Understanding Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Institutions: Initial Evidence from Latin America and the Caribbean

Daniele Vieira, Assistant Professor, UFPE (corresponding author)
Daniele.vnascimento@ufpe.br

Francesca Ceserani, Research Assistant, UNESCO IESALC, f.ceserani@unesco.org

Abstract

Employing primary data collected from an online survey, this study intends to better understand whether and how women in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region experience violence in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs), and the availability of institutional mechanisms to address the issue. Preliminary results of this work show that psychological/emotional abuse was the form of violence that was experienced at the highest rates among respondents. Sexual harassment and physical violence were also reported, but at low rates. The obtained findings show the lack of prevention and response mechanisms to address gender-based violence (GBV) in the higher education institutions where the respondents belong to, highlighting poor reporting mechanisms as well as absence of general awareness and knowledge of the topic.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, violence against women, higher education institutions, Latin America and the Caribbean, gender inequality, higher education, sustainable development goals.

Introduction

Gender-based violence is a severe form of discrimination that occurs both virtually[1] and physically among all societies and age groups[2]. While anyone can fall victim to gender-based violence, it disproportionately affects women and girls[3], and it is mostly perpetrated by men[4]. Similarly, it is more prevalent upon certain regional and cultural contexts, especially in those with the most pronounced gender-based disadvantages[5]. In this context, it is fair to affirm that gender-based violence, frequently understood as violence against women (VAW)[6], is deeply rooted in unequal power relations between men and women and in gender disparities[7], which are pervasively present across Latin America and the Caribbean[8].

Although gender-based violence is now broadly recognized as a severe violation of human rights with threatening direct and indirect consequences on women and girls, there is little knowledge and limited understanding of this phenomenon when it manifests in higher

---

[1] Herrera A.P, Compton L.R., Farris N.D. (2020), *Gender, Sexuality and Race in the Digital Age.* Springer International Publishing.

[2] Hadi A. (2017), *Patriarchy and Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan*, European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research, 10(2):297.

[3] Zinyemba K. G. & Hlongwana K., (2022), *Men's conceptualization of gender-based violence directed to women in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, South Africa*, MBC Public Health. 22:2235.

[4] Eze C. (2016), *Are men perpetrators of gender-based violence? Counseling for trauma prevention,* Vol. 5 Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict Transformation, No. 2, pp. 67-77.

[5] Saldarriaga LP. (2022), *Sexist Stereotypes and Prejudice in the Latin American Context, and Their Relation to Sexual Violence.* Bielefeld: Universität Bielefeld.

[6] Zinyemba & Hlongwana (n 3).

[7] Hadi (n 2).

[8] Saldarriaga (n 5).

education institutions. The higher education system has massive transformational power and potential to achieve gender equality. To provide women with a solid university education is to make long-term investment in their future, in addition of contributing to poverty reduction, equitable globalization, and sustainability.

It is against this background, that an exploratory survey on the topic was made. This preliminary regional survey was carried out to generate initial evidence about the current status of gender-based violence in academia across Latin America and the Caribbean HEIs, in addition to better understand whether and how female students, professors, and staff have experienced violence as part of their campus life and to pilot test data collection instruments. Despite the small sample size of this pilot study, results yielded critical insights: they revealed that to meet the objectives of the 2030 agenda, higher education institutions must leverage their efforts in providing non-violent learning environments, while also seizing the opportunity to build more sustainable and gender just higher education systems.

Given such research objectives, this paper asks: What is the evidence on gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean? What barriers or facilitating measures are in place to support access to services and recourse to justice for females subjected to violence in such institutions? And which strategies and instruments can be used to reduce the problem? To answer these questions, this study was undertaken with students and staff from LAC higher education institutions that self-identified as women. Their perceptions and experiences of gender-based violence in their institutions are the focus of this paper.

Literature background

Gender-based violence has been increasingly recognized as a severe human rights and global public health issue[9] that adversely affects the health of survivors, including physical damage, mental, sexual, and reproductive health consequences[10].

In the context of higher education, the long-term consequences of gender-based violence on survivors extend to the professional sphere, causing deleterious implications for academic performance[11] and potentially leading to impaired career opportunities, decreased job motivation[12], impaired economic independence[13], as well as direct and indirect consequences of poverty[14]. Additionally, beyond the multiple deleterious consequences on survivors individually[15], evidence confirms that such experiences of violence can also have harmful

[9] Orr, N., Chollet, A., Rizzo, A. J., Shaw, N., Farmer, C., Young, H., Rigby, E., Berry, V., Bonell, C., & Melendez-Torres, G. J. (2022), *School-based interventions for preventing dating and relationship violence and gender-based violence: A systematic review and synthesis of theories of change*. Review of Education, 10, e3382.

