Gender and Education

ISSN: 0954-0253 (Print) 1360-0516 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgee20

Gender-related violence in Australian and UK universities

Carolyn Jackson & Emily M. Gray

To cite this article: Carolyn Jackson & Emily M. Gray (05 Nov 2025): Gender-related violence in Australian and UK universities, Gender and Education, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2025.2568424

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2568424

Published online: 05 Nov 2025.

GENDER AND EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2568424

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Gender-related violence in Australian and UK universities

Carolyn Jackson [a] and Emily M. Gray [b]

[a]Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University Lancaster, UK; [b]School of Education, Culture and Society, Faculty of Education, Monash University, Clayton, Australia

ABSTRACT

We analyse interview data from two projects undertaken in Australia and England to explore gender-related violence (GRV) and its impact on university staff. This focus is novel and important as most research on GRV in universities has focused on students, meaning that staff experiences are largely absent. We argue that universities are unsafe spaces for women staff, particularly those in minoritized groups, and in Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. We consider spatial aspects of GRV, focusing on three interrelated themes: spaces of resignation, disciplinary spaces, and spaces of challenge/resistance. We end by discussing key requirements for much-needed, systemic change. Notably, university leaders need to acknowledge that GRV pervades HE and is a substantial problem for staff as well as students. They must understand what underpins GRV and commit to meaningful change across the sector. Without such acknowledgment, understanding and transformation, universities will continue to be unsafe spaces.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 September 2025
Accepted 18 September 2025

KEYWORDS
Gender-related violence; higher education; sexual harassment; sexism; staff

Introduction

> Sexual harassment 'at epidemic levels' in UK universities. (The Guardian, 5 March 2017)
>
> Sexual misconduct still rife in Australian universities. (Times Higher Education, 23 March 2022)

Gender-related violence (GRV) is a major problem in universities in Australia and the UK. In both countries, over the last decade there have been reports, policies, recommendations and initiatives focused on GRV in universities prompted by its increased visibility globally because of high-profile cases and movements such as *#MeToo* and *Everyone's Invited*. However, while there is increased attention in universities, the research fields in the UK and Australia are still nascent. Furthermore, most of the research has focused on students' experiences, despite indications that universities are unsafe spaces for staff as well as students (Jones, Farrelly, and Barter 2024).

Our use of the term gender-related violence (GRV) is informed by Alldred (2023, 4) who argues that GRV is a broad category, understood as:

CONTACT Emily M. Gray emily.gray2@monash.edu Faculty of Education, Monash University, 19 Ancora Imparo Way, Clayton, VIC 3800, Australia

> Violence that relates to gender, but is not only structured by the primary axis of gender inequality and might include violence (actual, threatened or symbolic) that is enabled by the very concept of gender and so recognises gender normativity, the insistence of a gender binary, homophobia, transphobia, as well as injuries of women's inequality to men —sexism, misogyny, sexual violence and sexual harassment or coercion.

Like Alldred, we regard 'everyday' sexism and harassment – which are the primary focus of this paper – to be part of a continuum of GRV that provides fertile ground for, and scaffolds, more extreme forms of GRV such as sexual assault and rape. We also acknowledge the importance of Alldred's positioning of GRV as supplying 'a theoretical framing that articulates with feminist and LGBTQIA + activism, gender and sexualities research and intersectionality studies' (1) which is crucial in our analyses.

In this paper, we draw on our considerable bodies of rich interview data generated through two projects in Australia and England to explore university staff experiences of, and perspectives about, GRV. Our exploration is timely and novel. It is timely as there is increasing concern about GRV in university contexts amidst intensified global attention to GRV generally. However, there has been very little research on staff experiences of GRV in universities and none which provides an analysis across higher education systems in Australia and England, contexts that are distinct yet similar. Our analysis explores the spatial aspects of GRV, focusing on three interrelated themes: spaces of resignation, disciplinary spaces, and spaces of challenge and resistance. We move now to provide a discussion of the existing work on GRV in higher education (HE) before introducing the research projects upon which our analysis of the three themes is based.

Gender-related violence in higher education: universities as unsafe spaces

Social research and commissioned reviews demonstrate that universities in Australia and the UK are profoundly unsafe spaces for women, people with minoritized identities, trans and gender diverse people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and gender diverse people in the Australian context (see Anderson, Gatwiri, and Townsend-Cross 2020; Gray et al. 2025; Fredericks and White 2018; Jackson and Sundaram 2021; Phipps and Smith 2012). There has been recognition of HE's problem with gender in both the UK and Australia, and research demonstrates how white hetero patriarchy operates, through neoliberal governance, to institutionalize racialized, gendered and sexual forms of discrimination and violence (for example, Ahmed 2021; Gray et al. 2024; Wong 2018). However, the extent of the problem is still not fully visible or acknowledged by the HE sectors in either country, and reports focusing on the prevalence of sexual harassment, assault and violence are limited largely to students.

In Australia, there have been two key reports. First, in 2017 the Australian Human Rights Commission published a report *Change the Course,* which surveyed the nature, prevalence and reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities and was based on the experiences of over 30,000 students across the 39 public universities. The report is explicit in demonstrating how problems related to gender equity and justice in Australian society are reflected within universities; namely, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and marginalized students are more likely to experience disrespect, harassment and other oppressions. In response, universities across Australia

revised and refined their various policy guidance, such as Gender Equity Plans and Reconciliation Action Plans, to address some of the issues raised by *Change the Course*.

