



## Article

# The Contribution of Critical Pedagogy to Feminist Research on Sexual Violence

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**Abstract:** As a form of scientific enquiry, feminist research aims to produce knowledge that is de-centred from, as well as decentres, androcentrism. It also establishes challenges that send us back to methodology and how we produce knowledge. Feminist research on sexual violence proposes a number of methodological challenges that open new paths for exploration: integrating intersectionality into research; reflexivity as a criterion of rigour; the development of research techniques that respect the voices and practices of women as active agents; and the role of emotions in research. In order to analyse to what degree methodological challenges are being met and what work is still to be done, we reviewed various Spanish studies (published between 2015 and early 2022) that used a feminist approach to research sexual violence. Subsequently, using illustrations from two studies we have implemented, we outlined how critical pedagogy can make an important contribution to the methodological challenges of feminist research in this field. The article proposes that a closer relationship between socio-educational praxis (critical methodology) and feminist approaches can contribute to an enrichment and improvement of scientific praxis (feminist methodology), as well as showing how knowledge production can straddle scientific concerns and social intervention.

**Keywords:** methodology; feminist; intersectionality; reflexivity; gender; violence



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## 1. Introduction

We understand feminist research as a critical approach to knowledge production that is based on the problematisation of certain apparently immutable scientific assumptions—objectivity, neutrality, and scientific universality—and the biases introduced by sexism and androcentrism (Anderson 2015). Although there has been rich debate between the different strands of feminist theory and epistemology on its principal ideas and approaches, there has been relatively little development of practical tools for the production of empirical knowledge (Biglia and Bonet 2017). This is not to say that feminist research considers classical research techniques to be invalid, rather that they need to be accompanied and complemented by methods that are capable of detecting and delving into the cracks of social reality where techniques such as the survey, the interview, and the focus group cannot go. Casado and Lasén (2012) argue that this problem can be overcome through the sociological, pedagogical, and psychosocial imagination because it permits us to create alternative approaches capable of bringing to light aspects of social reality not easily detected by conventional research tools.

Sexual violence is a complex and not easily defined concept. As such, we have limited our understanding to the manifestations of sexual violence that are formed by the triple axis of sexual binarism, hierarchical gender relations, and normative sexuality (Luxán et al. 2018). This definition includes two broad forms of sexual violence: on the one hand, that defined by the Spanish penal code as crimes against sexual freedom and indemnity<sup>1</sup>; and on the other, forms of violence that tend to be considered less serious but affect the

everyday lives of women and children by submitting them to systems of control, power, and structural domination—sexual harassment in the street being one example.

Focusing on these forms of sexual violence against women and children was not a trivial decision, but we feel it is justified by the decades long invisibilisation of this social problem. Relegated to the personal, insignificant, and anecdotal, public administration has hardly invested in quantitative and qualitative research on this issue. Because the Spanish state does not have a continuous programme of population surveys to establish the pervasiveness of sexual violence or the forms that it takes, the only way to track the scope and nature of the problem is through data on reported or prosecuted crimes (Ballesteros and Blanco 2021). However, a recent government report, The Macro-Survey on Violence against Women, estimates that 453,371 women, aged 16 or over and resident in Spain, have been raped at least once, but only 10 per cent have reported it to the police. Furthermore, this figure falls to 8 per cent for women who were victims of sexual violence not perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner (Ministerio de Igualdad 2020).

While statistics such as these provide some indication of the scope of the problem, there are a number of questions that must be addressed: How is the issue of sexual violence being approached in other settings, outside of public administration? What contributions, and based on what approaches, are being made in academia, social activist organizations, or the various bodies that provide support to victims of sexual violence in the judicial system? To what extent have feminist research approaches permeated these contributions? Is there sufficient research to influence the public policy agenda? What can critical pedagogy contribute to the methodological challenges posed by feminist research?

To address these questions, we have structured the article in six sections. Following the description of the study methodology (Section 2), we describe the main methodological approaches employed by Spanish feminist research on sexual violence (Section 3). Subsequently, following a brief outline of the premises of critical pedagogy (Section 4), we present some of the contributions that this discipline could make to the methodological challenges presented by feminist research, which we illustrate with some results from two studies that we have been involved in (Section 5). Finally, we conclude the article with some reflections aimed at summarising both perspectives (Section 6). This article has two principal purposes. First, to explore the extent to which feminist proposals and research methodologies are being employed in the study of sexual violence in the Spanish context. To do this, we provide a critical review of recent empirical studies and the various methodological approaches they have implemented. Second, to consider how critical pedagogy can contribute to the methodological challenges of feminist approaches through the development of feminist research tools that can be applied across all spheres of education. In other words, techniques that are useful in awareness creation, as part of training, in actions to foster collective responsibility in educational institutions that range from schools to universities and also include other spaces of non-formal education and socialization, such as activist collectives, social movements, and women's centres, amongst others. The ultimate aim of this paper is to develop feminist methodological proposals in the area of sexual violence and to therefore contribute to greater awareness and policy development.

## 2. Materials and Method

The study approaches the research questions in two ways. First, we conducted a review of the scientific literature produced in Spain between January 2015 and February 2022 on sexual violence, concentrating on the most representative research. In this sense, we wish to be clear that the method we employed should not be considered a systematic review, in the strict sense, but rather as a classical review of scientific literature guided by a series of quality criteria, which we outline below. Second, on the basis of the literature, we have developed a series of reflections and proposals, grounding these in the findings from two recent studies we have been published.

