

Looking the Other Way: Sexual Harassment on Campus

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of two experiences of gender violence perpetrated in recent years by male teaching staff against female students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Unlike the silence that victims habitually keep in the face of this kind of behavior, both cases were reported not only within the institution but also in the media. The students publicly denounced these cases because the university failed to duly address the complaints that they initially filed through university channels. Thus, these women used the recourse of making their testimonies public in order to be listened to and to place pressure on the institution to punish their aggressors. Our analysis of these two cases demonstrates the behavior of different institutional actors in the face of these situations, seeking to avoid recognition of a problem that, despite its frequency and the harm it causes to women, has been conveniently ignored within the institution.

Keywords: higher education, sexual harassment, gender violence, cultivated ignorance, silencing

1. Study Overview and Method

Using a qualitative approach, this article presents the results of research on two cases of gender violence against female students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Spanish acronym: UNAM), the oldest and largest higher education institution in Latin America. The first experience was triggered when a male physics professor proposed to improve a 16 year old female student's grade in exchange for sexual favors. The second case has an antecedent of a sentimental relationship between a female student and one of her male professors who, to revenge her decision to break off the relationship, accused her of plagiarizing her thesis topic. These experiences were selected because they were both made public in the media, which is unusual, and their analysis allows us to observe the institutional reaction to gender violence complaints and to the pressure that arose from the media coverage that these cases received. Since our attempts to interview the young woman harassed by her physics professor were unsuccessful, we took on the task of compiling the information she shared with different media sources (social networks; radio and TV interviews) in order to publicly disseminate her testimony and to demand attention to her complaint. The account of the student accused of plagiarism was obtained from an interview that this young woman gave us thanks to the intervention we requested from a group of students who gave her support to make her case public. The relationship that we have established with this group is based on our shared interest in bringing gender violence practices at the university to light. In the first case, we saved and studied the video—which was widely circulated on YouTube—of the professor's aggression as recorded by a fellow student. We also transcribed the interviews in which the female student gave a detailed description of what happened. Likewise, we inspected the letters and comments published in social media. In the second case, we requested the student's authorization to tape her story and then we transcribed the interview for purpose of analysis.

Additionally, we compiled video registry of the protest march carried out on different parts of the UNAM campus by groups of feminist students to publicize the case. We also obtained a copy of the letter the female student wrote to make her complaint public. In the analysis of the compiled information, we considered the findings of investigations that show the different kinds of obstacles that women face when they file complaints in cases such as these. The interest of institutions to ignore the existence of this problem is noteworthy; as stated by Dzeich & Weiner (1984) —in their classic study on sexual harassment committed by teaching staff against female students in a wide variety of universities in the United States—, higher education seeks to promote the self-image of a ‘green island,’ separated from the vices of the outside world. This interest leads to different types of practices used to silence victims in order to keep the problem, and everything that it entails, under a veil of ignorance that is convenient to institutions in order to avoid rifts in their idyllic image. Topics considered for analysis include: a) the way in which the cases were triggered and the facts occurred, b) the context in which each experience took place, c) the position and the reactions of the students and the aggressors, d) factors that led to filing of the complaint, e) obstacles to filing the complaint, f) actions undertaken, g) support received, h) personal and institutional effects resulting from the experience. The information was analyzed using thematic color coding, placing special attention to register any emerging topics. Each of us carried out our analysis of the two testimonies separately and then, results were compared to identify coincidences, discrepancies and emerging themes.

2. Sexual Harassment in Higher Education and the Cultivation of Ignorance

In contrast with the idyllic vision that higher education institutions promote of being ‘green islands,’ research on these institutions lets one clearly appreciate that there are multiple practices that contradict the fiction that universities are in fact a world apart. So, thanks to the ample number of studies in recent years on the subject of sexual harassment within higher education institutions in several parts of the world, we now have access to information that illustrates the extent of this problem, which is often trivialized or conveniently ignored. For example, in the United States, the data obtained on a national basis by Hill and Silva (2005) provides evidence that around 6 million students had suffered this type of behavior. According to a report by the National Union of Students (2011) in the United Kingdom, 68% of the students attending higher education had experienced some form of sexual harassment. The report coordinated by Feltes (2012, p. 59), which includes data gathered from a total of 35 universities located in 5 European countries (Germany, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom and Spain), shows that ‘More than half of the students surveyed (mean value = 60.7 percent) had experienced at least one event during their time at university.’

