

## **Intersectional approaches to gender-based violence in universities: Experiences and interventions**

Gender-based violence (GBV) is understood to be any act of violence and abuse that disproportionately affects women, and is rooted in systematic power differences and inequalities between women and men (Hester & Lilley, 2014). For the purposes of this chapter, GBV includes domestic violence and abuse, including coercive control, abuse mediated through the internet or mobile phones; stalking and harassment; 'honour-based' violence and abuse, including forced marriage; and sexual violence and abuse (c.f. Gangoli, Bates & Hester, 2020). There is an international body of evidence indicating that one-third to one-half of university students are subjected to GBV during their time at university (e.g. Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Fedina, Holmes & Backes, 2018), and nearly 16% of students have been subjected to GBV before joining university (Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000). These diverse experiences have a profound impact on the lives of the victims and survivors, and their experience of higher education (e.g. Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Stenning, Mitra-Kahn & Gunby, 2012).

While there is a wide body of work on GBV in the UK and internationally, there is a paucity of material that highlights the voices of victims-survivors (see Mulvihill et al., 2018) in general; and in particular with victim-survivors of GBV in UK universities settings. This paper draws on the conceptual framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) to explore this in the context of GBV in university settings in the UK. We use the concepts of intersectionality to explore unique and original empirical interview data that address diverse women's experiences of GBV while at university, including university responses. We will explore women's positioning in terms of gender, student identity, ethnicity, and social class.

The research question guiding this study is: how do the intersections between GBV, universities and women's societal positioning manifest to enable students to achieve their potential or disable women from achieving their potential within higher education, and what role can universities play in terms of interventions. We understand interventions as being both individualised i.e., instinctual/ organic interventions, for e.g. steps taken by students and university staff to ensure their own safety, or those of their friends, or students deliberate/planned interventions, such as counselling programmes and feminist societies.

The chapter will start by explaining the conceptual frameworks we use; and then explore key issues emerging from literature on GBV in university settings. Next, there will be a brief description of research methods for the interview data; moving on looking at key themes emerging from the sample. Finally, we will discuss the findings and the implications of the research.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

We draw on the conceptual framework on intersectionality, which we understand as “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class and sexuality” (Nash, 2008, p. 2). Kimberle' Crenshaw (1991) is credited with introducing the term ‘intersectionality’ to the feminist lexicon in the late 1980s as part of antiracist struggles that interrogated law's penchant in fixing identities, and therefore not paying enough attention to how black women may suffer from both race and gender inequalities. Nash has argued that the notion of intersectionality is under-theorised, suggesting that it has focussed so far on how marginalised people are (adversely) affected by their identities, rather than how those in power are able to use intersectional identities to their advantage. Victims have multiple identities and while some combinations disempower them, others might privilege them in some ways (for example being a wealthy women with disabilities).

Linked to this is Nils Christie's notion of the 'ideal victim' (1986) wherein some victims are deemed more readily deserving of the status than others, because they are weak (very old or young), they are performing a 'respectable project', and they cannot be blamed for being where they were. This construction has rightly been challenged as not recognising women's agency (Roberts, Donovan & Durey, 2019), but is useful in this context in recognising how universities may respond.

Groups that may be most vulnerable to GBV in universities include, young women and girls (Jones et al. 2020), those with disabilities (both mental and physical), or those from ethnic minority, working-class, or LGBTQ+ communities (Healthy Poverty Action, 2021). We believe that it is impossible to discuss the complexities of GBV without due attention to multiple sites of oppression, and privilege, and this is what we aim to explore further in this paper by looking at how intersecting identities may impact on women's experiences of navigating higher education and GBV.

### **Setting The Scene**

Studies on GBV experienced by UK university students are relatively new in comparison to studies on U.S. universities but this body of literature is growing rapidly and thus far provides findings consistent with previous research in the U.S. (e.g. Krebs et al., 2017) and Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). Most UK studies focused on sexual violence (SV) and used a range of operational definitions, research designs and recruitment strategies to assess prevalence (Jones et al., 2020). Inconsistent methods led to findings varying from 31% to 77% of all students being subjected to SV (CUSU, 2014; EUSA, 2014) and from 37% to 68% of women being subjected to SV (Neville et al., 2014; Phipps & Smith, 2012). Despite these variations, the findings indicate that at best a substantial minority are subjected to SV, and at worst a majority of students are subjected to SV. Some university responses to disclosures have further compounded the trauma. Half of students who reported to their university described the university's response as denying what they had

been subjected to, and 30.9% described the university's response as suggesting that their report could negatively impact the university's reputation (NUS, 2018). This is not to say that all university responses have been negative. One-quarter of students thought their university supported them after they made a report (NUS, 2018). These radically different responses have been attributed to wider institutional cultures (Bull & Rye, 2018) but they may also be influenced by pre-conceptions of which students are 'ideal victims'. Students deemed to be performing a 'respectable project' and not threatening the university's reputation may be the ones to receive a supportive response from universities. However, it is difficult to untangle how these pre-conceptions may influence university responses until more studies investigate other forms of inequality associated with and intersecting with GBV in universities, and universities' responses.

