Afterword

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Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) occur in the everyday spaces of academia. This statement should be a truism, but as the chapters in the volume attest, it can still be risky to state that GBVH happens in academia, in everyday spaces, as a normal occurrence. The focus of the volume on ‘everyday spaces’ is a crucial intervention to move away from common sense assumptions and myths about where, how, and to whom GBVH in academia occur, and as Alexandria Petit-Thorne describes (in this volume), it is crucial to include ‘liminal academic spaces’ such as student organizations, labour unions, and social spaces within the understanding of ‘everyday spaces’. Chapters in this volume also reveal how GBVH intersects with violence and harassment on the basis of gender identity, ‘race’, sexuality, and disability, and is upheld by legacies of colonial violence. The book also serves as a reminder of the value of autoethnographic accounts such as Lieselotte Viaene, Catarina Laranjeiro and Miye Nadya Tom, as well as, Simona Palladino and Laura Thurman in this volume. Such accounts form their own genre, forming a lineage that includes Elizabeth Stanko (1995); Deborah Lee (2018), and Whitley and Page (2015), among others, in making visible the experiential level of how abuse occurs.

In addition to its contribution to this lineage, an under-examined area that this volume contributes to is the specific logics of how GBVH occurs within the cultures and norms of different disciplines, as outlined in this volume by Simona Palladino as well as Laura Thurman in anthropology, and Apen Ruiz Martinez and colleagues in archaeology. see for example Bradford and Crema (2022) and Voss (2021) also on archaelogy; Aycock et al. (2019) in physics; Bull, forthcoming on music; Cardwell and Hitchen (2022) on geography; Fernando and Prasad (2018) on business schools; Clancy et al. on astronomy and planetary science; and a relatively large body of work in medicine, including National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018). As Laura Thurman notes in relation to anthropology, publishing such accounts ‘can contribute to a larger understanding of different kinds of violence and the ways in which they are connected to our discipline’s methodology’. They can also allow academic disciplines to see beyond their own siloes or cultures and examine the similarities (and differences) across different contexts where GBVH occurs (Kelly, 2016), avoiding an approach whereby GBVH is seen as an issue particular to a discipline and instead focusing on the structural factors that create a conducive context (Bull forthcoming).

As such, the detailed, empirical, context-specific accounts of GBVH that this book includes are of great importance and contribute towards unveiling hidden histories – and present-day accounts – of GBVH in the academy. My ongoing research and activism, carried out primarily within UK higher education, has shown the need for such accounts. As a co-founder and director of The 1752 Group, a research and campaign organisation addressing staff/faculty sexual misconduct, it is clear that GBVH is still minimised and invisibilised in higher education institutions (Jackson and Sundaram, 2020; Whitley 2022). The 1752 Group was formed in 2016 by Tiffany Page, Heidi Hasbrouck and Chryssa Sdroulia and myself. Tiffany, Heidi and Chryssa had all spent several years fighting (as part of a larger group) to have their ‘complaint collective’ (Ahmed, 2021) taken seriously and acted on by Goldsmiths, University of London. As outlined in Page et al. (2019), as part of a wider institutional reluctance to address this issue; Goldsmiths was willing to commit only £1752 to supporting the group of PhD students attempting to make change in the institution. Our name therefore serves as a reminder that sticking-plaster solutions will not be sufficient to address GBVH in academia; and indeed, some months after this gesture from the institution, Professor Sara Ahmed resigned in protest at Goldsmiths’ failure to tackle sexual harassment, leading to headlines around the world. Goldsmiths then saw fit to appoint a member of staff to a full-time strategic role to lead on this work.

