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## ENGLISH TRANSLATION

*Why is there sexual abuse against students of Asian descent in Australia?*

By Neena Bhandari

Sydney, 17.03.2019: Ria Singh (Name changed on request) was on her daily commute from Sydney's Central Station to her university. No sooner had she boarded the packed university bus that a male staff member began to push and rub against her. "It continued for the 20-minute bus ride. I felt violated, but I was too scared and didn't know what to do or whom to approach at university. I didn't raise an alarm because I didn't want my parents to know as they wouldn't understand. It wasn't something I could share with my younger brother either. I did mention the incident to my close friend, but she didn't know any better".

This happened just before the 2017 *Change The Course: National [Report](#) on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities* by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) was released. "I am angry at myself for keeping silent and not doing anything about it. Most students from South Asian communities think sexual harassment is not something one should talk about because it may jeopardise their family honour. Since the report, there has been more awareness on prevention and support services," says Ria, who had moved to Australia from India with her parents as an infant.

The AHRC, an independent statutory organisation, survey found students who were sexually harassed in a university setting in 2015 or 2016 were most likely to have experienced the incident on public transport to or from university (22 percent) and 51 percent of students who were sexually assaulted in a university setting knew some or all of the perpetrators.

Emily Li (Name changed), who had come as an international student from Malaysia says, "Under peer pressure, I accepted my friend's invitation to visit him at his place. We had some alcohol and he initiated sex, which I didn't know how to handle. It was a cultural shock. Back home, we don't have sex education and I hadn't experienced social life that includes alcohol. I felt ashamed and didn't tell anyone for years because I didn't want to be treated as a victim and endure blame".

She recently confided in a friend and acknowledged that it was rape because she did not consent to it. "If I was aware of sexual consent then and knew that if pushed in such a situation, it is okay to say 'No', I could have possibly prevented it", Emily adds.

Council of International Students Australia's National Women's Officer Belle Lim says, "We have a responsibility to educate and empower students about sexual consent upon their arrival in a more sex-liberated country like Australia. The lack of sex education and awareness in students from Asian countries renders them more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault in terms of recognising, responding and reporting these inappropriate behaviours".

Many of the international students coming to study in Australia may have left the protected confines of their homes in Asian countries for the first time. Their potential unfamiliarity with a new culture may make them more vulnerable.

Devana Senanayake, a former international student from Sri Lanka says "As an 18-year-old, when I enrolled at a university in Melbourne, I witnessed a culture of alcoholism, recreational drug use and un-consensual touching, which made me very uncomfortable. I encountered four guys streaking one day on campus. It was all very foreign to my cultural upbringing. I was fortunate to find a good group of friends, but being an international student can be very lonely and isolating in a new country".

The AHRC survey of more than 30,000 students from 39 universities had found 5.1 percent of international students were sexually assaulted in 2015 and/or 2016. The survey found that 1.4 percent

of those surveyed experienced sexual assault in a university setting. Women were significantly more likely than men to have experienced those behaviours.

AHRC's Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins says, "We did hear evidence to suggest that international students may be more vulnerable when sexual assault and harassment occurs, for example, that they might be isolated from their support networks, not know how to access the same help as domestic students. In my current sexual harassment and assault inquiry at [workplaces](#), we have found they might also be more vulnerable in workplaces to sexual harassment and workplace rights abuses".

Students organisations, advocacy groups and sexual assault survivors are holding universities to account to do more to prevent such abuse from occurring and supporting victims of abuse in a culturally appropriate manner.

"In South Asian communities, these issues are not talked about and the system doesn't make it any easier. One student told me reliving the experience before a counsellor made her "feel naked", says Mariam Mohammed, who had come as an international student from Pakistan and is former co-president of the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association.

In 2018, End Rape on Campus Australia (EROC) had about a hundred students, 5 percent from South Asia, seek help from it. EROC founder and director Sharna Bremner says, "It is a significant number given that students from South Asia don't report. The information that universities are giving to students isn't culturally appropriate. Students aren't even aware that they can report a lot of the times. For many, a thought of filing a report means that they would have to tell someone back home and that plays a big part in deciding not to report".

The survey had found 87 percent of students who were sexually assaulted, and 94 percent of those who were sexually harassed, didn't make a formal report or complaint to their university. One of the main barriers to reporting for international students was fear of ramifications on visa.

"A vast majority of students, who do report, aren't happy with the response they get. Universities' responses range from taking no action at all to offering some support through counselling, extension for assignments, but no actual consequences for perpetrators. So, they are left on their own to deal with it", says Bremner.

The survey also found postgraduate students were almost twice as likely as undergraduate students to have been sexually harassed by a lecturer or tutor from their university. Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations has actively worked on several policy initiatives, particularly in the area of student-supervisor relationships. Its National President Natasha Abrahams says, "It is widely believed among student leaders that international students under-reported their experiences in the survey. This is due to taboos as well as students having difficulties in correctly identifying their experiences".

Melbourne-based Centre for Culture, Ethnicity & Health Co-Manager Alison Coelho says, "One way to reduce the rates of sexual assault on campus is to provide mandatory online sexual health and healthy relationships training. For international students, this module would need to be tailored, taking into consideration students' varying cultural perspectives, gender norms and expectations based on sex education provided in their home countries".

Since the AHRC [Report](#), universities in the country have been proactive in reviewing policies and procedures related to sexual harassment and assault.

Catriona Jackson, Chief Executive of Universities Australia, the top body representing the university sector says, "Universities run extra orientation activities for international students — including presentations on health and counselling services, and information on where to report unacceptable behaviour. Universities also provide pre-arrival and post-arrival information on safety and wellbeing".

Diksha Dahiya from Delhi, who has recently started her Masters in Applied Economics and Econometrics at Monash University in Melbourne says, "I was very impressed by the *Respect at Monash* module, which provides all the information about social conduct, sexual behaviour, healthy and unhealthy relationships, alcohol, and a list of helplines for support. In India, these are taboo subjects. The module has enlightened me on these topics and allayed some of the concerns I had, being away from home in a new country".

Well-being and safety of international students is crucial as [education](#) is Australia's third largest export worth AUD32.4 billion to the economy. In 2017, there were 799,371 enrolments generated by 624,001 full-fee paying international students. China with 231,191 (30 percent) and India with 87,615 students (11 percent) were the largest sources of international students, according to the Department of Education and Training.

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, the regulator, is monitoring what the universities are doing on the issue of sexual assaults and harassment. The AHRC has conducted two audits, in [December 2017](#) and [August 2018](#), and it will conduct a survey later this year to measure the progress of whether actual prevalence of sexual harassment and assaults has reduced with the audit report out in 2020.

Opposition Labor Party deputy leader Tanya Plibersek says, "Everyone on a university campus has the right to be safe, and of course that includes international students. That's why Labor (if it comes to power in the forthcoming Federal elections) will establish an independent taskforce with strong powers to crack down on sexual harassment and assault at universities and residential colleges".