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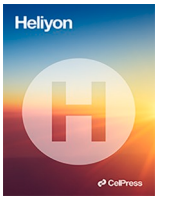

Research article

Educational intervention on sexual violence to empower university students in developing healthy affective-sexual relationships

Alba Berenguer-Simon [a], David Ballester-Ferrando [a], Carolina Rascón-Hernán [b], Zaira Reyes-Amargant [a], Dolors Rodríguez-Martín [c,*], Concepció Fuentes-Pumarola [a]

[a] Nursing Department, University of Girona, Health, Gender and Aging Research Group, Girona, Catalonia, Spain
[b] Nursing Department, University of Girona, Research Group in the Development of the Nursing Profession, Girona, Catalonia, Spain
[c] Department of Fundamental Nursing and Medical-Surgery, School of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Barcelona, Consolidated Research Group on Gender, Identity and Diversity (2017-SGR-1091), Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Sexual violence (SV) is frequent in universities, and a link has been demonstrated between SV and toxic substance use by university students in leisure settings. In Spain there is little scientific evidence in this regard, and SV prevention programmes are practically non-existent in Spanish universities.

Objectives: To develop, implement, and evaluate an educational awareness-raising intervention regarding SV aimed at empowering university students to develop healthy affective-sexual relationships.

Methods: Participatory action research intervention, implemented with a convenience sample of students recruited in a public university and qualitatively evaluated using a phenomenological approach.

Results: The sample was composed of 22 women students, whose discourse revealed that SV acts are normalized in university leisure settings featured by the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Post-intervention, the participants showed an increased understanding of SV, a heightened awareness of SV, and a greater capacity to identify SV acts. The intervention empowered the participants in terms of coping with SV situations and in raising awareness in their own social circles.

Conclusions: The intervention changed the participants' attitudes and behaviours regarding SV, empowering them not only regarding their own affective-sexual relationships, but also in censoring attitudes and behaviours that foster SV, and in transmitting their acquired knowledge of SV in their social circles. Post-intervention, the participants considered themselves to be agents of social change in their environment and in terms of healthy affective-sexual relationships.

Public contribution: University students participated in and evaluated an intervention that trained them to identify and to censor attitudes and behaviours that promote SV, empowered them as engines of social change, and showed them how to foster healthy affective-sexual relationships.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: alba.berenguer@udg.edu (A. Berenguer-Simon), david.ballester@udg.edu (D. Ballester-Ferrando), carolina.rascon@udg.edu (C. Rascón-Hernán), zaira.reyes@udg.edu (Z. Reyes-Amargant), dolorsrodriguezmart@ub.edu (D. Rodríguez-Martín), concepcio.fuentes@udg.edu (C. Fuentes-Pumarola).

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1. Introduction

Sexual violence (SV), one of the more typical manifestations of gender violence, constitutes a serious public health problem [1,2]. As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), SV, which includes harassment, abuse, and assault, is "*any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching and other non-contact forms*" [2]. According to WHO data from 2018, around one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in her life, and 6 % of women aged 15 years and over have experienced non-partner SV at least once in their life [3]. In the USA, women in the age range 18–24 years, which coincides with the university years, are at higher risk of SV [4].

A Spanish study shows that 8.9 % of women aged 16 and older have experienced SV from a partner or ex-partner at some point in their lives; specifically, 6.7 %, 5.4 %, and 5.2 % have reported being forced to have sex against their will, experiencing sexual touching without consent, and having had sexual relations for fear of what would happen if they refused, respectively [5]. Another study reports that 8.4 % of women aged 16 years of age and older stated that they had experienced SV outside their relationship [6].

SV is especially frequent in the university environment; according to research carried out at a Canadian university, 23.2 % of women students reported having experienced SV in the previous year [7], and one in five students in the USA have experienced SV at university [8]. In Catalonia (Spain), a study in four public universities found that 15.6 % of nursing students – 93.5 % women and 6.5 % men – had experienced some form of SV [9]. Revealingly, Valls et al. [10] report that many women who experience SV do not recognize it as such.

In Spain, although alcohol consumption is intimately linked with leisure [11,12], there are few studies of SV linked with toxic substance abuse in university leisure settings. Alcohol consumption in Spain typically begins at around the age of 14 years and becomes weekly around the age of 15 years. Among students aged 14–18 years of age, alcohol consumption, with a prevalence of 73.9 %, is the most consumed psychoactive substance [11,12]. Toxic substance use by university students has been associated with physical and sexual aggression [13,14], and university parties are considered a high-risk nightlife scenario due to the link with alcohol and drug use [15]. European studies of the population aged 16–27 years report an association between alcohol intake and SV [16,17]. While SV prevention programmes have been implemented in universities in the USA and Canada, they are practically non-existent in Spanish universities, despite SV being a serious public health problem, as well as being a violation of human rights and of fundamental individual freedoms [18].

The fifth goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is aimed at achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls [19]. An effective approach to building collective knowledge and educating and empowering people to tackle SV is participatory action research (PAR) [20,21], in which community members participate as co-researchers and as agents of change.

The objective of our research was to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention aimed at raising awareness of and educating university students in SV and at empowering them to develop healthy affective-sexual relationships.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design, population, and setting

The intervention, based on the PAR methodology, ran between February 2019 and June 2019, and was evaluated using a qualitative methodology based on a phenomenological approach. The study population consisted of 10,164 students enrolled in a degree course at Girona University (Spain) during the 2018–2019 academic year.

