

Towards a politics of listening in universities: Equal opportunities offices, gender procedures and the lack of listening to the voices of victims in Chilean universities.

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Abstract

The gap between the promises of universities to resolve complaints and the reality has been the subject of Sara Ahmed's research on complaints within universities in the U.K. (2021). This paper examines how Chilean universities process gender violence complaints and to what extent their protocols are able to resonate the voices of victims, thereby practising a "politics of listening" (Bassel, 2017) in the university. Despite the success of the Chilean feminist student movement and the subsequent implementation of equal opportunities offices and sexual harassment protocols (Dinamarca and Trujillo, 2021), universities face challenges in institutionally channeling complaints with regard to gender violence (Barra and Montes, 2022). The paper presents the results of this research – based on qualitative interviews with equal opportunities officers and officers – and a sonic research exhibition "Listening to their voices" that aims to demonstrate the sonic dimensions of resonance and listening on a political level.

Full paper

Prior to the pandemic, the 2018 Chilean student feminist movement sharpened the demand for gender equality, sexual harassment protocols, and the inclusion of gender in the curriculum (Hiner and López, 2021; Muñoz, 2020; Simbürger and Undurraga, 2013; Zerán, 2018). While in 2016 only two universities had an equal opportunities office (Undurraga and Simbürger, 2018), in 2020 more than 40 Chilean higher education institutions maintain policies, protocols or regulations on their web pages aimed at the prevention, investigation and/or punishment of sexual harassment or other types of gender violence committed by university members and/or in university spaces (Santelices, 2021).

Despite the success of the feminist student movement and the subsequent implementation of equal opportunities offices and sexual harassment protocols (Dinamarca and Trujillo, 2021), universities face challenges in institutionally channeling complaints with regard to gender violence (Barra and Montes, 2022). This is further documented in the omnipresence of funas (public call-outs and/or acts of public shaming) in Chilean universities over the last few years in relation to sexual harassment cases (Hiner and López, 2021), thus pointing to a gap between what institutions aspire to resolve through their complaint channels and procedures and the reality of how complaints are processed. In general, the emergence of

funas over the last few years can also be explained by the emergence of new political subjectivities amongst young people, as Hatibovic, Sandoval and Cárdenas (2012) found for students in Valparaíso universities.

The gap between the promises of universities to resolve complaints and the reality of their (partial) failure has been the subject of Sara Ahmed's research on complaints within universities in the U.K. (2021). Ahmed used oral and written testimonies of students and academics who formally made complaints to universities, in relation to sexual harassment and working conditions, in order to carry out a feminist phenomenological analysis of how complaints are processed. She demonstrates that filing complaints and getting them processed is a lot of work for victims. Additionally, complaints are rarely resolved in a satisfactory manner, and complaint procedures leave victims more exposed and revictimized within the bureaucracy and power structures of universities (Ahmed, 2021). This may be related to the fact that according to Les Back "our culture is one that speaks rather than listens" (2007: 7). Social theorist Hartmut Rosa (2019) frames this as a problem of resonance that is indicative of our relation with the world.

For Bassel (2017), a politics of listening defines listening as a social and political process that aims for the disruption of power and privilege and promotes equality. Listening would thus have to be a capacity that needs to be improved (Back, 2007), allowing better resonance (Rosa, 2019) and working towards a "politics of listening" that considers gender (Butterwick, 2012) within universities and equal opportunities offices, thus creating better dialogues based on empathetic processes of listening (Ramm, 2015).

In an analysis of sexual harassment protocols of four gender units in Chilean universities, Flores-Bernal (2019) identified the need to improve complaint channels that continue to protect the harasser and not the victim, and to work on policies that prevent sexual harassment, thus confirming Ahmed's diagnosis of "the politics of complaint" and pointing to a problem of listening. Against this background and with a new law (21,369) that became effective in September 2022, forcing universities to proactively develop policies that prevent gender violence, there is a need for researching the practices of processing gender-based violence complaints in universities (Hiner and López, 2021) and to examine to what extent they create real listening and reparations for the victims.

Based on the evidence discussed above, this paper presents the results of a study that analysed how gender violence complaints are processed by Chilean universities and to what extent Chilean universities practise a "politics of listening" with regard to victims (students and academics) of sexual harassment.

For this study, we carried out twelve qualitative interviews with equal opportunities officers and academic trade union representatives as well as fifteen interviews with victims (students and academics) of sexual harassment in four regional universities (region of Valparaíso) in Chile. The theme of a politics of listening will further be discussed on a methodological level in the setting of research exhibition "Listening to their voices" (October 2024). Based on snippets of qualitative interviews with gender violence victims at universities, student representatives and equal opportunity officers, as well as document analysis. This installation will problematize how gender based violence complaints are processed at universities and center the lack of a politics of listening.

References

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