A Critical Feminist Examination of Gender Power Relations in Two University Residential Colleges in Melbourne, Victoria

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Abstract

Gender inequality in educational contexts under-researched in university residential settings, where gendered violence persists at worryingly high levels, despite increasing regulatory governance. Local, contextualised gender power relations, which normalise men's domination over women, need to be disrupted and reordered to enable women's safety and equality in university residential colleges. However, the research examining gender power relations in Australian universities, particularly in the distinct, complex institutional setting of university colleges, is limited. To address this gap, this research used a critical feminist theoretical lens to examine the manner in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in university residential colleges. The research further examined the manner in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered through the institutional structures of student leaders, college administrations, student-led activities and informal policies and the traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs they produce and uphold. As literature relating to the multidimensional institutional context of the unique Australian university residential setting is limited, and university residential settings are structurally distinct from universities where much of the relevant literature focuses, this thesis presented and discussed the contextual frame which informed the research design and data analysis. The research adopted critical qualitative methods to gather and analyse data through six focus group interviews with student leaders, senior students and residential advisors (n = 74) in two university residential college sites in Melbourne, Australia.

The research found that the patriarchal gender ideology in the sites normalised men's dominance and women's subordination in localised gender power relations and was characterised by benevolent sexism, gender essentialism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and restrictive gendered norms and stereotypes in the sites. The research found that hegemonic gender power relations in the sites were maintained through the complex structures of the institution of the university residential college, reinforced by student leaders and college administrations. Further, harmful gender power relations are sustained through attitudes, norms and beliefs (as evident in the gendered division of labour in the sites); the uncritical re-enactment of traditions handed down by alumni and returning students (particularly present in traditional social events and rituals); and through student-led extracurricular social and sporting activities (often in communal spaces). In line with the critical feminist theoretical orientation of this thesis, the research was oriented towards structural change. The research found that student leaders hold social capital and social power, acting as 'cultural gatekeepers' in the sites, and are committed to (and already enacting)

leadership to create change in their colleges. As a result, the research concludes that student leaders are central to the transformation of gender power relations in college settings. Finally, the thesis found that women students are engaging in everyday acts of resistance and seeking allyship from their men peers, and concludes that these prefigurative acts should be fostered to promote collective, structural transformation in university residential colleges.

This study offers implications for policy and programmatic efforts to disrupt harmful gender power relations in the unique context of the university residential setting, to promote women's equality and prevent gendered violence.

Declaration of Authenticity

I, Brett Louise Woods, declare that the Master of Research thesis entitled *A Critical Feminist Examination of Gender Power Relations in Two University Residential Colleges in Melbourne, Victoria* is no more than 50,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, citations and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE20-037).

Signature:  Date: 26 June 2024

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I’m grateful to friends and family for supporting this thesis (and the degrees that came before it). Thank you to my mum, Wendy, and my grandmother, June, who have encouraged me to ‘just get it done, already!’ when needed. Thank you to my sister, Shannon, whose undergraduate gender studies readers provided my first orientation into the literature which informed this study. Special thanks to Kate for her enthusiasm for jumping down rabbit holes with me and to Ange for her encouragement. Thank you especially to Paul and Max who have offered patience, love and support. The stress of impending deadlines and late nights at the computer was not carried by me alone. I am grateful for the gentle reminders that there are things that matter more than a thesis. And finally, thank you to Lily for the quiet companionship.

I acknowledge that this thesis was proofread by Adam Finlay AE, consistent with Standards D and E of the Australian Standards for Editing Practice.

While this thesis has been strengthened through the wisdom, generosity and expertise of others, any errors or shortcomings are mine.

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List of Abbreviations

AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
DFFH	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (Victoria)
DoE	Department of Education (Commonwealth)
ERoCA	End Rape on Campus (Australia)
NCAS	National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NSSS	National Student Safety Survey
NUS (Aus)	National Union of Students (Australia)
NUS (UK)	National Union of Students (UK)
SLCARC	Senate Legal and Constitution Affairs References Committee
UCA	University Colleges Australia

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1. Introduction

Gender inequality and gender power relations remain under-examined (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2019) in university residential settings. This is problematic as gender inequality and other intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination, including heteronormativity and racism, provide the underlying social context for gendered violence (Boucher, 2023; Our Watch, 2021; Webster et al., 2021). In light of the "etiological relationship" (Kearns et al., 2020, p. 13) between gendered violence and gender inequality (with patriarchal ideology sustained through oppressive gender power structures), the promotion of gender equality is accepted by state and federal governments as best-practice primary prevention of gendered violence (Heywood et al., 2022; Our Watch et al., 2021) and, as a result, informs programmatic responses adopted by governments and the university sector (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (Vic) [DFFH], 2022; Department of Social Services (Cth), 2019; *Gender Equality Act 2020* (Vic)). In responding to the 2015 Royal Commission into Family Violence Victoria, then Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews confirmed the Victorian Government's commitment to address gender inequality: "If we are serious about ending violence against women, then we must begin by addressing gender inequality" (Department of Premier and Cabinet (Vic), 2016, p. 3).

However, despite universities being priority settings for primary prevention of gendered violence (DFFH, 2022; Our Watch et al., 2021), rates of sexual violence in residential settings remain at high levels (AHRC, 2019; Heywood et al., 2022). Notwithstanding "insipient institutional action" to address gendered violence, university organisation cultures continue to "reproduc[e] gender inequalities and women's subordination" (Tildesley et al., 2023, p. 2003). Addressing gendered violence in these settings requires "a more concerted effort … [to] engag[e] and destabilis[e] the 'common-sense' and normalised cultures of gender and identity" (Kiguwa et al., 2015, p. 106) across different settings. This thesis aims to critically examine and better understand the drivers of these patriarchal beliefs and normalised cultures of gender inequality and gendered violence, particularly those reproduced by students, student leaders (and student clubs) and university residential administrations in two college settings, in order to contribute to the 'concerted effort' by governments and universities to address the problem.

University residential settings are diverse, including university owned and operated halls of residences, privately owned for-profit accommodation providers and high-status not-for-profit educational colleges (often owned or controlled by large religious institutions such as the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting churches). This research seeks to examine the maintenance of gender power relations in the unique university-affiliated but religiously owned residential

college context; largely these complex institutions have remained unexamined (AHRC, 2017) and have been subsumed into broader university programmatic and policy approaches in the context of gendered violence prevention, despite being structurally and culturally distinct. The research problem is discussed in more detail under **1.3**. This research adopts a 'critical feminist' (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016; Connell, 1987; hooks, 1984; Davis, 1981a)[1] lens to examine gender inequality through gender power relations and its attendant cultures, structures and mechanisms for perpetuating oppression in the educational setting of university residential colleges.

1.1 Aims of the research

The overarching aim of this research is to apply a critical feminist lens (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016; Connell, 1987; hooks, 1984; Davis, 1981a), as a theoretical framework to examine how gendered power is maintained and/or countered in university residential college settings. This theoretical orientation was selected owing to critical social theory's location "in a sweet spot between critical analysis and social action" (Collins, 2019, p. 3). Consequently, this research is motivated by the emancipatory aims of a critical feminist approach and the call to action implied in its critique of dominance and power in gender relations (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Stevens & Martell, 2019). As such, this research used a critical feminist lens to:

1. Examine women's lived experiences of gender power relations in their university residential college settings;
2. Examine 'dominance' in the ways in which gender power relations are maintained in university residential colleges;
3. Identify and examine 'resistance' to unequal gender power relations in university residential college settings;
4. Document the complex university residential college context and its relationship to the maintenance of differential gendered power; and
5. Make findings and recommendations that lead to action and change.

[1] While the American Psychological Association publication manual (7th edition) prescribes that multiple works should be cited in alphabetical order, the author has presented a select number of works throughout this thesis in chronological order in citations where it was important to acknowledge the chronological development and application of concepts relating to the theoretical orientation of the thesis.

1.2 Research question

To achieve these aims, the research explored the following questions:

> *In what ways are gender power relations maintained and/or countered in two university residential college sites?*
>
> (a) How do student leaders and college administrations maintain and/or counter gender power relations in the sites?
> (b) How do traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies in the sites maintain and/or counter gender power relations?

1.3 Research problem and significance

With recent political and popular attention being devoted to addressing gendered violence over the past decade, several settings have been identified as areas of heightened levels of violence perpetration and risk, as well as settings for intervention (DFFH, 2022; Our Watch, 2021). Universities and university residential settings are included in these priority settings owing to the levels of sexual violence and the preventative opportunities in these educational institutions to impact society at large (Rosa & Clavero, 2022). The scale of the problem of sexual violence in universities is well documented (Heywood et al., 2022; Zark et al., 2024).[2] University students experience gendered violence across its continuum of harm at higher rates than the general population (AHRC, 2019; Broderick, 2017). Women in colleges experience gendered violence at even higher rates than their non-residential peers (AHRC, 2017, 2019; Heywood et al., 2022). In university residential colleges ('colleges'[3]), women are four times as likely to be sexually assaulted as men (AHRC, 2017). However, despite the urgency in the sector heralded by the Hunting Ground Australia Project (2015), National Union of Students (Aus) [NUS (Aus)] (2016) student survey, End Rape on Campus Australia (ERoCA, 2017, 2018[4]), AHRC (2017, 2019), Australian Human Rights Centre (2017a, 2017b) and Broderick (2017) reports, and most influentially the National Students Safety Survey (2016, 2021), gendered violence at universities

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[2] Following Keene (2015, p. 7), the researcher acknowledges that existing statistical studies likely underestimate the "true incidence" of gendered violence, owing to the complexities in "acknowledging, disclosing and reporting".

[3] Throughout this thesis, 'college' is used to refer to the specific university-affiliated but religiously owned residential college setting of this research as distinct from the broader, diverse range of university student accommodation settings. **Chapter 4** provides a contextual framework for the setting of this research.

[4] *The Red Zone Report: an investigation into sexual violence and hazing in Australian university colleges* (ERoCA, 2018) is the report that was recently torn up by elected student representatives at a recent meeting for newly elected members of the University of Sydney's Student Representative Council (Cleal, 2024).

has not reduced (Heywood et al., 2022) and remains at the "disturbing levels" first identified by AHRC (2017, p. 4).

That women are no safer in colleges today than a decade ago reveals the inadequacy and/or incompleteness of the current institutional responses (Henry, 2023; Tildesley et al., 2023). During the course of writing this thesis, there was media coverage relating to sexual violence in Australian universities and the "failures" of universities to "prevent and respond to sexual violence" nationally (Al-Khouri, 2023).[5] Such concerns about universities' failures to prevent and respond to sexual violence have been echoed in the recent Commonwealth inquiry into current and proposed sexual consent laws in Australia, with the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee (SLCARC, 2023, p. ix) recommending the implementation of an

> independent task force with strong powers, to oversight universities' policies and practices and respond to sexual violence on campus and in residences.

While the *Australian Universities Accord, Interim Report* (Department of Education (Commonwealth) [DoE], 2023b) released late in 2023 was not as critical as the Senate Committee in its assessment of institutional efforts to address sexual violence, it similarly highlighted the need for improved university governance. However, the introduction of regulatory instruments to promote gender equality often faces backlash from "institutional actors inclined to maintain the unequal, gendered status quo" (Tildesley et al., 2023, p. 1997; see also Ruggi & Duvvury, 2023), which prevents the effective structural and transformational change required to promote equality (Verge et al., 2018). Despite resistance and limited evidence related to the efficacy of governance and regulatory approaches (Ahmed, 2012; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2015; Tack, 2022) to address gendered violence, the current political climate (DoE, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a; SLCARC, 2023) suggests there will be a renewed focus on preventing gendered violence in universities and colleges through policy, albeit with heightened regulatory accountability. This heightened regulatory focus has begun; the Commonwealth Department of Education (2024b) recently announced the establishment of an independent National Student Ombudsman and a National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence.

As identified above, regulatory instruments and/or programmatic responses designed to address individual attitudes or behavioural change are, in and of themselves, insufficient to address gendered violence in universities and (diverse) university residential settings (Gram et al., 2021).

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[5] In 2024, 27 students at St Paul's College (University of Sydney) were expelled or suspended for the "humiliation and sexual degradation" (Cleal, 2024; Rix, 2024) of a fellow student. St Paul's is Australia's oldest residential college, established by the Anglican Church and only opened to women students from 2023.

Further, such efforts may be undermined and counteracted by other organisational cultures and practices (Grzelec, 2024) and fail to offer "even a latent threat of genuine enforceable institutional accountability" (Henry, 2023, p. iv). As gender inequality and other intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination, including heteronormativity, provide the underlying social context for gendered violence (Our Watch, 2021; Webster et al., 2021), addressing gendered violence in all university residential settings, therefore, requires more than just a focus on individual change. Rather, it requires a structural and systemic examination and reordering of the existing gender power regime. The need to disrupt the subordination of women in current gender power regimes in society broadly (and, as a consequence, in universities and university residential settings) to address gendered violence has received recent political acceptance: gendered "violence is a manifestation of inequality and discrimination based on gender, race and other power imbalances" (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023, p. 13).

Despite universities being a priority setting for primary prevention and the "promoti[on] [of] safety and respect within residential student accommodation settings" being identified as a "key avenue for continued action" (Heywood, et al., 2022, p. 6) there is limited research into gender power relations in these sites or into the unique, contextual factors which enable the maintenance and/or countering of the gender regimes in college settings. This study is required, as the ways in which men maintain their dominant position over women (Kearns et al., 2020) and the opportunities to disrupt oppressive gender power regimes in particular Australian college contexts are under-examined (AHRC, 2017, 2019; Keene, 2015; Mikhailovich & Colbran, 1999). This knowledge is critical to inform the design of institutional responses to promote women's safety and inclusion in these settings (Kiguwa et al., 2015; Our Watch et al., 2021). Meeting the knowledge gap relating to the structural maintenance and/or countering of gender power relations in colleges is essential to ensure that structural, systemic, collective, physical and cultural factors in these institutions can be addressed to prioritise and promote gender justice (Burrell, 2018) and reduce gendered violence in these complex settings.

As gender relations are locally, socially and institutionally contextualised, this study is an examination of localised gender relations, including an analysis of the unique and specific interrelated 'cultures' and structures in the settings. College 'cultures' are understood in this thesis to refer to the attitudes, norms and beliefs, traditions, student-led activities and informal policies that "shape the behaviour of individuals and groups in a college" setting (Kuh & Witt, 1988,

p. iv)[6]. In the landmark AHRC (2017, p. 15; see also ERoCA, 2018) report, the Commissioner found that the cultures and practices of colleges were a specific "cause for concern" which "warrant[ed] further investigation". This thesis contributes to this 'further investigation' by analysing the complex and multidimensional cultures and structures in two college settings to inform and contribute to future gendered violence prevention and gender justice promotion. It is the cultures and structures themselves that need to be transformed to promote women's equality and safety (Kiguwa et al., 2015). With a commitment to social justice and cultural change, this research was particularly alert to fissures in the maintenance of inequality and gendered dominance to inform opportunities for transformative change to ensure these settings are safer for all students.

1.4 Outline of research chapters

This thesis is divided into seven chapters.

- Chapter 1 provides an overview of the research problem, the theoretical orientation of this project, the research questions and aims, and the researcher's positionality;
- Chapter 2 situates this research in the context of existing literature relating to the problem of gendered violence and gender power relations in society and educational settings;
- Chapter 3 outlines the critical feminist theoretical lens that shaped the conceptualisation and design of the research and informed the data analysis, discussion and findings;
- Chapter 4 presents a contextual frame examining the dynamic institutional context of the site of inquiry of this research – the university residential college;
- Chapter 5 outlines the methodology and methods adopted in the data collection and data analysis, consistent with the theoretical lens and the contextual frame;

[6] Despite the age of this germinal text, the research has adopted Kuh and Whitt's (1988) definition of culture and relies on it throughout this thesis. This is appropriate owing to their unique, extensive treatment of the complex university residential college context. While their cultural study of colleges examines the US context, their survey provided utility to the researcher in areas where there are similarities between the US and Australian experiences. The researcher is not aware of a more contemporary resource or an equivalent Australian resource. The closest cultural examinations of Australian colleges are the 2017 Broderick Report (*Cultural renewal at the University of Sydney residential colleges*), and 2018 ERoCA Report *(The red zone: An investigation into sexual violence and hazing in Australian university residential colleges*). However Broderick does not provide any definition of the broader cultural context of the universities or university residential colleges, focusing more on drinking cultures. In response, ERoCA provided a more detailed examination of college cultures, but focused on hazing and sexual assault specifically.

- Chapter 6 presents the results of the analysis, and the results are examined, identifying new knowledge and confirming existing knowledge, in dialogue with relevant literature; and
- Chapter 7 offers findings, implications and recommendations for further research and concluding remarks.

1.5 Positionality statement

Knowledge in interpretive research is "situated in relations between people" (Bukamel, 2022, p. 327). Powell and Phelps (2021, p. 435) cautioned that "critical engagement with intersectiona[l] [feminism] … calls for an acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality and reflexivity in how it shapes knowledge-producing practices". Practising researcher reflexivity (a core tenet of critical theory) (Collins, 2019; Horkheimer, 1982) required me, as the researcher, to consider my own experiences with the research problem and explicitly identify how these may have influenced the research design, analysis and discussion (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Drawing on feminist and intersectional work, Massoud (2022) highlights the centrality of researcher self-awareness in qualitative research and the attending benefits of being transparent with the researcher's positionality. These benefits include establishing connection and understanding with the reader and acknowledging the influence of the researcher's own "experiences, identities and commitments" (Massoud, 2022, p. S69) on research design and interpretation. In line with the critical feminist theoretical approach and critical qualitative methodology adopted in this research, I offer to the reader a brief overview of my (current) understanding of my own identity and the "social, economic [and] cultural privileges" which shaped (Massoud, 2002) the ways I conducted this research. Drafting this positionality statement has allowed me to build an awareness of my voice and its influence on the research.

I am a white, cisgender woman and of settler descent, living on unceded Aboriginal lands. I have been shaped by Anglo-Celtic cultural heritage and a middle-class background. My secondary school education was undertaken in a school incorporated by a mainstream Christian tradition, which would be familiar to a large proportion of the Australian population. I have extensive experience in tertiary educational environments, having studied and worked in higher education settings in Melbourne, Australia, for 17 years across four tertiary education institutions. I continue to work in tertiary education contexts, having been employed in teaching and research – predominantly in insecure roles – for nearly a decade across three different universities. As a student and a worker in educational settings, I have experienced and observed discriminatory and oppressive impacts of current gender power relations. These experiences and my desire to

contribute to cultural change in these settings motivated this research and shaped its critical feminist orientation. Concerning the setting of this research, I did not attend a residential college during my university studies; however, I am familiar with the associated narratives and lexicon of colleges, through having spent time as a young person with my family living in this setting and with family members attending colleges.

Following Hamad (2019, p. 78)'s understanding of 'whiteness' as a "state of proximity to formal power", I acknowledge my own privileged position as a white woman. As a white woman examining gender power relations in a setting where students continue to be predominantly white, I acknowledge that whiteness is undergirded and unnamed within much of the data and analysis.

1.6 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has positioned this study in its broader context, identified the research aims and questions and outlined the research problem and significance. It offered an outline of the chapters in this thesis and introduced the author's positionality. The next chapter examines the relevant literature on gender, gendered violence and gender power relations in educational settings.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides the reader with an overview of the literature relating to gender, gendered violence and gender power relations, broadly and in higher educational settings, specifically. Throughout this chapter, key concepts relevant to this research are defined. The context for this research is further developed in dialogue with literature in **Chapter 3** with a discussion of the research's critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens and its deployment in educational settings and in **Chapter 4** with the presentation of the contextual frame.

2.1 Gender and gender power relations

2.1.1 The social construction of gender

Gender has historically been understood through biological (Bem, 1993), individualist, interactional (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and institutional frameworks, which a majority of sociologists have acknowledged as overlapping and interacting to some degree (Hoyenga & Hoyenga, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). While acknowledging that defining gender is a contested and complex practice, in line with a critical feminist approach this research adopted Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin's (1999, p. 192) conception of gender as "a system of social practices that constitut[e] [difference] in socially significant ways", while organising "relations of inequality on the basis of [these] difference[s]" (see also Ridgeway, 2011). This is consistent with the approach of recent scholars, such as Ejaz et al. (2023, p. 7; see also Risman, 2018) who have adopted this understanding of gender as an institutionalised "system for organising gender inequality in social relations and practices". Following this system of social practices approach, gender is seen as being "enacted … not merely expressed" (Wharton, 2005, p. 7), and this acknowledges that differences are culturally created (Burn, 1996) and not based on assigned sex distinctions (Kessler & McKenna, 1978).

Understood in this way, gender is not an "exclusively individual characteristic" (Wharton, 2005, pp. 7, 8; see also Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999) but is embedded further "embedded in the structures and practices of organisations and social institutions", such as those found in higher education contexts. As a consequence, gender "is difficult to restructure or escape" and it impacts "social perceptions, values, activities … occupational practices and individual advancement" (Beck et al., 2021, p. 169). Griscom (1992, p. 391) noted that gender alongside race, ethnicity, class and sexuality "function as large social-structural patterns of unequal power relations".

Further, Nentwich and Kelen (2013, p. 131) suggest that a core theme of 'doing gender' in organisational settings "involves doing hierarchies". However, West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) highlighted the "micropolitical activities" resulting from 'doing gender', which allows for the "possibility of transformative power and politics" (Johnston, 2016, p. 668). As gender is something that is 'done' (West & Zimmerman) or 'performed' (Butler, 1990), there is the possibility that "alternative performances" may allow for gender power relations and binary conceptions of gender to be disrupted (Nentwich & Kelen, 2013, p. 123). The acknowledgement of some measure of agency "within a changeable, albeit constrained, world of gender relations" (Powell, 2008, p. 167) is consistent with the emancipatory priority of critical feminism (hooks, 2009). The 'constraints' which shape the manner in which gender is performed should not be underestimated, however. People are incentivised to conform to socially constructed, endorsed and scripted performances of gender through the promise of access to forms of power and resources (Wharton, 2005). As discussed below at **3.1.2.2,** dominant gender ideologies prescribe and incentivise gender performances which align with particular forms of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 1987; 2005).

The research resisted gender essentialism (including gender-critical perspectives), gender-normative assumptions and binary conceptions of gender (Butler, 1990; McCook, 2022) and rejected "the presumed naturalness of the binary man-masculinity and woman-femininity" (Johnston, 2016, p. 668). In line with the critical feminist and intersectional approach of this research, 'women' were understood to include any person who identifies as a 'woman' and binary or sex distinctions were avoided, in line with the social practices approach to the construction of gender.

As gender is socially constructed and performative (Butler, 1990; Doane, 1982; Nentwich & Kelen, 2013; Riviere, 1986; Robinson, 2005; Wharton, 2005) institutions, spaces and cultures shape how gender is enacted. In the 1990s, the rise of gender stratification theories, building on the second-wave feminist challenge to the prioritisation of the 'male-coded' public sphere over the 'female-coded' public sphere (Hayden, 1999; Massey, 1994; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020), explored women's experiences of marginalisation and oppression in spaces, places and cultures. Spain (1993, p. 140) theorised both "architectural segregation" (gendered distinctions within actual building design and function) and "geographic segregation" (gendered distinctions based on separation and distance) as forms of influencing the attitudes, norms and beliefs in institutions. Women's segregation and/or exclusion from public spaces is symbolic of the "restrictions on women's place in the social, political, economic and political arenas" (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020, p. 266). Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020, p. 269) highlighted the impact of physical spaces on women

and how they are required to do additional labour to adapt their performance of gender in response, documenting the "automatic reflex" or "safety work" that is employed by women to minimise or avoid men's intrusions. The manner in which women modify their behaviours as they navigate spaces dominated by men is well-attested in literature relating to public spaces (Fileborn, 2019; Stanko, 1990), university campuses (Roberts, 2019) and sporting settings (Forsdike & Giles, 2024). The "distinction … between gendered arrangements in the private and public spheres … across dimensions of the gender order" (Webster et al., 2021, p. 375) is attested to in the literature (Connell & Pearse, 2015).

Beyond the physical, Collins et al. (1993) argue that it is the cultural ideologies of institutions that shape gender performance and reinforce gender stratification. These cultural ideologies may be expressed, enforced and internalised through gender norms which "are in the world, embedded in institutions and reproduced by people's actions" (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 412; see also West & Zimmerman, 1987). Cislaghi and Heise (2020, p. 412) point to the manner in which gender norms are enforced by the very "power holders who benefit from people's compliance with them". For example, Hentschel et al. (2019) have documented the persistence of gendered notions of leadership. Additionally, Waling and Roffee (2017) have documented the heteronormativity embedded in cultural ideologies of higher education institutions, and Donovan et al. (2023) have identified essentialist, cisnorms and heteronorms perpetuated through hidden curriculums in secondary schools in the UK.

The presence of such norms and their role in maintaining women's subordination in the setting are examined in the analysis. Further, the normative role of social interactions and structures in these two educational sites are interrogated and the interconnectedness (Wharton, 2005) of gendered distinctions and inequalities examined.

2.1.2 Gender power relations

Gender power relations are social structures that "shape … constrain … and enable … individual and collective practices" (Messerschmidt et al., 2018, p. 3) based on gender. In line with Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin's (1999, p. 192) social practices approach to the construction of gender, it is appropriate that this research focused on examining the gender power relations in the sites of inquiry as these are inherently "relations of inequality" based on perceived socially significant differences. Acker's (2006, p. 441) language is even stronger, labelling gender power relations as "inequality regimes". This language has been employed by Duffy et al. (2022, 2023) in the context of gender power relations in Australian universities. The concept is useful as it identifies the active role of power holders in "protecting existing gender relations" (Cislaghi &

Heise, 2020, p. 413). Through a critical lens, informed by Gramsci (1977), Acker's language of "inequality regimes" similarly enables an examination of the manners in which those who are oppressed may either uphold and maintain, or resist, the regime itself. For now, it's important to name that context-specific gender power relations are maintained through oppressive ideologies which "all people (men and women) internalise, believe in, and perpetuate … in social relationships" (Beck et al., 2021, p. 170).

These 'regimes' are inherently grounded in patriarchal structures, with patriarchy being the "central organising principle in society" (Callaghan & Clark, 2006, p. 88). While definitions of patriarchy are contested (Walby, 1989, 1990), this thesis adopts Crittenden and Wright's (2013, p. 1268) amalgamated definition of patriarchy as a

> historical and social system of [men's] dominance over women, which is used to both enforce and reinforce the inequity of power between [men] and [women], with social arrangements privileging [men].

These patriarchal systems include the "ideological, cultural, and structural dimensions … encompass[ing] hegemonic and normative beliefs, ideas and concepts" (Tevis et al., 2022, p. 342). In line with the Gramscian (1977) informed critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens of this research, the structural privilege of men is understood to be maintained ideologically (Daldal, 2014; Hunnicutt, 2009). Burrell's (2018, p. 457) triadic patriarchy work has provided further analytic utility to "illustrate the connections between the personal and the political" by distinguishing between patriarchy (as social structure), masculinity (as culture) and individual actor (as personal). Dominant patriarchal gender ideologies are "easily obscured" (Hunnicutt, 2009, p. 556) owing to how pervasive they are. Further, patriarchal gender ideologies and women's oppression may be even more obscured by the presence of more 'palatable' attitudes and behaviours; for example, women's position being perceived as "merely different" (Lafontaine, 1983, p. 29) than men's position, and gender-essentialist beliefs relating to women's inferiority being recast as 'protective' practices (Hunnicutt, 2009) or individual choices (Reilly et al., 2016). Messner (2018a, p. 19) explains this 'recasting' through the concept of 'soft essentialism':

> currently ascendant hegemonic ideology of the professional class … [which] valorises the liberal feminist ideal of individual choice for girls and women while retaining a largely naturalised view of boys and men … [which] is especially evident … in youth sports.

Where differential power and rights are dismissed as relating to 'individual choice', inequality is perceived by educational institutions as "legitimate" (Reilly et al., 2016, p. 1031). In addition to *soft [gender] essentialism*, benevolent sexism may also be present in the dominant gender

ideology. Hannover et al. (2018, p. 3) define benevolent sexism as consisting of beliefs concerning genders which "may appear positive but are actually counterproductive to gender equity". According to Mastari et al. (2019, p. 2), benevolent sexism is a "subtler" expression of sexism where "men's role to protect and provide for women by putting them on a pedestal in a chivalrous way" is emphasised. In contrast to hostile sexism, benevolent sexism offers a "protective" rather than "dominative" model of paternalism, where women's access and equality are limited "in order to protect them" (Barreto & Doyle, 2023, p. 100). Benevolent sexism, understood in this way, is less visible and may, therefore, be more dangerous in sustaining the gender power order as it reproduces gender inequality without explicitly stating negative attitudes towards women (Hannover et al., 2018). However obscured through soft essentialism or benevolent sexism, the dominant gender ideologies continue to oppress women.

Gendered inequality and gendered violence are inherently linked to these historical and ideological patriarchal structures. Burrell (2018, p. 448; see also Westmarland, 2015) affirms that a feminist orientation towards gender justice is grounded on an understanding that men's violence is "both a cause and consequence of patriarchal inequalities". These patriarchal inequalities and the specific gender power regime in each context may be evident in the manner in which women's access, rights, status and equality are limited, based on their gender. This oppression may occur through the cultural reproduction of gender roles (Powell, 2008) or through harmful stereotyping at "institutional, structural and interpersonal levels" (Ejaz et al., 2023, p. 7). The stereotypes present in this study's data are assumed to evidence the dominant gender ideology in the sites.

As asserted by Ejaz et al. (2023), stereotypes functionally support the reproduction of harmful gender power relations. Drawing on an evaluation of research from the preceding two decades, Ridgeway (2011, p. 44) demonstrated that gender is a "primary cultural device for making sense" of others; such labelling

> implicitly primes in the person's mind shared cultural stereotypes of [men] and [women] and makes those stereotypes unconsciously available to shape the person's judgements and behaviour toward that other.

Gender stereotypes occur at both the individual and social level (Ejaz et al., 2023). At an individual level, individual cognition results in unconscious tendencies to interpret "people and events in terms that confirm their prior expectations" (Ridgeway, 2011, p. 161; see also Hentschel et al., 2019). Stewart et al.'s (2021) systematic review of literature relating to interventions to address rigid gendered stereotypes distinguished between agentic and communal traits, traditionally attributed to men and women, respectively. For men, these "agentic traits" included "ambition, power and competitiveness"; for women, the "communal traits" included "nurturing,

empathy and concern for others" (Stewart et al., 2021, p. 20). The distinction in the gendered stereotypes relating to the expected traits are related to the inherent characteristics that are valued and required in patriarchal systems of men's domination and women's oppression. Women are structurally disincentivised from working or studying in areas outside these limited domains that align with Stewart et al.'s (2021) communal traits conception through gendered norms relating to "women's work" (Finch & Groves, 2022). In higher education institutions specifically, O'Connor (2020, p. 215) identified the manner in which 'male-dominated' cultures are "underpinned by stereotypes which legitimise the allocation of devalued activities" to women. Gendered norms operate as unwritten rules which constrain women's agency and, ideologically, maintain differential gendered power relations (Erikson & Verge, 2022; McInerney & Archer, 2023; Paechter, 2018), endorsed by men as a means of maintaining their power (Crittenden & Wright, 2013). The presence of such stereotypes, gender norms and, more broadly, gender power relations based on a system of oppression of women in the sites of inquiry are analysed in **Chapter 6**.

2.2 Gender power relations in educational settings

2.2.1 Universities as gendered settings

> Universities are not neutral places. They reflect and reproduce their origins as institutions by and for white, heterosexual, cisgender, upper-class, non-disabled men. (Tack, 2022, p. 3)

Rosa & Clavero (2022, p. 1) describe universities as being "both gendered and gendering organisations". The central role educational institutions play in reproducing inequalities and marginalising those who do not fall "within narrow paradigms established in a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal world" (hooks, 2004 p. 248; see also Acai et al., 2022; Dancy, 2014) is well attested in the literature. Recent international literature critiquing the structures of dominance present in higher education settings has identified the presence of active systems that "oppress and limit the advancement of those deemed as other" (Tevis et al., 2022, p. 342), even if they are no longer recognisable as the "elitist, male and unerringly white British spaces they once were" (Forsyth, 2014, p. 228). Australia's earliest universities were established prior to Federation and higher education "mirror[s] and uphold[s] the predominant European colonial systems and practices" (Phillips, 2024, p. 4). Coloniality continues to shape academic and institutional paradigms, resulting in the perpetuation of "narratives that erase the identities of those not privileged within the prevailing knowledge framework" (Phillips, 2024, p. 3). Literature also attests to the enduring gendered nature of education systems (Tildesley et al., 2023). Investigations of dominance in secondary school settings in the UK and higher education settings in Australia have identified homophobia, violence and misogyny as "integral aspects of the

dominant mode of masculinity" (McCormack, 2011, p. 85; see also Waling, 2022; Waling et al., 2022; Waling & Roffee, 2017). Verge (2021, p. 195) contends that universities *specifically* are "underpinned by the adoption of a masculine point of view as neutral and universal"; resonances of the "Academic boys' club" (Forsyth, 2014, p. x) continue to echo. Differential access and power, disempowerment (Dancy, 2014) and a failure to institutionalise support (Waling & Roffee, 2017) are characteristic of the ways educational settings are "complicit in the re/production of … dominant gender norms" (McCormack, 2011, p. 83) and the regulation and marginalisation of non-dominant classes. Further, the heteronormativity and ableism towards "non-normative bodies" (Bailey & Mobley, 2019, p. 22) embedded within these cultures in higher education result in people with "identities and experiences considered to be non-normative" experiencing stigmatisation, violence and exclusion (Waling & Roffee, 2017, p. 302). Further, Tildesley et al.'s (2023, p. 1997) recent gender equality research in Spanish higher education settings highlights the domination of men in university settings, with power relations structured according to academic status and intersecting "axes" of gender, race, class and sexuality. Women now encompass the majority of undergraduate students in Australian universities; however, Forsyth (2014, p. 215) cautions that even predominantly white, middle-class women "have never derived the same benefits" from their education as their men peers. In line with the critical feminist lens of this thesis, it is important to identify that the 'meritocracy', as it relates to university admission, has not disadvantaged all women equally. Rather, as Forsyth (2014, p. 215) submits, the 'meritocracy' and admission systems in universities (and colleges, by extension) "have worked well for white middle-class women" (cf. Rosa & Clavero, 2022). To promote institutional change in universities (at structural and cultural levels) requires "institutional processes, practices and the social norms, biases, and stereotypes that produce gendered inequality in the access to goods, services, rights, and freedoms" to be challenged (Tildesley et al., 2023, p. 1999). This thesis examines these institutional processes, practices, norms and stereotypes to enable them to be dismantled to promote gender justice.

2.2.2 Gendered violence in higher education settings and programmatic responses

Gendered violence in Australian society is both symptomatic of structural sexism (Collins, 2019) and a "function of gender inequality, and an abuse of male power and privilege" (Burman et al., 2020, p. 189). While this research focused on gender power relations, consistent with the critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021) theoretical lens, it is important to acknowledge that violence in all its forms can be deployed in the maintenance and reinforcement of power (Gramsci, 1977). In the context of gender relations and gendered violence, sexual violence can be understood expansively to exist along a continuum of harm (Kelly, 1987, p. 48; Leidig, 1995). In addition to harms

experienced by sexual violence, Keel et al. (2023, p. 7) assert that the broader "spectre and spectrum of gendered violence shape[s] the everyday realities of women". These 'everyday realities' require women to undertake additional labour to resist men's intrusion and domination (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Much of the literature relating to women's responses and resistance to the "continuum of everyday sexual violence" (Walkate et al., 2019, p. 64) is situated in the criminology discipline, with these responses being characterised as 'risk management strategies' women adopt to promote their safety (Fileborn, 2019; Fisher & May, 2009; Keel et al., 2023; Roberts, 2019; Stanko, 1990, 1995; Valentine, 1989; Wenham & Jobling, 2023). While the analysis is conducted in conversation with this literature, the critical feminist lens of this research prioritises viewing such responses as oppositional resistance (de Saxe, 2016).

More broadly, violence can be interpersonal, direct and/or structural, or symbolic (Bourdieu, 1992; Galtung, 1990). In the context of gender power relations and gendered violence, other scholars (Adkins, 2004; Powell, 2008) have examined masculine domination through Bourdieu's (1992) conception of symbolic violence. In line with the structural, institutional focus of this research and the associated hierarchical and gendered norms and cultures, this research was guided by Galtung's (1990, p. 291) cultural violence definition to inform the researcher's understanding of how power may be used in violent ways: "cultural violence is any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimise violence in its direct or structural form".

Gendered violence – especially sexual violence – is a "well-known problem" in universities (Keene, 2015, p. 2) and "a significant public health concern" (Tashkandi et al., 2020, p. 1777). The recent National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) study of sexual assault and harassment at Australian universities identified that one in six students have experienced sexual harassment and one in 20 have experienced sexual assault since starting university (Heywood et al., 2022). These findings confirmed previous research by AHRC (2017) which found that experiences of sexual assault and sexual harassment among university students are common. The most prevalent forms of sexual harassment reported were inappropriate staring or leering, sexually inappropriate comments or jokes and invasive inquiries about an individual's private life or physical appearance (AHRC, 2017, p. 37). These broad experiences of sexual harassment reported by participants in the AHRC report align with the accepted, expansive definition of a "continuum of sexual violence" (Kelly, 1987, p. 48; see also Leidig, 1995).