2.2. Study sample

Sampling was convenience-based and participants were recruited through the Social Commitment and Gender Equality Unit of Girona University. A registration form was distributed to the entire student population by email and on the university website. Inclusion criteria were to be registered for any course offered by Girona University and to sign the informed consent.

Participation was encouraged with two European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) units for each student. The intervention methodology required recruitment of around 20 participants, but due to demand, 22 students finally participated, all women despite an appeal to participation by both men and women. The participants represented 66 % of the university faculties, mainly the Faculty of Education and Psychology, Faculty of Nursing, Faculty of Letters, Faculty of Tourism, Faculty of Law, and Faculty of Sciences. The students also agreed to participate in a qualitative study to evaluate the intervention.

2.3. Intervention description

The PAR-based intervention was developed with the purpose of raising awareness and educating university students regarding SV and at empowering them to develop healthy affective-sexual relationships. The designed intervention, called *"Fun? Yes! Healthy consensual relations? Also!"*, consisted of ten face-to-face 2-h sessions, each with different objectives and themes. The sessions were designed, validated, and implemented by agreement between nursing, anthropology, and psychology professionals experts in SV. Table 1 summarizes the learning objectives, methodology, and content covered in each of the ten sessions.

Table 1
Session objectives, methodology, and content.

Session	Objectives	Methodology	Content
1. Presentation	- Introduction - Pre-intervention questionnaire - Pre-intervention interviews	–	–
2. General concepts	- Definitions and characteristics of key sexuality concepts - Sexuality and relationship differences and similarities - Defining aspects of sexual diversity concepts - Importance of positive attitudes to healthy and respectful sexuality for the self and others	Participatory dynamics with audiovisual support	- Sexuality, sex, gender, and gender role definitions - Sexual identity and orientation - Sexual diversity
3. Sexual violence, symbolic violence, myths, and stereotypes	- Sexual violence and its origins - Gender stereotypes in patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity - Basic sexual violence concepts - Romantic love and relationships myths - Roles assigned to women and men in relationships and the consequences	Theoretical session based on different dynamics and aimed at reinforcing learning	Patriarchy: cause and origin of sexual violence - Sex/gender - Socialization: gender roles and stereotypes - Gender inequalities - Romantic love myths Sexual violence: - Definitions - Sexual violence from partners: extent and data - Differences between sexual and other violence - Types of sexual violence - Cycle/spiral of sexist violence - Sexual violence repercussions for women's health
4. Sexual violence	Information on sexual violence	Theoretical session based on different dynamics and aimed at reinforcing learning	- Sexual violence definition and types - Sexual violence data - Sexual violence legislation - Sexual violence and leisure settings - Chemical submission and drug-facilitated sexual assault - Sexual violence repercussions for women's health
5. New masculinities	- Alternative masculinity through dissidence with the traditional model - History of men's movements linked to feminism - Educational proposals and alternative models for education in equality	Theoretical session with group debate	- New masculinities and dissident masculinities - Origins of the men's movement for equality - Men and feminism - Educational proposals and alternative models
6. Toxic substance use	- Youth consumption of alcohol and other drugs - Drugs classified by their effects - Main effects of drugs consumed in leisure settings - Toxic substance use and sexual violence in leisure settings	Participatory work: Observe patterns of toxic substance use in leisure settings and write down quantities consumed by an adjacent person during a night of partying (if relevant, also record pressures to consume) Session: Note and compare the recorded amounts, map substances, and classify effects. Debate on toxic substance use and sexual violence in leisure settings	- Toxic substance use in leisure settings - Toxic substances classified by effects - Toxic substance use and sexual violence in leisure settings
7. Sexual violence in leisure settings	- Leisure setting dynamics and behaviours - Established gender roles and the consequences of transgression - The concept of sexual terror and its development in society - Published sexist campaigns - Combatting sexist aggression in leisure settings	Theoretical session with group debate and reflection	- Leisure setting behaviours and the role of drugs - Stigma and responsibilities imposed on women in leisure settings - Feminism and drug use - Differences in female and male consumption patterns - Gender roles and transgression – 1970 feminist movement and social repercussions

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Session	Objectives	Methodology	Content
			- Sexual terror: instigation and promotion - Aggressor prototypes - News of a sexist nature and the link with sexual terror - Sexist campaigns and women-blaming - Feminism as a solution
8. Round table on sexual violence resources	- Resources for addressing sexual violence from a multidisciplinary perspective	Multidisciplinary round table open to the university, educational, and health communities	Presentations by: - Girona Police Sub-Inspector on sexual violence - Lawyer/public policy advisor for criminal and gender law - Psychologist specializing in sexual violence - Emergency nurse from a reference sexual assault centre for adults
9. Healthy consensual relationships	- Different forms of interpersonal relationships - Affective ties in object relations	Psychodrama workshop	- Interpersonal relationships - Object relations
10. Evaluation	- Post-intervention questionnaire - Post-intervention interviews - Course conclusion	–	–

Thirty hours of autonomous activities (videos, films, articles, and book chapters) accompanied the face-to-face sessions. In addition, consistent with the PAR methodology, the students carried out a participatory activity that aimed to raise awareness of SV in the university social environment; selected as the setting for this purpose was the university students' day.

3. Intervention evaluation

3.1. Data collection

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews conducted before and after the intervention. Two focus groups of 11 participants each were organized, and group interviews were face to face and were conducted by a woman researcher in the presence of a woman observer. The interviews were carried out at the university. The researchers previously informed study participants of the study objectives, that the anonymity of their responses was guaranteed, and that they could notify their withdrawal at any time. The interviews, lasting on average 75 min, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Student sociodemographic and academic data collected were sex, age, faculty, degree course, and academic year (first to fourth year).