In 2021, a follow-up survey, entitled *National Student Safety*, shows that there remains a long way to go (Social Research Centre 2021). Research demonstrates that, whilst bystander programmes have been introduced, respectful relationships programmes implemented, and 'safer community' units created, there remain barriers to reporting, and training for staff on how to respond to students' disclosures of sexual harm is lacking (Ison, Henry, and Loney-Howes 2022). Staff experiences nationally remain a largely unknown entity. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) conducts surveys on staff sexual harassment in universities: in 2023 almost one in three (29%) respondents reported experiences of sexual harassment at work, up from nearly one in five (19%) in 2018, constituting a rise of almost 53% (https://www.nteu.au). However, these surveys include only NTEU members, so a large proportion of the Australian university workforce is rendered silent about experiences of sexual harassment at work. Although there are no national surveys of staff in Australia, there is a growing body of research that uncovers and amplifies experiences of staff in relation to sexual harassment, assault and intersectional everyday sexisms (e.g. Crimmins 2019). This work reveals that staff are not safe from these harms, and that intersecting microaggressions shape the experiences of women and gender-diverse university employees.

There is a similar picture in the UK, where work on sexism and GRV in HE has often been framed in terms of 'lad culture' and has focused almost exclusively on students (Jackson and Sundaram 2020). Research was initially driven by the National Union of Students (NUS). *The NUS Hidden Marks* study (2010) was pioneering in highlighting that sexual harassment and assault are experienced frequently by women university students: two-thirds of women respondents reported experiencing verbal or non-verbal harassment in or around their institution. The study also revealed that 1 in 7 women students had experienced *physical or* sexual assault, while a survey conducted 10 years later during the Covid pandemic revealed 1 in 5 women students had experienced sexual assault (Empowered Campus 2020). *The Empowered Campus* survey, which generated responses from 8,106 students from 124 universities, highlighted the importance of an intersectional analysis, as lesbian, gay and bisexual students were 15.1% more likely to experience sexual harassment, and disabled students 11.8% more likely to experience it. Overall, many surveys have revealed high levels of sexual harassment and violence among women UK university students and low levels of reporting to their universities (e.g. Brook 2019; OfS 2024a). Furthermore, crime survey data show that full-time students are more likely to have experienced sexual assault than people in any other occupational type (OfS 2022), and Office for National Statistics data show that between March 2018 and March 2020 students in England and Wales were over three times more likely than average to have experienced sexual assault (Lewis 2022).

Since lad culture and GRV in UK universities began to gain increased attention just over a decade ago, there have been numerous initiatives to attempt to address it. Jackson and Sundaram (2025) provide a discussion of these initiatives, many of which were funded by the Office for Students (OfS) on the back of a Universities UK (UUK) task force review. The Task Force, established at the request of the Conservative Government in 2015, considered violence against women, harassment, and hate crime in HE, with a focus on students. In addition to a set of recommendations (UUK 2016),

there were three rounds of OfS catalyst funding, totalling around £4.75 million, for projects relating mainly to sexual harassment, hate crime and online harassment (see OfS 2020). A range of resources and initiatives were developed, including: awareness raising and campaigns; developing support pathways and reporting tools; disclosure and consent training; and, most commonly, bystander interventions which UUK (2016) recommended (Jackson and Sundaram, forthcoming, 2025). Also, guidance was produced about how to handle student disciplinary issues involving sexual misconduct (UUK and Pinsent Masons 2022).

The OfS acknowledge that limited progress has been made on the back of UUK and OfS's work (Jackson and Sundaram, forthcoming, 2025). An evaluation confirmed that 'improvements have been made, but that this progress is uneven and slow … self-regulation has not delivered the change students need' (OfS 2022, 3). To compel change, in July 2024 the OfS published regulatory requirements for all HEIs in England to address harassment and sexual misconduct, which came into force in August 2025. They relate to harassment and sexual misconduct policies and procedures, training, monitoring and evaluation, and staff-student relationships (OfS 2024b).

There is very little research on GRV against staff (Jones, Farrelly, and Barter 2024), but the limited evidence suggests it is a notable problem and deserves much more attention. For example, McCarry and Jones (2021) generated survey responses from 603 staff and interviewed 17 about gender-based violence and perceptions of gender inequality in one university in Scotland. Their data suggested that 33% of women and 11% of men had experienced sexual harassment within the previous year and 23.4% of respondents (26.8% women and 16.4% men) thought there was institutional sexism at the university. A relatively limited amount of other research has touched upon GRV when analysing sexist cultures in academia more broadly (e.g. Savigny 2019). The lack of attention to staff experiences is a serious problem, because as Jones, Farrelly, and Barter (2024, 13) note while calling for more research on staff, it 'not only limits our understanding of SV [sexual violence] for those working in universities but inhibits a recognition of the wider instructional cultures which may underpin SV within these educational contexts'. Our focus in this paper on staff experiences of GRV is based on data from two projects, which we now outline.

The research contexts and projects

While our focus on university staff is rare, our analysis of staff perspectives of GRV in Australia and England is entirely novel and enables us to offer an extended spatial analysis across HE systems and contexts that are distinct yet similar. The similarities between the two contexts have their origin in Britain's colonial history, with the Australian system of HE being modelled after the British during the invasion and colonization of unceded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands. As in the UK, there is a hierarchy of universities in Australia. The Group of Eight is at the top, like the Russell Group of Universities that occupy the highest rung in terms of funding, prestige and international reputation in the UK. In Australia, the dominance of (European) white, Cartesian ways of knowing work to create an epistemological hierarchy that places masculinist disciplines such as science at the top and subjugates other ways

of knowing, being and doing, particularly Indigenous and feminist knowledges (Moreton-Robinson 2004). This hierarchy creates barriers to participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students (Page, Trudgett, and Sullivan 2017), who often experience racism at university (Thunig and Jones 2021). There are also colonialities of gender (Lugones 2007) at play within Australian and UK universities that work to (re)produce normative racialized, gendered and heteronormative subjectivities. Within Australia, the gender binary and nuclear family are themselves colonial projects imposed upon Indigenous peoples (O'Sullivan 2021). That Australian universities reflect such gendered dynamics further marginalizes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples studying and/or working within them, especially queer and gender-diverse Indigenous peoples (Sullivan and Day 2021). Gender hierarchies also function to disadvantage non-Indigenous women and gender-diverse academics, as women and minority staff often undertake the 'academic housework' of programme co-ordination, student pastoral care and administrative work, whilst (white) men are favoured for research-intensive and leadership roles (Gray et al. 2024).

