

“Count on Me” Project: tackling violence against women at university games

Projeto “Conte Comigo”: enfrentamento da violência contra as mulheres nos jogos universitários

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The university is an instrument of social change, capable of bringing new thoughts and critical analyses to the community. With the expansion of the feminist movement in Brazil, the discussion about gender relations has increased, with demands for symmetrical relations, juxtaposing university spaces to such demands. In this context, in the university games between medical schools (Intermed), violence against women has become evident, with the need for a center able to provide protection to students and promote changes in the accomplishment of such events. Based on this reality, the idea of the “Count on Me” project has emerged.

Experience report: At the organization of “Intermed” 2017, a group of women proposed to construct an environment where the participants could find safeguard in an oppressor context. A support tent was created, in which complaints of transgressions that occurred during the event would be heard. To optimize the approach to specific complaints, training was carried out together with the Special Police Force for Women’s Assistance for the project volunteers, in addition to the creation of a network of which function during the event was: to provide an emergency care shift in the tent; Minute Book for the recording of complaints and ornaments to identify the volunteers. In 2018, the participants of “Count on Me” project helped in the drafting of the statute that regulates the organization of “Intermed”, assigning punishments to some types of violence. Additionally, this document formalized the requirement for a physical space for the project in all editions.

Discussion: In a few years, the “Count on Me” project established itself as an apparatus for the safety and well-being of the female participants. As violence against women is a public health problem, this innovative measure showed to be effective in confronting sexism.

Conclusion: Even though the implementation of “Count on Me” project can be considered a success, multiple efforts are still necessary to make the university environment a fair one for all students, which depends on the volunteers’ engagement with frequent trainings, the education of male students regarding the cause, to the coordination of Medical Schools that have the obligation to provide the best possible environment for all students.

Keywords: Feminism; Undergraduate Medical Education; Gender-Based Violence; Universities; Sexual Harassment.

RESUMO

Introdução: A universidade é instrumento de mudança social capaz de levar à comunidade novos pensamentos e análises críticas. Com a expansão do movimento feminista no Brasil, a discussão a respeito das relações de gênero se expandiu, com reivindicações por relações simétricas, juntando os espaços universitários a tais demandas. Nesse contexto, nos jogos universitários entre Faculdades de Medicina (Intermed), evidenciou-se a violência contra as mulheres, havendo necessidade de um núcleo capaz de prover proteção às estudantes e promover mudanças na condução de tais eventos. A partir dessa realidade, surgiu a ideia do projeto “Conte Comigo”.

Relato de experiência: Na organização do “Intermed” de 2017, um grupo de mulheres se propôs a estruturar um ambiente em que as participantes conseguissem salvaguarda em um contexto opressor. Foi criada uma tenda de apoio na qual seriam acolhidas queixas de transgressões que ocorressem durante o evento. Para otimizar a abordagem de queixas específicas, promoveu-se capacitação na Delegacia Especial de Atendimento à Mulher para as voluntárias do projeto, além da elaboração de uma rede para atuar durante o evento com: escala de pronto atendimento na tenda; livro-ata para registro das queixas e dos adornos para identificação das voluntárias. Em 2018, as participantes do “Conte Comigo” ajudaram na redação do estatuto que rege a organização do “Intermed”, atribuindo punições a alguns tipos de violência. Além disso, nesse documento, foi formalizada a obrigatoriedade de um espaço físico para o projeto em todas as edições.

Discussão: Em poucos anos, o “Conte Comigo” se estabeleceu como aparelho para a segurança e o bem-estar das participantes. Como a violência contra a mulher é um problema de saúde pública, essa medida inovadora se contrapôs a comportamentos machistas.

Conclusão: Mesmo com a implementação do “Conte Comigo” podendo ser considerada um sucesso, múltiplas ações ainda são necessárias para tornar o ambiente universitário justo para todos os estudantes, o que depende de engajamento das voluntárias com capacitações frequentes, educação dos estudantes homens quanto à causa e coordenação das escolas médicas que têm o dever de prover o melhor ambiente possível a todos os estudantes.

