



Asian International Students' Barriers to Reporting Sexual Harassment Incidents

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ABSTRACT

Asian international students continue to suffer from sexually harassing behaviors on college campuses. However, there has been little to no reporting of the incidents that cause their distress. Drawing on narratives of Asian international students in a predominantly white institution, the current study examines the barriers that these students face while reporting a case formally to the institutional representatives. The findings suggest that the severity of the case, lack of departmental support, fear of retaliation and peer relationship are among the major factors that hinder them from making a formal report. Implications of this study lie in informing the institutional policies and departmental practices to design more inclusive environment for the international students.

Keywords: sexual harassment, sexual misconduct policies, Asian international students, women, institutional resources, higher education

Institutions of higher education have policies that guide them to address issues related to sexual harassment. However, incidents of harassment and assault have not ceased to occur. The culture of silence around sexual harassment is not an unfamiliar issue. More than 80% of college women remain silent about sexual harassment incidents including rape, and only 2.7% of rapes that get reported involve drugs, and/or alcohol (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). In addition, 40% of campus sexual assaults go unreported, and when they do, they aren't reported to institutional offices (Kirkner, 2022). Disclosure is delayed (Dewan 2018) and is more likely when the victimization experience fits societal stereotypes of sexual assault. Among the very limited studies that have been conducted so far, the research indicates that minoritized populations in general are at a greater risk of being sexually harassed (Brubaker et al., 2017) and less likely to report officially (Slatton & Richard, 2020; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011).

Among the various understudied minoritized student populations, international students are missing from the campus climate and sexual misconduct surveys so far conducted (Brubaker et al., 2017). Further, international students come from a different cultural background where education around sex might be starkly different from what it is in the United States (Martin, 2015). Often grouped under a homogenous label of “vulnerable population” in the literature, international students’ experiences and barriers to address sexual harassment are oversimplified and understudied (Hutcheson & Lewington, 2017). Moreover, the rising anti-Asian discrimination and hate-crimes within the US have impacted the experiences of Asian international students as well. This paper is part of the larger study conducted in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) with 12 participants who identified as women, femme, and/or non-binary. Drawing from the narratives of four of those advanced doctoral students coming from East and South Asia, the paper questions how the multiple layers of marginalization interact with organizational policies to create barriers for Asian international students as they think of reporting an incident of harassment in their institutions. The findings from this study indicate how there is a need for creating more awareness about the support systems that are available, promoting the fact that international students are valued by the authority and the representatives of the institution; and additionally, the requirement for educative initiatives to eradicate the negative stereotypes associated with sexual harassment and reporting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section focuses on studies that explored international students’ experiences in the US and on reviews that draw from sexual harassment surveys. As campus climate surveys conducted so far did not report findings related to status or national origin of students, the literature review synthesizes the policy landscape that might impact international students if they face sexual harassment. International students struggle with a lack of sense of belonging, cultural shock, difficulty to adapt to the new system of instruction (Koo, 2021; Telbis et al., 2014; Xiong & Zhou, 2018). Thus, education in a foreign country can be associated with challenges, especially concerning students’ vulnerability. Studies reveal how international students learn to mask their experiences in order to cope up (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee et al., 2023). To manage their personal-enacted identity gap, women international students learn to let go and not interpret their experience or react. Moreover, women international students engage in behaviors that are acceptable and expected in the situations in which they find themselves so that they can fit in their new environment (DANIELS & RITTENOUR, 2018). With all these challenges, navigating sexual harassment might add another layer of burden to this population. Further, being exposed to a particular culture from birth until the start of adulthood cements their thoughts on what they feel is normative behavior (Martin, 2015). Thus, it may be difficult for international students to identify what constitutes sexual harassment. Allegiance to the community and fear of isolation and/or academic disruption may also factor into the decision of reporting sexual misconduct incidents for international students (Brubaker et al.,

