Student Experiences of Sexual Violence as Targets and Bystanders—a Qualitative Investigation in a Public University in Guatemala

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Abstract

Bystander behaviour in sexual violence has been investigated widely in the Global North, and especially in the US context. However, there has been a call for qualitative approaches to increase understanding of sexual violence and bystander behaviour in a wider range of countries. In the present study, we conducted focus group research to investigate sexual violence in the only public university in Guatemala, Central America. In total, 18 students (5 men) participated in one of six online focus group sessions. We employed an inductive thematic analysis, and constructed four main themes: Forms, dynamics, and consequences violence to the targets and the bystanders; Barriers to bystander action; Facilitators to bystander action; and Past bystander intervention actions. We discuss the results with a reference to the context in Guatemala, and suggest intervention approaches based for the future.

Keywords Bystanders · Sexual violence · University · Focus group · Guatemala

Introduction

Sexual violence in universities is a global problem (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Klein & Martin, 2021; Ranganathan et al., 2021) with severe adverse academic and mental health consequences to the victims (Bastiani et al., 2019; Bilal et al., 2022; McClain et al., 2021; Molstad et al., 2021; Sheldon et al., 2021). To tackle sexual violence in university campuses, many institutions have employed the active bystander

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approach, teaching observers to intervene safely before, during, and after the event takes place (Evans et al., 2019; Fenton et al., 2016; Kettrey & Marx, 2019; Labhardt et al., 2017; Mujal et al., 2021). These workshops attempt to teach the participants to overcome some of the barriers to intervention (e.g., noticing the event, identifying it as high risk, taking personal responsibility for intervening, and having the skills to act, and overcoming audience inhibition; Burn, 2009). However, most investigations and interventions in this area have been conducted with limited samples mainly from the United States (Labhardt et al., 2017). Because barriers and facilitators to bystander behaviour have complex relationships with individual and contextual variables (Banyard, 2011; Banyard et al., 2021), it is crucial to widen our understanding more globally before developing interventions (see Bloom et al., 2024). What works in the university setting in the USA may not be transferable to other countries or cultures. Although the topic has received a fair amount of research attention, the studies can be critiqued for using mainly quantitative methods (which means that important details could be left out), as well as utilising participants from mainly USA (which means that important contextual and cultural factors are ignored; Labhardt et al., 2017).

In this research, our focus of interest is bystander experiences in sexual violence in Guatemala, a lower middle-income post-war country in Central America. Guatemala has high levels of gender inequality (Romero, 2021), ranking 122 out of 155 countries (World Economic Forum, 2021). Gender inequality is visible in fewer opportunities for girls and women in the educational sector (Tarallo, 2019), as well as sexual harassment in public transport (Morales Vargas, 2021), public places (Gutiérrez Solares & Mejía Gonzalez, 2016), and universities (Véliz & Valenzuela, 2020). Increasing the understanding of bystander involvement in the university context in Guatemala has the potential to contribute to gender equality, which also is one of the priorities for the United Nations development goals (United Nations, n.d).

The context of Guatemala could present unique bystander barriers and facilitators for several reasons. For instance, in war and post-war settings, gendered violence is often silenced and invisible, leaving the perpetrators unpunished (Torres Falcón, 2015). Because of the violent history that continues into the present, being an active bystander in the Guatemalan context could cost one's life. Thus, a fear of danger is a potentially substantial barrier in this context. Also, Guatemalans are both collectivist (i.e., prioritise the group over individuals), but have also high levels of independent self-construals (i.e., the tendency of individuals to define themselves through their unique characteristics; Krys et al., 2022).This could influence bystander behaviour in several ways. Collectivism could support bystander action when social norms are against gender violence, but prevent it when social norms do not condemn violence. In addition, independent self-construals could relate to higher propensity to help, as this has been linked to support of gender equality and justice for the oppressed (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Bystander behaviour is affected by a complex interplay between factors at different levels, from individuals to peer and family, community, and the whole society (McMahon, 2015). Guatemala could be very different to countries in the Global North due to its historical, political, and cultural context.

