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Power and possibility: an intersectional perspective of campus sexual violence disclosure

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Abstract

Sexual violence on higher education campuses represents a global public health crisis that threatens students' safety, well-being, and academic success. Despite increasing awareness and available supports, most students who experience sexual violence do not disclose their experiences. This perspective article critically explores the disclosure process through an intersectional lens, revealing how institutional barriers, systemic oppressions including racism, ableism, and transphobia, and power structures shape students' decisions to seek support after sexual violence. Drawing on firsthand insights as a social worker and researcher in a Canadian campus sexual violence support office, I explore the often-overlooked risk of further harm during or following disclosure. The discussion provides a globally relevant perspective on the shared challenges student survivors face across various cultural and institutional contexts. I challenge one-size-fits-all response models and advocate for transformative, student-centered approaches that prioritize student survivor choice, justice, and equitable care. By exploring the systemic impacts of disclosure and its nuanced complexities, this perspective contributes to global conversations on campus sexual violence and identifies critical gaps in research. It demonstrates how intersectional frameworks are essential to developing ethical, responsive, and empowering practices that reduce harm and uphold student survivors' agency. Ultimately, it calls for a fundamental reimagining of support systems that honor diverse student experiences, validate both disclosure and nondisclosure, and confront the realities of sexual violence in academic environments.

Keywords Disclosure, Higher education, Intersectionality, Sexual violence

Background

The complexities of disclosure

Acts of sexual violence on higher education campuses worldwide violate students' well-being and institutional commitments to safety, representing a pervasive public health crisis that transcends borders, cultures, and socioeconomic contexts. Despite growing global awareness and policy responses, the impacts of sexual violence continue to profoundly damage students' health, well-being, and academic success [1]. Alarmingly, the majority of students who experience sexual violence do not disclose their experiences [2], a pattern increasingly recognized as a public health issue in itself [3]. Nondisclosure perpetuates cycles of harm by limiting access to critical support services, exacerbating mental health challenges, and reinforcing systemic inequities for higher education students across the globe. Disclosure, while an essential step in accessing care and justice, is a complex and deeply personal process shaped by systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers. It is at this critical juncture that inequities in health and social outcomes become particularly

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visible. Research on disclosure, however, often fails to capture the nuanced ways in which intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and citizenship status, and power dynamics shape student survivors' decisions and outcomes [4].

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any individual, regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting" [5]. Estimating the global prevalence of sexual violence among students remains difficult due to inconsistent definitions, methodological limitations, and a lack of representative sampling. A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis of 131 studies estimated the global prevalence of sexual violence as affecting 17.5% of women, 7.8% of men, and 18.1% of transgender and gender-diverse people [1]. While the specific rates and forms of violence may vary, the systemic barriers to the disclosure of sexual violence are a shared challenge across diverse contexts. Sexual violence perpetrates multifaceted consequences that transcend academic performance, profoundly impacting students' holistic well-being [1]. Nondisclosure of such experiences, frequently motivated by internalized shame and legitimate concerns about potential retaliation or further harm, creates significant barriers to accessing essential support services [3]. This lack of support substantially increases students' vulnerability to severe health consequences, including elevated risks of depression, suicidal ideation, and negative impacts on physical, emotional, and spiritual health [6–8].

Disclosure involves sharing personal information during social interactions, offering a chance to communicate thoughts and emotions, foster self-awareness, and strengthen intimacy in relationships [9,10]. For example, a student might disclose their experience of sexual violence to a trusted professor, seeking understanding and support as they express concern about being in the same study seminar as the student who caused them harm. However, when the disclosure involves sexual violence, the process can become significantly more complex. Student survivors must navigate potential risks, including stigma, disbelief, and institutional processes that may delay or complicate support due to legal and procedural requirements. While institutions have a duty to uphold procedural fairness, including balancing the rights of both complainants and respondents, these complexities can make even trusted spaces feel uncertain. Despite its critical role in connecting student survivors to care, minimal research has examined the intricacies of the disclosure process or its varied impacts on students based on their social locations and intersecting identities. For students from equity-deserving groups, such as Indigenous, racialized, and 2SLGBTQIA + (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual or Aromantic, and other diverse sexual and gender identities) students, as well as students with disabilities, disclosure often entails additional barriers shaped by systemic inequities, including structural racism, colonization, ableism, and gendered oppression [11].