Palavras-chave: Feminismo; Educação de Graduação em Medicina; Violência de Gênero; Universidades; Assédio Sexual.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women can be defined as “any act of violence based on gender difference that results in physical, sexual and psychological suffering and harm to women”¹. It is a result of sexism, a type of historical prejudice that defends the domination of men over women based on a biological view of the subject².

One of its components is sexual harassment, described in the Penal Code, in article 216-A. It is a crime that establishes the existence of an employment relationship between the agent and the victim, in which the harasser uses work hierarchy to obtain sexual advantages³. If the behavior is practiced on the streets or in other contexts, it configures another crime: indecent assault, defined as, for instance, “rubbing oneself against someone against their will, groping someone, touching an individual on any part of their body in a sexual manner, aiming at obtaining sexual gratification”⁴. The present study, regarding technical terms, addresses indecent assault. However, the term “sexual harassment” is used, considering its accessibility and universality in the media.

From the expansion of the feminist movement in Brazil since the mid-1960s and the beginning of questions about gender relations in the 1990s, the discussion about the female universe, gender and power relations has expanded, encompassing new aspects⁵. From this context, women, in their awareness-raising process, transformed personal and individual issues into political ones, and have organized themselves into politically active groups called “collectives”⁶.

From the perspective of feminist university collectives, sexist behaviors identified in higher education institutions (HEIs) should be reproached. Some scientific studies corroborate the existing disparity between genders in the university. A study carried out by the Instituto Avon/Data Popular, in 2015, with 1,823 students in Brazil on gender violence in the university environment showed that 67% of women acknowledged having already suffered some type of violence inside the university⁷. In 2018, in a survey carried out by the “USP Women’s Office”, at the University of São Paulo (USP), 13,377 students were asked about the university environment, and, of these, 71% considered USP a sexist environment, whereas 26% have already experienced moral violence and 7% sexual violence – with the latter being often related to the “parties” space⁸.

In the collectives, when trying to integrate HEIs to the demands of the new generations, the framework of the university structure started to be redesigned. For example, at USP located in the municipality of Ribeirão Preto, a Committee was established to investigate allegations of Gender-based Discrimination, Harassment and Violence Against Women (CAV-Mulheres USP-RP). In 2018, the committee released the

“General guidelines for institutional intervention actions in situations of violence and discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation”. Among them, there are guidelines for the comprehensive care of the victim, which relies on promoting the subject’s autonomy in situations of violence, the commitment with the systematization of data related to what happened and the continuity of care, among others⁹.

In this context, considering possible interventions that could be carried out in universities in the Midwest (MW), some of the traditional events of institutions, such as interuniversity games, started to be rethought, aiming to adapt them to these new demands.

The university games between medical schools are known as “Intermed” games, being played in different parts of the country, in different editions. For the Federal District (DF), the micro-regional edition corresponds to “Intermed - DF” and the macro-regional, which includes the other schools in the Midwest (MW), corresponds to “Intermed - MW”. Each edition is carried out by an organizing Academic Athletic Association (AAA). An AAA is a student organization with a sports-related characteristic, whose main objective is to promote sports practice in the university environment¹⁰. The schools participating in “Intermed” are invited through their own athletic associations and their students are under the responsibility of these athletic associations.

In 2017, based on the analysis made by several feminist university collectives of the MW about the experience of the event, it became clear the need to establish a permanent support center capable of providing protection to female “Intermed” participants, in addition to the need for changes in the implementation and structure of such events. Based on this circumstance, the “Count on Me” project emerged.

Therefore, this descriptive study aims to report the process of the project creation, structuring and the results already attained by this initiative.

