

BARRIERS TO REPORTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: POWER DYNAMICS AND ANTICIPATED COSTS

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Abstract

Campus sexual victimization is associated with multiple physical and psychological consequences. It can affect the ability to pursue academic or professional activities at the university and foster feelings of institutional betrayal towards the university. The use of university services can sometimes help reduce negative consequences associated with sexual victimization. However, very few victims disclose sexual violence and use available resources in their institution. Studies that have explored reporting barriers have mostly been conducted on undergraduate students' samples. They also generally lack an intersectional perspective on violence and power relations, which acknowledges individuals' overlapping political and social identities. We conducted a mixed methods study in Quebec to explore the reasons behind the choice to not report sexual violence to university authorities or resources. First, we analyzed 88 testimonies of individuals who had experienced sexual violence and had not disclosed the situation to their institution. Second, we used a sample of 202 university community members who had been sexually victimized and had not reported it to conduct quantitative analyses. The results revealed a tendency to minimize the acts of violence, a negative perception of the institutional response and various fears of reprisals (e.g., social, professional, or academic repercussions). These findings allow us to reflect on the importance of fears for oneself and others, the assessment of anticipated costs and the potential benefits of disclosure, and the influence of power dynamics. Results can raise awareness among those likely to receive a report and, if necessary, to initiate appropriate institutional actions. The study confirms the need for awareness-raising messages that could improve victims' trust in academic institutions.

Keywords: *Higher education, campus sexual violence, sexual harassment, reporting, disclosure.*

1. Introduction

Gender-based and sexual violence in higher education institutions is a widespread social and public health concern. In North America as well as in Europe, several studies show that more than one third of university students had been sexually victimized (Burczycka, 2020; Federação Académica de Lisboa, 2019; Lebugle et al., 2021). Sexual violence on university campuses (SVUC) can have significant consequences on victims' functioning. SVUC victims are more likely to report negative consequences on their physical and mental health, including depression, suicide ideations, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Basile et al., 2014; Burczycka, 2020; Campbell et al., 2009; Dworkin et al., 2017). SVUC can also lead to feelings of insecurity, hinder academic or professional pursuits, disrupt employment or educational pathways, reduce academic performance, and even result in a decision to leave the university (Bergeron et al., 2016; Burczycka, 2020; Jordan et al., 2014). The use of university resources can potentially mitigate the harmful outcomes associated with sexual victimization. However, rates of disclosure to university authorities or resources are very low. Only a small fraction of victims chooses to

disclose their experience of sexual violence and use services provided by their educational establishment (Burczycka, 2020; Federação Académica de Lisboa, 2019; Sabina & Ho, 2014; Stoner & Cramer, 2019).

Although several studies and surveys have explored the reasons why victims do not report the event to their university services (Sabina & Ho, 2014; Sable et al., 2006; Stoner & Cramer, 2019), the current state of knowledge is largely based on research conducted with a homogenous sample of white, heterosexual, cisgender, young, middle-class undergraduate students (Brubaker et al., 2017). Consequently, the experiences of other groups, such as graduate students, employees, and sexual and/or gender-minority individuals, remain largely unexplored (Brubaker et al., 2017). Previous studies also fail to adopt an intersectional perspective, which considers the multifaceted political and social identities of individuals, such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and disability, and their relationship with power dynamics. The power dynamics associated with specific social positions can influence the decision to report SVUC event, making some individuals in the university community more likely to report than others who may have less power. Marginalized groups, such as racialized women, international students, or sexual and/or gender-minority individuals, may choose to remain silent due to the fear of negative stereotypes and experiences of revictimization (Brubaker et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2022; Sable et al., 2006).

In this study, reporting is defined as communicating a situation of sexual violence to a university-affiliated service or resource, such as the safety office, the sexual violence prevention center, human resources, a student association, or a professor. It is important to note that reporting encompasses a broader range of actions beyond the formal filing of a complaint. Thus, the term reporting is distinguished from disclosure, which refers to the act of revealing the situation of sexual violence to someone within one's personal network, whether that person is a member of the university community or not. Also, sexual violence is conceived on a continuum that considers an inclusive range of different forms of sexual violence, as outlined by Kelly (2013). Furthermore, this violence is understood to be rooted in a paradigm that perpetuates its gendered and systemic dynamics (Hanmer, 1977).

