## Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity

## Nobody's business: Proposals for reducing gender-based violence at a South African university

Anthony Collins [a] [b] [c] , Lliane Loots [d] [e] , Thenjiwe Meyiwa [f] [g] & Deepak Mistrey [h] [i]

[a] University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban

[b] Gender Based Violence Lobby Group

[c] Psychology and Society Masters Programme, E-mail:

[d] Drama and Performance Studies Programme, and the Gender Studies Programme, University of KwaZulu-Natal

[e] Gender Based Violence Lobby Group, E-mail:

[f] Gender Studies Programme, University of KwaZulu-Natal

[g] Gender Based Violence Lobby Group, E-mail:

[h] School of Philosophy and Ethics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

[i] Gender Based Violence Lobby Group, E-mail:
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# Nobody's business: Proposals for reducing gender-based violence at a South African university

Anthony Collins, Lliane Loots, Thenjiwe Meyiwa and Deepak Mistrey

## abstract

This 'Open forum' outlines proposals developed to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) at a South African university. It argues against simply viewing GBV as a security problem – GBV can only be effectively tackled if measures are developed to change the underlying social norms and overall institutional culture. Specific strategies include breaking the cultures of silence around GBV, establishing clear and visible norms for social behaviour, providing victims with effective support mechanisms, and having an effective body specifically mandated to develop policy and practices around GBV. They also include providing all students with intellectual opportunities to reflect on their own values and practices in order to develop a clear understanding of the impact of violent and discriminatory social behaviours, and to enhance positive skills for participating in diverse social environments. In conclusion, it is argued that implementing these proposals requires establishment of centres of authority within universities to develop and implement institutional reform based on comprehensive understandings of GBV.

## keywords

rape, sexual assault, gender-based violence, universities, higher education

## Introduction

One of the greatest ethical challenges for academics in South African universities has been that of facing up to – intellectually and emotionally – levels of gender-based violence (GBV) on our campuses (Mama and Barnes, 2007). The authors of this paper[1] have encountered numerous students who have used the space offered by our courses to express experiences of GBV faced by students. While we have been quick to take up the services of excellent student counselling centres, we have also wanted to create safe learning spaces for all students by examining and reimagining our institutional and educational processes, structures and cultures to truly embrace gender democracy.

The Gender Based Violence Lobby Group, a loose coalition between staff and students, was formed in 2005,[2] and began to tackle issues around student safety and the security paradigms

of our university. We asked the university's Risk Management Services and certain sectors of the university management to assist. This request was made in the age-old gender activist tradition of 'breaking the silence', and reactions to it varied from strong support to reluctance or inability to assist. For example, we encountered from Risk Management Services a refusal to document GBV statistics. We also became aware that the security services were structured by a larger institutional culture of outsourcing, which had the effect of encouraging the institution to disavow responsibility for 'its' staff and to let this 'GBV problem' be regarded as a problem of the contracted company.[3]

## The review revealed the pervasiveness of sexual violence in residences

The increasing global neo-liberalisation of higher education[4] has seen South African universities begin to take on Personnel Performance Management Systems – a numerical system of rating job performance and time management. In recent training sessions we asked the performance management training staff (also outsourced by the university) how we 'in-put' the hours of a week counselling students around HIV status, family problems and gender violence. Despite the fact that we do this precisely because these issues undoubtedly affect students' academic performance, we were briskly told by the training staff that engaging students in personal matters was 'not our job'. Freire (1970), however, reminds us that education and higher education is about "liberation". If we teach and educate from a democratic and emancipatory impulse around gender (and race and class) equity, then we believe the necessity arises to enact this and demand it in the learning institutions we work in.[5]

In 2007 an undergraduate female student had

enough courage to report[6] a rape that happened in a campus residence bathroom. The clash and debates between academic staff, students, student governance bodies and campus management that this reported incident of GBV unearthed eventually led to a campus-wide Safety Review commissioned by the university. Data around students' safety in residence and on campus as well as staff perceptions of students' safety and security were collected intermittently over a period of four months from more than 120 people.