[10] WHO (World Health Organization), (2012), *Understanding and addressing violence against women: Intimate Partner Violence*. WHO.

[11] Moylan, C. A., Javorka, M., (2020), *Widening the lens: an ecological review of campus sexual assault.*, Trauma Violence Abuse, 21(1): 179– 92.

[12] Henning, M. A., C. Zhou, P. Adams, F. Moir, J. Hobson, C. Hallett, and C. S. Webster. (2017), *Workplace harassment among Staff in Higher Education: A Systematic Review*. Asia Pacific Education Review, 18: 521-539.

[13] Bettio, F., Ticci, E. (2017), *Violence against Women and Economic Independence*. Publication Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/394400.

[14] Bondestam F., & Lundqvist, M., (2020), *Sexual harassment in higher education – a systematic review*, European Journal of Higher Education, 10:4, 397-419.

[15] Johns, M. M., Lowry, R., Rasherry, C. N., Dunville, R., Robin, L., Pampati, S., Stone, D. M., & Kollar, L. M. M. (2018), *Violence victimization, substance use, and suicide risk among sexual minority high*

impacts on the university community at large, putting other women at risk and spreading dangerous messages of tolerance of gender-based violence[16].

Forms of gender-based violence in higher education institutions vary from physical violence and bullying, verbal and sexual harassment, non-consensual touching, sexual coercion, and assault[17]. One example includes the demand for sex by male professors to female students in exchange of good grades[18] or economic influence: considering the professors' power over decisions of grading and academic achievement, such proposals will inevitably lead students to fear the potential consequences of a refusal[19], while potentially causing psychological distress, absenteeism, and dropouts[20].

Previous studies have demonstrated that the incidence of gender-based violence in the higher education context is a pervasive phenomenon at a global level. One research highlighted rates of unwanted sexual touch from 2% to 34%[21], while other surveys found rates ranging from 13% to 30% and from 4.2% to 20%[22] within campuses. At the same time, the limited existing research on gender-based violence in higher education institutions highlights issues around lack of reporting, failing systems in case management, and lack of knowledge about gender-based violence in general[23]. Nevertheless, the existing data is scarce, with poor knowledge on the possible instruments or strategies needed to address the issue.

Various international frameworks in relation to gender-based violence against women have been established throughout the years, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Framework to underpin Action to Prevent Violence against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and the Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, higher education institutions must also set their agreed strategies and standards on gender-based violence prevention and response, and align their internal culture with such duties.

Data Collection

The study examined four different types of gender-based violence: (a) psychological/emotional violence; (b) physical violence; (c) sexual violence and harassment; and (d) institutional violence.

A series of preliminary interpretations were developed on the basis of the data captured during this pilot phase. The same took place over a period of two months between November 2022 and January 2023. Respondents were students and staff who self-identified as women, including those whose gender identity or orientation differs from the sex assigned at birth such as, but not limited to, transwomen.

school students- United States, 2015- 2017., MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 67, 1211-1215.

[16] UN Women, (2018), *Guidance note on campus violence prevention and response.* UN Women.

[17] UNESCO, (2022), *Glossary: understanding concepts around gender equality and inclusion in education, tool 1.* UNESCO.

[18] Bondestam & Lundqvist (n 14).

[19] Eller, A. M., (2014), *Power Dynamics and Sexual Relationships between Professors and Students at an Urban University in Benin*, Institute for Global and International Studies, IGIS WP 11 /GGP WP 08.

[20] Molstad, T. D., Weinhardt, J. M., & Jones, R. (2023), Sexual Assault as a Contributor to Academic Outcomes in University: A Systematic Review. Trauma, violence & abuse, 24(1), 218–230.

[21] Fedina, L., Holmes, J. L., & Blackes, B. L., (2018), *Campus Sexual Assault: A systematic review of prevalence research from 2000 to 2015,* Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 19, 76-93.

[22] Cantor, D.J., Fisher, B.S., Chibnall, S., Townsend, R., Lee, H., Bruce, C.A., & Thomas, G.E. (2015), *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct.*

[23] Bondestam & Lundqvist (n 14).

