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ABSTRACT

Purpose - This study aims to analyse how the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy in the form of community discourses and activism conceptualises organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and enhances the development of new accountability instruments.

Design/methodology/approach - The study draws on social movement theory and the intellectual problematics of accountability, together with the empirical insights from two research engagement projects established and facilitated by the author.

Findings - The study reveals multiple dimensions of how post-#MeToo community activism impacted the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work. The movement enhanced discourses prompting a new societal sense of accountability for sexual wrongdoings. This in turn facilitated public demands for accountability that pressured organisations to respond. The accountability crisis created an opportunity for community activists to influence understanding of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and to propose new accountability instruments advancing harassment reporting technology, as well as an enhancing the behavioural consciousness and self-assessment of individuals.

Originality/value – The study addresses a topic of social importance in analysing how community activism arising from a social movement has transformed accountability demands and thus both advanced the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and established socially desirable practices for it. The study contributes to theory by revealing the emancipatory potential of community activism to influence organisational accountability practices and to propose new instruments at a moment of organisational hesitation and crisis of accountability.

Keywords: sexual misconduct at work; community activism; #MeToo; organisation accountability; accountability instruments; ethnography.
1. Introduction

Any place I go to, there are people like you. They’re all interested in significant, important problems – problems of ... empowerment, of understanding the world, of working with others, of just finding out what your values are ... and helping each other to do it.

Noam Chomsky on community activists (Chomsky, 2002, p. 177)

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Social movements are powerful indicators of the matters that require public attention (Catchpowle & Smyth, 2016; Della Porta & Diani, 2020). Back in 2006, activist Tarana Burke started the #MeToo movement to raise awareness of the experience of sexual abuse (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019). The movement received a new impetus in 2017 when the accusations of sexual assault against the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein provoked a massive reaction on social media in the form of individuals using the hashtag #MeToo to share their experiences of sexual harassment. The movement then synergised its efforts with the newly emerged Time’s Up initiative to raise funds to assist survivors with legal counsel (Kantor & Twohey, 2019; Regulska, 2018).

The protest rapidly went beyond Hollywood and the film industry and expanded into politics, fashion, academia, sports, the health and aid sectors, and many others. The domino effect of this expansion revealed the need for new regulatory initiatives and the transformation of workplace norms and societal understanding of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct (Clair, et al., 2019; Goncharenko, 2021; Veissière, 2018; Zarkov & Davis, 2018). The concept of accountability for abuses of power and misconduct, primarily localised within academic discourses and political debates (Clinard, 1990; Grant & Keohane, 2005), has been placed in the centre of the #MeToo public agenda, turning both individual and organisational accountability into a widespread aspiration.

From being an event significant only in the margins, the #MeToo movement spread into a wider societal domain. The new public discourse and evolving dialogues brought cases of workplace harassment out into the open simultaneously revealing the ultimate absence of adequate instruments to exercise organisational accountability for workplace wrongdoings (Gillespie, Mirabella, & Eikenberry, 2019; Regulska, 2018). As the main wave of the social protest has now passed, the present study aims to examine how the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy enhanced the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and stimulated the development of new accountability instruments.

The study is grounded in the interdisciplinary perspectives of social accountability and occupational management and ethics. It mobilises the theory of social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2020; Ishkanian, 2021; Morris, 2000), emphasising the role of community activism and dialog organising in the mobilisation of collective awareness, persuasion and solidarity and turning the legacies of protest into new social and organisational practices (Chomsky, 2017; Gallhofer, Haslam, & van der Walt, 2011; O’Leary, 2017; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). The study also engages with research on the intellectual problematics of accountability (Blader & Rothman, 2014; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009) to understand how the accountability of actors is shaped by their engagement with ‘the Other’ (Butler, 2005; Yates, Belal, Gebreiter, & Lowe, 2020). The term ‘accountable actors’ is used to refer both to individuals at work and to organisations, considering the latter to be ‘collectives of individuals’ who determine the direction of organisational accountability (Boomsma & O’Dwyer, 2019). Finally, the study builds on prior research into the situational aspects of harassment and victimisation (Garcia, 2021; Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Pilch & Turska, 2015) to understand the phenomenon for which
the boundary needs to be set and accountability discharged. Due to its complex nature, interdisciplinarity and advancement as a result of a social protest, the study views organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work as a ‘boundary concept’ (Gracia & Oats, 2012; Llewellyn, 1994; Mollinga, 2010) that “facilitate[s] communication and cooperation between members of distinct groups … [and constructs] interdisciplinary alliances” (Allen, 2009, p. 355).

Methodologically, the study deploys ethnography with elements of participatory action (in the form of dialogic organising and facilitation) and builds on the empirical insights of two research engagement projects undertaken by the author in the United Kingdom in 2019–2021. It contributes to research on social and dialogic accounting (Bebbington, Brown, Frame, & Thomson, 2007; Brown, 2009; Catchpowle & Smyth, 2016) by revealing the emancipatory potential of community activism to advance the conceptualisation of organisational accountability – in this case, for sexual misconduct at work. The study narrates how in the midst of organisational hesitancy to address escalating demands for accountability, community activists mobilised relevant expertise to articulate socially desirable pathways for organisations to conduct accountability for sexual misconduct in the workplace. The study also shows how a crisis of accountability provoked innovations in the area of accountability instruments designed to collect and assess the evidence of sexual misconduct, and improve reporting channels for abuse survivors. Importantly, the study highlights the activists’ emphasis on the need to enhance the implementation of such digital innovations with the cultivation of greater behavioural consciousness, self-accountability and self-assessment of individuals at work. This dual focus on the technological advancement of reporting accompanied by conscious attention to workplace environment and culture is likely to shape organisational approaches to communicating accounts of sexual misconduct and corresponding disclosures as the evolving concept finds its place in occupational settings, regulatory frameworks and corporate disclosures.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a review of the literature discussing the role of social movements in facilitating accountability demands, the situational contexts of workplace harassment and the necessity for the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work to evolve and advance. The third section outlines the research methodology and ethnographic settings of the study. The fourth section presents the empirical findings revealing how community discourses enhance the conceptualisation of organisational accountability by proposing and promoting technological innovations in harassment reporting accompanied by the groundwork of transforming the workplace environment. The final section reflects upon the findings’ implications and concludes the paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social movement theory: When ‘the Other’ becomes ‘the Collective Us’

The ability of actors to acknowledge and process the impact of their conduct is limited due to the biases of self-consciousness (Hernandez, Almeida, & Dolan-Del Vecchio, 2005; Passyn & Sujan, 2006). To facilitate accountability for (mis)conduct, a physical or virtual presence of a counter-party is needed to impose scrutiny and pass judgement if the justification for the conduct is unsatisfactory. This counter-party is known by many names, including ‘public gaze’, ‘accountability forum’ or ‘the Other’ (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009; Yates, et al., 2020). The presence of ‘the Other’ and the demands they impose are essential for the actor’s capacity to discharge accountability (Islam & McPhail, 2011; Neu, Saxton, Rahaman, & Everett, 2019).
The actor approaches self-assessment in line with the (potential) expectations of ‘the Other’ and holds themselves accountable only for the conduct significant and visible to ‘the Other’ (Cooper & Lapsley, 2019; Messner, 2009). A continuous interplay between self-accountability and demands imposed by ‘the Other’ shapes the identity and self-understanding of accountable actors, who “always find …[themselves] already in a situation in which a demand has been formulated … and once …[they] start to give an account, … [they] have accepted the situation … as legitimate” (Messner, 2009, p. 927).

