



**+1 Podcast**  
*Season 1: Episode 5*  
*Victor Sojo*

Medo Pournader:

Hello and welcome to the +1 Podcast where we discuss diversity and inclusion in our workplaces at the University of Melbourne. I'm your host, Medo Pournader, Senior Lecturer in Management and Marketing at the Faculty of Business of Economics, University of Melbourne. In this episode we host Victor Sojo, Senior Lecturer in Leadership in the Department of Management and Marketing, the Faculty of Business of Economics. I talk to Victor about workplace abuse, the different forms that it takes, the affected communities by abuse and how to intervene to mitigate abuse at workplace.

This episode was recorded on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Medo Pournader:

Hello, Victor. How are you?

Victor Sojo:

Good, how are you, Medo?

Medo Pournader:

I'm a bit cold actually. On my way to the studio, I was like, "This is so cold for a sunny day in Melbourne."

Victor Sojo:

I think it's colder when it's sunny, right? I've heard that. Apparently, the clouds keep the warmth.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, it's so opposite to Europe.

Victor Sojo:

Yeah, very much so.

Medo Pournader:

You mentioned they had a heat wave there.

Victor Sojo:

Yeah. So, I think it's pretty bad right now. I was there a couple of weeks ago and it was still very hot, 35 degrees in Spain, which is a bit brutal with the humidity too, but right now, it's like 40.

Medo Pournader:

Oh my God.

Victor Sojo:

Not great.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. So, did you enjoy your travel to Europe?

Victor Sojo:

I did. I did. It's interesting because I did have a great time in Ireland. The best part of the trip was a walking tour that we did of Dublin with a guy who had done history and theatre at Trinity College. He really took us in three hours on this tour, explained the city, the history. He was very passionate about it. So, you really feel it when people are that passionate about the things they do. So, that was the highlight.

Medo Pournader:

When you say Trinity College, is Trinity College here?

Victor Sojo:

Trinity College Dublin.

Medo Pournader:

Dublin.

Victor Sojo:

Yes, exactly. So, that's probably the most prestigious university in Ireland I would say. I think so.

Medo Pournader:

Oh, great.

Victor Sojo:

That's where they had the conference. The European Academy of Management Conference was there. It was quite pretty too.

Medo Pournader:

Did you enjoy the conference?

Victor Sojo:

It was good. I mean, there is a lot of variance in what you get from conferences, right? So some of them were pretty solid, very interesting. It's also good to meet the people who are doing the same stuff as you are somewhere else and see how they look at the world in a different way, even though they're very much interested in what you do.

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely.

Victor Sojo:

So that was pretty awesome.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, various perspectives to a topic, which is how science works, right? So different people add different perspectives to a topic and it grows over time. Speaking of which, can you tell me a bit more about what your area of research and engagement is and how relevant it is to diversity and inclusion so that we take the talk from there?

Victor Sojo:

Awesome. Sure. I would say around half of my research is about workplace abuse and about how organisational factors makes it more common for abuse to happen at work. I'm also interested in how abuse happens in sport context. So, those are the two areas where I'm doing work. So, looking at social and structural dimensions of organisations and how they incentivize certain behaviours among people. So, that will be roughly half of my research at the moment. Then most of the other research is about policy interventions around social equity at work and whether they are effective or not.

Victor Sojo:

So, I'm trying to figure out the conditions under which certain interventions actually achieve their objectives, what could make them more effective, what hinders the implementation, and then also doing some level of critical analysis of the logic behind some of these interventions, which might have some explicit motive or logic. But then when you dig a little bit deeper, you realise that there is some weird, counterproductive, sometimes even unethical logics underneath them. So, not only evaluating whether they're effective or not, but whether the reasons behind them are actually good for humanity or the people who are the recipients of the interventions. So, I'm very interested in that. What else do I do?

Victor Sojo:

Well, I mean I was just then at King's College London working with one of my teams, and they were also replicating a study that we're doing in Australia looking at how different dimensions of gender inequality at the population level have an impact on the wellbeing of men, women and their children. So, yeah, you could call that public health, if you like, sociological approaches to gender inequality, figuring out how that gets under the skin, literally how that end up impacting your health. So, lots of measurement, connecting population level data with individual level indicators to figure all of that out.