There has been much focus on quantitative methods when investigating bystander barriers (e.g., Labhardt et al., 2017), which could mask the uniqueness of each con-

text (Labhardt et al., 2024). The barriers have often been analysed using the five-stage model by Burn (2009), where bystanders fail to help due to various reasons (e.g., not noticing the event or understanding the risks, failing to take responsibility, lacking skills, and succumbing to audience inhibition). In a previous quantitative study in Guatemala, flawed myths around rape (e.g., blaming the victim and excusing the perpetrator) related to many of these five barriers (Lyons et al., 2022b, 2023). However, this study used an etic approach with questionnaires that were attempting to confirm Western models in non-Western context. This kind of approach is somewhat under criticism, with calls for developing emic studies to understand phenomena that can be culturally diverse (e.g., Lyons et al., 2023; Thalmayer et al., 2022).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of bystander behaviour in a new context, it is beneficial to utilise a qualitative approach (Labhardt et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2022). Because bystander facilitators and barriers are likely to vary significantly in different social and cultural contexts, an emic, bottom-up approach could be the best way to start the investigations in a new country (Lyons et al., 2022a).

Our target of investigation is the only public University in Guatemala, Universidad San Carlos de Guatemala (USAC). The University has gone through turbulent times with accusations of fraud in the leadership elections in 2022 (Rodríguez, 2023), resulting in demonstrations, strikes, and organised aggressions towards students (Pérez et al., 2024). Sexual violence in USAC is a worrying problem, but there currently are no official routes to report it anonymously (de Saénz & Buitrago Novoa, 2019). The context of elevated violence and lack of support from university administration is likely to influence bystander behaviour in this context. The aim of the present study is to explore students' experiences of sexual violence in University campuses in Guatemala- both from the perspectives of bystanders, and as targets of violence.

Method

Participants and Recruitment

In order to gain a better understanding of bystander involvement in sexual violence in university campuses, we utilised a qualitative online focus group approach. In total, three interviewers/facilitators (ND, NC, and LR) recruited students from five different university campuses of the only public university of the country. The recruitment was achieved via contacts with the academic directors/coordinators who distributed the study advert with contact details of the researchers to students. Those who were interested in participating contacted the researchers to arrange a time for participating in an online session.

Although we tried to match the participants for gender, this was not always possible due to difficulties in recruitment (University was going through some difficulties with student strikes and demonstrations at the time of the interview; Blanco, 2019). Participants knew that they will be in groups that could consist of any gender/gender identities, and that the other participants will be students from their own university. In total, there were 6 online sessions with students from five different

University centres in diverse regions of the country (Focus group 1 = two men; Focus group 2 = four women; Focus group 3 = two women, one man; Focus group 4 = two women, one man; Focus group 5 = two women; Focus group 6 = three women, one man). Altogether, 18 students (13 women, 5 men) participated in one of the six sessions. The study was granted ethical approval by the ethics committee of Liverpool John Moores University (ref: **22/PSY/017).**

Materials and Procedure

The focus groups followed a semi-structured interview schedule, where the facilitators had a list of topics/questions, but also an opportunity to follow up comments with additional questions. The language of the interviews was Spanish. The transcripts were translated into English by ML (fluent in Spanish), and checked over by the Guatemalan team members (ND, NC, LR), all fluent in English. The focus groups were recorded on zoom, and the recordings were deleted after the sessions were transcribed on a word document. Any identifying information (i.e., names) were deleted from the transcriptions. The participants received a link to the Participant Information Sheet 15 min prior to the session, and gave consent by writing their names on the online consent form. The facilitators welcomed the participants, did an ice-breaker activity, and started the sessions by asking what the participants definition of sexual violence was. The questions were loosely around experiences as a bystander in sexual violence in university.

Data Analysis

At the point of transcription, participants were allocated a code (e.g., Participant 1 from Focus group 1 is P1FG1, etc.). We analysed the data utilising an inductive reflexive thematic approach (e.g., Clarke & Braun, 2021). The researchers familiarised themselves with the focus group content by first listening and re-listening the recordings (NC), and after transcriptions, reading and re-reading the transcripts (NC and ML). After the familiarisation, ML devised a coding system that was discussed with the rest of the group, and that went through several revisions during the coding process (where similar codes were amalgamated and new codes were created). Simultaneously with the initial coding, NC and ML started organising the codes into broader themes with several subthemes. After the final coding was agreed, ML went through the transcripts and coded all the data.

Results

We constructed the following four themes with several sub-themes from the transcripts: Theme 1: Forms, dynamics, and consequences of violence to the targets and the bystanders; Theme 2. Barriers to bystander action (subthemes: Fear of repercussions; Lack of university support; Nothing changes; Culture of silence and acceptance; Doesn't know what to do); Theme 3: Facilitators to bystander action (subthemes: Collective action; Presence of procedures and support groups; Increasing knowledge

and visibility of violence; Personal obligation); Theme 4: Past bystander intervention actions.