‘The Other’ is also complex. Understood as a wide assembly of stakeholders gathered in accountability forums (Dellaportas, 2019; Goncharenko, 2021; Yates, et al., 2020), ‘the Other’ is contra-lateral to an accountable actor. One may wonder what is happening on the side of ‘the Other’. However, once one steps to the Other’s side, there is no longer ‘the Other’, but ‘the Collective us’. This notion of an assembly holds valuable insights into how and why certain social discourses, collective actions and demands for accountability emerge, progress, peak and collapse (Brodsky, 2021; George, Brown, & Dillard, 2021; Vachhani, 2020).

One way to explore such insights is through social movement theory (Ishkanian, 2021; La Torre, Di Tullio, Tamburro, Massaro, & Rea, 2021). ‘The Collective Us’ could disintegrate one day, and then ‘suddenly’ be empowered and mobilised around a shared idea or target. Social movement theory illuminates the transformation of individual voices into collective concerns and aspirations, and then into a widespread movement (Morris, 2000; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). A movement is, then, a form of organising ‘the Collective Us’ to strengthen the vocalisation of a certain idea or a demand for accountability, justice or change from responsible actors (usually governments and organisations).

Individuals join social movements in response to “a question of scale and dedication” (Chomsky, 2002, p. 179) once their individual identities resonate with the movement’s ideology and agenda (Della Porta & Diani, 2015; Gahan & Pekarek, 2013). Unlike professional campaigners, community activists usually have another professional occupation but join a movement reacting on their internal sense of (in)justice and calls for the greater good, or as part of the “responsibility of intellectuals” (Chomsky, 2017). A movement’s absence of a clear centre or formal hierarchy allows anyone to join at any stage in order to process the experiences of collective living, form a task force or develop collective actions in the name of a shared idea. The lack of ownership permits parallel developments and advancement of a movement’s ideas in various locations, even with very limited coordination.

Social movements place significant emphasis on facilitating the agenda for accountability by constructing and imposing accountability demands, intensifying the presence and manifestation of ‘the Other’, and by effectively overcoming the blocks associated with more traditional and established pathways to hold individuals or organisations to account (Chomsky, 2002; Kavada, 2015). Spontaneously and rapidly increased demands for accountability are often rooted in outbreaks of collectively experienced emotions of blame, resentment, anger and disbelief, especially in situations of crisis (Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Goncharenko & Khadaroo, 2019; Guénin-Paracini & Gendron, 2010; Skærbæk & Christensen, 2015). The synchronised and intensified escalation of calls for accountability persuades accountable actors to respond.

Due to the broad variety of matters a widespread protest can potentially target, its socio-economic and political outcomes are hard to predict and examine (Della Porta & Diani, 2020; George, et al., 2021). To bring about improvement, social demands for accountability need to be bolstered by an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon attracting social concern and requiring accountability. The next sub-section outlines the role of situational settings and contexts in workplace misconducts of sexual nature.
2.2. The situational aspects of sexual misconduct at the workplace

As open systems, workplaces are “vulnerable to all of the dimensions of domination and subjugation that operate in the larger society” (Hernandez, et al., 2005, p. 112). However, within the workplace domain, individuals do not always recognise their roles in the social patterns (Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010). This resonates with what Garcia (2021), elaborating on the philosophical insights of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, suggests calling a ‘situated individual’, i.e. an individual determined by their situation. Garcia explains that “one … hold[s] together two levels, the one of the individual, who makes choices and behaves in certain ways, and the one of … [situation], which prescribes certain behaviours” (Garcia, 2021, p. 55).

Those who hold power tend to maintain the privilege of defining normality for others (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019), either excluding themselves from being held accountable for their conduct (Persson, Roland, & Tabellini, 1997) or being “held to a lower standard of accountability” (Jory, Anderson, & Greer, 1997, p. 407). In contrast, those vulnerable to victimisation are not usually equipped with instruments to hold others to account or facilitate change (Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Pilch & Turska, 2015). Routinised professional activities, gendered workplaces and gender-based (mostly, female) victimisation in various professional settings aggravate gender (mostly, male) domination and amplify the social patterns of power (Carmona & Ezzamel, 2016; De Coster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999; Haynes, 2013).

The broad amplitude of sexual misconduct goes from offensive remarks about someone’s body and appearance, sexual jokes, discussions about sexual matters, and gestures of a sexual nature to the brutal acts of rape and assault (Sen, Borges, Guallar, & Cochran, 2018). The conceptualisation of abuse of power at work for sexual wrongdoing remains widely debatable, as sexual misconduct cannot be reduced to a single definition, but is rather determined through context and the specifics of a particular situation, and the (potential) impact on victims and witnesses of abuse (Bimrose, 2004; Hunt, Davidson, Fielden, & Hoel, 2010). At the same time, even the mildest misconduct can cause severe and largely unpredictable psychological damage: the experience of a traumatic event is unique to each individual (Eissa, Lester, & Gupta, 2019; Pilch & Turska, 2015; Tepper, 2000). Trauma also arises from the experiences related to misconduct, such as shame, humiliation and emotional distress (Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995).

Moreover, the risks associated with the use of social media in the era of digitalisation enable new types of misconduct among co-workers such as textual harassment and cyberbullying (Mainiero & Jones, 2013a). It is therefore necessary to recognise the offensive behaviour of employees on social media as workplace misconduct (Kelley & Mullen, 2006; Latan, Jabbour, & de Sousa Jabbour, 2020; Mueller, De Coster, & Estes, 2001). In addition to the negative psychological impact of toxic digital communication on an organisational environment, organisations are also often held liable for the online offensiveness of their employees expressed in cyberspace, on digital platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as via text messages and emails (Boyd, 2010; Mainiero & Jones, 2013b; Russell, Woods, & Banks, 2017).

In situations of conceptual ambiguity, organisations are considered responsible for identifying the behaviours that they will not tolerate (Cheng, et al., 2020; Pilch & Turska, 2015). To achieve liberation from unhealthy power dynamics and toxic patterns, behavioural consciousness, and an emphasis on accountability and empowerment, is recommended in the workplace environment as “structural differentiation controls sexually harassing behaviours [but] … decentralisation and formalisation reduce sexual harassment” (Mueller, et al., 2001, p. 436). The notion of collective justice within organisations can facilitate the development of
shared patterns, cognitive perceptions and commitments to moral values and prescribe certain behaviours while discouraging inappropriateness (Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Ott & Dicke, 2001; Siehl & Martin, 1984). However, as organisational polices on misconduct prevention tend to lack enforcement (Bruce & Nowlin, 2011; Greve, et al., 2010; Mueller, et al., 2001), the external emphasis on continuous public scrutiny and an accountability gaze imposed by organisational stakeholders or ‘the Collective Us’ has the potential to persuade organisations to transform themselves and exercise accountability.

2.3. Organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work as a boundary concept

As the #MeToo movement stimulated new social discourses on the topics of accountability for workplace misconduct (Jain & Lee, 2020; Veissière, 2018) and physical and psychological safety at work (McBride, Mitra, Kondo, Elmi, & Kamal, 2018), survivors shared their testimonies to raise awareness of a collective issue and to take part in a “[public] dialogue about the brokenness, silence and trauma” (Clair, et al., 2019, p. 118). The complexity involved in understanding the traumatic experience of harassment poses a challenge to accountability practices. At the same time, such complexity motivates setting explicit professional, ethical and moral boundaries in the workplace (Ott & Dicke, 2001), linking them to a better execution of accountability for wrongdoings “as [when] boundary maintenance increases, so too does accounting” (Llewellyn, 1994).