EXPERIENCE REPORT

At the university games, violence and sexism are intrinsically reproduced and can be identified based on the analysis of different components. During the games, the insults uttered at the female players by part of the fans show the subjugation of the male over the female gender, both in the form of “war cries” and as individual comments. Expletives are commonly related to the female players’ sex life and their bodies, objectifying them and giving them a connotation of contempt¹¹.

Moreover, at the “parties” that take place during the event, it is common for the female players to have their arms grabbed, followed by forced kisses, inappropriate touches and physical intimidation. Furthermore, music is the most explicit

and passively accepted vehicle of this type of violence¹¹. For instance, a song played numerous times in past editions was “Helicopter”, by DJ Guuga with the participation of MC Pierre, whose lyrics say:

“Tu vai fuder no céu piranha, dentro do helicóptero... Piranha tu quis o céu, (...) qual que vai ser? Vai dar ou vai descer?... O mar tá lá embaixo, nós tá aqui em cima. E ela tá achando que nós tá brincando, não tô brincando..., se ficar de palhaçada eu tacho no oceano”¹². (You’re gonna fuck in the sky, bitch, inside the helicopter... Bitch, you wanted the sky, (...) which one will it be? It’s my way or the highway... The sea is down there, we are up here. And she thinks we’re kidding, I’m not kidding..., if she kids with me, I’ll toss her in the sea)¹².

Thus, the female students who attend these events expecting to be entertained end up placing themselves in situations of fear and social disrespect by an important part of the students who reproduce sexist patterns learned in society.

The project emerged during “Intermed - DF”, in 2016, when the report of a rape that would have taken place in one of the event’s student accommodation areas was circulated. At the time, a discussion was initiated about the need for a support center for women during the games. In the second edition of the same year, at “Intermed - MW”, some students, who were organized independently from the event, distributed bracelets during the festivity, identifying themselves as a source of support for other female students.

In the following year, a group of women from the “Security Commission” of the AAA, the organizer of “Intermed - DF” proposed to draw up a program to embrace women, in which participants victims of violence could be protected during the celebration. Then, the proposal made at the “Intermed-MW” in the previous year was retrieved and based on that, the “Count on Me” project was created in the first half of 2017.

At the time, this same group of women met with the chief deputy of the Special Police Force for Women’s Assistance of the Federal District (DEAM-DF, *Delegacia Especial de Atendimento à Mulher do Distrito Federal*) and held a training program to help victims of sexual harassment among a group of volunteers. These consisted essentially of female students participating in the event, regardless of their college of origin and undergraduate period. The training was part of a project already established by the DEAM called “Lidera – Empoderar para Multiplicar” (Lead – Empowering to Multiply), aimed at community leaders regarding combating the violence against women. The project works through workshops that address gender issues, different forms of violence prevention and basic measures to help the victims. In the following “Intermed”, all previously trained female

volunteers were responsible for sharing this content with the new volunteers who joined the project.

The initiative is based on a structure capable of embracing women at any time during the event, based on two pillars: a fixed support and a mobile one. The fixed one consists of a support tent, strategically placed close to the party venue, in which complaints of different types that occur during the “happy-hours” are received. In the tent there is a Minute Book, in which the aggressor’s name, the school to which they belong, what happened and the date are recorded, aiming to keep a quantitative and qualitative history of the transgressions. At the end of the service, the female students were offered the possibility of being taken to a health unit, police station or lodging place. Unfortunately, the Minute Book used during the event was lost after the last edition of Intermed, in 2019, which makes it impossible to categorically quote the types of violence recorded in the book. Fixed support also counts with an organization network of female volunteers, scheduled for emergency care to meet the demands. Mobile support, on the other hand, is performed the way it was carried out in 2016: female volunteers identify themselves as a “source of support” through the use of badges and special bracelets. Therefore, throughout the day, and not just at the parties, the project manages to be present while providing help.

