

Sexual Violence on University Campuses: Communication Interventions

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ABSTRACT

In this advocacy brief, we examine the nature of sexual violence on university campuses, the effects of sexual violence, and the role of communication in preventing as well as responding to sexual violence. Based on our review of the literature, we offer strategies for communication advocacy directed at addressing sexual violence on university campuses.

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Students in Universities across the globe are subjected to sexual violence (Dziech & Weiner, 1990; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, Gold, ... & Weitzman, 1988; Stabile, 2017). The forms of violence vary greatly, depending on the University; the broader socio-cultural context around gender, sexuality and violence; and the environment of social justice. While accounts of sexual violence are typically described in terms of extreme events such as rape, other forms of sexual violence from sexual advances to

sexually loaded comments to sexual intimidation need to be taken into account as markers of sexual violence

Coercion and the deployment of power to achieve sexual goals are underlying threads that run across these various forms of sexual violence (Dziech & Weiner, 1990; Grauerholz & Koralewski, 1991; Kelly, 1987). These various forms of sexual violence have strong and sustained effects on student performance, student mental and physical health, and student wellbeing (Heise, Pitanguy, & Germain, 1994; Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock, & Walsh, 1992). Also, sexual violence not only adversely affects the target of violence, but also the health and wellbeing of those that witness and perceive the threat of sexual violence (Stabile, 2017). The overarching culture of sexual violence in a University undermines the health of members, irrespective of whether they have directly experienced an act of sexual violence targeted at them. Moreover, Universities as organizational cultures fundamentally violate the rights of students to health and wellbeing when they reproduce such cultures of violence (Stabile, 2017).

Whereas many of the forms of violence take place within universities in the hands of individuals employed by the University, in other instances, such forms of violence are carried out by external stakeholders that have some form of relationship with the University and therefore, have access to students through University-legitimized mechanisms. When external stakeholders secure access to students as targets of violence, they enact forms of power that are normalized through university processes. For instance, sexual violence carried out by donors, or carried out during internships, recruitment efforts, and industry dialogues all draw upon the legitimating role of university processes and are often connected to normative ideas of career progression. Accounts of student harassment in the hands of Instructors, Lecturers, and Professors have been systematically documented over the past four decades (Dziech & Weiner, 1990); these accounts have emerged from across the globe in the wake of the #metoo movement (see Dziech & Weiner, 1990; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Many well-known and reputed academics were “named” in this organic social media campaign, having been alleged to have been involved in harassing students based on a collective collection of student accounts. In many of the student accounts of sexual harassment, the academics who were alleged to have deployed their power in enacting various forms of sexual violence on students were reported to having been protected by institutional structures (Wood, 1992).

This notion of Universities protecting the perpetrators of sexual violence has emerged in a wide array of student accounts, pointing to the drawbacks and limitations of institutional processes, themselves immersed in relations and webs of power (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018). Largely, Universities globally are ill equipped to address sexual violence, immersed in patriarchy and male privilege (Stabile, 2017). The consolidation of power in patriarchal cultural mores is reproduced in Universities as organizations embedded in the culture. In US culture, norms of White masculinity underlie patriarchal cultural practices around sexual violence (Stabile, 2017). In East Asian cultures, norms of Asian femininity underlie the performance and circulation of sexual violence and the attribution of responsibility to women who are targets of sexual violence (Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002; Lee, Pomeroy, Yoo, & Rheinboldt, 2005). Sexual violence is constituted within relational spaces that are shaped within normative discursive practices; consider for instance the Asian mystique that underlies the sexual violence enacted by a White male professor on Asian students in an Asian University. Add to these culturally enabled forms of sexual violence that are driven by differentials in power inherent in the organizing logics of University education. In the absence of adequate institutional mechanisms for addressing sexual violence, student accounts point toward the important role of interventions that seek out the involvement of law enforcement agencies and juridical processes outside the University.

In this policy brief, we draw on the tenets of the culture-centered approach (CCA) to suggest key strategies for communication advocacy that seek to transform University cultures of sexual violence. Amid the overarching culture of sexual violence on University campuses globally, the following key points serve as entry points to social change. The points are organized around process-based anchors to advocacy and communication-based anchors to advocacy.

Although in both of these threads, communication is the underlying concept, whereas the first thread points toward the processes to be created for addressing sexual violence on University campuses, the second thread points to specific communication strategies to be put into place to achieve the first set of goals.

