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Learning from survivors: Reporting parties' perspectives on how higher education institutions should address gender-based violence and harassment

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Abstract

Tackling gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) is an essential step for addressing gender inequality. This article applies theories of student/survivor 'voice' to accounts from interviewees ($n = 35$), analysing their perspectives on how higher education institutions (HEIs) should address this issue. Interviewees were current or former students in the United Kingdom who had disclosed or reported GBVH to their HEIs. The most urgent step that interviewees called for is open discussion of GBVH and how HEIs are handling it. They also want more education, prevention and early intervention, and changes in how reports are handled. These findings are contextualised within a critical discussion of how reporting parties' voices are, or could be, heard within higher education. It argues that institutional mechanisms for hearing survivors' voice in relation to GBVH may need to differ from approaches for engaging with students on other issues, most notably by taking into account how power relations shape voices.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) are both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality (Strid et al., 2023, p. 55) in higher education (HE) as well as in wider society. While, as Strid et al. (2023, p. 52) note there is 'a complex relationship between gender equality and violence against women', such violence and its impacts are gendered, as women and trans/non-binary people are much more likely to be targeted and men are more likely to perpetrate this violence (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; MacNeela et al., 2022; National Union of Students & The 1752 Group, 2018). Nevertheless, there is evidence that reporting processes remain ineffective (Ahmed, 2021; Bedera, 2022; Bull & Shannon, 2023; Oman & Bull, 2022) and may even be in themselves discriminatory (Bull et al., 2021).

There are increasing calls to draw on the voices of survivors of GBVH in tackling this issue. For example, discussing the US context, as Susan Marine notes, 'centering survivor voices is imperative to understanding the significant impact sexual violence has on student lives and futures' (Marine, 2018, p. 62). In the United Kingdom, Geoghegan-Fittall et al. (2023) call for 'more victim-survivor centred, indeed person-centred, research and practice'. Alongside these calls, within higher education studies there is an increasing interest in 'student voice' (Raaper et al., 2023). In this journal, discussions of student voice have explored challenges in student participation in university governance (Tamrat, 2020) and students' preferences for collegial, partnership-based approaches to engagement (van der Velden, 2012) but have not yet linked discussions of student voice with tackling GBVH.

A group that represents both student voices and survivor voices are students who have reported GBVH to their higher education institution (HEI). As such, they have valuable perspectives on GBVH in higher education (HE) due to their lived experience of attempting to navigate institutional systems to tackle this issue. As Page et al. (2019) have argued,

> Those who must navigate and use faulty procedures develop intricate knowledge of how these particular systems work or fail to work. For example, following a failed or ineffective complaints and investigation process, an institutional response might be salvaged by drawing on the lived experience of survivor-complainants in order to reform these policies and practices. (Page et al., 2019, p. 1319)

And yet, reporting parties' voices appear to be seldom heard in institutional policy-making, despite guidance that requires HEIs in England and Wales to 'learn [...] from the experience of students who have been involved in reports or investigations' (Office for Students, 2021: 4). While there is an increasing focus on hearing the voices of reporting parties in research (Bull & Rye, 2018; Bedera, 2022; Holland & Cipriano, 2021; Shannon & Bull, 2024), those who have reported—or attempted to report—GBVH to their institution remain an under-represented group in research and policy-making. This is surprising as tackling GBVH in HE is an area of growing policy and research interest internationally (Huck et al., 2022; National Academies, 2018; Office for Students, 2021).

This article, therefore, discusses the perspectives of student survivors of GBVH who disclosed or reported their experiences to their institution on how HEIs should address this issue. It draws on data from student participants in two interview-based studies, one carried out in 2018 interviewing students about GBVH from academic staff; and a second carried out in 2020–2021 including interviews with students about reporting GBVH to their institution. The article contextualises these findings within a discussion of how reporting parties' voices are, or could be, heard within higher education. It builds on existing literature in two ways: first, by paying attention to the perspectives of survivors who have been through reporting processes in order to inform institutional responses; and second, by bringing academic and practice work on 'student voice' in higher education (Raaper et al., 2023) into dialogue with work on activism and representation of GBVH survivors in HE.

The article first outlines theorisations of 'student voice' in higher education, contextualising this literature within discussions of 'transformative justice' for GBVH. It then outlines existing research to explore where survivors' and reporting parties' voices are already heard within HE. The studies which this article draws on are

then introduced as well as the specific context for this study—UK higher education—before the article turns to a thematic analysis of the data and a discussion of which theorisations of voice are most appropriate for hearing survivors' voices.