2. Objectives & methods

We conducted a mixed methods study in Quebec to explore the reasons behind the choice to not report sexual violence to university authorities or resources. Documenting the reporting barriers allows for an improvement of institutional actions and measures and to achieve better outcomes.

2.1. Qualitative study

First, we analyzed testimonies of individuals who had experienced sexual violence and had not reported the situation to their institution. These testimonies are derived from the 2016 ESSIMU Study (Enquête Sexualité, Sécurité et Interactions en Milieu Universitaire; Bergeron et al., 2016). This study examined forms of SVUC by using a French adaptation of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire elaborated by Fitzgerald et al. (1999). The questionnaire consists of 21 items to assess sexual harassment, unwanted sexual behaviors, and sexual coercion. When a participant reported having experienced at least one of incidence of sexual violence, an additional section invited them to respond to an open-ended question that asked them to describe an SVUC situation they had experienced: "This section allows you to testify about this event in greater detail. [...] Can you describe one of the situations in the university setting that you experienced (a one-time situation or a situation that occurred repeatedly over time)?"

Of the 9,284 individuals who participated in ESSIMU Study, 3,430 reported experiencing at least one SVUC situation and 1,801 responded to the open-ended question. Some individuals described multiple SVUC situations in their written response, and each situation was counted as a separate testimony, for a total of 2,057 testimonies, ranging from 5 to 950 words. Of these, 88 met the selection criteria for this study, namely: (1) having experienced some form of SVUC; and (2) having clearly mentioned non-reporting. Among respondents, 86% identified as cisgender female, 10% as cisgender male, and 4% as other gender. In terms of status within the university, 21% were undergraduate students, 29% were graduate students, 45% were professors or other employees of the university. Regarding sexual orientation, 78% identified as heterosexual and 18% as non-heterosexual. Finally, of the types of VSMU reported, 88% of the sample reported experiencing sexual harassment, 72% unwanted sexual behavior, and 23% sexual coercion.

2.2. Quantitative study

The second part of this study was based upon a quantitative research conducted from November 2021 to July 2022 at eight French-speaking universities in Quebec, Ontario, and New-Brunswick. Inclusion criteria were: (1) studying or working at university; (2) having experienced some form of SVUC; and (3) completing the entire questionnaire. The final sample consisted of 202 university

community members. The majority identified as cisgender women (77%), 15% as cisgender men, and 8% as other gender. Regarding sexual orientation, 64% identified as heterosexual and 36% as non-heterosexual. In terms of status, 33% were undergraduate students, 29% were graduate students, 38% were professors or other employees of the university.

As in the ESSIMU Study, participants were asked to complete the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (Fitzgerald et al., 1999). If they had experienced a form of SVUC, they were directed to the question: “Following situations of sexual harassment or violence experienced in a university context, some people confide, and others are reluctant to do so. Have you disclosed one or more situations to a person, authority, or service at your university?” If participants indicated that they had not reported to any authorities or services, they were presented with a list of reasons that may have influenced their decision to disclose. They had to indicate with a Likert scale from 0 - *Not at all influenced* to 5 - *Definitely influenced* the extent to which each of the presented reasons influenced their decision. The list of reasons was specifically created for the study. A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted and identified the reasons primarily given by victims for not reporting a situation of sexual violence, particularly to academic institutions or services, but also to the judicial authorities (e.g., Amar, 2008; Krebs et al., 2010; Pinciotti et al., 2019; Proulx, 1997; Sabina & Ho, 2014; Stoner & Cramer, 2019; Walsh et al., 2010; Zinzow & Thompson, 2011). These studies have been conducted in Canada or the United States, with diverse populations. A total of 45 items were presented to the participants.

Prior to recruiting participants, all ethical approvals necessary for both data collections were obtained. The confidentiality of data collection and handling was ensured, and participants were given a list of support services and information.