An explicit understanding of how systemic oppression impacts the outcomes of the sexual violence disclosure process is crucial for higher education institutions to meaningfully support students following sexual violence. Intersectionality, a framework that examines how systems of oppression such as sexism, racism, and classism intersect to create complex power dynamics, offers a critical lens for addressing these challenges [12,13]. While intersectionality has gained prominence as a theoretical framework in higher education studies [2], it remains largely absent from most discussions addressing non-disclosure culture [3]. The decision to disclose experiences of sexual violence is deeply influenced by power dynamics and social positionality, as student survivors must assess whether they will be believed and supported [2]. For equity-deserving students, these challenges are compounded by their social positionality within structures of power, which can include higher education institutions.

Power dynamics are inherently present at the institutional level and significantly influence the disclosure process. I emphasize the complexity of disclosure because it can unfold in various, often unpredictable, ways—for instance, when a student's desire for confidentiality or control over their disclosure is overridden by mandatory reporting requirements. In Canadian higher education settings, disclosure involves sharing an experience of sexual violence with someone, typically with the goal of seeking support. In contrast, reporting triggers a formal institutional process, such as submitting an incident to a designated authority, which may lead to investigations or accountability measures. In the Canadian context, disclosure does not automatically mandate reporting unless the student explicitly consents or the institution is legally obligated to act.

Legal frameworks across North America outline exceptions to confidentiality in cases of sexual violence reporting, though policies differ by jurisdiction. In the United States (US), Title IX mandates that many university employees, including faculty and staff, are required to report disclosures of sexual violence to institutional authorities [14]. In Canada, provincial laws, such as Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act, Ontario Human Rights Code, and Occupational Health and Safety Act, require institutions to investigate and address sexual violence disclosures under specific conditions. These include cases where university staff

are alleged perpetrators, where the incident constitutes a criminal offense, or when there are imminent safety risks to individuals or the broader community. Such mandates, while designed to protect students, can inadvertently strip them of their sense of agency and compromise trauma-informed decision-making. Students may feel a loss of control and agency when their choices are overridden, leading to feelings of disempowerment.

Although institutional policies across North America differ in their legal foundations and scope, they share the intent of protecting students. However, the very mechanisms designed to ensure safety can also create unintended barriers to disclosure and support [15]. The impact of mandatory reporting extends beyond North America, as policies and institutional responses vary across global contexts. Understanding these variations is essential to evaluating how institutional policies shape student survivor experiences and access to care. This perspective critically examines these challenges, highlighting the risks and structural barriers that deter disclosure, and concludes with actionable recommendations to strengthen campus responses, promoting that all students receive meaningful support and access to justice.

Positionality and perspective

As a Canadian researcher and social worker in a sexual violence response office within higher education, I have witnessed firsthand the complex journeys that student survivors navigate when disclosing their experiences to their institutions and community social supports. Just as significantly, I have been privy to the many reasons students choose not to disclose, whether due to fear of retaliation, distrust in institutional processes, cultural stigmas, or concerns about not being believed. These experiences have deepened my understanding of both the vulnerabilities and systemic barriers that shape disclosure decisions.

While this discussion reflects my Canadian-based knowledge, it aims to provide a globally relevant exploration of the complex and often-overlooked nature of disclosures of sexual violence on campuses worldwide. I acknowledge the limitations of my perspective, both in capturing the full range of global disclosure experiences and in the specificity of legal, cultural, and institutional contexts. For instance, as noted, meaningful differences exist even between Canada and the USA regarding disclosure processes and institutional responsibilities, highlighting the impact of jurisdictional context on responses to sexual violence. Nevertheless, by encouraging critical reflection among those working with students impacted by sexual violence, this work aims to inspire colleagues internationally to stand alongside students and advocate for the transformation of higher education through responsive policy, effective prevention, and comprehensive programming—ultimately ensuring that student survivors can reclaim their rights to safety, health, and justice.

