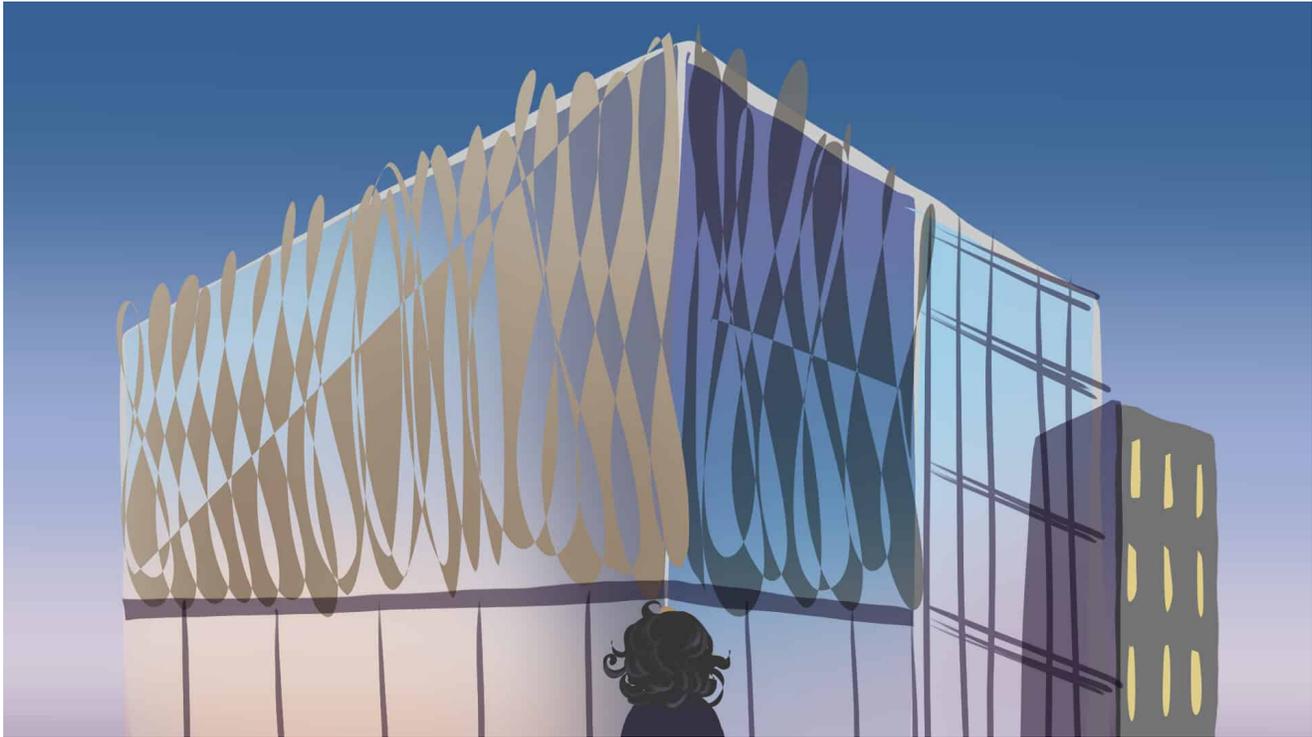


“Lonely, unsafe, and unheard”: four women speak out about experiences reporting assault at UTSC

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FIONA TUNG/THE VARSITY

Content warning: this article contains discussions of sexual assault.

When you think of the University of Toronto, you think big. Big dreams, big classes, big ideas. As students, we usually feel pride in our ability to say we go to the top school in Canada. But this fantasy does not always match up to the reality.

As great as U of T may come across as, the institution fosters an environment in which many students, particularly survivors, feel unsafe and unheard when they experience sexual or physical assault and harassment on campus. In my second year of university, I became one of these students.

I experienced harassment from a man I worked with at the UTSC residence. I was one of three coworkers he targeted, as he made inappropriate comments about our bodies and sometimes even became physically abusive. Some of us were tackled onto the ground; some were lifted without consent and thrown in trash cans; and some were tied to chairs and pushed over in the middle of our workplace without prompting.

