

Women's and Gender Studies Association (WGSA) is Canada's national association for this academic field and area of scholarship. WGSA members come from Women's and Gender Studies programs and departments (by all sorts of names)— but also include people in adjacent fields such as disability, race, Indigenous, sexuality, and post-colonial studies. What we all share is a passion for critically examining social identity categories and the difference those make to knowledge systems, social structures and organizations, and power relations.

On July 13 2023, WGSA held a meeting with faculty and students of gender studies (broadly defined) to talk about the hate-motivated attack at the University of Waterloo in which a faculty member and two students were stabbed. This attack was described by police as a crime of hate against “gender identity and gender expression”— a phrase specifically signaling anti-trans ideologies.

We are reiterating our call to university and college administrators and faculty unions/associations to work collaboratively with faculty who teach gender and social justice-focused courses, and student leaders, to create meaningful responses to the increasing threats of violence and harm on our campuses. See our Open Letter here: <https://forms.gle/nXN59mKouD9BhwQs5>

As faculty members teaching gender studies, and as students learning in gender studies classrooms, participants in this meeting noted their ongoing concerns with safety and wellbeing for 2SLGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, women, disabled, precarious faculty, and international faculty, staff, and students on campuses across the country. While this incident at the University of Waterloo has garnered particular attention, we know that our colleagues— notably Black, Indigenous, People of Colour— face discrimination, harassment, and violence on a regular basis and their concerns about safety and wellbeing are too often downplayed or dismissed.

The increasing threat of violence on our campuses requires preventative measures that aim to shift cultures of injustice, exclusion, and inequity, in addition to a response to immediate safety concerns. While universities and colleges may want to respond to this incident by increasing security on campuses, we remind leaders that such measures will create unsafe conditions for those most marginalized on campuses, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour. We encourage administrators to heed the expertise of those most impacted by white supremacist and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hate in responding to campus safety concerns.

University and college leadership should be active and explicit supporters of gender studies, and other departments and programs. Faculty in these programs have long-standing commitments to identifying and disrupting systems of misogyny and sexism, homo and transphobia, colonialism, xenophobia, and ableism in their teaching and community work. Universities and college leadership need to make explicit that attempts to silence or intimidate faculty or students involved in the study of gender, race, or social justice will not be tolerated through communications and demonstrated support for gender studies programs and scholarship.

WGSA calls on universities and colleges to work in partnership with gender studies faculty and student leaders to implement some or all of the following changes in response to ongoing threats:

1. A campus safety audit of classrooms, offices, and student centers that is community and/or faculty led.
2. Gender-focused courses (and other courses deemed “contentious”), especially those that are large, are moved to classrooms that have at least two means of exit.
3. That all gender-focused classes are scheduled in central locations on campus.
4. In consultation with faculty and students, facilitate greater flexibility with respect to class modalities (remote / online / hybrid).
5. Installation of panic buttons in offices, classrooms and student centers, as requested by faculty, students, and staff.
6. Remove information about the location of offices from public-facing websites and directories as requested by faculty.
7. Remove public-facing information from academic timetables, or other directory sources, about the locations of in-person classrooms in which gender-focused (or social justice) courses are being taught and ensure that there is a way for students who are registered for these courses to be informed about their location.
8. Provide training for frontline staff, part-time, and full-time faculty on how to de-escalate/respond in an emergency situation.
9. Provide training for faculty and staff about lock-down procedures, and ensure that lock-down technologies, including emergency communications, are properly installed and functioning across campus.
10. Provide training for campus safety, security, and/or police first responders on the rise of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ and white supremacist hate and violence, and the impact of racialized trauma on students, staff, and faculty stemming from encounters with law enforcement.
11. Provide training to faculty on how to respond to in-person and online harassment that is specific to the kinds of harm faced by 2SLGBTQIA+, Black Indigenous, People of Colour, women, disabled instructors.

12. Public statement in support of gender studies and social justice focused faculty, students, and programs.

Many of these changes are already being implemented on campuses across Canada, perhaps most notably by the University of Toronto whose administration is collaborating meaningfully with the Women's and Gender Studies Institute.

As articulated by faculty and students in our discussion, the attack at the University of Waterloo should be understood not a one-off event nor a 'lone-wolf' crime. This attack is both reminiscent of the École Polytechnique massacre of 1989 and reflects the ongoing and insidious violence faced by marginalized faculty and students on campuses, and elsewhere.

WGSA will continue to support faculty and students in this work, and welcome universities and colleges to share their insights and best practices with each other as they move forward.

Claire Carter & Corinne L. Mason, Co-Chairs, WGSA