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# Sexual Violence Prevention and International Students in Canadian Universities: Misalignments, Gaps and Ways Forward Prévention de la violence sexuelle et étudiants étrangers dans les universités canadiennes : décalages, lacunes et mesures à prendre

Miglena S. Todorova, Hayley H. Brooks, Rachel S. Persaud et Emily A. Moorhouse

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article rapporte les résultats d'une étude qualitative explorant la façon dont les étudiants étrangers et le personnel de campus dans les universités urbaines du Canada perçoivent la violence sexuelle et les initiatives de prévention mises en place dans leur université. L'étude est basée sur des entretiens personnels et trois groupes de discussion auxquels ont participé 95 personnes au total (64 étudiants de 25 pays et 31 membres du personnel de soutien du campus qui travaillent directement avec ces apprenants). L'analyse de ces récits se concentre sur trois axes essentiels de la prévention de la violence sexuelle : la sensibilisation, les tendances de signalement d'incidents et la promotion d'une « culture du consentement ». Elle révèle un décalage important entre les besoins et les connaissances des étudiants étrangers et la logique culturelle et ethnocentrique occidentale des approches du campus. Les étudiants étrangers recherchent plutôt des discussions menées par leurs pairs sur l'inégalité des sexes, la sexualité, les pratiques sexuelles sûres et le rôle de la religion, de la culture et des parents au sein de leurs communautés et pays d'origine. Ils recherchent également des espaces sûrs pour réfléchir et débattre du type de politiques ou d'actions qui pourraient permettre des changements dans leur pays d'origine et dans le monde.

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## Sexual Violence Prevention and International Students in Canadian Universities: Misalignments, Gaps, and Ways Forward

Miglena S. Todorova  
*University of Toronto*  
miglena.todorova@utoronto.ca

Hayley H. Brooks  
*University of Toronto*  
hayley.brooks@mail.utoronto.ca

Rachel S. Persaud  
*University of Toronto*  
rachelseema.persaud@mail.utoronto.ca

Emily A. Moorhouse  
*University of Toronto*  
emily.moorhouse@utoronto.ca

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**Sexual Violence Prevention and International Students in Canadian Universities:  
Misalignments, Gaps, and Ways Forward  
Prévention de la violence sexuelle et étudiants étrangers dans les universités  
canadiennes : décalages, lacunes et mesures à prendre**

Miglena S. Todorova, OISE, University of Toronto  
Hayley H. Brooks, OISE, University of Toronto  
Rachel S. Persaud, OISE, University of Toronto  
Emily A. Moorhouse, OISE, University of Toronto

**Abstract**

This article reports findings from a qualitative study exploring how international students and campus staff in urban universities in Canada perceive sexual violence and prevention initiatives enacted in their university. The study rests upon personal interviews and three focus groups involving a total of 95 participants (64 students from 25 countries and 31 campus support staff members who work directly with these learners). The analysis of these narratives focuses on three pivotal areas in sexual violence prevention: awareness, incident reporting patterns, and fostering a “culture of consent.” It reveals important misalignment between the needs and knowledges of international students and the Western, ethnocentric cultural logic of campus approaches. Instead, international students seek peer-led discussions about gender inequality, sexuality, safe sex, and the role of religion, culture, and parents within their own communities and countries of origin. They also seek safe spaces to think through and debate the kind of politics or actions that could enable changes within their home countries and the world.

**Résumé**

Cet article rapporte les résultats d'une étude qualitative explorant la façon dont les étudiants étrangers et le personnel de campus dans les universités urbaines du Canada perçoivent la violence sexuelle et les initiatives de prévention mises en place dans leur université. L'étude est basée sur des entretiens personnels et trois groupes de discussion auxquels ont participé 95 personnes au total (64 étudiants de 25 pays et 31 membres du personnel de soutien du campus qui travaillent directement avec ces apprenants). L'analyse de ces récits se concentre sur trois axes essentiels de la prévention de la violence sexuelle : la sensibilisation, les tendances de signalement d'incidents et la promotion d'une « culture du consentement ». Elle révèle un décalage important entre les besoins et les connaissances des étudiants étrangers et la logique culturelle et ethnocentrique occidentale des approches du campus. Les étudiants étrangers recherchent plutôt des discussions menées par leurs pairs sur l'inégalité des sexes, la sexualité, les pratiques sexuelles sûres et le rôle de la religion, de la culture et des parents au sein de leurs communautés et pays d'origine. Ils recherchent également des espaces sûrs pour réfléchir et débattre du type de politiques ou d'actions qui pourraient permettre des changements dans leur pays d'origine et dans le monde.

**Keywords:** sexual violence prevention, international students, higher education  
**Mots clés :** prévention de la violence sexuelle, étudiants internationaux, enseignement supérieur

## Introduction

The number of international students pursuing higher education outside their home countries has increased dramatically in the last decade: in 2019 alone, over five million international learners enrolled in academic programs abroad, the majority choosing universities in Australia, Canada, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom (UNESCO, 2021). Responding to the trend, educational researchers have focused on the vulnerabilities of international students on and off campuses, as well as the services supporting them (Sherry et al., 2010; Thorup-Binger & Charania, 2019). Sexual violence prevention among international students, however, has remained understudied in the literature on campus-based violence prevention, despite increased attention to the issue worldwide (Postel, 2020).

