

The Perspectives of Sexual Assault Policies from SMU, MSVU and CBU Chinese Students Focus Groups
Nina Zhang

Report Highlights

- Policy invisibility and ways of promoting visibility
 - Most Chinese students are not aware of the school's sexual assault policies and related services.
 - Universities should offer various approaches to constantly inform international students of the school's policy.
- Policy flaws and concerns
 - Lack of assault *prevention* initiatives
 - Worries of encountering racism when reporting an assault
 - Desire for more serious penalties for perpetrators and further protection for victims
- Educating students
 - Provide sex education workshops
 - Define and clarify culturally and socially acceptable and appropriate behaviors around sexual activity in the Canadian context
- Support for victims of a Chinese cultural background
 - Ensure victims' privacy is and remains the top priority
 - Offer language support if needed

Policy Invisibility

More than half of all participating Chinese students from the three universities (SMU, MSVU, CBU) have never received information about their school's sexual assault policies. The remaining students have seen a few posters including information on supporting victims of sexual assault but are not clear about the details. As the female-identified student below stated, though the poster is physically visible, it is not useful if it does not give sufficient information to understand its purpose.

I [did see] some advertisement at school. While - while we go to restroom, there is some poster said [there's] a women's center that we can get [...] help from; but I am just not sure what kind of help they offer and if they offer counselling or what. I am not quite sure of it. [...] Also, like, couple of weeks into the new semester, there is [...] some activity fair on campus and the women's center have a booth there; and they handout some information flyers. [...] I am not sure if that is also related to our program. I think they might. So that's my observation, thanks.

Posters are good sources of promotion. However, other approaches ensure better publicity, including sending informative emails from a school administration account, setting up a section on the school's website, airing public service announcements on campus televisions, including a presentation during international student orientation,

and/or including the information as a standard part of the curriculum or individual course syllabi. One female-identified student pointed out that her school did not use its TV channel to promote its sexual assault policy:

I notice the school has installed some new TV flat screen in the common area and I didn't notice there any women center or this kind of school policy advertise[d] on TV. So, I think it's a good way to do it, because it doesn't cost much to do that; and the other one would be, implement presentations in orientation for all the new students between all the sections.

Policy Flaws

Prevention matters

More than one student pointed out that the sexual assault policy focuses on steps taken *after* an assault instead of preventing the assault in the first place, which they identified as a concerning feature. As one female-identified student said:

I have some questions. I think the policy can protect us for it can punish the criminals, but it can't protect us before the accidents happen. So, I think my parents will still worried about my safety.

Another female-identified student addressed the same worry and distrust of the policy:

I don't think this policy can protect me. It can only punish the criminal after the bad things happen.

As possible solutions to the concerns of not having enough prevention of possible sexual attacks, the Chinese focus group participants suggested that schools should install more cameras or surveillance systems to intimidate possible assailants and offer evidence to the school or law enforcement if any assault happens. As a female-identified student asked:

So, is there enough cameras installed in the campus to prevent this situation?
Or is there not enough cameras?

One of the participants, a female-identified student, shared a personal sexual assault experience that took place on campus in a dark area that had no surveillance camera and expressed her distrust of her school's determination in investing in its policy.

One of my harassments had happened [...] under no camera, and actually it was a dark corner around SMU [that] everybody didn't notice. Actually, I guess the school noticed, but they don't want to put money to make it brighter or put a camera there. But after I called 911 and they realised how big this thing goes, finally they put a camera there, and I guess everyone

probably noticed the little aisle you can take around the gym - the short cut to the residences aisle - is much brighter than it was a year ago.

Racism worry

Students addressed different levels of concern about encountering racism when reporting an assault to the authorities.

I heard someone said there is racial discrimination here. I may not choose to go to the police. I have a hypothesis: if we have been sexual assault in Canada, can we report it to China? I don't think Nova Scotia government or Nova Scotia authorities will protect our rights if the racial discrimination does exist.

More penalties, more protection

Some students from the focus groups believe that "increase[ing] the degree of punishment" will "reduce the criminal rates" in terms of addressing sexual assault. Penalties should be made loud and clear to all students so that any potential respondent would reconsider acting on an urge to sexually assault. In order to make people think twice of the consequences, penalties should have more serious impact on the respondent's future. As a female-identified student said below:

I would say, increase the degree of punishment. For example, I am not sure if that would be likely to happen, but I can think if someone commits sexual harassment or something related to that, they should increase it like they increase their auto car insurance. If they keep doing it, by more than two times or three times, they have to withdraw their driver's licence, so they would not obtain one. The other one is, if an international student keeps doing it, he or she will not be able to apply for citizenship for that province; they should have to go to another province. So, this is the kind of punishment I can think of. And they also should have certain community hours to serve, so that they could have the chance to think about what they did and how it is really wrong to hurt others. Last but not least, they have to pay off a financial penalty before the school tuition. So, if someone commits sexual harassment but he is not understanding this is wrong and keeps going to school, he might also hurt other students. So, I think he or she who commits sexual harassment should have to pay a financial penalty.

In addition, participants worried there seemed to be a gap in terms of preventing "revenge" actions towards victims after a case has been adjudicated. As one female-identified student stated:

I think this policy has not shed light on the seriousness of revenge or the retaliation from the person accused. I think all the respondents [should] be informed of the university's position regarding the seriousness of any

allegations of revenge against the person who got hurt, a witness, or other involved.