3.2. Instruments

To introduce students to the study, all 22 participants together first viewed a 6-min short film (Nit de Festa/Party night) [22] on student discourses reflecting knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding SV and toxic substance use in leisure settings (based on an Girona University survey carried out in 2017–2018). The purpose of showing the short film, which reproduces typical SV situations in a Spanish youth leisure context, was to encourage reflection and debate among the participants. The participants were also asked to describe what they considered to be SV in written format, before and then after the intervention, so that perceptions could be compared. Used as reference was the WHO definition of SV [23].

Pre-intervention group interviews were designed to understand participants' knowledge and experiences of SV, and perceptions of SV behaviours and attitudes in leisure settings involving toxic substance use. Some of the guiding questions formulated pre-intervention were as follows: "What did you think of the short film? "Do you think it reflects the attitudes of young people in a party context?" "In the short film, the girl is upset at being touched: have you or someone you know had a similar experience?" "In the short film, there is unwanted touching by the partner: have you or someone you know had a similar experience?" "Do you think that consuming alcohol and other drugs influences the way you relate to others?"

Post-intervention group interviews aimed to find out how the participants assessed the intervention and to collect proposals for improvement. It also aimed to analyse awareness and empowerment in relation to SV, and to determine what knowledge had been acquired by the students, who were asked to redefine their previous concept of SV if it had changed. Some of the guiding questions formulated post-intervention were as follows: "How do you rate the intervention (strong points, weak points, and proposals for improvement)?" "Has your attitude regarding your social relationships changed? How?" "How do you rate the student's day activity?" "Do you think men should participate in these activities? Why?"

3.3. Procedure

The study procedure is depicted in Fig. 1.

3.4. Ethical considerations

The research team adhered to bioethical guidelines as established in the Belmont Report (1979) [24] and the Helsinki Declaration (1964–2013) [25] World Medical Association, (2013), and the study was approved by Girona University's Research Ethics and Biosecurity Committee (CEBRU0003-2018). All participants were informed of the aims and authorship of the study, and received guarantees of data confidentiality and anonymity, as per Spanish legislation protecting data of a personal nature [26]. The participants gave their written informed consent to participate in the study and to be audio-recorded during the interviews. During data transcription and management, the privacy of individuals was maintained by the use of alphanumeric codes. Once the information provided by the participants was transcribed, the recordings were destroyed.

3.5. Data analysis

Qualitative data are reported as frequencies and percentages and quantitative data as mean and standard deviation (SD) and as median and interquartile range (IQR) values.

Discourse, as analysed from literal transcriptions of the audio-recordings of the interviews, was classified in terms of analytical categories and codes. Stages as described by Bardin [27] were followed in the analysis, namely, pre-analysis, coding, and categorization until content saturation, and thematic areas, categories, and sub-categories were established. Taken into account in constructing the categories were the concepts of single criterion, mutual exclusion, homogeneity, relevance, clarity, objectivity, replicability, and productivity [28]. The data were repeatedly reviewed with literal readings and inductive reduction of the content. To ensure data

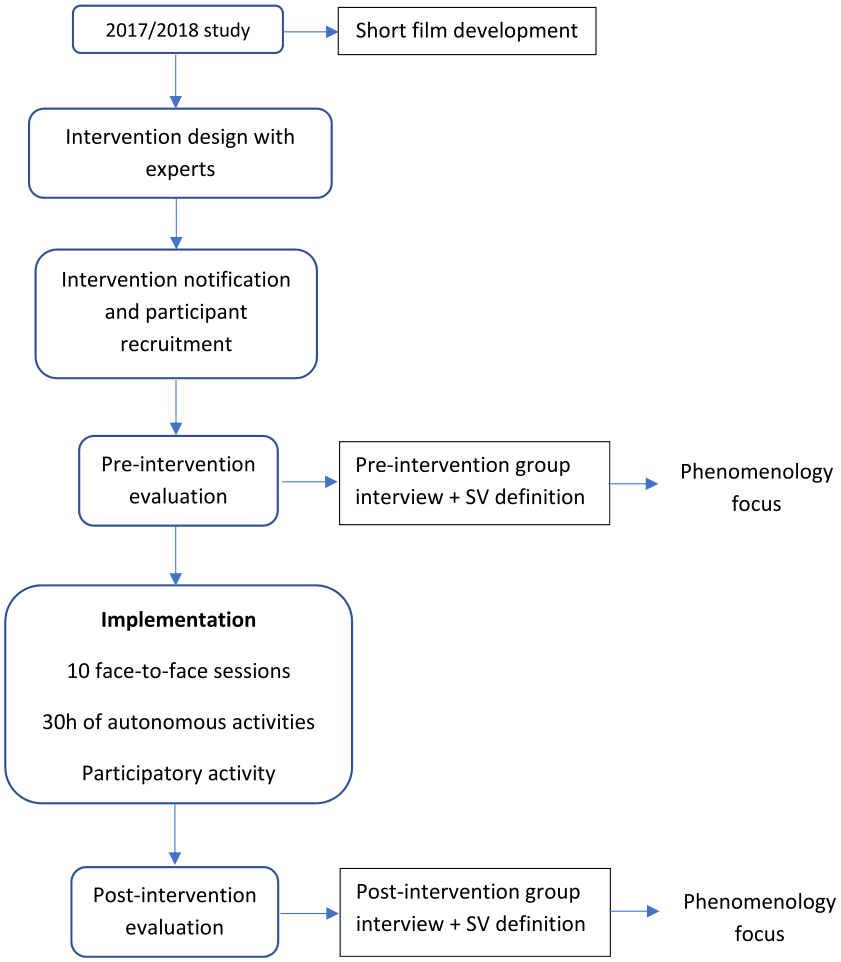

Fig. 1. Study procedure flowchart.

reliability, two researchers working independently categorized the data before subsequently pooling their results. By agreement between the researchers, data saturation was achieved with the analysed texts, with the 22 participants in the two groups providing sufficient information to address the study aims.