This study addresses the knowledge gap by examining how international students and campus staff in large urban universities in the province of Ontario, Canada, perceive sexual violence and interpret sexual violence prevention initiatives enacted on their campuses. Based on personal interviews and focus groups with 64 graduate and undergraduate students from 25 countries, and 31 counsellors, safety officers, and administrative staff working with international students, the study suggests that widely implemented prevention programs on Canadian university campuses fail to meet the needs of international students. The study attributes the failure to theoretically and culturally limited university approaches to prevention, as well as lingering colonial imaginations fixing international students as non-Western people and therefore, culturally inferior visitors in need of special instruction regarding sexuality and violence.<sup>1</sup>

Our study challenges these notions and related attitudes by highlighting international students' agency and active negotiation of the social, educational and institutional realities related to violence in both their countries of origin and in Canada. International students' capacity for individual and collective action, resourcefulness, and ability to find and interpret critically information related to sexuality, intimacy, and gender relations calls for prevention approaches encompassing international students' existing knowledge and strengths. We currently lack such prevention programs as campus-based programs and staff perceive international students overwhelmingly in terms of imagined gaps in knowledge, lack of skills, and vulnerability due to cultural background.

The remainder of the article illuminates the misalignment between the views of staff, existing campus prevention initiatives and international students' self-identified needs in Ontario in three pivotal prevention areas in the field: raising student awareness, reporting incidents of violence, and fostering a "culture of consent." The implications of the study findings for prevention practice among international university students in Canada may apply to other countries, especially those hosting a large number of students from China and India. These learners represent 56% of international students in Canada (El-Assal, 2020), the majority of international learners worldwide (UNESCO, 2021) and a large number of participants in this study.

## Review of the Literature

### *Focus on Vulnerabilities and Risk Factors*

The literature on the prevalence and manifestations of sexual violence among international students is inconclusive. For example, studies from Australia, Canada, the United States and the

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United Kingdom suggest that international students are at a higher risk of sexual victimization than are domestic students due to unique challenges, such as coping with a strange environments and foreign languages (Lee & Rice, 2007), limited or no social networks in the new country (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002), lack of information about safe housing, transportation and services (Vivancos et al., 2009; Vakkai et al., 2020), limited funds and few employment opportunities due to visa status (Calder et al., 2016), and lack of knowledge about what constitutes sexual harassment in the new country (Chang et al., 2021). Gender-specific studies from Australia (Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012; Gilmore, 2017), Canada (Park, 2010) and the United States (Chang et al., 2021) further show that female international students from China and South Asia are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and domestic and intimate-partner violence (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016). However, recent survey-based studies based on large population samples from the United States challenge this literature: the authors report no significant differences in the prevalence of sexual violence between domestic and international students (Scholl et al., 2021), and lower risk among female international learners due to lower risk factors such as less participation in campus “party cultures” (binge-drinking and drugs) and because they are less likely to have a disability than domestic students (Daigle et al., 2018).

Interestingly, researchers finding either higher or lower probability of violence against foreign students assess “risk” based on individual and group “vulnerabilities” among this student population. However, the literature has not evaluated these risk factors from the perspective of international student agency. For instance, researchers have defined international student “vulnerability to victimization” as “routine” and typical behaviours related to psychology and culture, as well as level of cognitive maturity and inability to always make sound decisions attributed to young persons in general (Daigle et al., 2018, p. 1055; Postel, 2020, p. 75). These negative notions of “vulnerability” linked to “risky” circumstances and behaviours fail to recognize that international students engage in agentic behaviours as well: they are “wholesome agents” who, like all human beings, face power, domination, or violence, and they navigate such perils using critical thinking, active decision-making, self-direction, resistance, and choice (Tran & Vu, 2018). Reductive notions of vulnerability conceptualized as weakness without understanding strength and resistance, have been applied to domestic students as well, albeit differently, emphasizing higher risk of violence based on social markers such as queer or transgender identifications, racial minority status, or disability (e.g., de Heer & Jones, 2017).

Feminist scholars are critical of constructions of “vulnerability” as “typical,” a human trait, or ontological condition (Butler, 2004; Gilson, 2016, pp. 74–75). “Vulnerability” thusly defined mutes the more important conversation about “vulnerable life situations” that are not permanent and therefore, would and could be changed and structurally addressed (Virokannas et al., 2020). Ascribed to women, the reductive use of “vulnerability” emphasizing weaknesses and victimhood also perpetuates understanding of sexual or gender vulnerability as especially related to female bodies and their sexuality, while fixing male aggression as an immutable gender trait (Hollander, 2002).

Notions of international student vulnerabilities as lack of something, having a weakness, and being inherently violable due to race, original culture, or language, inform campus-based prevention interventions aiming to correct these gaps (see Quinlan et al., 2017). Brief prevention activities during campus orientation aiming to raise international students’ awareness of danger from sexual violence and online workshops teaching students to give and ask for consent in social and intimate relations dominate university campuses in Ontario (see Council of Ontario Universities, 2022). These programs aim to instill knowledge and skills related to gender,

sexuality, intimate relations, and violence that international students are believed not to possess (e.g., Katz, 2018). Our study challenges these notions, shining light on international students' agency, self-direction, and active decision-making, yet also their safety needs and unique circumstances linked to risk of violence.