Colleges were identified by AHRC (2017, p. 66, 2019) as "a particular area of concern, with women four times as likely as men to have been sexually assaulted in this setting". These findings echoed earlier international research that confirmed that university residential environments are places where women feel unsafe (National Union of Students (UK) [NUS UK], 2010). Despite

the urgency created in the residential sector following the AHRC (2017) and Broderick (2017) reports in 2017, the NSSS confirmed that the situation has not changed, finding that the "students most likely to have experienced sexual assault in a university context in the past 12 months [were] those who lived in student accommodation or a university residence" (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 2). The "unwarranted cost of the threat and reality" of sexual violence is born by women students "embark[ing] on a college career" (Keene, 2015, p. 9).

Research investigating gendered violence in higher education settings in Australia is primarily found in grey literature. Recent literature (government, sector and independent reports) relating to gendered violence in university contexts in Australia is further limited to the *prevalence* of gendered violence in universities at a broad, national or institutional level (Broderick, 2017; Heywood et al., 2022). These reports emphasise the risk and protective factors through a policy/administrative lens, as well as evaluating the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of university policies, responses and supports concerning sexual violence (see also AHRC, 2017). For example, Broderick's 2017 report on sexual assault and harassment in University of Sydney residential colleges identified harmful behaviours and cultures. The report was criticised by key activists in this area for sanitising the reality of experiences at these colleges (Funnell, 2017; see also ERoCA, 2018). The role of the University of Sydney and the individual colleges in funding and participating in the research is explicitly identified by Broderick. Further, Broderick (2017, p. 4) suggests that the report demonstrates that individual colleges are "genuinely committed to cultural renewal". In light of the enduring prevalence of gendered violence in these sites, and in line with the critical feminist lens of this research, Broderick's assertion is viewed sceptically by the researcher. While being cautious with the findings, Broderick's report remains the principal work focusing on gendered violence in the specific college setting. It surveyed over 1000 college students and engaged 600 college students through focus groups and interviews. Broderick's (2017) contribution did not, however, explicitly focus on the constitution of gender power relations in the settings. Finally, Henry and Powell (2014, p. 2), have focused on broad, whole-of-institution approaches in universities in Australia to address the "social, cultural and structural discourses and practices in which sexual violence is tolerated, accepted, eroticised, minimised and trivialised". However, the reduction of gender inequality, through dismantling the current gender power order, an area that is recognised as important (Our Watch et al., 2021), is yet to be examined specifically in the Australian college context.

While there is literature in international contexts relating to gendered violence on college campuses (especially in the US, see Klein & Martin, 2021; Kaukinen et al., 2017; Kafonek & Richards, 2017), the Australian experience of 'college campus' life and the associated cultures

are different to the US context and under-investigated. The literature from the US, to the extent that it is relevant, was considered in the analysis of the data in **Chapter 6**. Closer to home, Keene's (2015, p. 14) study of sexual victimisation in university residential halls in New Zealand examined the cultural and environmental factors contributing to elevated sexual violence amongst student populations, identifying how women students' "sexual victimisation is ingrained in the very fabric of normal college life" in New Zealand. The focus of Keene's (2015) thesis, however, was on sexual victimisation (with a core focus on reporting, policy and institutional response), rather than the gender power relations in those settings which enabled such violence to occur.

While there is negligible literature on gender power relations in Australian college settings, there is a growing body of knowledge on harmful/unsafe attitudes, behaviours, cultures and policies in Australian college settings relating to public health issues, such as alcohol harm minimisation (Corney & du Plessis, 2022; Leontini et al., 2015, 2017). This research-based public health literature has considered the complex relationships, cultures and traditions that exist in these settings (Corney, 2016; Corney et al., 2020; Corney & Woods, 2019; Leontini et al. 2015, 2017) and informed this research. For example, Leontini et al. (2015, p. 172) analysed the "influence of cultural norms and belief systems, peer group pressure and belonging, life stages and educational transitions" as well as institutional policies on student alcohol consumption and associated behaviours. This body of literature informed the analysis of the varied and layered structures and systems that maintain and/or counter gender power relations in colleges in this research, allowing for the complexities of the structures and norms in these unique settings to be examined. The specifics of the college context and the socio-structural relationship is developed in **Chapter 4**.

There is a focus in the UK on institutional responses to sexual assault (see Anitha & Lewis, 2018a; NUS (UK), 2010; Universities UK, 2016, 2019), although Lewis (2017, p. 58) cautions that "there has been an absence of prevention efforts by institutions of higher education" in the UK. However, like the domestic literature, current research does not explore gender power relations in colleges. One notable exception is prevention work in Scotland. Burman et al. (2020, p. 178) describe primary prevention programs in Scottish universities that adopt "an explicit gendered analysis in their work, situating [gendered violence] within unequal relationships between men and women", and found student leaders were central for informing responses to gendered violence.

While secondary and tertiary educational contexts have made some efforts to address the systemic marginalisation of women (see McCall et al., 2024), these programmatic and policy responses have often been limited by the risk-averse nature of higher education institutions (Burman et al., 2020, p. 173); have focused on compliance with legislative requirements and policy approaches (Zark et al., 2024) rather than transformation of gender relations or addressing of structural

inequalities (Tack, 2022); have prioritised organisational risk-mitigation through adopting one-off interventions, such as 'bystander training' (Leone, 2018); have adopted punitive and reactive responses in line with the neoliberal prioritisation of individualised responsibility (Aronowitze & Giroux, 2000; de Saxe, 2016; Giroux, 2010; Majerski, 2024; Jones & Floyd, 2024; Lund et al., 2019); are under-resourced (Kafonek & Richards, 2017); and/or their impact has not been evaluated. Further, such efforts to promote diversity and inclusion may not disrupt the damaging gender power relations but rather, further embed them (Tack, 2022). Ahmed (2012, p. 11, 13) identified the hegemonising role of higher education institutional policies and related laws, diversity committees and other initiatives which seemingly promote diversity and inclusion; and the "performative cultures" in higher education institutions that are often used to "manag[e] or contain[n] conflict or dissent". McRobbie (2015, p. 8) has furthered Ahmed's critique of institutional policies, suggesting that young women "have become favoured subjects for [institutional] attention …", noting that institutions exchange "access to a wider field of meritocratic opportunities" for young women's "willing abandonment of a renewed feminism and its attendant collectivities". Further, Powell's (2008, pp. 172–3) survey of research on the transformation of gender relations suggests that "recent celebrations of the detraditionalisation and re-negotiation of gender may fail to acknowledge the ways that so-called new gendered norms … may represent old norms in disguise". Finally, Burrell (2018), Gram et al. (2021) and Tildesley et al. (2023) are critical of individualised attitudinal and behaviour interventions as they do not address the structural maintenance of women's oppression.

In light of these cautions, and in keeping with the critical feminist orientation of this study, the research was conducted with a critical scepticism of such diversity efforts or individualised programmatic interventions (such as bystander training) in the sites of inquiry and their relationship to the ongoing hegemonising (Gramsci, 1977) project. Such scepticism is aligned with a critical feminist approach which is "wholly distrusting of the rules of conduct" (Collins, 2019, p. 60) as constituted in current society. There are two further assumptions that underpin the analysis in this thesis of college gendered violence prevention initiatives: (1) (Perceived) changes in men's power result in 'backlash'[7] as a means to maintain privilege (Maricourt & Burrell, 2022). As such, the analysis is also alert to men's backlash to efforts to disrupt gender power relations (Maricourt & Burrell, 2022; Phipps, 2016; Tildesley et al. 2022). (2) In line with Setty et al. (2024,

[7] Following Ging et al. (2024, p. 243), the author acknowledges that men's backlash flows from attachments to men's privilege which "are clearly not uniform, but are a complex constellation of socio-economic, cultural and psychological factors". Further, men's backlash in educational settings has been found to be propelled by the online resurgence of men's supremacy, championed by those such as Andrew Tate (Wescott et al., 2023).

p. 11), current approaches which do not involve students' active participation "delimits scope for cultural change". As a result, the research design and analysis highlights student and student leaders' experiences and acts of opposing and reordering current gender power relations.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the literature relating to gender and gender power relations as concepts and in the educational setting of this research. These concepts will be further developed below concerning this thesis, with the critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens outlined in the next chapter, followed by the presentation and discussion of the contextual frame of the site of inquiry in **Chapter 4.**

3. Critical Theoretical Lens

The research adopted a critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016; Connell, 1987; hooks, 1984; Davis, 1981a) theoretical and analytical lens to answer the research question:

> *In what ways are gender power relations maintained and/or countered in university residential colleges?*

Niederman and March (2019, p. 3) describe a theoretical and analytical 'lens' as analogous to reading glasses which allow someone to "compensate for flaws in human eyes … [and] see more clearly". Applying such a lens allows for "particular aspects of a viewed terrain" (i.e. a research problem, literature or site of inquiry) to be elucidated and highlighted (Niederman & March, 2019, p. 3). The theoretical lens further guides the overall research design (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and makes explicit the manner in which the researcher is "making sense of difficult social interactions and phenomena" (Collins & Stockton, 2018, p. 6) in the analysis and interpretation of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This chapter outlines the theoretical lens, focused on the setting of inquiry, which informed the research conception and design, data analysis and discussion. The discussion below provides an overview of critical feminism, situating the theoretical lens in its feminist and critical traditions, and surveys the application of critical feminist theory in educational settings. The chapter concludes by identifying the core theoretical priorities that shaped the research.

3.1 Critical feminism

3.1.1 Critical feminism – an overview

Critical feminism is a theoretical approach that draws on both feminist and critical theory, merging (Beck et al., 2021) these traditions in ways that allow for a feminist analysis of patriarchy and gender inequality (Beck et al., 2021; de Saxe, 2012, 2016; Martin, 2002) to be complemented, extended or focused by critical theory's priority of "identifying prevailing structures and practices that create or uphold disadvantage, inequity or oppression" (Wood, 2008, p. 324). A structural focus is a core distinctive of critical feminism; in contrast to liberal feminism, critical feminism focuses "less on the individual woman or gains for women" (Stevens & Martell, 2019, p. 3). In recent literature, critical feminist theory has been defined as a

> field of inquiry that promotes systemic change and examines whether or not inequalities or exclusions are the result of existing patriarchal systems, and suggests alternatives for institutions to promote egalitarian opportunities. (Beck et al., 2021, p. 168)

A critical feminist perspective views gender as the "primary mechanism of difference" with violence "patterned along gender lines" (Hunnicutt. 2009, p. 556). Hunnicutt (2009, p. 556) submits that the principle task for feminist theorising is to "examine the gender social order". As a result, this research centred on examining gender power relations in the participating sites.

In critical feminism, women are centred in the research (Beck et al., 2021), sex and gender inequity are exposed and "the ways power and privilege are granted or denied" are interrogated (Beck et al., 2021, p. 169). The utility of employing critical theory as a "complement" to feminist theory in this research is that it "examines the structures that promote inequity and … promotes alternatives that give power to those historically oppressed" (Stevens & Martell, 2019, p. 3). It is these structures that remain largely unexamined in college settings; this is the problem this thesis sought to address.

3.1.2 Critical feminism – situating the theoretical lens in its feminist and critical traditions

A critical feminist lens provided the "underlying structure, … scaffolding [and] frame" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85) for the research. It informed the researcher's understanding of the research problem (Maxwell, 2013), the development of the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the research design to answer the question (Miles et al., 2019), and the analysis and interpretation of the data, resulting in the presentation of findings, discussion and recommendations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This theoretical and analytical lens enabled a structural critique of power and the way power is used in college settings in relation to gender to be critically examined. The theoretical lens is consistent with the worldview of the researcher as a woman working and studying in educational settings, as outlined above at **1.5**.

Marshall et al. (2021, pp. 21, 26) caution that the term 'critical' "has become problematic" in social sciences owing to its ambiguity or its (mis)use in "academic performativity". Further, critical feminism is described by de Saxe (2016, p. 59) as "a constant theory in the making, always evolving yet continuously fighting against many diverse forms of inequity and oppression". In order to heed de Saxe's (2016, p. 67) caution to avoid "simplistic" or "prescriptive" understandings, the research considered the historical development of critical feminism and identified core critical feminist priorities and concerns. The discussion that follows situates the critical theoretical lens of this research within the specific body of critical scholars who have informed this study (Marshall et al., 2021).

Critical feminist thought and resistance practices came to prominence in the 1970s through the work of Shulamith Firestone (1970), Angela Davis (1971a, 1971b), the Combahee River Collective (1978) and bell hooks (1984), amongst others, "out of the disillusionment and lack of resonance felt by many Black feminists during certain liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s" (de Saxe, 2012, p. 189). hooks (1984, p. 2) challenged *second-wave feminism*, as articulated and embodied in Freidan's *The feminine mystique* (1963), with the charge that they "ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women" by seemingly universalising the experiences of college-educated, white women. hooks and Davis championed a feminist theory that was multifaceted, centred on women who were structurally and socially marginalised and acknowledged the historical and cultural interplay of class, race and gender. Their contributions reoriented feminism towards the "reframing and reconsidering of alternative modes of oppositional resistance" (de Saxe, 2016, p. 68) and have been developed and documented further through intersectionality and 'critical race theory' by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) in legal contexts and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) in educational contexts.

Contemporary scholars, such as Hamad (2019, p. 77), continue to highlight the link between race, class and gender, stating "race does not run parallel to other factors in our lives". However, through the "mainstreamisation of Western feminism" (Borah et al., 2023, p. 1; Zakaria, 2021), white women continue to experience racial privilege and participate "in a system where their womanhood is itself a privilege and a weapon" (Hamad, 2019, p. 79). Critical feminist theory prioritises intersectionality as a challenge to dominant white feminist ideology; rejecting the categorisation of women as a "unified and universalised" group (Borah et al., 2023, p. 2). Such critiques of white feminist ideology provided important grounding for this study, as gendered violence "cannot be effectively challenged in isolation from other experiences of structural inequality or oppression" (Boucher, 2023, p. 12). This enabled the researcher to heed Lorde's (1984, p. 138) caution that there "is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives".

While the exclusion of non-white women from feminist theory and the feminist movement spurred the development of alternative feminist approaches, it is in the adoption and development of 'Marxist' (Marx, 1986) ideology based on the "exploitation-centred concept of class" (Wright, 2005, p. 5) for the feminist project, where critical feminist theory finds its home in the antecedent Frankfurt School (Collins, 2019; Hall, 1996; Horkheimer, 1982). Sternbach et al. (1992, pp. 224–5) highlight the achievements of critical feminists in adopting and going beyond class: "whereas male analysts stressed the cultural or economic determinants … [critical] feminists argued that such politics are *also* rooted in the authoritarian foundations of patriarchal relations in the so-

called private sphere". Firestone's *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution* (1970) developed Marx's *materialism*, arguing that oppression originates from female biology and advocating for women to seek to control the 'means of *re*production' (Alice, 2000). Sharing Firestone's central concern of the oppression and subordination of women, Davis (1981a, 1981b) employed Marxist ideology (without adopting a gender-essentialist approach or privileging gender over other forms of oppression, such as race, as Firestone was critiqued for doing), recognising the "contributions of the intersections of Marx-ist, anti-racist, and feminist praxes" (James, 1998, p. 15).

Davis adopted Gramsci's (1977) cultural expansion of Marx's notion of class "to embrace the whole spectrum of ways structural inequalities reproduced across generations manifest themselves in the lives of women and men", including "the inequalities of gender and ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation" (Crehan, 2016, p. 194). Stoddart (2007, p. 194) suggests that critical feminist theories "disrupted" rather than employed Marxist ideological models by "bringing attention to the production of gendered … networks of social power" rather than centring class "as the locus of power". In this 'disruptive' way, Davis (1981a; and later hooks, 1984, 1990, 2009) built on Gramsci's (1977) concepts of hegemony, central to his understanding of the exercise and maintenance of power. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is "political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class" (Bates, 1975, p. 352). Davis' expansion of Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony offered an "intersectionist analysis of race, class, gender, sex and economic hegemony" (Yancy, 2000, p. 128). Davis and hooks' tradition has been continued, allowing "hegemonic structures and practices that continue to alienate and demean women's ways of knowing and being in the world" to be exposed and critiqued (Darder, 2016, p. xi; hooks, 1984, 1990, 2009).

Critical feminism owes "an intellectual debt" (Ledwith, 2009, p. 686) to Gramsci. Gramscian concepts of common sense, coercion and consent (as they relate to the ongoing maintenance of systems that disenfranchise and control the excluded 'subaltern' (hooks, 1990; Smith, 1990)) continue to inform critical feminist thought in the broader gender transformation project (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ledwith, 2009; McRobbie, 2015; Waling, 2019b). These concepts have similarly been adopted in critical men's studies, perhaps most explicitly in Hearn's conception of men as a "gender class" (Hearn, 2014, p. 13, 2004) and his insightful, albeit critiqued (e.g. Berggren, 2018), concept of the "hegemony of men" (Hearn, 2004, p. 59). These critical contributions offer utility in transforming the gender power order in society and gender power regimes as constituted in the sites of inquiry for this research, providing a mechanism to

understand the dominant norms and structures "which function to marginalise and delegitimise the histories, lived experiences and participation" (Darder, 2016, p. ix) of women. It is in the ongoing development of the Marxist, Gramscian tradition of the feminist transformation project, as modelled by hooks (1984, 2009) and continued by contemporary scholars (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2016, 2019; de Saxe, 2014, 2016; Ledwith, 2009; Connell, 1987, 2005; Hearn, 2004), that critical feminist theory has been most influential in the context of education.

3.1.2.2 Critiquing hegemonic dominance in educational settings

Gramsci's (1977) cultural hegemony has been fruitful for critical feminism in educational contexts owing to the centrality of education in his conception of hegemony (Mayo, 2010, p. 22): "every relationship of hegemony is, necessarily, an educational relationship" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 350 as quoted in Borg et al., 2002, p. 241). The role of the intellectual and education are central to the hegemonising project of the dominant class. Ledwith (2009, p. 685) observed "hegemonic forces reaching into [her] classrooms to construct personal lives". Gramscian assertions about the role of education systems in the maintenance of the ruling class offer utility for critical feminist approaches (such as Connell, 1987, 2005, 2006; Darder, 2016; Ledwith, 2009) in diagnosing and dismantling the structures, norms and traditions that perpetuate women's oppression in – and through – educational settings, and the "hegemonic structures and practices that continue to alienate and demean women's ways of knowing and being in the world" (Darder, 2016, p. xi). Further, Phipps and Blackall's (2023) recent research in UK secondary schools has demonstrated how cisnormativity is culturally created and maintained; the 'common-sense' beliefs concerning the binary nature of gender result in the erasure of trans and gender-diverse students. Additionally, "dominant discourses of gendered authority" (Robinson, 2000, p. 88) have been identified in research in public and private schools in Australia (Keddie, 2007; Variyan & Wilkinson, 2022).

It is primarily in Connell's (1987) application of cultural hegemony to her 'hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity' thesis that this critical feminist adoption of a Gramscian worldview is most evident. This conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity as a normative "pattern of practice … allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832) The research that precipitated Connell's masculinities theory was based on Australian elite, private secondary schools, analogous to the college setting of this research. Originally intended as a more limited Marxist critique, Connell's findings identified the way gender power relations shape these school settings. Adopting Gramscian hegemonic concepts and broader notions of class, Connell and her co-authors found that:

> The school as an institution is characterised at any given time by a particular gender regime … the pattern of practices that constructs various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff and students, orders them in terms of prestige and power, and constructs a sexual division of labour within the institution. (Kessler et al. 1985, p. 43)

Connell's theory is consistent with critical feminist approaches, providing "a critical feminist analysis of historically specific masculinities whilst at the same time acknowledging the varying degrees to which individual men play in its reproduction" (Wedgewood, 2009, p. 329). Connell's approach also furthers the emancipatory aims of the critical feminist theoretical lens, prioritising the Gramscian focus on "the dynamics of structural change, involving the mobilisation and demobilisation of whole classes" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831), ensuring the possibility of structural and social change is maintained.[8]

In addition to the utility of cultural hegemony in educational contexts, Gramsci's *false consciousness* concept has been developed in the field of liberatory education (Freire, 2009), in line with critical feminist commitments to resistance and transformation. Gramsci identified not only the hegemonising role of education but also the "centrality of popular education in raising consciousness" and the potential of education to be the "external element" needed to "demystify the prevailing hegemony" (Ledwith, 2009, p. 686). Building on Gramsci, Freire's (2009) processes of *conscientization* in his emancipatory pedagogy have been adopted by critical feminist scholars in educational settings, such as Ladson-Billings, who was central in developing critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and Sandoval (2000). Sandoval's (2000) *differential consciousness* has consequently informed current critical feminist scholars in education, such as Zhu (2023), Beck et al. (2021), de Saxe (2016), Ngidi and Moletsane (2015) and McLeod (2009). It is in this critical feminist approach that feminist theories and pedagogical theories converge in current academic discourse surrounding education. Further, there is emerging evidence relating to the use of critical pedagogy in the prevention of gendered violence in educational settings (see e.g. Giffin et al., 2023; Granger & Gerlach, 2023; Rodriguez, 2022). Feminist theories/research and critical pedagogy go "hand in hand" (Luna & Rubio-Martín, 2022,

[8] Connell (2005, 2006; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell & Pearse, 2015) has further developed and reformulated her hegemonic masculinities and emphasised femininities theory since its inception in the late 1980s. Despite being critiqued and/or redeveloped by other feminist scholars (Beasley, 2015; Berggren, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Hearn, 2004; Howson, 2009; Kimmel, 2010; Paechter, 2018; Waling, 2019a, 2019b, 2022), it remains a "prevailing approach in Australia" for gender-transformative change (McCook, 2022, p. 2; see Jordan et al., 2022, for utility in UK settings), testifying to the utility of adopting cultural hegemonic conceptions in critical feminist examinations of educational settings.

p. 8). Situating this research in current academic discourses allowed for the research to contribute new knowledge in ways that have utility and currency.

3.1.3 Critical feminism's orientation to structural change

As a critical theory, critical feminism has "explicitly ethical or normative aspirations – it aims to better society by both understanding and working to change it" (Collins, 2019, p. 62; see also Kiguwa, 2019; Nash & Young, 2023). Current critical feminism is an interdisciplinary practice, recognising the "many diverse modes of oppositional resistance, and how those affected by oppression choose to respond" (de Saxe, 2016, p. 71). As a result, this research is alert to diverse oppositional/resistance practices women employ, rather than prescribing a predetermined model of resistance. These diverse practices may include individual and collective direct countering of attitudes and behaviours (Lewis et al., 2018), refusal and "deliberate disengagement" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 8), everyday political practices (Naylor, 2017), "quiet" resistance (Jung & Moon, 2024, p. 218) and seeking allyship (Halvorsen et al., 2024; Carlson et al., 2015, 2020), in addition to formal, organised resistance. In light of the constraints of patriarchal structures and gender power relations, nascent practices may be conceived of as *pre-figurative* actions (Leach, 2022; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), with women embodying or *reworking* (Katz, 2009) practices in anticipation of, as an embodiment of, and to "instantiate … social [structural] change" (Törnberg, 2021, p. 83).

Focused on transformation and liberation, de Saxe (2012, p. 198) suggests that critical feminist theory

> does not offer specific or 'text-book' ways we can go about creating or transforming spaces. Rather, it calls on us to reconsider our existing understandings of knowledge, power, and spaces of empowerment.

Beck et al. (2021, p. 168) adopted this lens to investigate ways of "disrupt[ing] oppressive and hegemonic STEM environments … thereby promoting structural and systemic change in [educational] institutions to support equity and inclusion". This thesis also seeks to disrupt existing gender power regimes to promote equity and inclusion.

Critical feminist understandings of the centrality of the role of education and educational institutions to the maintenance of dominance of men (hooks, 2009; Sandoval, 2000), coupled with the liberatory priorities of a critical feminist approach, have resulted in a resurgence in the adoption of this approach to investigate and examine gender relations and their resulting inequalities in educational settings. In adopting this theoretical lens to examine hegemonic gender power relations in two colleges in Melbourne, Australia, this research continues the recent work

of de Saxe (2014, 2016) in primary and secondary school educational settings, Stevens and Martell (2016, 2019) in evaluating the high school teachers' gender-equitable practices and Beck et al. (2021) in addressing the low numbers of women pursuing education in STEM. Beck et al. (2021, p. 169) helpfully summarise the "core" of critical feminism and its utility in understanding gender power relations in educational contexts:

> At its core, [critical feminism] calls us to continuously re-evaluate social structures challenging gender equality and equity, and provides a framework for understanding how power relationships in social structures, like educational institutions, reinforce patriarchy through male supremacy.

This research aimed to contribute new knowledge to this *understanding* of gender power relations in colleges, to inform change – structural, programmatic and cultural responses to promote gender justice.

3.2 Theoretical priorities

This research adopted a critical feminist approach, in the tradition of hooks (1984, 1990, 2009) and Davis (1971a, 1981a, 1981b) and as modelled in educational contexts by Connell (1987, 2005, 2006), de Saxe (2014, 2016), Stevens and Martell (2016, 2019) and Beck et al. (2021). As a result, the research design, data collection, analysis and discussion were informed by the following concerns:

1. identifying the "multiple, diverse and individual ways women experience oppression" (hooks, 2009, p. 39; see also Bohman, 2016), inequalities inherent in institutions and adopting an anti-oppressive approach (Davis, 1981a, 1981b; Moosa-Mitha, 2005);
2. prioritising the collective lived experiences of women in their specific local contexts, valuing subjectivities (Dadds, 2011; de Saxe, 2014, 2016; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Moosa-Mitha, 2005);
3. acknowledging intersecting lines of power, privilege, inequality and oppression (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Davis, 1971a, 1971b, 1997; de Saxe, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1992), resisting gender essentialism (McCook, 2022), cisheteronormativity (Muñoz, 2019); ableism (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Lorde, 1984) and cultural imperialism (Ahmed, 2002);
4. interrogating knowledge, power and spaces (de Saxe, 2012, 2016; hooks, 2009) and their relationship to the maintenance of gendered power relations (Connell, 1987, 2005, Ledwith, 2009);

5. critically evaluating educational settings as structures central to cultural practices and the maintenance of and "reproduction of systemic inequalities in society" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 105; Gramsci, 1971; Mayo, 2010); and
6. examining existing resistance practices and being oriented towards change (Beck et al., 2021; Davis, 1981a, 1981b; de Saxe, 2016; Horkheimer, 1982; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Muñoz, 2019).

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has described the critical feminist theoretical and analytical 'lens' that informed the research conception and design and the researcher's 'sense-making' throughout the data analysis process and the discussion. It provided an overview of the application of the critical feminist theoretical lens in educational settings and identified the critical feminist priorities of this research. The next chapter discusses the contextual frame for the research. In line with the critical feminist theoretical lens the contextual frame highlights the structural nature of colleges as institutions.

4. Context: University Student Residential College

The critical feminist theoretical lens, as described in the preceding chapter, orients this research towards an examination of the structural manner in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in the educational sites of inquiry (de Saxe, 2012, 2016; Gramsci, 1971; hooks, 1984, 1990). The structural focus of this research and the complexity of the setting warrant a rich examination of the context, provided in this chapter. It examines the context of the university residential college ('college') and presents the contextual frame that informed the research. This frame details the various interrelated structures present in the setting (the institution of the college).

A detailed discussion of the institutional context (presented through the contextual frame) is provided to enable a "deep understanding of underlying structure[s]" in the setting; such frames offer utility in "dealing with" complex structures and the interaction of people and their social and organisational environments (Coral & Bokelmann, 2017, p. 3). This *deep understanding* of the complex college setting not only informed the design, data collection and analysis, and findings of this research but is also important knowledge to inform future programmatic and policy responses to prevent gendered violence and to promote gender justice in these settings. *Gender justice*, in contrast to *gender equality*, centres analysis and action on power, alongside gender (Keddie, 2007). This knowledge of the complex, multidimensional nature of the university residential setting is essential, as colleges have been rarely distinguished from universities or other student accommodation settings in efforts to address diversity and inclusion, or the primary prevention of gendered violence in Australia (AHRC, 2017; Our Watch et al., 2021). This is problematic, as there are differences between universities and college contexts and cultures which present distinct (unaddressed) challenges and (unrealised) opportunities in transforming gendered relations. Colleges in Australia are also contextually and culturally distinct from those in the US and the UK, where much of the research regarding gender (in)equality and gendered violence in college settings has been conducted (Gascoigne, 1996). As there is little research regarding the structural nature of the institution of the college, this chapter describes the complexities of this context and supplements the discussion under **2.2** in the literature review.

4.1 University residential colleges: context of the research

4.1.1 Introduction to the context

The sites and setting for this research focuses on two 'traditional' colleges. There are diverse forms of campus-based residential accommodation for university students in Australia. The original colleges were affiliated with the original sandstone universities, and these are often described as 'traditional colleges'. These traditional colleges are owned and operated by organisations (traditionally faith-based denominations) whose governance and leadership is independent from their affiliated universities; they are often identified by the extracurricular activities and intercollegiate sporting activities provided through college-based student leadership. In addition to the traditional colleges there are newer entities, with alternative contractual and ownership relationships with universities, across a range of residences. Some may be university owned, and these maybe referred to as 'halls of residence' (such as those predominantly found at the Australian National University); others are privately owned and operated but contracted by universities and often referred to as 'student villages' or 'lodges'. Although University Colleges Australia (UCA) and other student accommodation sector industry groups do not publicly report on numbers of students, Walker (2016, p. 10) suggested that the traditional university-affiliated colleges account for approximately 13% of student accommodation provision, markedly reduced from 87% prior to the Second World War. In more recent decades, the growth in the student accommodation market has been through for-profit accommodation provision, often contracted by universities. The commercial, for-profit university student accommodation sector is growing rapidly (Savills, 2023; Walker, 2016), especially in Victoria where high numbers of international students create economic demand. The market-based for-profit student accommodation villages, while located on or close to university campuses, are structurally and culturally distinct from the university owned and operated halls of residence, and different again from the university-affiliated, independently operated traditional colleges. This thesis examines gender power relations in these traditional colleges – those that are owned and operated by Christian denominations, run independently from their affiliated university. These traditional colleges are referred to throughout as 'university residential colleges' or 'colleges'.

4.1.2 Traditional colleges

While colleges in Australia may be diverse institutions (Corney, 2016), the established traditional colleges affiliated with older sandstone high-status universities have common historical roots (Walker, 2001, 2016). Historically, these traditional colleges were primarily established for the

education of men at a time when men constituted the majority of enrolments at universities and dominated the professions, in particular, as clergy of Christian denominations (Walker, 2001). Despite most colleges now being co-educational settings, the setting of this research is college institutions originally designed for men and led by men, with historical and cultural narratives, traditions and norms that have prioritised men (see Broderick, 2017; Jordan et al., 2022).

While each college or residential setting has its own unique culture and historical identity (Corney, 2016; Gascoigne, 1996), their overarching cultural roots and traditions can be traced back to the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge and the influence on the early Australian universities of scholars and faculty who had attended these English institutions (Baldwin, 2019; Gascoigne, 1996).

The more traditional colleges have been criticised for being exclusive and "excessively" elitist (Forysth, 2014, p. 204; see also Martin, 2012; cf. Walker, 2016). The privilege and power experienced by those who have been allowed "access to a particular space or community" render these select experiences as "legitimate and authentic" (Waling & Roffee, 2017, p. 304). Martin's (2012, pp. 429–430) social class analysis of student satisfaction in elite residential university settings in the US hypothesised that the "imperfect relationship between the distribution of cultural and economic capital" in these settings results in institutional structures and cultures "reward[ing] dominant class origins [while] still appear[ing] to uphold meritocratic principles". This research built on Martin's contribution, applying an intersectional, gendered lens to an analysis of power in relation to class distinctions in college settings.

The 'neoliberalisation' of universities and the broad range of university residential settings further fuels the gendered nature of these educational sites. The influence of neoliberalism and the increasing corporatisation and commercialisation of universities have been critiqued by numerous scholars (e.g. Jones & Floyd, 2024; Connell, 2019). Lund et al.'s (2019) critique of the problematic and gendered discourses in neoliberal universities is instructive in evaluating the admissions processes in university residential settings, and in traditional colleges in particular. Lund et al. (2019, p. 1378) identified that the "discourses of merit and gender are mutually constitutive and the evaluation of merit in universities is based on taken-for-granted assumptions" about the ideal student. Further, these 'merit-based' selection processes have privileged white, middle-class men and women "compared to other areas of disadvantage" (Forsyth, 2014, p. 215).

Historically, the traditional colleges have offered students a three-fold experience of robust academic programs, extracurricular activities and pastoral care, which enhance students' university experiences (Broderick, 2017; Walker, 2022, 2006). These offerings are also central to

the cultures of colleges. Broderick (2017, pp. 5) identified the "great strengths" of the collegiate experience, including:

> the sense of community; the academic excellence that inspires students; the pastoral care; the extracurricular activities; the building of deep and lasting friendships; and the networking opportunities and connection to College alumni.

While there is great diversity between college settings in their histories, external affiliations and governance structures, there are core structural features that exist across traditional colleges in Melbourne. These structures are foundational to their raison d'être, distinguish them from other student accommodation environments and form the basis of the contextual frame presented and discussed below.

4.2 Contextual frame

Contextual frameworks (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994) focus on 'factors' influencing an environment or research problem and have been employed to enable researchers to examine the complex, interrelated structures and conditions in a setting where change initiatives or broader interventions are proposed (e.g. Rojas Smith et al., 2014). Following the literature review and informed by the theoretical lens, a contextual frame was developed to guide the research design, data collection, analysis and discussion to answer the research questions in examining how gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in the specific cultural context of these complex sites. The contextual frame was (re)developed throughout this study, drawing on the researcher's own knowledge of these settings, informal conversations with current and former students and college administrators, documented histories relating to Australian colleges, and through the data collected from participants. This is consistent with Luft et al.'s (2022) approach.

In presenting this frame, the researcher seeks to enable the reader to understand the complexity of the interrelated structures of the context, sites and setting of the research and to enable them to situate the research problem, results, discussion and findings in these unique environments. Further, the development and presentation of the contextual frame contributed to achieving the research's aim to examine the complexity of the college context and its structural relationship to the maintenance of differential gendered power.

The contextual frame is summarised visually in **Figure 1**, before being examined in more detail. The visual presentation of the contextual frame provides an overview of the following categories that shape the setting of this research – social, cultural, internal and external – and outlines the

connection of these categories to this study. The two specific college sites of inquiry for this study are further described, in line with the categories of this contextual frame, in the methodology chapter (see **Table 1**).

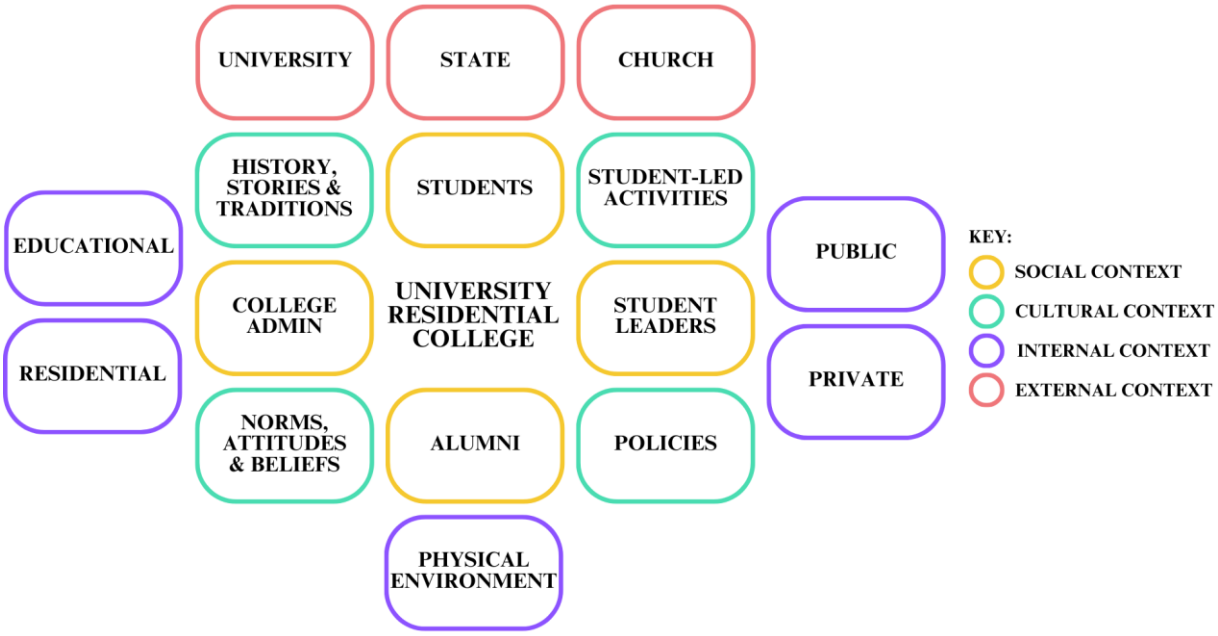

Figure 1: Contextual frame of research

4.2.1 Social context of college settings

The first category of the contextual frame is the *Social context of college settings*. In this category, the overlapping and interrelated roles of groups of people and positions are presented. The social context includes college students, student leaders, college administrative staff and alumni. The social dimension of the college is unique in that leadership is dispersed and negotiated between three "tiers" (Broderick, 2017, p. 9), including student leaders, staff and the governance body that includes high numbers of alumni. In investigating how gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in colleges, a core priority of this research was to understand the roles or groups of people in the setting who wield formal or informal positions of power in relation to the gender power regime. While acknowledging that those who have been appointed to formal positions of power do not exhaust the list of those who exercise institutional, economic, social or cultural power in these sites, it was appropriate (and pragmatic) to frame the research design around those with express institutional authority. Further, the unique characteristic of colleges which distinguishes them from universities more broadly in the social context is the role of student

leaders. As a result, the first research question focuses on this unique aspect of the college setting by examining how student leaders and college administrations maintain and/or counter gender power relations in the participating sites. While the social context of the college includes the broader student body and alumni, the limited size of this thesis necessarily required the research to limit the research scope to ensure research feasibility.[9] Future research may focus on other social structures of the college setting and, further, examine the complex interrelationships between the different social structures in this setting.

