INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES TO PREVENT AND FIGHT AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES - THE CASE OF QUEBEC, CANADA

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Abstract

The high prevalence of sexual violence within academic institutions has been internationally documented. Furthermore, the phenomenon of under-reporting of sexual violence experiences has been observed worldwide. Official complaints to universities reflect only a very small proportion of sexual violence acts experienced by community members. Thus, understanding how higher education institutions can support victims of sexual violence, including in their reporting process is needed to improve upon current practices. Our results from two consecutive studies conducted in Quebec offer promising measures to stimulate the reflection process of higher education institutions in the fight against sexual violence. Based on a sample of 9,234 students and employees, the first study revealed the high prevalence of campus sexual violence in Quebec. Over one in three individuals have experienced at least one situation of sexual violence and less than 10% of victims had reported to their university. The second study used a qualitative methodology to conduct interviews with 22 victims to explore their experiences of reporting to their home university. Analyses shed light onto central themes, in particular the obstacles identified by victims in their reporting process to the university. These obstacles can be related to structural elements specific to institutions (e.g., specialized services' accessibility, sexual and gender-based policy) and the responses they can provide to victims, as well as elements belonging to the victim's environment and personal characteristics. By adopting actionable measures centered around the needs of victims, higher education institutions can promote a healthy and safe environment for community members, free of all forms of violence. The actual and sustained mobilization of institutional leaders and stakeholders in the fight against gender-based and sexual violence is an essential condition for cultural change in universities, and in so doing, would contribute to an equitable access to education within a social justice context.

Keywords: Campus sexual violence, reporting, obstacles, institutional response, higher education.

1. Introduction

Sexual violence remains a pervasive social issue. Collective voices such as #BeenRapedNeverReported and #MeToo have brought public awareness to the widespread issue of sexual violence, which occurs in all walks of social life, including higher education institutions. This article examines the prevalence of sexual violence on university campuses (SVUC) in Québec, Canada, and the experiences of reporting these incidents to universities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends using an inclusive definition of sexual violence to measure its prevalence (Basile et al., 2014). Accordingly, their proposed definition is not limited to experiences of sexual assault (or rape). In this paper, the definition of sexual violence aligns with that of the CDC. It encompasses a wide range of experiences, including sexual assault, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual harassment, cyber harassment, unwanted touching, rape threats, sexual blackmail, and other forms of non-consensual sexual behaviors. This definition allows for the conceptualization of sexual violence on a continuum, as many feminist

researchers have advocated since the groundbreaking work of Kelly (1987) and Hanmer (1977). This continuum approach is also in line with the definition of sexual violence adopted by the World Health Organization in its World Report on Violence and Health:

> "Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work." (Krug et al., 2002, p. 149).

Despite these recommendations, the rates of SVUC reported in studies vary according to the definition of "sexual violence" (e.g., including non-contact forms of victimization such as sexual harassment or only contact forms of sexual assault) and the reporting period (e.g., the last 12 months or since arriving on campus). Fedina et al. (2016) highlighted these variations in a review of 34 studies published between 2000 and 2015 on the prevalence of sexual violence experienced by college and university students in the United States, excluding sexual harassment. They report that the estimated prevalence varied between 6% and 44% for women and 1,4% and 3,2% for men. In France, the VIRAGE survey indicated that 41% of women and 30% of men reported at least one incident of sexual violence in the past 12 months within the context of university studies, including sexual assault and sexual harassment (Lebugle et al., 2021). In Canada, a large-scale survey by Statistics Canada found that 45% of female and 32% of male students experienced at least one incident of unwanted sexual behavior in a postsecondary setting during the last 12 months, including sexual harassment (Burczycka, 2020). Additionally, some groups are at a greater risk of being subjected to SVUC, including women (Cantor et al., 2015; Fedina et al., 2016), international students (Budd et al., 2023; Fethi et al., 2023), sexual and/or gender-minority individuals (Coulter et al., 2017; Martin-Storey et al., 2018; Potter et al., 2020). Sexual violence is a significant problem due to its prevalence within the university community and its detrimental consequences on individuals' well-being. These consequences include physical and mental health issues, intrusive thoughts or nightmares related to the SVUC event, difficulties in concentrating or fulfilling academic requirements, as well as the intention or decision to leave the university (Burczycka, 2020; Hill & Silva, 2005; Krebs et al., 2016; Paquette et al., 2021). A recent study on sexual harassment revealed that significant adverse impacts could result from it, such as symptoms of depression or panic attacks (Bastiani et al., 2018). Furthermore, despite its prevalence and significant consequences, SVUC remains largely underreported. The underreporting of SVUC has been observed worldwide (e.g., Burczycka, 2020; Krebs et al., 2016; Lebugle et al., 2021) and has been attributed to concerns over confidentiality, fear of not being believed or taken seriously.

