

ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

**How to Achieve the Common Good: Analysis of  
Discrimination and Violence Based on Gender  
Relations as Experienced by Male/Female  
Students at Universidad Nacional de San Martín,  
Argentina**

*¿Cómo lograr el bien común? Un análisis sobre la discriminación y la violencia basada en las relaciones de género a partir de la experiencia de las/los estudiantes de la Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Argentina*

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**ABSTRACT** Since the establishment of the Program Against Gender Violence at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, in 2013, cases of symbolic violence –such as taunts, jokes, denigration and underestimation in corridors, classrooms and faculties– have been the most frequently reported by different members of the academic community. The purpose of this article is to describe and analyze, from a quantitative and qualitative approaches, the causes and effects of symbolic gender violence experienced by male and female students at Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Argentina.

We conclude that symbolic violence is a common type of violence because it is naturalized by various members of the university community. The majority of symbolic violence is inflicted by male students against female students. However, male professors and members of the non-academic staff also engage in symbolic violence and social media harassment acts involving abuse of power.

**KEYWORDS** Gender violence, University, students, symbolic violence.

**RESUMEN** Desde la creación del Programa contra la violencia de género de la Universidad Nacional de San Martín, en el año 2013, casos de violencia simbólica –como chistes, burlas, sarcasmos en pasillo, aulas y facultades –han sido denunciados por diferentes miembros de la comunidad académica. El objetivo de este artículo es describir y analizar, desde un abordaje cualitativo y cuantitativo, las causas y efectos de la violencia de género de tipo simbólica que viven las y los estudiantes de la Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Argentina.

Concluimos que la violencia simbólica es un tipo de violencia frecuente porque está naturalizada por los distintos actores de la comunidad universitaria. La mayoría de la violencia simbólica es infringida por los estudiantes varones contra las estudiantes mujeres. Sin embargo, los profesores varones y no docentes también practican violencias simbólicas y acoso a través de redes sociales, que se interseccionan con abusos de poder.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** Violencia de género, Universidad, estudiantes, violencia simbólica.

## Introduction

In 2009 the Argentine State enacted Law No. 26,485 on *Comprehensive Protection as a means of preventing, punishing and eradicating violence against women*. This law represents a victory of the local feminist and women's movement in its struggle for greater gender equality and better social coexistence. Four years after its enactment, the Universidad Nacional de San Martín<sup>1</sup> (UNSAM) decided to launch a research and education initiative to focus on and raise awareness of violence against women. The Program Against Gender Violence (Programa contra la Violencia de Género, henceforth referred to as PcVG) was created after a UNSAM student and her mother died in a double femicide in 2013 and it now stands as a paragon of the institutional commitment made by UNSAM to promote a violence-free environment and to ensure the wellbeing of the university community as a whole. PcVG intervenes in cases of gender discrimination and violence<sup>2</sup> that arise at the University, as well as in General San Martín County and its surrounding areas.

1. The Universidad Nacional de San Martín is located in General San Martín County, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. This county is bordered to the east by the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, capital city of Argentina. The Campus property encompasses 8.5 hectares.

2. Despite taking into account the definition of violence offered by this law, PcVG does not exclusively address violence against women. It includes all those bodies that do not conform to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and it understands sexual innuendo as a form of violence, too. Violence will exist as long as there is subordination, which may be subordination of women, but also of non-heterosexual men, heterosexual men who do not fit stereotypes of masculinity or men of color.

Since the establishment of the program in 2013, cases of symbolic violence, which are often accompanied by other forms of violence, have been the most frequently reported by different members of the academic community. In the light of this finding, we endeavor to describe and analyze the causes and effects of symbolic gender violence experienced by male and female UNSAM students. Quantitative and qualitative approaches will be used to meet these objectives. For analysis of symbolic violence in the university community, we rely on two sources: (1) the findings of a survey 'Diagnosis of Discrimination and Violence' conducted on UNSAM students from different academic units<sup>3</sup> to assess cases of gender discrimination and violence; (2) accounts anonymously given by members of the student community.

