Acting against gender-based violence at universities

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• Attempt to reduce gender-based violence and improve victim support by using research and analysis rather than relying on traditional assumptions and institutional mechanisms.

• Safe Campus Project, Gender-based Violence Working Group, S.A.R.A.H. (Students Against Rape and Hate)

• Howard College Campus, UKZN 2008-2011
Recognition and Denial of violence:

- University as corporate brand requires positive image-management.

- Personal sense of well-being and security often entails denial of risk.

- Denial of risk often takes the form of victim blaming

Just World Hypothesis: bad things don’t happen to good people
• Latent sense of unsafely erupts as anger and impulsive protests when incidents become public.

• Not channelled into sustained interventions, and quickly dies away.

• Levels of violence are very high, but not in the ways imagined
Key findings:

• i) sexual coercion is widespread, especially within social and romantic relationships. Date rape rather than stranger rape.

• ii) intimate partner violence within relationships is the biggest problem. Includes cases of murder.

• iii) widespread hostility to gay and lesbian students and men perceived as effeminate. Includes cases of rape of gay men by straight men.
• Perpetrators often rely on positions of institutional power.
• Most incidents (over 95%) are not reported. Even when reported, many complaints are withdrawn.
• Violence is impulsive and/or expression of social norms, not deviant behaviour with ‘malice aforethought’
• Most forms of violence are not linked to failures of security services, but normalisation of violence in social relationships and everyday life.
Conventional security approach:

- Increase guards, access controls, lighting, CCTV, investigation, apprehension and prosecution of offenders

Problems:
- perpetrators are legitimately on campus
- perpetrators are known to victims
• victims are either fearful or socially and emotionally connected to perpetrator
• perpetrators are in positions of social and institutional authority
• victims either blame themselves or do not see the violence as unacceptable
• perpetrators and bystanders regard the violence as socially acceptable
• perpetrators are in positions of social and institutional authority
Solutions: move from...

• reactive protests to consistent proactive intervention
• ‘crime and punishment’ model to prevention
• perpetrator punishment to victim support
• authoritarian control to participatory democracy
• policing deviance to shifting social norms and values
Specific suggestions

- Establish dedicated institutional mechanisms to reduce violence and improve safety.
- Specific body to develop, implement and evaluate interventions
- Provide accessible, trusted, high profile integrated crisis support service (medical, psychological, legal, social). (Neither reducible to security nor counselling.)
- Reskill security staff to deal with interpersonal violence rather than just property crimes.
• Refocus student counselling to introduce social interventions rather than just private victim counselling.

• Create effective peer support and activist networks (separate from student politics). e.g. SARAH, RU Silent

• Prevent abuse of authority by university staff.

• Challenge institutional norms that justify abuse: patriarchy, ‘culture’, normalisation of violence and exploitation.
Core academic training for all students

- Critical thinking and reflection on values and practices
- Expose how patterns of violence come to be justified and normalised, and challenge them.
- Examine inequality, prejudice, violence, exploitation and abuse
- Explore democratic social values, non-violence, and conflict resolution
Conclusion:

• as actual patterns of violence are expressions of social norms, interventions should challenge those norms and provide alternatives, rather than focusing on security and punishment.