We draw on data from two projects carried out separately by the authors and teams in their respective locations. In Australia, Emily Gray worked with Mindy Blaise and Jacqueline Ullman on the Australian Research Council funded project *Understanding and Addressing Everyday Sexisms in Australian Universities*. The project aimed to (a) Improve the ways in which gender-based discrimination is understood and addressed in Australian universities taking a situated, intersectional, and creative approach; and (b) respond with an innovative approach to generating new knowledge about everyday sexisms at the individual level and across disciplinary and university contexts. The project developed a four-phase approach to data generation: a targeted audit of all of Australia's 39 public university websites, looking for where, how and in relation to what gender is represented; 12 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (academic women STEM leaders, Aboriginal women academics, complaints and equity officers); a large-scale mixed methods survey of staff at 12 Australian universities (n = 1257 respondents); and 3 creative focus groups. The data presented here is taken solely from the interview phase of the project. Because of the scarcity of workers in Australia that share their identities and positions, participant details have been kept to a minimum.

The UK project was undertaken by Carolyn Jackson and Vanita Sundaram to explore staff perceptions of lad culture in HE contexts in England. Approximately 10 interviews were conducted at each of 6 universities (labelled U1-U6 in this paper); in total, 72 staff took part in interviews (62 in individual interviews, 10 in 3 focus groups) of whom 51 identified as women and 21 as men. A range of staff were involved, including: senior leaders; Student Union officers; lecturers; welfare tutors; college officers; bar managers and security staff (see Sundaram and Jackson 2018; Jackson and Sundaram 2020, 2021, forthcoming 2025).

Data from both projects were re-analysed thematically by the authors. This was done by thinking with the colonial histories of universities in Australia and the UK, and the ways in which physical, relational and intellectual spatial relationships work to (re)produce hierarchies within universities. We read both data sets and worked together to develop analytic themes, paying close attention to commonalities and points of departure within the data. Through this process, three themes were identified: spaces of resignation,

disciplinary spaces, and spaces of challenge. These themes are used to structure the remainder of the paper.

Spaces of resignation

Participants in both studies articulated feelings of resignation in relation to GRV in their workplaces. Resignation is akin to the 'reluctant acquiescence' noted by Fernando and Prasad (2018) in their research in UK business schools, which was a response to organizational silencing of women who had experienced sexual harassment. Universities are dominated by gender hierarchies, as reflected by most Vice Chancellors in UK and Australia being men, replicating 'male at the head' discourses that shape heteronormative social, cultural and interpersonal relationships. Our data reveal that institutional heteronormativity and gender hierarchies play out in the everyday of university life, and that many participants are resigned to self-regulate the affect that being situated in such an environment produces. As this section demonstrates, for some, a profound desire to create change can also be provoked.

Participants in Australia and England discussed the sexist 'banter' of men staff, with some women seeming largely resigned to it:

> It's the guys that work out and want big muscles just taking the piss out of each other for not having any triceps or just normal laddish comments about strength, guns (I mean guns in a biceps way not in an American kind of way!). Yeah, just more jokes, very football orientated but also weightlifting - they do a lot of weightlifting - it's like who can lift the heaviest weight. Just a little bit of banter but it is work-related banter a lot of it. But I know that there's some banter like racism, homophobic type banter in there, but they don't tend to do it in front of me, 'cos they know that I'll probably have a little strop or say something. (Lucy, woman, England, U2)

Lucy conveys how men staff position themselves in terms of how masculine their physique is perceived to be. Whilst Lucy does not mention her colleagues' race or sexuality, that she describes how the 'banter' extends to racism and homophobia belies their whiteness and heterosexuality. Lucy's comments suggest that most of the banter is 'harmless' – she refers to it as 'just jokes' that the men in her work area share. However, often what is presented as 'harmless banter' or 'just a joke' is far from harmless. Research demonstrates that 'disparagement humour' – 'jokes' that are sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic and so on – is used to construct and reinforce hierarchies of power within and between groups (O'Connor, Ford, and Banos 2017; Rawlings 2019). Those who do not laugh at the 'jokes' are dismissed as 'woke' or killjoys who are not only devoid of a sense of humour themselves, but also want to ruin everyone else's fun (Jackson 2024). Thus, 'banter' can be very difficult to challenge: legitimate responses to discriminatory or harassing comments – discomfort, embarrassment, anger – are trivialized and those who do not laugh along are cast as the problem (Jackson 2024).

To some degree, Lucy presents herself as a killjoy in her comment that the men choose not to joke about race or sexuality in front of her because she might 'have a little strop'. Her choice of the term 'little strop' minimizes her own response to the more serious forms the banter can take; 'little strop' suggests something small, insignificant and even childish. Thus, Lucy both minimizes the negative aspects of laddish banter and her response to it.

Participants also articulated a kind of bystander resignation – that is, when they reported sexual harassment to a manager, their complaints were minimized and trivialized:

> When I started here, I was sexually harassed by one of my colleagues, and I'm not straight. And I complained to my manager at the time […] Nothing happened [and so] I changed the way I was dressing completely, because I could tell that he wasn't going to stop [because] 'that's just what he does'. You know he loves staring at women's boobs, like ridiculously. And I was like 'but that's not okay', they [were] like 'that's just him'. What are you going to do? Well, I could file a complaint […] and then nothing's going to happen. And, it got to the point where it was just so ridiculously overt […] I said to my boss at the time, I said look I'm actually going to lodge a complaint, because […] I don't even want to go into meetings anymore, because he would literally just sit there for five minutes and just look at your boobs the whole meeting, not even make eye contact. (Alex, woman, complaints officer, Australia)