3. Results

3.1. Qualitative analysis

The results of the content analysis highlighted four dimensions of motives and twenty reasons mentioned by the ESSIMU Study participants. The first dimension was the belief that the acts were not serious enough to be reported. It included 32 testimonies in which victims refer to characteristics related to the severity, triviality, and temporality of the SVUC situation to explain non-reporting (e.g., “It was not severe harassment.”, “It was anecdotal, trivial, ordinary.”). The second dimension was fears of negative repercussions. This dimension included 32 accounts that mentioned five fears expressed by the victims: fears of judgment and retaliation, fears of negative repercussions on their professional or academic career, fears of negative repercussions for the individual responsible for the acts of violence, fears of retaliation from the perpetrator or someone close to them. The third dimension was negative perceptions of the institutional response. It included 20 accounts that expressed a negative perception of the institutional process for handling reports of SVUC, particularly with respect to formal complaints (e.g., “The process is too long and complicated; it is also necessary to have the evidence to prove it happened.”, “I’ve heard horror stories about how complaints are handled.”). The fourth dimension was the use of self-defense and protection strategies. This last dimension included 17 testimonies in which reporting seemed unnecessary as victims have defensive strategies, such as confrontation or threatening to report the situation.

3.2. Quantitative analysis

The most common reporting barriers were the belief that the sexual violence was not serious enough to report, and that the psychological or physical consequences were not severe enough. These two items were reported by nearly 80% of participants. These results are consistent with findings of previous studies of the Research Chair on Sexist and Sexual Violence in Higher Education Settings (Bergeron et al., 2016). The normalization and trivialization of sexual violence can affect how victims perceive and interpret the situation, leading them to expect an institutional response that would also minimize the situation. The other most common reporting barriers were: “I felt able to handle the situation on my own.”, “I wanted to put the situation behind me and stop thinking about it.”, “I wanted to focus my time and energy on other important things (e.g., end of semester, exams, job).”.

Principal axis factor analysis with promax oblique rotation was performed using R software. We performed the Next Eigenvalue Sufficiency Test (Achim, 2020). We determined that the optimal number of factors was seven, which accounted for nearly half of the total common variance. The seven components of barriers were:

1. Fear of negative repercussions in the university environment (e.g., “I feared negative impacts on my academic career, employment, or professional future.”)
2. Fear of negative repercussions in the personal environment (e.g., “I was afraid of negative reactions from people around me (e.g., family, friends).”)

3. Belief that the situation does not warrant reporting (e.g., “I did not consider the consequences of the situation to be serious enough to disclose it to my university's authorities or services.”)

4. Use of avoidance and protective strategies (e.g., “I tried to avoid being in contact (or being near) the person who committed the acts rather than disclosing the situation to my university's authorities or services.”)

5. Negative apprehension of institutional/university response when handling of reports (e.g., “I was concerned that the authorities or services at my university were not going to take the situation seriously.”)

6. Limited awareness or knowledge of available services within the university) (e.g., “I didn't know who to contact at my university.”)

7. Specific concerns related to minority groups (e.g., “I didn't know if the authorities or services at my university took an inclusive approach to diversity.”)

4. Discussion

Using a mixed methods design, this study enlightens the variety of non-reporting experiences. It reveals the existence of multiple personal, social, and institutional factors. These findings can help university administrations better understand the support needs of victims and improve their services to promote recovery. The objective is neither to discourage individuals from reporting, nor to overemphasize the value of reporting at the expense of victims' health and safety. Rather, it is to illustrate the complexity of the decision-making process that does not always result in a satisfactory outcome for the victim.

The decision to (not) report the event to university services appears to be based on a cost-benefit analysis. For SVUC victims, the anticipated “costs”, such as reputation damage, negative impacts on professional future, or safety concerns, may outweigh the potential “benefits” of reporting, causing some victims to opt for not reporting. Fear of reprisals for oneself and for others, as well as negative testimonies from other victims about how university authorities have handled cases in the past, contributed to victims' evaluation of the potential costs of reporting. It is crucial for university administrators and decision-makers to reflect on and challenge existing practices. Knowing that time and energy costs can be higher for victims from marginalized populations, universities' services and authorities should be aware of the power dynamics and privileges, and improve their cultural sensitivity (Brubaker et al., 2017). Institutions should also put in place institutional measures that can mitigate the perception of bias and feeling of helplessness, for instance, with external investigations. In addition, findings also show the need for mandatory training and the importance of providing information on resources, support, and institutional policies. It is important to consider developing new approaches that not only mitigate the costs associated with the reporting decision, but also increase confidence in the institutions' willingness to respond effectively and helpfully to reports and to sanction SVUC.

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