The idea of holding to account sets the concept of accountability at the intersection of various disciplines revealing both its moral (intellectual) and instrumental (procedural) sides (Bovens, 2007; Mulgan, 2000, 2003; Roberts, 2009). The escalating social concern over accountability for sexual wrongdoings that expressed in the #MeToo movement, together with the aforementioned complexity associated with workplace harassment, creates the need to formulate organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work as a distinct concept. Taking into consideration the relational and context-specific characteristics of accountability practices (Cooper & Lapsley, 2019; Messner, 2009), as well as the multifacetedness of the psychological, legal, organisational and regulatory aspects of sexual harassment at work (De Coster, et al., 1999; Mueller, et al., 2001) and widely-expressed societal aspirations of accountability (Vachhani, 2020; Veissière, 2018), it is apparent that the notion of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work is of a boundary nature and thus could be considered as a boundary concept.

Boundary concepts enhance communicative value as they hold “different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough … to make them a recognisable means of translation” (Westerink, Opdam, Van Rooij, & Steingröver, 2017, p. 409). The loose and vague nature of boundary concepts is not because they are weak; on the contrary, they hold cohesive power to facilitate evolving discourses, debates and interactions (Allen, 2009; Löwy, 1992; Mollinga, 2010). By acknowledging the complexity of the phenomenon being conceptualised, a boundary concept is neither seeking precision nor forcing compromise, but instead it harnesses interdisciplinary synergies in the multiplicity of interests, solutions and alliances that it brings together (Jones, 1959; Stoof, Martens, Van Merrienboer, & Bastiaens, 2002).

For instance, when it comes to accountability for sexual misconduct at work, the psychological viewpoint emphasises the limited ability of actors to exercise (self)-accountability affected as they are by a variety of psychological factors, such as empathic biases, emotional blindness, memory limitations and internalized beliefs (Jory, et al., 1997; Locke & Edwards, 2003). Personal engagement in and management empathy towards one side
of a conflict may reduce their ability to exercise unbiased professional judgement (Banks, 2013; Blader & Rothman, 2014). In contrast, deliberate critical consciousness stimulates the execution of accountability (Hernandez, et al., 2005). The need for accountability is also of psychological importance, amplified by the trauma recovery of abuse survivors as “the victimised … may be further psychologically damaged if … the accountability of the [abuser]” has not been properly acknowledged (Jory, et al., 1997, p. 400; Passyn & Sujan, 2006).

The legal perspective, taking a broader view, understands sexual harassment not only as a criminal offence but also as an infringement of civil rights, as the experience of abuse deprives survivors of full participation in working processes (Brodsky, 2021; MacKinnon & Mitra, 2019). As a constraint on survivors’ opportunities, sexual harassment causes inequality and illegal discrimination, creating a long-lasting negative impact on their careers, education, and mental health (Franke, 1996; Glomb & Cortina, 2006). The legal view thus extends organisational responsibility beyond the visible damage of a specific incident towards greater accountability for the provision and enforcement of the fundamental human rights to physical and psychological safety in the workplace environment (Baer & Frese, 2003; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

The accounting perspective on accountability for workplace sexual misconduct manifests in its effective execution, in particular through reporting and information disclosure (Persson, et al., 1997; Sillince, 2000). As accounting practices appear in the majority of economic and socio-political interactions (Gallhofer, et al., 2011; Gray, Brennan, & Malpas, 2014), there are societal expectations of reporting technologies’ ability to simplify complexity and generate documented evidence to provide visibility and ensure accountability (Mouritsen & Kreiner, 2016; Walker, 2016). This normally allows the rationalization and governance of complex phenomena, such as crime, violence and abuse of power, and enables preventive measures to be put in place (Islam & McPhail, 2011; Lehman, Hammond, & Agyemang, 2018). However, while organisational reporting on measures of risk assessment, physical safety and injuries has been standardised (Schormair & Gerlach, 2019; Sinkovics, Hoque, & Sinkovics, 2016), psychological and sexual abuse, damage and vulnerability are yet to find their place in regular reporting practices and disclosure requirements (Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Kelley & Mullen, 2006; Tepper, 2000). Moreover, when it comes to reporting of individual incidents of sexual harassment, there are extensive social, cultural and practical barriers (Deegan & Islam, 2014; Hunt, et al., 2010) due to the associated feelings of shame and distress, uncertainty about how a complaint will be received, the power disparity between the parties involved, and the possible complicity of the employer (Crawshaw, 2009; Lopez, Hodson, & Roscigno, 2009).

The present study is set to reveal the insights from community discourses about the role of activism in shaping the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and facilitating the development of new instruments to report harassment and enforce accountability. Prior to that, the next section discusses the empirical settings and methodology.

3. Ethnographic setting, methodology and research design
To explore the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy, the author decided to design a specific ethnographic setting. Ethnography, as a research approach, recognises the value, beauty and complexity of human experiences and interactions placed in a situational context (Atkinson, 2017; Gullion, 2018). It allows the dynamic capture and analysis of societal discourses, shared practices, discussions and disputes as they develop (Juris & Khasnabish, 2014; Townsend, 2013). Ethnography enables the researcher to see the big picture as the methodology also permits the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of viewpoints and the
nuances between different perspectives expressed by opinion holders. The researcher can then
develop insightful meanings, taking into consideration the specific characteristics of an
individual or a group, the context in which they found themselves and the interpretation of
events they experienced that shaped their perspective (Atkinson, 2019; Barratt & Maddox,
2016; Brewer, 2000). Together, these affordances constituted the author’s rationale for
mobilising an ethnographic approach to her study.

More specifically, the study adopted the interventionist approach of engagement as an
ethnographic research method, exploring the issue from multiple perspectives (Cameron &
Gibson, 2020). Research engagement is defined as “a research activity that seeks to develop
comprehensive understanding” of studied phenomena (Correa & Larrinaga, 2015, p. 17). Research engagement has proved to be an effective instrument for “creating a context in which
audiences themselves” (Steinem, 2015, p. 47) cultivate ideas and co-produce knowledge to
reveal “assumptions … about the world … generated through socially shared beliefs … and
conventions” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 20; Bebbington, et al., 2007). As a method, research
engagement with wide stakeholder groups has been previously used in the fields of dialogic
social and environmental accountability (Ball, Soare, & Brewis, 2012; Correa & Larrinaga,
2015) and contributed to the conceptualisation of the institutionalisation of corporate social
responsibility discourse (Arachel, Husillos, & Spence, 2011; Clune & O’Dwyer, 2020),
stakeholder dialogue (Unerman & Bennett, 2004) and responsibility for environmental
reporting (Bouten & Hoozée, 2013; Rodrigue, Magnan, & Boulianne, 2013).

The author developed and delivered two research engagement projects focusing on
accountability for sexual misconduct at work: a research-facilitated public debate (2019) and
an impact acceleration account (2020). The first project comprised the convening of a panel of
law enforcement, psychology, technology and public policy experts, NGO activists and
campaigners for a public discussion about the challenges of addressing workplace harassment. The second (follow-up) project facilitated collaborative learning and deepened the discussions
within engagement partnerships developed in the first project, and made possible wider
dissemination of the insights obtained. Table 1 outlines the design, preparation and delivery
stages of both projects. [Table 1 near here]

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<td>Design</td>
<td>May–June 2019</td>
<td>The author designed and submitted a proposal for a public event ‘#MeToo: A journey towards a harassment-free workplace’ to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science1 (2019), aiming to organise a panel debate on how the #MeToo movement enhanced social discussion of workplace organisational</td>
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1 “The Festival of Social Science is an annual celebration of research and knowledge about humans and society. It’s an opportunity for anyone to explore topics relating to social science – from health and wellbeing to crime, equality, education and identity – through events run by researchers from UK universities”; see https://festivalofsocialscience.com/about/
practices, reporting mechanisms, disciplinary measures and refusal to tolerate abusive behaviour.

