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An Agenda in Motion: Women's Issues in Latin American Higher Education

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In 2015, on a reality show in Brazil called “Master Chef,” a 12-year-old female participant started receiving harassing messages from male members of the audience. As a result, an organization for women’s rights decided to start a campaign on Twitter to condemn sexual harassment against girls, using the hashtag: #miprimeroasido (my first harassment). Brazilian women reacted to that and started sharing their experiences of sexual harassment, most of which took place when they were young girls. The following year, in 2016, a similar movement was started by a Colombian feminist who lived in Mexico City. She promoted the use of another hashtag: #MiPrimerAcoso (my first harassment) to denounce the violence suffered by women in Mexico. In the days that followed, more than 100,000 women participated in this initiative of sharing early recollections of sexual harassment. Again, most of these women reported having been harassed when they were very young, little girls between seven and nine years old. Violence against women appears to be a very common practice in Latin America. Indeed, the region reports the most significant number of female homicides worldwide.

The culture of *machismo* seems to be an intrinsic characteristic of the relationship between women and men in most Latin American countries. Women living in these countries experience physical and psychological violence, discrimination, lack of equal opportunities, and limited recognition for their work, abilities, and capacities. In 40 years, there have been only ten women presidents in Latin American—in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Panama. However, the role of women in the most prestigious positions in the legislature, government, industry, science, business, and society in general is marginal. The MeToo and Time’s Up movements (2017) deal with the issue of women’s role in present-day society and exhibit cases of male power directed against women, particularly those in more vulnerable positions. This article offers a reflection about what is happening in this regard at universities in the region.

WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In Latin America, the gender gap in education is not as pronounced as in other regions of the world: in 2013, higher education enrollment was about 13.15 million women vs. 10.44 million men. Access is not a significant issue but other problems demand attention, for instance what types of higher education institutions and programs women are able to access, women's drop-out rate due to youth pregnancy, and disparities regarding the labor market as well as salaries.

There are three primary areas of concern in current debates regarding gender and harassment: disparities between men and women concerning the most prestigious and best paid positions in academia and administration; sexual harassment suffered by female college students; and female faculty falling victim to abuse of power by men in higher positions.

In Mexico, during the most optimistic periods, only about 16 percent of university presidents have been women; there is still a long way to go in this area. While the number of women in senior leadership has increased, on the whole this is a reflection of how hard it is for women to reach top positions in universities. The glass ceiling seems unbreakable. The same takes place in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas, where female enrollment represents less than 10 percent of recruitment. In 2009, only 19 percent of women belonged to the top level of the most important peer review system for faculty.

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As a consequence of the public debate on the MeToo and Time's Up movements and the #MiPrimerAcoso campaign, Mexican student activists became more proactive in denouncing male faculty members accused of harassing female students. Accusations have taken place at the largest and most prestigious universities in Mexico: the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the Center for Economics Research and Teaching, Autonomous Metropolitan University, Ibero-American University, and others. Due to the lack of relevant protocols, public accusations via social networks and demonstrations on campuses were the primary means used by students to highlight sexual harassment. In cases of power abuse against students, sexual favors for instance, formal mechanisms must be in place to start procedures against faculty at these institutions. At present, many universities are working on this topic. Fewer cases

of harassment or targeting of female faculty come to light for different reasons: the power structure in academia, the career implications of denouncing male peers or managers, and the fact that women may feel more vulnerable. If a movement similar to #MyFirstHarassment was promoted in higher education institutions, it is not hard to imagine that many women would follow suit.

Public universities in Argentina share characteristics with Mexico. Around 48 percent of university scholars are women, but they do not occupy leading positions in similar proportions. There are remarkably few female rectors, only five at more than 57 national public universities, although the number of female deans has grown in recent years. This situation is also reflected at the national council for scientific and technical research, where 54 percent of early-career researchers are women, but only 25 percent make it to the top of the career ladder.

