Dialogue to address sexual violence at a South African university
Girls leading change


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We ask...
How can participatory initiatives (including digital media practices) with young women, a group typically excluded from policy dialogue, inform practices, policies, programs and services related to their own safety, security and well-being?
• Sexual and gendered violence in the higher education sector is a worldwide concern (Phipps & Smith, 2012)

• Sexual violence within as well as outside sexual relationships has far reaching public health and human rights implications and is a continuing focus of research in South Africa (Wood, K., et al., 2007).

• For example, research in SA ...
  – Coercive sexual practices and gender-based violence on university campus (Clowes, et al., 2009)
  – Narratives of transactional sex on a university campus (Schefer, et al., 2012).
  – Institutional violence in higher education (Dowler, et al. 2014)

• Policies for sexual harassment in higher education: Two steps forward and three steps somewhere else (Bennet, 2009)

• How do we prevent sexual violence in the 21st century? How do we change institutional cultures?
Identifying the issues and taking action

Cellphilms → Policy Posters → Action Briefs

Participatory Visual Research

Dialogue
Cellphilms: Identifying the issues
Making cellphilms
Representing the issues:
Policy Posters
Representing the solutions: Action Briefs
My body, your toy?

Digital media for change and well-being: Girl-led ‘from the ground up’ policy-making in addressing sexual violence at a South African university

Aiming to explore how researchers and policymakers can draw on the participation of young women in relation to their safety and security, young first year university women students have come together to construct new knowledge through participatory research in relation to addressing one of the most critical global issues in the context of human rights violations, i.e., sexual violence.

Situation
As young first year women students arrive at university – determined to achieve set goals and objectives, getting into residence can become a challenge when having to negotiate access while being sexually coerced.

Problem
In trying to get into residence at the beginning of the year young women run into various displays of harassing behavior. Some young women are coerced to return sexual favours or to get romantically involved with whoever it is that can allow them access into the residence – due to them not having enough money to pay the deposit or the rent. It is not morally right that just because we are women, we should ‘pay extra’ for gaining access to residence. This is disgraceful, humiliating and dehumanizing.

Solution
A successful strategy to deal with the issue of getting into residence should include:

- At career exhibitions, at schools, information about the qualifications of all the various residences and how the application processes work should be made available.
- Organizations and services available on campus – such as student counseling and the students’ rights organization – aimed at assisting students to deal with problems should be marketed more, also during student orientation.
- Officials responsible for financial aid schemes should be made aware of the potential threat to student safety and success due to prolonged realization of financial aid decisions. Funding should ideally be allocated in January.
- Only trained professional staff should be employed in the residence administration offices and a clear code of conduct should be adhered to.
- The process and contact information for reporting irregularities should be posted on notice boards in the residences.
- Off-campus residences should be submitted to regular checks and those which do not adhere to the criteria set by NMMU should be removed from accredited NMMU residences list.

No such luck!
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Situation
As young women students we do not always feel safe in the university residence and in our rooms. We also do not feel safe in other university spaces.

Problem
In the residences the danger emerges from different sources such as room mates and their visitors, floor mates and their visitors, and security staff and other residents in general. In more public spaces such as labs women students are exposed to harassment by the male students. In the computer labs safety cannot be guaranteed and women students feel vulnerable. These spaces that are owned by all who share them should be free from all forms of harassment, abuse and ill-treatment. No one person or group of people deserves to use them more than the others.

Solution
- When entering residences and sharing a room, an agreed upon contract drawn up by the residence manager in negotiation with the house committee, should be signed by the room mates, making clear the rules of sharing a room.
- Failure to abide by the rules of the residence contract, should be discussed with the room mate, and if the problem cannot be resolved, the issue should be reported to the house committee, the RSO and then the residence manager.
- An ‘issue box’ should be set up where residents can post their written problems to be addressed by the house committee.
- Women students should create a platform at university to raise awareness about gender issues.
- The safety and security in the computer labs should be improved to include close circuit television for surveillance of the laboratories.
- Awareness of all the issues that put young women students’ safety at risk must be raised at every opportunity. All students (female and male) must sit back but must stand up for themselves.
My right to privacy
your responsibility to respect it

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Aiming to explore how researchers and policy-makers can draw on the participation of young women in relation to their safety and security, young first-year university women students have come together to construct new knowledge through participatory research in relation to addressing one of the most critical global issues in the context of human rights violations, i.e., sexual violence.

Situation
Men visit women students in residence but do not use the lounges but tend to visit in the young women’s bedrooms. When the men need to go to the toilet, they use the women’s bathrooms. This is done without warning and places other women students in the bathrooms in a vulnerable position.

