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'Monstrous men' and 'sex scandals': the myth of exceptional deviance in sexual harassment and violence in education

Vanita Sundaram[1] & Carolyn Jackson[2]

ABSTRACT

One might argue that sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence have become hyper-visible in recent times. The #MeToo movement has focused our attention on the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse in a range of contexts, including in Hollywood, the media industry, Westminster, science and academia. Media reporting of these high-profile cases represents the perpetrators of these crimes as 'monsters', 'sex pests', as highly unusual or deviant individuals. We argue here, that rather, such practices pervade a range of contexts, including educational ones, and are normalised and 'hidden' within these settings. We will draw on our recent research on 'lad culture' in higher education to discuss how harassment and sexual abuse are normalised in certain university contexts. Our piece will explore how such cultures silence survivors and mask, or make invisible, instances of everyday sexism and harassment and how such silencing can perpetuate the notion that individual 'monsters' commit such acts. Drawing on interviews with staff working in universities, this piece shows how sexual harassment is mis-perceived, justified and minimised (particularly in relation to less visible examples of degradation or abuse of women) and how the notion of the 'problematic individual' prevails in favour of a structural, gendered analysis of harassment and violence. University responses to sexual harassment and violence have therefore tended to be responsive and focused on individuals, rather than taking a whole-institution approach to tackling these practices.

[1] Department of Education, University of York, York, UK. [2] Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to V.S. (email: vanita.sundaram@york.ac.uk)

The pervasiveness of sexual harassment and violence

Sexual harassment affects the lives of women and girls, in particular, every day. Studies across a range of national contexts have shown how pervasive sexual harassment and sexualised violence are. The Everyday Sexism Project, an international online project, which collects women's stories of sexism, harassment and violence has demonstrated how women modify and restrict their own practices, language and movements in order to avoid—or to mitigate against the impacts of—sexual harassment and violence in public spaces. Their stories tell us how women experience sexualised intimidation waiting for taxis, while jogging, when they are walking to the bank, to school, to pick up their children. Young girls and women share their stories of being followed in cars, whistled at, shouted at by men on the way to school. Recent high-profile cases of women runners being attacked, even murdered, women being assaulted for rejecting unwanted sexual advances (Willsher, 2018), have highlighted the pervasive sexual harassment and abuse experienced by women undertaking what might be termed 'everyday practices' in public spaces.

One might argue that sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence have become hyper-visible in recent times. The #MeToo movement has strengthened the voices of survivors and given them a platform from which to talk about their experiences. Celebrities, revered and powerful men have been named at the centre of harassment and violence, often spanning decades and involving clear abuses of power. These men have been referred to as 'monsters', as 'evil' and have generally been cast as unusual, particularly problematic individuals who pose a clear threat to women and children. We argue that while these perpetrators have certainly been prolific and more visible than most, sexual harassment, misconduct and violence are masked and made invisible by a culture in which harassment and sexual violence by men against women is normalised. The #MeToo movement itself has simultaneously enabled the 'calling out' of individual perpetrators and has highlighted how widespread sexual harassment and violence are in a range of contexts and sectors. The movement has itself become a vehicle for emphasising the systemic nature of sexual harassment and violence, for highlighting the multiple structural, social and cultural barriers to disclosure for survivors; it has made visible the continuum of practices that women (in particular) are subjected to, highlighting the significant and persisting impacts of sexual harassment and violence. There has been some debate about the effectiveness of 'naming and shaming' strategies in terms of bringing about culture change; does an individualised approach enable us to transform the culture itself? Does it enable us to name and destabilise the cultural conditions that make women vulnerable to gender-based harassment and violence?

It is clear that the culture that enables gender-based violence is not specific to particular industries or spheres of work. Rather, it pervades a range of contexts including educational ones. In this piece, we draw on findings from research conducted in educational settings to explore why these practices are so prevalent and how they are sustained; and what can we do about it? Can the culture that sustains such practices be changed and if so what factors need to be considered? Despite the recent visibility of sexism, harassment and violence, these are, of course, not new phenomena. There is no evidence that these practices are on the decline; this is despite growing awareness of, and attention to, these issues and, arguably, progress in terms of gender equality in a number of spheres. For example, the Crime Survey for England and Wales suggests that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 25 men in the general population have experienced some form of sexual assault (which covers rape, sexual assault, indecent exposure and unwanted touching) since the age of 16. We know that there is no significant change in the prevalence of sexual assault measured by the Crime Survey for England and Wales since 2005 when the module on sexual assault was introduced. When considering prevalence statistics we need to take into account under-reporting among survivors of all genders, as more than 80% of survivors do not report their experiences to the police (CSEW, 2018).

