Intersectional perspectives on technology-facilitated sexualized violence: A mixed-methods investigation of post-secondary institution materials

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Flora Oswald[1], Amanda R. Champion[2,3], Sean Pearson[2], & Cory L. Pedersen[3]

[1]University of Connecticut, Department of Psychological Sciences, Storrs, Connecticut

[2]Simon Fraser University, School of Criminology, Burnaby, British Columbia

[3]Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Department of Psychology, Surrey, British Columbia

Abstract

Introduction: Technology-facilitated sexualized violence (TFSV) is a growing concern in educational, public health, and public policy spaces, with severe implications for health and well-being. In particular, young adults are at particularly high risk of TFSV victimization, which is compounded by structural sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, racism, and additional forms of oppression. Applied research on current TFSV educational awareness, prevention, and intervention materials/resources available for post-secondary students and employees (e.g., staff, administrators, and faculty) is lacking. **Methods**: In late 2022 and early 2023, we conducted an environmental scan of TFSV resources at 25 public post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in British Columbia, Canada. The purpose was to identify TFSV-specific institutional materials/resources including support services for TFSV victim-survivors and educational training/resources on TFSV victimization (e.g., response workshops, awareness campaigns, etc.). In addition, our environmental scan examined intersectional considerations among TFSV resources. **Results**: We identified an overwhelming lack of TFSV-specific resources, with only one PSI indicating any such resources. Follow-up interviews with PSI employees in sexualized violence responding roles (*N* = 6) confirmed a dearth of institutional TFSV information and resources. **Conclusion**: We identified a pressing need for additional funding to support the development and implementation of TFSV-specific resources, particularly those incorporating intersectional frameworks. **Policy Implications**: To reduce the harms associated with TFSV, which are shaped by systems of oppression, we call for the development of "living" TFSV resources, centralization of these resources, increased funding for professional development and policy implementation, and the incorporation and valuation of intersectional praxis at all stages of policy development and implementation.

Keywords: disparities; qualitative methodology; environmental scan; university context

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As technology increasingly permeates our social lives, experiences of technology-facilitated sexualized violence (TFSV) and abuse are increasing (Powell & Henry, 2017). Such incidents are referred to as revenge porn, sextortion, doxing, etc., and carry adverse consequences for victim-survivors[1], ranging from embarrassment, humiliation, depression, anxiety, helplessness, and substance use to self-harm and suicide (e.g., Bates, 2017; Champion et al., 2021; Snaychuk & O'Neill, 2020). A recent study conducted with a Canadian sample of university students revealed extremely high rates of TFSV victimization (defined broadly) spanning from 74% for male students to 88% for female students (Snaychuk & O'Neill, 2020). Furthermore, Champion et al. (2021) reported that being a victim-survivor of TFSV "increased levels of suicide risk significantly through experiences with increased bullying victimization, which subsequently increased depression symptomology, and, as a result, increased feelings of burdensomeness" among a sample of adults (p. 11). These significant negative outcomes render TFSV an emerging concern for spaces including public health, public policy, and education (Patel & Roesch, 2020).

Though campus sexual violence is a prominent current concern (Colpitts, 2022), TFSV is an underacknowledged risk. This is in part due to traditional understandings of violence which center physical harm and thus trivialize digitally-mediated harms (Bailey & Burkell, 2021; Henry & Powell, 2015) in tandem with individualistic framings of violence and perpetration which depoliticize violence and undermine attention to systemic factors shaping vulnerability and resource access (Colpitts, 2022). However, the high severity and prevalence of TFSV, particularly among university students (e.g., Snaychuk & O'Neill, 2020) necessitates institutional

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[1] We use the term "victim-survivor" to refer to those who have been subjected to TFSV; we opted to use this terminology as it defies binaries between victim and survivor identities, is frequently represented as a selected identity label (Boyle & Rogers, 2020), and better acknowledges the intersecting oppressions which (re)produce the trauma of sexualized violence (Covert, n.d.).

responses; for educational institutions, this may include strategies such as public health campaigns, educational awareness, and school policies (Patel & Roesch, 2020).