Theme 1: Forms, Dynamics, and Consequences Violence to the Targets and the Bystanders

We constructed the first theme as a broader description of the forms, dynamics, and consequences of campus violence experienced by the participants either as witnesses, or as targets. The first theme is important in giving a context to the subsequent themes that are more specifically constructed around understanding bystander behaviour. In this theme, the students discussed various inappropriate behaviours perpetrated by the lecturers, the dynamics of the violence, and the consequences of it.

Many participants described campus abuse as something that was perpetrated by staff members, more specifically, the teaching staff. The inappropriate behaviour from (mainly male) staff members towards (mainly female) students took many forms, from looks and comments to touching and attempts to exchange sex for marks. A participant (P1FG1) had observed that…"*Manipulation by professors is seen a lot in daily life. They play with words to make the student think that if they do not do what he would like, their marks will be affected in the class that they take with the professor*". As well as being witnesses to inappropriate behaviour in the form of blackmailing and bribery, participants disclosed having experienced this in their own lives. When a student had a question or needed help in their studies, some of the lecturers saw it as an opportunity for sexual exploitation. According to one female participant (P3FG 3), *" I have had lecturers who…when you approach them… they see it as a way to take advantage and tell you "oh, I'm going to summon you to my office and we can see there*." The comments demonstrated how the male lectures used their position of power in an attempt to exploit their students.

Indeed, the lecturers' blackmailing targets were often students who already were in a vulnerable position. For example, students from poorer families, indigenous backgrounds, and those who struggled academically were at risk of predatory lecturers. In the words of P2FG6, "…*there are teachers who sometimes take advantage of the fact that a student is doing poorly in a course and begin this(sexual) harassment towards the student so that they can pass a course. Many times, students, due to the pressure of passing the course, agree to the teachers' insinuations.*" This indicates that the lecturers are aware of vulnerabilities of students, and use this as a tool in harassment.

A common form of harassment was inappropriate comments or questions. These comments could be sexist remarks of the students' appearance, or questions about whether they had a boyfriend. For example, one participant explained how "…*suddenly they make comments or start asking personal questions…such as "oh, are you single or do you have a boyfriend?", and these things*." (P2FG3). The outcome of comments like these was that they made the students feel uncomfortable and powerless "…*and they are really uncomfortable situations especially due to the fact that we are in a class where it is supposed to be an environment where we should feel safe and so on. And that is not the case unfortunately…*" (P2FG3). Sometimes, the students were left with the feeling that the lecturer had sexual intentions towards them, based on intuition and very subtle nonverbal cues. For instance, one student recalled

a time when she was "*... in a class where a lecturer touched me, not my private parts, right, but it was like... I think a woman knows when a man touches her or looks at her differently. It's like another sense... And it was in front of everyone, in front of the entire class*" (P2FG5). One participant disclosed how they and other female students were harassed by an older professor. Other students made fun of the situation due to the age of the professor, which was highly embarrassing for the targets " *... truth is there was no intervention on the part of other students because they laughed when the doctor made comments...saying that... it was a bit funny...and the situation becomes quite uncomfortable and we don't know how to stop it*" (P3FG5). Comments like these demonstrate how violence from the lecturers was often masked as a joke, where the target and the bystanders were left embarrassed and unsure of how to react.

As well as feeling emotionally exhausted and powerless, the harassment by the professors can have severe academic consequences. Many mentioned how bystanders and targets of harassment"*... have lost courses for not following the lecturers little games...they are lecturers who are protected by the management...*"(P5FG2). This was echoed by P1FG2, who highlighted how the lecturers could "*...put a lot of obstacles in the assignments or exams*" for those who complain about harassment. This suggests that the lecturers are often successful in their exploitations because they hold a a position of power and can retaliate towards dissenting voices.

Theme 2: Barriers to Bystander Action (Subthemes: Fear of Repercussions; Lack of University Support/Nothing Changes; Culture of Silence and Acceptance; Doesn't Know What to do)

There were several topics that the participants discussed that were barriers to acting as a bystander. These barriers were around fears of negative repercussions, lack of support from others and the university, the feeling that intervention is pointless because nothing will change, lack of knowledge on what to do, and a culture of silence and acceptance that makes intervention difficult.

