‘Heard and seen and safe’? Experiences of disclosing and reporting gender-based sexual violence and harassment (GBSVH) in higher education institutions in Ireland

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Content Warning

The research presented in this report relates to personal experiences of gender-based and sexual violence and harassment. The language used in this report is direct, and the qualitative data presented is detailed. This may be distressing or uncomfortable for readers, for many reasons. Information on how to get help, if you need it, can be found at https://hea.ie/policy/policy-development/national-supports/

Use of terminology in this report

This report uses the term *gender-based and sexual violence and harassment* (GBSVH), reflecting the national strategy on ending Sexual Violence and Harassment (SVH) in higher education. The language in the report draws on research in the fields of gender-based violence, workplace bullying, and harassment. This section explains the rationale for the terminology chosen:

Gender-Based and Sexual Violence and Harassment (GBSVH) This phrase is used as an umbrella term referring to a broad collection of types of violence and harassment that have in common a basis in gender inequality, which in turn reinforce gender inequality, with different impacts across different minority groups. The rationale for this conceptualisation is outlined more fully below.

Disclosure In this report, the term "disclosure" is used to refer to any act of telling somebody in a higher education institution about incident(s) of GBSVH. A disclosure may occur as part of a formal complaint or report, but it is more likely to be informal. See also HEA (2025).

Participant People who took part in in-depth qualitative interviews are referred to as participants, or by a first name (pseudonym) which was assigned by the research team, following a process of de-identification. The focus of the report is on participant experiences of GBSVH, and experiences of speaking (disclosure/ reporting) in their higher education institution. We draw on their perspectives and use their language where possible and appropriate. As a report on survivor experiences, we did not

investigate the backgrounds to the experiences shared, and we do not draw any conclusions about the outcomes of those experiences.

Victim-survivor The ethos of this project is to centre participant experiences as they were described in the research interviews (see Methods section). At times, we refer to participants collectively as victim-survivors, in line with research on gender-based violence (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1996). This term recognises existing critiques of both "victim" and "survivor" as essentialising and reductive of certain experiences and reflects common usage in services and advocacy (Women Against Abuse, no date). For the purposes of this report, we do not refer to participants as "targets" in line with workplace bullying literature (Leonard and McDaniel, 2025) although in many cases that is also how they could be understood.

Abuser/Harasser When speaking about the person or people responsible for the behaviour that we describe as GBSVH, we use the terms abuser or harasser. In most cases there was no complete investigation process, and we do not suggest that these terms are indicative of a formal finding. We use this language to allow us to recount the experiences of victim-survivors, without imposing doubt on their accounts. We deliberately do not use the language of criminal justice processes, such as *perpetrator* or *offender*, as that is not the focus of this research and would distort the experience-centred accounts of the participants. We note that for some participants in this research, criminal justice experiences have been traumatising, and this research aims to avoid the unnecessary use of such language.

Reporting party and respondent party Where the report discusses formal processes within the HEI, such as disciplinary and grievance procedures, we use the term 'reporting party' for the person making a report, and 'respondent party' for the person who is the subject of the report. We do this, again, to make a distinction between the HEI and the criminal justice process which uses terms like 'complainant', 'complainer' and 'accused' (Cowan and Munro, 2021; Disantis and Towl, 2025).

Receiving party A key finding of this research is that victim-survivors disclose their experiences to a wide range of different people within their HEI, even when they do not proceed to making a formal report. We use the term 'receiving party' to refer to anybody with an institutional role who is told directly about an experience of GBSVH – including and not limited to: human resources personnel; EDI or sexual violence personnel; tutors; lecturers; line managers; senior management and others – even when this information is received in an informal context or manner. Other recipients of disclosures, such as friends and families, who do not have an institutional role, are referred to as 'informal sources', in line with the wider literature on disclosure (Ahrens, 2006, Ahrens *et al.*, 2007).

Glossary

GBSVH – Gender-based and sexual violence and harassment

HEA – Higher Education Authority

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HoS – Head of School

SVHO – Sexual Violence and Harassment Officer (in this report, this refers to anybody in an SVH institutional role, including SVH prevention and response managers and dignity and respect managers)

SATU – Sexual Assault Treatment Unit

PI – Principal Investigator

Introduction: Two Stories

SARAH

Sarah is a visiting lecturer in a HEI. She met a man through online dating who turned out to be a PhD student in the same institution as she was. They went on one date, then she made it clear that she didn't want to take things further. He proceeded to stalk and harass her over several social media platforms, before sending harassing emails to her university email address. This caused her to feel unsafe at work. She mentioned the issue to her Head of School, who was immediately supportive, and suggested that she should speak to the sexual violence and harassment (SVH) service in her HEI.

The SVH officer outlined Sarah's options. Sarah did not feel a formal complaint process was appropriate: she didn't want to be exposed or to have to explain things about her private life; and she didn't want her reputation to be up for debate. She also didn't want the man involved to face excessive consequences. Instead, she chose to ask her Head of School to intervene with the PhD student's Head of School. He did so, and the behaviour stopped.

Sarah said that when she spoke to the SVH officer and to her Head of School, she felt "heard and seen and safe".

NAOISE

Naoise is an undergraduate student. She was sexually assaulted by a fellow student on a date. When she told some friends about what had happened, they helped her to recognise the incident as an assault.

Naoise visited the SVHO in her HEI, who was kind and supportive, and advised her that she could not file a formal complaint and make a Garda report at the same time. She chose to make a statement to the Gardaí. Naoise's experience of the Garda report and investigation was prolonged, stressful and traumatic, and lasted for nine months. Some Gardaí were supportive and others more adversarial or unhelpful. She said: *It didn't feel like the guards were on my side. At all."*

While the Garda investigation was underway, Naoise's health deteriorated. She saw the man that she had reported frequently on campus. Naoise asked many people in the HEI to provide protection measures for her. She spoke to security, academic and administrative staff as well as senior management. All said that this was only possible if she made a formal complaint – even though this was not available while the investigation was underway. As the investigation progressed, she became exhausted at repeating her story and concluded that she could not proceed with a formal report in the HEI in addition. After many months, the Gardaí contacted her to say that that there was not enough evidence to proceed with a charge.

Naoise continued to see the man on campus. She felt that now that charges were not being taken, he was "*getting more brazen*". Her efforts to seek protection continued, with the same result, that without a formal complaint, no action was possible.

Naoise described the experience as lonely, putting her "on edge" all the time. She avoided her HEI as much as possible in her final year. Naoise's experience of a sexual assault was compounded by the failure of people in authority to help her to protect herself. The cumulative impact of these different responses in different places left Naoise feeling abandoned, alone, and devastated.

Executive Summary

Overview

This executive summary prefaces research that reports an in-depth qualitative research study on experiences of disclosing and reporting gender-based and sexual violence and harassment (GBSVH) in higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. The study was commissioned by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), as part of the national implementation plan for ending sexual violence (ESVH) in higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2022a).

The research involved in-depth interviews with people who have disclosed themselves as having experienced GBSVH within a HEI in the past 4 years. Interviews focused on experiences of disclosing, reporting and managing the aftermath of violence and harassment within the HEI, including instances where the victim-survivor did not disclose to anybody. Recruitment was carried out with the assistance of Sexual Violence and Harassment (SVH) services in HEIs and NGOs, primarily online. Interviews were conducted in person and online between May 15th and July 31st 2025. In total, this research represents 18 interviews with victim-survivors of GBSVH: 12 students and 6 staff; 16 women and 2 men across 7 different HEIs in Ireland. The types of GBSVH reported were varied, including sexual and physical assaults; harassment and stalking including cyber-located harassment; as well as gender-based and sexualised bullying and harassment. The profile of participants varied, with all but two participants reporting at least one minoritised identity in addition to their gender, including international status; race or ethnicity; physical and mental disability.

The research report situates the research in the context of international literature on GBSVH in higher education. Recent research specific to reporting GBSVH in higher education highlights not only longstanding barriers to disclosure, but also the profound effects of institutional responses on victim-survivors. This report synthesises emerging evidence showing how institutional silencing, betrayal, and organisational violence can shape reporting behaviours and significantly impact those who come forward.

A qualitative methodology was employed for the research comprising in-depth interviews with self-selecting participants across HEIs in Ireland. The incidents of GBSVH and subsequent efforts to disclose or report detailed in the study all took place since 2021[1], and across the different HEIs sampled from, different policies, procedures and resources were in place. The research team acknowledges that some of the challenges captured in this report have been addressed in some cases but not all. Meaningful and sustained improvement will require a coordinated approach that

[1] There is one exception, of an incident that took place in 2018, where the survivor continued in the HEI and was still there at the time of the interview.

includes policy and procedure development, effective implementation, and ongoing monitoring and adaptation.

The findings begin by mapping the nature of GBSVH experiences in the data; identifying and emphasising the factors that contributed to levels of vulnerability to violence and harassment as well as the impact of this toxic behaviour on individuals. Through a detailed analysis and mapping process, the findings outline how participants navigated their HEI's systems and structures as victim-survivors of GBSVH. Key disclosure moments are identified in terms of how the victim-survivor was *heard* in the institution.

We begin by identifying positive disclosure experiences and the common factors that underpin them, in a section named "heard and heeded". A sense of being heard, believed and supported was of huge importance to those disclosing, especially when making a disclosure to an *informal source* such as friends or family. Importantly, our focus is on cases where disclosures were made to people with institutional roles including, but not limited to, designated SVH staff and those other people who took decisive and helpful action, enabling the victim-survivor to focus on their own needs, because they were "heard, heeded and helped".

We then identify cases where we describe participants as "unheard". By this we mean that they were "missed" or "let down by" the higher educational system. A number of participants did not disclose at all or limited their disclosure to close friends or family. Some did not know, and did not find out, that policies and supports were in place in their HEI, while for others, structural barriers made it difficult for them to access or engage with those supports. In these "unheard" cases, participants made adaptations to their own movements and behaviours to navigate the GBSVH, up to and including changing jobs and dropping out of courses of study.

The findings then explore cases of participants who attempted to report or complain within their HEI, either to secure their own safety or the safety of others. In these cases, participants were "heard and harmed." Their experience of pursuing safety was complicated, lengthy, adversarial, and frequently added to and/or worsened the trauma of the original experience of GBSVH, while also failing to secure protection for the victim-survivor or more generally. Critically, there were no examples in the data of complaints or reports that were pursued within the HEI in a way that was victim-centred or trauma-informed. This is not to say that they may not exist, rather that they do not come through in our data set.

We then outline the outcomes of these varied journeys for victim-survivors, noting the small number of instances where violent and harassing behaviours were tackled, and the resilience, growth and commitment to change expressed by some survivors. We draw attention to the cumulative harm done by the experience of violence and harassment intermingled with indifferent, ineffective, or hostile institutional responses.

The report concludes with recommendations of relevance to multiple stakeholders within the Irish HEI sector, the actions from which are outlined in full below. The

research team acknowledges that the context in which this research occurred is currently evolving. In many HEIs, policies, procedures and resources related to GBSVH are new; and in cases where these were already in place at the time of the incidents discussed in the data, these policies, procedures and resources have expanded and/or bedded down since. It is worth noting that this research clearly shows that policies and procedures interact with wider institutional imperatives, which persist and have impacts even in the context of policy change.

We note that there is a demonstrable commitment to tackling GBSVH in higher education in Ireland, as evidenced in a body of national and institutional-level policies and guidance documents, and in the provision of dedicated resources to support implementation on the ground.

Our report moves from experiences to recommendations, and these can be cohered as outlined in Figure 1:

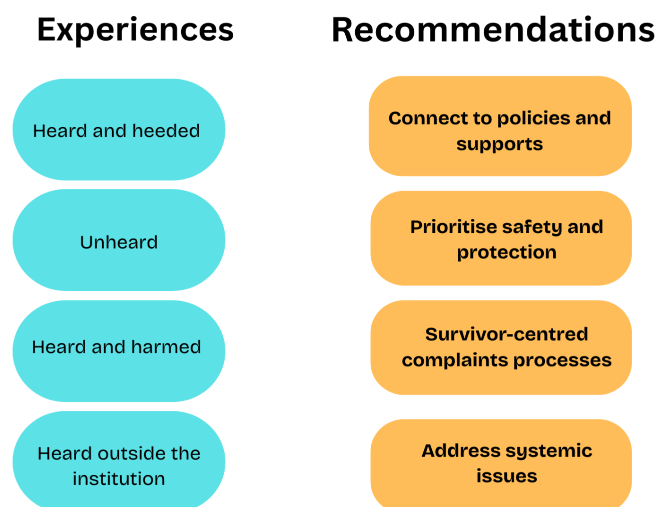

Figure 1 : Overview of experiences and recommendations

These recommendations are intended to support the roll-out of policies and procedures and to strengthen existing commitments, such that the sector moves closer to providing an experience which our informants describe as feeling "heard and seen and safe" after having made a disclosure. Key actions are listed here, with a more thorough discussion of recommendations in the body of the report. Detailed qualitative understanding of this issue within Irish higher education is in its infancy, and the report concludes with recommendations for further research directions.

Recommendations

Connect victim-survivors to policies and support

The number of victim-survivors who did not access dedicated support within their HEI is noteworthy, either because they were unaware of these supports, or because they did not believe these would help them. This service gap is largest for the people most vulnerable to GBSVH: members of minority groups including racialised or international staff and students, disabled staff and students and others; and those in precarious or dependent positions such as PhD students and early career researchers. In some cases, a lack of awareness about the existence of dedicated SVH support extended from the victim-survivor to the receiving party. Our recommendations are presented as actions that emphasise outreach and awareness-raising across the whole institution, with an equalities lens and clearly delineated and differentiated roles and responsibilities.

Recommended Actions

In order to expand and diversify the use of support services by victim-survivors, the following actions should be taken as part of comprehensive strategies that include prevention and, where required, prosecution and disciplinary measures.

Ensure easy identification of a single, named, and accessible point of contact for every victim-survivor who needs to access support from their HEI.

Embed education and awareness raising throughout the academic journey. This should be continuous and not provided as an add-on. Basic information should be disseminated widely and frequently across the institution, recognising that anybody in the HEI community might receive a disclosure. This should include simple straightforward information about how to respond to disclosures in the immediate (e.g. DO listen and support, DON'T judge or adjudicate; DO help find the appropriate SVH point-of-contact, DON'T minimise or dismiss).

Clearly highlight that receiving parties do not have to take decisions or adjudicate the rightness of a case; but they do have an active responsibility to connect victim-survivors to support. Frequent referrals should be viewed as evidence of a well-functioning system.

Provide specific training such as First Point of Contact. The provision of training for students and staff should include explicit input on how to respond to disclosures. Training should include information about confidentiality, privacy, and cultural and gender sensitivity. Awareness-raising about policies and procedures should be very visible and frequent for all staff, with additional emphasis on key strategic points of

emphasis in career i.e. induction, assumption of management or leadership roles, and also be tailored and culturally sensitive to target minoritised people so as to acknowledge and ameliorate risks of seeking services for them. People receiving disclosures should be enabled to be future-focused, enabling the individual victim-survivor to identify their next step. Training and awareness-raising needs to respond to the many locations where disclosures occur, not only within the hierarchical structure, but across the campus community.

Review and regularly update information, communications and awareness-raising materials to ensure that:

- they reach people who are vulnerable to GBSVH in HEIs, especially marginalised groups, such as international staff and students; precariously employed staff; people with disabilities; LGBTQIA+ communities and others.

- they address commonly-held myths about GBSVH and related supports and enable effective signposting to services.

Prioritise safety and protection

Acts of disclosure and reporting in this study, as in many others, took place to secure safety – both that of the individual victim-survivor, and of the wider HEI community. Seeking safety typically involved risk-taking – that the abuser/ harasser would find out about their disclosure/ report, or that their reputation would be damaged. However, disclosing to different actors in the HEI rarely led to immediate safety action to protect the victim-survivor. Instead, responses sometimes doubted or questioned the individual's account, demonstrated victim-blaming or "himpathy", or were excessively procedural. When victim-survivors were involved in Garda investigation processes, no safety actions were taken by the HEI while the investigation was underway. The recommended actions focus on protection actions that would lead to more immediately victim-centred and trauma-informed responses.

Recommended Actions

Prioritise the immediate safety and well-being of individuals making disclosures, including offering physical safety and rapid identification of a range of options and giving the victim-survivors choices and control over how to proceed.

Develop clear policies and procedures that ensure that when victim-survivors choose to make an official report to the Gardai, they are protected and supported throughout the period of the investigation. The safety of victim-survivors should equally be addressed while the HEI's complaint and investigation processes are underway.

Provide psycho-social support that is appropriate, timely, trauma-informed and tailored to the individual needs. If dedicated trauma-informed counselling cannot be provided within the HEI, referrals should be facilitated to ensure that all victim-survivors are able to access the support they need.

Make clear and defined commitments to follow-up by SVH services with victim-survivors. In the aftermath of a disclosure to designated support within the HEI, at least one follow-up contact should be initiated, even if the victim-survivor does not take any official action.

Ensure that staff in campus accommodation services have the awareness and competency to respond proactively and appropriately to disclosures of GBSVH, by linking victim-survivors to dedicated supports and by making changes that improve the victim-survivor's security (and that of the wider community, when required).

Implement survivor-centred complaints processes

While the study showed the positive impact of additional resources and dedicated support staff in HEIs, experience of complaints processes documented in the data were all difficult. Once victim-survivors attempted to invoke disciplinary or complaint systems, they were treated as parties to a dispute, rather than individuals addressing what was often a traumatic problem. Grievance procedures often created, or served to reinforce, trauma and feelings of distress. Official procedures placed victim-survivors in adversarial situations where they felt they had to defend themselves, generally in cases against a responding party who had power to further harm them. These power dynamics were often denied or ignored by people within official proceedings. There was evidence of participants being required to go through mediation processes that were inappropriate to the issues being addressed. The recommended actions in this section seek to offer alternatives to distressing and bureaucratic investigation procedures and to implement trauma-informed approaches to investigations where these must take place.

Recommended Actions

Provide genuine options for protection and continuation in the HEI, even if the individual does not want to engage in formal processes. As previously, these options should be clearly designed and communicated for the benefit of those who are most minoritised and/ or powerless within the HEI.

Ensure that all line managers understand their responsibilities related to GBSVH, and that any potential conflict of interest is recognised and addressed at the point of disclosure.

Develop dedicated procedures for formal investigations for those who wish to pursue them, in line with trauma-informed and victim-centred practice. Address delays in these processes as a matter of priority.

Identify and implement ways to support victim-survivors appropriately while formal complaints processes are underway, through provision of appropriate protections, supports as well as connections to expert accompaniment.

Communicate transparently and appropriately with victim-survivors in the aftermath of an investigation, with a view to reassuring them that their safety and protection is a priority. Communicate with the *entire* HEI community at a general level about HEI actions to address GBSVH including investigations undertaken and outcomes, with a view to building trust in the procedures.

Recognise the systemic nature of GBSVH in higher education

Participants in this research often understood their experience as part of a wider system. Indeed, in some instances they disclosed or reported because they wished to see this system changed. Victim-survivors drew attention to the fact that GBSVH was normalised or diminished within their HEIs, adding to their fear of being blamed or judged for speaking. Perceived impunity for acts of GBSVH meant that some participants believed that the violence or harassment they had experienced was ongoing or potentially ongoing against other targets. When they engaged with formal processes, however, the responses were narrow and individualised, aimed at resolving interpersonal disputes rather than addressing evidence of gender inequality. The recommended actions in this section seek to take a comprehensive and systemic approach to hearing victim-survivor disclosures.

Recommended Actions

Cascade training and education beginning with senior leadership, i.e. Presidents and all senior management including governing authorities and HR, before saturating it across the whole HEI. It is vital that senior leaders receive complete and up-to-date training on GBSVH, so that when they are called on to adjudicate cases and speak on the issue, they have a clear understanding of it and that they themselves as trauma informed when such issues come onto their desks. A top-down approach signals commitment that the issue is taken seriously, which is essential in each and every HEI.

Ensure that remedy and redress following incidents of GBSVH has a future focus, seeking not only to resolve the dispute, but to prevent future harm, and embed awareness of and commitment to gender equality within the HEI.

Ensure that data collected by SVH/D&R services and via the anonymous Speak Out tool is analysed and shared, to identify priority locations and times for action. Consider whether disclosures which do not result in reports, alongside Speak Out data, can provide environmental information and enable risk assessment and proactive action by the HEI, in the absence of formal complaints.

Commit to ongoing regular monitoring and data collection from SVH and D&R services and communicate actions clearly in order to demonstrate commitments and build trust and generate understanding of the meaning of ending sexual violence and harassment in higher education.

Reduce the barriers to complaining by considering enabling group reports and/ or historic reports, which can be pursued by victim-survivors without feeling isolated, threatened and completely alone in the process.

Ensure that wider gender equality plans (e.g. Athena Swan) link with the strategic goal of Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in HEIs. Cascade the message that GBSVH, like gender equality, is in everyone's interests.

1. Understanding GBSVH Reports and Disclosures in Irish Higher Education and internationally: The Literature

1.1 *Conceptualising gender-based and sexual violence and harassment*

Precise terminology and definitions of violence vary, offering different emphases across location, form, target and perpetrator (Boyle, 2019; Anitha, Jordan and Chanamuto, 2024). Overlapping bodies of research across higher educational environments variously address gender-based violence (Mergaert *et al.*, 2024); sexual misconduct (Bull, Calvert-Lee and Page, 2021; Bull and Page, 2022) sexual violence (Disantis and Towl, 2025); violence against women (UNWomen, 2019); gender-based violence and harassment (O'Connor *et al.*, 2021); and workplace bullying and harassment (Hodgins and Mannix McNamara, 2017; Hodgins, MacCurtain and Mannix-McNamara, 2020). For this report, we draw across this diverse but connected literature, identifying three key aspects: that forms of violence are distinct, but connected on a continuum (Kelly, 1988; Anitha *et al*, 2024); that they occur in the absence of consent (Department of Education and Skills, 2019; Lagdon *et al.*, 2025); and that they are underpinned by complex power relations and particularly by intersectional gendered hierarchies (O'Connor *et al.,* 2021; Anitha *et al.,* 2024).

Continuum thinking (Kelly, 1988, Boyle; 2019) recognises many distinct types of sexual and gender-based violence including sexualised jokes and harassment, flashing, sexual assault and rape. It recognises violence that occurs both online and offline, and both everyday, "mundane" types of violence and rare or "extreme" forms (Anitha *et al.,* 2024). Continuum thinking about GBSVH connects behaviours that are labelled harassment or bullying with those conventionally labelled as violence, on the basis that they are '*targeted at individuals or a group of individuals because of their sex or gender'* (Foley *et al.*, 2020 p1676), and that they are relational, unethical and institutionalised (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2021). This captures the fact that sexual harassment embraces both sexual and sexist behaviours and targets both people and environments, encompassing negative treatment of men and women who are perceived to violate masculine and feminine ideals (Franke, 1997 cited in Cortina and Areguin, 2021). Positioning these behaviours on a continuum recognises that when supposedly "mild" forms of violence are not addressed, they "tend to gradually escalate" (Mergaert *et al.,* 2024: 8). From the perspective of the individual victim-survivor, continuum thinking does not impose a given hierarchy of severity on forms of violence, which are often experienced cumulatively over a life course (Kelly 1988), and for this reason, the term "violence" applies collectively across the continuum (Mergaert *et al.,* l 2024, Anitha *et al.,* 2024). Power imbalances are understood as "a

central root cause of violence" (Mergaert *et al.,* 2024), especially gendered and sexualised power imbalances, which ripple through ecological levels from interpersonal, through institutional relationships, to wider social and cultural norms (Heise, 1998). Gender-based violence has important overlaps and interconnections with other forms of discrimination and exclusion, including, for instance, racialised violence (Crenshaw, 1991; Mergaert *et al.*, 2024; Humbert and Strid, 2025); migration status (Forbes-Mewett and McCulloch, 2016); contract status (O'Connor *et al.*, 2021; Hearn *et al.*, 2025; Reeves *et al.*, 2025); disability and neurodiversity (Ridout, 2020; Robinson, Frawley and Dyson, 2021; Fox, 2025); and multiple other axes of exclusion (Humbert and Strid, 2024; DiSantis and Towl, 2025).

Researchers take different approaches to addressing GBSVH in the higher educational environment, variously focusing on the student experience (Cowan *et al.*, 2024; DiSantis and Towl, 2025); the staff experience (Hodgins *et al.*, 2024; Reeves *et al.*, 2025), and the whole institution (Pilinkaite Sotirovic *et al.*, 2024; Lipinsky *et al*, 2026). For this report, we look at the *whole* institution, drawing out aspects that are unique to different cohorts, and also the connections across them. Importantly, we note that these two cohorts, students and staff, share HEI spaces and may be directly related through experiences of GBSVH, as in instances of staff to student violence or student to staff violence. By addressing the issue at the level of whole institution, it is possible to bring attention not only to individual interpersonal acts, but also to the conducive context of gendered inequality (McCarry and Jones, 2022).

There are, nonetheless, important distinctions. Students form the largest cohort of the HEI community, though proportionally, they are less likely than staff to experience GBSVH (Humbert and Strid, 2024)[2]. Students are most likely to experience physical and sexual violence; and less likely to experience psychological violence or sexual harassment – although these latter are the most common forms of GBSVH reported in higher education (Humbert and Strid 2024). For students, abusers are most commonly friends, acquaintances, and existing sexual partners; and perpetration appears to be most common in the initial months of higher education (Kimble *et al.*, 2008). Abusers are overwhelmingly men (Humbert and Strid 2024; DiSantis and Towl, 2025). Staff to student violence is especially defined by power imbalances. Research depicts grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours by academic staff in contexts where students' power to consent or object is minimal (Bull and Page, 2021). These power differentials arise most sharply during postgraduate study, when students are more likely to work on an individual basis with staff, and may be dependent on them for future progression to academic careers (Cowan and Munro, 2021).