There are some excellent studies that address the intersectional role of racism, class, disability and gender/sexuality in university students' experiences (Vaccaro, 2010; Vaccaro et al., 2020; Willis et al., 2019), but these do not always address intersections with GBV (Jones et al., 2020). Findings from these studies were consistent with previous research on GBV (e.g. Coulter et al., 2017) in that they indicated that occupying positions of less social power (e.g. women, Black and Minority Ethnic) had an increased chance of experiencing SV and/or domestic violence (EUSA, 2014; Young et al., 2018), but there was less discussion on the experiences of these women in higher education.

There are a few studies using quantitative methods that look at the role of higher education as a protective factor for GBV (Aramsky et al., 2011). Campbell's study (2004) shows that women who had the lowest education levels were more likely to be killed by their male partners in comparison to women who were emotionally abused. ??There are also recent studies that look at the ways in which control over education or 'educational sabotage' by perpetrators can be a form of emotional abuse in cases of domestic violence (Voth Schrag et al., 2019) and forced marriage (Gangoli et al., 2011). This is often exercised as a part of

financial abuse, and can have severe consequences in terms of women's ability to escape the abuse.

There is a body of important work addressing how schools could respond to domestic violence and intimate partner violence witnessed or experienced by students (Dunne et al., 2006; Ollis, 2017; Lloyd, 2018, Barter et al., 2015), but there is very little on how universities may address the issue with students who may have been subjected to interpersonal violence or other forms of GBV in their parental home, or in relationships outside the university. Indeed, no UK study could be located which provided base line data on student experiences of sexual and domestic violence, sexual harassment and other related harm that students come with when they start university. As far as we are aware there is very little UK based research on the role that higher education can play in protecting victims of GBV where the perpetrators may not be part of the university communities, but are family members, friends or acquaintances of the victim.

An important recent exception is the work by Phipps (2020) and more recently Ahmed (2021) that situates sexual harassment and violence and institutional inaction in the neoliberal university. Phipps (2020) and Ahmed (2021) address this in the context of universities being subjected to increasing tuition fees, and a transformation from liberal universities as a space for critical thought, slow contemplation and transformative becoming for both student and university worker. The neoliberal university aims to continuously increase performance – measurable in ultimately economic terms, imposing a new auditable disciplining, and quickening pace, of learning, thinking and working. When students complain of sexual harassment in this context, their complaints are articulated – and also dismissed – in the language of consumer rights.

Further, while there is research on young South Asian people's experiences of forced marriage and 'honour based' violence and abuse (c.f. Gangoli et al. 2020), and some of these point to how some young women in particular use higher education as a way to postpone or escape forced marriage (see for example, Gangoli *et al.*, 2011). However the

specific experiences of, and university responses to young people in universities being subjected to these forms of GBV are not addressed.

## **Methods**

The Justice, Inequality and GBV project team<sup>1</sup> consisted of ten experienced researchers. We conducted interviews with 251 victims-survivors of GBV. Most participants were interviewed individually (n=227; 87%), with the remaining participants (n=24; 9%) taking part in group interviews. The project sought and gained research ethics approval from the University of Bristol ethics board. The research design was phenomenological, as the intention of the research was to understand the meanings of justice from the perspectives of victim-survivors of GBV (Williamson et al. 2020). Following this design, participants were recruited by asking partner agencies, and other agencies working in the field of gender-based violence prevention to send information about the project to their service users. We offered language interpretation, or other support for the interviews. In total, we recruited participants through more than 80 different organisations, and these organisations supported the victim-survivors. The interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, or using online telecommunication software, and included some specific demographic and experience related questions including age, income, employment and education. We asked questions about GBV they had been subjected to, and tried to explore what justice meant to them both abstractly, and in the context of their own experience. Interviews lasted between an hour and two hours, with the average interview just over an hour. All the interviews were

---

<sup>1</sup> Justice, Inequality and GBV project (ESRC grant number ES/M010090/1) [https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence\(49bc49cc-1db3-4675-b2ed-94a46555a0e9\).html](https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence(49bc49cc-1db3-4675-b2ed-94a46555a0e9).html)

recorded, and transcribed verbatim either by a team member, or a professional transcriber, and pseudonyms were allotted to each participant.

### **Sample**

*[ TABLE 1 NEAR HERE.]*

While the aim of the interviews was not to look at university based experiences of, or responses to gender-based violence, during analysis, we found that a subset of respondents (n =10) had been in university during some of their experiences of gender-based violence. All were university students, and one was also a university lecturer who was studying for her PhD at the time of interview.

One of these had been at university over 20 years before the interview, and this respondent was removed from the sample. The majority of respondents (7/9) had decided to enter higher education as a response to GBV. Closer analysis of the material for this paper revealed that some of the respondents had found that university services and structures had influenced their experiences. These interviews have been analysed at greater depth to analyse the intersections between education and victim-survivors' experiences of GBV.

This paper will draw from the nine interviews, as explained above. We found that all but one participant were under the age of 30 at the time of the abuse; six of nine were White British women, one was Indian, and two were British Pakistani. The three Black and Minority Ethnic women in our sample had experienced GBV linked with forced marriage and 'honour based' violence. Eight women in our sample had experienced sexual violence and abuse, most commonly in the context of intimate partner abuse, and one had experienced sexual abuse as a child. Half of the women interviewed experienced domestic violence and coercive control. The three BME women in our sample identified as middle-class. Of the white

sample, two clearly identified as middle class, one as working class, one as mixed (middle class father, but brought up with working class mother), and two did not disclose their class status. See Table 1 for demographic information on each case, as well as the form(s) of GBV experienced, and help sought.