Regarding the proportions reached by this type of behavior in UNAM, the survey conducted by Buquet, Cooper, Mingo & Moreno (2014, pp. 304-305) allows us to appreciate that 49.3% of the female student body and 27.6% of their male peers had suffered, during the last two semesters, at least one of the 12 types of behavior used to classify and measure the sexual harassment which takes place within the UNAM campus. Furthermore, the survey showed that the majority of those who sexually harass both the female and male students belong to the masculine sex (88.7% and 64%, respectively). As it has been observed in several research projects such as the aforementioned investigations, the most common occurrence in UNAM is that the affected population declares they have done nothing about the said incidents (71.7% of the female students and 67.0% of the male students). Only a small proportion of them actually made any complaints to the institutional authorities (2.9% of the women and 2.2% of the men). Thus, the high frequency of the acts of sexual harassment, the fact that the majority are targeted against women with men as the perpetrators, the countless number of obstacles faced by those who do wish to denounce them, in conjunction with the impunity enjoyed by most perpetrators, clearly indicate the existence of a gender order that grants a tacit permission to commit these acts. Blindness, deafness and silence are the traditional mechanisms through which the institutions of higher education protect themselves in order to avoid the recognition of the different forms of violence directed towards women within the confines of their installations. Feldthusen (1990, p. 74-78), in his analysis of the events that took place in the University of Western Ontario, where a group of male and female law students requested an official response to the sexism and sexual harassment therein, observed that this type of complaints go against the male ‘right not to know’ (to ignore, deny, trivialize) about women’s problems.

According to this author, this right has several layers, among which he lists: 1) to ignore what happens despite knowledge of the acts specified in the complaint, 2) to see the incidents as isolated, as individual episodes, rather than behavioral patterns explained on a sexual basis, 3) to adopt a defensive attitude, whether personal or institutional, in the face of any complaint filed by a woman, 4) to feel offended by the allegations in such a way that the sexual harassment experienced by women pales when faced with the outrage it triggers. In her analysis concerning the rejection generated by a report on the presence of systematic practices and dynamics of a sexist and racist nature at the University of British Columbia, McIntyre (2000) identified a persistence among the privileged individuals—in particular, the professionals of these universities—which she identifies as ‘cultivated ignorance’ regarding the systemized nature and dynamics of inequality revealed by this type of reports. She states that the option of not knowing and not thinking chosen by these privileged people, allows them, amongst other things, to deny the relations of established dominion that bring them benefits and confirm their individual innocence regarding the systematic exercise of the oppressive habits of privilege. Furthermore, the recurring nature of this type of ignorance allows them to justify the lack of institutional action when faced with claims of systematic inequality. Reflections upon this type of ignorance¹ show that ‘its nature is less cognitive than performative [...] it is not a simple lack of information but rather the incapacity—or the refusal—to acknowledge one's own implication in the information’ (Felman, 1982, p. 30, original emphasis). Frye (1983, p.118) affirms that ‘Ignorance is not something simple: it is not a simple lack, absence or emptiness, and it is not a passive state [...], ignorance of this sort [...] is a complex result of many acts and much negligence.’ For her part, Tuana (2006, p. 11) states that:

Willful ignorance is a deception that we impose upon ourselves, but it is not an isolated lie we consciously tell ourselves, a belief we know to be false but insist on repeating. Rather, willful ignorance is a systematic process of self-deception, a willful embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one's role in that exploitation. One of the things that adds to the cultivation of ignorance regarding gender violence, specifically in the case of sexual harassment, is the silence imposed to women in several ways, for example: a) by blaming them for this type of act, because of how they dress, speak, look, walk, dance, drink; of the places they visit and the time of day they go out, for the friends they keep, etcetera; b) by naturalizing this practice through a wide variety of discourses that position them as objects for the satisfaction of the supposed uncontrollable male sexual drive; c) through the trivializing of the discomfort this type of behavior produces; d) through the obstacles which make the reporting of such acts difficult and the costs of making such claims. These aspects, promote reactions—such as fatigue, confusion, anxiety, guilt, shame, fear, sadness, feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, paralysis—which produce emotional exhaustion and undermine the spirit needed to air this kind of problem somehow, and over which silence has been imposed as a norm. Regarding emotional exhaustion, Summers-Effler (2002, p. 45) proposes that: When a person is subordinately positioned and loses emotional energy, they can react in three ways (1) resist the positioning, (2) avoid or minimize such interaction in the future, or (3) continue to participate in these interactions and manage their emotional responses to their internal positioning internally. The last choice minimizes social conflict, but it requires energy-draining work that leads to diminished intrapsychic energy and continued emotional energy-draining interactions. While the last option would seem to be the worst, it is often the most promising option for women.