Like Lucy's minimization of banter – which oscillated between comparing muscle tone and racism and homophobia – as mostly 'just jokes', Alex's experience of sexual harassment was minimized and presented as a harmless aspect of her colleague's character when she reported it. Such responses are common and are highlighted and explored in research on GRV (for example, Jackson and Sundaram 2020), reporting and complaints processes (for example, Ahmed 2021), and bystander intervention (for example, Fenton et al. 2016; Jackson and Sundaram, forthcoming, 2025; Park, Woo, and Kim 2023). The minimization and lack of action against her colleague prompted Alex to change how she dressed so she could continue working in the space. Alex also articulated that she is 'not straight', which again draws attention to the heteronormativity of the university working environment. We do not know if Alex had disclosed her sexuality at work, but that a man's overt sexualized gaze at women colleagues is dismissed as 'just him', reinforces the gendered hierarchy within universities as spaces where compulsory heterosexuality is allowed to thrive; Alex felt left with only one real option – to self-regulate her body in the heteronormative space (Valentine, Jackson, and Mayblin 2014).

In these and other cases, the spatial affect caused the women to minimize their emotional responses (Lucy) or to make physical changes to their appearance at work (Alex). Another Australian participant, Sally, a woman STEM leader who also identifies as lesbian, articulated an affective response to the heteronormative tone of her workplace as causing feelings of resignation linked to belonging:

> Well sometimes I don't feel like I belong and [I feel] that I'm taking up someone else's space […] I don't want to paint it [as] this big dark picture, but that's the easiest way for me to describe it ... that I'm occupying their space is how sexism makes me feel. I mean particularly being a minority group as well. All the time [I feel] I'm different and I shouldn't have to feel different […] And that's how I think everyday sexism in my career, in my life, has made me feel ... that it's their world, not mine.

Sally demarcates space as 'theirs' and understands herself as being made to 'feel different' by the knowledge that the space she works in does not belong to or welcome her, as it is 'their world, not mine'. This sentiment was voiced by many others in our research and was felt particularly acutely in male-dominated discipline spaces – it is to this that we now turn.

Disciplinary spaces

> Last year a male science lecturer set up a picture of a half-naked woman on his lecture slide saying, 'there's something for the lads to look at during a lecture', which got quite a lot of complaints. (Kate, woman, England, U6)

The experiences of sexism and the affective impacts discussed in the previous section were influenced by the disciplinary spaces within which the interviewees worked. There is a substantial literature on horizontal gender segregation in universities (and beyond) whereby women and men tend to be clustered in particular discipline areas (and occupations). For example, research shows how the marketization of higher education has entrenched an 'economized hierarchy of worth' (Gray et al. 2024) where the male-dominated disciplines of STEM are highly valued economically as well as intellectually and socially (see Brown 2015; Casad et al. 2021; Sims 2020). Outside of universities, men in early childhood settings have historically been subject to suspicion as this sector of education is associated with feminine carework (Ljunggren and Eidevald 2023; Martino 2008).

For decades, there have been initiatives that attempt to redress some of these educational 'gender imbalances' (Casad et al. 2021). While these include attempts to encourage more men into traditionally 'feminine' occupations such as early years and primary school teaching, much more commonly schemes focus on attempting to get more girls and women into STEM. The latter schemes typically involve attempts to challenge gender stereotypes about STEM, showcase 'female role models', and improve girls' confidence and resilience (see, for example, the work of the social enterprise Stemettes which aims to support girls, young women and non-binary people into STEM careers and, more recently, Arts too – https://stemettes.org/). These types of initiatives typically adopt a 'fix the women' approach rather than advocate for changing disciplinary knowledge practices, structures and cultures (Whelan 2024). Furthermore, initiatives tend to focus on getting girls and women *in* and are less attentive to girls' and women's experiences once they are there. Schemes tend to be evaluated, if they are evaluated at all, by quantifiable metrics such as the proportion of women in a discipline and at what levels. Women's voices and everyday experiences are seldom documented and analysed; when they are, the limitations of metrics-driven approaches and related awarding frameworks (e.g. Athena Swan) are brought into sharp relief (Malone 2024). For example, Christine Mathew (2021) explored the experiences of early– and mid-career researchers in a UK STEM department that had secured a gold Athena Swan (AS) award. AdvanceHE, the awarding body for Athena Swan in the UK, describe gold award holders as 'beacons of achievement in gender equality' (AdvanceHE 2021, 2). Yet, attesting to the limited nature of what these schemes can assess, Mathew concludes that: 'The Athena Swan departmental action plans were not aimed at impacting the hegemonic subcultural norms; therefore, the performative norms in these spaces were found to remain unchallenged resulting in negative experiences for women … In short … the AS accreditation has limited real-world relevance to women's actual everyday experiences' (236–237).

In both of our projects, GRV was particularly associated with male-dominated disciplines, including STEM, management/business schools and sports science (see also Litzellachner et al. 2024; Vargas et al. 2020):

> The more male-dominated disciplines like engineering, science, technology, have many more complaints around sexism … most of the sexist lecturers are from the two … science faculties basically, where I think they're probably used to not having women with ideas. (Kate, woman, England, U6)

In the previous section, we discussed ways in which Lucy (England) is resigned to, and copes with, the 'banter' of her male colleagues. We return to Lucy to explore further her coping strategies and rationales in the context of her male-dominated, sports science department. Perhaps Lucy's coping strategies are particularly well developed (and necessary) as her department is not only heavily male dominated numerically, but sport is also very strongly associated with lad culture (Dempster 2009; Jackson and Sundaram 2020). In the discussion below, she starts by attributing the laddism among staff to being in a sports department, although her analysis fails to engage with her observation that it is only male colleagues who engage in laddish banter.

