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# About the *Social Media and Mobilizing Change for Community Impacts* Project

Social media has become a pivot for individual level activism and community level change. This collaborative project between the Canadian Women's Foundation and the McGill iMPACTS project investigates the connections between social media and action for social change in the context of sexual assault on Canadian post-secondary campuses.

Along with a panel discussion hosted on June 22, 2022, this report is the final knowledge dissemination component of the project's three phases. An interdisciplinary literature review on feminist social media use, gender-based violence (GBV), and campus responses to rape culture was developed during the first research phase. The second phase involved connecting with key informants and conducting in depth interviews. This third phase has resulted in this report, summarizing 12 key informant interviews conducted with anti-violence organizers, student activists, and frontline staff working at post-secondary institutions (PSIs) across Canada. The interviews offer insights into how feminist organizers use social media platforms to educate, build movements, and support survivors of sexual violence.

The reach and accessibility of social media platforms have made them an indispensable communications tool for activists and organizers working to eradicate all forms of GBV. However, a key concern within both the online and offline activist discourses is that those most likely to experience gendered violence are under-represented, unheard, and excluded when these are precisely the voices that should be central to any discussion of feminist organizing around GBV. Black and racialized women; women living with disabilities; Indigenous women and Two Spirit people; non-status and precarious status migrant women; older and elderly women; and queer, trans, and non-binary people exist outside of what literature has called "the ideal victim" (Trusolino, 2017) and continue to experience the highest rates of violence, yet they are under-represented in both media accounts of activist movements and in the academic texts that analyze them.

The interviews, guided by six key questions (see appendix 1), focused on how this fourth wave of feminism engages technology to expand prevention, education, and activism. Discussing the communications platforms that 18-24 year-old students use most, key informants shared their insights and expertise on community engagement, movement building, and the challenges associated with social media.

# Methods

This report presents findings from 12 key informant interviews conducted over Zoom between November and December 2021. Key informants were recruited using a snowball method via email using the Canadian Women's Foundation network. The project's advisory committee (see appendix 2) also assisted with key informant recruitment.

Recruitment materials were explicit about wanting to reach communities outside of Ontario and urban centers in order to gather a more holistic understanding of communities with smaller campuses, diverse population sizes, and demographics. Our aim was to collect knowledge about how communities use social media for anti-violence organizing outside of large, urban centers and to produce research that moves away from Ontario-centric representation. Our reporting speaks broadly to the largely conservative province of Alberta and also to the smaller east coast city of Fredericton, New Brunswick with additional information from key informants in large PSIs in Vancouver and Toronto, as well as a community legal clinic in Toronto.

The interviews were constructed according to narrative inquiry methodology and design. Each 60-90 minute interview was guided by the same six questions, which were intended as prompts rather than strict questions that required direct answers. Key informants were invited to respond, reframe, or engage with the questions in ways they saw most appropriate, and new questions were generated throughout the course of the discussion. As experts in their fields, key informants pulled from their various professional and lived experiences, their personal and work engagements with social media platforms and feminist organizing, and their own opinions, beliefs, and perspectives on the subjects presented more broadly.

Key informants were offered the choice to participate anonymously, and two of the thirteen people interviewed chose to participate using a pseudonym. Other key informants are, at times, named in affiliation with their professional organization, campus collective, or PSI. See appendix 1 for a full list of key informants.

The results were generated using narrative analysis methodology. This report is organized according to the six guiding questions, with major themes identified and highlighted.

# Using Social Media for Education, Organizing, Activism

*“What we really use social media for is to draw attention to the problem, but also to highlight survivors’ experiences and to put pressure on the university to make change and to make the community aware that this is a really severe issue here” (Talia Dixon).*

All key informants reported using social media for organizing, education, resource sharing, and activism around GBV. While some organizations have dedicated teams running their social media accounts, others rely solely on volunteers, or it is additional work staff take on outside of their regular duties. Particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the communities that campus-based frontline staff, organizers, and activists are engaging with on GBV are almost entirely online. As one key informant summarized: *“We have to meet them where they’re at, and they’re online.”*

All key informants use Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram as part of their communication and outreach efforts, noting that Instagram is the most commonly used platform for post-secondary students, with parents and alumni more active on Facebook. Multiple key informants highlighted TikTok as the platform to watch, with none of the institutions or associations they represent having TikTok accounts of their own. Calling social media a *“medium for public pedagogy,”* Dr. Jessica Wright offered that were she still organizing as a student activist, she would likely be using TikTok. She noted that viral content on TikTok is often seen thousands of times, gaining mainstream attention from major news sources.

Katie DeLucia-Burk, Co-Coordinator of The Campus Collective at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, noted that while The Campus Collective had always used social media in their work, the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary to shift everything online to maintain services. For students at The Campus Collective and for all other key informants, using social media to promote and spread information about GBV was critical, because it was their only vector of interaction with people in the community. *“We’ve had to shift our methods to make more infographics and things that are available from mobile phones and not necessarily word of mouth. We’ve done letter writing campaigns and then we can put in our Google Drive link and drop it in our link.tree” (Katie DeLucia-Burk).*

CJ Rowe, Director of Sexual Violence Support & Prevention Office at Simon Fraser University, offered practical information about how organizations can use their social media platforms. They explained that their office has two social media channels: one is the Sexual Violence Support & Prevention Office’s main channel, and the other is an active Bystander Network Channel – their peer program network. Both channels use Instagram and Facebook for educational purposes, with strategic yearly plans made for communications across platforms.

Rowe explained that in the four years that their office has been open, their team has been actively figuring out how best to use social media to reach their campus communities. Their

office has developed monthly plans to promote messages that are developed and curated within the community and to focus on some key tenets of GBV prevention. They promote events and initiatives, aligning them thematically with campus campaigns like *Consent Matters* in September and *Bystander Intervention* in November. The office engages in prevention and education to create cultural change. From there, the team builds out their accompanying communications and social media plans.

Kristine Cassie's organizational efforts on social media echo much of what staff and students on campus shared. As CEO of the Chinook Sexual Assault Centre, she offered that Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram all help her team connect with anti-violence organizations and other voices in and beyond their community. Social media offers the ability to share information and make connections in a way that can support the development and maintenance of an anti-violence movement.

Cassie offered that while social media platforms primarily act as educational tools, she also noted that they provide new ways for people to reach out. In her community, queer and trans people, who face additional hurdles seeking support after experiences of GBV, have felt comfortable enough to reach out via direct message to inquire about the centre's services. Also receiving a number of crisis calls through Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, she said her team recognizes the importance of using social media to alleviate some of the fears people may have about accessing in-person support.

Ashley Young at Sexual Violence New Brunswick uses social media both professionally and personally, offering that it is an easy way to connect with other feminists. She sees it as a cathartic space for sharing both anger and joy. Sexual Violence New Brunswick has also partnered with the Government of New Brunswick on sexual violence awareness campaigns, consulting on social media campaigns that they would then cross-share using their platforms.

Corinne Ofstie and Haley Scott, employees of Alberta Sexual Assault Services, offered that their workplace uses social media primarily to amplify other work being done in their community, stating: *"For us, social media is a way by which we share information, events, resources related to enhancing public awareness of sexual violence and enhancing access to specialist social services. Our core service is coordination and collaboration of direct services and so primarily, it's awareness that we're promoting"* (Corinne Ofstie).

## #MeToo and Campus Culture

In 2015, Brock Turner, a student at Stanford University, sexually victimized an unconscious woman outside a fraternity house, near a dumpster during a party. The case drew widespread media attention and is notable because it represented a marked shift in cultural responses to GBV: the public was widely on the side of the victim. Talia Dixon noted this high profile case

being prominent on her social media accounts when she entered university. She credits social media for contributing to her knowledge of sexual violence on campus.

Dixon credits the #MeToo movement with contributing to a culture in which people can come forward publicly on social media. Since #MeToo, she has observed an increase in reporting, and she draws connections between the public awareness fostered by #MeToo and students feeling comfortable coming forward with their stories. For instance, In the summer of 2020, an individual posted her story of being assaulted by a fraternity member on a Facebook page called 'Overheard at UAlberta.' Dixon said this resulted in hundreds of people coming forward and telling their stories.