### ***Focus on Intersectionality***

Sexual violence is not race, class, sexuality, or gender neutral and reflects a relationship of power between victim and perpetrator (Burns, 2020). The majority of foreign learners pursuing higher education in Western countries originate in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the sexual victimization of foreign students reflects the histories of racism, colonization, and exploitation that target them (Brown & Jones, 2013; Yao et al., 2021). In Canada, perceptions of Asian students as "other" (Houshmand et al., 2014) and embodying a language deficit has led to these students' marginalization, exclusion and isolation in classrooms and campus activities (Surtees, 2019). Such racialized marginality, in turn, increases risk of sexual violence (Benoit et al., 2015) and sexual assaults and harassment that especially target Asian female international students (Park, 2017). Therefore, universities in Ontario, Canada, where the present study took place have embedded "intersectional lenses" in their prevention initiatives and sexual violence policies, dovetailing a range of survivor-centred services designed to especially support the needs of racialized participants in higher education (Quinlan et al., 2017). However, research shows that Canadian institutions of higher education also have used "intersectionality" in their policies to brand themselves as progressive and anti-racist public institutions without providing related services and supports (Colpitts, 2021).

The present study embraces intersectional understandings of sexual violence; yet it questions if intersectional approaches designed for domestic racialized groups address international student needs related to sexual violence (see Harris & Linder, 2017; Sabina & Ho, 2014). Our analysis emphasizes specific circumstances facing international learners, thus problematizing notions that this student population is well-served by intersectional programs designed for domestic "students of colour" (Yao et al., 2021). To be effective, these intersectional paradigms must enfold postcolonial lenses perceiving the ways in which colonial histories and epistemes, as well as West-Rest international hegemonic relations of power support cultural and racial stereotypes that permeate university narratives recruiting international students (see Buckner et al., 2021), institutional and state policies targeting these learners for financial exploitation (Chatterjee & Barber, 2021), and racial and sexual violence against them (Chang et al., 2021). Our study reveals how cultural hierarchies and presumptions about the "backwardness" of "emerging" and "developing countries" originating in the histories of colonialism inhibit sexual and gender-based violence prevention on university campuses in Canada hosting large populations of international learners from non-Western locales. These views support social, academic, and institutional structures of inequality, causing further financial exploitation of foreign students and brain drains hurting the economies and development of countries especially in Africa and Asia (Bhandari, 2019).

### **Study Design, Methods, and Population Samples**

*Design and Researchers:* The study design includes personal interviews and focus groups with international and local participants in higher education in Ontario, Canada. Personal interviews are an established data collection method protecting the safety and confidentiality of participants in the area of sexual violence used by the World Health Organization, feminist, and transnational

researchers, and those working in the area of campus-based violence (Daigle et al., 2018; Pennel & Hibben, 2016; World Health Organization, 2005).

The data was collected by a team of six researchers: the principal investigator and faculty member, as well as five graduate students trained in qualitative research techniques. Five members of the research team had studied sexual violence and gender-based violence prior to this study; two had been involved in campus activism pertaining to violence against women; four of the researchers were born or raised outside of Canada; four are members of racialized social groups; five identify as female.

*Research Sites and Recruitment of Participants:* The study collected data among graduate and undergraduate international students enrolled in a large, urban university located in one of the most culturally and racially diverse cities in Canada. The sample of university staff and counsellors working with international students included respondents in three additional local universities. The variation was caused by fluctuating research conditions under the global COVID-19 pandemic resulting in campuses closing, social distancing, country lockdowns and departures of many international students to their home countries, making it difficult to recruit student participants. Loosening pandemic restrictions in the next research stage allowed recruitment of staff in several universities; however, international students were not allowed back on local campuses, stalling student recruitment and resulting in an uneven number of research sites. This uneven number of sites does not impact the data collected from international students because the individual views under study transcend Canada and because the student interviews were collected in a single university. The staff members in the study work in universities governed by the same provincial legislations related to sexual violence in higher education in Ontario. Hence, despite the multiple sites of data collection among campus staff, the sample allows for generalization about shared perceptions and differences. Recruitment occurred by invitation for participation through international student offices' listservs, printed flyers posted in public spaces frequented by international students, student unions, emails to staff, and word-of-mouth. The study was approved by the research ethics board and central administration of the researchers' home institution.

*Focus Groups International Students (n = 15):* The researchers conducted three focus groups: one female-only and two male-only focus groups with five participants in each. These group conversations focused on masculinity, femininity, gender roles, sexual intimacy, dating, and behaviours to examine how these are constructed and/or reinforced through group and social interaction and communication (Kitzinger, 1995). Participants also talked about what they identified as sexual violence, how and why such violence was viewed in their countries of origin and commented on sexual violence prevention initiatives on their campus.

