassment since #MeToo. As such, the article documents the space between the criminal justice system and informal justice mechanisms by analysing workers’ perspectives on employer responses to sexual harassment. It asks, from the perspective of workers who had experienced and/or reported sexual harassment in the UK film and television industry since #MeToo, first, what are interviewees’ perceptions of employers’ responses to sexual harassment reports; second, what workplace mechanisms to prevent and respond to sexual harassment are interviewees aware of; and third, how do interviewees perceive changes within workplace prevention and response mechanisms to sexual harassment since the 2017 #MeToo movement? .

## #MeToo and workplace sexual harassment justice mechanisms

The #MeToo movement, as Lena Karlsson notes, ‘has been framed as a movement that pits the shortcomings of criminal legal justice against the opportunities for informal justice offered by social media’ (Karlsson, 2024, p. 143). Across many jurisdictions, criminal justice mechanisms have been argued to effectively decriminalise rape by low conviction rates, slow processes, and extremely poor experiences for victim-survivors (see for example, Ministry of Justice, 2021). As a result, survivors have turned to ‘speaking out’ on social media, which has been argued to ‘engender a critical sensibility and collective sense of solidarity and resistance to silencing mechanisms’ (O’Halloran and Cook, 2023, p.12). ‘Speaking out’ – for example through the ‘whisper network’ or through publicly naming perpetrators – is celebrated and encouraged, taking on a ‘morally loaded cultural imperative’ (Karlsson, 2024, p. 15). However, this emphasis on ‘speaking out’ has been critiqued for assuming that such actions are effective in addressing the issue (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023, p. 47) and that it is in itself a solution to the problem of sexual violence (Zarkov & Davis, 2018, p. 6). It further risks ‘absolving the industry and their employers of responsibility’ (Trusolino & Ships, 2023, p. 10). ‘Speaking out’ may also lead to retaliation ( or in the UK legal context, ‘victimisation’), including through defamation lawsuits or institutional complaints processes that uphold pre-existing rape myths (Moro et al., 2023, p. 91; Author's own). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that media depictions of sexual violence post-#MeToo are dominated by a ‘frame’ of the futility of speaking out (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023). This discussion reveals a contradiction within #MeToo between the emphasis on speaking out, and its eventual and apparently inevitable futility. It remains an urgent task, therefore, to expand the repertoire of ‘justice mechanisms’ that are available to activists and survivors.

Workplace justice mechanisms – by which I refer to internal organisational grievance, complaint and disciplinary mechanisms, routes for redress under civil law, or other steps employers take to prevent and respond to sexual harassment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2024) – have been argued to be part of the ‘traditional legal procedures’ that have ‘failed for survivors’ (Clarke, 2019, p. 37). Nevertheless, as this article will argue, we should not be too quick to write these off, amidst ongoing legal reform and policy and practice changes in this area in many jurisdictions.

Whether and how to engage with law reform in addressing gender-based violence continues to be disputed within feminism (Andersson et al., 2024). Formal justice-seeking, including workplace disciplinary mechanisms and actions by employers and education institutions to address sexual harassment such as placing restrictions on those responsible for harassment, suspending them, or firing them, has been argued to be a form of carceral feminism ‘that serve[s] mainly to interpellate the dangerous Other and safeguard the institution’ (Phipps, 2024, p. 63). Nevertheless, this position is contested. Sara Ahmed argues that ‘to deprive someone of institutional power has to involve the institution in some way’ and so feminists *should* engage with organisational complaints processes (Ahmed, 2022). Similarly, I argue that ‘to step away from engaging in [institutional complaints] processes is to give up on the framework of equalities and labour rights that underpin these structures’ (Bull, Under reviewb).

As such, I argue that one area in which the legacy of #MeToo can be enhanced is through strengthening the effectiveness of workplace justice mechanisms. Such a project requires hearing the perspectives of those who have attempted to navigate these mechanisms in order to ascertain how ‘experts-by-experience’ – victim-survivors who report to their employer – negotiate them. These perspectives remain underexplored in academic literature on tackling workplace sexual harassment post #MeToo (Ahmed, 2021; Bull, 2024; Bull & Page, 2022; McDonald et al., 2008). More generally, while there is substantial academic discussion of limitations and possibilities of US workplace justice mechanisms (Rhode, 2019; Schultz et al., 2018), the US differs from other contexts such as the UK in handling workplace sexual harassment, most notably in the predominance of ‘mandatory arbitration’ agreements (Rhode, 2019, p. 393) and different mechanisms for addressing workplace sexual harassment to other forms of discrimination (Schultz et al., 2018, p. 42).