Both Katie DeLucia-Burk and Kristine Cassie agreed that #MeToo prompted a more mainstream conversation around GBV than was formerly impossible. DeLucia-Burk said that while victim blaming can be pervasive, there's also a very public discussion around sexual violence and a mainstream understanding of what sexual violence is, particularly among feminine presenting students. This encompasses an understanding of what consent is and what a person's rights are in regards to turning down sexual advances. DeLucia-Burk offered that one of the consequences of this conversation being elevated is that campus anti-violence organizers have to contend with male fragility and the rise of hashtags like #NotAllMen and incorporate responding to this backlash into their education efforts.

With the mainstreaming of the conversation about campus sexual violence, the majority of key informants commented on the increase in service requests and individuals reaching out to support centers after #MeToo. They also note an increase during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CJ Rowe and an anonymous key informant from an Ontario legal clinic said #MeToo opened the doors for some people to realize that they have experienced or are currently experiencing sexual violence. Some found supportive online or in-person communities and felt like it was the right time to come forward. Rowe remarked that the influx of people coming forward opened up avenues for newly funded, specialized projects on campus. The anonymous key informant from the legal clinic added that many young women employed in the service industry, including PSI students, experience job insecurity and sexual harassment, and that the clinic built on the #MeToo movement to launch a project to provide specific legal support for them.

Dr. Jessica Wright called #MeToo a catalyst that allowed the conversation around GBV to reach a broader community. She says that while it may have seemed like an explosive stand-alone moment, it was, in reality, the result of decades long global activism that set the stage for #MeToo's reach and visibility. She says that the proliferation of conversation around consent has materially resulted in more consent education initiatives and an understanding that consent and educating to promote it is important. *"#MeToo really created a lot of space to talk about GBV in general but then looking specifically on campus, there are a lot more initiatives and more conversations about consent, whether it's through campaigns or consent*



*education. It's become kind of mandatory or status quo for universities to at least do the low level consent awareness stuff" (Dr. Jessica Wright).*

On and off campus, Dr. Jessica Wright noted that there's a lot more of what she would call "walking on eggshells." She's noticed that administrators are realizing they'll face a larger backlash in the news if a university fails to address instances of sexual violence. Institutions were able to sweep misconduct cases under the rug more easily before #MeToo and now there's a public call for more accountability, which, she says, is the beauty of hashtag feminism. It is a public form of justice, in a way. Despite its successes, there's work to be done.

*"Unfortunately, we do live in such an oppressive society that things like #MeToo that we think are going to make such a huge wave don't. I think #MeToo has made a tremendous impact but this work has been going on for decades. For instance, there was a femicide on McGill's campus fairly recently (2021), and it was not very big in the news" (Dr. Jessica Wright).*

Ashley Young and Hilary Swan reflected on the positive, albeit delayed, impacts #MeToo has had on the east coast, saying that prior to #MeToo, public conversations around GBV were rare. Both credit social media movements with empowering people to come forward and disclose if they were a survivor, noting there's power in sharing stories, because the sharing can support other survivors and remind them that they aren't alone.

Ashley Young related using social media to second wave feminist whisper networks in the 1970s, when American women created networks to organize against rape culture. She cited similar feelings of empowerment in both spaces. In Fredericton, Young and Swan said trends tend to impact them a little later than other places across the country; the #Accountability movement that emerged within a few east coast PSI communities in 2021, #MeToo, and other hashtags continue to offer a way for people to find information about GBV without having to explicitly search for this content online.

#MeToo also brought about cultural attention to GBV that an anonymous key informant working at a PSI in Alberta credits with the forming of Sexual Violence Prevention, Education & Response Offices, full time staff positions, and dedicated response policies at PSIs. She also noted that, though pressure for change generated via social media has been effective, there also exists the idea that disclosures on social media can result in immediate change. In reality, PSIs are bound by legislation and policies that don't allow for a quick complaints process.

The information students lack around institutional and legal processes is balanced by much higher literacy surrounding GBV than previous generations, which many key informants attribute to their exposure to community-based learning from social media. Katie DeLucia-Burk, Aleah Bastein, Talia Dixon, and Kristine Cassie all reflected on the depth of knowledge students between the ages of 18 and 24 have about GBV, and how this is shaping students'

expectations of their educational institutions. Katie DeLucia-Burk noted that students are getting their news from online platforms where messages can greatly differ or be more radical than traditional news sources. Social media may intensify the motivation of students who want to hold their institution accountable.

Kristine Cassie, Aleah Bastein, and Talia Dixon mentioned fraternities and sororities being de-ratified in Alberta (losing their formal status as university associated clubs) because of behaviours regarding sexual violence. Kristine Cassie and Aleah Bastein identified social media and online discussions as one of the key factors that led to the university's decision.

However, the power of the Twitter-based #MeToo may be waning among PSI students as students shift to other social media platforms. Ailish Mackenzie-Foley said that she no longer sees a lot of hashtags being used around sexual violence and is more often confronted with TikTok trends. She no longer knows anyone who goes out of their way to seek information via hashtags and notes that students in the 18-24 age group tend to use hashtags as a social media form of joking. She said: *"I feel like the hashtag is possibly slowly fading."* With the rise of algorithms on social media that don't rely on hashtags, such as Instagram's reels or TikTok videos, it is possible that hashtags will become less effective at raising awareness.

## Disclosing Gender Based Violence Online

*"Our systems are broken, so of course people don't want to go through justice processes, of course people don't want to go through a process on campus because they fail every time. The idea of being able to still bring that accountability to a perpetrator by posting and disclosing on social media is very attractive, others validate you and provide that support"* (Hilary Swan).

The phrase most often used to describe social media in our key informant interviews was "double edged sword," as social media provides both communication and educational benefits and exposes users to an array of risks and negative impacts.

All key informants stated that people who have experienced GBV have a right to disclose in any way they choose. Katie DeLucia-Burk argued that disclosing online opens up a space to share information and reduce the stigma of talking about GBV. She suggested that because of the history of institutions and law enforcement not treating sexual violence properly – including re-traumatizing survivors when they come forward – disclosing online has a strong potential for empowerment. Similarly, Talia Dixon said that being able to post online is powerful, because it draws attention to the issue at hand, allows survivors to get support, and shows others that they don't need to be ashamed.

While each key informant listed countless positives to individuals disclosing online, they also offered many associated risks that come with public exposure.

An anonymous key informant noted that while having a voice and the ability to speak one's truth is foundational to the healing process, disclosing online can come with a range of unanticipated outcomes, including digital community backlash and the threat of defamation civil suits. She wondered whether the focus on social media is resulting in fewer people understanding the legal implications of disclosure. She said that her job at a PSI is not only to inform students of their rights to a formal complaint process and what this looks like at their particular institution, but to paint a realistic picture of what the process looks like and to provide any additional support needed.

Similarly worried about backlash against survivors who disclose online, Kristine Cassie raised concerns about how public information might impact a survivor's case should they go on to report to a policing agency.

*"There's absolutely power in people being able to give their truth to others and I always always always worry about what that backlash is going to be or what the other ramifications are. We've seen some great power come from making those very open disclosures online but it's very different when you have \$50 million in the bank to where you have nothing in the bank. It's very different when you have a circle of support around you. We can use this as an education tool, not to scare people, but to help them make an informed decision"* (Kristine Cassie).

Talia Dixon reflected on the shame associated with sexual violence and how social media might normalize a way to confront what has happened and facilitate a process by which a survivor tells others about it. However, she echoed the concerns of other key informants, suggesting that students are usually unaware of the risks associated with posting online, not knowing that they can be subpoenaed, with their public content being used against them in court. She offered that members of the student's union or campus sexual assault centre can reach out and provide support if they see someone has disclosed online, connecting them with resources or helping them work through the complicated and discouraging process of getting justice at the University of Alberta.

*"As long as our systems don't serve survivors, [social media] is one of the only options that you have to actually get support, attention, and justice. Right now, unless you go through a legal court case, there's really no way to hold the person who assaulted you or whatever might have happened, accountable"* (Talia Dixon).

Aleah Bastein offered that there's a misconception that being open about an assault or experience of GBV means it wasn't a serious incident, and that this contributes to some inappropriate handling of disclosures by PSIs.