4. Results

The sample was composed of 22 students, all of whom self-reported as women. Mean (SD) age was 21.20 (2.75) years and median (IQR) age was 20 (2) years. By academic year, second-year students represented 59.1 % of the sample, while first-, third, and fourth-year students accounted for 13.6 %, 22.7 %, and 4.5 %, respectively.

4.1. Pre-intervention interviews

Table 2 describes thematic areas A and B and the corresponding categories.

4.2. Thematic area A. Knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes regarding leisure, toxic substances, and the links to sexual violence

From the discourse of the participants, it could be deduced that sexist attitudes and behaviours, toxic substance use, and SV are all normalized in university leisure settings.

Machismo attitudes and behaviours. The interviewees considered that hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity are hindering the evolution of men. They also believed that males perceive women's awakening as an attack on them.

> "The heteropatriarchal and super-sexualized system has always placed a lot of emphasis on displays of masculinity in men. Homosexual men have been very discriminated against because they are considered effeminate. It's like you hurt men's pride, the natural way of being of man. Men, the moment they are questioned, feel they are attacked by the system in general" (P4).

The interviewees were of the opinion that evolution from machismo to feminism is difficult for men and attribute this to the patriarchal system. They also linked it to the fact that men generally do not experience SV as victims, even though men and women are raised in the same environments.

> "We've all been brought up this way. No one is born a feminist, the system is patriarchal and sexist. Why don't boys notice? Because they don't really care. We women have changed faster because we experience it firsthand, and they may take longer to change because they don't live it" (P1).

Objectification of women. The interviewees also described how young women are used as a product that sells, recognizing, however, that they also can benefit from this fact.

> "It's known that if girls enter clubs for free, more boys will come, so they are offering you as a product for boys to consume, boys will pay to enter if they know that there are more girls inside" (P2).

> "As a woman I too take advantage of that, of the fact of not paying, it shouldn't be like that" (P1).

The interviewees explained that depending on the leisure space, both sexes need to comply with certain admission criteria. They also reported prejudice and discrimination regarding dress.

> "I once went to a nightclub with a group of friends. One girl had dreadlocks and wore sneakers and they let her in no problem. When a boy with dreadlocks in a tracksuit and sneakers arrived, they told him that he wasn't allowed in. They let the girl in because she's the product that sells" (P3).

Table 2
Pre-intervention thematic areas and categories.

Thematic area A Knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes regarding leisure, toxic substances, and the links to sexual violence		Thematic area B Perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding sexual violence in leisure settings	
Category	Sub-category	Category	Sub-category
Machismo attitudes and behaviours	Objectification of women Aesthetic pressure	**Normalization of sexual violence**	
Normalization of toxic substance use in leisure settings		**Male exercise of power in consensual/ non-consensual sexual relations**	
	Alcohol as a socializing element Social pressures to consume	**Reactions to sexual violence**	Normalized feelings of fear and insecurity Active response or immobilization Guilt, Rejection, Incomprehension
Normalization of sexual violence and toxic substance use in leisure settings	Toxic substance influence on sexual violence	**Secondary victimization** **Non-egalitarian and sexist education**	

Aesthetic pressures. They also declared themselves to be influenced by peer group acceptance and approval.

> "I've always had many problems when it comes to thinking about what people will say. In secondary school I had a hard time with new clothes because of what my classmates would say. There were clothes that I loved that I wanted to wear, but I didn't dare because of what people would say" (P3).

The interviewees felt that the patriarchal system imposes an image of femininity to be internalized by women. They also highlighted that social pressures and media influence on women maintaining their image are far greater than on men.

> "It's the patriarchal system that influences you subconsciously. The typical ads, like "Do you want to party and you can't because you haven't waxed? No worries …" It's sold as an obsession that if you don't wax you can't go out … They're instilling the fact that if you don't wax you just won't be able to party" (P8).

Normalization of toxic substance use in leisure settings. The interviewees indicated that toxic substance use, most especially of alcohol, is habitual and normalized.

> "Most people consume both alcohol and drugs" (P18).

According to the interviewees, different types of illegal drugs were typically present at parties, stating that the reason was usually to enhance enjoyment.

> "He put a line in front of me saying that if I don't take it I won't have a good time, and marijuana is not enough" (P3).

They reported that drugs are present and very available in all leisure settings, but also defended that drug use is a decision that corresponds to each individual.

> "People from inside the club itself come up to you to sell you drugs (…) People end up deciding for themselves, but you'll find drugs everywhere" (P3).

Although they perceived that drug use is widespread in all leisure settings, they felt that there are spaces where use is more open and others where people are more discreet.

> "I think drugs are available in all settings, what happens is that there are places that hide it more and places that hide it less. When you go to a rave, people don't hide it. When you go to a posh nightclub, people also use drugs, they just don't show it as much" (P3).

The interviewees viewed alcohol as a socializing element, pointing to the social pressures and media influence regarding its consumption. They also felt that the fact that alcohol will be consumed is taken for granted.

> "We've reached a point where maybe it's not that you really want to drink beer, it's that you need it, because without it you can't have a good time" (P8).