Advocating to build communicative structures

1. Advocating to build gender just Universities. Critical in building a gender just University is to build a University culture that foregrounds the ways in which sexual violence is carried out, identifies these forms of violence, and clearly communicates the position of the University in the context of gender violence. Prevention of gender violence is tied to an explicit stance that the University ought to be pushed to take regarding the culture of violence, its complicity within this culture, and its commitment to cultural change. Educational opportunities for students and other stakeholders ought to be created for identifying sexual violence and for fostering behaviours that prevent various forms of violence. From orientation programs for various internal and external stakeholders, to training programs for University leadership, to mechanisms for evaluating various stakeholders including University leadership, sexual violence ought to be placed at the center. Centering sexual violence in various processes, training programs, and evaluation mechanisms creates a framework for social change in the culture of University life. The role of advocacy is crucial as a site for holding the University to account, pushing for institutional processes and at the same time critically evaluating these institutions processes.

2. Advocating to build internal University structures for addressing sexual violence. Given the health threats, violation of fundamental human rights, and challenges to student performance posed by sexual violence, it is crucial to advocate locally and globally for creating explicit policies on sexual violence. Various forms of sexual violence need to be clearly defined, and students ought to have access to platforms for shaping the definition of sexual violence through accounts of their everyday lived experiences. Universities ought to have clearly defined structures for lodging complaints about sexual violence and for seeking justice. Given the complicity of power in reproducing sexual violence and in benefitting from it, the anchors of advocacy ought to emerge from outside of the structures of power, maintaining a dialectical relationship with power.

3. Developing clear standards of communication. Given the complexities in the definition of terms and experiences of sexual violence, building clear standards of communication addresses the uncertainty around sexual violence. Students coming into the University ought to be offered programs that seek to build literacy around sexual violence, grounded in conversations that connects across contexts and builds on local experiences. Communicating about the standards is particularly critical, given the hegemony of patriarchal cultural norms and given the ways in which culture is often used as a patriarchal tool for legitimating violence. Moreover, drawing on student experiences that are situated in the local context, anchors need to be created for disrupting culturally legitimized forms of sexual violence within Universities as local sites.

4. Developing clear and accessible channels of communication. Because the experiences of sexual violence are often embedded in relationships of power, developing clear and accessible channels of communication ensure student participation. When a student experiences sexual violence, he/she should understand where to go to, whom to speak to, and how to go about reporting the incidence of sexual violence. These channels however ought to be located at a critical distance from the structures for organizing power in Universities, and ought to be linked with mechanisms for seeking social justice outside the University. This is particularly salient, given the institutionalization of mechanisms of complaint that then get co-opted in logics of power.

5. Developing mechanisms of protection of targets who report. Because Universities are embedded in fundamental power inequalities, the structures ought to ensure that the student reporting the incidence of sexual violence is adequately protected from repercussions from the structures. This is particularly critical given the close proximity of power to the enablement of sexual violence and the closing in of ranks around the perpetrator, with those in power often being complicit in carrying out the culture of sexual violence. In addressing stigma and retaliation that might be related to reporting of sexual violence, broader networks of solidarity need to be built to hold University structures to account.

6. Developing cultures of witnessing. Sexual violence thrives amid cultures of silence, where patriarchal practices embedded in power foster disempowering logics (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). The silences around sexual violence are broken through the building of communicative cultures of witnessing, where those witnessing acts of sexual violence speak out, report, and offer accounts of the violence to hold perpetrators accountable (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). These acts of witnessing also counter the culture of “airbrushing” widely adopted in neoliberal universities, driven by metrics and likely to “sweep the issue under the carpet” (Phipps, 2018). To witness and then to communicate what is witnessed through channels outside of the University framework resist such silencing and airbrushing. Bystander programs that specifically encourage those witnessing the acts of sexual violence to speak up and speak out have been found to be effective across cultural contexts in preventing and responding to sexual violence (Coker, Cook-Craig, Williams, Fisher, Clear, Garcia, & Hegge, 2011; Potter, Moynihan, Stapleton, & Banyard, 2009).

The cultures of invisibility and silence are disrupted through the accounts of witnessing (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004).

7. Building sustained evidence. Cultures of sexual violence are perpetuated through the absence of accounts of violence. Building a sustained body of evidence on incidences of sexual violence on University campuses is a key resource for efforts of advocacy. For a large number of Universities globally, transparent mechanisms for documenting and reporting sexual violence are absent. This erasure of data is further enabled by the airbrushing strategies of neoliberal Universities where risk management and reputation management take precedence over a moral and ethical framework of addressing the problem. Sexual violence thus becomes a public relations problem for media management post-hoc rather than a systematic cultural problem that needs to be examined and addressed structurally. In the face of such strategies of “sweeping things under the carpet” that University administrators typically employ, building an infrastructure of evidence is a key tool for advocating for change.