The review of the scientific literature was carried out through searches of the following databases<sup>2</sup>: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and ERIC, with some auxiliary searches on

Google Scholar. During the first stage of the search, the inclusion criteria were defined as: 1. empirical research in the field of social science; 2. studies conducted in Spain, at local, regional or national level; 3. studies whose theoretical framework or methodological design was based on a feminist research approach. Searches were conducted in Spanish and English for key terms in titles, abstracts and keywords. The results of the Spanish search were as follows: “sexual violence” AND “feminist methodology” (0 Scopus, 0 WoS, 0 ERIC, 2 Google Scholar); “sexual violence” AND “feminist” (9 Scopus, 1 WoS, 0 ERIC, 814 Google Scholar); and “sexual assault” AND “feminist” (9 Scopus, 0 WoS, 0 ERIC, 2689 Google Scholar). The same searches in English resulted in seven publications once studies not conducted in Spain were excluded. When the search was combined with “critical pedagogy” the results were even more limited. In fact, excluding Google Scholar results, no publications were identified that met the search criteria. In accordance with feminist proposals, the search criteria included academic publications and those produced by activist collectives (research reports not published through journals or universities)<sup>3</sup>. Once duplicates, false positives, and results that did not meet the initial criteria were screened out, 175 publications were identified.

In the second phase, we reduced the results of the initial search to 20 studies that met our criteria of having made a significant contribution to the analysis of sexual violence from a feminist perspective (12 academic studies and 8 conducted by activist collectives)<sup>4</sup>. In order to ensure that this final selection was not biased, it was independently assessed by two external experts in feminist research and both agreed that it was representative of the state of the art in Spain. The full list of publications, along with the author names, year of publication, and publisher (scientific journal, university, or activist collective) is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Final selection of 20 articles, theses and reports published between January 2015 and February 2022.

	Author(s) and Publication Year	Scientific Journal/Editorial
Academic studies	1. Rubio-Martín et al. (n.d.)	Revista Española de Sociología
	2. Ballesteros and Blanco (2021)	EMPIRIA Revista de Metodología de Ciencias Sociales
	3. Ranea (2021)	Femeris Revista Multidisciplinar de Estudios de Género
	4. Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2021)	Convergencia Revista de Ciencias Sociales
	5. Vergés and Gil-Juarez (2021)	Florianópolis Revista Estudios Feministas
	6. Alario (2020)	Doctoral thesis, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos
	7. Cagliero (2019)	Doctoral thesis, Universidad Rovira y Virgili
	8. Cagliero and Biglia (2019)	Revista Española de Ciencia Política
	9. Rodríguez-Martínez and Cuenca-Piqueras (2019)	Archives of Sexual Behavior
	10. Barjola (2018)	Doctoral thesis, Universidad del País Vasco
	11. Luxán et al. (2018)	Universidad del País Vasco
	12. Tardón (2017)	Doctoral thesis, Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Studies by activist collectives	13. Castellanos (2022)	Fundación CERMI-Mujeres [CERMI-Women’s Foundation]
	14. Atencio et al. (2021)	Asociación Alasur. Geoviolencias [Alasur Association—Geoviolence]
	15. Cillán et al. (2020)	Quesesepa.org [Letitbeknown]
	16. Hybridas and Kommons (2020)	Calala Fondo de Mujeres [Calala Women’s Fund]
	17. Amnistía Internacional (2018)	Amnesty International Spain
	18. Barcons et al. (2018)	Creación Positiva [Positive Creation]
	19. Burgos (2018)	Noctámbulas
	20. Muntané and García (2016)	AADAS (Associació Assistència Dones Agredides Sexualment [Association of Women who have been Sexually Assaulted]) y ALMENA, Cooperativa feminista [Feminist cooperative]Noctámbulas

In terms of the analysis, we used a grounded theory approach to conduct a thematic analysis of the 20 studies to identify which of the main constructs of feminist research had been applied, which included: situated knowledge; the formulation of research questions related to women's actual lives and experiences; giving prominence to women's own voices; a commitment to social transformation; and the use of analysis informed by feminist theories, intersectionality, and feminist methodologies (Haraway 1988; Anderson 2015; Ruan 2020). Subsequently, with the help of examples extracted from the publications reviewed, we illustrate how these concepts and proposals are addressed in the literature, as well as identifying the aspects of feminist approaches that are less present and require development (Jiménez 2021).

### 3. An Overview of Feminist Research on Sexual Violence in Spain

Given that, with one exception (Tardón 2017), all of the research was published from 2018 onwards, the first observation that we can make on the production of empirical work on sexual violence in Spain is that the introduction of feminist perspectives is a recent development. This tells us that there has been a basic failure to address this theme from the perspective of women—a cornerstone of feminist research. This deficit is mainly due to the fact that most of the work on violence against women has focused on gender-based violence, a concept that, as defined in Spain, is limited to the sphere of relationships with partners or ex-partners, such as in the Spanish Organic Law 1/2004 on Integrated Protection Measures against Gender-Based Violence<sup>5</sup>. This has overshadowed and relegated sexual violence to the background and given precedence to indicators focused on physical and psychological abuse, to the detriment of sexual violence. There is also the added difficulty of continued blindness to the fact that sexual violence can take place within a relationship with a partner or with an ex-partner (Martínez 2015). The centrality of gender-based violence has impacted public policy, meaning measures against sexual violence, such as the 2017 State Pact against Gender-Based Violence [*Pacto de Estado contra la Violencia de Género*], are only very recent developments and very limited in their scope<sup>6</sup>. Undoubtedly, the adoption of the State Pact has been influenced by the ratification of the 2014 Istanbul Convention as well as by recent events that have had an enormous media impact and led to widespread protests from feminist groups—for example, the 2016 *La Manada* [Wolf Pack] case and the #MeToo campaign (Tardón 2017; Matthews 2022).