The data from the Safety Review confirmed (in line with various literature and research on sexual violence, e.g. Braine et al., 1995; Ferguson et al., 2004 and Mama and Barnes, 2007), that the overwhelming majority of acts of violence are committed by men at every level. The review noted that GBV on campus was committed not only against women, but also against gay men.

The review revealed the pervasiveness of sexual violence in residences. Many witnesses pointed out that repeated incidents of violence cause despondency and lack of trust in the systems of the university. A number of witnesses stated that their attempts at either reporting or participating in finding solutions were often frustrated by an empty promise that the matter was being dealt with, or by shifting responsibility and referring each incident to a different office.

Mama and Barnes (2007) note that various statistics affirm the existence of sexual violence throughout the country, although the extent of the problem at universities remains under-researched. This university review revealed that many sexual violence cases in university residences go unreported, and that in most the victim is known to the offender and vice versa. The review indicated that the power of violence does not only manifest in the act itself but also in the disturbing effects it has on the witnesses' ability to establish a sense of safety.

A finding of note was the university female students' anger over attempts of 'ensuring their
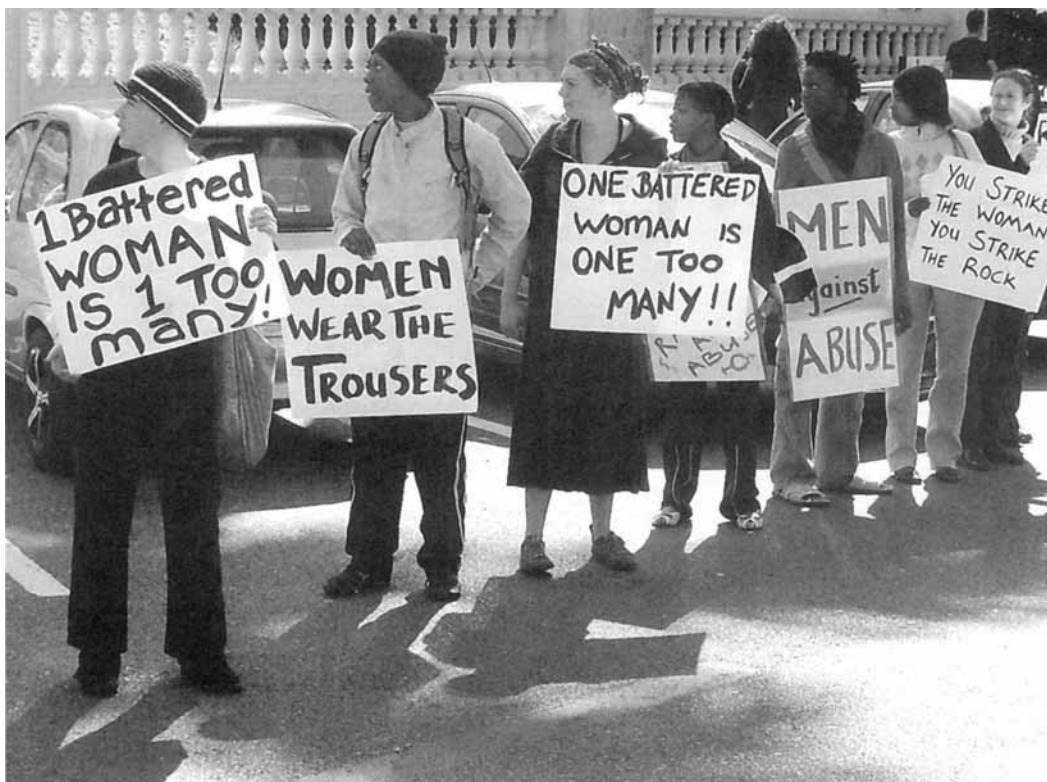
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safety' through the provision of additional security. This, they claimed, polices, stigmatises and further victimises survivors and potential victims. Most female students interviewed felt that they do not belong to the university, that they are not listened to, not cared for, and even felt despised, with some expressing that this is an indication that the university does not appreciate that violence is a human rights abuse.