## **Findings**

Our findings indicate that all our respondents came with previous or ongoing experiences of GBV both within and outside universities structures. We also found that the intersections between GBV, university structures and women's identities, for example, class, sexuality/ethnicity/nationality impacted on their experiences of higher education, and that university responses were mediated by these intersecting identities.

## **Ethnicity**

The negative impact of ethnicity was experienced particularly by the BME respondents. Two BME respondents reflected on the ways in which parents or partners used the financing of higher education to control women. Asha described her experience of her father constricting her ability to obtain higher education because he refused initially to pay for the education.

I had to come to university. I was meant to stay in the house for 6 months because my father was not sure whether I should go to uni or not go to uni. I had to go through a lot and finally (father) decided I could come to UK (Asha)

In another case, choosing higher education was one of the triggers for forced marriage, as the community and family saw this as a sign of the woman exercising their agency.

... I got a job in (redacted) which was the trigger for the community saying I should get married. Also the trigger that I actually went to [name of university] (Amani)

Lack of understanding of minority women's cultural and familial situations meant that, at times, university responses were perceived by students as minimising, or unhelpful.



Sameera recounted that when her father threatened her with forced marriage; an academic she confided in minimised her experience.

... but nobody really knew what to do, and (name of college lecturer) was the worst in the sense ... I said look I know they're going to marry me off, my dad's going to marry me off, you've got to help me. And she basically said 'That's a nice jumper you're wearing' ... it was very much 'Do you really want to go [to a refuge]?' ... Go home, you've got a nice jumper, you're not going to get that in a [refuge]' you know 'If you've got it bad now, you wait till you get in a [refuge]' (Sameera)

Our findings indicate that international students are less likely to be able to access support and welfare systems than British students. Asha spoke of her experience when she was being threatened by her father and coerced into leaving the country to return to her family home.

But the harder bit is if you're not a British Citizen I don't know how they can help you, to be really honest, because...they can't really do much. There is...because there is no... legal laws in place for someone who is not a British Citizen, on how to help them out with their protection and everything. Yes, they'll help them in this country, but there's nothing that anyone else can do once you go away (Asha).

### **Social class, gender and ethnicity**

Our sample demonstrate a correlation between social class, race/ethnicity and access to education. All the three BME women in our sample were middle class, while the white women were more diverse in terms of their class composition. The woman who seemed to have the best outcome in terms of university response to her abuse was a middle class, white woman.

I come from a very lucky middle class white affluent background, very lucky upbringing, very happy, never had to worry about anything ... (Anna)

Anna also enjoyed social capital, in terms of family links with the police:

Some friends were involved in helping get me out of the situation. One of them's a retired police officer, and also my uncle and aunt are both retired police officers. So I was very lucky, I had a lot of help from family and friends.

Anna was both a university lecturer and a student at the time of the abuse, and found her line manager at work extremely supportive

Um ... it was a very new job, I think it was a week into a new job as a part time lecturer, and I told my boss as soon as it happened. And he .. has been fantastic.... They've let me have days off to go to the lawyer, they've understood if my work hasn't been great ... yeah I have been really well supported.

Anna was able to access counselling through her work, when she found that the NHS waiting lists were too long:

So I went to the doctor's too and they gave me a prescription to help me sleep. And I asked them about counselling and they told me that the waiting list was over 6 months. So it wasn't worth trying to get counselling through them... I've just had some counselling now through my job... I've had 9 or 10 sessions with a counsellor, and it's made massive ... I feel absolutely fine now, it's made a massive difference to me.

In contrast, Maria, a working class student doing a professional post graduate degree, who was undergoing domestic abuse at the hands of her partner, who was also her colleague at a professional internship she was working on towards her degree, found that her practice manager was not supportive, and chose to support her partner when she filed a complaint against him of domestic violence in a public space. The respondent at the time filed a counter claim that Maria had sexually harassed him, and his violence was in response to this:

... initially I was banned from our office, I couldn't go there, he could stay. Yeah yeah, that was my [practice manager's] decision, that I cannot come back to the office. So I was just put somewhere in exile when I was reinstated back to work.

Gemma, a working class white woman commented on how her class made her an outsider in the university:

So I was the one with a [regional] accent, tattoos and piercings, and everyone else was posh. I think the professors took them more seriously.

Social class did not always protect BME women. Sameera reflected on the reality that immigrant women often did not enjoy the same class privileges as they would have in their country of origin:

this isn't about what class or how educated you are....basically educated women...and it surprises me because the educated women I was talking to....and they were like...oh I didn't realise that my degree here it isn't internationally recognised ..they didn't realise the power of their own degree is missing

### **Empowerment through University**

For three respondents, GBV was either a stimulus for entering higher education, or gave them the skills to escape it. Engaging in higher education in itself was a form of individualised intervention for these women. Maria explained that her ability to survive domestic abuse in a previous relationship gave her the confidence to enter higher education:

For me, it (abuse) was a bit of a catalyst to change then. ...It changed my life, yes, because it was that terrifying at the time. I genuinely don't know how I got through it. So when you go through something like that, you do think, "Actually, I can cope with anything." So I went into terrifying education.

Gemma, who was experiencing domestic abuse from her partner at the time of studying, found that university was a safe space for her:

I mean I was at university through three years of this relationship, so I would find that probably ... and I was at placements and things ... and so yeah I suppose I would find it a bit of an escape sometimes.

