

Sexual violence and harassment

In January 2021, the Ontario government announced it would be proposing changes to sexual violence policies in post-secondary institutions with the hope of creating safer campuses and reducing the fear and stigma associated with sexual violence. These changes serve as one of many steps forward in reducing sexual violence on campus. However, greater awareness of sexual violence, its impacts, fear and stigma are still needed.




SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND CONSENT

What is sexual violence?

The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, any unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim/survivor in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.” Though there may be the desire to judge the severity of the assault and dismiss those that are not physically injured, sexual violence is not about the physical force of an assault but the emotional implications of having your choice and autonomy taken away. Cases of sexual violence are known to be widely underreported. Many victims of sexual violence and harassment fear coming forward due to the potential backlash, stigma and judgment involved.

Campuses are still working at understanding sexual violence and its impacts. It can be a struggle to obtain disciplinary measures on the perpetrator. The few supports that are available are often difficult to access or non-existent (Canadian Federation of University Women, 2016). A first step in correcting this is to look at why sexual violence is so common.

A stylized illustration of a university building in shades of purple and blue. The building has multiple stories, arched windows, and a central entrance. A flag is flying from a pole on the roof. The building is set against a dark blue background.

“SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS MOST COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD AS AN INDIVIDUALIZED PROBLEM, RATHER THAN AS A POLITICAL, SOCIAL PHENOMENON, AND IS OFTEN ATTRIBUTABLE TO CERTAIN TRAITS AND BEHAVIOURS OF OFFENDERS OR VICTIMS. IN THIS VIEW, SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMMING IS DIRECTED TO CHANGING VICTIMS’ BEHAVIOUR THROUGH RESISTANCE TRAINING.”

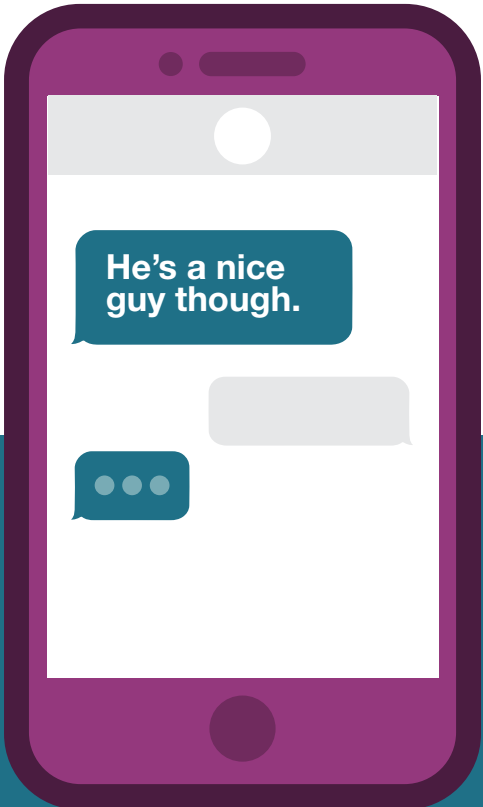
(QUINLAN ET AL., 2017. P. 63)

UNDERSTANDING RAPE CULTURE

RAPE CULTURE: Society that perpetuates and normalizes sexual violence and rape, and encourages sexual aggression. This includes casual use of the word “rape” and non-physical acts as stated above.

Rape culture is part of the patriarchal society that is embedded in our culture. It is in institutions in which we work and go to school. Rape and lack of consent are often viewed as being different, but they are not. In a study examining whether college men have engaged in forced sex acts, over six per cent said they had, provided that the word “rape” wasn’t used in the question (Lisak, 2002). Many perpetrators do not think of their actions as rape or sexual assault, which may stem from a society where boys are taught that to be a “man,” you must show aggression and domination (Brentz, 2014). Rape culture is protected by all people, including both men and women, by guarding male stereotypes as uninhibited aggressors with no control over their sexual desires.

THIS LANGUAGE INCLUDES:



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Rape culture is all around us. It acts to normalize, trivialize and encourage sexual violence. Social environments foster gender inequality that results in women experiencing high rates of violence. Mainstream popular culture also eroticizes sexual violence. Many movies romanticize the idea of sexual violence. A controlling relationship is often portrayed as protective and loving, thus creating the idea that sexual violence can be OK if the person loves you.



