Original Research Article

Instruments for conducting comprehensive interviews with victims and informants of sexual harassment in the university environment

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ABSTRACT

Background: Having qualitative research instruments to study sexual harassment at university is essential to understand the experiences and perceptions of victims, improving the quality of research and interventions to prevent and address this problem. Objective was to validate, by experts, in-depth interview instruments for victims of sexual harassment and key informants in the university environment.
Methods: In-depth interview instruments for victims and key informants of sexual harassment allow to investigate qualitative data on sexual harassment at the university, such as: perceptions, the context in which it occurs, experiences of sexual harassment, perceived needs, physical, psychological, social and academic effects, as well as the perception of individual and institutional actions against sexual harassment.
Results: In-depth interview instruments for victims and key informants of sexual harassment allow to investigate qualitative data on sexual harassment at the university, such as: perceptions, the context in which it occurs, experiences of sexual harassment, perceived needs, physical, psychological, social and academic effects, as well as the perception of individual and institutional actions against sexual harassment.
Conclusions: In-depth interviews with victims of university sexual harassment and key informants allow to obtain relevant data from the students' perspective, pertinent information to identify the complexity of university sexual harassment and to commit the university to the implementation of effective prevention, intervention and comprehensive reparation policies.

Keywords: Gender violence, Higher education policy interview, Qualitative research, Sexual harassment

INTRODUCTION

Since social problems are unfavorable circumstances that affect certain groups of people in a society, the eradication of each of them is essential to ensure citizen development.

Among the aforementioned challenges that prevent collective progress is sexual harassment, which generates a great impact on the victim both physically and psycho-emotional, since, when violated, not only is her rights violated, but also the lack of security provided by the environment that surrounds her is evident. Therefore,

sexual harassment is considered a problem of security and physical and mental health.[1] Sexual harassment is defined by the Ministry of Social Development and Family as those "practices with sexual connotations exercised by an unknown person, in public spaces such as the street, transportation or semi-public spaces (mall, university, squares, etc.); which usually generate discomfort in the victim".[2] It should be noted that these acts of harassment are not only repulsive because of the way or place in which they are carried out, but are also extremely serious due to the lack of consent on the part of the victim.

Consequently, since sexual harassment is a non-consensual act that can be carried out by unknown and known persons, it can take place in work environments, educational systems, outing areas, sports spaces and public places.[3] Thus, due to the great variety of scenarios in which this type of perversity can occur, the perpetrators can resort to various forms of sexually harassing other people, these can be visual, verbal, gestural, physical, extortionate due to abuse of power, where each of these presents its own specifications according to the context, actors and relations of mandate that make them up.[4]

Within the academic context, specifically at the university level, sexual harassment continues to be a reality that is unfortunately naturalized and affects both students and academic and administrative staff. In a study carried out in Spain on the vision of students in relation to sexual harassment within their university environment, it was found that students perceive sexual harassment as a common situation in the academic environment, given that these situations are invisible, and students also show that they have little support from the university.[5] On the other hand, in Ecuador, according to the Survey of Family Relations and Gender Violence against Women, carried out in 2019, it is evident that, at the higher level, 63 out of every 100 women report the prevalence of violence throughout their lives, with women aged 18 to 29 being those who have experienced the most violence in the educational field.[6]

Therefore, interviews are one of the indispensable tools for identifying victims and locating witnesses of sexual harassment. An interview is considered a valuable tool for collecting information in various contexts, offering participants the opportunity to communicate their situation from their own perspective, allowing the researcher to access each subject's individual interpretation of situations or phenomena.[7] In the university setting, raising awareness and investigating cases of sexual harassment is essential. To address this problem, various methods can be used, among which interviews stand out. The usefulness of this tool is evidenced in the work of Gómez et al in which interviews were conducted with a group of participants, as a means to delve deeper and obtain information about experiences and perceptions of harassment situations, in addition to the impact generated on victims.[8]

The objective of this study was to present instruments that allow for in-depth interviews with victims of sexual harassment and key informants in the university setting.

METHODS

This study consists of the validation of instruments in the students of the Polytechnic School of Chimborazo during the academic period March 2024 to July 2024 with the participation of a total of 150 students. In addition, a bibliographic review was carried out on the definition of university sexual harassment, the analysis categories were identified, the first versions of an in-depth interview for victims of harassment and another for key informants (student representatives) were created, which contained the categories and open-ended questions.

The content of the in-depth interviews was validated, with the participation of three national experts, who met selection criteria.