4.2.1.1 Students

While in these college settings students are usually referred to as 'residents', the researcher refers to this group throughout this thesis as 'students', to distinguish them from others, such as academic staff and administrative staff (who may also reside on the college campus) and to highlight the unique educational setting of the institutions. Students in these settings are overwhelmingly undergraduate students, with a smaller number of postgraduate students. Students who are residents or non-residents of these colleges predominantly attend for one of two reasons: (1) students are from regional or rural areas in Victoria and are moving to Melbourne for their university studies; and/or (2) students (and/or their families) are seeking the pastoral, educational, leadership and social opportunities (and privileges) that are offered as a part of collegiate life (in this sense many students may have parents who are alumni of the colleges). Like university student populations more broadly, the "patterns" of who attends or doesn't attend college "are forged by history" (Forsyth, 2014, p. 210). Students are often from private, academically advantaged schools with university-educated parents (who may also have attended a college).

As the cost of living in college is prohibitive for most, college student populations are dominated by those with the financial resources to enable their attendance or those who are offered bursary or scholarship support (Walker, 2016). The provision of financial support for students without the resources to fund college experience is limited to those who serve broader college needs (such as increasing *diversity* numbers or recruiting those with particular sporting or artistic prowess). Forsyth (2014, pp. 205, 210) is biting in her diagnosis of students who receive financial assistance as those who have been "welcomed into the elite", seen as the "deserving poor" for "pulling themselves up by their bootstraps" during their secondary schooling. Further, the students in colleges have been chosen through competitive college administration admission processes and

[9] Limitations are further described at **7.3**.

through relationships with external institutions such as denominationally affiliated secondary schools. Students typically stay at college for two to three years. Student populations are socially stratified through informal student hierarchies (Broderick, 2017), with first-year students ('freshers') having less power than second- and third-year students ('returners').

In addition to participating in compulsory or voluntary activities and initiatives led by student clubs or the college administration, students complete mandatory service duties each week (such as meal preparation and post-meal cleaning, or building and grounds maintenance), which are reminiscent of 'chores'. Some of these service roles also incorporate paid/unpaid leadership opportunities (such as being a duty leader) and are rostered.

4.2.1.2 Student leaders

The traditional colleges also emphasise leadership development. In line with this prioritisation of leadership formation, formal student leadership groups (primarily made up of senior students in their second or third years) are elected by the student body each year. Most colleges elect a student president(s), vice-president(s) and committee to an independently incorporated student club. Student club presidents wield power and status inside and outside their institutions. For example, the National Association of Australian University Colleges (the representative body of college students in Australia), evolved from a network of student club presidents.

The student leaders have formal working relationships with college administrative staff and college governance bodies. Student leaders at colleges not only represent the broader student population, but also facilitate extracurricular and intercollegiate activities for their peers. The student club levees fees on the student body, and these substantial funds are used by the student leaders to run orientation week activities (primarily targeting 'freshers') and a suite of social and sporting activities throughout the year. Election into a student leadership position reflects peer support and social capital. Student clubs in distinct colleges have their own lore and traditions; these are documented and passed on by previous student club leaders to the officer-elect in the following year. It is through these student leadership structures and student clubs that the "historic 'legacy' of an institutional identity" (Corney et al., 2020, p. 31) is promoted; first-year students are socialised into this identity. For example, student clubs and student leaders are central to the maintenance of college cultures through their role in student discipline through the imposition of fines for breaching college or student club rules. The cultural and power dynamics between the student populations, student leadership groups and college administrations result in a complex set of institutional practices.

Finally, there is emerging evidence that partnering with student leaders may be central to culture change initiatives in colleges (see e.g. Davidson et al. [2022] and Corney et al. [2020] in the context of alcohol harm minimisation and Burman et al. [2020] in the context of prevention of gender-based violence).

4.2.1.3 College administrations

Principally, administrative staff roles reflect the trifold focus of colleges: academic programs, extracurricular activities and pastoral care. Additionally, there are operational and maintenance staff. Wellbeing staff are being increasingly prioritised, with counsellors and academic advisors supporting students in their studies and transition to university life. This pastoral support was previously provided primarily by chaplains/clergy in these settings.

College administrative leadership roles reflect a hybridisation of the university, religious and corporate sectors; most colleges have heads with titles such as master, provost or dean as well as finance, maintenance and catering 'managers' alongside chaplains and/or pastoral carers and counsellors. Colleges have councils/boards as part of their broader governance structures and, for religiously affiliated colleges, the chairs of those governance boards may be bishops (or equivalent denominational regional leaders), reflecting the hierarchy of the church. Historically, college masters and/or deans (and senior staff) were academics and/or clergy of the college's denomination. Senior staff also held concurrent (honorary or paid) academic appointments in the affiliated university. These practices continue to varying degrees. In more recent times, analogous to the neoliberal managerialism of university leadership and governance bodies, college masters, staff and council/board members are increasingly recruited to bring corporate rather than theological or educational expertise (Walker, 2022). Heads of colleges may have roles on affiliated university boards or councils. Like the universities and student associations, college administrations have their own sector-wide representative body, UCA, to promote the values, unique nature and high status of these institutions.

Additionally, a select number of students are employed as academic tutors or residential advisors (who provide peer-to-peer academic and/or pastoral support) or to support the operation and maintenance of the college. These paid positions are offered to relatively few (usually postgraduate) students and are distinct from the service duties that all students must complete.

4.2.1.4 Alumni

An additional unique feature of the college setting is the centrality and influence of college alumni. College alumni enjoy elevated status and presence in colleges, compared with universities

more generally. Alumni successes are celebrated amongst current and former students; those who have characteristics which the colleges wish to instil in their students are invited to present at formal dinners, careers nights and awards ceremonies, sit on college councils/boards of governance and may also have honorary college titles, such as senior fellow. The names and stories of "distinguished alumni" (Broderick, 2017, p. 3) are recited proudly by staff and students.[10] This celebration of alumni, which is characteristic of colleges, is an expression of the foundational desire of colleges to "fashion" leaders in all realms of society (Forsyth, 2014, p. 204; Blainey, 1957; Walker, 2001).

Beyond these prestigious alumni, the broader alumni population is connected to the college through activities such as college events and dinners, mentoring of students and appointment to college councils or boards. Alumni continue to remain connected to their colleges, for example through the use of college chapels for weddings. They are also particularly involved in the extracurricular activities of the colleges and, as a result, connected to college student clubs. Recent graduates may continue to attend social activities organised by the student clubs. In the context of sporting activities, which are often central to the identity and social fabric of the colleges, alumni coach teams and attend inter-college sporting events as spectators. Alumni also occupy informal roles as key promoters of the college (recruiting college applicants and/or recruiting financial support), financial supporters and gatekeepers to the informal networks through which students and other alumni may gain advantage, such as through employment opportunities.

4.2.2 Cultural context of college settings

This research also considered how gender power relations may be maintained and/or countered through the broader cultural structures of the setting, including student-led activities; informal institutional policies; the norms, attitudes and beliefs present in each site of inquiry; and the unique histories, stories and traditions of each setting. The cultural context of the sites is the focus of the second research question, *How do traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies in the sites maintain and/or counter gender power relations?* in the sites of inquiry.

[10] Notably, those alumni who are deemed 'prestigious' and worthy of celebration are primarily those who have achieved 'success' in traditional professions or community-focused endeavours and may have been recognised through formal prestigious public recognition traditions, such as appointment to the Order of Australia or as King's Counsel. Other prestigious alumni reflect the colleges' focus on academic achievement.

4.2.2.1 Norms, attitudes and beliefs

As in society more broadly, and, as documented in other educational settings as described in the literature review at **2.1.2**, college settings are institutions that shape and constrain opportunities, behaviours and experiences for students and staff alike. The norms in these institutions dictate (and are themselves reinforced through) the attitudes and perceptions of the collective student body and individual students in the sites (Erikson & Verge, 2022; McInerney & Archer, 2023). These norms operate as unwritten rules and are not immediately visible to those outside the institutions. The norms, attitudes and beliefs present in colleges are interacted with and shaped by the incoming students and staff whose individual attitudes and beliefs may have been shaped by location (i.e. living in regional towns), family and religiosity of family/community. The setting acts as an "important anchor point" (Jones et al., 2020, p. 23) in a liminal period for students, who are transitioning from dependence to independence, from adolescence to adulthood. The students in this setting (and the participants in this research) are navigating and negotiating peer and personal relationships in new ways and being exposed to norms, values and cultures which may conflict with – or reinforce – the attitudes and behaviours of their own families and communities. As such, colleges may provide opportunities for taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and sexuality to be examined as people are exposed to the norms and values of the institution and the attitudes and beliefs of their peers. The norms, attitudes and beliefs of the student body, student leaders, college administrations and alumni are shaped by the histories, stories and traditions experienced in the college sites.

4.2.2.2 History, stories and traditions

Each college, with its unique foundational history and purpose, has developed its own stories and traditions, which are recounted and re-enacted through ceremonies and rituals. Kuh and Whitt (1988, p. iv) highlight the manner in which institutional college cultures reflect "interactions among history, traditions, organisational structures" and the behaviours evidenced in the site. These histories, stories, "deep-seated traditions" (Broderick, 2017, p. 10) and the accompanying unique language and uniforms (college-branded clothing and other items are common) are important in facilitating shared identities and fostering belonging to the college community. The college sector is a competitive market, with institutions "sustaining their prestige" (Leontini et al., 2015, p. 172) and securing enrolments through their programmatic offerings and reputational currency; college administrations, alumni and student leaders are invested in the maintenance of particular identity-forming traditions. In these settings, students are not merely "consumers" of an educational experience, "marketed by higher education institutions as their source of attraction" (Leontini et al., 2015, p. 172). They are also active participants in "valu[ing],

defend[ing] and preser[ving]" college traditions (Leontini et al., 2015, 174; see also Martin, 2012). These histories, stories and traditions are imbued with symbolic meaning.

4.2.2.3 Student-led activities

As described above, the formal structures of student leadership are a unique cultural component in colleges and student leaders exercise autonomy from college administrations. This thesis adopted the language of 'student-led' activities, rather than the language of 'student club' activities, to reflect the different student leadership structures at different sites. In colleges, student leaders are active in facilitating extracurricular activities, primarily social and sporting activities. These activities are often connected to the traditions, stories and histories of each specific college, are handed down through the years and are powerful signifiers of belonging as well as valuable currency in the informal networks of alumni.

Student-led social activities are more commonly described in college literature, including heavy drinking, initiation rituals and excesses of orientation week (Corney, 2016; Corney & du Plessis, 2022; ERoCA, 2018; Hughes, 2012; Leontini & Corney, 2023; Leontini et al., 2015, 2017). Leontini and Corney's (2023, p. 270) recent work diagnosed Australia college environments as enabling "frequent and heavy alcohol consumption among [students]". As described above, the public health literature has examined these contexts in relation to alcohol harm minimisation; however, gendered power has not been evaluated in the context of student-led social activities. In such social activities, groups of men may engage in harmful, dominating behaviours associated with the well-documented concept of 'lad culture' in university settings (Anitha et al., 2023; Jackson & Sundaram, 2019; Lewis et al., 2018; Phipps, 2016, 2018; Phipps & Young, 2015; Stenson, 2020; Sundaram, 2018; Waling, 2020). Following Phipps (2016, 2018), 'lad culture' is understood as both men's sexism and violence, and as men's reaction to a perceived loss of gendered power.

There is limited examination of sporting activities in Australian residential colleges in peer-reviewed literature. Such activities are not understood as merely leisure pursuits, marginal to the collegiate experience, but rather as an extension of the broader educative purpose of the college and the formation of future leaders (Walker, 2001). Historically, there has been a primary focus on sporting activities and competitions – both inter-college and intra-college sporting events – as an expression of extracurricular physical activities. Organised sport is inherent to the traditional college setting, in contrast to newer forms of campus accommodation. The seasonal intercollegiate sporting competitions reflect the sporting codes practised in elite private secondary schools (e.g. rowing, rugby and cricket) and revolve around the winning of trophies which are

highly prized and hold high status with both college administrations and student associations. Revolving around these intercollegiate sporting activities are gendered drinking games and rituals that are embedded in the social norms of the college student culture and into which 'fresher' first year students are introduced (Leontini, 2015).

Sporting activities are an example of an organised, central extracurricular activity connected to the complex relationships, cultures and traditions that exist in these settings (Corney, 2016; Corney et al., 2020; Corney & Woods, 2019; Leontini et al., 2015, 2017). Kessler et al. (1985, p. 39) documented practices in selective private secondary schools in Australia (analogous to traditional colleges), highlighting the "honoured place" which sport, especially football, holds in these elite institutions. Walker (2001, p. 505) suggests that sport has "assumed a level of almost religious significance" in Australian traditional colleges. The centrality of football and sport more generally to collegiate life has serious ramifications for gender relations in the sites, owing to the manner in which football acts as "a medium for the construction of a particular kind of masculinity. … celebrat[ing] toughness … and connect[ing] a sense of maleness with a taste for violence and confrontation" (Kessler et al., 1985, p. 39).

The findings from Kessler et al.'s (1985) research continue to be supported in more recent research, albeit in overseas contexts. In the US, Hextrum (2020, p. 1053) submits that US college sports are "prime cultural sites of … sexist ideological production". Her research documents the role of sex-segregated sports in higher education in "providing the structural support for orthodox notions of race and gender" (Hextrum, 2020, p. 1068; see also Howard, 2023; Lütkewitte, 2023; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). This is consistent with findings from research in Australian sporting organisations and clubs outside of university contexts that sporting environments are settings where gendered violence is perpetrated and "can provide a setting for entrenched violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours to be played out" (Liston et al., 2017, p. 41). Further, sporting activities reinforce the norms, attitudes and beliefs in the sites. Existing literature confirms that traditional men's sports are privileged over women's sports (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023; Treagus, 2005; Willson, 2018), with examples from professional pay equity issues to equal access to local community ground allocations. Gacka (2017, p. 196) asserts that "women's exclusion from full participation in society" is "reinforced" by the gender-essentialist beliefs around women's physical 'inferiority', which is "most evident in the sporting context" (see also Cooky, 2018; Fink, 2015; Jeanes et al., 2021; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021; Meân & Kassing, 2008; Tredinnick, 2023). These gender-essentialist beliefs and their attendant gendered stereotypes and norms, revealed through sporting activities and in broader social structures, sustain and perpetuate cisnormativity in these settings (Phipps & Blackall, 2023, p. 1098).

Sporting activities, however, also provide a context for disruptive, cultural change (Liston et al., 2017; Messner, 2018b; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). The role of extracurricular activities (such as sports) and associated traditions and norms in the assertion of or resistance to gendered dominance in college settings is a focus of this research.

4.2.2.4 Policies (formal and informal)

As educational institutions in the neoliberal era of increased risk-mitigation and individualised responsibility, colleges have an excess of formal policies, rules, regulations and requirements, often communicated through 'handbooks' provided to incoming students. These are supplemented by informal policies: the unwritten/unspoken rules and practices in the sites. As described in the problem statement above at **1.3**, the predominant approach to the prevention of gendered violence has been a regulatory approach, reflective of a broader *compliance culture* in higher education settings (Atkinson & Standing, 2019; Marine & Nicolazzi, 2020). Necessarily then, colleges have focused on (formal) policy development (but not consultation, co-design or implementation) as a means of risk and reputational management (see e.g. Durbach & Grey, 2018). These foci may inhibit meaningful change, in line with Keene's (2015, p. 10) caution in her study of sexual victimisation in residential halls in New Zealand, which identified the negative impact "institutional anxieties about reputational impact" may have on efforts to promote student wellbeing and safety (cf. Towl, 2016). While formal policies, as a part of the regulatory framework in the colleges, are important in the context of gender power relations, this was not a core focus of the research. Rather this research focused on examining informal policies and practices. This was appropriate given the knowledge gap identified in the introduction, which identified the sector's preoccupation with (formal) policy and regulation, and the comparatively unexamined area of the ways the gender power regime in the sites is asserted and/or resisted through other unique characteristics of the sites, such as informal policies, practices and traditions. While the limited scope of this thesis prohibited an evaluation of the formal, documented policies in the specific sites, there is other literature examining university and college policies, in the context of sexual violence (see e.g. Anitha & Lewis, 2018a [UK], Colpitts, 2019 [Canada], Driessen, 2019 [US], Henry, 2023 [Australia], Keene, 2015 [New Zealand], Marshall, 2000 [Australia], Iverson, 2016 [US]).

4.2.3 Internal context of college settings

While universities are primarily educational settings and newer, alternate forms of university student accommodation are solely residential settings, colleges are *both* educational and residential settings. This duality contributes to the complexity of gender equality work in these

settings. The contextual frame allowed for both the educational and residential contexts of the setting to be elucidated and prioritised. Further, universities are public spaces, while colleges are *both* public and private spaces, with consequences (and opportunities) for women's safety and for disrupting the gender power regimes in the setting. At times, these potential dualities present tensions in the purpose and cultures of college. To explore these tensions, these factors are presented below as dichotomous. The colleges are also physical environments, with buildings and grounds which shape women's experiences. While the internal context of the research was not expressly identified in the research questions, it has, however, informed the research design, data collection, analysis and discussion, and it is reflected in the findings to allow for the discontinuities and continuities between educational/residential and private/public dimensions to be elucidated and analysed.

4.2.3.1 Educational/residential

Despite the colonial Australian colleges' adoption of cultural traditions from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the formal academic role of the Australian colleges is more limited than their "traditional counterparts" (Walker, 2001, p. 181). Walker (2001) suggests that the educational model of Australian colleges is more akin to the Scottish model than the English model. While in England the Oxbridge colleges themselves *are* the university and students are by and large taught by academics inside the colleges themselves, in Australia – following Scotland's model – students attending college receive their substantive formal academic education from attending the college's affiliated university. As a result, Walker (2001, p. 181) concedes that the Australian colleges play a "far less crucial [role] in the academic life and progress" of college students than in the Oxbridge model. In spite of this reduced academic role, colleges are inherently educational settings (as evidenced in the original state land grants for the establishment of the colleges at the University of Melbourne). Traditional colleges continue to see themselves as educational institutions and understand their role as producing future leaders of society (Forsyth, 2014; Walker, 2016). For example, academic tutorials are offered by college-employed tutors to supplement formal university instruction, and additional educational resources are provided on college campuses for students such as study facilities, libraries and librarians.

However, colleges also offer an educational experience beyond formal tutorials; extracurricular activities are viewed through the lens of educational opportunity. Student leadership, for example, is celebrated for its capacity to provide educational experiences for students that will offer utility and advantage for students' future employment and community endeavours. Additionally, in traditional colleges, the head of college and/or dean are often themselves practicing academics

and regular wearing of academic gowns by both staff and students is a common practice at tutorials, meals and on formal occasions.

There is a shared identity amongst the college community flowing from the educational focus of the institutions and the common university experience. Education, and educational institutions, are central to the dominant class' broader hegemonising project (Gramsci, 1977). In such settings, the value of 'knowledge' and the differential attitudes towards ways of knowing operate to reinforce the dominant class' power while marginalising others. Traditionally, colleges have been sites of educational and economic advantage (Martin, 2012). The provision of financial assistance to applicants "who demonstrated strong academic ability" (Walker, 2001, p. 178) further demonstrates the prioritisation of academic excellence in these educational settings.

The site of inquiry for this research is also a residential setting. The residential nature of the college has been described by the AHRC (2017, p. 11) as heightening risk for students, as "easy access to bedrooms … provides perpetrators with a space in which to commit sexual assault or sexual harassment". Further, unlike universities, students and (some) staff do not leave this educational setting to return to their domestic worlds. Rather, the educational and residential/domestic are entwined. For the period of their attendance at the college, these spaces are effectively students' homes. Walker (2018, p. 20) explains that colleges,

> as places of belonging and being known … are home and family; places of support and security while away from the family, friendships and familiarity of home towns and countries.

The educational and residential dimensions of the college have been presented here as dichotomous to reflect the potential tension between the dual purposes of these settings and to foreshadow the additional complexities of implementing gender-transformative work in these settings (as discussed in the findings). However, they are not dichotomous in reality. Theoretically, the residential nature of the sites was intended to foster and enrich the educational experience of students. This enrichment may include the opportunity to informally foster knowledge sharing between academics, staff and students around dinner tables and (figurative and literal) fireplaces in social settings.

4.2.3.2 Private/public

The complexity of these sites is further amplified in how participants in this site of inquiry navigate the public and private spheres of their lives inside the college. Colleges are both private and public spaces and private and public domains. Insofar as they are private and public spaces, colleges are places of communal living and learning, while also being places where students live in their 'private' spaces (their rooms). There is little privacy or personal space, beyond bedrooms.

Beyond the physical spaces, colleges are also coded as both public and private domains. Behaviours, norms and broader expectations differ across public and private domains. The performance of gender may also be informed by these differential domains. This duality is important to highlight in this context, as research attests to the differential attitudes, beliefs and values of young people across private and public domains (Webster et al., 2021).

4.2.3.3 Physical environment

College institutions themselves are physical environments, with buildings and facilities that are generally inaccessible to those who are not students or staff. Most are located adjacent to university campuses. The architectures reflect the histories of the institutions; some colleges in Australia are built as replicas of sister colleges at Oxford or Cambridge. Thelin and Yankovich (1987, p. 57) identified the centrality of physical environments to the collegiate experience, highlighting the manner in which "historic and monumental" architectures serve as both "a source of pride and affiliation". Kuh and Whitt (1988) understand college architectures as artefacts of college cultures reflecting institutional values. Many of the colleges were initially built as men-only residences and as such, the portraits of college heads and sporting teams that adorn the walls of dining halls and common rooms are mostly of men, reminding students that women are a recent addition to these spaces. Traditional colleges also include religious spaces, such as chapels, and here again the walls are adorned with honour roles of men students and alumni who gave their lives in wars.

4.2.4 External context of college settings

Colleges, as institutions, are also influenced by the external context of the setting. There is a socio-structural relationship between these external institutions (which include the university, church and state) and the college. There is also, of course, an interrelationship between the external institutions themselves. University graduates "have a substantial voice" in the public and political realms (Forsyth, 2014, p. 204). The external context of the sites of inquiry of this research informed the data collection, analysis and discussion and is reflected in the findings, despite being outside the scope of the research question. Research evidences the gendered nature of these institutions themselves: universities (Tack, 2022), the church (Homan & Burdette, 2021) and the state (Lowndes, 2020). There is also an emerging body of knowledge relating to the prevention of gendered violence in these distinct institutions (see e.g. Our Watch et al. [2021] in universities, Davis et al. [2021] in churches and AHRC [2021] for the state).

4.2.4.1 University

The gendered nature of universities was examined in the literature review at **2.2.1**. As described above under **4.1**, there are differing relationships between different university student accommodation settings and universities. For the traditional colleges, which are the sites and setting of this research, there are limited contractual arrangements between colleges and their affiliated universities. However, it is important to outline the other manners in which the university may, nevertheless, influence the college setting.

Historically, university-affiliated colleges exerted influence on their affiliated universities. Historically, college heads/masters were appointed to senior roles in affiliated universities, including university boards/councils and as senior academics with teaching and/or research positions (paid or honorary). While the neoliberal shift towards non-academic corporate appointments to boards/councils has seen the scale of this formal influence on governance structures decrease in recent decades, it is of note that the heads of college in the sites of inquiry in this study were educators with academic backgrounds.

The relationship between the college and their affiliated university is one of mutuality; universities need student accommodation but also need the sense of institutional loyalty (and resulting fundraising contributions) that college alumni provide. Universities have an interest in colleges addressing issues such as gendered violence, with the "toxic culture of the residential colleges" in Australian universities being described by ERoCA (2018, p. 5) as harmful to both individual students and the "very reputation and marketability of the University itself". Colleges rely on their affiliated university's academic status and student enrolments and goodwill for the college's continued existence.

4.2.4.2 Church

The traditional colleges, universities and the Christian Church (across its denominational breadth) are historically linked (Walker, 2001) and situated in the Australian colonial project (Fong, 2019, p. 2). Fong (2019, p. 2), writing on the connections between the University of Sydney and established religion, observed that denominational settings, such as colleges or denominational clubs in universities, "si[t] at the terminus of the historical evolution of religious appeasement and secularity in Australia". Following the Oxbridge model, distinct denominational colleges were established (on land granted by the state) to provide for theological and other education in a compromise, as the first universities in Sydney and Melbourne were legislatively established with explicitly secular foundations. Most of these institutions were established through church denominational governing bodies as independent not-for-profit organisations providing both

accommodation for university students and theological education for trainee clergy (Corney, 2016, p. 8). The influence of the institutional church denominations continues, despite the transition away from the provision of theological training.

In traditional colleges governance is still linked to the denomination itself, with college masters/heads being accountable to the relevant boards and councils who have various reporting lines back to their denominational governance (Walker, 2001). Further, the continued influence of the relevant church denomination is explicit in the conduct of regular religious services and observance of traditions, such as the recitation of grace (in Latin) before communal meals and provision of pastoral care by chaplains. The physical structures in the setting also reinforce the church's influence; chapels are common and alumni often return to be married in college chapels or on college grounds.

As discussed above, colleges historically employed clergy in administrative, pastoral and leadership positions. Staff appointment priorities have shifted; however, denominational influence continues. For example, denominational colleges often require senior staff to be members of their denomination. Overall, the need for these sites to be financially viable (by attracting and retaining students in an increasingly competitive market) has resulted in colleges needing to be less overtly 'religious' than at their founding. Walker (2011, p. 2) has also observed that college relationships with affiliated universities have resulted in a "secularis[ation]" of colleges. Even if secularised to some degree, there is a continuing presence of church denominational influence through leadership and religious observance in colleges, and this influence distinguishes colleges from universities with their secular foundations.[11]

The continuing influence of the institutional church may have implications for disrupting gender power relations and the dominant gender ideologies which maintain women's oppression, owing to the role of religion "as a vehicle for endorsing and reinforcing patriarchy" (Crittenden & Wright, 2013, p. 1270; see also Hannover et al., 2018; Nyhagen, 2019). In educational settings, the ongoing influence of religion has also been identified as reinforcing a binary understanding of gender and gender essentialism (Callaghan et al., 2023; McClain & Schrodt, 2024).

4.2.4.3 State

The traditional colleges at the original sandstone universities owe their existence, in part, to land grants from the state, as a part of their founding; many continue to receive tax exemptions as

[11] There is a more recent outlier: in 1991, four Catholic tertiary institutions were amalgamated and Australian Catholic University was opened in Melbourne.

educational institutions. Colleges are subject to some of the legislative requirements of the state. However, the regulatory force has been limited in so far as the presence of exceptions to anti-discrimination legislation available to educational and religious institutions. Unlike universities more broadly, the college setting context is further complicated by the duty of care obligations that colleges owe to their students, under torts.[12] Colleges owe their students a *pastoral duty of care* (*SMA v John XXIII College (No 2)* [2020]; *Waters v Winter and The University of New England* [1998]). A recent judgment of the ACT Supreme Court of Appeal found a college had breached its duty of care in both the "handling of [student sexual assault victim/survivor's] complaint" (*John XXIII College v SMA* [2022], [13]) and in staff directing students to leave the college premises to continue drinking elsewhere, while intoxicated.

Further, as colleges are not subject to the oversight of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) as universities are, regulatory efforts promoted through TEQSA by the federal government are of limited consequence to colleges.[13] This is a challenge that has been recently highlighted in the context of the Universities Accord process (DoE, 2023b, 2024a) and in Henry's (2023) recent doctoral work.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter has visually presented and described the contextual frame that informed the research design, data collection and analysis and findings in the unique institutional setting of colleges. The frame examined the complexity of the interrelated structures in this context (in line with the critical feminist lens of this research) and distinguished the distinctive nature of the college setting from tertiary education settings more broadly. The frame described the social, cultural, internal and external contextual categories of colleges, and outlined their relationship to the research questions. In addition to these structures being explicitly analysed in the discussion (**Chapter 6**), the contextual frame categories are adopted in the next chapter to describe the participating sites and are revisited in the findings (**Chapter 7**). The next chapter outlines the research's methodology.

[12] In the context of the Universities Accord submission process, NUS (Aus) (2023) advocated for the adoption of a university duty of care modelled on New Zealand's code for universities (see New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2021). This was not adopted in the Final Accord Report (Department of Education (Cth), 2024).

[13] The Commonwealth Department of Education is currently consulting on a National Student Ombudsman to escalate complaints about their higher education provider. It is as yet unclear whether this will eventuate and, if so, whether it would include university residential colleges.

5. Methodology

To answer the research question and sub-questions, this study adopted a critical qualitative methodology (Denzin et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research employed focus group interviews ($n = 6$) to collect data documenting the experiences and perspectives of student leaders, senior students with formal/informal leadership roles and residential advisors ($n = 74$). This approach enabled the researcher to identify and examine the ways in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in two college sites in Melbourne, Victoria (Jubas, 2010).

The research design was guided by the critical feminist theoretical lens (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). This chapter outlines the research data-gathering approach, recruitment of sites of inquiry and participant selection and recruitment. It then outlines the methods by which data were collected and analysed, before describing the ethical considerations that informed the research. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations.

5.1 Research approach

Consistent with the critical feminist theoretical orientation which provided the "underlying structure, … scaffolding [and] frame" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85) of this research, the study adopted a critical qualitative approach (Denzin et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rooted in social and political critique, a critical research paradigm focuses the research on questions of power in the particular site of inquiry, including how power is "negotiated … [and] what structures in society reinforce the current distribution of power" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 10). Denzin et al. (2017, p. 494) describe critical qualitative inquiry as being informed by "various complex power relations and discourses of injustice of various kinds". This approach offered utility in examining the research topic relating to the ways in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in the sites of inquiry of this study.

A critical qualitative approach "assumes that people's narratives about their lived experiences within relations of power provide insight into mechanisms of reproduction" (Hextrum, 2020, p. 1057; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A critical qualitative research paradigm is grounded in an *epistemological* perspective which views reality(ies) as being "situated in political, social [and] cultural contexts" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 12; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and acknowledges certain realities are privileged. Such an epistemological perspective aligns with the research questions that were designed to examine the role of the traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies in the sites, and the role of student leaders and college

administrations in maintaining and/or countering gender power relations. Further, consistent with critical feminism's orientation to change (Collins, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) (as described at **3.1.3**), a critical paradigm seeks to "bring about change" through the research (Crotty, 1998, p. 113).

Finally, a critical paradigm in educational settings focuses the inquiry on how the educational institution itself "is structured such that the interests of some members and classes of society are preserved and perpetuated at the expense of others" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 13). Employed elsewhere in educational research (see e.g. Diem et al., 2014, 2019; Young & Diem, 2017), a critical research paradigm further informs research design in three ways: (1) in the focus on "complexities and systems in which [the] phenomena take[s] place" (Nash & Young, 2023, p. 232); (2) in the emphasis on historical context; and (3) in the emphasis on the "relationship between theory and method" (Nash & Young, 2023, p. 232). The specific complexities and systems in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in colleges and the unique historical contexts of colleges guided the design of this research, as outlined in the contextual frame at **4.2**. Finally, the research was designed to maintain consistency between the critical feminist theoretical orientation of the paper and the methods utilised to answer the research questions.

5.2 Recruitment of sites

Two participant college sites were identified based on existing networks and the willingness of each site's administration to participate. In qualitative research, multiple sources of data increase the reliability and validity of findings (Patton, 2015). The research did not focus on a comparison between the sites of inquiry and did not seek to provide a representative sample of students, but rather a focus on student leaders. The two sites were constituted differently, as outlined below. A summary of the sites according to the categories of the contextual frame **(Figure 1)** is presented in **Table 2**.

5.2.1 Site one

The first college site recruited was a small (approximately 50 students), independent, not-for-profit institution constituted under the auspices of a local mainstream Protestant church of a Christian denomination. Established in the mid-20th century, this site caters primarily for undergraduate students from country and regional areas moving to Melbourne for tertiary studies. It is not affiliated with any one university, but rather students attend multiple universities across metropolitan Melbourne. Staff employed by the local denomination that runs the residential college live onsite. These staff undertake a range of positions, primarily focused on pastoral care

and broader support for students transitioning from living regionally or from interstate to Melbourne. There are also a small number of local church members (who may be postgraduate students and/or alumni) living on campus, fulfilling leadership, administrative, educational and pastoral roles. The site has a small cohort of elected student leaders but no formalised student club.

5.2.2 Site two

The second college site recruited was a large (approximately 300 students), university-affiliated, independent institution governed by a large denominational Christian Church organisation. Site two was also established in the mid-20th century and originally designed for men students only but opened to women within a decade of opening.[14] Students from metropolitan Melbourne, regional and country Victoria, interstate and overseas live onsite and attend the affiliated, adjacent university. Students attend this site for up to three years (or longer if continuing into postgraduate studies) and student leaders are elected in their second and third years. A small number of students are also employed by the site as residential advisors. There is an active, independent student club that facilitates activities. There are a range of staff employed and living on campus, fulfilling leadership, administrative, educational and pastoral roles. There are also staff members who have teaching roles in the affiliated university who live onsite and provide tutorials at the site.

Table 1: Summary description of sites of inquiry according to contextual frame categories

Contextual frame category		**Site one**	**Site two**
Social	Students	50 undergraduate students from regional Victoria and interstate.	≈ 300 students (mostly undergraduate but some postgraduate) from metropolitan Melbourne, country and regional areas, interstate and overseas.
	Student leaders	Elected student leaders (second-year students), with gender balance requirements.	Elected student leaders (second- and third-year students) and active student club, with no prescribed

[14] Compared to many other traditional colleges, the time between the institutions founding and the time when it was opened to women is decades shorter.

Contextual frame category		Site one	Site two
			gender balance requirements.
	College administration	Small staff group, including leadership, pastoral and transitional support. Church members, postgraduate students and/or college alumni volunteer as residential advisors. The head of college is appointed by a management committee and the associated church. The chief governance body is a management committee.	Large staff group, including leadership, administration, wellbeing, education and pastoral support roles. Senior undergraduate students employed as residential advisors. A small number of undergraduate students are employed to support operations. The head of college is appointed by the council. The chief governance body is a council appointed by the denominational archdiocese.
	Alumni	Informal alumni influence (some past or postgraduate students employed in pastoral roles).	Established alumni networks and alumni participation in select events/activities.
Cultural	History, stories and traditions	Established mid-20th century. Open to women and men. *To be examined further in the study.*	Established mid-20th century for men. Open to women within a decade of opening. *To be examined in further the study.*
	Norms, attitudes and beliefs	*To be examined in the study.*	
	Student-led activities	No formal student club.	Active, autonomous student club.
	Policies	Student handbook, codes of conduct. No alcohol onsite. *Informal policies are to be examined in the study.*	Student handbook, codes of conduct. Alcohol is provided and consumed onsite,

Contextual frame category		Site one	Site two
			according to relevant alcohol policy. *Informal policies are to be examined in the study.*
Internal	Educational	No formal educational facilities or supports (such as tutoring). All students are university students.	Educational facilities (e.g. library) and academic support (e.g. tutors and formal classes) are offered. All students are university students.
	Residential	Students live onsite during university semesters.	Students live onsite during university semesters.
	Private sphere	Students share bedrooms (two per room).	Students have their own bedrooms.
	Public sphere	Students negotiate shared common areas (e.g. dining areas and leisure spaces) and may participate in activities and events.	Students negotiate shared common areas (e.g. dining areas and leisure spaces) and may participate in activities and events.
External	University	No formal relationship with a single university. Students attend a variety of universities that are located away from the site.	University affiliated. All students attend that one university. Located close to the university campus. Some university staff live at the site. University representative on college council.
	State	Subject to legislation and duty of care requirements.	Subject to legislation and duty of care requirements.
	Church	The site is run by a Protestant denominational Christian Church, geographically located next to a local church with	Denominational Christian Church. For the first 30 years of operation, the master (head of college) was an ordained priest and leader in

Contextual frame category		Site one	Site two
		shared facilities and church members living onsite. The site leadership team are religious. Optional religious services are offered at the auspicing church located next to the site. Members of the local church are members of the management committee.	the associated religious order. More recently, the master is religious but not an ordained priest or leader. The site is under the direction of the Victorian bishop of the associated denomination. Chaplaincy is provided by a priest and optional religious services are offered. Clergy are members of the college council, along with lay members.

5.3 Recruitment of participants

5.3.1 Recruitment methods

To answer the research questions, this study sought to capture data relating to the traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies, and the interrelated role of student leaders and college administrations in the sites of inquiry. As a result, students holding leadership positions were purposefully recruited (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Miles et al., 2019). Data were sourced from three different (but overlapping) participant cohorts (student leaders, senior students and residential advisors) (Flick, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2019). Collecting data from three participant cohorts allowed for the subjectivities of differing power holders within the research settings to be investigated. This resulted in a richer examination of the sites' contexts and structures. Recruiting participants in these formal and informal roles was intentional for three reasons. Firstly, this ensured participants had lived at the site for at least one year. As a result, these participants had relevant knowledge which could be examined to answer the first research sub-question. Secondly, the participants were themselves student leaders or residential advisors who facilitated student-led activities and/or who had the most visibility out of the broader student body into the role of college administrations in their sites. This approach enabled data to be collected to answer the second research sub-question relating to student leaders, student-led activities and college administrations. The recruitment of student leaders and

residential advisors also enabled this thesis to contribute to the gap in knowledge and build on previous research which recommended that further "action" in colleges in Australia focuses on student leadership (Broderick, 2017, p. 6).