FEAR OF COMING FORWARD: WHY PEOPLE DON'T REPORT



BEING BLAMED

Some of the experiences that individuals face when coming forward to report an assault are being asked what they did to contribute to this act, such as drinking, choice of clothing, dating the person, leading someone on or being in a neighbourhood perceived as dangerous. Any actions of the victim are not an invitation for assault. They should not be blamed.



NOT BEING BELIEVED

Knowing the accused or survivor may make them difficult to believe based on your pre-existing relationship. You may think something like that can't happen on campus. Know that very few people make false sexual violence accusations, and it can be even more terrifying accusing someone that has positive relations or power within the institution.

NO CONTROL OVER THE OUTCOMES

When there is a disclosure, individuals are often asked to retell their trauma many times and they may be questioned, blamed or silenced. This can be traumatizing. It is important to know the institution's policy and procedure before you recommend next steps to someone, or take them yourself. People have a right to control their disclosure.

KNOWING THE PERPETRATOR/RETALIATION

In a campus environment, you might know the perpetrator about which an individual disclosed an assault. Individuals who are disclosing can be afraid to tell others who it is based on that individual's power, social position, and accusations.



NO REPRESENTATION

Racialized people and other marginalized groups are often underrepresented in occupations such as policing, security, counselling, faculty and other positions on campus. Those that they report to are more likely to be white and cis-gendered. Those in higher-ranked positions are also more likely to be male. This can make reporting more difficult for survivors, especially those in marginalized groups. All white staff may not understand the multiplicity and intersectionality of being in an equity-deserving group and have an unconscious bias that could affect their disclosure.



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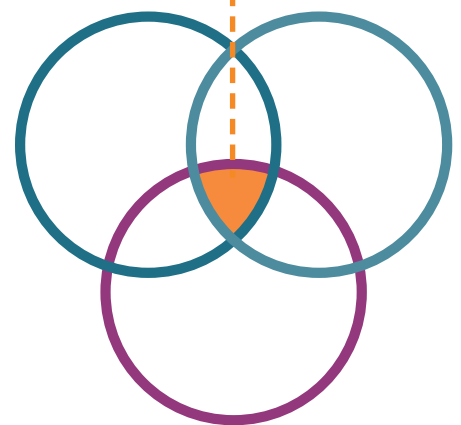
INTERSECTIONALITY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

INSECTIONALITY: Individual characteristics that interconnect and overlap to make unique and complex experiences of oppression.

The importance of intersectionality is often lost when thinking about sexual violence. Cis-women are not the only victims of sexual violence, and sexual violence is not a single-issue social phenomenon. Certain populations are at greater risk based on multiple oppressions and social determinants of health, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender diversity, age, class, and religion, to name a few.

Indigenous people are at a greater risk because of the racist and colonial ideas that generally disregard Indigenous people and the lives of Indigenous women. We all work within society and institutions that were built with colonialist ideals, which creates colonial violence. This violence intersects with gender inequality creating unique risks for Indigenous women (missing and murdered Indigenous women).

Institutions should strive to develop policies that stem from the reality of sexual violence on campus. It is not an individual problem but rather a larger systemic issue in which everyone participates. Policies should focus on the unique challenges for survivors and work to foster a larger community of equality (Quinlan et al., 2017). A culture of equality ensures all students and those who work on campuses can participate in what the campus offers. Acknowledging oppression and its forms of exclusion can help foster a culture of equality.



The rate of violent victimization for Indigenous women is **3X HIGHER** than the rate for non-Indigenous women.

PROVIDING THE RIGHT SUPPORT

- Don't focus on why the victim/survivor was there or other components preceding the assault.
- Focus on validating their feelings, believing them and offering support.
- Not every survivor/victim wants to go to the police or talk about their assault. Just being supportive is valuable.
- You can suggest options for next steps, but it is up to the individual to choose what works for them. Even if you disagree, work with them and support them to find the best way to move forward.
- Learn how your campus may be perpetuating gender inequality. This might be types of course offerings, sports/clubs offered, events hosted, etc.
- The needs of all people who experience sexual violence are not the same. People need different spaces and supports offered. This is especially true for marginalized groups and Indigenous women. Include marginalized people in creating space and support on campus.
- Work to reduce rape culture on campus. Call on people to use language that doesn't normalize sexual violence.
- Reach out to others who are doing the same work and get support.