



# THE POLITICS OF NAMING AND CONSTRUCTION: UNIVERSITY POLICIES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE UK

*Professor Sundari Anitha, Dr Ana Jordan,  
Nicola Chanamoto, University of Lincoln*

## GBV in University Communities

- High prevalence of GBV (Cantor et. al. 2015; Heywood et al. 2022; NUS 2010, 2012) and 'lad cultures' (Phipps and Young 2012) in university communities worldwide
- NUS (2010) survey of 2,000 UK students found one in seven female students had experienced serious sexual assault/physical violence
- Another survey of 4,205 LGBT+ students and support staff found 31% of LGB and 30% of trans students had experienced homo/bi/transphobic verbal abuse (Valentine et. al. 2009, 25)
- University policies are a crucial aspect of addressing GBV on campus as they impact on victim/survivors' experiences (Ahmed 2021; Bull and Rye 2018) but not yet systematically explored across the UK university sector

# Understanding constructions of the problem in policy responses

- Policies warrant critical analysis as actively construct problems in particular ways (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016)
- To ‘make politics visible’ (Bacchi 2012), we applied feminist theories to explore how universities frame/conceptualise GBV through policies
- Even naming issues as gendered (e.g. GBV) can be perceived as threatening (Hearn and McKie 2008, 76) - postfeminist representations of universities as places where gender equality has been achieved (McRobbie 2009)
- Analysis of policies situated within these broader structures and discourses, but also resistance both within student communities and from (feminist) actors within and outside of universities (Bull and Rye 2018; Lewis et al. 2016; NUS 2018; Page et al. 2019; Marine and Lewis 2020)
- Our analysis also examines institutional policies for any challenges to dominant constructions of GBV
- Though formal policies neither capture the realities of implementation nor everyday practices/cultures, they are a crucial indicator of universities’ approaches to GBV

# Understanding constructions of the problem in policy responses

- We examine how the 'problem' of GBV is represented, making links between abstract feminist academic understandings of GBV and practical guidance on how alternative representations of the problem might provide better outcomes for victims and signal a shift in universities' approaches to GBV
- We understand GBV as behaviour or attitudes underpinned by inequitable power relations that hurt, threaten or undermine people because of their (perceived) gender or sexuality.
- GBV reflects and simultaneously reinforces prevailing gender inequalities and problematises violence premised on hierarchical constructions of gender and sexuality.
- Women and girls constitute the primary victims of GBV as measured by amount, severity and impact of the violence, and men, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators (Hester 2013; Walby and Towers 2017).
- GBV includes a continuum of behaviours and attitudes such as domestic violence, sexual violence, sexist street harassment, trans/homophobic expressions and behaviours, and expressions on social media which normalise sexism and sexual objectification.

## Methods: Data collection

- 133 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) approached between September 2019 and February 2020
- Concurrent 10-minute searches of institutions' websites to gauge accessibility of GBV policies
- 47 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests made under FOI Act (2000) and FOI Scotland Act (2002)
- Total of 569 documents received
- Weighted selection criteria applied to 569 policies to determine most relevant policy for each HEI:
  - Policy name directly references GBV or sexual violence
  - Policy applies to student-on-student violence
  - Document is termed a 'policy' (rather than 'guidance', for example)
  - Document contains keywords including *sexual, gender, violence, harassment*
- Result = a sample of 129 policies from **131 HEIs** across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales
- 44 named policies, with titles specifically including 'gender-based violence' or similar terms

## Methods: Data analysis

- 129 HEI GBV policies coded using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *Nvivo*
- 50 codes developed and grouped under eight central themes
- Analytical themes developed using '*What is the Problem Represented to be?*' (WPR) approach to policy analysis (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 20)
  - How is the 'problem' represented?
  - What are the presuppositions and conceptual logics underpinning different representations?
  - Are there any silences or alternative conceptualisations of the problem which are excluded?
  - What are the effects of specific representations of the problem?
  - How might dominant representations be disrupted or replaced?
- Specific themes for analysis collectively identified by the three researchers based on deductive examination of the literature on GBV/GBV in universities and inductively to allow identification of previously unanticipated themes
- Individual institutions not named as focused on analysing patterns across the sector

## The nature of the 'problem' that is constituted: Whether GBV is explicitly acknowledged

- The most common construction of the problem - as a generic, individualised issue of bullying/harassment or student misconduct;
- Only 44 out of 129 institutions had a named policy that utilised terms such as GBV, domestic violence, sexual violence, or sexual misconduct in its title.
- Of these 44 named policies, 36 related to sexual violence (named variously as sexual harassment/violence/assault/misconduct), with 7 of the 44 having titles relating to GBV more broadly, while one referred to violence against women.
- Two named policies also specifically cited domestic violence/abuse and stalking in their titles alongside sexual violence.