Two respondents believed that they were able to process and understand their experiences of gender-based violence better because of the nature of their education. Gemma explained that she was able to explain what was happening to her better to her friends, because she was studying domestic violence at university, and was also able to understand it herself better.

When I read up on it (domestic violence) you know I can tell them [the class] things ... it makes a lot more sense to them, and it makes more sense to me now as well (Gemma).

### **Bystander Interventions**

Four of our respondents testified to the important role that bystander intervention can play in cases of GBV. Maria, a working class woman describes her experience when her abusive partner entered her classroom during a lecture, and no one in authority intervened to stop him:

Maria: The security guards didn't bother to come in.

Interviewer: Really?

Respondent: No, they didn't bother at all. The teacher picked the camera up and ran off, because they were videoing us that day. So she picked the camera up and ran off... (Maria)

Another respondent described her experience of sexual assault on public transport, while she was travelling to her university. No one on the train platform intervened, included some students from her university who were present at the time.

While I was saying, "Can someone, please, go and get help?" I was yelling, and they could see very clearly an attack. Like stereotypical attack situation... I can't understand why people wouldn't want to intervene... I don't really understand why somebody wouldn't run out and get the police, who were already in the station (Melody)

While lack of, or negative responses from bystanders was upsetting, our respondents spoke of the responses from friends being even more important in terms of their self-esteem.

Rachel, who was raped on a night out talks about how her friend stonewalled her experience.

... maybe about 5, 6 months afterwards, I said to one of my friends... I told her that I'd been raped, and this was when I was like ... And I said to her that I'd been raped, and ... he was there at an event that was happening where I was with her...[we both] saw him, and I said to her 'Oh he did that to me'. And um ... yeah so she knew but never asked me anything else about it....No, she never mentioned it again (Rachel).

Rachel believes that the lack of response from her friend led her to 'clam up for years' about her experience.

In contrast, supportive responses from friends felt enabling for survivors, and gave them courage to deal with their experiences. Gemma, who was subjected to domestic violence from her partner, spoke about how she was able to share her experience with a friend who was also a victim of domestic violence at the time.

I had one friend who knew what was going on throughout the whole relationship, because she was going through something similar as well, so I felt I could speak to her. (Gemma)

Other than listening, friends can sometimes offer support in other, more direct ways, particularly in validating women's experiences of abuse:

Yeah like a lot of my friends would say God help him if he ever runs into me. He actually ... on court day he actually ... I was with one of my friends came to support me, and he tried to speak to her on that day, and she just told him like fuck off basically. She ended up getting warned off [by] the security at the court because she was getting high pitched and stuff, but she was just so angry, she couldn't believe that he was actually approaching her. But yeah she's like 'God, I wanted to hit him'. (Gemma)

### Positive Response from University Services

Clear and efficient organisational response can increase the capabilities of women in situations of gender-based violence. This is clear when we look at Asha's experience. When she was at university in the UK, she converted to Christianity as an act of rebellion against her Hindu family and her father found out:

I don't exactly know how, if it was via my Facebook, or what really went on. But he found out and he threatened that, if I don't come back home, he's going to kill me, and he's not going to pay my fees any further. So that was...obviously I got really, really depressed and in fear of my life. At that time I was in contact with the University of xx Wellbeing Centre. They advised that this needs to be phoned to the police, because they were obviously worried, and I thought yeah maybe that's a good idea.

Asha also contacted the police at the behest of the Wellbeing services when she was threatened with death by her family, due to her relationship with a student in her university:

It was the Wellbeing [*at the uni*] which encouraged me to do that, because I otherwise wouldn't be...I would be really scared, I wouldn't know what to do, because of this situation where you don't know who you can trust, or what anyone can do. So I was told by them, if I contact them (police), they might be able to help me out, because my father's threatening me, and all of that, hence the reason I made contact.

University peer groups and forums supported by the university also played an important role in enabling women to take action against gender-based violence. Three of our respondents were active in feminist debates and activism at university, and all of them attribute their involvement to their experience of abuse. For instance, Alena felt able to report her historical experience of sexual abuse to the police due to the support of the peer group in her university:

I was on the University [ ] Sexual Violence Forum for about five years the year after I went to uni. The police officer that came and was talking to us said, "Basically, you can report it any time." I was like, "Oh, right." So now, I was so much stronger, 20 years afterwards, I rang and reported it. I had a patrol officer come round to go through it with her. She was brilliant.

### **Discussion**

The findings indicate that the intersection of neoliberal educational systems, unequal immigration laws and policies, and lack of societal and peer empathy can exacerbate women's experience of gender-based violence in university settings. However, enabling factors – where they exist – can help survivors to escape and even transcend their abuse in an educational setting.

Our findings indicated that women entering higher education have a range of experiences of GBV. Many of these are experienced before they join colleges, and universities, but they continue to experience the long term impacts of many of these incidents and experiences. Women also experience GBV during their time at universities, perpetrated by fellow students or staff; or by family members. University responses to these cases vary, but it is apparent that students are more likely to experience their time in higher education positively, and arguably gain more from their education where the response has been consistent, and experienced as helpful.