*"In my experience as a student, you hear people constantly iterating instances of sexual violence, specifically in relation to the fraternity [affiliated with the campus]. They went to counselling services in the sexual prevention and education office and they didn't feel like*

*their experience was validated, they didn't feel like they got the resources they needed. Basically, they felt as if the assault was their fault. Universities need to be investing more into trauma-informed care frameworks, not only in their counselling services or their sexual prevention and education offices. I personally think it should be mandatory for all university administration and it should be made available to any professors or university staff who interact with students because realistically anyone who interacts with students might receive a disclosure” (Aleah Bastein).*

All on the east coast, Ashley Young, Hilary Swan, and Ailish Mackenzie-Foley told the story of a 2020-2021 Instagram account survivors used to disclose. An anonymous social media-based support group emerged in the fall of 2020 when a woman posted an image of herself to Instagram after commencement holding a sign about Mount Allison protecting perpetrators and silencing survivors. Around the same time, multiple allegations of sexual assault came up against a psychiatrist at the University of New Brunswick. He was put on leave, which Ailish Mackenzie-Foley said resulted in public outcry from the community. Posted to Instagram, the woman's content went viral. This resulted in a public protest, and others started reaching out to the woman to share their experiences. Ailish Mackenzie-Foley said that students would message the account with their story, and the account administrator would create a graphic with their story and post it to the account page.

While initially a positive and supportive online community, her Instagram page eventually became a place of conflict and was deleted. Another #Accountability Instagram account opened in its place, run by different account administrators, with changes to how people's stories and disclosures were collected. People who wanted their stories to be posted to the account would submit via a Google Doc, giving consent for their story to be anonymized and posted. For some, this felt like an invasive control measure and there was disagreement as to whether or not the people facilitating the account should have a say in how people expressed their experiences.

*“It wasn't run or facilitated by anybody that had any sort of mental health training or background in facilitation. I doubt anyone had an understanding beyond lived experience of sexual violence in a way that was formalized and could offer support. It became self explosive and really harmful to be involved with. With no containment or boundaries, people were messaging at any hour of the day, with disclosures then being broadcast to all the survivors at once” (Hilary Swan).*

Hilary Swan offered for a lot of survivors, this was their first experience of feeling seen, heard, and valued. For many people who feel isolated post-violence, the online world offers a place where they are known and supported. On the other hand, people disclosing online can still be isolated in the offline world, particularly when options for reporting are re-traumatizing.

Ailish Mackenzie-Foley said that she's careful to post trigger warnings before posting any content about sexual violence. This might look like adding a black screen with text that says

‘trigger warning – sexual violence coming up in my next few stories.’ This gives the person scrolling through an opportunity to decide whether or not they want to be exposed to something that may be upsetting. She compared this feature of Instagram to TikTok, noting that the speed of TikTok content delivery doesn’t allow for reaction time. She cited this as the main challenge with using Tik Tok for organizing; other platforms allow people to absorb content at their own pace, while TikTok moves content on your behalf. She, like other key informants, reflected on how sharing stories of sexual violence on social media can be triggering and emotionally exhausting, especially because it is common to “go down wormholes” where you are likely to find comment sections that are anti-feminist and victim blaming. She also commented on the lack of control people have over content once they’ve shared it, highlighting the reality that even content posted to someone’s private account can be captured in a screenshot and sent to people who do not have access to your account.

*“You can’t take back what you put on the Internet, and I think a lot of people realize that after the fact. You’ll see people will put their perpetrator’s name or use their pictures and then get into a whole legal battle of defamation and possibly a court case that they didn’t want to be in in the first place... just for telling your story which may not have happened if it was in person”* (Ailish Mackenzie-Foley).

Ashley Young offered that everybody knows each other in a small or rural community like New Brunswick and that people get involved and ask questions, or discredit the person’s experience, if someone shares a public story. She noted that organizations, businesses, and the government in New Brunswick tend towards conservatism, upholding gender inequality, sexist myths, and stereotypes.

She says that it’s quite common in her community to hear that there were no consequences after a disclosure of workplace harassment or GBV and that there were often no repercussions for the person who caused harm, usually a co-worker. It makes sense to her that people turn to social media to try to find justice outside of formal complaints systems.

The potentially devastating impacts of disclosing online, discussed above, reflect multiple key informants’ comments related to the Stephen Galloway case, which involves a professor at the University of British Columbia accused of assaulting a graduate student (whose experiences were echoed by others). Galloway filed a defamation lawsuit against his accuser and a number of other people who spoke out against him online. Dr. Jessica Wright said that some of the posts included in the trial didn’t even mention his name but were written by people speaking out about assault, trying to seek support from others online. She offered:

*“We know that healing only happens in community. It’s only through telling our stories and reaching out and connecting with other people, being heard and having our pain seen that we can actually start to heal. There are very devastating implications to censorship, especially around survivors being able to connect with other survivors or folks online to find community and healing”* (Dr. Jessica Wright).

She continued that sharing experiences of GBV on social media can also be a mode of connecting and venting, but if it's taken as a disclosure that someone takes up and presents to an institution, [social media] can also be dangerous. Education around digital safety is needed. She worried about the increasing number of PSIs across Canada adopting a web-based tool whereby students can disclose and report experiences of GBV. By clicking a button, they can also send their report directly to the police.

*"I think there's something about the digital space that can be very affectively charged and people can feel some relief in disclosing harm online, but there's also something about the digital space that can be private or numbing in a way. I was very nervous when I saw this website and I think it's not trauma-informed. When folks are in the aftermath of violence, of course, some people really want their abuser to pay for what they've done...or to get some kind of justice. It could feel really good to just click that button and send it off. But the website doesn't offer information about the fact that virtually no one gets an outcome that they want from the university and very few people come out of reporting to the police unscathed. It's sort of just this web page...you can click the button without understanding the potential implications or consequences of disclosing or reporting online"* (Dr. Jessica Wright).

CJ Rowe called disclosing online a catch 22. On one hand,

*"...it's a way to address the harms that have been done..there's a power in that, in terms of an individual being able to say, hey this happened to me, this person did it, and then other folks can say, that same thing happened to me with that same individual. It's almost like networks of survivors are formed that way, and I think that's kind of cool, it's like a new form of the whisper network."*

On the other hand, Rowe raised questions about when it is appropriate for an institution to intervene in a public declaration made on social media. They also noted that public disclosures have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis and that institutional risk assessment looks different from one instance to the next. They argued that there's always a risk of putting something online, because it doesn't disappear, rather, it gets archived. There's a necessary criticality and education that has to be enacted when it comes to using social media and digital technologies, especially because there are predators using these platforms and mediums as a way to gain access to and harass vulnerable populations. Rowe offered that front-line support staff should be having conversations with students individually to offer them the information they need to make informed choices about online disclosures.

*"...there are still the less than stellar ways in which #MeToo has unfolded, I mean, out here, especially on the west coast, we are wrangling with the legacy of the Stephen Galloway case at UBC. Folks who did step up and say #MeToo online – we've seen how that has unfolded and we've had to continue to support people who are impacted by defamation lawsuits"* (CJ Rowe).

Hilary Swan also brought up the risk of defamation lawsuits that survivors face:

*“I’ve seen perpetrators target entire groups that have used hashtags to speak publicly about them and filed civil lawsuits against them. A survivor spoke out on this, of being hit with a lawsuit and a gag order which prevented the survivors from being able to talk about that person or about anything. We’ve seen this on our own campus after decisions have been made and the survivor shares that information publicly on social media and then they’ll get hit with a defamation lawsuit. Yeah, [social media is] such a great way for connection but it’s also hard to see the harm that sometimes comes, which is just another form of control that perpetrators can have over their survivors or their victims” (Hilary Swan).*

## Social Media and Intersectionality

Critical perspectives on GBV understand an intersectional analysis of violence as paramount to preventing trauma (Crenshaw 1991). “Intersectionality,” coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, emerged from Black feminist theory and is a conceptual tool that emphasizes “the ways in which categories of identity and structures of inequality are mutually constituted and defy separation into discrete categories of analysis” (Thornton-Dill & Kohlman 2014).

An anonymous key informant suggested that social media’s reach has a lot to do with intersectional feminism emerging as a main social discourse. She offered that social media is not actually intersectional, but that it provides a platform to look at people’s lived experiences and consider how different intersecting social locations impact people. This kind of analytical framework doesn’t just happen, but rather has to be taught and enacted intentionally. She also mentioned the importance of looking at group demographics, noting, for example, the need to consider how international students who are women and living with disabilities might be experiencing the post secondary institutional system differently from others.