In the current study, we sought to understand how educational institutions in one Canadian province, British Columbia (BC), are responding to increasing rates of and concerns surrounding TFSV. We conducted an environmental scan of the TFSV resources currently available at 25 public post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in BC, Canada. We critically assessed (a) the presence of TFSV resources (e.g., trainings, support services) and (b) whether and how TFSV materials adopted an intersectional approach. We sought to understand how these resources engaged with TFSV's roots in broader systems of oppression.

Evaluating TFSV Resources

Evaluations of sexualized violence trainings in Canadian university contexts suggest that university-based resources can be effective in reducing the incidence and severity of harms relating to sexualized violence generally (e.g., Senn, 2011; Senn et al., 2015), though such evaluations also note a lack of intersectional engagement among such resources, diminishing their capacity for transformative structural change (Colpitts, 2022). Intersectional approaches to sexualized violence, and to TFSV in particular, are necessary to account for its roots in systemic oppression and to highlight how oppressive forces shape uneven distributions of risk (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Colpitts, 2022; Rajani, 2022; Roskin-Frazee, 2020). Intersectional approaches have the capacity to re-politicize technology-facilitated forms of violence and situate them in broader discourses surrounding violence, domination, and oppression (Rajani, 2022). An intersectional lens that conceptualizes TFSV incidents as both a mechanism and an outcome of existing power hierarchies and can interrogate structural-level interventions and responses, including those necessitated by institutional-level university policies and resources. We thus sought to examine whether and how institutions engaged intersectionality in their TFSV-related policies and materials (see also Colpitts, 2022).

The Current Study

We conducted an environmental scan of the TFSV resources currently available at 25 public PSIs in BC, Canada to identify TFSV-specific resources at various PSIs that take the form of support services for TFSV victim-survivors and educational resources on TFSV victimization (e.g., response workshops, awareness campaigns, etc.). In addition, we examined intersectional considerations among the existing TFSV response or educational resources.

Methodology

We conducted an environmental scan as needs-assessment tool for gathering information about existing materials and identifying gaps in institutional resources (Albright, 2004; Rowel et al., 2005). We first conducted content analyses of existing resources (e.g., website information) and then conducted follow-up interviews with key informants.

Sampling

We identified all public PSIs (*N* = 25, see OSM for full list) in BC using information from the Government of B.C.'s "Find an Institution" webpage.[2] We visited each PSI's website to compile a list of key contacts holding positions responsible for sexual violence education and awareness, and counseling services. Based on this search, we identified 67 key contacts.

Part A: Content Analysis of Online Materials

In December 2022, we screened each PSI's website for resources relevant to TFSV. Our primary outcomes of interest in this content analysis were: (a) whether institutions described materials/resources relevant to TFSV; (b) if yes, what type of materials/resources were available; and (c) whether institutions engaged intersectionality in these materials (e.g., by acknowledging systemic oppression as a contributing factor to violence and victimization). Coding of website data was completed in a structured excel sheet (see OSM).

Part B: Informational Interviews

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[2] https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/find-a-program-or-institution/find-an-institution

Our list of PSI key contacts (N = 67; 50 individuals and 17 general department emails) were sent an email request to complete an initial brief information-gathering online survey through Qualtrics. The purpose of this survey was to individualize semi-structured interview questions to ask during a follow-up interview. The initial information-gathering survey of PSIs consisted of 10 closed- and open-ended questions regarding awareness of TFSV-specific resources, materials, or programming targeted specifically toward TFSV (see OSM). A total of 17 (68%) PSI contacts completed our initial information-gathering survey.

Fourteen of the 17 (82%) PSI key contacts who completed the initial survey were sent a request via email to participate in a 30-minute informational interview with our research team. Of the 14 survey completions, we received nine interview-request responses. Six participants consented to participate in interviews (67%); three participants were not interviewed due to a lack of knowledge of TFSV materials at their schools, and the remaining five did not respond to our repeated requests for a follow-up interview..

Interviews focused on whether and how TFSV training prepared service providers for dealing with issues unique to marginalized populations, whether available resources or educational materials adopted an intersectional perspective (i.e., understanding the multiplicative nature of violence, oppression, and discrimination associated with interconnecting identities), and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of existing TFSV training approaches, allowing us to conduct a gap analysis and provide recommendations. The interviews also solicited input concerning possible improvements to existing training resources. All interviews were conducted by the second author via online conferencing software. The full list of semi-structured interview questions for PSIs with and without TFSV training and resources are available in OSM.

