

## **Mobilising higher education for gender justice praxis**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

This paper draws from a praxis-based program of work within the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, aiming to mobilise higher education as a potential vehicle for gender justice. It focuses on the invisible dimension of student access and experience connected to experiences of gender-based violence (GBV). Drawing from feminist methodologies and praxis, the work brings research, theory and practice together through a community-based program of lifelong learning and a university-based program of relational navigation aiming to create counter-hegemonic spaces of care, connection and safety for victim-survivors of GBV. The research-informed programmatic work is underpinned by feminist pedagogies, drawing on arts-based methods, framed by Fraser's multidimensional gender justice constellation of redistribution, recognition and representation. The programs are situated within practice-informed research to mobilise praxis, exploring the relationship of higher education to gender-based violence and its capacity to foster gender justice.

### **Full paper**

The extent of gendered-based violence (GBV) has been described as a global pandemic, with significant implications for access and participation in higher education. Gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence, has intensified since the onslaught of COVID-19

due to many women being trapped at home with their abusers and struggling to access services that are suffering from cuts and restrictions (UN Women, 2020). In relation to these concerns, and the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5 to achieve gender equality, universities are challenged to understand and respond to the significance of GBV in the context of higher education. This has been an under-researched area (Wagner & Magnusson, 2005) and has received little attention in higher education policy and practice terms, aside from the issue of GBV on campus (see, for example: Heywood et al., 2022; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

Drawing on Fraser's approach to gender injustice and considering the relationship between GBV and higher education equity, we engage redistributive justice whilst challenging misrecognition (Fraser, 2013) through a praxis-based program of work. A redistributive justice approach ensures that those with GBV experiences are provided the required resources and opportunities needed to access and participate in higher education. However, simultaneous attention must be paid to the gender injustice of misrecognition, "an institutionalised pattern of cultural value that privileges traits associated with masculinity, while devaluing everything coded as 'feminine'" (Fraser, 2013, p. 162). These are the "androcentric value patterns" that pervade everyday interactions and result in gendered status subordination, including "sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence", "exclusion or marginalisation in public spheres and deliberative bodies" as well as many other expressions of gendered injustice (p. 162-163). Further, GBV is problematically framed as about one-off incidents enacted by deviant individuals, rather than as deeply woven into the fabric of institutionalised gender injustice. The exclusion of the voices of victim-survivors in powerful social institutions, such as universities, deepens gender injustice. Fraser's gender justice framework (Fraser, 2013) brings attention to the ways that both GBV and higher education are social sites of maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation, deeply affecting the right to higher education (Burke, 2012).

The paper reports on a qualitative program of work, exploring the following questions:

1. How do current students who are victim- survivors of gender-

based violence experience higher education?

2. How might universities better understand and/or respond to gender-based violence in the context of commitments to gender equity?

The paper draws from in-depth interviews with 24 student victim-survivors and brings research and practice together through a community-based program of lifelong learning (Reclaiming My Place) and a university-based program (Claim Our Place) of relational navigation (Burke, Cameron, Fuller and Hollingworth, 2021), aiming to create counter-hegemonic spaces of care, connection and safety for victim-survivors of GBV. Students were recruited from one College at an Australian regional university and completed a questionnaire, which mapped the forms of GBV they experienced across their lifetime before participating in interviews, which focused specifically on their journeys into and through higher education. These mixed-methods aimed to generate new knowledge about the impact of GBV on higher education access and participation, and to identify redistributive, recognitive and representative strategies for gender justice. An overarching aim was to explore the potential of higher education to be mobilised as a vehicle for social justice transformation.

Many described the impact of GBV at different points in the lifecourse as significantly impacting their confidence and life chances, including the belief that they were 'too stupid' for university. We argue that such sensibilities about low confidence and capability are tied to the social phenomenon of GBV, which then impacts at the individual level of experience and identity.

Surviving GBV also provided incentive to explore and develop personal sensibilities of potential and to counter the destructive narratives of abuse. Against the damaging deficit discourses of lack of confidence and capability, students drew strength and insight from their experiences, often reinforced through the feminist pedagogies and collective space of the arts-based programs.

Participants appreciated opportunities for collective sense-making and representation of their experiences. They pointed to the imperative of higher education to raise awareness of and challenge

GBV. Participants valued the opportunity to contribute to knowledge on a significant social issue which is often seen as private, and not usually acknowledged as an important dimension framing student experience. The arts-based workshops facilitated a process in which participants gained new understanding of their lived realities, by establishing coalitions of support and by promoting the development of networks of belonging both within and outside of higher education.

## References

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