Such detailed, context-specific accounts are needed to combat ‘common sense’ assumptions and myths around what GBVH is and where and how it occurs. Such myths still abound, despite increasing public knowledge of this issue. One of these common sense myths is around why and how people report GBVH. Institutional policies still tend to work within the assumption that reporting occurs on an individual basis: that reporting will involve a single incident, a single person being targeted, and this incident will be carried out by one other individual within their academic community. Instead, reporting is just as likely to occur through a ‘complaint collective’ (Ahmed, 2021) whereby a group of (usually) women will find each other – often by chance, or through the ‘whisper network’ or other forms of direct action such as graffiti as outlined by Lieselotte Viaene and colleagues, in this volume as well as Whitley and Page (2015) – and then may support each other to come forward to their institution. Indeed, this collective approach should not be surprising when evidence shows that many of those who engage in abusive behaviours target multiple people (Cantalupo and Kidder 2018; Bull and Rye, 2018). This reality – made visible through empirical research as well as first person accounts – also calls into question the common sense notion of ‘barriers to reporting’ as it is often outlined in research and policy. While there is a large literature on such ‘barriers’, there is much less research looking at the other side of the coin: reasons why people *do* report (Bull, 2021). In qualitative interviews with students and early-career staff/faculty who did report – or attempted to report – GBVH to their institution or to the police, it was clear that the overwhelming reasons they reported were to protect themselves and others (Bull, 2021). In some cases, this was at great cost to themselves. This collective, mutually-supportive approach needs to replace the myth that reporting usually occurs on an individualised basis.

Another widely-held assumption is that people will recognise sexual violence or harassment when it happens to them or when they witness it. Some survivors have found that the idea of ‘grooming’ is helpful in making sense of their experiences as it helps to make visible the ways in which abuse may occur in ways that are difficult to recognise. While in the criminal justice system, within English law, this term refers only to actions taken by an adult towards a child, it is gaining traction in explaining a pattern of ‘boundary-blurring’ behaviours over time between people in positions of unequal power (Bull and Page, 2021a). Being subjected to ‘grooming’ behaviours means that it may take a long time for survivors to recognise how unequal (usually gendered) power dynamics are creating a situation where they are not in control; these dynamics can also lead to victim-survivors feeling complicit in their abuse (Bull and Page, 2021a). Part of the work that this volume is doing, therefore, is to help make visible to readers the myriad ways in which GBVH can occur, and how it can compound wider social inequalities or legacies such as those occurring due to colonialism (see Keri Cheechoo’s chapter in this volume).

When it comes to institutional responses to GBVH, as Lieselotte Viaene et al.’s chapter attests, many victim-survivors do not have faith that their institution is safe to report to. And yet within institutional policies, the common sense assumption prevails that if complaints processes are followed, they will provide justice and safety for complainants. This assumption overlooks, as Ahmed (2021) describes, the reality that the complaint is being made in the same context where discrimination or harassment occurred. As various authors have outlined, the wider conditions of marketized higher education and historical and contemporary inequalities within institutions shape how institutions handle complaints (Phipps, 2018; see also Lena Wånggrenin this volume; Shannon, 2021). But it is not simply policies’ implementation within unequal, discriminatory, marketized HEIs that impedes complainants’ ability to obtain justice; there are also issues to be tackled on the level of the structure of policies. As Tiffany Page, Georgina Calvert-Lee and I have outlined, staff-student complaints processes in particular (but also to a lesser degree in staff-staff or student-student processes):

fail to offer similar protections and privileges to the student complainant and the responding staff member and, as a result, students are often excluded from the process purporting to resolve their complaint (Bull et al., 2020).

Indeed,

In a society where vastly more sexual misconduct complaints are made by women against men than vice versa, a process for investigating sexual misconduct complaints which gives those responding more rights than those complaining might well be thought to place women as a group at a particular disadvantage and so to amount to indirect discrimination, in breach of the Equality Act 2010 (The 1752 Group and McAllister Olivarius, 2020a, 4–5; see also UN Women 2018, 8)

While this example refers to UK policy and practice, similar structures for institutional complaints are in other jurisdictions where the process of making a grievance or complaint against the institution is separated from the disciplinary process against the reported party, or where the legal framework favours perpetrators (such as in Spain (Lombardo and Bustelo, 2022)). Therefore, a fundamental lack of parity of rights within complaints is normal practice. In our Sector Guidance we have suggested an amended process to address this issue (which also applies to other discrimination-related complaints) (Bull et al., 2020). The question of whether GBVH-related complaints processes should follow the same structures as other forms of disciplinary processes within higher education (Brodsky, 2021), or whether bespoke systems need to be devised to address this issue (Witwatersrand University, 2015) remains open, and this is one area where international sharing of research, experience, and activism is needed.