By contrast, the UK legal context for addressing workplace sexual harassment – as outlined below – stems from the European legal framework (Zippel, 2006), which, despite reinforcement since 2017, has been argued to be not ‘sufficiently effective in practice’ in addressing workplace sexual harassment (Petroglou, 2019, p. 32). Overall there remains a contradiction between the popular emphasis post-#MeToo on the importance of reporting sexual harassment amidst insufficient critical scrutiny ofcivil legal protections or employers’ approaches as a response to #MeToo. This is particularly urgent in occupational sectors characterised by precarious work, power imbalances and gender inequalities, all of which are risk factors for sexual harassment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2024). The creative industries, including the film and television industry, constitute such a sector (Conor et al., 2015; Gill, 2014; Hennekam & Bennett, 2017; O’Brien, 2019; Scharff, 2020). As such, this sector is likely to illuminate some of the most challenging aspects of implementing workplace justice mechanisms to tackle sexual harassment.

# UK and industry context

In the UK, while discrimination on the basis of sex was codified in law in 1975, sexual harassment only became legally actionable in the 1980s (Jackson et al., 2024). A separate law on sexual harassment became part of the Equality Act (2010), which covers both sexual harassment (in a gender-neutral definition) and harassment on the basis of sex. However, short time limits on legal action and significant barriers in accessing employment tribunals to obtain redress where employers failed to uphold their legal duties, mean that it is near-impossible for many people to enforce legal rights (Hillier, 2025). Regulatory oversight is weak; the Equality and Human Rights Commission has been criticised for its insufficient powers to inspect and fine employers (O’Neill, 2025). Furthermore, the Equality Act frames sexual harassment in terms of ‘dignity’, i.e. as an individual rather than a collective issue (Petroglou, 2019).

However, as this article argues, workplace justice mechanisms have significant potential for tackling sexual harassment (Ahmed, 2021; Bull, Under reviewb; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2019; Rhode, 2019; Schultz et al., 2018). Indeed, since #MeToo, activists have engaged with legal reform processes in order to strengthen workplace provisions in this area (Bull, 2023a; Childs, 2023; Rights of Women, 2024), There remains, however, insufficient evidence as to how these mechanisms are being implemented and experienced in the UK context. Research into the higher education sector has found that that inequalities within institutions shape complaints processes (Ahmed, 2021; Bull & Shannon, 2025); there are unequal rights in the process between reporting and responding parties (Bull et al., 2020; Bull & Shannon, 2023); formal reporting processes are difficult to complete nor do they offer the remedies that survivors need (Bull & Page, 2022). In the hospitality industry, a lack of employment rights for low-paid workers impedes redress (Jeffery et al., 2024). With the passing of the Worker Protection Act (implemented in 2024), employers in the UK now have a duty to prevent sexual harassment, and further legal protections are due to be added in the forthcoming Employment Rights Bill..

Within the film and television industry, sexual abuse was already on the agenda prior to #MeToo when in 2013 the BBC’s *Respect at Work Review* followed a high-profile scandal (BBC 2013)*.* Immediately after #MeToo, the British Film Institute, a leading sector organisation, produced guidance on handling reports and disclosures of sexual harassment in the screen industries (BFI, 2018) and in 2023 The Film and TV Charity produced further guidance (The Film and TV Charity, 2023). Trade union BECTU have also produced guidance, raised awareness, and lobbied employers (Prospect & Bectu, 2024). Workplace mechanisms recommended by these actors include a policy that enables reporting/disciplinary process; apps, helplines or online systems that either enable reporting or that gather data on workplace; ‘wellbeing advisers’ or workplace representatives designated to support people with this issue; and/or training in recognising harassment, ‘active bystander’ strategies, or for line managers, handling reports.

