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## What should not be silenced in universities

According to research, 67% of women in Brazilian universities say they have experienced some type of sexual violence



Ana Alice Coelho / Comunicação Visual - Jornalismo Júnior

By Regina Lemmi

Two rape allegations and one attempted rape on the Butantã campus of the University of São Paulo (USP) received national media attention in September 2024.

In May of that year, a resident of the *USP Residential Complex (Crusp)* reported being abused by a neighboring student who lived a few meters from her apartment. On August 21st, at 7 PM, a student reported being the victim of an attempted rape by an unidentified man with a fake weapon. Another rape case at *Crusp*, reported in August 2024, was reported by the media after the victim went to the police. The suspect was expelled from the student housing, but the victim interacts with him daily in the university buildings.

These cases are not isolated incidents. They raise public questions about how universities can combat sexual violence and why they do not take measures to protect their students, staff, and faculty.

### Research and the lack of it

A survey conducted by *CNN Brasil* in August 2023 contacted 64 Brazilian federal universities in order to obtain data on reports of sexual harassment. Nine institutions did not respond, and part of the ombudsman offices did not present information.

The journalist, activist, and screenwriter of the documentary *#EuVocêTodasNós* (2017), Ellen Paes, points out that data on sexual violence are underreported within harassment records at universities.

According to the journalist and director of the Instituto Patrícia Galvão, Marisa Sanematsu, “society does not see violence, does not recognize its various forms, and sometimes blames women for what they suffered.”

The institute gathers data on violence against women in Brazil, committed to communication as a crucial mechanism for guaranteeing the rights of women. Its specialty is conducting opinion research, that is, the statistical survey of a particular sample of public opinion.

In the study [Violence against women in the university environment](#), the communicators emphasize that sexual harassment is not recognized by men: about 2% of those who participated in the study spontaneously admitted having committed violence. After the researchers listed topics of abuse, 38% acknowledged that they had perpetrated violence.

Still according to the study, 67% of female university students reported having suffered some form of sexual harassment after being presented with a list of actions of this nature. 63% admit that they did not react when they suffered the violence.

Ellen Paes adds that confronting sexual harassment “is like swimming against a current, emotionally, physically, and financially exhausting, so many give up along the way or simply do not even try.”

In 2019, *Intercept Brasil* published the results of a data collection that gathered 209 occurrences of sexual violence in universities since 2008. The [report](#) suggests that more than 556 women were victims in 122 institutions.

The outlet listed 85 episodes of sexual harassment, 102 sexual assaults, and 22 psychological violences. Apology for rape, misogynistic discourse, violent hazing rituals, and the dissemination of intimate images were grouped under psychological violence.

## **A flirt, a harassment**

Marisa Sanematsu emphasizes that harassment is normalized in moments of student interaction and group belonging. According to her, from a social perspective, it “has nothing to do with desire, affection, compassion, or love. Violence manifests oppression, directly linked to gender inequality.”

University hazing rituals were the main stages where female freshmen suffered harassment. This practice has been banned in many universities after pressure from rectories and the presentation of bills such as [PL 445/2023](#), in the Federal Senate, which provides for the prohibition of reception activities that “involve coercion, aggression, humiliation, or any other form of constraint” against students.

At the University of Brasília (UnB), a [hazing ritual](#) in 2011 led female freshmen to be forced to lick sausages covered with condensed milk. Punishments for those involved were mild, and the following year the hazing continued, but this time the meats were hung around their necks.

A survey that analyzed 24 texts by Brazilian authors since 2012 concluded that 87.5% of the publications consider sexual violence as a gender-based violence, a sociocultural aspect. The [article](#) was written by students from the State University of Maringá (UEM) and the State University of Londrina (UEL): Mariana Silva Basso, Jordana Fontana, and Carolina Laurenti.

According to the study, sexual violence is also correlated with hierarchy in the educational field. Half of the articles discuss the hierarchical configuration between student and professor, and the harmful effect created between violence and the expectation of the return of “favors.”

Ellen Paes emphasizes: “I do not know a woman who has not gone through some type of harassment in her life. Unfortunately, we live in a structure that naturalizes this behavior, placing it on the same level as a flirt, a romantic advance.”

Beyond the direct consequences of abuse, the students address the mental health of university students. According to the WHO, survivors are more susceptible to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal behaviors, and panic disorder.

## The students

Giovana Oliveira, a student at the Institute of Chemistry at USP, reveals that safety against harassment on campus must be provided through infrastructure. From a more welcoming university environment, survivors would feel more comfortable reporting abuse, alongside conversation circles and parallel feminist movements.