The expert judgment was carried out using the consensus technique, in two rounds of validation, a first qualitative round, in a group work session where the categories and questions were reviewed and a consensus was reached; later in a second round of validation it was carried out with a quantitative scale, using the Moriyama criteria to validate each question, according to an instructional validation guide used.[9]

The inclusion criteria were those that established: if the question is clearly defined, it contributes to the fulfillment of the objective: if the question will allow the objective of the research to be fulfilled; and, it considers the category/question important and necessary: if the presence of the category and question included in the interview is justified. The exclusion criteria were those people who were not university students, people who did not complete the validation instrument and those who refused to participate.

The study has been ethically approved by all participants, ensuring that participants can access information about the project at any time. In addition, ensuring that the different participants were able to make an informed decision.

RESULTS

One of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and among other strategies to achieve this purpose, it proposes: ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls, and eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual exploitation and other types of violence.[10]

Ecuador has raised its own agenda to be developed in the Ecuadorian State; in fact, some progress is recognized, such as the promulgation of the "Comprehensive Organic

Law to prevent and eradicate gender violence against women," in force since 2018, whose objective "is to prevent and eradicate all types of violence against women: girls, adolescents, young people, adults and older adults, in all their diversity, in the public and private spheres; especially when they are in multiple situations of vulnerability or risk." This Law aims to "prevent and eradicate violence against women, by transforming the sociocultural patterns and stereotypes that naturalize, reproduce, perpetuate and sustain inequality between men and women, as well as to care for, protect and compensate victims of violence".[11]

To get closer to the definition of sexual harassment, we have the one in force in article 166 of the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code (COIP) of Ecuador, which states:

"Sexual harassment: The person who requests an act of a sexual nature, for themselves or for a third party, taking advantage of a position of authority at work, as a teacher, as a religious person or similar, whether a tutor, a curator, a minister of worship, a professional in education or health, a person responsible for the care of the patient or who maintains a family bond or any other form that implies subordination of the victim, with the threat of causing the victim or a third party harm related to the legitimate expectations that they may have in the scope of said relationship, will be punished with a prison sentence of one to three years. When the victim is under eighteen years of age or a person with a disability or when the person cannot understand the meaning of the act or for any reason cannot resist it, they will be punished with a prison sentence of three to five years. Any person who requests favors of a sexual nature that threaten the sexual integrity of another person, and which are not provided for in the first paragraph of this article, shall be punished with a prison sentence of six months to two years".[12]

The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2013) considers sexual harassment to be physical behavior (physical violence, touching, unnecessary approaches), verbal behavior (comments and questions about appearance, lifestyle and sexual orientation, offensive phone calls) and non-verbal behavior (whistling, gestures with sexual connotations, presentation of pornographic objects). In this same sense, Ana Kornblit and Monica Petracci (2002) point out harassing behavior that is verbal (verbal seduction games, proposals for dates, jokes, obscene calls), written behavior (obscene notes) and bodily behavior (groping, pinching, patting, kissing, caressing, unwanted sex, rape). The Manual for the Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment, from the Women and Equal Opportunities Institute of Spain (2015), proposes to adopt the criteria of ILO Convention 111 (1958) to distinguish a situation of sexual harassment from other forms of harassment in the workplace. According to this manual, three situations must occur: 1) Behaviour of a sexual nature. 2) Unwanted, unreasonable and offensive conduct for the person who is the target of

it. 3) Such conduct creates an intimidating, hostile and humiliating work environment for the person affected.[13]

It must be recognized that university sexual harassment as a form of gender violence had not, until recently, been the subject of attention by the broad international and national regulations aimed at safeguarding women's rights. However, the Higher Education System has included in the Organic Law of Higher Education as its guiding principles equal opportunities for all members of a community, interculturality, non-violence and discrimination, among others, aspects that in university activity even constitute aspects of the quality and accreditation of higher education centers.[14]

Various groups of students and teachers have made public situations that have historically been silenced and naturalized in universities. However, when it comes to identifying the conceptions surrounding these practices, there is a clear lack of knowledge. On the other hand, when it is detected, the option is to silence it to avoid reprisals; to a large extent, this is due to the fact that not all Higher Education Institutions have clear policies and routes to prevent, address and sanction cases of sexual harassment.[15]

Therefore, this research echoes the global, national and local concern about sexual harassment in Ecuadorian universities, which reflects the agendas of the time and the relevance and interest of the scientific community. Therefore, together with the Feminist Research Network (REDIFEM) in Ecuador, several universities carried out a national research with a quantitative approach, applying a survey on Sexual Harassment in Higher Education Institutions (ASIES).[16]

Undoubtedly, these data revealed a specific diagnosis of the situation by participating universities and of the reality of the country's educational centers regarding university sexual harassment and account for the need to systematize research processes from different perspectives and approaches to deepen its study, in addition to the fact that these topics also show interest by the scientific community. Based on the problem presented, this research proposal with a qualitative, phenomenological and narrative approach aims to create research instruments to deepen the study of sexual harassment in the university environment.