Finally, recruiting residential advisors, as employees of the college administrations, enabled perspectives on college administrations and informal institutional policies to be documented. Residential advisors play a unique role in colleges and are frequently involved in pastoral care and reporting. The inclusion of college administrators in the participant pool was considered; however, the scope of this research was limited to ensure feasibility. The approach of collecting data from students, rather than the college administration, was also consistent with the critical feminist commitment to prioritising the lived experiences of those experiencing oppression in their specific local contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; de Saxe, 2012; Dadds, 2011; Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

Additionally, the recruitment of student leaders, senior students and residential advisors, as opposed to members of the student body more broadly, was important owing to the unique leadership roles and influence these participants occupied and exerted in their college settings. In this investigation of gender power relations, engaging with participants who hold power over others and are subject to others' power (i.e. college administrations) is both appropriate and central to answering the second research sub-question. Further, in line with the research's critical feminist commitment to be oriented towards change (Davis, 1981a, 1981b; de Saxe, 2016; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Muñoz, 2019), recruiting student leaders, senior students and residential advisors as participants allowed the research to consider the existing and potential resistance practices of those in formal positions of power to be considered. Finally, the researcher anticipated and acknowledged that the participants, in (differing) roles of leadership inside colleges (which are themselves places of educational and economic power), would already be experiencing some level of power and privilege. Following a critical feminist approach, this dynamic was acknowledged and interrogated in the study's analysis and identified as a limitation of this research (see **4.6**).

The research adopted a purposeful approach to sampling student participants (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2015) to recruit participants in the specific roles identified above in the sites of inquiry. A total of 74 student leaders, senior students and residential advisors participated across the six focus groups. As some participants occupied more than one role and the focus of the study was not a comparison of perspectives based on position, participant numbers are reported collectively. The sample size was opportunistic, based on the availability of student leaders, senior students and residential advisors (Wright & Sim, 2002). The sample size exceeded the minimum of 20 participants suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2022) as being required in qualitative

descriptive studies. Finally, the sample size exceeds the number of participants in comparable qualitative studies in college settings in Australia (Leontini et al., 2015, 2017).

To enable access to the sites and participants, the researcher sought the support of the college administrative staff, who are the "gatekeepers" of the sites of inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 199). With their endorsement, recruitment was facilitated through the college administrations at each site. To ensure participants were able to provide informed consent (National Health and Medical Research Council et al. [NHMRC], 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2022), participants were recruited through the distribution of flyers through existing student leadership group communication channels (e.g. WhatsApp and Facebook groups). Administrative staff at the sites were asked to distribute the information for participants form to the student leadership executive, senior students and residential advisors. The research protocol included the researcher's email address for participants to contact to raise any questions relating to the study. The information for participants document was made available to students before their participation to enable them to consider their self-interests and discuss the "information and their decision with others if they wish" (NHMRC, 2018, p. 16).

Additionally, before the focus group interviews, participants were provided with a hard copy of the consent form. The researcher explained the research project, that individual participants would not be identified in the research, how the data collected would be kept by the researchers and how the data would be used and managed. Participants were reminded that focus groups are not confidential and invited participants to consider the potential risks involved if they chose to participate. Participants were then given the opportunity to sign the consent form before the formal focus group interview began. The explanation of the research was audio-recorded for each focus group interview. These processes went beyond "mere[ly] satisfy[ing] of formal requirements" (NHMRC, 2018, p. 16) and sought to engage potential participants in an open discussion of the research processes and allow them to consider their self-interests. These processes aimed towards building "mutual understanding" (NHMRC, 2018, p. 16) between the participants and the researcher, as a form of power-sharing. A university ethics application (HRE20-037) was successfully obtained for this project.

5.3.2 Participant demographics

The participants in this study were students, primarily in their second and third years of university and attendance at their college, aged between 19 and 22 years, with the majority being aged 20. Each participant held a formal or informal leadership role either as an elected student leader or as

a senior student in the college. Some participants held more than one role at the site (e.g. a voluntary student leader and also a residential advisor).

The participants included women (n = 39) and men (n = 35). As the research adopted a purposeful approach to sampling students, focused on recruiting students in established positions of leadership to enable an investigation of the unique role of student leaders in the college setting, there were no students who satisfied the recruitment criteria who identified as gender-diverse. This may be reflective of the cisnormative culture present in the sites (see **6.9.1**), which marginalises students who do not conform to binary conceptions of gender from leadership positions (Anderson, 2024). The researcher acknowledges that cultures in these sites may render it unsafe for students to openly identify as gender diverse. As a result, there may have been gender-diverse participants who did not disclose their identities to the researcher in the focus groups.

Additionally, the research participants were predominantly of Anglo-Celtic origin, despite the presence of a (small) culturally diverse student population at both sites. Again, questions of access to positions of power, relating to race and culture, may be relevant. It follows that the white women participants in this study occupy their own positions of privilege, relative to other women. As identified at **2.2.1**, Australia's university system has privileged white, middle-class women "compared to other areas of disadvantage" (Forsyth, 2014, p. 215). This is amplified in colleges where there are additional 'merit-based' admission selection processes.

As described above, the two sites of inquiry had distinctive student cohorts. The participants from site one were primarily from regional and rural Victoria; the participants from site two were primarily from metropolitan Melbourne, with some regional students. The fees at site two were higher than at site one, suggesting that participants at site two had more (familial) financial resources available to them. In many ways, site two conforms to the imagery of the 'elitist' institution, as described in the literature review and the cultural frame. However, participants from both sites were firmly from the middle class.

5.4 Data collection

Data were collected from student leaders, senior students and residential advisors at two college sites through face-to-face focus group interviews (see **Table 2**). Focus group interviews were selected to allow for depth of insights to be captured and examined. The use of this method allowed for participants' "subjectivities" to be acknowledged and explored in depth and enabled

the “multiple, intersecting forms of human … agency to order and reorder social and cultural life” to be examined (Kamberelis et al. 2018, pp. 699, 712).

Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews in line with the “collectivist, sociocentric” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 111) critical feminist priorities of this research. The use of “socially oriented” (Marshall et al., 2021, p. 169) focus group interviews enabled participants’ contributions relating to their feelings and experiences in their residence. The approach of collecting and analysing participants’ “feelings and experiences”, developed in a specific “social context” of the college, was consistent with critical qualitative methodologies operating from an epistemological stance that views engagement with “the people” as central to knowledge (Jubas, 2010, p. 226). Adopting focus groups, rather than individual interviews, allowed for a broader range of lived experiences to be represented in the data. The research participants also had more power and “more control over the interaction” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 114) than the researcher, by virtue of their numbers.

Additionally, Guest et al. (2017) suggest that participants are more likely to share openly in a focus group setting than in a one-on-one interview, as focus groups can replicate the everyday experience of talking amongst peers (Wilkinson, 1998). This process allowed participants’ understandings and contributions to be informed by the contributions of their peers (Marshall et al., 2021). As gender power regimes are locally constructed (Waling, 2019a) and gender is performative and socially constructed (Butler, 1990; McCook, 2022), the focus group questions explored through semi-structured conversations in the natural (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), social setting of participants’ residential sites. This allowed for data relating to the social and cultural dimensions of the gender power relations in their local institutional context to be collected.

A total of six face-to-face focus group interviews were conducted (see **Table 2**) across the two sites. As the recruitment yielded a larger number of participants than anticipated, the focus groups were facilitated in a manner that allowed for small group reflections before larger group discussions (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The responses from focus group participants in the large group discussion were audio-recorded and transcribed, and participant responses were de-identified. Data (including transcripts and researcher notes) were thematically analysed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) (see **5.5**).

Table 2: Data collection methods

	Identifier[15]	Number of participants	Participants' genders	Participants	Focus group topic / Content
Focus groups Set 1: Preliminary focus groups					
Site one	FG1S1W	13	Women only	Senior students and student leaders	Themes of safety, respect, equality, celebration and participation. See **Appendix A** for an indicative interview schedule.
	FG1S1M	8	Men only	Senior students, and student leaders and residential advisors	
Site two	FG1S2W	8	Women only		
	FG1S2M	14	Men only		
Focus groups Set 2: Vignette focus groups					
Site one	FG2S1	11	7 women, 4 men	Senior students, and student leaders and residential advisors	Questions relating to a vignette (informed by data collected in the first set of focus groups). See **Appendix B** for the vignette and reflective discussion questions.
Site two	FG2S2	20	11 women, 9 men		

[15] These identifiers are used as data references in the discussion and results (in **Chapter 6**) for verbatim quotes.

5.4.1 Content of focus groups

In order to collect data that sought to answer the research questions, the study used semi-structured, open-ended questions that allowed for in-depth responses from, and between, participants on the research topic. Seeking depth was in line with the research's critical feminist theoretical orientation and its critical paradigm (Diem et al., 2014). Interview protocols were consistently used to guide each focus group interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The researcher faced two design challenges when collecting data to answer the research question and sub-questions. The first challenge related to the trend of young people's sense that gender equality has already been substantially achieved, and, as a result, they are "less aware of inequalities in more subtle forms" (Politoff, 2019, p. 13). Additionally, existing gender power relations and the norms that maintain the status quo are often accepted as common sense (Kiguwa et al., 2019). Therefore, the researcher anticipated that participants may not have interrogated these relations and norms prior to participating in the focus groups. To enable participant reflection and contribution, the focus group interview content was designed to focus on participants' feelings and experiences around their everyday lives across areas that were more familiar and accessible to them.

5.4.1.1 Focus group Set 1: Themes of safety, respect, equality, celebration and participation

In light of the challenges above, for the first set of focus groups (two per site as described at **5.4.2**), the indicative interview questions were designed to "essentially parse the central phenomenon" of gender power regimes "into its parts" (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 203). In line with the critical feminist orientation, the interview questions related to the following themes drawn from the State of Victoria's *Safe and strong* gender equality strategy (Department of Premier & Cabinet, 2016): safety, respect, equality, celebration and participation. The researcher invited women participants to share responses from their own experiences, while men participants were invited to respond to questions relating to their own experiences and to also consider women's experiences. The questions were designed to both collect data to answer the research questions and to inform the vignette used in the second set of focus groups.[16]

5.4.1.2 Focus group Set 2: Vignette

The research question focused on the ways in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in the particular setting of the college. The second set of focus groups (one per site)

[16] See **Appendix A** for the indicative interview schedule.

sought to capture data that explicitly moved beyond individual participants' experiences of gender inequality and descriptions of the current gender power regime. To enable the researcher to examine the contextualised factors that constitute the maintenance of gender power relations in the sites of inquiry, the second set of focus groups focused on the broader traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies in the sites, and the roles of college administrations and students leaders in their settings.

In the second set of focus groups, a vignette was used to generate discussion and participant reflection (Barter & Renold, 1999; McInroy & Beer, 2022; Wilks, 2004). Vignettes are short stories that invite participants to respond to a fictional situation (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Vignettes have been used in qualitative research relating to young people and gendered violence (Aujla, 2020; Barter & Renold, 2000; Burrell, 2021). Vignettes are particularly valuable for research relating to the gender order (Blum et al., 2019) and in the related study of people's gendered attitudes and perceptions (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Notably, Barter and Renold (1999, p. 1) noted that vignettes allow participants to discuss sensitive topics in a "less personal and therefore less threatening way" by allowing participants to "differentiate self from hypothetical protagonists of same and opposite sex" (Blum et al., 2019, p. 1). This anticipated benefit was particularly useful in this research, as the participants in the first set of focus groups initially stated that there was no gender inequality in their colleges (see **6.3.3** and **6.6.3**). However, using a vignette (and accompanying related questions) in the second set of focus groups, participants contributed a "discursive interpretation" (Hughes, 1998, p. 383) of how the characters in the narrative experienced marginalisation and oppression in their (fictional) residential settings, and the role of institutional cultures in perpetuating marginalisation, and were able to identify areas of continuity with their own experiences in their colleges.

The use of vignettes has been criticised for being inauthentic owing to the "very distance they create from the narrative that facilitates participants' unvarnished responses" (Blum et al., 2019, p. 2). Hughes (1998) tempers this risk by asserting that no single research tool can "wholly capture real life" (p. 384). Further, strategies can be employed in vignette design to enable participants to respond to the scenario in "much the same way as they would to a real-life situation" (Hughes, 1998, p. 385). These strategies include the prioritisation of creating a realistic, relevant story that avoids "an atmosphere of 'make believe'" (Finch, 1987, p. 109). To ensure the authenticity of the vignette, the story was drafted using language and scenarios participants shared in the first set of focus groups and was constructed as a composite (Spalding & Phillips, 2007) of different stories offered by both men and women participants in the first set of focus groups (Hughes, 1998). The discussion questions further sought to bridge the gap between the created vignette and the

participants' realities by inviting them to reflect on the scenario and what the characters might be feeling or should do, followed by explicit questions about the participants' own experiences in the sites of inquiry. Additionally, the first question participants were asked to reflect on was whether the vignette was realistic and whether the fictional scenario was something they could see happening at their site. All participants responded positively to the vignette. One reflected: "We looked at the whole scenario and it was like 'I've seen this happen, this exact thing'" (Man, FG2S1). Another commented: "We thought that something like this could be seen happening at [site two]" (Woman, FG2S2).[17]

5.4.2 Gendered grouping of participants in focus groups

The first set of focus groups was conducted in gender-specific groups.[18] In the small group reflections in the second set of focus groups, participants were also grouped according to gender, before sharing their responses in a larger mixed-gender discussion. As differential gendered power was an underlying assumption of this research, the employment of homogenous participant cohorts was important to mitigate predicted gender power differentials between participants of different genders. Additionally, the research design was informed by the critical feminist tradition, which is grounded in an orientation towards structural change (Collins, 2019) and, as a result, has often harnessed Sandoval's (2000) differential consciousness in educational settings (Beck et al., 2021; de Saxe, 2016; McLeod, 2009; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2015). In light of this theoretical influence, the researcher anticipated that by segregating groups based on gender in the focus groups, participants would:

> realis[e] group commonalities in what had previously been considered individual and personal problems … [and] women [would] develop a clearer sense of the social and political processes through which their experiences are constructed – and perhaps also a desire to organise against them. (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 115)[19]

5.5 Data analysis

To answer the research question and sub-questions, data were collected from six focus group interviews and thematically analysed. Thematic analysis is a category of methods of "identifying,

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[17] See **Appendix B** for the vignette and questions for reflection and discussion.

[18] Participants were invited to self-select which focus group to attend. The researcher acknowledges that the binary categorisation of focus groups would not have been appropriate if there were identified non-binary participants.

[19] Any conscientization (Freire, 2009) or collective organisation against these social and political processes by participants resulting from their participation is beyond the scope of this study.

analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). This research adopted Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach to thematic analysis. This chapter outlines the interpretive (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), recursive (Byrne, 2022) and "predominantly deductive" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397) approach to the critical (Denzin et al., 2017) analysis. Consistent with the critical qualitative methodology (Denzin et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the analysis was guided by the critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) theoretical frame of this research, and the associated research questions informed the development of the a priori list of analytical codes.

5.5.1 Thematic analysis approach

5.5.1.1 Thematic analysis as an interpretive process

Thematic analysis is an inherently interpretive practice (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Thorne (2020, p. 149) contends that the researcher's lens "inevitably and fundamentally paints the colours and defines the contours [in which the researcher] … will see the field". Any resulting interpretation, therefore, is reflective of the "decisional model" that the researcher adopts to reconcile data (Thorne, 2020, p. 153). This is consistent with qualitative approaches broadly, which do not "contend to provide a single or 'correct' answer" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1393) from the interpretation. This is because the researcher's interpretive decisions are rooted in their conceptual and/or theoretical framework. As such, the results and discussion of this data analysis do not "simply describe what participants report[ed]' (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2030). Rather, the analysis offered the researcher's "interpretation of the patterns" and the "infer[red] meaning about experiences, perspectives, or belief systems through the lens of a particular conceptual or theoretical framework" (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2031). In this study, the data were interpreted through the researcher's critical feminist lens.

5.5.1.2 Thematic analysis as an iterative process

Despite various thematic analysis methods being presented as a series of linear, sequential steps, thematic analysis is not a linear process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It follows that the analysis for this thesis was not linear but iterative (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and recursive (Byrne, 2022). It was iterative to the extent that the data collection and initial data analysis 'phases' were "undertaken concurrently" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). Tentative themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were identified and presented to participants in situ for feedback and validation as part of the focus group interview process. This allowed for the verification of initial themes to be "interwoven" throughout the data collection process (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 12). Additionally, the data from the first set of focus groups was analysed and the initial themes

informed the development of a vignette used in the second set of focus groups (Miles et al., 2019). Miles et al. (2019, p. 152) suggest that this "intentional iteration of additional data collection and reanalysis ensure[s] a more robust set of findings" and sequential analysis results in "progressively more 'big picture' analysis". Further, the process was recursive to the extent that the researcher frequently returned to the data itself and revisited and refined codes and themes as patterns in the data necessitated, whilst "building connections to literature" (Terry et al., 2017, p. 29).

5.5.1.3 Inductive and deductive thematic analysis approaches

An inductive approach to thematic analysis is a *bottom-up* method, driven by data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes develop through the process (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018). Conversely, Azungah (2018, p. 391) states that a deductive (or *top-down*) approach to interpretative data analysis adopts an "organising framework" in which to develop themes. There are a range of scholarly views relating to the exclusive use (or otherwise) of inductive or deductive approaches and how, or if, they should be pursued in data analysis (Thorne, 2020). However, Byrne (2022) cautions that qualitative data analysis is rarely exclusively deductive or inductive.

This research adopted a "predominantly deductive" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397) approach to the critical analysis, with additional themes identified inductively as they developed through the analytic process (Xu & Zammit, 2020). This was appropriate as the thesis sought to specifically examine the "influence of power, and the perpetuation of [men's] domination" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 103) in the sites of inquiry. As a result, the analysis was actively guided by the theoretical lens, the research questions and the contextual frame to move beyond the text of the data itself and to "move closer to challenge dominant structures" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 103), while also allowing for additional themes to be *constructed*[20] inductively throughout the data collection and analysis process.

5.5.1.4 Research questions as the analytical lens

Castleberry and Nolen (2018, p. 808) assert that themes "capture something important about the data in relation to the research question". The data analysis sought to "communicate something meaningful that help[ed] to answer the research question(s)" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1403). The

[20] Throughout this thesis, the inductive component of the thematic analysis is described as being one where themes were "constructed" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35) rather than describing themes as "emerging" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). This was an intentional decision to identify the active role the researcher played in the development of the themes.

researcher was persuaded by Lochmiller's (2021, p. 2030) contention that thematic analysis is a "fundamentally question-driven exercise". As such, the analysis was informed by an a priori "starting list" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 58; see also Castleberry & Nolan, 2018; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) of preliminary, "researcher-centric" (Azungah, 2018, p. 394) codes drawn from the constituent parts of the research questions. The research questions were developed consistent with the theoretical lens. As such they "integrate[d] concepts already well known in the extant literature" and were applied in the analysis process in anticipation that certain concepts would be present in the data (Bradley et al., 2007, p. 1763; Castleberry & Nolan, 2018; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

As the analysis in this study was "predominantly" deductive (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397), and was informed by the critical feminist theoretical lens and research questions, the analysis in this thesis was "an inevitably and thoroughly partial reading" of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 174; Thorne, 2020). While adopting a critical feminist theoretical lens in the analysis allowed for certain themes to be "revealed" and interrogated, the researcher acknowledges that this theoretical frame may also have "conceal[ed] other aspects" (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 31; Carter & Little, 2007; Thorne, 2020).

5.5.1.5 Latent level analysis

Thematic analysis can allow for underlying meanings and their connection to the structural elements in the research questions to be inferred from the participants' perspectives (Lochmiller, 2021). This critical analysis focused on the latent rather than just the semantic level to allow the "salience and meaning" (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2029) of the data to be analysed and ascertained beyond the explicit statements of the participants.

5.5.2 Thematic analysis process

Informed by the critical qualitative methodology (Denzin et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens of this research, the researcher adapted Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach of deductive coding and theme development for the analysis of the focus group data. Their hybrid approach incorporates the adoption of an a priori list of codes informed by codebook/template (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1984) approaches to data analysis, while allowing for additional codes to be constructed from the data. This hybrid approach was selected for its ability to integrate "data-driven codes with theory-driven ones" (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, pp. 80, 83) to "allo[w] the tenets … to be integral to the process of deductive thematic analysis", while resisting the post-positivist focus on empirical standardisation and replication

common in applications of codebook analysis alone. Pragmatically, starting with a predetermined, theoretical lens-informed, tentative list of codes also allowed for select data to be winnowed (Guest et al., 2012) from the large quantity of qualitative data from the six focus groups to enable timely completion of this thesis.

5.5.2.1 A priori list

Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), the researcher developed a list of a priori broad codes related to the theoretical lens and the constituent parts of the research question (Lochmiller, 2021; Byrne, 2022) before starting in-depth data analysis. The list of a priori codes is outlined in **Table 3**.

Table 3: A priori codes

Preliminary code	**Preliminary code essence**[21]
Gender power relations	Current power imbalances based on gender, present in the sites of inquiry. Presence of gender inequality or equality.
Traditions	Process of handing down customs or beliefs in the particular sites of inquiry. This might include leaders, returning students, alumni, affiliated institutions and college administrations.
Attitudes and beliefs	'Common sense' beliefs in the sites of inquiry. Primarily collective (related to social norms beyond gender norms) but may also include individual perceptions.
Gender norms	Presence of and reproduction of gender norms (as a source of inequality) in the particular site. Including gender essentialism, cisnormativity and heteronormativity.
Spaces	The impact of geographical location, physical spaces and architecture and design of buildings and spaces on oppression in the sites. May also include the use of physical spaces by students in the sites.
Student leaders and student-led activities	Role of student leaders and associated student-led activities (collective activities and individual behaviours) in reproducing or countering gender norms and gender power relations in the sites of inquiry.

[21] The researcher chose to adopt the language of 'essence' of the theme, rather than 'definition'. This is language that is offered by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 92) and adopted by Lochmiller (2021) to reflect the tentative nature of labelling codes and themes.

College administrations	Role of college administrations in reproducing or countering gender norms and gender power relations in the sites of inquiry.
Countering	Potential or actual conflict, resistance or renegotiation of gender power relations in the sites of inquiry.

5.5.2.2 Coding

The six focus group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and uploaded into NVivo 12 software to aid the analysis. Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), codes from the a priori list were created as nodes to initially guide the analysis. This preliminary list of codes provided a way of organising the data and was applied to the transcript data "with the intent of identifying meaningful units of text" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 87). Miles et al. (2019, p. 64) describe coding as a "heuristic – a method of discovery" that results in an "intimate, interpretive familiarity with every datum in the corpus". This critical analysis, which was conducted in the "context of socially situated power relations" (Collins, 2019, p. 61; Horkheimer 1982), paid particular attention to the context of the participants' comments to aid the researcher's understanding (Marshall et al., 2021). As a result, the researcher coded the data to ensure the social context of the participants' contributions was maintained. The process of coding was "not confined" (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 88) to the a priori list, and further preliminary codes were also identified from the close reading and re-reading of the data.

Following Collins and Stockton's (2018, p. 9) caution that an "overreliance on theory could prevent the salience and importance of the data from coming through", the researcher "looked for *negations* of what was presupposed". To support this, a journal of questions and observations was maintained. To enable the identification of negations, preliminary themes were viewed as being in dialogue with relevant literature and are examined in further detail in the discussion of the results in **Chapter 6** and the findings in **Chapter 7**.

5.5.2.3 Theme development

Codes were catalogued into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This cataloguing process included identifying "unifying" ideas (Lochmiller, 2021, pp. 2029, 2032), relationships between the codes and "re-assembling" the small chunks of meaning into patterns of significant meaning cohesive across the whole dataset. The themes were then "refin[ed], defin[ed] and nam[ed]" (Braun & Clarke, 2002, p. 6), allowing for "insights to be deepened through re-reading and refinement" (Hextrum, 2020, p. 1057; see also Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As the research questions guided the thematic analysis, the strength of a theme was determined owing to "whether it

captured something important in relation to the overall research questions" (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018, p. 810). This was consistent with a critical qualitative approach to answering the research question, which sought to interrogate the structural maintenance of the contextualised gender power regime in the sites of inquiry. The aggregate data organised under each theme were reviewed to ensure the entire dataset supported the theme (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) to prevent fracturing or fragmenting of the whole testimony of the data (Lochmiller, 2021). These themes are presented as the results of the analysis and discussed in **Chapter 6**.

5.6 Ethical considerations

In this research, there was a small risk that participants could experience discomfort from discussing their experiences of gender power relations in their college settings. The psychological risk may have been more severe for participants who had directly experienced marginalisation or inequality in any of its forms, across the continuum of harm and intensity (Leidig, 1995). Further, there was also a risk that participants would experience discomfort from participating in focus groups in their residential settings with their peers. As with the psychological risk, this social risk may have been more severe for participants who had experienced marginalisation, or for participants without strong relationships and social capital in the setting.

To minimise these potential risks, student leaders and senior students, rather than first-year students, were invited to participate in the focus groups. The rationale for this was that student leaders are senior students, with established relationships, networks and support structures in their residences. To minimise risks of disclosure and discomfort, the focus group interview schedules intentionally focused on participants' feelings and experiences (Jubas, 2010) about the traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies in their colleges, and the related impact, rather than expressly asking participants to disclose their own experiences of marginalisation or violence. Further, the vignette allowed participations to choose to talk about hypothetical characters, rather than their own experiences.

5.7 Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, feasibility concerns necessitated containment to two sites of inquiry. Both sites are independent, not-for-profit settings and not representative of the burgeoning for-profit residential industry. However, as the research examined gender power relations in site-specific structural, social and cultural contexts (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020), the research design valued "particularity rather than generalisability"

(Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 216) in this "located sense-making" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 176).

A second limitation of this research design relates to the lack of gender, cultural and economic diversity in the participant cohort. While a critical feminist theoretical orientation necessitates the recognition of diverse forms of inequity (de Saxe, 2016), the nature of the participating sites (as in colleges more broadly), restricted diverse representation in the participant cohort. As the selection criteria related to participants' roles (e.g. student leader), participant selection could not target gender, cultural and/or racial and economic diversity. While this is a limitation of this research owing to the setting, to avoid the 'invisibilisation' (Jonsson, 2014) of those who are not white, cisgender and middle-class (Borah et al., 2023), the author acknowledges that within patriarchal systems there exist "terrains of power" (Hunnicutt, 2009, p. 555) and women and men, depending on their relative social location, will hold varying "types and amounts of power". As foreshadowed at **5.3.2**, women participants in this study may be "simultaneously located on [the] axis of privilege and oppression" (Fileborn, 2019, p. 224). As a result, they are afforded comparably more access to power and rights than other marginalised groups. Further, while there were differences between men participants concerning their location within other systems of power (such as race, disability, and religious adherence), the research focused on women as an oppressed class, as "all men receive some degree of power and privilege from patriarchy" (Burrell, 2018, p. 460).

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the critical qualitative approach to this research. It described the recruitment of the research sites and participants. It also outlined the data collection methods adopted to enable the researcher to examine the maintenance and/or countering of gender power relations in the sites of inquiry to answer the research question, and outlined the utilisation of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach to thematic analysis. Consistent with the critical qualitative approach of the research, this chapter also detailed how the critical analysis was interpretive, recursive, "predominantly deductive" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397), and employed the research questions and theoretical orientation of this thesis as the analytical lens. The results of this thematic analysis are presented and discussed in the next chapter. Finally, this chapter identified the ethical considerations and limitations present in the research.

6. Presentation of Results and Discussion

The overarching aim of this research was to apply a critical feminist theoretical lens (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) to examine the maintenance and/or countering of gendered power relations in two university residential colleges. Using critical qualitative methods (Denzin et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) the research sought answer the following sub-questions:

(a) How do student leaders and college administrations maintain and/or counter gender power relations in the sites?

(b) How do traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies in the sites maintain and/or counter gender power relations?

Through adopting Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid data analysis approach, as described in the previous chapter, the researcher constructed themes that "communicate[d] something meaningful that help[ed] to answer the research question(s)" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1403), informed by the interrelated "primary tenets" of the researcher's critical feminist lens: gender, oppression and patriarchy, systems, and social institutions (Beck et al., 2021, p. 169). The themes and sub-themes from this analysis are summarised and presented as the research results in **Table 4**. Owing to the limited word count in this thesis, the summarised results of the research are presented and discussed in this chapter. In the discussion, the research themes are described and examined, in dialogue with relevant literature.

As the research was a critical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), the results and discussion that follow are "an inevitably and thoroughly partial reading" of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 174). The results presented and discussed in this chapter do not claim to offer the only reading. Instead, the thesis aimed to provide a "convincing account of the meanings [contained in the data] … and explain why these meanings matter" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 175). Further, in line with a critical qualitative (Denzin et al., 2017) approach, the researcher views knowledge as "contextually located and produced within relationships and interactions" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 176) and acknowledges that the results and discussion that follow are reflective of a particular reading of data from a particular set of participants, in a particular setting, at a particular time.

While the researcher resisted "positivism creep" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 7), reliability (from the perspective of trustworthiness) was an important consideration in the data analysis and presentation of results (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To promote trustworthiness, the analysis was "grounded in the participants' own accounts" (Madill et al.,

2000, p. 17) and presented below with "rich, thick description" (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, pp. 213–214). To resist homogenising women, differing perspectives and experiences shared by women participants are presented and highlighted in the analysis.

To further holistically contribute to the reliability of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), the following strategies were adopted:

1. The research setting was described in detail in the contextual frame in **Chapter 4** (and specific sites of inquiry in line with these categories were outlined in **Table 2**);
2. The researcher's positionality statement was included at **1.5**;
3. The critical feminist theoretical frame was outlined in **Chapter 3**;
4. The a priori list of codes that informed the critical analysis was provided at **5.5.2.1**; and
5. The vignette used in the second set of focus groups was developed from narratives that participants themselves provided in the first set of focus groups (see **5.4.1.2**). Participants were asked whether the vignette was authentic and relatable. Participants confirmed that the scenario used was "real and relatable" (Man, FG2S1) and "realistic because you see this happening" (Woman, FG2S2).

While this thesis has used the terms 'woman'/'women' and 'man'/'men', in line with the gendered focus of this study, participants used a range of language (i.e. 'males', 'females', 'boys', 'girls', 'guys') and occasionally moved between describing their own (or their peers') gender and sex, interchangeably. Where direct quotes are used, the language used by the participants has not been altered.

6.1 Presentation of results (summary of themes)

A summary of the results of the research as overarching 'themes' and 'sub-themes' constructed from the interpretative analysis of the research data, informed by the critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens of this research, is presented in **Table 4**. Despite these themes being presented as independent spheres of gendered power activity, the researcher acknowledges that they are overlapping and interrelated. The separate presentation of the themes in **Table 4** serves to assist the reader to more easily navigate an overview of the research results before the discussion section, where the interrelated themes and sub-themes are examined as they relate to the specific structural context of gender power relations in the sites of inquiry. To assist the reader, related sub-themes are included in footnotes throughout the discussion.

Table 4: Presentation of results: themes and sub-themes

Themes	**Sub-themes** (hyperlinks to relevant sections)	**Descriptive commentary**
Theme 1: Oppression of women	1(a):Gendered hierarchy of authority	Gendered hierarchical attitudes afford women less authority and power than men in the sites. Differences between formal and functional authority in the sites.
	1(b): Women as subordinate 'other'	Women are treated differently than men and presented as subordinate and the resulting impact of this differential treatment on perceptions of women's abilities and value.
	1(c): Men's (un)awareness of differential treatment	Men's awareness (and/or unawareness) of the ways women in the sites are treated differently in the context of sporting activities. Women's perspectives on men's (un)awareness and desire for allyship.
	1(d): Men's domination of social activities (pack mentality)	The antisocial, unsafe and exclusionary behaviour displayed by groups of men in social settings and women's 'refusal' in response.
	1(e): Men's domination of communal areas	The way in which groups of men dominate shared spaces in college residences (e.g. dining areas and activity rooms) to the exclusion of people of other genders and the manner in which women respond.

Themes	**Sub-themes** (hyperlinks to relevant sections)	**Descriptive commentary**
Theme 2: Gendered norms and stereotypes	2(a): Gendered stereotypes and norms relating to 'women's work' inside the college context	The presence of stereotypical gendered attitudes relating to the nature of work that women "enjoy" and are "naturally" good at, and the normative manner in which these disadvantage women, restricting the kind of work women can do in the college setting in service duties and paid jobs. Women's prefigurative acts in response.
	2(b): Gendered stereotypes and norms relating to 'women's work' outside the college	Gendered stereotypical attitudes relating to work and education, including associated stereotypes about women's intelligence and capabilities and women's countering these.
	2(c): Gender segregation reinforcing gender-essentialist beliefs	'Soft' gender-essentialist beliefs as both a rationale for, and the result of, gender segregation of sporting activities.
	2(d): Benevolent sexism	The normalisation of benevolent sexist attitudes (those that reveal men's 'protective' role towards women as a way to maintain dominance while perpetuating gender norms and women's subordination).

Themes	**Sub-themes** (hyperlinks to relevant sections)	**Descriptive commentary**
Theme 3: Safety and equality: Perceptions and barriers	3(a): Safety as an 'outside' problem	'Safety' (primarily described by participants as physical, rather than psychosocial safety) was a problem that students considered as being something that was a concern outside their colleges. Threats to students' safety were primarily described as occurring off university campuses (e.g. walking home from public transport or the local pub) and as coming from people who did not attend their colleges (e.g. strangers).
	3(b): Men college peers are trustworthy 'protectors'	The perception of both women and men that men living in the college residence are trustworthy and offer protection to women students from external threats.
	3(c): (Mis)perception and backlash relating to gender equality	Individual perceptions that gender equality has already been achieved in the sites of inquiry and that women students enjoy the same rights, access and freedoms as men students. The perception that the institution treats people equally regardless of gender and that institutional policies have resolved gender inequality and gendered violence. In light of this belief, this sub-theme also includes men's negative responses and backlash to advances in or promotion of women's equality.

Themes	**Sub-themes** (hyperlinks to relevant sections)	**Descriptive commentary**
	3(d): Individual student leaders bearing social cost of challenging problematic behaviours	The perception that individual men are the problem and the institutional perception is that the problem is 'individual, rogue players'. The perception that the solution to gender inequality is for individual men to challenge problematic behaviours by "calling it out" and for individuals to report issues to college administrations. The social cost borne by individuals challenging behaviours and how this functions as a disincentive for action. The commitment of student leaders to lead change in their college.
	3(e): (Lack of) consequences	The absence of (formal or informal) consequences for behaviours that are unsafe, exclusionary or disrespectful.

Discussion of themes

In line with the critical qualitative methodology and the critical feminist theoretical orientation of this thesis, the discussion and analysis below include rich descriptions and verbatim quotes representative of the participants' experiences and the sites more broadly to enable the foregrounding of site-specific contexts and participants' lived experiences and subjectivities (de Saxe, 2012). Data references are included, based on the identifier codes below (with further detail provided in **Table 2**).

Table 5: Data reference identifiers

	Identifier	**Participants' genders**
Focus groups Set 1: Preliminary focus groups		
Site one	*FG1S1W*	Women only
	FG1S1M	Men only
Site two	*FG1S2W*	Women only
	FG1S2M	Men only
Focus groups Set 2: Vignette focus groups		
Site one	*FG2S1*	Women and men
Site two	*FG2S2*	Women and men

6.2 Overarching theme 1: Oppression of women

The first theme related to the structural oppression of women in the participating sites. Sub-theme **1(a)** relates to the gendered hierarchy of authority in the sites, with women students, student leaders and staff provided less functional authority than men students, student leaders and staff. Sub-theme **1(b)** relates to women's subordination; women are structurally rendered 'other', as described by participants in the context of college sporting activities and college architectures, and in the ways women must adopt masculine behaviours to gain entry to activities and spaces reserved for men. Sub-theme **1(c)** relates to men's (un)awareness of differential treatment of women students, with the perceived invisibility of women's oppression in the sites a cause of frustration and distress for some women participants (and the cause of some women's resistance) and revealing men's privileged positions in these sites. Sub-themes **1(d)** and **1(e)** relate to men's domination of collegiate life through the exclusion of women from social activities and communal settings. Sub-theme **1(d)** describes the intimidating, unsafe behaviours enacted by groups of men in social activities. These social activities are annual traditions, led by student clubs and handed

down by alumni. Two emblematic activities from the transcripts are examined: 'Beach Party' (which functionally excludes women) and 'Wedding Night' (which is – in part – a gender-segregated event). Sub-theme **1(e)** relates to men's domination of college communal areas, outside of formalised activities, functionally excluding women. Women students' everyday, collective and individual practices to resist and counter men's domination in the sites is also examined. As the critical feminist theoretical lens of this research focused analytical attention on the diverse modes of opposition (de Saxe, 2016), the analysis focuses particular attention to nascent actions at the micro level which may be understood as 'prefigurative' action (Leach, 2022; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020) and may "instantiate … social [structural] change" (Törnberg, 2021, p. 83).

6.2.1 Sub-theme 1(a): Gendered hierarchy of authority

The focus groups revealed the hierarchical, oppressive and gendered nature of authority in the participating college sites in the negotiation of and compliance with institutional structures. Differential power and authority were most evident in the transcripts in the context of discussions relating to the formal institutional structure of required service duties,[22] as described in the contextual frame at **4.1.1.**In the context of a discussion around non-compliance with service duty requirements, a woman participant described the site's policy that "if you miss a duty, you get a double duty", meaning "you have to make up two for one at a later date" (FG1S1W). She described a recent situation where a man resident missed a duty and was approached by the "female duty manager" to do the required double duty while the ma n resident was "in the middle of a game of pool". She described how when the woman (student leader) duty manager approached this man resident he "refused" to end the game to comply with his required duties. This refusal was "very vocal and very persistent". The next day, the woman participant observed that the same man resident was again "in the middle of a game of pool" when a man (student leader) duty leader asked him to do the double duty. The man resident responded to the man duty leader that he would "just take this shot and come straight away". Another participant in the focus group observed:

> I think the boy found it much easier to refuse, and to be persistent in his refusal, to a girl, rather than to the male. (Woman, FG1S1W)

[22] The gendered nature of the allocations of these service duties and paid jobs is discussed in sub-themes **2(a)** and **2(b)**.

