

# West African Female Focus Groups: How the experiences of West African Women Shape their Opinions and Perceptions of the Sexual Assault Policies at CBU & SMU

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September 3, 2021

## **Highlights**

- "According to Statistics Canada, 71 percent of students at Canadian post-secondary schools witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviors in 2019, and about one in 10 women experienced a sexual assault in a post-secondary [institutions] during the previous year" (Cooke, 2021). Given such figures, it is crucial that university sexual assault policies be accessible to and useful for students across the cultural groups that populate our campus communities.
- The CAPSAP research program explores how university students from various cultural groups view their sexual assault policies. This is a brief analysis of the thoughts and experiences of participants who identified as West African female (WAF) students in focus groups about their university sexual assault policies, held at Cape Breton University (CBU) and Saint Mary's University (SMU).

## **Findings**

- I discuss three categories of barriers to seeking and receiving sexual violence supports that emerged during my thematic analysis of these conversations. CAPSAP focus group participants who identified as West African Females suggested that participants belonging to their demographic:
  - Have knowledge and experience of West African postsecondary systems in which sexual violence by faculty against students is normalized. This can lead to low expectations of university-based sexual assault supports among West African students.
  - See knowledge among university community members of university sexual assault policies as crucial, but currently underdeveloped.
  - Question the usefulness of university sexual assault policies as they are currently implemented.
  - Emphasize the importance of cultural knowledge and cultural representation among university-based sexual assault service providers

## **Experiences of the West African Postsecondary System**

In West African universities, systems for reporting sexual assault may be built to fail victims/survivors in that they oblige people to report sexual assaults through a chain of

command that includes perpetrators or allies of perpetrators. Those who commit sexual assault are often those in power, e.g., professors or teachers. One participant gave the following example: "I would notice the behavior in students and teachers [...]. The behavior would be, like, they touch you, but then if you get annoyed about it, [they] would say, 'Oh, I'm just playing. You are just being too sensitive'." With this mindset being common, it is hard for victims to seek justice or to speak against their professors. When victims/survivors do speak out against their professors, students are aware unpleasant consequences may result, leading the victim to live in constant fear and never speak about their abuse to authorities.

For these reasons, participants suggested WAF students are particularly uncomfortable with institutional systems for reporting sexual violence. One participant said, "We don't speak up!" She went on to explain that this is because, in her home country, "nothing is really done about this things and people." This is why "[victims/survivors] prefer to be quiet about it. [...] I think it's basically where we are from." Another participant said, "I come from a country where things like sexual assault where just things of nature, or they ridiculed and, like, normalized." Similarly, yet another WAF participant said:

I think exposure plays a big role in this because if you were back home, let's say, and things like these happen, because most of this is normalized, you tend to say, "Oh, you know what? Let's just keep it like low key," kind of thing, and "Let's not even talk about it," because most of the things are taboo, type of thing.

Not only are students who know they have been victimized often silenced by the dynamics described above, participants argued that many victims/survivors do not recognize when and if they have been assaulted due to normalization in their home countries. WAF-identified participants believed it is important to inform students coming into Canada about their sexual liberties, and about what constitutes sexual assault. Such educational materials should include definitions of sexual assault that appear in university policies and in Canadian law, broader explanations of these policies and laws, and information about consent.

### **Invisibility of the Policy**

WAF-identified focus group participants also expressed their thoughts on the visibility of the policy. There was general agreement among participants that information about the sexual assault policy should be communicated to every student, but there was also a sense that currently, many students are unaware of the policy. Some participants had heard about the policy during trainings or classes where the policy was discussed. As one WAF participant stated, "the only reason why I knew about a sexual assault policy... is because I volunteered for this other thingy. ... And that is the only time I heard about the policy." Some participants had heard about the policy but never seen it and had no knowledge of the information contained in it, while some had not heard about it at all.

Focus group participants discussed how policy awareness could be improved. One suggested that "A lot of people, umm, assimilate and keep what they hear more than what they read. So,

there can be classes on it ... so people can know about this policy, about what is in it, and why is it important, for everyone." Another participant saw problems with making discussion of sexual assault and a sexual assault policy required material for students. She worried "about some people in that class who may be going through that trauma, and then they don't want to, like, listen to it in class." She went on to suggest that "people who want to hear about it should opt for it."

### **Apparent unhelpfulness of the policy**

Notably, participants who had heard about the sexual assault policy sometimes expressed a different kind of concern: a concern about whether the policy was helping. In the words of one participant, "I've heard about the policy and everything, but I've also heard a lot about sexual assault cases in residence specially, and how it's, like, a real problem...but how is the problem being solved? [...] It's there if we need it, but is it really doing anything?" If students do not believe the policy is working, they will not turn to it when sexual violence occurs in the campus community, whether they know it exists or not.

### **The Importance of Cultural Knowledge Among Service Providers**

Participants also highlighted how critical it is for counselors and other support providers to have some cultural knowledge about students they are supporting. One participant said,

I think it's best for them to understand that because of where we come from, something, like this - If they were to ask, let's say, "Oh, why didn't you report it?" - I think it's important for them to gain some cultural knowledge and understanding from where we come from, so they could understand.

Making a similar connection to norms in her country, one participant brought up the importance of reassuring victims that "It's not about how you dress; it's not about how you, like, look; it's really not about any of that. So, let them be reassured that it's okay."

### **The importance of Cultural Representation Among Service Providers**

Participants spoke not only about the importance of cultural knowledge among service providers, but also about the importance of diversity and inclusion among support staff. In the words of one participant, "I would look for someone, maybe from the same background. Like, if we are in Canada, I would go to someone who is a Nigerian, because she would understand me better. I wouldn't go to an Indian, because the way she would handle this may be different." This participant went on to say, "and probably I would go to someone who is [...] a female like me. I am not going to go to a guy for counseling and tell him what another guys has done to me."

### **Conclusion**

Analysis of these focus groups sheds new light on sexual assault policies from the viewpoints of West African females. CAPSAP findings indicate not only the significance of the sexual assault policy, but also the necessity of education about that the policy provides to university students, of cultural knowledge and cultural representation among service providers, and of ensuring and communicating to students that their university sexual assault policies actually function to support victims/survivors. The policy's lack of visibility and accessibility, lack of trust in the policy, cultural barriers to accessing the policy, and a lack of education and knowledge about sexual violence and sexual consent can create an environment of fear on campus, where victims are hesitant to address cases of sexual assault. The findings imply that more should be done in terms of mandatory, thorough training about university sexual assault policies and services for students and university authority figures (professors, counselors, and administrators).

### **Reference:**

Cooke, A. (2021, May 14). *Meet 2 recent Nova Scotia graduates who want to highlight anti-sexual violence work on campus - Halifax*. Global News.  
<https://globalnews.ca/news/7863616/nova-scotia-graduates-anti-sexual-violence-advocacy/>.