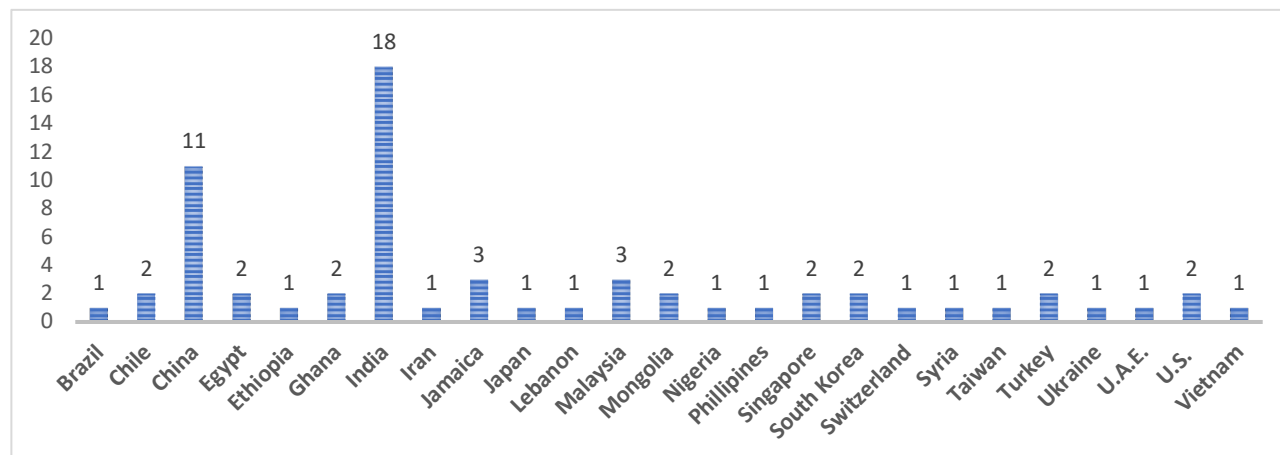
*Personal Interviews—International Students (n = 49):* Confidential one-on-one interviews with self-identified female, male, transgender and gender-fluid international students from diverse cultural and national backgrounds provided rich and in-depth qualitative insights, including individual and culturally specific experiences, perceptions, and ideals that reveal how they understand gender, sexuality, violence, and consent. The semi-structured interviews were guided by behaviourally specific questions that cued participants to provide examples of what they believed to be sexual violence, sexually inappropriate behaviour, or unwanted sexual contact. Follow-up questions probed the cultural and social origins of perceptions informing these examples in both their country of origin and in Canada. Questions further probed awareness and usage of available services using hypothetical scenarios asking the interviewees what they would do and who they would tell if they, or someone else on campus, experienced violence. International students in Canadian postsecondary institutions must pass an English-language proficiency exam

in order to enroll in university programs, therefore, the interviews were conducted in English. However, the multilingual researchers provided translation for international students who, during the interview, preferred to express themselves in their primary language or asked the researcher for clarification of a question in their first language. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 21 international students who were asked six questions about their preferences for content and format of sexual violence prevention program. These follow-up responses inform our discussion of desired topics, timing and delivery of prevention initiatives identified by international students.

*Personal Interviews—Campus Staff* ( $n = 31$ ) Counsellors and case managers at the offices for international students, staff with student safety, housing, and campus police, and dons at student residential buildings were interviewed. These participants were asked to comment on safety issues involving international students, what they thought were the needs of this student population, and if the existing services and sexual violence programs on campus support these needs.

*International Students Demographic Sample* (Total = 64): Participants were self-identified female, male, transgender, and gender-fluid individuals over the age of 18 who hold Canadian study permits (the equivalent of student visa) and were enrolled in full-time or part-time degree programs in the university under study. Six respondents were employed by the university in service jobs related to international students. Forty-seven percent of the participants came from China and India; the other 53% originated in 23 other countries (see Figure 1). The sample resembles the international student population in the university under study in 2019 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2021). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual, while 14% identified as either gay, queer, homosexual, or bisexual. The majority (80%) also identified as single, while the rest were either married or in a relationship.

**Figure 1: International Student Participants & Countries of Origin**



*Campus Staff Demographic Sample* ( $n = 31$ ): Ten participants in the sample were employed by the university hosting the research. The rest worked in similar positions in three other local universities that also receive a large number of foreign students. Two-thirds (or 72%) of these staff members identified as female; 21% as male, 2% as transmasculine and non-binary. The range of professional experience in the sample varied from 1 to 15 years in the field of student support and educational services. The majority (72%) identified as members of racial minorities in Canada; 24% self-identified as Caucasian/European/White; 4% identified as “mixed” and “other.”



*Data Analysis Method:* The transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed using a deductive data coding approach involving reading the transcripts and manually extracting as direct quotes words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs pertaining to categories that anchor the guiding study questions: “sex,” “gender,” “equality,” “safe/safety,” “prevention,” “woman/femininity,” “man/masculinity,” “violence,” “force,” “culture,” “consent,” “campus services,” and “the university.” The extracted clusters of data codes were related and grouped manually into broader themes organizing the analysis (Saldana, 2014). The analysis was enhanced further by NVivo software used to conduct word frequency counts across the interview transcripts allowing validation of themes identified through the manual coding as well as generating additional themes. All themes were analyzed in relation to each other and the demographic and social profiles of individual interviewees. The process revealed shared and divergent experiences, as well as patterns allowing for generalizations and analysis of group similarities and differences (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

## **Study Findings**

### ***Preventing Sexual Violence on Campus: Current Approaches***

Prevention strategies implemented on the university campuses we studied respond to Ontario Regulation 131/16, legislated under the *Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act* in 2016. The regulation required publicly assisted colleges and universities in the province to develop and implement sexual violence policies that are survivor-centred, research-based, and designed through consultations especially with vulnerable groups: women, racialized, and Indigenous students, those with disabilities, and queer and transgender learners and staff. Our review of the consultation processes disclosed in institutional reports submitted by universities in the province showed that international students were either not consulted, or only marginally considered in these processes. The reason is institutional disregard for the needs of this student population, evidenced by international students’ grievances about very high tuition fees yet inadequate housing, lack of mental health and care services, and abuse by employers off campus (Mohanty, 2021; Canadian Broadcasting Company, 2022).