Normalization of sexual violence and toxic substance use in leisure settings. Acts of SV in the context of leisure and toxic substance use were perceived as normalized by the interviewees, often leading them to leave a place or to be selective regarding the leisure spaces they frequent.

> "Not a day goes by that you go out and it doesn't happen. It happens to you, it happens to your mate, or you see it happen to someone you don't know" (P12).

The **interviewees** suggested that alcohol favours acts of SV because it produces a disinhibiting effect and loss of control, but were of the opinion that this is no excuse for SV.

> "I think that alcohol always accentuates things, it amplifies everything more. A boy who calls you pretty at night, well, he may not if it were during the day, he's thinking about it … as he checks you out when you pass in front of him. But at night it's like maybe it's accentuated, he's less inhibited" (P17).

4.3. Thematic area B. Perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding sexual violence in leisure settings

From the interviewees' comments, it can be deduced that SV is normalized in society and especially in leisure settings. Males exercise their power in any sexual relationship, whether consensual or not, and there is peer pressure to perform sexual acts.

Normalization of sexual violence. The interviewees explained that harassment and abuse are common in all settings and are normalized by society.

> "Comments of all kinds … you don't have to be in a disco. You're walking along and you pass in front of this person and he lets loose. It doesn't have to be night, or a disco, or an enclosed place, or a place full of young people …" (P19).

They also affirmed that such acts are intimidating, and despite leading women to modify how they dress and decide what leisure spaces they might safely frequent, they still continue to experience acts of SV.

> "Lately I'm using more managed spaces, Punto Violeta* spaces and the like … but for all that the environment is different I still see a lot of aggression" (P17).
>
> [*Punto Violeta [Violet Dot] is a Spanish system aimed at raising awareness regarding SV and designating safe spaces for women.]

Male exercise of power in consensual/non-consensual sexual relations. The interviewees reported that in their partner relationships, men tend to be possessive and to believe they have rights over women, yet are not fully cognizant of this fact. They also stated that not enough importance is attached to consent.

> "If he's your boyfriend, you don't pay too much attention … You're with friends and he makes a joke and touches your rear …. thinking it belongs to him. He's my boyfriend and he doesn't mean badly, but he's done it …. and at that moment you don't much dwell on it" (P12).

They affirmed that, in partner relationships, there is a perceived obligation to have sexual relations, and that men sometimes use psychological and emotional blackmail to coerce women. However, they were of the opinion that women simply need to learn how to be more assertive.

> "When a partner wants to have sex, we also have to know how to say "no" if we don't feel like it or if we don't want to right then. Sometimes we do it just for their sake, and in the end … it's like an indirect obligation" (P19).

Reactions to sexual violence. The interviewees reflected on how, when alone on a street at night, feelings of fear and insecurity are normalized for women. They reported how they personally deploy various strategies, ranging from alert systems between friends (WhatsApp, location apps, etc.) to the use of self-defence devices (pepper spray, etc.).

> "During the day I'm not scared, but at night … I and my roommates always arrange to meet at the same time to go home together, and we never leave anyone behind alone" (P17).
>
> "I've got friends who've even bought pepper spray because of their fear of going out in the city alone, or they keep their keys in their hands to defend themselves" (P2).

From the accounts of the interviewees, a dichotomy is evident between actively responding to acts of SV and feeling immobilized. When touching by men is unwanted, they often openly manifest their rejection, but tend to feel blocked in situations perceived to be more dangerous. They stated that, with experience, they have learned to respond more proactively when they intuit potential SV.

> "I was walking down the street and three boys surrounded me and started touching me, I kicked at them and luckily escaped. But the very moment I found myself in that situation I felt totally blocked … not even aware of what I was doing … I don't remember it clearly, I was like I couldn't do anything, not even scream …" (P8).

They reported that sometimes their reaction was self-blame for the way they were dressed.

> "Once at a party they didn't just touch my ass, but they went to touch my private parts and put a finger in me. My reaction was to feel terrible and I decided to go home alone. I realized that, in the end, I was blaming myself because that day I was wearing fishnet stockings and a very short skirt" (P3).

The interviewees reported that they only gave accounts of their experiences to people close to them who they know will understand, as, in general terms, they felt misunderstood and rejected.

> "I really don't tell many people when these things happen to me. I think differently, and I don't feel comfortable explaining because they might think I'm exaggerating. I only share it with a few friends, because I feel quite rejected by other people" (P13).

Secondary victimization. The interviewees felt that there is little system-based support for women; for instance, when women report SV to the police, they are often required to back up the facts with evidence that may be difficult to obtain.

> "When you file a complaint, they tell you: But you never said no. Yet if you're in a state of shock you are unable to say no. You'd like to say no, but you can't" (P8).

Non-egalitarian and sexist education. The interviewees were of the opinion that sexism developed in forms of family upbringing that differentiated attitudes through comments and different demands placed on sons and daughters.

> "I really notice the difference. It's summer and it's hot, my brother wants to go around in underpants and there's no reaction, I go around in panties and there's a reaction …" (P8).

They highlighted how fear is transmitted between generations and how parental recommendations to sons and daughters differ.

> "Of course – the mythical phrase: "Be careful out there" (P2).
>
> "But a boy is not told: Take care not to do anything you shouldn't" (P8).

Finally, they perceived clear differences between the generations and believe that the upcoming generations need to work further to achieve a change towards equality.

"How lucky you are, your husband helps you at home. They are words that are meant well, but they denote what's left unsaid. I suppose that it's down to our generation to begin to change things" (P3).

4.4. Post-intervention interviews

The post-intervention interviews covered three thematic areas (C, D, and E).