Due to its excellent results, the project acquired new proportions, gaining more autonomy and respect. One of these achievements was the space for participation and speeches during the daily meetings of the event organization. In these meetings, the organizing AAA, together with those responsible for each participating AAA, analyzes all the events of that day and makes decisions on each case. With this space guaranteed, it was possible to explain the violence that occurred, which allowed the collective organization of different forms of punishment and warning to the denounced parties.

The applied penalties ranged from the loss of game scores by the AAA responsible for the aggressor in the competition to the individual expulsion of participants from the event, depending on the severity of the aggression. As for collective aggressions (such as “war cries”), the AAA was held responsible as a whole, and in specific interpersonal violence, both the participant and the AAA bore the consequences.

Another important achievement occurred in 2018, when the participants of the “Count on Me” project helped to draft the new statute of the Intermed Midwest League (LICO, *Liga Intermed do Centro-Oeste*), which regulates the organization of “Intermed - MW”. Under article 52, the participant who “proceeds with verbal aggression of a personal nature, such as racial offenses, xenophobia, offenses of a sexist nature, offense to religious beliefs, among others” is subject to written warning

and, under article 53, the participant who “is involved in fights or retaliation, physical aggression, racial offenses, sexual harassment, robbery or theft” may be suspended.

Furthermore, within the scope of the project’s achievements, the statute formalized the obligation for the organizing AAA to provide a physical space for the project, in addition to bracelets and badges for its participants. The creation of an easily accessible physical structure to protect the privacy of the victims was also mandatory, aiming to create a permanent and lasting feature for the “Count on Me” project.

DISCUSSION

Created aiming at the students’ relaxation and socialization, ‘university games’ have become the setting for the reproduction of collectively learned behaviors. This context is a common feature in informal environments, as the rigor required in formal socializations has been abandoned, contributing to the exercise of violence and oppression.

Therefore, the extra-academic scenario has become a social escape mechanism, in which one believes there is an implicit permission to break social rules under the pretext of informality. University games are a social projection of the problem and provide the materialization of violence, mainly of a sexual and moral nature.

That said, some points need to be considered for a full understanding of the impact of the presented project.

Games and parties are just two of the existing scenarios for the practice of violence against women in the university environment. Violence takes shape in other spaces, such as classes and lectures, both in the hierarchical relationships between teachers and students and among the students themselves. However, there is a major limitation in the characterization of this type of violence within the university, both due to the fear of retaliation on the part of the victims, and the fact that, for many authorities, such violence only exists when it leaves severe physical marks in the victim, as narrated by the researcher Heloísa Almeida in: “Sexual and gender violence at the university: from the secrecy to the struggle for recognition”¹³. Therefore, the devaluation of psychological violence or harassment without physical contact characterizes yet another type of violence: the institutional one¹⁴.

As a center for critical analysis of society, the university makes room for the process of awareness-raising based on the personal and institutional perception of a structural problem such as violence. Within this context, it is important to address the behavior of the aggressor and of witnesses in these situations. According to a survey by Instituto Avon/Data Popular, approximately 38% of male students admitted to having committed some type of violence, whether sexual,

psychological, moral, physical or of intellectual disqualification based on gender⁷. Regarding the behavior of witnesses, a Nigerian study on the preparation of medical students to recognize and respond to gender violence showed that 59.8% of respondents believe that it is not a medical competence to be involved in how a couple resolves their conflicts and prefer not to act because they consider it an “invasion of privacy”¹⁵.

Furthermore, violence is also a public health problem. According to the Brazilian Yearbook of Public Safety 2020 (“*Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2020*”), 35.5% of women who were victims of first-degree murder in 2019 were victims of femicide, demonstrating a 7.1% increase in the femicide rate per 100,000 women between 2018 and 2019. The analysis of the last eleven years produced by the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA, *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada*) according to the Atlas of Violence 2021, indicates that the homicides of women inside their homes increased, while those outside their homes decreased in the same period, indicating a likely increase in domestic violence¹⁶. These numbers are alarming within the current context of structural sexism and raise an alert regarding the importance of implementing preventive strategies.