Construction and validation of in-depth interviews

The in-depth interview is a qualitative research technique that allows us to delve into the opinion of the interviewees through a conversation directed towards relevant topics, obtaining detailed information on a specific phenomenon. In a general sense, this technique is understood as an interaction between two people, planned and following an objective, in which the interviewee gives his opinion on a matter and the interviewer collects and interprets that particular vision.[17]

In fact, in qualitative methodology, the in-depth interview is understood as the repeated face-to-face meetings between the researcher and the interviewee, which aim to know the opinion and perspective that a subject has regarding his life, experiences or lived situations.[18]

Qualitative methods are based on the "interpretation" of social reality, values, customs, ideologies and worldviews are constructed from a subjective discourse, since the researcher will assign a particular sense and meaning to the experience of the other. Within qualitative studies there are different techniques that help to approach social phenomena, among these the in-depth interview plays an important role, since it is constructed from repeated face-to-face meetings between the researcher and the informants with the aim of entering into their intimacy and understanding the individuality of each one.[19]

In this context, the in-depth interview is an ideal data collection technique for studying the experiences, characteristics and qualities of sexual harassment in university students. In this research, two types of in-depth interviews on sexual harassment were developed and validated, one for victims and another for key informants.

In-depth interview for victims of sexual harassment at university

(University students who have experienced or experienced sexual harassment: physical, verbal, non-verbal or by blackmail and abuse of power during their university studies).

The objective of the interview with victims of sexual harassment at university was: to identify perceptions of university sexual harassment, the context in which it occurs, stories of their own experiences of university sexual harassment, the physical, psychological, social and academic effects, the perceived needs of people who have suffered harassment and the perception of institutional actions.

Table 1 with the categories and questions of the in-depth interview for victims of university sexual harassment.

Table 1: Categories and questions of the in-depth interview with victims of university sexual harassment, case study.

Categories	Questions
Experiences and experiences of sexual harassment at university	1. Tell us your story of the sexual harassment situation you experienced, what happened? 2. When did it happen?
Consequences and effects of sexual harassment at university	1. Did the sexual harassment you experienced generate consequences? If so, what psychological and emotional consequences did the sexual harassment you experienced generate that you felt during that time? 2. What physical consequences did your experience of sexual harassment at ESPOCH generate for your health? 3. How was your academic performance after your experience of sexual harassment at ESPOCH? 4. What social consequences did the experience of university sexual harassment generate? 5. Do you consider that you have been the object of revictimization, that is, because of your experience of sexual harassment, you have been the recipient of unfair treatment, have you felt as if you were the culprit of the university sexual harassment you received, have you had to relive the trauma, deal with the fact before different audiences and other forms of revictimization?
Actions of students when facing sexual harassment at university	1. Tell us if, in your case, you thought about reporting it or if you did report it, if you say no. 2. Why didn't you report your case of university sexual harassment? 3. What did you do? Who supported you? What was that support like? What kind of help did you receive in the university environment, in your case of sexual harassment? 4. What did your classmates do when they witnessed or when you told them about the sexual harassment you experienced at the Polytechnic?
Perception of institutional actions against sexual harassment at the university	1. When you experienced sexual harassment, did you know what ESPOCH does in these cases? 2. At that time, did you know what to do and who to turn to for support? 3. Do you know if ESPOCH has a protocol for dealing with sexual harassment at university? What do you know about the protocol? 4. Would you like to say anything else about what you experienced in your case of sexual harassment at ESPOCH?

In-depth interview with key informants (student leaders from unions, student co-government, courses or programs)

The objective of the in-depth interview with key informants was to: identify perceptions of university sexual harassment, the context in which it occurs, accounts of experiences of university sexual harassment by themselves and others, the physical, psychological, social and academic effects, the perceived needs of people who have suffered harassment and the perception of institutional actions.

Table 2: Category and questions of the in-depth interview with key informants (student representatives).