4.4.1. Thematic area C. Evaluation of the intervention

Table 3 describes thematic area C and the corresponding categories.

Overall rating. The interviewees stated that the programme was very useful in expanding their understanding of SV and in clarifying doubts and concepts.

"Apart from information, it has greatly helped to clarify concepts, I had everything very mixed up … and now I know how to differentiate things better" (P20).

They also affirmed that it raised their awareness and led them to reflect on personally experienced situations that they had not previously considered to be SV.

"After each session I would come home and reflect on situations I had experienced in the past" (P3).

Rating of content and methodology. The interviewees, although they stated that the theoretical knowledge was undoubtedly useful, reported that some sessions lacked shared reflections by the group.

"The sessions were very useful, but the reflection was my own … and if we had discussed things together, perhaps we would have gotten more out of it …" (P1).

One interviewee considered that how emotions could be managed was overlooked.

"I think that lacking was something on emotional training and tools, so that you could get to know yourself and better understand your relationships, those you have and those you'd like to have (P19).

Some interviewees made a point of positively rating interactions with professionals.

"It wasn't just explaining things, they also gave examples and described cases, they asked you questions, they talked of the self …" (P22).

Finally, they positively valued the work in preparation for debate and reflection in the sessions.

"In each session we reinforced material that we had worked on previously … A film we watched or a text we read, in the session this was linked to and so we reinforced what we had already observed" (P21).

Absence of male participants. The interviewees deplored the absence of men students in the programme, and suggested that this was due to the fact that many men perceive feminism to be an attack on them.

Table 3
Intervention evaluation categories and sub-categories.

Thematic area C Evaluation of the intervention	
Category	Sub-category
Overall rating	Expanded information and knowledge
	Raised awareness
Rating of content and methodology	Negative aspects: • Lack of group reflection • Emotion management overlooked
	Positive aspects: • Professional-participant interaction • Pre-session work
Absence of male participants	Mens' perceptions of feminism as an attack on men
	Men not experiencing sexual violence as women do
Student's day activity	Satisfactory results
	Positive impact
	Lack of time
Awareness and empowerment	Awareness
	Behaviour modification
Agents of change	Transmission of learned knowledge
	Ability to raise awareness and to lead people to reflect

> "I think that boys have many prejudices, they think feminism is like an attack on them, but no …. I mean, what they need to do is understand that we live in a heteropatriarchal society and that they also suffer the consequences. Obviously it's us who suffer the most, but they do too, and yet I think they think it's an attack on them … but it's not like that" (P8).

They also associated the absence to the fact that men do not experience SV as widely as women, so they do not perceive SV as a problem that directly affects them.

> "Obviously they aren't interested because they don't live it and they don't feel it like we do. They'll never live with the fears that we live with … as sexual objects, going down the street in fear … They'll never feel things the way we women do. A boy will never be persecuted like we are, a boy will never be objectified to the same degree. If you don't experience it personally, you don't understand it …" (P8).

In highlighting the lack of participation by men students, the interviewees were of the opinion that, if men had participated, they as women may not have felt comfortable in sharing intimate experiences.

> "The first day of describing experiences, perhaps I wouldn't have felt comfortable. For me, sharing an experience is not the same with people you trust, girlfriends or other girls, as with a boy" (P2).

Student's day activity. The students positively rated the realization, impact, and outcomes of the activity they implemented on the university's students' day. Even so, they felt they lacked time and could have managed it better.

> "We created a working group and organized the "I have never ever …" game, and it went very well. It was very visual, people even took photos of it. When they noticed there was a game, they came with their friends, played, and commented on it: Wow, yes, that's something, huh? We spent the whole afternoon preparing it, and it led to great group cohesion. It was cool" (P17).

Awareness and empowerment. The interviewees explained that they felt very much more aware of what SV entails once the programme was completed, and also felt that their attitudes and behaviours in their own affective relationships were modified, mainly in terms of being able to identify acts of SV that they had previously normalized.

> "Thanks to the programme I am much more aware. Before I was, a bit, but I didn't attach so much importance to and sometimes didn't even notice things. Now I pay attention to any little detail, anything, language … Thanks to the sessions I have also realized that psychological violence possibly played a role in relations with my ex-partner" (P8).

Agents of change. The interviewees reported having shared the knowledge acquired in the programme with their families, partners, and friends, believing that this empowered the people around them.

> "Yes, I have shared it and it's curious because in the early sessions I'd say: "Today we did this" and I left happy, I left wanting to tell my friends. But as the sessions went by it was they who started asking me what I did. Wow! That way of sharing, I liked how it captured so much interest" (P4).

The interviewees, having completed the programme, now consider themselves to be agents of change. They said that they will be able to raise awareness of SV and will lead the people in their social circles to reflect on, and to censor, sexist attitudes and comments by peers.

> "For myself, at least, I do everything possible to be an agent of change, especially in my circle of friends. When you are with friends and a boy makes a comment, before maybe you overlooked it, but now you say: "No way, that's just not done." And when I do that I feel good … I hope I'm doing my bit so that this person, when he gets home, thinks about what he has said and done" (P4).

4.4.2. Thematic area D. Strengths of the intervention

Strengths were categorized into diversity of participants, participation of professionals from different fields, and the small group size.

The participants very positively rated the fact that the group was made up of students of different ages and from different degree courses.

> "I think it's very positive that there are women from different courses and of different ages" (P19).

They also positively highlighted the fact that sessions were moderated by professionals from different fields and their sharing of experiences.

> "I really liked the participation by different professionals because they also describe their vision and their experiences and also share everyone else's experiences" (P16).

They also believed that the small group size facilitated participation and interaction.