In the case of staff-to-staff violence, certain aspects are particular to the higher education environment: namely, the nature of the neoliberal academy as individualistic, hierarchical and competitive; creating optimal conditions for exploitation

[2] The authors suggest that this differential is related to the duration of time spent in the institution, with students passing through relatively quickly, and staff often spending whole careers within an institution, hence having more time in which to experience GBSVH.

and abuse (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; O'Connor *et al.*, 2021). Research on sexual harassment in workplaces highlights its connection to gender discrimination more broadly in society (Charlesworth, 2002), and further notes that gender is mediated through other identities (Humbert and Strid, 2024). This recognises the uneven distribution of vulnerability to GBSVH among people who experience multiple and intersecting types of minoritisation and/or marginalisation (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; Higher Education Authority, 2022b; Hearn *et al.*, 2025). GBSVH, in higher education as elsewhere, is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality, and an expression of inequality in itself (Hearn et al 2025, Anitha *et al* 2024). In light of this, theorists draw attention to the creation of the higher educational workplace as a hostile environment for women and minoritised people (Ahmed, 2021), in which gender inequality and sexual harassment are mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing, in what McCarry and Jones (2022) describe as an 'invidious circle'.

1.1.2 Disclosure and reporting: conceptualisations

Naming, identifying, and speaking about GBSVH is a key aspect of the victim-survivor experience (Kelly, 1988). Extensive research shows the damage that negative disclosure experiences can have, sometimes being encountered as retraumatising (Bedera, 2023) and referred to as a "second rape" (Campbell *et al.*, 2001). Speaking about GBSVH to anybody at all can be challenging. For higher education institutions to be able to respond, victim-survivors need to disclose what happened to them, and to seek support or help. For the most part, victim-survivors make their initial disclosures, when they do, to informal sources such as friends or family (Ahrens *et al.*, 2007). In higher education, one study found this meant other faculty or staff, friends or a romantic partner (Kirkner *et al*, 2022). The social reactions of informal sources can determine whether a survivor continues seeking help, or whether they choose silence (Ahrens, 2006; Jones, 2025).

From a victim-survivor perspective, disclosure within the HEI should be appropriately supported, as it can potentially unlock access to services and supports as required, as well as providing the institution with the information it needs to tackle patterns of violence. We understand disclosure to refer to any act of telling any person about an experience of GBSVH within the higher educational institution. In this study, we explore both the decision-making around disclosure, and what happens following a disclosure. These events are mediated by policies which provide victim-survivors with options, including options to make a formal complaint or report. We understand "formal" processes to refer to any official process, following official guidelines and overseen by HEI management and procedures.

The acts of disclosure and reporting involve a minimum of three actors. First, there is a victim-survivor (potentially more than one), who has experienced GBSVH. There is also an abuser/ harasser (or potentially more than one) who has caused the GBSVH. This person may not be aware of the disclosure or involved in it, but they are

implicated. Finally, there is the person or people who receive the information, who we refer to in this report as receiving parties. We conceptualise anybody who receives a disclosure within the HEI as a receiving party. These may be friends, classmates, colleagues; or they may have official or supervisory roles, as line managers, senior managers, HR personnel and others.

1.2 Prevalence and policy of GBSVH in higher education: Ireland in international context

Although precise prevalence estimates for GBSVH in higher education vary considerably, it is widely agreed that internationally, HEIs experience high levels of such violence and harassment (UNWomen, 2018), leading some to characterise universities as sites, not only of learning, but also of violence (McCarry and Jones, 2022). While GBSVH can affect anybody, it is rooted in gender discrimination and by far the greater proportion of victim-survivors are female (CoE 2011). Because it is structurally embedded, such violence impacts diverse identities, and the risk of exposure is comparatively higher for non-binary and trans individuals (Humbert and Strid, 2024). By a conservative estimate, at least a fifth of all female students in the UK have experienced unwanted sexual contact (McCarry and Jones, 2022), and one in four female students globally report experiences of sexual harassment (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020). Studies show that staff feature as both victim-survivors and harassers/abusers in cases of GBSVH, and university campuses show higher levels of sexual harassment than other workplaces (McCarry and Jones, 2022). Research in higher education shows that sexual harassment behaviours are likely to occur serially rather than just once and that typically, harassers/abusers target multiple people (Cantalupo and Kidder, 2017; Hales and Gannon, 2022).

Recent quantitative research studies have begun to map the scale of the problem in Ireland. In a national survey of students (MacNeela *et al.*, 2022b) almost one third of females experienced sexualised comments, at least 60% experienced sexual hostility, more than 30% unwanted sexual attention and 12% experienced sexual coercion. Turning to staff, MacNeela *et al.* (2022a) found rates of up to 24% of female staff experiencing sexualised comments, up to 25% experiencing sexual hostility, 11% experiencing unwanted sexual attention and 1-2% sexual coercion. In both surveys, rates were higher for women, gender non-binary respondents, and those with a disability (McNeela et al 2022a, 2022b). This supports wider research that shows that intersectional minoritisation, including gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and disability status, serve as predictors for GBSVH (Dawson *et al.*, 2024; National Disability Authority, 2024). In the national Speak Out report for the period 2022-2024 documenting anonymous reports of sexual violence and harassment in HEIs, nearly half of the 60% of respondents who gave demographic details identified with one or more marginalised identity. 24% of those who gave demographic details had a

minority race or ethnicity, and 37% had a disability of some kind (Speak Out National Office, 2025).

Vulnerability to GBSVH can also be enhanced by contract precarity (O'Connor *et al* 2021, Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020), which is disproportionately experienced in higher education in Ireland by minority ethnic groups (Kempny and Michael, 2021; Higher Education Authority, 2022b). A review of gender equality in higher education in Ireland concluded that the vulnerability of minorities and precarious staff to GBSVH needs to be properly addressed (Higher Education Authority, 2022b). Ni Shuilleabhain and Skerritt (2024) suggest that GBSVH among early career academics in Ireland may be higher than commonly believed and call for more research in this area. It is clear that GBSVH constitutes a significant problem including, but not exclusively, from an EDI perspective and one which requires action, in Ireland as much as internationally.

1.2.1 Policy framework

There is widespread agreement that universities have both a duty and capacity to significantly reduce sexual violence (UNWomen, 2019; Cowan and Munro, 2021; Disantis and Towl, 2025). HEIs in Ireland do this through different approaches including codes of (mis)conduct, dignity and respect policies, targeted initiatives such as Active Consent, Speak Out, bystander programmes, and training programmes (Crowley *et al.,* 2025; MacNeela *et al.*, 2025; Murphy, Skelly and Grimes, 2025). They aim to support victim-survivors to continue with education; and to implement robust complaints procedures (Cowan *et al.*, 2024). At a high level, good practice guidance for HEIs has begun to be disseminated, drawing on research and case study experiences, focused both on students (e.g. DiSantis and Towl, 2025, UNWomen, 2019), and whole institutions (e.g. Mergaert *et al.,* 2024). The largest study of gender-based violence in higher education to date, the UniSAFE study, proposes a "seven P" framework to tackling gender-based violence in higher education, comprising: prevalence; prevention; protection; prosecution of offenders and disciplinary measures; provision of services; partnerships between actors; and policies (Mergaert, Linková and Strid, 2023). This builds on the Istanbul Convention "4 Ps" framework which guides the Irish sectoral approach (see below): Prevention, Protection, Provision of services, and policy coordination (CoE, 2011). Comprehensive policy responses call for a whole institution approach which should be ecological, survivor-centred, trauma-informed, human rights based, and intersectional (DiSantis and Towl, 2025). Since GBSVH both constitutes and reinforces gender discrimination (Hearn *et al.,* 2025, McCarry and Jones, 2022), HEIs have a responsibility to tackle it, not alone as an interpersonal issue, but as discrimination *against a group* (Bull, 2022). Failing to act on sexual violence impacts the university and campus community as a whole (UNWomen, 2019; Cowan and Munro, 2021).

In April 2019, the Department of Education and Skills published Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions (Department of Education and Skills (2019), more commonly referred to as the ESVH Framework. In August 2020, the Minister for Further and

Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science expanded the remit of the HEA's Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality to cover Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and to include oversight of the implementation of the ESVH Framework. An expert Advisory Group was established to advise the HEA on policy relating to addressing sexual violence and harassment in Irish higher education institutions, including but not limited to, the implementation of the ESVH Framework. In January 2022, the HEA published the reports of the 2021 National Surveys of Staff and Student Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish HEIs. With the support of the HEA Advisory Group on Ending Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment in HEIs, the Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions Implementation Plan was developed to address the recommendations that emerged from an analysis of the survey findings. The Implementation Plan is intended to build on and complement the broad range of initiatives ongoing across the sector towards the outcomes set out in the national policy framework. The current study has arisen from Action 12 of the Implementation Plan: Undertake a study following the victim's journey from disclosure to outcome. The Implementation Plan was extended until the end of 2025. HEIs continue to implement the ESVH Framework, and in November 2025, the HEA published a review of the Framework by an expert group, as this report was being finalised. The Report of the Expert Group: Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment Framework (Higher Education Authority, 2025) makes recommendations as to how, in the view of the Expert Group, the 2019 ESVH Framework could be revised and renewed, while retaining the current focus on prevention and response.

Notwithstanding this progress, a programme of culture change dedicated to the needs and experiences of HE staff has yet to be actualized' (MacNeela *et al.,* 2025). A detailed analysis of HEI policies is beyond the scope of this report. We note a wide variety of policy approaches across very different institutions, which are nonetheless connected by significant coordination and exchange across the network of practitioners for SVH prevention and response.

1.3 *Disclosing and reporting GBSVH in Higher Education: Ireland in international context*

The current study explores the experiences of victim-survivors of GBSVH in HEIs in Ireland once GBSVH has occurred, whether it has ended or not. It is recognised that GBSVH responds to wider cultural conditions and reinforces cultures of gender inequality (Charlesworth, 2002; McCarry and Jones, 2021; Ahmed, 2021, Anitha *et al.,* 2024). In spite of the global outpouring of testimony that occurred in the #MeToo movement, silence remains a key feature of the experience of GBSVH in higher education (Kirkner et al 2022).

Internationally, as noted by both Ahrens (2006) and UNWomen (2018), for example, HEIs follow the same patterns as noted in wider literature of silence, disclosure to

informal sources, and low formal reporting rates (Jones *et al.,* 2025). In a study of 88 faculty and staff in the US, Kirkner *et al.,* (2022) found that 40% of those surveyed did not report or disclose experiences of sexual harassment to anybody at all. Data from the US and the UK suggest rates of somewhere between 6-20% of campus sexual assault to be reported either to police or institutions (US Department of Justice, 2014; Revolt Sexual Assault and The Student Room, 2018). When it comes to sexual and gender-based harassment and workplace bullying, in the absence of quantitative data, similar patterns are predicted (Kirkner *et al.*, 2022). Victim-survivors are more likely to consider an incident to be sexual assault, and to report, where there is evidence of physical violence and/ or injury, or where evidence can be provided via a "paper trail" of digital abuse (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022) – that is to say, where the violence or harassment is perceived to meet a standard of evidentiary proof (Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Charlesworth, 2002).

Survey research conducted in 2021 into GBSVH in HEIs in Ireland demonstrated predictably low rates of reporting in the institution, particularly among students. Less than 10% of students reported their experiences to staff, counsellors or Gardaí (MacNeela *et al.,* 2022a). Reporting was higher among staff: between 27% and 51% of those who had experienced GBSVH in some form reported it to a line manager (MacNeela *et al.,* 2022b). A small number of studies on attitudes and experiences of reporting in higher education in Ireland are instructive, and bear mentioning here. Across a survey of HEI staff in Ireland and Northern Ireland, McNeela *et al.,* (2025: 69) found that on the whole, confidence in institutional responses was low, and participants saw a gap between existing policies and their implementation. Studies on workplace bullying and harassment in higher education in Ireland indicate multiple barriers to reporting bullying and harassment, including HR malpractice, toxic leadership, and cultures of fear (Hodgins and Mannix McNamara, 2017; Fahie, 2019; Reeves *et al.*, 2025). Where gender inequality underpins such experiences, it renders them all the more challenging (O'Connor *et al.,* 2021). Intersections with race, class, migration status and other axes of discrimination are less fully explored. In a staff survey on the subject of racism in higher education in Ireland, Kempny and Michael (2021) found a lack of awareness of procedures, unwillingness to report owing to fear of personal consequences, and very few positive experiences of reporting. Responses to their survey also drew attention to the particular intersections between gender inequalities and experiences of racism in higher education in Ireland.

Low rates of formal reporting or disclosure are well-documented in general populations internationally (Ahrens *et al.,* 2007), and Ireland is consistent with this trend. CSO data gathered in 2022 shows that within the general adult population, few people disclose sexual violence to either police or formal services such as counselling or medical help (CSO 2023). According to that national survey, only 21% of adults who experienced sexual violence in adulthood used any service. Of those adults who disclosed to anybody, just 5% disclosed to police (CSO 2023). In higher education institutions, similar patterns are evident in recent analysis in spite of the recent roll-out of dedicated sexual violence and harassment resources and services across higher education.

Findings from a 2025 freedom of information request show that in the six years since 2019, 109 allegations of sexual harassment or assault had been made to institutional authorities across Irish HEIs (Casey, 2025). This is a minuscule proportion of the overall student population, and likely to represent a fraction of all who have experienced GBSVH. Among those who logged an experience of SVH on the Speak Out anonymous reporting tool, 20% of staff and 12% of students had made any formal/ official complaint to their institution, while 4% of students and fewer than 10 staff members had reported to the Gardaí (Speak Out National Office, 2025). It can be expected that disclosures to institutional services and formal reports will increase, as awareness of policies and newly-offered services increase. However, judging by national and international experience (see, for example CSO 2023), it is also expected that disclosures and reports will continue to be low relative to rates of victimisation.

Unable to successfully address the problem through their institutions, victim-survivors often implement informal coping strategies, including avoiding the harasser, or denying, downplaying and/or ignoring the situation (Kirkner *et al.*, 2022, O'Connor *et al.,* 2021). Over time, these coping strategies can become destructive and ultimately lead to despair and withdrawal, often feeding into a sense of institutional betrayal (Smith and Freyd, 2013; Shannon, 2022). According to Mergaert *et al.,* (2024: 8) 'seemingly "innocent" or "mild" forms of misconduct when not addressed tend to gradually escalate into more severe and grave forms of violence.' For this reason, it is generally agreed that there is a need to increase safe, survivor-centred opportunities for disclosure (DiSantis and Towl, 2025; Bull, 2022). Disclosure can be beneficial for various reasons: it can enable victim-survivors to access what they need for their own immediate safety and that of others (Bull 2022); while also providing data to allow for detailed local understanding of the extent and nature of the problem within HEIs; providing a base for possibly bringing about long term change (Bull, 2022; Bull and Shannon, 2025).

Decisions to speak, and to report, are understood as part of an ongoing process rather than one-off moments (Taylor and Norma, 2012; Bull, 2022); as is the pursuit of justice for GBSVH (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Bull, 2022). Analysis of literature establishes certain aspects that cut across victim-survivor journeys in the higher educational environment, providing a framework for understanding the context of decision-making, these are presented here as: policy approaches; centering trauma and survivor needs; power, gender and intersectionality; and institutional incentives.

1.3.1 Policy Approaches

Policy is widely recognised to be a key lever for serious efforts to address GBSVH in higher education (UNWomen, 2019, Mergaert *et al.,* 2024). As already outlined, policies in Ireland and internationally aim to encourage disclosure and reporting (Higher Education Authority, 2022a; Mergaert *et al.*, 2024; DiSantis and Towl, 2025). Research provides some insight into gaps in existing policy approaches (Anitha *et al.,* 2024; Bull and Shannon, 2025; Cowan and Munro, 2021, O'Connor *et al.,* 2021). A mapping of HEI formal disclosure policies in the UK notes a preponderance of vague

or discretionary language, an absence of definitive guidance, and scope for corresponding inconsistency in interpretation and implementation across the sector (Cowan and Munro, 2021). In the absence of clearly defined outcomes, regulation can result in "regulatory ritual" (DiSantis and Towl 2025), or tokenistic policy (Fahie, 2019), characterised by exhortation but not clear direction. Consistent with this analysis, qualitative responses to the national surveys on SVH in higher education in Ireland conducted in 2021 indicated that at the time, many staff and students saw a gap between policies and their implementation (McNeela *et al.*, 2022). Respondents to a more recent survey of staff in HEIs in Ireland and Northern Ireland described a lack of clarity on consequences in the event of disclosures or reports of GBSVH, and selective implementation of policies (Lagdon *et al.,* 2025). At policy level then, confusion and implementation gaps may impose barriers to making disclosures that bring about satisfaction for victim-survivors; this is explored in further detail in later sections.

1.3.2 Survivor needs and trauma-informed practice

It is generally agreed that effective HEI responses to the phenomenon of GBSVH must be survivor-centred (UNWomen, 2019; DiSantis and Towl, 2025). Gender-based violence can occur at any point in the life cycle, and can be profound, life-changing, ongoing and cumulative in its impact (Burke *et al.*, 2025). Trauma that is related to experiences of GBSVH is often deepened by wider cultural messages, both those which downplay or minimise violence, and those which emphasise linear recovery (Burke *et al*. 2025). Failure to recognise the complex, ongoing nature of trauma in the HEI context can worsen the individual victim-survivor's experience; by constructing deficit models of survivorship whereby recovery is a requirement of the 'temporal hierarchies' of higher education. These emphasise rapid progression through courses and towards promotion (Burke *et al.* 2025). Research documents trauma associated with GBSVH, being worsened or compounded by trauma associated with institutional responses in higher education (Bedera, 2023; Shannon, 2022).

Trauma and survivorship are not connected in a one-to-one relationship; that is, not all survivors will experience or display signs of trauma; nor do signs of trauma necessarily evidence victimhood/ survivorship (DiSantis and Towl, 2025). However, being fully trauma-informed allows an institution to be prepared for the potential of trauma to confound or complicate both the victim-survivor's experiences and the requirements of formal processes. We follow Disantis and Towl (2025: 71-72) in adopting the key principles for a trauma-informed institution from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Safety; Trustworthiness and Transparency; Peer support; Collaboration and mutuality; Empowerment, voice and choice; and Cultural, historical and gender issues. Being trauma-informed is considered to be the most advanced institutional response possible; greater than trauma-sensitive or trauma-aware.

1.3.3 Power, Gender and Intersectionality

The same unequal power relations render people vulnerable to violence and impose barriers to speaking about it (Pilinkaite Sotirovic *et al.*, 2024; Hearn *et al.*, 2025; Lipinsky, Pereira and Sotirovič, 2026). Higher education contexts are characterised by especially pronounced structurally-embedded power imbalances (O'Connor *et al.*, 2021; Hodgins *et al.*, 2024; Hearn *et al.*, 2025). An intersectional and gender sensitive approach is key to understanding the power structures that underpin GBSVH in higher education (Anitha *et al.*, 2024; Disantis and Towl, 2025; Humbert and Strid, 2025).

Naming and understanding power dynamics and intersecting hierarchies is crucial to enabling disclosure and reporting for all in the higher education environment (Bull and Shannon, 2025; Lipinsky *et al.,* 2026). HEI policies that lean towards universal/ neutral language and approaches, render significant power systems such as race and gender invisible, naturalising them, and ultimately leading to worse outcomes for raced and gendered minorities (Bull and Shannon, 2025; Anitha *et al.,* 2024). Policies that do not account for the fact that men and women are not equally at risk for GBSVH can lead to narrow approaches to violence as individual/ interpersonal problems, decontextualising them and implicitly imposing masculinist worldviews (Anitha *et al.,* 2024). In an analysis of staff and student experiences in the UK, Bull and Shannon (2025) demonstrate how gender-neutral policies lead to unequal gendered outcomes through, for instance, gendered credibility assessments, and gendered narratives on disciplinary panels. Similar outcomes are visible when policies fail to expressly name other vectors of inequality such as race, class, contract status and others (Pilinkaite Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024; Anitha *et al.,* 2024). Even when efforts are made to address these issues, policies have been shown to perform "ornamental intersectionality", by invoking the term in GBV frameworks without translating this into practice (Lipinsky *et al.,* 2026). For this reason, Lipinsky *et al.,* (2026) call for HEIs to actively challenge and decentre dominant constructions and normative thinking of "ideal" (white, heterosexual, middle-class, etc.) survivors in GBSVH policies across the board.

1.3.4 Institutional incentives: patterns and trends

It is widely observed that higher education institutional responses to GBSVH can be inhibited by market-based expectations and the corresponding imperative to protect institutional reputations (O'Connor *et al.,* 2021; Phipps, 2020; Cowan *et al.,* 2024; Ahmed, 2021; Pilinkaite Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024; Shannon 2022). This tendency has been variously assessed as institutional inaction (Hodgins *et al.,* 2024), institutional airbrushing (Phipps, 2020), institutional harassment (Bull and Page, 2022), institutional betrayal (Shannon, 2022), and institutional violence (Ahmed, 2021). In the context of neoliberal incentives and risk management, higher educational institutions may deny, downplay or minimise the seriousness of GBSVH (Bull, 2024) – or when they acknowledge and seek to address GBSVH, they may nonetheless emphasise stability and maintenance of the status quo (Humbert and Strid 2024, Pilinkaite Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024). The twin imperatives of stability and brand maintenance can drive a pressure not so much to address GBSVH, as to be *seen to be addressing it*

(Cowan *et al.*, 2024; Pilinkaite Sotirovic *et al.*, 2024). Institutional self-protection can be experienced by the victim-survivor as retaliation and attack (Reeves *et al.,* 2025). Resultant policies are often incident-based and individualistic (Ahmed, 2021; Anitha *et al.,* 2024), seeking restoration of the existing order, rather than transformation of structural imbalances. In many cases, institutions isolate GBSVH through an emphasis on the sexual, but not the sex- or gender-based, serving to sheer off sexual violence as incident-based and interpersonal, and unconnected to wider gender issues (Charlesworth, 2002; Bull and Shannon, 2024). A socio-ecological approach to GBSVH requires addressing more than incidents and interpersonal relations but additionally tackling the culture that sustains underpinning power relations (McCarry and Jones, 2021; Kirkner *et al.,* 2022; Hearn *et al.,* 2025; Shannon and Bull, 2024).

1.4 *Experiences of disclosing and reporting GBSVH in HEIs*

It has long been recognised that institutional responses to sexual violence can be traumatic (Smith and Freyd, 2013) and retraumatising (Bedera, 2023; Shannon, 2022). As policy approaches to the issue in higher education proliferate, this section summarises qualitative literature on disclosure and reporting experiences. It begins with a discussion of barriers which prevent some from ever disclosing and prevent others from official or formal reporting or help-seeking. It moves on to a discussion of reasons why people do speak within the institution, and their experiences of institutional responses when they do.

1.4.1 Barriers to disclosure and reporting in HEIs

It is generally acknowledged that prevalence of gender-based violence in society is under-estimated owing to low rates of disclosure and reporting (Krug *et al.*, 2002; Kirkner *et al.*, 2022). Literature on sexual assault shows that the response of the first recipient of disclosure – most frequently an informal source – is decisive in the decision to proceed to seek help elsewhere (Ahrens, 2006; UNWomen, 2019; Kirkner *et al.,* 2022). When the survivor is not initially believed, they are less likely to go on to seek help from trained or formal services (Campbell *et al.,* 2001; Jones, 2025). Like violence and harassment, barriers are socio-culturally mediated (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010). Research shows that students at the highest risk of sexual violence are the least likely to disclose those experiences (Sears-Greer *et al.*, 2022; Jones, 2025). Nonetheless, to date, research data draws disproportionately on the experiences of relatively more privileged populations (Jones, 2025).

An early barrier to disclosure is the identification of the experience as *violence* and as unacceptable (Kelly, 1988). Cultural normalisation and/or trivialisation of acts of gender-based violence can make them difficult to understand or be perceived as such (Anitha *et al.,* 2024; Bull, 2024). Identification of the issue as unacceptable is often culturally mediated, both in the sense of different cultures having different expectations

and awareness of power and abuse in higher education, and in not knowing how to assess or understand behaviours in an unfamiliar culture (Bull, 2024; Forbes-Mewitt and McCullock, 2016). In the case of bullying and harassment, targets are generally slow to recognise their experience as such (Hodgins *et al.,* 2020), and it can take targets up to 10 years to name this experience (Hodgins *et al.,* 2024). In cases of under-researched factors including disability and/ or neurodivergence, distress can be pathologised and located both by the wider culture and by individuals in the deficits of the victim-survivor rather than in the violence itself (Robinson *et al.*, 2021; Fox, 2025).

Reasons for non-disclosure or very limited disclosure of GBSVH include guilt, shame, self-blame, and negative expectations of how the disclosure will be received by others (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022; Burke *et al.,* 2025, Forbes-Mewitt and McCullock, 2016, Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). Victim-survivors describe concerns that they will not be believed, that they will be blamed, or that they will meet a backlash or reperpetration by the abuser/harasser (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022). Among staff in HEIs, barriers to reporting bullying and harassment include toxic leadership, HR malpractice, power struggles and cultures of fear (Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Fahie, 2019). In some cases, victim-survivors state that there is no point in disclosing to their institutions, or that nothing can or will be done (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022; Humbert and Strid, 2024).