There has been some progress toward a gender agenda in recent years. A national university became the first to extend maternity leave to six months for women and one month for men (it is usually three months for women and three days for men). National universities created over the past 20 years have adopted gender policies and action protocols for the prevention of gender or sexual violence or discrimination. In 2015, the most well-known national university, Universidad de Buenos Aires, passed a resolution for such a protocol, which proved to be timely as a case of sexual harassment was brought by students against a faculty member in the same time period. Since then, it has primarily been students who have brought new accusations using resources such as social media. Additionally, student organizations, which historically have been active in demonstrations, have shown significant presence at the International Women's Day march on March 8. Up to now, they seem to be taking the lead in setting an agenda that addresses discrimination against women in the country.

MOVING FORWARD

Clearly, the situation in Latin America regarding violence and discrimination against women needs much more attention, and calls for the development of protocols as well as a continuing discussion about how to increase equal opportunities in academia, universities, and the labor market. In the case of higher education institutions, there seems to be a convergence between groups of activists demanding public attention to particular cases—mainly with the help of social networks and mass media—and authorities, who cannot ignore the victims any longer. This could be a signal that higher education institutions are moving to change their policies in order to prevent sexual harassment from happening, and shaping policies to solve the disparities between women and men at all levels. Both students and fac-

ulty are more aware of their rights and limits. This is good news for the region, but it also means a major challenge for higher education institutions.

Note: While this article was in production, an important protest at Chilean universities was taking place. Several university buildings of at least 15 institutions have been occupied by female student activists, including the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. Students are protesting against gender violence and for establishing protocols to report sexual harassment cases, to achieve a non-sexist education and to change the curriculum among other demands. ■

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Sexual Harassment at African Higher Education Institutions

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In Africa, enrolling in higher education institutions (HEIs) is an aspiration of many young people and their families and represents an investment in their own socioeconomic progress. This is why university graduation ceremonies are celebrated with great pomp—the ceremonies anticipate significant long-term benefits. Higher education institutions are the power engine of Africa's progress. Additionally, issues of gender equality and diversity have gained momentum in the twenty-first century as it has become widely acknowledged that balanced economic and social progress is only possible with these tenets. Most governments in Africa have adopted and ratified policies such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Freedoms (1948) and the African Union Gender Policy (2009), which mandate them to observe and practice gender equity and empower women in higher education institutions.

THE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

In Egypt, 99 percent of women experience sexual harassment. In South Africa, three-quarters of women experience some form of abuse or sexual violence. In 2014 and 2015,

South African police recorded 53,000 rape cases annually. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Rwanda, many women report sexual violence by intimate partners. In Uganda, sexual harassment and gender-based violence against women, including abductions and murder, make the headlines on a weekly basis. Globally, 35 percent of women experience physical or sexual violence of all kinds. Women suffer derogatory comments and unsolicited sexual advances.

Students enrolling in higher education institutions in Africa have different backgrounds: some are freshly graduated from high school, some are mature-age entrants. Over 90 percent of the younger students are from poor families. Unlike higher education institutions, secondary schools and most homes are restrictive and heavily regulated when it comes to relations between the sexes. Traditionally, girls and boys are socialized differently, which has a negative im-

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pact outside of these regulated spaces. Young female students entering HEIs are vulnerable, innocent, unexposed, and naïve, eager to explore their newly discovered freedom, sometimes ending up with unplanned pregnancies and dropping out altogether. The rampant, sexual manipulation of women, girls, and sometimes boys, happens within and outside the institutions. Most universities in Africa have gender policies and policies against sexual harassment, but several factors contribute to sexual harassment and gender-based violence. University hostels, where disadvantaged female and male students stay, are often cheap and unregulated, serving as the first location for sexual harassment because they attract sexual predators. Other contributing factors include financial need, the imperative to get good grades to open doors on a scarce labor market, graduate unemployment, and peer pressure. Monitoring systems are often in place, but are weakened by unprofessional administration. A strong patriarchal tradition, often aggravated by sheer misogynistic behavior, undermine female staff and students systematically, contributing to denying them advancement and ruining their academic careers. Some perpetrators of gender-based violence are persons of responsibility and influence on the students, such as faculty, course coordinators, and examination officers. Finally, substance abuse contributes to a culture that is uncondusive to respect