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Phipps, Alison (2023) Tackling Sexual Harassment and Violence in Universities: Seven Lessons from the UK. In: EditorsEmailORCIDPantelmann, HeikeUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDBlackmore, SabineUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIED, (eds.) Sexualisierte Diskriminierung und Gewalt im Hochschulkontext. Erscheinungsformen, Umgang, Prävention. Berlin, Springer, pp. 197-208

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<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-40467-3>

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Cite as:

Phipps, A. (2023). Tackling Sexual Harassment and Violence in Universities: Seven Lessons from the UK. In: Pantelmann, H., Blackmore, S. (eds) *Sexualisierte Belästigung, Diskriminierung und Gewalt im Hochschulkontext*, 197-208. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-40467-3_15

Tackling sexual harassment and violence in universities: seven lessons from the UK

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This chapter began as a keynote for an event hosted by the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California and Freie Universität Berlin, in February 2020. It was the last in a series of sessions on sexual harassment and violence in universities at which academics, students and activists from Latin America, Africa and Europe discussed the issue. When invited to speak, I was both delighted and concerned about what I could offer, as a British academic whose work on sexual violence has been mainly focused on universities in my home country.

My work began in 2006 with a pilot study at my own institution, and since then I have been involved in many research and intervention projects, collectives, and campaigns. The first of these was the National Union of Students' campaign against 'lad culture'. I set up the Changing University Cultures (CHUCL) collective, which worked within institutions, to varying levels of success (Phipps and McDonnell 2021). CHUCL also collaborated for a short time with Universities UK (the body representing UK university leaders), until it became obvious, in the context of rapidly deteriorating industrial relations in the sector, that we could not continue (Phipps and McDonnell 2021, pp6-7). Alongside CHUCL, I co-led the pan-European Universities Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence project, which created training programmes for over a thousand staff in twenty-one institutions in Greece, Italy, Latvia, Spain and the UK (Alldred and Phipps 2018).

My most recent initiative is the Abolition Feminism for Ending Sexual Violence collective, set up with Nikki Godden-Rasul and Tina Sikka. Abolition feminism has a lineage in Black feminist thought and activism and is focused on ending gender violence, in all its forms (Davis et al 2022, p117). This means that ending sexual violence requires an end to state violence, especially the violence of policing and criminal punishment, and the violence of borders. Abolition feminism sees the university as what Audre Lorde (1981 in 2007, pp103-6) would call the 'master's house': built on the violence of racial capitalism, albeit a dwelling underneath which the rebellion is also being fermented (Phipps and McDonnell 2021, pp3-4).

Abolition feminism represents the end of one process for me and the beginning of another: I now operate with a deep understanding of what the university is and try to imagine and enact a future beyond it. My turn towards abolition reflects the failures of my own previous activism, and what follows below, and what I shared with my international colleagues in February 2020, is an attempt to distil what I have learned since 2006 for fellow scholars and activists in other countries. Here are seven lessons from the UK; I hope some of them will be helpful.

1.0 Lesson One: Name the Problem (but don't stop there)

Sara Ahmed (2015, p8) has written: 'When we put a name to a problem, we are doing something.' This doing, in her words, is 'gathering up what otherwise remain scattered experiences into a tangible thing.' The gathering up, the making tangible, can allow the thing to be addressed. It was the UK student movement, in the early 2010s, that persistently named the issue of sexual harassment and violence in our universities. Kelley Temple, Susuana Amoah and Hareem Ghani, who were all Women's Officers of the National Union of Students (NUS), were three key figures.

The first national study of sexual violence against students was conducted by NUS in 2010. Entitled Hidden Marks, this was a survey of over two thousand self-identified women students across all four UK nations. One in seven had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault; sixty-eight per cent had been sexually harassed (National Union of Students, 2011). I assisted NUS with this research, and shortly after the report's release they commissioned me, with Isabel Young, to conduct a study on campus 'lad culture' and how that framed sexual harassment and violence.

Our study recruited forty women studying in England and Scotland, for focus groups and interviews. These women were very clear on what 'lad culture' was: a group dynamic enacted by young men in team sports and on the social scene, characterised by misogynist and homophobic 'banter'. This 'banter' often involved rape jokes and sexual harassment and had the potential to escalate into more extreme forms of sexual violence. Our report, entitled That's What She Said, theorised 'lad culture' as a conducive context for sexual violence (National Union of Students, 2013).

