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'Changing the Culture'?: A feminist academic activist critique

**'Changing the Culture'? – A feminist academic activist critique**

Kym Atkinson, Liverpool John Moores University

Kay Standing, Liverpool John Moores University

Author biographies:

Kym Atkinson is a PhD researcher and Lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University. Her PhD explores women's experiences of sexual violence whilst at university and the multitude of university responses to this. She is based within the Centre for the Study of Crime, Criminalisation and Social Exclusion.

Dr Kay Standing is a Reader in Gender Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. Her research interests are in gender, GBV and education in the UK and Nepal. She is part of the Tender national partnership programme working in schools to prevent domestic abuse and sexual violence by promoting healthy relationships based on equality and respect.

Affiliation: Liverpool John Moores University, UK

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Contact details: [k.atkinson@2015.ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:k.atkinson@2015.ljmu.ac.uk)

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## **'Changing the Culture' – A feminist academic activist critique**

### **Abstract**

The Universities UK (UUK) Taskforce (2016) report, 'Changing the Culture', has been seen as a turning point in UK universities' responses to gender based violence (GBV) (Richardson and Beer, 2017). Institutional changes have occurred as a response to grassroots feminist activism and resistance to GBV, focusing on sexual violence, harassment and 'lad culture' in universities (Cobb and Godden-Rasul, 2017; Lewis, Marine and Kenney, 2016). This article will argue that the neoliberal marketization of higher education, concurrent with the persistence of misogyny and patriarchy, creates an environment where GBV is normalised, and feminist voices are marginalised and silenced. Interviews with academics show support for victim/survivors on campus often falls to particular academic staff. When initiatives for change, led by institutional management, are limited to protecting the 'reputation' of the university, it furthermore falls on academics to challenge not only GBV, but also the reactive and uncritical responses offered by institutions. We contend that national, institutional and individual responses to GBV must consider the meaning of 'cultural change' beyond policy reform, zero tolerance campaigns and condemnation of GBV. Attempts to enact true cultural change must analyse the broader issue of sexism, its intersections with further structural issues, and the ways in which this plays out within the neoliberal institution to the detriment of students and staff.

## Introduction

Gender based violence (GBV) experienced by female university students in the UK has gained significant media and political interest since 2010. This is in part due to the publication of *Hidden Marks* by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2010) which proved a catalyst for developing responses and shedding light on the issue. The report found that one in seven female students had experienced a serious or physical sexual assault and 68% had experienced some form of verbal or non-verbal harassment in and around their institutions (NUS, 2010). The study highlighted the problem of GBV on campuses, a lack of awareness of existing support, and low levels of reporting incidents. Universities UK (UUK)<sup>1</sup> (2016) later produced a report and recommendations in relation to responding to and preventing various forms of violence. Since the NUS and UUK publications, there has been an increase in the number of research projects and institutional responses and interventions into sexual violence, with a growing number of projects looking at GBV more broadly (for an overview see: UUK, 2017). The focus, with some exceptions, has tended to be on students as victims/survivors and perpetrators of GBV. Likewise, in terms of activism, research has mainly focused on students, particularly feminists, as agents of change (Lewis, Marine and Kenney, 2016; MacKay, Wolfe and Rutherford, 2017). The popularisation of 'lad culture' and discussion of sexism and misogyny on campus has also led to a surge in feminist societies (Hilton, 2013). Whilst these are undoubtedly positive shifts, we argue that the focus on students as both the 'problem', and 'solution' to GBV on campus enables institutions to delegate responsibility for cultural change to student bodies, rather than addressing the underlying patriarchal and misogynistic culture of many universities.

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<sup>1</sup> Universities UK (UUK) is the body that represents higher education institutions in the UK and consists of vice-chancellors and principals. The UUK board is the decision-making body across various issues including, but not exclusively, inclusion, equality and diversity.

In this article, we explore the role of feminist academics, as activists in the area. The ‘feminist academic activist’ role is understood as a vital part of the struggle to create cultural change on campus, but one that brings its own set of difficulties. We argue the role of feminist academic activists in resisting the neoliberal project of modern universities serves to further highlight the problem of, not just GBV, but wider sexism and misogyny on campus.

### **The UK response: cultural change.**

UK wide and individual institutional responses to GBV in universities has focused on the need for cultural change (UUK, 2016; UUK, 2017). UUK’s overview of the current evidence argues that universities, as a microcosm of society, are therefore affected by the same problems as wider society (UUK, 2016: 14). Universities have responded with projects aimed at preventing, responding to and recording incidents, and training for senior leadership and all staff (UUK, 2017). However, there is no coordinated response across UK Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), and many of the responses fail to determine what is actually meant by cultural change in relation to the issues of GBV. Whilst UUK do not explicitly state what it means to ‘change the culture’ it can be surmised from the report that it relates to the promotion of a ‘zero-tolerance’ culture, the dismantling of ‘lad culture’ and a culture that mitigates against ‘unacceptable behaviour’ (UUK, 2016). As discussed below these are contested terms, and whilst cultural change seems self-explanatory, what the culture needs changing from, and to, needs further consideration.