**J.Press** also interviewed Carolina Bezerra, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Anthropology at the School of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences (FFLCH) at USP. Her work is developed from the perspective of survivors as a public health issue and within the educational sphere.

Carolina states that, as an undergraduate student between 1997 and 2004 and former director of *AmorCrusp*, the residents' association of USP's residential housing complex, she received many reports of rapes within the housing facilities. She emphasizes that students already knew sexual violence was present on campus, even before revelations in the mainstream media.

Carolina and Giovana highlight that low-income female students, residents of *Crusp*, are the most susceptible to experiencing sexual violence. They also reported the precarious conditions of USP housing and the lack of effectiveness in punishing students who abuse women in the residential blocks. Both state that the lack of support from the university regarding complaints also influences students to remain silent.

Giovana explains that, in the process of reporting a case of abuse, the survivor needs to speak with a social worker. “There will be a judgment of her,” she points out. The professional carries out a referral, which means that she will call the abuser to hear the story from his point of view.

*“We [women] are constantly intimidated into not speaking about the violence we experience.”*

**Giovana Oliveira, USP student**

In addition, the student comments that, in meetings with PRIP (USP’s Office of the Vice-Rector for Inclusion and Belonging), “they always say they are open to listening to the cases, but we know that in practice this does not happen.”

PRIP stated in an email to **Jornalismo Júnior** that the Council for Inclusion and Belonging is in the process of implementing the SUA (USP System for Welcoming, Recording, and Accountability for Situations of Harassment, Violence, Discrimination, and Other Human Rights Violations). However, the resolution of discussions regarding this new system is scheduled for December 2024.

PRIP’s advisory office also indicated the protocol under its responsibility as a strategy for assisting women victims of gender-based violence at the university. The manual suggests phone numbers for reporting on each campus, related to each type of violence suffered: LGBTphobia, racism, and sexual violence.

However, students are not the only ones at risk. In May 2024, an employee suffered an [attempted rape](#) at the State University of Ponta Grossa (UEPG), on the Uvaranas campus, in Paraná. The worker was returning home around 6:30 p.m. when she was threatened with a penknife and strangled with “rear naked choke” holds. The suspect was not found.

## Terms

*“We are called crazy, hysterical, liars. We are stigmatized as victims.”*

**Ellen Paes, activist**

There are different ways to refer to victims of sexual violence. “In Chile, researchers use ‘complainants’ and also ‘affected persons,’ because they understand the perspective as a public health issue. This idea of ‘affected persons’ shows that the entire community is affected,” says Carolina Bezerra.

The researcher analyzes the use of the term ‘victim’ in Portuguese as referring to a submissive, passive person, socially tainted, stained, and stigmatized. The term ‘survivor’ emphasizes that the person experienced a traumatic situation but can rebuild their life.

## Protocols

Harassment, as a veiled form of violence and a public health problem, is not restricted to Brazil. The research [#PasóEnLaU](#), conducted by the *Distintas Latitudes* team with support

from members of *Re LATAM* in 2019, studied the various protocols against harassment in 100 universities across Latin America.

Of the four Brazilian institutions analyzed, only the University of São Paulo officially has a protocol against harassment, created by the Office of the Vice-Rector for Culture and University Outreach (PRCEU) in 2017.

Approximately 70% of federal universities in the country take no measures to combat harassment and do not develop any prevention strategies. The research, conducted in 2020 by Bianca Spode Beltrame, PhD in Administration from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), examined 44 federal higher education institutions.

## Initiatives

The State University of Campinas (Unicamp) has the Sexual Violence Care Service, an assistance body linked to the Advisory Committee on Gender and Sexuality, which integrates the Executive Directorate of Human Rights (DEDH). The specialized ombudsman's office aims to welcome members of the university community who have experienced sexual violence.

At USP, the lack of institutional measures generated mobilization among faculty, students, and staff to combat episodes of sexual violence. Giovana Oliveira describes the *Olga Benário Women's Movement* as a major pillar in this struggle.

The group carries out urban occupations for women who have suffered violence, offering legal and psychological support throughout Brazil. Already active in several universities across the country, last year the movement began expanding at USP and received more than 90 complaints from students.

The [Rede Não Cala!](#) (Don't Be Silent Network) was formed in 2016 by faculty members of the Network of Female Professors and Researchers for the End of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence at USP. The professionals act independently and autonomously to assist "people who felt assaulted, create ideas for the reformulation of the institution's administrative processes, and develop educational actions for awareness" at the university, according to the project's website.

*"All of us, from any social movement or any place in society, must take upon ourselves the responsibility to fight rape culture."*

**Ellen Paes**