

# GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION



COMMITTEE FOR MANAGING GENDER ISSUES



Gendered experiences of higher education around the world have been documented throughout the years by various scholars, especially in STEM disciplines (see Cohoon, 2007; Barnard et al, 2012; Smith, 2013; Walkington, 2017; Parson and Ozaki, 2017). In an attempt to break the ice on how gender manifests itself on multiple levels in the institution, to begin the not-so-comfortable conversations amongst peers and to build solidarities amongst those who feel similarly, we had in-depth conversations with students from IIM-A to understand and capture their lived experiences as (female) students around the campus. Each conversation was at least an hour long and some lasted for around two hours. Inspired by these conversations, we launch what we hope to be only the beginning of a series of newsletters on “gendered experiences of higher education.” Each newsletter, as part of this series, will focus on themes identified from our in-depth interviews with the students, emphasising on the world-view of women, of their life at campus, as they live, see and experience it.

The respondents were made to understand that their inputs would be used for the newsletter and all of them agreed to be part of the exercise<sup>1</sup>. We hope that this series will be a step towards acknowledging, visibilising and validating the experiences of women in higher education, including our own institute and discipline, and to begin conversations regarding the same.

*“First-person accounts of experience are indispensable, not only for a [politics] of interest based on shared identity, but for a [politics] of solidarity based on recognition and sympathy. The evidence of experience crucially makes collective [...] action possible by allowing us not only to identify with other people, but to dis-identify from the singularity of our own position.”*  
- Johanna Oksala, 2014

1. All the respondents have reviewed and approved the following content

# I. CAMPUS CULTURE: DATING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Somewhere in between the large font headlines of spiking covid positive cases, shortage of vaccines, curfews, and so on lies the news about the arrest of a student from IIT Guwahati, accused of raping a fellow student by spiking her drink.

“#Hokkolorob movement takes social media by storm; 1 lakh Jadavpur University students march against the VC to protest against sexual assault”

“The 11 students who led the protests against the sexual molestation of a female student on the campus of Banaras Hindu University (BHU) have been barred from taking up courses in the future”

“JNU professor arrested in sexual harassment case, gets bail”

“IIM-Ranchi professor accused of sexual harassment”

“IIT Madras lecturer found guilty of sexual harassment, yet to be demoted”

“Rohtak police book IIM director for sexual harassment”

These are some of the news articles related to sexual harassment and rape in the recent past. These experiences are not unique to India, just as an example BBC reported a similar case in 2019 from a university in UK, suggesting that the campus culture might have something to do with the prevalence of sexual harassment in higher educational institutes despite regulations to prevent it being mandated in universities across the world.

Our respondents felt that there seems to be a substantial amount of pressure on men to “score”. Research suggests that having multiple part amplifies the self-esteem and social status of men, i.e., it boosts reputation, popularity and power amongst peers (see Meston and Buss, 2007<sup>2</sup>). Concomitantly, the pressure on women to date results in women receiving so much (unwanted) attention. Often, the easier way out is to lie about not being single because a simple “not interested” will not deter the men but they might just respect another man’s territory. This is actually a widespread practice resorted to by women across the world to ward off potential aggression the man might take recourse to in the face of rejection, as research indicates (see Stratmoen, Rivera, and Saucier, 2020<sup>3</sup>).

The role of campus culture in creating academic masculinities, a tradition of silence, and hostile precarious milieu for students, a focal point of research (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020<sup>4</sup>; Forke et al, 2008<sup>5</sup>; Voth Schrag, 2017<sup>6</sup>; Muehlenhard et al, 2016<sup>7</sup>), has to be brought into the discourse of gendered toxicity campuses demonstrate. For instance, a female student also observed that her female friends from MBA are often confused as to if they should break up with their ‘old’ boyfriends since these women would be earning more than their partners and this, is perceived as complicate the relationship dynamics, pointing to how the superiority complex of men is often guarded by the society translating to women often not realising their potential, downplaying their achievements, and so on. According to our respondents, it was supposedly not uncommon to hear gossip which claimed that a man was dumped because he did not get a PPO or was not shortlisted in some company, all implying that women are just interested in the materialistic tangible pleasures the men of the institute have to offer.

2. Meston, C.M., Buss, D.M. (2007). Why Humans Have Sex. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 36, 477–507

3. Stratmoen E, Rivera ED, Saucier DA. (2020). “Sorry, I already have a boyfriend”: Masculine honor beliefs and perceptions of women’s use of deceptive rejection behaviors to avert unwanted romantic advances. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 37(2):467-490

4. Bondestam F., Lundqvist M. (2020). Sexual harassment in higher education – a systematic review. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 10:4, 397-419

5. Forke CM, Myers RK, Catalozzi M, Schwarz DF. (2008). Relationship Violence Among Female and Male College Undergraduate Students. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 162(7):634–64

6. Voth Schrag RJ. (2017). Campus Based Sexual Assault and Dating Violence: A Review of Study Contexts and Participants. *Affilia*. 32(1):67-80

7. Charlene L. Muehlenhard, Terry P. Humphreys, Kristen N. Jozkowski & Zoë D. Peterson. (2016). The Complexities of Sexual Consent Among College Students: A Conceptual and Empirical Review, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53:4-5, 457-487

In 2019, BBC reported about a “lad’s chat” and group of male students from Warwick University that was brought to the attention of the authorities in the form of a complaint. In India too, last year, a similar group where men talked about raping women, where women were sexually objectified and slut-shamed to say the least blew up, underlining how normalised these conversations and behaviours are. All the respondents were certain that such ‘boys locker room’ conversations take place amongst men, “probably in lesser intensity and toned down”, a couple of respondents hoped.