### ***Zero tolerance.***

A recommendation made by UUK is to adopt and embed zero-tolerance policies across institutions (UUK, 2016) in order to reinforce positive behaviour in student communities. It is argued zero tolerance policies should be supported by student disciplinary regulations, addressing acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Zero tolerance is thus

presented in a disciplinary framework, rather than situated within a feminist analysis of gendered violence, which draws on work that makes links between different forms of male violence, theorises gendered violence as being about power and control, and located in the context of gendered structural inequalities. Zero tolerance policies label only the individual as the problem and therefore discount and downplay the context of the action (Cassidy and Jackson (2005). Cassidy and Jackson (2005:447) also note that, '[t]he one-size-fits-all policy is adhered to, without due consideration of the students involved'. In relation to zero tolerance towards GBV in universities, a consideration of intersectionality is important in exploring which students are seen as more or less deserving (Phipps, 2017), often based on stereotypes around race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and which perpetrators are more or less likely to be punished, again based on stereotypes across identities. In a zero tolerance approach, individual perpetrators become defined as the problem, without consideration of the social, cultural and educational environment of the university which may perpetuate such negative behaviours. In order to address the problem of GBV in universities, we argue there is a need to consider the role of the university in perpetuating these behaviours as well as the impact of such policies upon all students with varying identities

### ***Lad culture.***

The need to address GBV by UUK is also contextualised in terms of 'lad culture'. 'Lad culture' is defined by Phipps and Young (2013) as 'a group or "pack" mentality residing in activities such as sport or heavy alcohol consumption, and "banter" which was often sexist, misogynistic and homophobic' (Phipps and Young, 2013: 28, see also Anderson, 2016; McAlpine, 2012; Sanghani, 2014). However, 'lad culture' is a contested term, which theoretically needs developing and should be understood as one of a variety of masculinities (Phipps and Young, 2013). Laddism is not a monolithic term, and Phipps (2017) moves the debate beyond universalising ideas of 'lad culture' to reframe it within the context of

consumerist neoliberal rationalities in HEIs and 'the conditions which shape and produce particular performances of 'laddism' (Phipps, 2017: 1), to include a class and gender analysis and its effects. In arguing that laddishness can be linked to the socio-economic trends of neoliberalism, Phipps and Young (2014) show how consumerism, competitiveness and new forms of sexualised audit play out in higher education, and this is discussed below in more detail.

***A culture that mitigates against unacceptable behaviour.***

One way in which UUK (2016: 33) recommends changing cultures is through 'supporting students to be agents of change and fostering a positive respectful culture via evidence-based, bystander initiatives'. However, Changing Universities Cultures (CHUCL) (2016) also note that institutional responses, such as bystander intervention initiatives, are often not sensitive to diverse student demographics. CHUCL (2016) therefore question whether all students are equally positioned to act as, and be seen as, bystanders. Factors such as gender, the physical location, number of witnesses and relationship between the victim and offender all contribute to whether a bystander will intervene (Banyard, 2011). It is also questionable whether all students will receive an equal level of support from their institutions; who is subject to strict enforcement of policies and which complaints are taken seriously.

Whilst many universities have developed policies on unacceptable behaviour, definitions of 'acceptable' and unacceptable behaviours are contested, and the focus is often on individual student misconduct which may be a criminal offence (UUK, 2016) rather than the wider culture of masculinities within the neoliberal university. Using a feminist analysis, located in the context of gendered structural inequalities, enable us to problematize different forms of masculinities, makes links between different forms of gendered violence and

‘Changing the Culture’?: A feminist academic activist critique

theorise gendered violence as being about power and control, rather than individual ‘unacceptable’ behaviour.

Masculinities have long been understood as multiple, as existing in different forms at particular times, and as always being subject to change (Connell, 2005). Whilst patriarchy, misogyny and GBV existed before neoliberalism, neoliberalism is connected to current manifestations of masculinities, sexism and GBV which we discuss below.

### **Neoliberalism, GBV and masculinity**

The forms in which masculinities exist, and play out, in the context of higher education’s commitment to neoliberal values are key to understanding GBV on campus. Neoliberalism is a politically imposed discourse, which has spread from the economic to institutions, particularly Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The neoliberal economic ideals of the self-interested individual, free market economics and commitment to *laissez-faire* (Olssen and Peters, 2005) have extended from the market to ‘a mechanism for the institutional regulation of public sector organisational contexts’ (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 317). Walcott (2009: 78) positions neoliberalism as a cultural project ‘concerned with individual conduct that spills over from the economic realm’. Neoliberal processes work through the interplay of the naturalisation of inequalities and increased gendered demarcation. This individualised, competitive discourse produces certain forms of masculinities, in the context of higher education, this means competitive and consumerist sexual behaviours, such as counting conquests and marking women in relation to sexual encounters, are presented as neoliberal values, which shape sexual communities in higher education (Phipps and Young, 2015). As the neoliberal model of education ensures institutions must engage in competitive behaviours, the neoliberal individual student does too.



Neoliberalism as a cultural project furthermore means that this particular socialisation ‘erodes the notion of collective responsibility and our individual responsibility to others’ (Lipton and Mackinlay: 83). These values further influence the way in which institutions respond to the overall problem of GBV on campus, as discussed later in the article. The backlash against feminism and postfeminism can also be theorised in the context of consumerist neoliberal masculine rationalities and austerity (Phipps 2017). Neoliberalism’s impact upon feminism in the academy is discussed below.