Nevertheless, post-#MeToo, sexual harassment continues to be prevalent (Bright Purpose, 2022; Wilkes et al., 2020), in the context of ongoing gender inequality (Creative Diversity Network, 2023). Nevertheless, practices for addressing sexual harassment at work remain underdeveloped. In a 2021 survey, out of those who had experienced bullying or harassment in the past year, only 11% said things improved while 16% of those who reported their experiences said things worsened as a result (Film and TV Charity 2022, 12).

A problem with existing sector-specific as well as national guidance for addressing sexual harassment through workplace 1justice mechanisms (ACAS, 2020) is their focus on punitive sanctions for those found responsible for sexual harassment. This means that the consequences of sexual harassment on those targeted remain unaddressed, nor does such an approach address the environment that enabled the harassment to occur (Bull, Under reviewa)Furthermore, non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) may silence victims of workplace sexual harassment (Barmes, 2023) and freelance workers – who form a large part of the film and television industry workforce – face added difficulties in raising concerns about sexual harassment; while freelance workers who are directly employed are covered by existing legislative provisions, there is a widespread belief that freelancers in the creative industries cannot risk their reputation by reporting sexual harassment (O’Brien, 2019; Scharff, 2020).

Existing literature on sexual harassment in the film and television industries, as well as the wider creative industries, has focused on informal justice: ‘speaking out’ on social media and informal strategies used to cope with sexism, sexual harassment and violence in the workplace (O’Brien, 2019). This includes comedy workers’ ‘DIY strategies’(Trusolino and Ships 2023, 9; Liinamaa and Rogers 2022; North, 2016, p. 506) andhe ‘whisper network’ where women share the names of abusers within their industry (Cobb and Horeck 2018, 491. There is less discussion in academic literature of employers’ responsibilities in this space. One exception is Sørensen’s study of the new role of ‘intimacy coordinators’ in the screen industries (2022). However, this provision only applies to actors or ‘talent’. Furthermore, Sørensen argues that intimacy coordination – despite contributing to improved practices on set – is primarily a way of mitigating any ‘financial and reputational consequences’ relating to sexual harassment (Sørensen, 2022).

As such, the UK film and television industry provides a fertile context for exploring how workers affected by sexual harassment experience workplace justice mechanisms. This article now turns to introducing the study, before outlining findings and asking what a critical exploration of such mechanisms, and how they function in practice, can reveal about the legacies of #MeToo.

# Methods

The study draws on interview data from 18 people working or studying in the UK film and television industry who had experienced and/or spoken up about sexual harassment and violence at work since December 2017. Interviews were chosen as a method in line with the feminist epistemological framing of this study, which foregrounded gathering knowledge to support social change (Wise & Stanley, 1993); while multiple surveys have been carried out on this topic, qualitative accounts of reporting and harassment experiences were lacking. The temporal specificity of the study is crucial; it explores how sexual harassment was occurring, and how employers were responding, since the 2017 #MeToo movement. Out of the 18 interviewees, three were bystanders who became involved in reports of sexual harassment experienced by others. 15 were directly targeted, five of whom were subjected to sexual violence including indecent exposure, sexual assault and rape, and interviewees also described 17 instances of sexual harassment at work (for further details see Bull, (2023b).

Participants were recruited by reaching out to organisations supporting minoritized groups and/or women in film and television; advertising on social media (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook); an article published in *Broadcast Now* magazine; and newsletters for industry organisations. As such, the sample is self-selecting, drawing on those who were willing to speak to an academic interviewer, and is therefore unlikely to be representative. All interviewees who disclosed sexual harassment or violence had had experiences that met the UK legal definition of sexual harassment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2024), even when they themselves experienced them as ‘grey areas’ and did not use the label of sexual harassment.

Interviews were carried out on Zoom in February and March 2023 by the author, who is trained and experienced in supporting survivors of sexual violence. Interviews followed best practice protocols for research with survivors of sexual violence (Campbell et al., 2009), including interviewers being knowledgeable about sexual violence/harassment and its impact on victims and this knowledge being used to provide information to interviewees to help them understand/normalise their experience (Campbell et al., 2009, p.603). For example, some interviewees wanted to know whether what they had experienced was in fact sexual harassment, and whether their employer’s response was appropriate. In addition, interviewees needed to be given time to tell their story in their own words, choosing what to disclose or not disclose (Campbell et al., 2009, p.601). More widely, support for participants included a debrief after the interview, as well as discussing support needs and signposting to specialist support organisations at each stage of the study. Interviewees were given the opportunity to review and redact their interview transcripts, and to comment on the final draft of the report.