The anonymous key informant offered that while frontline workers are aware of the need for intersectional frameworks and analyses when it comes to anti-violence programming, she doesn’t think it is common for the various departments within a PSI to think intentionally about the unique needs of different student groups. She continued that it’s important to consider how the awareness of different needs translates into specific actions. For instance, she argued that PSI efforts to support 2SLGBTQIA+ students, or international students, or racialized students tend to be performative. She noted that frontline workers are aware and intentional about their programming, because students themselves are aware of the spectrum of needs across the student population, but notes that how that awareness translates into action is where problems can arise. She said that while frontline workers try to build out programming specifically targeting groups like queer and trans GBV survivors, the effort to be intersectional at the institutional level is always partial. This, she said, may relate to an understanding of intersectional feminism as an analysis that in practice is partial in nature,

embedded in specific educational supports but not embraced institution-wide.

Corinne Ofstie and Haley Scott said that social media offers access to content produced by Black and Indigenous people who are leading [anti-violence] education work online, often for free. This gives people who are not Black or Indigenous an opportunity to hear the perspectives of those whose leadership and experiences need to be centered in the work to end GBV. They said that there are so many barriers to accessing diverse leadership and voices in the offline world, and social media gives people in the anti-violence sector the opportunity to uplift and center the work of Black and Indigenous leaders. However, social media's accessibility may be contributing to the perpetuation of unpaid and transformative, activist labour falling onto people who are already underrepresented in leadership roles. While social media can expose people to a diversity of thought and experiences, it also facilitates knowledge extraction and appropriation in situations where people in positions of educational, economic, racial, and ableist privilege capitalize on digital efforts without proper compensation or credit.

*“I think that’s the hard work we’re trying to do...we do live in a racist and sexist and colonial society, and I mean, it’s an uphill battle to navigate. That being said, [mainstream culture] has improved greatly, in the last five years in terms of supporting survivors of sexual violence”* (Corinne Ofstie).

Haley Scott notes a shift in the anti-violence sector across Alberta: *“A lot of young people are out there protesting right now...in Calgary there’s a string of high school walkouts because of high school responses to sexual violence. There are young people organizing climate protests at city hall and I do feel like...coming up in that [fourth] wave of feminism has made many folks more active than I’ve ever seen.”*

Aleah Bastein said that prior to post secondary school, especially in middle school and high school, a lot of the terms she’d come across related to intersectional feminism online weren’t used or taught in the curriculum. She noted that the shift to deeper, more intersectional understandings of GBV has been slow but that it is, in fact, happening.

*“I think if we’re actually looking to make systemic change with all these different movements or all these different hashtags, we have to start at the younger generations. I know for my generation that a lot of the learning and unlearning we’ve had to do, we’ve had to take it on ourselves.”*

Ailish Mackenzie-Foley stated that she’s noticed people are more willing to be educated on issues related to larger, intersectional social media movements. Commenting on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, she noted that it continues to be largely Black women leading educational efforts around gendered physical and sexual assault.

An anonymous key informant offered that while social media levels the playing field for different communities that don’t often have a voice in the mainstream media, it’s important



to acknowledge the power of algorithms and not to pretend that social media platforms are a neutral space.

*“All of it is corporate controlled, and there’s very much an emphasis on steering people to click on these things and keep using social media in ways that create more divides. When we’re thinking about the intersectional dimension of social media, there are ways in which it can lead us to feeling more separation across categories of identity in some way.”*

Dr. Jessica Wright offered that grassroots approaches to activism always center the voices of the most marginalized. From her perspective, effective organizing also includes deciding what media also centers the voices of those disproportionately affected by GBV. She said that while it was reassuring to see more social media engagement with an intersectional understanding of #MeToo and/or the intersectionality of trauma informed, survivor-centric work, PSIs are now visibly appropriating the language of intersectionality, which can obscure what is happening in practice. *“It seems to me that we’ve shifted into a space where the language of intersectionality has become the status quo but that doesn’t mean that intersectional analysis is the status quo.”* She shared concern about the appropriation of anti-violence rhetoric.

*“It reminds me of being in my undergrad and in my masters as a student activist at York University, where the institution would essentially suggest that the impoverished, largely racialized Jane and Finch community [in Toronto] was responsible for assaults on campus. It was quite blatant and so I think there’s a shift in terms of the university knowing that what’s politically correct has shifted and universities trying to avoid not looking politically incorrect. I’m not sure to what degree they’ve appropriated things and to what degree there’s actual action.”*

Wright also observed that there’s a type of messaging online that scripts how people need to show up in order to be an activist or a progressive person or a feminist. Important learning and insight comes from the disability justice movement’s approach to organizing and movement building, grounded in the idea that we should put the slowest people at the front of the march or movement and that way, we all move forward together. She said this kind of organizing demands an inclusive framework for thinking about collective justice and care.

*“A lot of what we’re talking about as feminists when we’re talking about activism is about care...about building a more caring world. A place where people aren’t hurt as much by other people, and a place where healing can happen. I think disability justice frameworks have a lot to offer in terms of helping us understand how we’re interdependent... how we need to care about one another and pay attention to intersectionality and the ways that people face compounding oppression.”*

She said the online space has a lot to offer in terms of giving some people with disabilities who can’t physically participate in marches or attend events in person a place where they can find solidarity, community, and perhaps healing. On a similar note, an anonymous key

informant offered that people in the disability community have been asking for hybrid ways to be involved or to be able to access services and that the pandemic has shown people what is actually possible. The impacts of changes demanded by people with disabilities also benefit members of the broader community who are also experiencing isolation.

*“If there's political will and capacity...we've seen that we've all shifted really quickly....Now there are clients that, for example, might be experiencing sexual harassment as a domestic worker or they're in school and they don't necessarily have the time to come to the clinic during regular business hours. Being able to access from wherever they are just makes it so much more accessible”* (Anonymous).

Talia Dixon noted that social media is so intertwined in our lives, especially for young people, that it's unsurprising that Gen Z is more educated on issues of intersectionality and feminism than previous generations. In her work, she noted the importance of bringing many different campus communities together. For example, when writing a call to action at her university, her aim was to bring together students from the Black students association, Indigenous students association, and the international students association to work on the letter together. She noted that she's not entirely sure how these student communities otherwise coalesce or how they reach out for different supports. Her team actively tries to gauge where different communities are in relation to conversations around accessing support services post-violence and what kinds of barriers they face. As a student union, they are also aware that international students who might not speak English as their first language may also face specific barriers to accessing services. They're also attempting to bring disability into the conversation, recognizing that measures to include students with disabilities need to improve.

Katie DeLucia-Burk noted the socioeconomic barriers to access that many students face: *“Access to things like wifi and a computer is directly connected with financial privilege, which is also connected to racial privileges, so you know, there is an inequity of having access.”*

She noted that for students living on a First Nations Reserve close to campus, attending classes over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge due to the fact that they didn't have stable wifi. Meaningful action rooted in an intersectional lens would address the socioeconomic barriers students face when connecting online and would prioritize addressing the sometimes complex challenges surrounding GBV that Indigenous students face.

CJ Rowe also noted that there is an opportunity to learn about the discrepancies and the digital divides when approaching prevention education. They said that their team tries to approach their work in a multiplicity of ways, recognizing that there is no one way that will work for all the people all the time, or even some of the people, some of the time.

*“Leaning into and harnessing the power of internet communication technologies is really interesting and it's been brewing over time. I had this conversation like, 23 years ago, and I*

*think we just have to meet folks where they are at. Whether they are online or in person, we have to take the opportunities to come into contact with people. How do we ensure that hopefully at some point they will run into our messaging? Maybe that's scrolling through their stream while they're walking down the hallway to get to class. How do we work with professors, to ensure that they're integrating clear content into the curriculums they're teaching? How do we work with peer programs, to ensure that we're able to do workshops and have online learning opportunities made available? We have to come to this work of prevention education with a multi-modal approach. There's so much possibility."*

Kristine Cassie argued that intersectionality might be a more common analysis and framework within the circle of service providers, but she didn't think the concept had spread or had influence beyond that.

*"When we see the backlash that's happening to [racialized and] Indigenous populations, when we see the backlash that's happening for people who identify within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, I don't think there's as much understanding.... We've had this surge of viciousness that has happened post #MeToo...a critical backlash happening towards populations that are open...and I think there are other issues that are impacting this in a very negative way. I don't think it's more intersectional now, I think it's worse."*

She suggested that people are more aware of some of the struggles of BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. At the same time, she worried about the kind of violence being facilitated by digital social media platforms. People can be openly racist and discriminatory from an anonymous profile and she cited this as one of the main reasons we've seen a rise in hate-filled language and discrimination on social media.

