Gender-based violence among university students: A challenge for higher education

Violencia de género en estudiantes universitarias: Un reto para la educación superior

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Background
Due to the growing focus on violence against women as a significant public policy and public health concern, there is an urgent need for systematic studies capable of examining this issue in all its complexity (Hébert et al., 2017; Rivas-Rivero & Bonilla-Algovia, 2020). Researchers in this area have gradually shown greater interest in the mental health implications of gender-based violence. A number of studies have found high levels of anxiety and moderate to high levels of depression among survivors of this violence, with symptoms persisting even after women have ended their relationships with their abusers (Martínez et al., 2013). Elsewhere, researchers working with survivors have found signs of anguish, sadness caused by low self-esteem, sudden mood swings, episodes of irritability, sleep disorders and other problems (Domenech del Río & Sirvent García del Valle, 2017). In the face of these difficulties, support networks have been shown to offer women the emotional and practical support they need. This is a key part of the process of recovering well-being (Woemer et al., 2019). Within these networks, family and friends have important roles to play, as they can help to boost self-confidence and reduce feelings of isolation (Muñoz Cobo et al., 2009). Also central to these support networks are groups that offer a critical perspective on gender issues and can encourage survivors of gender-based violence to take steps toward further emancipation. This is a role fulfilled by the feminist movement as a whole, and often specifically by university-based feminist groups.

Aims
The objectives of this article are: To identify the mental health consequences of gender-based violence perpetrated by the partners of Chilean women university students; to investigate the difficulties of young women experience in ending these kinds of relationships; and to analyze the roles of formal and informal support networks that can help women confront gender-based violence.

Method & procedures
This study used a qualitative methodology. The researchers conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with women university students attending daytime classes at three regional universities in Chile. Eligible for inclusion were women undergraduates who reported having past or present experience as victims of gender-based violence in the context of heterosexual relationships. Face-to-face interviews were carried out during the second half of 2019. According to self-reported data, the types of violence the interviewees had experienced were psychological, physical and sexual.

Results & discussion
In recounting their experiences, the participants reported having experienced symptoms of depression to varying degrees, as well as suicidal ideation, panic attacks and anguish, among other symptoms. Many of their statements also pointed to feelings of insecurity, a lack of energy and low self-esteem. Due to the mental health problems caused by violence, the women reported having difficulties in ending their relationships with their abusers. Support networks take on great importance in helping women overcome these difficulties. Specifically, friends play an essential role in offering support and providing women with the tools they need to escape these abusive relationships, and with advice and material support. The interviewees also highlighted the importance of the feminist mobilizations at Chilean universities in 2018.

This movement created spaces for dialogue that allowed women to share their stories and to recognize and explicitly label their own experiences as cases of violence. University students who had been victims of sexual harassment in the university setting reported feeling similarly supported by this movement (Ramírez Raunig, & Trujillo Cristoffanini, 2019).

Conclusion

In broad terms, the experiences reflected in this study shed light on the effects of gender-based violence on young women. In the specific context of university life, this violence has implications both for women's overall well-being and for their opportunities to succeed academically. Meanwhile, the study confirms the significant role of support networks and the importance of the feminist movement as a protective factor against this kind of violence. Based on these findings, it is more urgent than ever to raise awareness of the role that institutions of higher education can play in the fight against gender-based violence. There is also a clear need for the Chilean government to adopt measures that address the phenomenon of gender-based violence in broader, farther-reaching terms, as the current legislation on domestic violence, Law 20.066, does not take into account couples who do not live together or have children in common, thus excluding the relationships between many young people. Additionally, as Villegas (2018) has underlined, this legislation does not offer legal protection to women based on gender or address the unequal power relations between men and women. In this context, the university is a strategic space, but not the only one, to promote the demands of the community and to further research in this sphere. especially considering technical and ethical difficulties of asking certain questions to children. Finally, the process of victimization and its effects is clearly related to socioeconomic access, indicating that future ways of intervention should specially focus on mental health of those that have less opportunities to have treatment.

Keywords: education, feminism, gender-based violence, universities

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