1.1 | Theorising student/survivor voice

As Raaper et al. note, there exist different conceptualisations of student voice in literature on higher education, including student activism, student representation and governance and pedagogical partnership; the authors argue that 'each can be understood as a distinct form of student voice' (Raaper et al., 2023, p. 1). Jerusha Conner puts forward a theorisation of student voice across two 'core dimensions':

> whether students are speaking for themselves or for their peers, and whether their voice is invited and authorized by the institution or asserted in the absence of such invitations. Grouping instantiations of student voice along these two dimensions allows us to name four broad types of student voice: self-report, self-advocacy, representation/governance, and activism. (Conner, 2023, p. 18)

This framework has the advantage of clarity and simplicity. In addition, it is helpful to include both individual and collective dimensions of 'voice', institutionalised methods of data collection, and extra-institutional voicing.

Nevertheless, this framework needs to be adapted to make it appropriate for hearing reporting parties' voices. First, it needs to include 'institutional listening' as well as simply speaking. As Susan Oman and I have (2022) described, GBVH survivors as well as students speaking up about mental wellbeing issues experience 'institutional listening while silencing' in that initially sympathetic responses are subsequently undermined by inadequate institutional actions. Indeed, in theorising 'pupil voice' in schools, Lundy (2007, p. 931) argues that 'voice is not enough' and puts forward a theorisation of pupil voice that includes 'audience' and 'influence'—which capture policy requirements for 'the right to have [pupil's] views given due weight'. Other helpful theorisations of voice include those from Hart and from Cook-Sather, both of whom focus on decision-making. This involves 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives' (Hart, 1992: 5) or 'having a legitimate perspective, presence, and role in decision-making at the classroom, institutional, or educational systems level' (Cook-Sather, 2006). Conner's typology can, therefore, be amended to include elements of decision-making, audience or influence within each of its four dimensions.

Second, the ways in which voices are shaped or elicited by the power relations of the space needs to be accounted for (Arnot & Reay, 2007). As Arnot and Reay outline, **'t**he student voices heard in process of consultation are not in fact independently constructed "voices" rather they are "the messages" created by particular pedagogic contexts (Arnot & Reay, 2007, pp. 317–318). Instead, Arnot and Reay suggest adopting a 'sociology of pedagogic voice' (Arnot & Reay, 2007, p. 323), which recognises the ways in which social identities shape voice; how the 'surface expressions in student talk' may be different to 'tacit voice' (Arnot & Reay, 2007, p. 323); and, drawing on Bernstein, that some 'messages' remain at the level of 'sub-voices' or the 'yet to be voiced' (Arnot & Reay, 2007, p. 318). This theorisation of voice is particularly important when exploring students' ability to speak out about GBVH. The possibility of labelling and speaking about GBVH are shaped by the gender power relations of the institution and the institutional hierarchies that may intersect with or compound gender inequalities (Bull, 2023). As Jackson and Sundaram (2020) explain, GBVH has been invisibilised and minimised in higher education, which may render it—as with gender inequality more widely—'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014). This is a stark example of how 'voice' is shaped by the power relations of the space (Arnot & Reay, 2007).

A final theorisation of 'voice'—even if it is not usually understood as such—are theories of justice for GBVH survivors. Being heard—having a voice—for many survivors, forms part of their 'justice needs' (Daly, 2011). Here, we return to Lundy's assertion that 'voice is not enough'; voices need to have audience and influence. Theories

of justice—most notably in this context, 'transformative justice'—enable voice through social transformation and/or interpersonal recognition of harm (Daly, 2011, p. 20; Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017, p. 207). Transformative justice 'seeks to disrupt the underlying structural and cultural causes of violence and inequality' (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017, p. 207); as such, it can also be seen as a form of activism (as discussed below). This perspective is also helpful for listening to the voices of survivors of GBVH as it is a reminder that 'voice', in this context, needs to include recognition of the harms done, whether in experience(s) of GBVH themselves, and/or in institutional and social responses following these experiences.

It can be seen that, in listening to the voices of survivors of GBVH, general theorisations of (student) voice may not be sufficient or appropriate. Below, the usefulness of these different theorisations of voice will be explored. First, however, this article examines ways in which the voices of survivors who report GBVH are currently heard within HEIs.

1.2 | How are survivors' and reporting parties' voices heard within HEIs?

I have outlined elsewhere two levels on which survivors speak out about GBVH in HE: first, by disclosing or reporting their experiences when they occur, and second through (attempting to) participate in institutional and educational-systems-level structures for addressing this issue (Bull, 2023). In Conner's framework, the first level could be understood as self-reporting and self-advocacy, that is, on the level of the individual, and the second as representation or activism, that is, speaking for others. Here, however, I organise existing literature across the other axis of Conner's framework: first examining ways in which survivor voice is 'invited' by HEIs through self-reporting and representation before turning to self-advocacy and activism.