## The nature of the 'problem' that is constituted: Whether narrow or broad definition of GBV is adopted

- Where the problem was labelled GBV, policies were most likely to adopt a comprehensive definition achieved by signalling that GBV includes verbal, non-verbal and physical behaviours, challenging the construction of 'real harm' as the rarer, physical incidents (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2011);
- However, more common to focus on sexual violence (excludes other harms and victims), but adopted a broad framing of sexual violence within online and offline spaces as one-off rarer acts, and/or as everyday/ongoing conduct.
- Why does it matter? Individualised construction of problem as interpersonal dynamics (bullying/harassment) that can happen to anyone vs recognition of structural basis of what is seen as a social problem.
- How we construct problems shape solutions...



## The place of gender in this problematisation

- Several universities—particularly but not exclusively in England—used the UK cross-government or Home Office (2015) definition of domestic violence - 'can happen to anyone';
- This mirrors recent shifts away from a gendered analysis in national and federal policy contexts in the global north and Eastern Europe;
- A small number of policies (13) did recognise that although any individual can experience GBV, it disproportionately affects women and gender/sexual minorities.
- Scottish universities were more likely to include a statement framing GBV as a social problem both rooted in and reinforcing of gender inequalities, thereby adopting the Scottish Government's recognition of GBV 'as a function of gender inequality.'
- Why does it matter?

## Recognising intersecting social relations of power in GBV: Gender, race, disability, sexuality etc...

- How other social relations of power might also be framed in interaction with gender (Vincent and Eveline 2010)
- Only 15 universities acknowledged intersectionality by explicitly recognising in policies that people located at the intersection of gender and other social relations of power are more likely to experience GBV and greater barriers to disclosure and receiving help

# Reproducing or challenging dominant constructions of GBV: Mediation

- 54 policies—esp. generic ‘bullying and harassment’ policies—suggested that victims of sexual misconduct should, in the first instance, try to resolve the issue through dialogue with the perpetrator;
- Only six policies included an explicit caveat explaining that informal resolution was not appropriate for sexual misconduct;
- These suggestions are premised upon a construction of the problem as a ‘misunderstanding’ between two individuals;
- And as a one-off incident that is unconnected to, and unrepresentative of, a pattern of behaviour prevalent in society;
- And disregards victim-blaming discourses which minimise the harm and blame the victim for the perpetrator’s behaviour;
- And responsabilises victims to deal with the problem by risking further harm to themselves and places the onus on them to end the GBV.

# Reproducing or challenging dominant constructions of GBV: False complaints

- Fourteen university policies reiterated dominant myths about sexual violence by including warnings about false, malicious or vexatious complaints.

These policies warned against:

- 'frivolous allegations' - may imply everyday forms of GBV, which are commonly constructed as 'normal' and 'not real harm';
  - 'clearly unfounded allegations' - implies penalties against the complainant where findings are not in their favour;
  - 'providing false or misleading information in any investigation of complaints' - goes beyond a 'commonsense' understanding of a 'false' allegation as a complete fabrication of something that never happened and instead employs a broad definition that suggests: *'an allegation containing falsehoods'*;
- In contrast, a handful of policies explicitly recognised rape myths and/or underreporting of GBV and the low prevalence of false allegations and harms associated with this myth.
  - Problem is underreporting not overreporting due to false allegations...

# Reproducing or challenging dominant constructions of GBV: Anonymous reporting

- Facility of anonymous reporting is important as it recognises the barriers that victims commonly experience in disclosing GBV;
- 28 policies signposted anonymous reporting (though not always clear on what this meant);
- Just eight policies referred to the role of anonymous reporting data in enabling institutions to: 'identify any possible trends in reports' and 'effectively engage in prevention and response initiatives';
- 17 policies actively discouraged anonymous reporting (not allowed: 5 policies), or stated that taking this route could even impede the disciplinary process or 'prevent a fair investigation' (12 policies).

# Conclusion

- University policies on GBV can both reflect and reinforce broader harmful gendered social norms and constructions of GBV as well as—less commonly—recognise and challenge these prevailing problematisations;
- The majority of policies reflect and reproduce harmful constructions of GBV and gender, thereby limiting the development of helpful solutions to the problem;
- However, some partial contestations are also evident whereby institutions acknowledge and counter dominant constructions in ways that help to foster resistance and effective action;
- Our findings also offer original insights into how such conceptualisations are materialised within institutional policy and regulatory frameworks;
- At a practical level, our analysis also suggests ways in which staff and student communities within universities can assess their policies and work to remove content that reinforces dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, and of GBV.

## Next steps

- Thank you for listening
- Report and checklist aimed at practitioners/policymakers: *'Policies on gender-based violence in UK universities: Understanding current practice, mapping future directions'* – in development, watch this space
- Contact us: [sanitha@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:sanitha@lincoln.ac.uk); [anajordan@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:anajordan@lincoln.ac.uk); [nchanamuto@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:nchanamuto@lincoln.ac.uk)