### **The neoliberal academy and feminism**

The neoliberal academy poses particular issues for feminist academics. In a neoliberal framework, students are consumers paying for a service (Morrison, 2017) and consumerist levers, performance indicators and audits such as the National Student Survey<sup>2</sup>, the Research Excellence Framework<sup>3</sup> and the Teaching Excellence Framework<sup>4</sup> ‘measure’ the success of the university. Research shows that these audits are gendered, with female lecturers and professors consistently receiving lower scores in teaching evaluations and student surveys (Boring, 2017; MacNell, Driscoll and Hunt, 2015).

Whilst overt gender discrimination has diminished, neoliberalism encourages a stereotypical masculinist ethos. This ethos rewards individualism and competitiveness whilst negating and downplaying the feminised emotional labour many academics experience (Leathwood and Hey 2009, Thornton, 2013). It is also argued that the neoliberal agenda runs counter to the feminist agenda of subverting hierarchies, challenging power, promoting

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<sup>2</sup> The National Student Survey gathers information from final year undergraduates regarding various aspects of their time in higher education. Subjects covered include, but are not limited to, satisfaction in relation to teaching, assessment, academic support, course management and resources.

<sup>3</sup> The Research Excellence Framework is a framework for assessing research quality in universities in the UK with a significant focus on research “impact”.

<sup>4</sup> The Teaching Excellence Framework was introduced in 2016 and is a voluntary scheme which assesses teaching quality in the UK.

egalitarianism and collaboration, and incorporating an ethic of care (Mauthner and Edwards, 2010). Feminist activist academics moreover assert that the university has a social function beyond the provision of education (Canning, 2017) and the individualizing discourse of neoliberalism, and the ideology of individual agency as the solution to social problems, including GBV, is incompatible with collective feminist struggles for social justice (Weber, 2010).

Neoliberalism moreover means the role of the academic activist is under threat, both from rising workloads and student numbers, and the silencing of activist academics by the institution who see them as ‘non-conforming’ and ‘trouble makers’ (Grey, 2013). This is particularly the case at the structural level where feminist voices have not been in command of institutional level responses to GBV and instead, their demands and voices are co-opted by institutions (Bumiller, 2008: 11). Feminist insights into GBV, which were once nuanced, become removed from their context, reducing them to bullet points and sound bites (Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson 2008). Mohanty (2013) discusses the depoliticization of antiracist and transnational feminist intellectual projects in the neoliberal academy. With pressure from UUK to act quickly, responses are often reactive, without necessarily acknowledging and addressing the need for cultural change. In the context of the neoliberal university, addressing GBV becomes a marketing task, where policies are written or rewritten, procedures may be altered, and the institution then publicly presents these changes in a marketable format. Feminist voices, which address the structural and institutional problems relating to GBV, are marginalised or silenced as they are often at odds with the neoliberal agenda.

However, many feminist academics are attempting to resist and challenge neoliberalism (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017) for example by adopting tenets of the ‘slow university’ (O’Neill, 2014), or creating ‘workarounds’ to maintain critical feminist research

## 'Changing the Culture'?: A feminist academic activist critique

(Acker and Wagner, 2017). Key to this is to research the progressive potential of universities for changing culture, rather than a focusing on universities as dangerous spaces. For example, Lewis, Marine and Kenney (2016) explored young feminists' resistance and challenges to problematic cultures on university campuses, arguing the university can be seen as a relatively safe space for challenging sexual violence and sexism through the production of zines, performances and challenging institutional cultures. MacKay, Wolfe and Rutherford (2017) also explored the possibilities of collective student action in the university context in Canada following high profile rape cases which resulted in a campus safety audit. Due to student activism, the originally planned safety audit was successfully challenged to become externally lead, include student voices, and one that challenged the institutional framework that supported sexual assault.

Boyle et al (2017) also considered the impact of feminist mobilisation on campus in the United States and found that, at institutions where there was a greater feminist presence and anti-violence activism, and in states where women have higher socioeconomic status, the reporting of campus rape was higher. For Boyle et al (2017), under-reporting is understood as an institutional failure (Boyle et al, 2017) and reporting levels, for Towl (2016), can be used as a measure of the success of the institution as well as a demonstration of students' trust in the institution. UUK (2018) similarly highlight that some institutions consider the increase in the number of disclosures positively. The recognition that low levels of reporting does not equate to low levels of GBV is a major feminist achievement, which highlights increased feminist mobilisation as a useful tool in combatting and transforming the culture that underpins GBV. The resistance to neoliberal, self-interested values inherent in HEIs by student feminist communities is a powerful counter-narrative to the university as a dangerous space, which instead highlights women's agency in struggles against GBV (Lewis, Marine and Kenney, 2016). Less research has aimed to understand the role of academics, as feminists

and activists, and their experiences in resisting and challenging institutional structures which underpin GBV on campus and the article goes on to explore this.

## **Methods**

The study came in part out of our own experiences of research and teaching around GBV in HEIs, and of being involved in trying to instigate institutional and cultural change within our own institution. The research began with the idea that academics, working within HEIs in the UK, were central to activities in the university which work towards eliminating GBV on campus, educating staff and students about GBV and/or supporting students who had experienced GBV. Their experience and knowledge however has not previously been explored in detail and therefore, the research sought to explore their perspectives on the key issues relating to GBV at university.

