

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

We Can Take Steps to Overcome our Blinders to the Multiple Harms of Sexual Violence and Enable Higher Education to Fulfill its Mission

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Dear Higher Education,

Our bias to frame sexual violence¹ and gender-based harassment as a purely interpersonal acts has left us unable to see and address the harms of this social practice on the core mission of our institutions: the production and transmission of knowledge. In the academy today, gender-based harassment is endemic. In its 2018 Consensus Study Report, the National Academies for Science, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) highlights that more than half of women staff and faculty in the academy (in all disciplines) have experienced sexual harassment. Sexual violence in Higher Education damages the production of knowledge and creates a hostile environment that pushes women and gender-diverse students and researchers out of academia, particularly in the historically male-dominated fields of STEM research (Molstad, Weinhardt, Jones, 218-30). Worldwide institutions have implemented policies and mechanisms to address sexual violence in recent years, and many countries created legislation to protect survivors from retaliation (NASEM 2023). Yet, sexual violence in higher education remains prevalent across the globe.

As an administrator, faculty member, graduate student, colleague, and advocate working in higher education in three countries (Canada, Ecuador, and the United States), I have either experienced or managed the impact of sexual violence in the academy for more than 25 years. As a graduate student, my experiences ranged from unwelcome remarks to unwelcome touching. As a faculty member, it was stalking that began as soon as I took on a tenure track job. And as a colleague, I have heard it all: experiences that were physically intrusive, deeply humiliating, and too often so heavy to bear that leaving the academy became an existential need. I have seen colleagues who never returned to write their thesis after fieldwork, violated miles away from their support networks and alone where they were sent to study other cultures—and unprepared for the risks and unsupported by their academic programs in the aftermath. For others, the harassment came from graduate advisers, which they endured for decades until it became too much to bear.

It strikes me, dear higher education, that you already know this. We have all seen the signs. Do you remember, perhaps, that overly-personal commentary at public Q&As at your annual academic conference of choice that made you wonder? Or possibly you remember your discomfort with the overly clingy behavior that your inebriated former adviser had with a colleague at that academic cocktail party? What about the time you weren't quite sure what to say when one colleague ogled and commented on another's body parts? And even if you didn't

¹ Sexual violence is an umbrella term that includes sexual harassment and sexual assault, among other forms of unwanted non-contact sexual attention. It is my preferred term here because it is not attached to any specific crime or violation of a national legal system in the ways terms that terms like harassment, rape or gender-based violence tend to be.

experience any of those, maybe you do remember the academic #MeToo moment early in the 2020s when too many of your colleagues shared brief glimpses of their experiences with sexual violence on social media. Even if you only read articles about #MeToo on social media and did not read your own colleagues' stories, I know we have all read the stories of perpetrators who abused in place for decades, as their institution's very public secret. If not those stories, we surely have read or heard whispers about those who hopped from institution to institution inflicting abuse to new groups of unsuspecting students.

My dear higher education, sexual violence is indeed our very public secret, and we are doing too little to support those who have and continue to experience it and are moving too slowly to curtail the elements of our institutional cultures that enable it to flourish worldwide. There is much more we can do.

Since 2010, I have been advocating and enacting policy change in my own discipline. I have engaged in committee work, taskforces, policy development, and a three-and-a-half-year stint as the inaugural organizational Ombuds for Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault for the American Anthropological Association. In 2018, I worked with my colleague Dianna Shandy to finalize a collaborative and multi-authored process for devising the American Anthropological Association's "Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Policy," which framed instances of sexual violence as scientific misconduct following NASEM's 2018 Consensus Report (209-234). Wanting to work beyond my own discipline, I joined the advisory committee of the NASEM's Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education in 2023 and I am currently working to organize a global network for preventing sexual violence in higher education. My long durée approach to addressing sexual violence as a systemic problem has been to get involved to ensure that good trauma- and support-informed policy and practice is developed and enacted.

As a sector, we can work together to build upon a number of initiatives already underway:

1. Within institutions, develop institutional courage by acting "with accountability, transparency, actively seeking justice, and making changes where needed despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term costs." Institutional courage requires engaging in practices and policies that are focused on supporting persons who have experienced sexual violence over compliance-focused approaches. In the US context, a key example is rethinking the blind embrace of mandatory reporting policies which too often confuse reporting with supporting potential targets of sexual violence (Holland, Hutchison, Ahrens, Torres).
2. Encourage institutions to participate in communities of practice that are researching and developing new policies and interventions. In the United States, for example, approximately 60 institutions are working together in NASEM's Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education² to develop, implement, and assess evidence-based early intervention practices, institutional accountability measures, and pass-the-harasser prevention policies. Similar organizations are at work at the national level in the UK, Chile, Australia, and also in regional organizations covering multiple nations³.
3. Fund research on sexual violence in higher education. In Canada, for instance, a joint initiative between Women and Gender Equality Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council is dedicating 3.5 million to the study of gender-based violence, higher education contexts included.
4. Support foundations and state research funding agencies that explicitly have zero tolerance for harassment or assault within the agency or at the awardee organizations. The development of policies and offices in the United States' National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health are good examples.

² Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education. <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/action-collaborative-on-preventing-sexual-harassment-in-higher-education/about#participants>

³ See for example, the UK's 1752 Group, Chile's Proyecto Anillo Disonancias, Australia's Respect.Now.Always., and Africa End Sexual Harassment Initiative

5. And, finally, because the problem of sexual violence is not only systemic but also global, support the development of global networks of practice that can share policy and practice resources, consulting expertise, and begin to engage in much-needed global and cross-cultural research on sexual harassment in the academy.

Beyond the concrete steps outlined above, we can do better going forward by acknowledging the systemic nature of higher education's sexual violence problem and enacting policies and practices that change the very elements of our institutional cultures that sustain sexual violence and their perpetrators. We owe it to ourselves, our students, and to the creation of knowledge with integrity.

In Hope,
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About the author

Dr. M. Gabriela Torres is a transformative leader committed to fostering a more diverse and socially just academy. She is Vice Provost at Rhode Island College. Dr. Torres is an experienced and trained conflict management professional and was the inaugural Ombudsperson for sexual harassment and assault for the American Anthropological Association from 2018-2021. Dr. Torres has been named an adviser to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education as recognition of her expertise and policy work on sexual harassment in the academy. As a scholar, has published over 30 peer-reviewed articles, research reports, and book chapters, in addition to the volumes *Marital Rape: Consent, Marriage, and Social Change in Global Context* and *Sexual Violence in Intimacy: Implications for Research and Policy in Global Health*.