



**National
Council of
Women GB**

For a fair and
inclusive society

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NCW has special consultative
status at the United Nations

12th March 2024

Susan Lapworth
Chief Executive
Office For Students
Park House – Level 1
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

Dear Ms Lapworth,

We are writing to you as a members of the National Council of Women of Great Britain's Network 18 – 30. The NCW Network brings together young women who share the aim of working to eradicate inequality and disadvantage, particularly as it affects women and girls. We are full members of NCWGB, which seeks to empower all women to make their voices and perspectives heard and taken into account in policy making as part of the organisation's work towards achieving a fairer and more inclusive society. We have enclosed a leaflet about the organisation.

We are writing to you to because of our deep unease about the level of sexual violence and harassment faced by women students at UK universities. We have been following the work of Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee on violence against women and girls and were particularly struck by the section on sexual misconduct at universities in their recent report on *Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings*. You drew the Committee's attention to the disturbing ONS Crime Survey for England and Wales, which shows that sexual assault is higher among full-time students than any other occupation, and women of all ages are significantly more likely to be victims of sexual assault than men.

Our particular concern is in the current trend of non-fatal strangulation and suffocation during sex. This is something initially brought to our attention through personal experience – being subjected to non-consensual strangulation, with the other party assuming it to be an expected, pleasurable experience. One 2021 study undertaken in the US suggested that 58% of female students on campus had been choked during sex; a clear concern when considered alongside the fatality rates of such choking (as outlined in the 2022 government addition to the Domestic Abuse Act). This behaviour is being exacerbated by the popularity of

pornography, in which choking is more normative – shifting understandings of ‘normal’ sexual practices.

We note that the OfS is in the process of developing a sexual prevalence survey having conducted a pilot in 13 universities. Our universities were not one of these so we didn’t have the opportunity to participate. Therefore, we are writing to express the hope that the prevalence survey will include a question on the particular types of sexual violence that students experience, and the context, and to urge you to consider including a specific question about unwanted choking or gagging, or something to that effect. We think it’s important to have authoritative, quantitative data about uninvited, non-consensual, non-fatal strangulation and suffocation, which we believe to be on the increase. Students need to understand that this is not normal or acceptable behaviour. If universities are to be in a position to develop effective evidence-based awareness education, training and support services, we think it important for them to be fully cognisant of the nature and extent of particular acts of sexual violence. If instances of uninvited, non-consensual, non-fatal strangulation and suffocation remain anecdotal, the problem cannot be addressed.

Unless effective steps are taken in educational settings to tackle the issue of sexual misconduct in all its manifestations, including non-fatal strangulation and suffocation, the problem of violence against women and girls in society will not be resolved.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts on this.

Yours sincerely

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