

Rethinking response strategies to sexual violence in universities: Awareness, recognition and accompaniment

Training principles and theory

Based on a feminist understanding of sexual violence (SV) as a product of heteropatriarchal culture that “reflects and reinforces hierarchical and unjust power relations” (Toledo, Pineda, 2016: 8), and as a form of control over women and other subjects that are not sexually and/or gender normative. The majority of sexual violences are, as such, an expression of gender-related violences, understood as violence that “has its origin in stereotyped visions of gender and the power relations on which they are based” (Biglia, 2015: 29).

In this sense, the training focused on understanding how culture creates the conditions that make SV possible and enables it, and also on the necessity to dismantle these cultural dynamics. This process is based on personal work that arises from reflection on the stereotypes that people hold about supposed victims and aggressors. As such, the training is based on the concept of affirmative consent¹, meaning that a clear expression of interest and sexual desire must be explicitly communicated if a sexual relationship is to be understood as consensual. Furthermore, this approach makes clear that the absence of an explicit denial of interest cannot be understood as consent.

At the pedagogic level, the training was inspired by the principles of feminist pedagogy: starting from the self and encouraging self-reflection by emphasising the relationship between the content of the course and the lived experience of the participants. This approach is also based on collaboration as a way to facilitate a greater acquisition of knowledge and to promote the development of community in the university, or at the very least, a network of people that are aware of and sensitive to the dynamics of sexual violence.

Learning outcomes

1. To understand the complex phenomenon of sexual violence

- To understand, within the framework of gender-related violences and power relations, the different forms of SV.
- To acquire knowledge of the effects of rape culture and of the necessity for consent based sexual relationships.

¹ As Toledo and Pineda (2016: 25) explain, in some North American states this concept “has acquired legal recognition as a tool to help prevent sexual violence on university campuses (per ex. California Senate Bill 967, 28th August, 2014)”

2. To improve participants' ability to recognise cases of sexual violence in universities

- To know how to identify different typologies of possible SV cases, including more subtle or less obvious ones.
- To reflect on the influence of intersectionality.
- To understand the importance of collective responsibility and the roles of the different social agents implicated in response strategies to each case.
- To be familiar with the relevant state and regional [autonomous regional communities] legislation (legislative act 1/2004, act 5/2008 and 11/2014).

3. To learn basic first response skills when faced with a situation of sexual violence

- To develop participants' confidence to act in situations where they are asked for help in cases of sexual harassment or assault.
- To help participants to develop skills in listening, caring and accompanying that encourage a respectful response to situations of sexual violence.
- To understand the difficulties and limitations of accompanying people who have experienced sexual harassment or assault and the need for referral to specialised professional services.

4. To rethink and design strategies to help confront sexual violence in the context of university life

- To understand relevant university policies and protocols and to generate collective strategies to improve their use.
- To be aware of available university and community resources for first response to cases of sexual violence and/or making an appropriate referral.
- To develop a network of people in the university that are aware of and sensitive to the dynamics of sexual violence.

Outcome keywords: recognising, understanding, listening, accompanying, collective commitment

Content keywords: gender-related violences, power relations, intersectionality, active consent, caring accompaniment, networks and resources

Mode of delivery:

Two sessions (over two days) of 5 hours each, made up of groups with a minimum of 6 and maximum of 15 participants. In the training for trainers groups there was an extra 5 hour session.

The course is divided into four blocks. Each one starts (1 and 3) or ends (3 and 4) with a body dynamics activity, and then continues with activities such as problem solving, case studies, theatricalization, etc. Many of these activities start with a small group task and then proceed to a wider collective debate. At the end of each debate some theoretical and practical reflections are presented to the group using powerpoint slides. During the workshops, videos and other support materials are used, such as an interactive map of Catalonia that displays available resources close to the university.