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Gender-based violence in South African universities: an institutional challenge

Abstract

South Africa has witnessed increasing incidents of gender-based violence reportedly perpetrated within and around campuses of higher education institutions. The gender-based violence incidents that became local and/or national news are a tiny fraction of all such incidents in the country as the majority are not reported for various reasons. This makes it difficult to acquire a full picture of the scale of the scourge of gender-based violence in the country. Despite being one of the most common forms of human rights violations not only in South Africa, but in other countries as well, gender-based violence has not attracted much research interest as other forms of abuses of human rights. The result is that there is poor understanding of, and insight into this phenomenon which, in turn, constrain efforts to develop effective interventions to abate and eliminate gender-based violence.

The paper looks at gender-based violence in higher education institutions as a challenge that needs to be addressed. It explores the possible causal factors and the reasons why it is difficult to acquire information about all incidents of gender-based violence in higher education institutions. It also assesses how universities respond to gender-based violence, and suggest an integrated framework that universities could adopt in order

to effectively respond to the scourge of gender-based violence.

Key words: Culture, gender-based violence, patriarchy, power relations, sexual harassment, social biases

Introduction

During the 2019 academic year, some high profile incidents of gender-based violence (GBV) reportedly perpetrated within the spaces of higher education institutions in South Africa, or within their vicinity, became national headline news. This has been the case although South Africa has a Constitution and a number of pieces of legislation that protect human rights and outlaw acts of human rights abuses, including GBV. Furthermore, the South African government has ratified and adopted a number of regional and international conventions and protocols that are focused on eradicating GBV. These include:

- the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) (1995);
- the UN Resolution 1325 on Women;
- the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003);
- the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development; and
- the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international instruments (UN, 1993) (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), 2016).

The reasons as to why the ratification of these regional and international conventions and protocols seems to have had no effect on deterring the occurrence of incidents of GBV within households and communities across the country, are not clear and are worth investigating through research.

Besides the reality that incidents of GBV continue to occur almost unabated, the dearth of research on the subject is also inexplicable, but it only serves to perpetuate the poor understanding of what GBV entails, its prevalence patterns, its root causes and conditions that encourage it. It also constrains efforts towards finding effective means of not only bringing it under control, but also eradicating completely and consigning it to the dustbins of history.

This paper attempts to explore and explain GBV as a serious challenge on university campuses in South Africa. It also provides an international perspective of GBV in higher education institutions with a view towards confirming that it is a global phenomenon although its forms, intensity and prevalence patterns vary from country to country. The paper further explores the possible causal factors of GBV, as well as the serious challenge posed by the underreporting of incidents of GBV. The paper also argues that the sexual harassment policies of most institutions are not a substitute to having policies that directly address GBV. It concludes with a proposal for the adoption of an integrated framework for preventing GBV on university campuses in South Africa.

Defining and understanding GBV

One of the effects of the lack of significant research on GBV is that this social ill remains poorly understood, both in terms of what it entails as well as its prevalence. Clear details about the other types of violence are often expounded upon, which includes physical violence, domestic violence, emotional violence, economic violence, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence (see Vetten, 2007; Sigsworth, 2009). However, one cannot find similar levels of clarity and detail regarding GBV. To date, the dominant narrative and understanding of the phenomenon of GBV seems to be that it is simply a

male-on-female violence. However, there are some unintended less helpful implications with such a construction. The first one is the implicit homogenisation of women as 'a priori victims and as powerless' (Shaikh, 2003, p. 149), with the corollary notion that, just because they are women, they cannot be perpetrators of GBV. The second implication is that, the construction of gender is universal and static, and yet, as Butler (1995, p. 5) makes us aware, gender is not always composed coherently or consistently in different historical contexts because it intersects with social, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively comprised identities.