Medo Pournader:

Oh, that's fascinating what you're doing. I remember I was sitting at your presentation at the Women in Leadership event, if I recall the name correctly, which was primarily aimed at our alumni at the faculty. You were talking about the gender inequality studies that you have been doing, and it was fascinating. I remember everyone at our table, specifically our alumni from industry, they were really keen to hear more about that because it applied to women and as you mentioned, to men and the broader society.

Victor Sojo:

That's right.

Medo Pournader:

But let's go step by step. So, abuse at workplace, you mentioned, if I got it correctly, that there are some factors that actually might contribute to abuse at work, specifically for minority groups, which is basically the topic of this podcast. Can you please elaborate on that? What are those factors and how do they contribute to abuse at work?

Victor Sojo:

Yeah, thanks for that. I mean, it is interesting because I would say power imbalances within organisations is one of the key drivers of workplace abuse and they manifest in different ways. If you look at it from a social dimensions point of view, we'd see how there are different social groups in the world and they are afforded different status or appreciation or value in society. So, if you're a member of a minority group, if you are a migrant person, or if you're a member of the LGBTQI+ community, if you're a refugee or asylum seeker, all of those social categories, whether we like it or not, they are often afforded less status and less human value in society.

Victor Sojo:

The implication of that is that when you go into a workplace, that means that the value replicates inside organisations. Sometimes it could manifest either directly because I just literally treat you like you're less deserving of opportunities, resources, or my respect, or it could manifest as a form of backlash. So, basically, when you try to speak up or when you try to progress in your career and then people use abuse as a way to put your back into the box where you belong. So, that's, if you like, the social aspects of it, and then it could become more structural when you look at the fact that the many of these members of these social groups, that these minority groups are also less likely to be represented in positions of power within organisations.

Victor Sojo:

So, again, that means that as member of this group, you are less likely or less able to push back when you are a target of abuse, because you literally have less structural power. So, abusers typically are looking for... They don't want people to push back. If you're going to abuse people, you want to make sure that you're going to be able to get away with it. So, you look for people who are socially or structurally more vulnerable because they have less capacity to push back.

Medo Pournader:

It's very cruel and brutal. It's just such a fascinating perspective because if you are within a minority group, already subconsciously or consciously, you're looked down upon, but also you do not have many people on the high levels of organisation that would understand your situation because as you

mentioned, they often do not suffer from being that minority group. That makes things worse. So, I have a lot of questions.

Medo Pournader:

My first question is that from an outsider perspective who might be listening to this podcast right now, from a person from our university or a person from industry, we might think that this is a topic not for Australia because Australia is really a developed economy. We have got that culture, we have got LGBTQI+ support at least, or we have got diversity and inclusion initiatives in our university in our company. Does it still happen in various industries in Australia? Do you have any insights in how bad is it if it happens?

Victor Sojo:

Yeah, that's a great question. There are two elements that I would like to talk about there. One of them is the people who might not be the target of these forms of abuse and how we basically were more likely to empathise with people who belong to the same groups we belong to. Okay. That's being well studied. The implication of that is that then it is harder for you to understand what it is like when somebody else is being the target of this. So, you could imagine how that structural inequality with powerful people not belonging to minority groups makes it harder for them to actually act upon these issues, because they don't see it. If they see it, they might even be normalising it. So, that's one element of the issue that we're dealing with.

Victor Sojo:

The thing that has to do with the question that you asked, which is about the prevalence of these events, well, the evidence is very clear. So, when you look at the Australian Human Rights Commission, when you look at the Victorian Human Rights Commission and the kind of reports that they have prepared about discrimination and abuse in general, but also across demographic lines, the evidence indicates that these events are quite prevalent.

Victor Sojo:

So, when you look at the sexual harassment, so in any given year, around one fifth of the population will be target of this form of abuse. Of course, we have a range of behaviours that we're talking about here. So, we are talking about from gender harassment, which is low intensity, high frequency, sexist and sexually charged comments that people might make at work all the way to unwanted sexual attention, including sexual assault or quid pro quo. So, all of those events, they are more prevalent than we think.