The case for an intersectional framework

The conceptual framework of intersectionality provides a transformative lens to interrogate and reimagine our understanding of sexual violence disclosure among students in higher education. Grounded in Black feminist scholarship and driven by interpretive communities within Black feminist social movements, the framework of intersectionality challenges interlocking systems of oppression and overlapping inequities entrenched in racism, class exploitation, patriarchy, and homophobia [13,16]. This perspective shifts beyond isolated identity categories, emphasizing the need to understand how various aspects of identities impact individuals' lived realities in complex and systemic ways [12]. An intersectional lens serves as a powerful tool to challenge dominant narratives and move beyond Western norms and assumptions. By centering the voices and experiences of students who face multiple, compounded forms of oppression, an intersectional lens allows for a deeper understanding of diverse realities often overlooked in mainstream discourse, provided higher education teams make the deliberate choice to prioritize its application.

Higher education settings, as microcosms of society, are sites of deeply entrenched social hierarchies, inequities, and exclusions [17]. Despite efforts to create safer environments, many initiatives adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to account for the full range of student identities, lived experiences, and social realities. Such frameworks often neglect the ways systemic oppressions, manifesting as racism, ableism, or transphobia, shape students' decisions to disclose sexual violence and their access to appropriate supports. For instance, sexual violence policies in Canadian higher education institutions often employ identity-neutral language, ignoring the compounded vulnerabilities faced by students who occupy multiple marginalized identities [18]. Transgender and gender-diverse students often feel excluded by policies that fail to reflect their lived experiences, address their heightened risk of harm, or incorporate their input and needs, further amplified by the lack of representation among campus leadership [19]. Indigenous students, for example, may hesitate to disclose sexual violence due to fears of perpetuating stereotypes about their communities, compounded by historical mistrust of institutional systems rooted in colonial violence [20]. Similarly, international students encounter unique barriers, such as ineligibility for financial bursaries offered by sexual violence support offices or restrictions on course

withdrawals necessary to maintain their study permits. These examples are not isolated but rather illustrate how overlapping identities can amplify systemic barriers. A transgender Indigenous student, for instance, may face compounded discrimination due to both their gender identity and the enduring effects of colonialism. Prevention efforts further fail to address these intersecting inequities. Bystander intervention programs often assume that all students have equal power and privilege to act, disregarding how systemic inequities shape students' capacity and perceived safety to intervene when witnessing harm. Addressing discrepancies in these examples of inequitable support and resources begins with whether, and how, higher education staff acknowledge them. An intersectional lens offers essential guidance for delivering equitable care and fostering student-centered, survivor-centered practices that reflect the realities of all students, particularly those navigating multiple barriers to safety.

Critical theories operate on the principle that true knowledge is accessed by uncovering the relations of domination that shape our realities [21]. Intersectionality, as a critical lens, allows scholars and practitioners to ask alternative questions outside of dominant discourse or assumptions about the process of sexual violence disclosure: How do systemic inequities intersect to shape students' experiences of sexual violence disclosure? How do power dynamics within institutions influence whose voices are heard, validated, or pathologized? By shifting the focus from individual behaviors to structural forces, intersectionality offers a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and opportunities faced by diverse student populations. This approach does more than critique existing frameworks; it unlocks transformative potential for survivor-centered care because it inherently embeds resistance and social justice, ensuring that policies and practices prioritize the rights and safety of all students [22]. The process of engaging and witnessing disclosures of harm is an opportunity for campus support staff and sexual violence response teams to recognize the intersecting identities of their students and of themselves. An intersectional approach is not merely a theoretical exercise but a transformative tool for ensuring that policies, practices, and research consider the unique realities of all students. This perspective article concludes by offering inspirations of institutional change, demonstrating that building campuses where students feel safe, supported, and empowered to heal is not just an aspirational goal but a critical responsibility.