A second finding relates to epistemology. Most of the studies on sexual violence that we reviewed were categorised under a “gender perspective”. On the one hand, this was applied in a rather loose way to mean a basic disaggregation of data between women and men in order to compare and identify inequalities. On the other, more complex approaches stressed how gendered inequality is not just a reflection of material conditions, but relates to power relations, social representations, prejudices, and stereotypes rooted in centuries of patriarchal domination that act to legitimate and perpetuate discrimination. While useful in terms of boosting the number of studies on gendered inequality, the dominance of this perspective (Schiebinger and Schrauder 2011; Bustelo 2017) has also been counterproductive. Namely, resulting in the displacement of critical feminist postures and epistemologies—empiricism, standpoint theory, postmodernism, and more contemporary strands (Harding 1987; Anderson 2015; Doucet 2018)—that seek to reformulate classical research processes.

Situated knowledge and self-reflection are two of the main premises of feminist research. Of the studies we analysed, the work of Vergés and Gil-Juarez (2021) on online *machista* violence stands out for their approach to these questions. Not only do these authors make their own research positions explicit, they also discuss how this influences knowledge production. By revealing their situated knowledge as a point of reference, they justify the choice of study concept (*machista* violence) and the research methodology. Their decision to include academic and non-academic research was, therefore, not arbitrary, but consistent with a dual commitment to formal academic publication and activism. In other words, the generation of knowledge through constant bidirectional dialogue between social

practice and academia. On this basis, the research task consists of making a “contribution to and, at the same time, a return to feminisms” (Vergés and Gil-Juarez 2021, p. 2, authors’ translation). Feminism, as such, is always political. In one of the first and most complete studies on sexual violence in Spain, Tardón (2017) makes her positionality clear (experience in politics and activism) and contemplates the influence this had on her research. The author recognizes, for example, how her experiences in politics and activism made it possible for her to observe and better understand the obstacles faced by both victims of sexual violence and the health professionals that care for them; what she called the “desolation encountered by victims and survivors” (p. 29, authors’ translation). Setting out from a position of situated knowledge and self-reflection permits the development of political measures that are different to those that come from mere technical criteria. In her study, Ranea (2021) reflects on how her own position as a woman might have influenced her interviews with men who pay for sex with prostitutes, a population characterized by homosociality and a desire to remain anonymous.

Recognising and acknowledging women’s lives and experiences is another premise that is essential to the aim of breaking down androcentric thinking. This requires asking questions from the perspective of women themselves: who is affected by sexual violence, what or who causes it, who is in a position of privilege or, on the contrary, of subjugation, and who is identified with the problem of sexual violence? Ranea (2021) explored the sexism that has traditionally framed the analysis of prostitution. She notes that women (prostitutes) are habitually the primary subjects of research and therefore come to embody prostitution, while the men (clients) who demand it remain concealed. From a feminist research perspective, she sees one of the main objectives of her research as subverting the frame of reference in order to “unload the weight of prostitution that has traditionally fallen on women and to shift the analysis from the construction of feminine subjectivities around prostitution to examine the relationship between prostitution and masculinity” (Ranea 2021, p. 77, authors’ translation). As such, without an interrogation of this architecture of androcentric knowledge around prostitution it is not possible “to generate knowledge that is committed to social change” (Ranea 2021, p. 76, authors’ translation). The author explains how androcentric knowledge avoids identifying men’s role on the demand side of the relation because neither masculinity nor its privileged position are problematised. Instead, “others [women] are analysed, labelled, stigmatized and required to change” (Ranea 2021, p. 76, authors’ translation). Another study showing how research can emerge from women’s experiences and perspectives is “Let it be Known: The Macro-Questionnaire on Sexual Violence” [*Que se sepa. El Macroquestionario sobre violencias sexuales*]. The authors (Cillán et al. 2020) describe how:

Let it be Known arose from within the framework of a feminist movement whose usual battleground is on social networks. It was born during a meeting in which, after several confessions, we discovered that all those present had experienced various forms of sexual violence and had never before spoken about it. (p. 4, authors’ translation)

Moving away from habitual approaches, the research questions in this study were formulated from the experiences of women themselves. This meant that the study went beyond facts and figures related to behaviour and types of crimes, etc., to address subjective perceptions and emotions.

Another feminist premise relates to the need to give prominence to the voices of women themselves, without supplanting their testimony, speaking in their name, or devaluing their subjectivities (Biglia 2015). In this respect, one of the principal objectives of the “Let it be Known” study was to give voice to the greatest number of women possible (Cillán et al. 2020). This had implications for the study design. In deciding not to limit the study population, the researchers sacrificed statistical representativity in favour of mass collection of responses. In terms of content, the questionnaire took an uncommonly broad approach to sexual violence; in addition to questions on the experiences of women in the intimate-sexual sphere, it also addressed types of sexual violence that are often ignored. In