The man student's refusal to comply with woman's request was identified by some women participants as being gendered: "men tend to listen to other men more than if [woman staff member] were to go and do it to this man" (Woman, FG1S1W). Another participant named this behaviour as disrespectful towards women:

> A big one [for women not feeling respected] is when men don't listen because women [are] speaking... because "She's a woman. How would she know? I'm not going to listen to her because she's female." (Woman, FG1S1W)

The woman participant's identification of men's behaviours in not listening to women as "disrespectful" demonstrates her awareness of the attitudes and attendant behaviours of her men peers who do not value women's voices. To respond to this named structural oppression, a participant stated that "male leaders [need to] really call it out" (Woman, FG1S1W), expressing a desire for men to counter existing disrespectful attitudes and behaviours. In addition to the gendered hierarchy of authority, power differentials – between student leaders and other students – were also present in both sites. While the indicative quote above highlights women participants' perception that men student leaders and staff need to challenge disrespectful attitudes and behaviours, men participants spoke to the formal institutional authority of student leaders and seemed unaware of the gendered nature of authority in their residence. In the context of a discussion around moderating harmful behaviours and men's domination of social activities and communal settings, participants suggested all student leaders (regardless of gender) had authority to challenge these behaviours (i.e. counter gender power relations and hegemonic gender ideology):[23]

> If all the boys were yelling and getting a bit silly … if someone like a strong student leader – be it a boy or a girl – called it out, that could encourage others to call it out too. (Man, FG2S2)

This is evidence of women's (and some men's) recognition of and oppositional resistance (de Saxe, 2016) to oppressive behaviours (and structures) and women urging men peers in the setting to counter problematic behaviours by 'calling it out' to challenge these behaviours (and structures). However, the focus group data overwhelmingly suggests that the structures in the site reinforce a gendered hierarchy of authority that appears to take precedence over other forms of authority expected in the hierarchical educational setting, such as senior/junior student and staff/student power binaries. Despite the *formal* institutional authority granted to women duty leaders (who are student leaders in paid/unpaid roles) and residential advisors (who are senior

[23] Men's domination of communal areas is discussed under sub-theme **3(b)** and student leaders' roles in challenging behaviour is discussed in sub-themes **5(b)** and **5(c)**.

students paid to undertake a staff role), the gender power regime afforded men – students and staff – more *functional* authority than both women students and staff; thus women urging men to 'call it out'. This inverted authority is consistent with Variyan and Wilkinson's (2022) research in elite, private secondary schools in Australia, which revealed the manner in which women teachers were sexually harassed and oppressed by men students. The subversion of traditional educational and institutional power binaries owing to the "dominant discourse of gendered authority", as evident in the data in this research, have been similarly documented in school settings – both private and public – in Australia (Robinson, 2000, p. 88; see also Keddie, 2007; Variyan & Wilkinson, 2022). This gendered hierarchy of authority may also be explained by Hentschel et al.'s (2019, p. 13) finding relating to gendered notions of leadership, where women are "still not seen as 'having what it takes' to adequately handle traditionally male roles and positions".[24]

The gendered hierarchy of authority, discussed in this sub-theme, is indicative of the subordinate role that women are afforded in the sites despite women's resistance and their urging of men to counter it. It is evidence of both the ideological and structural manifestation of patriarchy across the two sites (hooks, 2000; Hunnicutt, 2009). From a critical feminist perspective, a gendered hierarchy of authority is unsurprising, as Nentwich and Kelen (2013, p. 131) assert that a core theme of 'doing gender' in institutional settings "involves doing hierarchies".

6.2.2 Sub-theme 1(b): Women as subordinate 'other'

The focus group data also revealed the ways in which women in the participating sites are structurally marginalised and rendered 'other' in their colleges. This was evident in the transcripts in discussions of sporting activities and building design. Participants raised both formal and informal sporting activities as settings of inequality and disrespect of women. As Jeanes et al. (2021, p. 546) state that it is "widely recognised … [that] sport settings are a prominent place where dominant gender relations are constructed, legitimised and perpetuated", and the paucity of research regarding the relationship between sporting activities and women's subordination in Australian college settings, the institutional structure of sporting activities is examined in detail below. In relation to discussions around women's (in)equality, participants in this study described annual sporting events embedded in college histories and traditions, with associated rituals, which revealed the often gender-segregated nature of activities across the sites, the manners in which

[24] Gendered stereotypes are discussed in sub-theme **2(a)**.

gender is performed at these sites within the "strictly defined cultural boundaries" (Robinson, 2005, p. 22) and the structural nature of women's oppression in the participating sites.

For example, at site one, there is an annual 'Footy Day'. The Footy Day is emblematic of the nature of formal sporting activities at both of the research sites and in the wider context of colleges and indicative of the manner in which the structure of extracurricular activities (and their related traditions) maintains men's power and women's oppression in these settings. In the annual Footy Day, matches are played in teams segregated by sex/gender. Resistance to this inequality is contained in the recognition and voicing by women (and some men[25]) participants of the unequal nature of the day, stating that the women's game was afforded less time on the field than the men's and the size of the playing area was reduced to less than half the size of the usual men's ground, which may be understood as "spatial injustice" (Bevan et al., 2024, p. 312). Additionally, women participants stated that they felt women were not treated equally because "the girls get one game out of the day, and the boys get four, five" (FG1S1W) and that the men "g[e]t more playing time" (FG1S1W). A woman participant who had played on Footy Day reflected on how she felt after the women's match: "[I thought] 'Oh, I've only been here for, like, eight minutes. Fun. That's over. Glad I came out for the whole day.' Whereas, the boys played for a couple of hours" (FG1S1W). The participant's sarcastic tone conveyed her sense of frustration and disempowerment, in comparison to her men peers. A further participant related the experience of a former resident:

> I remember speaking to an ex-resident … she said, in her first year she didn't play on Footy Day because she was too embarrassed, because it's a guys' sport. No one has ever taught her how to play, even though guys get taught how to play all the time. And then, in her second year, she played, but she was so disappointed because they made the pitch a quarter of the men's size, and they were playing against kids from the [local] church … and she said she felt like a bit of a joke, and not taken seriously, and wasn't given the same opportunity, and she just didn't enjoy it. (Woman, FG1S1W)

In addition to playing fewer, shorter matches on Footy Day than men, the size of the field was reduced for the women's match and the opponents provided for the women's team to play against were children from an external [associated religious] institution. It's unsurprising then that in the above indicative quote the woman who participated in the Footy Day described "feeling embarrassed", "disappointed", "like a joke", "not taken seriously" and, as a result, "not enjoying" Footy Day. The participant also revealed how football is perceived to be a sport for men (by both

[25] See sub-theme **1(c)** 'Men's (un)awareness of differential treatment'.

men and women) in this site. As a result, women are functionally excluded from participating by not being taught how to play.[26] This is unsurprising, with existing literature identifying that sport's historically 'male-dominated' status "makes it difficult for women to be involved or taken seriously within its exclusive realm" (Gacka, 2017, p. 196), resulting in "few development pathways or competition options being offered comparative to the men" (Willson et al., 2018, p. 1709; see also Phipps & Blackall, 2023). However, the fact that some women participants identified their marginalisation through Footy Day, coupled with the manner in which some women students were organising together through sharing stories (including conversations between students and alumni), may indicate the prefigurative, collective nature of women's everyday practice of what Hughes et al. (2022, p. 9) describe as "micro-resistance".

Further contributing to women being demeaned and marginalised as subordinate 'other' (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023; Hextrum, 2020) on Footy Day was the scheduling of the one women's match in the middle of the day (akin to half-time entertainment) reinforcing the idea of women playing football as a spectacle – something 'other', unusual and entertaining. This form of objectification is evidence of the role of sports in the sites in "maintain[ing] the patriarchal structures, beliefs, and behaviours that subordinate women" (Gacka, 2017, p. 197). In subordinating women in this manner, men retain their position of power (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023); such subordination has been identified by Meân and Kassing (2008) as a means of men's active resistance to the entry of women into the sporting arena. The structural manner in which taken-for-granted assumptions about women as subordinate 'other' are reinforced through sporting activities in the sites demonstrates the manner in which the colleges, as institutions, reproduce gender ideologies in broader society.

Men participants identified the manner in which external actors might oppress women in the site. The researcher asked men about ways in which women might be disrespected in their college. Men participants described staff from the affiliated university as the cause of women's disrespect in the site. As with other colleges, some academic and clerical staff also hold positions at the college's affiliated university. The following excerpt reveals not only the manner in which men participants (FG1S2M) were able to identify the behaviour as problematic, but also reveals their lack of response:

[26] While this thesis is focused on the experience of women participants in the sites of inquiry, it is important to acknowledge that women are not the only 'class' of people marginalised from football contexts. Existing literature attests to the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous Australians (Gacka, 2017) and gender-diverse people (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023) and those from particular culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from Australian Rules football.

> Interviewer: So it's university people coming over [that are the problem]?
>
> Participant 1: Yeah. One example is where there were four people [getting an award] … three were boys and one was a girl, and [man staff member whose substantive employment is in a senior academic role with the affiliated university] came over and shook the three boys' hands, and then didn't shake the girl's hand.
>
> Participant 2: And we were all sitting within a metre of each other.
>
> Participant 3: I think the girl was sitting next to one of the boys.

It may be unsurprising that men employed in universities exhibit sexist attitudes towards women, owing to the gendered nature of these educational institutions, "in which men dominate, especially within higher rank academic positions" (Tildesley et al., 2023, p. 1997). It is, however, revealing that this was one of the few examples men participants could initially identify in relation to women being disrespected in the sites, in spite of the myriad examples in the transcripts. Additionally, some of the participants themselves had been present and did not respond contemporaneously or following the incident. This lack of response may suggest that women's subordination is so taken for granted and structurally maintained in this educational institution that the men students were unable to problematise this behaviour until prompted by the interviewer. It may alternatively suggest that men are (consciously or otherwise) unwilling to disrupt the dominant gender power regimes in the sites so as to maintain their own privileged positions and educational advantage or from fear of reprisals.[27]

In addition to the ways in which sporting activities and traditions function to subordinate women, the architectures of the physical campuses of the participating sites also cement women's 'other' status. At site two, women participants identified the design of the buildings as a source of women's inequality. Site two was designed and built for men students, with women allowed entrance as students a decade later.[28] With the admission of women, some facilities were retrofitted to allow women's access. Women participants noted that some of the pre-existing bathrooms had been converted to women's bathrooms in the site, however there were fewer bathrooms for women than men (even though there were equal numbers of women and men students in residence) and the women's bathrooms were located at the ends of halls and away from communal areas, requiring women to "walk around the other side" (FG1S2W) of the

[27] The fear of reprisals and social cost of challenging harmful behaviours is further examined at sub-themes **3(d)** and **3(e)**.
[28] In many other (older) university residential colleges, women were not allowed entrance as residents until many decades later.

building to use the bathrooms. One woman participant voiced resistance, explaining that "it was so frustrating" (FG1S2W) that the men's bathrooms were centrally located while the women's bathrooms were inconveniently located. Another woman participant voiced resistance, sharing a similar frustration that "sanitary bins [are] obviously in the female [toilets] but they're not in the male ones" (FG1S2W). She further explained that meant that "the males can use our toilets but we can't use theirs all the time … that really bugs me." Additionally, participants also described the penalties ("getting logged"; Woman, FG1S2W) enforced by residential advisors and student leaders for people using the bathrooms assigned to people of a different gender, disadvantaging women and reinforcing the gender binary. Such policing by student leaders and the administration of bathroom use enforces cisnormativity in the sites.

Despite women being functionally granted access to these physical locations, the architecture (including the physical adaptations made to accommodate women's enrolment) not only inconveniences and penalises women but symbolically reinforces their 'other' status in the sites. This is analogous to women's entrance to (previously) men-only universities, where basic necessities such as bathrooms were not considered. In reflecting on the absence of toilet facilities for women in certain 'male-dominated' disciplines in universities, Forsyth (2014, p. 215) asks "what clearer message could there be that this is not your field than the fact that there was not even somewhere for you to pee?" Like in universities, the gendered distinctions within actual building design and function of colleges – what Spain (1993, p. 140) referred to as "architectural segregation" – may structurally disadvantage and oppress women in the sites. Further, these physical structures, imbued with symbolic meaning, structurally perpetuate a dominant gender ideology where women are intruders, outsiders and 'others' in these settings.

The design of physical buildings was also described by women participants in the context of women's negotiation of unsafe spaces. Women participants described the presence of a raised walkway platform between two buildings on campus in site two that was commonly referred to by students as the "catwalk" (FG1S2W). This name had been inherited from previous student generations. The 'catwalk' is situated close to spaces where men students gather in informal social and sporting settings.[29] Women described being "sexualised" (Woman, FG1S2W) when using the walkway, aware of the way in which the building design concentrated the 'male gaze' on women students.[30] The very nickname of the walkway connotes women's sexualisation and objectification for men's consumption, highlighting the manner in which the physical design of

[29] Men's domination of communal areas is discussed in sub-theme **3(b)**.
[30] Men's (un)awareness relating to the 'catwalk' is discussed in sub-theme **1(c)**.

the college structurally reinforces differential gender power relations in the site. Women participants described adopting time-consuming, inconvenient alternate routes around campus to avoid the 'catwalk' in anticipation of the male gaze (Calogero, 2004). By enacting such strategies, women may be exercising prefigurative agency and (latent) resistance in deliberately refusing to engage in their own objectification (Forsdike & Giles, 2024; Naylor, 2017).

As this research sought to desist from homogenising women's experiences, it is important to acknowledge that not all women students are subordinated to the same extent in the setting. Participant responses revealed that women who are "seen as one of the boys" (Woman, FG1S2W) may be granted access to spaces, events and activities (explicitly or otherwise) reserved for men. While some women participants were granted access to "boys' stuff" (Woman, FG1S2W), all 'women' retain their subordinate position (Connell, 2005). This differential position is revealed in the manner in which some women describe having to adopt "masculine" (Woman, FG1S2W) behaviours and is demonstrative of women's marginalised status in the site. In considering the manner in which power may be contested and negotiated in the current gender power order, women's adoption of masculine behaviours may signify efforts to disrupt and/or subvert women's subordinated status, within the agentic capacity such a hegemonic regime affords. However, women's "co-op[tion] into 'lad cultures'" (Anitha & Lewis, 2018b, p. 8) or adoption of such behaviours may ultimately merely serve to reinforce the dominant power regime (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

6.2.3 Sub-theme 1(c): Men's (un)awareness of differential treatment

Women participants across both sites identified men's lack of awareness and understanding about the differential treatment women experienced. The perceived invisibility of women's oppression in the site was a cause of frustration for some women participants. Further, men's lack of awareness was described as being in a causal relationship with the perpetuation of women's differential treatment in the sites: "unawareness and lack of understanding about gender equality … leads to behaviour and language that contributes to the issue" (Woman, FG2S2). Women's identification of men's (un)awareness of women's differential treatment denotes their resistance and further reveals the unexamined privilege that men experience in these sites.

Towards the end of the first focus group (women only) at site one, the researcher asked the women participants whether the researcher should ask men participants the same questions. Women participants uniformly agreed:[31]

> I think it would be good to ask guys because I feel like all women are very aware of the problems that women face. Whereas, if you were to ask guys, you'd get some guys who would know heaps about it, and guys who would be like, "I have no idea." (Woman, FG1S1W)

The women participants' desire for their men peers to dialogue around the problems women face in the setting may be understood as expressing a desire for *allyship* (Halvorsen et al., 2024; see also Arif et al., 2022) from their men peers (whom they have trusted relationships with[32]) to collaboratively "rework" (Katz, 2009, p. 245) the manner in which gender power relations are constituted in the setting, as a form of resistance and/or prefigurative action (Leach, 2022). The discussion and analysis below more broadly examines the manner in which men (and some women) were aware/unaware of differential treatment in the sites.

Unlike the women participants, men participants in the focus groups did not initially identify Footy Day,[33] or sporting activities more broadly, as an area where women experience inequality or disrespect. When asked by the researcher whether everyone was able to play footy as a part of the formal Footy Day or informally at other times when groups use the adjacent oval to "go have a kick of the footy" (Man, FG1S1M), men participants initially stated that "no one's really left out, there's always opportunity for anyone" (FG1S1M) and "I feel like any events in general, invitations are generally open [to everyone]" (FG1S1M). When the researcher specifically interrogated whether *women* play footy at the site, men participants conceded that women don't often play football but explained this by ascribing 'different' interests to women:

> I think … we do have different interests, so the guys are more inclined to go have a kick of the footy, whereas the girls [have] different interests. (Man, FG1S1M)

Another participant was quick to agree that the lack of women's participation in sporting activities at the site was related to women's (perceived) different interests: "The girls decide they don't want to and guys decide they do want to" (FG1S1M). Despite the men participants' apparently earnest statements around the different interests of women concerning sport (as evidenced in the indicative quote above), these statements did not reflect any specific or individual woman's

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[31] The indicative interview schedule for the focus groups with men was subsequently updated to specifically include these questions – see **Appendix A**.
[32] The perception of men college peers as trustworthy 'protectors' is analysed at sub-theme **3(b)**.
[33] Footy Day is described and examined at sub-theme **1(b)**.

personal interests but ascribed a constructed misconception to women as a homogenous group. Rather than demonstrating women's lack of interest, fewer women participating in formal and informal sporting activities is a product of socialised conceptions of femininity and "dominant cultural narratives of gender roles" (Howard, 2023, p. 2). Cooky's (2018, p. 114) participant observation study of girls' participation in community sports programs identified how "cultural beliefs regarding … girls' interest in sport is socially constructed". Her study further pointed to the beliefs of administrators and coaches who "believed that girls did not participate because 'girls' just aren't interested in sport" (Cooky, 2018, p. 127–8). The attitudes expressed by men participants in the focus groups are consistent with Cooky's (2018) findings. The homogenisation of 'women' – "the girls" (Man, FG1S1M) – expressed by men participants concerning purported differential interests was also apparent consistently throughout the focus groups and itself suggests the subordination and dehumanisation of women in the sites.[34]

In relation to the gender segregation present in the informal sporting activities, men participants subsequently clarified that they weren't (explicitly) excluding women: "I don't think that's ever because we haven't invited [them]" (FG1S1M) and "Nah, it's just what happens, sort of" (FG1S1M). Men participants' lack of awareness and their inability to interrogate the structural factors that influence women's marginalisation from sporting activities is evidence of false consciousness (Gramsci, 1977) and "perceiving the position of women as *merely different* [emphasis added] … than the position of men" (Lafontaine, 1983, p. 29). They were not able to identify that women might be subjugated in this context. Further, the men participants were unable to see that this false consciousness was also "problematic for them qua oppressed individuals" (Lee, 2022, p. 105). This is consistent with literature that suggests the context of sport is one where "sexist attitudes are so deeply embedded with [its] history, they often go unnoticed" (Booth & Pavlidis, 2022, p. 640). Despite sporting activities being central to collegiate life, identity and student character development (Walker, 2001), men participants were unaware that women were structurally excluded from participation and harmful cultural narratives reproduced in the sites remained un-interrogated.

When the men participants were advised by the researcher that the women participants had raised Footy Day as a location of inequality, men participants confirmed women residents' awareness, resistance and countering of the differential treatment ("I know there were [women] who were very upset that the girls' game was just played in the 50"; Man, FG1S1M). However, only one

[34] Gender-essentialist attitudes were also present in the sites and evident in the context of extracurricular activities. These are examined in sub-theme **1(d)**.

man participant explicitly linked this to gender inequality: "footy is an example of gendered bias" (FG1S1M). Despite their awareness that women had voiced their concerns and were 'upset', most men students didn't appear to have taken any action to understand or address this marginalisation.[35] It is perhaps unsurprising that men (and some women) were uncritical in their evaluations of the ways women are treated differently in the context of Footy Day, as this reflects the broader social ideology conveyed in the media and sporting contexts. Willson et al. (2018, p. 1715) suggest that women have been "ideologically positioned and regulated as 'out of place' in the AFL". In the sites of inquiry, sporting activities (such as Footy Day), provide evidence, consistent with literature, that sport "both produc[es] and reinforc[es] wider society's gender constructs and biases" (Gacka, 2017, p. 197). Despite this evidence, the institutional structure of sporting activities remains under-examined and unaddressed in current gendered violence prevention efforts in universities and colleges.

Men participants were also unaware of the impact of the physical buildings on their women peers or unable to identify how the (mis)use of communal physical spaces may render women subordinate or sexualised.[36] When the researcher asked men participants about the 'catwalk' – the physical walkway between two college buildings described in sub-theme **1(b)** – one man participant confirmed their awareness that women didn't "like" to use this walkway:

> A lot of my [women] friends … didn't like walking on the catwalk which is sort of near [communal area], because they just feel intimidated by the group of boys getting pissed. (Man, FG1S2M)

The participant seemed to locate the problem merely with the behaviours of the nearby group of men,[37] rather than the walkway itself. When the researcher asked the men participants if there were any connotations with the name 'catwalk', one participant responded, "I think it's just a name they call it" (Man, FG1S2M) and another confirmed, "That's just what it's called" (Man, FG1S2M). Even when directly prompted, the men participants were unable to identify or examine the manner in which this walkway may inhibit, marginalise or demean women. The discussion with men participants about this physical aspect of the building design revealed that men were unaware and unable to examine the way it impacted their women peers or the additional labour required of their women peers to resist men's intrusion and gaze (Very-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Despite the sexist, sexualising and objectifying connotations inherent in the nickname and the

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[35] The influence and agency (or otherwise) of student leaders is examined further under sub-themes **5(b)** and **5(c)**.
[36] The impact of physical buildings on women students is discussed in sub-themes **1(b)** and **4(b)**, and men's domination of communal physical spaces is discussed in sub-theme **3(b)**.
[37] These behaviours are discussed in sub-themes **1(d)** and **(e)**.

attending mythology and traditions around the 'catwalk', women's experiences relating to this walkway structure went unexamined by men participants. These traditions (and their associated mythologies) are themselves patriarchal. That the men participants were unable to see the patriarchal nature of this (or other) building designs or structures in the site, however, is consistent with a critical feminist understanding of the ideological maintenance of gender power relations insofar as patriarchy, and the dominant gender ideology in the sites, is "easily obscured" by how "pervasive" it is (Hunnicutt, 2009, p. 556).

6.2.4 Sub-theme 1(d): Men's domination of social activities (pack mentality)

Some participants described the behaviours and "toxic" (Man, FG2S2) environment that resulted when homogenous groups of men came together in social environments in the colleges. When participants were asked about when they felt unsafe in college, women participants (across both sites) described feeling "uncomfortable" (FG1S1W & FG1S2W) and unable to speak in groups of men gathering together. One woman participant described "a really large pack mentality of guys" (FG1S2W) in the college. She provided a caveat to state that she "didn't feel like they were ever going to hurt [her]" and questioned whether feeling "uncomfortable" and feeling like she "couldn't speak where they all were" counted as feeling "unsafe". When participants were asked to provide examples of the settings for groups of men behaving in this manner in their college, men and women participants in site two identified the Beach Party activity, as a location within the college for unsafe 'pack' behaviours where women experienced exclusion. The Beach Party is an annual tradition, passed on by student leaders and returning second and third-year students, that takes place within the college grounds and is emblematic of college student club led activities. In their detailed work on US college cultures, Kuh and Whitt (1988, pp. 46, 35) describe these emblematic activities as an "invisible tapestry" and the "symbolic properties of institutional culture" in colleges. At the Beach Party activity, a temporary pool is erected onsite at the college's outdoor sports court. While this activity isn't explicitly restricted to men, the event and associated behaviours functionally exclude women. One woman participant described the event as follows:

> …we sit outside and have a pool and have some drinks. It's mostly the boys, and I'm very comfortable going and seeing the boys because I'm friends with them and I'm quite masculine I guess, so I'm fine. But then they'll be yelling out to all these other girls, and it's not very inclusive. (FG2S2)

In response, other woman participants added that the event was "a bit intimidating" (FG2S2) and that "the majority of girls were too scared to go" (FG2S2). A man participant acknowledged that women might feel intimidated either engaging with a group of drunk men at an event or even "potentially walking past them" (FG2S2). This participant's hypothesis was consistent with

earlier statements made by women participants who stated that if there were groups of men drinking together, they would signal their resistance and counter these activities by refusing (Hughes et al., 2022) to be present in those spaces and the associated unsafe behaviours, even if it meant going the "long way" (Woman, FG1S2W) around the campus. These strategies reported by participants are consistent with literature relating to the risk management strategies that women adopt to promote their safety (Stanko, 1990), including Roberts' (2019) study of risk management strategies amongst university students in the UK. Roberts (2019, p. 32) suggests that fear of groups of men in common spaces functions to "socially control women and their use of public space"; it is a social system in which men's dominance is maintained (Valentine, 1989). These agentic actions may represent forms of resistance to gender power relations in the sites.

Participants also described the Wedding Night as another social activity where groups of men behave in ways that are unsafe for women. Wedding Night is a gender-segregated annual tradition, run by student club leaders. One man participant reflected that the language used by men in these social activities may have resulted in "the girls feel[ing] objectified" (FG2S2). Another man participant described how a few, select women were allowed entrance to the men-only mock 'bucks' night' that accompanies Wedding Night; however, these women were provided access only to perform "lap dance[s]" for the "the guys" (FG2S2). As sexual objectification separates women from their bodies and "prioritises" their bodies when determining women's worth "usually at the expense of their emotional, social or intellectual worth", the sexualisation of women in college sites, as evidenced in the indicative quote above, shows how women students "become undervalued and mistreated" (Hollett et al., 2022, p. 2760).

This man participant noted his discomfort at the sexualisation and objectification of women present:

> It was very confronting for me. … it almost seemed like a real lap dance strip club. (FG2S2)

He also explained what was so confronting: "There's something about strippers being funny, but then for us it was like 'the girls'" (FG2S2). One of the reasons the participant felt confronted was because the women being sexualised were 'the girls' – his friends/fellow students. Participants may not have felt as confronted if they were women with whom the men students did not have a pre-existing relationship; this may again demonstrate the paternalistic benevolent sexism[38] that is revealed in these social events in the colleges (and beyond) where men gather in groups.

[38] The presence of benevolent sexism in the sites was examined in sub-theme **1(d)** and is further discussed in sub-themes **4(a)**, **4(b)** and **4(c)**.

In addition to identifying that homogenous, gender-segregated social activities enabled behaviours that were unsafe for women, some men participants did register resistance and described how these activities "were unsafe for anyone" (FG2S2). In discussing the "lap dance" situation at Wedding Night, another man participant shared that he and some of his men peers chose to leave the event:

> I could tell a lot of people were upset because I went to my room and I left my door open and there was like nine of my friends in my room. I was like, "Oh you guys didn't like it either". (FG2S2)

However, despite registering their resistance by 'leaving', it was also evident in this participant's response that men students do not discuss their own experiences of these events, unlike some women students. Wedding Night is an annual tradition, passed down – seemingly uncritically – from cohort to cohort. The participant described being surprised that other men students also didn't like the event. The students' enculturation into the histories and traditions of the colleges they attend prevents them from overtly critically evaluating whether events continue to serve the broader values and goals of the student body. These traditions and activities may be inconsistent with the student body's values and may continue to sustain the gender power relations that privilege men – whether students are consciously aware or otherwise.

One of the participants explained how he felt "so uncomfortable" (Man, FG2S2) when events were segregated by gender owing to the seemingly inevitable aggression that resulted from men-only social events. Other men participants added that at Wedding Night "boys … [were] fighting on the floor" (FG2S2) and "wrestling and everything broke out" (FG2S2). One man participant suggested that alcohol played a central role in safety and inclusion at the college, suggesting that women might feel unsafe and intimidated "when a group of blokes have got really quite intoxicated, drunk together" (FG2S2). While (excessive) alcohol consumption is a central component of social activities in colleges (well documented elsewhere, e.g. Corney & du Plessis, 2022; Leontini & Corney, 2023; Leontini et al., 2017), alcohol alone does not explain the behaviours (ERoCA, 2018). The broader patriarchal cultures and men's domination of women and other were evident in the transcript in contexts without alcohol.[39] Further, the same aggressive displays of masculinity were present in the participants' descriptions of sporting activities.[40] However, excessive alcohol consumption has been documented as an expression of hyper-masculine cultures that are unsafe for women. Waling's (2020, p. 58) conception of a

[39] **Theme 1**: 'Oppression of women' details men's domination of women across a suite of structures, none of which include alcohol.
[40] See sub-themes **1(b)**, **2(d)** and **3(c)**.

contemporary Australian 'lad culture' in which "masculinist endeavours of binge drinking, partying, casual sex, and aggressive displays of 'macho-ness' are idolised" is useful in understanding the manner in which participants linked alcohol to other unsafe, dominating behaviours enacted by groups of men in colleges, as revealed in the emblematic Beach Party and Wedding Night social activities.

In describing the behaviours and traditions of Footy Day, one man participant described the ways that men celebrated on the football field, explaining that "the guys express affection physically [by] wrestling or jumping on each other". The participant couched their reflection in a 'protective' narrative, stating that if women were in that environment they might "feel unsafe":

> I feel like if I was a girl, I'd be a little bit intimidated by that. (Man, FG1S1M)

This aggressive physicality of sport was also described in relation to associated social traditions off the field. One participant acknowledged that aggressive celebration traditions that characterise the men's sporting matches might be intimidating to "girls" (Man, FG1S1M). However, the participant did not reflect on how it might also be intimidating or exclusionary to other students not embodying/enacting the aggressive masculine norms in this context. Further, men participants didn't problematise the aggressive forms of masculinity that were displayed in the context of sporting activities (as opposed to some men participants who problematised aggression in social activities). The problem was described as being women's discomfort or intimidation. This is consistent with literature suggesting sports are hypermasculine environments that enculturate men into aggressive, risk-taking and violent behaviours (Tredinnick, 2023; Fink, 2015). In addition to excluding women and non-binary people, the literature also provides evidence of the cisnormative and heteronormative nature of the aggressive manner in which gender is performed in men's sporting contexts (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023) and the manner in which sport "work[s] as an authoritative figure in producing hegemonic masculinity" (Fink, 2015, p. 337).

The hypermasculine aggression present in the groups of men also created environments where some men students felt unable to challenge or resist the harmful group behaviours directly; however, similar to women students, some men participants expressed their resistance through refusal or "deliberate disengagement" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 8). One man participant identified that in those group settings it was difficult to actively resist or challenge the language or attitudes of their men peers:

> If you did call it out, it was pretty [hard] because the people who attend Beach Party would sort of back up the person or objectifying women. (FG2S2)

Another participant added that if men felt unable to challenge these behaviours, then women would not be able to resist or challenge these behaviours either. When asked by the interviewer to explain why this was the case, he stated:

> What I said before about fears of not being taken seriously … it's been dismissed as 'boys being boys'. (Man, FG2S2)

The minimisation and dismissal described by this participant was reiterated by other participants and is examined further in sub-theme **3(e).** The cultures of minimisation and dismissal of men's domination described by participants are important in understanding the contextual, structural constraints to women and some men's resistance and countering of gender power relations in the sites.

6.2.5 Sub-theme 1(e): Men's domination of communal areas

Communal areas in colleges provide a unique, complex intersection of the private and public domains (Webster et al., 2021) of students' lives. Throughout the focus groups, women participants described how men dominated communal spaces (such as the common rooms, pool room, gym and basketball court) which ostensibly should be accessible to all students, regardless of gender. Women described resisting men's domination of these communal spaces by boycotting or removing themselves from those spaces. However, the resulting absence of women in communal spaces was described by woman participants at both sites as being "intimidating" (FG2S1 & FG2S2). One woman participant further stated that the absence or minority of "girls there" ensures these common areas "don't feel like a safe space" (FG2S2). Another woman participant described the basketball court "as a bit un-inclusive" and it did "not necessarily feel like it's an open space" (FG2S2). This is consistent with Lewis et al.'s (2018, p. 65) finding in UK universities that resisting men's domination and the attendant 'lad culture' behaviours can result in women "feel[ing] alone and isolated".

In the authentic vignette used to facilitate reflection and discussion in the second focus group, the scenario played out in a hypothetical common room in a college that included a pool table for students' enjoyment; however, the setting was transformed into an amphitheatre for the performance of aggressive masculine behaviours when groups of men gathered there. When asked whether the scenario felt realistic, one woman participant commented specifically on the communal areas aspect of the story: "common spaces part of the scenario is realistic because you see this happening [at college]" (FG2S2).

When participants were asked to reflect on women's inclusion/exclusion from communal spaces, both men and women participants described a "very male – sort of like locker room type banter" (FG2S2) that accompanied social activities, including those described above at sub-theme **1(d)** and which

occurred in communal spaces (such as the pool room) where groups of men were gathered, segregated from women. This was consistent with participant's earlier responses:

> The language that's used amongst a group of boys, or even worse, a group of drunk boys, if a girl was to overhear some of that conversation … I don't think they would be too happy about that. (Man, FG1S2M)

Another man participant at site two also reflected on other impacts of the (mis)use of communal spaces by (groups of) men. He was aware how men students could be disrespectful of women and fellow students in their use of communal spaces:

> If there's a group of boys drinking together, often they sort of drop … their respect towards the girls, they'll start to say things really loudly, maybe not even thinking about the girls that might be in their rooms. (FG2S2)

This participant's reflection acknowledged the unique language and behaviours enacted by groups of men when women are not present. Further, the men participants identified that women wouldn't be "too happy" with some of language that was used. The participants' use of language around "girls … overhear[ing]" the banter suggests that participants did not identify the banter as the sole problem, but rather it was the risk in being found out or caught. Some other men participants, however, began to examine the potential negative impact of the banter on women's inclusion, sense of belonging and safety in the second set of focus groups (employing the vignette). One participant characterised the content of the banter as that which "propagate[d]" (Man, FG2S2) the objectification of women. Another participant at site two described the banter as contributing to the broader "toxic[ity] and male dominat[ion]" (Man, FG2S2) at the college. In a similar conversation at the other site, a man participant noted how the language used by groups of men around the pool table, which he described as "banter", "had a lot to do" (FG2S1) with women's exclusion from communal spaces in the site. He described hearing "a few things … [which] automatically put people a bit offside" and hypothesised that this resulted in women choosing not to be in that space; rather, he suggested that after hearing those comments, "the girls would feel safe[r] just being upstairs". The description provided by this participant of women in site one resisting and countering the dominating group behaviour of men by disassociating and demarcating themselves from particular communal spaces they perceived to be unsafe is consistent with the contributions of women participants in site two who described their countering actions by informally boycotting particular spaces and adopting alternative routes across or around campus to demarcate communal areas where groups of men gathered and there was

"banter" (Woman, FG1S2W).[41] This confirms that some women in colleges resist and counter the hegemonic gender power relations in the settings by adopting mitigation strategies to demarcate themselves from not only physical or sexual violence or sexualisation[42] but also to "deliberately disengage" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 8) from the "locker-room banter" (Woman, FG2S2). These may be seen as informal but collectively practiced oppositional strategies to structural inequality and as harm minimisation strategies that promote women's safety, within the limited agentic boundaries afforded to them by the gender power regime.

When discussing men's domination of communal spaces in the college through the vignette, one woman participant commented that "it's not explicitly said" that women were not welcome but that there was a "kind of internalised acceptance of the boys club" (FG2S2). The internalised acceptance of the unwritten rules (informal policies) for who has access to enjoy the facilities of the college and whose enjoyment is prioritised is evidence of the domination of women resulting from the existing gender power regime at the site. Another woman participant confirmed that the exclusion "is not explicit" (FG2S2). She further stated that "sometimes you're encouraged to join but it just doesn't feel like a safe space which you can just join". The gender power regime and the resulting domination of women meant that women were functionally excluded from common areas, even if occasionally 'invited' to enter.

6.2.6 Conclusion for Theme 1

This first overarching theme, 'oppression of women', highlighted the structural nature of women's oppression in the participating sites. Women's oppression was maintained through the gendered hierarchy of authority; women were subordinated through sporting activities and college architectures with dominant gender ideologies rendering them 'other'; and men's privileged position rendered them unaware of differential treatment of their women peers, reinforcing oppression. These sub-themes are interrelated and demonstrate the structural and invisible manner in which gender power relations are maintained in these sites. The analysis above also revealed how the manner in which groups of men behave functionally excludes women from social activities and communal spaces which are central to collegiate life. Men and women participants' descriptions of the aggressive, intimidating and sexualising behaviours evoked images of the 'lad culture' documented amongst groups of young men in society, broadly, and in universities, specifically (Phipps & Young, 2015; Stenson, 2020; Waling, 2020). The analysis demonstrated how gender power relations are maintained through the structure of student-led social activities

[41] See earlier discussion in sub-theme **1(b)**.
[42] As discussed in sub-theme **1(b)**.

and through the functional exclusion of women from enjoyment of college communal spaces. It further identified the manner in which some women and men resist the hegemonic gender power relations, primarily through refusing to participate in activities and refusing to be present in spaces where men's domination is displayed (Hughes et al., 2022).