Reframing disclosure in higher education

Despite widespread initiatives encouraging sexual violence survivors to disclose their experiences, such as the global *Me Too* movement, the assumption that disclosure universally benefits survivors is deeply flawed. In Canada, even with mandated sexual violence policies in most higher education institutions, 71% of students continue to either witness or experience unwanted sexualized behaviors [23], and over 90% of incidents remain unreported [24]. This discrepancy arises from the misconception that disclosure is a straightforward path to support. In reality, the disclosure process is complex and can carry negative consequences, including retraumatization, disbelief, and institutional betrayal [25], which can deter individuals from seeking help. Chaudoir and Fisher's disclosure processes model (DPM) [26,27] offers a critical lens for understanding this complexity, emphasizing that disclosure is not inherently beneficial but rather shaped by the interaction between an individual's goals, the response to their disclosure, and the broader social context. There is limited research, both domestically and internationally, examining the positive and negative outcomes of disclosure for students reporting harm to postsecondary institutions [28]. However, existing studies suggest that disclosing experiences of sexual violence can lead to benefits such as reduced interpersonal distress, fewer avoidance symptoms, and improvements in physical and psychological well-being [29]. These benefits, however, are not guaranteed and often depend on how the disclosure is received. Supportive responses can help survivors develop coping skills and build resilience, while negative or lack of responses to disclosures, such as dismissal, victim-blaming, or breaches of confidentiality, can lead to self-blame, distress, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress [30]. Therefore, while disclosure may be beneficial for some, institutional responses play a critical role in determining whether it fosters healing or causes further harm.

For many students, disclosure may feel less like a step toward healing and more like a burden that risks further harm. In clinical and therapeutic settings, disclosure is often viewed as critical to building client-practitioner relationships and facilitating rapport. However, Chaudoir and Fisher's research on the outcomes of disclosure among individuals with concealable stigmatized identities questions the notion that disclosing always leads to improved well-being [26,27]. Their findings, informed by biopsychosocial theories of stress and social inequity, emphasize that disclosure can have harmful outcomes, particularly for populations facing marginalization who are disproportionately impacted by structural violence [27]. In 2010, Stephenie Chaudoir and Jeffrey Fisher developed a theoretical framework, the DPM, to explore the circumstances under which disclosure can be beneficial. The model examines factors such as an individual's initial goals, the disclosure event, the processes that mediate its effects, the resulting outcomes, and its related

feedback loop [26]. They noted that existing research on disclosure typically focused on two distinct processes: (a) how individuals decide to disclose or (b) how disclosure impacts them afterwards. However, it is only by examining these aspects together that the complexity of disclosure becomes clear, revealing its potential to profoundly affect multiple areas of a person's life [26]. The DPM has also been extended to sexual violence disclosure, as research indicates that survivors cannot be identified by appearance alone, and that disclosing sexual assault may elicit adverse social consequences, including discrimination, rejection, and inequitable treatment [31,32]. By exemplifying how disclosure outcomes are influenced by both individual and systemic factors, the DPM reveals the necessity of trauma-informed and equitable approaches that prioritize survivors' agency and mitigate potential harms, rather than assuming disclosure is unconditionally advantageous. For students in higher education, it is crucial that institutions unpack their beliefs about the role of disclosure. This begins with recognizing the multifaceted risks and barriers students may encounter and working to ensure that disclosure is an empowering choice—not one that exposes students to further harm.

Critical race scholar Maya Hislop's concept of *paradoxical justice*—which she describes as "both as a salve for and salt in the wound of [one's] respective traumas" ([33] p.338)—provides valuable insight into the complexities survivors face when navigating systemic barriers after disclosure. Students at the highest risk of sexual violence are the least likely to disclose their experiences, highlighting a critical concern about the adequacy and accessibility of institutional supports [1]. In higher education, safety or justice is not guaranteed, aligning with Chaudoir and Fisher's feedback loop concept that influences students' decisions to disclose based on their understanding of how society treats them [26]. Yet, much of what we know about disclosure is constructed from research focused on relatively privileged student populations.

Research by Brubaker and colleagues reveals that much of the existing literature on student nondisclosure is based on homogeneous samples of white, heterosexual, cisgender, young, middle-class undergraduate students [4]. As a result, institutional policies and interventions often fail to reflect the needs of equity-deserving groups, perpetuating inequities in care. For example, international students face unique vulnerabilities when navigating disclosure processes [11]. Without citizenship, they may fear immigration-related repercussions, discrimination, or the withdrawal of financial or academic support if they come forward. These fears are compounded by systemic barriers, such as a lack of cultural competency among institutional staff or within supportive programming. However, none of these specific nuances or risks is typically acknowledged in institutional policies, leaving international students unable to see themselves or their unique needs reflected in the framework of care. As a result, these students may feel unsupported and marginalized, further disincentivizing disclosure. Similarly, students from historically marginalized communities often distrust institutional systems of care, including law enforcement and health services, due to long-standing systemic oppression. For example, for every Black woman who reports sexual assault in the USA, at least 15 do not,34 many fearing they will not be believed or their community will face further violence or criminalization, reinforcing Chaudoir and Fisher's model of the consequences of disclosure [26]. Despite these realities, it is not the norm for schools to provide alternative pathways or crisis supports that acknowledge these systemic issues. Most institutions do not offer options for students who feel unsafe contacting police or other authorities, leaving them with limited support. The risk management following disclosure is not the same for everyone, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing structural violence [35].