An excellent example of the emotional dynamics associated with the silencing of women is offered by Chubin (2014, p. 188) when she speaks of her own reactions faced with the sexual harassment to which she has been subjected in the streets of Tehran, or on the public transport in that city: The way I find myself mute when one of these assholes leans on me or rubs his thigh to mine, when I walk in the street and I just can't turn back and yell 'shut up' to their nasty comments on my body. All the rage and revulsion just never finds a pore to come out; my shame has become this concrete wall disarming my body, zipping my mouth closed. Why is it that I can't react until I feel a serious physical threat? And there comes one day when you can't hold it in anymore, especially when you know you have the support of a friend who is sitting next to you. So as I gathered all my energy today to protest, to say a word, to stop this pathetic situation that is eating my soul, all my rage and disappointment left my body in a soft, apologetic voice when I realized how powerless I am in such situations; I asked, 'Would you mind sitting a little bit further away so we can be more comfortable?' The guy said not a single word and moved himself a little bit away. Not that we all didn't know he would be back where he was after a sharp turn and this time I would not repeat the same hopeless sentence (our emphasis).

In regards to the costs of reporting this kind of acts, the famous controversy begun in the United States when Anita Hill accused Judge Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment in 1991 is very illustrative: ‘For coming forward, Hill was attacked as psychotic, a lesbian, a pathological liar, a nymphomaniac, and, in journalist David Brock’s infamous slander “a little bit nutty, a little bit slutty”’ (Baker, 2004, p. 9).

3. Sexual Harassment in the UNAM Context

In order to contextualize the two cases analyzed in this article, in this section we turn to some of the testimonies collected by Agoff & Mingo (2010) in six discussion groups held with female and male students in three schools of UNAM. These testimonies allow us to appreciate that sexual harassment by university teaching staff is a practice that habitually remains impune. Thus, in the participants’ accounts there was continuous reference to lecturers who, despite being renowned for sexual harassment toward the female student population, received no punishment whatsoever. For example, one teacher took a female student to an empty classroom under the pretext of explaining what the course was about; once there, he said to her: ‘I want to sleep with you;’ when the student reported him, nothing happened, while he, bragging about the power of the faculty members in UNAM, told her: ‘don’t be surprised, the same thing will happen all the time.’ In one of the groups, the female students commented that although the leers of some of the teaching staff bothered them, they never reported it: ‘there’s no point’ given that, in most cases, those who receive the complaints discourage them in several ways: They asked us: ‘What is he going to do to you?’ [To which we replied]: ‘the thing is he has a history of this type of behavior and we are scared,’ ‘Yes, but... what is he going to do to you? Moreover, nothing has been proved; he is highly protected by the union and, even though we present the complaint and provide evidence, nothing will happen.’

One female student said: ‘you complain and they pretend to take note but at the same time they ignore you. At least that’s what happened in the case of my girlfriend, nothing happened [to the teacher].’ On several occasions, it was mentioned that certain professors stare at the breasts of the female students, producing distress, discomfort and anger: ‘He sat down, lowered his glasses and stared at her neckline. And you, kind of like... What’s with him? Besides, he was always getting too close.’

Several female students mentioned that on occasions they ended up confused by their experiences, because their complaints were always questioned: I think the problem is that they begin to doubt. Even our peers, the teachers, and the persons, to whom we take our complaints, comment: ‘Really?’ ‘What?’ ‘But he’s a nice guy,’ ‘Are you serious?’ ‘Look, pay attention, you’ve probably been very sensitive recently... and your hormonal changes...’

Besides this, the female students said there was nowhere to report their complaints regarding the harassment: ‘The thing is I don’t know who to tell because there’s no special department, no office, nobody who is in charge of complaints about sexual harassment, whether it is from another student or a teacher, from a teacher to a student, between students, from a worker to a student, whatever!’ They emphasized how discouraged they felt because of the difficulties they have to face to present a complaint: So there you go, and first of all you have to face all that exhaustive paperwork, and then you become frightened, you panic, because once again you bump into the perpetrator, and he says things to you again. And even the other students say to you: ‘Why not just forget it.’ In reality, you are opening yourself up to further social pressure. The female students mentioned the fear, the paralysis and the submission they felt when faced with sexual harassment from their teachers: ‘you feel impotent because you know there is nothing you can do to them,’ ‘it was such a shock that nobody said anything to him,’ ‘you have to put up with it if you want to go on.’ During the interventions of both the male and female students, it was clear that many times the blame for the sexual harassment is placed on the women. On several occasions it was stated that it was their own responsibility to dress carefully and ‘to instill respect.’

