

## Sexual violence in Indonesian University: On students' critical consciousness and agency

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### ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study analysed how aspects of critical consciousness in students played a role in the issue of sexual violence in a higher education institution. This research involved students, lecturers, and elements of higher education leaders of a university in Aceh, Indonesia. For the data collection method, the researchers used semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using thematic analysis with the utilization of critical consciousness and student agency concept as the theoretical frameworks. This study found that aspects of critical consciousness played a significant role in dealing with sexual violence issues in university. Without critical consciousness, students would potentially err in analysing the issue of sexual violence. Aspects of students' critical consciousness were also influenced by the structure or discourse of higher education in viewing sexual violence. The tendency of campus to be more concerned with its good reputation also exacerbated the handling and prevention of sexual violence cases. The implication of this research is the finding that critical consciousness and institutional structure influence each other, both positively and negatively. To deal with sexual violence, a university must promote critical consciousness among students and academics, create pro survivors' discourse and underpin students' agency, and most importantly, strive to cultivate gender equity perspective among university leaders. Future research should focus on investigating effective pedagogy to nurture critical consciousness for supporting the anti-sexual violence agenda in a higher education institution.*

**Keywords:** Critical consciousness; higher education; sexual violence; student agency.

## **ABSTRAK**

*Penelitian kualitatif ini menganalisis bagaimana aspek kesadaran kritis pada mahasiswa berperan dalam isu kekerasan seksual di perguruan tinggi. Penelitian ini melibatkan mahasiswa, dosen, dan unsur pimpinan perguruan tinggi pada sebuah kampus di Aceh, Indonesia. Untuk pengambilan data, peneliti menggunakan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk menganalisis data dengan dilengkapi oleh konsep kesadaran kritis dan student agency sebagai kerangka teoritis. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa aspek kesadaran kritis berperan besar dalam menghadapi isu kekerasan seksual di perguruan tinggi. Tanpa kesadaran kritis, mahasiswa akan berpotensi keliru dalam menganalisis persoalan kekerasan seksual secara komprehensif. Aspek kesadaran kritis mahasiswa juga dipengaruhi oleh struktur atau diskursus perguruan tinggi dalam melihat isu kekerasan seksual. Kecenderungan kampus yang lebih peduli pada reputasi atau nama baik kampus juga semakin memperparah penanganan dan pencegahan isu kekerasan seksual. Implikasi dari penelitian ini adalah temuan bahwa kesadaran kritis dan struktur institusi saling mempengaruhi, baik secara positif maupun negatif. Untuk menangani kekerasan seksual, perguruan tinggi harus mempromosikan kesadaran kritis di kalangan mahasiswa dan akademisi, menciptakan wacana pro korban dan mendukung student agency, dan yang terpenting, berusaha untuk menumbuhkan perspektif kesetaraan gender di antara para pimpinan kampus. Penelitian di masa depan harus fokus pada penyelidikan mengenai pedagogi yang efektif untuk menumbuhkan kesadaran kritis untuk mendukung agenda anti-kekerasan seksual di perguruan tinggi.*

**Kata Kunci:** Kesadaran kritis; perguruan tinggi; kekerasan seksual; student agency.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Sexual violence has been a severe issue in higher education on a global scale. We have noticed many reported forms of sexual violence, including rape, intimidation, or sexual harassment, such as unwanted touching, stalking, and cat-calling in university. We have also observed various supported background or motivation, including quid pro quo aided by power relations. The perpetrators who have a strong background such as professor, and dominant position in the social structure like male academics, could make this case more challenging to be solved. Also, the patriarchal culture that has been deeply rooted in the higher education structure has created a circle of evil that further lead to nurture survivor-blaming and silencing behaviour for the sake of campus reputation.

Globally, research on sexual violence in higher education is considered abundant. Researchers have investigated this issue from many perspectives, themes, and intentions. One of the latest studies highlighted the optimistic approach to design feminist education for the university community as a pedagogical tool for dealing with sexual violence (Jones, Chappell, & Alldred, 2021). It might be essential as another

study discovered that handling sexual violence cases might be negatively influenced by how higher education operated in the age of neoliberalism (Hurtado, 2021).