A total of 131 women participated in the pilot study, aged 17 years-old and over: most women belonged to age group 50-60 years-old (30%), followed by 28-38 years-old (22%), 39-49 years-old (18%), 17-27 years-old (18%), and 61-79 years-old (12%). The pilot phase was conducted across the Latin America and the Caribbean Region, including Mexico (25 women), Paraguay (16 women), Argentina (16 women), Costa Rica (14 women), Guatemala (9 women), Brazil (8 women).

The questionnaire entailed a series of statements (indicators) followed by 4 scale points (i.e. strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) related to respondents' experience, feelings, and perceptions related to violence against women within higher education institutions. Other questions asked participants to compare and order options based on their preference, while another one provided only two possible answers (yes/no). Additionally, qualitative data was gathered through open-ended, optional questions to enable to improve interpretation.

Acknowledging the sensitivity of the research's topic, ethical requirements such as confidentiality and anonymity were observed to minimize harm to respondents. Against this background, it is important to note that the sensitivity of the survey topic might have increased the unwillingness of respondents to answer questions and preferences truthfully[24]. Similarly, another factor that might lead to accuracy bias is the small sample size of this pilot study[25].

Results

Psychological/ emotional violence in this study refers to "any act that induces fear or emotional distress[26]", including insults, belittling, constant humiliation, intimidation, or verbal threats of harm[27]. Data in this section was captured by asking questions related to their experiences and perceptions related to psychological/ emotional violence within their institutions. For instance, they were asked whether they had previously been offended, insulted, humiliated, or degraded, and whether they had considered dropping out of the institution because of an uncomfortable situation, or had feared retaliation when reporting a related incident.

The collected data revealed high levels of psychological violence, with more than half of respondents reporting such experience (53%). Furthermore, when respondents were asked whether they believed that their institution would protect them if they reported psychological/emotional violence, many (50%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. Data further showed that over half the respondents (53%) have perceived professors/colleagues' hostility toward women, and 46% reported having heard people in their institutions insulting, ridiculing, or mocking women in general. Additionally, this section sought to understand to what extent the respondents had experienced online and technology-facilitated violence[28] within the context of their institutions, which disproportionately impacts women (Hinson et al., 2018). When respondents were asked whether someone had publicly shared sensitive information, photos, or videos about them without their consent, 89% disagreed and strongly disagreed. Nevertheless, it is important to say that despite only 15 out of 131 women reported having experienced non-consensual distribution, the small sample

---

[24]Grangaard, R. (2022), *Common Problems in Survey Design and Data Analysis.,* US Institute of Peace.
[25] Lakens, D., & Albers, C. J. (2017), *When power analyses based on pilot data are biased: Inaccurate effect size estimators and follow-up bias.* PsyArXiv, doi:10.31234/osf.io/b7z4q.
[26] UN DESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), Statistic Division (2014), *Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence against Women - Statistical Surveys.* United Nations.
[27] WHO (n 10).
[28] UN Women, *Accelerating efforts to tackle online and technology-facilitated violence against women and girls*, 2022.

size of this study makes it difficult to reach significance and valid conclusions[29], while increasing the risk to obtain false-positive results[30].

For this survey, physical abuse was defined as any conducts "aimed at physically hurting the survivor and include, but are not limited to, acts like pushing, grabbing, twisting the arm, pulling hair, slapping, kicking, biting or hitting with a fist or object, trying to strangle or suffocate, burning or scalding on purpose, or threatening or attacking with some sort of weapon, gun or knife"[31].

In contrast to psychological/emotional violence, direct exposure to physical violence was reported with significant lower rates, at 1,5%. However, considering that 11% of respondents confirmed having witnessed other women being hit or held firmly against their will on campus, a hypothesis is that such finding may point to an underestimation. This might be due the reluctance of participants to deliberately, or subconsciously, provide truthful responses to such sensitive topic[32]. Furthermore, the data shows the perception of most of the respondents that their institutions lack clear strategies or mechanisms to protect women from violence in higher education: almost half of respondents (48%) said they wouldn't know whom to contact in their institutions if they were physically attacked. In terms of feelings and perceptions, 37% women reported not feeling safe around their male classmates/colleagues, while 18% said they think that physical violence against them or other women was previously justified/condoned in their institutions. When asked whether physical violence was likely preceded by psychological violence, most women (51%) agreed and strongly agreed.

Sexual violence, in its turn, is understood in the survey as "any sort of harmful or unwanted sexual behaviour that is imposed on someone, whether by use of physical force, intimidation or coercion. It includes acts of abusive sexual contact, forced sexual acts, attempted or completed sexual acts without consent, non-contact acts such as being forced to watch or participate in pornography, etc[33]." Equally, sexual harassment was defined as a form of sexual violence that "includes such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour as physical contact and advances, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography and sexual demands, whether by words or actions[34]".