She said we've had a move from the #MeToo movement to *"a whole other world of hate that's come out, that I think it's quite disruptive. I think we're seeing the really destructive side of what social media is doing as well."*

## Can social media bring about "Real Change"?

Reflecting on the capacity of social media to bring about substantive change on campus, Aleah Bastein cited Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz's performance art thesis project, "Carry that Weight,"<sup>1</sup> which became well known across the United States and beyond, primarily because it was documented and shared on social media. Despite the power social media can have, she said that until universities actively engage in more impactful anti-violence efforts, it's going to be hard for students to see the change they're pushing for. She said that the university campus itself is neither accessible nor sufficiently funded for students to feel comfortable accessing services on their campus that might support them post-

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<sup>1</sup> For coverage of the Carry that Weight project, see: <https://youtu.be/Xn1SW4o4quo>

violence. She noted that the deratification of fraternities on her campus was a win by the student union—a decision based on the frequency of sexual violence reports against fraternities. She said that despite the deratification, the university did not comment on the student union’s decision to deratify Greek life on campus or to revisit the existing sexual violence policy. She noted an instance where a student filed a sexual violence report with the university and the university settled with the accused on her behalf, without her consent. She said that cases like this make it impossible to believe a university’s claim that it is anti-violent. A commitment to anti-violence must be affirmed in the university’s actions and policies.

Dr. Jessica Wright said that the effect of social media on changes made to the campus environment has to be considered within the larger context of feminist organizing over the last 30 years. She said that the impacts of organizing are cumulative of the history of activism around GBV and that it’s important to remember that the university as an institution has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, which makes change hard to achieve.

*“We might make incremental change, but the university is built on some very oppressive material structures and I’m just not sure how far we’re able to get in terms of making change and tying it back to social media feminism. I’m sure the pressure is very important and hashtag feminism has really helped.”*

In her own experience of campus activism, she noticed an uptake of engagement with posts and content that centered the voices of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, and people with disabilities. In these conversations, BIPOC and disabled people seemed to find belonging and understanding, which can be powerful and healing for people who had never before spoken about what they had experienced and felt empowered to try.

Kristine Cassie credited organizing efforts on social media, shows on Netflix broaching GBV, the “Unfounded” journalism series from the *Globe and Mail*,<sup>2</sup> and other mainstream media content for drawing attention to GBV. She said there’s a long way to go before it becomes standard for people to talk about GBV openly, but there have been some gains.

*“[Conversations about GBV] are about 10, 15 years behind where [conversations about] domestic violence are..What’s happening within the judicial system, both through policing services and the court system...its relevance and how seriously it gets taken at those levels. Even when you get a conviction, the convictions are light. I think that dissuades people from having those conversations as well and it keeps us from advancing those issues in our society.”*

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<sup>2</sup> Doolittle, R. (2017, December 8). “The Unfounded Effect,” *The Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/unfounded-37272-sexual-assault-cases-being-reviewed-402-unfounded-cases-reopened-so-far/article37245525/>

Cassie said that PSIs know that the majority of sexual assaults involving students do not happen on campus, but that they happen at parties off campus. Institutions need to figure out how to guide, navigate, and protect the student who has been sexually assaulted when they haven't gone to the police, because they may never want the police to be involved. She said that there need to be mechanisms in place at institutions to protect students who have been victimized from perpetrators who may also be students at that institution.

*“I think there’s a lot of maneuvering that needs to happen within those institutions to figure out how we create those protections and how we believe students and how we move forward to create safer campuses. Part of creating this change involves education. There is a great deal of work that needs to be done where we see this as an okay thing to bring into the curriculum from K to 12 as well as in post secondary.”*

Talia Dixon said that her position with the students union has allowed her to build on the work of her predecessor who capitalized on social media and drew attention to the issue of GBV on campus. Their combined efforts have resulted in the creation of a new position—a sexual assault prevention coordinator. She said there was a lot of internal conversation, and while social media was not the only reason that the university created a position specifically to support students around issues of GBV, organizing via social media contributed to pushing the university to create the position. For Dixon, organizing on social media can have an impact, because it shows the university that many people care about this issue.

*“For example, yesterday we put out a petition surrounding sexual violence that already has over 500 signatures. I think that’s a lot harder to get in the context of a protest. 500 people or so, particularly in the context of COVID-19... I think it has a huge capacity to show the university that thousands of people care about this issue. It means that they absolutely have to respond to it.”*

Katie DeLucia-Burk noted that while people are online for almost everything in their lives, it is common for people to become burnt out from social media and so organizing with it needs to be strategic. She noted that at the outset of her role with the Campus Collective, she didn't know to use Instagram rather than Facebook but soon realized that cross posting to Instagram had much higher rates of interaction and engagement because that's the preferred platform for many incoming students.

*“Those perspectives come from having younger people involved in the conversation. It’s easy to forget that things change as you get older. Most of our staff are students aged 19-22 so they have a much stronger understanding of social media. They’re the reason why we use link.tree because one of them was like, hey you should be using link.tree. I think it’s really important, considering that the demographic of post secondary students is 18-24 year olds. You have to make sure the people who are making the decision about how you communicate ... are reflective of those communities you are trying to reach.”*

An anonymous key informant indicated that she first joined Twitter because of its potential to build community and educate. She remembered it as kind of a dream space where people could level the playing field and be able to organize and form networks, which are very important factors in ending GBV, because the roots of GBV are social inequality and isolation. She said that these two things are key to keeping people vulnerable to violence and that she is cautiously optimistic about social media's potential to foster connection and break people out of their isolation. She also mentioned social media's potential to foster connections across geographic locations and expand people's minds, interrupting their local and conditioned ways of thinking. She said many people don't realize how often their locality is shaping their thinking until they hear about someone else's experience that might be different based on their region. She also noted that the sharing of tools and resources can act as an equalizing force for people across different PSIs, because some PSI campuses might have more resources, tools, capacity, and staff, and if people connect using social media to share then they can enact that kind of equalizing effect.

Ashley Young cited social media as an opportunity for different people to pull their voices together in a way that society doesn't always allow. She noted an instance where a business in Fredericton had an abusive person working for them and a number of people came forward online, which resulted in him being let go from his position. Thinking about campus violence specifically, she said that for students who may be experiencing GBV as perpetrated by a person in a position of power, social media might allow them to bring about consequences faster than making a formal, institutional complaint. In New Brunswick, a province in which people don't have very much access to a basic rights like abortion, social media might be useful for protests and petitions to push for access. She considered that because the campus ecosystem is an enclosed environment, it might be possible to see change happen more quickly than at the governmental level.

Ailish Mackenzie-Foley saw firsthand how multiple campaigns dealing with divestment can affect how universities operate.

She shared an experience that she and some other student activists had meeting with the New Brunswick Progressive Conservative government's Minister of Women's Equality, who wanted to talk to survivors and advocates about GBV. Despite the Minister's record of voting against bills favouring women and Indigenous people, Ailish said that there was collective excitement about the possibility of bringing their ideas and sharing stories in an effort to see some real change happen; they took this invitation as a sign that their universities and governments were collaborating to take steps to end GBV on campus and beyond.

She noted that the meeting, held during the COVID-19 pandemic, was on Zoom and that many of the students and activists invited to share their stories felt tokenized due to the fact that they were not invited back for a second meeting or included in any of the decision making thereafter. She said that, in hindsight, the meeting had a clear political and timely agenda, with the next election being held two months later and with the Minister promising her constituents that she would do something about the high rates of GBV. Many of the people

who joined the meeting asked for a trauma-informed and holistic approach to working with survivors instead of the reactive measures that universities and governments currently enact. They asked for meetings that would keep their representatives accountable, suggesting collaborative community brainstorming sessions on an annual or biannual basis to discuss sexual violence across the province and on university campuses. She relayed that a group of participants wrote an email expressing that they took issue with how the Minister facilitated the meeting and how the larger issue of GBV was being dealt with. They also expressed that they felt their inclusion was a tokenistic and performative move, given that so little of their feedback was taken seriously in the meeting. Ailish said that the Minister canceled the follow-up meeting, removed the participants who had written the email from all subsequent meeting Zoom calls, and ignored their email as well as their suggestions.

