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The politics of naming and construction: university policies on gender-based violence in the UK

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ABSTRACT

The problematisation of a social phenomenon is a political process that both constructs the problem and, in doing so, suggests possible remedies and occludes others. Based on the first-ever comprehensive analysis of 129 UK university policies to address Gender-based violence (GBV), we examine how the 'problem' of GBV is conceptualised in institutional policies. We explore three interconnected themes: the nature of the 'problem' that is constituted, analysing whether GBV is explicitly acknowledged and constructed narrowly or broadly; the place of gender and its intersection with other social relations of power in this problematisation; and the implicit ways in which GBV is constructed as an individual or a social problem. We also examine the implications of such constructions for imagining possible responses to GBV. In doing so, this article contributes to academic debates on the conceptualisation of GBV, while offering original insights into how such conceptualisations are materialised within institutional policy and regulatory frameworks.

Gender-based violence in university communities

Gender-based violence (GBV) is increasingly being recognized as a problem in schools, colleges and universities worldwide. A multi-country study by the World Health Organization estimated high lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence among young women and girls; 29.4% for those aged 15–19 and 31.6% for those aged 20–24 (WHO 2013). These findings are reiterated by UK crime surveys (ONS 2022; Scottish Govt 2021). Given the age profile of university students, high prevalence levels of gendered and sexual violence have been documented in universities across the world, including in South Africa and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Beyene et al. 2019; Finchilescu and Dugard 2021; Sidelil et al. 2022), Europe (List 2017; Osuna-Rodriguez, Amor, and Dios 2023), Australia (Heywood et al. 2022) and the USA (Cantor et al. 2015). In the UK, the NUS (2010) survey of 2,000 students found that one in seven female students had experienced serious sexual assault/physical violence, while subsequent research has

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documented the nature of 'lad cultures' in universities (Phipps and Young 2015). Universities are often considered spaces where traditional norms on gender and sexuality are challenged and there is a greater degree of acceptability for non-binary gender identities and diverse expressions of sexuality. However, surveys in 15 European countries documented high levels of violence and abuse directed at LGBTQ+ students (Lipinsky et al. 2022; Valentine and Wood 2009). GBV within university communities creates a hostile learning environment for women and LGBTQ+ students – survivors report adverse psychological effects, negative impact on academic outcomes and an increased dropout rate (Valentine and Wood 2009; Villacampa and Pujols 2019).

In contrast to the USA, where research and policy focus on this issue began in the 1980s, attention to GBV in universities elsewhere in the world is more recent, but has gathered pace in the last decade. In India, for example, the Nirbhaya rape case started a new phase of feminist activism against GBV, centred on university campuses and digital spaces (Dey and Mendes 2022). The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace Act 2013 led to regulations by India's University Grants Commission mandating every university to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee with elected student representatives for the prevention, prohibition and redressal of sexual and GBV. Phipps and Smith (2012) note the differing role of academic and activist feminism, as well as political climates and structures leading to neglect of this issue in the UK, compared to the USA. Recent policy attention to GBV in UK universities has been left to individual institutions where, unlike the USA and India, there is no central mandate or minimum requirements. Following mixed take-up of guidelines by Universities UK (an advocacy organization for 140 UK universities), the independent regulator of higher education (hereafter, HE) in England, Office for Students recently launched a consultation on minimum mandatory requirements for sexual violence policies in English universities.

These UK initiatives reflect the broader research and policy attention to sexual violence within universities worldwide (Anitha and Lewis 2018), though the earlier focus on rape and serious sexual assault has increasingly widened to acknowledge the harms from everyday sexual violence (online and offline). There is still relatively little attention to domestic violence within student communities (Anitha and Lewis 2018; John 2019), and comparatively less attention to GBV against LGBTQ+ students.

We understand GBV as behaviour or attitudes underpinned by inequitable power relations that hurt, threaten or undermine people because of their (perceived) gender or sexuality. This definition recognizes that GBV reflects and simultaneously reinforces prevailing gender inequalities and problematizes violence premised on hierarchical constructions of gender and sexuality. Women and girls constitute the primary victims of GBV as measured by amount, severity and impact of the violence, and men, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators (Hester 2013; Walby and Towers 2017). GBV includes a continuum of behaviours and attitudes such as domestic violence, sexual violence, sexist street harassment, trans/homophobic expressions and behaviours, and expressions on social media which normalize sexism and sexual objectification.