Student involvement in GBVH prevention and response varies by context. In the United States, Bloom et al. (2022, p.3574) note that 'a group of students who are often left out of conversations about SVSH prevention and education efforts are survivors themselves' as 'students are rarely asked to be part of evaluating, improving, or informing SVSH prevention, response, or policy change efforts', and Krause et al. (2017) note that students have been primarily seen as objects of study, rather than agents of change. However, participatory projects involving student/survivor voice exist elsewhere in the world (Magudulela, 2017), and in the United Kingdom there have been incentives in policy and funding to include student and survivor voice in initiatives to tackle GBVH. For example, an evaluation of funding provided to over 60 HEIs across the United Kingdom (Baird et al., 2019) found that this funding led to an increase in student-led activity in this area, which students tended to evaluate positively (p. 45), although lack of diversity among student groups involved was an issue (p. 46). Nevertheless, 'the involvement of students making reports or those responding to allegations in developing providers' strategic response to the [...] recommendations was low across all providers' (p. 45).

Involving victim–survivors' voices is becoming a stronger part of the regulatory landscape in England; the regulatory body for higher education, the Office for Students, require that 'higher education providers should appropriately engage with students to develop and evaluate systems, policies and processes to address harassment and sexual misconduct' including 'learning from the experience of students who have been involved in reports or investigations' (Office for Students, 2021, p. 4). In an evaluation of the impact of the statement of expectations carried out in 2022 in which 68 higher/further education institutions responded to a cluster-based random sample survey, while 77% of these institutions had engaged with students' unions on this issue, only around one-third of respondents had engaged with reporting and responding students and/or victim–survivors to develop and/or evaluate their approach (SUMS Consulting, 2022a, p. 44).

This study did not give any detail of *how* this engagement was occurring. However, Dickinson and Blake (2022, pp. 328–329) put forward a typology of three ways in which students may be brought into this work. First, as a strategic partner, for example, an elected students' union representative may sit on a working group or committee; second, as facilitators/deliverers, for example, students may be involved in delivering or supporting bespoke

interventions; and third, as evaluators, for example, students may be invited to participate in activity that evaluates existing provision and processes, or critiques ideas for improving them (Dickinson & Blake, 2022, p. 329). The authors caution that in drawing on the services of survivor volunteers, 'we have seen students "re-traumatised" by their participation and thus withdrawing – at worst such "engagement" can be both exploitative and damaging' (Dickinson & Blake, 2022, p. 325). Furthermore, those survivors who do come forward may not be fully representative of student survivors (Dickinson & Blake, 2022, p. 325).

It can therefore be seen that in the UK context—perhaps unlike the United States—there exist mechanisms and structures for hearing student, and sometimes survivor voices. Nevertheless, it appears to be rare that institutions elicit the voices of those who have gone through sexual misconduct reporting processes. As van der Velden (2012) notes, surveys are the preferred approach for 'student engagement' or engaging student voice in the marketised UK HE context. Surveys do sometimes ask how respondents think their HEI would—hypothetically—respond to reports (MacNeela et al., 2022, p. 55) or analyse responses from reporting parties (National Union of Students & The 1752 Group, 2018). However, in the UK context while some surveys of GBVH have been carried out at institution-level, the data has rarely been published (Bull et al., 2022). Furthermore, survey methods do not give reporting parties opportunity to feed back to their institutions about their experience of reporting. As a result, it is not surprising that survivors find other ways of speaking out, for example by speaking to their discipline in peer-reviewed journals (Cardwell & Hitchen, 2022), speaking out on social media (Anitha et al., 2020), and by engaging in activism on this issue, an area in which there is a growing academic literature (Lewis & Marine, 2019; Marine & Lewis, 2020; Page et al., 2019).

As Conner (2023, p. 11) argues, 'one of the purest expressions of student voice [is] student activism'. Lewis and Marine (2019) and Marine and Lewis (2020) suggest that activism to address GBVH in HE is often a transformative project, whereby students and staff aim to go beyond 'compliance' or 'implementation' and instead aim to transform higher education cultures. Activism can also allow diversity and contradictions between survivor/student voices to emerge. And as Anitha et al. (2020, p. 16) argue, analysing the List of Sexual Harassers published in India in 2017, it can achieve goals that university reporting processes may not:

> (1) it provided publicly accessible information about who perpetrators are (or may be) to other students for their own safety planning, (2) it reversed the shame that has historically been attached to victims/survivors of sexual violence by shifting the focus from the victims to (alleged) perpetrators of violence, and (3) it required a far less intensive investment of time and energy from survivors than engaging in cumbersome, often re-traumatising adjudication processes that commonly fail to centre survivors' safety and dignity.