In this section, respondents were asked to report their own experiences with sexual harassment within their higher education institutions. Here, the pooled estimates revealed that conducts of verbal nature were the most reported experiences by respondents, including being told insulting or rude comments toward women in general (45%), sexual jokes (37%), and sex-related comments about their physical appearance (36%). When women were asked whether someone had shown them or shared online sexual videos, pictures or cartoons, sexually explicit graffiti, or other sexual images, 12% of them responded positively. Further to this, it is important to note that globally, online and technology facilitated violence exponentially increased in the past years, especially due the increased internet usage during the COVID-19 pandemic[35]. On the other hand, conducts of physical nature were reported with lower rates: 36 out of 131 reported unnecessary physical contact, including unwanted touching, while 9 women out of 131 said having been asked for sex in exchange for a benefit or favour.

---

[29] Grangaard (n 23).
[30] Forstmeier W., Wagenmakers E., Parker H.T. (2017), *Detecting and avoiding likely false-positive findings – a practical guide,* Biological Reviews, 92, Issue 4, 1941-1968.
[31] UN DESA (n 25).
[32] Grangaard (n 23).
[33] UN DESA (n 25).
[34] UN CEDAW (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women). (2017), General Recommendation 19, art. 11 – 18.
[35] UN Women. (2019), *Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19.* UN Women.

When respondents were asked why some women in their institutions were at increased risk of sexual violence, issues related to poor capacity to respond as well as the existence of gender roles and stereotypes prevailed. Respectively, the lack of knowledge on how to report sexual violence and the lack of sanctions to perpetrators, the prevalence of hyper-masculine behaviours and of societal norms that reinforce women stereotypes were cited at the highest rates.

Finally, when asked about what contributed to the risk of violence against women in their institutions, most respondents mentioned the low levels of prevention: in particular, 71% strongly agreed and agreed that the lack of acknowledgement of all types of violence was one of the main risk factors, followed by the lack of staff training (66%) and of gender sensitization events/programs (65%). Equally, as previously deduced in section 2, many respondents agreed and strongly agreed that the absence of an effective response system in their institutions negatively influenced women's safeness, pointing out to poor reporting mechanisms (63%) and the absence of a university policy to respond to VAW (57%). Gender inequality and unequal gender relations were also considered root causes of violence against women in the context of their institutions: for example, 66% strongly agreed and agreed that male leaders were not interested in addressing violence against women, while also reporting at high rates the lack of women representation in decision making (58%).

The survey further sought to collect respondents' opinions on the actions needed to increase women's safety in higher education institutions by presenting a list of relevant strategies, which were all fully welcomed by respondents. Specifically, women recognized the importance to establish clear interventions for both response and prevention: among the highest rates, 104 out of 131 reported the need to establish clear sanctions for students and staff that commit different types of violence, while 96 called for the creation of a dedicated body/committee to research, monitor, and evaluate institutional responses to the issue. Equally, 94 out of 131 women believed that developing an advocacy and communication strategy to educate women and encourage them to report would be one of the most appropriate strategies.

Further to this, qualitative findings reiterated that the existence of gender stereotypes and bias was believed to be one of the main challenges to ending violence against women, together with the general lack of knowledge of the topic by both students and staff, and the institutions' lack of interest in preventing and responding to violence against women. Qualitative questions further asked respondents to identify some possible actions to be taken to tackle violence against women within higher education institutions. For example, it was noted the importance to develop and establish indicators on violence against women – "*you can't improve what can't be measured*". The need to strengthen the existing response mechanisms was also highlighted: although the institution might have a proper policy response, violence against women could be normally condoned, and the survivor not taken seriously. Other participants pointed out to the need to increase actions to prevent violence against women in view of transforming social norms and gender stereotypes that tolerate violence against women. In this context, qualitative results suggest the need to strengthen capacity building and to implement awareness-rising initiatives, for example.

Concluding remarks

Despite the small sample size of this pilot survey, results yielded critical insights on gender-based violence in the context of higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In terms of types of gender-based violence, psychological/emotional violence was the form of violence that, among respondents, was experienced at the highest rates. Similarly, sexual harassment was reported at high rates, especially in terms of conducts of verbal and non-

physical nature. On the other hand, physical violence was reported at lower rates, however, signs of possible underestimation emerged.