> "In a small group, it is much easier for everyone to participate and contribute with their experiences" (P15).

4.4.3. Thematic area E. Proposals for improving the intervention

Proposals for improving the intervention were categorized into post-session reflection, more dynamic sessions with more group debates, extending availability to other groups, and follow-up programmes.

The interviewees suggested that the final part of each session be devoted to group reflection on session content.

> "In each session, dedicate around half an hour to reflecting on ourselves in the presence of the professional" (P3).

They also suggested more practical and dynamic sessions based on group debates.

> "Much more practice in putting everything together, sharing how you feel about what someone else says, and applying it to your situation" (P8).

The interviewees were of the opinion that the programme should be offered to more people and not only to university students.

> "It would be interesting if everyone could do this training because many people do not have even minimum understanding or perhaps do not even notice things or perceive sexist attitudes … With the course I could change and see things" (P15).

The interviewees considered that a follow-up programme would allow them to delve into other topics, such as homophobia, gender fluidity, polyamorous relationships, racism, emotional training, and non-hegemonic groups.

> "Perhaps if there was a follow-up programme we could deal with other issues that are related to what we have been doing, things like racism and homophobia, what a heteropatriarchal society implies, how everything is all very heteronormative" (P8).

Fig. 2 shows the analysed thematic areas and categories.

4.5. Pre-and post-intervention definitions of sexual violence

The 22 interviewees were asked to define the concept of SV before and after the intervention (Table 4). The pre-intervention definition that obtained the greatest consensus – 22.7 % – was that SV was "violence that mostly men exert on women in any non-consensual sexual sphere". Post-intervention, of the nine interviewees (40.9 %) who redefined the concept, five redefined it as "non-consensual sexual acts, ranging from acts of harassment to abuse and assault".

5. Discussion

The objective of our research was to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention aimed at raising awareness of and educating university students in SV and at empowering them to develop healthy affective-sexual relationships.

Our interviewees attributed perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding SV to machismo and a patriarchal system that grants privileges to men for the mere fact of being male [29]. Although men and women are brought up in the same family environment, the interviewees felt that sons and daughters are treated differently. They also reported that men find it difficult to evolve from machismo to feminism, reasoning that this is mainly because men are not victims of acts of SV [30].

The interviewees referred to women objectified in leisure settings in the interest of marketing, and studies carried out with Spanish university students confirm that acceptance of the objectification of women increases the risk of SV [31,32]. The interviewees also highlighted the gender stereotypes imposed by the patriarchal system, as well as media influence in maintaining this system, with

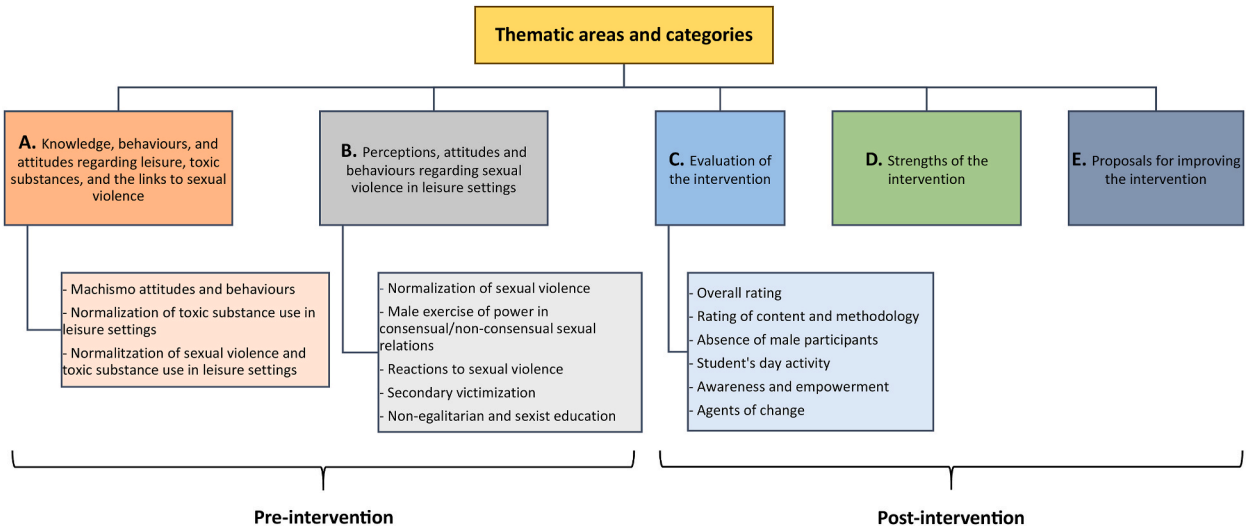

Fig. 2. Analysed thematic areas and categories.

Table 4
Distributions according to student pre- and post-intervention definitions of sexual violence (N = 22 and N = 9 respectively).