2. Context & objectives

The situation in the United States highlights the importance of political motivation and leadership. Despite challenges and resistance from the institutions, the Obama Administration had previously demonstrated a commitment to address the issue of sexual violence on campuses by setting federal regulations (e.g., Title IX). In Canada, institutional regulations to address sexual violence differ by province. In the Province of Québec, the government adopted 2017 a framework legislation and an action plan in December 2017 mandating postsecondary institutions to implement effective measures to address SVUC. Presented as the "Act to Prevent and Fight Sexual Violence in Higher Education Institutions," Bill 22.1 calls for the implementation of prevention, awareness, accountability, support, and assistance measures (Gouvernement du Québec, 2017). University administrative leaders had until September 2019 to adopt stand-alone policies to prevent and address sexual violence within their institutions.

This article aims to understand how higher education institutions can support victims of sexual violence in order to improve current practices. To achieve this goal, we first conducted a quantitative study to examine experiences of underreporting, followed by a qualitative study to explore the reporting process of SVUC victims in Québec, Canada. The quantitative study is based upon a large-scale research project titled the ESSIMU Study (Enquête Sexualité, Sécurité et Interactions en Milieu Universitaire). This study was initiated following recommendations made by feminist groups and students who mobilized in response to a series of racist, sexist, and homophobic incidents (for additional context surrounding ESSIMU see Ricci & Bergeron, 2019). This study aimed to measure sexual violence and address three limitations identified in previous studies. First, this study examined the experiences of the entire university, including students, faculty members, and employees. Second, it focused on incidents involving perpetrators affiliated with the same university as the victims. Third, analyses were not limited to incidents within university grounds and included assaults that could have taken place either on or off-campus. The qualitative study we report on in this paper draws upon a research partnership aimed to document current issues related to SVUC prevention, practice, and research. This study is named the VSMES-CRSH partnership project

(Violences Sexuelles dans les Milieux d'Enseignement Supérieur - Conseil de Recherches en Sciences Humaines du Canada). We present research findings to better understand the experiences of victimized individuals by examining their reporting process and their needs for institutional support.

3. Methodology & ethical considerations

The results in this paper are derived from two studies: the first is based on quantitative survey data, and the second involves qualitative interviews with SVUC victims. We describe each methodology below. The ESSIMU study was conducted in 2016 at six French-speaking universities in Quebec, members of these universities were invited via flyers, emails from the university, and emails from pertinent student organizations to participate in the ESSIMU. The only requirement to complete the online questionnaire was that participants had to be either employed or enrolled as students at one of the six universities at the time of data collection. A total of 9,284 individuals responded to the online survey. Sexual violence was measured using a French adaptation of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ—DoD) previously used by Fitzgerald et al. (1999). The questionnaire consists of 21 items to assess three categories of sexual violence: sexual harassment (i.e., verbal and nonverbal insults and hostile or degrading behaviors), unwanted sexual behaviors (i.e., verbal, and nonverbal behaviors of a sexual, offensive, unwanted, or nonreciprocal nature, including rape/sexual assault), and sexual coercion (i.e., blackmail involving promises of future benefits related to jobs or studies or reprisal if sexual favors were not given). To assess disclosure of events, individuals who reported at least one incident of SVUC were asked: "Did you report the incidents to university authorities/resources?" Those who did not disclose the events or disclosed only some were asked for their reasons for not reporting, with a choice of 16 statements.

The qualitative study rests upon the VSMES-CRSH project, which began in 2020 with a call for participation widely distributed across all French-speaking Quebec universities. Recruitment was conducted through social media campaigns and dissemination by the project's co-researchers within their respective universities. The inclusion criteria for participating in the study were: having experienced SVUC (regardless of when the acts had occurred) and having reported the situation to a university resource after September 2019 (the deadline for institutional leaders to adopt sexual prevention policies). A total of 22 individuals were interviewed, including students and university employees. Individual interviews explored several themes, including the context of SVUC, the reporting process to the university, the needs and expectations towards the university, and the facilitating elements and obstacles encountered when reporting.