 All interview questions were voluntary, and covered experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace and disclosing or reporting this; impacts of these experiences; interviewees’ ideal responses to their disclosures; awareness of workplace initiatives to address sexual harassment; and their perceptions of, and ideas for change in the industry. The wider findings of the study are reported in Bull (2023c; 2025).

Ethical review of the study design was carried out by the University of York, Department of Education Ethics Committee. All names given are pseudonyms, and details of interviewees’ identities are given as an overview of the whole sample rather than being linked together.

Interviewees worked across genres including high-end television, scripted and unscripted documentary; factual/entertainment; journalism; drama; and PR. Interviewees’ roles/departments were actor; executive producer; researcher (x2); assistant editor (post-production); journalist (x3); runner (x2); costume; journalism student; script supervisor; development producer; producer; senior PR executive; edit producer; props. Interviewees had between 6 months and over 40 years’ experience working in the industry; with seven having 5-9 years’ experience in the industry; six having 10 or more years’ experience, and five interviewees having fewer than five years' experience. Ten interviewees were freelancers, working on contracts ranging from days to months. Six were on permanent or rolling contracts; one was directly employed on a fixed-term contract, and one was a student on a work experience placement.

No interviewees identified as trans or non-binary. 17 were women and one was a man; out of 16 who gave information on disability, 15 were non-disabled and one disabled. Of the 15 who gave information on ‘race’, 13 were white, one mixed race and one ‘West Asian’. Of the 14 who gave details of their class of origin, one self-identified as upper-middle class, nine as middle-class, two as lower-middle-class and two as working-class. Of the 13 who gave details of their sexuality, seven were heterosexual and the others self-described as bisexual, queer/pansexual, or bi-curious. Despite efforts to recruit a more diverse sample (Bull, 2023c), it is primarily white, middle-class women who are represented in this study. This limited range of representation is likely to reflect the group who feel most confident to speak out about their experiences and to participate in academic research.

Data analysis was primarily inductive, aiming to retain the integrity of each individual account while also drawing out themes and patterns. It involved making a narrative summary of each interview; carrying out thematic analysis across the whole dataset; and creating an analysis matrix to compare key elements of participants’ accounts. The researcher’s subjectivity – as a white, cis, middle-class woman with expert/activist knowledge around the UK’s legal and regulatory context around sexual harassment – was a reflexive resource in the analysis. The analysis took a ‘semantic’ reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), i.e. it focused on explicit rather than implicit meanings, due to the primarily descriptive aims of the study. .

# Findings: Workers’ experiences of workplace justice mechanisms to address sexual harassment

In order to describe how workers affected by sexual harassment are experiencing workplace justice mechanisms in the UK film and television industry, the findings below are organised in response to the three questions presented above: first, interviewees’ perceptions of employers’ responses to sexual harassment reports; second, workplace mechanisms to prevent and respond to sexual harassment; and third, how interviewees perceive changes within workplace prevention and response mechanisms to sexual harassment since 2017.

### A reliance on informal actions: interviewees’ perspectives on employers’ handling of reports

First, an overview of interviewees’ perceptions of employers’ responses to sexual harassment reports is given in Figure 1. The most common type of action that interviewees described was informal action, taken in eight out of the 15 cases. I use the term ‘informal action’ to mean responses that did not appear to follow any organisational policies, and did not have the potential to lead to any disciplinary actions such as suspension or dismissal, such as an undocumented conversation with the person responsible for harassment (Bull, 2023b).

Figure 1: *Actions taken by employers as a result of reports of sexual harassment*

Sometimes, such informal responses were in line with what interviewees wanted. In other instances, informal actions were taken where interviewees had wanted a formal response. However, out of the types of informal action taken, only one – ensuring the person responsible was not allowed on set unless invited – was considered effective and satisfactory by the interviewee. The other informal actions taken were either ineffective, failed to address the behaviour adequately, or led to victimisation, i.e. treating someone badly because they have made a complaint of harassment. For example, in one case the interviewee, Vanessa, had asked not to be in the same room as her boss who had sexually harassed her. She then found that she was unable to access skills and career development opportunities as a result. Not only that, but he didn’t adhere to this condition, and she eventually had to leave her job and her career in order to get away from him. Furthermore, one type of informal response was to arrange for harassers to work solely with other men, not with women. This creates further discrimination, which could amount to victimisation. Disbarring women from parts of the workplace results in those being discriminated against – in this case women – bearing the cost of harassment.