> Interviewer: Do you get the laddishness amongst staff?
>
> Lucy: In our team, probably a little bit, but we are a sports team and when certain members of staff are together there's a little bit of laddism in certain topic areas, more so than others.
>
> Interviewer: So it's mainly or exclusively the men that are like this?
>
> Lucy: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely, in a staff perspective all men, the females not really, no.
>
> Interviewer: Does it feel exclusionary?
>
> Lucy: Not really 'cos I join in with some of it and they don't tend to do a lot of the others whilst I'm around, but that doesn't bother me. Whereas I suppose if you were new and the room went quiet when you walked in or they changed the topic you might feel a little bit like, oh God were they talking about me? But once you got to know the fact that they were probably being really inappropriate then it's fine [LAUGHS]. Just walk in with headphones and everyone's happy. You can choose to have your music or ignore them or not. But I don't think the staff culture is a problem, I don't think it's a negative. When I came in there was only one other female in the team and you did notice the fact that there wasn't that many females. And I think if you had a really girly female come into the team it would possibly be very noticeable for them, but we don't tend to have many, very, very, very [girly females], you know, 'cos it's a sports department. You've always got that common interest I suppose, that can be quite male dominated anyway.

Lucy seems resigned to the situation to the extent that she defends it: 'But I don't think the staff culture is a problem, I don't think it's a negative'. She implies that the culture may be difficult if she was a 'very, very, very', girly female or new to the team – perhaps reflecting how she felt when she was new to the team. Yet despite her attempt to be positive about the culture, she must wear headphones as she walks into the room so that she does not hear the 'really inappropriate' things her male colleagues are saying. Her wearing headphones apparently makes 'everyone happy'. Presumably her colleagues are happy because they do not have to temper their laddishness and change their behaviour at all, and Lucy is 'happy' because she does not feel awkward for 'making' them change their behaviour by dint of her presence, nor does she have to hear their inappropriate comments. By not hearing them she avoids having to choose between ignoring them and becoming complicit, or challenging them and risking being perceived as a feminist killjoy with all that entails (Ahmed 2024). So, Lucy adapts her behaviour, self-excluding

and rendering herself invisible, to find a route of least discomfort in a male-dominated environment that is at points sexist, racist and homophobic.

Although male-dominated discipline cultures and spaces provide particularly fertile ground for sexism, Layla, a female Equity Officer in Australia, reminds us that external drivers to focus on promoting gender equity in STEM should not distract us from recognizing that sexism pervades all university contexts. She also speaks to our earlier point that focusing on metrics and counting women is a necessary but insufficient strategy for promoting change.

> I think women in STEM is a huge priority, and I think that's usually driven by firstly the climate outside of the university, but also it's the university's one commitment as well. Sometimes in those [other non-STEM] faculties the sexism is there, we just can't put metrics to it, and so it's where those … micro aggressions and everyday sexism, and who holds power [are important]. It's fantastic to have 25 female professors in your faculty, but if your Dean is one man who holds all of the keys, so [it's] a place filled up with women without power … that's not good enough, right? The women need to be holding some of those keys as well. So I think that yeah, like absolutely there's a case to be made for women in STEM. But yeah, I think that the other faculty, the other disciplines, have so much work to do, because that's where change is going to be the hardest, because it's going to be harder to illustrate and because most of those people think they already know everything.

We turn now to consider spaces of challenge.

Spaces of challenge and resistance

Here, we examine the relational spaces that are forced open. It is important to amplify these spaces and the acts of resistance that occur within them for several reasons. First, whilst universities remain hierarchical and colonial spaces, they are also 'radical and transformational spaces, within which dominant ideas can be confronted and challenged' (Anderson, Gatwiri, and Townsend-Cross 2020, 1). Second, because universities reflect a social order that is organized along racialized and gendered lines, it is important to pay 'affective attunement' to the tactics employed to interrupt and challenge these hierarchies because: 'subtle shifts in atmosphere may occur, and in those moments, different energies are released, different attunements made possible' (Gannon et al. 2019, 55). Whilst not all the examples of resistance discussed in this section took place within collective contexts, we hope that readers who feel isolated understand that they are not alone, and that there are 'chinks of light that guide us to more equitable futures' (Gray et al. 2024, 13).

Nicola, an Aboriginal woman academic in Australia discussed her experiences of having to enter spaces at work that are named after colonizers who committed violent acts of genocide against Indigenous peoples in Australia, and of collective resistance to this physical space of segregation:

> [At my university] all of the buildings except for one are named after white men. So that can kind of give you an idea about how sexism plays out […] And I remember [studying] in a building that was named after this horrible white man who committed genocide against Aboriginal people and studied their brains and stuff. And we lobbied so much to get that building changed. But you know, I think that visibility goes a long way and if the university is really serious about including women, then there needs to be a visible presence, not just,

> you know, as far as staff goes. At high levels of staff, but also around the place, you know, visibly saying to women that they have a place on a university campus.

Nicola's experience as an Aboriginal woman illustrates how physical and symbolic spaces within Australian universities (re)produce multiple oppressions. Her words illustrate the ongoing coloniality inherent in an Australian university system that simultaneously marginalizes Indigenous knowledges whilst prioritizing colonial heritage, thus becoming 'sites of colonial commemoration, and colonial violence' (Roberts and Binet 2023). Nicola demonstrates that whilst the university as an institution may attempt to ignore the violence of its colonial foundations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples not only cannot, but actively refuse to, ignore these histories and so work collectively to take action. Nicola also speaks to the importance of addressing gendered intellectual spatial segregation through 'a visible presence', which lets women know that they have 'a place on a university campus' that was not designed by or for them. Universities then (re)produce colonialties of gender (Lugones 2007) by centring settler colonial norms of race and gender (Gray et al. 2024).