addition, the questions were carefully worded so as not to make women feel like victims. This approach resulted in 479,360 responses to the survey. The analysis also undertook to identify differences based on respondents' race and the report was written and disseminated from a feminist perspective. Another study, carried out by Amnesty International ([Amnistía Internacional 2018](#)), used a qualitative research methodology, based on semi-structured interviews with 17 victims and survivors of sexual assault. The methodology was designed to permit the participants to give detailed accounts of their experiences of revictimization during the legal process. The study highlights the lack of credibility given to women's accounts of sexual violence throughout the whole process, from the initial forensic medical examination right through to the experience of giving oral evidence during court proceedings. In this respect, it is also particularly important to give voice to minority groups and for researchers to take great care not to modify the message participants wish to communicate. This makes it absolutely essential that researchers self-observe and recognise their own subjectivity ([Biglia 2015](#)). Along the lines of this process of self-reflection, [Castellanos \(2022\)](#) collected the testimonies of women with mental disabilities who had been sexually abused. She stresses the many prejudices and barriers that still condition how we listen to their stories: "In all healthcare and social fields we have difficulty giving credibility to accounts of experiences of sexual abuse" ([Castellanos 2022](#), p. 353).

In relation to the previous point, coproduction (researcher-research participants) is another premise of feminist knowledge production that aims to recognise and/or develop women's agency and to better inform public policy makers. While there has been progress in this area<sup>7</sup>, there is still a significant need for research in which the voices of women are mediated to the least degree possible. In this sense, [Muntané and García's \(2016\)](#) initiative is exemplary. They organised a group of survivors of sexual violence to collectively analyse reports on sexual assaults in Catalan newspapers and then compiled their recommendations.

The commitment to social transformation that characterizes feminist research is evident in all the studies cited so far. In addition to those studies that make explicit recommendations for policy and intervention measures ([Castellanos 2022](#); [Amnistía Internacional 2018](#); [Tardón 2017](#); [Cillán et al. 2020](#); [Muntané and García 2016](#)), others make implicit proposals that are deeply significant at a political level. For example, when [Barjola \(2018\)](#) analysed media coverage of the sexual assault and murder of the Alcásser girls<sup>8</sup>, she was ultimately aiming to produce feminist knowledge capable of exposing the narratives of terror that exert social control over women by reinforcing subordinate social roles and the threat of sanction. Her study also aims to raise awareness amongst women of how supposedly information-oriented media coverage perpetuates these narratives and impacts women's lives and bodies. Thus, by dissecting the political nature of representations of power in terms of the "sexual danger" of being a woman, [Barjola \(2018\)](#) provides a "tool for political-feminist struggle" in order to develop counternarratives of sexual violence that revert "the terrorizing force and dynamics of patriarchy on itself" (p. 278, authors' translation).

Another common element of the studies discussed up to this point is how they are underpinned by feminist theory. In this respect, we can highlight [Barcons et al. \(2018\)](#) work on sexual assaults and abuse through the analysis of legal judgments and sentencing documents. In doing so, they based their analysis on four key axes: intersectionality; an analysis of the androcentrism that underlies concepts of sexual violence; the inclusion of the institutional violence of judicial processes; and a study of the myths and stereotypes that underpin trials. Following a similar methodology, [Rubio-Martín et al. \(n.d.\)](#) articulated their analysis of the real rape myth by examining the effects of rape culture. This approach allowed them to uncover the disparity that exists between the reality of sexual assault offences that go to court and the attitude of many legal officials. [Cagliero \(2019\)](#) and [Cagliero and Biglia's \(2019\)](#) work on gender-based and sexual violence in universities was also premised on the acknowledgement of its structural nature. In other words, in the relationship between "these [acts of] violence and the culture of rape, gender stereotypes,

and heterosexist power relations on which academic organization are built" (p. 143, authors' translation). Finally, [Rodríguez-Castro et al. \(2021\)](#) analysed women's experiences of first-time sexual violence on the basis of the theoretical ideas of [Kelly's \(1988\)](#) sexual violence continuum. Through an analysis of testimonies on a digital platform, the authors showed how new technologies can be a vehicle for raising awareness and reporting offences. Also in a digital context, [Hybridas and Kommons \(2020\)](#) adopted an intersectional perspective to study online sexual violence. They concluded that the presence of racial, binary, moralist, and generational conditions worsened discrimination.

However, as we have already mentioned, there are still only a relatively small number of studies on sexual violence grounded in feminist approaches that question classical forms of knowledge production. In this respect, the greatest challenge facing researchers who wish to adopt a feminist approach is the development or design of appropriate methodological tools ([Biglia and Bonet 2017](#); [Jiménez 2021](#))<sup>9</sup>. Specifically, there is a lack of both quantitative and qualitative studies addressing the complexity of intersectionality in sexual violence. In this sense, [Rubio-Martín et al. \(n.d.\)](#) point out that the difficulty of analysing sexual violence has as much to do with the way the problem is understood and the limitations of basic analytic categories as the general lack of data that inhibits more complex analysis of structural forms of inequality.

Additionally, there are still very few reference works that provide a guide to the development and application of research techniques that meet feminist epistemological proposals and which can be used individually or in combination with classical methods ([Biglia 2015](#)). This deficiency is especially notable when the objective is to study viewpoints, subjectivities, or discourses related to intimacy, emotions, non-hegemonic and non-normative social positions, the intersection between public and private, and "everyday controversies and feelings of unease" ([Lasén and Casado 2012](#)). Techniques such as photovoice ([Castellanos 2022](#)), photo-elicitation, feminist ethnographies, auto-ethnographies, narrative production, bodily itineraries, World Café, etc. are all part of a repertoire of methods that require further development ([Mendia et al. 2015](#); [Burgos 2018](#)). In a sociohistorical context where hybrid online-offline sexual violence is ever more common, it is also important to consider research techniques appropriate to digital platforms ([Rodríguez-Castro et al. 2021](#); [Cillán et al. 2020](#); [Atencio et al. 2021](#)).

