The politics of naming and construction: University policies on gender-based violence in the UK

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It is widely recognised that the problematisation of a social phenomenon is a political process that both constructs the problem and, in doing so, suggests some possible remedies and occludes others. Based on our analysis of policies to address gender-based violence (GBV) in 129 UK universities, we examine how the ‘problem’ of GBV is conceptualised in institutional policies. We explore three interconnected themes: the nature of the ‘problem’ that is constituted; the place of gender in this problematisation; and the implicit ways in which this is constructed as an individual or a social problem. The first theme examines how policies represent the nature of the problem, analysing whether GBV is explicitly acknowledged; whether policies are focused narrowly on specific forms of violence or operate with a broader understanding of GBV, and whether GBV is understood in terms of one-off rarer acts, and/or as everyday/ongoing conduct. The second theme unpacks whether and how gender is acknowledged in the construction of the problem. Lastly, we explicate the implicit ways in which this problem is constructed as merely an interpersonal matter requiring individual redress, or as a social harm that reiterates and reflects broader inequalities based on gender (and other social relations of power). We also examine the implications of such constructions for imagining possible solutions to the problem of GBV. In doing so, this article contributes to academic debates on the conceptualisation of GBV, while offering original insights into how such conceptualisations are materialised within institutional policy and regulatory frameworks.