One important way in which survivors' voices are being heard within HEIs is therefore through activism. This may also blur the boundary with 'self-advocacy'; as Ahmed (2021) notes, reporting parties often have to become activists, such as by forming 'complaint collectives' to navigate HEIs' processes. However, if institutions were listening to survivors' and complainants' voices in ways that allowed them to be heard, they would be have less need to turn to activism. Recent waves of activism around GBVH in HE should, therefore, be leading institutions to implement meaningful and effective ways of listening to survivors' voices.

Against this background, this article asks, what would institutions hear if they listened to reporting parties, and how are reporting parties' voices shaped by their institutional and social context? First, however, I outline the context and methods for the studies this article draws on.

2 | CONTEXT AND METHODS

This article draws on two studies from the UK context. It is beyond the scope of this article to give a full outline of the policy landscape in the United Kingdom (see Humphreys & Towl, 2020), but tackling GBVH in HE has been

on the policy agenda formally since 2016 (Universities UK, 2016), following many years of activism on this issue (National Union of Students, 2010).

The first study this article draws on (Study one) was carried out in 2018, involving interviews (carried out by the author) about GBVH from academic staff with 15 students. They were recruited via survey respondents to the study Power in the Academy (National Union of Students & The 1752 Group, 2018) who had indicated willingness to participate in a follow-up interview ($n = 11$) as well as via social media ($n = 5$). Study two involved interviews carried out in 2020–2021 with 21 current or former students—all recruited via social media—about reporting GBVH to their institutions since 2016 (whether perpetrated by staff or students). One student was interviewed for both studies as she went through two reporting experiences, therefore the total number of interviewees is 35. Nine were international students, and 26 UK students. For those whose racial identity was known, 24 were white, three were South Asian, two mixed race and one Black. Level of study (5 MA students, 13 undergraduate students and 17 PhD students) is dominated by PhD students, reflecting the focus in the first study and of the campaign group who led on recruitment, of staff–student sexual misconduct. As a result, questions of power relations are particularly present in the data.

For both studies, sampling was opportunistic. The sampling criteria were current students who had experienced anything they defined as sexual misconduct while at university, and had disclosed or reported this to their university. While staff survivors were also included in the study, their data are not reported on here due to the theoretical focus on student voice. Both studies followed a feminist epistemology (Wise & Stanley, 1993), explicitly drawing on reporting parties' voices to create changes in policy and practice. In particular, the six principles laid out by Campbell et al. for interviewing survivors of sexual violence were followed (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 601), along with their recommendation that interviewees have expertise about rape including at least 40 hours of training. The interview approach also included giving interviewees explicit choice and control over the interview space wherever possible (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 611; Shannon, 2022).

Ethical review of both studies was provided by the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities Ethics Committee. Interviewees were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and remove any identifying information, as well as to withdraw from the study entirely at this stage (although no interviewees chose this option). Before the interview, participants were offered the opportunity of an informal discussion about participation, and a debrief was held immediately after the interview to discuss pseudonymisation and carry out a welfare check. Interviewees were sent copies of the public reports coming out of both studies ahead of publication to allow them to check they were comfortable with their pseudonymisation and quotations used. Interviewees had different orientations to their participation in this research; some wanted to stay involved in the work (e.g. offering their accounts for use in training materials; Bull, 2022a) while others wanted to participate so that their experiences could contribute towards positive change, but preferred minimal engagement with the research process.

The interviews focused on experiences of GBVH (study one) and reporting to their institution (studies one and two). After being given the space to outline their experiences, interviewees were asked, 'while it's not your responsibility to solve this problem, do you have any thoughts on what HEIs can do to better to address gender-based violence and harassment?' The data from these responses are analysed here.

It is important to consider how the research context shaped the voices in these accounts. The interviews captured interviewees' perspectives at one particular moment; it is possible that interviewees' perspectives would have changed over time if a longitudinal method had been chosen. Their voices were also shaped by both studies being carried out by a researcher who led a campaigning organisation in this space [redacted for anonymity]. This meant that interviewees were aware of the feminist politics of the research; this context also shaped the sampling in that people who had had poor experiences may have been more likely to participate through being aware of the campaigning organisation.