Fear of repercussions were mentioned often as a barrier to intervention. The repercussions that were mentioned were social, physical, or academic. The participants talked about multiple fears around retaliation from the perpetrator, sometimes linking this to having their studies jeopardised as a result. For example, one participant mentioned how those who report sexual violence, or make it visible always risk "*... retaliation that could occur from the aggressor*" (P1FG1). Another student talked about how "*...often, there is retaliation... it is something that everyone fears and that is why they do not get involved...*" (P5FG5). The fear of negative repercussions in academic studies was also reflected in comments where the participants talked about how the hierarchical position made intervention difficult "*...as women we feel helpless...and sometimes we feel tied by our hands and feet for not being able to intervene. Many cases of harassment occur in situations of hierarchy, and it is very difficult to intervene in these cases*" (P2FG6). The fear of repercussions relating to hierarchical power was a significant barrier across the participants.

There was also a fear of physical risk. For instance, if the bystander does not know the perpetrator, they may not know about the potential for escalation of the situation, leading to physical danger. P2FG4 mentioned that if "*...you don't know*

who the person is, you don't know how dangerous the person can be. And many times one thinks of putting one's own life at risk as well". There were also apparent social risks involved in bystander intervention. Students discussed how intervention could be linked to social status among peers. One participant talked about how "…*I do not act because I am probably going to look like someone who is overacting because they don't see that it is about defending someone…*" (P3FG6). The fear of physical and social repercussions and uncertainty of outcomes for both the targets and the bystanders was a notable barrier preventing individuals from providing help.

Subtheme 2 (lack of university support/nothing changes) was discussed in terms of lack of support from university, impunity of the abusers, and inability to make a change. Even when bystanders did act on behalf of targets of abuse, the university administration often ignored the complaints, and the lecturers remained in their positions. For example, P3FG6 explained how…*"My faculty is mostly women, so you see and hear a lot of things from the professors… it is quite normalized. Also during the pandemic…several professors were exposed. The truth is that the faculty never took action on these complaints. The professors remained in their positions".* The perpetrators of violence were often seen as having impunity because of their hierarchical position in the University. Often, students felt that even if they complained about a staff member, the staff were protected by the University, and nothing would happen as a consequence of the complaint. Bystanders felt that they could put themselves in a risky position for no tangible benefits. For instance, according to one of the participants, *"even if I speak, in the end nothing is going to happen.then should I speak? Or should I not speak? So there's kind of that unknown"* (P1FG4). The same participant was weighing the benefits of intervention against the possible risks. There is a possibility that the bystander risks their studies if there are repercussions of their actions,while the perpetrator does not face any consequences: "*What if I speak and then they take me badly? Or what if I fall behind with my academic goals? I feel it's a bit complicated, right?"* The participants felt like risk associated with intervention did not outweigh the benefits when the lecturers would be protected by the university.

Subtheme 3 circled around culture of silence and acceptance. Many participants talked about how harassment is normalised, which could be a barrier to intervention. In the words of P3FG5, "…what they tell you is like *"oh, try to get along well" or "try not to get into trouble." They never tell you that you should say what's happening, or anything. And I feel that this makes harassment normalized and staying silent becomes normalized because there is no efficient reporting system".* The participants discussed how harassment is part of the culture, often masked as humour or compliments, which could reduce the willingness of bystanders to intervene. They may simply not think that the situations are intervention worthy. In the words of P2FG1".*harassment is very normal, culturally speaking, this harassment…they feel like it's a compliment and they do not see it as harassment…because culturally it is seen as very normal."* In addition, blaming the victim and excusing the perpetrator could also link to bystander barriers. If targets of violence are viewed as instrumental in inviting the abuse, there may be less willingness to intervene as a bystander. *"There have been several cases where… people speak badly about the victim and, well, nothing is said about the perpetrator. So that is the context we have here."* (P1FG1). The

social norms and victim blame were factors that would make help more difficult, as participants were unwilling to go against many of the cultural norms.

Subtheme 4, lack of knowledge of what to do, related to "freezing" in the situations of abuse. Although there was a will to help, the person felt incapable to do anything because they did not know how to act. For example, P2GFG2 talked about how "… *sometimes it happens while in class, so I really don't know how to act there… He (the lecturer) does not like to be interrupted and I tend to go into a bit of shock and not know what to do or what to say… or I don't dare to do it because I know that it can cause problems later…*". P1FG2 There are many of the questions that go through one's mind, because it is seeing it, but not knowing how to act.