The research was inductive, we did not set out to speak to ‘feminist academic activists’, rather, we approached academics who were active in some form in the area of GBV and were therefore recruited through purposive sampling. We interviewed eleven academics, ten women and one man. Interviewees were working in some capacity in the area of GBV, either through teaching and/or research, and/ or as activists. Nine of the participants were based in universities in England, one in Australia and one in the USA, although they had both previously worked in a UK based institution. Interviewees represented academics at various career stages including one PhD student employed as a sessional lecturer, one Professor, with the other participants employed as lecturers or senior lecturers. Because of the small sample size, the need for confidentiality and anonymity, and given that several interviewees were critical of their institutions, we did not ask for further demographic details, as this may identify individuals. All academics interviewed teach and research within the broad area of humanities and social science with the majority specifically working within

criminology, law, sociology and social policy. Most respondents were, or had been previously, involved in activist work around GBV, in addition to their academic role.

We were not trying to achieve a representative sample but instead aimed to allow for a thorough exploration of participants' views. Possible participants were identified, contacted and face to face interviewees were arranged where possible. Five participants opted to answer questions via email due to time constraints and schedules. The interview questions were open-ended and were concerned with interviewees' experiences of working in the area of GBV particularly in relation to dealing with students, research or campaigns, and suggestions for how universities could improve services and support for survivors of GBV. Signposting to local and national support services was provided, although all participants were working within this area of GBV and were already familiar with these services through their academic work. Interviews were anonymised, and references to their institutions or research, which could identify respondents, were removed. This was important, as several respondents were critical of the practices of their institutions, and the failure to implement meaningful cultural change, or to listen to those with expertise in GBV. Moreover, the naming of specific institutions may imply it is only an issue at these HEIs, rather than a sector wide problem (Phipps, 2018).

Face to face interviews were transcribed and these and the email interviews were analysed by the authors. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach, both authors read all transcripts, generated initial codes, searched for, extracted, reviewed and refined themes. The interviews were broadly interpreted within a feminist theoretical and ideological framework which allows researchers to 'give voice' to participants (Spencer, 2017). The researchers attempted to adhere to four themes, identified by Fonow and Cook (1991), as characteristic of feminist research methodology, these are: reflexivity, action

orientation, attention to the affective components of the research and the use of ‘situation at hand’. The positioning of the researchers, in relation to the participants meant there were shared or similar experiences which presented challenges in conducting the research and maintaining reflexivity. The ‘insider status’ (Blythe et al., 2013) of the researchers was addressed firstly through acknowledging this status and the challenges inherent, most notably, the potential for assumed understanding. This assumed understanding firstly relates to the participants assuming the researchers were aware of particular issues, and potentially omitting information. This was addressed, in line with Blythe et al’s (2013) suggestions, through the use of probing questions and asking participants to clarify their statements. Assumed understanding however, also related to the researchers own experiences and the impact this may have upon data analysis. Maintaining consistent reflexivity on the roles of the researchers and participants was therefore key and verbatim quotes are presented throughout in order to show the data in direct relation to the findings.

Within the context of this research, the action orientated approach centred upon the decision to undertake critical research within the area of GBV experienced at university. In providing attention to the affective components of research, the authors recognised the significance of the research in relation to the participant’s own values, specifically in terms of challenging existing structures, which facilitate GBV within universities. Finally, in making ‘use of the situation at hand’, the study was drawn from the author’s own experiences of teaching, research and activism in the area of GBV in universities, and explored themes and issues which were important to others within this context. For Crawley, Lewis and Mayberry (2008), the ‘use of situation at hand’, means research can be engaged in the “right here”, the local context, which focuses upon issues important to local people, but with due regard for the connections between the local and global. The decision to undertake the research provided a unique opportunity to explore the perspective of academics, working to effect

change within universities around GBV, thus facilitating the production of new knowledge through the use of ‘situation at hand’.

Analysis of the interview data highlighted the broader role of the academic participants in practical activities beyond academia in relation to GBV, which we have termed academic activism. Eschle and Manguashca (2006) assert that activism can be central to the role of academics and can be developed through ‘critical scholarship’ and ‘critical pedagogy’. Whilst academic activism is a contested term (Eschle and Manguashca, 2006) and the participants in this research did not necessarily define themselves as such, we use the term to highlight, within the particular context of the research, the activities which participants undertook to create cultural change on campus within their own institutions. These activities relate to teaching, supporting students, campaigning alongside students and challenging the power structures within universities. This is a broad interpretation of activism, however, hooks (1994) highlights the way in which teaching is fundamentally political due to its roots in antiracist struggle. A commitment to learning (and teaching) though, must be a counter-hegemonic act in order to distinguish between ‘education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination’ (hooks, 1994: 4). We therefore assert that a critical approach to teaching GBV is also activism. Interviewees were also often engaged in challenging, on both a small and large scale, policies and practices within the institutions, as well as developing prevention initiatives.