Sexual harassment has been shown to be prevalent in educational contexts, including in primary and secondary school classrooms (Lee et al. 1996; Espelage et al. 2016; Renold, 2002; NEU/UK Feminista, 2017). In the UK, the Women's and Equalities Committee launched an enquiry in 2016 into sexual harassment in education. The report from this enquiry showed the scale and nature of sexual harassment and sexualised violence experienced by young girls and women in schools across the country (WEC, 2016). For example, 22% of young girls aged 7–12 reported experiencing jokes of a sexual nature from boys in their school. Girls as young as 9 reported having their skirts lifted up and their pants pulled down by their peers, leaving them too scared to wear skirts to school. Sexual harassment and humiliation have also been shown to be prevalent in secondary schools (Ringrose et al. 2012; Sundaram and Sauntson, 2016; GirlGuiding, 2017). Sexualised bullying focuses on girls' physical appearance and presumed sexual activity, and harassment using pornography and digital media is widespread.

We know that sexual harassment and violence persist into university contexts. The National Union of Students has conducted several studies of women (and men) students' experiences and has shown that two-thirds of women students have experienced verbal or non-verbal harassment (NUS, 2010); 1 in 7 women students has experienced serious physical or sexual assault (NUS, 2010); and 37% of women and 12% of men students have experienced unwanted sexual advances (NUS, 2014). More recently, the NUS has conducted research showing that staff-on-student sexual misconduct is also a concern (NUS, 2018). A significant minority of respondents in their survey reported having experienced sexual harassment from a member of staff in their university, ranging from sexualised comments to rape. Twelve percent of former students had experienced non-consensual sexual contact from a staff member in their institution. High profile examples of staff sexual misconduct in universities in other national contexts have also been exposed through #MeToo, including cases in India (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-41862615) and the USA (https://www.vox.com/2018/8/14/17688144/nyu-me-too-movement-sexual-harassment-avital-ronell), the latter case also illustrating the complexities of abuses of power. While student-student misconduct may be viewed as a 'normal' part of student culture, staff-student misconduct has been more explicitly condemned. Links between sexual harassment and violence and 'typical' student practices such as heavy alcohol consumption, sports activities and initiation rituals are discursively naturalised (NUS, 2012). There is a sort of 'shrug of the shoulders' about student misconduct and perhaps especially so in contexts where there is no standardised policy or legal framework for responding to complaints. However, even though staff misconduct towards students has provoked greater public outcry, we argue that prevailing gendered power relations—in universities and elsewhere—serve to silence and dismiss such complaints when they are made (this silencing has also been highlighted in recent work by Bull and Rye, 2018). University interventions to address student-student harassment and violence have often foregrounded learning about consent and rape culture; there is a clear sense in which such interventions are aimed at young people, mainly assumed to be living away from home for the first time and having relatively little experience of negotiating interactions in university spaces. Staff-student misconduct is, of course, about something rather different than

people 'misunderstanding' behaviour or interactions. The explicit abuse of power in such interactions must be named, kept visible and inform university responses to complaints made.

Staff perspectives on 'lad culture', sexual harassment and violence

In the first UK project on university *staff* perspectives on sexual harassment and violence in higher education, we found that staff working in universities had also encountered a range of harassing or violent behaviours that encompassed abusive language, forms of online or digital abuse, and sexist and abusive behaviour (Author and Author, 2015, 2018). Many of the experiences that staff recounted were directed towards students and were perpetrated by other students. Sexual harassment and assault in social spaces such as in nightclubs, bars, and at union events was perceived as common and as the most likely context for such behaviours. Staff also encountered sexualised bullying and intimidation in online spaces, most often through social media. While sexual harassment was most often associated with social spaces our participants gave examples of the ways in which sexist and sexualised language and behaviour was used in teaching and learning spaces to intimidate, humiliate or objectify women students and/or staff (as exemplified below).

> A colleague of mine was giving an interactive lecture on India and she said 'does anyone know how many women are in the Lok Sabha parliament?' - one of the houses of parliament - and there was a cry from the back from somebody of 'too many'… You encounter this. I certainly, in my department, I encounter a lot of misogyny and these sort of jokes about feminism, about women, about all these sorts of things. It's really prevalent. (Paul, man, focus group, U5) (Author and Author, 2018, p. 12).

Our findings suggest that sexual harassment and violence in higher education should be considered beyond its manifestations and impacts in social spaces. The ways in which such practices permeate teaching and learning spaces have consequences not only for women students but also for staff. We argue that recognising the varied, and sometimes subtle, ways in which sexism and sexual harassment are used in university contexts allows us to recognise the more insidious ways in which sexism operates more generally. Understanding the less overt manifestations of sexual harassment is important for analysing the ways in which sexism and harassment become normalised, invisibilised and sustained in university contexts.

