

Acting against gender-based violence at universities

Anthony Collins

anti@webafrica.org.za

- 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 Even when reported, many complaints are withdrawn.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. SARA, 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.