GBV and abuse is manifested in parental control over education. Current discourses on the neo-liberalisation of higher education (Mahony & Weiner, 2019) in the UK and elsewhere (Saunders, 2007) address the impacts of tuition fees on student experience, and the growing consumerisation of higher education. Parental control over education through financing it, particularly in the case of international students who are not eligible to UK student loans, links directly to the idea of 'educational sabotage' (Voth Scrag, 2019). Educational sabotage can include financial and emotional abuse, and can further restrict

women's choices to escape parental control. In the case of Asha, her father's refusal to pay her tuition fees can be understood within this prism, where she was unable to leave her home to join university until her father agreed. We can also see other forms of educational sabotage in the case of Maria's experience, where her abusive partner came to her university during a lecture to disrupt her education, and invade her safe space.

As evident from Asha's experience, the intersection of gender, ethnicity and discriminatory immigration laws further complicates the experience of gender-based violence for international women students (c.f. Gangoli et al., 2020). Higher education can sometimes be used as a way to postpone or avoid forced marriage (Gangoli et al. 2020), but at other times it can be a trigger for forced marriage. Recent research on sexual violence and abuse among refugee and asylum seeking communities (Bates *et al.* 2018) highlighted issues of immigration, familiarity with support systems and lack of community support as key barriers in reporting 'honour based' and sexual abuse; and some of these may apply to international students on student visas.

Intersectional disadvantage can also be a product of what has been described in social work literature as 'race anxiety' (c.f. Burman et al. 2004), and may be more accurately be understood as 'race related timidity'. Failure of those in power to intervene, due to lack of knowledge, or fear of appearing racist, can potentially cause harm. As implicit in Sameera's case, her lecturer was reluctant to intervene when she shared her experience of living in fear of forced marriage, and encouraged her to 'work with her family'. The response was experienced by Sameera as both insensitive and unhelpful. In contrast, positive intervention and advice by relevant university staff, which Asha received in the form of advice to approach the police can empower victims in challenging the abuse.

University support can sometimes be indirect, for example, through university student groups, such as feminist support groups that may provide a safe space for students to reflect on, and process on past abuse and violence. This is apparent in Alena's experience, where



she was able to articulate her abuse and seek help and redress for the historical abuse she had experienced.

Our research also indicated the importance of bystander intervention, which has been well documented in literature (Fenton et al, 2016; Holland, 2019; Jones, Mitchell & Tuner, 2015). Survivors of GBV can feel supported and empowered where bystanders respond positively to incidents of abuse. However, the reverse can happen where bystanders do not respond, and this can heighten when perpetrators enter university settings, previously experienced as safe spaces.

Victim-survivors of sexual and domestic violence sometimes choose to disclose their experiences to close friends or family members, in the hope of achieving an empathetic experience (Rodino-Colocino, 2018, Gregory et al. 2019). Research has demonstrated that friends and peers can act as buffers against effects of abuse, and may also act as preventative factors for future abuse. This is apparent in Gemma's experience, where her friends supported her during her traumatic experience of experiencing domestic abuse, and court hearings where she was confronting her abusive partner. Gemma's friend supported her throughout the journey, both by acting as an emphatic listener, and by confronting her abusive partner during a court hearing.

However, negative or non-responses from friends and family can have a negative impact on victim-survivors, who can feel further silenced and isolated. Gregory's research (2019) reveals that family and friends often lack the knowledge and training to respond in empowering ways, and sometimes may find the experience of being confided in, traumatic in itself. As is apparent in Rachel's experience, her friend's lack of engagement with the abuse contributed to her feeling silenced for a number of years.

Much literature focuses on the negative impact of GBV on the ability of women to access higher education, or to fully partake in it (for e.g. Loots & Walker, 2015). Earlier research by the authors (Gangoli et al., 2011) has found that young women at risk of forced marriage can often 'use' higher education as a way to escape family pressure, but this

appears an instrumental use of education. In our research, we found that in some cases, abuse is a catalyst for change and education; and that some survivors experience higher education both as empowerment, and a route for escaping some forms of gender-based violence.

The findings also indicate that universities respond best when the victim is seen as the ideal victim (Christie, 1986). In this context, an ideal victim is a middle class, white and young woman. Anna, as a young, white British, middle class woman, who was both university student and staff, enjoyed the best outcomes and interventions of all our respondents, including counselling provided by the university, and sympathy from her line manager. Class alone does not protect women from ethnic minority backgrounds, as is evident in Asha's and Sameera's examples. Asha did get some support, but due to her status as an international student, did not have access to all the resources that a British woman would have.

There has been some literature on the impact of conducting research on GBV by victim-survivors, and some of these suggest that most victim-survivors found the experience as beneficial, or even transformational (Aroussi, 2020). Aroussi points out that many survivors of rape and sexual abuse feel alone, and isolated, and the process of researching GBV can both validate their experience, and reclaim their voice. Two of our respondents chose to study gender-based violence, and found that their experiences of abuse gave them both an insight into their own abuse, and some of the academic learning. This enabled them to process their abuse. In our view, this is an important finding, as it considers how higher education may enable some victims to make the journey to being survivors.

### **Conclusions**

The unique contribution of this paper is that it highlights the positive role that universities and higher education institutions can play in tackling and empowering women experiencing gender-based violence and abuse. This sample testifies to the importance of the role of higher education for women with current or historic experiences of gender-based

violence and abuse. It enables women to have a sense of agency and control over their own lives, and possibly to escape an abusive relationship. We also found that perpetrators are aware of the empowering role of education, and through 'educational sabotage' (Von Scrag, 2019), can try and control women's agency.