Once the six interviews were completed, relevant information was extracted and entered into an Excel spreadsheet and, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), qualitatively analyzed by the first and second authors for deductive and inductive common themes.

Findings

Part A: Content Analysis of Online Materials

We sought to examine (a) whether institutions described materials/resources relevant to TFSV; (b) if yes, what type of materials/resources were available; and (c) whether institutions engaged intersectionality in these materials.

We first scrutinized whether institutional definitions of sexualized violence incorporated TFSV. We found that 100% (*n* = 25) of institutions incorporated TFSV into their formal definitions of sexualized violence/sexual misconduct, suggesting that all of our PSIs note a responsibility to respond to incidences of TFSV in their communities. Despite this acknowledgement and incorporation of TFSV into PSI policies, we identified only one PSI (4%) that indicated or presented on their website any materials or resources specific to TFSV. Simon Fraser University (SFU) had both informational resources (online blog posts) as well as information about an in-person workshop, offered by request, which seeks to: "Define the concepts of cyberconsent and technology-facilitated sexual violence; Identify strategies to set and maintain digital boundaries and to respect others' boundaries; [and] Gain awareness of relevant resources and support services at SFU and in the community."[3] These offerings did not indicate an explicit intersectional lens; however, SFU's general materials on sexual violence indicate a "culturally sensitive" lens to responding.

Part B: Informational Interviews

Initial Information-Gathering Survey

Seventeen PSIs responded to the survey of the 25 we contacted (68%). In contrast to the findings of our content analysis, nearly 59% (*n* = 10) of responding institutions indicated that they were aware of TFSV materials at their institutions. Furthermore, approximately 65% (*n* = 11) indicated that their institution had managed cases of TFSV in the past. Of the 10 PSIs that

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[3] https://www.sfu.ca/sexual-violence/education-prevention/request-a-workshop.html

indicated having/using TFSV-specific materials, four indicated TFSV workshops for employees,

two indicated TFSV training manuals or documents for employees, one indicated TFSV training

videos for employees, five indicated TFSV workshops, one indicated TFSV manuals, four

indicated website resources for students, nine specified TFSV internal resources for students

(e.g., counselling services, etc.), and eight specified TFSV external resources for students (e.g.,

links to community organizations).

Interviews

Our thematic analysis of interview data identified three major themes and seven

subthemes associated with PSI's current TFSV materials, training, and resources. We labelled

the themes as follows: (a) Conceptual Challenges in Incorporating TFSV, (b) Practical

Challenges and Opportunities in Incorporating TFSV, and (c) Intersectional Challenges and

Opportunities in Incorporating TFSV. Table 1 presents the structure of the themes and related

subthemes.

Theme 1: Conceptual Challenges in Incorporating TFSV

Participants identified several challenges unique to the nature of TFSV as an evolving

phenomenon. Specifically, participants articulated challenges regarding the pervasive and ever-

evolving nature of TFSV and TFSV-related impacts, definitional clarity, and problematic issues

embedded in TFSV investigations and evidence gathering.

Subtheme: TFSV as a Subcategory of Sexualized Violence

Many participants explained that TFSV at their respective PSI was covered under

existing broad sexual violence and misconduct policies. Several participants spoke about how

incidents of TFSV are given the same level of rigorous investigation, attention, student support,

resources, and accommodation plans as any other form of sexualized violence. Even so, many

PSIs noted the need for more comprehensive TFSV-specific educational materials and victim-

survivor resources within their current sexualized violence materials and resources, and

Table 1

TFSV Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Conceptual Challenges in Incorporating TFSV	TFSV as a subcategory of sexualized violence
	Need for "living" definitions and materials for TFSV
	Challenges with investigating TFSV complaints
Practical Challenges and Opportunities in Incorporating TFSV	Lack of resources
	Incorporating student perspectives
	Evaluating resources
Intersectional Challenges and Opportunities in Incorporating TFSV	Need to incorporate intersectional lens

recognized the uniqueness of incidents of TFSV, including distinctive issues with disclosure, investigations, and support resources.