Notwithstanding the above observations regarding the dangers of reducing GBV to male-on-female violence, most conceptualisations of GBV are based on the 'UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women' (UN, 1993), which defines GBV as any act that is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats or acts of coercion, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, private or public, in the family or community. Along the same lines, Bloom (2018, p. 14) observes that the term GBV is generally used to describe violence that occurs as a result of the normative roles and expectations associated with each gender, as well as the unequal power relationships between the genders within the context of a specific society. It is a means to subjugate not only women, but anyone who does not conform to gendered forms of conduct, and anyone who is perceived as 'less-than' normal and therefore deserves to be controlled, manipulated and violated.

The 'Policy Framework to address Gender-Based Violence in the Post-School Education and Training System' (DHET, 2019, p. 8) is similarly premised on the dominant view of GBV as male-on-female violence. However, it also acknowledges that while GBV 'is most often directed at women and girls as the obvious bearers of the female and feminine, LGBTQI individuals may also experience GBV, including on the basis of being gender non-conforming and/or not practising heterosexuality'. LGBTQI is an abbreviation for people who fall into the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Intersex collective classification. The Policy Framework therefore

broadens the meaning beyond male-on-female violence to also encompass violence perpetrated against LGBTQI communities by heterosexual people within society. However, given the dearth of research on this topic, the extent to which current perspectives of GBV within university settings are inclusive of violence against LGBTQI communities, remains unclear.

An international perspective on GBV

The blight of GBV is by no means limited to South African universities. Research confirms equally widespread prevalence of GBV across broad geopolitical contexts. In a study on sexual assault on American campuses, Karjane, Fisher and Cullen (2002) found that sexual assault is widely considered to be the most underreported violent crime in America. Another interesting finding of the study was that most sexual assaults on campuses are committed by acquaintances of the victims; and that this may explain, in part, why these crimes are underreported (Belknap & Erez, 2007; Rennison & Addington, 2014). According to Karjane *et al* (2002), just under 3% of all college women become victims of rape (either completed or attempted) in a given 9-month academic year. If the percentage is projected to a full calendar year, the proportion rises to nearly 5% of college women. And when projected over a typical 5-year college career, one in five young women experiences rape during their college time (Karjane *et al*, 2002, p. 2).

Echoing the findings of Karjane *et al* (2002), a study involving 27 institutions of higher education in America, with responses from 150 000 students, researchers found that since enrolling, 23% of female students had experienced sexual contact involving physical harm or incapacitation, and 62% had experienced sexual harassment (Cantor, Fisher, & Chibnall, 2015; Krebs, Lindquist, Berzofsky, Shook-Sa, Peterson & Planty, 2016). More specifically, 23% of women, 6% of men, 12% of students who identified themselves as transgender, genderqueer or nonconforming, questioning, or not listed (TGQN), and 13% of students who declined to state their gender, indicated that they had experienced some type of sexual violence while enrolled in college (Cantor *et al*.

2015). Significantly, according to Cantor *et al.* (2015), while female students were the most likely to be sexually harassed, nearly 43% of male undergraduate students reported experiences of sexual harassment; and TGQN students had the most reports of sexual harassment.

In another study involving 300 female university students in Kano, Northern Nigeria, more than half (58.8%) of the participants reported experiencing one or more forms of GBV (Iliyasu; Abubakar, Aliyu, Galadanci, & Salihu, 2011). This means more than half of the female students in that part of Nigeria are likely to be victims of GBV.

In the UK, universities have largely failed to recognise GBV, and have only begun to give the matter attention following the establishment of a task force by the government in 2015 (Anitha & Lewis, 2018). According to a survey by the National Union of Students (NUS) of 2000 students, studying in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, one in seven female students had been victims of serious sexual assault or serious physical violence, while 12% had been stalked (NUS, 2010, cited in Anitha & Lewis, 2018, p. 3).

Given the increasing prevalence of GBV across diverse geographical, political, social and economic contexts, it becomes necessary to ask two important questions: Why is GBV perpetrated? And why does it persist, seemingly unabated? These are two separate questions, each of which warrants careful attention, as discussed in the ensuing section.