4. Case 1

Several students from one of the campuses of UNAM’s national high schools uploaded, at the end of April 2013, a video to social networks which led to lots of press coverage and comments due to the indignation and general alarm caused by images in which a male teacher can be seen “imprisoning” the body of a 16-year-old female student, with whom he struggled to get hold of an exam on which he had written the sexual favor he required in exchange for giving her a passing grade on the final exam.ⁱⁱ The antecedent of this event is the evidence requested in the legal department of the campus from the student when she initially made the complaint about the alleged sexual harassment. This is the reason that the girl decided, together with some fellow students, to find a way to exhibit the behavior of the aggressor. The evidence gained—the exam with the proposal written in pencil: ‘breast kisses,’ along with the video—led to the dismissal of the teacher and to the student taking the perpetrator to court.

It should be noted that, since this event occurred, both men and women who were studying—or had previously studied—at this campus, published a large number of comments on social networks, stating that this professor’s inappropriate sexual behavior was a well-known fact and had been previously denounced, but that his conduct had been completely ignored by the institution. Frye (1983, pp. 120-121) states that: If one wonders at the mechanisms of ignorance, at how a person can be right there and see and hear, and yet not know, one of the answers lies with the matter of attention [...]. Members of dominant groups are habitually busy with impressing each other and care more for that than for actually knowing what is going on [...]. Attention has everything to do with knowledge. In a letter written by the student concerned, directed to her fellow students requesting for help, she says: ‘This teacher is already known for this type of behavior and has even been reported to the pertinent office of the campus, but nobody has dared to make an official complaint due to fear, to lack of evidence and even due to some kind of interest.’ⁱⁱⁱ There are also comments in the social networks in which the student herself is accused of lying and provoking the teacher, for example a male student wrote: ‘she must have insinuated or said something and later tried to take advantage, even if the teacher (‘el profe’) had written breasts, or tits, or whatever, she incited him to write it. So what! She’s the classic loser who’s trying to find a way to get a pass on her exam. What a shame;’ or: ‘to every action there’s a corresponding reaction, she was looking for something and then tried to turn it against the teacher.’^{iv} These comments reveal, on the one hand, the solidarity this young man feels for the teacher, to whom he refers affectionately by calling him ‘el profe;’ while on the other hand, his anger because the girl violated the unwritten rule which covers up this kind of act; that is to say, that she should break the expected silence maintained by the women who have suffered this kind of behavior. Because her complaint affects not only the teacher involved, but also calls into question the gender order which presupposes the subjugation of women, and which the youth himself benefits from. In light of this young male student’s comments, it is pertinent to consider what Baldwin (as cited in Bailey, p. 17) points out:

What I say about you, about someone else, about everybody else, reveals you [...] what I think of you as being, indicated by my own necessities, and my own psychology, my own fears and desires. I’m not describing you when I talk about you, I’m describing me. The intervention requested by this student from the National Commission on Human Rights (Spanish acronym: CNDH), because she considered that UNAM had not helped her sufficiently,^v triggered a controversy which caused a great scandal, given that it was widely broadcast on several media. In the reply provided by the University^{vi} to the recommendation received from the CNDH, as well as its rejection by the University Council, one can observe that the emphasis is placed on denying any omission or responsibility on the part of the Institution regarding what happened in this case. To this end they listed the actions taken concerning the case in question, along with the measures taken to promote a culture of respect for human rights and the equality of the sexes within UNAM. Accordingly, the recommendation made by the CNDH^{vii} is qualified by several members of the University Council not only as unfounded, but also deceitful, and it is assumed that this procedure intended to discredit the institution and its authorities. In this way, the traumatic experience undergone by the girl who was attacked by the teacher and the necessary reflection on the fact that she had to put herself through this kind of risk to get the required evidence, are forgotten; the UNAM became the victim and its public defense was its priority. Thus, the self-complacency with the measures listed in the quoted documents obscures the problems faced by many women (and a good number of men) regarding sexual harassment in UNAM on the one hand; and, on the other, the institutional responsibility for the ongoing existence of these practices which are, in so many ways, silenced.