Medo Pournader:

It includes both men and women.

Victor Sojo:

That's right. So, obviously, we know that around 75% of these incidents are actually targeting women. So, women are significantly more likely to be the targets of this form of abuse because of the same reasons that I gave earlier. So, if you are a minority group in a specific community or organisation or people actually afford you less status and respect, then you're more likely to be targeted with this form of abuse. So, it is more common, and interesting enough, it is what I would call an asymmetrical process. So, women are more likely to be targeted. Men are significantly more likely to be the instigators of the

form of abuse towards both men and women. So, a man is significantly more likely to be sexually harassed by other men.

Victor Sojo:

What changes is the way in which men sexually harass other men versus women. So, if you are going to sexually harass me, what would normally happen is that you are going to be challenging my masculinity. Okay. So, you're going to be making jokes about whether I'm man enough or about how involved I am with my family life and the fact that I'm under control of some domineering partner and so on. So, it's different the way I am being harassed, but it's possible for men to be sexually harassed too.

Medo Pournader:

I mean, fascinating. Are there any industries that these types of, for example, sexual abuses or sexual harassments more prevalent compared to other industries, or is it the same ratio across all industries?

Victor Sojo:

Yeah, it's a great question. We have identified variability across countries, across industries in the prevalence of sexual harassment. Across countries, what we see is that different societies have different social norms about what behaviour is tolerable and how likely they are to identify that something is sexual harassment and call it that way and push back. So, basically, the social norms of the community are important to figure out what's abuse and then to decide to act upon it.

Then at the organisational level, we have also identified that there are differences in the kind of harassment that people experience and also in the prevalence of the harassment. So, for instance, we know that being in an industry that is dominated by a specific gender increases the likelihood that you're going to be sexually harassed. So, for instance, in female-dominated work environments, if you're a man working in that context, you are more likely to have people challenging your masculinity.

Medo Pournader:

Wow. By women?

Victor Sojo:

By women and by other men, which we call it gender policing. So, people start questioning what you do, the hobbies that you have, and the fact that you're there. So, why are you there? You don't belong there.

Medo Pournader:

What is an example of a female-dominated industry?

Victor Sojo:

Well, it's interesting, because we could talk about power versus numbers. So, numerically, nursing and primary school and early childhood education are contexts that numerically dominated by women, typically also in terms of power. So, there are more women nurses who are senior in these roles. Even though we know that in primary schools, men are also relative to their representation in the industry, they're also quite likely to become principals. Even though there are not that many of them, they're likely to end up in those positions of power.

Victor Sojo:

So, when you talk about female-dominated industries, you need to be careful because there are numbers and then there is power to define domination of an environment. So, that happens to men who work in those places. Of course, well reported, typically better understood on the other side, when we have male-dominated work environments, defence or armed forces, fair respondents, well-

Medo Pournader:

Construction.

Victor Sojo:

... construction, finance, particular institutional banking, in all of those environments, these situations could unfold. Again, the most common form of abuse is the sexism undermining of women. Again, so do you really belong here? People making comments about whether you have what it takes to be in that environment because you are not a typical object there.

Medo Pournader:

Then if you are a person who is really keen on their job and they want to prove themselves, and I have a friend actually that works in the construction industry. She was telling me that because it's such a male-dominated industry, specifically when you're working on site as a civil engineer, which she is, she said the typical rules sometimes of the harassment and how you react to those just go out the door. Because the famous, really interesting actually statement that she made one day was that if you really want to raise everything that you experience, you have to be living at the HR office.

Victor Sojo:

It's impossible to win basically. I would say that's the key issue here, that if you don't call it out, you normalise it and then people carry on doing it all the time. Whether that gets to you or not, they will carry on doing it. If you call it out, then you are an outsider and you're acting like an outsider effectively proving their point, because the whole point of this is to make you feel like you don't really belong here and then you should leave.

Medo Pournader:

Exactly.