In the next section, we provide an outline of the main points of confluence between critical pedagogy and feminist research and then go on to make some proposals aimed at fostering the development of this relationship and meeting the aforementioned methodological challenges.

#### 4. Critical Pedagogy and Feminist Research

Critical pedagogy is an educational model that questions the asymmetric and hierarchical power relations in society and is specifically focused on social transformation. It is a multidirectional, participative, and democratic model that links education with social justice by overcoming traditional paradigms, breaking down hierarchies, emphasising the work of all actors involved in education, and advocating for equal opportunity ([Alvarado 2007](#)). Social justice refers to a form of social or cultural distributive justice which aims for people to live the most dignified life possible and therefore goes beyond the simple distribution of economic or material goods and resources ([Cobo 2005](#)). Social participation is one of the main ways that critical pedagogy seeks to achieve social justice, which is consistent with the main ideas of feminist research methodology in the sense that it aims to give prominence to women's voices.

Although Paulo Freire is considered the pioneer of critical pedagogy, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren have built on his ideas and made very innovative contributions to this educational model ([Sánchez et al. 2018](#)). While the development of critical pedagogy is based on diverse influences, each of these share the aim of educating people to have critical and reflexive capacity and a collective consciousness of social change. This commitment to transformation is a further point of commonality with feminist research. In fact, both

critical pedagogy and feminist research point to practice and experience as the engine of knowledge. In this sense, authors such as [Mirabal \(2008\)](#) invite actors in educational processes to start out from their own practices, then go to theory, and subsequently return to practices in order to transform them. This continuous theory-practice dialogue can lead to new democratic forms of social order.

Economic neoliberalism has implanted unjust models of distribution that promote exclusion and social marginalisation. The education system, as a part of that model, reproduces social inequalities. Through cultural and political action, the new democratic forms of social order proposed by critical pedagogy aim to overcome various forms of oppression in society.

Through its commitment to dismantling the hegemony of powerful social groups, critical pedagogy also emphasises interculturality and diversity. In this respect, it seeks to provide people with the ability to question the different forms of subjective hierarchical social segmentation so as to promote new interrelationships. This educational model, therefore, recognises diversity and challenges the institutionalisation of inequality while fomenting the creation of educational spaces that do not reproduce established asymmetrical relations of power and privilege ([Santaella 2014](#)). Under this approach, dialogue is the engine that generates educational spaces for change. This dialogic relationship should be horizontal. Educators and learners, and of course researchers and study participants, grow and learn together through exchange based on reflection and action. It is interesting to highlight how, in the domain of interculturality and intersectionality, we find further correspondence with feminist research methodology.

Both critical pedagogy and feminist research aim to unveil and overcome oppressive and privileged models by giving prominence to participants' involvement in action-research and learning, in addition to the coproduction of knowledge and commitment to social transformation. Both are, therefore, political. Importantly, this only comes through reflexive and critical dialogue. In this sense, critical pedagogy seeks to break from the linear educator-learner relationship because it does not conceive of the person as an empty and abstract agent, much the same as the feminist research approach (researcher-participant). The active participation of students in the construction of knowledge helps them feel and develop their capacity to transform reality. Through this dialogue, both the student and teacher are empowered. Similarly, feminist epistemologies and methodologies promote and develop the agency of participants on the basis of their active, critical, and reflexive position in research.

From a critical pedagogy perspective, the contextualisation of the educational process implies educating people for community life. Through the convergence of education, pedagogy, culture, socio-politics, and history, educational institutions become a space where hegemonic social models are critiqued and challenged. In this context, every individual has knowledge based on their origins, interests, expectations, and the place that they occupy in the world. In short, factors that condition and influence the interpretation of reality and what each of us recognises as knowledge.

Although operating in different spheres of action, we can say that critical pedagogy and feminist research go hand in hand. Both have ethical, political, and methodological components that situate the person at the centre. People are conceived as being critically conscious and capable of seeing themselves in the world and having the capacity to transform it through dialogue, horizontal relations, and co-constructed and reflexive knowledge. As such, the people that researchers aim to study, should not be seen as subjects and agents of change nor mere objects of study. Both approaches promote action by the "dehumanised", which, within feminist research, means the delegitimization and oppression of women, as well as their subjection to the codes of masculinity and patriarchal power relations.

All of these characteristics of critical pedagogy can be incorporated into feminist research and its objective of transforming social reality. In seeking to go beyond adaptation to immediate needs, such transformation is understood as occurring at the level of social



consciousness, the strengthening of teamwork, a commitment to permanent research, and an understanding of history that explicitly acknowledges the past, the present and the future as processes. That is, supplanting the hegemony of manipulated political discourse (Klaus 1979, in [Ramírez 2008](#)).

### 5. Contributions of Critical Pedagogy to the Challenges of Feminist Research Methodology

As we outlined in Section 3, feminist research on sexual violence has made a significant contribution to the advancement of new knowledge that is decentred from masculine perspectives and forms of thinking/feeling. However, there are still methodological challenges to be addressed. In this section, we consider how critical pedagogy can contribute to these challenges. Before offering some reflections and proposals, we find it important to recall that there is almost no scientific production that connects critical pedagogy with feminist research on sexual violence<sup>10</sup>, which is the primary rationale of this paper.