In order to seek help within a HEI, the victim-survivor requires knowledge of policies, protocols and procedures (Mergaert *et al.,* 2024) – assuming that these are in place, and actionable. Unclear procedures and uncertainty about consequences can feed into decision-making related to disclosing and/ or reporting violence in higher education and can also add to the distress caused by making reports or complaints (Hodgins *et al.,* 2020; Ahmed, 2021). As previously noted, this knowledge is mediated by power relations and culture, and people with greater privilege are often more likely to see their complaints as serious, significant and actionable (Ahmed, 2021). Institutional communications are directed towards imagined users who can be idealised versions of victims: implicitly white, middle class, heterosexual, cis-gendered and able-bodied (Lipinsky *et al.,* 2026); as opposed to those who are precarious, racialised, and otherwise minoritised. This can mean that they fail to communicate effectively with those most likely to need help or support (see Mergaert *et al.,* 2023 and DiSantis and Towl, 2025 for best practice approaches to culturally sensitive communication about policies and procedures for victim-survivors). In this way, marginalised individuals and members of marginalised groups can be rendered even more vulnerable, both through being excluded from policy communication and outreach, and by anticipating that they will be disadvantaged by policies not designed for them (Robinson *et al.,* 2020; Fox, 2025).

In spite of a policy emphasis on encouraging disclosure, it is well-established that disclosure can have harmful outcomes, especially for people who already face stigma and marginalisation (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010; Jones, 2025). Vulnerabilities to exploitation and victimisation are related to vulnerabilities to the impacts of speaking, both generally connected to the power relations at play (Ahmed, 2021; McCarry and

Jones, 2021; Forbes-Mewitt and McCulloch, 2016; Jones 2025). This is especially relevant in the case of hierarchical inter-dependencies, such as those between academic/ teaching staff and students (Whitley and Page, 2015; Bull and Page, 2021); or senior and junior academics (O'Connor *et al.,* 2021; Ahmed, 2021, Hearn *et al.,* 2025). As already noted, victim-survivors often believe that their voices will not be heard or believed (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022, Forbes-Mewitt and McCulloch 2016). Separately, victim-survivors may maintain silence out of a belief that if they are found out, their harasser will retaliate (Humbert and Strid, 2024; Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). Where staff or students have staked a lot on their academic success – by moving countries, investing years in low paid work, and being away from loved ones and/ or dependents – they may feel they have too much to lose by disclosing violence within the institution (Forbes-Mewitt and McCulloch, 2016).

Given the factors outlined in the foregoing discussion, it is argued that a key aspect of the decision to disclose is trust and confidence in the institution (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022; Humbert and Strid, 2024). Individuals are more likely to disclose and/or report within institutions when they can see that there are clear mechanisms in place for dealing with reports, and, crucially, they can see that such mechanisms are used and effective (Humbert and Strid, 2024; Bull, 2022; Bull and Page, 2022). Past experience may inform future action: victims who have had negative experiences or heard about them from others are less likely to make a report (Bull and Shannon, 2024). Experiences and expectations of the institution are also varied and mediated by past experiences of structural inequality and exclusion (Jones, 2025). A belief that the institution is characterised by "cultural malaise", a lack of accountability, or an inclination to prioritise its reputation above individual wellbeing works against the desire to disclose or report (Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Fahie, 2019; Hodgins and McNamara, 2019; O'Connor *et al.,* 2021). HEIs can demonstrate a commitment to acting, and reporting transparently on their actions, in order to build trust or confidence in the institution (Humbert and Strid, 2024). Nonetheless, as with all aspects of policy in this area, *trust-building* is most critical and possibly most challenging among minoritised and excluded groups (Anitha *et al.,* 2024; Jones, 2025), whose past experiences of institutions and authority may give them good reason to feel suspicious (Jones, 2025). It is also noted that for some victim-survivors, reporting is considered necessary although fraught, even when they do not trust their institution (Bull and Shannon, 2024). The institutions' duty of care comes into play, because it may be the only structure capable of addressing the harm an individual has experienced, whether they trust it or not (DiSantis and Towl, 2025).

The institutional commitment to action is thus vital in the decision to speak: this is assessed by victims not only via the presence of policies and protocols, but also their transparent and effective implementation. In addition to evidence of institutional responses to GBSVH, wider environmental conditions of power and inequality are taken into account in considering whether it is safe to speak about GBSVH in the HEI (Bull and Shannon, 2024). Given a mutually reinforcing "invidious circle" between gender inequality and sexual harassment in higher education (McCarry and Jones,

2021), Kirkner *et al.,* (2022) argue that the "sexual harassment climate" of the institution can directly inhibit victims' choice to use internal grievance procedures.

1.4.2 Experiences of disclosing within HEIs

Internationally, and in Ireland, institutions increasingly have dedicated staff in place to receive disclosures, and support victim-survivors to meet their needs and navigate the system as part of the national policy framework and implementation plan (DiSantis and Towl, 2025; Mergaert *et al.,* 2023; Higher Education Authority, 2022). Given the extensive personal, cultural and structural barriers to speaking/making disclosures, it is important to understand what causes victim-survivors to choose to disclose and potentially report experiences of GBSVH – whether for justice or help-seeking purposes (Bull, 2024; Holland *et al.,* 2021; McGlynn and Westmorland, 2019).

Victim-survivor support needs related to GBSVH depend both on the individual and on the type of violence experienced. Some incidents of physical and sexual violence are associated with urgent health responses; while other types of violence can be more prolonged and lead to different response needs. The first and most important priority in the event of any disclosure is safety (DiSantis and Towl, 2025; Bull, 2022). Other immediate needs can include health care such as (*inter alia*) post-rape care including emergency contraception, safe abortion and STI prophylaxis; front-line psychological support; and physical health care (García-Moreno and Temmerman, 2015). In the UK, HEIs are expected to provide support to student victim-survivors to continue with their education (Cowan *et al.,* 2024). In line with this, occupational/ campus-related needs for students can include changes in accommodation arrangements for victim-survivors or perpetrators; arranging temporary leave of absence; or postponing assignments or exams (UNWomen, 2018). Facilitating staff to continue at work might similarly involve changes in work allocations, locations, and providing for temporary leave of absence.

Research shows institutional imperatives and institutional thinking in operation as soon as a disclosure is made (Bull and Shannon, 2024; DiSantis and Towl, 2025), which can inhibit the possibility of disclosures turning into complaints or formal reports (DiSantis and Towl, 2025). In some instances, the response of institutional actors to a disclosure can worsen the impact of the original violence (Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Campbell *et al.,* 2001; Bedera, 2024). In the case of bullying and harassment, disclosures have been shown to be received in a way that minimises, plays down, or reduces the experience to "just" an interpersonal conflict or communication problem (Hodgins and McNamara, 2017; Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). This overlaps with an established cultural pattern of minimising and normalising GBSVH (Gavey, 2019) which has been demonstrated playing out on disclosures in higher education (Phipps, 2020; Whitley and Page, 2015; Bedera, 2023). The problem of "himpathy" is widely noted (Bedera, 2023; Rogalin and Addison, 2023; Bull and Shannon, 2025), apparent in a disproportionate emphasis on the impact of disclosures on the responding party, and an exaggerated concern with the risk that reporting parties are being dishonest

(Anitha *et al.,* 2024; Ahmed, 2021). This is closely related to a tendency, still common, to respond in a way that implicitly or explicitly blames the victim (Bedera, 2023; O'Connor *et al.,* 2021; Burke *et al.,* 2025).

When victim-survivors do not pursue a formal report, HEI policies typically offer interpersonal remedies such as reconciliation or mediation (Woodrow and Guest, 2017; Hodgins, MacCurtain and Mannix-McNamara, 2020; Ahmed, 2021; O'Connor *et al.*, 2021; Shannon, 2022). In practice, these remedies seek to "resolve" an interpersonal problem, without being able to interrogate or address the underlying power relations (Ahmed, 2021; Shannon, 2022; O'Connor *et al.,* 2021; Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). Procedural and administrative errors appear to be common (Bull and Shannon, 2024), while in other cases, managers may delay or "prevaricate" owing to unwillingness to directly address the issue (Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). Such errors and delays have a differential and potentially discriminatory impact: trivial to the institution as a whole and potentially positive for respondent parties yet devastating to the reporting party who is typically female and often additionally minoritised (Ahmed, 2021; Anitha *et al.,* 2024; Jones, 2025).

1.4.3 Thinking about taking things further: reasons for reporting, rationale and impediments to reporting

Existing literature details common reasons for making formal or official reports or complaints about GBSVH: in order to protect others who might be exposed to the same person; self-protection; and practical academic or career needs that require intervention in order to continue at the HEI (Bull, 2022; Taylor and Norma, 2012). The rationale of fighting injustice (Bull, 2022) shows that victim-survivors are sometimes motivated by a desire for institutional accountability (Whitley *et al.*, 2021; Dey, *et al.*, 2025) and systemic cultural change (Whitley *et al.,* 2021). Although some incidents and behaviours may be considered criminal, reporting to police is extremely low in Ireland and internationally, especially so among minoritised students who may feel unsafe approaching authorities who might criminalise them owing to migration status, past histories, or stigmatisation (Jones, 2025). Cowan and Munro (2021) suggest that students may be explicitly motivated *not* to punish or harm the reporting party, particularly given some manner of pre-existing relationship between many victim-survivors and those who abuse or harass them (DiSantis and Towl, 2025). In some cases, they suggest, students worry that outcomes of investigations might "ruin" the responding parties' lives (Cowan and Munro, 2021). For these reasons, it has been suggested that even when acts or behaviours are considered criminal, students may prefer their problems to be addressed within the educational institution, rather than through police and legal systems (Cowan and Munro, 2021; Jones, 2025).

Paradoxically, for those who report in order to secure their own safety, reporting often involves negative and potentially risky impacts for the complainant (Bull, 2022; Bedera,

2024; Ahmed, 2021; Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Jones, 2025). This is especially the case in toxic or hostile environments (Ahmed, 2021), and for individuals who are minoritised (Lipinsky *et al.,* 2026; Ahmed, 2021, Jones, 2025). While members of minority groups may seem invisible to GBSVH services, which are not designed with those groups in mind, they become hypervisible when they make reports or draw attention to GBSVH (Lipinsky *et al.,* 2026). When acts of speaking or reporting bring about greater harm to the individual, this can in turn damage trust in the institution to address GBSVH, reinforcing the cycle of non-disclosure and inaction. There is thus an important feedback loop between negative experiences of disclosure, and the overall safety of an institution. Since levels of GBSVH socially remain high, a low number of reports in an HEI is unlikely to mean that violence and harassment is not taking place; rather, it might be seen as indicating institutional inaction/ untrustworthiness, and therefore, that institutions are unsafe places (Towl, 2016).

Studies of disclosures to colleagues, mentors and supervisors within higher education show a trend of "warnings" against taking things further (Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Ahmed, 2021; Pilinkaite-Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024): sometimes in order to protect the victim-survivor's own wellbeing or career; or to protect the wellbeing of the institutions they depend on, including nominally progressive agendas (Ahmed, 2021). Warnings can have dual outcomes of maintaining overall institutional stability (Cowan *et al.,* 2024; Ahmed, 2021) while retraumatising the individual victim-survivor (Bedera, 2023). Warnings can take the form of fatalism (nothing can or will or should be done) or placating (listening with a view to ending/ neutralising the complaint) (Ahmed, 2021; Oman and Bull, 2021). Sometimes warnings are experienced as silences, or endorsements of silence and inaction (Pilinkaite-Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024). In all of these responses, it is also possible that the person receiving the disclosure may be warning or "shutting down" further action in order to protect themselves (Shannon and Bull, 2024), and sometimes that person is themselves precariously situated (Ahmed, 2021). As a result, victim-survivors may need to disclose to multiple people in their institution before finding somebody who is willing and able to help them, even at the risk of being retraumatised.

Alongside warnings, policies and mechanisms that draw attention to high penalties for false or vexatious complaints implicitly and erroneously suggest that such complaints are common and a significant problem to be addressed (Anitha *et al.,* 2024; Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). This can lead to a perception among victim-survivors that their complaint or report will be handled carefully or suspiciously, and that they cannot expect empathy or care in response to their complaint (Bull and Shannon, 2024; Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). This can lead to fatalism and reliance on informal coping mechanisms on the part of targets (O'Connor *et al.,* 2021). In this way, policies themselves can serve to deflect from the power relations that underpin GBSVH – and in so doing, to reinforce them (Ahmed, 2021; O'Connor *et al.,* 2021).

1.4.4 Pursuing formal reports and complaints within the HEI

Where individual victim-survivors take formal complaints against responding parties in institutions that are committed to tackling GBSVH, policies typically lead to disciplinary processes of investigation and redress (Cowan *et al.,* 2024; Di Santis and Towl 2025). Since reporting is low, and policies are relatively new in all settings, there is very little research data on experiences of dedicated investigation processes for GBSVH in HEIs, particularly among students (DiSantis and Towl, 2025). There is some evidence outside of the higher educational sphere that grievance procedures benefit minoritised women more in more gender-equal organisations (Dobbin and Kalev, 2019), leading some scholars to advocate for research towards the development of more gender-sensitive grievance procedures (Bull and Shannon 2024). Others note that to date, very little research has engaged with the perspectives of victim-survivors themselves, a key gap in generating victim-centred responses (Bull, 2024).

Current scholarship on HEI policies and implementation indicates numerous obstacles to victim-centred or gender-equal outcomes, mainly owing to the application of procedural equivalence within grievance processes. Once a formal report is lodged, studies note an imposed equivalence between reporting parties and the responding party, based on institutional priorities of "natural justice" or "neutrality" (Cowan and Munro, 2021; Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). By flattening the power differences between two parties, this imposed equivalence can deny the importance of context, manipulation and exclusion, and depoliticise acts that are in fact discriminatory (Bull and Shannon, 2024; Ahmed 2021). There is some evidence of cases where gendered power relations have been taken into account and addressed within disciplinary investigations (Bull and Shannon, 2024), but this is far outweighed by evidence of such dynamics being overlooked, denied or minimised (Ahmed, 2021; Bull and Shannon, 2024; Hodgins *et al.,* 2020). On the rare occasions that research documents power relations being taken into account within HEI investigations, it has been argued that this is only in cases where those relations conform to stereotypical expectations, involving stark differentials of gender, status and possibly age – as in the case of university lecturers abusing undergraduate students (Cipriano *et al.,* 2022; Bull and Shannon, 2024).

As an outcome of the false equivalence that characterises disciplinary processes, responding parties have in some instances been shown to be empowered to turn the accusation back towards the reporting party, a phenomenon described as DARVO – deny, accuse, reverse victim and offender (Ahmed, 2021; Bedera, 2023; Bull and Shannon, 2024). At its worst, this process allows responding parties to exploit the power imbalances that official grievance procedures conceal (Ahmed, 2021).

Different jurisdictions provide for different protections and rights: in the US, both reporting and respondent parties have rights within disciplinary processes; while in the UK, reporting parties to such processes are positioned as witnesses (Bull *et al.,* 2021; Bull and Shannon, 2024; diSantis and Towl, 2025). Unlike the respondent party, the

reporting party/witness does not receive information about the investigation while it is underway and does not have the same right to confidentiality (Bull and Shannon, 2024; Cowan *et al.,* 2024). Within investigation processes, confidentiality for the reporting party is a vital principle, given the risks outlined previously of social stigma, judgement, and re-perpetration/re-victimisation by abusers and harassers. In practice, this principle can prioritise institutional over individual well-being (Cowan, 2024; Phipps, 2020, Pilinkaite-Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024; Oman and Bull, 2022) – for instance, through the required signing of non-disclosure agreements by complainants (Ahmed, 2021). Once again, questions of power and value/worth can come into play, when respondent parties are perceived as too valuable for the institution to lose, given their role as "institutional breadwinners" (Shannon, 2022; Phipps, 2020).

Evidence from the implementation of disciplinary hearings suggests a pattern of gendered credibility assessments and gendered narratives that impose putative doubt on women's testimonies; downplay or fail to recognise evidence of sexualised or discriminatory behaviour; reinforce rape myths; or frame assessments through a "himpathetic" lens that centres male respondent parties rather than reporting parties (Bedera, 2023; Bull and Shannon, 2024). Gendered processes of this nature have long been documented in criminal justice rape trials (Cowan and Munro, 2022; McGlynn and Westmorland, 2019). The use of specialist trained investigators for such cases is recommended (Cowan and Munro, 2021; DiSantis and Towl, 2025) but insufficient, given the failure of HEIs to identify issues as power-related and gender-based in the first instance, and the failure of overall procedures to address these issues, even when specialist investigators are involved (Bull and Shannon, 2024).

Studies in both the US and the UK report a tendency in existing disciplinary processes to mirror criminal justice ones by involving legal professionals, drawing on legal approaches including burdens of evidence, and correspondingly limiting the options available to survivors for alternative approaches (Cowan and Munro, 2022, Javorka and Campbell, 2021). The gathering of excessive, invasive, or irrelevant documentation including past sexual histories has been recorded (Cowan *et al.,* 2024). This can promote what has been described as "crime logic" (Coker, 2017), which emphasises individual "bad" perpetrators rather than systemic harm; draws on stereotypical imaginings of "innocent" victims; and recreates adversarial and retraumatising experiences for victim-survivors (Cowan and Munro, 2022). These depictions of "criminal justice drift" in campus disciplinary proceedings for sexual violence (Cowan and Munro, 2022) have something in common with the longer standing literature on workplace bullying and harassment, which similarly documents adversarial processes, inappropriate action and breaches of confidentiality (Thirlwall, 2015; Neall, Li and Tuckey, 2021; Hodgins *et al.*, 2024).

Owing to the frequently distressing and retraumatising nature of reporting processes, there is some debate about the extent to which formal reporting should be encouraged in HEI environments (Bull, 2024), especially for marginal and minoritised people (Jones, 2025). Normalising reporting can raise awareness, improve data, and lead to

more resources for prevention and response (UNWomen, 2019; Bull and Shannon, 2024). However, given the risks inherent in engaging with formal processes, it has been argued that it is unethical to encourage this within environments known to be hostile (Ahmed, 2021; Bull, 2022). Research is required to identify how formal reporting might be scaffolded with additional initiatives to support reporting parties and increase safety across entire campus environments.

As previously discussed, it has been widely noted that HEI policies and reporting processes individualise the systemic nature of GBSVH (O'Connor *et al.,* 2021; Phipps, 2020; Bull and Shannon, 2024; Charlesworth, 2002, Bull and Page, 2022). Institutions frequently seek "resolution" of GBSVH complaints at a local or individual level, where resolution most typically takes the form of financial remedy (Bull and Page, 2022). Research on the reasons people report GBSVH demonstrates a mismatch in this respect: where individuals seem to report to secure their own safety, the safety of others, and wider cultural change (Bull, 2024; Whitley *et al.,* 2021), individual financial remedy secures none of these things, but allows the HEI to close the case and move on (Bull and Page, 2022). An analysis of student experiences of reporting sexual misconduct in higher education in the UK found that reporting parties wanted transparency, openness and institutional accountability regarding the realities of pervasive sexual violence in higher education (Bull, 2024). Other approaches to redress include involvement of the wider community in repair (Bull and Page, 2022) – which might constitute the opposite of the secrecy and silence that continues to surround cases of GBSVH in higher education (Pilinkaite-Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024; Cowan *et al.,* 2024). A key aspect of this analysis is the observation that trauma-informed responses seek not to atomise and isolate survivors, but rather to connect them (Ahmed, 2021; DiSantis and Towl, 2025).

Bull (2024) advocates enabling group complaints, which would reduce the isolating and risky nature of individual complaints. Rather than waiting for formal reports, Bull (2024) suggests that institutions can catalyse reports through mechanisms that reach out to victim-survivors. It has been noted that reports and disclosures can and should function as information that enables the HEI to act to secure safety (Mergaert *et al.,* 2024; Bull 2024). Even in the absence of a formal report, disclosures should be sufficient to enact protection measures and initiate risk assessments for individuals and at unit level and potentially carry out targeted awareness-raising actions (Mergaert *et al.,* 2024).

1.4.5 External Processes (Criminal Justice) and the HEI

Analysis of the UK context notes that a sharp distinction has historically been made between criminal acts such as sexual assault on the one hand, and breaches of HEI dignity, respect and behaviour codes on the other. The former has been seen as exclusively the preserve of police forces, and the latter within the remit of the HEI (Cowan and Munro, 2021). As a result, up until the mid-2010s, HEIs tended to distance themselves from criminal acts entirely, adopting a "hands off" approach to sexual

assault (Cowan and Munro, 2021). This is in stark distinction to the US, where Title IX policies have for decades required universities to act on sexual violence as a type of gender discrimination (Javorka and Campbell, 2020). Globally, the recognition that HEIs should take an active interest in survivors of criminal violence is relatively new. While victim-survivors have a right to report to police, it is generally recommended, in line with survivor-centred approaches, that such reports should be only with the intent and consent of the reporting party (UNWomen, 2019; Holland, Cipriano and Huit, 2021). Service providers who take significant decisions on behalf of victim-survivors are undermining a trauma-informed approach, which seeks at all times to restore control to victim-survivors (Holland *et al.*, 2021). In the timely words of one research team: “reporting is not supporting” (Holland *et al.*, 2021) and an excessive emphasis on reports can inadvertently harm survivors, undermine teaching and research aims, and de-centre the individual support needs of victim-survivors (Holland *et al.*, 2021).

Decades of research have documented failings of the criminal justice system towards victim-survivors of sexual violence (Gilmore, 2017; Cowan and Munro, 2021). In spite of efforts to improve this, negative survivor experiences combined with high rates of attrition and ultimately low convictions demonstrate a significant justice gap in criminal justice systems (Hanly *et al.,* 2009). This reality plays a role in the decision-making of victim-survivors in HEIs, who may choose to avoid police reports, in favour of invoking institutional disciplinary processes (Cowan and Munro, 2021). Individual and community identities and experiences can mean that victim-survivors themselves feel unsafe or at risk of criminalisation at the hands of police – for instance, if their migration status is precarious; they have a criminal history; or their communities have a history of discriminatory police treatment (Jones, 2025).

There is limited research on the interaction between HEIs and criminal justice systems, or the experiences of students or staff of criminal justice procedures (Javorka and Campbell, 2020). UNWomen (2019) recommend that HEIs develop MoUs with law enforcement, among other frontline services, a common practice in the US, but not elsewhere. Judicial processes and HEI ones are different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, a feature which scholars suggest can be seen as an opportunity for HEIs to offer alternatives (Cowan and Munro; 2021, Javorka and Campbell, 2020). It is noted that university codes of discipline are different to criminal law, imposing different expectations on their subjects, and requiring different standards of evidence (DiSantis and Towl, 2025; Cowan and Munro, 2021, Javorka and Campbell, 2022), although clarity on how this can or should operate in practice is often lacking (Cowan *et al.,* 2024).

It is a matter of some dispute whether concurrent criminal and disciplinary investigations can take place within HEIs (Cowan and Munro, 2021), but in the absence of this, HEIs may continue to take a “hands-off" approach with regard to sexual violence (Cowan and Munro, 2021). The long duration of criminal justice investigations and their high attrition rates mean that waiting for a police investigation to be complete may take up the entire period of a course of study such as a degree or

diploma. No research was found on the experience of staff or students while awaiting the outcome of a police investigation.

The justice needs of survivors are often far more diverse and relational than those imagined by criminal justice systems (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Cowan and Munro, 2021; Bull and Page, 2022; Frasca *et al.*, 2025). The question of institutional justice and accountability arises frequently (Phipps, 2020; Bull, 2024; Dey, Shannon and Quirk, 2025), and when institutions are felt to "fail" survivors, this sometimes results in acts of public naming and protest (Phipps 2020; Bull 2024; Dey *et al.* 2025). As movements including #MeToo have demonstrated, such actions can be impactful (Dey *et al.* 2025), however they do not necessarily deliver the desired outcomes, and they can potentially reinscribe harmful power relations and inequalities (Phipps, 2020). Nonetheless, they highlight the reality that higher education institutions exist in wider contexts, and victim-survivors will draw on the resources that are available to them to meet their needs. Indeed, in a context where the voices of students and victim-survivors are systematically ignored or unheard, student activism can constitute a clear expression of student voice (Bull, 2024). A contextual understanding of GBSVH in higher education thus needs to be alert to the role of external actors, institutions and spaces in the victim-survivor journey.

1.5 *Impacts of GBSVH and disclosures in higher education*

Rather than making a sharp differentiation between incidents of violence and the impact of disclosing or reporting them, we understand the victim-survivor's experience as encapsulating both. The term "survivor journey" can appear linear and clear – from harm to recovery – but research on trauma and higher education processes recognises that such journeys do not have obvious or inevitable endpoints, that they are varied and involve a multi-level range of actors and processes, intervening, accelerating, delaying and reversing the direction of recovery (Burke *et al.,* 2025; Ahmed 2021).

Responses from institutions can play a defining role in the overall experience of the victim-survivor, to either mitigate harm or worsen it. A study on student experiences of reporting sexual harassment to Title IX supervisors in the US found a significant disconnect between the education-limiting impacts of sexual harassment on victim-survivors, and the investigators' assessment of the events as not reaching a necessary bar of severity (Cipriano *et al.*, 2022). Research shows that institutional self-interest can have a negative impact on victim-survivors (Humbert and Strid, 2024; Bedera, 2023; Holland *et al.* 2021). At best, reporting can be hoped to unlock access to supports and services that might ameliorate the impact of GBSVH on academic performance, for instance through provision of counselling, legal advice and academic

accommodations; and additionally by offering some sort of closure to the victim-survivor, improving their ability to focus and perform (Humbert and Strid, 2024).

The significant individual-level impacts of gender-based violence have been extensively documented: on physical and mental health; on economic and professional well-being; and on social networks, connections and belonging (UNWomen, 2018). These impacts are wide-ranging and include physical injuries up to and including death as well as sexual and reproductive impacts including unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as chronic health issues related to fear and stress including headaches, back pain, fainting and seizures (Jina and Thomas, 2013). Mental health, professional and social impacts of sexual harassment are also extensively documented in higher education (Bondestam and Lundeqvist, 2020; Hearn *et al.,* 2025; Reeves *et al.,* 2025).

The individual impacts of GBSVH are intersectionally differentiated in many of the ways already mapped through this literature review, with those who are more vulnerable to perpetration also being more vulnerable to the negative impacts of such violence (Hearn *et al.,* 2025; Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020). Awareness of this fact can play into the overwhelming levels of silence among minoritised and marginalised victim-survivors (Lipinsky *et al.,* 2026; Pilinkaite-Sotorivich *et al.* 2024; Jones, 2025), potentially rendering them invisible in both policies and reporting data (Frasca *et al.,* 2025).