Theme 3: Facilitators to Bystander Action (Subthemes: Collective Action; Presence of Procedures and Support Groups; Increasing Knowledge and Visibility of Violence; Personal Obligation to Help)

We constructed this theme with several subthemes around factors that would increase the ease of intervention. Many of the discussions were around collective action as a facilitator. In addition, presence of procedure and support groups, increasing knowledge of violence, and personal obligation (e.g., morality and empathy) were mentioned as facilitators of bystander action.

Subtheme 1, collective action, was an important facilitator for bystanders. When students act together as a group, they feel that there is safety in numbers. Collective action not only sends the target a message that they are not alone, but it also shows the perpetrator that their actions are not tolerated. For example, P3FG4 discussed collective action by mentioning how "*…collectively there would be no fear because when there are enough people, the harasser would be a little more afraid and the girl who is being harassed (or the boy), would also feel calmer knowing that there are more of us*". Collective action was also mentioned as something that could be support networks of women, or even collaborations between different institutions in sharing good practices. Or, in the words of P2FG5, bystander action could be facilitated when "*…the intervention focuses more than anything on the support networks that one has. Mutual support networks, either between women, or perhaps between institutions in order to exchange solutions as a collective…*" Collective action and mutual support were of paramount importance in this context.

Subtheme 2, presence of university procedures, support groups, and key staff members as allies, was an important facilitator to bystander action. Having the possibility to delegate the matter of abuse to a staff member was viewed as something that is of major importance. However, the participants would need the assurance that the staff member is sympathetic to the topic, and acts on the information that they receive from the bystander. For instance, P2FG4 discussed how…*"they have had the opportunity to comment to someone superior with whom I have confidence. I have done it without fear of anything because I know that there is that trust with that person too".*Some of the suggestions for how to facilitate the reporting of abuse as bystanders were around anonymous surveys or other routes of anonymous reporting.

The key here is that the reporting (whether online or as a feedback box) has to be anonymous in order for the students to feel save. P3FG4 talked how sexual violence

on campus could be reduced significantly if it could be possible to *"… find a way to make ourselves heard without knowing who we are, who the person is. Without knowing which degree and which year, we must be anonymous, right, to allow us talk…"* It was clear that universities need clear, transparent, and efficient complaints procedures in order to facilitate the intervention of bystanders. One of the participants was discussing how a presence of women's collectives that are visible and organised would help in intervention as the bystanders would have somewhere to turn to: *"I believe that creating support networks between women and making them visible would help. I believe that the main problem of the faculty is that these organized groups do not exist and if they do exist, they do not have the visibility nor do they have the support to be able to take action on the matter…. So, I think that's the way to intervene. Make groups of women to organise themselves (P1FG5).* Formalised support in University as well as among student groups would facilitate bystanders also by making the problem more visible.

Subtheme 3, increasing knowledge and visibility of sexual violence, was mentioned as something that could facilitate intervention. Many mentioned how intervention is possible only with the consent of the target of sexual violence. One of the problems was that in the context of Guatemala, targets do not always know where the boundaries are. One of the facilitators that also could improve the target's understanding of what is/is not appropriate could be to "…*inform the person who is being harassed.there are many people who don't even realise, because they are so used to harassment, in Guatemala, that they don't even realise that they are suffering harassment…right, they normalise it* (P5FG6)". Increasing visibility and knowledge around sexual violence could facilitate intervention partially because the bystander would feel that the target is receptive to receive the help.

Subtheme 4, was a facilitator related to personal obligation to intervene. Some of the participants were mentioning empathy towards the victim as something that would make them more likely to intervene. For example, P2FG3 discussed how intervention is facilitated when you" *.put yourself in the place of the person who is being violated…and think that it could be me… I need some way or another to help them."* The participants discussed how intervening in harassment could influence the campus environment, and having a positive impact on altruistic behaviours. In the words of P1FG4, " *in the end everything good that you do sometimes comes back. Maybe not from the same person, but from other people.".* The moral obligation was also about the feeling that it is the "right thing" to do. One of the participants talked about how "…*intervention is, first of all, the courage to do the right thing… to continue with the process irrespective of who the people are, the perpetrator or the victim, no matter what age or rank. Have that courage to continue the process to stop…harassment or abuse"* (P5FG5). Intervening also came with positive personal consequences for the bystander. They could feel good about themselves after helping a victim of abuse. For example, P1FG6 mentioned how "… *one comes out feeling victorious when being able to help the person who is being harassed and also have the satisfaction that one was able to help…"* Morality, empathy, and "doing the right thing" are important personal factors that can increase the willingness to help.