5. Case 2

The other case examined here is that of a female student of Language and Literature who had established a sentimental relationship with one of her teachers. For several years, this teacher had used his position to seduce and initiate relationships with female undergraduates who he mistreated both physically and psychologically. This young woman made the decision to denounce the sexual harassment and other types of abuse she was suffering after she broke off the relationship, because the professor, to get back at her for the break-up, accused her of plagiarizing her thesis topic to prevent her from graduating. When we interviewed the student, she said that in order to discredit her, the teacher presented his accusation of plagiarism not only within the educational institution, but also through a letter he wrote to the Director of the institution where the student was working as an apprentice (servicio social). The oppression and despair that this situation caused to the student led her to accept the offer of psychological help from the official who received the letter.

The said therapy, together with the support she received from her mother, family, friends and a female teacher she had consulted—and who suggested the student to make the case public—, encouraged her to contact two female students who participated as representatives on the School Council, and whom she requested to aid her with the complaint about what had happened to her. From the student's point of view, the solidarity and the aid received helped her to transform the guilt and grief she had felt into indignation and anger, which gave her the strength to write the letter in which she specified the abuse she had suffered over a long period of time, the sexual harassment and other forms of violence that she was experiencing, along with the falseness of the accusation made against her regarding the plagiarism.^{viii} She read this letter at a School Council session. This was possible thanks to the two students who represented her within the Council and who pressured the Dean of the School, a woman who opposed such action arguing that this was a 'personal matter' and, as such, should not be heard by a body created to make important academic decisions. It is relevant to consider what Spelman (2007, p.126) states in regards to managing ignorance: People are rewarded or punished for what they know or do not know, want to know or do not want to know, and because of that they may well have an interest in the management of their own and others' ignorance. Management of such ignorance is both an individual and a social labor. At the Council meeting in which the student read her letter of complaint, in the moment when the story revealed the brutality with which the teacher had acted, the Dean intervened saying: 'That's enough!' That is to say, the official invoked the silence of a woman who, as in the case analyzed by Silva (2009, p. 90), was not requesting commiseration, but rather the recognition of the violence she had suffered:

I'll give you my story /give me your indignation. Indignation is an opposing feeling [...] to the ways in which someone is discredited through disdain and contempt; this is why it is a feeling with a moral coating which implies a certain idea of restitution and distributive justice (original emphasis). Because of the demand of the student's representatives and of some of the teaching staff, the Council agreed to suspend the teacher concerned on a temporary basis, while the case was investigated. However, the majority of the teaching staff felt that it was a personal matter and actually doubted the veracity of the story. Tuana (2006, p. 13) states that: In the arena of knowers there are epistemically disadvantaged identities [...] their testimony is discredited; their memories are questioned. In instances such as these, it is not simply facts, events, practices, or technologies, that are rendered not known, but individuals and groups who are rendered 'not knowers.' They are constructed as untrustworthy. After what had happened with the Council, both the students who supported the offended woman and the female teacher who had helped her insisted that the best way to protect herself and force the dismissal of the abusive teacher was to place the letter in the public dominion. Initially, the student sent her letter to the President of UNAM, to the President of the Gender Equity Commission (Comisión de Equidad de Género) of the University Council and to the Defender of University Rights, all of whom provided no answer to her letter; that is to say, they all decided to ignore what had happened to this woman and maintained their silence on the matter. The student also sought help regarding the law within UNAM. The lawyers who were appointed to her case treated her in such a way that made her feel guilty and actually attempted to convince her not to go public, or make a formal criminal complaint; basically, they recommended her to keep silence.

In the light of the behavior of the various institutional agents, there's no doubt that Spelman (2007, p. 120) is correct when she states: Ignorance [...] is at least sometimes an appalling achievement; managing to create and preserve it can take grotesquely prodigious effort. And where there are costs and benefits associated with what one knows or don't know, with what one wants to know or doesn't want to know, ignorance is likely to need management. Faced with a brick wall regarding her complaint, the student decided to circulate her letter via email among her contacts within UNAM. Thus several feminist student groups heard about the case and offered their support. Besides writing a public statement, which they uploaded to the social networks, these groups held several events to publicize the case and promote the complaint; among these events, there was a protest march which initiated in the School and ended outside the building housing the Rectoría.^{ix} The participants pasted posters with the complaint along with a photograph of the teacher in question on the walls; they marched through the busiest parts of the School with banners of repudiation, whilst alternately transmitting through loudspeakers the reading of the complaint and fragments of telephone calls in which the teacher insulted and threatened the student. From this point on, the student began to receive letters from other women who claimed to have been through the same kind of experience at the hands of this teacher and applauded her courage. One of the incidents had happened 20 years earlier.