Burke *et al.* (2025) relate student attrition from higher education directly to life experiences of GBV, both within and outside of the university. Experiences of GBV also served to prolong students' time in higher education, delaying the prescriptive "endpoint" of rapid course progression. This is not recognised or acknowledged and results in "misrecognition". Deficit discourses conspire as a result to produce feelings of shame and not belonging (Burke *et al.,* 2025).

In higher educational environments, approaches which address GBSVH in narrow individualised ways can make such violence and its impacts on victim-survivors invisible on campus (Burke *et al.,* 2025; Pilinkaite-Sotirovich *et al.,* 2024), notwithstanding the high prevalence estimates. The impact of this invisibility has been described as "insidious trauma" (Burke *et al.,* 2025), by which it becomes possible for the campus community to ignore the fact that victim-survivors are part of the community (Burke *et al.,* 2025). The over-valuing of individual and masculinised traits within the neoliberal academy can lead to a misrecognition whereby the individual victim-survivor's needs are understood – even by them – as a deficit, and go unaddressed (Burke *et al.,* 2025). Such processes sustain and underpin gender inequality.

Literature rarely traces precise impact pathways, but the reactions of others within the institution are likely to play a role in respect of the extent of these impacts (Humbert and Strid, 2024; Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Bedera, 2023). Smith and Freyd (2014) developed the concept of "institutional betrayal trauma" to name the trauma that arises

from the failure of an institution on which a person depends for safety and security: this is relevant to higher education institutions, which are workplaces among other things (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022). Particularly for those who report to institutions in the expectation of protection for themselves or others, the failure of the reporting process to meet their justice needs and potentially retraumatise constitutes an institutional betrayal trauma (Bull and Shannon, 2024; Bedera, 2023). Research shows that GBSVH in academic workplaces – both the violence and harassment, and the response of others - can have a serious negative impact on mental health (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022; Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; Reeves *et al.,* 2025; Bedera 2023; Burke *et al.,* 2025), and additionally on engagement, productivity, and institutional perspectives on bias in the environment and career progression (Kirkner *et al.,* 2022; Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; Reeves *et al.,* 2025); ultimately including losing or leaving jobs (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; Reeves *et al.,* 2025). Beyond individual victim-survivors, research also notes the possibility of a broader impact of GBSVH on gender inequality within HEIs (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; Hearn *et al.,* 2025).

1.6 Conclusion

Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned as workplaces, educational spaces, social spaces and, for some, accommodation providers. They have a unique role to play in prevention and response to GBSVH. Research in recent years has moved beyond barriers to disclosure to gain a more granular understanding of what happens when people do disclose, and how different actors within institutions respond. A growing emphasis is placed on the experiences and perspectives of victim-survivors themselves, which this report shares. Existing research highlights significant blockages to victim-centred or trauma-informed responses, including the reputational imperatives that pervade the neoliberal academic market, and the individual, hierarchical and competitive dynamics that are specific to higher education. It also begins to map the experiences and voices of victim-survivors within institutions. More work is required to understand local, contextual and specific dynamics in detail, and this report seeks to contribute to this.

2. Methodology

2.1 Approach and objectives

In line with the HEA implementation plan for ending sexual violence and harassment in higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2022a), this research study was commissioned to investigate the victim's journey from disclosure (or no disclosure) to outcome. It is a qualitative study that focuses on the experiences of victim-survivors in their higher education institutions. The objectives of the study were:

1. To document and give voice to a range of staff and student experiences of GBSVH in higher education and to capture the impact on those directly and indirectly affected.

2. To explore survivor experiences of disclosing and reporting GBSVH to their institution, including, but not limited to, complaints that were formally investigated, in order to identify strengths, challenges and lessons.

3. To document and articulate survivor experiences and testimonies in accessible, creative, and sharable formats.[3]

4. To develop evidence-informed recommendations for Higher Education Institutions to enhance support to survivors as well as improve institutional responses to GBSVH.

The method selected for the field research was in-depth semi-structured interviews with self-identified victim-survivors of GBSVH. The research sought greater understanding of experiences of the HEI in the aftermath of experiences of sexual violence and harassment, including: disclosure of any sort; pursuit of institutional procedures including complaints and formal reports; and choosing not to disclose or report.

Inclusion criteria for interview participants were:

✓ staff and students of higher education institutions that have experienced GBSVH since joining their institutions and in the past 4 years.

✓ Contractors; visiting researchers, visiting lecturers and visiting students that have experienced SVH in the Irish institutions and in the past 4 years.

✓ Former staff and alumni of an institution may also be considered who experienced SVH in the past 4 years.

Recognising the sensitive and challenging nature of the experiences that the study wished to explore, all phases of the research were conducted, insofar as possible, in

[3] This objective is addressed in a separate output of the project

a trauma-aware manner, intended to minimise the harm of revisiting traumatic experiences, and to provide participants with power and choices, whenever possible (Campbell *et al.*, 2019). All members of the research team took part in training on trauma-informed practice in advance of data collection; this training informed the research design, implementation, analysis and writing of this report. The team was also supported by an Advisory Board of practitioners, community members, and policy-makers (see appendix 2).

2.2 Recruitment

As a national study, the researchers aim for relevance across all HEIs within the ESVH framework. The sampling approach was purposive, with recruitment outreach driven by the research questions and the constraints of time and capacity; it did not seek to be representative, nor would that be possible for a qualitative study of this nature (Bryman 2008; Fahie, 2025). An objective of gathering fifteen to twenty in-depth interviews, from as diverse a range of voices as possible across types of institution (IUA/ technological universities) and geographic locations was set. A mix of staff and student experiences, recognising that the student population is significantly larger than the staff population was sought, and active outreach to minoritised groups including racialised and classed groups; LGBTQIA+ communities; and international members of the HEI was included.

Study information was widely disseminated with the support of a network of practitioners in EDI, employment rights and gender-based violence, both based in HEIs and not. The study made use of social media, newsletters and email lists held by different institutional stakeholders including HEI dignity and respect services; sexual violence and harassment services; and HEI staff and student email lists. Recruitment information was also shared with civil society organisations including rape crisis centres, the National Women's Council, LGBTQIA+ support organisations, Traveller rights organisations and others, as well as HEI staff and student unions. In order to maximise the possibility of securing former staff and alumni, social media sharing was promoted, and full study information, including the participant information sheet, consent form, and a list of frequently asked questions, was made available on a standalone website held by the research consortium (www.borg.ie). Prospective interview participants expressed interest by entering an email address in a confidential form on the website, whereupon they were contacted by the field researcher to explore whether they wished to go ahead with a full interview.

The recruitment process was open from May 15th 2025 to July 31st 2025. In that time 58 expressions of interest were received. Each expression of interest generated a standardised email with further study information and an invitation from the field researcher to ask questions, get in touch, or make an appointment for an interview. Different levels of correspondence ensued, with the field researcher following up a

total of three times before allowing a lead to drop. Ultimately, a total of 18 interviews were conducted, of which 12 were with students (undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD), and 6 were with staff (technical/ support staff and academic). These were across a total of 7 different Irish HEIs, ranging in size (by student population) from 2,000 to 38,000. Sixteen of the participants identified as female and 2 identified as male; none gave any other gender identity. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked if they had any relevant minoritised identity or status: where they said they did, that is recorded here. Three participants identified themselves as autistic; 4 as having some other chronic condition or disability; one was bisexual; one "queer"; and 9 were either international, racialised as Black or brown, or both.

In recognition that the category of GBSVH is broad, close attention was paid to the types of violence and harassment during recruitment, and this emerges in interviews. It was deemed important that the data as a whole should include a range of types of GBSVH and a range of identified abusers/harassers; this was the case. The breadth of experience and patterns across the data are discussed in more detail in the data analysis below, section 3.1. Key demographic information is presented in tabular form below, table 1; and summary information about the identities of abusers/ harassers and locations of violence is presented in table 1.

2.3 Interviews

In line with trauma-aware practice, participants were given as much control as possible to choose interview location and timing (Campbell *et al.*, 2019); as a result, about half of the interviews were conducted online, over Teams, and half in person. One researcher conducted all the interviews and managed all correspondence, with the support of the lead Principal Investigator (PIs), in order to ensure a high degree of confidentiality.

Table 1: Demographic profile of interview participants

	Students	Staff	Total
Total	**12**	**6**	**18**
Women	12	4	16
Men	0	2	2
Bisexual	1		1
Queer	1		1
Any physical disability or chronic condition	4	1	5
Autistic	1	2	3
International/ migrant	4	2	6
Racial or ethnic minority (Irish or international)	5	1	6

Table 2: Patterns of GBSVH in the data

	Patterns of violence	Student	Staff	Total
Identity of abuser/ harasser	Student abuser/harasser	10	1	11
	Staff abuser/harasser	1	5	6
	Unidentified/ unknown abuser/harasser	1		1
Location of GBSVH	Cyber-located	3	2	5
	Student accommodation	3		3
	Campus public and social location (bars, clubs, outdoors)	3	1	4
	Academic and workspaces (classrooms, library, labs, offices, meeting rooms etc)	5	5	10
	Off campus	2	1	3

The interviews were semi-structured, to allow the participants to steer the narrative in accordance with their own, highly diverse experiences, and again, to share control with the participants (Campbell *et al.*, 2009). The semi-structured interview guide recognised that it is often difficult to make clear distinctions between specific experiences of violence and harassment in the institution and their aftermath; especially when disclosures, complaints and reports are experienced as reiterating or re-perpetrating the initial traumas (Bedera, 2023). Participants were invited to share the information they considered relevant or necessary about the original experience of GBSVH and then asked to tell the story that followed that, with the interviewer prompting to hear who they told, and what happened next. The final part of the interview involved the participants' own reflections and analysis about how HEIs deal with GBSVH and how, from their perspective, this might be improved.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using secure automatic transcription. Careful attention was paid to de-identification, to ensure that the ensuing data can inform action across higher education in Ireland without identifying either individuals or institutions (see Phipps, 2020). De-identified transcripts were returned to participants, to allow them to make amendments if required, then stored on the secure One Drive server of the lead PI, once again they were double checked for de-identification and then shared with the research team for analysis.

2.4 Ethics

This study addresses highly sensitive and potentially traumatic life experiences and ongoing risk to individuals, making it ethically complex. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick.

The research team undertook training in trauma-informed approaches in advance of data collection, and fieldwork was conducted by an interviewer with extensive experience in the area. Detailed information about the interview process was made available to potential participants in advance of any meeting between the researcher and potential participants. Consent was understood as an ongoing process, so that a consent form was signed before the interview began, with the understanding that the participants could end the interview whenever they wanted. Before beginning, there was also a discussion of trauma, potential for triggers, and preferred coping strategies, which prepared both interviewer and participant for the possibility of emotional distress, and indicated a readiness to address it, that included the freedom to end the interview as desired.

A list of support resources was provided to all research participants. A key aspect which made it possible to conduct the research ethically with an emphasis on survivor wellbeing was the network of SVH practitioners across Ireland's HEIs. The research interviewer leaned on the expertise of this network before and during data collection. For interview participants, it was possible to offer a connection directly to local expert support from HEI SVH staff. This engagement and commitment from an expert support cohort was fundamental in providing the research interviewer with a sense of security and shared responsibility and in delivering ethical, trauma-aware research.

2.5 Analysis

Transcripts of the eighteen interviews were analysed by the research team, composed of expert academics in the fields of education; organisation studies; psychology; and gender studies. For the purposes of this report, the analysis was structured according to four overarching categories: Experiences of GBSVH; Experiences of disclosure and reporting; Impact; and Recommendations. The interviews were qualitatively coded under these four overlapping headings to collectively identify key themes, with regular exchanges between the research team to discuss and agree/disagree with the themes as they were identified. This analysis was directed specifically towards producing a report and recommendations that could be implemented by the HEA and HEIs.

The overarching analysis and recommendations were shared with members of the study advisory board for expert feedback on relevance and feasibility. Interview participants who had consented for the research team to keep their contact details were also invited to review the summary analysis and recommendations and offer

feedback. This follows a trauma-aware approach, in that it continues to respect the agency of the victim-survivor within the study and allows them to see how their data is being used. Responsibly using member checks is in keeping with SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed principles of Safety, Trustworthiness and Transparency, and Collaboration and Mutuality (Karmakar and Duggal, 2024). The final recommendations were completed with due reference to responses from members of the advisory board and participants.

2.6 Research Strengths and Limitations

This is a qualitative study, and the research team do not seek to generalise or make claims to statistical representativeness. The themes and analysis that we draw from this data are robust and supported by indications in survey data and qualitative research literature from other countries. The inclusion criteria set for the study included current and former staff and students, as well as other members of the HEI community, such as contractors, visiting lecturers, visiting students and visiting researchers. Every effort was made to reach this latter group of "other" members of the community, but these are not represented in this data. Future research might specifically target such groups, particularly staff working for contract firms including catering and security firms, who have a specific and differentiated range of vulnerabilities and protections (or lack thereof), deserving of specific methodological and analytical approaches. The sample, as noted throughout this report, represents sufficient diversity to draw out valuable analyses related to minoritisation and exclusion. It bears noting that sexual minoritisation arises relatively rarely as a topic in this study, given the high frequency of bisexual women and non-binary students in national and international studies on the subject (Humbert and Strid, 2025; Dawson *et al.,* 2024).

The study was completed in a relatively short timeframe of twelve months. A longer period would allow for further purposive sampling to include specific or harder to reach groups.

More direct support from all 16 Higher Education Institutions could also have extended the recruitment outreach to potentially reach a wider range of potential participants.

Further initiatives of this sort would benefit from shared understanding among EDI and SVH sections in HEIs that research of this kind by its very nature can be supported as a vital dimension of EDI and SVH work. Future initiatives would be strengthened by explicitly recognising and communicating this dimension of complementarity with EDI and SVH efforts.

3. Findings and analysis

The data are presented as follows, first an overview of the range of different GBSVH experiences is provided, followed by detailing experiences of disclosing and reporting in HEIs. Experiences are divided into those who were “heard and heeded” (and, at best, also helped); those who were “unheard” or missed; those who were “heard and harmed”; and those who went outside the institution to be heard. This is followed by the outcomes and impacts of the journeys captured in this data: impacts of both GBSVH and the institutional response. Conclusions with recommendations arising from this analysis are then presented.

Interspersed through this section are three short vignettes outlining three different examples of victim-survivor journeys from the study. These are presented to give a sense of the varied experiences in this data and the complex navigations of higher educational institutions during and in the aftermath of experiences of violence and harassment. These vignettes include participant voices, but detail has been removed to avoid identification of either the participants or the institutions.

Vignette 1: Sarah

In this vignette, we introduce the case of Sarah, an international member of academic staff. Sarah disclosed within her department and to an SVH officer in her HEI. Responses were positive, appropriate and helpful, allowing her to process the experience of harassment in a supported way. ***Sarah’s case is one of being heard and heeded and helped.***

Sarah is a visiting lecturer in a HEI. Her experience was of harassment from a mature student whom she met online and had one date with, unaware of their shared HEI. As boundaries were not being respected, Sarah communicated her need for his persistent messaging to stop; “*...at that time I said, I don't think we should have any contact. Please do not communicate with me again.*” However, he continued to communicate online through multiple channels, including work-related channels. Sarah, as an outsider to Irish culture, struggled for a while with what was “acceptable” or not. “*It was just weird, and I remember feeling just like… this is now making me feel deeply unsafe coming here to campus? Yeah, alarm bells kind of went off.”*

Sarah spoke with her Head of School (HoS) and the SVH service. The SVH officer outlined her options. She decided not to take a formal process and did not feel pressurised to take either direction (process or not). Her reasons for not making a formal complaint included: the exposure involved in having to explain and document a personal and private situation; being open to probing and the risk of not being believed; and not wanting to have her reputation debated. She chose, instead, an

informal process, and spoke to her Head of School who undertook to speak to the harasser's Head of School.

The unacceptability of the behaviour was outlined to the mature student, and it stopped. Sarah attributes the Head of School's experience and willingness to step up and address the problem as critical; '*He's a very good, you know, as Head of School is very good at managing things (…) But they just made it very clear that like, you know, this cannot happen, like this is not behaviour you need to repeat. And again like, there's zero tolerance for this*.'

She described her HoS as authoritative, knowledgeable and compassionate. He understood, did not question or probe, and offered help immediately. She said she felt heard and seen and safe as a result of the intervention; '*I was so thankful that my Head of School responded so compassionately. He did kind of lay out, these are the things you can do like (…) we want to support you and what you want to do. (…) his response was about as best as it could be, and he continued to be that way through the entire thing. (He) did not need me to explain myself more.*'

3.1 Experiences of GBSVH

3.1.1 Types of GBSVH experienced

Table 3. below outlines the types of GBSVH depicted in the data, demonstrating the diversity of experiences that are assembled in this study, drawing together staff and student experiences to provide an overview of the institutional factors that underpin many of the accounts. Subsequent disclosure experiences and journeys were marked by the nature of the GBSVH that preempted them and equally marked by institutional factors. These include: HEI physical and online environments; power relations; and the timelines of student and academic lives. An overview of the range of experiences is offered here (Table 3):

Table 3: Descriptive Typography of GBSVH Experiences

Victim-survivor identity		
Naoise - third year undergraduate (physical disability) Sylvia – international student undergraduate Hazel – second year undergraduate Kim – second year undergraduate, autism, physical disability Toni – second year undergraduate. African American Cecilia – first year undergraduate, disability, international	Anne – International PG student (PhD) Lila – International undergrad Mia – International mixed race Chanel- Asian-Irish PG (Masters) Li – International PG student (PhD) Sinead – 1st yr undergrad (chronic physical disability)	Eoin – academic staff (autism) Darragh – technical staff (autism, contract probation) Sarah – international, academic (fixed term fellowship) Beth – academic Tara – research (postdoc) Eimear – technical, junior staff, new role
Types of sexual violence and harassment experienced		
Sylvia – Rape, in her campus accommodation Naoise – Sexually assaulted on a date.	Anne – ridicule, hostility, derision by a senior male colleague, especially regarding women's issues	Eoin – (staff) bullying, vexatious following Eoin reporting SVH of student

Hazel – Harassment by a tutor Kim – Online harassment to groups by another student Toni – Sexually assaulted by a male student friend Cecilia – Sexually assaulted by a man acquaintance	Lila – Raped by acquaintance, drink spiked Mia – Raped on campus Chanel- Cyberstalking, sexual harassment Li – Harassing, sexualised racialised behaviour following a date Sinead – Along with her boyfriend, was serially harassed; boyfriend was physically attacked	Darragh – (staff) gendered bullying Sarah – (staff) sexual harassment Beth – (staff) gendered bullying Tara- (staff) gendered and sexualised harassment Eimear –(staff) sexual harassment
Abuser/ harasser identity		
Naoise – A male student (on a date) Sylvia – A male student (known to her) Hazel – A male tutor Kim – An unknown other person, a student, who carried out harassment on WhatsApp groups	Anne – A senior male staff member in her lab Lila – a male student, friend of her housemate, international Mia – unknown Chanel - Male student whom she had dated	Eoin – Senior male staff Darragh – senior female staff Sarah – male PG student Beth – senior male staff, international Tara- multiple staff in her unit

Toni – A male friend and fellow student, older Cecilia – A male co-worker on campus who she was friendly with (international, Master's student)	Li – Male student, also PhD Sinead – female acquaintance	Eimear – technical male staff
Spatiality / Location		
Hazel – Her small class tutorials and online (social media, email) Sylvia – Campus accommodation Naoise – On campus, on a first date with someone Kim – Online social media groups Toni – Campus accommodation Cecilia – Campus accommodation	Anne – on campus in labs Lila – campus accommodation; drink spiked in college bar Mia – outdoors on campus ground Chanel- everywhere on campus, social spaces on and off campus, by text message Li – online harassment and on campus in different social and academic areas Sinead – everywhere: campus spaces, off campus, at home, online	Eoin – campus: in workplaces, meeting rooms, online workspace Darragh – campus: shared office and other spaces Sarah – online: social media, email Beth – campus: meetings, online workspace, affected every dimension of working life Tara - campus: entire department and departmental socialising Eimear – campus – office, workplace

Across the eighteen interviews, the types of GBSVH described showed a significant variance, and included physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence.

Experiences included extremely violent physical and sexual assaults; sexual coercion and manipulation; cyber-located sexual harassment and stalking; and gendered and sexualised manipulation, bullying and harassment; with some of these overlapping and co-occurring. In line with quantitative research on the topic (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; Humbert and Strid, 2024), the most physically and sexually violent incidents in the sample were experienced by undergraduate students. Across the entire sample, cyber-stalking and technology-facilitated violence and harassment arose, often alongside other forms. Psychological abuse, including coercion and gender-based bullying and harassment, was more commonly reported by postgraduate students and staff. Power dynamics inherent in academic hierarchies, between senior and junior staff, permanent and precarious contract holders, and staff and students, created conditions of vulnerability and silence, underscoring the structural nature of such harms. These dynamics were especially at play for people who held minoritised identities, such as international staff and students, racialised staff and students, and people with disabilities.

Of all the GBSVH incidents described, two of the abusers/ harassers were women (one aided by a group of friends, both women and men), while the remainder were men. Most were peers, although, as noted above and below, there were complex hierarchical power dynamics at play in many cases. There was one incident of *staff-to-student* GBSVH: a male tutor grooming an undergraduate woman student; and there was one incident of *student-to-staff* GBSVH: a male PhD student stalking and harassing a lecturer who had gone on one date with him. These variations within such a small sample highlight both the importance and the dynamism of power relations, which can operate along multiple lines including institutional hierarchies, cultural and social norms, and interpersonal dynamics.

Not all participants in the study expressed their experience in terms of trauma, although many did. In the accounts in the interviews, the impact of violence and harassment was often intermingled with the impact of trying to address it and/or find safety within the HEI. Impacts are discussed at the end of this findings section.

The discussion that follows offers a flavour of the initiating experiences explored. While interviews focused on disclosures and reporting, individual narratives often weave the GBSVH together with the experience of reporting it. In this discussion, we emphasise the factors and power relations that made participants vulnerable to GBSVH, as these vulnerabilities carried through and influenced experiences of disclosure, reporting, and resolution-seeking. We also outline the places in which GBSVH took place, to highlight the importance of the entire HEI environment, including online spaces, to victim-survivors.

3.1.2 Gender, power and vulnerability to violence

As already noted in section 2.2 above, the sample includes a majority of participants marginalised by at least one other factor or identity status in addition to gender. Of 18 participants, a total of 9 (7 students and 2 staff) were either racialised, international, or both. Physical disabilities, chronic medical conditions, and neurodivergence were

relevant for 7 participants (4 students, 3 staff); while one student identified as bisexual and one as queer. Life and career stages also vary. Most students in the data were undergraduates at different stages in their programmes, and there were also four postgraduates, of whom 1 was a Master's student, 2 PhDs, and 1 had experiences that cut across her time as undergraduate, Master's and PhD student. Of the six staff in the study, two were technical officers, one a postdoctoral researcher, and three were early career academics with lecturer roles. These stages of progress, as we shall show, impacted participants' experiences and decision-making.

Participants' experiences of GBSVH were underpinned by gender inequality, intersecting with other axes of minoritisation/ marginalisation. The normalisation of sexual scripts made some young women in the data vulnerable to exploitation:

> I was in an environment where... blurred boundaries were normalised, especially in social settings like there was this pressure to be found to go along with things; to not make a scene, and because I didn't want to seem dramatic or difficult, I kind of ignored my discomfort in moments when I should have listened to it (Toni).

Women who experienced harassment in their institutions often noted that they were treated differently to men in their teams or departments, by being sexualised, patronised or stereotyped. Anne, a former international PhD student, described the constant harassment she and others experienced in her workplace, a research laboratory, saying: *'It was definitely because of my gender.'* This differential treatment of women was especially noted by those who were made more visible by their race. Chanel, an ethnic minority Master's student, was discussed by her harasser in terms that were both racialising and sexualising: he was overheard asking a fellow student: '*Are you trying that Asian one.'*

Tara, a postdoctoral fellow, described her experience of standing out in a HEI department where she was a visiting researcher, not Irish, and racialised as *'brown-skinned':*

> Everybody thinks you're available for that. Oh, what fun. I got this fellowship; I came to Ireland just to entertain them all. Like it's my privilege to entertain them (Tara).

Not being from Ireland added an additional element to vulnerability. Sarah described her feelings of fear and vulnerability as an immigrant in Ireland when she was being subjected to online stalking and harassment by a man who had once walked her home, so he knew where she lived:

> I didn't even know what to call this behaviour other than that, it just really scared me... I live alone as a woman. ...And usually in the US, I have like, a baseball bat in my house you know [laughing]. And I was like, I don't have my baseball bat! You know, like just some sense of protection, since this person knows

> where I live. You know and like again it's not. I don't have you know, my uncles or my... I don't have these people here in the same way. And I feel vulnerable (Sarah).

For Sarah, the fact that the harasser/ abuser knew where she lived, while she did not have the support and safety mechanisms that she had built up in her home country, added to her vulnerability and her constant feeling of fear. Hazel, an undergraduate who had experienced multiple traumas, had similar feelings of vulnerability: *'It's like the reason as to why I didn't force it. It was another safety thing as well. He knows who my friends are.'*

While Sarah and Hazel highlight their sense of vulnerability in the face of their abusers' knowledge, Li reflected on her feeling of being less protected by the higher education system as a foreign, PhD student. She described a conversation she had with an Asian friend, and their reflection on how international students might be treated differently to Irish students: *'I think he [the man who was harassing Li] won't do the same thing, like the sexual harassment to an Irish lady because he knows that she could report, or, that you have already kind of supporting system for her.'*

The power imbalances were often complex. Toni, an undergraduate who described herself as African American, reflected on the many subtle vectors of power that enabled a man that she thought she could trust to sexually assault her:

> ...there was also this huge power imbalance. Sometimes it wasn't even about physical force. It was about someone using their social status, their age or their position in a way that made it feel hard to say no or to walk away and. I'm not, I'm not trying to say he was in a higher status, but, coming to the age he was older than me and he was kind of my senior and I felt maybe he would use those against me since he was already known in college, and I believed he would use that against me, to put me down (Toni).