For this article, data from both studies was analysed together. Data analysis involved inductive thematic analysis of responses to the question above, contextualising responses within a narrative summary of each interview to ensure that interviewees' perspectives were understood in the context of their experiences. Analysis involved

examining responses to the question above from both studies, summarising interviewees' responses to the question above into headings, using their own words wherever possible, as well as identifying illustrative quotes. These summaries were categorised into a list of seven provisional themes, which were then reviewed to reach the three top-level themes outlined below. These themes were then examined, and are discussed below, in dialogue with the different theorisations of 'voice' as outlined above.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Open discussion and change in attitudes

Across both studies, the overwhelming concern of interviewees was for transparency and openness from their institutions in relation to GBVH. They argued that the sector, disciplinary communities, and institutions need to admit there is a problem. This approach should include more awareness-raising, openness and communication within institutions about this issue and how institutions are tackling it. The suggested focus of these open discussions varied according to the positionality of interviewees and the experiences they had had, but a common theme was to have 'a more open discussion that this is happening all the time' which would 'help people who've been affected by it [so] that people feel like they can come forward'.

Interviewees who had been abused by staff/faculty while they were students had a specific take on this recommendation. They wanted more conversations about power and grooming, and steps taken to avoid staff–student sexual/romantic relationships being normalised. Courtney, who was in an abusive relationship with a lecturer as an undergraduate student, argued for:

> having the conversation out in the open in a way which... like a conversation around consent and power that centres the teacher's or the staff's responsibility and also centres, I suppose, cultural shifts where someone wouldn't feel so scared to report or confront another member of staff.

Students who had been targeted by other students wanted HEIs to recognise the scale of the issue. As undergraduate student Joanna argued, universities need to take responsibility for the situation that is being created for new students, addressing culture and consent among freshers:

> I think the attitude that we have, "Oh, you have turned 18? Alright, that is your problem now," is just not helpful at all. [...] A lot of 18-year-olds starting in September six months ago were still asking for permission to go to the loo. Do you know what I mean? You can't just dump us in the acid like that.

Similarly, undergraduate student Victoria argued that 'I think actually recognising that this is a serious problem across British campuses is the first step'.

Reporting parties had a privileged perspective on the discrepancy between public and private messaging on GBVH, as undergraduate student Chisimdi commented:

> I think less trying to spin this and how well we did and more trying to be open, and I think one thing which would be really helpful is if they just took accountability for it [...] it just felt like they wanted to like keep [my report] a secret, not make it their problem, but it felt really unfair in that way.

This 'institutional airbrushing' (Phipps, 2018, p. 230) was described by another student survivor, Jennifer, who noted that:

> my institution prides itself [...] on being a leader in the UK at this stuff. They hold these big conferences and workshops about it, to show exactly what they're doing. [...] It all just seems a very flowery show. Then you try to do something, and they're like, "Actually, this process is horrible. It's there for you, but it's going to actually be horrible and traumatic."

In contrast, a positive example of openness and transparency came from a disciplinary rather than institutional context. Helen was a PhD student who was targeted for an abusive relationship by a lecturer in her department. Subsequently to this experience, she noticed her disciplinary community starting to tackle sexual harassment and gender inequality. She argued that the two things that had made a difference to addressing sexual harassment in her discipline were more women being hired, and also continuing conversations about the problem, for example, at international conferences:

> The national meetings here and in the US, they'll have at least one plenary session on sexual harassment or more, just broadly, all harassment [...] They're making it part of the main plenary session, rather than only one session a tiny room somewhere, so it's "No, this is a thing that you should all be going to, and we will shame you if you don't" rather than just the niche thing that only the women go to. The first couple of times they did it, the room was mainly women and a few men in there, and now the rooms are full.

Such calls for openness and transparency—which echoes the perspectives of undergraduate students in the United States (Bloom et al., 2022, p. 3570)—can be theorised as part of a transformative justice approach to tackling GBVH. Similarly to Fileborn and Vera-Grey's (2017, p. 222) study of responses to street harassment, 'social and cultural transformation [is] the concrete form of relief sought'. This is a direct contrast to many HEIs' approaches, for example, Phipps (2018) and Jackson and Sundaram (2020) argue that HEIs 'airbrush' and 'invisibilise' GBVH. However, while, Fileborn and Vera-Grey (2017, p. 223) found that their participants were not clear on 'what this transformation would actually entail and how it could be achieved', reporting parties in this study were clear that this openness and transparency would in itself contribute to transformation of HEIs (Marine & Lewis, 2020), as well as to prevention, through raising awareness which would enable others to recognise GBVH when it happened to them, as explored in the next theme.

