

## South Asian Students – SMU

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#### **Report Highlights**

It is important for sexual assault policy and prevention programs to provide a safe environment for all students irrespective of their background. The transcripts of two South Asian focus groups held at Saint Mary's University were analyzed to provide policymakers and sexual assault educators with suggestions and practical implications based on the experience of South Asian international students. The result of this analysis is discussed in terms of educating students about sexual assault, accommodating victims, and investigating sexual assault incidents. Below is the summary of findings and practical implications resulted from this analysis:

- Educating Students about Sexual Assault
  1. Do not make any assumptions about the prior knowledge or understanding of sexual assault when writing the policy or developing the training materials since some international students may have not had any exposure to sexual assault policies before.
  2. Address the stigma around sexual assault (i.e. victim-blaming) in all stages of sexual assault prevention and response program.
  3. Present learning materials in a way that is helpful to a friend supporting a victim/survivor.
  4. Address the concern around wrongful accusations while developing new policies or training materials.
- Accommodating Victims
  5. Emphasize the victim's right to decide whether they would like to report the incident after they have disclosed it to the university authorities, while clearly communicating any limits to confidentiality.
  6. Provide long-term and community-based support that also considers the religious background of the victims of sexual assault.
- Investigating Sexual Assault Incident
  7. Increase the transparency of the policy by communicating to students what would happen and who would help the student in every stage of the process following a disclosure or report of sexual violence to the university.
  8. Address the false dichotomy between reporting to the Police and disclosing the incident to the university authorities by communicating that students may report to the police *and* report or disclose to the university (assuming that this is true under the university policy in question).

#### **Educating Students about Sexual Assault**

##### **Covering the Basics**

In a university that has students from many countries in the world, it is important to remember that some students may not be even familiar with the foundations of sexual assault policy as they have not had this policy in their home country. One female-identified student brought up this concern in terms of not being familiar with the overall application of the sexual assault policy:

“When I compared it with my place, we don't have something like this, a policy, like hearing essentially how to write disclosing and reporting”

Another male-identified student expressed his concern about the differences that exist between different cultures in defining sexual assault:

“We have some different views, for instance, couples need to get consent every time and things like that. In my culture, you might not believe that the older generation might think differently. So, that's a difference”

In terms of the inclusivity of the policy, one of the male-identified students added:

“It might not include a lot of things different genders like female to female, male to male or transgenders, there are lots of other genders which might be just ignored completely. So, they would think like they are not included, and they might not be able to express that they are not even in the policy so will think that they are not even a part of this policy to have to go to the university office to disclose the incident, we are not even considered important, something like that”

Based on these observations, the analysis suggests sexual assault policymakers and educators not to make any assumptions about the prior knowledge or understanding of sexual assault when writing the policy or developing the training materials since some international students may have not had any exposure to sexual assault policies before.

### **Addressing the Stigma**

The stigma around sexual assault is one of the most important barriers in disclosing or reporting a sexual assault incident. One male-identified student explained the blaming culture that is ingrained in their society as follows:

“In many cultures, they have this problem of victim-blaming where they blame the victim to say that oh, they must have done something to bring it this on them. So, from where I come from, this is something that I hear a lot and I think that is the first thing that they should not do, that they should understand whatever happened, they never deserved it.”

Another male-identified student added:

“According to our cultural perspective, this policy is good, and it helps people to reach out, but as other people told that, in our culture, even the parents won't want the name to go out because it is directly related to the family's prestige. And anonymity, they would like to keep it, and even in some situation people from my country would like to stay away from even the police and keep it a secret because of shaming and defamation”

This matter was emphasized by another male-identified student as follows:

“When back home If they experienced sexual violence, they don’t even tell it to their family members because of shame and the feel that society will perceive them in a different manner, and they will be the victim”

As it is mentioned by the students, the fear of getting judged by the peer and society holds victims back from disclosing or reporting the sexual assault incident with a motivation to save their family’s name and reputation. Therefore, addressing the stigma around sexual assault is crucial in all stages of sexual assault policy and prevention program.

### **Teaching Perspective**

In a discussion on what students need to think about before giving advice to a friend that was sexually assaulted, one male-identified student expressed his lack of knowledge and preparation to act appropriately in such an event:

“If these policies could cover some stuff on giving me some resources or some stuff, like how can I prepare such a person [a victim] to be ready to take help, you know, I think that's what I can do there. But I don't know how to do it. And that would be great if we could cover it.”

Additionally, this evidence implies that students are probably more willing to learn about sexual assault policy if the materials are presented at them in a way that these are helpful resources in case an incident of this nature happens to their close friends, rather than learning about this policy and resources because it may happen to themselves.

### **Wrongful Accusations**

One of the main concerns within the male-identified focus group was regarding wrongful accusations. Male students were concerned about the resources that will be available if they receive a threat that they will be reported or if they get wrongfully accused of sexual assault. One of the male-identified participants expressed his concern as follows:

“The reporting frauds that might go on because there might be animosity between students, I don’t see any policy against that.”

As much as wrongful accusations happen very rarely, this analysis shows that the fear of getting wrongfully accused is very strong among male students. Therefore, this analysis recommends policymakers and educators address this issue while developing new policies or training materials.