As someone once a victim of sexual harassment, a female-identified student pointed out that the process for protecting a victim after an assault needs more work:

SMU does have the security for walk you anywhere in the campus, 'cause after a harassment happen, um, they provided me to have a security to walk anywhere I wanted to on the campus. But the only thing I don't like is [...], you have to apply every time. You have to book an appointment, umm, you have to make arrangements. Like, what if [an] emergency happens – like, I needed somebody? I have to make an appointment? You have to make an appointment? [...] That just sounds low key ridiculous to me.

Educating Students

General sex education

Due to the impact of conservative mainland Chinese ideas on sex education, few Chinese students have received the same amount of sexual instruction as their Canadian peers. Sex as a topic is taboo for many Chinese parents. As the statements below show, many students think it is important to receive more sex education as a crucial prior step *before* learning a school's sexual assault policy.

I wish the university would provide sex education to all students. It doesn't matter where you are from, or the genders, because people from different cultures received different sexual education. Everyone knows in China, it's rare to have a sex education during school, but it doesn't mean we cannot have this during university! So, I think it's very important that sex education should be continuing during university.

Participants felt implementing general sex education would be helpful in reducing student vulnerability to sexual violence.

I agree with Participant 5 [that] sex education is very important. Because in my experiences, the school in China did not offer something like this to help us to understand. So, I feel it's easy to get trapped if you got seduced by someone from a different background, different religion, different countries.

Identifying the line

Chinese students from the focus groups also shared a common confusion about where the line is drawn between situations that students should handle on their own and situations students should report as an assault to school and/or state authorities in the Canadian social context. As two female-identified students raised this issue:

The school should provide some information about the actual definition of sexual assault, 'cause as Participant 1 said, she doesn't know what kind of action would be considered an actual assault. Like, what is more, serious? [...] I think they should explain the definition, does that make any sense? [...] It's like we need more details on what sexual assault is, you know, what is sexual harassment? What kind of actions should you be aware of? Um, and what should you do about this?

Some people may not know what's the norm in Canada; they might do something they used to do and they didn't know that they're breaking the law.

Participants expressed a desire to be instructed in the correct steps when encountering any sexual assault situation, on-campus or off-campus. Another female-identified student pointed out that more information about their legal rights would be helpful:

They should mention not only information about the school policy; I would also like them to mention the Canadian law related to sexual violence. They should also help students when they have similar situations while working in Canada, or when they are exploring Canadian society. This information will always help. So, I wish the university protected students not only while they are attending university, but also protecting them even after they graduate. They should provide information that can help them forever.

Support

Privacy protection

Privacy was brought up many times during the focus group interviews, particularly with regard to victim protection and support. Especially for a victim from conservative East Asia, privacy concerns are closely connected to the stigma from any scandal related to sex. Even being a victim of sexual assault is a major damage to social reputation. Since the Chinese community in Canada is much smaller than that in China, any stigma impacts even harder on a victim's personal life if their privacy is not protected. Thus, as a female-identified student summarized, "The most important thing is to protect privacy of the victims." The absolute assurance of privacy has a fundamental role in ensuring a victim's comfort in seeking help and reaching out for support. The students strongly wanted to know how the sexual assault policy protects their privacy:

I have one question about this policy: If something happened, how do you protect the [...] personal privacy, you know? For example [...] for the survivor, after the terrible thing happened [...], if she or he asks for help [...], how do they avoid letting the others know that this girl or this boy suffered the terrible thing, you know? [...] This is very important [...], especially for the international students here in Canada. We are not the native, not the local. How to protect ourselves if privacy can't be guarantee? So, it's a terrible thing.

As mentioned in the “Prevention matters” section of this report, installing more cameras seems to be a popular idea from the focus groups, which naturally brings up concerns of surveillance versus personal privacy. More than one student mentioned that it is important to limit access to the surveillance footage to a certain group of trustworthy authorities to protect people’s privacy.

I think we should guarantee that only the authorized people, who have signed the confidentiality can have access to watch this camera. You can submit an application to watch those videos if you want, with some reasons. I couldn’t accept anyone is watching at me while I’m working. No matter who.

Language support and cultural understanding

Since English is not the native language of mainland Chinese students, the language barrier is not only an obstacle for them in precisely describing their experiences; it also creates a cultural gap when expressing their emotions. They are very concerned that language inaccuracy or insufficiency would affect their encounter with authority. More than one student expressed the necessity of having language support from their school.

So, I wish that whatever we are doing now, we should have different communication teams for different regions or different cultures. If this community or team included people who practice different regions, that would be even better for all SMU students, as it would cover more students from different cultures and different countries and that would make all situations better.

Like, for international students who may have a language problem, we may not be able to explain what happened. So, to let the security or to let the police know that it is serious, I think we need language support.

Conclusion

Chinese students are eager to learn more information related to the sexual assault policies from their schools and also in terms of the related laws in Canada; however, they also find the information hard to access. They also point out that the lack of prevention terms in the policies is concerning to students. For the service providers, it is important to be aware of the victims’ cultural background so that they can adjust the service more accordingly such as offering language support and being culturally sensitive.