Category	Questions
Perceptions of university sexual harassment	1. What do you think is university sexual harassment? (Encourage a comprehensive and reasoned response) 2. What do you consider to be the manifestations of university sexual harassment? (Encourage a comprehensive and comprehensive response that allows for a wide range of manifestations)
Context in which sexual harassment occurs	1. Why do you think sexual harassment occurs at university? 2. What circumstances favor sexual harassment at university? 3. Who commits sexual harassment at university? 4. In what spaces does university sexual harassment occur?
At this point in the interview, if necessary, the definition of university "Sexual Harassment" adopted for this research is clarified.	*"Verbal, written or oral, physical or gestural practice, blackmail with sexual content, not consented to or desired by the harassed person, the purpose of this type of gender violence is the exercise of power or sexual satisfaction of the aggressor, it generates discomfort, intimidation or discomfort and is carried out in different spaces of university life"*
Experiences and experiences of university sexual harassment, perceived needs of people who have suffered sexual harassment at ESPOCH, effects of sexual harassment (physical, psychological, social, academic) and perception of institutional actions.	1. Have you ever experienced or are you aware of sexual harassment at ESPOCH (verbal, verbal, written, non-verbal or gestural, sexual and physical blackmail)? 2. Tell us about a sexual harassment situation at ESPOCH that you know about, tell us the details of the case that happened, where it happened, was it reported, are they still at the university? (whether it is a case that is close to home or heard or is publicly known) 3. When did it happen?
Effects of sexual harassment (physical, psychological, social, academic)	In the case of sexual harassment that you experienced or know of and told us about, if it existed, what were the effects on the harassed person? Physical: Psychological: Social: Academic: Other:
Perception of individual and institutional actions.	1. What does a person who experiences sexual harassment at ESPOCH do? 2. Where do they go? 3. Do you know if they have reported it? 4. Do you know how the route or protocol for care is applied at the institution? 5. Do you know if people who have experienced situations of sexual harassment at ESPOCH have received psychological help? 6. What needs were not addressed, what problems arose in the case of sexual harassment? 7. Do you know of other actions taken by the university to deal with this problem, which ones? 8. What else should be done at the university to deal with sexual harassment, from a preventive point of view, in terms of applying the route, disciplinary and legal cases?

The content of the first versions of the proposals for in-depth interviews was validated with the participation of experts. Three national experts participated and were selected according to the following criteria: they had a

master's degree or PhD, experience in the construction of data collection instruments to investigate university sexual harassment, experience in research on issues of university sexual harassment, they have scientific publications on the subject of sexual harassment in higher education institutions, they belong to research networks and other relevant data considered by the expert.

Two rounds of validation were carried out and the main technique was the consensus of the group of experts. According to the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy, consensus is defined as: the agreement adopted by consent between all members of a group. Other authors indicate that the consensus technique is used for decision-making with expert judgments and this is done in order to have reasonably correct estimates in a certain course of action and to reduce the uncertainty of erroneous and poorly founded choices made within a decision-making process. It is necessary to resort to experts. An expert opinion is, in essence, a poll of opinions among people recognized as reliable sources of a topic, technique or skill, with authority in a specific matter.[20]

From the first version of the in-depth interview for victims of sexual harassment and key informants, the content was validated by expert criteria.

The validation was carried out in two rounds of expert consensus:

For the first round of expert validation, a qualitative validation instruction guide called the Open Question Validation Guide for Qualitative Research on University Sexual Harassment was created, which asked the expert:

First round of expert validation by consensus

For the first round of expert validation, a qualitative validation instruction guide called the Open Question Validation Guide for Qualitative Research on University Sexual Harassment was created, which asked the expert:

Expert description: (first and last names, undergraduate degrees, postgraduate degrees, current job, current job functions, research experiences on university sexual harassment issues, scientific publications on harassment issues, whether the expert belongs to research networks, and other relevant data that the expert considers).

Observations on the open questions of the data collection techniques, which need to be carried out: prior to the expert consensus work session, the experts were asked to write down their observations on each analysis category and question, in addition to requesting to write down another analysis category, questions or any other observation that they consider.

Other observations: refers to other observations on the analysis categories or open questions of the data collection techniques in-depth interviews with victims of sexual harassment and key informants, which the expert considered should be carried out, prior to the expert consensus work session.

Subsequently, the experts were invited to a group session to analyze their observations. The proposed changes were made based on the experts' consensus criteria.

Second round of expert validation by consensus

The second round of validation by experts was carried out quantitatively and qualitatively, with the objective of assessing the content and quality of the construction of the questions. For the first round, the experts' criteria were based on the basic properties proposed by Morillama for the validation of the questions [21].

The criteria used for quantitative validation were:

Clearly defined: if the question is clearly defined

Contributes to the fulfillment of the objective: if the question will allow the fulfillment of the objective of the research

The category/question is considered important and necessary: if the presence of the category or question included in the interview is justified.