The remainder of this focus attempts to understand why the many positive contributions to addressing the problem of violence at the university have not been acted upon in the years that have passed since they were put forward.

## The GBV Lobby Group's submission to the Safety Review

The submission began by locating the problem of sexual violence in a broader social context, showing that the specific incident of rape that had led to the Safety Review should not be seen as an isolated incident, but rather as a manifestation of broader social patterns in which 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men (Richter, 2002) are victims of sexual violence. This is important because it avoids the problem of interpreting the incident as failure of local security measures, and instead locates it within more pervasive patterns of social behaviour. It was further argued that the incident should be understood within a continuum of GBV

ranging from sexual harassment to the murder of intimate partners, and that in fact violent rape by a stranger is less common than a range of other problems such as intimate partner violence and date rape. It also drew attention to homophobic violence and attacks on men who reject dominant stereotypes of aggressive masculinity, as well as the hidden problem of rape of men, which almost never receives public attention but is well known to counsellors.

This shift in perspective was seen as important because it showed that an exclusive focus on physical security would not be effective in curtailing intimate partner violence, which has more complex social underpinnings. Instead it pointed to the need for measures that also intervene at the level of gender norms and social life.

**Violent stranger rape is more likely to be reported than acquaintance rape ... both more likely to be reported than homophobic violence and sexual assaults on men**

We also noted that sexual assault is a significant vector for the spread of HIV in our context, not simply because individuals are being forced into sexual contacts that they would otherwise avoid, but because these contacts are themselves so terribly dangerous: safe practices cannot be negotiated under duress, and the use of physical force causes internal tissue damage that dramatically increases the likelihood of the virus being transmitted to the victim.

A major problem lies in the massive under-reporting in the area of GBV, within which there are systematic patterns better known to those who work with victim support than those who provide security services. Violent stranger rape is more likely to be reported than acquaintance rape, and both of these are more likely to be reported than homophobic violence and sexual assaults on men. This has several problematic outcomes:

i) the prevalence of the problems tends to be dramatically underestimated and incorrectly identified by authorities;

ii) many victims do not access support services; and

iii) prospective and repeat perpetrators come to believe that they can operate with impunity, and to believe that their acts are neither deeply antisocial nor criminal, but rather only mildly transgressive matters of individual preference which will not result in any serious repercussions.

This raised the issue that GBV depends not only on what can be got away with both physically and legally, but on prevailing norms of acceptable social interaction. The dominant forms of masculinity and femininity, ideas about sexuality and perceptions of social status and entitlement all provide the social and psychological environment in which these interactions take place. Our aim was thus to show that there are ways of intervening at these levels in ways that would ultimately be more effective than a restricted (although nevertheless absolutely essential) focus on improving physical security measures.

Here we could draw attention to increasing reporting, improving access to support services, and creating a social ethos in which the community accepts that GBV is not acceptable. We could also illustrate ways of producing environments where victims are effectively supported and perpetrators face serious action; where equality, co-operation and mutual respect are shared values which shape social life, where intolerance and coercion are rejected, and where individuals are not driven by misguided attempts to achieve social status and self-worth by dominating, humiliating or controlling others. It was important to note that expertise in these areas already existed within the university, but was dispersed across many individuals, and what was missing was a coherent, officially mandated and adequately resourced structure

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to allow these resources to be utilised efficiently within the organisation.

With this in mind, it was possible to reconceptualise the problem in terms of five core areas: (i) security considerations; (ii) student support services: crisis response service; (iii) broad-based academic intervention; (iv) broad-based social interventions; and (v) a gender and diversity networking centre. These are expanded on below.

## Security considerations

Questions around access controls, guards and CCTV were all already under consideration by the university. A serious additional problem was frequent reports that some security guards were not only failing in their duties, but were in fact the primary instigators of sexual harassment. This was linked to the outsourcing of the security services, and the use of under-skilled guards who were trained to secure property rather than to work in a complex social environment. Students showed very low levels of confidence in the guards and were generally reluctant to use the security services. They also often circumvented existing security features, making them ineffective. Questions around gender segregation of residences were raised, especially for new students not yet accustomed to university social life. We felt that security issues were already well understood, and the real danger was that the entire issue was being conceptualised exclusively

from a security viewpoint rather than as a social problem.