University policies are a crucial aspect of addressing GBV on campus as they impact on victim/survivors' experiences (Ahmed 2021; Bull and Page 2021), however, policies are an under-researched aspect of responding to GBV in universities.

Understanding constructions of GBV in policy responses

Policies warrant critical analysis as, rather than simply presenting 'solutions' to a fixed, objective 'problem', policies *actively construct* problems (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). To 'make politics visible' (Bacchi 2012), we applied feminist theories to explore how universities frame/conceptualize GBV through policies, which can actively reconstitute gendered categories in ways which reproduce/challenge inequalities and have concrete implications for peoples' lives (Bacchi 2017).

Our analysis was developed according to the principles of 'What is the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) policy analysis. WPR is a Foucauldian-inspired poststructuralist approach which critically examines and disrupts the 'taken for granted' in social discourse (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 4). WPR has been taken up by feminist scholars who see policies as 'gendering practices' through which inequality is *done* (Bacchi 2017).

Policies are not created in a vacuum, they reflect dominant logics, but can also be sites of contestation given the open-ended nature of 'gender' and other categories (Bacchi 2017). At a general level, policy is not gender-neutral, even where it purports to be, as 'policy and policy development [is] constructed by and through assumptions about gender', so 'much policy […] can be understood as policy on and about gender and gender relations' (Hearn and McKie 2008, 75). Even naming issues as gendered, for example, as 'gender-based violence' in policy contexts, is itself often perceived as threatening 'current social and gender orders' (Hearn and McKie 2008, 76). In relation to universities, some have argued that the predominant, implicitly masculinized, neoliberal framework surrounding UK HE and embedded in institutions, scaffolds tolerance of GBV and problematic 'lad cultures' (see, for example, Phipps and Young 2015). To speak of GBV subverts neoliberal, postfeminist representations of universities as places where gender equality has been achieved (McRobbie 2009). Analysis of university policies must be situated within these broader structures and discourses. However, institutions are never monolithic or total. There has been considerable resistance to GBV both within student communities and from (feminist) actors within and outside of universities (Lewis, Marine, and Kenney 2016; Marine and Lewis 2020; NUS 2018; Page, Bull, and Chapman 2019). Our analysis examines institutional GBV policies for both reflections of and any challenges to dominant constructions.

Research and data from the across the world show that survivors are unwilling to report sexual violence to universities for reasons including: lack of faith in institutional policies and reporting mechanisms, absence of support structures, and victim-blaming cultures (Dey 2020; Krebs et al. 2007; Spencer et al. 2017). Surveys from the UK and USA indicate only 1 in 10 students report their experiences of sexual violence to the university or the police (Revolt Sexual Assault 2018; Spencer et al. 2017). Research from Canada and India highlights how barriers to reporting are intensified for students marginalized on account of the intersection of gender, race, class, caste and/or religion (Colpitts 2021; Dey 2020). Though universities' formal policies capture neither the realities of implementation nor everyday practices/cultures, they are a crucial indicator of institutional approaches to GBV.

Despite recent policy and research interest in responses to the problem of GBV in UK universities (UUK 2016; 2019) and calls for closer examination of university policies (Jackson and Sundaram 2015), there is no comprehensive study of GBV policies across

the university sector in any country. Two small-scale studies explored policy and practice aimed at tackling GBV across 19 institutions in Scottish HE (McCullough, McCarry, and Donaldson 2017) and in three Canadian universities (Colpitts 2021). Another recently analysed policies on staff–student GBV across 25 UK universities (Bull and Rye 2018; see also NUS 2018). These reviews produced valuable insights and some guidance but are limited in scope and size.

We address this gap by providing the first comprehensive analysis of GBV policies in (UK) universities and establishing the current state of the sector. Though these policies are shaped by the UK legal and institutional contexts, we examine broader issues relating to how the 'problem' of GBV is represented, identify underlying assumptions, and reflect on some of the potential implications of these, both conceptually and practically. In doing so, we contribute to academic debates on constructions of GBV and policy analysis. As well as expanding conceptual understanding of GBV policies, we make links between abstract feminist academic understandings of GBV and practical guidance on how alternative representations of the problem might provide better outcomes for victims and signal a shift in universities' approaches to GBV. While our data is drawn from the UK HE context, the findings are relevant to ongoing debates in the US, Australia, South Africa, Canada, India, and other sites where GBV policies within HE are under discussion.