Theme 4: Past Bystander Intervention Actions

This theme contained different actions that the students had engaged in as bystanders in the past. These actions included working collectively with other students to have dialogue about cases of abuse, raising awareness of inappropriate conduct, delegation to staff members, or delaying by supporting the target after the abuse had taken place. Many times, the past bystander actions were highly collective in nature. Students were getting organised in groups to tackle collectively the problem of sexual violence on campus. For example, one of the students was discussing such collective action by saying that *"Here in the (name hidden) department the girls have taken action to get organised- to intervene directly when it comes to harassment, to mention the principles of the civil code, and all the problems that they (abusers) can get into if they continue… And they advise new girls and everything. They have defended themselves very well here. There has been a lot of unity on the part of the girls lately"* *(P1FG6)*. The collective action also included sharing screenshots of abusive online messages, and warning new students about abusive lecturers. It was clear that the abusers already had a reputation, and that students were collectively preparing to try to minimise the harm to others.

The participants mentioned multiple other actions that they had engaged in as bystanders. For instance, students discussed delegating the matter to a trusted staff member (who changed the study schedule of the student so that they would not take the class of the abuser), walking together with the individual who was the target of abuse so that the perpetrator would find it more difficult to harass, or supporting the target of abuse by talking to them. P3FG6 discussed how they preferred to talk to the target of violence rather than intervene directly as a safer alternative *"… I prefer to talk with the person, "look, well, that's what you went through…do you feel comfortable?" So that she herself realizes that it is something that she doesn't have to tolerate"*. These kinds of intervention strategies were seen as a less risky option in providing help for the target after the event had taken place. Bystanders also considered that their role had importance in validating the targets' experiences. Bystanders play a role in spreading the message that sexual violence is not appropriate, and should not be tolerated.

Discussion

Our study provided a useful insight into experiences of being a target and a bystander in sexual violence in a public University in Guatemala. The focus group participants discussed different forms of sexual violence (perpetrated mainly by lecturers), dynamics in the classroom, actual bystander actions they had employed in the past, as well as various barriers and facilitators to bystander behaviour. The problem of sexual violence in the University is serious, and that bystanders were willing to help, but often lacked the tools to intervene in a safe manner.

When exploring the forms and dynamics of sexual violence, it became obvious that university staff were the main perpetrators, often abusing their hierarchical position. These results echo studies from other parts of the world (see Klein & Martin,

2021), including United States and United Kingdom (Batty et al., 2017; Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018), the African continent (e.g., Ugah, 2023), and the Latin American region (Fuentes-Vásquez, 2019; Morales Cobos et al., 2020). The consequences of sexual violence perpetrated by the lecturers were detrimental to not just to the targets, but also to the bystanders, and the whole class. It led to humiliation and shame, feelings of powerlessness, and fears for ability to complete studies. A recent systematic review found that being target of sexual harassment in University leads to serious mental and physical health consequences (Klein & Martin, 2021), and it is obvious that this can also be detrimental to the health of the bystanders.

Another distinctive dynamic was that sexual violence was often masked as a joke, and others (especially male students) joined in the harassment with the lecturers. This has been found in previous studies, where sexist jokes serve as tools for increasing ingroup cohesion in men, leading to sexual hostility and victim blame (Thomae & Pina, 2015). Indeed, gender-based harassment and microaggressions in the classroom are perceived as more acceptable if they are delivered as jokes (Midgette et al., 2023). In the US context, showing non-verbal objection, as well as direct verbal confrontation may increase disapproval of a sexist joke teller (Saucier et al., 2020). Future research should investigate if open disapproval of sexual violence would be appropriate in the Guatemalan context too, and whether it would reduce bystander barriers in the classroom.

The participants also discussed various barriers that prevented them from intervening and providing help to targets of sexual violence. Many discussed how they feared for their safety and wellbeing, expecting direct retaliation from the abusers. Students felt like the university did not facilitate the reporting of abusers, and nothing would change as a result of their actions. There also was a general culture around remaining silent, and accepting violence as a normal part of life. Some discussed how they were willing to help, but were not sure what to do. The findings on many of these barriers resonate with results from other parts of the world. Factors such as fear of negative consequences, skills deficits, positional power, and lack of responsibility have been identified as important barriers in previous studies in the Western context (Bloom et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2022; Yule & Grych, 2020). It seems that the barriers are not always that dissimilar in different contexts, but there are commonalities between Guatemala and studies from the Global North.