GBV causal factors

The causal factors of GBV are complex and intricate, but they are often locked in deep social and patriarchal constructions and posturing. Patriarchy, explains Hooks (2000), is expressed in a way that holds up maleness as central, as opposed to femaleness, which is deemed as subordinate. This centrality is evident in male domination whereby males fulfil the most important and visible roles, while the few women who are 'promoted' to fulfil similar roles are expected to subscribe to male norms (Hooks, 2000). This power

dynamic is as widespread in society as it is in university spaces.

The very notion of violence being predicated on a social construction, such as gender, should raise questions which extend beyond reductive understandings of violence and aggression. At play here are norms and narratives of power, and more specifically, what Foucault (1997, p. 291) refers to as 'relations of power'. Foucault (1997, p. 292) explains that power is always present in human relationships 'whether they involve verbal communication, or amorous, institutional, or economic relationships, any relationship in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other...' The potential to 'wreak boundless and limitless violence' exists wherever an individual is perceived, or constructed to be less than the other, or at another's disposal as a utility object (Foucault, 1997, p. 292). The source of the power could be culture, religion, economics, age, gender, sexuality, space, community, as well as education, or a lack thereof.

GBV is therefore a display of power, and because of that, it is as widespread as it is unpredictable. As the source of power, culture, religion, economics, age, gender, sexuality, space, community, as well as education, or a lack thereof, legitimise GBV in one way or another. Studies, such as those by Heise, Ellsberg and Gottmoeller (2002), confirm the link between GBV and these factors. They provide the example of communities, 'where violence against women is seen as the norm culturally and religiously, and where the use of alcohol and ownership of guns are celebrated as markers of hegemonic masculinity' (CSVR, 2016, p. 8).

Similarly, GBV is often downplayed or dismissed as a non-issue through the (often misinterpreted) understandings and framings of religion, culture and tradition. African cultural practices, such as *ukuthwala*, virginity testing, and lobola are often cited as traditions, which promote the ownership, control and subjugation of women ((Ludsin & Vetten 2005; Kheswa & Hoho 2014). Socialisation into practices of male authority and female submissiveness are as pervasive

in the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), as they are in other faiths and traditions. Moreover, religious traditions are inextricably intertwined with cultural norms, often, making it hard to differentiate between what is religious and what is cultural.

One of the (mis)conceptions of most cultures is that men are entitled to have sexual intercourse with their wives, girlfriends or female partners. According to these (mis)conceptions, anything that men do to satisfy their sexual desires, as long as it is done with their wives, girlfriends or female partners, is acceptable. Therefore, the notion of rape is completely alien. In other words, it is inconceivable that husbands and boyfriends can rape their wives, girlfriends or female partners (Phipps, Ringrose, Renold & Jackson, 2018). Phipps *et al* (2018, p.1) explain further that these cultural norms produce prevalent 'rape myths' such as that women enjoy being raped, and give credence to the idea that there are 'blurred' lines around consent. The consequences of these (mis)conceptions are that rape victims who report are hardly believed, and when rape cases go for trial, there are low conviction rates of the alleged perpetrators.

The issue of consent is further compromised by settings of alcohol and/or drugs – both of which are commonly associated with university culture. Research reveals that a significant number of sexual assault victims were drunk or intoxicated at the time of the assaults (Fisher, Daigle & Cullen, 2010; Fischer & Calhoun, 2012), with binge drinking being identified as a facilitator for sexual assault perpetration and victimisation (Mouilso, Fischer, & Calhoun, 2012).

The culture, power and influence of social media are widely recognised as enabling new forms of communication in relation to gender and sexual violence (Rentschler, 2015). With all its obvious benefits, social media facilitates the capacity for anonymous, unsolicited, and unwanted expressions of engagement – it is, in sum, an unregulated space. Fairbairn, Bivens, and Dawson (2013) submit that very little is known about the sexual nature of online abuse

and harassment. The majority of sexual violence associated with social media goes unreported, and abusive relationship patterns may also be facilitated, or maintained through social media (Fairbairn *et al*, 2013). According to Fairbairn *et al* (2013, p. 3), there are several unique themes associated with sexual violence through social media. These include location tracking, online harassment, unauthorised dissemination of sexual images and texts, cyberstalking, the use of deception and anonymity, and shaming, particularly 'slut shaming' of young women. The criminality and violence of these incidents are often underplayed and minimised against the normalisation of sexual violence and familiar victim-blaming tropes in high-profile cases involving politicians, sportspeople and celebrities (Monchgesang, 2015).