There were examples in both England and Australia of women acting alone to challenge sexist and masculinist discourses, which were especially prevalent in male-dominated disciplines. For example, Sue (woman, England, U2) recounted:

> Just a small example, a colleague from computing science (there are very few females in computing science, particularly this course on digital forensics) was talking about football and saying, 'for you men'. And I said … 'you're making assumptions and reinforcing stereotypes and you shouldn't'. And he was able to take it in good part, but it's that lack of a filter. And a business lecturer who will do that whole thing about, 'guys, what you need to understand about women is … ', and I said, 'look, I know you're Australian but you've got to stop kind of, you know, I find this really problematic' […] And the bends and the cracks and the corners how that whole thing is perpetuated, which can be as corrosive as the more extreme cases of laddism and lad culture. And those are the things to watch.

Whilst Sue herself draws from stereotypes about Australian cultural 'laddism' (or Larrikinism to use a more culturally appropriate term) to challenge the everyday sexisms that characterize her workplace, she offers examples of 'creating subtle shifts in atmosphere' (Gannon et al. 2019) through interrupting the dominant discourse within her workplace.

Sally, a woman STEM leader in Australia similarly talks about having to act alone to challenge sexism and patriarchal structures in her workplace:

> I try and think how we're going to change it, you know. And I talk to the guys, like I'm always encouraging […] I'm not going to be quiet; I'm not going to be. I'm not going to be well behaved as I should be, you know. And if I don't want to smile, I won't smile, so uhm, and that's what it's all about. It's just we just gotta keep chipping away at it, and eventually it will change. I've gotta believe that, that eventually it will [change], and I will hear, you know, I will hear someone out there saying 'dude, not cool', you know.

Sally, like Sue, discusses creating change through micro-interactions – by calling sexism out and 'chipping away' at the gendered intellectual spatial segregation that characterizes her workplace. What is interesting about both Sue and Sally's articulations is that in challenging everyday sexisms they also chip away at gendered stereotypes about women. They achieve this through the comments they make, for example, Sue telling her colleague that he is 'making assumptions and reinforcing stereotypes' and Sally by

stating that she is 'not going to be well behaved'. In addition, by not 'smiling' or laughing at sexist banter, both participants shift the atmosphere of their workplaces.

Conclusion

We have explored ways in which universities are unsafe spaces for women staff, particularly women in minoritized groups and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women within the Australian context. We have foregrounded the voices of women staff in universities in Australia and England to illustrate how spaces are unsafe, how experiences are inflected by disciplines, but also how women navigate these spaces. Gender-related violence is normalized in HE contexts and the resignation voiced by our interviewees attested to that. We provided examples of the ways that women minimized and trivialized harassment and banter and their affective reactions to it, seemingly to enable them to cope with working in heteronormative environments that can be layered with sexism, misogyny and racism. We discussed how women felt compelled to change their behaviour – self-regulating their bodies – to escape the patriarchal male gaze and avoid hearing sexist, racist and homophobic 'banter'. In some cases, this was done as a last resort when it was clear that institutional processes and safeguards were ineffective. In another case, self-regulation, in the form of self-exclusion, was presented as a strategy to make 'everyone happy', although the account was riven with tensions and contradictions and appears to us to be more about self-survival and coping than about happiness.

There were also, though, spaces of resistance and challenge. While these undoubtedly require considerable emotional labour, such challenges can be influential. Work on GRV suggests that it is the everyday sexism – banter, boys-will-be-boys discourses, objectification of women and so on – that normalize and scaffold more extreme forms of GRV such as rape and murder. So, challenges are important and can begin to disrupt the foundations upon which extreme forms of GRV depend. Indeed, there were instances of that change occurring, albeit slowly, through disrupting foundations. For example, Jessica in England spoke about her department that had 'a very strong lad culture led by a core group of five or six men who have been in the department for a very long time and are very dominant and very much use the kind of tools of lad culture, the booze, the joking around, sport, the banter, as their modus operandi within the department'. However, this begun to shift organically with a change in departmental leadership that brought in women who were alert to gender injustice and created spaces for challenge:

> In the senior management team within the department there are now more of us women, and women who have an explicit research focus and personal perspective that this [lad culture] is not OK. So we have a stronger voice from that side to actually challenge that behaviour when we see it. And I have witnessed bits and been part of bits of that challenge when it's been happening. But it hasn't been ever as explicit as 'we've got to do something about it', but just, hey look, now we're here we can do this and we're naturally doing it. But it certainly doesn't mean that the behaviour has stopped. (Jessica, woman, England, U2)

This is a good example of how culture change can occur. In this case, it was not by explicit initiatives, but by shifts that rectify imbalances and promote equity and diversity: women moved into leadership positions and thereby disrupted long-standing patterns formed by a group of dominant men. Research suggests that gender inequality is a primary risk

factor for GRV; contexts that are gender unequal, or whose cultures support or amplify gender inequality, are fertile ground for sexual harassment and violence (Sundaram 2025). The moves towards rebalance and equity that occurred in Jessica's department disrupted the problematic cultures, although as Jessica notes, they did not resolve them entirely. Yet it offers us optimism about finding spaces for challenge and change. Addressing GRV requires deep-rooted change. It involves challenging problematic gender norms – and norms that underpin other intersecting inequalities – to transform cultures and structures. While the changes brought about by Jessica and her colleagues are crucial – as are all the challenges by our participants discussed earlier – instigating change should not be the responsibility of only women. It is imperative that change is driven at all levels by everyone. Crucially, university leadership teams need to acknowledge that GRV pervades HE and is a substantial problem for staff as well as students. Even more importantly, they must understand what underpins it and commit to change.

Acknowledgements

Emily Gray acknowledges that this research was carried out on unceded Aboriginal land. In Naarm this is the land of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation. In Boorloo this is Whadjuk Noongar boodja and on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. She acknowledges that Sovereignty was never ceded across any of the lands and waters of what we now call Australia, and that this always was, and always will be Aboriginal Land.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Australian Research Council [grant number DP210101258], The English project was funded by the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE).