In this section, we outline a series of proposals from the field of educational praxis in response to the four challenges for feminist research methodology set out by [Jiménez \(2021\)](#), which include (p. 191, authors' translation):

1. Paying attention to social categories beyond gender (ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, amongst others).
2. Incorporating the reflexive role of the researcher in the research process and the development of an acute awareness of processes and contexts.
3. Taking the diversity of life experiences into consideration, which requires an understanding of the social consequences of scientific research and, therefore, of its methods. In other words, the goal of transforming power structures and inequality in the search for social justice.
4. The role of emotions in research.

In critical pedagogy, [Méndez \(2014\)](#) conceives of intersectionality as a methodology that takes four key issues into account: 1. The necessity to critically examine analytic categories used to interrogate social problems; 2. The mutual relations between social categories; 3. The invisibility of some 'inconceivable' realities; and 4. The positionality of the person who questions, analyses, and constructs social reality. By encouraging participants to critically reflect throughout the research process, this approach incorporates intersectionality as a transversal component of the entire process and not just an end in itself. As such, Paltero's four key issues align with the critical and reflexive approach that critical pedagogy considers to be a foundation of knowledge production. First, knowledge is constructed by questioning the meaning of categories without taking for granted that consensus already exists. [Méndez \(2014\)](#) asks a series of questions oriented towards the deconstruction of "false consensus" of apparently naturalised discourses or practices.

Second, she proposes a dialogue between these social categories on the basis of the critical pedagogy concept of dehumanisation. The idea is to place the emphasis on the relationships between these categories not just in relation to social exclusion but also exclusion from privilege, agency and empowerment, which are traditionally masculinised. Thirdly, in questioning social categories it is important to use approaches that incorporate everyone and to avoid invisibilising those that have not been included in the social debate. Finally, a rupture with hegemonic structures of power is guaranteed by the application of situated knowledge in conjunction with the validation of discourse through reciprocal dialogue.

As such, critical pedagogy helps to overcome the analytical challenges posed by feminist research because it views the whole research process as imbued with intersectionality. In other words, it is a methodology in and of itself. Its proposals permit a break with oppressive paradigms so that there can be a transformation in the coproduction of knowledge.

The second challenge requires reflection to be a criterion for rigour in feminist research ([Bishop 2018](#); [Yarbrough 2019](#); [Astudillo-Mendoza et al. 2020](#)) that is incorporated into the role of all research participants throughout the entire process rather than just being a box checking exercise. In critical pedagogy, reflection drives transformation; questioning

culturally and socially constructed essentialisms destabilises hegemonic structures. In practice, reflection is understood to have a spiral dynamic, being a process of constant bidirectional feedback where it is necessary to ask not just *what*, but also *why* and *what for*. Within a process of constant (de)construction, critical pedagogy invites feminist research to incorporate reflection as a criterion of rigour in the research process. Such reflection must be critical-social, emancipatory in its aims, and go beyond simple cognitive exercises. Furthermore, as Gimeno (2013) argues, critical-social reflection is not compatible with the interests of power. To illustrate, she points out that prevailing power structures are interested in creative persons and entrepreneurs such that “the state remains free of responsibility, for example, for full employment or ensuring fair labour conditions for workers” (p. 82, authors’ translation). As such, current policies promote concepts like entrepreneurialism, effort, responsibility, and authority that associate critical thought with creativity. Feminist research, however, incorporates reflection as a criterion of rigour that is based on a capacity for social critique in the face of inequalities and abuses of power. In this respect, using the dynamic feedback of the spiral model as a methodological strategy of feminist research, along with intersectional analysis, implies questioning the foundations of knowledge and not just gathering simple information. This process of critical review focuses on research participants to the extent that interaction with them implies analysis, debate, and confrontation of opposing arguments. As such, in feminist research, interaction as a process of reflexive and critical dialogue signifies cooperation and validation in the co-construction of knowledge.

Thus, according to Cuesta et al. (2005), “feminist research makes it possible to unveil the unjust contradictions that originate in a distorted rationality and the search for new cultural policies that ( . . . ) open the horizon to new, more just, and freer forms of life” (p. 20, authors’ translation). To achieve this, the criterion of rigorous critical-social reflection demands new techniques for collecting information, which coincides exactly with Jiménez’s (2021) response to the third methodological challenge: “the reinvention of conventional methods and techniques that ensure respect for [participants’] voice and ethical practices around agency” (p. 193, authors’ translation).

Finally, Jiménez (2021) points out that, for many decades, one of the concerns of feminist researchers has been the connection between emotions and research. On the one hand, the emotions of the person conducting research affect the research process and, on the other, the process of researching has an emotional effect on the researcher (García and Ruiz 2021). In this sense, it is important to emphasise emotionally experienced knowledge. Mujica et al. (2018) used this approach, advising that close attention should be paid to the way that the meaning of emotions change according to context and location. In this sense, feminist research is encouraged to use field notes and journals to document emotions throughout the entire research process, as well as incorporating questions designed to capture and systematise emotions, as suggested by Jiménez (2021).

Conscious that all of these proposals may seem somewhat abstract, in the following paragraphs we draw on our own experiences in two research projects where we used two different research techniques that combine critical pedagogy and feminist research proposals: Photovoice and World Café.

Photovoice is a pedagogic tool that promotes processes of empowerment, participation, and social mobilisation and action. At the same time, it is an information gathering technique often used in action-research (Borges-Cancel and Colón-Colón 2015; Castellanos 2022)<sup>11</sup>. On the basis of the photographs or drawings, this technique gives prominence to the voice of study participants (victims/survivors) as opposed to those who make decisions or perpetrate violence (power structures). Photovoice is, therefore, a way for participants to express their experiences and perceptions of reality as they see it, with a minimum of interference.