3.1.3 Particularities of the academic environment

The specific demands of courses of study and academic career trajectories played an important role in shaping participants' experiences of, and vulnerability to, GBSVH. Lines of dependency were especially important in increasing vulnerability to GBSVH. Hazel, an undergraduate student, noted her need to get positive assessments from a tutor who was grooming and stalking her: '*And obviously I felt like, if I don't respond this guy, this guy is grading my papers... this is college... I don't want to, like, fail in second year.'*

The negative behaviour was taking place in the classroom, before, during and after class, but because of the dependency, she felt obliged to put up with the behaviour. Hazel reflected:

> ...obviously I couldn't stop going to the classes because I... if I don't show up for the class. I mean, participation is a part of the grade, so it's not like I could be like, oh, I'm just going to stop going to tutorials (Hazel).

For staff members who experienced violence and harassment, incidents or patterns of behaviour occurred relatively soon after they began a new role. Participants described how early in their roles they began to have negative experiences: *'I had just been there about a month' (Eimear). 'It started as soon as I took over the role really' (Darragh) .*

Periods of transition from one role to another were also points where GBSVH risk increased. Eimear noted that the man who harassed her had previously observed her in a different capacity within the college, which appeared to create a blurred boundary in how their new role was perceived.

> This man would have witnessed me as a student in the college and witnessed me …….in that weird kind of limbo between student and staff. And then had also witnessed me as a paid member of staff. So I would think it's relevant that there was a, maybe a blurred boundary there between how he viewed me in terms of my role within the college (Eimear).

Transitions, such as moving roles from student to faculty member can be challenging while the shift may seem empowering; it often disrupts existing networks and may even position the new faculty member as a perceived threat. As one participant described, moving to a more senior role was one of the elements that she perceived as inciting negative behaviour from a colleague: *'So when I got the [promotion]……. I still collaborate with the group I was in, but I'm no longer within the hierarchy that is that group' (Beth).* No longer being junior within the hierarchy was a career success for Beth, but it unsettled a pre-existing power dynamic and marked the beginning of a campaign of harassment against her.

Gatekeeping and resource hoarding can serve as significant sources of power over individuals within an organisation, particularly in higher education and other hierarchical environments. In some cases, this involves not only restricting access to tangible resources but also deliberately limiting opportunities to connect with valuable networks of professional colleagues, thereby isolating individuals and constraining their professional growth. Such behaviours are often underpinned by peer rivalry and organisational politics, where competition for recognition, advancement, or influence fosters an environment in which relationships are framed as win/lose rather than collaborative. This dynamic can perpetuate exclusionary practices, reinforce existing power imbalances, and undermine a culture of openness, equity, and mutual support, as Darragh outlined:

> She kept trying to create a division in the office. Where all the long-term staff, the ones with permanent contracts, I was in probation area at that stage. And a lot of people were advising - everyone knows she's difficult. So, everyone was

> advising me. Ohh yeah, this is what everyone was saying to me. Even my [acquaintance] who is now working in the university took me aside and goes: Say yes to everything (Darragh).

3.1.4 Naming and identifying GBSVH

Participants in the interviews often spoke about their own uncertainty about naming or defining their experience as harmful, violent or unacceptable. This is connected to myths about rape and sexual violence (Gavey, 2019), and to the challenge of understanding bullying as such (Hodgins, 2014). For instance, following an experience of sexual assault on a date, Naoise, an undergraduate student, described feeling confusion and doubting her own judgement: *'Because I remember like, feeling uncomfortable but I didn't really know why.... I mean, why didn't I, you know, do something straight after [the assault]? But it was, you know. But yeah, I was literally just in denial, and I thought it was normal.'*

Students who did not seek help or attempt to report the experiences often struggled to name their experiences as violence. Cecilia was assaulted in her bedroom by a man she considered a friend and colleague: she found it hard to label the experience because it was not a physical attack. Her emotional response was hard for her to make sense of:

> And myself, I'm surprised. I have reaction because like I say, I still thinking there's no physical violence, but when he left, I started crying. [laughs] And then I throw away everything he used and I start washing everything like my blanket, my bed sheet. And I go shower for a very long time. I shower and then I come out. I still feel I have. That's his smell in my room and I wash everything again. I'm surprised I would react like that. I thought it won't be that heavy (Cecilia).

Subsequently, it was months before Cecilia told anybody at all about the assault, and ultimately, the only people she told were her housemates and friends.

Elements of cultural misogyny and rape myths expressed themselves in participants' own thinking, self-blame adding to the distress caused by the violence:

> I felt it was my fault. Maybe I shouldn't have gone there. Or maybe I should have gone with someone. Or maybe I shouldn't have even gone there in the 1st place. Then maybe all of this will not even have happened (Toni).

Self-doubt and uncertainty were sometimes accompanied by an unwillingness to label the abuser as a perpetrator. When Naoise considered reporting her abuser/ harasser to the police, she worried about the impact it would have on him:

> … straight away on the phone I was like, Oh my God, what am I doing? Like he's so young like this fellow like he's, what am I doing I'm going to ruin his life (Naoise);

Interestingly, the doubt and uncertainty that was present in numerous undergraduate student accounts did not arise in the accounts of postgraduate and staff participants in this study. While staff sometimes argued that their experiences were not *'you know, something extreme' (Eimear)*, this did not cause them to doubt the significance or relevance of the actions, and they drew attention to the fact that "subtle" experiences were still underpinned by abuses of power relations:

> And it's kind of vaguely subtle? This is very much on the harassment scale of things rather than kind of something sexually violent there. But the power dynamic and the power plays are, were. This was very I don't even know if this was about sexual attraction as such unless it was about kind of, an expression of power you know (Darragh).

These accounts show that unambiguous language marking acts of GBSVH as *wrong* remains elusive to some victim-survivors in this study, particularly when they feel that it does not cross some threshold of "seriousness". Varied experiences of violence were marked by a lack of agreed language, but also by a recognition that even when they were difficult to pin down and explain, they were underpinned by power relations, both gendered and others.

3.1.5 Spaces of perpetration

According to the data, acts of GBSVH took place in a wide variety of locations, mainly on campus but also off campus; and both online and offline. Certain locations stood out: Four serious undergraduate student sexual assaults had taken place in student accommodation, typically on campus. Further assaults took place elsewhere on campus social and public spaces, for instance, in a student bar, outdoors, walking to a bus stop, walking to a library. In all but one of these cases, the abuser was known to the student who was assaulted. In two cases, for a staff member, and a graduate student, harassment and stalking occurred after romantic dates, taking place principally online and making the participant feel very unsafe on campus.

> But he was like messaging me on there [Instagram] too. You know and it...just was like there was just a lot of messaging happening. And I was even out of the country at the time, and I'm like, OK, this is...this is a lot, and it's making me uncomfortable (Sarah).

There was a sense that nowhere was safe from GBSVH, including staff and student workspaces. Students who described assaults or violence from fellow-students noted the actions of their abusers and their continued fear/feeling of risk in many campus spaces, including libraries, classrooms, laboratories, student services and support spaces (see Outcomes section, below). Staff members experienced GBSVH as part of their everyday workplaces: they were harassed and/or abused in their offices, at meetings, and on virtual workspaces.

3.1.6 Summary of GBSVH experiences

In summary, the experiences captured in this study are diverse and wide-ranging. There are stark differences between very physically violent attacks, sexually violent attacks and barely detected insidious acts of manipulation; although these are connected by the acceptability of harmful gender norms and of harm itself. The victim-survivors in the data are similarly diverse, although overwhelmingly affected by structural vulnerabilities to violence and harassment, including through race, migration status and situational precarity (of visa status; housing; contract insecurity). Diverse experiences are also connected by flashpoints where vulnerability is heightened, for instance within hierarchical and dependency relationships, and career transitions for postgraduate students and staff.

Vignette 2: Chanel

This vignette recounts Chanel's testimony. Chanel is a postgraduate student who was harassed by a fellow student. She felt unsafe and she asked for support to make her safe throughout her department and institution. She went through a disciplinary process which was unsuccessful. She was questioned and doubted by many receiving parties, and nobody told her about the SVH policy or the SVHO in her institution. ***Chanel's case is one of being heard and harmed.***

Chanel, a postgraduate student, had a very brief relationship with a fellow student, which she chose to end. Chanel described her experience of the break-up, which took place over the course of several conversations and disagreements.

Following this, the fellow-student's behaviour shifted dramatically, and he began sending Chanel constant, unwanted messages. Feeling harassed and emotionally manipulated, she sought help through official channels. Chanel did not want to jeopardise her harasser's career; she just wanted to be left alone and feel safe. She first sought advice from the Student Support Officer, who told her she should be stronger and '...*tell him 'No!' better'*. The constant texts and pleading continued intermittently over the next few months and subsequently escalated to him contacting her friends and following her on campus. As a result, she felt physically unsafe and contacted the Head of School who advised reporting the behaviour, taking a week off and going home. This felt like punishment to Chanel. She felt she was being banished. '*She told me to go home for reading week, which I did. I went home with my tail tucked between my legs…. I had study sessions booked. I had everything booked and I had to cancel all of them. And I went home and I had to suffer because of it…felt so mortified'.* No action occurred, and the harassment culminated in a physical attack on Chanel by her harasser (a fellow student) while out socially.

Chanel went through many different channels seeking resolution, including a complaint portal, student support officer, advocates, and the Head of School.

However, her attempts to file a complaint were constantly unsuccessful; she was passed between individuals, with each disclosure met by inconsistent and inappropriate responses and lack of effective support, leaving her feeling unsupported, vulnerable and to blame – *'...they basically told me that I had to make my boundaries stronger, which I don't think is fair. And he's like, yeah. Like, you're just too nice.'* She describes the lack of any reassuring response was '*one of the most traumatic experiences'* she has had. The whole experience culminated in a meeting with a senior manager in the institution, where she was told that there was nothing further, they could do owing to a failure (on the part of the institution) to follow procedure correctly. She was reassured that she was believed but, because of a legal loophole, nothing could be done, and she could not resubmit a complaint. She was also informed that because of her experiences, they were *'reviewing their policies'*. She was offered counselling, but she explains that in the absence of any other support or action to ensure her safety, this only reinforced the sense that she was the problem.

With no reassurance regarding safety, Chanel became increasingly anxious and failed her exams. Counselling was the only support available to her, which she received as insulting, because the problem was not her emotional resilience, but her physical safety. In the absence of other support, she availed of the institution's counselling service, where she was asked if she had spoken to the Sexual Violence and Harassment Officer, this came as a shock as Chanel had never, at any stage, been told about the existence of an SVHO. She followed up with the SVHO and when the SVHO suggested making a complaint, Chanel declined. She explains was worn down. She had spent months trying to advocate for herself to no avail and was left feeling exhausted, broken and angry. *'I feel like if I'd been treated with a bit of respect... been treated with, you know, understanding and compassion and not faced with, you know, questions and like, you know an inquisition.... I wouldn't be so angry right now. I'm sure you can tell I'm angry from this situation. I think it was horrific.*

Chanel's story highlights how organisational failures, delayed and inappropriate responses, lack of clear procedures, and victim blaming, can leave victims feeling unsupported and vulnerable. Despite Chanel's many attempts to seek help, the intuition's inadequate and often harmful handling worsened the situation, effectively silencing her and allowing the harassment to continue unchecked.

3.2 Experiences of disclosing and reporting

With one exception, everybody who participated in this study had disclosed the experience to somebody, and most had disclosed to others in the institution. In most cases, they had made multiple disclosures, often in the expectation that an action would result. It is well-established that victim-survivors of gender-based violence usually disclose first to informal sources such as friends and family (Ahrens, 2006; UNWomen, 2018; Kirkner *et al.,* 2022), and this was true of this sample also. Within the HEIs, disclosures were also received by friends and close contacts such as friendly colleagues (by staff members) and trusted supervisors, tutors and lecturers (by

students). In some cases, students had trusting relationships with wellbeing services, this was particularly the case for international students who mentioned disclosing to trusted actors within international student supports.

It is important to note that all HEIs in Ireland now have policy and resources dedicated to GBSVH, and these have been in stages of development and implementation since 2019. However, there is variability across the HEIs in terms of when policies and resources were in place, how extensive they are, and their exact remits. An analysis of policies is outside of the scope of this study, but we note here that in the majority of cases (though not all), there was a dedicated person or team tasked with addressing GBSVH in the HEI at the time of the incident discussed in the interview, although both policies and resourcing may have changed in the intervening time. As this data shows, disclosures, reports, and attempts to address the problem went far beyond these services and often did not connect with them at all. In Table 4 below, we draw upon our data to detail the HEI SVH support services that were available and accessed by participants in the interviews:

Table 4: Any GBSVH dedicated support in HEIs at the time of the incident discussed in the interviews

	Students	Staff	Total
Total interviews	12	6	18
Any dedicated SVH policies + resources were in place in HEI at time of incident	9	5	14
Participant accessed SVH support services in HEI	4	2	6
Participant didn't know about SVH service in HEI	3	0	3
Participant knew, but chose not to access SVH service/ thought it wasn't for them or wouldn't help their case	2	3	5

This table shows that dedicated SVH staff in the HEI are, at most, a single node in a network of contacts. As the following section outlines, victim-survivors in the data did not make a hard distinction between different types of disclosures, complaints, and reports. Each individual travelled a different route, navigating the support that was available that seemed to meet their particular needs, often in a context where they were also navigating the aftermath of trauma. As we go on to show, disclosures occurred across HEIs, and supportive and helpful actions took place throughout the institution, as well as harmful and damaging ones. Thus, the survivor journey far exceeds relationships with dedicated services, even when these are in place and operating as intended.

The variety of experiences in this data is striking, yet there are important commonalities. Every interview was with somebody who experienced GBSVH while

studying or working in an HEI, who addressed that experience while in the HEI, and who often needed the HEI's involvement. Across 18 interviews (with some participants represented in both Garda reports and HEI processes):

- 1 person told nobody at all, until this interview
- 4 spoke with close friends or family about the GBSVH, but took it no further
- 4 made Garda reports (of whom 1 successfully received a protection order against the harasser; the other 3 did not proceed to full investigations/ prosecutions).
- 7 brought their complaint to somebody in the HEI, seeking action or support without engaging in the formal complaints process.
- 5 had engagements with formal processes within the HEI.
- None had brought a formal report to completion at the time of the interview.

Below we outline the nature of these experiences, the considerations that arose, and the eventual outcomes. We arrange the experiences into three broad categories, which lead into the report's recommendations. These are: first, positive experiences, in which participants felt heard, heeded and, at best, helped. Next, we outline the missed cues that meant victim-survivors needs were "unheard". These are the multiple ways in which participants went unconnected to trained and supportive staff or processes who could help them to seek protection, justice or support. The final category is experiences of being "heard and harmed", in which participants attempted to get support from the HEIs, and had negative experiences, which added to the impacts of the violence itself. Finally, we identify those whose disclosure experience involved being heard outside of the institution.

3.2.1 Heard and heeded: Positive experiences

Being heard and validated

Being heard, being believed and being taken seriously came up for all the participants who talked about disclosing or reporting GBSVH. This constellation of experiences was critically important, a determinant of a positive experience when present and a negative experience when absent.

First disclosures were typically to friends, family, or close colleagues. Much of the data about first disclosures in this study was broadly positive, with informal contacts offering validation and support. The unquestioning support of friends and others was vital for victim-survivors, especially when they were navigating uncertainty, self-doubt, and self-blame in the aftermath of GBSVH. It was often by speaking to friends that participants understood the seriousness of what had happened to them, with friends giving them language and direction, for instance: *'that sounds like sexual assault' (Naoise);* or sharing their own comparable experiences. These initial conversations were reassuring and validating for victim-survivors. Numerous participants shared how

their families' reactions were supportive and empathetic, making it easier for them to navigate wider contexts that might be more skeptical or doubting of them:

> I remember like the guards, once the guards left, my mom was like, you know, she was looking at me. She was like: You 100% did the right thing, OK? Like hearing the story again is, you know, I'm like, Yeah, We should do something about this. So. Yeah. So she was in my corner. You know, so that was. That was good. (Naoise)

Being heard and validated was essential to wellbeing and self-esteem of many victim-survivors. In some cases, as we will see, they left it at initial disclosure and did not go further, but in many, the initial supportive response enabled them to take follow-on action.

Heard, heeded and helped

This data show key examples of successful, victim-centred disclosure experiences. We differentiate between disclosure to informal sources such as friends, family and acquaintances (Ahrens, *et al.,* 2007), and disclosure within the institution, to people who have the power to act (Kirkner, *et al*., 2022). When disclosures were made within the institution, victim-survivors often spoke with an expectation that the receiving party would do something concrete to make things better. Below, we present two cases of experiences where action was taken that was appropriate, within the receiving parties' remit, and helpful.

Lila was an undergraduate whose drink was spiked in the on-campus bar, and who was subsequently assaulted in her campus accommodation. A few days after the assault, she told her friend what had happened, and her friend directed her to the SVH officer in her HEI, whom she visited immediately. The SVH officer listened positively and offered Lila concrete actions to take to help her feel better immediately:

> So I had a meeting with [SVHO] and [they] told me that this is a really scary situation. It's really bad that this happened....
>
> And then [SVHO] told me, I think you need to go to [student support service]. Counselling. Go, drop yourself in over there. And also, you should go to the [student accommodation] receptionist, manager, and tell her that this is the situation and you would like to be moved (Lila).

Lila did all the things that the SVH officer suggested and was received supportively and sympathetically by the HEI services. She was immediately given new accommodation, with which she was happy. She attended student services, who treated her case with seriousness and urgency. Following their assessment, they ensured that she was able to access badly needed therapy as a high priority case, and for longer than the standard provision, that is, they tailored the support to her needs. She described her experience of the student wellbeing services:

> And I was assigned to this really nice person. His name was [name] and he was really supportive. One of the most supportive men I've seen in a long time.

> So I am still trying though and after I had this demo session with [name] they see how much priority I should be given to actually start scheduling proper well-being sessions. So [name] put me on high priority. And I got a call and they said we can start your sessions this week… So I saw her from [four month period]. Kind of every week (Lila).

In her initial conversation with the SVH officer, she also discussed what she wanted to do about the fellow-student who had assaulted her:

> Yeah, [the SVH officer] did give me options. So, the first one was going to the Gardaí and doing a formal complaint. And the second was going to [the HEI] and doing a formal complaint. And then there's an informal one where not much action will be taken, like they're trying to wrap it up as quickly as possible. So, I went for the one to finish it off quickly because I think I was in that phase of, scared to talk about it so much and I was like, I don't want to keep saying the same story to a new person every single day. And so, I did just tell [them] that, can you please tell this boy to stay away from me? So that this can like never happen again. If I see him, I start getting anxiety attacks and everything (Lila).

Lila was offered clear options and she chose "*the one to finish it off quickly"*. The SVH officer spoke to the harasser/ abuser and instructed him to stay away from Lila. Lila was assured by the SVH officer that *"if you ever feel like your decision. You're not happy with it, giving an informal complaint. You can always come back and tell me. I would happily give you a formal or any kind of complaint that you want.*"

In Lila's case, her friend knew about the support that was in place and signalled her appropriately. She found her way to dedicated services quickly, was received and responded to with an appropriate level of seriousness and urgency, and actions were taken across different domains to support her sense of safety and well-being. She spoke to numerous different people in the HEI, and each of them prioritised her needs.

Sarah (see vignette 1) was an international academic staff member who was harassed and cyber-stalked by a PhD student with whom she had gone on one date. When he started emailing her HEI account, she brought her feelings of fear and unsafety to her Head of School, whom she described as compassionate. The head of school laid out her options and offered support whatever choice she made.

> … we want to support you and what you want to do. So that was really, I mean his response was about as best as it could be, and he continued to be that way through the entire thing (Sarah).

He suggested that she should speak to the SVH officer, who also responded in a positive, supportive and proactive way;

> So then I contacted [SVH service]. They were very quick to meet with me on zoom and talk to me and they were very again compassionate. Kind of walked me through options (Sarah).

Sarah reflected on how these responses gave her a feeling of confidence and security:

> I mean, it gave me great respect for my Head of School at the time? You know, I mean, it really did make me feel like, OK. Now I mean, even in [HEI SVH services], everyone was very much like... You know, I felt very heard and seen and safe with that (Sarah).

Although the SVH service was supportive, they were not able to offer Sarah an action that would address the behaviour without initiating a disciplinary procedure, which Sarah did not want. The SVH officer suggested that she could talk to her Head of School about directly approaching the student who was harassing her, which she decided to do.

> So when I came back to, again my Head of School, he was very much like I've got it, Happy to do it. Like wrote out an e-mail. It was very clear, he sent it back to me and said was I OK with this being the e-mail I sent to the Head of School and to their supervisor? And I said yes.
>
> They took it very seriously. They immediately, you know from what the e-mail was then notified to me because I think this was very fast within just a couple of days. They brought that individual in. They talked to him and at the time he offered to apologise to me in person or meet with me in person and my Head of School like just was like: She's not interested. I was like Thank you because I'm not.
>
> ...
>
> But they just made it very clear that like, you know, this cannot happen like this is not behaviour you need to repeat. And again like, there's zero tolerance for this. (Sarah).

In Sarah's case, the behaviour was addressed entirely at unit level, between her department and the department of the student who had stalked and harassed her. Following that intervention, the behaviour stopped. Later, the SVH service also followed up with her to ensure that things had improved, and she said that they had. For Sarah, the action was successful because the two Heads of School involved *"took it very seriously"* and took responsibility for the problem. They enacted a culture of gender equality and not tolerating violence or harassment locally.

Certain elements are common to these two cases, and were present elsewhere in the data also, since some experiences could involve both successful and unsuccessful experiences of disclosure and reporting. The receiving parties i.e. a friend, heads of school, SVH staff, and ancillary staff in accommodation and student services, all recognised the seriousness of the disclosure immediately. They responded with a focus on the victim-survivor and a willingness to take action within their sphere of control. They were clear in their own remit, offering advice and signaling the appropriate services within the institution; allowing the victim-survivor to drive decision-making; and taking actions in line with their powers. The actions they took

ranged from tackling the behaviour directly, to communicating responsibly and transparently with the victim-survivor, to identifying specific supports that were appropriate to the victim-survivor's own needs, to following up after time had passed to check if anything else was required. There are additional examples across the data of supportive responses that were appropriate to the location of the receiving party: for instance, where specific departments or schools knew about the GBSVH and supported the victim-survivor psycho-socially and by making relevant academic accommodations, but where they had no role in addressing safety or disciplinary aspects. There are also many examples of victim-survivors who disclosed to supportive, professional and expert staff, in particular, SVH officers, chaplains or therapists and for whom those disclosures were positive, even when their subsequent experiences may not have been.

Through these cases, there is evidence of the promise of existing policies and procedures to provide victim-centred responses. It is also clear that people at many different locations in the HEI have a role to play, which can be fundamental to the final outcomes for survivors.

3.2.2 Unheard: Missed cues

Contrary to the cases above, there were relatively more cases in the data of victim-survivors who did not access or benefit from policies and supports that were in place. These were individuals who, we argue, were “missed” by the framework for action on ending sexual violence in higher education (HEA, 2019). In some cases, this was because they did not know about the policies, and nor did anybody they disclosed to. People were missed in other ways too for many reasons such as because of their powerlessness relative to abusers or harassers; because of lack of belief that the institution could help them; or because of a fatalism on the part of receiving parties. In all of these cases, disclosures were met by receiving parties without any positive action being taken.

Not speaking

All but one of the interview participants had told somebody about their experiences. In some cases, they spoke to a very small number of close friends or family, and in one case the participant had not disclosed to anybody before the interview. The data supports existing research on barriers to disclosure of GBV, including self-blame, stigma, disbelief, and protection of others such as family members (Jones, 2025; Kirkner *et al.,* 2022).

As we have shown, gendered norms, rape cultures, misogyny, and gender expectations fed into the ability of participants, particularly undergraduate students, to name their experiences as violent or unacceptable, to themselves or others. The uncertainty and self-doubt that characterised experiences of GBSVH further fed into a fear of speaking to others. Toni had not disclosed to anybody prior to the research

interview, here she outlines the self-blame and uncertainty that inhibited her disclosure:

> At first I didn't even fully understand what had happened. I just knew I felt unsafe, violated and confused. I blamed myself. I questioned whether it was bad or not to talk about it. I kind of froze in the moment, and afterwards I froze emotionally too. I carried away in silence for a long time (Toni).

Contemplating the possible impact of speaking about sexual violence also brought in the fear of gendered impacts, not just on the victim-survivor, but on their family, whether that was their parents, their children, or other family members. Toni worried about how other people's reactions to a disclosure of sexual assault might impact her or her family:

> And I felt like if I should go ahead, report, it might cause a scene in college and people would get to find out what really went on and it might take days for it to be resolved. And I wouldn't want it to have failed my academics or kind of put my family to shame or some kind of inappropriate way, so I just adjust, avoid those situations to avoid embarrassing my family (Toni).

In other cases, family reactions inhibited disclosure because of cultural beliefs. Lila, an international undergraduate whose drink was spiked and who was assaulted in campus accommodation, was aware that she would not receive support from her family, and that had an impact on whom she could speak to and what she could disclose:

> Of course, I couldn't tell them the whole thing. I couldn't bring myself to tell them the whole thing. Because probably because my dad would also be like giving, asking me the same questions of what did you wear? What did you drink? (Lila).