Methods

We analysed GBV policies from 129 UK universities to map how robust policies are across the sector, identifying best practice and common missteps. We invited 133 HE institutions to share whichever policies they would use for an alleged incident of GBV, giving our definition of GBV, examples, and alternative common phrases (e.g. 'sexual misconduct') for clarity. We also specified that policies should apply to students. In 47 cases, where institutions did not respond to a follow-up email, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were made under the FOI Act (2000) and the FOI Scotland Act (2002).

Overall, 129 institutions of the 133 contacted sent a total of 569 documents between September 2019 and February 2020, with most sending four or five. Of these, 194 policies applied only to staff members and not students, 165 applied only to students, and 210 related to both staff and students. We selected the most relevant policy from each institution for analysis.

Where a named policy existed, this was selected. Where there was no named policy, or where two or more were relevant, we applied four selection criteria (in order of weighting):

(1) Policy name directly references GBV or sexual violence
(2) Policy applies to student-on-student violence
(3) Document is termed a 'policy' rather than a 'guidance' accompanying a policy document
(4) Document contains keywords including *sexual*, *gender*, *violence* and/or *harassment*

Policies were coded using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *NVivo*. We developed 50 codes grouped under eight central themes such as framing, prevention and training, complaints and reporting structures and support mechanisms. Specific

themes were collectively identified/agreed between the three researchers based on deductive examination of the literature on GBV/GBV in universities and inductively to allow identification of unanticipated themes. Individual institutions are not named as our focus is on analysing patterns across the sector.

Analytical themes for this paper were determined through a set of questions drawn from the WPR approach (see above) which ask: how the 'problem' is represented (including working backwards from proposed 'solutions' to explore what problem they are supposed to address); presuppositions and conceptual logics underpinning different representations; any silences or alternative conceptualizations of the problem which are excluded; effects of specific representations of the problem, and how dominant representations might be disrupted or replaced (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 20).

The problematization of GBV in university policies

The following sections outline the implicit conceptual underpinnings of the policies and bring a critical feminist lens to examining the politics of university GBV policies. Our first section analyses the extent to which GBV is recognized as a problem and how the problem is framed. We then explore the place of gender and its intersection with other social relations of power in the policies. Lastly, we examine the implicit and explicit ways in which the problem of GBV is constructed as merely an interpersonal matter for individual resolution, or as a reflection of a significant, broader social problem by examining how mediation, vexatious complaints and anonymous reporting feature in institutional policies.

The nature of the 'problem' that is constituted

The first theme examines how policies represent the problem, analysing whether: GBV is explicitly acknowledged; whether policies are focused narrowly on specific forms of violence or operate with a broader understanding of GBV, and whether GBV is understood as one-off rarer acts, and/or as everyday/ongoing conduct.

The most common construction of the problem was as a generic, individualized issue of bullying and/or harassment or student misconduct. Only 44 out of 129 institutions had a named policy that utilized terms such as gender-based violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual assault or sexual misconduct in its title. While robust content could be hidden behind a generic title, the absence of named policies is itself a serious lacuna that may prevent institutions from conveying clear intent to recognize and address GBV. Of these 44 named policies, 36 had titles referring to sexual violence (named variously as sexual harassment/violence/assault/misconduct), seven had titles relating to GBV more broadly, and one had a title referring to violence against women specifically. Two named policies also specifically cited domestic violence/abuse and stalking in their titles, alongside sexual violence.

Where the problem was labelled GBV, policies were most likely to adopt a comprehensive definition. A broad construction of the problem was achieved by signalling that GBV includes verbal, non-verbal and physical behaviours, challenging the construction of 'real harm' as the rarer, physical incidents (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2011). Such policies were also more likely to identify the range of spaces, online and offline, where such behaviour

takes place – the family, work, educational institutions and the wider community. Further, they were more likely to recognize victimization based on (perceived) gender or sexuality such as homophobia and transphobia. Named policies on GBV were also more likely to include a (non-exhaustive) list of forms of GBV (e.g. rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, homophobic and transphobic abuse, cyber-bullying and stalking) with more detailed descriptions of behaviours associated with various forms. The practice of illustrating the scope of GBV policies through expansive definitions and examples is helpful in enabling victim/survivors to receive validation that their experiences are recognized as harmful.