### **Methodology and theoretical perspective**

This article is based in a quantitative and qualitative approach. For the quantitative approach, we work with the results of the survey 'Diagnosis of Discrimination and Violence'<sup>4</sup>, conducted by UNSAM 2016. In this survey, 50% of male and female students heard sexist or discriminatory remarks about characteristics, behaviors or abilities based on gender or sexual orientation, and 11% of the respondents were disparaged or degraded on the same basis.

For the survey "Diagnosis of Discrimination and Violence", we drew a representative sample of the student population of those academic units that participated<sup>5</sup>. The polls were anonymous and an informed consent was given to each respondent. We asked about three main topics: experiences of gender violence in public and private spaces of interaction, gender violence in sexual or partner relationships (formal or informal) and gender violence in the university.

In relation to the profile of the respondents, they are students and assist to the Campus of the University. The 28% of the sample attends to first year, 28% to second, 26% to third and 18% to the fourth or fifth year. They are mostly young, 87% are between 18 and 30 years old. If we analyze the sample by gender, 53% of the respondents define themselves as women, 46% as men and 1% as female trans.

For the qualitative approach, we worked with accounts given by female young students that assist to Art courses who indicated to PcVG that they suffered symbolic violence from male professors.

3. The academic units surveyed were: Economics and Management, Science and Technology, Humanities, Politics and Government, Social Studies Institute of Higher Education, Transportation Institute, Mauricio Kagel Arts Institute.

4. The survey and article were funded by "Proyecto Puente" from the University of San Martín during 2016-2017 (Code Number 80020160400018SM).

5. The sample comprised approximately 1.5% of the total student population, which was estimated at 11,688 in 2013. This means that 171 cases were covered. Survey conducted for the PUENTE/ UNSAM project "Relations of Gender Discrimination and Violence at Universidad Nacional de San Martín.

Regarding our theoretical perspective about gender violence, we base our definition in the studies of Femenías and Aponte (2009). The authors understand gender-based violence as those acts or threats that take place in public or private spaces that make women feel unsafe or with fear and that do not allow them to have the same rights, developments and peace as men (Femenías and Aponte, 2009, p. 44)<sup>6</sup>.

In relation to the symbolic dimension of gender violence, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) defines violence against women to such forms of submission, invisible and appeased, that are socially naturalized because they have been internalized as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action. This idea is interconnected with Bourdieu's notion of habitus which means "a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action meant constituting the social agent in his true role as the practical operator of the construction of objects" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 26). According to Femenías and Aponte (2009), as we show in the article, symbolic violence imposes an order based on the assumption that it is immutable and unquestionable.

### **UNSAM reflects on violence**

The legitimate exercise of gender-based violence throughout history has been confined to the private sphere, but the private-public distinction has been and continues to be the subject of much debate. According to Brown (2009), who draws on Bobbio (1985), the private sphere is understood as a space of self-realization in the liberal tradition, whereas the republican tradition argues that self-fulfillment is inherent to the public sphere. From a liberal perspective, sexuality and violence belong to the private and intimate sphere. From the republican standpoint, however, these issues are settled in the public sphere by implementing sexual and, above all, demographic policies (Brown, 2009).

Based on this dichotomic interpretation, Brown explains that public law is concerned with laws, while private law is governed by the (private) contract formula. "Contracts regulate agreements between private parties, whereas laws regulate agreements enforceable by state coercion." (2009, p. 24). The marriage contract, for instance, which is an agreement between private individuals, provides a regulatory framework for intimate partner relationships and for the quality of those relations. Consequently, if considered from a liberal perspective, there should be no state intervention in practices that the state views as "intimate". This laid the foundation for the idea that the process of knowledge creation is neutral and institutions of higher

