

# Before prison and therapy:

two interventions into gender violence in higher education.

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# CONTEXT

## International

- Increasing public awareness of gender violence in education – The Hunting Ground, Audrie & Daisy, 13 Reasons Why.
- Several decades of feminist research and activism (primarily US).

## South African

- Complex mixture of deeply patriarchal and socially progressive
- Gender often subordinate to race and class politics.
- Universities changing rapidly: conflicting elements of social radicalism and managerial conservatism.

## What is this project?

- Began as an attempt to research GBV at two universities and to propose more effective interventions.
- Changed into action research analysis of conditions of possibility of social change.
- Reframed as an analysis of the conceptual and organizational factors shaping engagement with GBV.
- How understandings of GBV and competing interests influence interventions.

## Traditional views and responses

- GBV is relatively uncommon.
- Risk imagined in terms of violent stranger rape.
- Risk is reduced by
  - Improving physical security on campus,
  - Discouraging 'risky behaviours' by imagined victims,
  - Prosecution of offenders.
- Managed by
  - Security services, and
  - Psychological counselling for survivors.

## Critical view

- Gender violence is widespread, but massively under-reported.
- Linked to power and social norms: Patriarchy and rape culture.
- Broader definitions of sexual assault – harassment, date rape.
- Sexual shaming, victim blaming, and bias against survivors.
- Recognises violence against gender minorities and men.
- Includes non-sexual gender violence.
- Interventions require attention to gender identities, inequalities in power, social norms, and institutional practices

## A: University Corporation

- Crisis began with highly publicised rape of international student.
- Incident fitted with idea of 'stranger danger'.
- Short phase of anger and protests, raising issue of pervasive fear and risk, followed by some attempts at ongoing activism.
- Consultants brought in to produce report.
- Contributions by staff and students indicated high risk, widespread underlying problems, ineffective interventions and lack of trust.

## RESPONSES

- Report suppressed.
- Critical recommendations ignored.
- Minor upgrades to security services implemented.
  
- Conflict around race vs gender.
- Gender activist academics attacked by management.
- Student's Representative Council opposed student gender activism.



## An intimate femicide

- Student killed in university residence by partner
- Reported as tragic death
- Criminal prosecution as violent crime.
- Not contextualised as GBV
- No student, academic or managerial reaction.
  
- Other students were aware of assault taking place, but regarded it as normal and did not attempt any intervention

## A serial rapist

- Lecturer realized from student reports that a serial rapist was active on campus.
- A popular student, linked to the ruling political party.
- Used Student's Representative Council to access resources and win trust.
- Survivors unwilling to lay charges because he was seen as politically powerful.
- Reported to Dean of Students, who threatened lecturer with disciplinary action and refused to take action against student.

## B: University of Education

- Ongoing activities around confronting gender violence.
- Silent Protest: widely supported annual event with a range of activities, especially survivor testimonies.
- Challenged culture of silence and offered public support for survivors, but did not include extensive preventative interventions.
- Later established inclusive university forum to develop proposals around gender safety, including transformative teaching initiatives.







## An intimate femicide

- Student killed in university residence by partner.
- Massive university reaction and structured collective grieving.
- Linked to systemic intimate partner violence.
- Psychosocial support services and assertion of supportive institutional values.
- Little attention to prevention beyond security.

# Institutional differences

## A: University Corporation


- Managerial, centralised elite decision-making, authoritarian.
- Focus on ranking and ratings, public image.
- Links to party political power.
- Transformation agenda: attention to race and ethnicity to exclusion of other dimensions of power.
- Transformation conceptualized as minorities access to power, rather than challenges to the systems of power themselves.

- Gender violence seen primarily as threat to reputation of university.
- Open confrontation with issues needed to be avoided.
- Attacks on staff and student gender activists, closure of gender studies programme.
- Failure to make use of academic and professional skills in addressing problems.
- Students low expectation of support exacerbated systems of violence
- Individuals seeking power linked themselves to the ruling political party and both used and protected this system of patronage.

## B: University Education

- Attention to public education and contribution to social citizenship.
- Deliberately avoided focus on ranking and ratings.
- Participatory, democratic decision-making.
- Integration of research, social analysis and social activism into decision-making.
- Gender-based violence recognised as educational and ethical issue, both within the university and for broader society.



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- Sustained focus on challenging social norms and creating supportive institutional culture.
  - Integrated into teaching and learning goals, and encouraged and recognised in teaching practice.
  - Both protecting the rights and well-being of students, and creating social citizens rather than simply employees seen as essential task of the university
  - Later developed an inclusive body to develop proposals for dealing with gender violence.

## Reflections

- Institutional culture has a major impact on gender-based violence.
- This extends far beyond traditional naming of patriarchal interests.
- Contextually specific factors (in this case economic, political, racial and historical issues) impact on institutional engagement.
- The branded university considers gender violence a public relations risk rather than a human rights problem, and responds accordingly.
- In this study the shift to neo-liberal, managerial universities increased risks of GBV, while an attempt to sustain the progressive values of a 'liberal education' allowed effective interventions against it.