3.2 | Education, prevention and early intervention

As described above, survivors' 'voices' are not simply waiting to be discovered but are shaped through the ways in which it is possible to speak within a particular context (Arnot & Reay, 2007). The possibility of labelling GBVH and speaking about it is shaped by gendered power relations and whether GBVH (and sexism/gender inequality) is 'speakable' in a particular space (Fileborn, 2019; Gill, 2014). This lens is important in understanding the second theme in this data, around education, prevention and early intervention. Interviewees' accounts revealed that awareness-raising was needed so that survivors would have more access to language to describe their experiences and would know that these experiences were 'speakable' within their institution or higher education community.

First, interviewees described wishing they had had more understanding of GBVH so that they could have recognised what was happening to them earlier. Notably, this awareness-raising was particularly commented on by international students of colour. For example, Sara, an undergraduate student who was groomed and sexually harassment by her dissertation supervisor, commented on her own lack of awareness about this issue, which meant that when her supervisor was 'gaslighting me and abusing me, I didn't recognise it at all'. Similarly, international PhD student Xun, who was groomed and assaulted by a staff member, noted that there was compulsory training for PhD students on research ethics and other research-related issues, but wondered why there could not also be compulsory training on how to recognise harassment, abuses of power and grooming. Students targeted by other

students held similar views. Zainab, a UK student who was raped by a fellow student during her first few days at university, argued that 'education around consent [which many HEIs offer] isn't enough'; better understanding of the impacts of sexual violence was needed, for example.

As well as training for themselves, interviewees wanted appropriate training for staff so they would recognise GBVH and know where to signpost people, and for staff handling reports to have specialist knowledge of GBVH. Alongside this, in keeping with the high proportion of the sample in these studies who had been targeted by academic staff, interviewees wanted clearer standards of behaviour for staff/faculty, including clearer guidance on staff–student relationships. Such views on professional boundaries are in line with wider survey findings from Bull et al. (2023). In addition, Kelly, who had been groomed and abused by her lecturer over a period of years, leading to her spending time as a psychiatric inpatient and taking a year out of her degree, noted the contradiction between expectations for students and for staff:

> As a student, you have to read the students' handbook, and you've got to sign that you're going to act like a professional. Okay, well, hold everybody to the same standard. Don't assume that the worst people that come into your institution are the students, because they're not.

In relation to prevention, interviewees wanted clearer mechanisms for raising initial concerns, including somewhere to discuss low-level concerns informally; staff knowing where to signpost students after disclosures; proactive responses to disclosures; and more proactive oversight of postgraduate supervision relationships, for example, through regular monitoring and options to stop problematic behaviour before it escalated.

Finally, some interviewees wanted options other than formal reporting. These could include restorative approaches rather than 'going nuclear with taking out a complaint against somebody', or informal adjustments without a formal report. As undergraduate student Lauren, who reported sexual violence from another student, described, 'I just wanted somewhere to discuss it and I didn't really want any discipline or any real punishment' (for the perpetrator).

Overall, the concerns outlined above in relation to education, prevention, and early intervention are notable in two ways. First, they constitute fairly basic requirements; it is difficult to argue with suggestions that every member of an institution should have awareness-raising training on how to recognise sexual harassment, or that staff in HEIs should have clear standards of behaviour. Second, they are broadly in line with recommendations from existing guidance for UK HEIs (Office for Students, 2021; Universities UK, 2016). Education and training in relation to GBVH in HE are frequently mentioned in recommendations and guidance (Universities UK, 2016) but listening to the voices of the survivors who reported in these studies clarifies what part of the purpose and outcome of such education and training should be, beyond regulatory compliance: enabling survivors to access language to describe their experiences and to label them as contravening institutional expectations of behaviour. It is evident that even these relatively modest suggestions could have transformative effects for survivors.

3.3 | Survivors' voices in relation to reporting processes

Unusually in the research literature, all interviewees in the two studies discussed here had disclosed or reported their experiences of GBVH to their institution (although see Bedera, 2022; Cipriano et al., 2022). Interviewees had detailed, specific, and passionate recommendations for how HEIs needed to improve reporting processes due to their having had to take on the role of 'institutional mechanics' (Ahmed, 2021) in order to navigate complaints processes.

Some recommendations from interviewees referred to basic implementation and support issues that are familiar issues in GBVH complaints-handling such as cutting the time it takes to investigate reports; removing time limits on reporting; specialist counselling; academic support; and independent advocacy (Bull & Shannon, 2023). These implementation and support issues formed part of the 'power relations' that shape voices (Arnot & Reay, 2007).

Lauren described how 'for me, all I just wanted was a discussion about it, really, and maybe just regular checking in about how it's going'. Instead, she ended up in a formal reporting process that couldn't offer the outcomes she needed. In contrast, Zainab described how the member of staff she initially disclosed to 'believed me more than I believed myself', validating her that because she had been drugged, she could not have consented. This support allowed her to go forward and make a formal report to the university and to the police.