Social policy researcher Andrea Hollomotz names that the elevated risk of violence faced by equity-deserving individuals is often attributed to personal vulnerability rather than the societal conditions, such as power imbalances and systemic marginalization, which underpin violence and its consequences [36]. This distorted framing obscures the structural factors that shape whether and how students disclose their experiences. Higher education institutions must be held accountable for explicitly naming and addressing these structural conditions and acknowledging their own role in sustaining environments that increase risks for students. To achieve this, institutions must support representative, intersectional research that meaningfully informs policy and practice, ensuring responsiveness to the varied and rich experiences of all students rather than focusing narrowly on a single, homogeneous student perspective.

Recommendations and future directions

As both a researcher and practitioner serving at a university's sexual violence support office in Canada, I recognize that the current landscape of institutional responses is fundamentally insufficient. The extraordinary courage of students who disclose experiences of sexual violence stands in stark contrast to institutional inertia, highlighting the critical need to radically rethink our approaches to support, prevention, and care. Drawing from initiatives like Barrios and Caspi's recommendations on culturally responsive support services [3] and Dunn, Bailey, and Msosa's intersectional bystander training [37], the work moves beyond critique toward actionable, systemic

change. This approach seeks to amplify strategies that center survivor experiences, challenge institutional complicity, and create genuinely responsive and equitable support mechanisms. By engaging with global perspectives and diverse institutional contexts, researchers and practitioners can develop more nuanced, culturally informed strategies that truly address the dynamic realities of sexual violence in higher education. As this perspective article concludes, the following section offers illustrative examples intended to inspire pathways of transformation. These examples demonstrate how meaningful, survivor-centered change can be conceptualized and implemented when grounded in an intersectional lens.

Transforming access: creating safer pathways for survivors

In the pivotal book *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed powerfully explores the complexity of reporting sexual violence in higher education settings in the UK. One of the key concepts Ahmed captures is the notion of policies as being non-performative—simply having a sexual violence policy in place is not enough [38]. Ahmed argues that non-performative policies are those that exist primarily as bureaucratic documents, creating an illusion of action while simultaneously maintaining the existing institutional structures that perpetuate harm [38]. These policies function more as a protective mechanism for the institution than as a genuine tool for supporting survivors or preventing sexual violence. It is time for higher education institutions to be held accountable for acknowledging the role of structural violence in students' lives within their policies and practices. Institutional policies must be revised not only to recognize who is being supported but also to actively create transformative pathways to care, support, and resources.

By incorporating an intersectional approach into sexual violence response and training, higher education teams can better account for the complex ways in which power, privilege, and systemic oppression shape students' experiences and disclosure outcomes. For instance, institutions can begin to shift these dynamics by honoring students' lived expertise and prioritizing their collaboration in the redesign of prevention and response programs, ensuring that the voices of those most impacted by systemic inequities are centered throughout the process. A concrete example of intersectional consideration as it pertains to accessing support is the University of Victoria's anonymous disclosure line [39]. This initiative offers a transformative model of survivor-centered care that prioritizes personal agency while addressing systemic barriers to formal reporting. By allowing students to access information and resources without identifying themselves, this initiative reduces risks associated with unconscious bias, structural violence, and mandatory reporting policies. Importantly, such a model acknowledges the specific challenges faced by marginalized groups, such as racialized students, 2SLGBTQIA + individuals, and those with precarious immigration statuses who may feel particularly vulnerable when navigating formal institutional processes. By removing these barriers, anonymous disclosure lines prioritize that survivors connect to support on their own terms, fostering trust and reducing retraumatization. This approach also highlights an opportunity for higher education institutions to implement additional pathways that prioritize survivor agency while addressing structural inequities. While anonymous systems cannot replace the need for comprehensive, intersectional policy reforms, such interventions illustrate how applying an intersectional lens can shift the focus from individual-level solutions to structural transformation.