Universities are microcosms of society, and the societal culture always finds expression on university campuses. Universities in South Africa are known to be widely disparate, largely because of the legacy of apartheid. However, despite their differences, they also often share certain commonalities, one of which is how they respond to GBV, and more importantly, how they unintentionally perpetuate certain institutional cultures which can enable GBV. Institutional norms have been responsible for the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity on campuses because they have significant influence on how policies on gender equality are framed, how GBV is perceived and how the institutions respond to this violence (Collins, Loots, Meyiwa & Mistrey, 2011). This was especially evident in a report of a Sexual Violence Task Team (SVTT) that was set up by one of the universities to probe sexual violence on its campus. According to the report, the male-dominated nature of the institutional culture at the university contributes to the creation and maintenance of an institutional space that is exclusionary and unwelcoming to female and gender non-conforming students.

While there appears to be consensus on the understanding that culture, religion, economics, age,

gender, sexuality, space and community patriarchal norms, play significant roles in legitimising GBV, there is less consensus on the understanding of the role and influence of education or lack of education as a causal factor for GBV. People hold different views on whether or not uneducated individuals are more inclined towards acts of GBV than those who are educated. On one hand, a number of studies, across different geopolitical contexts, have revealed that higher education enhances liberal norms, and reduces acceptance of violence as a method of resolving conflicts (Abrahams, Jewkes, Laubscher, & Hoffman, 2006; Boyle, Katholiki, John, & Yvonne, 2009; Waltermaurer, Butsashvili, Avaliani, Samuels, & McNutt, 2013). In support of this view, studies in Uganda found that women with secondary and higher education were significantly less likely to accept GBV (Speizer, 2010) while those with no or low education were more tolerant of, and resigned to being victims GBV (Uthman, Lawoko & Moradi, 2009).

On the other hand, the high incidence and degree of GBV at universities, seem to suggest that educated individuals are more predisposed to committing acts of GBV because of their belief that they could get away with it. Lange (2012, p. 2), for instance, contends that education might actually increase one's risk of participating in violence. The seemingly unrestricted environments offered by university campuses, insofar as students are away from their homes, adds to misperceptions around associations between sexuality and violence, and the right by men to have sexual intercourse (Phipps *et al*. 2018, p.1). Collins (2014, p. 286), for example, reports that for many young people (18 – 23 years), university presents the first opportunity to live away from home. The unfamiliar social environment presents 'fewer constraints and greater opportunities for experimentation – means that students are potentially more vulnerable to abuse and, because of their age and lack of experience, less skilled at protecting themselves' (Collins, 2014, p. 286).

Therefore, higher education appears to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it inculcates ethos of respect for the human rights of everyone, and the need to resolve conflicts using means that do not involve violence. On the other hand, education, particularly on university campuses, frees individuals from the constraints of conservatism in terms of culture, religion, age, gender, sexuality, space and community patriarchal norms. It instead creates a *laissez faire* environment that encourages students to do as they wish and experiment with things that would normally be considered as abhorrent, including the use of drugs, abuse of alcohol and GBV. The challenge of institutions is, therefore, to promote the first effect of higher education (inculcation of ethos of respect for human beings, and peaceful resolution of conflicts) over the effect of providing limitless freedoms that are not accompanied by the senses of responsibility and duty of care.