The event intended to facilitate engagement with civil society and professional communities working in the areas of advocacy, non-discrimination, harassment and violence; create an arena for a cross-sector discussion and attract panellists from NGOs, businesses, and policy actors. In line with the festival’s remit, the event was to be open to general public who would be encouraged to ask questions and share their opinions.

| Preparation | June – October 2019 | Once the debate proposal was approved by the ESRC, the author began preparation for the debate with some support from the university’s engagement team. The preparation stage was mainly focused on two activities:
- Inviting over 40 local for-profit, non-profit and public sector organisations to delegate a representative to join the panel and/or attend the debate. Businesses were encouraged to provide an employer (organisational) perspective on the topics of sexual misconduct and corresponding organisational practices. Public sector organisations were contacted as local employers or if their expertise included the regulation or enforcement of the matters under study. NGOs were contacted if their areas of activism included human rights, women’s rights, survivor support and/or related educational activities. Some invited organisations, regardless of sector, were organising their own awareness, solidarity and/or women-empowerment campaigns in the midst of the #MeToo movement and thus attracted the attention of the debate organisers.
- Disseminating information about the forthcoming event on social media (LinkedIn and Twitter) using both the author’s and the university’s accounts. Free registration was open on event and ticket management website Eventbrite. This allowed information about the event to reach additional organisations that expressed their interest to participate, such as harassment reporting technology developers.

At the end of this stage, the debate attracted 86 registered attendees with professional and managerial background and seven engagement partners, i.e. organisations willing to delegate representatives to the panel and publicise the event.

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2 See Table 2 for more information about partner organisations.
via their own professional networks. The panellists had expertise in the areas of psychology, justice and law enforcement, regulation, technology, women’s rights and campaign activism and thus offered a diversity of professional perspectives. In addition, two of them represented the largest public sector employers in the region.

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|          | The delivery stage included the preparation of a ‘best practice’ guide prior to the debate together with six contributors from partner organisations, some of whom were the panellists or their colleagues (abbreviated A/B, G, H, J, M, N – see Table 2). Each of them was encouraged to provide an individual essay-type written contribution, outlining their advice for addressing sexual misconduct in the workplace. These essays were then collated in the best practice guide booklet together with a preface written by the study’s author, and printed to disseminate among the debate attendees (‘#MeToo: A journey towards a harassment-free workplace’).

The debate took place at the local public library. To ensure the relaxed and comfortable participation of the panellists and attendees in discussion on the topic, the event itself was not recorded. However, on the day of the event, prior to the debate, individual interviews with six out of seven panellists (abbreviated A, E, H, I, J, M – see Table 2) were video-recorded ‘on stage,’ in order to capture the positions they were aiming to bring to the debate, the reasons for their participation and relevant activities undertaken by their organisations. The interviewees were also invited to share their views on the effects of the #MeToo movement on organisational practices and accountability.

The debate took place over two hours. The panellists and attendees were encouraged to express their opinions and discuss two main themes:

- How the #MeToo movement changes working practices and shifts perceptions of accountability for abuse of power in the workplace;
- How new reporting instruments, campaigns and regulation assist in creating a safe working environment.

Panellists A, J and O also delivered mini-presentations about legal justice, prosecution and organisational liability for sexual misconduct at work and technology instruments to enable reporting, analysis and prevention of misconduct.

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3 The seventh panellist was not available for an interview.
### Design

The project aimed to strengthen relationships with Project 1 collaborators and develop new connections with organisations working in the areas of harassment reporting and employee empowerment.

The proposal was developed and submitted to the ESRC for Impact Acceleration Account funding.\(^4\)

### Preparation

Once the proposal was approved, the preparation was mainly focused on the development of the projects’ webpage and the establishment of a LinkedIn community *Empowering Workplaces* to create an arena for people to share common interests, communicate experiences and relevant organisational practices, and promote transformative action in the areas of psychological and physical safety at work and harassment reporting.

### Delivery

Four engagement meetings (with H, J, K, L and P) and three follow-up interviews (with B, D and F) were conducted. All meetings/interviews were individual except one group meeting (with K and L).

The engagement meetings and follow-up interviews provided settings to facilitate open discussion with managers of partner organisations and to deepen the author’s understanding of their experiences, challenges and practices related to tackling workplace misconduct and/or delivering their services and conducting relevant activities. The participants discussed the disruptive effects of harassment on organisational effectiveness, relevant organisational challenges (including problematic power dynamics), and shifts in organisational perceptions and practices in the #MeToo era. In addition, the participants were encouraged to reflect on the steps their organisations were taking (or planning to take) to improve internal communication about cases of sexual misconduct and sustainable accountability practices. These engagement meetings were on average 1.5 hours long.

These meetings were followed by two webinars:

*Workplace culture that does not tolerate harassment* (Guest speaker – H);

*How can we bring sexual harassment policies to life within our organisation?* (Guest speaker – P).

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\(^4\) “Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) provide UK research organisations (ROs) that have a strong base of social sciences research with funding to support impact. This funding allows ROs to work with partners from all sectors to apply social sciences knowledge to challenges in society”. See: [https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/supporting-collaboration/supporting-collaboration-esrc/impact-acceleration-accounts/](https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/supporting-collaboration/supporting-collaboration-esrc/impact-acceleration-accounts/)
The webinars were attended by the LinkedIn group members: 47 professionals with an interest in organisational accountability, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and working culture, including EDI managers, HR managers, organisational leaders, misconduct reporting technology providers and users, consultants and legal advisers. The group also includes NGOs who are working towards advocacy, empowerment and safety.

The webinars gave visibility to the project and partners’ initiatives, and connected HR and EDI professionals within organisations with relevant experts and instruments.

By establishing a forum where (potential) users could meet the providers of expertise to boost organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work, Project 2 contributed to a larger societal agenda of helping to change working environments and organisational cultures.

The conducted projects 1 and 2 enabled participants to share experiences and generate new insights. The projects revealed the assemblage of opinions and enriched the research understanding of the complex phenomenon under study. As the topic of sexual harassment is sensitive and psychologically complex (Blader & Rothman, 2014; Hernandez, et al., 2005), the author acknowledged the research duty of care (Hillier, Mitchell, & Mallett, 2007; Richards & Schwartz, 2002) and deliberately chose not to encourage the discussion of anyone’s individual traumatic experiences to avoid the risk of re-traumatisation (Bimrose, 2004; Mueller, et al., 2001). Therefore, the discussions were mainly focused on the organisational aspects of accountability for sexual misconduct at work. In total, sixteen managers from ten organisations engaged in the projects as debate panellists, interviewees, and participants in engagement meetings and/or webinar speakers. As Table 2 demonstrates, the debate, written records, interviews and engagement meetings were the key sources of empirical data for this study.

Table 2 – Research engagement partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Position of the interviewee</th>
<th>Type of engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Technology company developing digital tools for harassment reporting</td>
<td>CEO, co-founder</td>
<td>Debate panellist; Interview; written record (collated in best practice guide’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior executive</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td>Global marketing lead</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td>Head of partnerships</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Regional police force</td>
<td>Chief constable</td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chief inspector</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Programme manager</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>An NGO specialising in workplace abuse training and psychological support for abuse survivors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communications, engagement and fundraising officer</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview; engagement meeting; written record (collated in best practice guide); knowledge-exchange webinar speaker</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>A regulator and a large public sector employer</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Executive director strategy &amp; risk</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debate panellist; Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>A legal firm specialising in cases of discrimination and sexual harassment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Director, Head of employment law</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debate panellist; engagement meeting; interview; written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>City council, the largest public sector employer in the region</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Equality, diversity and inclusion manager</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group engagement meeting</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>A digital innovation consultancy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Founder</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview; written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A women’s rights NGO</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior policy and research officer</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A digital misconduct reporting tool developer</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Co-founder</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debate panellist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>An NGO specialising in communication about sexual harassment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge-exchange webinar speaker</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
All data collected by the author in these projects was then publicly shared as part of an engagement and knowledge exchange. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, it is treated as publicly available secondary data.