### **Findings:**

The following sections present the key themes extracted from the research interviews, relating to the culture of the institution, and the experiences of individual academics within the institution. The interviews were concerned with staff experiences of managing, preventing and responding to GBV at university but participants also often discussed their

experiences of creating change within a challenging institutional context. In order to critique the current ‘changing the culture’ approach, the individual experiences therefore must be understood in the context of the wider institution. Because the issue in the UK is often framed around ‘lad culture’, we use this, as did interviewees, as a starting point to discuss the broader issues of everyday sexism and the masculine university. We start by discussing the institution, separately to the individual academics experiences, in order to provide context and move beyond the individualising nature and discourses of neoliberalism.

The first section explores participant’s perceptions of the institution’s role in creating change in relation to GBV, or conversely, in shutting down the debate. The second section discusses individual academic staff’s experiences of working to create change on campus, experiences which were often impacted by the institutional environment explored in the first section.

### **The Institutional Culture.**

For all interviewees, there was a recognition that GBV was widespread and that both institutional sexism, dominant discourses of masculinity and neoliberalism, broadly, need further exploration and action within HEIs. The focus of much debate, as discussed above, is ‘lad culture’, and although interviewees often discussed the concept, many questioned the extent to which it is useful in understanding the prevalence of GBV in that it may be perceived that ‘problematic’ masculinities did not exist previously. For example, one interviewee though ‘lad culture’ can obscure the origins of GBV, but may also play a role in preventing students from reporting incidents:

I think ‘lad culture’ is an increasingly problematic term... Sexual harassment and violence are not practices performed by all men, but they are gender-related and are disproportionately perpetrated by men. Using the term ‘lad culture’ or even ‘rape culture’ to describe these specific practices can obscure the nature of the issue and alienate some students from engaging openly and constructively with prevention efforts. “Lad culture” implicates men, but does not name ‘masculinity’; this is problematic given that (toxic) masculinity is an underlying cause of violence and can



## 'Changing the Culture?': A feminist academic activist critique

lead to an individualised focus on 'some' men rather than a discussion about gender expectations and identities. (interviewee eleven, a Professor)

Interviewees pointed to the need to focus on different forms of masculinity, rather than a homogenous idea of 'lad culture'. Whilst certain forms of masculinity may play out in universities, participants recognised that the culture of the university is part of the broader misogynistic and patriarchal cultures that contribute to GBV by sexualising and objectifying women:

One issue is the social messages which students are surrounded by, the ubiquity of pornography sexualised sexism in popular culture, and the pressure this exerts on female students to be "up for it" and "empowered" and the expectation of male students that they will be interested in sex. (Interviewee eight, Lecturer)

Universities were seen as being part of a broader culture that contributes to GBV but also, importantly, the culture within institutions was discussed as a contributing factor to the normalisation of everyday sexism and misogyny experienced by both staff and students on campus. This goes beyond 'lad culture', and identifies the institution itself as problematic. It was highlighted by one of the interviewees that, in their institution, the rhetoric is that sexual harassment and assault are unacceptable however:

they fail to see how women's lower status and the overt sexualisation of women in the workplace can contribute to an organisational culture which makes it harder to address sexual assault and harassment. (Interviewee nine, Lecturer)

Despite the massive growth in the numbers of women in higher education, the culture of these institutions remains sexist and misogynistic, leading to what Thornton (2013) calls the 're masculinisation' of the university. Interviewees noted the "male dominated" environment in which they were working, with interviewee six, a Senior Lecturer, stating 81% of the professors at her particular institution were men, most of whom are white, which is neither representative of the student population nor wider society (interviewee six). One Professor, interviewee one, had worked in universities for over forty years and tracked the changes she had seen from being the only woman employed in her department, to being one

## 'Changing the Culture?': A feminist academic activist critique

of many, and stated that whilst the composition of the department had changed, inclusionary and exclusionary gender practices persisted. Moreover, in a discussion of institutional, zero tolerance approaches to ending GBV, it was stated:

There isn't zero tolerance for the fact that this university is run by white, middle-class men. There are still massive gender divisions between professorships, between people who are accessing education as well, in places like the sciences; there should be zero tolerance towards that kind of culture that perpetuates gender differences that cause serious problems for women. (Interviewee six, Senior Lecturer)

Within this context, interviewee four, a PhD researcher and Sessional Lecturer, stated she felt academic staff within her department were interested in GBV from an academic perspective however, less interested from a practical or personal perspective. This was seen as preventing staff and students from raising the issue of GBV:

To be honest, whether or not I would feel comfortable approaching that with my colleagues, because of the culture at [my uni] it is quite a masculine setting, there's a lot of men and it can be quite, it feels very male dominated. I as a staff member would not feel comfortable bringing that up with a lot of the male academic staff. (Interviewee four, PhD Student and Sessional Lecturer)

The 're masculinisation' of the university was seen as upholding the structures which also enable gender microaggressions (Sue, 2010). These serve to undermine and devalue women staff and students achievements, but also create a culture where discussions of sexual violence become censored. As one respondent stated, for fear of provoking a 'backlash':

To talk of the insidious impact of micro-aggressions could suggest that I am downplaying issues of sexual violence. This is not my intention. I am increasingly conscious, however, of a visibility to sexual violence that was not evident before and this has changed daily behaviour. In large groups, for example, I am aware, as I always have been of females in the group self-censoring contributions for fear of provoking a backlash. (Interviewee seven, Professor)