Respondents generally highlighted the lack of prevention and response mechanisms to address violence against women in the respondents' institutions, noting with particular concern the absence of effective reporting mechanisms and of general awareness and knowledge of all types of gender-based violence.

Following from this, respondents fully recognized the urgency to establish various prevention and response strategies to tackle gender-based violence in higher education institutions, while also ensuring the effectiveness of such mechanisms.

References

Bettio, F., Ticci, E. (2017), *Violence against Women and Economic Independence*. Publication Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/394400.

Bondestam F., & Lundqvist, M., (2020), *Sexual harassment in higher education – a systematic review,* European Journal of Higher Education, 10:4, 397-419.

Cantor, D.J., Fisher, B.S., Chibnall, S., Townsend, R., Lee, H., Bruce, C.A., & Thomas, G.E. (2015), *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct.*

Eller, A. M., (2014), *Power Dynamics and Sexual Relationships between Professors and Students at an Urban University in Benin*, Institute for Global and International Studies, IGIS WP 11 /GGP WP 08.

Eze C. (2016), *Are men perpetrators of gender-based violence? Counseling for trauma prevention,* Vol. 5 Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict Transformation, No. 2, pp. 67-77.

Fedina, L., Holmes, J. L., & Blackes, B. L., (2018), *Campus Sexual Assault: A systematic review of prevalence research from 2000 to 2015,* Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 19, 76-93.

Forstmeier W., Wagenmakers E., Parker H.T. (2017), *Detecting and avoiding likely false-positive findings – a practical guide,* Biological Reviews, 92, Issue 4, 1941-1968.

Grangaard, R. (2022), *Common Problems in Survey Design and Data Analysis.,* US Institute of Peace.

Hadi A. (2017), *Patriarchy and Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan*, European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research, 10(2):297.

Henning, M. A., C. Zhou, P. Adams, F. Moir, J. Hobson, C. Hallett, and C. S. Webster. (2017), *Workplace harassment among Staff in Higher Education: A Systematic Review*. Asia Pacific Education Review, 18: 521-539.

Herrera A.P, Compton L.R., Farris N.D. (2020), *Gender, Sexuality and Race in the Digital Age.* Springer International Publishing.

Hinson, L., Mueller, J., O'Brien-Milne, L., & Wandera, N. (2018), *Technology-facilitated gender based violence: What is it and how do we measure it?,* International Centre for Research on Women.

Johns, M. M., Lowry, R., Rasherry, C. N., Dunville, R., Robin, L., Pampati, S., Stone, D. M., & Kollar, L. M. M. (2018), *Violence victimization, substance use, and suicide risk among sexual minority high school students- United States, 2015- 2017.,* MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 67, 1211-1215.

Lakens, D., & Albers, C. J. (2017), *When power analyses based on pilot data are biased: Inaccurate effect size estimators and follow-up bias.* PsyArXiv, doi:10.31234/osf.io/b7z4q.

Molstad, T. D., Weinhardt, J. M., & Jones, R. (2023), *Sexual Assault as a Contributor to Academic Outcomes in University: A Systematic Review.* Trauma, violence & abuse, 24(1), 218–230.

Moylan, C. A., Javorka, M., (2020), *Widening the lens: an ecological review of campus sexual assault.,* Trauma Violence Abuse, 21(1): 179– 92.

Orr, N., Chollet, A., Rizzo, A. J., Shaw, N., Farmer, C., Young, H., Rigby, E., Berry, V., Bonell, C., & Melendez-Torres, G. J. (2022), *School-based interventions for preventing dating and relationship violence and gender-based violence: A systematic review and synthesis of theories of change.* Review of Education, 10, e3382.

Saldarriaga LP. (2022), *Sexist Stereotypes and Prejudice in the Latin American Context, and Their Relation to Sexual Violence.* Bielefeld: Universität Bielefeld.

UN CEDAW (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women). (2017), General Recommendation 19, art. 11 – 18.

UN DESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), Statistic Division (2014), *Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence against Women - Statistical Surveys.* United Nations.

UN Women. (2019), *Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19.* UN Women.

UN Women, (2018), *Guidance note on campus violence prevention and response.* UN Women.

UNESCO, (2022), *Glossary: understanding concepts around gender equality and inclusion in education, tool 1.* UNESCO.

WHO (World Health Organization), (2012), *Understanding and addressing violence against women: Intimate Partner Violence.* WHO.

Zinyemba K. G. & Hlongwana K., (2022), *Men's conceptualization of gender-based violence directed to women in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, South Africa*, MBC Public Health. 22:2235.