

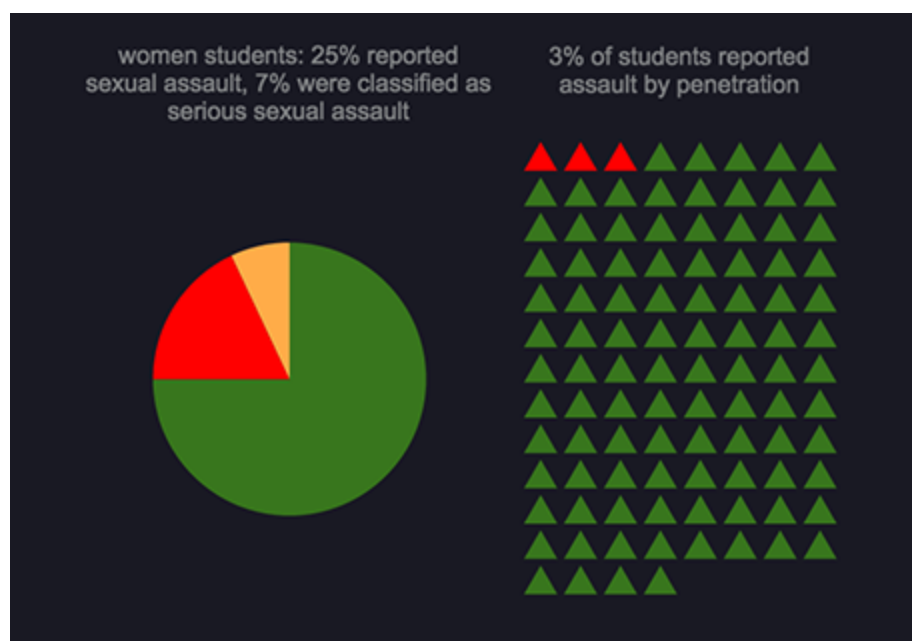
Are universities preventing violence against women?

[Helen Mott](#) 7 December 2016

Sexual harassment of women students is rife and violence against women in universities is commonplace. Are universities reflecting cultural norms of violence against women instead of shaping new norms?

Universities are [sites](#) for the production and reproduction of violence against women. Aside from the truism that they are microcosms of wider society there are additional reasons that explain the scale of violence against women. Most students are young adults: data for England and Wales tells us that [sexual offenders target women aged 16-19 and students](#) more than any other age group. Women aged 16-24 years have [the highest rates of domestic violence](#) and are most at [risk of forced marriage](#). [Young men](#) are the largest perpetrator group.

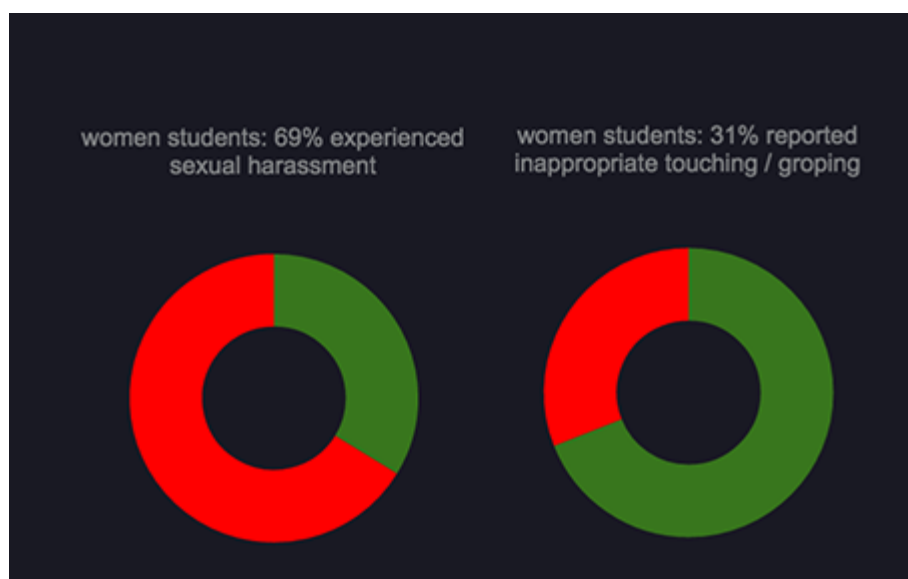
Yet universities, especially campus universities, are also sites where the physical and cultural environment are shaped and influenced: a university is not just a microcosm but also an organism - a space where cultural norms can be replaced, renewed, established. Just as cultures of sexism from [paternalism](#) to “[frat](#)” or “[lad](#)” culture can thrive in universities, so cultures of cohesion, respect and leadership against violence can be built where there is the will to do so.