That's What She Said entered a climate in which women were ready to snap. For Ahmed (2017), 'feminist snap' occurs when our experiences of negotiating worlds that demean and exclude us become overwhelming. The report prompted an outpouring - in feminist groups, students' unions, classrooms, faculty offices and on social media - from women who had had enough. Ahmed writes that moments of 'snap' can be catalysts for change. In the movement that emerged around 'lad culture' we raised awareness, created training, and partnered with women's services. We used the media to name and shame perpetrators and the institutions that enabled them. We lobbied university leaders for a better response. By 2015, this had prompted the formation of a taskforce by Universities UK (UUK) on violence against women, harassment and hate crime.

The taskforce report recommended that all institutions adopt centralised reporting procedures, develop effective disclosure responses, and run training programmes (Universities UK, 2016). Afterwards, the Higher Education Funding Council for England made £4.7 million available for projects addressing sexual harassment and hate crime, which supported institutional initiatives across the country. There was also further data-gathering: in 2018, NUS and the 1752 group (the UK's first organisation focused on staff-student sexual misconduct) conducted a study with almost two thousand current and former students, which found that forty per cent had experienced at least one instance of sexualised behaviour from university staff (NUS and 1752 Group, 2018).

In 2019, UUK circulated the results of a progress review of ninety-five institutions across all four UK nations. It found that eighty-seven per cent had a working group on sexual harassment, violence and/or hate crime and seventy-six per cent had secured senior leadership buy-in. Eighty-one per cent had delivered training, and seventy-eight per cent had developed or improved reporting mechanisms. Crucially, there had been an increase in reported incidents and 'a profound change in the initiatives and ideas that are now available for sharing across the sector'. It concluded that 'over time, this will help facilitate cultural change at both institutional and sector level' (Universities UK, 2019, p60).

The activist movement against sexual violence in UK universities had succeeded in naming the

problem and getting institutions to face it. Yet despite this huge achievement, I was circumspect. Institutional actions had mainly consisted of policy compliance and getting rid of ‘bad apples’ using disciplinary procedures. The movement, despite the input of several women of colour, was dominated by fellow white women who seemed happy to accept or even encourage this approach. However, sexual harassment and violence are not a poison infecting particular ‘bad apples’ – they are at the roots of the whole rotten tree.

2.0 Lesson Two: Don't Individualise the Issue

To fully understand sexual violence, we need to think big. Sexual violence is a pivot for the intersecting systems of heteropatriarchy and colonial racial capitalism. It works at the level of the nation, the state, the community, and the household. It enters the world via four vectors – threats, acts, allegations, and punishment – and these must be considered together if we are to comprehend why sexual violence occurs and how to stop it (Phipps 2020a, pxi).

Acts and threats of sexual violence keep women in our place and punish gender-nonconforming people, preserving binary gender as the condition for social reproduction at no or low-cost. Federici's (1998) work on the Early Modern witch hunts shows how central violence against women was to the imposition of capitalism. There is evidence that sexual violence was not so prevalent in societies in which production did not rely on exploitative gender relations: for instance, pre-colonial Indigenous societies. Sarah Deer (2015, p49) argues that rape, like patriarchy, was largely a European import. It was a key weapon in the colonial arsenal. It was a form of terrorism and a method of ethnic cleansing either through the forced production of children or through preventing women from reproducing due to trauma.

As women's bodies were colonised by sexual violence, men's bodies were colonised by imputations of it. Colonialism required the notion of the ‘savage’, which was based on the idea of sexual threat (Robinson 1983, p332): sex, sexuality and sexual violence were all central to the construction of race. From genocide to slavery to lynching, the pretext of ‘protecting women’ (or more precisely, protecting white women) was fundamental. This continues to construct individuals, communities, cultures, and nations as dangerous in multiple and interlocking ways. It underpins neo-colonial dispossession and military-industrial expansion, border regimes (of many kinds), and the swelling prison-industrial complex. What Bhattacharyya (2018, p179) calls the ‘edge’ populations of capitalism are both created by sexual violence and constructed as a sexual threat.

Sexual violence in the university performs all these functions, at a smaller scale. Sexual harassment and assault are used to demean and dominate, to make marginalised students and staff unwelcome, to keep us under control, and to express and maintain supremacy. Women and gender-nonconforming students are at high risk of violence, and being marginalised by race, class and/or disability creates additional vulnerabilities (Association of American Universities, 2015). In UK student communities, there is evidence that ‘lad culture’ and its attendant sexual violence is the preserve of middle- and upper-class white men who see successful young women as a threat (Phipps and Young 2015). Sexual harassment of students by staff usually involves senior male academics (the majority of whom are white) expressing their entitlement and abusing their power.

