Emerging Scholars Research Summary

College Faculty's Narratives of Addressing Gender-Based Violence at a Higher Education Institution in Delhi (India)

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ABSTRACT

Despite the central role played by faculty as teachers, advocates, and policy-makers in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) within higher education institutions (HEIs), their experiences have received limited attention in the context of India. The study seeks to fill this research gap by exploring teaching faculty's (n=10) experiences with addressing GBV at a public HEI in Delhi (India) through the use of narrative inquiry. Analysis of data from a pilot interview with an associate professor at the college reveals that female students who experience GBV typically refuse to lodge a formal complaint due to the fear of social stigma, and advocating for them in the absence of institutional support takes a psychological toll on the faculty. Further, safeguarding the college's

reputation is a key concern for the organization, which often dissuades victims from coming forward. The preliminary findings highlight the need for greater institutional support for HEI faculty in India to advocate for survivors of GBV and draw attention to the nexus between the gendered social structure at the macro level and institutional/personal responses to GBV at the meso and micro level.

Keywords: faculty, gender-based violence (GBV), higher education institutions (HEIs), India, narrative

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to acts and threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence perpetrated due to gender norms and stereotypes (UNESCO & UN Women, 2016, p.10). Despite the key role played by faculty as "teachers, researchers, advocates, and policymakers" (Sharoni & Klocke, 2019, p.1352) in confronting GBV in higher education institutions (HEIs), their experiences remain largely unexplored within academia. This is a troubling research gap because knowledge about how college faculty respond to GBV and the extent of institutional support available can help provide more effective social-structural responses for addressing the problem. However, the majority of the existing empirical literature deals with students' experiences with GBV in HEIs (Arnold et al, 2008; Forbes Mewett & McCulloch, 2016; Philpart et al, 2009), and the limited studies that focus on faculty's experiences are centered in HEIs outside South Asia (Hurtado, 2020; Kaufmann et al, 2019; Sharoni & Klocke, 2019). The study seeks to fill this research gap by exploring the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of faculty members at a public HEI in India when responding to GBV faced by the students?
2. To what extent do existing institutional structures at the college enable the faculty to respond effectively to GBV?

It is essential to point out here that GBV in HEIs is not limited to the physical space of campuses but often takes place when the student is traveling,

walking, socializing outside classes, or is involved in romantic relationships (Rogers, 2008).

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE & HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

A survey carried out by the *Thomson Reuters Foundation* in 2018 ranks India as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women because of high incidents of sexual violence and slave labor (Goldsmith & Beresford, 2018). According to the *Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation* in India, there has been a gradual increase in criminal cases against women in the past decade (2018). Further, official statistics released by the *University Grants Commission* (UGC) reveal that reported cases of sexual harassment in HEIs in India grew from 143 in 2019 to 245 in 2020 (n.d.). Despite having one of the fastest-growing post-secondary sectors in the world (Saini, 2021), limited efforts have been taken towards developing robust institutional structures in HEIs in India to confront GBV. While the UGC has explicitly laid down the guidelines for dealing with forms of GBV such as sexual harassment in HEIs (MHRD, 2016), widespread acceptance of traditional gender roles and the taboo surrounding sex influence the implementation of these policies (Nieder et al, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:
A *GENDERED* UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE

The study goes beyond a dichotomized understanding of women as victims of GBV and men as perpetrators. Instead it focuses on how existing gendered relations, stereotypes, and unequal power structures within the society lead to GBV; where both men and women can be victims of it. The theoretical framework is guided by a three-tiered structure for understanding GBV at the micro, meso, and macro-level developed by Buiten & Naidoo (2020). At the micro-level, GBV is understood in terms of the gender identities that people are socialized to ascribe to, which in turn are associated with certain gender traits and roles. This socialization perpetuates GBV in contexts where cultural beliefs about gender identities normalize violence. At the meso-level, the framework focuses on gendered patterns of *behaviors*, which refers to how one sits, talks, gestures, etc., and emphasizes how individuals act in ways that are often predetermined by the culture. Finally, at the macro-level, GBV is understood in terms of the gendered social structure existing within the society, which organizes not only

identities and behaviors, but also institutions, systems, and practices (Buiten & Naidoo, 2020, p 64-65).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry (NI) is a way of viewing the world and reflecting on experience through stories (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jovchelovitch et al, 2000). Within NI, researchers collect stories from their participants about their experiences with a specific phenomenon (Jovchelovitch et al, 2000), and the interview is relatively open-ended and collaborative. NI was chosen because of its capacity to engage individuals in active, meaning-making dialogues that enables the researchers to move beyond a strict problem-focused approach to a more general exploration of an issue (Fraser, 2004, p. 181).