In Indonesia, we also found a growing number of investigations on sexual violence, despite the amount of research on a local and global scale is incomparable; for instance, in the latest study conducted in an Islamic Higher Education Institution in West Java involving 333 respondents (students, employees, and lecturers), it was found that 27.5 percent of respondents had experienced verbal sexual violence, and 13.8 percent of them had experienced non-verbal sexual violence (Muhsin, Ma'mun, & Nuroniyah, 2021). The study also indicated that 71 percent of the incidents occurred during lectures, extracurricular activities, and so forth. However, it is difficult to find academic research focused on sexual violence cases in higher education settings in the Acehese context.

In this qualitative research, we conducted a phenomenological study involving ten students and four faculty members from a university in Aceh, Indonesia. We centred our study on students' *critical consciousness*, *agency*, and *structure* aspect because we found limited investigations, both on a local and global scale, which focused on studying students' roles in sexual violence issues and how an educational institution affected them. By conducting in-depth interviews, we tried to explore how those elements could affect how students responded to sexual violence issues on campus. In addition, previous works of the literature showed that students had a high probability of becoming sexual violence victims based on their weak position in the structural hierarchy of campus and their needs at the personal and academic level. Thus, studying the students would provide them adequate space to express their voice, idea, and aspiration against this issue. In addition, by positioning critical consciousness, agency, and structure as analysis elements, we also believed that students might potentially play a significant position to tackle this issue on campus.

We believe that studying sexual violence in any settings is a challenging task. Researchers must be meticulous in dealing with the safety of participants, especially survivors, and themselves as the investigators. If it is not executed assiduously, the researchers may potentially put the survivors and themselves in danger. We perceived those negative consequences might contribute to the lack of available research on this issue in Indonesia. Thus, this study would contribute to scholarly conversation on sexual violence in Indonesia or Southeast Asia, particularly in providing space for students to express their voice.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section will provide the definition and previous works on sexual violence issues in higher education and how they provided insightful concepts to our investigation. We would also explain the prior studies on *critical consciousness*, *agency*, and *structure*, and how it supported our study as the theoretical framework to analyse sexual violence issues on campus.

### *2.1. Definition and type*

Many scholars and organisations have conceptualised sexual violence as a definition. In this study, we selected a definition formed by the World Health Organization (WHO). It defines *sexual violence* as:

Any sexual acts attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. (WHO, 2012, as cited in Islam & Hossain, 2021, p.1)

*Sexual violence* is often used interchangeably or separately with other terms, including *sexual harassment*, *sexual abuse*, and *sexual assault*. We are aware that all of the terms have distinct senses and characteristics. However, in this study, we would only use *sexual violence* to encompass all types of sexual misconduct in the hope of avoiding confusion among readers.

Regarding the variation of sexual violence, a categorisation from the Indonesian National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan) would be helpful. It categorises sexual violence into fifteen types:

Rape, sexual intimidation, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, sexually motivated human trafficking, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, forced marriage, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced contraception or sterilization, sexual torture, sexually inhuman punishment, a sexually dangerous and discriminative tradition for women, and sexual control (Komnas Perempuan, 2012, p.4).

We noticed that not all of the sexual violence types took place in a higher education context. Nevertheless, we put the categorisation to show how multifarious sexual violence is. Additionally, the categorisation itself must be seen as fluid. For instance, sexual violence could encompass other malicious activities in this digital age, such as revenge porn (Fairbairn, 2015) usually distributed online as shaming, blackmailing, or extorting weapons.

### *2.2. Sexual violence in higher education*

Historically, one of the earliest reports on sexual violence could be traced from Kirkpatrick and Kanin's study in 1957 (Jessup-Anger, Lopez, & Koss, 2018). They studied the aggressiveness of men in dating-courtship relationships on campus, based on the reports from women. The respondents in that study reported how men used aggressive force to have sexual intimacy with them. The study was becoming a foundation for other studies on sexual violence in that era. Jessup-Anger et al. (2018) further provided some crucial highlights on essential findings regarding sexual violence research, including the lack of institutional definition of sexual violence and limited sexual awareness programs for new students. The unavailability of a formal definition

and adequate campaign of sexual violence on campus would make students unaware of the violence, even after they had become a victim.