Victor Sojo:

That's why at an individual level and when people ask me, "What should I do?", I always tell them, I have literally no solutions for you as an individual, because nothing that I tell you will actually as an individual protect you from these situations. What I could tell you is to form a coalition, literally to look for support in numbers, that the only thing that I'm willing to tell somebody who asked me for individually how I should deal with this. These are problems that are organisational and social problems. That's at the level at which they should be addressed, because as you just said, that person that you're describing has no way to win in this context.

We know that in hospitality, for instance, which are situations in which there is a lot of job precarity, so casual employment, insecure, you don't know whether you're going to get a new chief or not. Also, situation where you are supposed to be pleasing the client, the client is supposed to always be right, and they are literally giving you direct instructions about what you're supposed to do.

Victor Sojo:

If you're in a situation where you're also relying on tips to be able to make up your full income, so all of those situations actually put you in a very precarious situation. There is a choice that in those environments, sexual harassment is more likely to take place. So, you need to think about literally how we could create secure employment as a mechanism to reduce workplace abuse. So, it's not an individual level or an interpersonal problem only. It requires a more structural way of looking at it.

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely. We are doing a study in construction industry on modern slavery and what we have found, and I don't know how mind blowing that is, probably not, is that migrant workers and workers overall that are not considered as skilled workers, workers that can be replaced are the most prone to these types of abuses, at least sexual harassments or abuses. Especially considering your visa situation in Australia, for example, and the fact that one thing that, for example, that has been happening recently in Australia is that as far as I know, there were no restrictions in how many hours students could work during COVID.

Medo Pournader:

Now, the restrictions are back, which means that students who really need money for their studies need to work for cash in hand, and employers know that. If you're a good employer, yeah, good, the wages are fair, blah, blah, blah. But if you're an employer who looks at this situation as an opportunity, then that worker might be exposed to a lot of abuses, not to mention the wages that you're getting properly are below the normal wages that the worker gets all because of that visa and work permit situation that students have. As you mentioned, some of these would call for some policymaking changes, especially when the awareness is raised hopefully that these situations are happening.

Medo Pournader:

But speaking of abuse, I would assume that gender-related abuses are one thing, but we have got different types of abuses, mental abuses for example, or even physical, not sexually necessarily abuses. Then we have got different minority groups. As you know, we have got, for example, senior people. We have got disability groups. We have got LGBTQI group. We have neurodiverse groups. So, what does overall, the research or your research, if you have done anything on that part, say about the most prevalent or the most under the radar abuses for different minority groups?

Victor Sojo:

Yeah, so I mean, what I would say first about that is that when you think about abuse in terms of psychological, physical or sexual abuse, which are entirely arbitrary categories, because a lot of the time, they overlap. Abuse is like a process, like a range of things, sometimes escalating, sometimes spiralling or not. We know that particularly forms of abuse that are overt, a lot of people understand that they are unlawful behaviour, so like physical abuse or unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion. That's why they're also less prevalent, because people understand that you're not supposed to do that. So, in an organisation, there is a lot of psychological abuse. From incivility, this again, low intensity, high frequency undermining of the individual.

Victor Sojo:

Again, a lot of abuse from people who are more powerful within the organisation towards less powerful people. That's the most common dynamic that we observe. Also, abuse across people who are



competing for same resources and opportunities. So, people using that psychological undermining as a tool to get you out of the way when you're competing for important things. I mean in Australia and is seen globally, is that if you are a member of the queer community or if you're a person with disability or if you're an elder worker, all of those things, unless you have other form of power with you, would put you at higher risk of experiencing abuse. So, older workers who have a lot of power within organisations are less likely to experience abuse because they have the shield of their position, for instance.

But if you're not in a position of power, then that might expose you to agism, and again, people making condescending comments about you and how well you do at work. So, that's a very common experience that older workers report. There have been specific social events that have exacerbated the abuse that people experience at work. So, during the marriage equality plebiscite and what we saw there was an increase in the abuse towards members of the queer community. Again, so people would say, "Well, we're just having a respectful conversation," but the respectful conversation that we were having was whether you were human enough for us to give you the same civil rights that everybody else had.