I also felt dismissed in conversations, and he constantly mocked me or shut me down in front of others. No matter what we did or said, the words ‘stop’ and ‘no’ meant nothing to him.

These experiences had a particularly difficult impact on me because they stirred up memories from high school, when I had multiple experiences with men who sexually assaulted and emotionally abused me. This was trauma that I had never dealt with or processed – instead I just moved on, telling myself that I was making too big of a deal out of it. At that age, it wasn’t hard to forget after a while. But my experiences at UTSC brought everything back.

My coworkers and I endured this treatment from our colleague for months until, one day, we decided to do something about it. The three of us gathered together, huddled on a bedroom floor late at night. We already felt exhausted from his actions over the past few months, and the fear mixed with the guilt we felt about reporting him was overwhelming.

We worried about if we would be believed or if we would be taken seriously, trying to figure out if our experiences were even worth reporting. We sat in the circle for hours, taking notes about each other’s stories, making sure we wouldn’t forget anything.

It was exhausting. We went through our individual experiences, tracing how they all connected. We cried together as we were reminded of past trauma and as we reflected on the treatment we had endured. I was tired of feeling walked on.

My story is one of many at UTSC. Every institutional, interpersonal, or emotional barrier that I faced to see justice brought against my colleague was a barrier that many other survivors encountered as well.

To explore this issue further, three women who have experienced the process of reporting sexual assault at UTSC spoke to me on the condition of anonymity. Hearing their stories, I realized that their testimonies merged and intertwined with mine for certain experiences, ultimately illuminating where UTSC consistently fails its survivors.

Reporting experiences at UTSC residence



My colleagues and I reported our coworker to our residence life manager this past March, and by May, we still had not heard anything. During those three months, we didn't see any changes.

He was kept on staff, working in close proximity with us. We had to sit in rooms with him each week and were assigned to work shifts with him, which created severe challenges for some of us. For the rest of the year, until we left campus due to the pandemic, we were unable to sit through meetings or missed events simply because he would be there. The lack of communication from UTSC's residence management left us in the dark for months.

My experience with UTSC residence inefficiently and ineffectively handling my case mirrored the experience of Emma*, a recent UTSC graduate who also worked as a staff member with the UTSC residence life department. During her time there, she filed a report on behalf of a man student against a woman coworker for sexual assault. According to Emma, this woman coworker already had multiple reports filed against her for misconduct.

According to Emma, the student whom she had filed a report on the behalf of had initially reported his experience to a residence life team member, who then took the matter to the department managers. Despite multiple people reporting the assault, no actions were taken to remove the accused staff member from her position.

Emma then recalled how that accused staff member went on to work in the same job the following year.

She remembered her conversation with the affected student, as he felt like residence didn't really do anything to provide substantial support, aside from providing him with resources to the Sexual Violence Prevention & Support Centre (SVPSC) and health and wellness centres.

This was a common theme with residence; likewise, when I reported my colleague with my coworkers to residence management, we were unsatisfied with the outcome. When we expressed this sentiment to residence management, we were only given resources instead of an actual solution.

Another student who also endured the realities of residence's lack of ability to appropriately handle these cases is Maya*, a third-year student studying international development studies who was raped while living in residence in her first year back in 2016. Initially, she chose to not report, wanting to move on from the experience. Her assailant later physically and verbally assaulted her one day on campus because she had told some people that she had not consented.

Concerned for her safety, she chose to report her assault to residence. Maya recalled that during her reporting process, she wasn't offered support or sent to any external offices that would have been more equipped to handle it. The SVPSC was not yet established in 2016.

"Complaints were handled through the Office of Safety and High Risk, and [residence] never directed me there or to any of the external bodies," Maya said. "Then, even when the [SVPSC] happened, I only was aware of it because of another student on residence [who] was then raped."

Throughout the reporting process, she was also contacted by her assailant with threatening messages.

"The guy who assaulted me texted me another kind of threatening message while I was reporting to [residence]," Maya said. "I told them, and they asked me to read it out and repeat it a couple of times, so I assumed they were including it in the report. But when I picked up my report in 2018, there was no mention of the threatening message, much less what it said."