On the other hand, we found difficulty finding when the earliest research on sexual violence in higher education was conducted in Indonesia. The earliest research timeframe could show when academics started to have awareness about Indonesian higher education. However, regardless of the data limitation, we observed that the research on sexual violence in Indonesia intensified in recent years. One of its causes was potentially the significant dissemination of the '#MeToo' hashtag circularised in eighty-five countries, including Palestine, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

Sexual violence in higher education could occur in many forms, like rape, attempted rape, and unwanted touching (Moorman & Osborne, 2015). One of the most common sexual violence on campus is related to power relations and quid pro quo. In Ghana and Tanzania, for instance, it was found that a male professor asked a female student for sex to get an excellent academic grade (Morley, 2011). Karami, White, Ford, Swan, and Spinel's study (2020) found that the majority of sexual violence cases often involved perpetrators from higher social or academic rank (e.g., professor, senior lecturer, and supervisor) and survivors from the lower rank (e.g., junior staff and students). In terms of gender, the study also uncovered that 89.99% of harassers were male, 5.09% female, and 4.92% from other genders (Karami et al., 2020).

Sexual violence could produce a devastating impact on its survivors. A report from the American Congressional Research Service described that the victim of sexual violence could suffer much consequence both personally and academically (Gonzalez & Feder, 2016). They could endure physical and mental issues, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, drug abuse, unintended pregnancy, that could lead them to encounter a drop in their academic performance.

### 2.3. How Indonesian university dealt with sexual violence

A massive reported case of sexual violence in Indonesian higher education institutions was initiated in 2019 by four Indonesian mass media companies: *Tirto.id*, *The Jakarta Post*, *VICE Indonesia*, and *BBC Indonesia*. The reportage was entitled '#NamaBaikKampus' or '#CampusReputation' and involved 179 sexual violence survivors from seventy-nine (state, private, and religious) higher education institutions in twenty-nine cities in Indonesia (Adjie, 2020). The report uncovered sexual violence allegation cases in Indonesian universities. The title '#CampusReputation' outlined how Indonesian universities concealed sexual violence cases for campus reputation. The universities would try any possible way to save their reputation and silencing the survivors.

Several international studies also supported the findings above. For example, a study found that victims of sexual violence in university often hesitated to report the cases because they feared that their issue would not be taken seriously (Kirkner, Lorenz,

& Mazar, 2020). In addition, universities often neglected the victim of sexual violence with very little attention on seriously dealing with their cases (Marshall, Dalyot, & Galloway, 2014). Therefore, it would be inevitable that sexual violence survivors in university were experiencing isolation. One of the causes was the structuration of the communication process (Dykstra-DeVette & Tarin, 2019) that further led them to feel alone and alienated while seeking justice.

A study in Indonesia also found that policies on dealing with sexual violence could be found in Indonesian universities. However, it would be challenging to get justice for the survivors if it was not supported by knowledgeable university staff and convenient campus bureaucracy (Nikmatullah, 2020). Furthermore, another study in the country also found that the patriarchal culture could negatively impact female survivors (Munir & Junaini, 2020). The patriarchal culture is considered rooted in Indonesian academia as the cause of the low female participation and the limited gender equity knowledge among male senior faculty members (Haekal & Fitri, 2020).

#### *2.4. Critical consciousness, agency, and structure*

Freire, a distinguished critical theorist and educator from Brazil, originated the *conscientização* or critical consciousness concept. He believed that the oppression could be defeated when the oppressed people had critical consciousness to analyse their social condition and living world (Shih, 2018).

Christens, Winn, and Duke (2016) provided an essential synthesis of the critical consciousness concept from other scholars who categorised it into three components: *critical reflection*, *political efficacy*, and *critical action*.