6.3 Overarching theme 2: Gendered norms and stereotypes

The second theme related to the manner in which gendered norms and stereotypes are present and function to maintain gender power relations in the participating sites. This theme also identifies the manner in which these gendered norms and/or stereotypes are countered or resisted by women students. Sub-theme **2(a)** describes the gendered stereotypes and norms relating to 'women's work' inside the college, including (volunteer) service duties, paid employment opportunities and college administration staff. Sub-theme **2(b)** relates the gendered stereotypes and norms restricting and demeaning women's students' employment and educational choices outside the college and the educational disadvantage that is perpetuated by these stereotypes. Sub-theme **2(c)** pertains to the gender-essentialist beliefs around women's 'physical inferiority' present in the sites, reinforced by gender-segregated sporting and social activities and traditions. The gender-essentialism also functions to marginalise students who are not cisgender. Sub-theme **2(d)** relates to the taken-for-granted benevolent sexism revealed by both women and men participants in the focus groups. Following Stewart et al.'s (2021, p. 2) approach to investigating gendered norms and stereotypes, the discussion below incorporates "the attitudes, behavioural intentions and enacted behaviours that are produced and reinforced as a result of structures and systems that support inequalities" in the sites of inquiry.

6.3.1 Sub-theme 2(a): Gendered stereotypes and norms relating to 'women's work' in the college context

Gendered stereotypes and norms relating to women's skills, characteristics, natures and enjoyment were evident in the site. These stereotypes and norms were prevalent in participants' descriptions of the nature of service activities and paid employment (students and staff) in the ongoing, day-to-day maintenance of their college community.[43] When asked about equality in college, one woman participant raised the area of service duties as "something that [college] does well in regard to equality" (FG1S1W). This participant reflected that 'equality' meant that "everyone has to do a duty" and that in these duties "there's the same expectations of everyone".

[43] See **4.2.1.1** for a description of the service activities ('duties') college students are required to complete.

She described the requirement for all students to participate in duties and the "equal opportunities for the boys and the girls to apply for duty manager [leadership roles]" as being an arena where there was no gendered division or power differentials. A man participant in a separate focus group agreed that "everyone at [site one] has to get involved" (FG1S1M) and that the gendered split was "50/50 – two girls, two guys" on each shift. However, another man participant disagreed, stating that during washing up "it's always four girls and one guy" (FG1S1M). While all participants agreed that the requirement to complete service duties applied to people of all genders, some participants disagreed with their peers' statements (above) that this was an area of equality on the site.

One woman participant described the "jokes" (FG1S1W) that some of her men peers made while on kitchen duties together, suggesting that women enjoyed being in the kitchen because of their gender. She described a conversation where a man peer remarked, "Oh, you probably love doing that [plating up dinner] because being in the kitchen is just a great old time for you." Perceiving this as a gendered comment ("I knew what he was getting at"), the woman participant reported replying, "There are two boy kitchenhands – do you think they enjoy it as much as I do?" The man peer replied, "It doesn't come quite as naturally [to them]." The woman participant expressly identified that this man peer's "jokes" were grounded in gendered stereotypes regarding women and so-called "women's work" (Finch & Groves, 2022). 'Women's work' is work that aligns with the communal traits (such as nurturing and caring) that are undervalued in patriarchal structures (Stewart et al., 2021). She described her response to being stereotyped in this way:

> 'Don't place that stereotype on me!' [He] was partly joking, but I also could tell there was an element of truth – he believed what he was saying. (Woman, FG1S1W)

The participant's description of countering her man peer's comments indicates that some women in the sites are resisting gendered norms and stereotypes and "rejecting the status quo" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 8).

Hentschel et al. (2019, p. 2) submit that "gender stereotypes are generalisations about what men and women are like" and note that "there is typically a great deal of consensus about them". That the woman participant perceived that her man peer "believed" the stereotype he was repeating is demonstrative of the manner in which stereotypes are internalised by men (and some women) in the sites and that they are taken-for-granted, common-sensical beliefs. These stereotypes functionally support the reproduction of harmful gender power relations in the sites (Ejaz et al., 2023). Additionally, the data revealed that harmful statements, such as the one above, were veiled under the label of 'jokes'. Rawlings (2019, p. 711) suggests that describing such behaviours as

'jokes' is a "discursive manoeuvre … for students to invoke when attempting to evade accountability in incidents of violence".[44]

When asked about the extra work that women student leaders are required to do, one participant responded that women were expected to be "like a mother" (Woman, FG1S2W) to their peers. Another woman participant agreed, stating that as a women student leader, "you're in a mother role, like legit a mother role" (FG1S2W). The stereotypes around women's caring and nurturing traits (Stewart et al., 2021) were embedded in gender power relations in the sites, resulting in women student leaders having to adopt additional labour:

> People asking for help and venting and going through emotional stress, they want to talk to you because you're a woman. (Woman, FG1S2W)

This burden of additional labour extended beyond emotional labour; women participants also described the presumption that women would undertake cleaning and administrative responsibilities for the student club. Women's additional labour was not acknowledged by men in the site. One woman participant who was an elected member of the student club reflected that "the men [student leaders] probably never realised I've done a substantial amount of cleaning and organising for the committee" (FG1S2W). These descriptions of the expectation of domestication of women students' labour are analogous to Forsyth's (2014, p. 215) description of women academic staff in universities who are "relegated" to "institutional housekeeping roles" (see also McKnight et al., 2023). Women participants' awareness of the additional labour that women are expected to undertake, flowing from gendered norms and stereotypes, demonstrates the potential to disrupt gender power relations in the site through resistance to participant-identified, harmful norms and stereotypes.

Gender power relations are also structurally maintained through gender norms in the allocation of limited number of paid employment opportunities (see **4.2.1.3**) in colleges. One woman participant at site two stated that while paid opportunities were offered for kitchen and maintenance roles, she'd "never seen a girl in maintenance and [she'd] never seen a guy in the kitchen that isn't on community service" (FG1S2W). 'Community service' in this site is a punitive measure in response to student conduct, meaning the participant had only seen men working in the kitchen as a form of punishment. Women participants were asked about whether any women had wanted the maintenance roles. Three women participants responded that they would have liked to be able to have the maintenance role: "Yes, we've wanted to" (FG1S2W); "We've asked

[44] Lack of accountability is examined at sub-theme **3(e)**.

and we're actually not allowed to" (FG1S2W); and "I thought about maintenance but I thought they'd laugh at me" (FG1S2W).

Some women participants were also aware that the gendered division of paid labour opportunities excluded men from paid work in kitchen roles. One woman participant stated that she had known of "guys [that] have applied [for the paid kitchen role] … and just didn't get it" (FG1S2W). These small actions of enquiring about or applying for employment opportunities outside of the informal policy which structurally embeds a gendered division of paid labour may be understood as acts of resistance (Naylor, 2017) and/or women politically enacting prefigurative change (Leach, 2022) by seeking to disrupt gendered divisions in paid labour at the micro level (Törnberg, 2021). In the vignette-informed discussion, another woman participant observed that the gendered stereotypes about 'women's work' concerning service duties and students' paid employment were reinforced by college administration staff appointments. The participant identified that college staff (as distinct from students doing paid work) were employed in roles consistent with the gendered stereotypes described above:

> The [staff] cleaners all tend to be women and maintenance [staff] all tend to be men, which is perpetuating the idea that you'll find women in the kitchen and cleaning the rooms. (Woman, FG2S2)

Women participants were aware of the gendered division of paid roles in the college and had begun to identify the manner in which gender norms also restricted men students' employment opportunities and were structurally sustained through the college administrations' employment of staff along stereotypically gendered roles.

Men participants, however, did not identify the gendered nature of work in their colleges. When asked about whether these paid roles were available to people of all genders, men participants at site one identified that the "outdoor work" (FG1S1M) was currently being done by a man student but they did not believe this was gendered. Rather, men participants variously explained that the man student had been given this maintenance role because "he specifically approached [college administration] about it" (FG1S1M) or "maybe he just wanted some extra work or something" (FG1S1M). When asked whether there was any kind of gender stereotyping associated with paid roles allocation at site two, three men participants responded: "No" (FG1S2M); "I'm sure they'd let a male work in [the kitchen] but no one's applied" (FG1S2M); and "I guess there were already males there [in maintenance] and [the men in the role now] were just the first ones to display interest" (FG1S2M).

Men participants' responses revealed a lack of awareness of the gendered stereotypes and norms which limit students' opportunities in service duties and paid employment and did not identify the gendered division of college administration roles. The discussion with men participants across both sites provided insight into the false consciousness that is to be expected in a youth population who generally accept the ideology that gender equality has already been achieved and are, therefore, less able to identify diverse forms of inequalities (Coumarelos et al., 2023). Men participants may also not have been able to see the gendered stereotypes and norms in their colleges as gender norms governing both what is *accepted* and what is *expected* (Stewart et al., 2021).[45] Further, men participants may have offered their implicit endorsement of these "stereotypical gender roles and patriarchal beliefs more than women because it benefits them to do so" (Crittenden & Wright, 2013, p. 1269). The men participants (and the men students more broadly) have no incentive to identify or disrupt these stereotypes or norms, as they maintain their dominance over women by endorsing these gender roles (Crittenden & Wright, 2013). Conversely, women participants' awareness of and resistance to the gendered division of labour may have been fostered through the women participants' tangible experiences of marginalisation from paid employment opportunities.

Despite there being no written policy that excluded people from being appointed to kitchen or maintenance roles based on gender, there appeared to be an informal policy, based on unspoken gender norms, that was not interrogated by men but that some women students were aware of and were taking steps to counter. In this way, the gendered norms relating to 'women's work' in the colleges structurally constrain the roles women and men enact (Hentschel et al., 2019), which in turn reinforces the persistence of gendered stereotypes and harmful gender power relations in the sites.

6.3.2 Sub-theme 2(b): Gendered stereotypes and norms relating to 'women's work' outside the college context

Many of the gendered stereotypes relating to 'women's work' inside the college were also present in relation to attitudes and perceptions concerning 'women's work' outside the college. Women participants themselves referred to the 'stereotypical choices' that students had made concerning their areas of study. One women participant used the term "conventional" (FG1S1W) to describe her area of study, adding that she was studying the "very stereotypically feminine field [of] nursing" and that a number of the men students were studying stereotypically "masculine" fields

[45] Men's (un)awareness of differential treatment was further examined above at sub-theme **1(c)**.

such as “engineering and building design and commerce”. While the gender segregation in university courses described by the participant was not surprising as this mirrors the educational and workforce gendered-segregation broadly, of particular interest was the manner in which the attitudes of men students demonstrated the hierarchical, stereotypical view of ‘women’s work’, and the women students’ complicity in perpetuating these taken-for-granted, common-sensical views of women (Hannover et al., 2018). In recounting a discussion with a man student, a woman participant described being challenged by a man peer about the relative difficulties of their courses: “You don’t really think that teaching’s harder than engineering, do you?” (FG1S1W). Women participants at the other site confirmed similar conversations about the relative difficulty of courses, with nursing and medicine also being stereotypically gendered. One woman participant described “constantly getting shit from the boys who do med[icine]” and described being told by a man peer that “nursing’s so easy, I could do it” (FG1S2W).

In recounting this discussion in the focus group, another participant reflected:

> Putting these feminine things in a box … saying ‘that’s just easier’ rather than celebrating the fact that you have different gifts and different capacities to do those different roles. (Woman, FG1S1W)

This encounter reveals the patriarchal and oppressive nature of gender in this site. This is consistent with Tildesley et al.’s (2023, p. 1997) research which found that power relations in university contexts are “structured … by academic status”. Another woman participant described women’s educational choices, more broadly, as being “degraded” (FG1S1W), revealing a hierarchy with educational and occupational choices being embodied with gendered characteristics, and occupational domains where women are overrepresented (such as teaching and nursing) being perceived as easier and softer and afforded less status. The enduring presence and explicit expression of stereotypes of “women’s work” (Finch & Groves, 2022) outside the college, as it was for ‘women’s work’ inside the college in sub-theme **2(a)**, indicates the pervasive nature of patriarchal oppression, where caring and nurturing work is devalued (Cera & Klinenberg, 2024). The presence of these descriptive stereotypes, where women are characterised as being more nurturing and caring, are consistent with the findings from Stewart et al.’s (2021, p. 2) systematic literature review of programs seeking to transform norms and stereotypes to promote gender equality. This is further evidenced by how women participants themselves reinforced gendered stereotypes. Rather than resisting the categorisation of teaching as an exclusively gendered occupation, the participant used stereotypical language to express their discomfort with their men peers’ attitudes. The woman participant did not challenge the gendered nature of the stereotypes about gendered occupations but rather expressed a desire that gendered

differences be celebrated. This is consistent with Hentschel et al.'s (2019, p. 2) submission that gender stereotypes are "often internalised by men and women". However, other women participants' articulation – and rejection – of these gendered stereotypes may also be understood as latent resistance, a part of the "small-scale struggle continually occurring over subjectivities" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 8).

The devaluing of 'women's work' by men students and the perpetuation of stereotypes by women was also evident in participants' descriptions of gendered attitudes towards chores and service activities in the ongoing, day-to-day maintenance of the college community. Across both sites, there was a polarised division between service roles which were perceived to be duties that were stereotypically women's roles (emphatically described at both sites as being related to kitchen duties) and those that were stereotypically men's roles (maintenance/gardening duties). In relation to this overarching theme of gendered norms and stereotypes, participants described the duties and service roles that were stereotypically ascribed as "feminine roles" being devalued in the same manner as 'women's work' and study choices:

> I just feel like … people will look down upon the more feminine roles. (Woman, FG1S1W)

While some women participants named these attitudes as "gender stereotyping" (FG1S2W), some women participants consistently described gendered differences (biological, psychological and social). Rather than challenging these, some women participants seemed to emphasise these differences, seeking an 'equality' that celebrated difference, rather than rejecting the established gender power regime. The complicity of some women participants seeking 'equality' while maintaining gendered differences indicates the false consciousness of some women participants who have internalised oppressive patriarchal norms of the gendered nature of courses and occupational choices. The manner in which these patriarchal norms are so taken for granted in the sites points to the hegemonic nature of gender power relations in colleges.

The enduring hierarchical nature of gendered stereotypes relating to attitudes to women's abilities, skills and educational choices was also evident for women who were studying or volunteering in fields that were perceived by men students as harder and traditionally the domain of men, including physical work, law and medicine. In the context of extracurricular activities, a woman participant described the responses she received from her men peers when she told them she was an "active member" (FG1S2W) of her local Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigade. She described how "blokes" are "shock[ed]" and often asked whether she was "actually" in the CFA. She further recounted a recent conversation with a man peer where this "shock" was followed by an interrogation:

> "Are you just in the administration part, or are you actually on the truck?" I'm like, "On the truck." (Woman, FG1S2W)

The woman participant described the responses she received from her man peers towards her capacity to engage in physical work, traditionally characterised as being in the domain of men, as disrespectful.

Further women participants recounted that the (student) Dux of Law in a previous year was a woman, who instead of being celebrated at the awards ceremony was asked by the (man) law dean (resident onsite) to take a photo of himself with "five of the guys doing law" (FG1S2W). In describing this behaviour, women participants described the law dean's exclusion and devaluing of the woman law student as "being messed up" (FG1S2W) and reflected that this was not an isolated incident but an ongoing, "obvious" (FG1S2W) behaviour where he was known for "giv[ing] no support to the females who study law [as he] focuses primarily on the boys" (FG1S2W). This participant described the educational disadvantage that women experience in the college (i.e. through the denial of access to tutorial support – a core offering of the collegiate experience based on gendered stereotypes about employment and educational choices) (Hentschel et al., 2019). The participant further stated that women students were aware of this pattern of behaviour from the man staff member, and confirmed that the "only people I know that associate with him … are males". This academic staff member provides important academic and pastoral services to students, acting as a tutor and resident on a student residential floor. The manner in which this man academic staff member's behaviour had been discussed and critiqued by women students demonstrates their resistance to the 'messed up' behaviour (Katz, 2009). However, the women participants described this individual as the problem, rather than the broader culture of the college and the university where this man staff member was also employed. Cultures that have historically privileged men and oppressed women enable not only the continuing oppression of women but also an environment that renders this behaviour invisible to men students. It is dismissed by men and women students as the troublesome behaviour of rogue individuals rather than a systemic, patriarchal problem affecting all women, men and gender-diverse people.[46]

The behaviour of men staff (associated with the affiliated university) and men students reveals the harmful impacts of the pervasive stereotypes present in this educational setting. This site, like many college contexts, was built for men and had subsequently been opened to women students. However, the participants' accounts reveal that the breadth of educational opportunities was not

[46] The perception that the problems (and solutions) are individualised rather than structural or cultural is analysed at sub-theme **3(d)**.

equally opened. The ongoing "obvious" (FG1S2W) behaviour of some staff in their exclusion and oppression of women, based on stereotypes about intellectual ability and gendered perceptions of skills, demonstrates the pervasive, enduring power of pre-existing power regimes that were not disrupted through cultural change when women were allowed entrance into these settings. Further, the inability of men students to acknowledge the differential treatment of the Dux of Law and the stereotyping that women experience may be further evidence of false consciousness and may reflect the limited agency of men students to disrupt the gender power regime in the broader institutional context.

6.3.3 Sub-theme 2(c): Gender segregation reinforcing gender-essentialist beliefs

Participants described the gender segregation associated with sporting activities, with men and women playing in separate matches with distinct rules, traditions and differential status between genders. The researcher asked the men participants to explain why Footy Day[47] is segregated by gender and whether gender segregation could be removed so that people of all genders could play together.[48] Initially, a man participant responded that women couldn't play in the men's games because "it's just the way it's [always] been" (Man, FG1S1M). Despite the complexity of the historical, traditional nature of gender segregation in sporting activities, participants were encouraged to consider whether it would be possible to change this tradition; in effect, participants were asked about ways that gender power relations, as perpetuated through emblematic sporting activities, could be countered.

In exploring this possibility, men participants described potential barriers, revealing gender-essentialist attitudes (Messner, 2018a) and the nature of gender performance (Butler, 1990) in the setting. One participant explained that teams needed to continue to be separated by gender/sex[49] because there was "such a size difference" (Man, FG1S1M) between men and women, which other men participants agreed with. As this conversation developed, participants became more explicit in their descriptions of perceived biological differences between sexes.[50] One participant

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[47] Footy Day was examined in more detail at sub-theme **1(b)**.

[48] The researcher acknowledges that gender and sex-segregation in sport is a controversial, contemporary issue. As evidenced in relation to high-performance elite sports, this is not a settled discussion. An evaluation of the value (or otherwise) of segregating sports is beyond the scope of this research which sought to examine the manner in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in the settings which included college sporting activities (which are predominantly segregated by gender).

[49] As outlined above, participants referred to gender and sex interchangeably.

[50] Following Hextrum (2020, p. 1057), who identified the manner in which "gender categories are linked to sex categories through biological verification processes" in the context of college sport gender segregation, the use of 'sexes' here in the context of a discussion of perceived biological differences is intentional.

stated, “The fact that men and women are different biologically you can’t really ignore … I’m not saying women are worse … it’s just saying men have more muscle mass generally” (Man, FG1S1M). Only one participant described the possibility of women being physically strong, and this was itself tempered by the primary focus on biological differences:

> Obviously there are women who are naturally stronger and just as strong as some blokes ...but as a whole, there are obvious physiological differences that I don’t think you can just ignore … because, as a general rule, men are stronger than women. (Man, FG1S1M)

The misperception that women are physically ‘inferior’ in relation to sports that was present in the focus groups is well documented in other college settings (Hextrum, 2020; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021) and in sporting contexts more broadly (Gacka, 2017; Fink, 2015; Meân & Kassing, 2008). This (mis)perception is not benign; rather, it maintains men’s dominance. Hunnicutt (2009, p. 560) argues that through these systems of domination, men “demonstrat[e] that they are better than, and different from, women”.

This perceived physical ‘inferiority’ was also expressed by some women participants: “From a biological standpoint, most guys are a lot bigger than we are” (FG1S1W). That some women participants also framed their hesitations around women playing football in mixed-gender teams in generalisations about biological differences is demonstrative of the ideology that has been constructed to serve the maintenance of gender power relations present in the site (Arnot, 1982). Further, the gender-essentialist beliefs relating to women’s inferiority (repeated by some women participants as taken-for-granted ‘truth’) are evidence of the “symbolic climate” in these sites that “engineers consent and docility” from women (Hunnicutt, 2009, p. 561) and in turn their “complicity in their own subordination” (Hannover et al., 2018, p. 3).

The gender essentialism relating to the biological, binary nature of difference in the transcript could be understood using Messner’s (2018a) concept of *soft essentialism*. Viewed through this lens, the perspectives offered by men participants reveals the “incomplete [nature of the] feminist transformation of social institutions” (Messner, 2018a, p. 29). While men participants were positive about women choosing to participate in (‘women’s’) sports, albeit through a paternalistic frame,[51] fixed and reductionist attitudes towards women’s sporting abilities, based on assumed biological difference, endured.

The ‘soft’ essentialist attitudes of men participants may not merely be *revealed* in the sporting activities at the sites of inquiry but may also be *reinforced* by the gender/sex segregation of those

[51] Paternalism and benevolent sexism are examined in sub-theme **1(e)**.

very activities, as suggested by Ogilvie and McCormack (2021). Ogilvie and McCormack (2021, p. 1174) identify that "coercive gender segregation *presumes* [emphasis added] women's inferiority to men as it is seen as also segregating by skill and physical ability by virtue of men's perceived natural superiority". Further, gender-segregated settings such as the emblematic Footy Day activity have been understood to be "more conducive to the reproduction of beliefs and attitudes that legitimise patriarchal structures" (Lütkewitte, 2023, p. 2). In their research with secondary school physical education gender-diverse students and their teachers, Phipps and Blackall (2023, p. 1100) identify the ways in which these gender-segregated activities "embed and sustain" gender ideologies and "endorse" gender stereotypes and patriarchal hierarchies. This is consistent with research in US college settings. Hextrum (2020, p. 1060) found that the gender/sex-segregated nature of college sporting activities impacted the perpetuation of perceptions of gendered difference: "The two-sex system [of sporting activities] … presents the categories of 'man' and 'woman' as fixed rather than as socially constructed, fluid, and ultimately vulnerable". While sporting arenas can provide opportunities for gender-transformative interventions and culture change (Liston et al., 2017; Messner, 2018b; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021), the gender segregation of this emblematic event currently provides a rationale for gender-essentialist beliefs that may be perpetuated beyond the sporting arena into other structures of college life.

Finally, Jeanes et al.'s (2021, p. 545) recent study of Australian community football clubs identified how "men who are able to embody dominant forms of masculinity (i.e. high ability and able-bodied) continue to be privileged" in sporting contexts. As a result, the gender-essentialist attitudes in the sites may also prescribe heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, fostering broader social exclusion for students beyond those who identify as women and students who don't conform to the physically strong and aggressive masculine model represented in college sporting activities.

It was apparent to the researcher that the gender segregation of some social traditions also perpetuates cisgender norms in the sites, with traditions sown deeply in a binary conception of gender. However, only two participants explicitly identified cisnormativity in the sites and identified its impact on excluding students who were non-binary or gender diverse. One participant reflected on how "Wedding Night was a bit gendered" and noted that "sometimes people might not feel comfortable …with the male and female [division]" (Man, FG2S2). Another participant reflected on how the binary presentation of gender-segregated social events may lead to exclusion for gender-diverse students:

> [Wedding Night] ... not everybody identifies as women or men ... it's as though you're saying "[w]ell, you don't have a place here" and some of the students just really don't feel comfortable so it's quite a barrier to the acceptance or general respect for them. (Woman, FG2S2)

This participant's comment highlighted the impacts on individual students who do not conform to the gender binary and the manner in which student-led social activities and traditions structurally reinforce cisgender norms in colleges. It was troubling that only two participants were able to identify the marginalisation of transgender and gender-diverse students; however, this is consistent with Phipps and Blackall's (2023, pp. 1100, 1099) recent research in UK secondary schools which found that cisnormativity is "embedded" into and "permeat[es]" educational institutions' cultures and Waling and Roffee's (2017) study of heteronormativity in the cultural ideologies of higher education institutions. The cisnormative beliefs and attitudes in the sites are taken for granted as common sense and, therefore, rendered invisible to many students. However, the manner in which some participants were able to problematise the cisnormative beliefs and attitudes embodied in these social events points to opportunities for future resistance.

6.3.4 Sub-theme 2(d): Benevolent sexism

In addition to the soft essentialism and cisnormativity evident above, when the researcher asked participants about ways in which activities in the college – such as sporting activities – could be made more inclusive of people of all genders to play together, the responses revealed patriarchal, paternalistic views about men's role in 'protecting' women. In the context of football, one participant explained that football matches couldn't be played in mixed-gender teams, because a "contact sport like AFL … wouldn't work as well" (Man, FG1S1M). Another man participant agreed that football should remain segregated by gender but stated that there were other opportunities for mixed-gender sports at the college with the *"mixed netball"* competitions (Man, FG1S1M). Notably, netball is a non-contact sport, which Treagus (2005, p. 100) contends was designed to "encapsulate the dominant understanding of femininity as a form of constant and necessary restraint". As such, netball remains an activity that conforms to gendered stereotypes of women and upholds the current gender power regime.

Further, a man participant emphasised the physical nature of football and expressed concern for women's physical safety:

> I don't think you can just ignore [biological differences] for the sake of 'just play everyone together for equality's sake' because there will be injuries because as a general rule, men are stronger than women. (FG1S1M)

This indicative quote highlights the concerns expressed by men participants about women's physical safety in the context of contact sports. Men participants expressed a desire to 'protect' women from the "rough games" (FG1S1M) played in the men's matches at Footy Day. These beliefs may be representative of a culture of *benevolent sexism* at the site (Barreto & Doyle, 2023; Hannover et al., 2018; Mastari et al., 2019). This culture of benevolent sexism revealed in the transcripts, rather than hostile sexism, may serve to enable compliance and consent from women in the sites and ultimately enable men to retain their power in ways that appear more palatable and are, therefore, less vulnerable to students' resistance or rejection.

Research into benevolent sexism and young people is primarily situated in the context of intimate partner relationships; however, the close nature of relationships between students in the college setting may offer a similar relational context. Mastari et al. (2023, p. 2) caution that these 'protective' attitudes and behaviours are "an inconspicuous mechanism that perpetuates gender inequality". Hunnicutt (2009, p. 565) agrees, diagnosing how 'protective' actions can be wielded as "instruments of repression". It is these instruments which need to be countered in the sites to promote women's rights and equality. The 'protective' actions may also have been informed by the 'bystander training' which many participants had undertaken at college.[52] Finally, the presence of these unquestioned ideologies is demonstrative of the broader taken-for-granted assumptions which underpin gender power relations in these sites.[53]

6.3.5 Conclusion for Theme 2

The second theme has discussed the gendered norms and stereotypes in the participating sites which function to structurally maintain men's domination of women in the sites by 'legitimising' their elevated position. Harmful gendered stereotypes and norms homogenised and reduced women to an expression of their presumed (feminine-coded) 'communal' rather than (masculine-coded) 'agentic' traits (Stewart et al., 2021). These stereotypes and norms restricted women's service, leadership and employment opportunities inside the college and were reinforced through the stereotypically gendered appointment of college administration staff. Further, women were expected to perform additional caring, cleaning and organising labour as a consequence of these gendered stereotypes. The gendered stereotypes and norms also demeaned women's educational and employment choices outside of the college, with caring vocations devalued and women being educationally disadvantaged through discriminatory attitudes of staff. Gender-essentialist beliefs around women's 'physical inferiority' present in the sites functioned to exclude women from

[52] Bystander training in the sites is discussed further in sub-theme **3(d).**
[53] Benevolent sexism is discussed further in sub-themes **3(a)**, **4(a)**, **4(b)** and **4(c)**.

contexts where men perform aggressive dominance, such as sporting and social activities. These activities also function to reinforce cisgender norms and marginalise transgender and gender-diverse students. Finally, paternalistic attitudes, consistent with benevolent sexism, dehumanised women in the sites. The stereotypes and norms relating to women's educational and work choices, and the gender-essentialist attitudes and stereotypes, coupled with paternalistic benevolent sexism evident in the research sites can be understood through a critical feminist perspective, which views patriarchy as the "central organising principle in society" (Callaghan & Clark, 2006, p. 88). Through this lens, the particular constituted gender power relations in the research sites function to "limit who people can be" (Kiguwa, 2019, p. 227) and the transcriptions confirmed that women in the sites are constrained, compared to their men peers. There were representations of nascent countering efforts expressed in the transcripts, with potential fissures in the hegemonic maintenance of gender power relations (Hunnicutt, 2009) apparent.

6.4 Overarching theme 3: Safety and equality: Perceptions and barriers

The third overarching theme relates to 'safety',[54] and the first two sub-themes relate to participants' perceptions concerning safety. Sub-theme **3(a)** relates to women participants' perception that safety is only a concern outside of the college; women participants described feeling safe inside their college owing to restricted access to the site and trusted relationships with peers and staff in the sites. Informal policies relating to bedroom access are also examined. Men participants did not report similar concerns around safety. Sub-theme **3(b)** relates to women participants' perception that their men student peers are trustworthy protectors, who ensure their safety outside of the college. Women participants further described feeling unsafe in public spaces outside the college, when not accompanied by men, generally. Sub-theme **3(c)** relates to the (mis)perception that gender equality is already enjoyed at the college and examines men's backlash to equality efforts. The final two sub-themes concern current responses to harmful behaviours which disrespect women in the sites. Sub-theme **3(d)** relates to the misconception that the problems identified stem from individuals, out of step with the college culture or values, and the resulting social cost borne by student leaders in responding to individuals' problematic behaviours. Sub-theme **3(e)** concerns the manner in which issues are minimised and rationalised

[54] The author was mindful of Lewis et al.'s (2015, [5.5]) caution relating to the "limitations of the concept of safety" in the context of violence, owing to both the manner in which these safety discourses are "unambitious in their scope". In line with Lewis et al. (2015), the researcher does not see safety as the end-goal in itself.

in the sites, with an absence of consequences, even for behaviours which participants were able to identify as problematic.

6.4.1 Sub-theme 3(a): Safety as an 'outside' problem

When participants were asked to describe what makes them feel safe or unsafe, they identified physical safety concerns outside their college. The majority of participants described safety in terms of physical rather than psychosocial or sexual safety. One woman participant identified that she "automatically think[s] back to … physical violence" when she "hear[s] the word 'safety'" (FG1S1W). Only one participant described sexual violence in any form:

> My first reason to feel unsafe is the fear of sexual assault. (Woman, FG1S1W)

Overwhelmingly, safety was expressed as a concern for women participants outside of their college; safety was understood to be an external problem. Initially, women participants stated that they felt safe inside their college: "I think where we are is quite good, within the actual confines of [college], I don't reckon I've ever felt unsafe" (Woman, FG1S2W). Women participants stated that they felt unsafe when they were walking back to college from the local pub or waiting for a tram or bus connection at night, consistent with recent research (e.g. Wenham and Jobling's (2023) study of geographies of gender-based violence, focused on young people). One woman participant detailed a recent event when she had a flat phone battery which prevented her from calling someone at her residence to get picked up from the bus stop in the evening. She described asking a "girl opposite me" (FG1S2W) to use her phone, but it was flat too. The woman participant described how she then asked a "gentleman" to borrow his phone. As the woman participant's phone was flat, she didn't have access to phone numbers and instead used this man's phone to log in to Facebook to message her college peers. She described how the man later used her Facebook name to find her and "he ended up messaging [her] asking [her] to go out". This incident reflects part of the cumulative harm experienced by women college students which results in them experiencing fear of sexual assault "especially in public places at night because they are [primarily] afraid of being attacked by a stranger" (Fisher & May, 2009, p. 318).Overall, women participants across both sites described feeling unsafe when they were outside the physical boundaries of their college.

Conversely, women participants described feeling safe inside their colleges. In site one, several women participants stated that what made them "feel really safe" (FG1S1W) was the fingerprint lock installed on the entrance door to the main building "in the sense that only people who live [here] can get in" (FG1S1W). The women participants' responses suggested that they viewed their residence as a place where they wouldn't be harmed. One woman participant stated that

women feel safe "when they're around familiar people, in a familiar place" (FG1S1W). The relationships participants had with peers in the residence was a factor that woman participants stated contributed to their feelings of safety:[55]

> I've got relationships with everyone who lives inside here, and I feel comfortable that they'd never do anything to make me feel unsafe. I have trust in everyone around us. And, it's a mutual trust, because you're not going to break someone's trust that you live with. (Woman, FG1S1W)

Another woman participant extended this conversation, stating that the relationships with staff also afforded a measure of safety. She identified that her relationships with staff enabled her to feel "comfortable going to them if [she] had an issue" (FG1S1W). She expressed her confidence that the staff would "fully drop everything to help me … no matter if it was really small and insignificant, or if it was a big deal".[56] The established relationships with, and access to, staff made her feel safe.

The utility of established relationships and the perception shared by women participants en masse that they were safer inside their college may be explained by a belief that they could draw on "social protective mechanisms to prevent or reduce the likelihood … of crime victimisation" (Keel et al., 2023, p. 2) in their colleges. This form of what Keel et al. (2023, p. 2) call "perceived control" may foster feelings of safety in the context of the established, trusted relationships of the college setting. The women participants' fears about safety *outside* the college (their home) are contiguous with women's fears as documented in criminological literature elsewhere (Keel et al., 2023; Stanko, 1990, 1995) and with Fisher and May's (2009) study regarding perceptions of safety and fear of crime on university campuses (beyond residential settings themselves) in the US. Their study found that there was a perception of "relative safety and security of the university setting" that resulted in "generally reduced fea[r] on campus" (Fisher & May, 2009, p. 316). This perception may be further amplified in colleges, which ERoCA (2018, p. 89) described as "highly insular institutions", distrusting of "outsiders".

While it is positive that women participants reported feeling safe in their college home, it is also concerning, as research suggests that are less safe in their residences (AHRC, 2017). The majority of perpetrators of sexual harassment or assault in university settings (including residential colleges) are known to victim-survivors (AHRC, 2017, p. 10). The majority of sexual violence occurs in private rather than public spaces (Roberts, 2019).

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[55] See also theme 4(b), 'Men as trustworthy protectors'.

[56] This perception of staff availability and willingness to address issues is in stark in contrast to other participant reflections, as discussed at sub-theme **5(c)**.

However, women participants' belief that safety was an external concern is understandable given the pervasive role of institutions, such as the media, in

> disproportionately publicis[ing] attacks as happening in public spaces rather reporting about violence committed in the house. This re-frames the dangers for women in public places despite women being most at risk of violence in the home. (Roberts, 2019, p. 33)

The media and public discourse regarding sexual violence in public serves as a "form of control over women" (Walby, 1990, p. 140). This control may make women students more vulnerable, as their guard is down in their residence. It may also inhibit women from feeling confident to raise concerns, counter harmful behaviours or structures or limit women being believed if they do report issues. Additionally, without safety being identified as an issue inside college contexts, there is limited scope for the transformative change required to disrupt gender power relations in the sites.

After further discussion, the woman participant who had earlier shared that she didn't "reckon [she'd] ever felt unsafe" (FG1S2W) described an issue with a "bloke on [her] floor last year" who would "come around and knock on [her] door" at night. She described how she could identify his knock, so she "just wouldn't answer the door" to her room. The woman participant stated that he was "harmless" but cautioned that "some of the guys don't really get the message". She did not explicitly link this to safety more broadly or identify problematic behaviours or cultures associated with men at the college. In response to this story, the women participants described an informal/unwritten 'open-door' policy that requires student leaders and residential advisors in site two to "have [their] doors open all the time" (FG1S2W). Some participants described this as a positive policy to enable their peers to "come talk" (FG1S2W) to student leaders as a part of the pastoral care offered by the college. One woman participant identified that this open-door policy "could be problematic", with people assuming "that you're always willing to have a chat" (FG1S2W). For student leaders, the public/private divide was erased even more than for other students. Student leaders and residential advisors' rooms had to be open to all peers to enter, limiting their privacy and emotional and physical safety.

In the other site, participants described an alternate policy: "girls and boys aren't allowed in each other's rooms after 11 pm" (Woman, FG1S1W). One participant explicitly connected this policy to safety: "you know that there won't be a guy in your room after 11 pm … so, I feel safe" (Woman, FG1S1W). Another woman participant added, "Even though you trust everybody – it's just that extra peace of mind" (FG1S1W). It was interesting that this woman participant felt the need for a caveat to the feelings of safety that came from this policy by asserting that everybody is trustworthy. Another woman participant described their room as their "safe place" (FG1S1W).

As this college explicitly promotes 'Christian' perspectives on relationships and marriage, the researcher hypothesised that the policy aimed to promote 'purity' (with its attendant harmful, often gendered conception of shame) rather than safety. However, the feeling of safety women participants in this site attributed to this policy heightens concerns about the informal open-door policy at the other site. The dangerous safety implications of perpetrators' "easy access to bedrooms" in college settings were highlighted by AHRC (2017, p. 11).

When men participants across the two sites were asked about when they felt safe/unsafe, they initially struggled to think of examples of when they felt unsafe.

> I feel pretty good, I don't know about everyone else, but I barely have anything to worry about. (Man, FG1S1M)

This response is unsurprising, as criminologists have demonstrated that men report being less fearful of crime than women in general and in university student populations (e.g. Jacobsen et al., 2020; Roberts, 2019). When the interviewer probed further, men participants described occasionally feeling unsafe outside the college site after dark and concerned about "shady characters" (FG1S2M). One man participant explained that he "usually just look[s] over [his] shoulder until [the carpark gate] starts to shut to make sure that nobody follows [him] in" (FG1S2M). One man participant also identified "strangers" (FG1S1M) in relation to feeling safe/unsafe. Additionally, a man participant described feeling "a little bit unsafe" when their "Christian and conservative view[s]" (FG1S1M) were challenged or not respected. He reported feeling "in the minority these days" and feeling unsafe when a "teacher or someone doesn't facilitate listening to both sides of the argument". This participant's fears related to reduced social currency and power, perhaps suggesting his fear was grounded in losing the dominant status he felt entitled to.

