

# CARIBBEAN FEMALE FOCUS GROUPS: INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES AS ESSENTIAL FOR FAITH IN UNIVERSITY SEXUAL ASSAULT POLICIES

## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Caribbean women who participated in the CAPSAP study drew attention to:

- The limited visibility of their sexual assault policies among students. They suggested in-person approaches to education and awareness that would reach students across campus.
- Intense privacy concerns which they suggested students from the Caribbean would likely experience when considering whether to disclose or report a sexual assault
- Distrust in university systems and greater trust in family members for support in times of crisis
- The importance of preventative measures that take sexual violence seriously

## INTRODUCTION

Caribbean women who attended Saint Mary's University (SMU) and Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) and who participated in CAPSAP focus groups displayed a lack of trust in post-secondary educational institutions to adequately protect them from harm on campus.

Caribbean women navigate intersectional issues due to their gender, race, and status as international students. Due to these factors, Caribbean women experience unique vulnerabilities and are more likely subjected to marginalization relative to the general student population. So naturally, there is a general wariness of foreign institutions. This wariness is only exacerbated when universities neglect to recognize and address this distrust or to include considerations of Caribbean women in their policy building.

Based on the information gathered from the focus groups, there are three main areas universities and sexual assault policies need to address to be inclusive of Caribbean Women currently:

1. **Accessibility:** Educational Institutions must deliver information and resources actively, such as through in-person information sessions delivered during pre-existing classes.
2. **Privacy Concerns:** Institutions must display a higher degree of sensitivity to and consciousness of the anxieties Caribbean women have surrounding reporting, due to the relatively high social cost of disclosing they may experience.
3. **Lack of Transparency:** Policymakers must clearly outline the processes and outcomes linked to sexual assault policies to address the misgivings of Caribbean women.

These are some of the ways post-secondary institutions can address the intersectional needs of their Caribbean female student population and increase the level of trust these students have in their university sexual assault policies.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Participants frequently complained about the reach of the policy. Students from both groups were unaware of where to access resources on their respective campuses. When asked what steps they would take after experiencing sexual assault on campus, participants stated that they would be unable to report the incident without research due to being unfamiliar with the sexual assault policy. The current availability of information does not consider ways in which Caribbean students preferably access information. Approaches presently deployed by universities are relatively passive, as described by participants. Emails, online messages, and posters may work for Canadian students, but Caribbean students preferred a more personal and active approach. One participant from the MSVU focus group had this to say:

“They just up the posters, and that's it. They're not going through the proper channels. Like [what another participant] said, like, we should go back to the RAs [resident advisors] and the Dons so that they can come back to us and say ‘oh hey this is happening’ or have mandatory meetings and let us know what's going on. Inform us. You can't just put up posters and be like ‘Ooh, I'm going to consent week.’”

Institutions need to employ more active approaches to reaching Caribbean student populations. One MSVU participant suggested that education on sexual violence policies be incorporated into small segments of class time.

Um, so I'm thinking, like, even in classes [clears throat], like, they can take up maybe, like, 15 minutes, to say, “This is our policy; this is what we're trying to enforce.” Um, it's time that I've committed to class. I'm pretty sure teachers can give up 15 minutes of the time to talk about it. Um, yeah, and that way, they're addressing everyone, not just residence, because you do have people that aren't on residence, but they hang out here, um, that are affected.

## PRIVACY CONCERNS

The Caribbean women spoke about the social cost of reporting. Many mention the oppressive and misogynic aspects of Caribbean culture where sex (especially extramarital) and sexual

violence are taboo subjects. Furthermore, the women come from environments where consent and sexual violence are not a part of standard education or normal discussion. Here, the onus is usually on the victim to problematize and police the behaviour of offenders. Participants expressed concerns of ostracization due to disclosure, with one participant stating: "I feel like one of the major fears for women especially coming forward about sexual assault is ridicule, or just everyone is able to identify them and point the finger at them if they are – like, that's something that prevents a lot of people from reporting."

In both focus groups, students worried about the security of their information and consistently expressed the desire to know who would have access to their reports of sexual assault.

To address privacy concerns, policymakers should consider the inherent mistrust and concerns that the Caribbean women place in foreign institutions regarding matters of sexual assault. Universities can begin to mediate this problem by giving Caribbean students the option to disclose incidents to trained counsellors from the Caribbean. However, a more effective approach may be to provide victims/survivors options for involving parents or other family members as supports following disclosures or reports made under sexual assault policies. Caribbean students often possess strong family ties, with participants expressing reliance on parents and family members for support in times of crisis while in the university. In several instances, participants mentioned a preference for family members over friends and trained counsellors when disclosing experiences of sexual assault. Here are quotes from two students from MSVU on who they would talk to in such a case:

I'm saying that I probably wouldn't like to talk to somebody out here or someone from [ my home country]; yeah, I would rather talk to a family member, like my grandparents or someone like that.