## Student support services: Crisis response service

This encompasses increased support and an expanded mandate for existing student support services, going beyond victim counselling and into proactive awareness-raising campaigns, and diversity-sensitivity training courses.

The most urgent proposal was for an efficient, accessible and trusted 24-hour crisis response service. There would be a single contact point known to all staff and students that would mobilise the appropriate psychological, medical, forensic, social and security support without placing any additional stress on the victim. This would require personnel specifically trained to respond to these crises effectively in a sympathetic and supportive way, giving psychological support while also making all the other necessary arrangements to support the victim and co-ordinate their access to the full range of services. It should definitely not simply involve reporting issues to the guards and security system. Such a service would not only assist victims in their moment of vulnerability, but also demonstrate to the entire university community that the problem was being taken very seriously. This would help to overcome the problem of under-reporting and encourage other victims to come forward, and would also send a strong deterrent message to prospective perpetrators that effective action will be taken against them.

## Broad-based academic intervention

Here interventions in curricula in which the complex issues of living and learning in multicultural democratic societies are explored. This should include at least a transformative exploration of race and gender issues, responses to the HIV epidemic, questions of diversity, cultural pluralism and tolerance, and non-violent approaches to

dealing with interpersonal and social conflict. In this context a core academic module for all entering students deserves serious consideration.

## Broad-based social interventions

This includes interventions in university (and university-sponsored) events and spaces of social interaction, aimed at creating a healthy, vibrant student social life. These should:

– discourage activities (consumption of alcohol and drugs, provision of platforms to role models who embody misogynistic, sexist, racist, etc. attitudes) and events (e.g. corporate alcohol branding events) that predispose to violent, hateful and harmful behaviour; and
– encourage activities and events that create positive solidarities among students and call students' attention to and engage them in reflection on social issues affecting their lives. The various student representative bodies and organisations (and related campus structures) can and should play a key role in these interventions with the active support of the university.

The university and those who work for it at all levels must actively demonstrate their intolerance of violence and discrimination of all kinds, and should be encouraged and enabled to do so by, for example, workshops and courses on gender-sensitivity for employees.

## Gender and diversity networking centre

A crucial proposal was for establishment of a centre to co-ordinate and oversee the various interventions directed towards reducing GBV. Most importantly, the centre would develop policy from a broad perspective that clearly conceptualised the nature of the problem and the way in which all services and sectors need to function together in order to deal with GBV. It would continuously

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monitor and improve implementation of these policies.

In developing policy, it would address the problem that while there is considerable expertise within the university, it is fragmented and not effectively co-ordinated; for example, by translating teaching and research into policy it would ensure that GBV is not narrowly and disparately conceived by different sectors (security, counselling, housing, etc.) in a way that fails to understand the complexity of the problem as a whole. It would also enable development of new initiatives that do not fall under any pre-existing sector, such as the proposal of compulsory academic courses in gender and diversity issues.

Clearly this centre would need significant

resources and considerable authority within the university, and would represent a significant addition to its internal structure. While such innovation tends to be resisted, it can easily be justified in terms of increased student safety, improved public image of the university, an enhanced role in producing democratic citizens oriented towards equality, non-violence and mutual respect, and overall structural efficiency within the organisation.

## Conclusion

Looking back on the process nearly two years later, we have to admit that both our intervention and the Safety Review fell short of our expectations. While attempts have been made to increase

physical security (better surveillance and more locks on doors), little attention has been given to changing an institutional culture and consciousness around GBV.[7] This is surprising given that at the outset there was considerable concern from many quarters to address the problem. Some desperately wanted to end the human tragedy of GBV and some simply to reduce any future public relations fiasco, while for others it was a matter of doing their jobs well.[8] The university allocated significant funds to the Safety Review and then more for improving security. So what went wrong?