The masculine or male dominated nature of the university was seen as a key factor in understanding GBV on campus, but participants also highlighted the growth and impact of neoliberalism, as discussed earlier, as a contributing factor to either the minimisation of GBV

as a priority, or the enabling of its occurrence. Several interviewees pointed to the idea of the university as a business, first and foremost, as a barrier to developing serious and robust pathways for support. The reputation of the university was instead frequently suggested as being the institutional priority, for example, interviewee five, a Senior Lecturer, suggested that there was a need for a dedicated student support officer specifically in place for dealing with GBV however, this was unlikely within her institution as:

that would be admitting there would be a problem, so that would be quite difficult to negotiate high up in the university. (Interviewee five, Senior Lecturer)

Institutions were also seen as prioritising the creation or development of reporting mechanisms and zero tolerance policies, rather than encouraging any systematic attempts to change the culture around sexism and sexual violence. As Whitley and Page (2015) argue, mechanisms within universities relocate the problem of harassment, to the problem of women who complain about harassment. Discussing reporting mechanisms, one participant stated:

I am not sure that placing the onus on the recipient of the inappropriate behaviour is the best way forward... I would like to see more emphasis on the perpetrator of the action being called out by those around him or her. Such a culture shift would place the emphasis on all of us (students and academics) to be mindful of dynamics in a variety of situations (from the micro to the macro). (Interviewee seven, Professor)

Although there may be a focus on the creation and development of reporting mechanisms, this does not mean there is an improvement of the process for those making a report. Ahmed (2017a) explores the ways in which complaints are treated as potential damage (2017a), how a complaint about harassment can lead to more harassment and ultimately, how the gap between what is supposed to happen and what does happen is wide (Ahmed 2017b). Victims and survivors of gender-based violence may, willingly or unwillingly, take on the responsibility of instituting change. Whether this is through the process of reporting and raising a complaint, or in a broader activist role, the onus is often on victims and survivors to create the necessary changes. As Quinlan and Lusiak (2017: 232) point out, in their research,

‘Changing the Culture’?: A feminist academic activist critique

‘improvements to campus sexual assault response and prevention at the University of Saskatchewan were achieved at the expense of the women that were assaulted’.

For several interviewees, GBV should be seen as a staff-student issue, rather than a solely intra-student problem. The point that much focus has been on intra-student problems, according to interviewees, highlights the university’s capacity to hide the problematic behaviour of staff in order to protect the reputation of the university:

I mean I can name you three very renowned, in academic terms, male colleagues who had a reputation for that and managed to move with ease from one institution to the next and managed to commit the same offences and that is just in my knowledge.  
(Interviewee one, Professor)

Not only then is the power relationship between staff and students key, but also the university’s response when allegations are made:

I think it was at [named] University after there had been domestic violence by a lecturer against a student and the response was basically to silence it and let this guy keep working [...] the first step is not silencing it, which is the first thing that universities want to do for reasons which include having to then go through dismissal cases or disciplinary cases which means problems with unions and whatever else, but that has to be taken head on. (Interviewee six, Senior Lecturer)

Whitley and Page (2015: 52) discuss the ‘institutional quiet’, the institutional and legal frameworks within HEIs that “enable sexism to remain out of sight, to conceal behaviour and return the institution to a normalised state of affairs”. As Ahmed (2017) and Phipps (2018) argue, the institution must be ‘polished’ and flaws ‘airbrushed’ out.

Beyond reporting, participants questioned the focus on the development of zero tolerance policies. Such policies were seen as feeding into the neoliberal discourse of individualisation, placing responsibility upon one person, or one group of people, rather than addressing the institution’s role in perpetuating gendered inequalities:

Zero tolerance is reactive: when somebody steps out of line, you respond to them. Being proactive, universities should be proactive in not having small-scale approaches to gendered violence but actually self-reflecting. Saying to themselves, what are we

doing that perpetuates gender inequalities, that facilitate patriarchal violences, and how do we make significant changes to them. (Interviewee six, Senior Lecturer)

Participants were therefore interested in the ways in which zero tolerance policies, as well as reporting mechanisms and a focus on ‘lad culture’, as discussed above, serve to deflect attention away from the institution itself. The following section explores participant’s experiences of working within their institutions, often working to create change around GBV at university. Individual experiences of creating change were often related back to the broader culture and structural inequalities within the institution, explored in the previous section. The culture within the institution was seen as impacting upon and hindering efforts to create change, the individual experiences presented below are therefore explored in consideration with these structural constraints.

