ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT
April 2024

WUSA ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT:
Gender-Based and Sexual Violence

ISSUE: Ensuring a comprehensive framework to prevent and respond to gender-based and sexual violence experienced by undergraduate students at the University of Waterloo.

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY:

- University of Waterloo
- Government of Ontario
- Government of Canada
- Region of Waterloo
- City of Waterloo

DEFINITIONS:

- Gender-based violence (GBV) is committed against someone because of their gender, gender expression, gender identity, or perceived gender; it is recognized in Canada as a violation of an individual's human rights.[1]
- Sexual violence is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments, or advances or acts to traffic that are directed against a person's sexuality using coercion by anyone, regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including at home and at work.[2]
- Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours.[2]

DETAILS:

Gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) encompasses a wide range of acts, including sexual harassment, sexual violence, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence (IPV).[1] The impact of GBSV is far-reaching, often with lasting consequences for survivors' mental health and well-being, as well as reverberations in their support network and community.[3]

Statistics Canada's 2020 research shed light on the alarming prevalence of GBSV in the lives of post-secondary students: 71% of surveyed students "witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours in a postsecondary setting in 2019", and about 11% of surveyed women had been sexually assaulted **within the last year.** Most women (80%) and men (86%) who had experienced "unwanted sexualized behaviours" identified the perpetrator as a fellow student.[4]

Particularly vulnerable to GBSV are young women and girls, especially those under the age of 25.[5,6] Moreover, individuals who identify as disabled[6], queer (including trans and gender-diverse)[7], or Indigenous[8] face an even higher risk. These disparities across demographics and settings underscore the urgent need for proactive sexual and consent education. Additionally, they highlight the necessity for enhanced policies and support services addressing prevention, disclosure, and support concerning GBSV.

IMPACT / ANALYSIS:

1. **Discrimination & Climate**

Gender-based and sexual violence is intrinsically tied to social norms and power systems in a community. Pervasive rape culture, adherence to certain traditional gender roles, and victim-blaming all drive rates of GBSV up and rates of reporting down. Perhaps more subtly, a climate of discrimination and inequity maintains expectations, norms, and power dynamics that perpetuate GBSV in a community.[9]

One notable concern within post-secondary institutions, including the University of Waterloo, is persistent underrepresentation of women and gender-diverse individuals across faculty and the student body.[10,11] Specifically, disciplines in STEM have historically marginalized women and gender-diverse persons, perpetuating systemic inequalities.[12] Underrepresentation fosters an environment where power imbalances and unequal treatment can thrive, contributing to a vicious cycle of GBSV.

Undergraduates at the University of Waterloo have noted disparities in the distribution of academic and professional opportunities, at times observing their male peers receiving preferential treatment. Additionally, concerns have been expressed about the lack of moderation for discriminatory messages and comments on official institutional social media platforms.[13] Students have also reported experiencing misogynistic, transphobic, and homophobic behaviour from others on campus, which systemically contributes to an environment which normalizes GBSV.[14]

A lack of comprehensive sexual education before beginning post-secondary education may also exacerbate the risk of GBSV on campuses. In fact, the Red Zone — a well-documented period of heightened sexual assault and violence rates in post-secondary communities — occurs at the beginning of the school year, when institutions themselves have had limited opportunity to run educational interventions and programming for incoming students.[15] This also makes it especially important that the staff, faculty, and students welcoming incoming students into a new environment have received adequate training on fostering a safe environment, responding to disclosures, and intervening in situations as active bystanders.

2. **Safety**

Students have reported a profound sense of vulnerability to gender-based and sexual attacks, especially when walking at night. This sentiment is intensified by deficiencies in campus infrastructure, notably the lack of emergency help poles and adequate lighting. The limited availability of public transit options during late hours further compounds the issue, with students often unable to access modes of travel which may feel safer.

It is imperative to recognize that all students deserve to feel safe and secure, both on campus and in their communities. This principle underscores the fundamental right to education, which should be free from the threat of sexual assault and harassment. Post-secondary institutions, therefore, bear a crucial role in preventing and addressing instances of gender-based violence and fostering an inclusive and safe environment.