Lack of consideration for the needs of international students is further illustrated by the prevailing approaches to sexual violence prevention enacted in the four universities where we interviewed campus staff. These approaches treat domestic and foreign students as a homogeneous group targeted by awareness campaigns training students, faculty, and staff in identifying sexual violence as emotional, verbal, and physical harmful acts; campus services based on understanding intersectional forms of oppression and inequalities supporting members of groups most likely to experience victimization such as disabled and racialized students; and multiple entry points to a network of services for those who want to report incidents of violence or seek support as survivors (Council of Ontario Universities, 2022). Campaigns aiming to foster “campus culture of consent” using online videos, posters, webinars, and lectures teach students to communicate agreed upon behaviours before and during sexual intimacy (Canadian Federation of Students—Ontario, 2017). Consent in both public and private settings is also part of these campaigns, focusing on asking permission to embrace a person, shake their hand or touch them. Dedicated institutional websites also provide information about the sexual violence policy on campus, alongside details of the processes by which it was created, and the parties consulted along the way. These initiatives, and the offices carrying them out, are staffed by trained professionals and student volunteers who also collect and publish annually information on reported incidents of violence, as well as university responses to these events.

### ***The Narratives of Student Counsellors and Campus Staff***

Student counsellors, resident dons, campus safety providers, sexual violence program coordinators, and other interviewed staff working directly with international students share concerns about lack of attention to these students and their needs. The concern is welcome in light of research evidencing the gap in Canadian universities and beyond (Hutcheson, 2020; Postel, 2020). The interviews also show administrators' and staff's commitment to the safety of all students. Yet, the narratives illuminate certain inhibiting ideas and attitudes, specifically imagining and treating international students as persons from backward cultures lacking understandings of sexual violence. The NVivo manual coding and frequency counts show the words most frequently used by staff to refer to self and their campuses are action-oriented verbs such as "know/known" (1561 times), "think/thinking" (1520 times), "different" (488 times), "train/training" (473 times), and "educate/educating" (154 times). These references illustrate a relationship wherein university staff in charge of student safety and sexual violence prevention on campus view themselves as knowing, professional people whose job is to train and educate culturally and socially deficient persons from backward non-Western countries. These staff members are enforcing and rearticulating broader historical colonial discourses constructing non-Western and non-White populations as lacking the modern and civilizing aspects of Western and Canadian cultures signified by commitments to gender equality, sexual freedom, individual rights, and punishing violence. Staff and the university have taken it upon themselves to instill these values in international students from countries in the Global South thus extending the relationship of power underlining international education described by other researchers in the field (Chatterjee & Barber, 2021; Johnstone & Lee, 2017).

For example, a campus safety counsellor we interviewed recognizes international students as especially vulnerable. The interviewee highlights campaigns organized by the safety office on issues varying from housing scams and domestic violence, all the way to wildlife awareness campaigns prompted by a story about an international student trying to pet a wild coyote. The interviewee concludes: "It's just education, education, education [laughs] in the end," where international students are concerned. Another interviewee working with safety services on a different campus is concerned about increased number of international students ending up before the courts for committing intimate partner violence. They also discussed incidents of international students being victims of bitcoin scams: "There is a clear gap between what international students understand in terms of the law and how it works in Canada versus their experience ... this is a different culture and coming from one culture to another creates its own problems" The solution, for this staff member, is more campaigns to foster "raising awareness," "education," and "becoming conscious" among international learners because "their idea and frame of reference [about sexual violence] is very different."

A resident don is not sure the sexual violence policy on their campus is reaching international students and encourages more education and training for this student group: "A lot of [international students] ... don't understand consent or much about it ... they might think like, um, rape or like um, more physical acts of violence are the only forms. And they may not realize like, harassment or comments, um, or other less physical acts." A staff member working with international students in an academic exchange program on another campus worries about "how much is lost and how much is retained" by international students at the orientation sessions touching on sexual violence. "There is stigma around that," the interviewee adds, "in India and China ... Nigeria and Ghana," where the majority of these students originate. Another university employee believes that "some [international] students might be ... uh ... desensitized to uh, like

physical violence” because such violence is common in their countries. The interviewee suggests that these students “must be trained” and that the university sexual violence policy on their campus be translated and published in different languages.

Some staff members believe institutional policies and campus programs should not be different for domestic and international students. According to an interviewee, who coordinated a special program dedicated to sexual violence on their campus, students should be recognized as White, Black, Brown, refugees or Indigenous, regardless of their country of origin. Another staff member thinks that “intersectional approaches targeting the domestic students are good for the international ...” Yet, a student safety counsellor feels their job is not the safety of a specific student population, such as foreign students: “We’re looking at safety for the general public who happens to be at the University ... The focus is more likely, um, ... the context of it... rather than the specific population.”

Grouping students based on race and historical relations of power and inequality has been an important way to theorize intersectional prevention and organize supports for racialized survivors of violence in Canada and beyond (Burns, 2020). Yet, perceiving international students as people of colour coming from abroad, or treating the issue of their safety as just “general public” on campus, erases distinctions between domestic and international learners while presuming shared racial and ethnic identifications and experiences that are not actually claimed by international students themselves. The majority of foreign students in our study asked the researchers to explain to them racial categories, such as “Black,” “White,” and “Indigenous/Aboriginal” used in Canadian federal, state, and institutional surveys and embedded in our study’s demographic sheet (Statistics Canada, 2017). Instead, international students claim complex and multiple self-identifications, such as “diasporic Filipino/a/x,” “African Ethiopian, perhaps Black,” “heterosexual Mongolian,” and “Black/mixed from Switzerland” that defy the racial types commonly used in Canada and the United States. International students in this study also seek support related to their visa status, loneliness and fear due to separation from families and friends, long-term professional and immigration goals determined by state immigration policies, and distinct gender and sexual experiences that are not necessarily shared by racialized domestic students described in the literature (see Benoit et al., 2015).