### **The individual within the institution.**

Our broad interpretation of ‘activism’ includes the work, formally or informally, of teaching, supporting students, campaigning and everyday resistance around GBV. The neoliberal culture, with a focus on student satisfaction and evaluation of performance means that academic activism can be hindered, and respondents gave examples of students complaining lectures are ‘biased’ and politically motivated (Flood et al, 2013), which silences discussion of wider gendered inequalities and can create a culture where discussions of GBV become censored. One interviewee discussed her experiences of teaching in the area of GBV:

I was talking about the continuum of sexual violence... as soon as sexual violence [was] brought up, male students did not want to engage in that conversation and it makes it really difficult, and I think it makes female students feel those barriers like this is the response you’re going to get when you talk to someone about sexual violence, so why should I come out and report it to someone in the university if this is what my colleagues are talking like. (Interviewee four, PhD student and Sessional Lecturer)

Beyond teaching, some participants questioned the usefulness of their own activist work in which they created prevention campaigns around sexual violence for the university:

## 'Changing the Culture': A feminist academic activist critique

I think a lot of the time it's like, we're doing this but actually is there any real value in it? Is it worthwhile? Potentially universities are scared. Whose interest is it to admit that sexual assault is engrained into a culture? Universities, higher education is a business, so is there a motivation for them to admit that acknowledge it? (Interviewee three, Senior Lecturer)

Another interviewee questioned the impact of her project aiming to combat sexism and GBV at university without wider departmental and university-wide support, she stated:

There are really passionate and dedicated people working in this area in the universities but it is often about the constraints that you have to work in. There are people really trying to make a difference, it is about resources. It's also about pockets of people doing things, but about them coming together, but in this department I didn't really have any [voluntary] support from the male colleagues. I didn't have any conflict, but I didn't have the support. (Interviewee ten, Lecturer)

Participants felt that the broader culture of the institution restricted the work that they were doing, whether that was teaching, or developing campaigns to improve knowledge on GBV at university. The stories told by interviewees overwhelmingly reflected this feeling, that they were continuing to work to challenge GBV in the institution, often without institutional support.

Supporting students who had experienced GBV was also a key theme for participants who were working to effect change within the institution. Whilst this form of support may not be always be considered activism, it is a role which our interviewees often undertook alongside working to effect change or, because they are visible in their activism and scholarship around GBV, they felt this possibly lead to more disclosures. Many interviewees expressed difficulty when trying to support students who had experienced GBV. Key issues were the lack of recognisable point of contact to direct the student to, a lack of knowledge within the Students' Union and internal support services referring students to external services despite them needing specific support from the university. One interviewee stated:

I have several times [provided support to students], and never had constructive help from the university. I have been lucky to know individuals in student support services who stepped in to help circumnavigate administrative tangles e.g. extensions/intermissions, but have not trusted student support services to be experts

## 'Changing the Culture'?: A feminist academic activist critique

on sexual violence so have always referred to women's specialist services instead.  
(Interviewee eight, Lecturer)

Interviewee seven, a Professor, also pointed out that she had previously provided support to students who had experienced some form of GBV but noted that support and commitment from the institution and staff members was minimal, stating:

I fear that the university is still rather avoiding the issue. Excellent work has taken place but those who have attended training and discussion groups have self-selected.  
(Interviewee seven, Professor)

Across the interviews, several participants highlighted similar issues, that it was only small numbers of staff who were involved in supporting students or trying to effect change on campus. Discrepancies across different departments and different subjects were explored. It was also suggested that it was one participants' feminist activism, and teaching on a module on sexual violence that lead students to report to her more often:

When I taught subjects that dealt directly with sexual violence, I would receive at least one report a semester. Students tended to identify you as a 'safe' person to report to. (Interviewee nine, Lecturer)

With modules in the area often taught by feminist academics, the assumption could be made that they are taking on the extra work of supporting students. Whilst interviewees did not necessarily see this as a negative part of their work, it was seen as extra work undertaken by particular groups of people, often younger women academics, within the university:

I mean it is very interesting that it is female academics. I believe young female academics are known to have an increased workload and I think this is one aspect of it [...] so I think that certainly in terms of the sex of the lecturer but also the age as well, that can impact on whether people are willing to talk to them. (Interviewee three, Lecturer)

One of the interviewees, who teaches and researches in GBV, as well as identifying herself as an activist, is clear in that she believes work in the area, whether it is support, or trying to make institutional changes, is often left to feminist academic staff. She states:

## 'Changing the Culture'?: A feminist academic activist critique

It is left to me or you guys to do stuff that is localised, and that's really important, that has to be done but really, these places [universities] need to take a look at themselves. (Interviewee six, Senior Lecturer)

Working to effect change within the institution around GBV often means working to challenge power within the institution. Ahmed (2017a) highlights this in a discussion of the cost of raising a complaint and argues, 'power is maintained by increasing the cost of challenging power'. This was explored by interviewees in relation to challenging the culture, highlighted in the previous section, of neoliberalism and institutional sexism. Acker and Wagner (2017) argue neoliberalism's focus on competitiveness, individualism and managerialism disadvantage women and minority ethnic academics pursuing 'radical' research. This was a theme amongst interviewees; that radical voices were silenced and seen as 'trouble makers' (Grey, 2013), for example, one participant spoke of her experience of raising issues around GBV to senior management:

I've sat in rooms where I've been talked down by white men who run this university, and are Deans or whatever else, or dismissed as having radical ideas because I didn't want certain things to be dismantled that were important to students or staff. They are not willing to make changes that are actually wholesale, and they are not willing to consider how they'd change their knowledge into action. (Interviewee six, Senior Lecturer)

Interviewees, as discussed earlier, echoed the view that neoliberalism promotes the illusion of equality and meritocracy within universities, whilst upholding and reinforcing existing gender, and other, inequalities (David, 2014). The work of both supporting students experiencing GBV, and working with, (and against) the institution to institute cultural change, fell to those already active and working in this area. The implications of this for implementing meaningful 'cultural change' are discussed below.