During the interview, the student emphasized the doubts that were awoken amongst some of her peers and teaching staff who accused her of defaming the teacher; this, even though she had provided hard evidence: the recordings of the phone calls and emails in which the teacher offended, threatened, and tried to blame her for the way he had treated her. She also stated that there are still teachers who tell her they think her thesis topic was plagiarized and that some students still make fun of her. On recounting her story the student became markedly moved when speaking about the support she received and stated that: 'solidarity is a safety net. If one is going to fall, my circle (family, friends, the female teacher, feminist peers) is there supporting me.' She also underlined the importance of being believed. She recalled the fear and sadness she felt for such a long time. She celebrated the solidarity and the anger that helped her to register the complaint, adding that the dismissal of the teacher was due to the pressure exercised through the publicity surrounding her complaint as a result of the intense labor of the feminist student groups. She also smiled when expressing that today she feels free and strengthened by the experience.

6. Final Reflections

It is evident that organizations discourage the reporting of sexual harassment in a thousand different ways. The systematic silencing of sexual harassment leads to the appraisal of those few cases which are in fact denounced to be isolated/occasional incidents. Thus, the abuse is attributed solely to the perpetrator, making it appear that the act has nothing to do with the gender order which has been cultivated within the institution. With regards to the gender culture within organizations, Rhodes, Pullen, Vickers, Clegg & Pitsis (2010, p. 110) state that violence against women exists within a complex interplay between subjective/personal aggression and objective/organizational aggression which leads to important consequences concerning organizational ethics, and will oblige organizations to be sufficiently reflexive about their practices and thus commit themselves to an ongoing process of self-criticism, in the name of ethics, and not only to identify and incriminate individuals, but also to eradicate the conditions that sustain the acts perpetrated by them; those that allow, encourage and promote these violent relationships. Unfortunately, the violence—'soft' or hard—that women experience during their years at UNAM has not been the subject of institutional self-criticism. Sexual harassment is taboo within the University and it is common that the mere mention of the subject leads to animosity against the person who talks about it, who is then accused of undermining the prestige of the institution. Accordingly, 'the cultivation of ignorance' is used as a form of maintaining the waters calm and safeguarding the fiction of UNAM being a 'green island' isolated from what happens in any kind of organization.

The distance from the necessary self-criticism in this matter is evident in the prolonged lack of an obligated institutional diagnosis that exhibits the different types of gender violence which are part of the experience of the female students. Moreover, the data produced in several research projects of feminist academics interested in shedding light on the problem is ignored; this is quite clear when one considers that the institutional pronouncements never allude to the aforementioned data when speaking of equity between the sexes. Thus, the actions undertaken on this subject—which result from the pressure exerted by the feminist groups within UNAM and due to the interest in maintaining the public image of an advanced institution—originate far from the necessary knowledge of the reality which needs to be transformed. As to the handling of sexual harassment which is commonplace throughout the institutions of higher education, Dzeich & Weiner (1984, pp. 185-186) state: Sophisticated inquiry is what higher education does better than any other institution [...]. But forced to deal with sexual harassment, higher education has behaved as if it is incapable of sophisticated inquiry and must rely instead on second-grade approaches to determine what is knowable and believable. Confronted with cases of harassment, the same minds that move gracefully through dazzling theoretical issues revert to an eighteenth-century dunking–stool standard of truth. This lapse cannot be explained as inability to apply complex rationality to the housekeeping issues of higher education. The explanation, instead, is that the cultural patterns of society hold firmer sway than intellectual method, that sexism and stereotyping overcome sophisticated rationality.

Facing the 'cultivation of ignorance' we must insist on naming and bringing to light the violence which is used against women in many areas of our social life, as well as in the University. To this end, Giberti & Fernández (1992, p. 20) state: To name, nominate a discomfort is not exclusively a semantic act, nor a part of speech; the capacity to provide explicit existence, to publish, to make public, to state objectively, to make visible, to spell out, to theorize that which—not having been seen as an objective collective experience—continued in a state of individual, private experience as discomfort, expectation, anxiety, restlessness, frustration, represents a formidable social power.