Only in a minority of cases were the actions taken were aligned with what interviewees wanted. Most were dissatisfied with how their report or disclosure was handled. This response was due, in some cases, to the severe consequences for interviewees and lack of consequences for the person responsible for the harassment/assault. However, three interviewees – all freelancers – were satisfied with how their report/disclosure was handled. All three of these interviewees were in their 20s and were in relatively junior roles, and didn’t want formal action taken; as a result, it was easier for their disclosure to be addressed in the way they wanted. Previous research has documented barriers perceived by freelancers in reporting sexual harassment in the creative industries (O’Brien, 2019; Scharff, 2020)and found that freelancers are more likely than permanently-employed staff to be subjected to sexual harassment (Wilkes et al., 2020, p. 19). Nevertheless, these findings show that some freelancers are speaking out about their experiences, and having satisfactory responses to disclosures. Furthermore, harassment being perpetrated by someone on a freelance contract appeared to make it easier for employers to take informal action in the form of not hiring them again.

Overall, in the handling of sexual harassment reports in this sample, some interviewees described employers attempting to follow guidance and/or making organisational changes as a result of handling their report, while others described employers being unprepared or unwilling tofollow national (ACAS, 2020) or sector-specific (BFI, 2018) guidance. This finding was also borne out in discussions of workplace initiatives in this area, as the next section outlines.

### Workplace initiatives for preventing and addressing sexual harassment and violence

The second research question explored interviewees’ perceptions of workplace mechanisms to prevent and respond to sexual harassment. Interviewees were asked what initiatives they were aware of for addressing sexual harassment, both in the workplaces where they had experienced or reported it and in their working lives more generally. In the workplaces where interviewees experienced or reported sexual harassment, seven out of 18 interviewees said they were *not* aware of any initiatives or mechanisms in place to address sexual harassment. Five further interviewees said that sexual harassment was mentioned either in their employment contract or in a policy; that there was a staff representative; or the commissioning company had a mechanism for raising concerns. These mechanisms were not seen as appropriate or helpful for their particular situation. More generally, across their wider working lives, half of interviewees said that across all the workplaces they had worked in since 2017, they were not aware of provisions in any, or most, of their workplaces to tackle this issue. For example, Zoe estimated she had worked on around 40 productions since the 2017 #MeToo movement, and only in one of those had she been aware of any mechanism to address sexual harassment and bullying.

Some interviewees did describe sexual harassment initiatives that they had encountered at work. One such initiative is ‘wellbeing facilitators’ whose role includes ‘robustly support[ing] all crew and cast with their own mental health and wellbeing on set’ including addressing bullying and harassment (*6ft From The Spotlight and The Wellbeing Facilitator*, 2021). Nevertheless, in the rare cases where interviewees were aware of wellbeing facilitators on set, they did not describe them as being helpful. Training on bullying and harassment – whether bespoke sessions, or within wider health and safety provision – was mentioned by six interviewees. Training appeared to vary greatly in terms of quality, scope, and depth, and interviewees had varying perspectives on its quality and effectiveness. Sometimes they described coverage of sexual harassment as limited to the mention of 'inappropriate behaviour' as a line in a general training video, without naming or defining sexual harassment directly. By contrast, three interviewees described mandatory interactive training for all staff; in one case this involved ‘live’ discussion-based training seminars at start of production where attendees had to discuss how they would respond to different discrimination or bullying-related scenarios, in line with recommendations for good practice in this area (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018, p. 152).

An anonymous helpline was described as in place by one commissioning channel, which anyone working on a production commissioned by this channel could useOne interviewee, Annie, felt that despite the helpline being anonymous, it was still too risky to use. As she commented, “everyone on our team talked about calling it. But everyone's too scared. They're just worried that they're going to be identified and that they'll never work again.” However, a second interviewee, Zoe, described using it to raise an issue unrelated to sexual harassment that she had observed on set, and received a satisfactory response.