2017). Additionally, legal bindings, visa restrictions, administrative burden may hinder students from formally making a complaint (Hutcheson & Lewington, 2017). Coupled with the administrative roadblocks comes the intersecting systems of oppression, xenophobia, sexism that may play into why there's a gap in the literature. Additionally, international students' experiences with sexual harassment may be coupled with a myriad of other experiences that shape their identity as a student and as an individual in a foreign land. Research suggests that among women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, Asian/Pacific Islander women were the least likely to report sexual and physical victimization (Ho et al., 2018). As, sexual harassment is not a widely talked about topic in Asian countries, students may hesitate to come forward (Leiber et al., 2009). Other cultural factors like saving face, avoidance of shame, and filial piety may impact their perceptions of sexual harassment as well as their decisions to report (Chan, 2012; Chang et al., 2021). While it is the responsibility of the institutions to disseminate information and provide resources related to sexual harassment, not all students receive information and resources equitably. Some receive information, some do not, and most of the students do not remember if they received any email containing links to resources (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010). Research that included international students as part of their study sample reveal that they are more susceptible to peer sexual harassment than harassment by a faculty member (Sutton et al., 2021). However, harassment by a faculty member is associated with institutional betrayal and disengagement from academic activities (Rosenthal et al. 2016). Smith and Freyd (2013) documented that institutional betrayal exacerbates the adverse consequences of unwanted sexual experiences, including greater trauma symptoms. Further, international students are soft targets as they are perceived to have lesser resources (Cao et al., 2021), limited support, difficulty making friends (Guo & Guo, 2017), and have a lack of familiarity with cultural norms (Heng, 2018). While there has been little to no data on international students' likelihood of being sexually harassed on US college campuses, about 41.6% of international students in an esteemed Canadian institution experienced at least one incident of sexual violence on campus. Additionally, in another institution, 38.6% international students experienced harassment that was of sexual nature and 23.6% encountered explicit sexual assault (Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022).

Though prior literature touches upon the disadvantages international students experience, and outlines some possibilities as to why they may remain silent, there is a gap in empirical research that effectively uncovers the obstacles these students may face when they encounter an incident of sexual harassment. Thus, the gap in scholarly literature pertaining to sexual harassment among Asian international students demonstrates the need for studying what the experiences of this student population are. Moreover, historically higher education institutions in the US have recruited a growing number of students from the Asian continent. Even today, Asian students form the largest percentage (>53%) of the total international student population in the US. While China and India remain as the top two sending countries with 289,526 and 268,923 students respectively in the 2022-23 year (Institute of International Education, 2023), students from other East and South

Asian countries like Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are also growing. Therefore, with the rising number of students from other parts of the continent and given the fact that these students might struggle to find a sense of community because of being a minority among international students, it is increasingly important to include their experiences; especially when it comes to incidents of sexual harassment. Whether they possess knowledge about the resources related to sexual harassment on campus is a big grounding question that needs to be answered to analyze their perceptions about sexual harassment in general. Further, for students who have been survivors of sexual harassment incidents, it is imperative to know the perceptions in relation to the reporting process. While the present study does not focus specifically on individuals who have experiences of sexual harassment in the past, perceptions of students in general about sexual harassment is required. Whether they imagine facing any barrier or not, and the factors contributing to those barriers are consequential questions that call for our attention. The aim of this study is to understand the barriers in reporting- what factors influence their decision to report or not to the institutional offices. The guiding question for this study is: How do the multiple layers of marginalization interact with organizational policies and rules to create barriers for Asian international women students to navigate sexual harassment incidents? Under this overarching research question, my study seeks to answer: What barriers do they anticipate they may face while reporting sexual harassment cases to their institutional offices formally?

