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GENDER INEQUALITY IS PREVENTING FEMALE STUDENTS FROM SUCCESS

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In this piece, I focus on fundamental issues surrounding gender equality. This is an issue present in all areas of contemporary society and institutions, and heightened in the university setting. As a result, a barrier exists for many female students to achieve success. Undeniably, there is a gendered balance of undergraduates within higher education, with more females attending university now than ever. However, by no means does this mean that gender equality has adequately and effectively been achieved. The hegemonic and misogynistic masculinity and patriarchy is pervasively embedded and reinforced throughout university and ‘university life’, which leads to damaging consequences for the overall success of female students.

Fundamental Issues and Barriers

Of the 2.5 million students in the UK, 1.4 million are female. More specifically, the Northumbria student female-to-male ratio is 55:45 (Times Higher Education, 2021). However, by no means do these statistics mean that gender equality has adequately and effectively been achieved. Whether it is from reading statistics drawn from surveys distributed across UK universities, or simply chatting to fellow female students, we all know that many females experience sexual harassment during their time in higher education. Sexual harassment and abuse is rife at universities, and for many perpetrators it is normalized behavior, reinforcing their ‘lad culture’ values that are embedded throughout university life. For instance, a survey of 554 students across the UK found that one in seven respondents had experienced unwanted sexual intercourse, with one in three cases of sexual harassment happening on campus (Collier, 2019). These alarming figures are the reality that many female students have to endure, often with no easily accessible reporting systems or adequate support mechanisms in place—as the same survey shows that only one in seven students who had experienced unwanted sexual behavior said that they would report it. There is no denying that engaging in the night-time economy is a frequent norm for the vast majority of students, but this leads to further concerns for the safety of females. A report from Gunby et. al (2019) illustrates how a survey of over 150 different universities in the UK shows that 70% of female students have experienced sexual harassment or assault when socializing in a night venue, with over 30% stating that it happens almost every time they go out.

Ultimately, this will not only affect these female students mentally and emotionally—it will also be a strong barrier against success in both the short and long term. The effect it can have on them emotionally, paired with potential feelings of embarrassment and shame, can result in those females deploying withdrawal strategies. For example, they may stop engaging in lectures or even attending lectures altogether, thus affecting their academic success. Despite this piece predominantly consisting of female-only experiences of sexual harassment, it is also essential to acknowledge that many males can equally be victimized. Such experiences are likely to be just as concerning and damaging to the victim, and while sexual harassment or assault is already an underreported crime, for male victims the likelihood of offences going unreported may be much greater.

Voices of students who have experienced sexual harassment or assault need to be heard, while simultaneously creating a sense of solidarity among the students, ensuring they know they are not alone. The hegemonic and misogynistic masculinity and patriarchy is pervasively embedded and reinforced throughout university and ‘university life,’ which leads to damaging consequences for the overall success of female students (David, 2015). Enhancing gender equality within universities will lead to overall improvements in emotional and mental well-being for female students, which will translate to greater performance and engagement in academic studies (LERU, 2019). This in turn will lead to a more engaging environment where students will feel more valued and satisfied with their time at university.

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