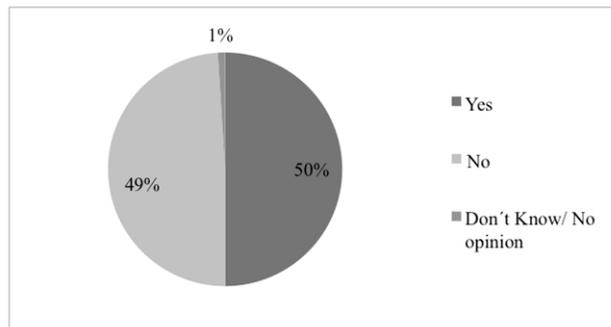
6. The definition of these authors is similar to the definition given by the Law 26,485 on *Comprehensive Protection as a means of preventing, punishing and eradicating violence against women*.

education should exclusively address academic and knowledge-related issues (Bourdieu, 2007). However, collected data showed that certain aspects of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity permeate both the process of knowledge creation and everyday social interactions in the university context (Connell, 1995; Massey, 1994). In this regard, Rafael Blanco asserts:

“at university we emerge as collective bodies: academic and student bodies, bodies of scientists and professors, and also political, partisan, union, disciplinary and collegial bodies. It is by drawing on corpora, knowledge, disciplines, fields and traditions that we teach, study and conduct research. Finally, as racialized, gendered and sexualized bodies, we transverse and constitute the breadth of university life through everyday relationships.” (2016, p. 3).

Situations of violence affect and interfere with the everyday life of individuals directly involved, those around them and the university community as a whole. For example, 49% of students reported that jokes and jibes about sexuality and gender are common in the university setting. (See Chart No. 1).

Chart No. 1: Are jokes, jibes or sarcastic remarks about gender (male, female, trans, etc.), sexual orientation and/or gender identity common in the university setting?



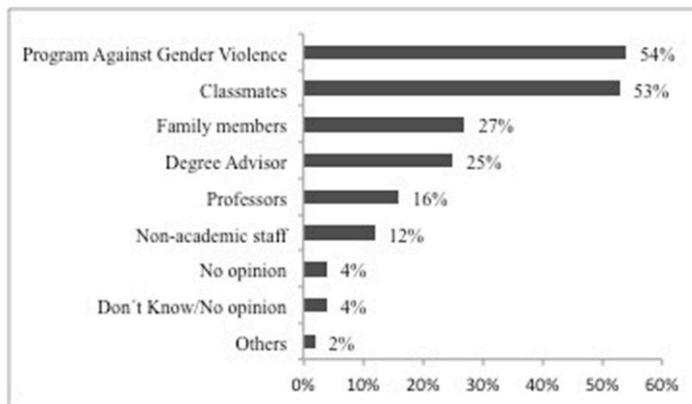
Self-made chart based on the survey “Diagnosis of Discrimination and Violence”, UNSAM, 2016

Through training and graduate courses, as well as awareness campaigns, PcVG promotes general well-being and combats gender-based and other forms of violence. This was recognized by the student population. According to the survey results, 45% of female and male students are aware of its presence and involvement. Despite the fact that further work is required to strengthen its institutional positioning (understood as increased awareness by all members of the university community) the survey showed that the performance of PcVG, as a center of assistance in situations of violence based on sexual orientation and gender, is highly acclaimed by female and male

students. When asked to whom they would turn for help or advice in situations of gender-based discrimination, harassment or abuse at university, among the different options, for students could select more than one, PcVG was favored by 54% of the respondents. This was followed by friends and people to whom they were emotionally close, which placed second, and family, which placed third (See Chart No. 2).

These findings suggest that: (1) in just three short years, PcVG has established itself as an integral part of UNSAM, effectively addressing reports and offering support to community members; (2) although the Program needs to become more visible, students do recognize its involvement and consider it to be a space where they can share concerns and voice complaints about abuse and harassment based on gender and sexual orientation. In fact, they choose it over people with whom they have close emotional ties, such as friends and family. The creation of PcVG and its status in the student community indicate that sexuality is no longer seen as a private affair. Instead, it has become part of the collective imaginary of UNSAM that university life is shaped by everyday interactions between racialized, sexualized and gendered individuals (Blanco, 2016). In other words, there has been a shift away from the private-public dichotomy as defined by liberal theory.

