

# History of MeToo University movement in Spain

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## Abstract

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The precedents of the MeToo University movement, both in USA and Spain, has been led since the 1990s both by people who have taken a stand against sexual harassment in universities. The present study reflects the history of the MeToo University in Spain with an emphasis in the start of organized movement in 2013, also simultaneously with the one organized in the USA. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with people who led this transformation since its beginnings, as well as with others who have joined recently, in order to learn about the historical scope of this movement from a qualitative approach. Those people have suffered from isolating gender violence for daring to break the silence, being a loudspeaker and putting a name to a problem still silenced in Spanish universities and in the world. The movement has achieved great advances in academic settings, such as the obligation of all universities to have protocols for action in case of sexual harassment or gender violence, the legislation of isolating gender violence, and an unstoppable number of people who come out to tell their cases.

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**Keywords:** MeToo University, Isolating Gender Violence, Victims, Survivors

# Historia del movimiento MeToo Universidad en España

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## Resumen

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Los precedentes del movimiento MeToo Universidad, tanto en EE.UU. como en España, han sido liderados desde la década de los 90 por personas que se han posicionado contra el acoso sexual en las universidades. El presente estudio refleja la historia del MeToo Universidad en España con énfasis en el inicio del movimiento organizado en 2013, también simultáneamente con el organizado en EE.UU. Para ello, se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad a personas que lideraron esta transformación desde sus inicios, así como a otras que se han incorporado recientemente, con el fin de conocer el alcance histórico de este movimiento desde un enfoque cualitativo. Esas personas han sufrido violencia de género aisladora por atreverse a romper el silencio, ser altavoz y poner nombre a un problema aún silenciado en las universidades españolas y en el mundo. El movimiento ha conseguido grandes avances en el ámbito académico, como la obligación de todas las universidades de disponer de protocolos de actuación en caso de acoso sexual o violencia de género, la legislación de la violencia de género aisladora, y un número imparable de personas que están empezando a contar sus casos.

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**Palabras clave:** MeToo Universidad, violencia de género aisladora, víctimas, supervivientes.

**I**n September 1991, the Community of Researchers on Excellence for All [CREA] was founded. The analysis made by their creators in the previous years concluded that only transforming the dominant feudalism in Spanish academia could the Spanish Universities both improve their scientific contributions and overcome their racism and sexism, including their *omertà* about sexual harassment. As Ángela clarifies: “even most female professors publishing about gender issues looked the other way when their students were harassed by the male professors who were in a higher hierarchy to them and arbitrarily decided their professional future”. Julia adds: “since the first moment, we developed Roma studies, Gender Studies, Arab and Muslim Studies and others oriented to scientific, policy and social impact. In several years, those studies crystallized in several Study Groups, the one on Gender finally decided the name of Sappho Women’s Group”.

At that time, the feudal structure of Spanish universities “freely” left in the hands of hierarchically superior professors the decision and the criteria over which precarious professors obtained a stable position and which already stable professors were promoted. The slightest support to a victim or the simple recognition that there was gender violence in the university led to massively extending slander about those who did as a previous step to expel them from the university. Given that the criteria for selection and promotion were arbitrary, such expulsion was disguised in one of the assessments of their quality that led to attributing zero points to an article published in a top-ranked international scientific journal if the author had supported a victim and attributing ten points to an article published in the journal of the harasser *catedrático* (Full Professor) if the author was subdued to his harassments.

Those practices maintained a fierce *omertà* on sexual harassments and also impeded the improvement of the scientific quality of the research and publications. In 1991 university professors’ research had to be conducted in their own departments, they could not constitute interdisciplinary research centers among members from different departments. Those who held the power in each department had the

subjugation of its members guaranteed, because they were in the academic committees that decided their promotion, but they could not secure the subjugation of professors from other departments whose promotion depended on other committees. CREA started an interdisciplinary research center with important support from the Research Programmes of the European Commission. Other professors followed this example and in 1995 the University of Barcelona approved a regulation that made the formation of interdisciplinary research centers possible (Soler, 2017).

This new situation allowed professor Ramón Flecha (founder and at that time director of CREA) to put the first official complaint against one professor that was harassing several students and to propose to the Rector's team the approval of measures to overcome sexual harassment in the university. Flecha did not receive any written answer, only an oral response warning him that his proposal would absolutely not be considered, affirming that there was no gender violence at the universities and clarifying that he would not let CREA's ethical code include a point saying that their members supported victims of sexual harassment in the university.