## **Accommodating Victims**

### **Freedom of Action**

One of the main concerns of students from this cultural background was about victims/survivors being encouraged to report the incident officially if they decide to disclose the incident to the university. One male-identified student expressed his concern as follows:

“I feel like that person [the university representative] has to be, like, a friend, and treated like a friend, and not encouraging them to disclose the situation for further actors. By not pushing them, because they want to feel they're here and somebody is like, having sympathy with them or something like that, I don't know. But that's something important

like that. Like the situation that a friend is getting involved. They have to respect that this is that person's decision if they want to pursue further action or not. I think that's a good thing if they do."

This concern was also mentioned by a female-identified student as follows:

"We come from a different background, and you got to do it [approach the victim] with more like a good connection, that would be the key to deal with it, and make sure that it takes time for them to open up"

Another female-identified emphasized this concern by adding:

"Make sure she's not all alone at the moment, that would be my priority rather than just making sure that she speaks up about the cases"

This anecdotal evidence suggests that students expect to have the ability to make the final decision on whether they want to report the incident. Emphasizing this victim's right in the policy and policy-related trainings may encourage people who experienced sexual assault to come forward and disclose the incident to the university's authorities.

### **Community-based Support**

One male-identified participant indicated the benefits of having community-based support rather than having a one-on-one consultation with a mental health supporter:

"I would say community support is something that's very important which will address the mental well-being and the physical well-being of that person to be able to help them support in their daily lives. Something like creating a circle of care which is like listening to the needs and caring of not just of that victim but like of the family members and friends and other people who care for that victim. So, it basically sets the responsibility of care, self-care from the individual and centers importance of caring for each other in the community"

Community-based support could include (1) a sexual assault support team, including a mental health consultant, a nurse, and a university representative, (2) students who have had a similar experience and are willing to support others, and (3) the victim's close friends and family members who are willing to learn how to form a supportive environment. This initiative is closely tied to the next suggestion, providing long-term support.

### **Long-term Support**

Sexual assault causes a traumatic experience that may take the victim a long time to deal with. A male-identified student elaborated the long-term consequences of this traumatic experience such as depression or having suicidal thoughts as follows:

"The country I come from, anything that relates to like a very intensive sexual violence causes a lot of suicides and depression. So, my other concern would be to prevent the victim from taking any such actions [...] It actually happened to a friend of mine and I had to like stay with the person for like eight or nine days so that he does not commit anything that would be of harm"

During the focus group, many discussion topics were focused on the type of support that is necessary to accommodate students from their respective cultural groups, but this evidence

shows that the length of support is also an important factor in helping victims, especially the ones who are more emotionally repressed.

### **Religious-based Support**

Students' religious background plays an important role in how they interpret a traumatic experience, feel about it, and act to cope with it. One male-identified South-Asian student explained how being a victim of sexual assault can tarnish one's "sense of purity" according to their religious beliefs:

"In my country and my culture, fortunately or unfortunately, there is a deep belief of a sense of like purity [...] It's not just an act of sexual violence, it is also an attack to their sense of purity and sense of religiousness and all that. So, they [support team] should be able to connect to that feeling and connect to those values while they are responding to the situation."

Based on this evidence, considering and acknowledging one's religious beliefs is an essential step to providing caring and compassionate support. This finding suggests policymakers familiarize the support team with the interpretation of sexual assault from different religious perspectives and incorporate those insights into providing support to the victims.

## **Investigating Sexual Assault Incidents**

### **Transparency**

Based on the analysis of focus group discussions, transparency was seen by the students as something that increases trust in the policy's ability to provide victims with support and hold individuals who have committed an act of sexual violence accountable. As one of the female-identified students mentioned:

"Make it clear [...] who is the person behind it [every stage of the process as it is indicated in the policy] or how are they going to deal with it [sexual assault disclosure] so that the victim doesn't feel like it's just like opening up"

This finding suggests policymakers and educators explain every step of the disclosure process, very clearly indicating what is going to happen and who is going to help the student in that stage. Providing this information may increase the rate of disclosure among students.

### **Police vs. University**

One of the key questions that was brought up by students in the male-identified focus group was as follows:

"Why should I, if I want to report it, come to the university and why shouldn't I call the police?"

Some students were in favor of only reporting the incident to the Police and not involving the university, as they would like to minimize the number of people who are aware of their experience:

“I think they would prefer going to the police first of all because of the shame, people tend to keep quiet and not inform many people and keep it as low in number as possible of the people involved”

Others were worried about the potential conflict of interests that the university may have with victims of sexual assault. Some students were concerned about university trying to “cover up” the incident rather than holding the ones who committed sexual violence accountable:

“If you ask my family, they would suggest directly going to the police instead of the university because they would believe that the university will try to cover up the incident for the sake of their reputation”

Finally, there was a student who believed sharing on-campus incidents with the university authorities is important as it may help them prevent future incidents from happening:

“Regarding the perspective of the investigation the police would play a better role, but I think university also plays a significant role in sense that the incident takes place on campus the university might have certain things implemented to prevent such incidents to take place in the future”

Overall, it appears that students believe there is a dichotomy between involving the university or going straight to the Police. Policymakers and educators can address this issue while developing policies or making training materials for students, highlighting the fact that students may report to the police *and* report or disclose to the university (assuming that this is true under the university policy in question).

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to sexual assault, students emphasized the importance of prevention rather than treatment many times during their discussion. Overall, not only will applying the suggestions resulting from this analysis benefit students with South Asian background, but it will also benefit university students as a whole.