A scale was constructed for the rating of each analysis category and questions by experts, based on compliance with each criterion: A lot = 3 A little = 2 Not at all = 1.

For the qualitative assessment, the experts were also asked, if they existed, to contribute with other observations of the analysis categories and/or the questions.

It was determined to keep the questions in the interview, when at least two of the experts (66.7%) considered the rating in the criterion a lot and the observations made by each of the experts were reviewed, on the other hand, when at least two of the experts rated the questions in the criteria little or not at all, the questions were reviewed together with the observations, to improve them or even eliminate them.

Once the experts' criteria were obtained, a general qualitative and quantitative analysis of the validation provided according to the previously established criteria was carried out, the experts' comprehensive rating and their considerations in observations were assessed, the pertinent modifications and adjustments were made and the final version of the in-depth interviews was constructed

DISCUSSION

An interview is considered an empirical method based on interpersonal communication, which obtains responses about the problem under study and allows for the collection of additional information through body

language and other non-verbal signals.[22] Thus, interviews to investigate problems such as sexual harassment in the university environment represent the opportunity to access important individual perceptions that facilitate addressing the problem. This is reflected in the study by Verdú-Delgado and Guarderas-Albuja, who, through interviews, conclude that the population studied has a negative attitude towards the normalization of harassment and the lack of information about sexuality and sexual violence. However, despite this criticism, students adopt a passive attitude, which highlights the need to implement information processes that make the problem visible and promote effective actions.[23]

Interviews allow for the collection of evidence during the investigation of sexual assault crimes, and it is of utmost importance to know how to conduct them. To do so, a relationship of trust must be established with the victim at the beginning of the interview. In addition, it is clarified that some of the questions may be unusual and directly involve the victim's experience during the event. Initially, the interviewer must establish an intimate environment that allows the person to feel comfortable and safe to express his or her story.[24] Bastidas and Prieto assure that to obtain the best results, the collaboration of the interviewee is needed, therefore, the person in charge of the statement must have an attitude that shows concern, consideration, warmth, sympathy, sensitivity and maturity.[24] Likewise, Vara et al, they mention that the interviewer must be professional and especially cautious when asking leading and suggestive questions, especially those that imply the victim's own guilt in actors of a sexual nature. Likewise, the interviewer must provide easy communication through the use of basic communication skills, such as active listening, empathy, the ability to summarize, and the execution of assertive questions.[25]

Interviews are part of the instruments used to obtain testimonies, however, various procedures have been defined for obtaining those statements from witnesses and victims. Vázquez states that the psychology of testimony uses various procedures to achieve its objective, two of the most representative being: the narrative recovery format and the interrogative recovery format.[26] For the development of the latter, a series of previously prepared questions must be asked, forming the script of the interrogation (implicit or explicit). Vázquez also states that for taking statements from adult witnesses with standard cognitive capacities, the Cognitive Interview (CE) should be applied and for those cases of testimonies from minors, the recommended procedure is the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) interview.[26] Barreto and Estupiñán consider the application of other techniques that facilitate the adequate reception of testimonies, these include: the psychology of testimony, CAPALIST Abilities Assessment, Michigan Protocol, Cognitive Interview and SATAC-RATAC Protocol. Vara et al, on the other hand, although agreeing with the promotion of the application of the NICHD interview, opposes the practice of other interview procedures such as the SATAC/RATAC protocol, since it has been judged for its confirmatory bias and the use of suggestive procedures.[27] The study carried out shows limitations in data collection and in the veracity with which the different participants can respond to the designed instruments. However, it is important to establish that a greater number of studies should be allowed to be carried out to provide certainty on this subject.

CONCLUSION

Gender violence in the university environment in one of its types, sexual harassment, emerged as a global problem, which is not alien to the Ecuadorian reality and its importance and significance in the higher education scenario, remains a pending issue to be addressed from different perspectives to address this problem in a comprehensive manner.

It is transcendental for the scientific community to find data collection instruments that allow characterizing sexual harassment in the university environment, in this context an in-depth interview technique is provided for victims of sexual harassment and key informants for this purpose.

The validation of experts of the in-depth interview technique for the study of sexual harassment in the university environment confirmed that it is applicable to the university environment, contains clearly defined questions, they are justified for the fulfillment of the objective and the categories and/or questions were considered important and necessary.

Qualitative research on sexual harassment in universities highlights the importance of investigating and addressing this problem in a comprehensive manner in universities, revealing the diversity of harassment experiences, the need for more effective prevention policies and programs, as well as the importance of providing support and resources to victims of sexual harassment in universities.

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