Together with the need to name and make public the violence to which women are exposed within the institutions of higher education, the relevance, as is evident, that the act of solidarity takes on bringing these acts of sexual harassment out of the closet, should be underlined. Solidarity played a definitive role in helping the student accused of plagiarism by the teacher who was her former partner, by providing her the necessary emotional energy —‘A mood of excitement and enthusiasm generated in interaction rituals and successful strategic engagement, encourages further action’ (Jasper, 2011, p. 287)— to overcome the vulnerability, fear and the sadness to which she had succumbed at the hands of this person, along with several other obstacles which she faced to finally make her voice heard. Similarly, solidarity was crucial for the under aged student whom the teacher tried to convince to improve her grade in exchange for sexual favors. Her peers acknowledged her discomfort and disapproval to such a degree that they supported her and gave her the strength she needed to risk grabbing her exam from the hands of the teacher. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore that the intolerable violence with which this girl paid for the dismissal of the teacher is the result of the indifference with which the earlier complaints were treated, of their trivialization, and of the comfortable practice of making the aggrieved party responsible for providing the proof of the said acts.

Likewise, one cannot ignore the discouragement and emotional fatigue that women suffer due to the deaf ears in which these complaints fall, nor the silence which reigns over the cases of sexual harassment—aimed at sustaining the fiction that the University is ‘a green island.’ This makes many of these women believe that harassment is actually a personal problem which they must face alone. The letter written by the student, who decided to open her complaint to the public, actually proves the importance of removing the veil of concealment: Until just a few days ago, I still felt guilt for the violent way in which the teacher Arturo Noyola acted towards me; however, the knowledge that I am not the only student to have gone out with him and to have been mistreated by him, has helped me through the process of liberating myself from the weight I was carrying on my shoulders due to my belief that I was the one responsible for his cruel and relentless behavior. To conclude, we should emphasize the importance of breaking the resistances which impede within UNAM the recognition that sexual harassment is a daily practice within the confines of the institution—‘lack of a will to know [...] drains off the moral capital they are initially invested with in their depiction as comely innocents’ (Betensky, as cited in Spelman, 2007, p. 121). Eradication of sexual harassment requires an institutional commitment which should be evident through, among other things, the open recognition of: the existence of the problem; the power relations that shelter it; the negative impact that tolerance of and concealment of the problem over years have left in the formative activity with which the institution is committed; the fatigue, anxiety, shame, fear, guilt, and resignation experienced by the population that is the object of these acts due to the regime of silence and impunity that fosters them; and that the persistence of this problem belittles the institution and affects the community as a whole. Thus, breaking the silence on gender violence and all of its implications is an inevitable task at UNAM. Failure to break this silence will maintain the heavy veil of ignorance that hides the problem from the public eye and that enables the practice of this type of behavior.

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ⁱ See Alcott, 2007; Frye, 1983; Jungkunz and White, 2013; Logue, 2008; Mills, 1997 and 2007; Spelman, 2007; Tuana, 2004 and 2006.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdg06veaIJs> (Accessed: November 18, 2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=390723484335855&story_fbid=456377074437162 (Accessed: May 9, 2014).

^{iv} http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=4xQBdiykcCtI&lc=t8EAP4kGxM6EackjpKQ92WfbSYSnYanUAoW8rKOFKgw (Accessed: May 9, 2014).

^v Regarding the inadequate handling of these matters, which so often happens in these cases, it is noteworthy that the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) released a list of 55 colleges and universities under investigation for possible violations of Federal Law over the handling of sexual violence and complaints of harassment. Among them are: Harvard, Princeton, Chicago, Berkeley <<http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-list-higher-education-institutions-open-title-i>> (Accessed: June 2, 2014).

^{vi} <http://www.dgcs.unam.mx/cndh.pdf> (Accessed: November 21, 2013).

^{vii} http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/fuentes/documentos/Recomendaciones/2013/REC_2013_045.pdf (Accessed: November 18, 2013).

^{viii} <http://es.scribd.com/doc/59270233/Carta-Violencia-contra-alumna-FFyL-UNAM> (Accessed: May 11, 2015).

^{ix} <http://noestansolas.blogspot.mx/search?updated-max=2012-05-21T00:21:00-07:00&max-results=7> (Accessed: May 20, 2015).