**Table 1**

Critical consciousness components

No	Components	Brief Description
1	Critical reflection	The ability to analyse inequities and injustices connected to one's social conditions.
2	Political efficacy	The sense that the individual or a collective has the ability and capacity to change their political and social conditions (Watts et al. 2011, as cited in Christens et al., 2016, p.17).
3	Critical Action	Critical action occurs when individuals actively seek to change their unjust conditions through policy reform, practices, or programs.

(Christens et al., 2016, p.17)

Thomas et al. (2014) had also provided important stages of critical consciousness: *precritical*, *beginning critical*, *critical*, and *post-critical*.

**Table 2**

Critical consciousness stages

No	Stages	Brief Description
1	Precritical	Issues of inequity and oppression are not recognised.
2	Beginning critical	Individuals would begin to recognise oppression and inequity.
3	Critical	The person has a solid sense of critical consciousness.
4	Post-critical	Some form of personal or social action in response to oppression or inequity.

(Thomas et al., 2014, p.489)

We found minimal studies correlated critical consciousness and sexual violence issues in higher education regarding the prior research. For example, a study from the United States of America reported that when students (as the *bystanders* or *witnesses*) had critical consciousness, they would tend to intervene in sexual assault incidents (Rojas-Ashe, Walker, Holmes, & Johnson, 2019). However, the study had not investigated whether there were *other* factors (besides critical consciousness) supporting students to survive or motivating them to act against the sexual violence cases.

We also utilised *student agency* and *structure* as other theoretical frameworks. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) presented an insightful explanation about *student agency*:

Student agency relates to the development of an identity and a sense of belonging. When students develop agency they rely on motivation, hope, self-efficacy and a growth mindset (the understanding that abilities and intelligence can be developed) to navigate towards well-being. This enables them to act with a sense of purpose, which guides them to flourish and thrive in society. (OECD, 2019, p.5)

In addition, *structure* is defined as “rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction; institutionalized features of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stable across time and space” (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Powell, 2018, p.3).

We would utilise all of the concepts above as the theoretical frameworks to analyse the sexual violence issue from students’ perspectives.

### 3. METHOD

This qualitative study used phenomenology as its research genre. The approach centralised on investigating the synthesis of essential lived experiences, events, and concepts from research participants (Saldaña, 2011). The participants of this research were ten undergraduate students and six faculty members from a university in Aceh, Indonesia. We selected the participants using purposive (or purposeful) sampling (Leavy, 2017) to get the best data for our investigation. In terms of defining the sample

size, we used the concept of *saturation* (Dworkin, 2012), in which we finished gathering the data after finding no new information or insights. The participants would remain anonymous during this study to protect their safety and privacy. As the data collection method, we used offline and online semi-structured interviews. According to Brinkman (2014), semi-structured interviews would allow researchers to get better data because it would enable them to follow respondents' perspectives during interviews. Additionally, we utilised thematic analysis to analyse the findings with the enrichment of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. The thematic analysis is a deliberative process of understanding the intricacy of meanings by organising the data into explorable patterns and themes (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019).

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In this section, we would discuss the findings by utilising thematic analysis and the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. We would present the discussion in three subsections. On reporting the respondents' perspective, we would use pseudonyms (if necessary) to protect their privacy.

##### *4.1. Students' critical consciousness of sexual violence*

We found that most of the students' respondents did not have a complete concept of sexual violence. Some of them even knew firstly about sexual violence from this study. Some respondents had vague or incomplete definitions of the concept. For instance, a female student described sexual violence as a non-consensual sexual intimacy, while a male student defined it as raping underage children or minors. Their inability to provide a complete definition of sexual violence makes students more susceptible, especially as victims. They might not know that they had *already* become victims. Like a testimony of one female student, she could not determine whether a male student had harassed her, but she felt uncomfortable with it. She said, "I am uncomfortable with his act, but I don't want to take it seriously." She also did not report the case because she did not want to get into any more trouble with the university.