Communicative strategies for advocacy

1. Communication advocacy is critical to social justice. To change the cultures of sexual violence that constitute Universities is to strategically use communication toward creating new meanings and anchors for social change. The individualization of sexual violence that often blames the target and simultaneously erases the account of sexual violence is a problem of organizational culture. To achieve and sustain a significant change in organizational culture therefore collective action plays a key role, with a sustained movement that emerges with substantive student involvement. The recognition that Universities are patriarchal organizations, embedded in culturally legitimized forms of power, offers an anchor for challenging the normative frameworks that constitute Universities. The role of communication advocacy as an anchor of social change is in explicit and direct opposition to the organizational culture of sexual violence.

2. Changing meaning formations. The hegemonic meanings of sexual violence normalize sexual violence, often carried out by men occupying positions of power (Dougherty, 2001). For instance, you might have instances of a Professor pressuring a student into sex in exchange for grades. You might have other instances of a Head of a Department pressuring graduate students into a sexual relationship. You might have a departmental culture of faculty members coercing students into sexual relationships. These acts of sexual violence are legitimized through the networks of power. Therefore, the entry point of change is the very de-centering of the dominant meanings of sex, violence, and power (Dougherty, 2001). Dominant meaning formations are disrupted through the telling of stories by those that have been targets of sexual harassment (Wood, 1992). The stories shared by targets of sexual violence interrogate and thus resist the dominant meanings formations in patriarchal cultures that circulate and normalize practices of sexual violence.

3. Deploying disruptive communication channels. Whereas modes of communication within the institution do offer key mechanisms for dialogue, these modes of communication available to advocates and activists are often themselves embedded within dominant logics. Communication for change therefore needs to be disruptive, deploying communication tools that challenge the status quo and that work outside of the disciplinary powers of institutional norms. Tools such as social media, albeit constituted within patriarchal logics, offer opportunities for collectivization and for centering the voices of those that have been systematically subjected to violence and erased (Isaacs, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, forthcoming). Similarly, channels that offer sites for naming and shaming perpetrators, academic administrators and universities disrupt the acts of airbrushing continually deployed by Universities. Communication as disruption continually seeks communicative channels that challenge the status quo through explicit forms of confrontation with the patriarchal structure.

4. Creating communicative infrastructures. The culture-centered approach (CCA) to social change communication foregrounds the salient role of communication infrastructures in listening to the voices of the margins (Dutta, 2011). The culturally sanctioned sites of sexual violence on University campuses across the globe systematically uphold practices of sexual violence through the erasure of the voices of those who have been subjected to violence. Therefore, communication infrastructures are critical to disrupting these erasures, working outside the norms of dominant institutional powers and logics. Naming and shaping for instance offer sites of confronting the strategies of silencing through airbrushing deployed by neoliberal universities. Similarly, communication channels such as WhatsApp and Twitter emerge as communication channels for sharing information, preventive resources, and warning about potential perpetrators of sexual violence. These communication channels often organically shared by students within student networks offer key resources of education and seeking justice outside of the institutional processes of the University. Communicative infrastructures for naming are particularly critical in the backdrop of the pressures to be silent exerted by Universities.

5. Sustaining through collaborations. Given the nature of sexual violence across Universities locally and globally, collaborations are key to sustaining sites and processes of social change. The sustainability of movements connected across various sites of sexual violence contributes to social change through an overarching momentum for change. The linkage between various activist movements across spaces offer lessons learned as well as opportunities for sharing best practices for creating and sustaining change.

6. Creating practices and sites of reflexivity. Given the continual embedding of social change processes within hegemonic sites of reproducing sexual violence, the CCA foregrounds reflexivity as a tool that continually questions the workings of power. Particularly salient here is the co-optation of change frameworks within institutional mechanisms as processes for addressing sexual violence become institutionalized.

Close attention to the ways in which power erases narratives and experiences of violence disrupts the hegemonic incorporation of change processes within dominant institutional structures in ways that benefit these structures and keep patriarchal violence intact.

Activist movements seeking justice on sexual violence in University campuses would continue to retain their transformative impulse through a reflexive stance that interrogates and disrupts the incorporation into power.

In this advocacy brief, we have outlined the epidemic of sexual violence on University campuses across the globe. Drawing on examples and lessons learned from the literature and from case studies, we have then outlined various communicative processes that ought to be the goals of change advocacy, as well as the communicative tools that might be deployed toward addressing these goals.

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