Notes on contributors

Carolyn Jackson is Professor of Gender and Education in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, UK. Her research focuses on: Constructions and performances of 'laddish' masculinities and femininities; affect and emotion in education (especially fear); sexism and gender-related violence; intersections of gender and student identities; constructions of gender in educational contexts.

Emily M. Gray is a feminist scholar of gender, sexuality and education, with 2 interconnected programmes of work: inequalities for LGBTIQ+ educators in schools and higher education, and everyday sexisms in higher education. Emily's work as an academic is driven by a feminist ethic of care that seeks to make a generous, generative and impactful contribution to research and to engage the wider public in innovative and participatory ways. With Mindy Blaise (ECU) and Jo Pollitt (ECU) Emily is co-founder and co-convenor of #FEAS Feminist Educators Against Sexism, a feminist collective committed to disrupting everyday sexism within the academy and other places. With Mindy Blaise (ECU) and Jaqueline Ullman (WSU) Emily is Co-editor of the Gender and Education journal. Emily is Co-chair, with Carli Rowell (University of Sussex) of the international feminist Gender and Education Association, a registered charity in the UK. With Drew Pettifer (RMIT University), Emily co-convenes the Australasian Queer Research Network (AQuRN) an interdisciplinary network run by and for researchers who identify as LGBTIQA+ or who research in the field.

ORCID

Carolyn Jackson http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0237-0307
Emily M. Gray http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0142-3059

References

AdvanceHE. 2021. *Athena Swan: Research Institute Gold Application*. York: AdvanceHE.
Ahmed, S. 2021. *Complaint!*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Ahmed, S. 2024. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. London: Penguin.
Alldred, P. 2023. "Gender-Related Violence: What Can a Concept Do?" *Social Sciences* 12 (9): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090479
Anderson, L., K. Gatwiri, and M. Townsend-Cross. 2020. "Battling the 'Headwinds': The Experiences of Minoritised Academics in the Neoliberal Australian University." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 33 (9): 939–953. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1693068
Australian Human Rights Commission. 2017. *Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities*. Sydney: AHRC.
Brook. 2019. "Sexual Violence and Harassment in UK Universities." http://legacy.brook.org.uk/data/Brook_DigIN_summary_report2.pdf.
Brown, W. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Casad, B. J., et al. 2021. "Gender Inequality in Academia: Problems and Solutions for Women Faculty in STEM." *Journal of Neuroscience Research* 99 (1): 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/jnr.24631
Christine Mathew, R. 2021. "The Impact of Athena Swan Accreditation on the Lived Experiences of Early-and Midcareer Researchers: A Qualitative Study of an Athena Swan Gold Award-holding Department." Doctoral dissertation, University of York.
Crimmins, G. 2019. *Strategies for Resisting Sexism in the Academy Higher Education, Gender and Intersectionality*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Dempster, S. 2009. "Having the Balls, Having It All? Sport and Constructions of Undergraduate Laddishness." *Gender and Education* 21 (5): 481–500. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802392299
Empowered Campus. 2020. "A Lot left to Learn: Student Experiences of Gender based Violence at University." https://www.empoweredcampus.co.uk/Our-publications.
Fenton, R. A., H. L. Mott, K. McCartan, and P. N. S. Rumney. 2016. *A Review of Evidence for Bystander Intervention to Prevent Sexual and Domestic Violence in Universities*. London: Public Health England.
Fernando, D., and A. Prasad. 2018. "Sex-based Harassment and Organizational Silencing: How Women Are led to Reluctant Acquiescence in Academia." *Human Relations* 72 (10): 1565–1594. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718809164
Fredericks, B., and N. White. 2018. "Using Bridges Made by Others as Scaffolding and Establishing Footings for Those That Follow: Indigenous Women in the Academy." *Australian Journal of Education* 62 (3): 243–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944118810017
Gannon, S., et al. 2019. "Working on a Rocky Shore: Micro-moments of Positive Affect in Academic Work." *Emotion, Space and Society* 31:48–55. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.04.002
Gray, E. M., A. Pasley, M. Blaise, J. Ullman, and E. Fishwick. 2024. "Sexisms and un/Welcome Diversity in Australian Universities." *The Australian Educational Researcher* 51 (5): 1945–1960. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00673-1
Gray, E. M., J. Ullman, M. Blaise, and J. Pollitt. 2025. "'I'm Broken but I'm Alive': Gender, COVID-19 and Higher Education in Australia." *Higher Education Research & Development* 42 (3): 588–602. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2096576
Ison, J., N. Henry, and R. Loney-Howes. 2022. "'Change the Course' Set Out to End Sexual Violence and Harassment on Campus. 5 Years on, Unis Still Have Work to Do." *The Conversation*. August 23.
Jackson, C. 2024. "Gregg Wallace: Why It's So Hard to Challenge 'Cheeky Chaps' and 'Loveable Rogues' (Even for Middle-Class Women of a Certain Age)." *The Conversation*, December 19.