Finally, three interviewees were in line management roles and in some cases had to handle complaints, including those of sexual harassment. In line with wider research in this area (Bright Purpose, 2022, p. 25), these line managers stated that they had not had any support, training, or guidance on handling sexual harassment. It is not surprising, then, that poor responses to reporting were occurring for many interviewees.

Overall, awareness – and therefore, presumably the existence – of workplace initiatives in this area was relatively low. This is in contrast with the claims of many employers to have carried out significant progress in this area (BBC, 2025; Channel 4, 2024, p. 4; Davies, 2025; Mulcahy, 2023), suggesting that there remains scope for significant improvements in prevention and awareness-raising initiatives.

### Interviewees’ perspectives on what has changed since #MeToo

The final research question explored how interviewees perceived changes within workplace prevention and response mechanisms to sexual harassment since 2017. Interviewees for this study have an important perspective on changes in the industry since #MeToo as they had all experienced and/or reported sexual harassment at work since 2017. Just over half the interviewees had been in the industry both before and after #MeToo and were also able to reflect on changes over time. Often, discussions of anti-sexual harassment initiatives in the screen industries since #MeToo focuses on intimacy coordinators (Sørensen, 2022). However, this initiative was not in place for, or appropriate to, the situations any of the interviewees in this study found themselves in. More generally, interviewees described some positive changes since #MeToo, but also new risks . Here, I focus on the catch-22 situation described by a minority of interviewees: that people are being encouraged to speak out about harassment and abuse, but then are punished or victimised when they do so. Chloe reported an incident of sexual harassment that also constituted a criminal offence to her employer. They dissuaded her from reporting to the police, and she was paid off until the end of her contract, while the perpetrator was given extensive support. As she explained:

From my point of view, it felt like what [#MeToo] did was made [companies] scared and maybe want to hide stuff. It didn’t have a response of, “Oh, we need to change things,” it just made women more confident in coming forward, but there was no change in [supporting women when they came forward], no, no, absolutely not.

Sarah was forced out of her job and career after reporting sexual harassment in support of a colleague. The enormous strain of the reporting process, and the victimisation that accompanied it, led to her becoming suicidal and taking sick leave. Once her sick pay ran out, she found herself unable to go back to work as the conditions remained unsafe. , She described how:

The slogans without accountability are so dangerous. Because if you didn't have the slogans [encouraging people to speak out], you wouldn't be tempted to believe them. Say nothing. […] I mean it's not a solution, but what you would stop getting is women coming forward and […] self-immolating over these values. Because that's all that happens. It's just, you just rub victims out.

This trend was particularly (but not exclusively) commented on by interviewees in the news industry, where news organisations were described as ‘hunting out’ stories about sexual harassment in other sectors or industries, while failing to address the harassment occurring in their own organisations. One interviewee even described her boss commissioning a story from her on sexual harassment, while he himself was engaging in harassing behaviour – failing to see the connection between his own behaviour and the story he was commissioning. As Kate, an experienced journalist, commented:

My sense is that it stops at the office door. All this stuff about exposing it, calling power to account, harassment in the workplace: we will brag endlessly about how we’re exposing it in the outer world but we know we can’t do it in our own newsrooms.

Around half of interviewees thought that little had changed in the industry since #MeToo in addressing sexual harassment. However, as people now may feel a greater moral imperative to report (Karlsson, 2024, p. 15), this potentially makes the industry *more* dangerous than prior to #MeToo as people may be reporting within unsafe systems or risk victimisation(Moro et al., 2023). Indeed, four interviewees experienced victimisation – two losing their jobs, and one being obliged to sign an NDA – as a result of reporting sexual harassment and abuse.

# Discussion

Overall, interviewees painted a contradictory picture with some positive change, but also new risks emerging. Despite claims from some employers of change since previous scandals (Channel 4, 2024; Davies, 2025; Mulcahy, 2023), across the industry as a whole. according to interviewees’ above accounts from between 2017 and 2023, employers were not following national or sector-specific guidance for handling sexual harassment reports. At the time of the incidents described in this study, there was some evidence of good practice in prevention and response but this was patchy, inconsistent, and not yet sufficiently developed to be effective in protecting people in the workplace. Furthermore, while this study found some evidence of workplace initiatives to address sexual harassment, this was far from being widespread; half of interviewees said that across all of the workplaces they had worked in since 2017, they were not aware of provisions in any, or most, of their workplaces to tackle this issue. Indeed, around half of interviewees thought that little had changed in the industry since #MeToo in addressing sexual harassment.