While this study allowed its participants to exercise complete agency in explaining what sexual harassment is according to them, a definition of sexual harassment is necessary. Sexual harassment is defined as any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal and physical harassment of a sexual nature (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Additionally, sexual harassment is not always sexual in nature and can include offensive remarks about a person's sex. Given the fact that sexual harassment can be of various nature and form, and that there is increasing evidence of sexual harassment denial, there's a need to understand sexual harassment mythology. Sexual harassment mythology refers to attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual harassment of women (Lonsway et al., 2008). The researcher uses the word "harassment" as an umbrella term to avoid confusion. However, participants referred to harassment, misconduct as well as assault incidents when asked about sexual harassment. Sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior, often physical, that occurs without the consent of the victim-survivor which include but are not limited to sexual coercion, rape or attempt to rape, forcing someone to perform sexual acts, unwanted touching, unwanted sexually explicit photos, emails, texts or comments (Rape Abuse & Incest National Network). As research has previously found out that the definition of sexual harassment is not uniform across organizations and that decentralized sexual assault policy—from federal to state governments to institutions—prevents people from developing shared terminology and meaning around sexual assault as well as receiving equal protection from it (Papp et al., 2023); the study takes into consideration the varied

experiences that the participants have encountered where they felt that their boundaries were crossed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study applies a critically conscious lens to examine Asian international students' understanding of the policies and resources related to sexual harassment; and how the multiple systems of oppression including but not limited to racism, sexism, xenophobia, language proficiency creates barriers for them to report an incident. Congruent with the research question, I draw on Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality. The notion of intersectionality refers to the interaction of gender, race, class, and other categories of difference (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). These differences interact to compound inequalities relating to social and institutional influences, which play out in terms of power. The neglect of experiences encountered by women of color had been highlighted by Black feminists by the time Crenshaw (1989) developed the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality dissects more simplified notions of gender to consider multiple vectors of oppression that form a whole and interact in experiences of exclusion and subordination (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). The value of an intersectional analysis is that by taking into account multiple and intertwined aspects, it gives "voice" to marginalized women. Considered as both a theoretical and methodological tool, intersectionality allows an analysis of various power differentials and/or constraining normativities, which construct various inequalities and unjust social relations.

This theory is applauded because of its universal applicability and usefulness for understanding and analyzing individual or group experiences and structural and cultural influences (Glass et al., 2022). Intersectionality identifies subordination not only in terms of gender, race, and class but also through other simultaneously operating forms of subordination (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Intersectionality analysis, then, allows for the extension of intersecting dimensions of inequality to incorporate categories associated with international student status. These categories include being in a foreign environment, often without adequate host country language and cultural skills, being separated from family and friends, and frequently having inadequate financial resources. Other studies conducted so far have applied theories which have looked at international students as a homogeneous group (Arthur, 2018). Research which has specifically studied Asian international students have also refrained from delving deeper into the nuances of their identities and provided a comparative analysis with the domestic students (Slaten et al., 2016; Yeo et al., 2019). However, in this context of studying sexual harassment, it is important to explicitly mention that despite coming from a similar geographic region, Asian international students have varied lived experiences and upbringing which might shape their perceptions in the US. Thus, this theory strives to observe intrinsically linked multiple and simultaneously operating vulnerabilities, and show how gender, race, class, interact with the international student status to compound their experiences. The framework may help in understanding how racism, xenophobia, sexism,

immigration status and other forms of oppression impact the students' decisions to come forward.

METHOD

This study delved deeper into the topic of sexual harassment. Thus, a great deal of care was necessary to conduct this project. It was important that the researcher realized and recognized the needs as well as emotions of the participants. Thus, integrating trauma informed research approach was imperative to the wellbeing of the respondents as well as the researcher (Alessi & Kahn, 2023; Campbell et al., 2019). The aim was to be present as well as be mindful of the participants' emotional well-being. However, a great deal of care was taken throughout the research, the first of which started with recognizing the fact that the participants might be survivors of various forms of trauma ranging from historical trauma to racialized trauma to chronic trauma and many more. Establishing trustworthiness and transparency; as well as empowering the respondents were some of the key tenets of trauma informed research. Despite all these measures, resources were provided for the participants to utilize post-interview if the need arose.