In some cases, participants mentioned an underlying misconception of TFSV incidents, especially among students; TFSV may be perceived as less serious than other forms of sexualized violence because of the technological component. Several participants noted that TFSV is "new to them [students]" and potentially not discussed in educational settings prior to college/university, potentially leaving students with the impression that TFSV is not taken seriously by educational institutions. Many students may be unaware of the channels through which TFSV cases can be managed or the re-victimization potential of TFSV (e.g., sexual images may be captured online indefinitely creating the potential for re-traumatization in the future). Thus, awareness, education, and accessible reporting are particularly important areas to address for TFSV, which in our estimation should begin even at the high school institutional level.

Subtheme: The Need for "Living" Definitions and Materials for TFSV

A salient concern among participants was defining clearly the concept of TFSV. TFSV was perceived to be an evasive concept, difficult to define, and including many different forms of sexualized and gender-based violence facilitated through various technologies and platforms. Participants recommended that a "living definition" be constructed on a centralized portal with "agreed upon" definitions and examples that all PSIs can access. Examples were noted as particularly important given the multifarious nature of TFSV; examples included in definitions were seen as providing grounding and specificity for defining the complex nature of the phenomenon.

Participants recommended that in order to "stay ahead of the curve", TFSV materials be kept updated and continuously modified as the nature of TFSV evolves, as digital platforms and technologies change, and as complex cases arise. Further, though many PSIs have been resourceful in drawing upon external resources to bridge gaps in TFSV resources, participants

noted that this strategy proves resource-demanding, as URLs to external resources need to be consistently monitored to circumvent broken webpage links. Participants thus indicated that in-house resources, or resources drawn from a centralized repository with consistent updating, were necessary to ensure that materials were accessible when needed. However, participants also indicated a need for definitions to be flexible for adaptation purposes. As new technologies have evolved, including artificial intelligence platforms which can generate images potentially falling under the scope of TFSV, definitions and materials must also evolve to encompass these technologies, enabling PSIs to respond appropriately to a wide variety of possible situations.

Subtheme: Challenges with Investigating TFSV Complaints

Participants reported complex challenges surrounding TFSV investigations. For example, evidence gathering on cases of TFSV usually included screenshots on numerous different platforms, which are impossible to authenticate. Also, participants disclosed a lack of access to information on third-party platforms and the need for cybersecurity consultants in certain cases of TFSV. PSIs were unlikely to have the resources necessary to manage these challenges and fully investigate TFSV cases in-house.

Some additional TFSV case considerations centered around the nature of TFSV as not tied to a particular location; for example, (1) TFSV incidents being unrelated to campus activities; (2) TFSV incidents occurring among individuals who had never been on university property; and (3) TFSV incidents taking place prior to official student status. All participants understood that the PSI was responsible for supporting and accommodating students regardless of these challenges in order to promote successful post-secondary completion and facilitate student mental, physical, and social well-being. However, the fluid and potentially remote nature of TFSV posed novel challenges to PSIs, necessitating re-examination of the university's role and scope in investigating incidences of sexualized violence.

Theme 2: Practical Challenges and Opportunities in Incorporating TFSV

Participants identified four salient practical dimensions for consideration: (1) lack of

resources for implementing TFSV-specific resources, especially at smaller PSIs; (2)

understanding and incorporating students' perspectives in material and resource development;

and (3) evaluating the effectiveness or success of training and resource materials.

Subtheme: Lack of Resources

All participants, whether employed at a large, mid-sized, or smaller PSI, expressed the

challenges associated with resource shortages. PSIs may not have enough resources/funds to

develop specific materials, access paid materials/resources, maintain changing student and

employee needs, or manage additional duties, such as integrating educational coordinator

duties with a primary student crisis support and safety services role. These challenges were

particularly salient at smaller PSIs and commuter PSIs, both of which may have fewer resources

allotted to student life spending.

Adapting materials from larger PSIs or using open-sourced materials was reported as

being extremely helpful, in addition to relying on educational campaigns and training sessions

from external organizations. Participants noted the importance of provincially consistent

programs in reducing resource burden, allowing for definitional clarity, and developing similar

policies across BC PSIs. Moreover, participants noted appreciation for the ability to modify

content for their specific PSI's needs. Still, some noted that currently available training

resources have the potential to obscure differences between institutions, suiting the needs of

certain PSIs better than others. Smaller PSIs or PSIs with unique foci may thus experience a

need to dedicate additional resources to adapting these materials, despite being less likely to

have available resources for these tasks.