Most of the named policies explicitly targeted sexual violence, framing the problem more narrowly than GBV, excluding harms such as domestic violence and homophobic abuse, and excluding victims such as LGBT+ people. A couple of policies named 'sexual violence' were exceptions, including definitions of (non-sexual) domestic violence and abuse within their scope. While this suggests a positive intention to address a broader range of GBV, mis-naming as sexual violence may exclude victim/survivors of other forms of GBV who are unlikely to navigate their way through a policy that initially seems to exclude their victimization.

Most named policies on sexual violence adopted a broad framing of sexual violence within online and offline spaces which included harmful everyday behaviours such as sexual comments/jokes, unwelcome sexual advances and graphic posts on social media/chatrooms, alongside rarer harms such as rape and sexual assault. In a few cases, however, policies that named sexual violence alluded to rape and sexual assault throughout, creating the impression that these were the sole focus.

Given the recent focus on GBV in HE it is surprising that only a third of the 129 policies explicitly addressed this issue. Where named policies do exist, the emphasis on sexual violence, as well as the predominantly broad definition of sexual violence within them perhaps reflects attention paid to this issue by UUK (2016; 2019). However, foregrounding sexual violence risks neglecting other forms of GBV (e.g. domestic violence, violence against gender/sexual minorities). By far the biggest challenge, however, is presented by the majority of generic policies, which risk invisibilizing the problem through their reluctance to name it. Notably, while the content of generic policies could hypothetically address GBV, in practice, robust content was rare within generic policies.

The place of gender in this problematization

Next, we explicate how gender is acknowledged in the construction of the problem, and the extent to which an intersectional understanding of gender is present. Early feminist conceptualizations of domestic violence critiqued dominant understandings of intimate partner violence as a private, interpersonal, and therefore trivialized matter ('just a domestic'). They drew on women's lived experiences to theorize different forms of violence against women as manifestations of women's oppression in patriarchal societies (Kelly 1988; Stanko 1985). Early scholarship on violence against gender and sexual minorities similarly conceptualized such violence as motivated by 'the urge to validate the gender conformity that is linked to a social system of heterosexual privilege' (Tomsen and Mason 2001, 270), thereby reflecting and reinforcing dominant heterosexist norms (Namaste 1996; Onken 1998; Tomsen and Mason 2001). 'GBV' is an umbrella term that

recognizes that social relations of power based on gender and sexuality are the cause of such violence, and that GBV in turn perpetuates existing inequalities.

Several universities – particularly but not exclusively in England – used the UK cross-government or Home Office (2015) definition of domestic violence 'as any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality'. Some added that domestic or sexual violence 'can happen to anyone, regardless of social background or wealth, age, gender, race, religion, sexuality, ethnicity or geography'. Such gender-neutral policy constructions simultaneously falsely individualize the problem and randomize its occurrence – like a reverse lottery, they suggest that this bad fortune can befall anyone in its indiscriminate lack of predictability (see Vincent and Eveline 2010).

Analyses of national/federal policy discourses in the US, UK and Central and Eastern European countries identify a recent retreat from gender-based analysis (Krizsan and Popa 2014), arguing that this reflects

> a shift from a feminist framing of violence that focuses on the safety and well-being of women and girls based on an analysis of gender, power, and structural inequalities, toward a conservative focus on individualistic solutions to gendered social problems. (Baker and Stein 2016, 89)

This de-gendering tendency can also be observed in university responses to GBV through bystander education programmes that de-emphasize the role of gender in violence and instead emphasize 'power-based violence' rooted in 'mutual aggression' or 'reciprocal violence' (Katz, Heisterkamp, and Fleming 2011, 689–690).

A small number of policies (13) did recognize that although any individual can experience GBV, it disproportionately affects women and gender/sexual minorities. These policies referenced NUS or national crime survey data to evidence the gendered asymmetry in the prevalence of sexual or domestic violence or drew upon reports on violence against LGBTQ+ people.