Interviewees called for more robust regulatory structures in relation to GBVH within HEIs as well as greater scrutiny and accountability of HEIs from external bodies. Such structures could include more robust legal rights for students; integration of GBVH into Athena Swan, the kitemark for gender equality in higher education; and stronger regulation from external bodies such as the Office for the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA), which adjudicates handling of student complaints in England and Wales. One interviewee who had tried to obtain redress via the OIA described them as 'toothless', and indeed there is evidence that their approach is not effective in sexual misconduct complaints handling (Bull & Page, 2022).

Other structural issues raised by interviewees included consistency across the sector in case-handling—an issue that has been raised in multiple sector-wide reviews (such as SUMS Consulting, 2022b), and the lack of information-sharing between institutions, most notably the lack of sharing of upheld findings between institutions—for students and staff. A further fundamental issue interviewees raised was to consider how to centre survivors—rather than responding parties—in reporting processes. Indeed, in the United Kingdom (and many similar jurisdictions) reporting processes centre the responding party, with the reporting party's status limited to 'witness' in the disciplinary proceedings against the responding party (Bull & Shannon, 2023; Bull et al., 2021).

Beyond process-related issues, interviewees noted that in order for HEIs to effectively address this issue, they needed a willingness to act. Interviewees were highly frustrated and bewildered at how unusual it was for serial perpetrators to lose their jobs. To them this indicated a lack of commitment to tackling this issue. HEIs' failure to listen to survivors' voices was seen as symptomatic of this lack of willingness to act.

These issues with reporting processes—along with a lack of openness and transparency about institutional failures—led some interviewees to go the media or speak out on social media about their experiences. Many became involved in efforts to change culture and practices within their institutions or disciplines, to use their experience to prevent harm occurring to others (Bull, 2022b). However, there were limited options for students to access formal roles for having their voices heard. They were more likely to be offered a one-off meeting with a senior representative of the institution rather than any role in institutional decision-making processes (Cook-Sather, 2006). As a result, some students turned to activism, the media, or legal redress. For other interviewees, participating in research was a way of ensuring their voice was heard. In this way, institutional context shaped voice, as interviewees' status as students impeded the extent to which they were able to speak out and be heard (Lundy, 2007).

4 | DISCUSSION

As noted above, theorisations of (student) voice have been conceptualised by Conner (2023) on a matrix as to whether they are invited or asserted, and whether they are speaking for themselves or others. In relation to the first point, as seen in the literature review and findings, reporting parties' voices are not usually invited into decision-making or processes around GBVH, and as a result they have to find ways to *assert* their voices via other routes. In relation to speaking for themselves or others, it is more difficult to trace this distinction in the data outlined above; most interviewees in both these studies had completed, or nearly completed, any institutional complaints processes and had little expectation or hope that their own situation could be mitigated or resolved, so they were usually speaking out on behalf of others (whether as part of this research or as activists). But this speaking out was also an important part of their sense-making around their own experience, for example, through participating in research they wanted to make sure their experience contributed

to wider change. In this way, a distinction between speaking out on behalf of themselves or others was not always relevant for these accounts.

The most generative theoretical perspective, however, for framing the accounts above and pointing towards future directions for engaging with reporting parties' voices is Arnot and Reay's work on how voices are shaped by power relations. As they note (Arnot & Reay, 2007), voice is not 'out there', ready to be uncovered; rather, it is shaped by the power relations of the institutional space and, in the case of the voices above, by the experiences of reporting to institutions. This shaping of voice was evident in the accounts above across all three themes: open discussion; education, prevention, and raising 'low-level' concerns; and reporting processes. For example, in the first and second themes the institutional context helped make GBVH '(un)speakable' and, in some cases, enabled students to recognise abusive or harassing behaviours when they occurred. A further perspective on 'voice' that was presented was transformative justice. These themes involve some steps towards transformative justice in 'seek[ing] to disrupt the underlying structural and cultural causes of violence and inequality' (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017, p. 207), through disrupting the context in which abuse occurs and seeking more open discussion of power imbalances.