## **Discussion**

Existing research, when considered alongside our own, highlights significant issues in the current national and individual level responses to the problem of GBV on campuses



## 'Changing the Culture'?: A feminist academic activist critique

(Jackson & Sundaram, 2015, Sundaram et al. 2017). Approaches which only address lad culture and develop zero tolerance policies and reporting mechanisms cannot be successful without tackling structural inequalities and the ways in which the university institution itself mitigates, perpetuates and enables GBV. This paper has highlighted the particular role academics play in working towards the elimination of GBV and supporting students who have experienced GBV whilst at university. They, in turn, have highlighted the need to consider the broader, structural context of the university which should be the focus in working towards cultural change.

The current focus on 'lad culture' arguably ascribes blame upon individuals, specifically individual male students, and places responsibility on individuals to change their behaviour, rather than tackling ingrained misogyny, sexism, and broader structural inequalities within the institution. Men are overwhelmingly perpetrators of GBV, including within student communities, and whilst this is not a point which should be ignored, the individualising nature of 'lad culture' discourse, can be used by institutions to deny the culpability of the university and the inherent structures which contribute to the problem. Initiatives which attempt to counter 'lad culture' among the student population are necessary, but should be undertaken alongside initiatives which challenge the masculine university, discourse and practice of staff members, university leaders and broader regulatory bodies. For example, in working towards transformational change, institutional commitment to a feminist analysis and therefore response to GBV is paramount. This would recognise the broader issue of sexism as violence, and for example, gender microaggressions as being part of a continuum of violence, which should be addressed alongside other incidents.

Transformational cultural change cannot be achieved through zero tolerance policies which work mainly to protect the institution, to deflect responsibility and are tools of the neoliberal university. Once policies are approved and released the university has, in writing,

condemned specific behaviours. This condemnation allows blame to be passed on to whomever/whatever is pinpointed in the policy document, for example 'lad culture', and again deflected away from the institution. Arguably, policy documents may be necessary, but they are not a complete solution and allow institutions to avoid serious interrogation into the institutional structures, discussed above, which enable GBV.

Responsibility, in terms of solutions to the problem of GBV, is also passed from the institution to individuals. Whilst campus activism is positive, feminists, students or academics, having to take on this role, without wider institutional support, is insensitive to the emotional labour involved in this (Hochschild, 2015). The fact that women academics do a disproportional amount of emotional labour is well documented (Berry and Cassidy, 2013; Grummell, et al, 2009) and there is a tension between feminist activists' commitment to transformational change and challenging GBV, and the constraints of the institutional cultures in which they work (Newman, 2013). Feminist commitment to structural change does not correspond with reactive, individual responses in the neoliberal academy. Moreover, within the neoliberal university, there is increasing pressure to publish, rising workloads and rising student numbers, as discussed above, this results in less time to undertake activist work. This reconciliation of politics, identity and organisational culture is particularly problematic when work and activism is co-opted, altered into a marketable format and presented in a way which is in line with neoliberal preoccupations, as discussed above. For this reason, a feminist theorising of GBV must be used to bring about cultural change, but at the same time finances and resources must be allocated to the issue through the employment of specialist coordinators, the financing of prevention work and the allocation of resources to student welfare services, so that the additional work does not fall to feminist academics.

Importantly, when talking of 'cultural change', the interplay of neoliberalism, sexism and the 'masculine university' must be recognised as the culture that needs altering in order

to enable transformational cultural change. The academics interviewed within this research highlight these factors as hindering their work to create change on campus through silencing voices, labelling those voices as radical, deflecting responsibility away from the institution and ultimately leaving the academics to do the hard work of trying to create change, without providing institutional support for this work. Transformational cultural change must also focus on broader inequalities, such as, universities still being seen as inaccessible by many working class students and individuals from minority ethnic communities disproportionately experiencing adverse outcomes at university (Pilkington, 2015). Acknowledging a problematic culture is a positive step and whilst phrases like ‘changing the culture’ might seem like strong statements, they are futile if the highlighted problematic culture is always directed outward, from the university (or regulatory body), to students (or individual universities). Instead, universities must look inward, to the structures and processes, highlighted by our interviewees, which underpin and enable the interlinked issues of GBV, sexism, exclusion and inequalities more broadly, whilst at the same time, hindering efforts for radical, transformational cultural change.

## **Conclusion**

The Universities UK report marked a turning point in UK universities’ responses to GBV and a wealth of positive initiatives continue to be developed. However, the broader neoliberal agenda, alongside the persistence of misogyny and patriarchy, within HEIs minimises possibilities for true cultural change. When we think about transforming campus cultures for the purposes of eradicating GBV, the focus should be not solely on incidents of GBV, but on the broader misogynistic and neoliberal culture. Specifically, feminist analysis and insights, which place wider experiences of GBV on a continuum and within the context, institutionally and individually, of power and control are key to transformation change. Additionally, the broader culture of neoliberalism, which minimises opportunities for radical

cultural change and silences feminist voices which call for such changes must be a focus for further activism. Transforming the culture cannot be achieved by only focusing only on eradicating incidents of GBV, but through analysing the broader issue of sexism, its intersections with further structural issues such as race and class, and working towards the eradication of these structures within a feminist framework.

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