This study also builds on earlier work on the importance of intersectional inequalities for victims-survivors of gender-based abuse, particularly, but not exclusively in the context of ethnicity, immigration status (Gangoli et al. 2020) and social class. This is exacerbated by the neoliberal nature of the higher educational sector in the UK, where rising tuition fees and commodification of higher education makes it more difficult for women of working-class backgrounds to access higher education, and this access was further controlled by abusive partners or family members. Interestingly, some middle-class ethnic minority women used higher education as a way to escape forced marriage. The importance of higher education for survivors of gender-based abuse and violence is further evident in the experiences of women who were able to process and understand their abusive experiences better after entering university. This could be due to the nature of their educational programmes, the role of university support services, friends and bystanders, or feminist activism within university settings.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice in higher education. Higher education institutions have the potential to play a significant role to reduce the power of perpetrators by effective and timely interventions, including bystander programmes (Taylor & Paule-Koba, 2020) for students, training for staff and resources for student networking groups, particularly for women and other marginalised groups. We recognise that this study is based in the U.K. but the findings and recommendations may have resonance in wider international contexts.

Summary of key points

- Victim-survivors have multiple identities and while some combinations further disempower them, others might privilege them in some ways (for example, a first generation immigrant woman may be wealthy, and that can empower her as compared to a white British working class student, but she would lack the benefits that the latter would have with regard to immigration rights).
- Linked to this is Nils Christie's notion of the 'ideal victim' (1986) wherein some victim-survivors are deemed more readily deserving of the status than others, they are performing a 'respectable project', and they cannot be blamed for being where they were.
- The methods used in data collection, and the analysis was victim-survivor led
- Some women begin university having already been subjected to some form of gender-based violence while others were subjected to gender-based violence while attending university.
- The intersection of neoliberal educational systems, unequal immigration laws and policies, and lack of societal and peer empathy can exacerbate women's experience of gender-based violence in university settings.
- Gender-based violence can be a catalyst for change and education; and that some victim-survivors experience higher education both as empowerment, and a route for escape.
- The findings also indicate that universities respond best when the victim is seen as the ideal victim (Christie, 1986). In this context, an ideal victim is a middle class, white and young woman.
- Class alone does not protect women from ethnic minority backgrounds, as is evident in Asha's and Sameera's examples. Asha did get some support, but due to her status as an international student, did not have access to all the resources that a British woman would have.

- Higher education institutions have the potential to play a significant role to reduce the power of perpetrators by effective and timely interventions, including bystander programmes for students, training for staff and resources for student networking groups, particularly for women and other marginalised groups.

#### Annotated references

Jones, C., Skinner, T.S., Gangoli, G., Smith, O., and Fenton, R. (2020). *Gender-based violence among UK university students and staff: A socio-ecological framework*.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4572506>

Theories have been used to explain gender-based violence (GBV) in U.S. universities (e.g. Gervais, DiLillo and McChargue, 2014; Tewksbury and Mustaine's, 2001) but they have limited utility in UK universities, as the history, composition, geography, and culture of UK universities differs (Phipps and Smith, 2012; Stenning et al., 2012). Due to these differences, a theoretical framework relevant to UK universities is needed that can guide studies and contextualise findings. As a starting point, this working paper adapted Hagemann-White et al.'s (2010) framework, which was developed for the European Union (EU). To date, this framework is the most researched, demonstrated and wholistic model for the EU. The framework used an ecological model to identify and categorise factors facilitating and scaffolding GBV, including policies, sanctions, redress and implementation of laws, to provide nation states with a framework to guide developing and implementing policies that would more effectively prevent and combat GBV. This working paper tailored Hagemann-White et al.'s model to UK universities, using a more sophisticated understanding of intersectional disadvantage (such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, class, age), men and masculinities, peer-group support for GBV, environmental time-space and power relations, and legal duties in prevention and response. The resulting model included six social systems: ontogenetic (intrapersonal), micro (interpersonal), meso (university), exo (wider community), macro (societal and national) and chrono (change and consistency over time). For each social system, a critical evaluation of research on factors facilitating perpetration in universities was presented, as well as recommendations for prevention and response.

Gangoli, G., Bates, L., & Hester, M. (2020). What does justice mean to black and minority ethnic (BME) victims/survivors of gender-based violence? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. doi: [10.1080/1369183X.2019.1650010](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1650010).