Acts and threats of sexual violence reserve and shape the space of the university for privileged white men (and some white women). They articulate and preserve the power relations of the institution and the wider world. Furthermore, in universities, as in the wider world, certain groups are constructed as more threatening than others. There is anecdotal evidence that queer academics, especially those who are also Black, are more likely to be accused of sexual misconduct (Duggan 2018). A recent report described how anti-radicalisation agendas in UK higher education represent Muslim men as particularly misogynistic (Guest et al, 2020). This is worrying given the ‘carceral creep’ (Kim 2019) of activism around sexual violence on UK

campuses, which echoes earlier developments in the US (Doyle 2015). Like the state, the institution is not neutral when it comes to addressing sexual violence.

3.0 Lesson Three: Know the Institution

Abolitionist thinking understands education as key to the capitalist, colonial, modern world-making project (Meyerhoff 2019, p4). It is a mode of primitive accumulation, which creates the preconditions for racial capitalism through hoarding the means of study and using them to credentialise us for stratified economic roles (Boggs et al 2019, pp15-16). It inculcates us into ways of knowing and learning that reflect capitalist norms and practices: separate public and private spheres, the rational and consuming individual, and colonial dichotomies between culture and nature, modernity and tradition, value and waste (Meyerhoff 2019, 21, 67). We become 'competent' in the knowledges of the state and status quo (Harney and Moten 2013), and other forms of world-making are cast as deprived and less evolved (Meyerhoff 2019, 21, 67).

Higher education has shaped nationalism, patriotism, citizenship, democracy, and 'civilisation'. UK universities are deeply embedded in state capitalist violence, including post-9/11 counter-terrorism regimes through which academics become border guards (Dear 2018). They are also places where student protest is violently repressed. As economic actors themselves, universities are central to flows of dispossession and accumulation. They have been built upon indigenous and/or enclosed common lands and enriched by transatlantic slavery (Draper 2018, Boggs et al 2019). They are now entrenched in the neoliberal rationalities and practices of privatisation, outsourcing, downsizing and precarity, and are subject to, and have, complex financial interests, including in the military-industrial complex (Lacy and Rome 2017).

During COVID-19 in England, the moral bankruptcy of our higher education system was starkly exposed. Our marketised universities lured students to campuses with promises of 'Covid-safe' teaching, to collect fees and rents. Students were blamed and punished as the virus inevitably spread, then told they could not return home and trapped in infection hotspots by fences and police. There was horror and condemnation of university leaders as this situation progressed. However, white feminists look to these same leaders, to protect us from sexual violence. How can the institution protect us from violence when the institution is violence itself? The university cannot not save us – it is what Audre Lorde (1981 in 2007, pp103-6) would call the master's house.

4.0 Lesson Four: Put Down the Master's Tools

UK campus activists have largely made gains in policy. In response to our lobbying, institutions have made written commitments, amended disciplinary and reporting procedures, and commissioned training. We have worked hard for these successes and have done well to achieve them. However, policy machinery constructs the institution as benign and able to be worked on, concealing the violence built into its very existence. Contemporary policy work also tends to be undertaken within neoliberal systems of measurement, monitoring and audit that generate surplus value for the university. This creates an emphasis on maintaining the appearance of a functional institution rather than worrying about the reality (Phipps, 2020b).

This is what Ahmed (2012, 34, 143) terms 'institutional polishing': initiatives ostensibly about equality, that are actually about generating a marketable image. These are what she calls 'non-performative': they do not produce the effects they name but substitute for them instead (Ahmed 2012, p90). A report produced in response to an issue, used to declare the issue has been addressed. A policy which is created and publicised, but ultimately not followed because just having the policy is what counts. In the UK, it has become important for institutions to look like they are doing something about sexual harassment and violence. However, looking like and doing

are not the same thing; in fact, sometimes the first allows us to escape the second. Policy is often one of the master's tools.

Institutional polishing can also become institutional airbrushing when problems emerge. Naming and shaming perpetrators has been a key strategy of the movement against sexual violence, and it is powerful because it threatens to mar the institution's polished image. However, the impact of the disclosure on the surplus value of the institution is usually more troubling than the disclosure itself (Phipps 2020b, p232). Although communities often close ranks around sexual violence perpetrators, in universities (which present as communities but more closely resemble corporations), the financial impact of disclosure must also be projected and reckoned up. For something to be marketable it must be unblemished, so the problem is airbrushed out.