Research Design

In this study, a social constructivist approach is employed to understand the perceptions of barriers in sexual harassment reporting. Social constructivism is one of the philosophical assumptions which enables the researcher to negotiate the reality of the participants socially and historically and give meanings to those in a collaborative manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Here, the researcher is aware of the variety and multiplicity of meanings and thus looks for the complexity of perspectives rather than narrow the meanings to a few categories. This paradigm well fits into the nature of narrative inquiry. An interdisciplinary research method, narrative inquiry is used to understand human experiences through thick questions and dense storytelling. In this approach, the researcher and the participants are actively involved in creating the stories. As the collection of data is intensive, the researcher aims to delve into the storied lives humans live both individually as well as socially (Kim, 2015) through active conversation for understanding not only the content of the story, but more importantly the subjectivity, meaning-making, and authority people deploy in telling the stories the way they do. By placing the Asian international students' narratives at the core of this purposive qualitative study, the aim is to investigate how their intersecting identities interact with the organizational policies to create barriers for sexual harassment reporting within their institution.

Data Collection

The present study is part of a larger research project conducted in a doctoral degree granting institution with very high research activity, situated in the eastern suburbs of the US. This institution is home to students from all 50 states and more

than 100 countries in the world. Historically a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), the school's student demographics continues to represent a high 60% of Whites along with just about 6% of Black/African American and 7% Asian population. Committed to promoting diversity and inclusivity, in Fall 2023, the school enrolled 11% international students among which 71% were from the Asian subcontinent. 35% of this clear majority of students identified as women with 15 students identifying as non-binary. Purposeful sampling methods were employed to recruit international students on F-1 visa who identified as women, femme, and/or non-binary coming from any of the 49 Asian countries. International students are defined as non-immigrant visitors who come to the US temporarily to avail education, are on either a F, M or J category visa, do not have a citizenship or legal permanent residential status and intend to stay in the US only temporarily (Institute of International Education, n.d.).

The present study utilizes narratives of four advanced level doctoral students coming from East and South Asia. Graduate students were selected because they experience distinct academic, financial, and social environments compared to undergraduate students (Ma, 2020). The sample was chosen based on their similar geographical origin, and time spent in their institution. The similarity in geographical origin is a strong predictor of how these students perceive institutional dynamics, respond to regulations, forces and policies that shape their experiences in the graduate school. Having come from East and South Asia, their knowledge around sex and sexual harassment might be similar which in turn might dictate how they combat harassment on campus. Also, previous studies have indicated how the cultural notions around sex education and sexual harassment reporting in Asia is influenced by filial piety, shame and saving face (Chang 2021), as well as family reputation (Ho et al., 2018). Next, as these students are either third- or fourth-year doctoral students and have spent a considerable amount of time in their institution, it is likely that they are aware of the institutional structures that may impact their experiences in cases of sexual harassment. Participants were recruited through an email letter with self-screening options. Two rounds of in-depth narrative interviews were conducted each of which lasted for 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted between Summer and Winter of 2023 via Zoom, the protocol of which had three distinct sections, beginning with the participants' personal information and higher education journey, followed by knowledge of sexual harassment resources, and perceptions of sexual harassment and barriers. All the interviews were recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. No transcribing software were utilized to ensure participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using a qualitative analyzing software MAXQDA pro. Initial coding was the first step of coding where codes were assigned to the data segments. This helped to open up the inquiry to produce concepts that fit the data. In the next cycle, the open codes were consolidated according to much broader codes. I developed a codebook following the conceptual framework and existing

literature. However, the first cycle of coding was open as I wanted to capture all the possible aspects of what a participant shared (Saldaña, 2021) and how those related to sexual harassment reporting. For example, I had codes like “sense of safety on and around campus”, “past exposure to sexual harassment”, and “home country culture around sexual harassment”. The second cycle of coding involved codes that related directly to the framework and identified the systems of oppression (like racism, sexism, xenophobia, institutional hierarchy). Finally, the coded data were clustered together to arrive at themes that are presented in the findings section.

Limitations

Though this study presents snippets of comprehensive stories of four international students, there are several limitations. First, because the study has been conducted in a single institution, the findings cannot be generalized to all international students from the Asian continent. The students’ narratives could be influenced by their unique backgrounds and their individual relationship with the institutional representatives. Next, sexual harassment is indeed a sensitive topic – participants may have felt hesitant to share many untold aspects of their stories and experiences. It is almost impossible to form a strong rapport and obtain complete pictures of their lives in 180 minutes. Also, some spontaneity and authenticity may have been lost in translation as students shared these stories in English and not in their preferred language (mother tongue). Lastly, the chosen sample is unable to represent the complete spectrum of Asian international students’ experiences with sexual harassment. Future research can delve deeper into the perspectives of international students coming from various other parts of Asia.