This paper addresses how 'justice' is understood, sought, and experienced by BME victims-survivors of GBV within the UK. The key aims of this paper are to explore (a) experiences of GBV for BME victim-survivors, (b) their experiences and perceptions of justice, and (c) factors enabling, or posing barriers to justice, including immigration status. We situate BME women's experiences and conceptualisations of justice within an ecological approach [Hagemann-White et al. 2010] and within Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'social capital' [1986.]. We found that migrant women lack access to vital aspects of social capital, that make access to justice particularly challenging, and that immigration status in particular poses key barriers in migrant women's experiences of accessing justice. Women and girls with insecure immigration status lack structural and state support to escape GBV. We also found that while there is a focus on 'cultural' factors in particular forms of GBV that BME women and girls may be subjected to (for example: 'honour based' violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation), women reported structural factors as equally, if not more important in accessing justice.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* Duke University Press.
- Aroussi, S. (2020). Researching wartime rape in Eastern Congo: Why we should continue to talk to survivors? *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 582 – 597.
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2017). *Change the course: National report on sexual harassment and sexual assault at Australian universities*.  
<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/change-course-national-report-sexual-assault-and-sexual>
- Aramsky, T., Watts, C.H., Garcia-Moreno, C., Devries, K., Kiss, L., Ellsberg, M., Jansen, H. AFM, & Heise, L. (2011). What factors are associated with recent intimate partner violence? Findings from the WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence. *BMC Public Health*, 11(109). doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-109.
- Barter, C., Aghtaie, N., Larkins, C., Wood, M., & Stanley, N. (2015). *Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships (STIR), Connecting online and offline contexts and risks*. Bristol: University of Bristol.
- Bates, L., Gangoli, G., Hester, M. & Justice Project Team. (2018). *Policy evidence summary 1: Migrant women*. University of Bristol, Bristol.
- Bull, A., & Rye, R. (2018). *Silencing students: institutional responses to staff sexual misconduct in higher education*. The 1752 Group.  
[https://pure.port.ac.uk/admin/files/11631036/Silencing\\_Students\\_The\\_1752\\_Group.pdf](https://pure.port.ac.uk/admin/files/11631036/Silencing_Students_The_1752_Group.pdf)
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241 – 258). Greenwood: Westport, CT.
- Burman, E., Smailes, S.L., & Chantler, K. (2004). 'Culture' as a barrier to service provision and delivery: Domestic violence services for minoritized women. *Critical Social Policy*. 24(3), 332-357. doi:[10.1177/0261018304044363](https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018304044363)
- Campbell, J.C. (2004). Helping women understand their risk in situations of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19(12), 1464-1477.
- Christie, N.(1986). 'The Ideal Victim.' In E.A. Fattah (Ed.), *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy* (pp. 17-30). Palgrave Macmillan: London.
- Coulter, R.W., Mair, C., Miller, E., Blosnich, J.R., Matthews, D.D., & McCauley, H.L. (2017). Prevalence of past-year sexual assault victimization among undergraduate students: Exploring differences by and intersections of gender identity, sexual identity, and race/ethnicity. *Prevention Science*, 18(6), 726-736.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence

- against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- CUSU (Cambridge University Students' Union). (2014) *Cambridge speaks out report*.  
[www.womens.cusu.cam.ac.uk/Cambridge Speaks Out Report 2014.pdf](http://www.womens.cusu.cam.ac.uk/Cambridge%20Speaks%20Out%20Report%202014.pdf)
- Dunne, M., Humphreys, S., & Leach, F. (2006). Gender violence in schools in the developing world. *Gender and Education*, 18(1), 75-98, doi: 10.1080/09540250500195143.
- EUSA (Edinburgh University Student Association). (2014). *Student experiences of sexual harassment in Edinburgh. A Report*. Edinburgh: Author.
- Fedina, L., Holmes, J. L., & Backes, B. L. (2018). Campus sexual assault: A systematic review of prevalence research From 2000 to 2015. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(1), 76–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016631129>
- Fenton, R.A., Mott, H.L., McCartan, K. & Rumney, P. (2016). *A Review of Evidence for Bystander Intervention to Prevent Sexual and Domestic Violence in Universities*.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexual-and-domestic-violence-prevention-in-universities-evidence-review>
- Fisher, B.S., Cullen, F.T. and Turner, M.G. (2000). *The Sexual Victimization of College Women. Research Report*. Report number: NCJ 182369. Washington DC: ERIC.  
[www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/182369.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/182369.pdf) .
- Gangoli, G., Bates, L., & Hester, M. (2020). What does justice mean to black and minority ethnic (BME) victims/survivors of gender-based violence? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. doi: [10.1080/1369183X.2019.1650010](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1650010).
- Gangoli, G., Chantler, K., Hester, M., & Singleton, A. (2011). Understanding forced marriage: Definitions and realities. In A. Gill & A. Sunhari (Eds.), *Forced Marriage: Introducing a Social Justice and Human Rights Perspective*. London: Zed Books.
- Gervais, S.J., DiLillo, D. and McChargue, D. (2014). Understanding the link between men's alcohol use and sexual violence perpetration: The mediating role of sexual objectification. *Psychology of Violence*, 4(2), 156–169.
- Gregory, A. C., Taylor, A. K., Pitt, K. S., Feder, G. S., & Williamson, E. (2019). "...the forgotten heroes": A qualitative study exploring how friends and family members of DV survivors use domestic violence helplines. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519888199>
- Hagemann-White, C., Kavemann, B., Kindler, H., Meysen, T., Puchert, R., Busche, M., Gabler, S., Grafe, B., Kungl, M., Schindler, G. & Schuck, H. (2010). *Review of research on factors at play in perpetration*. Brussels, Belgium: European Commission.  
<https://www.humanconsultancy.com/assets/understanding-perpetration/understanding-perpetration.html>
- Healthy Poverty Action. (2021). *Gender-based violence*.