Culture of silence and hostility towards women played a part in bystander inaction. Participants discussed how some students invited the lecturers to abuse them, or allowed it to happen because they lacked knowledge of what abuse is. Blaming the students for lecturers' unwanted advances is common in other parts of the world, and contributes to the silence of the bystanders (for example, see Guschke et al., 2019 for study in Denmark, and Ugah, 2023, for a study in Nigeria). Misogynistic peer norms can create hostility, which leads to bystander barriers (Leone et al., 2017). It would be beneficial to incorporate "social norms" approach (e.g., Berkowitz et al., 2022) in future bystander education in Guatemala.

Participants discussed how bystander help could be facilitated by multiple actions, such as acting collectively, having university procedures and support groups, increasing knowledge and visibility, and having a personal moral obligation to help. In other high-risk context where perpetrators have power and impunity, anonymous reporting

has been suggested as a useful tool for tackling sexual violence (e.g., see Ogunfowo-kan et al., 2023 for a study in Nigeria). Our Guatemalan participants discussed how this could facilitate their bystander behaviour too, feeling that they could be safe from repercussions.

Other factors that our participants discussed as facilitators were visibilisation of the problem, and collective action. Indeed, it has been suggested that activism against sexual violence in education starts with making the problem visible, and then, tackling it with collective action (Chamberlin & Plant, 2023; Page et al., 2019). In Latin America, where social movements and activism have a long, well-established history, students have started forming collectives in Universities to tackle gender-based violence (see Cano-Arango et al., 2022 for Colombia; and Cerva Cerna, 2020, for Mexico). It is easy to see how this kind of collective activism as a response to sexual violence in University could be the next step in Guatemala, uniting students as active bystanders.

Indeed, participants discussed the ways that they had acted in the past as bystanders, often together with other students. These actions included working collectively with others in discussing abuse, sharing screenshots, raising awareness of inappropriate conduct, delegating to staff members, or supporting the targets after the abuse had taken place. Participants' discussions of their past behaviour demonstrated that students were not just passive bystanders, but that they had intervened in diverse ways. Future studies would benefit from investigating what strategies are safe and effective (see Ford et al., 2023) in Guatemala. This knowledge would be beneficial in development of bystander intervention training programmes in this unique context.

Our study has some limitations. First, due to the difficult situation (strikes, manifestations) at the University during the time of the research, we had to resort to online focus groups, which could have led to shorter comments, and higher uniformity and agreement between the participants (Schneider et al., 2002). However, the richness of the data does not seem to vary between online and face-to-face focus groups (Abrams et al., 2015), and participants discussed the topics in sufficient depth. In addition, emerging research suggests that online focus groups are highly appropriate for especially sensitive topics, and could facilitate feelings of safety, resulting in open conversations (Samardzic et al., 2023). Thus, we do not feel that the method of focus groups was a serious limitation.

Second, we were hoping to have more participants, and more diversity in recruitment (e.g., including individuals from indigenous/racialised minorities, LGBTQ+, or disabled communities). However, due to time limitations with the research and difficulties in recruitment, we could not have as diverse and as large a sample that we were originally aiming for. This would be important to take into consideration, especially as minority status influences bystander intentions, opportunities, and behaviour (Hoxmeier et al., 2021, 2022; McMahon et al., 2020). It is crucial to develop diversity in understanding of bystander barriers and facilitators in order to develop future interventions that take intersectionality into account.

Our research should be considered as an initial step towards increasing understanding of context-specific bystander behaviour in sexual violence in a Latin American country. In Guatemala, collective action seemed like an especially powerful tool for intervening in sexual violence. When the perpetrators are in high power (e.g.,

lecturers), universities should provide anonymous routes to reporting in order to protect the identity of the bystander. Our results demonstrate that there is a willingness to help the targets of sexual violence, with some effective strategies already in place to this end. Future research should understand intersectional issues affecting the barriers as a bystander, and design intervention workshops that are inclusive to perspectives of students from all backgrounds.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The study was conducted in line with ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was granted ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Liverpool John Moores University. The ethics code: 22/PSY/017.

Competing Interests The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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