

Reimagining Equality

Sexual Harassment at Institutes of Higher Learning

A Policy Wishlist From
The Community

July 2021



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Introduction

In the first half of 2021, AWARE brought together 31 students who wished to share their experiences and suggestions for policy change related to sexual harassment cases at Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) in Singapore.

In this document, "sexual harassment" refers to offensive, unwanted and unwelcome behaviours of a sexual nature. This includes a spectrum of verbal, visual and physical behaviours, from misconduct to violence, including but not limited to unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and actual or attempted assault.

The group of students included polytechnic students and students from local and private universities. The participants were from diverse backgrounds, of different ethnicities and income levels. Most of the participants were either themselves victims of campus sexual harassment, or close to a victim (e.g. as friends or partners).

The areas of concern for participants included victim support and safety; the transparency, calibre and standards of current policies for handling sexual harassment cases, and institutes' role in such investigations. As a community, we brainstormed policy recommendations to better support sexual harassment victims at IHLs.

The Current Situation

Individual local universities in Singapore have worked to improve policies for sexual harassment cases at IHLs, but they are neither easily accessible to the public nor streamlined across IHLs.

None of the universities have implemented bystander intervention programmes. Only a small number have mandatory training for students on sexual harassment. A few have no accessible information on their protocols for handling specific cases of sexual harassment.

Additionally, private universities are not held accountable by any specific organisation with regard to the handling of such cases. Few have specific codes of conduct or victim care protocols for sexual harassment.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

A. Participants raised the following challenges relating to current IHL policies:

Lack of standardised protocol across IHLs, which allows for gaps in the system

- Unclear definitions for the varying forms of sexual harassment, resulting in a lack of standardised protocol for disciplinary action for each form
- Private institutes not held accountable by any government agency to handle cases appropriately

Lack of victim-centric policies and processes

- Victims not being updated on results of investigations
- Lack of publicly available protocol for victim protection, for example, dos and don'ts for alleged perpetrators; disciplinary action if they contact victims
- Lack of diversity on boards of discipline, with students not being fairly represented
- Not seeking victims' consent before reporting to police (risking re-traumatisation)

My university [Lasalle] was private so they had nobody holding them accountable to handle sexual misconduct cases appropriately.

-Aaditya, male student at a private university*

If you were the first victim [to report], you were told that the university would not take on the case unless more victims came forward.

-June, female student at a private university*

Lack of appropriate protocol in private universities:

At James Cook University, there is no education on consent or sexual harassment. We were told they would only proceed with an investigation if the victims are willing to talk to the counsellor and admit they need help. Overwhelming evidence was needed.

-Terence, male student at a private university*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

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Recommendations

Introduce and enforce a National Code of Conduct across all IHLs

The Code of Conduct should apply to staff, students and academics in all institutes and should:

- Include clear definitions of the different types of sexual harassment, with a strict standard of protocol for investigations, reporting processes, staff responses and support for victims.
- Include policies for disciplinary action that are transparent, publicly accessible and based on concrete benchmarks for each type of sexual harassment.
- Mandate the same standard of sexual harassment training across universities. Staff, volunteers, students and any first contact personnel, in particular, should be given gender-sensitive and trauma-informed training to support victims throughout reporting.
- Ensure that victim care is provided independent of university and/or police reporting outcomes.
- Hold universities accountable to the Ministries of Education and Law for any breach.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

B. Participants raised the following challenges relating to sexual harassment information and training:

- Current education modules on consent do not appear to be created in consultation with experts and were not relevant to the concerns of students in IHLs (e.g. technology-facilitated sexual violence)
- Disciplinary board members, professors, counsellors, security guards and other staff were not sensitive to reports of sexual harassment and seemed poorly equipped to deal with these cases

When the girl [victim of sexual harassment] spoke to the head of department, they had a meeting, but the school kept saying they did not want to pursue the case as it would tarnish the school's reputation, even when her parents were visibly upset and wanted the case to be escalated to the police.

-Aaditya, male student from a private university*

I reported sexual harassment and was told that girls should 'dress more conservatively' to avoid harassment. They can't treat us fairly or understand our needs if they themselves are not educated on these issues.

-Gayathri, female student at a private university*

Perpetuation of victim-blaming myths by staff:

My friend was sexually assaulted. The counselling sessions at the university's victim care centre were harmful as the counsellor invalidated her experience and said she didn't look 'depressed'.

Her experience with sexual assault was also not taken seriously by her friends and the people around her, as the perpetrator was her boyfriend. She had to drop out of school as a result. If survivors are directed to school counselling services, the counsellors should have training in dealing with trauma.

-Chantel, female student at a local university*

Trauma sensitivity is crucial. A male first responder in a situation I witnessed made the situation worse by making harassing comments as well.

-Derrick, male student at a local university*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

You can redo it [the online test] until you get it right so nobody takes it seriously... There needs to be a test that students have to actually pass to graduate.

-Li Jie, male student at a local university*

Lack of quality in sexuality education training module:

Our current education modules on consent are online, overly simplistic, reductionist and taught by lecturers who have often openly disagreed with what they are teaching us because they aren't educated on it themselves.

-Mirza, female student at a polytechnic*

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Recommendations

Implement training on addressing and preventing sexual harassment for all students and staff

This should be:

- Frequent: Training should be delivered bi-annually.
- Comprehensive: Topics should include consent, rape myths, bystander intervention education strategies, sensitivity training, sexual violence laws, unbiased treatment of victims and trauma-informed practices.
- Delivered by professionals: Training should be developed and delivered by trauma-informed professionals, such as clinical psychologists, lawyers or trained educators.
- Mandatory: Training should be mandatory for all students and staff, and should include mandatory testing to ensure comprehension of subject matter.