Medo Pournader:

Exactly my problem with that whole situation was that this is a basic human right. Why should we do a referendum on it? Just give it to people already.

Victor Sojo:

But the conversation was, do we consider you to be an equal here?

Medo Pournader:

Exactly.

Victor Sojo:

Because remember, people were not asking for religious marriage, so we're asking to have the exact same civil rights as everybody else. So, there are conversations that are happening in society could actually permeate what's happening in organisations and people could be exposed to form of abuse. Because everybody was told that they were entitled to an opinion, then that exacerbated the expression of negative opinions about LGBTQI+ people. Again, we'll see what the data shows, but this is one of the fears that we have with the current vote on the recognition of Indigenous people in the constitution and the voice to parliament.

Victor Sojo:

Because the fear is that it's going to repeat exactly what happened during the marriage equality plebiscite, which is that everybody's being invited to have their opinion. That in any context is great, but if you don't put some clear parameters about how is that we're supposed to have this conversation, it's quite possible that people will engage in some very negative way of talking about a group who's being historically oppressed and abused by-

Medo Pournader:

It gets worse, right? From the experience, as you mentioned with the referendum on marriage equality, one could tell, and especially right now, I can see the polarisation between Labor and Liberal parties, on one party obviously supporting that, the other party is saying, "No, there shouldn't be any special treatment." That causes controversies in society, and I'm pretty sure as you mentioned, is backlashing

on the indigenous communities, which is absolutely a sad thing to see happening all because of political brownie points.

Victor Sojo:

I mean that probably makes a clear distinction between the marriage equality plebiscite and what's happening right now, because with the plebiscite, there were people from both political parties supporting the yes votes for their recognition of equal marriage. Whereas here when it falls along political lines, it is very easy for the topic to become extremely politicised and to become polarised. That makes it harder for the minority group who's trying to get some kind of recognition in this situation.

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely. Speaking of which, so what shall be done? Because I could assume that many of the minority groups that are subject to any physical, sexual, mental abuse might not voice out what's happening to them. That's one issue. Another issue is that you mentioned interventions as part of your studies. Are interventions specifically targeted as people who are subject to abuse and people who might subconsciously or consciously do abuse, are they going to be effective? Have they been effective? What kind of interventions or what are some solutions to tackle this to some extent?

Victor Sojo:

No, that's a great question. This is something that I tell my students when I teach managing diversity, which is sometimes good diversity management is just good management. So, there are some issues of how we organise employment at the moment that are making it more likely for people to experience abuse. So, precarious employment, for instance, which we just mentioned, a lot of power disparity in the way that we organise institutions and situations where people are not given mechanisms to voice concern and for those concerns to be heard and addressed.

Victor Sojo:

So, for instance, if you don't have an independent body within your organisation who is well-funded and that is truly independent and that is able to fully investigate any kind of allegation of abuse, if you don't have a policy that clearly articulate what do we mean by abuse, what kind of behaviours is it that we do not consider appropriate for them to happen within a specific institution? That also articulate, depending on the behaviour that you display, the abuse that you instigate, what the consequences could be. So, lack of that clarity on what we mean by abuse here and what's going to happen, lack of clarity around what are the different ways in which I could deal with an instance of abuse.

Victor Sojo:

So, for instance, you could have a situation where there is clearly outlined on a website or somewhere in the organisation. If you're being the target of abuse, you could talk to somebody to organise your thoughts about this incident or you could make a formal complaint and this is what's going to happen if you do, or depending on the form of abuse, if it is a criminal behaviour, so this is what the obligations of the institution are because sometimes you have to report that to the police if you know. Okay.

Victor Sojo:

So, having that there actually makes it easier for you as a target of abuse to speak up, but also, if you're an abuser and you're working in an organisation where the policies are super clear, where we have spelled out what's inappropriate behaviour, where we have spelled out the consequences of this

behaviour, and what is it that somebody who's been the target of abuse could do to deal with this, you will think twice before engaging in abusive behaviour. So, this sounds like, kind of boring, but you need to have some good policies that are back up by infrastructure to manage the incidents of abuse if you want to prevent the abuse. This is not just about managing the incident. It's a good way of preventing the abuse from happening in the first place.