Although Maya had a witness who saw her assailant physically confronting her on campus, after she reported her assault, her assailant remained on campus, living in a townhouse not far from her own. Maya said that she did not understand why he remained in residence, and the fact that he was not removed affected her greatly.

For the remainder of her first year, Maya slept on a friend's couch in residence, unable to sleep in her own room because that was where the assault occurred.

She also knew that residence had the ability to suspend students from living there because after her assault, toward the end of the academic year in 2017, Maya was falsely accused of smoking marijuana outside one of the townhouses. The residence office gave her a one-year

suspension from living in residence effective immediately, even though Maya offered to take a drug test.

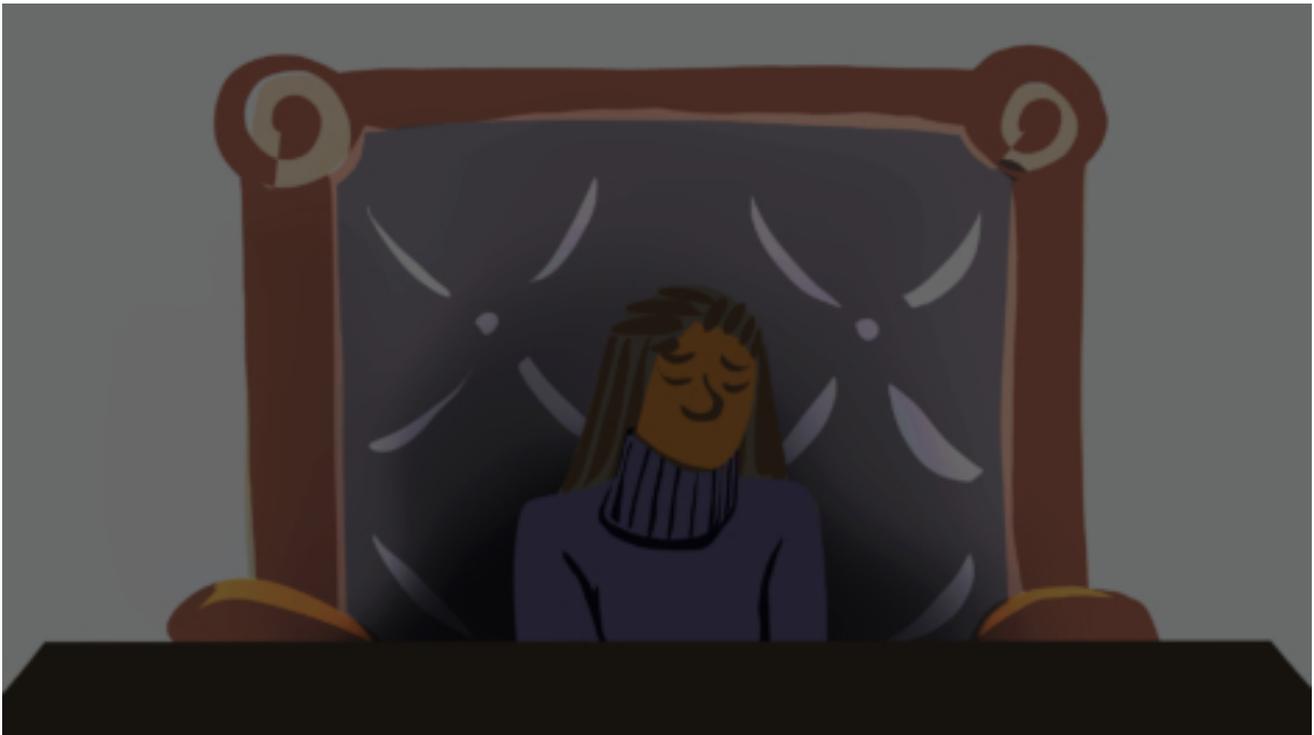
“That was interesting because the guy who assaulted me, there was nothing like that where he wasn’t allowed to return,” Maya said. “I mean, now, smoking weed is legal and assault still isn’t.”