According to an analysis of police data conducted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in 2019, the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge area ranks last of 26 large cities in Canada for overall personal security for women: rates of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and criminal harassment were all alarmingly high when compared with peers.[16] These statistics highlight the need for urgent action.

While research is still limited on the subject, a 2023 report released by Courage to Act notes that sexual harassment remains a regular experience for students in experiential learning work placements. Shockingly, the report reveals that 1 in 2 students were subjected to sexual harassment and/or violence during their experiential learning opportunity.[17] Some students at the University of Waterloo have shared, in confidence, their stories of seeking recourse due to sexual harassment in their co-op workplaces, with varying levels of success.

3. **Support & Accommodations**

It is essential that students have swift and seamless access to comprehensive health services whenever the need arises. This concern extends far beyond merely addressing the immediate aftermath of incidents related to sexual violence; rather, it encompasses a holistic approach to safeguarding survivors' mental and physical well-being in the long term. To this end, the process of accessing necessary resources must be streamlined to alleviate any additional burdens placed upon survivors during what is already a challenging time.

Central to this effort is ensuring that students are well-informed about the resources available to them, particularly those provided by the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office (SVPRO) at Waterloo. This includes not only effective promotion of SVPRO but also ensuring that students understand its purpose and the support it provides.

However, survivors may encounter challenges when navigating the array of support channels available on campus due to lack of clear information. An added challenge is the lack of communication between campus units, community-based support centres, and legal authorities when addressing individual cases, which can force a student to choose if they want to pursue additional avenues of recourse, risking retraumatization.[18]

Additionally, it is essential for students be aware of their options regarding disclosures and reports. While disclosures involve sharing one's experience with a trusted individual or resource without necessarily initiating a formal investigation, reporting involves formally documenting the incident and pursuing disciplinary action.[19] Providing clear information on these distinctions empowers survivors to make informed decisions about how they wish to proceed.

Moreover, it is critical to ensure that students, especially those participating in co-operative experiential education programs understand the support and accommodations available to them if they experience sexual harassment in the workplace. This may involve providing guidance on how to navigate such situations, accessing resources for support, and understanding their rights in reporting incidents of harassment.

Strikingly, less than 10% of student survivors of GBSV disclose their experiences or seek support from someone affiliated with their educational institution.[4] This highlights the need for proactive efforts to destigmatize seeking help and to create a culture of support and trust on campus, where confidentiality and survivor agency are prioritized in responses to gender-based and sexual violence.

For survivors to be meaningfully supported, they must be met with processes that are survivor-centric, trauma-informed, and grounded in principles of consent. This entails providing survivors with choices and autonomy in how they wish to proceed after disclosure, responding their confidentiality unless there is an imminent risk to

someone's safety, and ensuring that support services are sensitive to the unique needs and experiences of survivors.[20]

While on-campus support services are vital to responding to the needs of student survivors, community-based resources are also often necessary when sustaining a network of care for survivors, especially when specific contexts make on-campus support unideal in isolation. Currently, students may be unable to access important external resources due to geographic, financial, or other challenges. Many community-based resources also struggle to secure sufficient funding to provide their target service levels, affecting their abilities to support student survivors when needed.

POSITION / RECOMMENDATION(S):

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student's Association supports initiatives that encourage:

- prioritization of physical and organizational safety measures to protect students from gender-based and sexual violence.
- development and delivery of comprehensive sexual education for students prior to beginning their post-secondary careers at the University of Waterloo.
- implementation of high-quality prevention education and training for members of the campus community, guided by best practices.
- Implementation of high-quality disclosure response education and training for members of the campus community, guided by best practices.
- provision of resources, direction, and supports to students regarding prevention of and response to gender-based and sexual violence.
- allocation of funding and/or other resources for survivor-centric, trauma-informed services for students who have experienced gender-based and/or sexual violence.

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student's Association opposes initiatives involving:

- formal investigation or adjudication as the only measure for recourse offered to survivors of gender-based and sexual violence.
- changes to funding or resource allocations which decrease the overall level of support that students have access to in response to experiences of gender-based and sexual violence.

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