Victor Sojo:

So, I would say that is crucial to me. Again, dealing with precarious employment in all areas is crucial to prevent abuse. Managing power disparities, you could design literally empowering teams to solve problems on their own, empowering people to speak up, having clear mechanisms for people to raise any issue to more senior people about what's going on. This is something that we're seeing in Australia. They're having a couple of reviews of institutions such as the police or first respondents. What we have seen in many of these cases is that the boards of directors didn't know that the instances of abuse were taking place and many senior managers didn't know either.

Victor Sojo:

So, clearly, at some point, the communication broke between all the other employees and those who have power to deal with the issues. So, all of these are reasonably effective way of dealing with abuse. Of course, as I said earlier, abuse is a tool. So, there are instrumental beliefs about abuse. So, if you're working in the public sector, sometimes it could be quite bureaucratic. If it's hard for you to fire an employee who is not performing well, you might think that bullying this person is an effective mechanism to get rid of them from the organisation because they will end up quitting. So, people could have a range of thoughts or ideas about what abuse could be used for.

Victor Sojo:

In sport, we see coaches will think that if you yell at an athlete or if you make them do exercise to the point that they could injure themselves, that those are effective to train people. So, it is super important to address the thought of ideas that people have about how effective abuse is as a tool to solve problems in organisations, because that's literally what they're doing. In their head, abuse is an effective tool to solve problems.

Medo Pournader:

They're justifying it through, yeah, this person doesn't quit, not a good person, so let me just exert some abuse mechanism so that they quit and then you do not feel bad about yourself. You might be actually a really good, ethical person in your head, and you use that mechanism to justify it in your head that, yeah, I mean we want to get rid of this bad apple. That's where the abuse happens as well.

Victor Sojo:

Exactly right. And if you work within an institution where this is the most common way of dealing with that problem, which is what's happening in all of these areas, so you are learning by observing how other people have solved the same problem in the past. If they have been effective in the way that the problem disappear, then you just learn, right? That's the way to do it. So, yeah, there is that, right? Of course, there is the social tolerance. So, some of the elements that you just described are part of that, the social tolerance, which is the idea that abuse is a tool and it's effective, but then the ideas about what should I do if I see abuse happening?

Medo Pournader:

Exactly.

Victor Sojo:

Should I pretend that this has nothing to do with me because I'm not the target or this is not acceptable and I should intervene? Even if I have in my head that I should intervene, do I have the skills? Do I actually have the interpersonal skills required to call out inappropriate behaviour without the situations escalating further, for instance? A lot of people who are able to recognise that a situation is inappropriate don't feel efficacious enough to actually go and intervene. So, an intervention that we've been trialling and that has proven to be effective in experimental research is bystander intervention.

Victor Sojo:

So, literally, teaching somebody who is not the target of abuse, how to identify whether it's taking place or not and then how to intervene to call out inappropriate behaviour or to provide support to the person who's being the target of the abuse. So, again, this is a fairly effective way of dealing with this situation once the abuse is taking place. Okay. It doesn't necessarily help you prevent it, but it definitely helps you deal with it once it takes place.

Medo Pournader:

Let's call these bystanders organisational superheroes. Do we have such a mechanism or should we have? I know that we have HR in organisations, but HR is also a dependent entity to the organisation. But for example, for these bystanders and the impact of them in raising awareness when abuse happens and providing support to the person who has been abused, how do we do that? How do we achieve that in organisations?

Victor Sojo:

So again, both in my industry work and here at the university, we've been thinking about how you go about rolling out a program of that kind. The first thing that became clear is that you need to start at the top of the organisation. So, if you're going to allow a training program to deal with this behaviour but then you do it with junior people first, what you might be doing is sending them back to a team or a school or department where the instigator of the abuse is the most senior person in the room, which will actually put them at risk of further abuse and so on.