RESULTS

The Case is the Barrier Itself!

First, narratives from participants in the study revealed that the decision to report an incident of sexual harassment often depended on the “severity” of the case. While students had a generic hesitation to disclose an incident and were highly unlikely to report it to their institutional offices, whether an incident was a physical harassment determined their course of action. Majority of the non-physical harassment were unreported because those were perceived less severe by the victim-survivors. Text messages full of sexual innuendos, or harassing messages requesting to involve in a romantic relationship despite lack of consent were ignored repeatedly. Majority of the participants reported that whatever the incident was, it was not “terrible” and that they could deal with it. Also, for verbal harassment there was no “sign of harassment” that they bore. While the students recognized those as “uncomfortable” and “disgusting”, they were not ready to file a complaint against those incidents. As they did not perceive any immediate threat, they remained silent thereby increasing the frequency of the cyber

harassment. For example, Cora, a 4th year doctoral student did not feel comfortable working with one of her colleagues who was a TA in the same course she was teaching. What started with gender-based remarks soon became gender-based harassment and stalking, making her work environment hostile. Not only commenting on her looks, hair and dressing style, the TA crossed boundaries by sharing his disposition about other female students in the department. Further, instead of sticking to professional protocols, the TA repeatedly text messaged Cora despite her lack of consent, insisting her to go out with him. However, she chose to change her advisor and her laboratory because of repeated harassing behaviors instead of reporting the incidents. What really got her scared was the stalking part. She says,

I think I feel safe because it was virtual. Most of the unsafe part was when he said he moved near my area [my apartment]. That's when I felt unsafe, like how does he know where I live!

Next, contrary to the above situation, some of the participants were less comfortable reporting an incident of rape. According to them, cases of verbal harassment come with less stigma and stereotypes. Though rape is more heinous of a crime, participants were hesitant to report because of a culture of shaming. As verbal harassment did not bear any "marks" or "signs", it was easier for them to share and report. According to them, the onus was on the perpetrator and the survivor was at no fault. Even though they believed that there's no fault of the rape-survivor, they were afraid of the negative rape culture that might impact them for the rest of their academic lives in their institution. It was this fear of being "sexualized" that hindered them from reporting a rape case. As Sarah, a third-year doctoral student said,

I think it is fairly common for some men... to see victims sexually. They make sexual jokes about that.... I mean, people all know that rape is bad, but, some people are not mature enough to deal with that seriously. So, they just make jokes about victims, and they just like... like talk about victims in a sexual way. If I was raped, it would be harder for me to just open up about it.

Participants had also shared how people might blame the victim for being raped, as if she had "asked for it". This is where sexism comes into play inhibiting women to report a case that has already caused much harm. Along with navigating unfamiliar environment, students were dealing with intersecting forms of oppression which were exacerbating their situation. This was one of the attitudes that fostered stereotypes of social roles based on sex.

Lack of Departmental Support

The academic department played a significant role in the students' decisions to come forward formally. Students reported that lack of support system also added to the reasons why they did not dare to report an incident. Participants who disclosed their experiences of harassment to peers or colleagues were not shown

enough support in the first place. This signaled a lack of care from people around them. For example, Mia shared that she disclosed her encounter to her mentor who works in the same laboratory as hers. Instead of showing concern, her mentor suggested that Mia talk to the perpetrator to “straighten things out”. As Mia was looking for advice to report formally, her mentor’s suggestion disappointed her along with discouraged her to take any formal action. She did not want to face her perpetrator again, and felt like her mentor did not want things to be disclosed outside the department. This caused her to remain silent as she could not think of any other person to talk to within the department. Similarly, Cora was not sure if she should report her colleague to the institutional office. Thus, she disclosed her encounters to a mentor. And all her mentor said was, “yeah, this guy is weird! But he is harmless.” As Cora was navigating cultural differences, her mentor’s response made her feel that sex-based comments and stalking might be “normal” in the US. Explaining her feeling following her mentor’s response, Cora said,

...So, she [the mentor] is American. So, I feel like when she said “harmless”, I thought stalking might not be creepy here. But from my previous experiences in India and other countries, this behavior would be considered creepy. But I don’t know, it may not be so serious here.