Information on prevalence of GBV in institutions

The outrage over GBV on and around university campuses is as a result of the few 'high profile' incidents that have been reported in local and national media. However, the cases that make into the local and/or national news are just a tiny fraction of the incidents of GBV on and around university campuses in the country. There is a challenge in that not sufficient information is available to provide a full picture of the scale of the scourge of GBV. Incidents of GBV are generally underreported. The majority of incidents, particularly those in which the LGBTQI people are victims, either go unreported, or, when reported, they are not followed up and investigated.

The reasons for underreporting are wide and complex, and offer a worthwhile lens through which to understand both the normalisation and prevalence of GBV. They are often trapped in intersections of relationships and normative constructions of what constitutes perpetration and victimhood.

One of the reasons for underreporting, that is most commonly cited by victims, is that of 'not knowing what to do'. A victim is uncertain about where to go to report, who to approach and what processes to follow – in sum, a lack of clarity about institutional procedures. Furthermore, 'not knowing what to do' can also be understood as a sense of confusion, trauma, and hopelessness. Attached to 'not knowing what to do' are a range of possible emotions, which can include shame; fear of being negatively judged by parents, family, friends and the community; fear of stigma; and also fear of reprisal attacks from the perpetrators (Iliyasu *et al*, 2011). A significant proportion of incidents of GBV are not reported because of the shame, stigma and humiliation associated with sexual violence. The shame and stigma attached to being a victim of GBV are often reinforced by social and institutional discourses and norms. For example, programmes and initiatives aimed at eliminating GBV are regularly directed at women, or victims of these crimes, and places the responsibility of stopping this violence on them, rather than on the perpetrators, or the contexts which might facilitate these crimes (Rentschler, 2015).

Sometimes victims know what to do, but as Ahmed (2015) explains, they come up against barriers that block them from reporting. Students, she continues, are actively discouraged from making complaints because 'if you complain you will damage your career (this can work as threat, you *will* lose the very connections that enable you to progress); or if you complain you will damage the professor; or if you complain you will ruin a centre or collective' (Ahmed, 2015). Complaints about sexual harassment may also not be made public in order to protect the organisation from damage (Ahmed, 2015).

Contrary to widespread 'stranger-rape' myths, in the majority (80-90%) of GBV crimes, the victim and the assailant are known to each other – as an acquaintance, friend, or date (Karjane *et al*, 2002; Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2010; Rennison & Addington, 2014). This, together, with the possibility of drinking, which often defines socialising on university campuses,

adds to the burden experienced by victims and the subsequent unlikelihood of reporting. Moreover, research also shows that victims who are incapacitated due to alcohol or drugs during the assault are less likely to report their victimisation to law enforcement agencies than victims who are assaulted using physical force (Fisher *et al*, 2010).

The high rates of underreporting contribute to the perpetuation of GBV, and this does not help the cause of fighting this societal malady when. Coupled with institutional barriers and poor reporting procedures, underreporting has an indirect consequence of no reprisal, and hence a perpetuation of GBV.

In addition to underreporting, another challenge is that, universities in particular, often display the tendency to downplay the magnitude of the scourge of GBV on their campuses. They do so because they are driven by concerns of public image and status, and not wanting to commit the institutions to providing the necessary responses (Chauke, Dlamini, Kiguwa, Mthombeni, Nduna & Selebano, 2015; Gouws, & Kritzinger, 2007). Institutions are therefore contributing to the concealment of the actual scale of prevalence of GBV on their campuses. This practice makes the institutions concerned complicit in the perpetuation of GBV.

Institutional responses to GBV

Despite underreporting, and the attempts by institutions to downplay incidents of GBV on their campuses, this social ill can no longer be ignored or effectively swept under the carpet by university authorities. Almost all institutions realise that they have to respond in one way or another to GBV. Gouws and Kritzinger (2007, p. 69) report that within the past two decades, universities have had to prioritise issues of sexual harassment, which is believed to be the precursor to GBV. Most universities have therefore introduced policies and grievance procedures to deal with sexual harassment. While Gouws and Kritzinger (2007) might be correct about policies on sexual harassment, and that sexual harassment is normally the precursor to GBV, the reality is that policies on

sexual harassment may partially, but, of course, not fully address GBV.