*“They decided that the best thing to do was to make a sexual violence awareness month and put it out on Facebook right after the actual sexual violence awareness month. It was a very clear move to save face—like, look at what we’re doing, we’re having these meetings, we’re doing these things, but then no real change is actually created behind it. The experience here is very frustrating because no one actually wants to do anything or take accountability.”*

Mackenzie-Foley put out a few stories on her Instagram account related to universities failing to support student survivors of GBV, tagging her university’s accounts as well as the government accounts. She noted that all tagged accounts viewed the content but none of them responded.

On the other hand, Corinne Ofstie and Haley Scott presented some promising real world impacts that they tied to their use of social media. They said that the #MeToo movement coincided with their #IBelieveYou campaign, which they run annually, partnering with every PSI in Alberta. They said it was a timely coincidence, and that PSIs were developing policies and procedures, collaborating with them on creating guidelines that would help post secondary campuses respond to sexual violence.

*“We presented our knowledge exchanges with PSIs about their data collection around sexual violence and service accessibility. At that time, they did all develop positions on campus [sexual violence prevention educators]. All of campus sexual violence was now one individual’s responsibility I mean, getting a policy in place is a big change. Getting an individual [who specializes in GBV] and resourcing them is a big change. But so much more needs to be done.”* (Corinne Ofstie)

They offered that when citizens learn about GBV and feel empowered to get involved and vote in certain ways, it impacts future outcomes. They suggested that the power of #MeToo and its vast reach helped inform future hashtag campaigns with different angles that might target and impact how young people are voting. They offered that over the last couple of years they’ve had high school students reach out to them, wanting to do projects on sexual violence and tour their organization to learn more about the issue.

*“I’d never experienced that early on in my career and it’s only in recent years that young people in high school seem to be wanting to learn more about this. They’re bringing it to their classrooms and creating action...It seems that activism is happening earlier because of social media.” (Haley Scott)*

They note the importance of including young women and girls in their organizing efforts.

*“We really need to think about that talent pipeline and about fostering anti-violence advocates to work and have careers in this...No one can argue with their right and the righteousness of their message...Post secondary institutions are a place for them to mobilize and for them to become activated as individuals in this effort.” (Corinne Ofstie)*

CJ Rowe noted that they look for ways to connect virtually with colleagues who are working in similar offices to theirs at SFU in order to support each other and share experiences. They gather in communities on Instagram and participate in a couple of communities [of practice] that collect and share content and organize online. They also suggested that it is important for students to create content that speaks to their experiences and the power of peer education. For many students who experience sexual violence on campus, their families are not supportive. These students build connection and access support within online communities and social media. Like some other key informants, Rowe offered that they’ve witnessed community building happening through TikTok where people stay in conversation through more creative and interactive methods. They mentioned explicitly the need for community-building within the anti-violence work they do.

They also noted that when we think about the harm that’s done in online spaces, there’s an inability to respond in a formal or institutional way, because the policies don’t cover things that happen on WhatsApp or Reddit. Rather, institutional jurisdiction only covers instances of GBV that happen within university controlled technology [and social media platforms]. They said that how PSIs navigate technology-facilitated GBV is a huge question, especially given that so many PSI sexual violence policies are new.

## Hashtag Activism and the Campus Ecosystem

An anonymous key informant acknowledged that many of the people who work in the anti-violence sector also identify as survivors, so it’s important to keep in mind that any resources that are focused on supporting student survivors can also be helpful for staff at the PSI. She offered that the sharing of tools and strategies via social media can help reinforce the feeling that there is a community of people involved and focused on the issue, which can be helpful because often, there’s only one person working in a sexual violence prevention and education role at a given institution.



*“I’m always a big proponent whenever doing any kind of GBV awareness to always focus on the activism and social movement side of things, and the strategies coming out of that because it can help break this idea that [GBV] is inevitable. Because it’s not and we know that there are solutions, and there are ways that people are healing and there are ways that violence is being prevented. It’s more just a matter of having the resources and the political will to focus and eradicate the problem. I think social media can play a role for sure [so]...that it’s not just focused on the problem.”*

She noted the importance of building and supporting strong communities which are helpful in preventing a vulnerability to violence. She said that there’s a higher likelihood, for instance, that a person will tell someone if there is abuse happening in their relationship when they are connected and have others they can talk to. She argued that challenging gender norms, victim blaming, and myths about violence can happen through the spreading of information about consent and healthy and loving relationships. All this content, including information about self acceptance and anti-oppression, can influence culture and create change.

Corinne Ofstie and Haley Scott suggested that for students and staff on campus, a hashtag campaign might help people feel less alone or simply validate their experience. It might also exert positive pressure, displaying the community’s call for the administration to act. They said that decision makers at PSIs can leverage the social media outcry that comes from hashtag campaigns to benefit the campus, since it is difficult for administrators to ignore the issue and can result in the implementation of more suitable programming.

*“I got a call from this high school administrator from a small town in the north and she needed an education seminar on sexual harassment and sexual violence for the kids. What we’re seeing is that administrators are watching social media. Because there is a movement in high schools in Alberta right now, where high school students are walking out in solidarity with survivors of sexual violence, administrators are seeing that and they’re trying to be responsive and proactive.”* (Corinne Ofstie)

They noted that while there are some positive shifts taking place, what’s missing is the centering of Indigenous and Black voices and the real inclusion of people with diverse gender identities and people with disabilities. They said that they consider the #MeToo movement to be one where people felt empowered and secure enough to disclose online, but that the last few years has required more attention to be paid to address the calls to action related to Truth and Reconciliation. They note that while #MeToo may have had impacts like perpetrators losing their jobs, what’s missing has always been the honoring of the truth that’s being told and thoughtful next steps that respond to disclosures with integrity and in ways that challenge systemic oppression (e.g., anti-racist action).

Dr. Jessica Wright spoke to some of the tensions that come up in real life instances when student activists speak up against institutional systems. She said that she often heard people say they’re being re-traumatized by the institutional reporting processes; minor policy

revisions do not address student needs if there is a persistent culture of fear about coming forward to the university and not being believed. She said that while some administrators and frontline workers on campus genuinely try to facilitate a space for students to come forward, there are continuing systemic, structural injustices that stand in the way of real change. She said it's often framed as a responsibility for the students to make the change that's needed, downloading responsibility to survivors to take on the unpaid labour of gathering and presenting research, creating support networks, and advocating for their rights. She said the university's efforts to address GBV would greatly benefit by listening to the suggestions of student activists, such as to provide feminist, trauma-informed therapy services.

*“Why aren't they creating a hub on campus where they hire diverse feminist therapists who can intake people and who can provide trauma-informed therapy? Why not just do that as opposed to the conventional ways that we know are less effective?”*

She said that as meaningful as it could be, buzzwords like “trauma-informed” and “intersectional” and “decolonial” and “diversity” “inclusion” and “equity” are being appropriated by university messaging without tangible action behind them.

*“What's actually missing is an appreciation of what being multiply marginalized and victimized actually looks like, what it means, how it can be remedied, how it can be prevented. I think there's still a colonial cis-heteronormative and ableist framework for how we're thinking about addressing GBV on campus.”*

Dr. Wright pointed out that structural analysis is required, but because PSIs benefit from the status quo, they are unlikely to engage beyond the surface level. She added that there has been a proliferation of consent education initiatives on campus that universities point to to represent that they are taking action to address GBV. She said that there needs to be an emphasis on consent's importance, but that her research on consent education demonstrates that the kind of consent education currently being taught on PSI campuses isn't working. There needs to be more nuance in regards to trauma and systemic oppression, and that will only be possible if universities issue funding for program development and professional development for staff.

*“In my work with Courage to Act surveying around the country to see what was going on during COVID-19, one of the main pieces was a lack of funding. COVID-19 hurting the economy has resulted in there being fewer people working at centers with some teams being cut down to one person doing both prevention and response on their own.”*

Kristine Cassie argued that smaller community-based organizations don't necessarily have the time or staff to dedicate to social media communications strategies. She said she'd like to see more programs dedicated to helping PSIs and policing agencies understand what trauma-informed responses look like and how they need to be mandated across the country. She said that what is needed most within the post secondary institutions is ongoing messaging around people's rights, both to their bodies but also to their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and

the realities of GBV rather than one-time workshops run during orientation weeks and awareness months.

Hilary Swan similarly offered that social media might benefit survivors who want to disclose in a way that doesn't result in them having to be re-victimized by the experience of disclosing in the judicial process.