After her first year, Maya took time off for her mental health, staying in the hospital for a period of time due to her trauma.

Maya returned to campus in 2018 and decided she wanted to further pursue her case, as she had not heard any updates on progress from residence. Since reporting through residence and reporting through the university are separate processes, Maya had to pick up her file and bring it to the SVPSC.

Maya said that as she watched a worker make her a copy of her file, she realized that her entire residence reporting experience meant that her story “sits in a file cabinet for two years, and nothing happens.”

The reporting process



I had a much more positive experience when going through the reporting process outside of residence than those I spoke to. After first reporting to residence and not seeing any progress made on my case, I then chose to disclose to the SVPSC about my experiences.

Disclosing is different from reporting in the sense that it does not begin a formal investigation of the assault, but still lets you access support through the centre. Then, I reported again to the equity offices. For my coworkers and me, re-reporting was fairly tiring, as we had to tell our stories over and over, but we had support from each other and a Health & Wellness Centre counsellor.

Out of all of the testimony I heard from the other survivors, my case is the only one with a positive outcome, and it took a group of three women who could testify against one assailant in order to see change happen. However, the other survivors I spoke to didn't experience nearly as much support, which impacted them greatly.

Amelda*, a fifth-year student studying health policy, recalled her emotionally exhaustive and ultimately unproductive history of reporting. She explained that she was raped on campus by a teaching assistant (TA), and she didn't know where to go to seek help. She initially sought out the Scarborough Campus Students' Union (SCSU) for guidance because the union advocates for student concerns, but due to a lack of training, she was sent to the campus police, where she had a fairly traumatic experience.

"Campus police are... mostly men, and so when you go, it's like you're talking to a very rigid man who is basically talking to you like you're the criminal," Amelda said. "That was just uncomfortable for me."

When they questioned her, she remembered feeling uneasy about the situation.

"They ask you a series of questions, and a lot of those questions are really personal," Amelda said. "I remember breaking down in the office."

They asked her questions like what she was wearing, the nature of her assailant's relationship to her, and if she had showed any signs of wanting physical contact with him.

"It was horrifying," Amelda said. "They didn't even follow up on it... It was a very vague thing."

In addition to issues with the campus police, survivors have spoken about the SVPSC being unhelpful or unsupportive after disclosures.

"A lot of my friends who are survivors also complain... [The SVPSC is] not very resourceful," Amelda noted.

Maya had a direct experience with the SVPSC coordinator at UTSC, who she alleges has taken two years to file her report and, even now, still hasn't filed it.

After Maya's assault in 2016, she tried to file her report with the SVPSC in 2018. This process stretched into two years of back and forth between Maya and her coordinator, during which time her case still had not been officially reported with the SVPSC.

“[The coordinator] kept telling me that I wasn’t ready, which I don’t think was her decision to make,” Maya said.

After the coordinator took a leave from campus in February of this year, Maya was left without her report filed.

However, when Maya tried to file her report with the UTSG office instead, they took her report over a Zoom call in April.

The other major campus resource that was discussed were the equity offices. In my case, when residence failed to take action, my coworkers and I went to the Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Office to re-report our case. Along the way, we experienced challenges that other survivors also noted — namely, the university policy that survivors aren’t privy to updates about their investigations.

Under the investigation subsection of the reporting process in U of T’s Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Policy, there is no clear protocol in place explicitly stating that survivors will be privy to updates on the investigation.

When I reported to both residence and the equity office, my coworkers and I were told both times that we would not know more information about the case as it proceeded because it was university policy, and was in place to protect the person being reported. Even when it came to information about the final outcome of our case, all my coworkers and I received was an email telling us that the investigation had been closed.

Amelda also talked about her experience at an equity office after the SVPSC referred her there.

“They just asked me a series of questions — very vague — asking what was my relationship with the guy and all this stuff,” Amelda said. “And then, they didn’t give me a clear indication of what would happen. They just said it would be under investigation.”