The question of will is, perhaps, key. Nothing else can explain the relative inaction and lack of resources invested to date, certainly in the UK. It is possible to make a weak case for university leaders being historically unaware of the sheer scale of harassment, assault and violence given that so few women choose ever to make a formal report - research in the UK suggests [less than 15%](#) and this is high compared with other countries in Europe. Arguably then, the likelihood of a senior university manager with the power to effect change being fully apprised of the scale of the problem has been low. There is a serious data gap, worldwide: until recently the large-scale survey data came from North American universities,

although there was a [study](#) published in 2012 funded by the European Union which found high prevalence across universities in England, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain.

In the US, in addition to Federal support (for example the [Justice Department](#)'s Office of Violence Against Women gave more than \$15 million to university projects this year), there are state-wide and [country-wide](#) regular surveys which help universities to meet their obligations - enshrined in state and federal law - to monitor and prevent violence against women students. These obligations include having dedicated [policies, procedures and staff](#) to address sexual harassment and violence. This picture contrasts sharply with the position in most other countries, including the UK where it is only relatively recently that governments have begun to integrate awareness of VAW in universities into their policies, strategies and action plans. Across the world, VAW prevention programmes in schools and colleges designed to change the culture are [rare](#) - and vanishingly rare at a scale that will have lasting impact.



The first task, then is to make visible the extent of VAW - and to make clear the impact caused. The will to do this work is present - among university [academics](#) who are no longer willing to be silent or silenced, but also and critically among student activists. In the UK, it was the national student body - the NUS - which [commissioned research](#) documenting the scale of some forms of VAW. Journalists in a number of the UK's most widely-read news outlets including the [BBC](#), the [Guardian](#) and [Telegraph](#) newspapers, took up the issues and have helped to amplify the voices of survivors, sometimes showcasing spectacular [institutional mishandling](#). The global reach of new, social and feminist media has ensured that cases from around the world are shared (Emma Sulkowicz's [mattress protest](#) and the [Brock Turner](#) case in the USA; the rape and murder of student [Jyoti Singh/Nirbhaya](#) in India; the Baxter College [chant](#) in Australia). In the UK, specialist women's organisations through the umbrella body, the End Violence Against Women Coalition, have [called for change](#).

It is no longer possible to avoid or deny the scale of the issue: the Westminster government called upon Universities UK (the association for university leaders) to create a taskforce and produce recommendations. The taskforce [published its report](#) last month. The title "Changing the Culture" reflects the need for nothing short of system change. It also documents some very good (but nascent, not yet sustainable) practice. The report's 18 recommendations are an excellent start, although of course as always the devil will be in the

detail of implementation. The recommendations will be more, or less, applicable internationally depending on cultural, legislative and political contexts. They are grouped according to the themes in areas where universities are currently not performing well: Senior leadership; Institution-wide approach; Prevention; Response; Managing disciplinary/criminal offences; Sharing good practice, and online harassment.

The importance of mandating good data collection, including regular anonymised student surveys, cannot be overstated, because without measurement and recording we are in danger of losing the voice of survivors and we have no way to track the impacts of interventions. Annexes to the UUK report show that good practice in data collection, including online anonymous reporting, is being developed by a number of universities including SOAS, Manchester, Coventry and Keele.

A theme that runs throughout the report is the importance of working with specialist support organisations such as Rape Crisis, Women's Aid, and local specialist services for survivors of all forms of violence against women. The University Challenge project at Coventry University has set up an online course for university employees for responding to disclosures, developed in partnership with Rape Crisis. Bystander intervention programmes such as [The Intervention Initiative](#) are also contributing to preventing the violence and promoting a positive shift in culture away from social norms that support such violence.

If the UUK report's recommendations are implemented, there will be a sea-change in how victim-survivors are supported, and in the cultural attitudes – and consequently the prevalence - of violence against women in universities. In order for this to happen, the recommendations for “the development of a clear, accessible and representative disclosure response for incidents of sexual violence and rape, working with relevant external agencies where appropriate,” that universities “take an institution-wide approach to tackling violence against women, harassment and hate crime,” and “adopt an evidence-based bystander intervention programme,” are essential.

A future focus for UUK, not addressed in the report, is the chronic and complicated issue of staff-to-student harassment, violence and coercion. Vigilance is required to ensure that change and accountability are not blocked by vested interests: the weight of unequal power relationships here must not be minimised. Violence against women staff working in universities also requires attention, and should be seen in the context of [wider](#) and [intersecting](#) discrimination and disadvantage faced by women in universities. In each case, again, anonymous data collection will be critical. I would argue for a dedicated VAW office in all universities with responsibilities to monitor, to coordinate investigation and support, and to drive prevention and culture change.

Feminists and all those who are concerned – including every parent thinking of waving a daughter (or son) off to university – should grasp this moment to demand of each university that they share details of their plans, policies, collaborations and resources dedicated to ending violence against women.

Helen Mott researches and writes about sexism, violence against women and the psychology of social change. Her work focuses on the spaces where policy/politics, academic research and feminist activism meet and overlap.