*“It's a lot easier to type it out than having to write it out, then send it to like five different people, then have it be investigated by a campus security person or the police, then having to testify, and having to be possibly cross examined...and then what happens if it doesn't go the way they hoped?”*

Katie DeLucia-Burk also noted the importance of peer support on campuses, citing that their collective has a team of volunteers who are trained peer supporters who can talk to students about their experiences. She said this type of support can go a long way, because the student might have an expectation of how their disclosure is going to be handled by the institution and it's likely that they won't be supported by someone who is well versed in rape culture and sexual violence prevention.

*“I don't necessarily hear a lot of the reporting because, especially in the last year, we have not been as visibly accessible and folks don't necessarily want to come on a Zoom chat to talk about what's happening to them.”*

CJ Rowe argued that students who have experienced #MeToo and other forms of hashtag feminism are going to expect more from their PSI when they come to higher education. They noted that for students without access to social media education or for queer students who have no real sense of community or models of queer families, content put out by PSIs matters and should be tailored to the diversity of student communities.

One of the things important to note about the campus environment, Rowe offered, is that often those working there have been there since their undergraduate days and this continuing engagement with the post secondary institutional space makes them treat it as though it is a place to socialize, rather than a professional environment. They continued that it's important to consider the ways in which educators and activists attempt to reframe people's perceptions of the campus community and shift the narrative for those people who have never considered that one of the biggest barriers to changing the pervasive systems of power and rape culture are the faculty themselves, who have never really left the institution and have developed an ignorance to its impacts.

*“I mean again, I think one of the pieces that we are missing as prevention educators is mandatory training where we can keep engaging with ongoing learning and start building scaffolding approaches to understanding and building competencies.”*

They highlighted both the material and emotional labour that falls on staff who are somehow marginalized, be that because they are people of colour, disabled, queer or trans. They shared that they're often reminding directors and managers that they are leaders in the community and that they are responsible for understanding and having a fluency in the diversity of student and staff needs in order to create safer workplaces and educational environments.

*“The piece that I’m really interested in is how do we get people to normalize conversations around what sexual violence is, what behaviour is not okay? How do we normalize this conversation so that they’re not hidden or go unaddressed? We need people to have the knowledge and understanding so that they understand what’s happening in front of their eyes when they witness sexual harassment instead of saying “oh that guy’s always such a jokester.” I think social media is one of the ways in which we can bring those messages ... forward.”*

An anonymous key informant offered that social media allows people to feel as though they are part of a community that is trying to create change. Students who gather online can feel bolstered in their efforts, especially if they are seeing substantial change happening as a result of their online activism. While acknowledging these more positive outcomes, she worried that the energy invested in social media activism means that there is less energy going towards addressing policies and the social structures that make it difficult for survivors to come forward.

Aleah Bastein argued that there needs to be an acknowledgement of and involvement of younger voices in the movement against GBV, which often doesn't happen because there's the persistent idea that young people don't know what they're talking about. She called for a cultural shift to happen within university administration and within the current climate of online classes where engaging facilitation can lead to stronger community connections between students and faculty. This, she argued, contributes to greater educational outcomes, which is crucial during a time where most people feel disconnected.

Talia Dixon echoed that social media gives people the ability to hold PSIs publicly accountable and to call on them to do more. She suggested that the main way to apply pressure on a university to make change is by publicly calling on individuals who hold power within the institution. She and her team were strategic about this use, trying to get thousands of people's attention on that kind of call to action.

*“... I view it as a call-in. I think it's easy for university administrators to forget that sexual violence is such a big issue that needs to be addressed with such urgency because it's been happening for decades, and so I think it's kind of a good like jolt to action. This kind of public accountability, publishing a letter, say to [a particular] person, and to all people who hold positions of power, we are calling on you to do X, Y, and Z. That kind of public naming and the media attention that follows and the social media posts that come out of that can be really powerful and puts a lot of pressure on them.”*

She cited personal experiences where she's seen meetings take place behind closed doors where promises are made and then there is no action or follow through. She said writing a public letter or call to action can result in immediate meetings or public promises, which can have a lot of impact on administrators. She recognized that calling on administrators in this way might be hard on them as individuals, and that she also sees it as a way to give them a cover or a justification to put forward initiatives that they may have already wanted to implement but couldn't without the majority of student voices calling for change.

She said that social media is also helpful for survivors to know that they are not alone after an instance of violence, which often leaves people feeling isolated and ashamed. Social media posts portray solidarity and a hope for justice and improvement. They can act as a reminder that there are people working in the field who will support and understand them. For these reasons, she said, affirming social media posts are almost more important than calling out the individual who caused harm.

Ailish Mackenzie-Foley said that even with a lot of traction coming from a hashtag, she doesn't see very much change coming from anyone working at or for the university. Despite there being trends on social media addressing GBV on campus, she doesn't see any kind of accountability or urgency around institutional responses. More often than not, she feels as though people who work for PSIs are complicit. She said the current COVID-19 conditions make it hard to gauge what's happening. It seemed to her that universities don't want prospective students to look at their social media accounts and see that they released a statement about sexual violence, because that would mean that there's a culture of gendered violence that could possibly reduce their admissions to their school.

*"...but personally I feel like if universities, or any post secondary institutions, are more open and vulnerable to speaking about sexual violence that happens on their campuses and what they're doing about it...if prospective students see them using hashtags to make students feel safer...I feel like I'd be more inclined to go to the university to feel more safe and respect my university more."*

## Conclusions and Considerations

An anonymous key informant noted the emotional labour involved with supporting people who've experienced GBV, especially if those in supporting roles are also survivors with similar lived experiences. She shared that watching students struggle with the formal complaint processes and with posting to social media can be triggering for someone with PTSD, anxiety, or depression. She added that for PSI employees, there can be shame associated with feeling like they are constantly failing students, especially when they witness more harm than good come from formal complaint processes. She noted that there are differences in how student

survivors relate to their experiences, with some becoming fierce advocates, pulling together students to form collective responses, and others who feel a similar desire to make change but struggle with isolation. She went on to note student activists' emotional burnout, which can interfere with their academic success and emotional wellbeing.

She also mentioned the cultural shift she's witnessed over the last decade, noting the differences in how student survivors talk about and engage with their experiences of GBV. There seems to be less need for the kind of discourse around safety tips and believing survivors that was common in her early career. Frontline staff now support survivors who know that the violence they experienced wasn't their fault.

Commenting on the growing attention to alternative accountability and resolution models emerging from conversations around restorative justice and transformative justice, she noted that what's missing for many survivors is the truth. Part of why they might go online to disclose is so that they can tell the truth and seek community validation.

*"I think a part of what often people are seeking is truth from the other person. So often students will say 'I want them to know what they did. I wanted them to name what they did.' They're looking for human connection. I think that's so important for prevention... the ability for people [who have caused harm] to go 'yes I've done this.'"*

She also recognized the impossible situation set up for those who have done harm, citing that administrative systems are set up as replicas of the criminal justice system which makes it so restorative justice models cannot emerge. She argued that a person who has done harm has no chance to admit to their wrongs because they are bound up in the need to defend themselves from admitting to a crime and facing the punishment. She said that social media has amplified the shame of sexual violence, making it unlikely that those who have done harm will recognize their mistakes and make amends in a community of people who shame and "cancel" them.

Similarly, Kristine Cassie noted that while younger people are much more in tune with what trauma is and what the impacts of GBV are, there's still a need for curricula to incorporate consent education from kindergarten through post-secondary. With GBV being such a widespread problem, she argues that it needs to become a fundamental part of curriculum.

Katie DeLucia-Burk noted that in Alberta, the conservative government made considerable cuts to post-secondary education budgets, which resulted in mental health services on campus being scaled back.

Dr. Jessica Wright noted the stresses associated with GBV activism online. She reflected on the reality that many feminists who make themselves visible online receive death threats, disgusting and horrifying messages, as well as blatantly violent comments on a regular basis. On top of this, feminist activists online also often engage with a barrage of disclosures, which can make opening social media feel like a tidal wave of retraumatizing and debilitating

content. She noted the importance of community support to navigate that level of labour and stress, wondering if younger generations have built up a sort of resilience to being online.