Furthermore, given the lack of available resources at certain PSIs, participants

expressed that, although not ideal, response and disclosure management training for

employees were typically prioritized over other forms of awareness/educational training.

Essentially, these concerns suggested a "defensive/response approach" instead of an

"offensive/active approach." Additionally, participants from some PSIs noted that this lack of resources (e.g., overtaxed staff, etc.) at times prevented resources that were available from being utilized to their full potential.

Subtheme: Incorporating Student Perspectives

Almost all participants stressed the value of student perspectives when piloting training, educational materials such as awareness or poster campaigns, or resource materials. In some cases, participants reported that students took the initiative to develop SV or TFSV materials. Despite the value of these contributions, participants worried that the materials were not properly vetted/evaluated by other PSIs or topic experts, thereby contributing to a lack of consistency in definitions across PSIs.

Student perspectives were also valuable in informing discussions regarding the modality and compulsoriness of TFSV resource implementation. Many participants held mixed perspectives on making TFSV training and/or educational sessions mandatory for students and staff, administrators, and faculty. Some suggested that mandatory TFSV training might backfire and result in student discomfort or rejection of resources. Participants also recognized that many students (and staff, administrators, and faculty) already have low bandwidth with several existing commitments and that requiring mandatory TFSV training may unintentionally create additional frustrations.

Nonetheless, participants also noted that the values of their PSI necessitate training and awareness. For example, some participants stated a sense of obligation, such that understanding sexualized violence, and TFSV in particular, is an important component of supporting students. Participants thus described a complex relationship between their personal and institutional values, which prioritized trauma-informed responding to student experiences, and the needs of faculty and staff members themselves.

Subtheme: Evaluating Resources

Participants spoke of challenges with understanding who is accessing materials and assessing the effectiveness of materials overall. Though PSIs understand the importance of trainee, employee, and victim-survivor anonymity when accessing materials and resources, many alluded to an overall discomfort with reporting statistics on attendees or users of SV or TFSV materials. Participants recommended caution in interpreting PSI's current statistical reporting systems overall, as data should be evaluated and contextualized with the conditions of the PSI in mind (e.g., campuses without student housing, campuses with high enrollment for online programs, etc.).

Participants also stressed the importance of evaluating programs and suggested the incorporation of both quality (e.g., knowledge application/awareness) and quantity (e.g., how many people attend a session or testing pre versus post-test knowledge) in the evaluations. Several participants reported that there was no built-in evaluation of programs and that as a result, this labor falls on individuals who are often already overburdened.

Theme 3: Intersectional Challenges and Opportunities in Incorporating TFSV

Participants agreed that there were both challenges and opportunities in incorporating an intersectional approach into the development and implementation of TFSV training and resource materials. All participants supported the incorporation of intersectional concepts/themes within their PSI institutional values, policies, and awards. Nonetheless, participants noted some challenges with this incorporation. Given the lack of TFSV-specific materials identified in our scan, the themes presented here describe conceptual reflections on intersectional approaches, rather than discussing how intersectionality is incorporated into existing materials.

Need to Incorporate Intersectional Lens

All participants noted the importance of including diverse perspectives in the development and implementation of sexual violence and TFSV-specific training sessions, materials, and resources for staff, administrators, faculty, and student alike. Participants

described how incorporating diverse perspectives could allow materials and resources to better

suit the needs of diverse student populations and counter multiple forms of systemic

oppression. In particular, participants noted efforts to incorporate marginalized voices and

experts from the following communities: Indigenous, LGBTQIA2S+, and people of colour, as

well as the consideration of unique barriers experienced by international students (e.g.,

language and/or cultural considerations), mature students, and students with families. Despite

placing value on intersectional approaches, some noted challenges with implementation,

particularly when staff or community diversity is lacking; participants often did not have a

specific background in feminist theory and some did not feel qualified to build intersectionality

into their materials, but also did not have resources to develop this expertise or bring in

consultants with expertise or lived experience.