Perpetrators were rarely gendered as being predominantly men, even where it was recognized that victims were predominantly women – thus implicitly constructing men's violence as a problem of/for women, reproducing long-standing dominant discourses on GBV (Berns 2001; Phillips and Henderson 1999). One institutional policy stated that any victim would receive support (regardless of gender, sexuality, etc.) but nonetheless followed this by explicitly naming men's perpetration of sexual violence as a *social* problem ('the vast majority of victims of sexual violence, abuse and harassment are women, and the vast majority of perpetrators are men') and stated that 'the focus of our policy and actions will take account of this reality'. This was a rare occasion when the problem as well as approaches to tackle it were not individualized/degendered.

Institutional policies need to be located within national policy contexts which shape the lens through which they construct problems. Notably, Scottish universities were more likely to include a statement framing GBV as a social problem both rooted in and reinforcing of gender inequalities, adopting the Scottish Government's recognition of GBV 'as a function of gender inequality'. These policies acknowledged that GBV reflects and perpetuates unequal gender relations by contributing to the construction of ideas and practices about gender and sexuality.

Crenshaw (1991) drew attention to the role of intersectional, multiple inequalities in shaping the nature and impact of domestic violence. The concept of intersectionality remains crucial to crafting effective responses to GBV but was rendered invisible in an overwhelming majority of the policies. Only 15 policies acknowledged greater vulnerability of people located at the intersection of gender and other social relations of power with some of them referring to greater barriers to disclosure and receiving help. However, as Colpitts (2021) notes, referencing intersectionality solely in terms of heightened vulnerability can reproduce harmful pathologizing narratives and represents little by way of action to address intersecting inequalities in practice. Only one institution went further, naming intersecting disadvantages, but also acknowledging the policy implications by noting particular needs that may arise for marginalized groups, and signalling that tailored support was therefore provided through the Disability Service and through their Trans Student Support Policy. Drawing upon Strid et al.'s (2013) categorization, intersectionality is somewhat more substantively addressed here as what is understood as vulnerability in one policy domain (gendered violence) leads to concrete actions in others (disability services). There was no recognition of intersections between GBV and racist systems of oppression in any policy. While the role of dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, including rape myths, in inhibiting disclosures was acknowledged through provision of staff trained on GBV, there was no such acknowledgement of racialized constructions of gender which may prevent appropriate responses to racially minoritized students making disclosures. For example, dominant constructions of Black women as sexually promiscuous and strong/aggressive are commonly implicitly set against prevailing notions of the 'ideal' survivor who is presumed to be white, middle-class and heterosexual. These assumptions feed into mechanisms through which racially minoritized survivors are less likely to be believed and recognized as victims of sexual or domestic violence. We concur with Colpitts (2021, 156) analysis that most references to intersectionality in policies can be characterized as 'ornamental', whereby 'colour-blind' or 'race-neutral' language within policies actually normalizes whiteness, contributing to silencing the GBV that racially minoritized women experience (Wooten 2017).

Most UK university policies on GBV do not explicitly recognize gender as a cause and consequence of gendered violence. They rarely acknowledge the intersection of gender with other social relations of power in shaping survivors' experiences and in conditioning institutional responses.

Reproducing or challenging dominant constructions of GBV: mediation, false complaints and anonymous reporting

We explore the implicit and explicit ways in which GBV policies reiterate, reinforce and/or challenge dominant socio-cultural norms including myths about GBV, and address barriers to reporting and help-seeking. This is explored through three specific issues emerging from our analysis: the issue of mediation, the notion of false complaints and approaches to anonymous reporting.

Mediation

Complaints and reporting procedures varied among policies. Fifty-four – particularly generic 'bullying and harassment' policies, or those treating sexual violence/harassment

as a subset of bullying and harassment (e.g. 'bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct') – suggested that victims of sexual misconduct should, in the first instance, try to resolve the issue through dialogue with the perpetrator. For example, one such policy suggested options, including: speaking/writing directly to the individual concerned explaining their experience and requesting that the behaviour stop, or alternately/subsequently if this was not successful, to speak to someone else 'to obtain another perspective'. While some of these policies stated that informal resolution may not always be appropriate in cases of 'serious' misconduct of any kind, only six policies included an explicit caveat explaining that informal resolution was not appropriate for sexual misconduct.