Victor Sojo:

So, both in industry and here at the university, the approach has been we need to make sure that the most senior people in every department or faculty and then the professors and then the associate professors and literally a top down rollout of these interventions that they understand what are the new policies of the university. We have new policies around sexual harassment, which is fantastic. Well, two years old now. What they do, how is it that you're supposed to operate within the framework of the policies, and then what is expected of you as a leader? So the fact that it is part of your responsibility as a leader within this institution to prevent and to manage instances of workplace abuse. You know what I mean?

Victor Sojo:

You cannot pretend that that has nothing to do with you, squarely part of your job. It always was, but now they have a recent reminder because everybody had to go through this training program. Then once you have an understanding of the policy, how you're supposed to behave, and then having training

where you literally practise how to intervene, where abuse is taking place. Again, to do both things to support the target, but also to call out, to explain to somebody why their behaviour was inappropriate, what kind of standard of behaviour you expect to see from them into the future, and then an explanation about what kind of consequences you follow that behaviour, if any, right?

Victor Sojo:

Sometimes, again, if somebody makes a silly comment or a joke, calling it out immediately, explaining why it was problematic and explaining what you expect to see in the future is the most effective way of dealing with it, okay. Probably it's not the thing that people should lose their job for doing. If it is repeated, that's a different situation. If it's a once-off, deal with it on the spot and then we all could move on, but don't let it slide like it didn't matter because it does matter. I could go into a rant about why it matters among many other things, because the research is showing that when you allow for this low intensity, high frequency abuse to happen-

Medo Pournader:

It piles up.

Victor Sojo:

Exactly right. It piles up. It becomes an everyday hassle for people, but it also makes it more likely for more intense form of abuse to take place. So it could escalate into other form of abuse. So, the point is start at the top, clarifying what's expected of leaders, clarifying what is abuse, clarifying the infrastructure that you have put in place to deal with this issue, and then training people on how to respond when these incidents actually take place.

Medo Pournader:

I think at university, as you mentioned, we have made great progress with respect to specifically sexual harassment and sexual abuses, but other types of mental abuses or I don't think we have much physical abuse, at least in our sector, but mental abuse is something that I would say that goes under the radar. It is not visible, and it has got so many different forms, passive aggression, bullying. You name it, I'm not saying we have it, but it can happen.

Victor Sojo:

Oh, yes.

Medo Pournader:

And if you, I don't know if you are experiencing and exerting these types of behaviours and it can go brilliantly under the radar, it will be even harder to pick it up.

Victor Sojo:

Absolutely. So, I feel that academics develop a very intellectualised, highbrow way of abusing other people. Some people think of this as a masterful sort of skill as opposed to think about it as a shameful thing. So, if you are part of a university, you should be here to develop people. That's the job. So, the job is to produce knowledge, obviously, but there is a strong component of what we do here, which is to develop people.

Victor Sojo:

So, having colleagues who assume that the job is to be a gatekeeper, for instance, or to use this psychological undermining as a way to build your resilience because you need to be tough so that you are ready for the job market for instance, you could see it, right? You could see it in seminars where people don't even let you finish your presentation and they start asking you questions in a very aggressive way, because that's supposed to be part of your training to be able to keep your cool.

Medo Pournader:

That's an excuse, right?

Victor Sojo:

It is an excuse.

Medo Pournader:

You should have a thick skin in academia and let us destroy you a bit.

Victor Sojo:

Yeah. Again, you are wasting time, okay, because there are so many substantive questions that should be asked where you really drill into the conceptual elements of the research or the methods, or why are you making interpretations in that way? So you're literally wasting time dealing with the emotional elements of this that were introduced because of the abusive way of providing feedback or asking the question. All of that energy could be spent dealing with the substantive nature of what we're here to do.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, it's a tough one to navigate. I think probably many of us have been subject to that kind of behaviour in our workplace and it is really tough to point it out. Firstly, I would say with respect to psychological abuse, there needs to be substantial training of what are the different forms of it. We have got some training at university level, which is good just as a start. But I would say there are lots and lots of training and skills and practice needed to understand that. I mean, definitely for the workplace, behaviour and attitude and understanding if you are subject of a toxic behaviour at workplace, what is it?