What I call institutional airbrushing (Phipps 2020b, pp230-233) takes two main forms: concealment and erasure. Either issues are minimised, denied, or hidden and survivors encouraged to settle matters quietly, or when this is not possible, the perpetrator is 'airbrushed' from the institution, and it is made to appear that they were never there. Confidentiality or non-disclosure agreements are often used, or financial settlements given to perpetrators who resign. Institutional airbrushing stabilises the system; it communicates and embeds the idea that all the institution needs to do is remove the 'bad' individual. However, after the blemish is airbrushed out, the malaise that produced it remains. After the blemish is airbrushed out, it also tends to reappear elsewhere. This is called 'pass the harasser' (Cantalupo and Kidder 2018) and it is a significant problem in UK higher education.

Like racial capitalism itself, institutional airbrushing moves problems around and outsources, rather than addresses, them. Ultimately, we may outsource perpetrators from higher education to women in lower-status, lower-paid economic sectors. Although naming and shaming can be a form of direct action when other avenues are closed (Page et al 2019), it often triggers institutional airbrushing rather than genuine institutional change. Institutional airbrushing does not prioritise the personal interests of survivors but the financial interests of the institution and fuels a corporate media hungry for clickbait.

5.0 Lesson Five: Don't Mistake Outrage for Justice

Trauma is big business. The phrases 'disaster porn' and 'tragedy porn' have been coined to describe our fascination with the troubles of others (Molotch 2014, p370), which creates a market for the consumption of pain: photographs of drowned migrants on European beaches; stories of sexual assault in Hollywood; videos of Black people being brutalised and killed by police. This material, usually fed to us via 'clickbait', produces sympathy and outrage but does not often lead to systemic analysis or radical political action. In the corporate media that circulates these stories, holding governments, institutions and individuals to account comes second to manipulating outrage for revenue. This is what I call the 'outrage economy' of the contemporary Western media (Phipps 2020a, pp82-108).

Sexual violence stories are capital in this economy, exemplified by the viral iteration of #MeToo. Initiated in 2006 by Black feminist Tarana Burke as a survivor-led movement of mutual support, #MeToo 'went viral' in 2017 following a tweet by white actor Alyssa Milano, as a moment of mass media disclosure. This moment occurred in a media market which, like all markets, is profoundly nihilistic. Clicks, likes and shares are a multi-denominational currency: as long as they accumulate, it does not matter why. In other words, the media using sexual violence as clickbait does not imply support for feminist goals. The media using sexual violence as clickbait does not mean survivors will not themselves be vilified if this happens to be the better story.

During my years in the field, I have become suspicious of the cycle of mainstream feminist

activism. When the institutions we appeal to let us down, we often ‘invest’ our trauma into networked media markets, to generate outrage and the visibility we need to further our cause. Cynical media corporations exploit this outrage, building visibility for their brands through audience consumption of our pain. Meanwhile, the threat of damage to the brands of exposed institutions and organisations leads to the airbrushing of ‘bad men’ from high-profile sectors. These individuals usually move on to start again, while oppressive systems are left intact.

When individual men are named and shamed in the media, when institutional policies and initiatives focus on punishing or excluding these ‘bad apples’, there is almost no effect on the whole rotten tree. Indeed, we often find ourselves nourishing its roots – in relying on the patriarchal, racist, capitalist state, institution and media for justice, mainstream feminism uses the master’s tools to try to dismantle the master’s house and reinscribes the master’s authority (see Harney and Moten 2013, p135). Frequently, activism against sexual violence in universities fails to dismantle the intersecting systems that produce sexual violence and strengthens them instead.

6.0 Lesson Six: Stop Calling the Authorities

The cycle of mainstream feminist activism reflects what I call its political whiteness (Phipps 2020a, pp57-81). This is not about skin colour or identity, but about individualistic modes of political action that demand the status quo serve us better in our needs for protection and redress. White bourgeois feminists have called for more police, more convictions, and longer sentences: and when a problem emerges in our workplaces, we take it to the boss. These appeals to authority position us as clients of the system we may ultimately want to dismantle. In our efforts to address individual abuses of power, we turn to the institutional power that facilitates them. In thinking we can be safe in our institutions by punishing the ‘bad’ men, we conceal the fact that the institution itself is unsafe.