Research Site and Participants

The study will take place in a public HEI in Delhi (India) affiliated with a central university in India. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling will be used to recruit ten faculty members who have dealt with cases of GBV, and are willing to share their experiences. A recruitment call has already been shared with the faculty via email and social media, and at the time of writing the paper (November 2021), six faculty members have agreed to be a part of the study. The paper presents preliminary findings based on a pilot interview conducted with a female associate professor working at the college for the past twenty-five years. The interview was conducted in two sessions lasting approximately an hour each, and open coding was used to label concepts, as well as, define, and develop categories which were finally collated into themes (Khandkar, 2009).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Fear of Reporting GBV due to Social Stigma

A common thread across all the cases was the reluctance of victims to report GBV formally to the police station, or the college sexual harassment committee. Aakriti (pseudonym) shared a case where a male professor, who was initially friends with a female student, said lewd things behind her back in the staff room and classroom once they stopped talking. And even though the student sought Aakriti's help, she did not want to pursue the case formally:

When I said you give something in written, she (the student) said I only want the problem to end. I don't want this gentleman to comment negatively on my character… but I don't want to chase it further…the college administration then kept away from the case as the girl was not ready to report.

Despite efforts by Aakriti and another female colleague to talk to the professor, his behavior did not change, and he ended up harassing another young female colleague a few years later and "even she did not want to make a big deal about it, she only wanted the nonsense to stop". Aakriti shared another incident where a female student was a victim of online harassment. An unknown person entered the class using her name and started typing profanities about her in the chat, which traumatized the student. She stopped attending classes for some time, and when she was asked to formally report the case, she refused as "her parents would not send her to college if she did".

Psychological Toll of Activism in the Absence of Institutional Support

Aakriti revealed that she had also been a victim of physical and psychological violence when she was married and hence was passionate about activism linked to GBV. However, helping students in the absence of institutional infrastructure often takes a psychological toll on her:

Because I have faced it…I feel like I can make a difference. Because when I was suffering, nobody was around… But I feel that it is easier said than done…we can support the victim but if we also have to look after feeding her and ensuring her safety, she is crying we have to console her…it is all very taxing.

She shared an incident where a female student, who was physically assaulted by her boyfriend, hid at her place for several weeks while the police were searching for the culprit. The student was bruised when she came to Aakriti, and the college did not provide the victim with a safe place to stay. Aakriti expressed disappointment about this lack of support from the college, due to which many victims have to go back to their abusers "since they have no other choice". According to her, one of the prerequisites for redressing GBV is that HEIs provide survivors with a safe place to stay, where they are well fed and looked after, and the teachers can check on them.

Safeguarding the College Reputation

While the college has a sexual harassment committee, Aakriti felt that it has people who are more concerned with protecting the college's reputation than bringing justice to the victims. She believed that "people who are radical", or those who would "actually take action, expose the perpetrators…would never be given a position in such committees". Safeguarding the college's reputation is the primary factor when putting together such committees since if a case of GBV comes to light, "nobody will say the individual is bad, they will say the institution is bad". She felt that the sexual harassment committees should comprise of individuals who have a "sound understanding" of issues linked to GBV and can bring justice to victims, instead of keeping "people who are there to stall the movement".

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings draw attention to how the gendered structures at the micro, meso, and macro-level interact to weave a net of obstacles for victims of GBV. Firstly, at the micro-level, the victims' identities as wives, daughters, and/or girlfriends are central to their sense of self; safeguarding, which seems more important to them than reporting the perpetrators to the police. At the meso level, harassment by men (especially when it does not involve sexual intercourse) is normalized, and victims do not consider it feasible to report such cases. Both these factors lead to a gendered institutional structure at the macro-level where both the college and the society indirectly sustain GBV. While on the one hand, female victims are reluctant to report the cases, on the other hand, the college is concerned with safeguarding their reputation instead of bringing justice to the victims. The findings draw attention to the need for greater institutional support to enable faculty in HEIs in India to support the victims of GBV. It also highlights the nexus between the institutional structure and the gendered structure of the society, where far from being gender-neutral spaces, HEIs tend to construct and reinforce the gendered hierarchy, gender culture, and subsequently the gender violence prevalent in the society (Connell, 2005). The exclusive focus on heterosexual forms of violence within Aakriti's narratives also highlights the need for future research to focus on other forms of GBV such as homophobic violence, student-on-teacher violence, and women-on-women violence (Dunne et al, 2006) to develop a holistic understanding of how gendered social structures inflict violence on both women and men.

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