Medo Pournader:

And then as you mentioned, it's equally also important, how do you face that? How do you challenge that type of behaviour? So how do you call it out specifically if there is power imbalance, right? For example, I'm a senior lecturer. If a professor in my field is doing something that is toxic or is showing... By the way, disclaimer, this is hypothetical. If they are a bully and you know that there is power imbalance, you know the professor is very well-connected in the field, you know they can make life really hard for you if you are on their bad side. How would you try to navigate through that? What would you do?

Victor Sojo:

It's extremely hard. I would say I've been lucky though, because I've been on the receiving end of that behaviour here and I just went and told the head of the department. I just went and said that this happened. It happened last night, it happened this way. This wasn't good enough. It wasn't good enough. Thankfully, the head department was like, "Yup, it was not good enough, and we're going to deal with this."

Medo Pournader:

That's amazing.

Victor Sojo:

I mean, I was very pleased. Again, nobody lost their job. The person came and apologised and said, "Sorry, yeah, we shouldn't have done this. That was not the right thing to do." Yeah, I was pleasantly surprised that there was a clear understanding of why the behaviour was problematic after it was explained and then the person came and apologised. I'm not saying that this is going to happen in all instances, but that has been my experience and I'm very glad that it was like that.

Medo Pournader:

I'm so happy that it was resolved that way, but also, I think that your case might be an outlier.

Victor Sojo:

Yeah, quite possibly based on what we see in research. Yes, it's not necessarily the most common situation, but it's also the case that, well, we're learning. The world and Australia is not where we were five years ago or ten years ago thankfully, having a number of things that have pushed us to do better from the Me Too movement all the way to what happened in Parliament House in Australia a few years ago and the fact that now we know about it. That has forced all of us to have conversations that we wouldn't have had otherwise. I would say one of the key things that also draw us to review our own sexual harassment policy was basically being in this context, where we are right now, where we realised that, well, this was never good enough and now there will be consequences if we don't act on it.

Medo Pournader:

Which is always good.

Victor Sojo:

Which is always good. Yes, yes. So, I mean, I would say it's horrible that so many people have to go through so much pain, not only experiencing those behaviours, but then having to disclose it and to be revictimised and to be traumatised by having to recall and explain all of that to us, but they have done a great service to the world and to the country by doing that.

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely and good on them. I think the people who resist and stand for themselves in spite of any adversity that they might experience, those people are the ones that change the course of those types of behaviours for the better. Speaking of Australia a few years back and the progress that we have made since then, I asked this from all the guests in the podcast, how do you think the future looks like?

Victor Sojo:

Well, I would say it's interesting when I think about the past and the future and how people sometimes is nostalgic about the past. I'm never nostalgic about the past, because in my life, in my personal life, every year has been better than the previous one. I grew up in Islam, Caracas to a single mom, and I'm able to make it all the way here. So, clearly, I have no nostalgia for poverty. So, I think the future is going to be better. It could definitely be better than where we are at. I also see it in my own research, see it in my industry work. I also see a lot of backlash in the future. So, progress will also lead to backlash.

Victor Sojo:

It's not whether it's going to happen or not. It's how it's going to happen, when it's going to happen, who is going to instigate it. So, those are the questions that we need to be asking ourselves. So, if you care about diversity and inclusion, if you care about making the world a better place for everybody, you need to be prepared to identify the backlash and to reduce the likelihood that it happens, but also to counter it when it's taking place. So, I'm optimistic, but I'm also very clear that there will be a lot of pushback with anything that we try to do to make the world a better place.

Medo Pournader:

We'll need a lot of heroes in the field. Victor, I have a feeling we need at least one more session with you specifically to cover the gender inequality part. It was a fascinating talk. Thank you so much.

Victor Sojo:

Are we done?

Medo Pournader:

Yeah.

Victor Sojo:

Oh my God.

Medo Pournader:

Thank you so much, and talk to you again soon.

Victor Sojo:

I hope so.

Medo Pournader:

Thank you for listening, and please don't forget to subscribe to the podcast series. Please also reach out, let us know what you think, and whether you'd like to contribute to +1 Podcast series.