Now, it has been two years since she reported her case. “I still haven’t gotten an email, and I did try to follow up, but it gets lost,” Amelda said. “And then, on top of that, the reason it’s been pretty bad [is] because he’s a TA now for a class I was going to take, which is why I followed up with them.”

In the meantime, she was not presented with many options after filing her report.

“When I did report about him being a TA, their first option for me was asking if I wanted to transfer to a different campus,” Amelda said. “It wasn’t ‘oh yeah, we should kick him out’ or something, and that’s when I just gave up.”

The emotional toll



Knowing that there's no follow up from filed reports and that the reporting process is lengthy can be discouraging to survivors who may be hesitant to report in the first place. Across each story, there was one common theme: the reporting process is vague and confusing — and often leads to no results.

Maya left university and came back, enduring the systems of reporting at residence and the SVPSC, all while fighting her case for the past four years with still no end in sight. Her attacker remained at U of T.

Amelda went from the SCSU, to the campus police, the SVPSC, and the Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Office. Her assailant is still on campus with his job.

Emma reported on behalf of another student in residence, and the accused employee kept her job and continued working there the following year.

Out of these stories, my coworkers and I were the only ones who saw tangible results. Reporting to residence and then again to the Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Office, we were finally able to see a positive outcome for our case. However, the office never confirmed to us that this outcome was going to happen — instead, we had to hear about it from mutual friends.

I want to emphasize that my coworkers and I were the only ones who had the privilege of a solid support system throughout the reporting process. As three survivors who banded together to report against one man, we were able to lean on each other. But, like most survivors, Maya and Amelda had to fight their cases on their own.

In response to *The Varsity's* questions about the multiple allegations made against U of T bodies and employees, U of T Media Relations wrote that while they cannot comment on any individual cases, they are dedicated to providing resources for survivors. They also wrote that campus police on all campuses work with the SVPSC for equity and diversity training.”

Going through the process of reporting even once is an exhausting and difficult process. But reporting multiple times, reliving the trauma again and again, is debilitating, especially when the outcome is unknown or likely negligible. The emotions survivors may feel during this process are unpredictable.

Speaking from my own experience, two days after my coworkers and I filed our report, I fell into a depressive episode. I was unable to get out of bed, crying all day, and not sleeping or eating. I missed all my classes and felt the same dirty feeling I had felt years before in high school. I wanted to literally crawl out of my own skin — it was like dirt that could never be washed off.

For Maya, she was so affected by her assault that she was hospitalized for a week during her second year. She had to take time off from her academics and push back her graduation while her assailant continued on with his studies.

Amelda said that she felt lonely, unsafe, and unheard throughout the reporting process. Now, she no longer feels secure when she's at UTSC.

“I'm always skeptical when I step onto campus or I go to class because nothing was done,” she said. “How unsafe does the campus need to be before something is done?”

**Names have been changed out of privacy concerns.*

Editor's note (November 24): This article has been updated to include comment from U of T Media Relations.

The Varsity is looking to expand this article into a three-part series to include survivor experiences at UTSG and UTM. If you are from these campuses and have a story you would be comfortable sharing, please contact features@thevarsity.ca. Anonymity is always an option that can be discussed.

Where to find sexual violence and harassment support at U of T

A list of safety resources is available at safety.utoronto.ca

The tri-campus Sexual Violence Prevention & Support Centre's website is www.svpcentre.utoronto.ca

Individuals can visit the centre's website for more information, contact details, and hours of operation. Centre staff can be reached by phone at 416-978-2266.

Locations:

- U of T downtown Toronto campus: Gerstein Library, suite B139
- U of T Mississauga: Davis Building, room 3094G
- U of T Scarborough: Environmental Science and Chemistry Building, EV141

Those who have experienced sexual violence can also call Campus Police to make a report at 416-978-2222 (St. George and U of T Scarborough) or 905-569-4333 (U of T Mississauga).

After-hours support is also available at:

- Women's College Hospital Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Care Centre (416-323-6040)
- Scarborough Grace Sexual Assault Care Centre (416-495-2400)
- Trillium Hospital Sexual Assault Care Centre (905-848-7100)