Problem
Having male visitors entering the women’s bathrooms compromises the privacy of the women when they are showering, bathing or washing at the basins. Some male visitors sometimes make sexually inappropriate comments and even touch the young women. This affects us as young women in residences, as the sexual harassment affects our dignity and lowers our self-esteem. This also affects us academically because when we feel sexually harassed and intimidated, it becomes hard to focus on our studies. The reputation of the university is also at stake because whatever happens in the university residences impacts on the image of the university.

Solution
A successful strategy to deal with the problem of having male visitors entering our female bathrooms and making sexual comments includes:

- The residence manager and the house committee should review visiting times and assign times which would not inconvenience the young women residents, for example after 10:00 in the morning and before 10:00 in the evening.
- The house committee should, in collaboration with the women residents, draw up simple rules and regulations for using the bathrooms.
- One toilet should be assigned to and clearly marked for visitors.
- The young woman student being visited should take responsibility to alert her visitor to the ground rules laid down in the residences.
- A woman security guard should be visible in the residence and could also monitor the use of the bathrooms.

Male visitors to women’s residences compromise the privacy of women students by using their bathrooms
Unsafe

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Situation
Residences are renovated and maintenance work is done and students are not informed of the arrangements regarding the construction and maintenance workers entering the residences. This jeopardizes our privacy and puts young women students at risk.

Problem
Construction workers renovating university residences, also workers doing maintenance, arrive unannounced in the residences and in many cases find the women students busy in the bathrooms. We are not comfortable with the workers in our residences because they stare at us in a manner that makes us feel uncomfortable. We cannot help wondering what they can do when given the opportunity. This intrusion affects us because we don’t feel safe in our residence. This scares us because none of us want to become a South African rape statistic.

Solution
A successful strategy to deal with the problem of construction workers should include:

- The university persons in charge of renovations and maintenance should inform the house committee of the specifics of the work.
- The residence manager and the construction or maintenance company should agree on suitable times for workers to enter the residences. The residence manager should notify the house committee.
- The house committee should post announcements on a notice board (and send text messages) about the construction or maintenance workers working in the residence.
- The residence manager and the house committee should have and post clear guidelines for workers entering the residence.
- The company in charge of the renovations/maintenance should ensure that their workers wear a company uniform and an identity tag, so that workers can be identified, and if need be, reported.
- The procedure and contact details for reporting any matter should be clearly displayed.

In my space
Sexual harassment

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Who could one trust?

Situation
As young women moving into residence we expect to be safe because there are security staff and residence managers to keep us safe. When some of them are the ones who harass us sexually, who do we turn to?

Problem
We young women are being sexually harassed by some of our residence security and managers. Some make sexually inappropriate remarks and comments that make us feel uncomfortable.

We don’t feel safe in our own rooms. Some sometimes barge into our rooms. This situation is challenging as they are adults in positions of power and we have to maintain a level of respect for them.

Solution
A successful strategy to deal with the problem of sexual harassment in residence should include:

- Female residences should have female security staff.
- Security staff and residence managers should have clear guidelines and rules which should be displayed for all residence members to see.
- Close circuit television cameras should focus on the security booths and manager’s offices. This should provide proof when a case of sexual harassment is reported.
- The procedure for complaints should be displayed, including the necessary contact details.

Awareness raising about sexual harassment and sexual violence is everyone’s concern.
Date Rape

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Situation
Young women are oftentimes manipulated or coerced into sexual activities by a trusted partner or male friend.

Problem
It is difficult for young women to prevent date rape as the woman might not be aware that she is in danger as she is in a relationship with the male and also trusts him. Young women are often unaware that being coerced or forced into sex by your partner is rape. This then often remains unreported. The effect of date rape on the young woman goes deep, often leaving her thinking that it was her fault, leaving her distrusting males, and making her vulnerable to STIs, HIV/AIDS and even unwanted pregnancy. The psychological effects also impact on her completing her studies successfully.

Solution
A successful strategy to deal with the problem of date rape should include:

• The issue of date rape should be addressed at university, and information should be disseminated about it, making it clear that date rape is a transgression of the law.
• Young women students should create a platform to discuss gender violence issues, such as date rape.
• Date rape should be treated as you would treat rape by a stranger - and should be reported to the police.
• Young women should empower themselves with knowledge and skills on how to keep themselves safe when in different social spaces.

It is still rape! Report it!
Dean of Education and DVC Research and Engagement
Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy
Senior Director Institutional Planning, Director Transformation Monitoring And Evaluation
DVC Institutional Support, Dean of Students, Residence Manager, Head of Protection Services
Reflecting on our work
How are we taking this dialogue forward?