

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0438

Reimagining Gender Equity Through Exploring the Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Higher Education Access and Participation

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**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

**Abstract:** Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global pandemic with significant implications for educational access and participation and is shown to have intensified as a result of COVID-19 (UN Women, 2020). With the expectation to address gender equity, universities are challenged to understand and respond to the significance of GBV in the context of higher education (HE). Yet, there is little attention to this in research or policy terms, aside from more explicit attention being given to sexual violence on campus (see for example Phipps and Young, 2013; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). This is the first study to explore the relationship between experiences of GBV across the life course and participation in higher education. Drawing on feminist theories, this paper will explore the relationship of GBV to lived experiences of HE in the context of the wider social pandemic of gendered violence, focusing on themes of identity-formation, affect and becoming.

**Paper:** Gender-based violence (GBV) has been identified as a global pandemic with significant implications for educational access and participation. Renewed international efforts have been put in place to address this 'Shadow Pandemic' in light of data that has revealed that GBV, particularly domestic violence, has intensified since the onslaught of COVID-19 (UN Women, 2020). In relation to such concerns, universities are challenged to understand and respond to GBV. There has been little attention to this in higher education (HE) research and policy terms, aside from more explicit attention being given to sexual violence on campus (Phipps and Young, 2013; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). This is the first study to explore the relationship between experiences GBV across the life course and participation in higher education.

This study attends to the following research questions: What are students' lived experiences of HE in the context of prior, present and/or ongoing experiences of gendered violence? What forms of gendered violence have university students experienced over their lives? How do universities understand and/or respond to gendered violence in the context of commitments to gender equity, if at all?

Neoliberal approaches to equity have been extensively critiqued for the hegemonic deficit discourses that pathologise individual students and conceal the structural, material, cultural and symbolic multidimensional inequalities that students must navigate to access and participate in HE (Burke, 2012; Bozalek et al, 2020). This research attends to the under-researched dimension of GBV to consider how such hegemonic deficit discourses engage with problematic notions of victimhood to

reproduce individualised and mono-dimensional explanations of equity in HE. Assumptions that access to HE is predominately a neoliberal project of improving the individual self, outside of power relations and gendered inequalities, will be interrogated. This places higher education as a key site of analysis to consider its role in grappling with the deeply entrenched and multi-layered personal and social histories of gendered violence. The research situates higher education as a space of possibility for both the social *reproduction* and the social *transformation* of complex gendered inequalities.

The paper will present our analysis of 50 in-depth interviews with students at one case study HE institution located in a diverse and large region of Australia. Students also completed a questionnaire, designed to identify the different forms of GBV at play in the students' lives and histories. We analyse students' lived and embodied experiences of gendered inequalities not in terms of individual 'overcoming' but of residual, personal, collective and ongoing dimensions of struggle for gender equity. We understand experiences of GBV as deeply relational, connected to complex power relations and continually re-situated within interconnected institutional timescapes (Adam, 1998).

The study captures the patterns and forms of GBV, and how this impacts on participants' journeys to, and experiences in, HE. Our analysis shows the impact of GBV on university study is complex and wide-ranging. For some, university was described as the centrepiece in beginning a 'new life', as an escape from GBV. GBV experiences also caused feelings of isolation, including lowered self-esteem, disconnection and a sense of not belonging or being 'different' from other students. For some students, HE provides valuable forms of awareness-raising and the capacity to articulate concerns about the social nature of GBV, institutionalised misogyny and, through these means, to support others.

Students emphasise the importance of safe and inclusive spaces at university. They often found themselves in precarious and even dangerous living arrangements whilst at university, exacerbating earlier traumatic experiences and sometimes leading to new ones. Accounts of lecturers' lack of understanding of the significant impact of GBV on study was seen to sabotage student progression. In general, students talked about experiences of unsafe and misogynistic cultural environments. Students expressed high sensitivity to safety issues as survivors of GBV, which included always being on high alert. Experiences of GBV can have a profound and damaging impact on studies, including health issues preventing them from studying. However, intersectional inequalities compound and differently shape the impact of GBV, and the lived experience of GBV shifts over time and space.

HE is perceived as being of great significance in their lives, both in terms of future trajectories, hopes and dreams and in valuing the opportunity to learn. Many participants expressed a strong commitment to social justice as part of their motivation to study, which provided a sense of a wider purpose to help others. Students point to the potential of universities in playing a stronger educational role in raising awareness about GBV and challenging patriarchal and misogynistic institutional cultures and practices.

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