It seems that the detailed analysis and extensive proposals (of which the summary above gives a small overview) simply evaporated. This is so not necessarily because anyone wished 'to sabotage the project or conspire against safety and equality, but because the university simply did not and does not have the structure to assimilate it. Each sector – security, counselling, student affairs – did their best to confront the crisis. However, above these divisions there was no body that could conceptualise, in overview, with the requisite sensitivity to social complexity of the problems, what it would mean to restructure administrative sectors and allocate resources to implement the proposals made by the Safety Review.

No authoritative body (see 'Gender and diversity networking centre' above) exists to develop a blueprint for implementing changes on the basis of a broad conceptualisation of the nature of GBV. Without an understanding of this broadness, many well-meaning interventions do not apply at the appropriate points, and cannot recognise that there are no quick-fixes for this problem which has its roots deep in our social soil. In a sense the proposals all failed because the final proposal was unattainable.

Without the presence of a mandated, resourced centre with ability to draw together all the relevant resources within the organisation (including longer-term social and educational ones) and the authority

to restructure and implement new initiatives, little could be done. Everybody's business became nobody's business. Some new resources were allocated within the existing services, but none of the fundamental changes were introduced.

To make things more difficult, the university itself increasingly adopts a management ethos in which it views itself as a corporation, a brand to be managed, or a factory in which workers are locked into technical job descriptions and performance indicators (e.g. the personnel performance management systems now in place). While individuals try to continue to do the good work that is not recognised within this ethos, the institution itself is increasingly blind to the larger social, psychological and ideological structures within which it is embedded. As a result it treats its failures as public relations problems with its target market, or as failures of mechanisms (quite literally: CCTV, card-access systems), or breakdowns of incentive structures and instrumental effectiveness – rather than creating the kinds of positive spaces and advancing more positive social values that would challenge the prevailing attitudes that lead to high levels of GBV.

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## Endnotes

1 Two of the authors teach directly in a Gender Studies Programme, one teaches in Psychology and one in Philosophy.
2 The authors feel that it is not germane to name the institution because of the potential to compromise some of the current projects and processes that are presently being initiated to address the concerns of this article.
3 This despite the outstanding work done by some individuals within this sector.
4 See Sivil and Yurkivska (2009).
5 An invaluable reference has been *Southern African Higher Educational Institutions Challenging Sexual Violence/*
*Sexual Harassment: A Handbook of Resources* (Bennett, 2002).
6 Conservative estimates suggest that only 1 in 9 rapes committed are reported in South Africa.
7 Subsequent to the writing of this article, a 'Safe Campus Initiative' from the Dean of Students has begun to be put in place. However, at this point the specific aims of the initiative have not clearly been defined.
8 One very heartening outcome is that the students began to mobilise themselves, forming SARAH (Students Against Rape And Hate), a group that remains active in GBV and victim support. They can be emailed at no.to.rape.and.hate@gmail.com.

ANTHONY COLLINS is a middle class, English-speaking, heterosexual Anglo-Saxon protestant African white male who worries about gender-based violence, which seems to surprise some people. He is a lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, where he teaches critical social psychology courses on violence, trauma and consumer culture. He is an active member of the Gender Based Violence Lobby Group, and is the co-ordinator of the Psychology and Society Masters Programme. His current research explores South Africans' perverse enthusiasm for violence, and the ways in which they simultaneously complain about it as a social problem and demand it as a solution to social problems. Email: collins@ukzn.ac.za

LLIANE LOOTS is a lecturer in the Drama and Performance Studies Programme, and the Gender Studies Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is an active member of the Gender Based Violence Lobby Group. Email: lootsl@ukzn.ac.za

THENJIWE MEYIWA teaches in the Gender Studies Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her area of research and teaching is cultural manifestations of gender. She is an active member of the Gender Based Violence Lobby Group. Email: meyiwa@ukzn.ac.za

DEEPAK MISTREY teaches in the School of Philosophy and Ethics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is currently working on questions of domination, autonomy and subjection, and is an active member of the Gender-Based Violence Lobby Group.
Email: mistrey@ukzn.ac.za

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