All interviews and engagement meetings were conducted in English, digitally recorded and transcribed. The data transcripts and notes from interviews and engagement meetings cover 120 pages. The documentary analysis of supporting data (such as media coverage related to the activities of engaged organisations and coverage of harassment reporting regulation and regulatory initiatives) consists of approximately 150 pages. The data analysis contained three stages of data reduction, display and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The empirical findings were interpreted through the identification of patterns and the attribution of distinct meanings and outcomes to these patterns (Creswell, 2013; Lukka & Modell, 2010), assuring the plausibility of interpretations by revealing multiple and contrasting explanations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The analysis enabled the study to obtain empirical insights into the multidimensional complexity of the phenomena under study and the plethora of expert and activist opinions on organisational accountability for the workplace misconduct and proposed accountability instruments.

4. Collective insights

This section presents empirical insights from collective reflections on the outcomes of the #MeToo movement and how the multiple perceptions revealed shape the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and the development of new accountability instruments. The insights emerged from an analysis of the perspectives vocalised by experts and community activists in the projects outlined above, coalescing around the following interrelated themes: the new societal understanding of accountability for workplace misconduct in the #MeToo era, the escalated demands for organisational accountability and the activists’ vision of how to address the accountability crisis by proposing the pathways which synergise harassment reporting technology and the cultivation of self-accountability and self-assessment in the workplace.

4.1. Debating organisational accountability for sexual misconduct in the midst of a new societal understanding

The breadth and intensity of citizen involvement in the #MeToo movement has revealed the extensive societal demands to re-think and re-process the perceptions of individual and organisational accountability for sexual misconduct in occupational settings. One debate panellist encouraged participants to reflect on the significance of the movement for revealing and recording accounts of abuse and facilitating structural change:

Imagine if the Weinstein scandal never blew up in 2017, imagine if MeToo did not become a global movement. Imagine how much more harassment there would still be going on behind the scenes. Imagine if those 400-plus executives were not being held accountable and people weren’t taking notice. (A)

The organically developed composition of the event’s audience (both with respect to the panellists and attendees) revealed ‘the Collective Us’ as a community of activists and organisational stakeholders committed to persuade organisations both to listen to the advice they (‘the Collective Us’) are willing to provide and to undertake a thoughtful thorough examination of workplace environment to execute accountability for occupational wrongdoings. The spectrum of accumulated expertise within the audience included legal
advisers, psychologists, members of staff of survivors’ and advocacy NGOs, human resources and workplace training consultants, regulators and technology developers. Their wide range of knowledge and skills highlights the complexity inherent in issues of sexual harassment, and underlines the need for multiple perspectives to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work. The legal adviser asserted:

The thing is, with sexual harassment, it comes in many forms. It can be quite subtle. It can be a low level, but it … could be anything from sexual assault to rape. So … [legal advisers] act for anyone involved in that in the workplace. (J)

The debate (Project 1) and the subsequent engagement discussions (Project 2) identified common measures that organisations tend to undertake in response to increased calls for accountability, including the recognition of inappropriate behaviour, the declaration of zero-tolerance of abuse of power, and, frequently, (public) acknowledgement that male domination and/or a lack of workforce diversity may create conditions conducive to a predatory culture. In addition, organisations tend to utilise social and legacy media to communicate their values through hashtag campaigns. Several panellists represented organisations that have either publicly joined the established campaigns or developed and promoted their own. Such campaigns include the UN #HeForShe solidarity movement for gender equality, the #OverToYou kitemark for organisational response to workplace sexual misconduct, Time’s Up fundraising for survivors’ legal counsel, and the #BelieveWomen which highlights the importance of each story of abuse being heard. Presenting the rationale behind their organisation’s own campaign, one NGO officer explained:

We created … training … [outlining] a variety of promises that businesses and organisations make … We are saying survivors have said: ‘me too’. And now it is over to you, to businesses [and] to business owners to change that culture. (H)

The number of approaches outlined above signals the broad variety of possible pathways to address the accountability challenges posed by the #MeToo movement. Reflecting on this plurality of responses, the founder of the technological start-up characterised the organisations that use the #MeToo impetus to drive organisational changes as follows:

It is really those visionaries … that want to be on the right side of the revolution. Those employers who … send a … progressive message to their workforce … that they can always speak up and there will always be someone who will listen. (A)

The ethnographic observations made during the debate and engagement meetings show that the community of experts and activists felt empowered by the momentum to persuade organisations to acknowledge their responsibility for misconduct taking place in occupational settings, the obligation to establish workplace norms and to draw the line of normality in workplace behavioural patterns. The broad assembly of ‘the Collective Us’ with their legal, psychological, technological, educational and regulatory expertise offers a variety of perceptions of organisational accountability for harassment, offensiveness and abuse of power. The analysed discourses demonstrate that while no one perspective was dominant, equally the various approaches suggested were not in competition. On the contrary, in the face of the complex nature of the problem they were addressing, the experts expressed unity, and an enthusiasm to synergise their various perspectives in order to achieve greater organisational accountability for sexual misconduct.
4.2. The new instruments of accountability and harassment reporting

The debate revealed that, in addition to publicly vocalised commitments to accountability, it is even more important for organisations to undertake the actions required to deal with actual cases of misconduct. The legal adviser emphasised the importance of taking immediate action on receiving an allegation of abuse:

- Initiate an immediate investigation … suspend the alleged perpetrator on full pay in order to ensure the investigation is thorough. Take a full account from the complainant and make sure that all specific details such as dates and the detail of what happened are recorded. (J)

However, the #MeToo movement has highlighted the scarcity of instruments for survivors to report inappropriate behaviour at work and for organisations to collect evidence and investigate misconduct. One of the Project 1 panellists pointed out that the inadequacy of current methods of reporting abuse result is most misconduct going unreported:

- When you think about those anonymous reporting hotlines or … web forums, we know that … 75 per cent of all misconduct … is not reported … The old solutions, protocols, [and] policies are not appropriate and not adequate for our day and age … Companies should be opening up to innovation in this space. (A)

Recognising the demands for new instruments in the midst of a crisis of accountability, markets have responded by offering new technological solutions to make the complaint-raising process both easy and robust and to empower the vulnerable to speak up when they encounter misconduct (Elsesser, 2020). Such technologies attempt to link psychological and behavioural research and technological expertise. As an outcome they supply instruments to record the incidents of misconduct and accumulate corresponding evidence and analytics:

- There is a problem that people … do not trust their workplace to … report harassment internally … [This] deficit of trust … inspired … thinking [about] how technologies can bring … trust and empower humans. (A)

- There … [are] some really exciting tools that we can use to start … helping people create a more psychologically safe … environment. (M)

The role of emerging technological solutions to tackle sexual harassment at work became apparent during the process of organising the Project 1 debate (see Table 1 stages ‘preparation’ and ‘delivery’). The follow-up discussions with the representatives of a technological start-up (Table 2, B and D) then enabled a deeper understanding of these new reporting tools: a platform containing ‘an employee-facing app and a resolution hub for the enterprises where people can create safe digital records [in the form of] time-stamped wrap codes of events that happened to them, and disclose them at a time [when] they feel comfortable’ (A).