Chart No. 2: In case of gender-based discrimination/harassment/abuse at University, who would you turn or have you turned to for advice or help?



Self-made chart based on the survey “Diagnosis of Discrimination and Violence”, UNSAM, 2016

In our opinion, another factor that strengthened the position of PcVG as a representative was the adoption of administrative and institutional procedures for responding to incidents of gender-based violence and sexual orientation discrimination.

In addition to establishing help and prevention lines, the University developed and approved the “UNSAM Protocol for Cases of Gender-Based Violence and/or Discrimination”<sup>7</sup>.

As a result, the issue has become more visible and there is greater awareness among students of the assistance offered in situations of violence. These measures are consistent with legal feminism, which views legal instruments and the law as the first steps toward gender equality (Costa, 2016).

The Universidad Nacional de San Martín was the fourth university in Argentina to adopt a protocol, preceded by the Universidad Nacional del Comahue (2014), the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (2015) and the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (2015)<sup>8</sup>. Since 2014, an increasing number of universities have implemented institutional systems to combat gender violence. However, these universities represent a small proportion of the total national universities<sup>9</sup>, amounting to only 15%. This number suggests that institutions are still reluctant to reconceive themselves as complex and entities, with multiple relationships and dimensions interwoven into the fabric of university life, transcending the strictly academic.

The proposals submitted so far are based on the premise that pursuing the “common good” is a primary objective for educational institutions. To reject the idea that gender violence interferes with university life is to purposefully ignore a problem that concerns not only women or those who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity, but also society as a whole. An example of institutions furthering the cause—this time across the ocean—was the sentence passed by the High Court of Justice of Andalucía, Spain. It was concluded therein that “gender violence offences affect public safety, in the sense that said offences represent a serious threat to or attack on a fundamental interest of society, that of protecting the dignity as well as the physical and moral integrity of its members (...)” (eldiario.es, 12 de enero de 2017).

7. UNSAM Resolution of the High Council No. 230/15. It is worth mentioning that this document is the revised version of “*Protocols for Cases of Violence Based on Gender Identity and/or Sexual Orientation*,” approved by the Deans (Ruling 41/15) in the Faculty of Humanities in March 2015. This was a major source, serving as a precedent for the Protocol, which was then ratified by the High Council and is now valid for all academic units.

8. They were followed by the Universidad de Buenos Aires (2015), the Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (2016), the Universidad Nacional de Misiones (2016), the Universidad Nacional de José C. Paz (2016) and the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes (2016). Protocols were also adopted by the following faculties: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Universidad Nacional de Patagonia San Juan Bosco (Comodoro Rivadavia, Province of Chubut); Faculties of Humanities, of Law, of Political Science and International Relations of the Universidad Nacional de Rosario (Rosario, Province of Santa Fe); Faculty of Social Work of the Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos (Paraná); Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Universidad Nacional de Misiones (2016). Many others are in the process of developing a protocol.

9. Total number: There are presently 55 national universities across Argentina.

This sentence emphasizes two aspects: (1) that this type of offence affects the fundamental rights of individuals; (2) that the state is responsible for protecting the right to live a life free of violence. The same should apply to institutions of higher education, which should address the issue of gender violence in order to protect the rights of students, professors and non-academic staff.

### **The Experience of Female and Male Students at University**

Why do we focus on symbolic violence? We believe that there is an interrelation between different types of violence. For instance, psychological violence<sup>10</sup> has symbolic bases and physical effects on people. This article, however, will center on the analysis of symbolic violence, since reports and survey results showed it as the most frequent type of violence.

In accordance with Law No. 26.485, we define symbolic violence as “violence which uses stereotyped patterns, messages, values, images or signs to transmit and perpetuate domination, inequality or discrimination in social relations, and legitimizes the subordination of women in society”<sup>11</sup>. Recurring instances of symbolic violence are, in our view, the result of such violence being the most naturalized and socially legitimized. In fact, Femenías and Aponte (2009) maintain that symbolic violence has a legitimizing role in violence by allowing the latter to be perceived as normal. According to the author, symbolic violence imposes an order based on the assumption that it is immutable and unquestionable—an order based on the ethics, morals and customs of a given society. Despite its internalization, we consider that psychological and symbolic violence are, though subtler, no less effective in subjecting the victim.

When students were asked about various forms of violence based on gender or sexual orientation, symbolic violence yielded the highest rate of experiences, namely, shouts, taunts, remarks and disparagement. With reference to the question, “Have you heard sexist (or discriminatory) comments on the characteristics, behaviors or abilities of women, men or trans at university?” 50% of respondents answered in the affirmative. Similarly, female and male respondents had been disparaged, mocked or belittled based on gender or sexual orientation in 11% of the cases.

10. We understand psychological violence as that which causes emotional harm and affects self-esteem or harms and disrupts the full personal development of women or aims to humiliate or control them; it includes verbal coercion.

11. We include here people who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity, as explained in the Introduction.

12. Physical violence is understood here as violence used against the body of a woman causing pain or injury or entailing the risk of causing either; it includes any form of mistreatment or aggression affecting her physical integrity. Sexual violence refers to any action involving any form of violation, with or without genital access, of the right of women to decide voluntarily about their sexual and reproductive lives.

With regard to physical and sexual violence<sup>12</sup>, these were identified in the findings, but students had experienced them at significant lower rates. Although the survey did not reveal cases of sexual violence with penetration, it did indicate that 4% of students had experienced sexual and physical violence not involving penetration, which is to say that they (females/males) had been seized and kissed without their consent.

As regards the status of those who committed symbolic violence against female/male students, perpetrators are members of the University community in various capacities: as students, professors and non-academic staff. Although non-academic staff (administrative and maintenance staffs) work outside the classroom setting, they perpetrate symbolic violence based on gender or sexual orientation, such as making flirtatious or sexist remarks to female students.

With reference to sexist or discriminatory comments on the characteristics, behaviors or abilities of women, men or trans, 54% were made by students, 6% by professors and 2% by non-academic staff. Similarly, there were instances in which these comments were made by both professors and students (26%), by students and non-academic staff (8%), and by students, professors and non-academic staff (4%).

Various members of the UNSAM community also engaged in taunts, shouts, jokes and disparaging remarks: 61% of the perpetrators were identified as students, 6% as professors and 17% as non-academic staff. In addition to this, students who experienced this type of violence claim that they were perpetrated by students and professors in 10%, by professors and non-academic staff in 6% of the cases.

Although this type of violence is predominantly perpetrated by peers, it is important to note that the impact of violence varies depending on the perpetrator. The accounts given to PcVG by female students show that in Art courses some male professors frequently adopt teaching strategies that involve making sexist remarks to female students. In one instance, a male professor asked a female student to “be sluttier” so as to portray a character in a certain way, though the scene in the script contained no sexual elements. This situation is marked by abuse of power with sexual connotations, since the professor coerced the student by asserting his position as the one who has the expertise to teach the appropriate acting technique and the power to pass or fail her. If she had not complied with his instructions, her academic performance would have been judged unsatisfactory. Additionally, these forms of symbolic violence are concealed and supported by other students because it is assumed that the professor is the expert and the authority figure in the classroom setting.

According to the findings, face-to-face physical and sexual violence not involving penetration, such as kissing or touching a peer without her/his consent, were exclusively perpetrated by students (peer-to-peer violence). Nevertheless, the survey revealed that both professors and non-academic staff, along with members of the student body, have harassed students through social media and digital channels. When

asked, “From whom have you received phone calls, emails or messages/comments on social media about your private life?” 67% of the respondents said “from students”, 13% answered “from professors” and 20% “from non-professional staff”. These forms of communication, though mediated by technology, affect the academic performance and self-esteem of students.