I don't think I would want somebody from home to talk to me about that. Like people out here, they don't know me.

Perhaps a follow-up quantitative study could survey university students from the Caribbean to establish to whom these students would feel most comfortable disclosing experiences of sexual assault. For example, the survey options could include parents, friends, classmates, professors, trained counsellors, etc. This study could also explore whether and how Caribbean students would like opportunities to involve family members as advocates in times of crisis.

## LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

Participants did not find comfort in the policy as written but instead found that it lacked relevant details on the steps and processes involved in reporting and disclosing. Here are some of the questions that materialized:

- What is the point of disclosure vs reporting, and what are the steps involved?
- What are the potential outcomes of reporting?
- What is the expected time frame from the initial report to the outcome?
- Does waiting too long to report an incident affect the outcome?

- Are there financial costs associated with reporting sexual assault or accessing supports for victims/survivors?

Answers to such questions should either be provided by university sexual assault policies or, if they already appear in said policies, should be highlighted in policy-related education and awareness campaigns.

The uncertainty created by the vagueness of the sexual assault policy left the participants alienated from it. The lack of cultural connection in the document led to feelings of exclusion. To feel more connected to the policy, Caribbean women required specific and unambiguous references to their populations. According to the focus groups, policies need to acknowledge and consider international students facing distinct needs from their domestic counterparts. Participants were also aware of their marginalized status, expressing the unevenness of privilege across the two demographics. One SMU student reported on the policy saying:

“they covered all of the basic grounds, uhm I don’t see where they say anything about if you are from a different country or something, something you have to go through another channel or there is an extra process that can kind of maybe refer someone who is from a different cultural background to want to report it because of the steps, because of extra steps that may need to be taken, it seems to be a level playground in terms of reporting”

Sexual Assault policies must include comprehensive measures to gain the trust of Caribbean female students. Participants suggested that sexual assault policies underline how women who do decide to report instances of sexual assault are protected from retaliation. For example, university sexual assault policies should mention accommodations for victims in the aftermath of sexual assault. The students raised financial concerns about court fees where cases go to trial and protection from harassment after reporting. There was also a call for policymakers and administrators to research, become familiarized, and educate others on culturally specific forms of harassment that may go unrecognized by the dominant culture.

## RISK ASSESSMENTS

Transparency is crucial for fostering agency, which participants saw as a crucial part of effective responses to sexual assault. Students valued control in the inherently precarious situation of experiencing sexual assault in a foreign country. Caribbean women who participated in these focus groups wanted to know if they would have the power to control the level of escalation in terms of whether and how the case would be handled by authorities after disclosure and if they would have to access information on reporting outcomes. Informed students can perform risk assessments that consider the aforementioned social costs when deciding to disclose incidents. For example, the possible consequences to the accused factor in the decision to report. One MSVU participant puts it this way: “It’s just like, okay, am I really going to get justice, or is it just going to be something I go through, and I’m left in the dust. You know?”

## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

The focus groups expressed concerns over ways that educational institutions operate to prevent instances of sexual assault. Some felt that such policies should serve to deter would-be perpetrators. They wanted a policy that they could be confident would provide appropriate punishments for sexual assault. Furthermore, MSVU students expressed dissatisfaction over the school's current infrastructure in limiting their vulnerability to sexual assault. The students suggested the need for a nighttime shuttle service, improvement in campus lighting after dark, monitoring the traffic of visiting students, implementing a chaperone service, accessible panic buttons across campus, and improved training and presence of campus security officers.

## CONCLUSION

Canadian universities cannot presume international students feel loyalty to and confidence in Canadian postsecondary systems. Policy administrators in Canadian universities must pay particular attention to those students most prone to marginalization. Coming from an oppressive environment, Caribbean women are selective in where they place their trust. One manifestation of this is the careful attention Caribbean women participants paid to the risks associated with disclosure and reporting. To address this mistrust, Canadian sexual assault policymakers must intentionally seek out the voices of this demographic of women to inform policies that affect them. Furthermore, institutions need to pay close attention to cultural and other intersecting relationships that affect the experiences of Caribbean women.