The difference between interviewees’ perspectives and employer’s claims could be in part because employers are even at the time of writing – over seven years after #MeToo – updating their protocols in this area (BBC, 2025; Channel 4, 2024). This slow progress demonstrates either a lack of awareness in the early years post-#MeToo of the scope of changes required, and/or a lack of will on the part of employers to make such changes, in the context of a weak regulatory environment. It could also be because employers are primarily making changes in response to public scandals, and therefore companies where such public scrutiny has not occurred are not addressing the issue.

Furthermore, in this industry there remains a heavy reliance on informal responses, i.e. responses that do not follow any organisational policies, and do not have the potential to lead to any disciplinary actions (Author’s own) even in cases where those reporting wanted formal responses. Activist and lawyer Deeba Syed has pointed out that informal responses benefit the employer over the victim-survivor, as it absolves them of having to take formal action, and allows them to deny that sexual harassment has occurred (Bull, 2025) ) for example, by making public statements that ‘no formal reports have been received’ (see for example Rufo & Young, 2024). Finally, ‘a reliance on informal reporting helps uphold the myth that if someone is really a victim, they would have formally reported’ . Nevertheless, in an industry where informal working cultures are the norm (Swords & Johns, 2023a), this appears to extend to sexual harassment report-handling. These findings are in line with concerns raised by trade union Bectu, whose Head Philippa Childs has written to broadcasters stating that ‘it is abundantly clear that your helplines and other measures that broadcasters frequently point to are woefully inadequate in dealing with complaints, particularly those levelled at people in positions of power’ (Childs, 2023). Similarly, an independent legal review into ITV, while finding that complaints processes were ‘fit for purpose’, recommended ‘clarifying the routes for handling complaints raised about or related to ITV talent’ (Mulcahy, 2023, p. 4)

While some of these problems are specific to the film and television industry, the weak regulatory context in the UK (Bull, 2023a) plays a major role. There is ongoing legislative work to address this but its impacts remain to be seen. Furthermore, legal redress for those subjected to sexual harassment at work is currently ineffective (Hillier, 2025) and action needs to be taken to limit the use of NDAs in sexual harassment and bullying cases. These issues are not specific to the screen industries but are part of a wider programme of work that is needed to address sexual harassment across workplaces (Bull & Shannon, 2023).

The findings from this study also raise questions about the experiences of freelance creative sector workers in relation to sexual harassment. While freelancers feel more at risk (O’Brien, 2019; Scharff, 2020) this study shows that those who are in permanent or ongoing contracts are not protected either. While freelancers experience *more* harassment (Wilkes et al., 2020, p. 19) this may be due to moving workplace more often and therefore encountering more people. Those in permanent or ongoing contracts may, by contrast, experience sexual harassment situations for a longer period of time as they cannot leave at the end of a contract. These findings show that there is more complexity to the situation of freelancers’ experiences of sexual harassment than previous literature has explored.

Overall, this critical exploration of workplace justice mechanisms reveals that the legacies of #MeToo in UK film/TV industry workplaces have been uneven and are insufficient to uphold employers’ legal obligations (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2024) or to effectively prevent or respond to sexual harassment. In some instances, those who are targeted for or speak out about harassment are still experiencing life-changing negative impacts as a result. One of the legacies of #MeToo has been an increased emphasis on ‘speaking out’ about sexual harassment, even while the assumption that speaking out is in itself transformative has been critiqued (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2022). The findings from this article support this critique, in revealing that the legacies of #MeToo include new risks related to the emphasis on ‘speaking out’ and reporting. One of the legacies of #MeToo, as evidenced in this study, is therefore that employers encourage workers to report sexual harassment, when they are not prepared to receive reports. Nevertheless, workers believe these ‘slogans’ and assume that it is safe to report. There is, then, increased awareness of the moral imperative to report, and therefore increased risk of victimisation as a result of speaking out. The increased emphasis on reporting also leads to situations where people feel they have to speak out, whether or not they feel safe to do so. Nevertheless, increased reporting could also contribute to workplace justice mechanisms being more widely used and employers becoming more practised at handling reports. For example, one interviewee described her workplace sexual harassment policy being updated as a result of her report.