According to a few studies, the hookup culture as part of campus culture and the dating patterns point to a degree of unhealthy interpersonal relationships, especially those intimate in nature. (Oswalt, Wyatt and Ochoa, 2018<sup>8</sup>). In line, our respondents too divulged that the dating culture in the institute is borderline “toxic” to put it mildly. Cultural beliefs, especially, lead to treating relationship problems as private supplemented by rape-myths setting up an ambience where relationship violence (emotional and physical) are seen as individual problems rather than as a product of cultural norms (Lichty, Rosenberg, and Laughlin, 2018<sup>9</sup>).

An important aspect of higher education in India is the skewed gender ratios. While the percentages of women enrolled in higher educational institutes keeps increasing their numbers are still much below that of men and the hostile campus environments compel them to discontinue their education or use silence to safeguard themselves. Whilst the gender imbalance is proved to have multiple effects on a woman’s experience of educational spaces and education itself, the major correlations significant to the issue at hand is between the skewed gender ratios favoured towards men and sexual harassment (O’Hare and O’Donohue, 1998<sup>10</sup>; Gutek and Morasch, 1982<sup>11</sup>), intimate partner violence (Bose, Trent, and South, 2013<sup>12</sup>), and dating patterns (Uecker and Regnerus, 2010<sup>13</sup>), wherein the men exercise a higher degree of control and power highly influencing a woman’s behaviour and experiences in almost every sphere of her life, including education.

Safety is said to be one of the foremost factors of the high dropout rates of female students, mentions a report by South Asia Forum for Safe and Secure Education (SAFSSE). To safeguard the interests of women, the University Grants Commission (UGC) in accordance with Article 21 of the constitution and the Visakha guidelines, mandates an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) to be constituted in each educational institute to look into cases of sexual harassment and to foster gender sensitisation. However, the emergence of the #metoo movement across the world and in the nation called attention to how rampant sexual harassment is in academia and higher educational spaces, highlighting the power structures and the university ‘culture’ that might be contributing factors to these institutional mechanisms and due processes failing to serve their purposes. While actual numbers are hard to come by, a survey finds that 1 in 10 women have been sexually assaulted by at least one person from their educational institutions out of which only 15.7 percent have filed a complaint in relevant committees in their institution.

Women being discouraged to file complaints by various factors, both structurally and socially is not unheard of. In fact, one of our respondents has mentioned that a female student was actively dissuaded by peers to not file a complaint against a fellow student because the man’s future would be at stake and his career ruined. Almost all the respondents have heard about at least one case recognised as sexual harassment by their peers and involving persons from the campus – unfortunately none of these were registered as formal complaints but were part of the folklore.

8. Sara B. Oswalt, Tammy J. Wyatt & Yesenia Ochoa, (2018). Sexual Assault Is Just the Tip of the Iceberg: Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevalence in College Students, *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 32:2, 93-109

9. Lichty, L.F., Rosenberg, K. & Laughlin, K. (2018). Before there Is a Table: Small Wins to Build a Movement against Sexual and Relationship Violence in a University Context. *J Fam Viol* 33, 629–645

10. O’Hare, E.A., O’Donohue, W. (1998). Sexual Harassment: Identifying Risk Factors. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 27, 561–580

11. Gutek, B.A. and Morasch, B. (1982). Sex-Ratios, Sex-Role Spillover, and Sexual Harassment of Women at Work. *Journal of Social Issues*, 38: 55-74

12. Bose, S., Trent, K., South J.S. (2013). The Effect of a Male Surplus on Intimate Partner Violence in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48 (35): 53-61

13. Uecker, J. E., & Regnerus, M. D. (2010). Bare market: campus sex ratios, romantic relationships, and sexual behavior. *The Sociological quarterly*, 51(3), 408–435.

All our respondents felt physically safe on campus and yet, as women living in a country where sexual harassment is ever present, their guard is always on. “Whenever I have to study or work with someone, I always choose the library. Even if we have to study in our rooms, I always choose to go to the male colleague’s room so I can leave when I want to”, revealed a student. What is more, they notify that they and their friends avoid certain food joints or certain routes on the campus because the male gaze makes them uncomfortable. Though dressing up the way they wish to is not a major issue to the respondents, they felt that it was often subconsciously decided by the place, time, company and how people think or perceive them.

“It has not happened to me, but I am sure it has happened. I have been lucky that way”, all the respondents seemed to carry a similar line of thought, stressing and acknowledging that it is indeed ‘luck’ that they have been safe so far, both physically and mentally.

“It is so normalised that we do not even realise it. The sexism and misogyny is so subtle, it is ingrained as part of the “culture” here”, a student recounted. “This is just how things are”, another sighed.

What is more disturbing to these women is how the men on campus are not held accountable for behaviours that are just “men-like” which ensues in the inaccessibility to certain spaces and events which become a source of discomfort. They also highlighted the lack of safe spaces for women to even talk about their experiences and voicing them out loud is not an option. If anyone spoke up or called a behaviour out, they would be tagged as the “feminist-type” who somehow no one wants to associate with, consequentially tampering one’s networks, placements and ultimately one’s career.

It is perhaps time we visiblise, validate and acknowledge these lived experiences of our classmates, colleagues and seniors and sit down to introspect and reflect our roles in furthering, contributing, or even minimising these gendered experiences. It is time we asked ourselves what we could do to truly make the institution an inclusive safe space for each and every student, as we envision it to be- both structurally and socially. We can only hope for the uncomfortable conversations to begin, for more voices to come up and to move towards tangible change.