Student counsellors’ and staff’s constructions of international students as vulnerable and mostly racialized people from deficient non-Western cultures inform staff ideas for prevention interventions that do not consider international students’ existing knowledge, prior experience, self-determined objectives and strengths. Not surprisingly, the interviews with international students show resentment and desire to be included in institutional conversations about what they need, know, or do. International students want to be recognized in terms of their academic, health and safety needs, but also want to be addressed as agentic subjects who are aware and knowledgeable. Such recognition requires the paradigm shift suggested by Marginson (2014), who noted the paradoxical aspects of international education in Western countries such as Canada, where international students are viewed as people in “[the] process of adjustment ... to local requirements” rather than as “self-forming” subjects who actively negotiate the realities of the new country and university (p. 7). Recent studies link these perceptions to historical West-Rest relations of power, colonization, and modern sciences constructing subjugated populations in Africa, Asia, or Latin America as child-like people in need of governance, cultural uplifting and surveillance (see Buckner & Stein, 2020; Hall, 1992).

### ***International Student Awareness and Knowledge about Sexual Violence***

The international students we interviewed articulate complex and often comprehensive understanding of sexual violence as physical and verbal acts related to women's rights, gender inequality, meanings of "consent" and unequal social relations. The NVivo count of stemmed words most frequently used across the interview narratives revealed international students' sense of self-awareness and knowledge about the issue: "know/knows/known" appeared 2364 times in the transcripts. International students participate in intertwined local, national, and global media, cultural and political information flows where these issues have been discussed at length in the last years marked by #MeToo movements across the world, intense feminist and women's activism especially in South America, Africa, Asia, and former socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and a myriad of international and domestic NGOs supporting women's agendas (Stone & Vogelstein, 2019). The United Nations, World Health Organization, and other policy-making bodies have also pressured all countries in the world to enact laws and awareness campaigns against sexual violence (United Nations, 2021). International students have been exposed to these global conversations and find the campus-based campaigns around consent and sexual violence "rudimentary" and "nothing new." International students also do not think these campus initiatives speak to their cultural or religious communities and needs.

For example, international students from India share extensive knowledge about forms of violence and gender inequality. They paint a highly complex picture of how poverty, regional cultural differences, notions of womanhood and masculinity in rural and urban areas, caste, parental authority over children, and treatment of girls, boys, and women in their native country contribute to inequalities causing violence. Some share information they learned from media campaigns around the issue and public campaigns sponsored by the Indian state; others describe how Bollywood films have paid attention to the issue, inspiring them and others to think about the harm of sexual violence, women's inequality, assaults of boys and girls, and violence in marriage relations. Two male interviewees from India also refer to sessions on sexual relations and violence conducted in their high schools back home. A female student from India provides personal experiences as the main source of her awareness: back home in Bangalore, she explains, "I had this one experience with gym trainer ... they just get, like, overly close to you ... this guy tends to come too close ... it's uncomfortable ... in your personal space ... I would classify this as gender violence." Moreover, self-identified queer and bisexual students from India come to Canada to "come out" and live as trans or queer people away from disapproving families or traditional communities. Based on these social trends, one interviewee calls India a country resembling "a revolution" and a transforming society where awareness around sexual and other violence is discussed openly, especially in the large cities. The concern is speeding up the changes in the parts of India students associate with "traditional values" that continue to tolerate violence and oppression of women. These students want sexual violence education that enables them to transform their own communities and country. The awareness campaigns and videos describing "consent" as a conversation before and during sex, or before reaching to shake someone's hand or embrace them encountered by foreign students on campus do not and cannot support this want.

Likewise, Chinese international students attribute their knowledge about violence and consent to social media popular in Asia, as well as local activism. They are careful to point out the lack of state-led or school-based education about sexual violence in their country; yet they also articulate deeper than assumed understanding of verbal, emotional, and physical forms of violence. Students from China are concerned about gender inequality in their society: female international students point out male privileges and that men in their culture must appear strong while women

must behave as tender, caring, and fragile. Male students from China are highly aware of their gender privileges, narrating them carefully and critically. One respondent describes his shock upon hearing from a female friend, also from China, that her boyfriend slaps her: “I wouldn’t expect that ... people, like the male partner, will cause like physical injuries to the female partner ... I thought that was a rare case, but I go online and see the prevalence of domestic violence ... [I] felt like empathic and very shocking at the same time.” While both male and female international students from China agree that feminism and awareness of sexual violence is growing in their country, some also share the belief that women should not be drunk and be alone in a night club, or behaving inappropriately, thus attracting violence. Female students from China, as well as Malaysia, lead carefully managed public lives in their Canadian university, avoiding outings after dark, as well as places where they may encounter violence. In contrast, Chinese male students feel “very safe” on campus, and “safe” in the city in general, often going out to clubs and parties in groups. They are highly aware of growing critical responses to violence against women in their country and globally, yet some believe that domestic violence is a private matter that should not be discussed with others; a notion also shared by some male students from India.

These varying notions illuminate Chinese international students’ evolving perceptions and negotiations of meanings that are geared inward towards self, the global Chinese diaspora and China. Put differently, these students are not “adjusting” to Canadian values or local laws regarding violence, as the literature suggests (see Chang et al., 2021). Students from China actively and critically evaluate their prior ideas and experiences in relationship to multiple material and virtual realities and conversations: social media in China, globally disseminated news and cultural production, knowledge acquired through academic studies in Canada, and conversations with other international students and Canadian-born friends of Chinese descent.