In this way, feelings of self-blame, anticipated stigma and concern for family led some participants not to disclose, or to be very deliberate and careful about to whom they disclosed.

Not knowing

There were a number of examples of victim-survivors who did not know and never found out that their HEIs had policies and procedures for people who experienced GBSVH. Participants spoke about their experiences and their decision-making processes, assuming that there was no place that they could go to address their problems. As we have seen, numerous students in the data spoke to their friends but nobody else. They worried about being blamed, judged, or penalised if they spoke to anybody in the institution about what had happened/was happening to them. Nobody mentioned to them that there was a policy and dedicated support staff for them, and they never found out. They were missed entirely by the support infrastructure that was supposed to support them.

Other students and staff members disclosed at numerous points to receiving parties and who throughout the process remained uninformed their complaints fell under the remit of GBSVH. Chanel (see vignette) was a postgraduate student who attempted to report a fellow-student for harassment, stalking and physical violence. She spoke to multiple receiving parties in her HEI, including student welfare services, her Head of School, and a disciplinary committee. She was trying to ensure that she would not have to share space with the harasser, and that she could be protected from him while on isolated off-campus work placements. She pursued multiple avenues over a series of months, in a very distressing process. Eventually, she was referred to counselling, even though nothing had been done to address her problem, which was the ongoing threat from a student who was harassing her.

> The student counselling lady she said. Have you talked to this woman? She's like she's part of the harassment team. I was like, No! No one told me to go to her!
>
> And no one even mentioned her. And I finally met her and I was just so exhausted. She's like So, Chanel, you can put a complaint through, and you'd be well within your right to do it. ... And I was like, to be honest, I'm too tired. I can't do it anymore....And that is why I am here because. Someone should have told me to go to the sexual harassment lady. Someone should have told me how. Someone should have sat down with me and told me it wasn't my fault (Chanel).

Chanel's experience clearly highlights the converse of the examples above of different actors within the HEI taking appropriate positive action. She spoke to staff in her school; she spoke to ancillary services. None recognised that what she was experiencing was GBSVH; that there was a dedicated policy or dedicated support staff for GBSVH. By the time she got to speak to somebody with dedicated expertise and training in the area, she was drained, her will was depleted, and she had absorbed repeated negative, minimising and victim-blaming attitudes (see below). She was no longer prepared or capable to engage with services.

This is a particularly stark instance of a victim-survivor seeking help from the HEI and being missed by the dedicated support service. It suggests, in certain cases, a lack of awareness and ability to connect victim-survivors to the policies and procedures that are in place for them. It also highlights that disclosures occur throughout the HEI, and thus, this awareness, ability and responsibility must be directed at all levels, recognising the differential capacities and powers of different actors.

Being missed through structural exclusions

Further examples of missed cues involved people who were aware on some level that policies, procedures and supports existed, but who felt excluded in some way from accessing them. The following examples all involve reflections on the structural barriers to speaking about GBSVH within the HEI. In most cases, the participants speak about the reasons why they did not complain or report because barriers

prevented them from seeking help of any description in the HEI. These participants express their sense of exclusion or powerlessness, and as a result, they did not engage with or disclose to the institution in any way, neither to make a report, nor to seek safety, support or help.

Participants highlighted how precarity, dependency, and the power of their abusers meant that they did not feel safe to disclose within the HEI. Official services that do not directly recognise and address such power relations cannot meet the needs of those they are intended to support. Eimear, a junior technical staff member, drew attention to the impossibility of continuing her work at close quarters with her male colleague, a senior technician, if she were to make any sort of complaint about him:

> But I would have felt that if I went through a formal process where [harasser] had then been notified that somebody had made an allegation against him. It would have made things difficult. I go back to your question about comfort. I would have felt wildly uncomfortable in terms of my safety. I would have felt wildly unsafe if I had made a formal report and he had been notified. (…) But if that kind of report had been made and he had been notified, there is no - there would not have been a single day where I would not have been in close quarters with him. (…) If he had to come in and do something in my office that I would have at that point, felt very unsafe... (Eimear).

Hazel, an undergraduate, also felt threatened by her close proximity to the male tutor who was grooming and stalking her. She felt the risk was exacerbated by her dependency on the SUSI grant, meaning that she didn't have the flexibility to move away from him if a report went badly:

> What if he figures out that, you know, I've reported him? You know, I'm in the same college as him. Like, it's not exactly very easy to transfer to a different one, especially because I was on SUSI (Hazel).

In another case, Anne, an international PhD student, was experiencing sexual harassment in her lab. In order to secure a long-term visa to stay in Ireland, she needed her PhD supervisor's sponsorship, and so she did not feel she could risk speaking in her department about the harassment that was happening in her supervisor's lab.

A further risk of being identified with complaint, was being exposed to commentary, criticism, shame or blame, with participants believing that in order to tackle GBSVH, they would have to give up their confidentiality. Tara's case is interesting because, as we have seen, she felt hyper-visible as a *'brown-skinned'* visiting junior scholar in her school. She reflected on the negative impact that complaining would be likely to have – in a context where she was already highly visible as different and othered within her department (Lipinsky, *et al.,* 2026).

> That when it comes to sexual harassment, it seems like whether there's a place to report or not, the one affected is usually the one who's complaining about it.

> Even if you file a complaint, it would backfire on you, it ends up being you become the bad person if they come to know about it (Tara).

Policies and services that do not recognise the complex, intersecting and power–infused dimensions of victim-survivor navigations of the institution are thus unable to serve their intended users. In all the cases outlined above, although the HEI had an SVH policy and resources in place, the victim-survivors did not access it, because they felt that they could not risk the visibility or exposure that might result. None of them made anonymous reports or sought help confidentially, either because they were not aware that they could, or because they did not view that as helpful for their needs. The services existed but those who needed them were missed.

Fatalism and lack of trust:

Alongside missed cues and power-related barriers to reaching SVH services, there was also a sense of fatalism among numerous victim-survivors, that viewed the institution as a place of last resort for disclosure. Some participants contrasted a heavy assessment of the risk to themselves with a negative assessment of the likelihood that anything would change. Anne noted a prevailing negative narrative, saying *‘universities never do anything, women come forward with these problems and the universities just don't care.’*

Lack of trust in the institution drove many of the individual reasons for not approaching supports or complaining or reporting. International participants mentioned the limitations of trust and cultural communication within Irish HEIs. They were unsure what to expect of the HEI, and they did not have a pre-existing relationship or cultural understanding of service providers or authorities within the institution. For this reason, Li, a PhD student, reflected that for Chinese students like her to consider approaching HEI services for help with GBSVH: ‘*You need to make them believe that the supporting system can be trusted.’*

While international participants referenced a sense of uncertainty or unwillingness to risk trusting HEIs that they did not know or understand, Irish participants sometimes named lack of trust, based on knowing the HEIs well. Some mentioned experiences of hearing the violence that they had been subjected to being discussed *‘on the grapevine’,* including by senior leaders in institutions (Mia). In particular, the claims to confidentiality woven throughout policy documents would seem to be totally distrusted. It was not even mentioned by most participants, although Beth did articulate this unspoken assumption; *‘even though they say they claim that this process is confidential, my faith in the system is non-existent.’*

Discouraged/ warned against proceeding

The fatalism that individuals expressed was mirrored by receiving parties throughout the HEIs. These were people who, following disclosures from victim-survivors, not only did not signpost those people to dedicated services, but warned them against engagement with HEI processes. Comments ranged from nonspecific discouragement to explicit warnings that the process is unhelpful and ineffective. Darragh, a technical

staff member who was being harassed by his manager, was explicitly advised against engaging with HR by the line manager of his harasser;

> And only once ever did [the] line manager suggest that I go to HR. (…) Only once. And I went to him several times and. And. Yeah. And. And he suggested it once. Any other time you mentioned HR, he goes why would you go to HR? They'll only make you face your abuser (Darragh).

Beth, an early career academic, was also discouraged by other persons she disclosed to on the grounds that it would 'just' lead to mediation, an activity not expected to be helpful in resolving GBSVH;

> When I met with the Head of School, even though he was very supportive. Before I had even spoken on the call…He immediately said, he immediately told me an anecdote about how formal complaints never work. They take years. It never leads to anything. It just leads to mediation, which might not even work anyway, blah blah blah. Immediately. I hadn't even explained my story, and I was discouraged from making a formal complaint (Beth).

Later, a different receiving party similarly steered her away from making a complaint:

> And I felt like the entire meeting was just a fact-finding mission where she was trying to actively discourage me from making a formal complaint that she said there's no point in making a formal complaint. It never goes anywhere. You know, it's, you know, it's just it's, it's not gonna lead to anything. They're just gonna tell you to do mediation anyway (Beth).

Missed cues applied to victim-survivors who did not experience that the HEI had a commitment to their wellbeing, and who therefore did not reach SVH supports. It also applied to those who considered accessing supports, but did not, owing to structural or power-related barriers, or who had a sense of *"institutional fatalism".* In other cases, participants in this data did attempt to seek help from their institutions, but the people who they disclosed to actively "*warned"* them against engaging with institutional structures such as HR or the official complaints procedures. These instances involved receiving parties who pre-empted processes and channelled their own assumptions to victim-survivors. They did not try to connect the individuals to expert help or assistance. In all of these cases, disclosure failed to result in victim-centred or trauma-informed support.

3.2.3 Heard and harmed

Minimising, downplaying, equivalising

There were numerous examples in the data of victim-survivors whose experiences of disclosure were actively harmful (Bedera, 2023; Jones, 2025). This occurred when the violence or harassment they experienced was questioned, denied or downplayed; and/or when procedures were used against them, causing them additional suffering

on top of the harm of GBSVH, and on at least one occasion, further empowering the abuser.

Many participants found that their disclosure was met by receiving parties with indifference or minimisation. For instance, Chanel repeatedly asked her HEI to help her address the harassment that she was experiencing from a fellow student. On more than one occasion she was referred to student services, who advised her to adapt her behaviour:

> They told me to meet with [student support officer] again. ... I told him everything. I was very, very honest about it. OK.
>
> And he told me. Yeah, like you probably need to keep, you know, you probably need to be more strict with your boundaries. Remember, we talked about that [before].
>
> I was like. Look, I have been strict. ... And he's like, yeah. Like, you're just too nice. I was like, all right, well. Thanks for your help (Chanel).

Other interview participants spoke to supervisors or managers about their experiences, and were advised to ignore the behaviour, suggesting that it was minor and insignificant. In Beth's case, she was being intimidated and harassed by a male colleague. When she asked his line manager to address the harassment, his manager played down the behaviour, suggesting that Beth was over-reacting:

> You know informally numerous times during this process I had said he's doing this, you know, can you please ask him to stop or can you please... And quite consistently got the response of, he's just stressed, or I think it's just a conflict, a cultural conflict (Beth).

For cases like Beth's and Chanel's, the minimisation served to suggest that it was just an interpersonal disagreement between them and their abuser, thus leaving them without the protection they sought. In other cases, a seemingly supportive response was also an excuse for inaction, a process described by Oman and Bull (2018) as "listening while silencing" (cited in Bull 2024). For instance, Darragh approached his boss's line manager to seek help in dealing with his abusive manager:

> Eventually I went to [the] line manager at my wits end and I kind of went look, how do I manage this relationship? I don't know what I'm doing. Like I really don't. I don't know up from down. (…) He was an excellent active listener. And he did absolutely nothing. But he had a big paternalistic: This is what I hear you're saying. You're beleaguered you're harangued. You're this, that and the other. You know, you feel isolated and alone. And I said, yeah, yeah. Thanks (Darragh).

Both Beth and Darragh perceived a default position on the part of the institution that problems of sexual or gender-based bullying and harassment were seen as personality differences, especially when the victim-survivors were seen as being feisty

or outspoken. As Darragh pointed out, this allowed the institution to absolve itself of responsibility.

> Everything is a personality problem. Everything is personality conflict. ... And if we're making the problem go away, then it's solved. ... Because from what I can see, all the mechanics of this institution is about crushing the complaint (Darragh).

These experiences of downplaying, minimising and dismissing experiences were distressing to participants who felt vulnerable and were trying to address their complaints by talking to people within the institution. They were harmful both by reinforcing feelings of self-doubt and isolation, and by potentially leaving violent and abusive situations in place. The further participants in this data moved through the official processes within their institutions, the less trauma-informed and victim-centred their experiences became.

Insistence on "formal" processes

An important feature of participants' experiences was the message that many received to the effect that the institution was powerless to act unless the individual victim-survivor took a formal complaint against their abuser/ harasser. As we have shown, there were examples in the data i.e. the cases of Lila and Sarah, where no formal complaints were made, but actions were still taken to improve the situation for the victim-survivor. These examples were a minority, and in many cases the requirement to enter a detailed disciplinary procedure against an abuser/ harasser was experienced as a barrier to engaging with the institution. Experiences were very varied, but there was a common thread of making seemingly simple requests for basic safety measures and encountering defensive and intimidating responses from the institution. Sarah and Naoise's experiences are particularly indicative in this respect.

Sarah, an international staff member, was experiencing cyber-harassment at the hands of a PhD student and felt unsafe. She explained how she approached the SVH officer wanting to tackle the harassment behaviour, but not necessarily feeling *"that this is warranting a formal response."* When she discussed the complaints process with the SVH officer, she was given the impression that a formal complaint could be difficult, but also that there was nothing else available to her:

> they kind of also I would say, made it [a formal complaint] seem like it could be a long process?... You know, and again, they weren't trying to discourage me from doing formal; but it's more just like you should know, that it's just, you know it's a. It's a process, right?.. And I was kind of like, OK, but what? What happens with informal? And they were like, well, you know; we give you support, and it felt kind of... OK (Sarah).

Sarah wanted somebody to speak directly to the abuser/harasser to make it clear that his behaviour was unacceptable. The offer of "support" (which referred to mental health support and advice, but not direct safety interventions) was not helpful to her needs as it did not address her safety. While Sarah was able to address the problem

directly through her Head of School, other, less secure students and staff felt more dependent on the institution to manage their situations.

Following a lengthy and ultimately unsuccessful Garda investigation, Naoise persisted in asking multiple actors in her HEI to take practical steps to protect her from her abuser/harasser, whom she continued to see daily on campus. She was informed that no action could be taken to protect her without a formal complaint, which she did not want to pursue as she had been so distressed during the drawn-out Garda investigation (see section 3.2.4, below). Following a series of emails to the president of her HEI, she was invited to a meeting with senior staff members and the SVH officer.

> So, I was hoping, I was like: Oh, this is good news. They finally listened to me. But I went into the meeting, and they basically said to me: Yeah, there's nothing we can do unless you file a complaint (Naoise).

When Naoise asked if there was anything that the HEI could do to keep her away from the perpetrator, she was told '*How would you feel now if you were accused of something and you'd no way to defend yourself?'* a legalistic and equivalising response and framing that did not address her safety request. She was simultaneously denied any sort of intervention for her protection and then tarred as attacking her abuser/ harasser. The HEI's actions were bureaucratic, legalistic, and less concerned with Naoise's safety than following a perceived letter of the law.

While this process was going on, Naoise's persistent request for protection was driven by a real sense of danger: *'He's getting more kind of brazen and, you know, coming kind of closer to me. And I can't do anything about it.'* She described what she was hoping for from the institution; a description which was common to numerous victim-survivors in this data:

> Like even, I suppose, at the bare minimum, just kind of like having a word with him. Just saying that, Listen like, she feels unsafe, you know, can you do the decent thing and just stay away from her? But that can't happen, unless I put in the formal complaint (Naoise).

Naoise grew increasingly distressed through a combination of the impact of the initial assault; the effort of pursuing safety through a Garda investigation; the uncooperative HEI; and her ongoing sense of fear and threat from the abuser. This sort of cumulative, mutually reinforcing bureaucratic and traumatic cycle of distress was quite common in the experiences in this study.

The insistence that protective action requires a formal complaint (even when this was also presented as difficult or inadvisable) was challenging for numerous participants. It suggests to victim-survivors that the support of the HEI is superficial or contingent. Like Sarah, it engenders scepticism of what the SVH office could offer, if the formal process was too onerous or threatening to them. Tara, an international racialised postdoctoral researcher experiencing sexual harassment in her department, noticed posters for the SVH services, but since she did not feel she could pursue a formal complaint, she saw little value in the service: *'I don't know what they would do. Maybe they just listen. That's all they do.'* It is noteworthy that responses by receiving parties

within the HEIs were valued by victim-survivors when they went beyond hearing to acting appropriately and helpfully.

Some participants in this research thus experienced a binary choice in the support on offer from SVH services, with formal complaints seeming both unpleasant and undesirable and even off-putting, but having to be endured if they wanted help or protection. Many did not feel that the SVH policies provided them with the specific support that they needed. Sometimes they looked elsewhere i.e. to the hierarchical line management structure, to external structures including feminist organisations and the Garda, and to their own social support bases. These pathways were complex, sometimes helpful, and sometimes not (see section 3.2.4 below). The distress that participants like Tara and Naoise expressed was interpreted and addressed as not fitting within existing policies, leaving them substantially alone with the problem. Arguably, by speaking to SVH support staff, line managers or even colleagues, they were invoking an official process of sorts: they were asking people with responsibility within the institution to take action on their behalf, and so their actions felt quite formal. However, these participants found that outside of a very daunting complaint or reporting process, the institutions did not offer support that was meaningful to them, downplayed the significance of what was happening, and often emphasised protection of the abuser/harasser, including through following formal or "official" processes. Yet as we saw, successful action was taken by institutional actors, and this is possible, even outside of the formal reporting process.

Official complaints: bureaucracy and equivalising

Across the data, there was a general reluctance to invoke formal processes, expressed both by victim-survivors and those who received their disclosures. Those who proceeded with formal processes did so to make themselves safe, or to prevent the same thing happening to others. Similar trends have been found in studies internationally (Bull, 2022; Cipriano, *et al.*, 2022; Shannon and Bull, 2024). Victim-survivors sometimes pursue these processes even when they don't trust the institution, because they feel it is necessary (Shannon and Bull 2024) or that they have little choice. Experiences of seeking protective action through official complaint and disciplinary measures were stressful, prolonged, and frequently positioned the victim-survivor as an adversary in the process.

A key dimension was a conflict between the urgency that the victim-survivor felt about their case, and the procedural delays of institutional processes. For instance, after months of attempting to send her complaint up the lines of authority to have harassment and bullying dealt with, Beth received a message from the secretary of her Head of School offering a meeting in six weeks time.

> And I said, you don't understand, this is an emergency. I need to meet with him as soon as possible. I can go to the [location] where he works. I can do weekends. I can do evenings. I can do anytime. But I cannot wait six weeks. I will travel wherever you need me to travel (Beth).

This conflict between the urgency felt by the victim-survivor and the delays imposed by distant procedures was referenced by numerous participants in the study. The procedures themselves were not just slow but also frightening. Sinéad, an undergraduate student, explained how officials in her HEI seemed to place an emphasis not on her safety, but on the repercussions in the event that her complaint was found to be false:

> She [the HR person responsible for the complaint procedure] said that multiple times, she says, be really careful what you write in your complaint because it can fall back on you…Oh God, they kept saying this right, they kept saying that if you submit a complaint wrong, the disciplinary procedures can fall on your head. So be very careful what you write in the complaint (Sinéad).

She outlined what that felt like for her, a first-year student seeking safety:

> It felt dead silent. It was alien and cold and bureaucratic and like being in a courtroom of strangers who just want to go on their lunch break (Sinéad).

The juxtaposition of imminent risk with bureaucratic proceduralism and even, in Sinéad's case, threat, was distressing for participants. When they managed to invoke formal disciplinary procedures, they described adversarial processes where there was an emphasis on "natural justice", which in practice drew an equivalence between them as reporting parties and the responding parties. This shaded, at times, into "himpathy", a tendency of administrators and HEI investigators to focus on the impacts of the complaint on the responding party, implicitly casting doubt on the credibility of the reporting party. There were no instances in this data of a trauma-informed or victim-centred investigation process. For instance, Chanel used the disciplinary procedure in her HEI to report the sexual harassment that she was experiencing (as we have seen, she was unaware and was never made aware that there was specific support for victim-survivors of GBSVH). She was assigned investigators to her case:

> I was waiting for weeks to hear back from them. I met 2 advocates or something like that. And the entire experience was one of the most traumatic experiences I've ever experienced in my entire life. I - they asked me in depth about all these things. I told them, I told them everything I told you, and then I told them about the night in the... where he put his hands on me. And they're like, well, like, to be honest, like, we don't really have evidence of that now. I was like, well, but I'm telling you, this. They're like: yeah, but, it's you versus him really, isn't it? (Chanel).

The assertion that it's '*you versus him'* is common to adversarial and legalistic procedures, and not appropriate to trauma-informed or victim-centred processes. The impact of this flattening of power differences and equivalising of reporting party and respondent party was often devastating and retraumatising, as Chanel identified.

The prospect of mediation was regularly introduced, without recognition of the power imbalances that were at play, or the requirement for victim-survivors to agree to

mediation for it to be appropriate. Of the four people who proceeded with formal complaints, three explicitly said that they did not want to have to share a space with the responding party, or to confront them in person. Beth, an ECR who was being harassed by a male colleague, took legal advice, and spoke to her union and a personal coach before pursuing a complaint. Following guidance from all these sources, she was adamant that she did not want to meet directly with the respondent party. Despite this, she was told mediation was a requirement:

> I immediately was like: I told you, I don't want to meet with this person. But yet again. I think I'm in the position of trying to show I'm the bigger person, I'm solution orientated, blah blah blah so (Beth).

Beth eventually gave in to a mediation process despite explicitly stating that she didn't want to, while other participants were told that it was a likely outcome. Beth's emphasis on her rationale: *'I'm in the position of trying to show I'm the bigger person, I'm solution orientated'* draws attention to the work that victim-survivors need to do to mitigate against being seen as "trouble" or "complainers" within the institution and their individual units (Ahmed, 2021). These labels disproportionately attach to women and people who are minoritised (Ahmed, 2021), making the experience of complaints especially challenging for those most likely to need to make them (Pilikaite-Sotorivoch, *et al.,* 2025).

Disciplinary processes were experienced as slow, bureaucratic, and adversarial, pitting the reporting party against the responding party as though they were equal, and sometimes subjecting them to new risks. The power imbalance at play was sometimes very clear, as in Chanel's case:

> Oh, yeah, he lawyered up, by the way as well. So he, his lawyer, got him out of [it]... I don't know how you can afford a lawyer. Like. I assume they're about 600 euros - I don't know how much they are, but I can tell you one thing, I'm just about affording to live at the moment. Do you know what I mean? I can't afford a lawyer. So, there's a big inequality there (Chanel).

In Chanel's case, a "loophole" was identified by the respondent party's lawyer, which demonstrated that the HEI had not followed its own procedures correctly, and her case was dropped. By placing her within a legalistic process, she was traumatised and powerless to address the harm that had been done and her sense of fear.

While there is a lot of variety and contextual specificity in these cases, there was a common theme of fear and risk on the part of the victim-survivor; bureaucratic proceduralism on the part of the institution; and isolation of the individual within the process, leaving them without support and decontextualising the power imbalances which underpinned the GBSVH behaviours.

Official complaints: conflicts of interest and power imbalances

In numerous cases, attempts to pursue complaints or reports were complicated by conflicts of interest, particularly among senior graduate students and staff. This was

principally the case in cases of gender-based bullying and sexual harassment, where participants were often encouraged to resolve matters locally if they could. In these cases, both reporting and responding parties had pre-existing relationships in their units, and these relationships were mediated by hierarchies and inequalities. Hazel and Anne were both students who were being harassed in different ways by staff members. They felt it was impossible to address the problem, since they believed that staff in their department would obviously support a colleague over a student. The same was true for many of the staff in the data. Attempting to move her complaint through the hierarchy in her unit, Beth was confronted by the entanglement of senior staff with the man she was complaining about. Speaking about her responding party's line manager, she said:

> But she [the line manager] is - has a heavy, heavy conflict of interest in terms of, she likes me, but she also likes him, and she has a conflict of interest in terms of protecting him because he does a lot of research with her (Beth).

For Darragh, this hierarchy went beyond the individual unit and individual conflicts of interest to affect the entire institution. When he tried to complain about his line manager, he strongly felt that he was at a disadvantage because the institutional imperative was to support the hierarchy. He spoke about his experience reporting bullying to Human Resources:

> I didn't expect them to believe me about the bullying, the harassment, and other named abuses]. I didn't expect them to believe me about any of that. Because he [Darragh's line manager] doesn't. ...Officially. Personally, he does, officially, he doesn't because he protects his line managers. You know, that's the lowest common denominator here in [HEI]. They protect their line managers. They reinforce the status quo (Darragh).

The existence of conflicts of interest added to the stress and difficulty of pursuing complaints, and the sense of fatalism that participants often expressed that anything could change because of their actions. Many spoke with a belief that the odds were "stacked against them" because the people they were complaining about had more power and more institutional standing than they did. In the case of the most relatively powerless participants in this data, the students experiencing violence or harassment at the hands of staff, the disparity was so great that they believed there was no action they could take.

Inadequacy of response and suggested redress

In some instances, participants pursued disciplinary action because they believed that there was a threat, not only to themselves, but to others. In these cases, it was especially important to reporting parties that their action should result in a change not only for themselves, but for others. They drew attention to the cultural, structural, and systemic nature of the GBSVH they complained about: patterns of multiple and repeated victimisation, coupled with cultures of acceptance and protecting abusers/harassers. Participants argued that narrow individual solutions like moving

the victim-survivor or settling for the fact the harasser is not working in the institution at the present time illustrated a damage limitation response, ignoring and in effect condoning the systemic nature of the problem.