- The representatives provided an in-depth explanation of how the software is introduced into an organisation and synergised with their other strategies to tackle misconduct, how the employee uses the app to record their account of abuse and submit a claim, and how the organisation can then assess the evidence documented, undertake, and base subsequent strategic decisions on an analysis of the data accumulated. Based on psychological and behavioural research insights, the app is designed to gather detailed evidence of the account of abuse while supporting an emotionally vulnerable survivor or witness by generating nuanced follow-up questions within each report and opening a line of communication:

  [The platform] … prompts you through many questions and … vividly describes the experience: Where were you? When did it happen? How did it make you feel? More … quality evidence is actually shown here … [and] it puts more
accountability on both parties … The employer is fully empowered to decide the course of action … Those who are not … comfortable signing their name to their report … can go anonymous but … it [still] opens up a chat feature so that employers … can continue to speak with you even though they do not know your name … Whereas [with] typical legacy solutions … there is no way to … reach out to the [anonymous] person. (D)

The use of harassment reporting technology thus enables employees to raise their concerns about inappropriate behaviour and misconduct and to prompt the organisation’s management to investigate them and apply disciplinary measures. Each reported event of harassment results in a new accounting record and the platform thus allows all accounts of abuse to be documented, described, analysed and classified. Upon receiving a record of abuse, the assigned case workers and management are able to access information and examine the matter based on the evidence submitted. Held within the organisation, an overall digital register accumulates an extensive and continuous record of any accounts of abuse, including detailed evidence of the reported events.

Technological solutions to harassment reporting allow an organisation to acquire time-stamped evidence of the records of abuse and misconduct, to analyse relevant trends in their organisational practices and to identify their most vulnerable areas and divisions polluted by the patterns of domination and victimisation. This aims to demystify reports of abuse, to make patterns of abuse and unhealthy power dynamics visible and to facilitate mechanisms to hold to account:

> Our clients … should be measuring success as a benchmark against what … [their] current situation is. … Often it is not just [the] platform, but also … [their] policies in place … We provide a dashboard of data insights … to support the organisational response … [by the] information in the various categories … [to] see the trends in the organisation … which … [they] would then be able to map against something that might have taken place [in the organisation]. (D)

While the reporting of sexual harassment is the main focus of such digital platforms, they can also assist in tackling relevant non-sexual abuses of power adapting to larger sectoral and socio-economic challenges. This comprises fraud, corruption, discrimination, rights violation and abuse (including those taking place in organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic and other extraordinary circumstances). This adaptability resonates with the idea that a ‘situated individual’ may face various interrelated issues in the workplace. Therefore, a holistic ‘loose’ approach to recording and reporting abuse and actions undertaken is available to organisations in order to establish workplace boundaries and institutionalise the broadly understood notion of organisational accountability.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that as emerged from the interviews, even the providers of these technological products have not demonstrated an intention to oversimplify the matter of sexual misconduct at work despite the contemporary trends of digital modernity. They have explicitly highlighted that technological instruments would only allow improvements in tackling harassment when synergised with organisations’ other strategies to change workplace environments, such as behavioural consciousness and the self-accountability of individuals as discussed in the next sub-section.

4.3. The discourse on self-accountability and behavioural consciousness in the workplace

Enthusiastic about the innovative instruments of organisational accountability, the debate panellists nevertheless expressed concerns that new technological solutions can only go as far
as the human consciousness of the individuals allows. Employees might not always be able to recognize the roles they play in situations of workplace conflict and tension. Therefore, they stressed that for attempts to tackle workplace harassment to be effective, organisational accountability needs to be supported by the continuous enhancement of the self-assessment and self-accountability of individual members of staff. While the instruments of reporting need to be available and accessible, they are more effective when complemented by action to improve tacit organisational culture and the workplace environment. The panellists discussed the need for organisations to recognise the connections between the way a ‘situated individual’ feels at work and their productivity and attitude towards the organisation and colleagues, and to what extent organisations are accountable for the intangible conditions of the workplace environment:

Psychological safety … binds you to a group of people … The team is the only valid construct … that we … relate to on an emotional level … We have an intuitive sense of our team … If we do not feel safe … we are always going to be defensive … looking to minimise risk rather than to maximise return. (M)

It is important … to offer the best possible surroundings for people to thrive in that work … It … matters … because it is about people feeling comfortable to bring the whole of themselves to work. (I)

The providers of harassment reporting technology emphasised the relationship between cultural preconditions, the self-awareness of employees and the implementation of harassment reporting technology:

[The] … communication strategy … depend[s] on the current culture. … Are they trying [to] fix a broken culture [or] preserve a positive culture? … [The] best-case scenario is … [to] have a positive culture and … a tendency [of] demonstrable commitment to … inclusion in the workplace. Many employees [would show] … less resistance and … scepticism, because they believe that this is another … signal of commitment from their employer. (D)

[In contrast], if employers will not create an [internal] speaking … [channel], the employees will find a platform outside to raise accountability concerns. (A)

Most importantly, long-lasting sustainable shifts in an organisation’s environment around conscious non-tolerance of sexual misconduct, supported by accessible, standardised reporting, can empower those who experience harassment:

It is a quite radical approach to eliminating the stigma around reporting misconduct at work. … Signing your name to a claim or to something that you witness … can be empowering … [and] contagious. (D)

Such empowerment is rooted in employees’ confidence that their employer is committed to protecting employees’ right to feel safe at work, and to setting up the adequate accountability instruments to report misconduct, thus guaranteeing that previously silenced voices will be heard. At the structural level, the synergy of technological innovations and new behavioural expectations contributes to harmonising an organisation’s approach to accountability, not only for the physical safety of their employees while at work, but also for their psychological safety and wellbeing.

Some panellists were willing to support such claims by sharing specific examples of how they attempted to mobilise the positive leadership of individuals in power to enhance accountability in their organisations. For instance, the police force representative narrated how
the organisation sought to address negative power dynamics and gender imbalances at senior leadership level by simultaneously joining the UN #HeForShe public campaign, organising an internal anti-harassment campaign called ‘Knowing the Line,’ and the development of a digital reporting tool, Break the Silence:

We have been … getting every most senior man in every force across the country to sign up to two main commitments. The first … is about getting parity in the senior ranks across policing for gender. And the second … is about tackling gender-based crime … [It] is not a comfortable process. It is about having uncomfortable conversations. It is about challenging prejudices … We will only really be able to get to grips with this if we can truly understand the prejudices that exist and how gender inequality impacts on … gender-based violence. (E)

This organisational attempt reveals how a publicly expressed commitment to a relevant worldwide campaign supported by an actively executed internal anti-harassment campaign together with an appropriate technological tool for reporting could be used to cultivate the presence of ‘the Other’ to persuade individuals towards greater self-assessment. A demonstrable accountability in action has the potential to encourage tracing (potential) toxicity and offensiveness in once own behaviours surrounded by accountability gaze and public scrutiny. This could also have an impact on bystanders or witnesses of sexual misconduct to reflect on the negative outcomes of possible silencing and complicity in workplace environments.

Concluding this section: the empirical insights revealed in the two engagement projects allowed the identification and analysis of four sequential directions in which the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy and targeted community activism have constructed and advanced the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work. These directions began with the development of a new notion of accountability for sexual wrongdoings in society, which escalated demands for organisational accountability in cases of workplace misconduct. However, organisational hesitancy in addressing the matter and the lack of adequate instruments to report sexual misconduct, accumulate documented evidence and undertake disciplinary measures, created the momentum for experts and activists to advise new accountability pathways and, thus, shape the conceptualisation of organisational accountability in line with social aspirations. Consequently, a new market of digital innovations has emerged to demonstrate how the collaboration of psychological and technological expertise can provide new instruments of accountability. Finally, the findings revealed an emphasis by both (potential) users and providers of such instruments on the need to synergise the technological and behavioural aspects of accountability, i.e. to support technological innovations with continuous, deliberate self-assessment and self-accountability on the part of individuals at work, to encourage employees to recognise, report and thus eradicate toxic behavioural incidents and patterns.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Social movements make significant impacts on the societal perceptions of reality, determining the need to re-conceptualise particular phenomena and re-assess the metrics of execution (Catchpowle & Smyth, 2016; Martinez & Cooper, 2017; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). The #MeToo movement focused social attention on the chronic and complex issue of sexual misconduct in the workplace and enhanced collective reflection on the relationship between the abuse of power and accountability and the corresponding challenges embedded in organisations and workplace environments. The movement took place in a wider social context
in which the mobilisation of traditional media together with social media and technology platforms facilitated discussion and empowered the collective voices demanding accountability (Kantor & Twohey, 2019; Regulska, 2018; Xiong, et al., 2019).