Other participants stated the benefits of incorporating external community

agencies/organizations/institutions as partners in delivering training sessions,

awareness/educational campaigns, and promoting services and resources, as well as serving

as experts on PSI committees. These same participants acknowledged that multi-

agency/organizational/institutional partnerships, while valuable, can take a significant amount of

time, thereby elongating the process of material development, taxing resources for smaller

PSIs, and posing challenges for "living" [continuously updated] materials.

Discussion

The prevalence and devastating consequences of TFSV – with related outcomes

including depression, extreme distress, PTSD, problematic alcohol use, self-harm, and

suicidality (Bates, 2017; Champion et al., 2021; Powell & Henry, 2016; Snaychuk & O'Neill,

2020) – render TFSV an emerging public health concern (see also Patel & Roesch, 2020).

Much like for general sexualized violence, institutional policies and resources – including those

in higher education contexts – are an important component of TFSV responding (Colpitts, 2022;

Patel & Roesch, 2020). Yet, little is known about how institutions are responding to these

concerns. We conducted an environmental scan to better understanding existing resource

availabilities and gaps. Our dual-pronged approach scanned for TFSV materials and resources

available at PSIs and critically assessed whether and how these materials and resources

applied an intersectional lens. We identified an overwhelming lack of TFSV-specific resources,

with only one PSI indicating any such resources in their online information, and follow-up

interviews revealed few additional focused resources.

We identified a number of conceptual and practical barriers to the development and

implementation of TFSV-specific resources. Conceptual barriers included the somewhat

contradictory notions of TFSV as a subtype of generalized sexualized violence and the notion of

TFSV as scoping and ever-evolving, which suggests that TFSV pushes the boundaries of

sexualized violence responding and may necessitate unique approaches (see also Henry &

Powell, 2016). Additionally, PSIs noted challenges with investigating TFSV incidents due to the

unique nature of TFSV. Practical challenges included lacking resources, challenges surrounding

the evaluation of TFSV resources, and a need for the incorporation of intersectionality –

challenges also noted in traditional sexualized violence responding (e.g., Corcoran et al., 2020;

Colpitts, 2022; McCauley et al., 2019).

These findings are necessarily situated in the Canadian context and in the province of

British Columbia, where our authorship team is rooted. However, the scope of this project

included a range of institution types and sizes, which we believe to be broadly representative of

the post-secondary education context, and of the broad lack of TFSV-specific resources.

Additionally, concerns surrounding TFSV are broadly of interest in current health and education

discourses, and we provide initial insight into this gap and recommendations for practice which

we believe to be generalizable.

Policy Implications

Policy change and resource availability are essential for eradicating TFSV. Based on our

findings, we provide three recommendations for future development. First, we urge the

development of centralized, "living" resources to standardize materials and reduce the burden on individual PSIs. Keeping content current and accessible is a noted challenge in sexualized violence responding (Corcoran et al., 2022), and is exacerbated in the rapidly changing technological environment. However, this technological immersion also provides novel opportunities for centralized resource development and rapid dissemination.

Second, we urge the development of and funding for TFSV-specific training, implementation, and training evaluation following from recognition that TFSV is a unique but legitimate form of violence and mechanism of ongoing oppression (Henry & Powell, 2018; Rajani, 2022). We do recognize that agencies are currently funded for PSI TFSV training development in BC[4]; yet, we recommend similar approaches in other jurisdictions as well as the evaluation of these resources after implementation. Finally, we highlight the urgent necessity of incorporating intersectionality into all stages of TFSV material/resource development and implementation (see also McCauley et al., 2019). We note that the mere representation of diverse perspectives is necessary but insufficient for an intersectional approach, and discussions of TFSV must be situated in broader discourses of privilege and oppression (see Colpitts, 2022; Kelly et al., 2021; Rajani, 2022).

Conclusion

The current environmental scan provides an overview of TFSV materials and resources at PSIs in BC. We identified an overwhelming lack of TFSV-specific resources. Follow-up interviews revealed few additional focused resources. In order to reduce the harms associated with TFSV, which disproportionately impact people with marginalized identities, we call for the development of living TFSV resources, centralization of these resources, increased funding for professional development and implementation, and the incorporation and valuation of intersectional praxis at all stages of resource development and implementation.

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[4] see https://bccampus.ca/projects/intersectional-sexualized-violence-project/

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