Many more years had to go by to be able to break the silence for good. Tens of organizations in Catalonia (one of them CREA's Sappho Women's Group) created the "Platform against Gender Violence" which in 2003 organized the conference: 'Against harassment, zero tolerance'. Being the only university group of the Platform, CREA had to break the silence inside Spanish universities and led a scientific research project with diagnosis and solutions to gender violence in the academia. Simultaneously, CREA approved one new point in its ethical guidelines (Diario Feminista, 2021) accepted by the University of Barcelona several years before: "In the face of gender violence, all members of CREA want to contribute, to the greatest extent possible, to its eradication. That is why we are committed -as requested by the different organizations- to zero tolerance to mistreatment. We consider it essential (1) to always position ourselves in favor of the victim and never in favor of the abuser and (2) to collaborate with the victim to explain and denounce all those cases of which we are aware, whether close and/or distant, in

order to improve the quality of life of all people and especially of women victims of abuse" ([Diario Feminista, 2021](#), see [Omerta 14](#), [Omerta 15](#), [Omerta 53](#)).

### **The Scientific Investigations on Gender Violence Transformed Spanish Universities**

That attempt unleashed a very cruel Isolating Gender Violence ([Vidu et al., 2021](#)) against CREA and against its members. The University of Barcelona decided to eliminate CREA's ethical guidelines ([Diario Feminista, 2021](#), see [Omerta 15](#)). CREA obtained a very important international support from universities like Harvard and organizations like the European Women's Lobby besides the Platform against Gender Violence. Their research proposal was approved and funded by the Spanish National RTD Program. The preliminary results were commented on in the dialogues between members of CREA and members of the Spanish Parliament from diverse political parties. In 2007, the Spanish Parliament approved the legislation oblying the Spanish universities to recognize that they had an important sexual harassment issue inside and also oblying them to take the measures clarified by the results of this research. In doing so, the Parliament made the correction of a grave mistake it made three years before when in 2004 it approved the gender violence legislation without including that point. The CRUE (Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities) positioned itself against this recognition and against the researchers, but they had to follow this legislation.

The results of the research and their scientific, policy and social impact appeared in some of the main newspapers and TV channels, generating a profound awareness on the vision that society and politics had of the university feudalism and of the need to transform it.

That was one of the main strengths that would later lead to carry out a meritocratic transformation of academia to overcome its feudalism and hence improve its scientific productivity and its non-



sexist and non-racist values (Ley Orgánica 6/2001; LOMLOU 4/2007).

The previous arbitrariness in the selection and promotion of professors was substituted by scales where an article published in a top scientific journal at the international level had the maximum points, and an article published in a harasser's journal that was not in any scientific ranking was assigned with zero points. Since that moment, in order to obtain their selection and promotion, professors did not have to subdue to harassers. On the contrary, they had to create knowledge that would be published in the top scientific journals.

This new situation facilitated the possibility of presenting a complaint. On November 25 2009, Professor and member of CREA Lidia Puigvert sent to the Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Barcelona an official letter demonstrating that the structure of the Master's and Doctoral Programs promoted practices that would encourage sexual harassments. This letter also announced that one professor was harassing several students a year. Sarah Rankin (Director of Harvard's Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention) wrote these words about CREA: "Future generations of students and faculty will undoubtedly have a very different experience because of your work."

All victims and survivors interviewed highlight that both their support and the attacks they received came from all types of ideologies, genders and positions. In both sides, in favor of harassers and in favor of victims, there were people from all genders, sexual options, ideologies and professions. As Diana explains: "every person who has supported a victim at some point knows that there are always men and women on both sides, women and men in favor of the victim, and men and women in favor of the harasser. To affirm that all men are potential aggressors, that new masculinities are "whitewash" is not only a lie, but it means positioning oneself in favor of the harasser and against the supports of victims, provoking their isolation and their possibility to become survivors".

On September 26 2011, student of sociology Ana Vidu asked Professor Ramón Flecha for support after receiving a new email from Professor JdM, who was the most known professor in Spain by those types of harassing conducts. Flecha presented a complaint to the recently created Equality Committee of the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Barcelona. He also sent this denounce to Harvard's Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, because this professor said in his email that he was linked to this institution. On October 5 the Economics and Business Faculty's Equality Committee at the University of Barcelona decided that there was no case. On October 19, Harvard's Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response sent an email to the Dean. On October 25 the Economics and Business Faculty's Equality Committee rectified its initial position and decided to initiate a case.

Asking interviewees about this position that might seem strange in principle of the recently named Equality Committee, we obtain the following clarification (Julia): "The Rectors were obliged from the legislation to create Equality Commissions, but they maintained in their power the arbitrary designation of their components and they delegated in the Deans the designation of the members of each Faculty's Equality Commission. Most of them made designations that allowed the university to maintain the omertà and therefore silence the complicities that they had had with that situation. In fact, all female professors who had researched the issue and had supported the victims were either not named for those Commissions or, the few of those who have done it and who were named, were excluded when they showed the first support to a victim. Their objective is well expressed by the Count of Lampedusa in *The Leopard* "If we want everything to stay as it is, everything has to change".