These suggestions are premised upon constructing the problem as a 'misunderstanding' between two individuals, and as a one-off incident that is unconnected to, and unrepresentative of, broader social inequalities. Christie's (1986) work on constructions of ideal victims highlights the questions that are (literally and rhetorically) asked about victims' conformity to acceptable social roles, frequently 'read' from factors such as their dress, appearance, behaviours, and where/when the behaviours occurred. Such assessments are necessarily social processes underpinned by broader beliefs/assumptions about how members of different social groups should behave. In relation to sexual harassment/violence against women, women's clothing or alcohol consumption as well as raced, classed and ableist discourses are commonly utilized to minimize men's culpability for violence and to attribute responsibility to women for their own victimization (Daly 2021; Grubb and Turner 2012). Donovan and Barnes (2018) extend Christie's discussion of 'ideal victims', highlighting how GBV against lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people is often constructed in ways that suggest their own liability for being victimized. Such culpability is frequently ascribed simply for living a life that does not mask their sexuality/gender identity or for their very presence in public spaces that are not perceived as designated for LGBT+ people.

Suggesting mediation for victim/survivors of GBV is deeply inappropriate. Mediation risks re-victimization through strategies of minimization and victim-blaming that are commonly deployed in relation to GBV. It also responsibilizes victim/survivors to resolve the issue, placing the onus on them to end the GBV and keep themselves safe.

Vexatious complaints

Among the most long-standing myths about reports of sexual violence is that of the false complaint. Fourteen university policies reiterated this myth by including warnings about potential penalties for false, malicious or vexatious complaints, which was defined using terms such as 'frivolous allegations', or 'clearly unfounded allegations'. These wordings suggest a lack of engagement with the lived experience of (re)victimization.

Referring to 'frivolous allegations' without any examples of what this might mean may deter reporting of everyday forms of GBV, which are commonly constructed as 'normal' and 'not real harm'. By including this phrase, institutional policies risk mirroring a long-standing invalidation of women's experiences of men's sexual harassment as a trivial matter ('nothing really happened') (Kelly and Radford 1990).

Similarly, referring to 'unfounded allegations' implies that the complaint may attract penalties against the complainant where findings are not in their favour. In a context where the vast majority of GBV reports to the criminal justice system and to institutional complaints processes do not result in a finding in favour of the complainant, including

such warnings risks further deterring complaints. Research from across the world also indicates not all victims are similarly located in relation to the possibility of securing justice – those who are marginalized, the disabled (Pillay 2012) and minoritized (Cantalupo 2019; Daly 2021) find justice processes loaded against them and may be even more wary of complaining when immediately confronted with the prospect that complaints will be deemed 'unfounded' and they will face penalties.

Moreover, vexatious complaint was defined in one policy as: 'providing false or misleading information in any investigation of complaints'. This goes beyond a 'common-sense' understanding of a 'false' allegation as a complete fabrication of something that never happened and instead employs a broad definition that suggests: '*an allegation containing falsehoods*: a generic, all-encompassing definition capable of incorporating both the rape that did not happen (the false complaint) and the rape that did not happen the way the complainant said it did (the false account)' (Saunders 2012, 1168). Research indicates that victim/survivors of GBV may withhold information they think may mean they will be disbelieved or blamed – for example, not mentioning that illegal drugs were consumed prior to an incident or omitting details of any previous consensual sexual activity with the accused (Jordan 2004; Kelly 2010). Such omissions of information cannot be considered akin to making a false/fabricated allegation.

The notion of false complaints is commonly used to discredit women's accounts of sexual violence through overestimation of the prevalence of false complaints and through blurred/expanded definitions of false complaints (Kelly 2010; Saunders 2012). These constructions are underpinned by gender stereotypes about women as deceitful and ultimately regretful of sexual encounters. Similar observations have been made about victim-blaming attitudes towards gay men who are sexual violence victims (Sleath and Bull 2010).

A handful of policies explicitly recognized these dominant discourses about sexual violence, including rape myths and/or under-reporting of GBV. They offered reassurances about a culture of belief and/or that the person recording the student's complaint will be aware of such myths. For example, one institution addressed the person receiving the disclosure, including fellow students:

> If someone tells you they have experienced sexual violence, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence and/or sexual misconduct you should respond in good faith with the assumption that they are telling the truth. There are many myths within society that lead to victim blaming […] If you are not specially trained it is best to listen non-judgementally and direct someone to these services.