This study contributes to research on the intellectual, social and dialogic problematics of accountability (Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009) by exploring how ‘the Other’/ ‘the Collective Us’ perceive the creation and communication of accounts of sexual misconduct, and persuade organisations to enhance accountability. In particular, the study has demonstrated how the activists who tackled the issue from multiple, boundary-crossing perspectives gained momentum to propose and promote socially desirable pathways towards accountability and thus to shape and advance the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work. The study has thus linked the theoretical understanding of sexual misconduct through situations and contexts that individuals find themselves within (Garcia, 2021; Kelley & Mullen, 2006; Pilch & Turska, 2015) to interactions between accountable actors and ‘the Other’ (Butler, 2005; Goncharenko, 2021; Jory, et al., 1997; Yates, et al., 2020).

This study has provided multiple insights gleaned from ethnographic engagements with ‘the Collective Us’, including managers, civil servants, NGO activists, psychologists, legal advisers and providers of harassment reporting technology. Designed to reach out to relevant community experts as well as the general public and encourage them to gather in a public arena to discuss and debate matters of sexual misconduct at work, this purposefully constructed ethnographic setting revealed the multifacetedness of the collective understanding of how to tackle the occupational wrongdoings of a sexual nature together with their preconditions and consequences. Building its analysis on the ethnographic observations from the carefully facilitated dialogues, the study was able to identify several interrelated directions in which the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work has been shaped in the #MeToo era.

The study showed how this conceptualisation emerged from a new societal sense of accountability, concomitant with increased public demands for organisations to acknowledge and discharge their responsibility for the matters taking place in their occupational settings and beyond involving their employees. In this rapidly escalating crisis of accountability, as organisations were hesitating to come up with an appropriate response, community activists stepped in with their proposal for accountability pathways. This comprised a synergy of digital innovations in harassment reporting and the cultivation of behavioural consciousness, self-assessment and self-accountability on the part of individuals in the workplace.

The conceptual complexity of sexual misconduct (Bruce & Nowlin, 2011; Mueller, et al., 2001) to a large extent resulted in it being left up to organisations to define workplace norms and appropriate behavioural patterns. The study has demonstrated how the #MeToo movement has mobilised and routinised the continuous virtual and physical presence of ‘the Other’ in the lives of organisational and individual actors (Butler, 2005; Dellaportas, 2019; Roberts, 2009). The intensity of citizens’ demands for accountability highlighted the unhealthy behavioural patterns and imbalances for which organisations and individuals in power required to be called to account. Followed by wider socio-political discussion in many national and international settings, the #MeToo movement shaped an understanding that those demands for accountability must be formally recognised and addressed. Once society acknowledged the new calls for accountability, ‘the Collective Us’ placed increasing pressure on organisations to respond and proposed the actions to undertake.

The demands for sustainable change in the workplace environment stimulated, in particular, innovations in harassment reporting to enable and encourage employees to report and share accounts of abuse. A new market niche has emerged as the high-tech industry has
developed new digital solutions by linking psychological and behavioural research to technological expertise. The new instruments aim to help organisations to accumulate evidence about abuse in their workplace, thus highlighting the areas where employees might be exposed to harassment. Putting such technologies in place also allows organisations to signal that policies and declarations of principle are supported by practical actions and investments to facilitate reporting and intra-organisational communication, and so build accountability channels in the workplace. The findings of the study extend the knowledge of digital mechanisms of accountability (Cooper, Coulson, & Taylor, 2011; Ilgit & Prakash, 2019; Islam, Deegan, & Haque, 2020; McPhail, Ferguson, & Macdonald, 2016) by showing how accountability for the right to psychological safety in the workplace could be exercised by recording and accumulating accounts of abuse and how the analytical insights of (internal) reporting could underpin organisational decisions regarding the workplace environment and norms.

The study stresses the collective consensus that technical innovations alone will not eradicate sexual misconduct from workplaces. Community activists urge organisations to synergise technological innovations with conscious improvements within workplace environment and culture, and emphasise the commitment of individuals to put humanity and psychological safety at the centre of organisational accountability. The study also articulates the possibility of addressing the loss of trust and legitimacy faced at sectoral and organisational levels by seeking solutions also on an individual level in the form of self-reflection on the accountability and responsibility of individuals within an organisation. The study thus contributes to better understanding of the importance of interconnectedness between the instrumental and procedural aspects of accountability and its moral (ethical) core (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009) towards more holistic approach to accountability (Ebrahim, 2003; Mulgan, 2000; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2007; O’Leary, 2017).

Any challenge to be resolved first needs to be acknowledged, identified and named. In 2017, the societal response to the #MeToo movement spotlighted the widespread issue of sexual harassment, violence and misconduct at work and made strong and persistent demands that the offending individuals be held to account and also the organisations for which they worked, rendered complicit by their passivity. That response determined the objective of this study, to reflect upon how the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy made possible by community activists has impacted the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work.

The boundary concept of organisational accountability in this context can then be understood as a constructed social setting in which actors are aware of the need to use accumulated workplace power responsibly, of the consequences of power misuse and of the continuous societal gaze on their actions. Such conceptualisation is important for multiple reasons. First, it provides survivors with closure and the ability to heal. Secondly, by demanding accountability through the power of ‘the Collective Us’, societies signal that sexually offensive behaviour is no longer tolerated. Finally, the notion of accountability equips organisations with an essential perspective on and understanding of their role in eradicating sexual misconduct from the workplace.

The theoretical and empirical insights accumulated in this study provide a rich background and aim to facilitate in-depth case studies on organisational and managerial accountability for sexual misconduct at work and the use of harassment reporting technology in synergy with the deliberate work of organisations on workplace environment and culture. For further research, the author also suggests exploring the diversity of organisational responses to the calls for accountability, looking in particular at how various organisational
characteristics and the combination of instruments adopted might determine different outcomes impacting workplace environment and organisational performance. Finally, the long-lasting effects and implications of the #MeToo movement on and for organisational accountability and shifts in culture will also need to be thoughtfully observed and analysed in due course, based on the longitudinal data that time will provide.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the year 2022, I would like to dedicate this paper to my parents, Alexander and Galina, who have showed that civic activism often requires bravery and courage.

This study would not have been possible without the employees of ten UK-based organisations willing to collaborate and share their expertise in the areas of psychology, law enforcement, counselling, and IT. These passionate enthusiasts are committed to assist in unpacking the complex nature of workplace misconduct by suggesting ways to approach organisational accountability and enhance the development of respectful and safe workplaces. The author thanks the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for funding the Festival of Social Science event “#MeToo: A journey towards a harassment-free workplace” in 2019 and the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account project in 2020 at the University of Sussex.