With this in mind, it is important to emphasize that the university, as a space for teaching and social critical analysis, poses an excellent opportunity to break the vicious cycle of gender violence. Medical education must contemplate all the complexity dimensions of humanized care and interpersonal relationship. It is essential that, during undergraduate school, while training health agents with the capacity for socio-cultural changes, the public health problem posed by gender violence be addressed, as well as opening spaces for the personal perception of the perpetuation of aggressive attitudes that is complicit with violence (whether as aggressor or witness), in addition to the perpetuation of institutional violence.

The project is relevant, as it shows the academic community that impunity should not be accepted in any environment, even if it is totally informal, such as university games. Furthermore, the idea that there is an implicit permission for the breaking of social rules at the extra-academic level is proven to be false, making it clear that no abuse should be tolerated in any setting, regardless of its level of formality.

The project’s main pillar is the adequate embracement of violence victims, promoting support for those in need, validating their complaints and giving vent to emerging demands. With little time of its existence, the “Count on Me” project has established itself as an important tool for the safety of the participants, by providing physical and symbolic spaces (with power of action and speech) within the largest university event of the courses of medicine of the MW.

Regarding the structuring of the project, in order to systematize and standardize assistance, the Minute Book was used to record the approach used during the embracement. Furthermore, its inclusion as a mandatory instrument of "Intermed" through the LICO statute, makes its inclusion as a natural constituent of the event a tendency.

However, the "Count on Me" project has some limitations: the possibility of loss of quality of the assistance provided over time, if there is no continuous and regular training in partnership with DEAM; the final decision on punishment is exclusive to the organizing AAA, and there may be partial and subjective conclusions; and, finally, the absence of a prior description of the project's implementation and performance, with the transfer of its characteristics being carried out predominantly in an oral manner, which has resulted in the loss of relevant information, including for this report, such as details on DEAM training and systematization of assistance in the Minute Books over the years.

It is important to point out that no other scientific publications were found about the project proposal in the LILACS, Scielo and PubMed databases, giving this study a high added value.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The "Count on Me" project provided an unprecedented environment in the MW "Intermed", during which it became possible to typify the most common transgressions that occur in the event, making it subject to interventions.

It is important to point out that the maintenance of the project's success in its purpose depends on the joint actions of the main agents involved in it: the organizing AAA must provide the physical space and materials to identify the female volunteers, in addition to the space for dialoguing during daily meetings; and the volunteers must maintain ongoing training on a regular basis for new participants, with continuous improvement, preferably with the support of DEAM. Therefore, the tendency is to improve comprehensive assistance to victims, with an effective response to transgressions.

As improvements to the project, better systematization of the incidents that occurred, such as the computerization of records, have been suggested, so that the transgression profile follow-up is not lost and, consequently, there is no harm to the possibility of intervention of the complaints.

Moreover, it is important that actions in favor of gender equality are not limited to university games. Medical schools must consider in their curricula the approach to gender violence as a public health issue, in addition to positioning the medical professional in this context as an agent capable of sociocultural change. The fight against this type of violence

must be initiated at the HEI itself, defending its students, even against institutional violence itself. However, knowing that most Brazilian HEIs do not have experience in the adoption and implementation of policies to combat violence against women, the use of the CAV-Mulheres USP-RP guidelines is suggested as a basis for the articulation of policies.

Unfortunately, as the "Count on Me" project is an association of more than a dozen schools, it is unlikely it will become a program to be implemented in a standardized way in the medical schools. However, within the scope of possibilities of each school, it is possible, and recommended to develop programs with the same intention of creating a place of embracement for victims of violence organized through partnerships between women's collectives and the courses' coordinators.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed substantially to the study conception and planning; drafting and critical review of the manuscript; and participated in the approval of the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

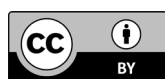
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