As well as Arnot and Reay's perspective, Cook-Sather's understanding of voice—that is, 'having a legitimate perspective, presence, and role in decision-making' (Cook-Sather, 2006)—is helpful in explaining the findings from the third theme, on reporting experiences. The specific issues that had gone wrong in interviewees' reporting processes—such as poor quality investigations, lack of information-sharing or inability to hold their institutional accountable for failures in the process—shaped their recommendations for HEIs. However, the framing of 'decision-making' in Cook-Sather's definition of voice is somewhat narrow; reporting parties wanted to be heard in formation of policy and regulation, not just decision-making. Finally, Dickinson and Blake's three-part typology of student representatives on committees; as facilitators/deliverers of interventions; or as evaluators (Dickinson & Blake, 2022) is helpful in providing practical steps forward on this issue. The role of reporting parties as evaluators of existing systems is particularly promising. However, for some interviewees, such involvement would still fall short of the types of change they would advocate for, and so even such changes will not negate the need for activism.

It is striking, across all three themes discussed above, that many of the recommendations from reporting parties were in line with the direction of travel in existing guidance and research in the UK context (Office for Students, 2021; Universities UK, 2016). However, amidst this consensus, reporting parties are also making more radical calls for structural change and victim–survivors' rights. One of the main calls from interviewees was for more openness and transparency from HEIs on this issue. This can be seen—in part—as a reaction to the lack of openness that has tended to characterise HEIs' responses to this issue, for example, in case handling HEIs are over-interpreting data protection requirements to avoid sharing information with reporting parties (Cowan et al., in press). Reporting parties' calls for education, prevention and early intervention are also echoed in existing guidance and research literature. However, what reporting parties' voices add to this is how such initiatives make their experiences no longer 'unspeakable'. Instead they enable the meaning-making work of enabling victim–survivors to recognise and label their experiences. Particularly in some of the staff–student sexual misconduct cases, finding language to label 'boundary-blurring' behaviours (Bull & Page, 2021) was important to interviewees. In this way, 'voice' was shaped through their access to language to describe their experiences, and through this language, they were able to access appropriate modes of self-reporting or representation.

The discussion above emphasises the importance of feminist research methods. For example, in interview-based studies, researchers play a role in making space for the 'yet-to-be-voiced' (Arnot & Reay, 2007, p. 323) to emerge through listening to and validating survivors' experiences. In addition, these studies show the importance of being explicit about using research to make social change, as this was important for interviewees (Wise & Stanley, 1993).

5 | CONCLUSION

Listening to survivors' voices is an important step in working towards gender equality in HE. The discussion above reveals that the most urgent step that reporting parties are calling for is open discussion of GBVH and how HEIs are handling it. They also call for more education, prevention and early intervention when issues arise, as well as practical and structural changes in how reports are handled including better scrutiny and accountability for HEIs in how they handle such reports. Theorisations of survivor/student voice to frame such initiatives need to include 'speaking for others' (Conner, 2023) which is an important part of activism/voice for survivors in this study, as well as understanding how voices are shaped by (gendered) power relations (Arnot & Reay, 2007).

Institutional processes for listening to those who have reported GBVH remain rare within UK higher education (SUMS Consulting, 2022a, p. 44). The (gendered) power relations that shape survivors' and reporting parties' voices need to be considered by HEIs in any mechanisms to elicit or hear them; for example, institutional structures for listening to GBVH survivors 'need to negate the ways in which gendered understandings of sexual misconduct minimise or invisibilise harassment' (Bull, 2023, p. 122). Such institutional mechanisms may therefore need to differ from approaches for engaging with students on other issues. Multiple routes for eliciting such voices and feeding them into HEIs' data processes are required, both via existing representative structures; via partnerships that enable lesser-heard voices to be drawn on; and through recognising activist voices and use these to inform change. These findings also shed light on thinking about 'voice' in HE more generally, suggesting that it may not be helpful to theorise 'voice' independently of what is being listened to.

Survivors of GBVH in HE should not need to 'go public' in the media or on social media in order to be heard. Such 'speaking out' will continue as long as adequate structures for 'hearing' survivors' voices are not in place. More sophisticated mechanisms for 'hearing' voices, embedded in institutional structures across multiple levels, which take account of how (gendered) power relations shape voice, are therefore needed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author is a founder and co-director of campaigning and research organisation The 1752 Group CIC. This is a not-for-profit organisation based in the United Kingdom whose activities are carried on for the benefit of victims and survivors of sexual misconduct or other forms of gender-based violence and harassment. Its aims are to undertake, implement and disseminate research informing higher education and related organisations, civil society organisations or other organisations with members to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct and gender-based violence and harassment; and to amplify the voices of individuals and groups affected by sexual misconduct and gender-based violence and harassment in institutions or organisational fora.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The interview transcripts from the two studies that this article draws on are not available open access due to the risks of identifying participants and/or their institutions, as well as due to the sensitive nature of the data shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Favourable ethical review for both studies reported in this article was obtained from the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences ethics committee.

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