A special thanks to the participants of the Alternative Accounts Europe Conference 2021, an online paper development workshop organised by Jeremy Morales and Rebecca Warren in February 2021, the 16th Organisation Studies Workshop 2022, the Alternative Accounts Conference 2022, and a research seminar at the University of Stirling in March 2022 for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper. The author is also very grateful to the special issue editors Carolyn Cordery, Ivo De Loo and Hugo Letiche and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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Table 1 - Stages and outcomes of the projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Month/Year</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>May–June 2019</td>
<td>The author designed and submitted a proposal for a public event ‘#MeToo: A journey towards a harassment-free workplace’ to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science(^1) (2019), aiming to organise a panel debate on how the #MeToo movement enhanced social discussion of workplace organisational practices, reporting mechanisms, disciplinary measures and refusal to tolerate abusive behaviour. The event intended to facilitate engagement with civil society and professional communities working in the areas of advocacy, non-discrimination, harassment and violence; create an arena for a cross-sector discussion and attract panellists from NGOs, businesses, and policy actors. In line with the festival’s remit, the event was to be open to general public who would be encouraged to ask questions and share their opinions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Preparation   | June – October 2019 | Once the debate proposal was approved by the ESRC, the author began preparation for the debate with some support from the university’s engagement team. The preparation stage was mainly focused on two activities:  
  - Inviting over 40 local for-profit, non-profit and public sector organisations to delegate a representative to join the panel and/or attend the debate. Businesses were encouraged to provide an employer (organisational) perspective on the topics of sexual misconduct and corresponding organisational practices. Public sector organisations were contacted as local employers or if their expertise included the regulation or enforcement of the matters under study. NGOs were contacted if their areas of activism included human rights, women’s rights, survivor support and/or related educational activities. Some invited organisations, regardless of sector, were organising their own awareness, solidarity and/or women-empowerment campaigns in the midst of the #MeToo movement and thus attracted the attention of the debate organisers. |

\(^1\) “The Festival of Social Science is an annual celebration of research and knowledge about humans and society. It’s an opportunity for anyone to explore topics relating to social science – from health and wellbeing to crime, equality, education and identity – through events run by researchers from UK universities” ; see https://festivalofsocialscience.com/about/
Disseminating information about the forthcoming event on social media (LinkedIn and Twitter) using both the author’s and the university’s accounts. Free registration was open on event and ticket management website Eventbrite. This allowed information about the event to reach additional organisations that expressed their interest to participate, such as harassment reporting technology developers.

At the end of this stage, the debate attracted 86 registered attendees with professional and managerial background and seven engagement partners, i.e. organisations willing to delegate representatives to the panel and publicise the event via their own professional networks. The panellists had expertise in the areas of psychology, justice and law enforcement, regulation, women’s rights and campaign activism and thus offered a diversity of professional perspectives. In addition, two of them represented the largest public sector employers in the region.

**Delivery**

November 2019

The delivery stage included the preparation of a ‘best practice’ guide together with contributors from partner organisations, as well as participants in the public debate.

Prior to the debate, the representatives of six partner organisations (abbreviated A/B, G, H, J, M, N) were encouraged to provide an individual essay-type written contribution, outlining their advice for addressing sexual misconduct in the workplace. These essays were then collated in the best practice guide booklet together with a preface written by the study’s author, and printed to disseminate among the debate attendees (‘#MeToo: A journey towards a harassment-free workplace’).

The debate took place at the local public library. To ensure the relaxed and comfortable participation of the panellists and attendees in discussion on the topic, the event itself was not recorded. However, on the day of the event, prior to the debate, individual interviews with six out of seven panellists (abbreviated A, E, H, I, J, M – see Table 2) were video-recorded ‘on stage,’ in order to capture the positions they were aiming to bring to the debate, the reasons for their participation and relevant activities undertaken by their organisations. The interviewees were also invited to share their views on the effects of the #MeToo movement on organisational practices and accountability.

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2 See Table 2 for more information about partner organisations.

3 The seventh panellist was not available for an interview.
The debate took place over two hours. The panellists and attendees were encouraged to express their opinions and discuss two main themes:

- *How the #MeToo movement changes working practices and shifts perceptions of accountability for abuse of power in the workplace;*
- *How new reporting instruments, campaigns and regulation assist in creating a safe working environment.*

Panellists A, J and O also delivered mini-presentations about legal justice, prosecution and organisational liability for sexual misconduct at work and technology instruments to enable reporting, analysis and prevention of misconduct.

**Project 2: Impact acceleration account**

**Design**

The project aimed to strengthen relationships with Project 1 collaborators and develop new connections with organisations working in the areas of harassment reporting and employee empowerment.

The proposal was developed and submitted to the ESRC for Impact Acceleration Account funding.¹

**Preparation**

Once the proposal was approved, the preparation was mainly focused on the development of the projects’ webpage and the establishment of a LinkedIn community Empowering Workplaces to create an arena for people to share common interests, communicate experiences and relevant organisational practices, and promote transformative action in the areas of psychological and physical safety at work and harassment reporting.

**Delivery**

Four engagement meetings (with H, J, K, L and P) and three follow-up interviews (with B, D and F) were conducted. All meetings/interviews were individual except one group meeting (with K and L).

The engagement meetings and follow-up interviews provided settings to facilitate open discussion between and with managers of partner organisations and to deepen the author’s understanding of their experiences, challenges and practices related to tackling workplace misconduct and/or delivering their services and conducting relevant activities. The participants discussed the disruptive effects of harassment on organisational effectiveness, relevant

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¹ “Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) provide UK research organisations (ROs) that have a strong base of social sciences research with funding to support impact. This funding allows ROs to work with partners from all sectors to apply social sciences knowledge to challenges in society”. See: https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/supporting-collaboration/supporting-collaboration-esrc/impact-acceleration-accounts/
organisational challenges (including problematic power dynamics), and shifts in organisational perceptions and practices in the #MeToo era. In addition, the participants were encouraged to reflect on the steps their organisations were taking (or planning to take) to improve internal communication about cases of sexual misconduct and sustainable accountability practices. These engagement meetings were on average 1.5 hours long.

These meetings were followed by two webinars:

- *Workplace culture that does not tolerate harassment* (Guest speaker – H);
- *How can we bring sexual harassment policies to life within our organisation?* (Guest speaker – P).

The webinars were attended the LinkedIn group members: 47 professionals with an interest in organisational accountability, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and working culture, including EDI managers, HR managers, organisational leaders, misconduct reporting technology providers and users, consultants and legal advisers. The group also includes NGOs who are working towards advocacy, empowerment and safety.

The webinars gave visibility to the project and partners’ initiatives, and connected HR and EDI professionals within organisations with relevant experts and instruments.

By establishing a forum where (potential) users could meet the providers of expertise to boost organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work, Project 2 contributed to a larger societal agenda of helping to change working environments and organisational cultures. The project also successfully disseminated relevant research and practice insights, accumulated, in particular, in the best practice guide.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Position of the interviewee</th>
<th>Type of engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Technology company developing digital tools for harassment reporting</td>
<td>CEO, co-founder</td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview; written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Senior executive</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Global marketing lead</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Head of partnerships</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Regional police force</td>
<td>Chief constable</td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chief inspector</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Programme manager</td>
<td>Written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>An NGO specialising in workplace abuse training and psychological support for abuse survivors</td>
<td>Communications, engagement and fundraising officer</td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview; engagement meeting; written record (collated in best practice guide); knowledge-exchange webinar speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>A regulator and a large public sector employer</td>
<td>Executive director strategy &amp; risk</td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>A legal firm specialising in cases of discrimination and sexual harassment</td>
<td>Director, Head of employment law</td>
<td>Debate panellist; engagement meeting; interview; written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>City council, the largest public sector employer in the region</td>
<td>Equality, diversity and inclusion manager</td>
<td>Group engagement meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Research engagement partners
<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A digital innovation consultancy</td>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>Debate panellist; interview; written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A women’s rights NGO</td>
<td>Senior policy and research officer</td>
<td>Written record (collated in best practice guide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>A digital misconduct reporting tool developer</td>
<td>Co-founder</td>
<td>Debate panellist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>An NGO specialising in communication about sexual harassment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge-exchange webinar speaker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>