PRE-INTERVENTION DEFINITIONS	n (%)
"Violence that mostly men exert on women in any non-consensual sexual sphere"	5 (22.7 %)
"Different types (physical, verbal) of sexual aggression"	4 (18.2 %)
"Violation of sexual rights"	2 (9.1 %)
"Violence exercised when sex is non-consensual"	2 (9.1 %)
"Sexual harassment/abuse, forced sex"	2 (9.1 %)
"Unwanted, involuntarily experienced, and non-consensual acts such as touching, insinuations, intimidating conversations, etc."	2 (9.1 %)
"Sexist violence with the aggravation of a sexual-affective relationship"	1 (4.5 %)
"Violence with and without penetration"	1 (4.5 %)
"Violence that affects intimacy, both physical and internal"	1 (4.5 %)
"Acts that negatively affect a person's sexuality"	1 (4.5 %)
"Use of force to obtain sex"	1 (4.5 %)
POST-INTERVENTION DEFINITIONS	**n (%)**
"Non-consensual sexual acts, ranging from acts of harassment to abuse and assault"	5 (55.5 %)
"All violence exercised against a person's will and without their consent during sexual relations"	2 (22.2 %)
"Non-consensual sexual relations, including with a partner who exercises violence for this purpose"	1 (11.1 %)
"Threatening acts or behaviours aimed at obtaining sex, through physically, mentally, and/or morally forcing a person to submit"	1 (11.1 %)

media content research confirming how females are stereotyped, hypersexualized, and represented as sexually available and desirable [33,34]. Corroborating reports by Spanish adolescents [35], our interviewees indicated that toxic substance use is normalized in university leisure settings; they also point to social pressures to consume alcohol, confirming reports by Australian university students [36]. The interviewees affirmed that acts of SV and toxic substance use in leisure settings are highly normalized, corroborating findings by Becker and Tinkler [37]. Some women consider that some acts of SV are inevitable in leisure settings, which only goes to show how normalized and under-recognized SV is [38].

The interviewees were of the opinion that men believe they have rights over women and assume a dominance that reflects the social hierarchy [29]. They also believed that not enough importance is attached to consent, including within partner relationships, and consequently, they felt that women need to be more assertive in their dealings with men. Pressure from men for sexual relations with their partners is common and normalized [17].

The interviewees declared that they feel fear and insecurity when alone on the street at night, and use strategies that range from alert systems among friends to the use of personal defence objects [17,39]. They reported that sometimes their reaction to post-SV situations was self-blame for the way they dressed. Acceptance of SV and victim blaming are documented to be an outcome of hypersexualization and the objectification of women in society [40].

The interviewees further referred to a form of secondary victimization in feeling misunderstood and rejected by a system that fails to support women victims of SV. This feeling can be contrasted with the finding that the causes of revictimization are usually ignorance of SV, social class, country of origin, a lack of economic resources, and a lack of SV training for police dealing with SV victims [41]. Secondary victimization by the judicial system is possibly reflected in the low rates of SV acts reported to police [42].

Lastly, although the interviewees affirmed that change is evident nowadays, they also believe that the next generation needs to work further on achieving change towards equality.

Comparing interviewee pre- and post-intervention definitions of the concept of SV, and taking the WHO definition as the benchmark [23], it can be seen that the post-intervention definitions are more elaborate, provide more information, and conform more to the WHO definition. The interviewees themselves were of the opinion that the programme was useful for them in terms of expanding their knowledge and understanding of SV and in clarifying doubts and concepts.

The interviewees confirmed that the programme was useful in raising their understanding and awareness of SV, and in enabling them to better identify acts that they had previously accepted as normal. They also confirmed that their perspectives and behaviours in their own affective relationships had changed.

The interviewees referred to transmitting the knowledge acquired within their social circles, considering that this fact also empowers their friends and families. They viewed themselves as agents of change, with the ability to raise awareness in people and to lead them to reflect on what is meant by SV. They also proposed follow-up programmes to explore other related topics.

Programmes that involve university students in the prevention of SV on campus and train them to identify SV acts empower students to censor behaviours that promote violence [43,44]. A well-known such programme in the USA, the Green Dot programme, has been clearly shown to reduce cases of SV [45].

One of the strengths of this study was that the intervention proved effective in the studied population, as evident from the changes in attitudes regarding SV. The study makes visible the need to prioritize awareness and prevention activities regarding SV among university students.

An aspect not commented by the participants, but that should be considered in future research, was the possible short- and long-term consequences of SV in the university setting, as described elsewhere [46].

Real and effective policies need to be implemented at each educational stage. including affective-sexual education, detection, prevention, and monitoring of violence, the promotion of healthy relationships, training on the effects of alcohol and other drugs (especially at age 13–14 years) and on responsible consumption (especially at age 16–22 years). Furthermore, men need to be

encouraged to participate and engage in future SV interventions and research.

The limitations of our study include the use of a convenience sample for the intervention, recruitment difficulties (especially of men students), and the fact that the cultural context (Spain) does not allow results to be extrapolated.

Little scientific evidence exists regarding interventions aimed at preventing SV in the university setting. Further research is needed into the effectiveness of educational programmes for universities where SV prevalence is high. It would also be useful to implement longitudinal evaluations of interventions to monitor changes.

6. Conclusions

Our intervention was effective in raising awareness in women students regarding SV in university leisure settings and the link with substance abuse.

Our interviewees reported a change in attitudes and behaviours regarding SV, their empowerment in their own affective-sexual relationships, their censoring of attitudes and behaviours that foster SV, and the transmission of knowledge acquired to their social circles. They consider themselves to be agents of social change in their environment and in relation to healthy affective-sexual relationships.

The effectiveness of the programme highlights the importance of implementing training for university students aimed at reducing SV and promoting healthy affective-sexual behaviours.

Ethics statement

The present study was approved by the University of Girona Research Ethics and Biosecurity Committee (CEBRU0003-2018). All participants were informed of the aims and authorship of the study, and received guarantees of data confidentiality and anonymity. The participants gave their informed consent in writing to participate in the study according to current regulations in Spain.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alba Berenguer-Simon: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **David Ballester-Ferrando:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Carolina Rascon-Hernan:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Zaira Reyes-Amargant:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Dolors Rodríguez-Martín:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Concepció Fuentes-Pumarola:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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