Male and female students from other countries considered non-Western, such as Ghana, Chile, Egypt, Jamaica, Nigeria, Malaysia, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, and Vietnam, also identify social media, news media, stories recounted by friends, family members, government-supported and school-based awareness campaigns and participation in feminist and grassroots activism in their countries as main sources of their awareness and knowledge. Participants in the study also refer to campus-based resources in Canada, but they appear as a vague remembering from orientation sessions, posters “here and there” on campus, or hearing about it in class from a professor. These students feel overwhelmed by the volume of new information they receive upon arrival in Canada, and rudimentary information about sexual violence is not a priority or retained. The majority of study participants are not aware their university has a sexual violence policy and are not sure where they could report incidences of violence or seek support. Importantly, the majority of learners in the study have not been in contact with the office dedicated to international students on their campus; rather they consider this resource the place to seek advice on travel papers and visa matters, not a hub for information on safety, health, and related matters.

The student interviews thus suggest fractured and unfocused campus-based awareness campaigns, as well as unclear pathways through which to report violence, leaving students to connect and interpret these processes on their own. The majority of international students in the study further articulate disinterest in recovering this information themselves, either online or through other means. One reason is the simplicity and redundancy of these interventions, painting international students as people in need of education, raised consciousness and cultural uplifting. Another reason is students do not consider this information urgent, rather something to keep in mind for future reference and if needed. Moreover, the decision to study in Canada is underlined by the desire to immigrate and settle in the country. That objective already demands avoiding

brushes with the police, law or authorities, whether as a victim or a perpetrator of violence. Therefore, incidents of sexual or other violence are rarely reported to campus authorities and tend to be shared and addressed together with friends or the international student's parents.

### ***Patterns of Reporting Incidents of Sexual Violence***

The majority of the students in the sample chose Canada for their studies because Canada “is not racist like the U.S.” and because it offers paths for immigration and permanent settlement. That objective, shared by over 60% of all foreign students who come to Canada (Choi et al., 2021), already demands avoiding brushes with authorities. Therefore, incidents of sexual or other violence are rarely disclosed to campus staff and are most often shared with students' friends and parents. For example, a respondent from South Korea, who told the interviewer they “would never report” sexual violence, added: “I came to Canada because permanent residency is the easiest” and because “my culture is conservative and homophobic.” Two female international students from China and Singapore share that they were victimized on campus: one was sexually assaulted in her dorm room by “a close friend;” the other student was stalked on campus by another international student. The first student disclosed the assault to a mental health counsellor with whom she was already working; the second student told her friends and consulted with her parents back in China. Neither reported the violence to campus authorities nor sought institutional action to punish the perpetrators. Likewise, a male student from India was told by another international student that her boyfriend “slaps her.” The two friends discussed the abuse; the victim decided to deal with it privately and not report it. The male friend contemplated mobilizing other male friends to confront the boyfriend directly.

Participants in the male focus group from Turkey, India, and Ukraine also talk about “handling” matters within their peer circle, alluding they have acted against individuals who have threatened or committed violence against their friends. A female student from China also recounts instances of Chinese international peers dealing with incidents within the group. Students in the female focus group from Lebanon, Egypt, and Japan explain that they would first talk to their parents if anything happened to them. These students and their parents are equally invested in immigration to Canada; the high cost of education in a major Canadian university is paid for by parents and extended family motivated by a dream for a new life and better opportunities. International students in the study are afraid that any violence or contact with campus authorities would create a record, inhibiting application for permanent residency after graduation. Emotional, financial, and family investment in immigration thus functions as a strong force curbing sexual violence among international students committed to a perfect academic and social record in Canada. However, it also prevents disclosures and reporting of violence to the university or police, making it difficult to collect data on sexual violence among this student population.

These reporting patterns cannot be addressed by the existing survivor-centred network of campus services or counsellors to whom international students could report such incidents and seek help. These so-called entry points to health and safety resources do not involve student parents in anyway. The gap is a missed opportunity to articulate to international students and their parents the importance and confidentiality of reporting incidents of violence, preventing realistic data on the prevalence of sexual violence among international students. The misalignment vividly demonstrates how prevailing prevention focused on intersectionality as the frame for campus responses to violence and reporting incidents, designed to meet the needs of domestic racialized and marginalized students, does not respond to the experiences of international students.

### ***Campus “Culture of Consent”***

The international students in the study note the Western bias and ethnocentricity of the campus campaigns focused on “consent.” Male students are especially interested in the topic because they contemplate dating local people and not understanding how Canadians practise sexual consent may get them in trouble. International students share the impression that culture of consent is a “Canadian thing” due to the myriad of speakers, webinars, and lectures on the topic articulating narrowly defined “rules” for touching, communicating, and behaving in the presence of others. Paradoxically, this “culture of consent” is neither widely shared nor practised by all Canadians, as is evident by the high rates of sexual violence in this country (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2021). “Culture of consent” involves concepts imported to Canadian universities from the United States, including notions of “affirmative consent” emerging from Antioch College in Ohio in 1990 (Stark, 2018). Research, however, shows that individuals and societies around the world communicate intimacy and consent in very different ways; therefore, promoting a campus-based “culture of consent” advances hegemonic and deeply ethnocentric practices (Levand, 2020). Recent public discussions led by Indigenous intellectuals and community leaders seeking to “Indigenize consent” in Canadian education underscore the presumptuous and ethnocentric nature of these university campaigns (Lowthers, 2019). Sensing the Western centricity of this practice, an international student from Vietnam wonders why these loud consent campaigns do not discuss communication of agreement to participate in sexual activities in different cultures worldwide: “In Japan and Asian cultures,” the student points out, “consent is non-verbal and subtle,” as certain gestures or statements actually mean the opposite; hence, “if a Canadian guy wants to approach an Asian girl, he would not understand.” Other international students also find these consent talks limited because they lack understanding of how Hindus or Muslims, for instance, communicate intimacy and sexual consent (see Hay, 2020).