Transforming bystander intervention programming

Bystander intervention is a cornerstone of sexual violence prevention on North American campuses, encouraging individuals to intervene safely when witnessing potential harm and to support victims afterward. However, traditional bystander programs often fail to address the diversity of student experiences, relying on assumptions rooted in white, cisgender, non-disabled, and heteronormative frameworks [37]. These frameworks often portray perpetrators and victims through a narrow lens: white, cisgender, heterosexual men as aggressors and white, cisgender, heterosexual women as victims. This not only excludes the realities of 2SLGBTQIA + students, racialized communities, disabled students, and others with marginalized identities but also reinforces a limited understanding of who is at risk and who is responsible for intervening. As a result, such programs may inadvertently alienate students whose experiences fall outside these normative assumptions, making them less likely to engage or feel supported. To encourage a truly inclusive culture of care, campus staff, social workers, and other support providers must receive ongoing training that transcends surface-level diversity awareness. An intersectional approach to this training not only acknowledges but also engages actively with the complexity of students' and staffs' identities. It unpacks how implicit biases, power imbalances, and systemic inequities shape disclosure dynamics and responses to sexual violence. This deeper understanding trains staff and students alike to recognize the unique barriers faced by groups at higher risk for harm, ultimately creating more equitable intervention strategies.

Leading the charge on integrating an intersectional approach into bystander training practice, Dunn and colleagues' chapter, *Stand by Me: Viewing Bystander Intervention Programming through an Intersectional Lens*, offers practical strategies that can transform intervention programs [37]. One key recommendation is tailoring content to reflect the specific needs of various student populations. For example, students of color may have unique experiences of sexual violence and varying levels of trust in institutional systems, influencing their responses to bystander intervention efforts. Similarly, 2SLGBTQIA + students may encounter specific challenges when seeking help due to fears of discrimination or invalidation. To create safer and more supportive spaces for engagement, students should have the opportunity to participate in identity-affirming discussions led by individuals who reflect their lived experiences [37]. These conversations might explore topics such as navigating disclosure within racialized or queer communities, resisting cultural stigma around reporting, and understanding how systemic power shapes vulnerability to harm or strategies for collective care and community-based safety. Facilitators may include trained student leaders or community experts, such as local 2SLGBTQIA + advocates, sexual health educators, or culturally specific service providers, who can ground these discussions in real-world contexts and affirm the diverse realities students bring to the table. These efforts enhance relatability, build trust, and foster a more inclusive culture of care where all students feel represented and supported.

Additionally, Dunn and colleagues emphasize the importance of addressing implicit biases among trainers and participants [37]. Without acknowledging and challenging assumptions related to gender, race, disability, or sexual orientation, bystander intervention programs risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes or excluding marginalized groups. Training sessions can serve as opportunities to dismantle these biases through critical self-reflection. For example, the chapter references a study by Katz and colleagues, which found that female-identifying students were less likely to intervene in a potential sexual assault if both individuals involved were male-identifying and presumed gay, compared to situations involving a heterosexual pairing where the female was the perceived target of violence [40]. Recognizing and addressing these patterns are essential to ensuring that bystander programs do not reinforce discriminatory attitudes. By incorporating exercises that foster critical self-reflection and promote equity, bystander intervention training becomes more empathetic, contextually informed, and effective. These intersectionality-enhanced programs not only avoid inadvertently causing harm but also create safer, more supportive environments for survivors. By fostering a deeper understanding of the intersecting identities and systemic barriers that influence both intervention and disclosure, these programs not only enhance prevention efforts but also contribute to creating an environment where survivors feel safer and more supported in coming forward.