As regards the gender of perpetrators, symbolic violence based on gender identity was most frequently perpetrated by men. Women were disparaged, mocked and belittled by men in 67% of the cases, by both men and women in 28% of the cases, and only by women in 5% of the cases. Likewise, 22% of male respondents experienced symbolic violence by becoming the target of disparagement, mockery and belittlement. This form of violence against male individuals was perpetrated by other men in 6% of the cases and by both men and women in 16% of the cases. Although literature on the subject shows that the ones more frequently abusing power at universities are men (Valls, Flecha, Melgar, 2008; Aguilar, Alonso, Melgar y Molina, 2009), the fact that some women in positions of power also perpetrate symbolic violence, as the survey results revealed, is equally worthy of notice.

With respect to sexist or discriminatory comments on gender, sexual orientation or gender identity in the UNSAM community, male respondents were the ones who most frequently made them (42%) and female respondents, the ones who most frequently received them (56%). The survey results also revealed an instance of violence based on gender identity in which a male individual made sexist and discriminatory comments to a trans respondent. Nevertheless, a high percentage of men, though lower than that of women, experienced this form of violence, too. Such acts of violence against men were perpetrated by other men in 20% of the cases and by both men and women in 22% of the cases.

For its part, the type of physical and sexual violence that involves kissing a peer without his/her consent was perpetrated by men against women in 71% of the cases and by women against men in 14% of the cases. In other words, despite the fact that the minority of perpetrators are female individuals and the majority are male, women do, in fact, perpetrate violence (Osborne, 2008).

In conclusion, symbolic violence is a common type of violence, naturalized by various members of the university community—more so than other types, such as physical or sexual violence. It is our understanding that shouts, insults and other forms of disparagement are ways to discipline those who do not conform to compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) or do not fit stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Rubin, 1986).

Symbolic violence, as a specific type of violence, is primarily perpetrated by members of the student body against other members of the student body. The majority of symbolic violence against female students is inflicted by male students. However,

male professors and members of the non-academic staff also engage in symbolic violence and social media harassment, acts involving abuse of power. Finally, women also perpetrate symbolic violence, though less frequently than men do.

### **Final Reflections: Addressing Gender Violence at University**

According to the survey results, the creation and implementation of a Program that assists and supports victims of gender-based discrimination and/or violence has been crucial, seeing as 54% of the student body supported this institutional policy.

As previously explained, national universities are increasingly developing various initiatives to address gender-based discrimination and/or violence, many of which are coordinated by offices of University Extension or Student Welfare. At Universidad Nacional de San Martín, PcVG reports directly to the Rector's Office for two reasons: (1) because the decision to create PcVG—after the double femicide of a student and her mother—was made by the Rector, who considered that UNSAM should join other institutions in preventing and eradicating violence; (2) because his supervision provides a cross-disciplinary framework for gender policies.

The previous section showed that symbolic violence is the predominant type of violence at University, which commonly occurs in the form of taunts, jokes, denigration and underestimation in corridors, classrooms and faculties. As Femenías (2009) states, symbolic violence legitimizes an order based on intra-faculty gender differences and hierarchical gender relations. Studies conclude that this kind of attitude can only be changed by educating about gender equality. It is crucially important to promote awareness of how sexual difference becomes hierarchical and unequal, and is thus structural. Intra- and inter-faculty coexistence represents a significant challenge, if universities are to become inclusive and more democratic.

In order to achieve the common good, eradicating gender violence in all its forms is a high priority. Our purpose is to promote respect and mutual appreciation among genders by establishing rules of coexistence. The strategies developed so far, such as protocols and attention-awareness initiatives, are safety measures that should accompany a continued institutional commitment to further raise awareness.

In conclusion, if gender violence is to be addressed and/or prevented by public institutions, a comprehensive approach should be favored over punitive and stigmatizing approaches. This is an invitation to the university community to question the very foundations of gender violence paradigms and to participate in the debate about strategies aimed at promoting the wellbeing of the university community by preventing violence and transforming relationships.

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