<https://www.healthpovertyaction.org/how-poverty-is-created/women-girls/sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>

- Hester, M., & Lilley, S.J. (2014). *Domestic and sexual violence perpetrator programmes: Article 16 of the Istanbul Convention: A collection of papers on the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/168046e1f2.v>
- Holland, C. (2019). Bystander responses to sexual assault disclosures in the U.S. military: Encouraging survivors to use formal resources. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 64(1-2), 203-218. [doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12333](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12333)
- Jones, C., Smith, O., Skinner, T., Gangoli, G., & Fenton, R. (2020). *Overview and analysis of research studies on gender-based violence among UK university students and staff*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4569042>
- Jones, L.M., Mitchell, K.J., & Turner, H.A. (2015). Victim reports of bystander reactions to in-person and online peer harassment: A national survey of adolescents. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 44(12), 2308-2320. doi: 10.1007/s10964-015—0342-9
- Krebs, C., Lindquist, C., Berzofsky, M., Shook-Sa, B., & Peterson, K. (2017). *Campus climate survey validation study. Final technical report*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Lloyd, K. (2018). Domestic violence and education: Examining the impact of domestic violence on young children, children, and young people and the potential role of schools. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2094. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02094.
- Loots, S., & Walker, M. (2015). Shaping a gender equality policy in higher education: Which human capabilities matter? *Gender and Education*, 27(4), 361 – 375. doi: [10.1080/09540253.2015.1045458](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1045458). doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2015.1076777
- Mahony, P. & Weiner, G. (2019). Neo-liberalism and the state of higher education in the UK. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(4), 560 – 572. doi: [10.1080/0309877X.2017.1378314](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1378314).
- Mulvihill, N., Gangoli, G., Gill, A., & Hester, M. (2018). The experience of interactional justice for victims of 'honour'-based violence and abuse reporting to the police in England and Wales. *Policing and Society*, 29(6), 640-656. doi: [10.1080/10439463.2018.1427745](https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2018.1427745).
- Nash, J.C. (2008). Re-Thinking Intersectionality. *Feminist Review*. 89(1), 1-15. doi:[10.1057/fr.2008.4](https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4)
- Neville, F. G., Goodall, C. A., Williams, D. J., & Donnelly, P. D. (2014). Sexual assault and harassment, perceived vulnerability, and association with alcohol use in a student population: A cross-sectional survey. *The Lancet*, 384, S56.

- NUS (National Union of Students). (2018). *Power in the academy: Staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education*. <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-staff-student-sexual-misconduct-report>
- Ollis, D. (2017). The power of feminist pedagogy in Australia: Vagina shorts and the primary prevention of violence against women. *Gender and Education*, 29(4), 461-475. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2017.1321737.
- Phipps, A. (2020). Reckoning up: Sexual harassment and violence in the neoliberal university. *Gender and Education*, 32(2), 227 – 243. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2018.1482413.
- Phipps, A., & Smith, G. (2012). Violence against women students in the UK: Time to take action. *Gender and Education*, 24(4), 357-373.
- Roberts, N., Donovan, C. & Durey, M. (2019). Agency, resistance and the non-'ideal' victim: How women deal with sexual violence. *Journal of Gender Based Violence*, 3(3), 323-338.
- Rodino-Colocino, M. (2018). Me too, #MeToo: Countering cruelty with empathy. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15(1), 96-100. doi10.1080/14791420.2018.1435083
- Saunders, D. (2007). The impact of neoliberalism on college students. *Journal of College and Character*, 8(5). doi: [10.2202/1940-1639.1620](https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1620).
- Stenning, P., Mitra-Kahn, T. & Gunby, C. (2012). *Gender-based violence, stalking and fear of crime: Country report United Kingdom* (EU-Project 2009-2011 No. JLS/2007/ISEC/415). Bochum, Keele: Ruhr-University Bochum, Keele University.
- Taylor, E. A., & Paule-Koba, A. (2020). "It's Our Responsibility": Examining the integration of sexual harassment and assault education in sport management programs. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 14(1), 1-11.
- Tewksbury, R., & Mustaine, E.E. (2001). Lifestyle factors associated with the sexual assault of men: A routine activity theory analysis. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 9(2), 153 – 182.
- Vaccaro, A. (2010). What lies beneath seemingly positive campus climate results: Institutional sexism, racism, and male hostility toward equity initiatives and liberal bias. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 43(2), 202-215
- Vaccaro, A., Lee, M.N., Tissi-Gassoway, N., Kimball, E.W., & Newman, B.N. (2020) Gender and ability oppressions shaping the lives of college students: An intracategorical, intersectional analysis. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, 13(2), 119-137.
- Voth Schrag, R. J. (2019). Experiences of economic abuse in the community: Listening to survivor voices. *Affilia*, 34 (3), 313–324. doi: [10.1177/0886109919851142](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109919851142).

- Voth Schrag, R. J., Edmond, T., & Nordberg, A. (2019). Understanding school sabotage among survivors of intimate partner violence from diverse populations. *Violence Against Women*. doi:[10.1177/1077801219862626](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219862626).
- Williamson, E., Gregory, A., Abrahams, H., Aghtaie, N., Walker, S-J., & Hester, M. (2020). Secondary Trauma: Emotional Safety in Sensitive Research. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 18, 55-70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-019-09348-y>
- Willis, T.Y., Mattheis, A., Dotson, B., Brannon, L.J., Hunter, M., Moore, A., Ahmed, L. & Williams-Vallarta, L. (2019). "I Find Myself Isolated and Alone": Black women's experiences of microaggressions at an Hispanic- serving institution. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, 12(2), 186-204.
- Young, H., Turney, C., White, J., Bonell, C., Lewis, R., & Fletcher, A. (2018). Dating and relationship violence among 16–19 year olds in England and Wales: A cross-sectional study of victimization. *Journal of Public Health*, 40(4), 738-746.