Eoin, a junior lecturer, took action to support numerous students who were experiencing sexual harassment in his unit. When he attempted to address the problem, the respondent party turned on him, smearing his reputation and harassing him and members of his family, online and in person. The advice that Eoin received from HR was that there was already a harassment case against the respondent party, and that he should not complicate this by adding to it. As a result, Eoin received no remedy or even acknowledgement of the damage done to him personally and professionally; and the existing GBSVH case was narrowed to one involving just two individuals, again suggesting an equivalence, and creating a perception of a resolvable interpersonal dispute rather than something which was deep, systemically-enabled, and ongoing. From the perspective of HR, the respondent party was being "dealt with," although Eoin was left without recognition or redress.

Darragh drew attention to the inadequacy of "solutions" which were offered to him, which were similarly narrow and individualistic:

> But if you get transferred to a different department, people are nicer to you, isn't that enough? And then you're: Fucking no, because she's still down there abusing people! What happens when the next fucking guy or girl or fucking person comes. Comes in there, you're just gonna allow her to abuse everybody and keep transferring victims out? While leaving her here like a spider in a web? (Darragh).

These examples demonstrate a clear sense on the part of research participants that their complaints needed to clearly address the interpersonal power imbalances between them and the responding parties; and also, to address the systems that ignored or enabled those power imbalances. Most participants chose not to enter into such processes, and for those who did, all of the experiences were negative. As we have shown in this report, there were examples where sensitive staff and colleagues, supported by clear policies and procedures, were able to provide the responses that victim-survivors needed in a timely fashion. What this section shows, however, is that when these procedures were unfit for purpose, or badly implemented, the impact on the individual victim-survivor was severe. These sorts of negative impacts dominate the data that we gathered.

3.2.4 Heard by external agencies

In cases of severe sexual assault, Garda reports also arose in the study and require specific attention. In some cases, reporting to the Garda occurred as a matter of procedure outside of the HEI, for instance, when Mia, an undergraduate student at the time, presented to hospital immediately following a rape. In other cases, the receiving

party in the HEI called the Garda immediately, or friends encouraged the victim-survivor to report to the Garda. Individuals typically weighed this decision very carefully, worrying about the impact on both the respondent party and themselves.

For the purposes of this study, what is relevant is the victim-survivors' experience of their HEIs in relation to their involvement in criminal justice processes. For a range of reasons, most participants in this data chose between either a criminal report or a HEI disciplinary process. SVH staff members provided clear and detailed information to victim-survivors. Detailed and complex procedures came in the aftermath of trauma, at a time that was already stressful and overwhelming, and the descriptions of victim-survivors of decision-making capture emotions like confusion, isolation, anxiety and stress. Garda reports happened immediately after sexual assaults, while pursuit of a complaint within the HEI would have to wait until completion of the Garda investigation, at which point the victim-survivor often felt that they would be “starting again” with processes of relating their traumatic experience and being subject to potentially invasive or distressing questioning about it.

Experiences of the Garda investigation process in this data were very mixed. For Naoise, the investigation went on for nine months, through her summer holidays and in tandem with her declining physical and mental health, she felt very isolated and alone throughout. Her communication with the Gardaí was difficult, she did not have a single liaison point, and she felt a lot of stress, *‘my head was fried’*. She had to repeat her testimony multiple times and felt that she was being threatened with the due process:

> And he [the Garda], like looked at me and he said like: You need to be 100% sure. OK, because if you get any of this wrong like you'll be in the witness box. They'll be throwing questions at you and like you know what, you need to be kind of. You know, 100% certain. But yeah, it's just, you know, very kind of isolating because the guards. It didn't kind of feel like the guards were on my side, like. At all. (Naoise).

Three other participants had made Garda reports, including Sinéad, who successfully filed for a protection order because she was unsuccessful in her repeated requests to her HEI to make her safe. Her experience contrasted dramatically with Naoise’s, in that she received the unquestioning support from the Gardaí that she had hoped for from the HEI:

> The protection order. We got in touch with our guard, who'd been responsible with everything. We'll probably make him godfather to one of our children if he's still around because, oh, my Lord, this man is amazing (Sinéad).

With the exception of Sinéad, the other three cases did not result in charges or summons, as most reports of sexual violence do not[4]. The exact relationship between

[4] In Ireland, between 2018 and 2023 just over a fifth of all instances of sexual violence reported to Gardaí led to a charge or a summons: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT131.pdf;

HEIs and criminal justice procedures was difficult to identify in the data. Policies about what the HEI could do while a report and possible investigation was underway often seemed unclear from the perspective of the victim-survivors, resulting in confusion for those who reported, and who expressed distress at the uncertain outcomes involved in police reports. Victim-survivor efforts to find safety within the HEI were rarely successful. Where individuals were simultaneously undergoing a Garda report, the impact of the associated stress and fear was worse. The experiences in this study suggest that policies need to more clearly delineate precisely what role the HEI can play in supporting victim-survivors' safety and wellbeing concurrently while they are involved in criminal investigations.

It is also worth noting that in some cases, victim-survivors seek accountability outside of “formal” mechanisms, for instance through engagement in public activism or use of social or mainstream media channels (Phipps, 2020; Mergaert, *et al.*, 2024; Dey, *et al.,* 2025). While this did not arise a lot in this study, it was present. One participant did reach out to Rosa, the feminist campaigning organisation, for support. Another published an anonymous article discussing victim blaming attitudes towards rape victims in her student newspaper. Both of these actions were described as expressions of frustration at failings within the HEI. Research literature on trauma notes that victim-survivors often find support, solidarity and the basis for action in community with other survivors (DiSantis and Towl, 2025), and those who had engaged with rape crisis supports indeed reported positive experiences in this regard, as discussed in the outcomes below.

Vignette 3: Naoise

This vignette shares the experience of Naoise, an undergraduate student who reported a sexual assault to the Gardaí. Her experience of the Garda investigation was upsetting and prolonged and did not result in a charge being brought. In her HEI, she continued to share space with her abuser. She sought safety from many places in the HEI, and was repeatedly told that nothing could be done to help her unless she brought a formal complaint. ***Naoise was heard outside the institution – and heard and harmed within the institution.***

Naoise was an undergraduate student. She was sexually assaulted by a fellow-student she went on a date with, on their HEI campus. She experienced shock at what happened, leading to denotive hesitancy, thus it took her some time to understand why she was so upset. When she told some friends about what had happened, they helped her to contextualise her experience and feelings and to recognise the incident as an assault: *‘The penny kind of dropped then like you know, when one of the girls*

https://www.drcc.ie/news-resources/sexual-violence-information/sexual-offending/#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20just%20over%20a,conclude%20and%20charges%20are%20issued

said to me, this sounds like sexual assault. Like you probably need to go to the guards and stuff.'

Naoise visited the sexual violence and harassment officer in her HEI, who advised her that she could not file a formal complaint and make a Garda report at the same time. She chose to make a statement to the Gardaí. Naoise's experience of the Garda report and investigation was prolonged, stressful, and traumatic. She interacted with a number of different Gardaí over the course of a process that lasted nearly a year, with some being supportive and others more adversarial or unhelpful. She felt that the emphasis was always on procedures and compliance rather than on her well-being: '*Honestly, I felt … like I was the one in the wrong.'*

While the Garda investigation was underway, Naoise's health deteriorated. She questioned and doubted herself constantly and worried about the outcome of the investigation. At the same time, the man that she had reported was still on campus and she saw him frequently, causing her more stress. In a conversation with the director of her course of study she unexpectedly shared the whole experience, as she was under so much stress. Her course director was compassionate and helpful, and helped her access therapy on campus quickly, in spite of the waiting list.

Naoise encountered the man who had assaulted her at close quarters on campus, which she found to be a terrifying experience. She asked numerous different people in the HEI to provide protection measures for her, but the consistent response was that providing protection was only possible if she made a formal complaint, even though this was not actually possible according to the HEI while the Garda investigation was underway. As the investigation progressed, she became exhausted and frustrated at repeating her story again and again, and concluded that she could not proceed with a formal report in the HEI in addition to the Garda investigation. After many months, the Gardaí contacted her to say that there was not enough evidence to proceed with a charge. She described herself as "devastated". She returned to college and continued to see the man frequently; she felt that now his name had been cleared he was "*getting more brazen"*. She made direct contact with different officials throughout the HEI and eventually was invited to a meeting with senior managers and the SVH officer. *'So I was hoping, I was like: Oh, this is good news. They finally listened to me. But I went into the meeting and they basically said to me: Yeah, there's nothing we can do unless you file a complaint. I was like, you know, could you not have said that in an e-mail?'*

Naoise described the experience as isolating, she experienced significant loneliness, putting her "on edge" all the time. Upset by the traumatic memory and her feelings of being unsafe on campus, she avoided her HEI as much as possible in her final year. Naoise's experience of the sexual assault was compounded by the absence of any authority figure who could recognise the harm on her terms and help her to address it. In addition to the Garda report, she disclosed to security staff, SVH staff, and managers at different levels in the institution, with just one request: to be kept away

from the man she reported. In responding, all personnel she engaged with emphasised institutional procedures and concerns about the impact on the man. The cumulative impact of these different responses in different places left Naoise feeling abandoned, alone, and devastated.

3.3 Outcomes and impacts of the experiences in the data

This data represents a very diverse range of experiences within Irish HEIs, with diversity spanning the identities of participants; the types of violence and harassment they experienced; the choices that they made about their experiences, and the journeys they made through their institutions. Speaking about personal impacts, participants who had significant engagements with the institutional body did not always make sharp distinctions between their experience of GBSVH and what happened in its aftermath. Indeed, because the institution was often both the place where the violence or harassment occurred and the body responsible for protection, many victim-survivors in the data experienced institutional responses and environments as part of the GBSVH.

There is an extensive literature on the many impacts of gender-based violence on victim-survivors, impacting their physical and mental health, economic wellbeing, personal security, and enjoyment of human rights. In the following section therefore, we draw attention to the outcomes of GBSVH for those who did and did not disclose or report to their HEIs, and we explore key impacts of the varied institutional responses on the victim-survivors in the data.

3.3.1 Resilience, growth and connection

Notwithstanding many negative outcomes and impacts on the victim-survivors in this data, some participants spoke about their overall response to their journeys in terms of personal growth and connectedness. The challenges that they encountered, not only from the GBSVH but also through social and institutional reactions, led to journeys of learning and development. Some survivors spoke with pride of what they had come through:

> It made me more resilient, more aware and strangely more connected to people who carry their own pain. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, but I'm learning that my pain is something I get to own and that's what I say. I will say it's kind of powerful for me (Toni).

These experiences sometimes extended into new commitments, relationships and projects. Several participants spoke about how they channelled their experiences into their own work, academically, creatively and professionally. For instance, Sylvia said: '*It actually kind of inspired my thesis that I just finished.'* Meanwhile, Sarah incorporated the experience into her teaching and mentorship of students. She explained how following her experience, she took steps to inform her students about what to do in the event of similar incidents:

> You know, they [the SVH team in the HEI] gave me some slides that I like then shared with students this past year. Really trying to advocate about, like, just because I know that the sort of data about these things is not great on campuses and so really making sure students understood these were resources for them (Sarah).

3.3.2 Protection and safety outcomes

In this data, there was a small amount of evidence of GBSVH behaviours being directly and satisfactorily addressed. In two cases (profiled above in section 3.2.1), actors within the HEI, with the agreement of the victim-survivor, spoke directly to the abuser/ harasser and indicated that the behaviour was unacceptable. Without proceeding to formal investigations or disciplinary proceedings, these actions were felt to successfully address the behaviour. In another case, following the refusal of the HEI to implement protection measures, the victim-survivor reluctantly gained a protection order from the Garda.

Outside of these three examples, there were no other examples of harmful behaviours being directly addressed either within or by the HEI. In the five cases where participants tried to initiate formal complaints or reports, none resulted in action. Exploring the details of these cases is far beyond the scope of this report, but the current research did not find any examples of HEIs implementing full investigations that resulted in addressing harmful gendered or sexualised violence or harassment in a lasting way. This opens questions about the impact of inaction, cultures of impunity, and persistence of violent and abusive behaviours.

3.3.3 Adaptations and coping strategies

In a context where institutional protection was not sought or efforts to seek it were unsuccessful, the data shows evidence of individual adaptations to cope with the impact of the GBSVH. Participants made modifications to where they went, who they saw and how they behaved, in order to protect themselves from further victimisation or impacts. Students often spoke about how they avoided campus, or how they were careful and hyper-alert in specific institutional spaces, as in this case from Mia, following an on-campus rape:

> You know I can't go into a lecture hall now because I don't know who's going to come up behind me. It, you know, all of those things, they, they impact every part of your life. I can't go to the bathroom because I don't know if I'm in the bathroom, that somebody's going to break the door down and grab me. I know. Stranger things have happened, but at the time, it's what's going through your mind. The sense of I cannot go up a flight of stairs now because I don't know who's going to come down the flight of stairs (Mia).

Participants spoke about avoiding certain places and correspondingly avoiding certain modules or groups, or choosing to attend classes remotely in order to protect themselves from the abuser/harasser. Participants deliberately curtailed their academic, professional, and social lives to protect their physical and psychological safety and wellbeing. Some invested energy in pursuing support or accountability from the institution, while others didn't, but there was a common theme of reducing their overall activity and movements within the HEI. The net impact of such spatial, academic, and social adaptations could be to change participants' relationships with their campus, and sometimes with the institution as a whole. Naoise, who felt fearful wherever she went on campus, described her feeling as she came to the end of her degree:

> I'm just like counting down the days to getting out of here, like, you know, for good. [laughs] Really and just kind of like escaping. Escaping [HEI location] (Naoise).

In other cases, adaptations influenced the opportunities participants availed of, with significant long-term impacts. Unable to either address or tolerate the gender-based harassment which made it impossible for her to do her research, Anne ultimately left her PhD programme. She reflected on the personal impact of her choice to leave the programme, in the absence of institutional support to address it. It is noteworthy that in her reflection, she is still affected by an internal sense that the failure was hers, and not one of either the abusive person or the institution:

> But there's definitely a lot of shame and a lot of guilt and second guessing myself. And, you know, a case of, well, maybe I should have just sucked it up and pushed through it all. And I think it's much better for my mental health that I didn't. And I'm still glad that I made the choice that I did, but it's definitely changed the trajectory of my life (Anne).

3.3.4 Impacts of stress, uncertainty and anxiety

Participants in this data reported severe impacts on their mental health and wellbeing owing to the violence and harassment they experienced. Here, we explore the additional ways in which institutional inaction or distressing institutional procedures impacted on victim-survivors. The combination of victimisation and the attempt to get

institutions to act led to feelings of distress, exasperation and exhaustion, as Beth outlined:

> I'm just drained. I'm just pissed off (and) being (told) that I need to have patience and compassion… all I have done is be patient and compassionate… I'm fucking sick of this shit (Beth).

For a number of participants, academic or career progress suffered while they navigated simultaneous experiences of violence and harassment, and institutional proceduralism. This included poor grades, missed assignments and failed exams owing to high levels of stress. In Chanel's case, the stress of trying to address the harassment while dealing with the pressure of her postgraduate degree eventually proved too much. She reflected on her sense of exhaustion from the cumulative stress of the violence and her HEI's response, which resulted in her giving up on her efforts to hold the abuser accountable:

> It wasn't worth it at that point. I'd done it. I'd done, what, four months of trying to advocate for myself. And because he hadn't escalated anymore, I just left it. I just had to. I was too tired, and I failed my exams and I was. I was just so exhausted from it all. I just really couldn't (Chanel).

3.3.5 Impacts on the relationship with the HEI

Participants, reflecting on the reporting process, raised the issue of a culture of non-reporting or institutional self-protection, and perceived this to be a barrier to meaningful engagement, not just with themselves but with other victim-survivors. Darragh commented on systemic unwillingness to take responsibility, being reminded of the institution's responsibility to protect its line managers. Eimear felt that SVH matters were never handled well due to a culture in which GBSVH is normalised and harassers could act with impunity.

> Culturally, staff members... Getting away is the only term I can use. Getting away with it, whether that go down to lack of reporting by students or staff, or institutionalisation of staff who just feel that they have been in that culture for so long that they will just say what they want (…) In terms of gender, race and sexual kind of harassment. There would be a long standing culture of, yeah, people kind of getting away with it, there being no repercussions. Nothing really being done or going through policies of reporting and then coming to this... Coming to an end with no conclusion (Eimear).

Sinéad summarised how it felt for her to be in an institution that was protecting itself rather than her, as a victim of ongoing GBSVH. Her words eloquently reflect the complex combinations of feelings of threat, fear, confusion and betrayal that many participants conveyed throughout this study; and the absence of victim-centred or trauma-informed approaches. She spoke about her feelings about the people and

structures in the HEI who were responsible for helping her to seek safety and to follow procedures:

> They're super duper duper duper human until they maybe made a mistake. And then once they maybe made a mistake it's like an animal in a corner and it's just lashing out at you no matter what you say, and you're trying to, like, reach through and you're trying to say I just want peace. I just want, like, mutual clarity and anything else that we can achieve moving forward. But it’s like shouting into a void. It's just a bunch of scared, angry adults emailing back saying: But you did this and you did that and blah blah blah
>
> And not really, I'm so sorry that happened.’
>
> No-one said I’m sorry this happened (Sinéad).

4. Discussion

This report has brought together a diversity of experiences of disclosing, reporting, and staying quiet about GBSVH in higher education institutions in Ireland. We use these experiences to develop recommendations for the HEA and HEIs throughout Ireland to direct their work to end sexual violence and harassment and for HEIs to be more victim-centred and trauma-aware. The experiences show diversity across the types of violence and harassment, the places where they occurred, and the identities of both victim-survivors and abusers/harassers. Many of the participants in the study experienced marginalisation through their gender and/or other factors, including race, disability and international status. The report explores four overarching trends in the data. We look at participants who were “heard and heeded”; those who were “unheard”; and those who were “heard and harmed”. Finally, we explore the HEI experiences of victim-survivors who disclosed and reported externally to the institution, and were “heard outside the institution”, mainly by the Gardaí. We develop recommendations out of these four trends, as follows:

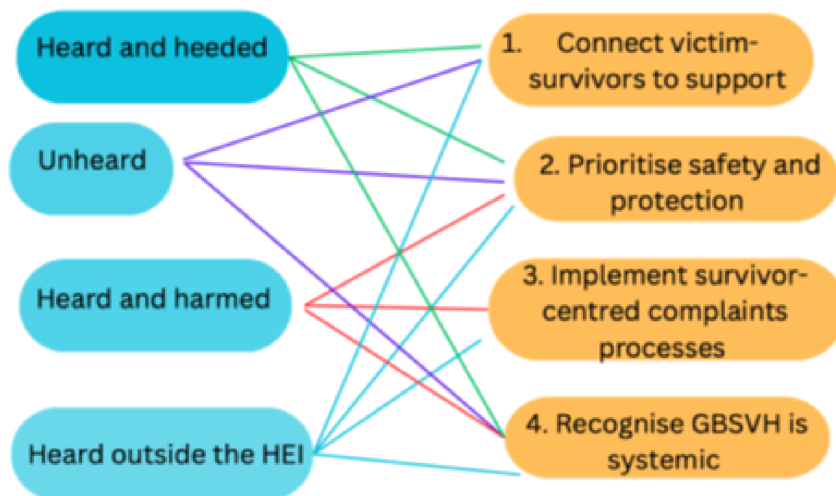

Figure 2: Recommendations based on research analysis

In the first section titled "heard and heeded", we outlined positive experiences of disclosure. These were especially significant in cases where the disclosure was made to somebody within the HEI who understood their specific role. In these cases, victim-survivors were "heard, heeded and helped". These examples point to good practice, particularly in connecting victim-survivors to support (recommendation one), and prioritising safety and protection (recommendation two). They are possible when a culture of gender equality is in place (recommendation four).

Second, we explored the data that shows victim-survivors who were "unheard". These are examples of people who were missed by official policies, either because nobody told them, or because they assumed that policies didn't apply to them or would not help. For these unheard participants, they made adaptations in their own lives and movements to survive and tolerate the violence and harassment, and they did not ask for safety provisions. Notably, those who were most vulnerable to exploitation and victimisation, as junior, marginalised or dependent, were also most likely to be missed or unheard by policies. For this reason, recommendation one of this study is to connect victim-survivors to dedicated GBSVH policies, procedures and services. As disclosures can happen anywhere in the institution, this involves wide-ranging training and awareness raising, targeted to specific roles and responsibilities. It also involves communicating directly with victim-survivors who fall outside of "mainstream" or "obvious" groups: including postgraduate and early career scholars; and marginalised groups such as disabled, international, racialised or sexual and gender minority staff and students. Recommendation two, prioritising safety and protection, follows on from

recommendation one, for those who are successfully connected to institutional supports.

The third broad trend we explore in this report is those victim-survivors who were "heard and harmed". These are examples in the data of people who attempted to complain, report, or otherwise initiate action within the HEI to make themselves and others safe, and who had negative experiences. Experiences include minimisation, bureaucratic delays and proceduralism, conflicts of interest, inappropriately adversarial and stressful initiatives, and inadequate or inappropriate efforts at redress. Such negative experiences were generally co-occurrent with ongoing violence and harassment, or a fear of revictimisation based on continuing to share space with the respondent party. For these participants recommendation two is especially important: often, they were seeking safety and instead becoming more endangered. This data additionally leads to recommendation three: implement survivor-centred complaints processes. Investigations and complaints are of significance for many people: reporting parties; respondent parties; and members of the wider institution. However, they are not of equal significance to those different actors, and they should never be cause of further harm or retraumatisation, as was the case for many participants in this study. The official arbitration of complaints, when it is required, should always be victim-centred.

The final trend in the data is related to external actors who heard victim-survivors outside of the institution. This is principally related to Garda reports, which were very mixed in this study. The role of HEIs in this regard was unclear and often inadequate, with victim-survivors left pending while difficult and sometimes lengthy Garda investigations were ongoing. Recommendations two and three both relate to these external processes: while victim-survivors may turn to the Gardaí, the media, or external organisations, they still require specific safety measures and in some cases complaints procedures within the HEI, potentially concurrently.

Finally, across all of the data, it is apparent that GBSVH is rarely an interpersonal problem that can be reduced to two individuals. It is enabled by conducive cultural contexts, wider gender inequality, and systems and structures that prioritise stability, competition and hierarchy over victim-survivors. Throughout the data, it is apparent that addressing individual cases narrowly leaves the wider problem in place, a fact that individual research participants frequently noted. Therefore, the final recommendation is to address GBSVH as a systemic issue, with reports treated as evidence that can enable action to increase equality throughout the institution.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Connect victim-survivors to policies and supports

The data show that victim-survivors do not always find their way to sexual violence and harassment services, even when these exist in HEIs. There are a variety of factors that contribute to this. For some, they are not aware that support exists. This was particularly the case for international or other minoritised, isolated or excluded students and staff. Others were inhibited from speaking to anybody due to gender inequality; discrimination; shame and myths about sexual violence; or dependency on lecturers, supervisors and/or managers. The data also indicates that disclosures can land anywhere in the organisation. Individuals in the HEI receiving disclosures may be unaware of existing policies and support staff, or have a poor understanding of them, and fail to signpost victim-survivors towards expert support.

In some cases, victim-survivors were "missed" entirely by support staff because the survivor was fearful of the negative impact of being associated with complaints. This especially affected people whose apparent difference was already a source of difficulty or exclusion, for instance, as the data illuminates, for international staff and students and/ or students or staff of colour. By not accessing those supports, they received no help from the HEI, leading them to tolerate or adapt to the GBSVH, or in some cases leave their positions.

This data suggests that support services may not be reaching or supporting those most disempowered by GBSVH. This leads to the need for recognition that within sections that deal with violence and harassment, an audit of the demographic of help-seeing would be of benefit so as to ascertain the demographics of who is reached, who is accessing the support and complaint procedures, and who may be unreached.

A key barrier is the identification of the problem. People who had some awareness of SVH policies and associated support staff often failed to identify particular cases as relevant, for example, considering them too complicated; "just" interpersonal differences; or not gender or sex-based. This was true for both victim-survivors themselves, and for receiving parties. Thus, the challenge is not only in raising awareness of the existence of policies and supports but also raising awareness of what constitutes GBSVH. There was a tendency to assume that cases were "too complicated"/ "not about gender"/ would damage the respondent party/ would result in lack of action or further harm. This meant that even when support services were in place and well-publicised, people did not recognise they could be relevant. As a result, HEIs should recognise that much greater awareness is required of the nature of GBSVH and the intention of related policies, so that people within HEIs are confident signposting all possible cases to expert support.

Worries about adjudicating the rightness or wrongness of a claim appeared to stymie people from acting, rather than directing all possible cases to a dedicated source of support. In the data, responses to disclosures sometimes defaulted to concerns about the person who was accused, the institutional reputation, or the person receiving the disclosure, thereby straying away from a central focus on the victim-survivor and their immediate needs. This leads to the need for recognition that awareness at all stages of complaint and protection processes, it is necessary to work against the minimisation and systematic doubting of reporting parties, which also impacts minoritised people disproportionately.

The constellation of issues presented above, which limit access to support for those who need it, demands awareness that support should be ubiquitous across all HEIs. In addition to a broad saturation of awareness, support also needs to be most clearly signaled and targeted towards people who are at the highest risk, and to members of minority groups. There is thus a need for broad and continuous organisational awareness-raising, and while necessary, it is not sufficient. Engagement, awareness raising and specific trauma informed training with key actors, operational and strategic units within HEIs that are likely to have contact with individuals at risk is important in relation to how to handle a disclosure, as well as in relation to prevention measures.

This data points to the need for clarification on the responsibilities of different receiving parties depending on their roles and location in the HEI. These include but are not limited to senior management; line management; lecturers and tutors; student services; accommodation services; on-campus social and catering services and others. For instance, some receiving parties are trained and mandated to provide direct support to victim-survivors during and in the aftermath of GBSVH, while others should signpost victim-survivors to expert staff. Degrees of responsibility should be established, clearly communicated, and signposted.

Recommended Actions

In order to expand and diversify the use of support services by victim-survivors, the following actions should be taken as part of comprehensive strategies that include prevention and, where required, prosecution measures.