An analysis of the policies of a sample of universities in South Africa reveal an emphasis on sexual harassment without demonstrating clear awareness of the inherent complexities within the social constructions of violence or gender. For example, one of the top five universities in the country specifies that it has three policies, which have a direct bearing on the fight against GBV. These are: Policy on Unfair Discrimination and Harassment (applicable to staff and students); Disciplinary Code for Students (applicable to students); and, Disciplinary Code for Staff Members (applicable to staff). However, none of these policies provide a comprehensive definition of GBV. Similarly, the sexual offences, sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, and sexual violence policies for a number of universities neither unpack what is understood by GBV, nor mention LGBTQI students or staff. Evident from these policies are generic understandings of, and emphasis on sexual harassment – with limited, to scant indications of the myriad permutations which shape both violence and gender. Furthermore, the policies are couched in a legal framework of response and remedial action, which need to be drawn upon as required, as opposed to a discourse or ethos, which ought to be cultivated not only in institutional spaces and practices, but also in academic programmes through teaching and learning encounters.

Students and staff understand the consequences of sexual harassment because they are articulated in the sexual harassment policies of institutions, but they do not have the same understanding of the gravity and consequences of GBV because the institutional policies do not address GBV directly. In the few institutions where there are policies that address GBV directly, such policies are often not updated to ensure alignment with current legislation, regional and international conventions and protocol, as well as best practice. Many universities also lack the necessary support structures to address and respond to cases of GBV (Adams, Mabusela & Dlamini, 2013; DHET, 2017).

It follows from the above that institutions are not doing enough to prevent and/or eliminate GBV on their campuses. They have focused on the 'passive approach' of developing policies, but again, most of their policies are not directly focused on GBV. This is a serious challenge that the institutions need to confront.

Towards an integrated framework for the prevention of GBV on campuses

As stated in the introduction to this paper, South Africa has laws and policies that can be utilised to prevent and/or eradicate GBV. It has also ratified regional and international convention on the prevention and eradication of GBV. At the level of institutions, there are policies on sexual harassment and related subjects, but not policies that seek to address GBV directly. As Gouws and Kritzinger (2007) observe, while universities want to be perceived as taking GBV seriously, they fear, however, that in actively addressing it, there will be an increase in reporting which could tarnish their institutional image. If we speak of sexual harassment as organisational culture, states Ahmed (2015), we threaten the organisation's reputation – 'those who are damaged become the ones who cause damage. And the institutional response can take the form of damage limitation'.

There are two concerns worth considering here. One is the contention - as made during the recent anti-GBV protests - that students resort to sharing GBV allegations on social media, because of the failure of universities to adequately address these allegations. Inasmuch as social media can be abused as a platform for GBV, it has also provided women (as the primary victims of GBV) 'with unparalleled opportunities to form and participate in counter-publics in which allegations of sexual violence are being received, discussed and acted upon in ways contrary to established social and legal norms' (Salter, 2013, p. 226). On the other side of the coin, Mendes, Keller and Ringrose (2019) contend that social or digital media presents a generative activist space which allows for

the expression of affective commonalities and solidarities, including fear, anger and disgust at GBV; and for the exposure of societal and institutional practices, which feed into sexual discrimination and GBV. Yet, on the flip side, the very same social media can be abused as a tool for GBV, just as it can be used for other forms of revenge, violence and violations – whereby activism degenerates into defamation and harm.

Each of the two sides of this debate has its own merits, and its own complexities. What both serve to highlight, however, is that the malaise of GBV cannot be managed solely through policies and initiatives of response. Swartz *et al.* (2017) contend that GBV exists because of particular contextual structures and systems, and therefore GBV as a system cannot be separated from the ongoing problem of how a privileged few reproduce a world around their bodies (Ahmed, 2015). As such, any framework, which seeks to address GBV, would need to depart from a recognition of contextual norms, structures, and cultures, which seemingly solidify gender biases and discrimination. What needs to be disrupted, therefore, are not only acts and perpetuations of GBV, but systemic structures and cultures, which allow GBV to occur, in the first instance. As argued by Swartz *et al.* (2017, p. 78), '[W]e cannot expect to see patriarchy, sexism, gender-based violence, homophobia and other related exclusions addressed if the proportion of university authorities (professors and decision makers) is not sentient of gender and sexuality-related (dis)advantage'. In other words, GBV will not simply stop once perpetrators are caught and held accountable. Developing or changing this or that policy, therefore, will not change the practice (Ahmed, 2015).