Thus, the response of a domestic student who was perceived to have more cultural knowledge, discouraged Cora to make a complaint. Additionally, the response germinated a seed of self-doubt questioning whether her perception of harassment was valid or not.

Mia mentioned how disclosing to her advisor was out of the question. While the literature points out that international students’ experiences are shaped to a great deal by their advisors, she did not consider him to be a source of support in this case. Several participants shared the same concern where they could not let their advisors know about their experiences. Coming from a different country, international students feel welcomed into the academic world represented by their advisors and the department they are in (Curtin et al., 2013). However, impersonal communications indicate lack of proper support for the students as they already struggle to find social support. Within these circumstances, disclosing to an advisor seemed difficult. Participants reported how they anticipate their advisors might not trust them because they are international students. Even though the advisors were invested academically, students felt they were not cared for as human beings. Advisors seldom involved in communications that suggested their concerns about the wellbeing of the students. Thus, the students not only were skeptical to share intimate details, but they were also afraid they might be completely unheard because of their foreign status.

Three of the participants shared that despite their advisors were the people that they saw the most compared to other faculty members, they suspected their complaints would not be taken seriously. They also indicated that their advisors might support the perpetrator. In explaining the discriminatory behavior, students shared that advisors’ relative closeness with domestic students might play a significant role in the polarization. Mia said that the perpetrator was an important asset of their laboratory. As such, her advisor always favored him and relied on

him to carry out major tasks within the lab. It was thus impossible for her to disclose her case to her advisor or even expect his support in this matter. For Nina, there was no dilemma as she did not rely on the department to help her. Having suffered from institutional cover-up before, she was certain that her department was not going to be much helpful in this matter – "...I don't trust the institutions that much, especially the department. So, maybe I will try my best to avoid the contact with the department... with *my* department." Nina understood the professional obligations of the staff and faculty members and thus did not expect much support from her advisors –

...Yes, I'm gonna tell. I have a good relationship with my advisors. I have two advisors and I'm gonna just announce to them. "Okay, this. So, I'm going to report it. I'm going to defend myself. And don't you dare interfere." That's what I'm going to do. I think I'm gonna have that attitude.

Fear of Retaliation: Personal and Institutional

Participants reported fear of retaliation as one of the strongest factors behind not reporting incidents of sexual harassment. Retaliation, personal or institutional could impact them educationally and psychologically making them susceptible to secondary harassment. Participants anticipated that perpetrators could get back at them if they learned about the report. Mia shared how the perpetrator might take revenge against her if he knew that he has been reported. While Mia was afraid of a second round of physical harm, she acknowledged the various forms a retaliation can take – "you know retaliation does not have to be explicit all the time, right? He can spread gossip against me - influencing people against me."

Next, the position of the perpetrator played an important role in the decision to report. Victim-survivors were relatively open to report if the perpetrator was a colleague or a peer as opposed to a faculty member or any representative of the institution positioned higher in the hierarchy. This indicated to the power play that governed the students' decision to report a case of sexual harassment. Among the participants who had prior history of being sexually assaulted by faculty members, some described how hard it was to "fight people in the power position". According to them, people in powerful positions, like advisors or faculty members had higher capability to manipulate actual incidents to shame the victim-survivor as well as had higher chances of getting away with the crime. As Nina explained, "...It's about the hierarchy, you know. I still think it's impossible to fight back the professors in academia. Graduate students and professors - they're never equal to one another." Furthermore, for international students who have come to the US to attain higher education were less likely to interrupt status quo and avail institutional help because of academic concerns. They adopted a conflict avoidance policy to deal with the situation and finish their degree as soon as possible. In Sarah's own words,

Oh, I wouldn't do that [report her advisor formally] because it might become a really big case that can impact my PhD life. My department

might be part of it... It is scarier...because like my advisor can decide whether I can continue with my PhD or not here. If I report, I have so many things to lose during the process!