Men participants may genuinely not have experienced the same fears as their women peers; research suggests that women have a "heightened awareness of their environmental conditions whereby they monitor activities around them" (Keel et al., 2023, pp. 27–28; Roberts, 2019) and that the resulting "safety rituals" adopted are gendered (Stanko, 1990, p. 85). However, the gender power regimes present in the sites, with the associated narrow expectations of the performance of masculinity, may have also impacted what the men participants felt able to share in the context of a focus group. The men participants may have – consciously or otherwise – desired to conform to dominant "masculine identities in line with patriarchal community expectations" (Keel et al., 2023, p. 29) by not expressing fears in front of their peers. However, following Fileborn's (2019, p. 241) example from her violence research in Melbourne, it is important to acknowledge that the

mostly white men participants' "whiteness positioned [them] in comparatively powerful locations" in the context of crime victimisation.

6.4.2 Sub-theme 3(b): Men college peers are trustworthy 'protectors'

When women participants were asked by the researcher about what makes them feel safe, they described the presence of their men resident peers as contributing to their feelings of safety: "[I] feel a lot safer [when going out] with I'm with boys from community" (Woman, FG1S2W). She further stated, "It's like a little family" amongst peers at her college, describing how the men students view their women resident peers "like sisters or something". Another woman participant described how some of her men peers would intervene when she was "getting hit on … and clearly didn't want anything to do anything to do with the guy" (FG1S2W) when at a pub or nightclub. She noted that her men peers "wouldn't say anything" to the man providing unwanted sexual advances but would provide physical 'protection' for her. This participant further described these interventions:

> You wouldn't even have to ask them to do it; they would just see it, and that's so normal for these guys to do it. (Woman, FG1S2W)

The normalisation of men intervening to prevent unwanted sexual advances from other men, when directed at their peers or people they view as 'sisters', is both encouraging and concerning. Men's intervention in the context of unwanted sexual advances was described as being contingent; protective initiatives were only offered to those where there was a pre-existing relationship (described in familial terms). The women participants did not describe men intervening when unwanted sexual advances were from other men inside the community or intervening to 'protect' women with whom they did not have a 'familial' relationship. This is consistent with Hunnicutt's (2009, p. 565) assertion that under patriarchal systems, women are offered "varying amounts … of protection".

On one hand, the normalisation of men's intervention in public settings (such as clubs and pubs) in this context demonstrates the men students' awareness (to some extent) of women's experiences of unwanted sexual attention and advances. It may be demonstrative of their efforts to counter harmful behaviours of other men. On the other hand, men students' failure to address the men perpetrating these behaviours may suggest that they were concerned about potential conflict and their safety, or it may suggest the minimisation of this kind of behaviour, viewing this as the behaviour of an aberrant individual rather than the conduct enabled in a patriarchal society. It may suggest that dominant gender power relations and violence are so normalised that it is accepted as fait accompli that women will experience sexual violence in some form.

A man participant reflected that "if I was a woman, I wouldn't feel comfortable going out to a nightclub without a bloke around" (FG1S1M). In describing women's safety, some men participants described how they would walk women students home from the local pub to protect them from external dangers. This may reveal some awareness of the safety risks women face and a genuine attempt to respond. Further, women's reliance on the presence of known men for their safety echoes the benevolent sexism (Mastari et al., 2019) discussed at sub-theme **2(d)**.

The 'protective' attitudes and norms evident in both the women and men participants' responses require further examination. Rather than benevolent, men's 'chivalrous' acts may result in what Hunnicutt (2009, p. 565) refers to as the "paradox of protection",

> render[ing] women powerless because accepting protection implies neediness and vulnerability; meanwhile, the threat of being victimised requires acquiescence to the protection men offer.

Roberts' (2019, p. 38) research with university students in the UK examines the manner in which women's risk-mitigation strategies, such as the "need to stay with known others and feeling the need to be chaperoned" (as also reported by participants in this study), are related to the socialisation of women to understand the centrality of men in protecting them to avoid "harmful events happening to them". The women participants in this study navigated the everyday with men as both the source of threat as well as their safety. Such reliance on men peers may have constrained their efforts to counter harmful gender power relations in their colleges.

In site one, the dominant religious views of the college institution and students were described as reasons for men students to be perceived as trustworthy. A woman participant stated that "a lot of people [in college] have Christian faith" (FG1S1W) and because of that she "feel[s] safe because [she] know[s] that all the boys are really respectful". She elaborated that because of the Christian faith of the majority of the men students, "you know that you're in a safe place and that they [men students] are going to behave appropriately". It was clear that shared religious beliefs of students in site one provided an important sense of common identity and values for women participants. However, there may be dangers associated with ascribing positive characteristics unquestioningly to men students based on a sense of shared Christian values. As Crittenden and Wright (2013, p. 1270) assert: "religion is a vehicle for endorsing and reinforcing patriarchy". Hannover et al.'s (2018, p. 13) research found that "highly religious boys and men approv[e] more strongly of benevolent sexist propositions than their non-religious or less-religious peers". Some women participants also identified the manner in which students' 'Christian' views "can differ and be a bit more conservative – not as open to ideas of promoting women" (FG1S1W).

Women participants identified the presence of men, generally, as enabling them to feel safe. A woman participant explained that "there's a real sense of safety when you're [out in public] with a man that you trust" (FG1S1W). The absence of (trustworthy) men was described as being a cause for concern:

> If I was walking home with two girls, I would not feel as safe as if I was walking home with a man that I trust. (Woman, FG1S1W)

When the interviewer asked the participant to explain why this was the case, the woman participant stated, "I think a lot of people respect men more, to not do things when they're there" (FG1S1W). Another woman participant confirmed that they feel safer with a trusted man present, rather than being in a group of girls, rejecting the idea that there is safety in numbers: "I reckon females can still be assaulted if there are multiples of them" (FG1S1W). Another participant reflected on feeling unsafe, even amongst a group of women, when "walk[ing] past even one man", explaining that this hypothetical individual man could "still cat-call you, harass you, [and] do whatever if you with a group of girls" (Woman, FG1S1W). When asked by the researcher why they'd feel safer with a man, the woman participant explained that "if you're with a guy, [the hypothetical individual unknown man is] not going to take that chance". Other participants continued the conversation before the researcher could interrogate what 'chance' referred to (which confirmed that this was an important point of discussion for women participants). This may have been the chance of being confronted physically or verbally by another man.

A third woman participant confirmed that she also feels safer when she's with "a male friend" (FG1S1W). She explained that "if it's just the two of you … people will automatically assume that you're together" and stated that this assumption of being in a relationship with a man accorded her safety from "sexual violence". It was concerning that the woman participant added, "And obviously, that's a witness." This woman participant seemed to be stating that what made her safe from sexual violence was men's fear of being successfully prosecuted for committing a sexual offence, rather than men's understanding of consent or respect for women.

The statements relating to safety being linked to the presence of a trusted man echo the gendered hierarchy of authority discussed in sub-theme **1(a)**, with the resulting differential respect and rights afforded to men and women by men. The additional respect afforded to men by men is evidence of the gendered nature of the power regime in society more broadly. The women participants at both sites described feeling vulnerable in the absence of a trusted man. Noticeably, no women participants offered any critique of the endemic violence that threatens them as they navigate their lives, perhaps suggesting that this violence is so normalised that it is unseen and uninterrogated. Further, trusted men were described as having an elevated status as protectors of

women. This is concerning as these 'trusted' men are themselves beneficiaries of the oppressive, patriarchal structures which they are (momentarily) 'protecting' women peers from.

6.4.3 Sub-theme 3(c): (Mis)perception and backlash relating to gender equality

At the beginning of the focus groups participants universally asserted that there was no gender inequality in their college. Women participants shared that they "don't really think there is a problem regarding inequality based on gender" (FG1S1W) and "it's never been a problem of there being inequality between the guys and the girls" (FG1S1W). One participant stated:

> We aren't experiencing those things, because we live in this great place that does such a good job to support women. (Woman, FG1S1W)

Another woman participant confirmed that gender inequality was something that they experienced "when [they] go somewhere else, like working somewhere, where [they'll] feel unequal because [they're] a girl" (FG1S1W). She contrasted this to her experience inside her residence, stating, "I've never felt that at all at [college]. I think everyone's got equal opportunities [here]."

As discussions progressed, however, women participants described gendered hierarchies of authority, gendered stereotypes and norms, and women's exclusion and oppression in the colleges (as discussed in themes **1**–**2** above). In the second set of focus groups, some women participants were able to identify the presence of gender inequality in their college. One woman participant stated there was "an unawareness and a lack of understanding around [college] about gender equality" (FG2S1). She added:

> It can be an issue because that leads to behaviour and language that contributes to the issue where people don't know that something's an issue, they're just going to keep doing the same thing that they were before without really noticing the impacts. (Woman, FG2S1)

This may be understood as expressing a desire for increased awareness and understanding around the structural nature of gender inequality in the sites, in order to collectively "rework situations of oppression" (Katz, 2009, p. 247).

When the researcher asked the men participants whether they thought there was gender equality at their college, men across both sites agreed there was equality at their college: "Yeah, they are [women] all pretty content" (FG1S1M), and "I couldn't think of any example [women] would bring up … I think we're all treated pretty equally" (FG1S2M). In addition to suggesting that there was no gender inequality in the sites, some men participants suggested that women had more rights and were more celebrated than men. The conversation amongst men participants (in the

gender-segregated focus groups) appeared to demonstrate false consciousness, if not backlash, to the promotion of women's rights. One man participant stated, "It's sort of like every day is International Women's Day here" (FG1S1M). Another man participant agreed, stating that he didn't "feel like we're ever really divided by gender" at the residence, and as a result, "from a guy's perspective, I don't think we really felt like we needed to set aside a special day as such" (FG1S1M). Further examples of men participants' perception of women's privilege over men were offered at both sites. One man participant noted that "when picking rooms, the girl [residential advisors] get first choice" (FG1S2M). A man participant in the other site offered a similar sentiment:

> I do joke about this with people – every single one of the girl bathrooms is just very recently been refurbished. The boy's bathrooms like the shower head is like [audible disgusted sound] … (Man, FG1S1M)

It is unclear whether these examples demonstrate a misperception that gender equality had already been achieved, a lack of critical reflection on the experiences of women students or a backlash to an improved position for women and the perceived contiguous threat to men's power (Bleijenbergh, 2018). There was evidence of backlash in the first focus group with men. When the researcher asked the participants 'What are we leaving out?', to capture other insights that might have been missed, one man participant retorted, "Violence against men, obviously" (FG1S1M).[57] This statement about violence against men was not, however, unexpected, owing to the manner in which men's backlash towards "progressive shifts in gender relations" often includes a focus on sexual violence against men (Maricourt & Burrell, 2022, p. 58).

There were also less explicit examples of backlash to gender equality, with some participants 'justifying' women's differential treatment. For example, in the context of discussions concerning the gender-segregated nature of sporting activities, men participants justified continued segregation by employing language relating to keeping women 'safe' (women whom some participants had earlier described as physically weaker). As discussed in sub-theme **1(d)**, this language may indicate paternalistic attitudes associated with benevolent sexism. The men participants may also have been expressing a desire to maintain gender segregation in sporting activities for reasons beyond the implicit desire to protect men's dominance in a domain that is consequential for men's status and power (Barreto & Doyle, 2023). Men participants revealed their latent concerns that their own enjoyment of football, and the associated opportunities to

[57] This participant's response prompted the researcher to incorporate an explicit statement in the introduction of subsequent focus groups to explain the focus on violence against women.

demonstrate their status and perform aggressive masculinity, may be limited by the inclusion of women. One man participant stated:

> From a guy's perspective, [if] it was the last few seconds of the game and there was a girl with a ball who's about to kick the winning goal and it was a guy who's trying to actually barrel them. You probably don't want to do that if it's maybe a girl who you think – that you might hurt them or anything like that. (Man, FG1S1M)

While offering an ostensibly caring attitude towards women (i.e. not wanting to hurt them), this indicative quote reflects the 'soft' gender essentialism described above in how it alludes to women being more 'fragile'. What differentiates this indicative quote from the benevolent sexism discussion in sub-theme **1(d)** is that it reveals an additional motivation – to enable men to continue to perform an aggressive masculinity on the sporting stage. In the context of sport more broadly, Gacka (2017, p. 196; Pavlidis, 2017) submits that sport in Australia has "come to define masculinity itself", particularly concerning the "aggression" that athletes are expected to perform.[58] Tredinnick et al. (2023, p. 81) detail the manner in which college sporting cultures emphasise hypermasculine "dominance, success and winning, risk-taking and violence". The participant referred to barrelling opponents and didn't seem to question hurting someone who wasn't a woman. This is consistent with the earlier remark made by another participant that including women in mixed-gender teams would result in the rules having to be "adapt[ed]" (FG1S1M). This comment was shared in a negative tone, bemoaning and resisting any anticipated changes, rather than identifying a way to moderate the match to ensure all people – regardless of gender – could play safely. This marginalisation of women from contact sports to enable men to continue to perform an aggressive masculinity (Barreto & Doyle, 2023) also reinforced women's feelings of exclusion and their adoption of self-limiting behaviours:

> The boys will probably be very much like, "We're playing soccer and we don't want to have to go easy on [a woman]." (Woman, FG1S1W)

This woman participant verbalised her reticence to participate in sporting activities with groups of men because she perceived that men didn't want to have to go 'easy' on her, as a woman. This reflection is indicative of the ways women participants expressed feeling unwelcome and perhaps, even burdensome, in the context of men's sporting activities. Women in the site were either explicitly excluded (through gender-segregated teams and few opportunities to play in formal

[58] The author acknowledges that women may also enact sporting aggression in contact sports. However, the manner in which the performance of aggression is embedded in certain forms of masculinity and enacted as a means for men to maintain power are well established in literature (Barreto & Doyle, 2023; Gacka, 2017; Jeanes et al., 2021). Men's domination and maintenance of power is the central focus of this research.

sporting activities such as Footy Day) or reported self-excluding from informal sporting activities (such as an informal game of soccer on the adjacent oval), owing to their awareness that their presence would limit the men's enjoyment of the matches.

6.4.4 Sub-theme 3(d): Individual student leaders bearing social cost of challenging problematic behaviours

While reflecting on the vignette, participants agreed that harmful and discriminatory behaviours that oppress women should be resisted and countered by students and student leaders and addressed by college administrations. However, participants described the exclusion of women, gendered hierarchy of authority, pervasive gender stereotypes and other harmful behaviours (as analysed in themes **1** and **2**) as an individualised problem, requiring an individualised response. Gram et al. (2021) and Tildesley et al. (2023) are critical of individualised attitudinal and behavioural interventions as insufficient to address the structural nature of oppressive gender power relations. However, this sub-theme has examined participants' perceptions relating to individualised responses as they reveal the complexity of the interrelated structures in the sites and the individualising of the problem by participants.

This neoliberal prioritisation of individualised responsibility in educational settings (Giroux, 2010) was evident in data relating to participants ideas relating to responding to harmful behaviours.[59] One participant stated that a "strong decisive stance [should be taken] against this sort of behaviour because it really doesn't have a place in this college and society in the larger picture" (Man, FG2S2). This indicative quote reflects a core challenge for gender justice and resistance and countering of oppressive gender power relations (and related gendered violence prevention work) in colleges; men and women participants uniformly perceived that the 'problem' was caused by errant individuals' behaviour out of step with college and societal cultures, rather than identifying that the behaviours were structurally and culturally embedded within their college institutions and society at large. As a result, their efforts to demonstrate individual resistance and their genuine personal commitment to addressing these issues was misplaced, as it focused on individual responses only. It follows that the primary manner in which participants suggested the behaviours identified in themes **1** and **2** be addressed was through other men 'calling it out'.

For context, it is important to note that participant responses may have been informed by their participation in 'bystander training' (Leone, 2018) in their colleges as part of their

[59] While the researcher's critical feminist lens informs the view in this thesis that these issues as structural, the participants described 'behaviours' and participants considered responding to problematic 'behaviours' rather than responding to structural issues.

induction/orientation week activities. In light of the urgency raised in relation to sexual violence in universities and college settings in Australia through media, political and legal avenues – such as through the AHRC (2017) and Broderick (2017) reports and the NSSS (Heywood et al., 2022) – both sites had implemented bystander training for student leaders, residential advisors or the broader student population. Bystander training focuses on encouraging individuals to identify and challenge discriminatory and harmful behaviour. Participants referred frequently to the training and its central intervention of 'calling out' the harmful behaviour of individuals.

Some women participants stated that the harmful behaviours of individuals were already being addressed by peers 'calling it out'. One participant stated that "if someone's doing something a little bit dodgy, it's so quickly called out" (Woman, FG1S1W). She added, "If someone does something slightly like that [disrespectful], it's automatically shut down by everyone around you." Another participant noted that there had been a change in responding to harmful behaviours between her first and second years at college. She stated that she'd been pleasantly surprised to note that in her second year, as opposed to her first, "if someone did say something that someone thought was a bit out of line, people were comfortable to stop and pick up on it … and give that person the opportunity to apologise and explain themselves" (Woman, FG1S1W). She contrasted this by reflecting on her experience in first year, when people wouldn't feel comfortable challenging others' attitudes and behaviours. "People would just suck it up and be like, 'Okay, that's just how it is here.'" A man participant at the same site confirmed that there had been "a conscious effort" to change the individualised attitudes and behaviours at the college and "even when someone does come along and maybe says something, there's either people [now that] don't encourage it by not laughing or there's always someone saying, 'you know, it's not cool'" (FG1S1M).[60] Both men and women participants expressed a commitment to challenging individual behaviours, indicating their efforts to resist harmful behaviours. However, rather than disrupting or countering the gender power regimes in the sites, students' efforts to shift individual behaviours may constitute an effort to "rework particular conditions that compromise the conditions of [women students'] existence" (Katz, 2009, p. 246).

Women and men participants were also cautious and appeared protective of their peers in their descriptions of what their peers might do that was harmful; they offered hypothetical examples

[60] These responses were provided in the first set of focus groups, before the reflection enabled by the vignette in the second set of focus groups. After discussing the scenario, participants were much more able to identify both problematic behaviours and where these were not challenged. However, the responses here in the first set of focus groups were provided after completing bystander training, suggesting the principal intervention adopted by the colleges to address gender inequality and gender-based violence did not enable students to see the scale or structural nature of the issues.

where a peer may "say" something "a bit out of line" (Woman, FG1S1W). They also emphasised the need to allow that person to apologise and publicly have the opportunity to justify themselves. This may be related to the close relationships at the college, with women ascribing positive intent to their men peers, the internalisation of benevolent sexism and the attendant mythologising of men in the sites as 'protectors' of women college students.[61] Further, the participants' individualised understanding of the problem (and associated response) reflects the neoliberal ideology of universities and colleges (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2000, Jones & Floyd, 2024; Lund et al., 2019) and the hegemonic nature of gender power relations in the sites.

When a man participant explained how unsafe behaviours could be "regulate[d]" by having peers "call them out", he stated that this would effectively signal to the 'offending party' that "the whole mood has changed now and people are actually in support of these girls" (Man, FG2S2). Rather than respecting women as equal human beings or promoting gender justice, the fear of negative consequences was provided as the motivation for changed behaviour. Analysing this data critically, the participant seemed to suggest that for men to continue to maintain their social (and other forms of) power, they would need to refrain from *verbalising* harmful statements; they wouldn't need to change gendered power relations and structures or disrupt harmful stereotypes or norms, but individuals should merely refrain from sharing those out loud. This reflection also highlights the invisibility of the structural nature of gendered power in the sites; participants noted that individuals' words needed to change but were unable to see the structural manner in which gender power relations are sustained in their colleges.

Women participants described the potential social cost for men calling out the behaviour of their peers. One participant stated that "boys might be scared [of] speaking out in terms of conflict with their friends or their mates" (Woman, FG2S2). While this potential 'conflict' was expressed as being grounded in friendship, it is interesting that the men participants also referred to women students as their friends. The researcher hypothesised that the participant was using coded language to refer to the real conflict – challenging people who hold power (other men/student leaders) rather than 'friends'. Another woman participant expressed a concern for "getting [peers] in trouble, mainly men" (FG2S2). Her motivation here was perhaps less about protecting men peers but rather about protecting herself from social consequences, as she added that it is "very difficult, because you don't want to feel like you're dobbing people in" (Woman, FG2S2). The strong relational bonds expressed by participants between students is an important part of the collegiate experience and a marketable asset for colleges. However, such loyalty may preclude

[61] Discussed above at sub-themes **2(d)** and **3(b)**.

the reporting of incidents or the calling out of behaviours owing to the expectations of loyalty towards peers and the college institution itself and may, therefore, preclude structural change. Further, these relational bonds constrain students' agency to counter harmful gender power relations in the sites.

In addition to the potential social cost for individuals challenging behaviours that demean or oppress women in the site, women participants also cautioned against responsive action that might lead to the individual whose behaviours are being challenged to experience shame or humiliation. In the context of a conversation about confronting students who expressed sexist, degrading remarks, one woman participant described the need to ensure that you don't "make them feel bad" or "pu[t] blame on them" (FG2S1); rather, she suggested to "have more of a conversation … instead of saying it's their fault". Another woman participant named that it was important when "calling [bad behaviour] out" to ensure that you don't do it "in a rude way" (FG2S1). The concern that women remain polite or pleasant, even when confronting men about sexist or misogynistic remarks, evidences the gendered stereotypical norms in the site and the perception (accepted as common sense by some women participants) that women should demonstrate 'feminine' qualities of gentleness and well-mannered deference to men. Further, these gendered stereotypes may require women to moderate their resistance.

A generous reading of this data might conclude that the participants' concerns for the wellbeing/status/ego of individuals enacting problematic behaviours stemmed from how patriarchal systems govern the manner in which men perform their gender, and participants, while complicit, are also naïve. Participant responses belied the power differentials in the site and demonstrated the internalisation of the gendered power hierarchy. The researcher also questioned whether the need to protect men's egos and comfort them, even when they're demeaning women, was a way for women to promote their own safety, whether consciously or otherwise.

Men participants also described the "potential negatives" of confronting peer behaviours. They reflected:

> …there would be awkwardness and potential conflict, but we saw that as a necessary evil. If anything's going to be changed, that's got to be shaken up and if that's awkward or if that results in a mate of mine getting [in trouble], so be it. (Men, FG2S2)[62]

[62] While the researcher is quoting an individual here, as the participant was explicitly reporting back on behalf of their small group discussion, they are identified as a group and plural pronouns are adopted. This practice is followed in the following two sub-themes, where applicable.

Another man participant agreed that the "negatives paled in comparison [to] that [which] could come out of [confronting the behaviours]" (FG2S2). The confidence men participants expressed to challenge men peers' behaviours, in spite of the 'negative consequences', compared to women participants was stark. Owing to the gendered hierarchy of authority in the sites (see sub-theme **1(a)**), it is unsurprising that men participants were less fearful of the personal consequences for calling out behaviours of their peers. Another group of men participants spoke to the need to have an educational conversation with individuals in response, rather than merely requesting men to moderate their audible statements. These men participants identified the need to "have a strong and honest discussion with the males involved [to] try and educate them that their actions have detrimental consequences to the others" (Men, FG2S2). While helpfully seeking to build empathy and learn from the lived experiences of 'the others' (women), their suggestion employs individualised, masculine (rather than structural, transformative, educational) language: 'strong and honest' discussions to understand the 'detrimental consequences'. Additionally, the men participants' proposal confines any 'educative' response to the realm of men's continued domination of women by adopting a punitive tone and marginalising women's voices or rights to share their own experiences. Finally, this may be further evidence of the false consciousness that pervades these sites (and society at large) that individual behaviour is the 'problem' and that the current gender power regime is only unsafe or harmful to women. The use of 'the others' as a moniker for women suggests a continued marginalisation of women (deemed to require additional protection) and belies the negative impacts of the harmful construction of masculinity in the sites described by men, as well as by women.

Interestingly, some participants suggested what might be construed as a structural response, in that student leaders should be the ones to call out harmful behaviours. However this was still in order to protect individuals owing to the potential personal social costs of calling out harmful behaviours. Women participants reported that "as a student leader, you're probably in more of a position to be uncomfortable than other people" (Women, FG2S2). Student leaders have comparably more social capital and (in)formal support networks than their non-leader peers or first-year students.[63] This, it seems, allowed the women participants in the small group discussion to feel as though they were the most appropriate individuals to face the risks of discomfort. However, participants' descriptions of men's domination of women, as examined in themes **1** and **2** above, suggest it is not merely discomfort that these student leaders might encounter, but harm.

[63] See the discussion on student leaders in the contextual frame at **4.2.1.2**.

In discussing the enforcement of positive behaviours, participants described the burden carried by student leaders in addressing these individualised attitudes and behaviours and the central role student leaders play in enforcing college values and informal codes of conduct. Participants described student leaders as having to act as "intermediar[ies]" (Man, FG1S2M) between students, and detailed having to confront students about ways in which their behaviours have made other students "uncomfortable or feel disrespected" (Man, FG1S2M). This 'intermediary' action was commonly described as occurring following reports from students who approached them for help (because of their student leader role), rather than being based on student leaders' observations or identification of problematic behaviours or indeed wider structural inequalities.

It was evident in the transcripts that student leaders carried a weighty pastoral and enforcement load. This was due to their visibility and the social power that they wielded. It may, however, also have resulted from their accessibility and relatability as peers, especially in contexts dominated by men senior college administrators. Men participants discussing barriers to women reporting disrespectful or discriminatory behaviours, noting that women "may feel uncomfortable approach[ing] a male authoritative figure" (Men, FG2S2). When the researcher asked a follow-up question about whether these were challenges that could be addressed with women administrative staff, one man participant identified specific women staff employed in administrative and operational roles at the college who women students might feel safer reporting behaviours to. However, there were no women employed in senior management or academic roles in either site, so the default became focused on junior administrative women staff not employed in pastoral or wellbeing roles. Following on from her man peer's comments, one woman participant recommended student leaders needed to change their behaviours, in respect to their availability and willingness to receive reports about men's behaviour, to enable "the girls [to] feel more comfortable approaching their [student] leaders, [the student] leaders should make themselves seem more approachable to them" (Woman, FG2S2). This response echoed the earlier discussion analysed at sub-theme **2(a)** where women students were expected to undertake additional caring labour. Further, the response suggests that participants were unable to imagine a world where senior college administrators would be either women and/or accessible and take these issues seriously. Instead, the participants committed to taking on these pastoral roles for themselves in caring for those who are harmed by the behaviours described in this chapter or confronting perpetrators of these harmful behaviours. This is a burden to place on (voluntary) student leaders, especially as they receive no training in handling complaints related to these behaviours, and they are members of the social worlds in which these behaviours are enacted. However, unlike Broderick's (2017, p. 10) deficit-based approach to viewing student leaders as requiring "guidance and direction" from staff as they are "still in a period of learning how to lead

effectively", this research suggests that student leaders already demonstrate leadership, grounded in the context of strong, trusted relationships with their peers and integrated in the lived realities of their peers. A critical perspective would suggest that the student leaders are leading 'effectively' in responding to individualised behaviours, but they continue to uphold the wider hegemonic structures that perpetuate harmful gender ideologies. The data suggests that the deficit is not in effective student leadership but rather in a lack of awareness, resistance and countering of the hegemonic structures in the college institutions, which individualised efforts of student leaders cannot resolve. The remedy, therefore, is not to be found in additional leadership training workshops for student leaders (which merely serve to bolster resumes and employability of college students) but rather in programmatic efforts to build critical consciousness to enable student leaders to structurally identify and problematise the institutionalised oppression of women in their sites. This would enable student leaders to creatively resist, counter and disrupt the harmful gender power relations in their contexts and leverage their collective power through the student body (as elected student leaders) to influence the institution more broadly.

Despite the burdens on student leaders having to manage individualised behaviours, participants also identified the centrality of student leaders to enable structural gender-transformative efforts in colleges. Student leaders are "in a fairly unique position to really mould the culture of the college" (Man, FG2S2). Participants described student leaders as de facto 'enforcers of culture'. Because of this unique position, actions adopted by student leaders to create change were described by participants as having the potential to "be quite impactful and have a strong ripple effect throughout the college" (Man, FG2S2). The student leaders are present at the coal face, live onsite, embody institutional power and hold social capital. After reflecting on the vignette presented in the second set of focus groups, the student leader participants appeared to be conscious of the structurally transformative power of their roles, Overall, they communicated a strong willingness to exercise that power to promote women's inclusion, safety and respect and that a transformation of the current cultures and gender power regime must be undertaken in partnership with student leaders. This is consistent with Burman et al.'s (2020, p. 194) finding on the importance of student leaders in gender-transformative work in university settings in Scotland. Further, the transformative role of student leaders as cultural gatekeepers in this study may be analogous to the role of teachers in compulsory education settings who have the capacity to "disrupt the status quo in schooling and society" (de Saxe, 2014, p. 549).

6.4.5 Sub-theme 3(e): (Lack of) consequences

Participants at both sites stated that their colleges valued inclusion, belonging and equality for all students regardless of gender and that this was reflected in formal college policies.[64] This sub-theme relates to the (lack of) consequences for attitudes and behaviours enacted by individual students and staff in the setting that do not comply with these values and formal policies. This thesis has articulated the researcher's position, in line with Ahmed (2012; see also Ngidi & Moletsane, 2015; Tack, 2022), that a governance and regulatory approach to addressing gendered violence in colleges (and universities) alone is insufficient to disrupt and transform the oppressive gender power regimes and structures that enable gendered violence to occur. As such, the discussion that follows regarding the (lack of) individualised consequences in the site is not a critique of the insufficiency of existing regulatory or policy approaches. Rather, it is an examination of the manner in which the current oppressive gender power relations are upheld or resisted in the settings and the ways men's dominance is enacted in the sites through the lack of consequences for the harmful behaviours identified by participants.

Some participants across both sites reported how discriminatory and unsafe individual behaviours (and related harms) were often minimised both by students and staff. Some participants themselves also minimised these behaviours. In the discussion around potential consequences, a participant stated that when there's been a report of a man's problematic behaviour, it was important to

> take [the alleged perpetrator] aside … and try and identify whether it was just a careless remark … just something that slipped out that they were caught up in the heat of the moment or whether these are some more deep-seated beliefs. (Man, FG1S2M)

The quote above is indicative of the tension some men and women participants described in applying consequences for discriminatory statements; some participants sought to minimise the impact and intent ('careless') and restate a false dichotomy to distinguish between verbalised statements and students' 'deep-seated beliefs'. Statements made by individuals in the sites were minimised as individual carelessness, rather than evidence of oppressive gender relations structurally sustained by the dominant gender ideology embedded across their institutions.

Women's resistance to the college administrations' and student leaders' individualising and minimising of groups of men's behaviour was voiced in their recognition that college administrations and student leaders particularly minimised 'masculine' aggression. Rather than

[64] Specific site values statements are not included to minimise the risk of participant identification.

consequences for physical violence and property damage by groups of men in communal spaces, these violent behaviours were normalised. A woman participant described damage to communal property, with no consequences. She noted how "a window got broken … there's been more pool cues [broken] … the pool table has been ripped heaps" (FG2S1). As described above in sub-theme **1(d)**, aggressive behaviours are often "dismissed [by college administrations and students] as 'boys being boys'" (Man, FG2S2). In addition to the normalisation and minimisation of aggression enacted by groups of men, the absence of visible consequences for perpetrators of demeaning or disrespectful behaviours also maintained the current gender power regime. One man participant noted that when an individual was seen "speak[ing] disrespectfully to someone that they're friends with, it enables [students observing the behaviour] to go out there and see it as respectful" (FG1S2M). A woman participant at the other site similarly identified the absence of consequences to be an enabling cultural factor at the site: "if nobody addresses the problem, it makes it seem like it's okay" (FG1S2). She identified the manner in which these behaviours become normalised, suggesting that when there's literal or figurative silence in the face of disrespectful behaviours, it's seen as "normal". The absence of consequences (whether formal or informal) reinforces men's power in the current gender power regime.

Participants also described how this culture of minimising behaviours constrained women students' ability to directly challenge or report harmful behaviours. One man participant reflected:

> if a woman hears something disrespectful, she might feel that she'll be more disrespected if she goes up and talks about it, someone will just be like, "Oh, it's not worth it, whatever, it's just language, blah, blah, blah," so it could feel disrespect[ful] and they don't want to get disrespected more, so they just brush it off. (FG1S2M)

Another participant reflected that "a lot of women … struggle because they speak about [their experiences] and nothing happens" (Woman, FG1S1W). A man participant confirmed that he could "think of a couple examples [that] weren't really followed up with the person … [Behaviours] within a boy's group are probably not challenged as much" (FG1S2M). Another participant noted that "you're more likely to dismiss [sexual] harassment, less likely to dismiss [sexual] violence" and the response at their site to harassment is to "sweep it under the rug" (Man, FG1S1M). This was confirmed by a woman participant who stated that women may not report incidents of disrespect or discrimination (and, by extension, sexual harassment and assault) for fears of the behaviours being dismissed: "[women] might also feel like it's pointless [reporting to college administrators]" (FG2S2). Other women added, women students "might feel like their concerns are unworthy of the time of the [senior college administrator]" (FG2S2). It was unclear whether this meant that the senior college administrator had communicated (implicitly or

explicitly) that he was not available or would not prioritise hearing such complaints, or whether the women perceived that the administrator was so removed from collegiate life that it was not appropriate to 'intrude' on their time. Perhaps all these reasons are at play in silencing women's complaints in these sites. Further, women in the sites may be self-censoring owing to a perception that "they're just overreacting and afraid of being seen as silly" (Woman, FG2S2). The descriptions in this study of women students self-censoring echoed AHRC's (2017, p. 4) finding that women university students do not report sexual harassment or sexual assault because they do not "believe their experience was serious enough". Such (mis)perceptions may suggest that women have internalised the patriarchal order, in which men's domination is so normalised and the current oppressive gender ideology so taken for granted and "commonplace they receded into the routine of daily life" (Lewis, 2017, p. 60), that they should not be challenging these behaviours, despite having felt uncomfortable or unsafe. These responses also see women themselves either ironically self-describing or buying into the gendered trivialising and stereotyping of women's legitimate concerns as 'silly'. However, despite the individualising and the self-censoring, women participants agreed that college administrations and student leadership have an important role to play in ensuring women's concerns are "validated [so] that they feel comfortable and supported and listened to" (Woman, FG2S2) to enable and foster their resistance to harmful behaviours.

6.4.6 Conclusion for Theme 3

This theme has examined the participants' (mis)perceptions relating to individualised and structural safety and equality in their sites and the barriers to achieving safety and equality. Throughout this theme, the dominant gender ideology which maintains men's dominance over women was evident and women (and some men) were both aware and voiced resistance; men and women participants described taken-for-granted assumptions which oppressed women and rendered them unsafe. Women participants perceived that safety was a problem only outside of the college, away from their men college peers who are cast in the role of 'trustworthy protectors'. This theme also examined the perception that gender equality had already been achieved at the sites, and the resulting backlash evident when men's position as the dominant class was challenged – even in small ways. This theme also examined the neoliberal narratives of individual responsibility which were present in the transcripts, identifying that participants were unable to identify the structural nature of the issue and rather perceived this to be an individual problem necessitating individual responses. This constrained the possibility of collective resistance. The burden and tensions carried by student leaders in enforcing individual responses was also examined. Finally, this theme identified the manner in which minimisation, normalisation and

rationalisation of men's domination of gender power relations, with a lack of visible consequences, presented barriers for reporting or challenging problematic behaviours and reinforced the men's invulnerable position in the sites.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented and discussed the results from the critical analysis of focus group data from two college sites. The analysis revealed women's lived experience of oppressive gender power relations in the sites of inquiry. Women's oppression was evidenced in the dominating nature of gendered hierarchies of authority; in the manner in which women were rendered as subordinate through student-led activities and sporting activities and college architectures; through men's unawareness of women's differential treatment (revealing the privilege men enjoy in the sites); and through men's domination of social activities and communal spaces. The prevalence of gendered norms and stereotypes restricted and demeaned women's educational and vocational choices, with tangible negative educational impacts. The gendered norms and stereotypes present necessitated women undertaking additional, unpaid and unacknowledged labour. Further, the gender-segregated nature of sporting activities and social activities reinforced gender-essentialist beliefs in the sites, perpetuating perceptions of women's 'inferiority' and reinforcing cisnormativity and heteronormativity. The dominant gender ideology was obscured by 'soft essentialism' and benevolent sexism, allowing for the reproduction of gender inequality and maintenance of men's power in less visible ways and enabling compliance and consent from women. The final theme analysed participants' perceptions around safety and equality, including the (mis)perception that safety is a problem outside the college environment and the (mis)perception that men college peers are trustworthy protectors of women students. Finally, barriers to safety and equality were analysed, identifying (mis)perceptions and resistance relating to gender equality, the individualised nature of the problem and response (and the social cost borne by student leaders in responding individually) and the lack of consequences in the sites of inquiry, resulting in problematic behaviours being minimised or dismissed and reporting being structurally disincentivised.