Moreover, the consent campaigns normalize participation of international students in so-called “sugar relations,” where they provide sexualized services in exchange for cash, restaurant dinners, fashionable clothes, travel, and other “benefits” supplied by older and usually wealthier “sugar daddies” and “mamas.” The interview with a self-identified “White gay” student from the United States who has been in “sugar relations” while studying in Canada illustrates that students seek and accept these arrangements because they *are based on consent*. This international student became a sugar baby because they felt they would not be judged in Canada where few people knew them; they can experiment with sexual relations, feel “special and taken care of,” wear expensive clothes, pay their tuition, and then exit and go back to their country without fear it would harm their reputation or career. Likewise, a female international student from China feels the Chinese women who enter in sugar relations in Canada are not doing anything wrong because these relations are consensual: “Two people benefit each other,” the interviewee explains, “the girl wants the money, the boy the other stuff ... it’s as [in] business.” The student adds that Chinese female students use these relations to pay their expenses and create social networks that increase their prospects for employment after graduation, thereby supporting their applications for permanent residency and immigration.

Not surprisingly, by 2018, nearly 1,700 students enrolled in academic programs in the university under study have used the popular dating website Seeking Arrangements for sugar relationships (Al-Hassaun, 2019). Nationally, there are 300,000 members on this dating platform (Dragicevic, 2019); globally, it hosts 22 million users (Thomas, 2021). Campus-based campaigns promoting “culture of consent” normalize these relations, albeit unintentionally, by advancing ideas of sexual “consent” as active, enthusiastic, and continuous agreement illustrated by examples

referring to colonization of land and intimate relations (University of Toronto, 2022). These videos fail to address the complexity of “free consent” (Linander et al., 2021) within transactional relations such as those between a “sugar baby” and “sugar daddy.” Power, albeit diffused and unstable, exerts economic, social, cultural, or political pressure thereby complicating the ease with which “consent” can be given or obtained, especially under the direction of social platforms such as SeekingArrangements.com, where international students seek and believe to find this “benefiting” sexual relation described by the female student from China.

### **Implications for University-Based Prevention Practice**

The follow-up interviews with international students revealed that the majority (88%) prefer multiple shorter sessions dedicated to sexual violence prevention education spread over an academic year. They further prefer that these sessions are focused on gender equality, practising safe sex, dating someone from a different culture, sexuality and coming out, sexual health, and non-violent intimate relationships.

The majority of respondents (76%) prefer these sessions to be facilitated by peers, with experts and professors invited as guests, and also requested affiliated small discussion groups for culturally and religiously specific communities. International students from Muslim and South Asian societies are especially interested in such culturally specific groups and conversations. Female students in the sample want these sessions to include both men and women so that patriarchal structures and gender inequalities are discussed and countered together. The majority of respondents (63%) also believe these sessions dedicated to healthy relationships, sexual well-being and gender equality ought to be mandatory for all incoming students. Some form of academic crediting or counting the sessions towards the degree is proposed by a couple of respondents.

Three out of five topics formulated by the principal investigator, based on the primary interviews with students and published research on positive practices, were ranked by the international respondents as “very important” topics that must be addressed by campus prevention programs: (1) Practising safe sex and maintaining good sexual health; (2) Dating, marriage, and intimate relationships in different cultures and countries worldwide, including Canada; and (3) The role of global and local power inequalities, and racial, gender, economic, and sexual hierarchies in how individuals encounter each other and form social and intimate relationships. International students also seek discussions and facilitations that do not patronize, but treat them with dignity, as knowledgeable subjects, while providing space for students to negotiate cultural and gender differences and think about the kind of politics or actions that could enable changes within their own communities and the world.

### **Conclusion**

Most international students in Canada and the world originate in non-Western countries and the Global South. Current approaches to sexual violence prevention on Canadian university campuses, much like state and institutional policies and narratives related to international education already documented in the literature, echo racialized views presuming the cultural inferiority on non-Western peoples whose sexual and gender practices must be supervised and reformed through education and training. Universities should not assume that “intersectional” paradigms addressing domestic racial minorities are a panacea for successful prevention. Drawing upon interview data with international students and campus staff, this study finds that we need prevention initiatives built upon international students’ agentic behaviours and existing knowledges, as well as their specific needs, circumstances, and life trajectories. We also need prevention strategies that



encourage international students to report sexual violence without fear for their visa status or ability to obtain Canadian permanent residency and citizenship. Campus campaigns promoting “culture of consent” should develop globalized yet culture-specific consciousness in order to capture and convey the multiple and complex ways in which societies communicate agreement and pleasure in sexual and intimate relations. More research examining the effectiveness of prevention approaches among foreign learners in Canada and in other countries is needed to push sexual and gender-based violence prevention in international higher education further and forward.

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**Miglena S. Todorova** is associate professor in the Department of Social Justice Education and director of the Centre for Media, Culture and Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies of Education, University of Toronto, Canada.

**Hayley H. Brooks** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada.

**Rachel S. Persaud** is a recent Master of Education graduate in the Department of Adult Education & Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada.

**Emily A. Moorhouse** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Social Justice Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada.