Perspectives and Discourses on Sexual Harassment in International Higher Education Contexts

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The Project

• Colleagues from universities in nine countries explore prevalence, manifestations and effects of sexual harassment in international higher education contexts and inquire structural implications such as favorable and prohibitive circumstances:

• Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica
• Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
• Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú
• Universidad Nacional de Colombia
• Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales, Ecuador
• Seoul National University, South Korea
• Chung-Ang University, South Korea
• Tokyo University, Japan
• Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India
• Philipps Universität Marburg, Germany
• Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
Facts and Debates I: A global phenomenon

Current Debates

- Higher visibility of the topic in the media after e.g. #niunamenos (not one less; Latin America), #aufschrei (outcry; Germany) and #metoo (US and other) → social debate

- As widespread at universities as in any other societal context, however: different levels of attention for the subjects in higher education subjects → although higher education context with its structural conditions (hierarchies, relations of dependance) is especially suited for the problem

- Normalization and Naturalization
Facts and Debates II: The German Context

Definitions and Discussion
- Definitions vary according to the societal context
- "Sexualized discrimination and violence" is used in university context: (problematic: very broad term)
- Little visibility for the topic in higher education context → mostly addressed in the context of gender equality, hardly any academic debate on the topic

Legal Basis
- General Equal Treatment Act (AGG): workplace regulation
- Legal basis only recently changed → sexual harassment is now a criminal offense
- Problematic framing of the recent change: racist appropriation of the subject after "Cologne events"
Survey Results and Contextualization

Impressions from Freie Universität Berlin

• Survey among students at Freie Universität Berlin in winter semester 2017/18 → 1156 completed questionnaires
• Executed at departments of biology/chemistry/pharmacy, political and social sciences and at associated central institutes
• Questionnaire from Costa Rica used and "culturally“ adapted for FUB context
• Students from all courses of study at the departments were asked to report own experiences and observations concerning sexual harassment
• Access to the courses/teaching staff via deanery and department administration

• Teaching staff reacted very differently – some very supportive, some very restrained → influence on the survey setting
• Some highly emotional reactions
First Findings from the project: similarities

- Overall relatively low complaint rates and even lower conviction rates in terms of formal action taken by the universities
- Widespread verbal harassment at all participating universities → organizational culture at universities does not hinder harassers
- „Climate“ of sexual harassment that is quite normalized („joke, no relevance“), but it shows also that a lot of the persons that have been harassed felt "uncomfortable“ („disapproved“, „didn‘t say anything, but felt deranged“, „didn‘t say anything, but felt insecure“)
- Verbal harassment mostly from peers, but not at all limited to this group
- Even less or no awareness for harassment of trans* persons
- Universities as „enlightened“ organizations → intellectual work, no more bodily issues
- Problem: what does „at university“ mean? → spatial limitations to university grounds makes no sense, especially in view of increasing online/virtual harassment
First Findings from the project: differences

• „Formal action“ (administrative/legal procedures) differs a lot according to the national contexts
• South Korea: „advanced“ forms of online/virtual harassment
• Not in all countries harassment of trans* persons can be addressed, in others it is more difficult to address harassment of homosexual persons
• University/Campus settings differ a lot and bring along various problems
Open Section Answers (FUB+UMR)

Why no complaint?

- It was a joke
- It was ok
- This is how men are
- Being an emancipated woman I can handle it by myself
- It's a structural problem with no solution on the individual level
- It's just normal
- Not bad enough to be reported
- What could anybody do?
- It was not dangerous
- It was not that bad

Comments on the survey:

- Verbal sexual harassment is omnipresent
- Survey questions are hysterical
- We need questions about feminists attacking male students
- When I talk about sexualized content why should I bother? Who doesn't want to listen should turn around and walk off
- I think people now become afraid to talk about sex
- It was not that bad
- This is how men are
- Being an emancipated woman I can handle it by myself
- It's a structural problem with no solution on the individual level
- It was ok
- It was a joke
- Not bad enough to be reported
- What could anybody do?
- It was not dangerous
Theoretical Framework

• Extended understanding of violence
  1. Not only reduced to direct physical and verbal forms of violence => Structural violence (Limitation of the possibility of realization)
  2. structural and personal level of violence are interwoven (Galtung)
  3. Cultural violence: legitimizes personal and structural violence (Galtung) => Normalization (organizational culture)

• Violence as social relation (of power and domination)
  ➔ Vulnerability as embedded in relations of power and domination: economic, reproductive, political and social insecurity is produced and maintained by relations of power and domination (Sauer)
  ➔ Institutionalized violence: violence = embed in organizations and political, social order
  ➔ Liberal dualism of public-private = maintains and produces gender relations

• Gender & violence: instrumentalization by conservative and fare right parties & social discours marked by racialization and individualisation of sexualized violence

• Intersectionality
Challenges & To Dos

1) Research design

- How to address cases of physical violence?
- How to include people’s perceptions of themselves and of sexual harassment (also offenders participate in the survey!)?
- How to make the survey more comprehensible and clear?
- Context sensitivity vs. comparability
- How to include and specify on homophobic and trans*/inter*phobic (sexual) harassment and violence in the survey?
- Interviews, focus group interviews, etc.
- In order to understand more about the climate concerning sexual harassment, there should be a survey among other university members (staff, professors …)

2) Linking research and equality policies

- Raising sensitivity on campus
- Campaigning for more visibility of existing support structures
Thank you for your attention.

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Literature