Informed by the contextual frame in **Chapter 4**, the analysis has revealed the manner in which gender power relations in the sites are maintained structurally and ideologically, and the manner in which these gender power relations are countered in the sites. A core theoretical priority of critical feminism is to examine existing resistance practices and be oriented towards change (Beck et al., 2021; Davis, 1981a, 1981b; de Saxe, 2016; Muñoz, 2019). Through the critical feminist lens, the data revealed the manner in which women participants were enacting collective

oppositional resistance (de Saxe, 2016), albeit limited, to men's domination of women in social and sporting activities, consistent with Sheikh (2024), within the constraints of the gender power regimes in the sites. While scholars, such as Roberts (2019) and Stanko (1990), have previously identified women's actions in avoiding spaces dominated by men as risk-mitigation strategies, as "safety work" (Forsdike & Giles, 2024, p. 3259; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020), when analysed in the context of the power struggle in the colleges, the critical feminist lens of this research enabled these actions to be understood as forms of collective resistance. While such collective activities could be characterised as either *nascent* or "quiet" (Jung & Moon, 2024, p. 218), women's refusal to participate in emblematic events and activities, their "deliberate disengagement" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 8) from communal spaces where groups of men perform aggressive masculinity, coupled with their (informal) collective organising through dialogue, suggests women students resist men's domination through everyday practices (Naylor, 2017). Hughes et al. (2022, p. 9) suggest that such *quiet* resistance is to be expected in the context, and while these acts of resistance can be seen as "an imperfect reaction to the exploitation, inequality, and oppression inherent to neoliberalism [and gender inequality] and the transformations of [gendered,] neoliberalising academic institutions", everyday practices of resistance can also be seen as 'prefigurative' actions (Leach, 2022; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), symbolising women each day embodying the hope of something better to come.

The final chapter will discuss the implications of this research and offer concluding remarks.

7. Conclusion: Findings and Implications

In answering the research question, the research has critically examined the manner in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in two university residential college sites. This research used a critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens to examine the maintenance and/or countering of gendered power relations in the sites and to answer the research sub-questions:

(a) How do student leaders and college administrations maintain and/or counter gender power relations in the sites?

(b) How do traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies in the sites maintain and/or counter gender power relations?

The analysis in the preceding chapter examined the manner in which gender power relations are structurally sustained through the complex, multidimensional actors in the context of the two colleges and the ways in which gender power relations are countered in these sites. This concluding chapter summarises the findings of the research, explores implications and makes recommendations for further research. In line with the critical feminist theoretical orientation of the research, this chapter is oriented towards the possibilities for transformative, structural change (Collins, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) to promote gender justice (Burrell, 2018; Flood et al., 2024) and women's equality in these settings.

7.1 Overview

This research has confirmed and built on the findings of others (AHRC, 2017, 2019; Broderick, 2017; ERoCA, 2018) that gender inequality and gender power relations in university student residences in Australia are problematic. This research has also extended knowledge relating to gender inequality in colleges, as this study is one of the first to focus solely on Victorian colleges specifically.[65] Further, as participant data provided evidence of gender inequality and oppression of women as a part of the social and cultural context of colleges, this research has built on and contributed contextual depth to the body of knowledge in these settings (AHRC, 2017; Boucher, 2023; ERoCA, 2018; Our Watch et al., 2021; Webster et al., 2021). It has contributed to

[65] AHRC (2017) researched universities (and by extension university residential settings) nationally, and the colleges at the University of New England (NSW) (2019); Broderick (2017) researched colleges at the University of Sydney (NSW); ERoCA (2017) researched universities nationally, and at the University of Sydney (NSW) (2018).

understanding the complex, structural manner in which oppressive gender power regimes endure in the specific context of the two sites. The research has identified and examined the complexity of the structural maintenance and countering of gender power relations in these settings and, as a result, may inform effective, structural programmatic approaches to transform gender power relations in colleges.

Further, this new knowledge relating to the complex and structural maintenance of oppressive, hegemonic gender power relations may contribute to understanding why the high prevalence of gendered violence in university and university residential settings persists (AHRC, 2019; Heywood et al., 2022), despite universities and all university residential settings being priority settings for primary prevention of gendered violence (DFFH, 2022; Universities Australia, 2021). This research has confirmed and extended the findings of Tildesley et al. (2023, p. 2003) which demonstrated that university organisations continue to "reproduc[e] gender inequalities and women's subordination", notwithstanding some efforts by these institutions to address gender inequality (such as through bystander training, as discussed further below).

The need for structural transformation to address the hegemonic maintenance of gender power relations in these institutions has been identified through this research. This builds on Kiguwa et al.'s (2015, p. 106) findings that "a more concerted effort … [to] engag[e] and destabilis[e] the 'common-sense' and normalised cultures of gender and identity is required", confirming this imperative in the broad Australian university residential sector. This research has confirmed the presence of patriarchal beliefs and normalised cultures of gender inequality and gendered violence in two higher education settings, consistent with Kiguwa et al. (2015), and has extended this knowledge by examining the role of students, student leaders and college administrations in maintaining gender power regimes in the participating sites.

This research focused on examining the manner in which gender power relations are maintained and/or countered in college contexts. The thesis has interrogated the social, cultural and institutional factors, including the traditions, attitudes, norms and beliefs, student-led activities and informal policies that maintain the contextualised gender power regimes that enable men's dominance over and aggression towards women in each site. These oppressive attitudes and beliefs are documented in broader population studies domestically (Carlisle et al., 2022) and internationally (Kearns et al., 2020); however, this research extends the body of knowledge to identify and examine these attitudes and beliefs in two colleges in Australia and has gone some way to addressing the identified gap in knowledge concerning colleges as distinct, complex structural institutions (AHRC, 2017, 2019; Keene, 2015; Mikhailovich & Colbran, 1999).

As gender relations are locally, socially and institutionally contextualised, this thesis examined localised gender relations through identifying and analysing the unique and specific institutional 'cultures' in the settings. These cultures included the "norms, values, activities and beliefs" that shape behaviours and experiences individually and collectively in colleges (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. iv). This thesis developed and adopted a contextual frame to inform the analysis of the data; this enabled the research question to be interrogated in the specific complex and multidimensional college setting.

This contextual examination builds on the work of Broderick (2017), ERoCA (2017, 2018) and AHRC (2017, 2019), by providing a rich examination of the manner in which gender power relations are structurally maintained. Further, this study has identified the (nascent) everyday practices women (and some men) adopt to resist and counter hegemonic gender power relations in the sites, with implications for structural transformation work. While limited to two sites, in identifying and examining the ways in which women's oppression in the sites is maintained and/or countered, this thesis adds to the literature relating to gendered violence prevention in college contexts, to enable transformational structural change in relation to the oppression of women. The critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens of this research has allowed this structural oppression to be identified so that it may be disrupted and dismantled in gender transformation efforts in these settings in the future. Further, the critical feminist frame enabled everyday acts of resistance, which may be understood as pre-figurative actions, to be revealed, providing opportunities for future transformation in partnership with student leaders in college settings.

7.2 Findings and implications

Owing to the limited word count of this thesis, this discussion focuses on four overarching findings and implications for this research: (1) hegemonic gender power relations are structurally maintained in colleges; (2) colleges are distinct, complex institutions; (3) student leaders as cultural gatekeepers, both maintaining and countering gender power relations; and (4) countering of gender power relations. The data also revealed additional avenues of examination, beyond the scope of this thesis. The discussion identifies the role of the institutional church and the role of physical environments (architectures) in maintaining hegemonic gender power relations as structures which require further research.

7.2.1 The structural maintenance of hegemonic gender power relations in colleges

The research identified the structural manner in which hegemonic gender power relations are maintained in settings. In examining the manner in which gendered power is maintained in the sites, the analysis identified how social and cultural activities in the sites are deeply interconnected with structural power. When analysing patterns in the data, the researcher identified that participants regularly framed their responses around college-based social, sporting and service activities. This is consistent with literature describing sporting and social activities and events as being at the heart of the college experience; they are characteristic of what it means to be at college and to experience and participate in college life (Corney, 2016; Walker, 2001). In addition to the academic programs and pastoral care offered at most colleges, the range of extracurricular activities distinguishes colleges from other student accommodation options (such as for-profit student housing) and is part of the rationale for students to enrol in these residences. These formal and informal activities are shared, collective moments where college traditions and cultures are revealed and reinforced.

For example, this research found that extracurricular activities are sites of the reproduction of gender inequality, including the homogenisation of women. Women are oppressed through the reproduction of cultural narratives around women's roles (Howard, 2023) in the participating sites (as evidenced in the data relating to participants' perceptions relating to differential interests in sporting, education, vocation and leadership). These cultural narratives were recited through the institutional structure of extracurricular activities in the sites; as a consequence, such extracurricular activities (and student club leadership of them) should be further examined and transformed to disrupt harmful gender power relations in the sites.

The analysis revealed the manner in which the patriarchal gender ideology (which normalised men's dominance and women's subordination and was characterised by benevolent sexism, gender essentialism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, dehumanising stereotypes and limiting gendered norms in the sites) was sustained through taken-for-granted, common-sensical beliefs. The analysis revealed the manner in which these taken-for-granted assumptions are sustained and reinforced through structures in the institutional setting of the college, including through the structures of student leadership, college administrations, norms, attitudes and beliefs, history, stories and traditions, student-led activities and informal policies. Consistent with Tildesley et al.'s (2023, p. 1998) findings, this study suggests the need for institutional efforts to disrupt harmful gender regimes in colleges through challenging the "taken-for-granted ideas around gender [in/]equality". This implication necessitates a shift from current approaches to promoting women's equality and primary prevention of gendered violence in colleges, which currently

prioritise regulatory, individualised and punitive responses (SLCARC, 2023; DoE, 2023a, 2024b). In recent months the Commonwealth government has invested further resources towards regulation and policy, extending the focus beyond universities to explicitly include colleges for the first time (DoE, 2024a). While the explicit acknowledgement of the need for focused reform in colleges is welcome, this research, consistent with Ahmed (2012), Ngidi and Molestane (2015), Verge et al. (2018) and Tack (2022), has found that such governance and regulatory approaches to address gendered violence and enable women's rights are insufficient, as they are focused on individual behaviour change. However, this research has found that hegemonic gender power relations are structurally maintained, and governance and regulatory approaches that individualise responses to student behaviour change alone will be insufficient to enable the structural and transformational change required to reorder gender power relations in colleges.

Further, this research has identified the manner in which the neoliberal discourses inherent in educational settings (Jones & Floyd, 2024) impact women's safety and equality in the sites of inquiry. The analysis revealed the manner in which institutional (and societal) narratives and approaches to gendered violence prevention that problematise individual behaviours (rather than the structural nature of patriarchal domination) result in minimising and normalising women's oppression in colleges through the "veiled rhetoric of individual freedom and responsibility" (Jones & Floyd, 2024, p. 95). Further, such discourses may be perpetuated through current one-off programmatic interventions such as bystander training. The analysis revealed the manner in which the dominant participant response to promoting women's safety and equality in the sites was for individuals to 'call out' others' behaviours. As above, individual regulation does not address the systemic and structural nature of harmful gender power relations in the sites, and further, the burden of responding to individual behaviours was placed on student leaders who bore the heavy social cost of policing their peers. While offering one-off programmatic interventions such as bystander training provides an efficient mechanism for college administrations seeking to mitigate risk, alone they are ineffective in disrupting gender power relations which are structurally maintained in the sites. Such initiatives leave "the patriarchal structures that provide the foundations for men's violence largely untouched" (Burrell, 2018, p. 459). Consistent with Burrell (2018, p. 459), this research recommends that any individual programmatic work "needs to be accompanied by efforts to bring about structural change".

7.2.2 University residential colleges as distinct, complex institutions

This study has revealed the manner in which hegemonic gender power relations are structurally sustained through the complex, multidimensional institutional setting of the college. In line with the aims of this research, the complexity of the institutional structures has been identified through

the presentation of the contextual frame and examined throughout the analysis. While a limited word count precludes restating the myriad ways gender power relations are sustained across the structural context of the college, three core structures (unique to colleges) were related to the second research sub-question, and these require particular attention for the manner in which they perpetuate women's oppression in the settings and for the possibility of structural transformation of and through these structures.

In the institutional structure of norms, attitudes and beliefs, gender power relations are maintained through the unique student 'duties' required of all students in university residential settings. The analysis identified the manner in which these duties reinforce a gendered division of labour, through harmful norms, attitudes and beliefs relating to 'women's work' and gendered stereotypes. These same limiting perceptions of women's abilities were evident in the paid work and educational opportunities provided in the settings. The critical feminist lens of this research allowed for the manner in which these norms, attitudes and beliefs function structurally, as well as socially and culturally, to be identified. The institutional structure of norms, attitudes and beliefs in the sites maintained asymmetrical gendered power relations and the subordination of women through "unequal distribution of …ideational resources" (Azmanova, 2018, p. 71). For example, gendered norms are both fostered through informal college administration policies, and, in turn, function to ensure harmful informal college administration policies, that remain largely unrecognised and unaddressed. Colleges have an opportunity to disrupt harmful gendered norms by examining and rectifying the gendered division of labour.

Further, the research revealed the manner in which gender power relations are sustained through history, stories and traditions in the sites. This study builds on Broderick's (2017, p. 10) identification of the presence of "deep-seated traditions" in colleges at the University of Sydney, confirming these traditions in colleges in Melbourne, Victoria. Further, this study has extended Broderick's (2017) findings by providing contextual depth to understand the nature of these traditions and the manner in which they maintain gender power relations and render women's oppression in the sites invisible to some students. While some activities could be considered cultural, the analysis revealed the manner in which harmful activities such as Footy Day and Wedding Night were handed down to student leaders and re-enacted annually and uncritically: "It's just the way it's [always] been" (Man, FG1S1M). As student-led activities, supported by college administrations, are central to college identities and unique to the institutional setting of this research, these can be understood as functioning structurally to reinforce harmful gender power relations in the sites. While these traditions facilitate student belonging (and enable college administrations to recruit future students), such traditions need to be examined, reformed or

removed to ensure they are in line with the expressed college and student values of equality and respect. It is of note that even Broderick's (2017, p. 6) report, which adopted an overwhelmingly positive view of the University of Sydney colleges, acknowledged that traditions in colleges "that have served an organisation well in the past may no longer be consistent with contemporary community expectations" and may need to be changed or eliminated ("on occasion").

Relatedly, the research found that student-led activities maintain hegemonic gender power relations. The independence, resources and social power of student clubs or student leadership groups is a distinctive structure in college settings. Throughout the analysis, student-led activities were revealed to be a core social and physical location of women's oppression, disrespect, lack of safety and exclusion. Formal and informal social activities (often in so-called communal spaces in the sites) became stages for men's domination through aggressive performances of masculinity and behaviours associated with 'lad culture', consistent with Lewis et al. (2018), Phipps (2016), Phipps and Young (2015) and Waling (2020). This study confirmed Tredinnick's (2023) findings relating to sport's enculturation of men college students into violent behaviours in the US and contributes depth to the Australian literature by analysing the maintenance of gender power relations through sporting activities in college settings in Victoria for the first time. Owing to the centrality and significance of sport in Australian traditional colleges (Walker, 2001), this is an important contribution. This research suggests that colleges need to focus transformation efforts on sporting activities to enable structural change to promote women's safety (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023; Burrell, 2021; Willson et al., 2018). Colleges may be aided in these efforts by documented, evidence-based programmatic interventions in community sporting contexts (Jeanes et al., 2021; Liston et al., 2017; Messner, 2018b; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021), school contexts (Phipps & Blackall, 2023) and college contexts outside Australia (Hextrum, 2020; Tredinnick, 2023).

Colleges are structurally and culturally distinct institutions from other university student accommodation settings and from universities themselves. The research has revealed the manner in which gendered divisions of labour, gendered power differentials and harmful norms are maintained through student duties; the role of traditions and rituals handed down by alumni and returning students in perpetuating women's subordination and rendering such oppression invisible; and the central role of student-led activities (social and sporting activities) in the maintenance of gendered power relations in the unique and complex college institutional setting. Many of these structures do not exist in universities themselves or in other university accommodation settings. As a result, colleges require a distinctive response to structurally address gendered violence, rather than being treated as a subset of universities under current and proposed government strategies (see e.g. DoE, 2023a; 2024a, 2024b; Our Watch et al., 2021).

Three further unique contextual factors distinguish colleges from universities and other university student accommodation settings. The first of these is the unique, trusted peer relationships between students and the associated sense of collective identity and belonging. Not only is this a core strength of colleges for students transitioning from school to university and dependence to independence, but the strength of these unique relational bonds has important implications for structural transformation at colleges. The analysis revealed that the trusted nature of the peer relationships perpetuated patriarchal, benevolent sexism, with both men and women students casting men peers in the role of 'protector', while women students mitigated perceived 'external' safety risks by adopting strategies to avoid being outside of their college without being accompanied by their 'trustworthy' men peers. While understandable given the media and political discourses surrounding women's safety (as discussed in the preceding chapter), such trusted relationships may render women vulnerable owing to AHRC's (2017) findings that women students are less safe in their colleges and the majority of perpetrators of sexual harassment or assault in university settings (including residential colleges) are known to victim-survivors. Further, the analysis revealed the manner in which trusted relationships and attendant institutional and peer loyalty in the sites constrain men and women students' ability to identify, report and/or challenge harmful behaviours. The analysis also revealed the manner in which these strong trusted relationships may strengthen collective identity and solidarity to disrupt oppressive gender power relations. The strength of the relationships between students in colleges provides barriers to and opportunities for disrupting harmful gender power relations in this setting and should be further examined by college institutions and researchers.

Secondly, this research has added to the existing body of knowledge about women's safety in residential settings. While the heightened risk of sexual victimisation in college settings in Australia is well documented (AHRC, 2017; Broderick, 2017; Heywood et al., 2022), this study has highlighted the complexities of safety and resistance in the context of the residential 'home'. This research confirms findings related to the challenges of gendered violence prevention work in other residential settings, such as Wenham and Jobling's (2023) work in rural neighbourhoods and Walklate et al.'s (2019) work in Australian society more broadly. As a result, the researcher echoes Walklate et al.'s (2019, p. 64) assertion of the need to "confront the presumed safe haven of the 'home'" and necessarily recommends colleges are viewed by legislative and regulatory bodies as homes, requiring alternative and additional programmatic and policy approaches to those adopted in universities.

Thirdly, the structural role of the church in the institution of the college distinguishes this setting from (most) Australian universities and other university student accommodation settings. While

an examination of the role of religion or the institutional church was beyond the scope of this study, the analysis revealed the manner in which some students' perceptions of women and gender equality were informed by their religious views, consistent with Hannover et al.'s (2018) findings. As described in the contextual frame at **4.2.4.2**, the church continues to exert denominational influence on college institutions (through explicit traditions, chapel services and provision of pastoral care by chaplains; through the role of denominational leaders in college governance and the requirement that senior staff be members of the associated denomination; and through implicit values, attitudes, norms and beliefs). The role of the church in maintaining (and/or countering) hegemonic gender power relations in the sites requires further, future examination, particularly owing to the unique relationship of the college to the institutional authority of the church, as owners and operators of the two colleges in this study.

Finally, while further examination was outside the scope of this research, the manner in which the physical and architectural design of colleges reinforces women's status as subordinate 'other' in the colleges is worthy of further investigation in future research. The analysis revealed the manner in which retrofitting physical facilities, such as bathrooms following the admittance of women to the formerly all-men college, structurally disadvantaged women and symbolically affirmed their status as an afterthought – a subordinated 'other'. Certain physical aspects of the college design like *"the catwalk"*, whether intentional or not, were used by men students to sexualise and marginalise women students. The broader architectures of colleges have been documented as reminding women of their inferior status elsewhere, including in Garner's (2020) description of visual histories (walls covered in images of men alumni and men college masters) nearly 30 years ago; however, no further research has been conducted to investigate this in Australia and no documented programmatic or policy initiatives address the architectural design of colleges. There is much in the gender geographies literature that could be considered and adopted by colleges seeking to structurally disrupt men's domination in these settings.

7.2.3 Student leaders as cultural gatekeepers maintaining and countering gender power relations

In concert with existing research on the prevention of gendered violence in Australian colleges (AHRC, 2017, 2019; Broderick, 2017) this research identified student hierarchies between junior and senior students, and power differentials between student leaders and other students. Further, this study has contributed nuance and complexity to the Broderick (2017) and AHRC (2017, 2019) reports by identifying the presence of gendered hierarchies, alongside the documented student/staff and junior/senior student hierarchies previously highlighted. This research has identified the presence of a gendered hierarchy of authority which destabilises other formal modes of authority in college settings, consistent with similar findings in Australian secondary schools

(Keddie, 2007; Robinson, 2000; Variyan & Wilkinson, 2022). The analysis revealed the nature in which authority is hierarchically ordered in the sites according to gender, with men staff and students afforded more functional authority than women staff and students. The manner in which gendered power differentials subvert the presumed (and formalised) academic and institutional authority granted to staff, senior students and student leaders has implications for programmatic and policy initiatives in these settings. As this gendered hierarchy of authority is propagated and sustained through structures in the sites, including through extracurricular activities and the enforcement of compliance with required service duties, structural transformation of the gendered hierarchies of authority is required.

While acknowledging the differential authority granted to men and women student leaders, this research found that student leaders have a "significant role to play in the change process", consistent with Broderick's (2017, p. 10) findings. This research has, however, extended existing literature by identifying student leaders' social capital, their sense of a moral mandate and their expressed commitment to changing their college cultures, in addition to the (in principle) formal authority described by Broderick. The finding that women student leaders (and staff) are afforded less functional authority than men students (as discussed above) provides further nuance to Broderick's (2017) findings. Further, this thesis has countered Broderick's (2017, p. 10) deficit-based approach to viewing student leaders as requiring "guidance and direction" to learn how to lead "effectively". The analysis revealed the manner in which student leaders are already demonstrating leadership, grounded in the context of strong, trusted relationships with their peers, integrated into the lived realities of their peers. As examined in the analysis at **6.4.4**, this research suggests that student leaders are already leading 'effectively' in responding to individualised behaviours, with personal social cost. As argued above, the analysis suggests that the deficit is not ineffective student leadership, but rather a lack of awareness, resistance and countering of the hegemonic structures in the college institutions, and the individualised efforts which student leaders cannot resolve. As feminist scholars such as Hunnicutt (2009, p. 557) have identified, patriarchy is "so pervasive, it is hard to 'see' it unless the lens is calibrated to gauge it". This research, therefore, recommends that colleges adopt programmatic efforts to build critical consciousness (Freire, 2009) of student leaders in order to provide students with a 'calibrated lens' to enable them to structurally identify, problematise and counter the institutionalised oppression of women in their sites.

This thesis has found that student leaders act as 'cultural gatekeepers', akin to the potential role of teachers in school-based settings (de Saxe, 2016; Ocio, 2023). As such, this thesis suggests that student leaders provide an opportunity to promote transformative, structural change to disrupt the

hegemonic maintenance of men's domination and women's oppression in these settings. This confirms Burman et al.'s (2020) finding of the importance of partnership with student leaders in gender-transformative work in universities in the UK and extends this finding to the Australian college context. Further, this study builds on Davidson et al.'s (2022, p. 143; see also Corney et al., 2020) finding that the institutional structure of student leaders is "a promising arena" for alcohol harm minimisation structural change approaches in Australian colleges, extending this to gender-transformative change in college settings.

7.2.4 Countering of hegemonic gender power relations

In line with the critical feminist (Beck et al., 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2019; de Saxe, 2016) lens of this thesis and in response to the research question, the analysis identified the ways in which hegemonic gender power relations in the sites are currently resisted. Consistent with Lewis et al.'s (2018, p. 59) findings that "women students are far from passive victims … [but] are often at the centre of principled resistance" in university settings in the UK, this research finds that women students resisted gender power relations in the sites. While there were few examples of formal, organised countering of gender power relations, there were frequent examples of women's (and some men's) individual and collective oppositional resistance to men's domination in the sites. These oppositional acts were most evident in women's (and some men's) refusal or "deliberate disengagement" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 8) from student-led sporting and social activities and communal spaces, their dialoguing with women peers and, at times, their direct countering of discriminatory statements and behaviours made by individual peers (consistent with Lewis et al., 2018).

These acts of refusal have been understood primarily through a lens of women's behavioural modification - their "safety work" (Forsdike & Giles, 2024, p. 3259; Roberts, 2019; Stanko, 1990) and may reflect the 'risk-avoidance' discourse documented in university residential colleges in Australia, where individuals are encouraged to adopt individual strategies to avoid risk of sexual harm (AHRC, 2019). The critical feminist lens brought to the analysis of data in this research identified women participants' agentic actions as resistance, rather than seeing these responses exclusively as 'safety work'. Resistance and safety work are not mutually exclusive, however. Rather, following Forsdike & Giles (2024, p. 3264), women's safety work can be understood as a "means of navigating a masculine hegemonic space where [women] yield little power." In a setting where hegemonic gender power relations constrain women's agentic responses (Powell, 2008), acts of refusal and avoidance may be understood to be acts of resistance.

This research finds that women are countering hegemonic gender power relations in the sites by adopting everyday acts of resistance (Naylor, 2017) within the constraints of the hegemonic gender ideology that normalises and minimises men's violence and domination and the strong relational context of the setting. The documentation of these everyday acts of resistance (described by Jung & Moon, 2024, p. 218 in contexts outside colleges as "quiet" resistance) contributes new knowledge that identifies women's agency despite, and in response to, their oppression in the sites, and contributes to what Tildesley et al. (2022, p. 907) identify as the need to map these countering practices "in times of rising global opposition to gender equality". While some theoretical conceptions of resistance – especially in political geography – may understand these actions as "non-transformative" (Hughes et. al, 2022, p. 2), the critical feminist lens of this research and the attendant focus on identifying the "many diverse modes of oppositional resistance, and how those affected by oppression choose to respond" (de Saxe, 2016, p. 71), the analysis has understood these (nascent) actions as everyday practices of resistance (Naylor, 2017). These acts can be understood as *pre-figurative* actions (Leach, 2022; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), with some women students embodying the hope of something better to come. The identification of what may be understood as nascent, pre-figurative acts of resistance in this thesis suggests that college student leaders could foster women's everyday political acts to propel transformative, structural change into the future. Future research may examine further women's perceptions of these actions (i.e. whether women consider their actions to be a form of resistance) and men's perceptions of women's actions of refusal or removal (i.e. whether men view these as a form of resistance) and could draw upon participatory action research methods (Bleijenbergh, 2018; Marshal et al., 2021) that involve women as both researchers and research participants.

Additionally, the analysis revealed the manner in which women students seek allyship (Carlson et al., 2020) from their men peers to build solidarity and collectively counter hegemonic gender power relations. Some women participants recognised the privilege and power men hold in their colleges and explicitly asked men to use that privilege and power to "rework" (Katz, 2009, p. 246) the oppressive conditions that women experience. This was most apparent in women participants requesting men to 'call out' problematic behaviours, which particularly focused on the potential for men student leaders to deploy their social power and formal authority. In light of the perception that men peers are 'trustworthy', women participants may have desired their men peers become "relationally accountable allies" (Halvorsen et al., 2024, p. 21). Additionally, in the lexicon of gendered violence prevention work, women students may be "enlist[ing] ambassadors" (Carlson et al., 2015, p. 1414) as a way to engage all men students and staff as partners in disrupting harmful gender power relations. For such allyship to be effective, however, in light of the discussions above relating to the perceived individualised nature of the problems in the sites,

and the structural manner in which hegemonic gender power relations are maintained across the institution of the college, this research also recommends colleges adopt programmatic approaches to raise the critical consciousness (Freire, 2009; hooks, 1984; Linder, 2018; see also Burrell, 2021) of college administrations, student leaders and students to the structural nature of the problems identified by participants in this study. This would also enable men students in the sites to grapple with the "complex relationship between individual and collective harms" (Kean & Buiten, 2024, p. 17; see also Stewart et al., 2024). To enable such *conscientization* (Freire, 2009), colleges may consider adopting Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985) method, which has been used internationally in universities and colleges as primary prevention for gendered violence (see Christensen, 2013, 2014; Moree & Benyovsky, 2019; Rae, 2012; Rodriguez, 2022) to raise consciousness and build solidarity. While the focus of this study was gender power relations, this research found that these relations are maintained through hegemonic processes, and this *conscientization* approach may also wield positive structural changes for other oppressive ideologies – beyond gender – which are sustained through the same hegemonic processes.

7.3 Limitations

As stated in the methodology, the researcher acknowledges that the analysis offers an "inevitably and thoroughly partial reading" of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 174). The critical feminist lens, which has allowed for women's oppression and resistance in the sites of inquiry to be elucidated, may have also "conceal[ed] other aspects" (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 31; see also Carter & Little, 2007; Thorne, 2020).

Owing to the limited scope of this thesis and the limitations identified at **5.7** in relation to participant demographics (predominantly of Anglo-Celtic origin, cisgender and middle class), there are a number of areas that were not examined in this study that are worthy of future research. As this research has identified the structural nature of oppression of women in colleges, it is assumed that there are other forms of overlapping oppression that are also structurally maintained through hegemonic processes in these settings. As Hamad (2019, p. 14) notes, women of colour experience the "very thing [which] happens between men and women" from white society broadly, and white women specifically. Future research may examine the manner in which racialised power is maintained and/or whiteness is countered in the university residential setting, particularly in the context of ongoing "forces of coloniality" (Phillips, 2024, p. 13).

Additionally, this research focused on two 'traditional' colleges. With the diverse range of university student accommodation settings (described at **4.1.1**) and given the growth of for-profit

university student accommodation providers, future research may focus on these diverse accommodation settings beyond the traditional college setting.

7.4 Conclusion

In addition to answering the research question, 'In what ways are gender power relations maintained and/or countered in two university residential colleges?', this study has met its aims (as described in **1.1**). It examined women's lived experiences of gender power relations in their colleges, exposing gender inequality in the sites and highlighting the oppression and subordination experienced by women in colleges. The presentation and discussion of results centred women (Beck et al., 2021) and resisted homogenising women's experiences through the presentation and analysis of women's diverse (and, at times, divergent) perspectives. Further, this study critically examined 'dominance' in the ways in which gender power relations are maintained in the sites. The analysis interrogated the manner in which gendered "power and privilege are granted or denied" (Beck et al., 2021, p. 169), revealing that men's dominance is maintained through the institutional structures of students, student leaders and college administrations through norms, attitudes and behaviours, history, stories and traditions, student-led activities and informal policies. Men's dominance was most evident in relation to the structure of student-led activities, in which men dominated social and sporting activities. This study revealed the manner in which this dominance is at times apparent to women and men students, and at other times rendered invisible by taken-for-granted assumptions reflective of a patriarchal gender ideology. Additionally, this analysis identified and examined resistance to unequal gender power relations, recognising diverse resistance practices (de Saxe, 2016) and highlighting the "quiet" (Jung & Moon, 2024, p. 218), pre-figurative (Leach, 2022) resistance employed by women students "within a changeable, albeit constrained, world of [hegemonic] gender relations" (Powell, 2008, p. 167). While such resistance may be characterised as nascent, the frequent refusal and deliberate disengagement highlight the manner in which women can resist oppressive and harmful gender relations in colleges through everyday practices (Naylor, 2017). The research also achieved its aim of documenting the complex context of the college and its relationship to the maintenance of differential gendered power through the presentation and discussion of the detailed contextual frame (see **4.2**) and the rich contextual and structural description throughout the analysis, informed by critical feminism's orientation to structural change (Collins, 2019). Finally, this research made findings and recommendations that aim to disrupt harmful gender power relations and foster existing resistance action in the sites, and it identified implications to inform programmatic and policy action in colleges.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Focus group one indicative interview schedule

Indicative interview schedule for focus group with women

1. Safety (in college):
    a. What makes you feel safe?
    b. What makes you feel unsafe?
2. Respect (in college):
    a. What makes you feel respected?
    b. What makes you feel disrespected?
3. Equality (in college):
    a. What makes you feel equal?
    b. What makes you feel unequal?
4. Celebration (in college):
    a. When do you feel celebrated?
    b. When do not feel celebrated?
5. Participation (in college):
    a. What makes you feel that you can participate?
    b. What makes you feel that you can't participate?
6. Empowerment (in college):
    a. What makes you feel empowered?
    b. What makes you feel disempowered?

Indicative interview schedule for focus group with men

7. Safety (in college):
    a. What makes you feel safe?
    b. What makes you feel unsafe?
    c. When are women safe?
    d. When are women unsafe?
8. Respect (in college):
    a. What makes you feel respected?
    b. What makes you feel disrespected?
    c. When are women respected?

    d. When are women disrespected?

9. Equality (in college):
    a. What makes you feel equal?
    b. What makes you feel unequal?
    c. When are women treated equally?
    d. When are women treated unequally?
10. Celebration (in college):
    a. When do you feel celebrated?
    b. When do not feel celebrated?
    c. When are women celebrated?
    d. When are women not celebrated?
11. Participation (in college):
    a. What makes you feel that you can participate?
    b. What makes you feel that you can't participate?
    c. What enables women's participation?
    d. What blocks women's participation?
12. Empowerment (in college):
    a. What makes you feel empowered?
    b. What makes you feel disempowered?
    c. When are women empowered?
    d. When are women disempowered?

Appendix B: Focus group two vignette and questions for reflection

Vignette (developed from responses to initial set of focus groups in site one and site two)

It is an ordinary weekday during the semester and it's late in the afternoon at College [X]. At first, there are just a small number of people sitting around quietly in the lounge and pool room areas off the dining hall. Some people are only just starting to get back to college from lectures and some people are just starting their duties in the dining hall and kitchen, getting things ready for dinner.

A couple of women students – Jill and Frances – are just starting to play a quiet, social game of pool. They don't normally play and are not sure of all the rules but thought they would have a go while there were not many people around. They would like to be better at playing pool because it's a big part of the social culture at college.

The girls[66] are enjoying playing as more people return to college from uni and start to gather round. Soon some boys turn up and stand around the table watching and waiting to play. They are keen to get on the table and start talking about their regular competition and the 'championship' game and how they need to get the game going before dinner, as they don't want to run out of time. A few of the boys are laughing about the pool cue throwing incident the night before when a cue was broken during a game. This has been an unofficial tradition at the College: when an important game is lost, a pool cue is snapped, and a fine is paid to the student club.

The boys start asking the girls to hurry up and a few start making comments about the quality of the game. As more boys start gathering around the table it starts to feel crowded and noisy. The girls start feeling a bit intimidated and miss a few shots – the boys react with cheering and jeering and start to make 'funny' comments about the quality and standard of the game. Some of the guys are laughing at the girls' lack of ability at pool. This turns into some banter back and forth between the guys who want to play and the girls who are trying to finish their game. Others who are standing around watching are also drawn into the banter.

Jill, who is playing, doesn't think it's fair that the boys are being critical and putting pressure on them even if it's all just seen as a bit of 'fun' and 'friendly banter'. Lots of people are now gathered around in the lounge and pool room areas waiting for dinner and are watching the game and

[66] The use of "girls" and "boys" in the scenario was a deliberate choice to reflect the language used by participants in the first focus groups to identify certain groups of students. While the researcher believes that this is infantilising and binary language and would not use this generally, this language was appropriate for the scenario, which sought to present an authentic situation that the focus group participants would identify with to facilitate participant discussion and reflection.

listening and laughing at the banter. The boys are getting noisier and louder and there is a bit of friendly wrestling among them – it feels like there are more boys than girls and that the boys are 'filling up the space'.

Jill and Frances are determined to finish their game, but the guys say it's time to stop – they say that the girls have had plenty of time and they should stop now and let the guys on or they will run out of time to play their 'championship' game, which is important. Jill is not happy but feels a lot of pressure to end her game. She wishes she could challenge the boys but feels outnumbered. As she's not a great player she also feels a bit intimidated and overwhelmed, and Frances feels the same way; she is pretty shy and hasn't said much and looks like she's not really enjoying herself anymore.

Jill wishes that someone else would stick up for her and Frances and say something to challenge the boys – but no one does. The banter is getting a bit out of hand and the tension is rising – one of the boys tries to make a joke, saying that 'pool's a boys' game', and all the boys laugh and someone says maybe Jill and Frances should 'go and help get dinner ready'.

Jill is angry and hurt at some of the so-called funny comments and would like to say something but doesn't feel it's the right time or place so she says to Frances, 'Come on, let's stop playing.' The boys cheer and start racking up the balls on the table for a new game. Jill returns to her room listening to the loud cheers and laughter of the boys in the background.

That night after dinner, Jill decides to speak to the President of the Student Club and to the college Dean (both men) about the banter and behaviour of the boys but is not sure of the best way to go about it. She doesn't want anyone to get in trouble and doesn't think it was anyone's fault in particular but doesn't think it should happen again. She's also concerned about how Frances is feeling and not sure what to do.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What are your reflections on the scenario? Is it realistic? Could you see this happening here?
2. Common spaces:
    a. Are there spaces or activities in college that are not inclusive? Is this a problem? If so, why?
    b. How do you, as student leaders, currently promote inclusive positive behaviour in common spaces?
3. Social interaction activities:

a. In the scenario, do you think that regulating the use of the pool table is important? Should there be rules of play or use? What happens when the rules are broken?
b. How are people inducted into the culture or traditions at college associated with particular social activities like pool?

4. Gender equality:
    a. Are there any perspectives or current practices at college that are problematic in the area of gender equality? And are there people or groups at college who are unaware or lack understanding about gender equality?
    b. How does the college currently raise awareness and promote gender equality and positively educate people?
    c. How does the college celebrate and empower women?
5. Calling it out:
    a. Should the behaviour and comments in the scenario be 'called out' at the time? Are there any negatives in intervening?
    b. What are the positives of intervening and 'calling it out' in the scenario?
6. Responding to the people in the scenario:
    a. How do Jill and Frances feel in this scenario? Is this a problem? If so, why?
    b. How do you respond positively to Jill and Frances and care for them?
    c. How do you respond to the men in the scenario and care for others who may have witnessed the scenario?
    d. Should Jill talk to the Club President and Dean about what happened in the scenario? How would Jill feel talking to the Dean? Would this be difficult?
    e. What is the current process for talking to the Dean or Deputy of the college?
7. Are there any other gender-related issues that you might like mention?