The majority of respondents were aware of the position of women as the susceptible group on sexual violence issues. However, some students, particularly the male, believed that protection against sexual violence is a personal obligation, not an institution. A male respondent, for instance, stated the importance of female students to dress politely and not going outside after 10 PM. "If they (female students) are away in the late evening, they will put themselves at risk of becoming sexual violence victims," he said.

On the other hand, most female respondents believed that the students had to dress politely and religiously. However, a female respondent said that if sexual violence still happened, it did not correlate with female outfits. "In my opinion, all female students in this university have dressed politely following the regulation. So, if sexual violence still occurs, it must be because of other reasons," she described. Regarding the outfits, The Body Shop Indonesia had held a virtual exhibition of sexual violence



survivors (Magdalene, 2021). From the exhibition, we could observe that despite the female survivors had dressed appropriately, and sexual violence still took place. Thus, the claimed that outfits linked to sexual violence did not have solid factual standings, as also supported by Moor's (2010) research. Additionally, the claim of female outfits as the cause of sexual violence on women had been widely campaigned by the mass media, as suggested by Najib's (2020) study. It would put more burdens on the female survivors as the ones who often got blamed.



**Figure 1.** Outfits of sexual violence survivors on a virtual exhibition conducted by The Body Shop Indonesia (Magdalene, 2021). For full access to the exhibition, please click: <https://virtualtour.tbsfightforsisterhood.co.id/>

Despite their low number, we also found that few female respondents demanded that the university provide specific education on sexual violence, especially for students. "I think the students still have limited knowledge on sexual violence, including myself. So, I think it's crucial," said a female student.

Based on the findings, most students have reached the *precritical* stage of critical consciousness on the sexual violence issue. At the very best, some of them had reached the *beginning critical* stage of critical consciousness. In consequence, it was difficult for the majority of students to understand the issue of sexual violence. Only a few students recognised the issue, but only at a beginning level, not a complete understanding. Therefore, we argued that with their current stage of understanding the issue, they had not reached the level of critical consciousness. They had the minimal potential to do *critical reflection*, *political efficacy*, and *critical action* against the issue of sexual violence. They even had more possibility of falsely understanding this issue, for instance, by positioning victims or survivors as the ones who were responsible for any sexual violence incidents. In addition, we also examined that the university *structure* negatively affected the students' *critical consciousness* and *agency* on the sexual violence issue. We would discuss it further in the following subsection.

#### *4.2. The hidden sexual violence incidents on campus*

The majority of male students and some female students believed that their campus was safe and free from sexual violence cases. During their study, they never heard any incidents related to sexual violence. One male respondent even said confidently that no way sexual violence could happen on campus.

However, different insights were given by some faculty members. A female lecturer said that she knew about two sexual violence incidents during her job on campus—both of the cases involving male lecturers as the perpetrators and female students as the survivors. The first case was an unwanted touching during a lecture that happened in an uncrowded classroom. The second case was related to sexual intimacy. Both of the cases were resolved through mediation. No cases were brought to police or end in a lawsuit. The campus often treated sexual violence cases as consensual intimacy, especially male lecturers and female students. She was afraid that this kind of settlement would never deter the harassers.

Another female lecturer also knew about one sexual violence case on campus. A male lecturer sexually harassed a female student. The perpetrator had a strong social and academic position on campus. He had a doctoral degree and a structural position. Later, he was asked by the university to resign. He resigned, and later he found a new teaching job in another university. Moreover, surprisingly, the survivor was also expelled from the university. “The case settlement is not pro-victim,” she said. In addition, the university did not bring the case to the police. It has never been opened to the public, including among academicians. Only a few faculty members knew about the case. The carelessness of the campus to ‘release’ the perpetrator without bringing him to justice would also potentially put people at his new workplace at risk.

A female university leader explained another sexual violence case. It involved a lecturer who was considered a religious figure on campus. He committed sexual violence by sending raunchy text messages to some female students. The university punished him by suspending him to teach for one year. However, the case only ended there. Currently, the perpetrator was still teaching and even had a structural position on campus. She added, “We didn’t report his misconduct to his faculty because it would affect the campus reputation.” It showed that the campus worked hard to protect its reputation without thinking about the safety of its students and academics, especially the recovery of the sexual violence survivors.

