

UniswithHeart: student networks leading the struggle for universities free of sexual violence

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ABSTRACT

Scientific literature has already shown the importance of solidarity networks and of protecting both direct victims and those who protect survivors of gender-based violence, who, if this protection is not achieved also for them, may become victims of Isolating Gender Violence (IGV). The concept of IGV raises awareness of the need to protect not only survivors but also those who actively support them -and may become victims because of that- to contribute to ending sexual harassment. Within this context and aligned with the EU-funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie research project -mainly conducted at UC Berkeley-, “UniswithHeart” (aim at studying social movements struggle to contribute to the creation of networks of support in academia, inquiring on social actors engaged and resistances faced), this paper aims at shedding light on how IGV operates, the negative consequences it has for survivors’ supporters, and how it prevents victims from feeling confident to speak up. In other words, this paper raises the need to protect survivors’ protectors, focusing on how to prevent Isolating Gender Violence. The project covers formal and informal mechanisms and discusses how North American higher education institutions have handled sexual harassment cases and complaints. After fieldwork with ten case studies and more than 70 interviews, the journal presents the model of the CARE Centers, studied within the University of California system, with emphasis on the UC Berkeley. These centers - which began as informal centers and later became recognized as formal by the university - have proven to inspire confidence among survivors, offering them protection and support. Our findings are twofold. On the one hand, they suggest that mechanisms of prevention and action need to include not only the protection of direct survivors but also those who dare to protect them. On the other hand, solidarity networks have been shown to be key to both supporting survivors and putting pressure on achieving institutional change. We conclude that to protect survivors successfully and have zero tolerance for gender-based violence within higher education, tackling the connection between solidarity networks and isolating gender violence becomes crucial for survivors to break their silence and keep forward, continuing their personal and professional paths.

Keywords: sexual harassment, sexual violence, harassment in academia, networks of support