Academic literature around #MeToo and its legacies – particularly in discussions of media workers – has focused on informal strategies for tackling workplace sexual harassment. However, there is a risk in academic analyses that focus solely on informal approaches, ‘speaking out’ or social media activism, of ignoring workplace legal rights and perpetuating a lack of awareness among workers about their options. Indeed, while complaints/grievance processes have been (rightly) critiqued for individualising an issue of discrimination (Charlesworth, 2002), there are routes for collective action in leveraging workplace rights such as collective grievances and working with unions as a resource to negotiate better prevention and response for sexual harassment in the workplace (Bull, 2023a; Prospect & Bectu, 2024). While workers themselves may assume that informal strategies are their best or only option – employing discourses of fatalism (Scharff, 2020) or futility (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023) – academic analyses should critically interrogate workers’ lack of awareness of their legal rights, where this exists, as well as the limits and gaps within those rights and mechanisms for upholding them. In addition, more critical discussion of workplace justice mechanisms outside the US context is needed, in order to avoid universalising US-specific approaches and to contribute to greater (critical) awareness of the possibilities and limitations for enforcing rights in the workplace. In this context, awareness of differences between criminal justice and workplace justice mechanisms is especially important in relation to discussions of carceral feminism.

The analysis presented here has limitations related to the sector and context studied – the UK film and television industry – as well as the sample. Most notably, there is a risk that this article reproduces #MeToo narratives that focus on white heterosexual middle-class cis women’s experiences; more than half of the sample were white middle-class women. Several interviewees commented that their accent, their education, their confidence, and their ability to negotiate upper-middle-class social norms meant that they knew how to speak up in a way that they were more likely to be listened to. There is more work to be done to listen to the voices of working-class people, people of colour, trans and non-binary workers, and disabled people, not least as there is evidence that the some of these groups are more likely than others to be subjected to sexual harassment and violence in the industry (Wilkes et al., 2020, pp. 33–34).

# Conclusion

This article has argued that in order to understand the legacies of #MeToo, researchers should pay more attention to workplace justice mechanisms, and especially the perspectives of those attempting to use such processes, in order to document and assess any changes. Examining the UK film and television industry as an example of a sector where there is both high risk of sexual harassment as well as high media profile and scrutiny due to its centrality in the 2017 #MeToo movement, the analysis found that while there appear to have been some positive shifts in employers’ responses to sexual harassment in the UK film and television industry, there remains an over-reliance on informal handling of reports; a lack of visibility of prevention initiatives; and the continuing risk of victimisation both from perpetrators and employers.

An urgent area for action highlighted by this study is the relative paucity of mechanisms and processes to tackle sexual harassment in many workplaces. While a minority of interviewees described some positive initiatives, half of the interviewees said that across all of the workplaces they had worked in since 2017 they were not aware of anything in place in any, or most, of their workplaces to tackle this issue. This is particularly concerning, as the biggest change that interviewees described as occurring since #MeToo was that people were more likely to speak out or support others to speak out about sexual harassment. But this encouragement or imperative to speak out is not, in many workplaces, being accompanied by mechanisms to ensure that it is *safe* to speak out. Indeed, for two interviewees, speaking out came at a great cost to their health and wellbeing as well as leading to loss of their careers.

In some jurisdictions, including the UK, creative industries-specific bodies are being established to tackle harassment and bullying (Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority, 2025; Irish Theatre Institute, 2024; Vincent & Goodwin, 2023). This marks a significant – if long overdue – shift towards taking workplace justice mechanisms seriously in tackling sexual harassment. Workers will, it is to be hoped, no longer have to solely rely on ‘DIY’ strategies or informal approaches. Such work will need ongoing critical scrutiny but may become the most important legacy of #MeToo in creative industries workplaces.

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1. I use these terms in line with the UK’s Equality Act, where ‘employees’ refers to ‘those who have a contract of employment’ and ‘workers’ as ‘those who contract to do the work personally’, which includes some freelancers (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2024). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)