A study in Indonesia highlighted that the tendency to conceal and protect institution reputation might be potentially influenced by religious and cultural aspects (Istiadah, Indah, & Rosdiana, 2020). It described the difficulty of dealing with sexual violence cases as the institution often showed limited support, and the survivors tended to remain silent (motivated by socio-cultural and religious dogma) to shield themselves and the institution. However, regarding the link between religiosity and students’ position as bystanders, another study found that the religious aspect in individual level could elevate students’ confidence to report sexual violence incidents (Rusyidi, Bintari,

& Wibowo, 2021). As the study conducted in Aceh (the only Sharia province in Indonesia), the religious aspect might be either seen as an inhibiting factor or a motivating factor in handling sexual violence cases.

#### 4.3. University structure and student agency

The university did not have specific regulations on sexual violence. One of the university leaders said that there was a general regulation from the Ministry of Higher Education. However, she was unsure that the university had socialised it widely to the students and lecturer, nor it is integrated into university policy. She added, “We don’t have any formal reporting systems for students to reports sexual violence cases. So, they usually report the cases by communicating to faculty members, like a student advisor.” For instance, she explained a case where two female students reported a male lecturer who sexually harassed them by sending raunchy text messages. The case was noticed after the survivors reported the villainy to a faculty member. Even though it showed that the ‘informal’ report worked, but it could not be seen as the success for the institution to prevent and deal with sexual violence cases. Since there was no formal report system, any act of resistance could only be seen as a sign of individual courage and it might not be perceived as a collective and systemic movement.

In addition, a male university leader also said that the regulation of sexual violence was not needed since there was no ‘extraordinary’ case of sexual violence. Further, he believed that the university must protect its reputation at all costs. He said, “If sexual violence cases on campus exposed, it would bring destructive effect on the institution reputation.” He further asserted that when a sexual violence case could be settled peacefully/ amicably, then he did not have any logical reasons to make it complicated, for instance bringing the perpetrators to justice. His response at one point showed that he had limited sensitivity towards the sexual violence issue, especially from the survivor’s perspective.

The findings that there were no regulations, rules, and the intention to disclose the sexual violence incidents had weakened the anti-sexual violence campaign on campus. The university *structure* did not support the anti-sexual violence narrative, and it did not support the growth of *student agency* on sexual violence issues. This essential element might be used to understand the institutional norms and perceptions used to design sexual violence prevention strategies (Banyard, Rizzo, Bencosme, Cares, & Moynihan, 2021). It even perpetuated and normalised the sexual violence incidents on campus by indirectly defending the perpetrators and neglecting the survivors.

Another negative impact was that most students did not have critical consciousness of sexual violence and even had a false conception. Most of them only sat on the *precritical* stage of critical consciousness. It would make them unable to even identified sexual violence cases. Few of the students had a position on *beginning critical* stage that they started to recognise sexual violence cases. However, to initiate social action, they need to position themselves in the *critical* and then *post-critical*

stage, as suggested by Thomas et al. (2014). Furthermore, the lack of critical consciousness in the advanced stage would make students unable to engage in *critical reflection*, which might later develop into *political efficacy* and *critical action*. Further, we argued that university structure would always play a vital role in affecting critical consciousness and later agency, both in positive and negative ways. Therefore, to create the reform, a university must have a healthy *structure* that might not be actualised by hoping the university leaders (and its adherents) change, but by the reform initiated by the oppressed students and faculty members.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The study has found two essential findings. Firstly, without critical consciousness on sexual violence, students would never initiate any reform to deal with the issue. Secondly, university *structure* could affect the positioning of *student agency* and *critical consciousness* on the sexual violence issue. The university must be run by individuals who had a gender equity perspective and critical consciousness to recognise or analyse any oppression in university, including sexual violence. If the reform is difficult to achieve from the university leadership position, then any academics, students, or faculty members must act to initiate the change.

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