Thus, they rather concentrated on finishing their degree and leaving the institution as early as they could, than reporting the advisor or any “powerful” representative of the institution.

Further, when the perpetrator was a peer or a colleague, reporting led to institutional retaliation. Participants shared that they were afraid of institutional representatives coming back at them for being a “trouble maker,” as one participant described. While participants could avail institutional resources to file a report, the institution did not guarantee full protection. Thus, there was a chance that faculty members and/or advisors might implicitly punish them for reporting a case. There might be loss of privilege, funding, and benefits, change in the attitude of the departmental people toward the survivor. They acknowledged while there might be awareness about sexual harassment, people sometimes fell into the stereotypes. Anti-sexual harassment and/or zero tolerance thus might be just a policy on paper thereby making the lives of survivors difficult. In reality, people actually did not stand by those principles and developed negative attitude towards individuals who reported incidents of harassment. As Sarah shared her apprehensions, “I know that there are like people in my department who are good, and they have liberal perspectives. But I can never be sure about how their attitude and behavior would change after that [after I report], because, like, you know, they want to think about their personal interest in terms of interacting with people. So, I might be less approachable after that incident.” Sharing her concerns about loss of privilege following a report Sarah says,

... they might not feel that comfortable to work with me. Then I might lose the opportunities. And that's a huge disadvantage in grad school. And the problem is that it's very subtle. But, I feel students can feel it when their advisors change their attitude towards you. In terms of like collaboration, when they just work with other students, you can totally feel it. But there is no way you can blame them because it's their choice.

Afraid to Burn Bridges

Lastly, in cases of harassment by peers or colleagues, students were often skeptical to burn the bridges. International students have limited social interactions (Lee & Rice, 2007) and are less likely to have friends outside of their institution who they can rely on. As such, they want to hold on to the connections even though those might pose threat. For incidents of harassment within an academic department, participants were unsure if colleagues would believe them. They did not want to share and lose friends along the way. Unfamiliarity with American education system, lack of understanding about departmental culture, concerns about exams were reasons why they needed

support from colleagues and thus chose to remain silent. Mia, shared how her laboratory functioned mostly from team work. As such, despite it was challenging for her to continue to work with the perpetrator side by side, she decided not to take any action against him. Describing her helplessness, Mia said:

...when we are PhD students, we, you know, we need to help-out each other a lot. Especially for us, we are in a big lab...Our advisor is super busy. So, he just uses limited time to meet with us. So usually, if you have any question or you need help, usually you would talk to your lab-mate first. And I think that is kind of the reason why I feel like I cannot break the relationship with him [the perpetrator].

Additionally, participants were hesitant to sabotage a fellow peer's career and future by reporting them to the institutional offices. Being unfamiliar with the US norms and practices, both inside and outside classrooms, international students often need peer support. Thus, they tried to ignore behaviors that were otherwise triggering. For example, Cora ignored how her colleague kept commenting on her pictures on social media, gave her unwanted attention as well as tried to micromanage her "by virtue of" being a male. She endured all these just because she was "new" and did not want to become a troublemaker for the department. She also felt like she had to share her phone number when she did not want to. Cora preferred to keep the relationship professional and wanted to communicate through emails. But she felt like she was forced to share phone number with her TA because he was senior. Reflecting on her experiences, Cora said, "... I would have given my number to a peer or a friend. But with him, I just didn't feel like giving my phone number because I felt something was off. At the end, I gave the number... because I was new. And I felt like, I don't know what kind of relationship he has with the professor." The international student status as well as the feeling of being "new" and someone who knows less about how things work in the US as well as in the department made the students give in to the demands of the perpetrators.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the findings that there are several barriers that Asian international students face when they decide to report an incident formally at their institution. Consistent with the literature, the majority of hesitation to come forward stems from the interplay of various identities that they have. Being an international student – unfamiliar with the host culture, being a racially minoritized individual and also their perceptions of being tied to the institution give rise to the factors that compel them to ignore incidents and adopt a conflict avoidance policy (Hutcheson & Lewington, 2017). As such, a culture of silence prevails not only repressing the incidents and missing an opportunity to educate students around anti-sexual harassment policies and behaviors; but also, by