The normalisation of sexual harassment and violence

We argue (in Jackson and Sundaram, forthcoming) that despite the fact that we know sexism, harassment and sexual violence are evident in university contexts, this is not always acknowledged or problematised by staff in various roles working in these settings. Part of the problem here is that staff do not perceive themselves as occupying the spaces in which sexual harassment and violence are most likely to occur: nightclubs, bars and student-facing social media. When sexual harassment is encountered by staff, this tends to be the more 'extreme', highly visible examples that are escalated upwards in the institution and become more widely known about. 'Everyday' instances of sexism and harassment were either 'invisible', not recognised as such; or seen as so common and widespread as to be unworthy of reporting (Author and Author, 2018). This reluctance to report 'minor' incidents such as groping, unwanted touching and sexually harassing language contributes to its invisibility; these pervasive forms of harassment are not made visible to or within institutions through formal reporting or complaints processes. As Ahmed (2016) has argued, when they *are* reported, the 'complainant' is constituted as just that: as complaining. When sexual harassment itself becomes invisibilised, so too, does the work of trying to challenge it - those who seek to challenge it are represented as troublesome, as enacting damage to the institution.

Limited understandings of what constitutes 'sexual harassment', as well as entrenched gender-blindness on the one hand, and gender stereotyping on the other, underlie the dismissal, trivialisation and invisibilisation of sexual harassment and violence in higher education. Practices that constitute sexual harassment, including sexualised name-calling or 'banter', sexually objectifying or degrading language, unwanted touching or persistent sexual advances, were not always recognised as such, either by individual staff or in formal university policies. They were also explained away, dismissed as the behaviour of 'naïve', unknowing men, who do not realise the consequence of their actions.

> People may not realise it's not okay if they're drunk, people may not realise they're doing it … I think it's down to the sexual desires and the need for people to find a partner. And just it comes out, when there's this laddish behaviour it comes out in the wrong way, because their judgement is impaired by alcohol and they forget that the normal things can happen. (Lydia, woman, U6)

The gendered basis of harassment and violence is not always recognised, and a perception that girls can be 'just as bad as boys' in terms of enacting some aspects of so-called 'lad culture' exists. As is the case in other contexts—and with other practices—individual and exceptional incidents are used to extrapolate to a common-sense notion that there is parity in these practices. Given the pervasiveness of such views in the higher education institutions in our study, we might think of universities not only as settings in which these practices occur, but as *conducive contexts* (Kelly, 2016) for sexual harassment and violence.

Jackson and Sundaram (*forthcoming*) have argued that universities are organised around particular power arrangements, which are gendered, racialised and classed. This unequal distribution of power, along intersecting lines of hierarchy, creates a context in which sexist (and other) language and behaviour becomes normalised and therefore allow other, more visible abuses of power to occur. Our data suggest that university staff do normalise and trivialise a range of sexist practices, and that those staff with the power to respond to disclosures often express problematic understandings about the prevalence, nature and impact of sexual harassment and violence. We therefore argue that in a setting where power is so unequally distributed, universities may not only be a space in which harassment and violence occur, but may indeed constitute a context which is conducive to these practices. However, we do not uncritically or simplistically conceptualise universities as a 'danger zone' as Lewis et al., (2018) have warned that contemporary debates might facilitate. Indeed, Lewis, Marine & Kenney note the ways in which universities might be sites for student-led and feminist resistance in a range of forms, spanning grass-roots and informal activism to lobbying for changes to institutional policies on sexual violence. We do believe in the potential to challenge and resist against existing power arrangements in the university, and we simultaneously acknowledge that current relations enable the existence, trivialisation and invisibiliation of harassment and violence and survivors themselves.

Understanding the causes and persistence of sexual harassment and violence

To prevent sexual harassment and violence we need to understand its root causes. So, where does gender-based harassment originate

and how is it sustained across educational (and other) settings? Sexist behaviours, values and attitudes associated with sexual harassment and violence clearly do not *arise in* university. We know that young people of secondary school age are highly accepting of different forms of gender-based violence (Burton et al. 1998; Prospero, 2006; Barter et al. 2009, 2015). Studies suggest that young people hold victim-blaming attitudes and women and girls are often seen as being to blame for violence perpetrated against them. Some forms of violence, for example, coercive or controlling behaviour, are not recognised as abusive and are seen by some young people as a 'normal' aspect of heterosexual relationships. In terms of understanding *why* young people accept and justify violence, recent research shows that young people's expectations of gender are pivotal to their understandings of violence as 'violent' (or not) and to their acceptance of different forms of violence. For example, McCarry's (2010) work shows that young men's understandings of what it means to be a 'proper man' involves exercising control and establishing dominance and power over their partners. This sometimes involves verbal aggression, coercion and controlling behaviour, and physical or sexual violence. Author 1's work in this area (Sundaram, 2013, 2014) has shown how young people are well-versed in official or formal discourses about 'violence' being wrong, but when young women (in particular) transgress expectations of 'appropriate femininity' or how a girl should behave in an intimate partner relationship, a range of forms of violence are narrated as justifiable, acceptable and even deserved. Drawing on Liz Kelly's (1987) pioneering concept of a continuum of sexual violence, Author 1 has argued that young people's acceptance of violence exists on a continuum rather than there being a dichotomous conceptualisation of violence as 'wrong' or as 'acceptable', and that gender expectations mediate these views (Author and Author, 2018). Conservative attitudes about gender have also been linked to greater acceptance of partner violence among teenagers (Lacasse and Mendelson, 2007). So gendered power relations - relations that position men or boys as more dominant, in control and as representing or holding authority compared with women or girls - are produced and upheld by many young people, and underpin their justification and normalisation of sexual harassment and violence in heterosexual relationships.