A few policies referenced research evidence on the low prevalence of false allegations and harms associated with this myth. For example, one noted: 'The University recognizes that false allegations of sexual violence and domestic violence are no more common than they are for other crimes, however the perception that they are, harms survivors'. In another case, such a statement was followed by a link to the charity Refuge's webpage, which tackles misconceptions about sexual assault.

A few policies reassured the complainant in case they were fearful of the consequences of not securing a finding of misconduct: 'If a criminal prosecution or internal investigation does not conclude on the balance of probabilities that the reported behaviour took place it does not mean the person(s) reporting was doing so falsely'.

Anonymous reporting

The facility of anonymous reporting is important as it recognizes barriers that victims commonly experience in disclosing GBV. The policies offered various options to those experiencing GBV, ranging from making a formal complaint leading to an investigation, to asking for support without initiating a formal complaint and/or reporting anonymously. UUK's (2019, 45) recent survey of 95 universities found that 'just over half' provide anonymous reporting mechanisms, though this includes as 'anonymous' reporting, policies where the reporting party must name the perpetrator. Their data suggests that between 16% and 21% of institutions (depending on the form of GBV) allowed *true* anonymous reporting where neither party must be named.

We found that 28 policies, around 22%, signposted anonymous reporting, but it was not always clear whether this was 'true' anonymity. Just eight policies referred to the role of anonymous reporting data in enabling institutions to: 'identify any possible trends in reports' and 'inform prevention strategies'. These institutions outlined specific monitoring mechanisms, with one policy specifically naming the institutional committee tasked to periodically analyse/act upon anonymous reporting trends. However, seventeen policies actively discouraged anonymous reporting by advising either that anonymous reporting was not allowed (5 policies), or that taking this route could even impede the disciplinary process or 'prevent a fair investigation' (12 policies).

Where actively pursued through robust analysis of anonymous reporting data, anonymous reporting can enable institutions to discern gaps between anonymously reported experiences of GBV (which still only represent a small proportion of GBV experienced) and formal reporting rates. This enables universities to take steps to increase confidence in institutional mechanisms and potentially to take preventative action where patterns are identified in the data (e.g. 'hotspots' for GBV). However, such measures are not widespread and are far more commonly discouraged or not facilitated.

Our analysis illustrates how university policies on GBV can both reflect and reinforce broader harmful gendered social norms and constructions of GBV and – less commonly – recognize and challenge these prevailing problematizations.

Implications of policy constructions

Based on a comprehensive analysis of policies from 129 UK institutions, we have examined the problematization of GBV in policies to 'make politics visible' (Bacchi 2012). We focused on three key interconnected themes: the nature of the 'problem' that is constituted; the place of gender in this problematization; and the implicit ways in which this is constructed as an individual or a social problem.

The first theme explored how policies represent the nature of the problem. Only a third explicitly addressed the issue through 'named' policies, invisibilizing GBV and perhaps indicating a lack of willingness to recognize/tackle the problem. Itzin (2000) observed 'how violence is conceptualized and defined will determine what is visible and seen and known […] and what is and is not done about it through policy and practice' (2000, 357). One of the first barriers women and girls face in the disclosure and help-seeking process is the complex journey towards recognizing and naming their experiences as abuse. In a context where behaviour which is construed by men and boys as normal or trivial feels harmful to women and girls (Stanko 1985), naming is a crucial

step towards rejecting the long-standing misrecognition of their experiences and towards help-seeking. Sexual violence researchers have long noted how dominant social constructions create patterns of minimizing and silencing (Kelly 1988). When women are unable to name domestic violence/abuse *as* violence, they struggle to allocate responsibility to the perpetrator and to seek help. The signalling of the specific harms of GBV through named policies, therefore, becomes an important first step in reassuring victim/survivors of institutional recognition of, and responses to, the problem.