Also relating to institutional responses to GBVH, a further assumption that needs to be called into question is the idea that complainants can obtain a satisfactory outcome to their complaint under current mechanisms. In some contexts, such as the UK and Canada, this is unfortunately this is not (yet) the case (Busby and Birenbaum, 2020). In a qualitative study of students and ECRs attempting to report GBVH in the UK, we found that only four out of 15 reached the end of the process and were able to obtain ‘remedy’ or redress for their complaint (Bull and Page, 2021b). For two of these, obtaining this outcome required taking legal action or going to the higher education adjudicator to attempt to hold their institution to account. Even then, the remedies offered were, for the most part, not what complainants were seeking – which as above, was to protect themselves and others from the reported parties.

Such reflections might leave readers despairing of the possibility of obtaining justice or safety within academic spaces. However, it is also important not to hold to solely negative assumptions about GBVH and institutional responses. In an ongoing research project with Erin Shannon, ‘Higher Education After #MeToo’, we have found very great differences between the resources, expertise, and institutional willingness that different UK higher education institutions are committing to tackling this issue (see also Chantler et al., 2019). Some institutions appear to have put high levels of investment into this area and are drawing on trauma-informed, specialist expertise to provide support and to handle reports. These are by far the minority, and even these (few) institutions still have a long way to go in this work or risk having it overturned by a change of leadership or dedicated personnel leaving. Nevertheless, for activists, survivors, and researchers in this space, these differences of approach are important; in the Australian context, a large-scale survey of 43,819 students has shown that two-fifths of those who reported sexual harassment to their university were satisfied with the process, and of those who reported sexual assault to their university, nearly one in three were satisfied with the formal reporting or complaints process (Heywood et al., 2022: 45). This of course means that over two-thirds of those who reported sexual assaults were dissatisfied – an unacceptably high number. Nevertheless, there is space for hope within these findings. While such quantitative studies cannot convey the complexity of experiences and responses that survivors describe (see for example Bull and Page, 2021b), they serve as an important reminder that it is worth fighting for change within individual institutions as such activist and change-making work can and does make a difference.

Related to this point, another common sense assumption can be that ‘the university’ or ‘the institution’ acts as a monolithic entity in responding to reports or disclosures of GBVH. Against this assumption, it is important to be alert to disjunctions between different levels and areas within the institution. Staff within institutions, perhaps with their own experiences of GBVH, are in many cases pushing their institutions to do better and doing their best to support survivors as far as they are able. This can lead to a pattern of ‘institutional listening while silencing’ (Oman and Bull, 2021) whereby ‘individual staff members within an institution are attempting to provide care but this care is not connected to the wider policy framework’ (2021: 11). The effect of this, for those attempting to disclose or report, is to feel initially supported then progressively confused and let down when the early response turns into institutional ‘brick walls’ (Ahmed, 2021), or even institutional harassment (Bull and Page, 2021b; Bull and Rye, 2018). Nevertheless, these disjunctions within institutions can work to the advantage of complainants, such as where committed and knowledgeable staff find creative ways to find ways to obtain justice, support, and safety for complainants.

In conclusion, over recent years we have seen an enormous shift towards institutions across society being required to take greater responsibility for preventing and responding to GBVH. Higher education institutions are just one site of this wider shift towards moving beyond criminal justice responses as the sole or primary mode of addressing GBVH in society (Cowan and Munro, 2021), and demanding that perpetrators and institutions are held accountable. The common sense assumptions outlined above reveal a snapshot of the progress to date, and the areas where we still need to do work to change our institutions and disciplines. As this book outlines, this broader sense of accountability also needs to extend to ‘liminal’ and everyday, as well as mainstream academic spaces.

Challenges abound: new generations coming into academia still find they have to break the silence over and over again; institutional responses too often take a gender-neutral approach rather than recognising the ways in which gendered power creates a context that enables abuse (see for example Jackson and Sundaram: 2020); survivor-centred approaches are not the norm (Bull, Page and Bullough, 2019); and evidence-based prevention programmes – such as in Egan et al.’s chapter in this volume – need much more attention and resources. Nevertheless, it is important to remain hopeful that the work we are doing – even if the pace of change remains infuriatingly slow – is making a difference. Rebecca Solnit reminds us that hope is an indispensable resource for activists:

Hope is a gift you don’t have to surrender, a power you don’t have to throw away. […] Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognise uncertainty, you recognise that you may be able to influence the outcomes – you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists (Solnit, 2016, n.p.)

Let’s hope for change, and in making changes, find hope.

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