Expectations for 'boy' and 'girl' behaviour are produced, reinforced and upheld in and by schools. Young people themselves, as well as teachers (and parents) demand conformity to a narrow and fairly rigid set of expectations for what is appropriate 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour (Davies, 1989; Renold, 2000, 2002, 2005; Atkinson, 2018). Some young people are beginning to challenge traditional ways of doing gender, including resisting the notion of the gender binary; however, policing of gender norms by young people and adults persists and is powerful (Bragg et al., 2018). These expectations are commonly narrated as being linked to the essential nature of boys and girls; the social constructedness of them is rarely made explicit by young people or by adults. Even when children transgress normative gender expectations, thereby clearly demonstrating the potential for disruption and the constructed nature of these, a discourse of natural 'boy' and 'girl' behaviour is maintained (Atkinson, 2018). The salience of binary gender expectations is demonstrable and can help us to understand how certain gendered practices, including sexual harassment and abuse, are pervasive and become narrated as 'normal' (even if not desirable).

Conclusion

Existing research on sexual harassment and violence in universities tells us that myths and misperceptions about the nature, prevalence and causes of sexual harassment are fairly widespread; that victim-blaming persists; and that there is some resistance to viewing sexual harassment and violence as gendered phenomena (in terms of perpetration and victimisation patters, as well as in terms of men's violence being reflective and reproductive of particular expectations of gender behaviour). These attitudes are located within a wider cultural context in which children are systematically taught to behave in particular gendered ways, including in their sexual and romantic interactions with each other. We know the myriad of ways in which gender stereotypes about boys' and girls' abilities, their personality characteristics, romantic and sexual interests and so on are reproduced in educational settings across the life course. Gender norms teach young men that they should be dominant, in control, authoritative; and teach young women that they should be submissive, sexually unknowledgeable and not too assertive. Within schools, these norms are upheld by pupils themselves, as well as teachers—and they have clear implications for negotiating consent, for understanding and confidently enacting boundaries in relationships. These norms are reinforced through the sex and relationships education curriculum (Sundaram and Sauntson, 2016). Our qualitative and linguistic analysis of sex and relationships education reveals not only how heterosexuality is promoted and foregrounded, but also how girls are held responsible for managing the risk of being harassed/assaulted by behaving 'appropriately' e.g., not drinking, not having sexual relationships; boys, on the other hand, are pressured to demonstrate sexual knowledgeability, desire and stamina. Gender equality, consent, pleasure, respect in relationships are not addressed within the statutory or non-statutory curriculum guidance documents.

While recent public analyses of the #MeToo movement and sexual violence in universities have focused on high-profile, problematic individuals, it is imperative that prevention efforts acknowledge and address the structural basis and systemic nature of sexual harassment and violence. Some cases of sexual harassment are (made) more visible than others, certainly, but these are not isolated cases. It may be a more convenient truth to represent sexual harassment and violence as relatively rare, as perpetrated by particularly deviant or troubled men. However, research shows how pervasive such practices are, and as we argue here, they are rooted in a cultural and societal context that produces and sustains gendered power relations. The norms and expectations for gender that are learned and taught—demanded, even—create a context of gender inequality, and one in which gendered abuses of power can readily occur and be excused and normalised. These practices can be understood as sustained by what Connell (2005) has termed the *gender regime*, which is embedded across a range of organisations. Thus, contexts that are conducive to gender inequality in various forms (including harassment and violence) are characterised by a gender-unequal division of labour, distribution of power, and beliefs/discourses about gender difference that sustain this hierarchy.

We need to address the structural and systemic nature of gender inequality, and the ways this plays out in everyday actions and interactions, as a starting point for prevention. Thus it is important to acknowledge how 'laddish' behaviours, including sexual harassment and violence arise, as well as understanding the pervasiveness of such practices. These are not acts committed by 'sex pests' or 'monsters'; these are not behaviours which are limited to certain environments. These behaviours reflect a wider culture in which sexual harassment and violence become normalised and routinized, in which the trivialisation and minimisation of such behaviours render them invisible and unspeakable.

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Additional information

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