An anonymous key informant said that one of the challenges with using hashtags for feminist organizing is that people need to know what the hashtag is before being able to search it to find more information in the associated threads. It might be difficult to tap into conversations and find the information people need without guidance and education on how the social media platforms work. She added that this barrier to digital literacy is particularly ostracizing for people who don't regularly engage with the online community and may limit access to information for older people, immigrants with limited English, and people without access to digital technology

*“What was so powerful about #MeToo was that everybody knew the hashtag, but that's not always the case. There are certain hashtags like #CanFem for Canadian feminism...if you don't necessarily know it or if you're new to the field and you want to learn more it can be hard to know where to look and [...] algorithms aren't necessarily going to drive you there.”*

She also commented on behaviour that she called “policing” that she's noticed becoming more frequent within the online communities where people are more likely to shame and surveil each other. She said there's a toxicity arising around how people post about an issue, which can derail organizing efforts because individuals feel criticized by people who are meant to be allies.

She added that organizers are so focused on the content of what they're posting or reading that they're not engaged in thinking about the digital structure or being critical about the power mechanisms at play. Similarly important, she said, is digital literacy for people who are considering disclosing on social media platforms. People need information around the potential implications of disclosing online, whether that's the threats of online harassment, surveillance, job loss, defamation lawsuits, or a loss of privacy and control about how personal information is shared and used once you've posted it. She mentioned an education project run by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto whose team ran a digital training for her clinic and non-status women, to help educate them about protecting themselves online. More education of this sort is needed to offset the potential negative consequences of social media engagement, and universities could offer this programming as part of their prevention efforts.

Ailish Mackenzie-Foley said she expects more from PSIs when it comes to GBV. She said there have been many instances where people want more safety when attending an educational institution and that social media is one way that people can call on them to do better. If universities see other PSIs trying to create a safer space, it encourages others to follow suit. She said it's only been after allegations of sexual assault that she's noticed PSIs put out messaging around GBV and that if PSIs and governments used their platforms correctly, to regularly post anti-violence messaging to their hundreds of thousands of followers, they could play a part in educating people on the reality of sexual violence.

CJ Rowe mentioned the lighter aspects of feminist organizing and presence across social media, noting the cheeky and creative humour that often accompanies serious conversations and content. They noted that it helps build resilience across communities and contributes to the ways that online technologies afford people ways to have nuanced conversations and find empowerment, whether it be through a joke or through art or performance. They noted the creativity being shared on TikTok and that it encourages organizers to use social media as a collaborative tool that engages and builds on student employees' wealth of experience and skills.

Rowe thinks about social media as one of many tools in professional educators' toolboxes—one that can help get messaging out and increase engagement across the campus community.

*"...oftentimes there's this notion that it's an institution versus me, whereas there's actually a lot of individuals and offices in an institution that may or may not disagree with the institution that they're working in. I think ...one of the limitations of institutions is that we are set up to work within very particular legal frameworks and I think students are the ones who often push the institutions to think outside of the box. That seems really funny to me, because we're supposed to be institutions founded on pushing people to think outside of the box. It's supposed to be that we're all here because we want innovation, because we want to push things and society forward, but then, sometimes I think institutions get caught up in the status quo."*

As seen through the key informants' perspectives in this report, social media plays an important but complex role in issues surrounding GBV on campus. The 'double-edged sword' quality of social media means that, on one hand, survivors encounter a lot of victim-blaming messages online, and social media itself is a site of violence and re-traumatization. On the other hand, social media has the potential to provide space for survivors to disclose and seek support where they may not have been able to do so otherwise. PSI administrators can also use social media to provide more options for support services and education to survivors and students more broadly. More education and awareness around the possibilities and potential harms of social media engagement is important to help create more safety for survivors and their peers online.



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# Appendix 1

Jana Vigor conducted 12 interviews with the following 13 key informants in November and December 2021:

## Key Informants in Alberta:

- Aleah Bastein—a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge
- Katie DeLucia-Burk—a student Co-Coordinator at The Campus Collective at the University of Lethbridge, formerly CEO at the Chinnok Sexual Assault Centre
- Corinne Ofstie and Haley Scott—employees of Alberta Sexual Assault Services
- Anonymous Key Informant—Sexual Violence Response Coordinator at a PSI in Alberta
- Talia Dixon—Vice President of Student Life at the University Alberta Students' Union

## Key Informants in Fredericton, New Brunswick:

- Ashley Young—an Education Coordinator at Sexual Violence New Brunswick
- Hilary Swan—a Campus Sexual Assault Support Advocate at Sexual Violence New Brunswick
- Ailish Mackenzie-Foley—a student and active organizer around GBV at St. Thomas University

## Key Informants elsewhere in Canada:

- CJ Rowe—Director of Sexual Violence Support & Prevention Office at Simon Fraser University, Project Co-Director of Courage to Act
- Anonymous Key Informant—a consultant for the Barbra Schliker Commemorative Clinic in Toronto, Ontario
- Dr. Jessica Wright—an incoming Assistant Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at MacEwan University, currently a post-doctoral researcher at McGill University's iMPACTS lab, former student organizer on sexual and gender-based violence

The six guiding questions for the interviews are as follows:

1. Do you use social media for education, activism, or organizing around gender-based violence?
2. How has the rise of feminist hashtags like #MeToo affected the conversation around gender-based violence on post-secondary campuses?
  - a. Do you observe a connection?

3. What is your opinion on people using social media to disclose experiences of gender-based violence? How has this affected disclosures to post-secondary institutions and their related support services?
4. Do you think social media facilitates a more intersectional approach to mainstream understandings of gender-based violence and responses to gender-based violence?
  - a. Why or why not?
5. Can social media activism or using social media for organizing cause “real change” in the context of gender-based violence on post-secondary campuses?
  - a. Why or why not?
6. How might hashtag activism around gender-based violence impact not only survivors who are attending post-secondary institutions but also the people who work there?
  - a. What changes have you observed overall?
  - b. What’s missing?

## Appendix 2

We gratefully acknowledge the support and expert guidance of our IMPACTS Project Advisory Committee members:

- Arezoo Najibzadeh, Platform
- Chantelle Spicer, Students for Consent Culture
- Lindsay Anne Cuncins, Vanier College
- Raine Liliefeldt, YWCA Canada

# Resources

#ConsentOutsidetheBedroom and Other Projects - Advocates for a Student Culture of Consent (ASCC). <https://www.asccconsent.com/projects>

I Believe You Campaign - Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services  
<https://www.ibelieveyou.info/>

Responding to Disclosures Training - Centre for Research on Violence Against Women, Western University  
[http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/online-training/resp\\_disclosures/index.html](http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/online-training/resp_disclosures/index.html)

BRAVE Model developed by Farrah Khan used by Ryerson University's Consent Comes First Office of Sexual Violence Support and Education  
<https://www.ryerson.ca/sexual-violence/give-support/>

Neighbours Friends and Family program  
<http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca/about/about-us>

Survivor Toolkit Video Series [www.Survivortoolkit.ca](http://www.Survivortoolkit.ca)

Brining in the bystander <http://cola.unh.edu/prevention-innovations/bringing-bystander%C2%AE>

Draw-the-line.ca / tracons-les-limites.ca

Decolonize and Deconstruct - Brock University. <https://brocku.ca/brock-news/2017/03/symposium-to-take-indepth-look-at-gender-and-sexual-violence/>

Green Dot Etcetera <http://livethegreendot.com/>

Start the Conversation - Carleton University.  
<http://carelton.ca/equity/sexual-assault/sexual-assault-psas/>

Campus toolkit for combatting sexual violence. Canadian Federation of students.  
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Developing a response to sexual violence: a resource guide for Ontario's colleges and universities. Ontario's Women's Directorate. January 2013.  
[http://www.women.gov.on.ca/oqd/docs/campus\\_guide.pdf](http://www.women.gov.on.ca/oqd/docs/campus_guide.pdf)

Making the Grade? - Findings from the Campus Accountability Project on Sexual Assault Policies. SAFER: Students Active for Ending Rape. October 2013.

<http://www.safercampus.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2013-Campus-Accountability-Project-Full-Chapter.pdf>

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Promoting a Culture of Safety, Respect and Consent at Saint Mary's University and Beyond. December 2013. <http://www.smu.ca/webfiles/PresidentsCouncilChapter-2013.pdf20>

Responding to Disclosures on Campus - The Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children. 2020.

<http://respondingtodisclosuresoncampus.com/about-training/>

Ending Rape Culture: Activity Zine - Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance. [https://www.communitysolutionsva.org/files/Rape\\_Culture\\_Pyramid\\_discussion\\_guide.pdf](https://www.communitysolutionsva.org/files/Rape_Culture_Pyramid_discussion_guide.pdf)

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