Jackson, C., and V. Sundaram. 2020. *Lad Culture in Higher Education: Sexism, Sexual Harassment and Violence*. London: Routledge.
Jackson, C., and V. Sundaram. 2021. "I Have a Sense That It's Probably Quite bad … but Because I Don't see It, I Don't Know": Staff Perspectives on 'lad Culture' in Higher Education." *Gender and Education* 33 (4): 435–450. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1501006
Jackson, C., and V. Sundaram. 2025. ""Lad Culture" in Universities: Where Are We After a Decade of Concern, Research and Initiatives?." In *Education, Gender and Sexuality*, edited by K. Hoskins and M-P. Moreau. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
Jones, C., N. Farrelly, and C. Barter. 2024. "UK Prevalence of University Student and Staff Experiences of Sexual Violence and Domestic Violence and Abuse: A Systematic Review from 2002 to 2022." *European Journal of Higher Education* 15 (2): 223–244.
Lewis, J. 2022. *Sexual Harassment and Violence in Further and Higher Education*. London: House of Commons Library, UK Parliament.
Litzellachner, L. F., J. Barnett, L. Yeomans, and L. Blackwood. 2024. "How Harassment Is Depriving Universities of Talent: A National Survey of STEM Academics in the UK." *Frontiers in Psychology* 14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1212545
Ljunggren, B., and C. Eidevald. 2023. "Men's Career Choices in Early Childhood Education and Care – An Embodied Intersectionality Perspective." *Gender and Education* 35 (1): 37–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2022.2142531
Lugones, M. 2007. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia* 22 (1): 186–219.
Malone, L. 2024. "Mind the Ladder: An Exploration into the Lived Experiences of Women in Senior Leadership Roles in Higher Education in Ireland." PhD. Lancaster University.
Martino, W. 2008. "The Lure of Hegemonic Masculinity: Investigating the Dynamics of Gender Relations in two Male Elementary School Teachers' Lives." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 21 (6): 575–603. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701546732
McCarry, M., and C. Jones. 2021. "The Equality Paradox: Sexual Harassment and Gender Inequality in a UK University." *Journal of Gender Studies* 31 (8): 928–940. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.2007471
Moreton-Robinson, A. 2004. "Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation." In *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, edited by A. Moreton-Robinson, 75–88. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
NUS. 2010. *Hidden Marks: A Study of Women Students' Experiences of Harassment, Stalking, Violence and Sexual Assault*. London: NUS.
O'Connor, E. C., T. E. Ford, and N. C. Banos. 2017. "Restoring Threatened Masculinity: The Appeal of Sexist and Anti-gay Humor." *Sex Roles* 77 (9-10): 567–580. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0761-z
OfS. 2020. "Student Safeguarding Evaluation and Resources." https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/student-protection-and-support/student-safeguarding-evaluation-and-resources/projects/.
OfS. 2022. *Tackling Sexual Misconduct in Universities and Colleges. Insight Brief*. London: OfS. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/tackling-sexual-misconduct-in-universities-and-colleges/.
OfS. 2024a. *Office for Students Sexual Misconduct Prevalence Survey Pilot 2023: Analysis Report*. London: OfS. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/e32ggmaa/sexual-misconduct-prevalence-survey-pilot-2023-analysis-report.pdf.
OfS. 2024b. "Condition E6: Harassment and Sexual Misconduct." https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/student-protection-and-support/harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/condition-e6-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/.
O'Sullivan, S. 2021. "The Colonial Project of Gender (and Everything Else)." *Genealogy* 5 (3): 67. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5030067
Page, S., M. Trudgett, and C. Sullivan. 2017. "Past, Present and Future: Acknowledging Indigenous Achievement and Aspiration in Higher Education." *HERDSA Review of Higher Education* 4: 29–51.

Park, S., H. Woo, and S.-H. Kim. 2023. "A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Bystander's Barriers to Intervene in Gender-Based Violence and the Role of Failed Prior Attempts." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 25 (3): 1998–2011. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231204887

Phipps, A., and G. Smith. 2012. "Violence against Women Students in the UK: Time to Take Action." *Gender and Education* 24 (4): 357–373. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2011.628928

Rawlings, V. 2019. "'It's Not Bullying','It's Just a Joke": Teacher and Student Discursive Manoeuvres Around Gendered Violence." *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (4): 698–716. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3521

Roberts, Z., and Jessica U. Binet. 2023. "Space and Place: Cultural Heritage and Colonial Commemoration at Australian Tertiary Institutions." In *The Palgrave Handbook on Rethinking Colonial Commemorations*, edited by B. Carlson, and T. Farrelly, 53–74. Cham: Palgrave Macmillian.

Savigny, H. 2019. "Cultural Sexism and the UK Higher Education Sector." *Journal of Gender Studies* 28 (6): 661–673. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1597689

Sims, M. 2020. *Bullshit Towers: Neoliberalism and Managerialism in Universities in Australia*. New York: Peter Lang.

Social Research Centre. 2021. *National Student Safety Survey*. Melbourne: SRC.

Sullivan, C., and M. Day. 2021. "Queer (y) ing Indigenous Australian Higher Education Student Spaces." *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 50 (1): 2–9. https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2019.19

Sundaram, V. 2025. "The Pelicot Rape Case Revealed Not a Group of Monsters but a Culture That Enables the Abuse of Women." *The Conversation*, January 7.

Sundaram, V., and C. Jackson. 2018. "'Monstrous Men' and 'Sex Scandals': The Myth of Exceptional Deviance in Sexual Harassment and Violence in Education." *Palgrave Communications* 4 (1): 147. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0202-9

Thunig, A., and T. Jones. 2021. "Don't Make Me Play House N***er': Indigenous Academic Women Treated as 'Black Performer' within Higher Education." *The Australian Educational Researcher* 48 (3): 397–417. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00405-9

Universities UK. 2016. *Changing the Culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce Examining Violence against Women, Harassment and Hate Crime Affecting University Students*. London: UUK.

Universities UK and Pinsent Masons. 2022. "Guidance for Higher Education Institutions: How to Handle Alleged Student Misconduct Which May Also Constitute A Criminal Offence." https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/topics/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/guidance-higher-education-institutions.

Valentine, G., L. Jackson, and L. Mayblin. 2014. "Ways of Seeing: Sexism the Forgotten Prejudice?" *Gender, Place & Culture* 21 (4): 401–414. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.913007

Vargas, E. A., et al. 2020. "#MedToo: A Large-Scale Examination of the Incidence and Impact of Sexual Harassment of Physicians and Other Faculty at an Academic Medical Center." *Journal of Women's Health* 29 (1): 13–20. https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2019.7766

Whelan, K. 2024. "Gender, Knowledge, and Curriculum: Engineering Educators' Contribution to Curricular Disciplinary Knowledge Practices." PhD. Lancaster University.

Wong, Y. R. 2018. "The Very Model of a Model Ethnic Minority." *Meanjin* 77 (4): 103–107.