In the policies that did name the problem, GBV was sometimes defined broadly to include, for example, domestic violence and violence against gender/sexual minorities, however, most policies targeted sexual violence which risks neglecting other forms of GBV. This reflects the dominant focus of existing research and of policy interventions such as those in the USA and India, which focus on sexual violence and harassment in university communities. While policies that dealt with sexual violence commonly adopted broad constructions of the problem incorporating online and offline, everyday and rarer harms, this was not always the case. Kelly's (1988) conceptualization of the continuum theorizes the implications of defining violence and harm narrowly or broadly. Each incident or a pattern of behaviour by a person or persons may occur, be reported and addressed by an institution through its complaints process separately. In contrast, the continuum emphasizes the conceptual connections between everyday expressions/behaviours that may be normalized and the less common acts, highlighting how everyday behaviours reflect and sustain a culture of gender inequalities, in turn condoning and enabling rarer, 'sledgehammer' events (Stanko 1985) that are more widely recognized as harm. One end of the continuum, for example, rape, or homo/transphobic violence therefore cannot be addressed without problematizing everyday manifestations of heterosexism and gendered hierarchies. Definitions of GBV that do not address the full continuum are therefore problematic and have implications for recognizing and addressing the problem effectively (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2011).

The second theme unpacked whether and how gender is acknowledged in the construction of the problem. With some exceptions, most UK university policies on GBV do not explicitly recognize gender as a cause and consequence of gendered violence. The problem was commonly framed as something that 'can be experienced by any individual' without acknowledging evidence of the vastly disproportionate victimization of women and girls and gender and sexual minorities. This reflects the increasingly degendered representations of GBV within media, research and policy discourses in the West that reinforce an individualized and de-contextualised masculinist worldview (Berns 2001; Johnson 2015). Policies rarely recognized the intersection of gender with other social relations of power in constructing experiences of such violence, in shaping barriers to disclosure and in conditioning institutional responses/actions. *How* GBV is represented as a policy problem has implications for understanding causes of the problem and therefore likely solutions.

In relation to the third theme, we found that GBV was most often constructed as merely an interpersonal matter requiring individual redress, rather than a social harm that reiterates and reflects broader inequalities based on gender intersecting with other social relations of power. For example, the pattern of suggesting mediation/informal resolution derives from an understanding of GBV as an interpersonal matter between two equally balanced parties, ignoring power differentials between perpetrators and victim/survivors.

It reflects dominant socio-cultural norms whereby women are responsibilized to act as gatekeepers to men's sexual advances and thus blamed for ineffective gatekeeping when victimized. It also risks harm to victim/survivors through re-victimization. This is compounded by warnings to potential complainants about negative consequences of making vexatious/malicious/unfounded complaints and false allegations. It is well-documented that different forms of GBV are vastly under-reported (Jaitman and Anauati 2020; Pezzella, Fetzer, and Keller 2019). Such statements within institutional policies mirror societal misconceptions about GBV being overreported and gendered constructions of victim/survivors as vindictive and deceitful, which have concrete implications for under-reporting and attrition rates in criminal justice and institutional processes.

Some policies, however, recognized GBV as a social problem, challenging these myths by acknowledging evidence that GBV is under-reported, identifying myths as harmful to victim/survivors and providing reassurance that there would be no negative consequences for complainants where complaints were not upheld. Finally, where anonymous reporting provisions are included in policies, this signals an awareness of under-reporting and commitments to better recognition of GBV within university communities and to challenging violence-tolerant norms/cultures. Including anonymous reporting measures also recognizes that under-reporting, not false (over)reporting is the key justice barrier. More widespread provision and encouragement for anonymous reporting accompanied by appropriate monitoring and review would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Applying a feminist conceptual lens to policies enabled analysis of how most policies reflect and reproduce harmful constructions of GBV and gender, which limits the development of helpful solutions to the problem. However, some partial contestations are also evident whereby institutions acknowledge and respond to dominant constructions in ways that help to foster resistance and effective action. Overall, our analysis suggests some evidence of emerging good practice in university GBV policies indicating a willingness to recognize and tackle the problem, but that there is still considerable work to be done. Through this analysis, the article contributes to academic debates on the conceptualization of GBV, while offering original insights into how such conceptualizations are materialized within institutional policy and regulatory frameworks.

At a practical level, our analysis also suggests ways in which staff and student communities within universities worldwide can assess their policies and work to remove content that reinforces dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, and of GBV. However, we note that while policies reflect prevailing constructions of a problem and suggest possible responses, they constitute a necessary but insufficient part of responding to this problem (Ahmed 2021). A full understanding of university responses to the problem of GBV requires examination of policies, practices, and the lived experiences of victim/survivors and broader student and staff communities.

Disclosure statement

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