GBV is not a problem limited to victims and perpetrators. It is, rather, a scourge which undermines the safety and wellbeing of everyone. It is part of a range of hegemonic factors because it targets that which is constructed as a weakness – as in femininity, or sexual orientation, or otherness. Furthermore, since

it affects the targets in terms of access, mobility, participation, recognition, inclusion, and safety, it is a human rights and social justice issue. The act of GBV, therefore, has to be understood as impacting upon a broader sense of the rights of individuals to live freely and safely; and as such, the gravity of GBV has to be reconceptualised in terms of its effects on the rights of all humans. Lines are drawn between those who are vulnerable and at risk (women and LGBTQI), and those who are categorised as perpetrators – as exemplified in the contentious hashtag, #menaretrash. When women or LGBTQI communities are forced to retreat, or forced to be on perpetual high alert in order to be safe from violence, then society ceases to be socially just. It cannot be the case that institutional and public spaces are safe for heterosexual men only. The task of universities, therefore, is to recognise the seriousness of GBV as a human rights violation, and to reconceptualise their policies, particularly those that relate to GBV in line with issues and discourses of human rights and social justice.

Universities also need to recognise that issues of violence – whether gender-based, or otherwise – do not unfold in isolation. GBV, in particular, is an institutional problem, and affects all who are a part of the institution. This recognition demands a critical reflection and interrogation of existing structures, hierarchies, and systems throughout the academe, which could give rise to gender biases, discrimination and exclusion. Institutional cultures and systems are created and sustained by individuals, who serve in certain critical positions. If these positions are all occupied by the same kind of individuals, then institutions cannot fully take cognisance of the immense diversity within it. The extent to which institutional and hierarchical structures are representative of the types of diversity encountered in the rest of the university says something about how the university understands itself as a diverse and inclusive space. GBV thrives in particular contexts, as discussed in this paper. If GBV is to be prevented, then spaces and contexts have to be reconceptualised and

reconfigured so that certain regimes of truth are disrupted and stifled.

Conclusion

The increasing prevalence of GBV on the university campuses in South Africa is a concern to all law-abiding citizens in the country. It is ironic that a significant proportion of reported cases of GBV take place in institutions that are supposed to inculcate the ethos of respect of human rights, intellectual discourses, and resolution of conflicts through civil means. It is indicative of some underlying challenges in the curricula, institutional cultures and the management and governance of the universities. It is therefore crucial that GBV becomes an important area of research and discourse in higher education, much as decolonisation and the alienation of students from the spaces and cultures of higher education institutions.

The solution is not to condemn higher education in the country, but rather to transform higher education so that it should be focused on promoting social justice and human rights. Universities should be at the forefront of national efforts to curb social injustices and human rights violations, de-normalise GBV, and redirect stereotypes and social biases. University spaces should not be conducive to the acts of GBV. The academic project cannot proceed unhindered, if the contexts of teaching and learning are brought into disrepute through GBV. Higher education, therefore, has to extend beyond disciplinary requirements and academic criteria for the attainment of degrees. Students have to be initiated, facilitated, and if need be, mediated into educational spaces and programmes, which challenge deeply embedded inequalities and social norms, that on the one hand, sustain patriarchal control and power, and on the other hand, tolerates and encourages violence against those who are perceived to be weak.

Managements of universities need to review their policies and ensure that there are policies that seek to address GBV directly. Security personnel on campuses

need to be conscientized about GBV, and be trained to support victims in getting the incidents reported and the perpetrators brought to book.

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