In the framework of critical pedagogy, the first study we conducted (Luna et al. 2021) was carried out to examine the experiences and views of students in university in relation to sexual and gender-based violence. The objective was to explore the validity of Photovoice

as a technique for use in feminist research in the classroom because of its capacity to encourage reflexive processes, participation, experiences of emotions, and empowerment. Based on a series of questions<sup>12</sup>, the student-participant created photo-narratives that were exhibited and debated in the classroom over various sessions.

As a general finding of the study, it was notable how active a role the students took in the process and the agentive capacity they showed. To start, we would like to highlight their capacity to construct research questions:

Why must women always be careful? ( . . . ) Worry if others don't like us? ( . . . )  
Be careful when we go out? [Worry] that we might not make it back, right? That we might be assaulted or abused. That they might follow us, getting whistled at, that it might not end at that<sup>13</sup>.

This process led the students to question social categories that naturalise sexual and gender-based violence and to deconstruct and reconstruct preconceived ideas in order to arrive at new conceptualisations and definitions:

For a number of years now I have been, I don't know if you could categorise it as harassment, I have never called it that, but I've realised that it is.

Finally, the participants in the Photovoice workshops came up with proactive suggestions to solve or at least alleviate problems they had identified:

In this photo-narrative I wanted to talk about the risks of sexting by comparing two very different social networks, such as Telegram, on the one hand, which is the two screenshots that I have put together, and on the other hand, WhatsApp, that I used to take the photo of my sister ( . . . ). At least, be aware that there are tools to ensure safer practices with photographs.

The entire action-research process was based on observation and reflection of the students' own experiences (one's own gaze and voice). The professors made no direct prompts to encourage this process of self-observation; the students decided, of their own volition, to construct most of the photo-narratives on the basis of their own everyday experiences:

I think that, if we haven't all [women] experienced it, almost all of us have, like being followed in the street and your automatic defence mechanism is to put your keys between your knuckles.

The photograph is a self-portrait that shows my face with tears painted in the colours of the bisexual flag. I decided to do it like that because it's an experience shared by most bisexual women that I have talked to. In my case, it has happened to me repeatedly.

The fact that, one way or another, the participants recognised that they had been affected by sexual and gender-based violence meant that the workshops were seen as safe spaces, where personal and painful experiences could be shared, which helped to create an atmosphere of trust:

I wanted to say thank you because, sincerely, I didn't imagine it would be so hard to share the experience, first to live through it and then to share it with you. ( . . . )  
I can identify with some things.

Thank you for listening because at times it is also good to talk.

The acknowledgement of lived experiences permits the establishment of a connection between emotional (feelings) and rational (concepts and theories) levels, demonstrating the usefulness of Photovoice as a way of linking specific emotional states with complex forms of thinking. One of the participants wrote:

I took this photo because I think that, for me, the act of shouting is like expelling everything you are carrying around, inside, and I wanted to show the pressure that we women feel from when we are very young.

The other technique we used, World Café, works by generating reflexive questions so that needs, interests, and strengths emerge and can subsequently be transformed into proposals and actions for improvement. Although it is conceived as a participative dynamic, some research studies have used it as technique for gathering research information (Chang and Chen 2015; Takahashi et al. 2014; Wiley et al. 2018).

In our case, we used World Café as a research technique to collect information on sexual and gender-based violence in universities (Luna, et al. in press). This involved engaging the participants, conceived as experts in the research object, in dialogue in order to generate ideas. One of the more notable findings of the study was the humanisation of knowledge, in the sense that, through the dialogue, the participants identified, reflected, analysed, and questioned established attitudes and values around sexual violence:

Now I realise how people in places of power manipulate and intervene in [people's] thoughts; it seems incredible that financing for research on queer themes is prohibited by claiming that it is a theme that has no "scientific credibility" or that it is "activism"<sup>14</sup>.

Through the development of reflexive and critical thinking, which promotes deconstructions and unlearning, the participants questioned previously unexplored approaches, such as the architectural design of university classrooms:

It is very interesting to notice how things that are so interiorised go unnoticed, without being questioned. I had never considered the extent to which the architecture of classrooms can be physical spaces of violence that manifest and evidence a form of power. I think it is crucial, as a university professor, to question this type of essentialism in order to eliminate sexual and gender-based violence in universities.

Something similar occurs with the generation of shared knowledge, understood not as academic but experiential knowledge. In the World Café technique, the participants were very positive about arriving at conclusions collectively:

I thought it was very positive how we reached conclusions like this (power relations in the university are marked by gender, race, and status) through the shared dialogue between academia and each of our [female] own experiences. I think the dialogue was horizontal, authentic, and real.

These types of interactive dynamics promote active participation and empowerment amongst the participants:

I felt free to express what I think and feel at all times. Thank you because I felt that my voice has been recognised, taken into account.

These examples make it possible to identify some of the methodological intersections between critical pedagogy and feminist research, especially those ideas that emphasise the questioning of "essentialisms", communicative interaction, the analysis and interpretation of real problems and, most importantly, the search for new democratic forms of social order that challenge cultural and political hegemonies.

## 6. Limitations

With regard to the limitations of the study, we wish to highlight the absolute lack of critical pedagogy studies on praxis in cases of sexual violence. Only our own research in this field in recent years enabled to address this challenge. There is no doubt that if we had been able to draw on other studies, the article would have been significantly enriched.