All necessary ethical approvals for the two research projects were obtained prior to the recruitment stage. Data collection and handling adhered to all confidentiality rules. A list of support services and information was provided to participants. Additionally, the research team interviewers received 15 hours of training on sexual violence, victim support, and how to conduct individual interviews.

4. Findings

The findings of the ESSIMU study (reported in full in Bergeron et al., 2016) revealed that SVUC is a frequent issue, as 37% of respondents indicated they experienced sexual violence at some point since arriving at university, perpetrated by someone affiliated with the same university. More specifically, 34% experienced sexual harassment, 18% experienced unwanted sexual behaviors, 3% had experienced sexual coercion (one person could report more than one experience). Rates of sexual violence were higher amongst certain groups, such as women (41%), non-binary individuals (56%), LGBTQ community members (49%), individuals with a disability (46%), and international students (42%). Additionally, silence appears to be an important part of SVUC aftermath. The study found that 90% of victims had never reported the incidents to their university. Several reasons have been identified to explain the decision not to report the violence to their institutions, with the following three primarily selected by the respondents: believing the situation was not severe enough to be reported (79%); wanting to put it in the past and not think about it again (30%); fearing the university would not take it seriously (20%). Other reasons suggest a lack of trust in institutions: not trusting existing university authorities or resources (16%), fearing the complaint would not be handled confidentially (14%), fear of negative consequences (13%), including fears for university-related employment, academic fulfillment, or athletic career.

Results from the VSMES-CRSH project offer a more comprehensive understanding of the reporting process by examining the personal experiences of individuals who have gone through this process at their respective universities. These experiences are influenced by multiple factors perceived as facilitators or obstacles. Whether their impact was positive or negative, these factors are on different levels from an individual perspective, then regarding the environment of the person and finally around aspects that are specific to the university. We will explore the aspects specific to the university institutions to identify practices that can be improved to enhance the reporting process. The very existence of institutional policies

to fight against SVUC, and correspondingly the availability of resources for victims within their university, was identified as facilitators, including the access to dedicated services to handle reports. However, the implementation of institutional policies, which raises issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and the administrative and time burden of the process, emerged as institutional barriers. Another aspect relates to the hierarchical structure of academia, resulting in an additional obstacle to the reporting process due to the intrinsic precarity of a subordinate position. The presence of psychosocial resources within the university (e.g., sexual violence intervention and prevention offices) was named as a facilitating element in the reporting process. Lastly, the results emphasize the pivotal role of support, which may act as a helpful factor when present and adequate (i.e., listening, validation, respect, and action in favor of the victim). However, it may become a barrier when insufficient or absent (e.g., lack of initiative or action to protect the victim, minimization). It is important to note that reporting experiences are diverse and multifaceted. Individuals who have filed reports hold various positions within the university, and adequate support may come from different individuals, not just those appointed by the institution within intervention and prevention offices.

5. Conclusions & recommendations

Based on research findings and an aim to foster social transformation, the ESSIMU team proposed 15 recommendations for the prevention of SVUC, which can be found in the research report (Bergeron et al., 2016). These recommendations are grouped into six focus areas: 1) framework policy and stand-alone SVUC prevention policy; 2) safe environment; 3) consistent and permanent awareness tailored to different groups; 4) education and training; 5) specialized support interventions accessible to the entire university population; and 6) research. These recommendations aim to provide university community members with a healthy, equal, and safe learning and work environment free from sexual violence. Results from the VSMES-CRSH project highlight the importance of a safe environment and the value of sexual violence education and training – not only for specialized service employees but everyone in the university –to offer appropriate support to victims. To encourage the implementation of institutional policies and effective prevention strategies, a more comprehensive understanding of SVUC is needed, including a description of the dynamics specific to academic settings and the interventions best suited to the institutions (Ricci & Bergeron, 2019). The research discussed in this paper contributes to the production of knowledge on the issue of SVUC in Quebec (Canada). It provides recommendations to raise awareness among government bodies, university management, and social stakeholders about this issue and to implement effective prevention measures for the entire university community.

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