Transforming research

Despite the growing recognition of intersectionality, significant gaps persist in research on sexual violence disclosures. Current literature often fails to capture how societal responses to sexual violence are intricately influenced by the intersecting dimensions of survivors' identities. For example, a 2024 scoping review by Tarzia and colleagues synthesized 34 global studies of qualitative literature on sexual violence against students in post-secondary education and revealed a lack of intersectional analysis in existing studies, despite the growing recognition that survivors navigate complex identities and systemic barriers [41]. Further highlighting this gap, American research by Linder and colleagues found that only 20% of studies collected data on sexual orientation, 0.9% on ability status, and 1.4% on nonnormative gender identity [42]. While 72% of studies collected data on ethnicity, less than 22% acknowledged ethnicity or racism in their analysis [42]. Little consideration is given to individuals' social positions, which significantly impact disclosure decision-making [3]. These omissions perpetuate a one-dimensional understanding of sexual violence, neglecting how social positions significantly impact survivors' disclosure decisions and experiences.

Future research must prioritize intersectional methodologies to uncover the ways systemic barriers and supportive interventions influence survivor outcomes. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) offers an ethical and equitable framework for involving all partners in addressing systemic inequities through shared decision-making, co-learning, and mutual ownership [43]. When applied in higher education, CBPR ensures students are not only consulted but also engaged meaningfully in shaping the systems that affect their well-being. This enables the development of programs and policies that reflect the structural realities students navigate, rather than reproducing dominant narratives or institutional norms [44]. CBPR offers a promising framework for fostering collaboration, emphasizing reciprocity, respect, and the principle of "nothing about us, without us" [45]. In light of this, CBPR is not a shortcut for addressing the deeply entrenched issues of mistrust, structural violence, and institutional betrayal. Creating a culture of safety and inclusion requires a sustained and genuine commitment to working with students as partners rather than merely participants. On our Canadian

campus, we often reflect on who does not access our office and why. While CBPR can help illuminate these gaps, it must remain an additional pathway, not a mandatory one. In a world where free speech is celebrated, students are equally entitled to remain silent. CBPR can be a valuable tool for collaboration and shared expertise, but it is not a mechanism to "give voice" or disrupt silence [46]. Silence, as public health social scientist Michelle Brear reminds us, is not merely the absence of voice—it can be a profound form of resistance, a way for individuals to maintain agency and power [46]. As we strive to create equitable access to safety and healing, we must honor the duality of disclosure: the power it holds and the depth of the silence it often contains. By integrating intersectional approaches into both research and practice, we can more effectively address disparities in disclosure experiences, fostering environments where all students feel supported in the ways that matter most to them.

Conclusions

Disclosure is a deeply personal decision conditioned by the intersection of student survivors' identities, power dynamics, and social positioning. Higher education must prioritize environments that foreground student survivor autonomy and confront the systemic inequities that influence whether students feel safe to disclose or seek support. This perspective piece emphasizes the urgent need to move beyond one-size-fits-all response models and adopt a more holistic, student-centered intersectional framework. Global scholarship is instrumental in advancing cross-cultural learning and addressing research gaps, deepening our collective understanding of how systemic barriers determine access to safety and care within educational institutions. Yet, it must also attend to the uneven distribution of resources, power, and political will that shape what is possible in different cultural and institutional contexts. Intersectionality, when applied with local specificity and global solidarity, provides a critical foundation for building more just and responsive systems of support.

To truly support student survivors, institutions must ensure that intersectionality undergirds both policy and practice. This involves reimagining support systems that honor survivors' choices, whether they choose to disclose or remain silent, and actively dismantling the barriers that prevent equitable access to resources and care. Institutional accountability to inclusivity, representation, and collaboration means more than statements of intent; it demands concrete action. Even when budget lines are impossible to budge, we have a responsibility to demonstrate commitment by insisting on transparency and meaningful engagement. Practical steps include openly sharing service utilization data, fostering authentic partnerships, redesigning educational materials to reflect a breadth of identities and relationship experiences, and embedding structural practices that continually ask: Who is at the table? Whose voices are missing, and why? These critical questions have transformative potential, especially when informed by innovative and equity-driven practices from other institutions locally and globally. How are other campuses meaningfully involving students and centering lived expertise in decision-making processes? What strategies are they implementing to ensure representation is not merely symbolic, but influential? Intersectionality is not an optional perspective. It is essential for building campus environments capable of addressing sexual violence at its roots, ensuring safety, dignity, and justice for all students, everywhere.

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