exacerbating the experiences of international students who otherwise could have a better sense of safety. With these cases being unreported, there's a higher probability that sexually harassing behaviors will persist within institutions of higher learning. While the institution conducts trainings and offers resources related to sexual harassment, the students still do not feel confident to come forward because of the existing structures that govern their academic and personal lives. The hierarchy between students and faculty members remain, though a new reality can be created with more inclusive practices. While most of the roadblocks may seem a student's individual barrier, a closer look confirms how the students are made to feel stuck by institutional practices and culture. The sheer helplessness of an international student stuck in a lab with their perpetrator points to the institutional ignorance and negligence. Unsupportive campus culture that incidentally trap students are to be held responsible for this. International students primarily come to the US with an ambition to attain academic excellence. Thus, an incident of harassment may cause disruption, let alone the reporting of it (Sutton et al., 2021). Inequitable institutional culture that continually makes students feel unsafe and propagate practices that exacerbates the campus climate thereby being passive observers of sexual harassment incidents may impact in international student mobility. It is evident from the data that academics and research excellence remain the principal focus of international students. Congruent with the literature, their decision to enroll in a higher education institution in the US is guided by the profile of their advisors, the research output, opportunity to learn new knowledge and personal growth (Chao et al., 2019; Mostafa et al., 2020; Zhou, 2015). Historically, because of the institutions' continuous internationalization efforts and commitment to international student mobility, there have been a steady increase in the enrollment numbers despite the effect of the pandemic (Institute of International Education, 2023). The majority of the endeavors have been financial - making sure the students receive adequate funding, advising and academic support. However, institutional culture plays an important role in determining future international student enrollments. It can be a major predictor whether students feel safe on campus and assist them open-up about their experiences (Porter, 2022). In an institution with pronounced hierarchical differences, students from minoritized backgrounds may fear retaliation and become hesitant to report a case if the perpetrator enjoys a "powerful" position (Smith & Freyd, 2016). The international student identity is a mesh of multiple identities. The lack of social support resulting from international status adds to the barriers they face. Further, the dearth of institutional support and advocacy compounds the hesitation of the students to come forward. Institutions need to put students' safety at a higher priority by condemning any sort of sexual harassment - be it verbal or physical, thereby raising awareness such that incidents are prevented and/or are reported. Research needs to be conducted on whether and how the policies meant to benefit students are implicitly protecting the perpetrators, be it faculty, staff, or fellow students. In addition to emphasizing zero-tolerance against harassing behaviors, institutional policy outlining procedural info should also highlight the various support systems they have in place to assist international students. Rigorous educative trainings

designed for staff members should also extend to members of the academic units like advisors, faculty members who work more closely with students to ensure they exhibit behaviors and attitude that enhances the students' sense of safety.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the discussion of the intersecting forms of oppression that Asian international students navigate in relation to sexual harassment incidents, and how there's a need for understanding the intricacies of the experiences they go through. For long, international students' experiences have been examined by an oversimplified lens disregarding the layers of constraints that govern their lives in a foreign academic institution. While this study brings forth the stories of only four such students, it still emphasizes the need for institutional agents to work collaboratively to first, unravel the conditions that hinder Asian international students from making a complaint, and second, provide an environment where incidents of sexual harassment are less likely to occur. Informed initiatives conjointly taken by academic units as well as Student Affairs administrators can be helpful in breaking the barriers outlined above. As underscored throughout, institutional culture and practices play a strong role in empowering international students, which in turn can help them find a voice to report their concerns formally. Future large-scale research can investigate the further nuances of the lived experiences of these students and potentially answer the questions that linger around the policy side of this issue.

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