To deal with this limitation, in future studies we propose to broaden the literature in Spanish, extending it to other parts of the world. Specifically, we aim to carry out the same study in the Latin American context, home of some of the most important theorists of critical pedagogy and consequently the area of its greatest development. In our view this broadening of the field would enrich both feminist research and the praxis of critical pedagogy on sexual violence.

## 7. Conclusions

In this article we have presented an overview of feminist research on sexual violence in Spain in order to explore some of its achievements and limitations. To do so, we conducted a review of recent literature and subsequently outlined the premises of feminist research being employed in contemporary empirical research on sexual violence.

Even though there are still very few empirical studies on sexual violence in Spain, feminist epistemology and methodology are gaining ground through the application of some of its premises (situated knowledge, formulation of questions that relate to women's lives and experiences, giving prominence to women's voices, a commitment to social transformation, and analysis informed by feminist theories, etc.) (Biglia and Bonet 2017). Although still insufficient, these advances are politically significant as they provide new knowledge that breaks with categories and points of view that are rooted in inequality between genders or monolithic and uniform visions of the problem of sexual violence (Haraway 1988; Anderson 2015; Ruan 2020).

Beyond this somewhat slow progress in the production of feminist knowledge on sexual violence, feminist research presents us with methodological challenges that still require development (Jiménez 2021). In this article, we have identified a number of ways that critical pedagogy can contribute to feminist research and we have illustrated this with examples from two recent research studies we have participated in.

Until now these two forms of knowledge production have not been connected in the area of sexual violence, but from our point of view, both forms of action-research are parallel strategies that can provide feedback to one another through horizontal and bidirectional dialogue (Luna et al. n.d., 2021). Concepts such as co-production of knowledge, (de)construction of hegemonic paradigms of knowledge and power, participation, horizontal communication, and humanisation are resources from critical pedagogy that can be useful in overcoming the methodological challenges of research praxis proposed by feminist research. Critical pedagogy contributes to the demystification of entrenched inequality and power (Freire 1985) by unmasking the barriers that impede people from developing their critical capacities and bringing about social transformation. Critical-social reflection and the deconstruction of social categories and androcentric forms of knowledge favour new forms of equitable and democratic social order (Luna et al. n.d.).

As such, both critical pedagogy and feminist research methodology foster the transformation of social reality through participative techniques of knowledge production that question the bases of gendered knowledge and therefore reveal the underlying structures of privilege and domination. Research on sexual violence is a field where both forms of knowledge production and participation can go hand in hand and can be mutually enriching.

As a conclusion, we identified the following common recurring errors in studies of sexual violence: inadequate development of methodological and technical research tools to comprehensively address intersectionality, non-normative positions and social discourses, the role of the emotions, and the researcher's self-reflection. In addition, with regard to future studies and best practices, in our view a more extensive dialogue with critical pedagogy is needed, as this would foster the development of a broader view of the limitations of feminist research.

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## Notes

- 1 Title VIII. Crimes against freedom and sexual indemnity [*El Título VIII. Delitos contra la libertad e indemnidad sexuales*] of the Spanish penal code includes sexual assaults, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, grooming or sexual cyberstalking of minors, exhibitionism and sexual provocation (the sale or distribution of pornographic or obscene material to minors or those requiring special protection due to disability), prostitution, sexual exploitation and corruption of minors.
- 2 All bibliographic consultations were conducted between January and February 2022.
- 3 Although our method did not follow the strict criteria of a systematic review, we believe that including research by activist collectives and doctoral theses helps to avoid bias.
- 4 It is important to point out that despite this result there is still very little research that might be considered as comprehensively feminist as most of the studies only partially apply feminist epistemology and methodology.
- 5 Article 1 of the Organic Law 1/2004 of 28 December 2004, on Integrated Protection Measures against Gender-Based Violence [*Medidas de Protección Integral contra la Violencia de Género*] defines this as a type of violence that occurs “as a manifestation of discrimination, inequality and power relations of men over women, [which] is perpetrated against them [women] by those who are or have been their spouses or those who are or have been connected to them through similar intimate relationships, including in cases without cohabitation.” The law also defines gender-based violence as that which “includes all acts of physical and psychological violence, including assaults on sexual freedom, threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of freedom.”
- 6 Pillar 8 of the State Pact against Gender Violence-2017 only incorporated 14 measures of the 481 proposed by the Congress and Senate (Tardón 2017).
- 7 In fact, the future Spanish government’s State Strategy to Combat Gender-Based Violence [*Estrategia Estatal para Combatir las Violencias Machistas*] (2022–2025) was developed through a participatory process with civil society, which included virtual participatory meetings, focus groups, and a citizen consultation through an online questionnaire.
- 8 The kidnap, torture, rape and murder of three adolescent girls in a municipality of Valencia in 1992.
- 9 Nevertheless, as Casado and Lasén (2012) point out, feminist research is not the only field that has problems in this respect. They argue that there is a general inertia and lack of methodological innovation in social science research methods.
- 10 Our analysis of the production of scientific knowledge on critical pedagogy and feminist investigation in the area of sexual violence found only 10 publications.
- 11 According to Borges-Cancel and Colón-Colón (2015), Paulo Freire’s use of drawings in culture circles is a precursor of this technique.
- 12 The questions were: What is sexual and gender-based violence? Does everyone experience and react the same to these forms of violence? Where do they happen? How should we/one respond to sexual violence?
- 13 The sessions were recorded and transcribed.
- 14 All sessions of World Café were recorded and transcribed.

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