Ensure easy identification of a single, named, and accessible point of contact for every victim-survivor who needs to access support from their HEI.

Embed education and awareness raising throughout the academic journey. This should be continuous, and not provided as an add-on. Basic information should be disseminated widely and frequently across the institution, recognising that anybody in the HEI community might receive a disclosure. This should **include simple**

straightforward information about how to respond to disclosures in the immediate (e.g. DO listen and support; DON'T judge or adjudicate; DO help find the appropriate SVH point-of-contact; DON'T mimimise or dismiss).

Clearly highlight that receiving parties do not have to take decisions or adjudicate the rightness of a case; but they **do have an active responsibility to connect victim-survivors to support**. Frequent referrals should be viewed as evidence of a well-functioning system.

Provide specific training such as First Point of Contact. The provision of training for students and staff should include explicit input on how to respond to disclosures. Training should include information about confidentiality, privacy, and cultural and gender sensitivity. Awareness-raising about policies and procedures should be very visible and frequent for all staff, with additional emphasis on key strategic points of emphasis in career, i.e. induction, assumption of management or leadership roles and also be tailored and culturally sensitive to target minoritised people so as to acknowledge and ameliorate risks of seeking services for them. People receiving disclosures should be enabled to be future-focused, enabling the individual victim-survivor to identify their next step. Training and awareness-raising needs to respond to the many locations where disclosures occur, not only within the hierarchical structure, but across the campus community.

Review and regularly update information, communications and awareness-raising materials to ensure that:

- they reach people who are vulnerable to GBSVH in HEIs, especially marginalised groups, such as international staff and students; precariously-employed staff; people with disabilities; LGBTQIA+ communities and others.

- they address commonly-held myths about GBSVH and related supports, and enable ready signposting to services.

5.2 Prioritise safety and protection

Across this research, participants frequently made disclosures and formal reports because to do so was necessary to secure their safety to continue with their studies or work. They did this at times in spite of their trust concerns with their HEI. The existence of dedicated SVH support and services demonstrated a commitment to protection and was successful in enabling situational and psychological safety for some victim-survivors. Successful actions by receiving parties of various types included: believing and openly hearing the victim-survivor; making proactive changes, including to campus accommodation and assignments to groups; communicating directly with abusers and lecturers/ line managers; and facilitating access to relevant targeted supports such as therapy. Participants who were able to avail of appropriate

on-campus counselling found it of immense value, although many highlighted waiting lists as barriers to access, and inadequate service provision where there was only one service available for a brief period of time, typically six sessions. Successful therapy was tailored to the needs of the individual, and lasted for as long as needed, or facilitated referrals to a sustainable long-term provider.

Less positive reactions included downplaying, minimisation and victim-blaming, especially when cases were embedded in hierarchical power relations that were understood as "normal" in the HEI (e.g. Supervisor/ PhD; senior/ junior colleagues; Principal Investigator/Research Assistant). Such responses both failed to address immediate safety needs, and worsened the impact of the GBSVH, at times making victim-survivors even more unsafe.

In cases where victim-survivors pursued official redress either internally or externally, for instance through a formal complaint or a Garda report, there was little evidence of protection or concern for the victim-survivor's wellbeing within the HEI. Lengthy and complicated processes often ensued, even though for many victim-survivors, the need for safety was immediate, urgent and simple. Existing procedures, even when they were followed, were not always trauma-informed or victim-centred. Victim-survivors, meanwhile, continued with their studies or work, often having to see or interact with the abuser/ harasser regularly, adding layers of trauma. There was very limited evidence that their well-being or protection was a priority for institutional actors in these processes.

Many victim-survivors in this study experienced official policies as binary. They often expected formal processes to be stressful and unpleasant, an expectation that was reinforced by the people they spoke to. This caused distress and self-exclusion from official processes for people who were structurally or hierarchically powerless, such as PhD students, international staff and students, and people who depended on an abuser/harasser for grades or advancement. Unable or unwilling to pursue "formal" processes, they were left strongly believing there was no option available to them. A commitment to protection would prioritise survivor safety before or alongside other processes such as reporting and complaining.

A further issue arises that where individuals disclosed to people in the HEI but did not go on to lodge a "formal" report or complaint, the HEI was left holding information about possible danger in the community, and it could be perceived as failing to act to reduce it. Better understanding is needed of actions that institutions can take to ensure safety, in the absence of an official or formal complaint.

Although not directly related to disclosures or reporting within HEIs, on campus accommodation arose in this study as a place of particular risk for gender-based and sexual violence and assault. This requires dedicated, specific attention in every HEI.

Recommended Actions

Prioritise the immediate safety and well-being of individuals making disclosures, including offering physical safety and rapid identification of a range of options and giving the victim-survivors choices and control over how to proceed.

Develop clear policies and procedures that ensure when victim-survivors choose to make an official report to the Garda; they are protected and supported throughout the period of the investigation. The safety of victim-survivors should equally be addressed while HEI complaints and investigation processes are underway.

Provide psycho-social support that is appropriate, timely, trauma-informed and tailored to the individual needs. If dedicated trauma-informed counselling cannot be provided within the HEI, referrals should be facilitated to ensure that all victim-survivors are able to access the support they need.

Make clear and defined commitments to follow-up by SVH support services with victim-survivors. In the aftermath of a disclosure to designated support within the HEI, at least one follow-up contact should be initiated, even if the victim-survivor does not take any official action.

Ensure that staff in campus accommodation services have the awareness and competency to respond proactively and appropriately to disclosures of GBSVH, by linking victim-survivors to dedicated supports and by making changes that improve the victim-survivor's security (and that of the wider community) when required.

5.3 Implement survivor-centred complaints processes

Positive experiences of support from actors across the HEI in this data demonstrated that HEIs are moving towards survivor-centred policies and services. However, such approaches did not extend to complaints processes. In this data, once victim-survivors attempted to invoke disciplinary or complaint systems, they were treated as parties to a dispute, rather than individuals addressing what was often a traumatic problem.

Experiences of making complaints in this study showed that those victim-survivors who pursued them found grievance procedures to be difficult, and these often served to reinforce trauma and feelings of distress. Official procedures placed victim-survivors in adversarial situations where they felt they had to defend themselves, generally in cases against a responding party who had power to further harm them. These power dynamics were often denied or ignored by people within the official proceedings. Delays and procedural complications caused complaints processes to be experienced as drawn-out, stressful and unpredictable.

The handling of complaints tended to isolate victim-survivors, and they were unable to draw connections with others who experienced the same or similar to them. Protecting their reputation in a unit or school often meant keeping quiet about the complaint process while it was underway, resulting in feelings of isolation, anxiety and exclusion, imposing a heavy burden of mental and physical ill health on participants.

In numerous instances affecting both staff and students, the person responsible for addressing problems in a department had a professional relationship with the respondent party or abuser/harasser, resulting in a perceived conflict of interest. While policies address this in the case of official grievance and disciplinary procedures, conflicts of interest can play a significant role before such procedures are invoked and can limit managers' willingness to act decisively to name GBSVH and identify it as unacceptable before it becomes severe.

There was evidence of participants being required to go through mediation processes that were inappropriate to the issues being addressed. Mediation is rarely an appropriate response to questions of power abuse such as those that characterise GBSVH. In the context of GBSVH, it should only be considered in very rare circumstances.

On the whole, a legalistic approach to complaint and redress mirrored depictions from research in the UK and the US of a "criminal justice drift" in HEI practices, whereby the actions of the HEI mirror those of the formal legal system, rather than those of an educational institution with a code of discipline and a duty of care to staff and students.

As with Garda investigations, significant consideration needs to be given to the fact that periods of investigation and complaint can be especially difficult and distressing for survivors of trauma. This is sometimes reflected in "warnings" against engaging in complaints processes, or (potentially well-meaning) advice not to pursue formal complaints, which can impose a chill on action against GBSVH. Experiences of institutional procedures, whether these were understood as formal or informal, were often distressing and/or traumatising, and proceeded at the same time as individuals often continued to see and interact with the responding party.

The outcomes of investigations were sometimes unclear to victim-survivors. They were asked to trust the HEI that the issue had been addressed but not given information about sanctions or follow-up actions taken. With due regard for the confidentiality of responding parties, it should be possible to share some outcome information with reporting parties, in addition to communicating more generally at an institutional level to demonstrate that direct action is taken to address violent and harassing behaviours.

Recommended Actions

Provide genuine options for protection and continuation in the HEI, even if the individual does not want to engage in formal processes. As previously, these options should be clearly designed and communicated for the benefit of those who are most minoritised and/or powerless within the HEI.

Ensure that all line managers understand their responsibilities related to GBSVH, and that any potential conflict of interest is recognised and addressed at the point of disclosure.

Develop dedicated procedures for formal investigations for those who wish to pursue them, in line with trauma-informed and victim-centred practice. Address delays in these processes as a matter of priority.

Identify and implement ways to support victim-survivors appropriately while formal complaints processes are underway, through provision of appropriate protections, supports as well as connections to expert accompaniment.

Communicate transparently and appropriately with victim-survivors in the aftermath of an investigation, with a view to reassuring them that their safety and protection is a priority. Communicate **with the entire HEI community** at a general level about HEI actions to address GBSVH including investigations undertaken and outcomes, with a view to building trust in the procedures.

5.4 Recognise the systemic nature of GBSVH in higher education

The everyday inequalities and hierarchies of higher education fed into vulnerability to violence in this study, and increased the difficulties that participants faced disclosing, reporting and tackling violence. Participants in the study drew attention to cultures and systems of gender inequality, such as ignoring or protecting GBSVH behaviours at unit level, repeat patterns of perpetration, and the risk of further incidents and new victims owing to perceived impunity. But HEI responses, both in this study and in policies and procedures, tended to focus on individuals and incidents, and to offer narrow individualised approaches to resolution. Such individual resolutions of complaints may provide short term relief or resolve instability at unit level, but often the complaints signal deeper issues which must also be addressed. If GBSVH is to be eliminated, rather than just responded to, then systems of inequality across the institution need to be tackled. Disclosures, reports and complaints can serve as the evidence for where to begin.

Recommended Actions

Cascade training and education beginning with senior leadership, i.e. presidents and all senior management including governing authorities and HR and then saturate it across the HEI. It is vital that senior leaders receive complete and up-to-date training on GBSVH, and trauma informed practice so that when they are called on to adjudicate cases and speak on the issue, they have a clear understanding of it and that they themselves as trauma informed when such issues come onto their desks. A top-down approach signals commitment that the issue is taken seriously, which is essential in each and every HEI.

Ensure that remedy and redress following incidents of GBSVH have a future focus, seeking not only to resolve the dispute, but to prevent future harm, and embed awareness of and commitment to gender equality within the HEI.

Ensure that data collected by SVH/D&R services and via the anonymous Speak Out tool **is analysed and shared**, to identify priority locations and times for action. Consider whether disclosures which do not result in reports, alongside Speak Out data, can provide environmental information and enable risk assessment and proactive action by the HEI, in the absence of formal complaints.

Commit to ongoing regular monitoring and data collection from SVH and D&R services and communicate actions clearly in order to demonstrate commitments and build trust and generate understanding of the meaning of ending sexual violence and harassment in higher education.

Reduce the barriers to complaining by considering enabling group reports and/or historic reports, which can be pursued by victim-survivors without feeling threatened, and/or completely alone in the process.

Ensure that wider gender equality plans (i.e. Athena Swan) link with the strategic goal of Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in HEIs. Cascade the message that GBSVH, like gender equality, is in everyone's interests.

5.5 Information gaps and further research

A good start has been made on creating systematic data collection systems related to GBSVH in higher education, through HEI framework commitments. Nevertheless, critical gaps remain in knowledge, particularly as this issue specifically affects the Irish context. For this reason, under each of the four recommendation themes , we highlight key elements that require further research and exploration:

1. **Connect victim-survivors to services.**

In the course of this project, it quickly became evident that there is more work to be done in the research field. This issue is nuanced and complex both organisationally and culturally. More in-depth research is required into how intersecting inequalities shape vulnerability to GBSVH in HEIs in Ireland. Quantitative research clearly demonstrates high exposure to and limited reporting of GBSVH among people minoritised by gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, race and other factors. Further research is needed on the local and contextual mechanisms, structures, and power relations that create these vulnerabilities. This study demonstrates that these vulnerabilities are carried through disclosing, reporting, and non-reporting in the institution. Further research should identify the specificities of vulnerability to GBSVH in the Irish higher education system; and ways of reducing vulnerabilities, including by tackling systems of inequality that underpin and support sexual violence.

It is also critical to explore how to build confidence and trust with staff and students, to mitigate warnings or downplaying that dissuades people from pursuing complaints within the institution. Organisational change models could be explored, and baseline data should be identified to measure progress.

2. **Prioritise safety and protection**

Research is required in the Irish context that can enable HEIs to take on a duty of care for community members affected by GBSVH, without succumbing to the "criminal justice drift" that assumes adversarial and punitive models of response. One valuable avenue for further investigation is sexual harassment remediation (e.g. Frasca *et al.*, 2025) that places the onus on the HEI to minimise harm for all parties to a complaint, in parallel to investigatory procedures.

Research is recommended into approaches to campus safety that are not exclusively dependent on individual victims engaging with formal complaint processes. In the UK context, analysts (Westmarland, 2017; Bull, 2022) recommend policy adaptations to allow for risk assessments to take place as soon as a disclosure is made, without requiring a formal complaint. Further recommendations include providing for group complaints, anonymous complaints, and historic complaints (Bull, 2022). All of these actions would allow for a greater emphasis on identifying and tackling perpetration while reducing the risk to the individual victim-survivor and should be explored in detail in the Irish context.

There is a gap in international research regarding how individual HEIs can protect and support victim-survivors while police investigation processes are underway. We recommend engagement with the Garda Síochána to explore best practices to address this difficulty in a victim-centred manner.

This research study focused on victim-survivor experiences rather than policies. However, the clear evidence of inconsistency in policy implementation and implementation gaps suggests that more work is needed on the capacity of HEIs to

action the policies that have already been put in place (see recommendation 3, (MacNeela *et al.*, 2022c).

3. **Implement survivor-centred complaints processes**

Further research should explore the justice requirements of victim-survivors and the HEI community in Ireland, to allow future policies to move beyond exclusively legalistic and adversarial approaches, including, for instance, restorative justice approaches where appropriate.

Further research should explore how an ethical framework approach, as distinct to a “neutrality” approach could be enacted in the HEI sector, as outlined by Klein and Martin (2011) in the context of successfully addressing workplace bullying.

4. **Recognise the systemic nature of GBSVH**

The wide range of types of GBSVH captured in statistics and in this study call for different levels of response and action. The strict pillaring of policy approaches, marking a firm separation between bullying behaviours on one hand and sexual misconduct on the other, is not consistent with the types of experiences documented in research, including this study. Further analysis and consideration should be given to ensuring that bullying and harassment policies have appropriate and due regard to the role of gender, sexuality and other factors of marginalisation in the abuse and responses.

More comprehensive and responsive data collection on GBSVH is required and could be facilitated through capturing informal or semi-formal disclosures within each HEI. Researching other data collection methodologies across the sector could yield a simple process of reporting for all receiving parties in the HEI, along the lines of a safeguarding report. This could ensure that disclosures, even when they do not result in reports or complaints, are recorded and visible in the system; and it might also provide pathways to support for receiving parties. This process should be very straightforward to complete, and as with signposting individuals to dedicated support staff, it should not require a formal adjudication of whether any abuse has taken place. It simply indicates the presence of a disclosure and over time could build up a picture of key spaces of concern and enable targeted change.

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Appendix 1: Study Materials

Ethical Approval Letter

From: EHS Research Ethics Contact Point <EHSResearchEthics@ul.ie>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2025 10:29
To: Patricia.M.McNamara <Patricia.M.McNamara@ul.ie>
Subject: 2024_10_12_EHS Decision:Approved on Condition*

Dear Dr. Mannix McNamara
Thank you for your Research Ethics application which was recently reviewed by the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The recommendation of the Committee is outlined below:

Project ID: 2024_10_12_EHS
Project Title: Exploring experiences of disclosing and reporting sexual violence and harassment to higher education institutions
Principal Investigator: Patricia Mannix McNamara
Other Investigators: Sarah McCurtain, Caroline Murphy, Niamh Hickey, Margaret Hodgkins, Padraig McNeela, Declan Fahie,
Recommendation: Approved on condition until 01/09/2025**

Reviewer Feedback:
This application is approved on the basis that any reference to anonymising data is changed to pseudonymisation .The reviewers trust the PI will attend to this matter and hence does not need to see this application again.

End of feedback

Please make note of the approval end date in your calendar to assure that you do not continue with Research beyond the period of ethical approval.

Yours Sincerely,

EHS Rec Committee
Education and Health Sciences Resarch Ethics Committee

Participant information sheet

EHSREC No:2024_10_12_EHS

Participant Information Sheet

Exploring experiences of disclosing and reporting sexual violence and harassment to higher education institutions

What is the project about?

The aim of the study is to explore and document experiences related to the survivor journey from disclosure to outcome of formally investigated cases of sexual violence and harassment, including the full range of experiences from no disclosure to formal investigation.

What will I have to do?

You will be invited to partake in a one-to-one interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The location in which the interview will take place will be according to your choice. Prior to taking part in the interview, you will be asked to sign a consent form. The interview will be audio recorded and may also be video recorded if it occurs online via MS Teams.

What are the benefits?
The potential benefits of the study are to give voice to victims of sexual violence and harassment as a result of their studying or working within a Higher Educational Institution in Ireland. There is a potential opportunity to inform policy that will afford protection to students and staff in the future.

What are the risks?

The potential risks associated with this study relate to the potential for distress from revisiting trauma. Given this, additional measures will be taken to support participants including interviews being carried out in a location of preference for the participant, providing participants with interview questions in advance of the interview, and an opportunity to review the interview transcript and make any changes or withdraw if you so wish to do so. After this point, transcripts will be de-identified and pseudonymised, and no key will be kept to identify participants therefore, withdrawal will no longer be possible.

What if I do not want to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary. You can stop taking part in the research study at any time, up until data is de-identified and pseudonymised (after transcript review). At that stage, it will not be possible to distinguish your data from that of other participants. Should you feel at any stage that you want to stop taking part in the study, then this is dealt with in a sensitive and confidential manner.

What happens to the information?

Following the interview, a transcript will be prepared. Once the transcript has been finalised, we will remove identifying information as much as possible including all names, names of institutions, and places. We will return your transcript to you and you will have the opportunity to make amendments or remove details that you do not wish to be included, within 7 days of receipt. The transcripts will be considered deidentified from this point onwards. We cannot guarantee that your data will be fully anonymous, as with all qualitative research, there is a very small chance that people might recognise you from the way you speak, phrases you use or stories that you tell. The information gathered from the study will be handled in complete confidence.

Results of the interviews as well as their confidentiality are the first priority of the researchers carrying out the study. The study will be audio recorded with all recordings stored safely, securely and confidentially and deleted after transcripts have been confirmed. If your interview takes place over Microsoft Teams with the camera on, then it will also be video recorded as there is no way of only recording audio. Only the PI and interviewing researcher in the study will have access to the audio/video recordings. When the study is finished, information will be kept on Prof Patricia Mannix McNamara UL GDPR compliant One-Drive cloud server.

Who else is taking part?

We are seeking to document the experiences of 15-20 individuals. Participants will include:

- Staff and students of higher education institutions that have experienced sexual violence and harassment since joining their institutions and in the past 4 years.
- Contractors, visiting researchers, visiting lecturers and visiting students that have experienced sexual violence and harassment in the Irish institutions and in the past 4 years.
- Former staff and alumni of an institution may also be considered who experienced sexual violence and harassment in the past 4 years.

What happens at the end of the study?

At the end of the study the information will be used to present results including a report, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference presentations and generating accessible and creative survivor stories/ outputs based on the research data, to be communicated widely. The main research outputs will also be on our website www.borg.ie. All findings shared will be fully deidentified.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something.

If you do not understand any aspect of the research, please contact any of the researchers and discuss any questions that you might have. It is important that you feel completely at ease during the research.

What if I change my mind during the study?

Should you feel at any stage that you want to stop being a participant in the research, you are free to stop and take no further part. After data de-identification, it will be impossible to withdraw your data as it will not be possible to distinguish it from the data of other participants. For this reason, it will not be possible to remove your interview data once we have finalised the de-identified transcript,.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Project Investigator Contact Details:

Principal Investigator
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This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health

Sciences Research Ethics Committee EHS REC numbers – 2024_10_12_EHS

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chair Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

EHS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel (061) 234101

Frequently Asked Questions

This information was available on the project webpage for the duration of recruitment: 15/05/2025-31/07/2025

Exploring experiences of disclosing and reporting sexual violence and harassment to higher education institutions

Frequently Asked Questions

I experienced gender-based harassment but I don't think it was sexual violence, can I take part in the study?

Yes. The study is interested in all forms of sexual or gender-based misconduct, harassment and violence. If you feel that your experience meets this description, we would like to interview you.

I didn't make a formal report or take part in any investigation, can I take part in the study?

Yes. We are interested in experiences that resulted in formal investigations, and also experiences that did not.

I didn't tell anybody about my experience, can I still take part?

Yes. We are interested in all experiences of disclosure, including decisions not to disclose.

My experience was a long time ago, can I still take part?

For this study, we are collecting data about experiences of reporting, disclosing, or not disclosing *in the past 4 years*. If your experience of sexual violence or harassment was in 2021 or since then; OR if you tried to report or disclose in 2021 or since then, we would like to hear from you.

I didn't experience sexual violence or harassment, but I helped somebody who did, can I take part?

No. This study is focused on the experiences of victims-survivors. It responds to action 12 of the ESVH Implementation Plan: Undertake a study following the victim's journey from disclosure to outcome. Action 13, which will build on this research, involves a study to analyse the views and experiences of those to whom disclosures were made.

I would like to share my story, but I'm worried that it will damage my career or my personal life.

The purpose of this study is to collect information that is often kept hidden or silent because of such worries. The research team will do everything it can to ensure your confidentiality. This includes:

- Only allowing two people access to your identifying information: the interview researcher and the Principal Investigator. Nobody else will see your name, your email address, or the institution that your experience relates to.
- Conducting the interview at a time and in a place of your choosing, so that you can ensure that you have the privacy you need.
- Providing you with a copy of your interview transcript so that you can remove any information that might identify you to others (we will automatically remove names; geographic locations; workplaces and institutions; and anything else that is identifying. You can choose the name that we use to talk about you in research outputs.
- Enabling you to withdraw from the process if you change your mind, and to withdraw your data up until the time when you have returned the transcript to us. Once we have deidentified your transcript, it won't be possible for us to find it in the complete dataset.

I am worried that if I tell my story it will be easy to find out who I am because of my unique characteristics or circumstances.

We are aware that some of the people who are most vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment are members of very small minority groups, including members of the Traveller community or racial minorities; transgender and non-binary people; people with disabilities and others. It is vitally important that these experiences are captured. We will record such details (identities, characteristics, circumstances) to improve the evidence base, but we be very careful not to report in a way that could identify you.

For instance, if you were a third year student at the time of your experience, and a member of the Traveller community, we might describe you as a racially minoritised undergraduate student, and never name your institution. We will make our recommendations as specific as possible, so they might name membership of the Traveller community.

How will I find out what happens with my interview data?

We will place the main research outputs on our website www.borg.ie

The study will produce a clear and succinct research report for the Higher Education Authority, including recommendations to improve institutional responses to sexual violence and harassment.

We will also work on generating accessible and creative survivor stories based on the research data, to be communicated widely.

Further research outputs are likely to include articles in peer reviewed journals; conference presentations; and short blogs or news stories.

We will be careful with all research outputs to maintain the confidentiality of individuals, while presenting data that clearly and effectively represents the experiences that we hear in the study.

Semi-structured interview guide

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Section 1: Demographics

First, I'm going to ask a small bit about you, to help our understanding.

1. At the time of experience, what was your involvement with the HEI? e.g. staff (academic/professional), student (undergraduate/postgraduate), contractor, visiting staff, visiting student, visiting contractor, former staff, alumni etc.
2. How long have you been in the role?

The two questions above are contextualised, different questions to lead to this information.

3. With which gender do you identify?
4. Do you consider yourself to have any relevant minority status? e.g. disability etc.

Section 2: Survivor Journey/Personal Experience

Now we're going to talk about your journey or experience. Remember that you can pause or stop at any time.

As you know, this study is about your experiences of the higher education institution and how it responds to sexual and gender based violence and harassment.

First of all, can you tell me what you think I need to know about the violence or harassment that you experienced?

5. Did you tell anybody about the experience?

Tell me about that experience.

What happened next?

Did anything happen after that?

Follow up/ probe:

- Who did you tell?
- Did you tell anybody in the HEI (fellow student/ colleague/ line manager/ support staff)?

- Did you consider making a formal report or complaint?
- Can you tell me about the decision?
- If you did make a complaint, was it investigated and what was the experience of that like?

  What was the outcome?

  What was the impact of the experience for you, then and now?

Section 3: Context/Perceived Psychosocial environment (possible probes)

6. Why do you think this happened?
7. Are there any factors in the higher education environment that you think might have facilitated this?
8. How well do you think the higher education environment deals with sexual violence and harassment (for everybody affected)?

Section 4: Future focussed

9. From your experience, what do you think is needed to support others who may experience this?
10. What does higher education need to do differently to ensure that this doesn't happen?
11. We're coming to the end of the recorded interview. Is there anything else you think I should know, or anything you want to add about your experience?

Appendix 2: Members of Advisory Board

Sarah Hughes – Mental Health Project Manager, Amlé Aontas na Macléinn in Éirinn

Emma Monahan – Vice President, Welfare, Amlé Aontas na Macléinn in Éirinn

Tony McMahon – HR and EDI advisor, Irish Universities Association

Maria Healy – Sexual Violence and Harassment Manager, University of Limerick