We recommend that the mandatory training be adopted as part of a wider Code of Conduct (as mentioned previously), or as a standalone measure.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

C. Participants raised the following challenges relating to victim-centric support:

- Lack of standardised victim care protocol across IHLs
- Lack of victim care during investigations; current level of care does not meet victims' needs
- Lack of accommodations (e.g. in timetables) to account for impact on victims' academic performance

Lack of victim-centric support:

I had to see my rapist in class every day. My entire class knew but they didn't know how to help me. It would have helped to have him be moved from the class or transferred to the next semester. Looking back, I can see how retraumatising it was.

-Aaditya, male student from a private university*

From my interactions with the Victim Care Unit, it became clear that even when certain staff wanted to offer more support or show their understanding, they couldn't, because of the people in charge of them and the centre. They should be given more autonomy to offer support to the victim.

-Grace, female student at a local university*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

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Recommendations

Introduce and implement a clear protocol of support and resources for victims

Support

All victims, regardless of reporting status, i.e. filed or not filed, and outcome, should be provided with this baseline level of support:

- Provide regular status updates on pending investigations by the school and full disclosure of case results for victims.
- Provide the victim with trauma-informed emotional support.

Resources

- Victim care unit should be staffed by counsellors or trauma-informed staff (not academic staff).
- Support pathways for victims should be easily accessible through victim care unit staff and university webpages.
- Survivor support groups and externally sourced mental health resources should be regularly updated and accessible for students.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

3

Recommendations

Introduce and implement a clear protocol of support and resources for victims (cont'd)

Interventions targeted at perpetrators

In addition to this baseline level of victim support, the community suggested the following interventions targeted at (alleged) perpetrators:

- Provide a mandatory sexual violence education session for all alleged perpetrators, detailing expectations of their behaviour.
- Implement regular accountability check-ins with the alleged perpetrator to monitor behaviour.

While a sexual harassment complaint is being investigated, universities must take the following steps to ensure the safety of the victim and manage the risk of retraumatisation:

- **Limit contact**

Limit the alleged perpetrator's access to specific school zones insofar as they affect the victim, in order to allow the victim safe study zones. Adjust the alleged perpetrator's schedule to limit contact with the victim. Consider removal of the alleged perpetrator from any non-compulsory school events.

- **Removal in event of continued behaviour**

If the alleged perpetrator continues the behaviour, they should be immediately suspended.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

D. Participants raised the following challenges relating to mandatory reporting:

- Mandatory reporting causes harm to victims by eroding their autonomy and choice and exposing them to further emotional and physical risk
- Lack of efforts made to seek victim consent before reporting to police, thereby risking re-traumatisation

Victim reporting rights:

Reporting is a very personal decision. The university can take action against the alleged perpetrator based on their own investigation with trauma-informed practitioners, without putting the victim through a police case against her will.

-Timothy, male student at a local university*

The whistleblowing procedure in these [sexual violence] cases is not respectful of the victim's consent.

-Grace, female student at a local university*

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Recommendations

Introduce Reasonable Grounds for Exemption from Mandatory Reporting

Victim's preference to not file a police report should be considered reasonable grounds for exemption from Section 424/legal obligation to report, unless the victim care unit deems the victim a threat to themselves or others.

What more can be done?

National Code of Conduct

All universities, including private universities, should maintain a National Code of Conduct for the ensured safety of all students, and ensured standard of quality with regard to the care and support provided. As an example, we suggest referencing Australia's current guideline on preventing and responding to sexual assault and harrassment in the higher education sector.¹

Bystander Intervention Training

As undertaken by countries such as the UK, France, Ireland, Spain, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Malta and more, the Singapore government should consider bystander intervention training, which has shown to result in: lower rape myth acceptance scores, higher bystander behaviours and increased reporting. We should similarly introduce designated trauma-informed counselling services, and a national policy to combat gender-based violence at IHLs to which all institutes, including private universities, must adhere.

International Markers

We also suggest that the government consider the recommendations of the European Union's review² of sexual harassment cases at the national, institutional and tertiary level. The European Research Area and Innovation Committee conducted research on Sexual Harassment in the Higher Education Sector. They collected data on EU member states and associated countries with regard to their action steps in combating gender-based violence.

¹"Good Practice Note: Preventing and Responding to Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the Australian Higher Education Sector". Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Australia), July 2020. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606441.pdf>

"Executive Summary." The Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/executive-summary-8>

²"Sexual Harassment in the Research and Higher Education Sector: National Policies and Measures in EU Member States and Associated Countries." ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation, June 3, 2020. https://genderaction.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SWGGRI_Sexual-Harassment-in-the-Research-Higher-Ed.-National-Policies-Measures.pdf.

Conclusion

The government's efforts to aid women's development must address the discriminatory effect of policies that do not support sexual violence victims in a trauma-informed and victim-centric manner. The impacts of sexual violence are deeply concerning and often life-long. Hence, this issue requires a trained taskforce with relevant expertise and resources.

All victims, regardless of the outcome of investigations, deserve quality care and a standardised national code of conduct to assure that care. We urge the government to consider the policy recommendations made in this wishlist and to address policies that impact the rights and safety of sexual violence victims in the forthcoming White Paper.