Our demands for discipline can also increase the institution’s power and ability to perpetrate violence. Technologies such as codes of conduct or ‘morality clauses’ in employment contracts could be misused to target groups seen as ‘deviant’ or threatening and undermine employment rights. A sex offenders’ register for higher education, which has been suggested by some UK activists and implemented at some US universities (Tewksbury 2013), is a deeply reactionary idea (Meiners 2009). Such forms of governance are also ultimately designed to protect the institution. It is notable that law firm Pinsent Masons, which represents UK university administrations as they defend themselves against discrimination claims and has given advice on how to undermine industrial action by staff (Pinsent Masons 2018), has also prepared guidance for universities on how to handle allegations of sexual misconduct (Pinsent Masons 2016).

Like the criminal punishment system, institutional discipline is rarely effective because it serves the institution, not us (Brodsky 2021). Furthermore, there is a difference between punishment and accountability, and strong evidence that the former does not create the conditions for the latter (Darwall and Darwall 2018). For Mia Mingus (2019), accountability requires four steps from someone who has caused harm: self-reflection, apology, repair, and changed behaviour. This centres the person who has been harmed, their understanding of why the behaviour was harmful and their definition of what constitutes repair. It makes space for that repair, acknowledging that none of us is above causing harm and we may all need that space someday. It is the job of the perpetrator and not the survivor and requires significant community input and support.

This would be difficult to achieve in higher education institutions which are corporations rather than communities, in which we are hierarchically organised, individualised, distrustful, and overworked. These conditions are not conducive to honest communication and collective action. Full accountability would require a collectivist, not a capitalist, institution: and this is probably an oxymoron. That does not mean, however, that we should not try to move in a better direction. We

certainly cannot keep relying on the system to do the work of accountability for us when it is itself a perpetrator of violence.

7.0 Lesson Seven: Be in it For the Long Haul

After many years in the field, I heed Lorde's (1981 in 2007, p105) advice that refusing to use the master's tools may only be difficult for those who 'still define the master's house as their only source of support'. This is an invitation to join the work of abolition, of building a different house. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2018) says, abolition is not about tearing things down but about collaborating with others to make something better. Instead of strengthening the status quo, mainstream feminist organising against sexual violence could become part of this broader project of making anew. What world do we want? What are some steps towards it that we could realistically take?

Abolitionist steps shrink, rather than grow, the state and institution's capacity for violence. Some of the UK's student-led initiatives fit this description: race-informed bystander intervention programmes for example, and community-based night-time safety ventures. We should expand this work in all directions: under the banner of transformative justice and over many years, people marginalised by race, class and disability, queer and trans people, have created a multitude of models to draw on outside the institution and outside the state (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020).

For those working within the system, the abolitionist distinction between reformist and non-reformist reforms is key. While reform tends to improve (and legitimate) existing structures (Davis 2003, pp9-21), non-reformist reforms are practical measures that move us in the right direction and help build our radical imaginations. They are not tailored to or co-optable by the system but make cracks in it and try to halt cycles of violence. Non-reformist reforms can help us resist the binary between reform and revolution and work towards transformative change in steady and pragmatic ways.

The term 'non-reformist reform' was coined by André Gorz in the 1960s. Amna Akbar (2020, pp103-6) describes three of its hallmarks: first, a radical critique and radical imagination. In other words, transformation is the end goal, even if we are only inching towards it. Secondly, non-reformist reforms tend to come from social movements and grassroots communities rather than being imposed from the top. Thirdly, they are concerned with building power rather than policy fixes, so should be part of an array of strategies such as strikes, protests, education, and mutual aid. It can be difficult to figure out what is a non-reformist reform and what is a reformist one. There is a deceptively simple question - does this do more harm than good? - which often has a complex answer. However, some of the measures survivors can demand of institutions, such as support to complete their studies and a guarantee they will not encounter their alleged attacker on campus, might fit the bill (Brodsky 2021, p48-9).

Most importantly, tacking sexual violence in universities can no longer be left to survivors: we all need to do our part. We might start by creating small, self-organised groups of staff and students who collectively imagine new ways of relating and responding to difficulties. These prototypes could be used to develop non-reformist reforms and abolitionist steps that create structures of accountability rather than shoring up the institution's power. This work would demand institutional resources (especially money) and would pose a radical challenge to the current model of the university and mainstream feminist activism. It would refuse the capitalist clock and neoliberal schemes of measurement and assessment: abolition is a process, not a destination. We must be in it for the long haul and take comfort in the fact that we are all in it together.

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