On November 3 2011, Ana Vidu initiated the contacts with other victims and 13 of them decided to provide their witness and emails that they have received with harassing content. On October 5 2012, the University of Barcelona decided it could not do anything and sent the report to the Prosecutor's Office. The only member of the Equality

Commission that continued supporting Ana Vidu and who had elaborated the first protocol against sexual harassment in a Faculty of a Spanish university, precisely for that commission, was excluded from it.

### **The Creation of the Firsts Networks of Victims and Survivors**

In 2013 the Solidarity Network of Victims of Gender Violence in Universities was created in Spain, simultaneously with EROC (End Rape On Campus) in the United States. On November 15, after receiving the file report from the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Network contacted the Rector, the Dean and the Equality Commission of the University of Barcelona to request meetings. Because they did not receive any answer, on November 28 2012 the Network decided to go public and directly meet with the press. On December 15, one of the five most important newspapers in Spain published a news with the following header: "Ten UB students demand measures against a professor for alleged sexual harassment".

In her interview, Naiara clarified: “the CRUE (the Rectors) threatened us and they justified themselves with the argument that speaking and writing about the supposed gender violence in academia gravely discredited the university. We always said that in the middle and long term the discrediting came from the omertà which maintained the silence about the very serious situation many females had in their universities. Unfortunately, they did not believe us until they read and saw in the newspapers and TV not only that gender violence was a reality in universities but also that they did not even want to talk to the victims and survivors”.

In 2014, the first victory in Spanish universities was already obtained when the University of Barcelona had to finally take an official position with clear measures against one denounced person. He was a male student reported by harassment to three female students of the Master's Program in Sociology. The victims asked and obtained support from Professor Ramón Flecha and Professor Marta Soler. At the end, their complaint process ended up winning,



becoming the first case in which a Spanish university explicitly sanctioned someone due to sexual harassment misconduct at the university. This was considered by MeToo University a great victory that immediately diminished impunity in the face of harassment.

Laura, one of those victims clarified important elements of this process: “the Director of the Master’s Program, chosen and nominated by the Dean, told Flecha off in an intimidating way saying that by supporting the victims he was being disloyal to the university and that such action would bring him consequences. The members of the Equality Commission said the victims were overreacting due to reporting that the cited student would put on the classroom table a knife of illegal dimensions while he painted female students naked staring at all parts of their bodies. This student was also found with a knife inside the women’s bathroom at the school. Members of the Equality Commission said that victims were overreacting. However, when the Equality Commission had to interview the student, the one responsible for the Commission asked and achieved to have security guards at her door. The vice president of the professionals for Gender Equality (also a student of the Master’s) wrote a public letter against the victims and in favor of the harasser”.

The Network was very active breaking the omertà and the citizens, policymakers and media were increasingly knowing what was happening inside the universities. More victims were becoming survivors and they were obtaining more victories and transforming the universities into spaces free of violence. What they were not conscious enough about is that important powers felt increasingly threatened by this transparency and were organizing themselves in a lobby with members of the universities and members of the media, planning a powerful campaign of slander in order to destroy the Network and their members, including the very few professors that supported them. This victory and this breaking of silence led the harassers, and those who for years and decades had been accomplices, to push forward a campaign, with significant institutional support in

universities, of Isolating Gender Violence [IGV] against those who supported the victims.

On February 5 2014, the most read Spanish newspaper, El País, published the words of the Secretary of Universities of the Catalan government when he found out that the Dean was aware of the compulsive sexual harassment of professor JdM since she was a student: "The head of Universities has also referred to the case of alleged sexual harassment at the University of Barcelona starring the professor of Sociology... saying that it is a regrettable fact that will set a precedent... and it is also regrettable that there are people who say that they already knew, that the fact lasted for years and did not denounce it and I do not say it for the victims but for those responsible for the university. If they knew about it, why didn't they act? The Secretary referred to the statement made by the dean of the Faculty of Economics... before the *Mossos* (Catalan police body) in which she recognized that in 1987, when she was a student, the existence of harassment was already rumored by the faculty".

On February 20 2014, students made a protest meeting in the office of the Rectorate to register the 1000 signatures collected demanding that the most denounced professor would no longer have teaching or research responsibilities with students. On March 1 2014, the Student Assembly of the Faculty of Economics organized the first assembly against sexual harassment in the Faculty of Economics and Business.

On March 3 2014, the Observatory of Gender Violence of the Women's Foundation and funded by the Spanish Ministry of Equality recognized the Solidarity Network of Victims of Gender Violence in Universities as a Good Practice and included it on its website in the "Database of Good Practices for the Prevention of Gender Violence". This was a very important position statement rejecting the slander against the victims and their supporters that were spread through the university hallways. That recognition was not only towards their effort but to the quality of their reflections and their actions, qualifying them as a good practice and including them in its official website.

On May 9 2014 the Solidarity Network, together with the Unitary Platform against Gender Violence, launched the campaign "Our daughters have the right". On July 23 2014, the scientific journal *Qualitative Inquiry* published the article "What Students Say About Gender Violence Within Universities: Rising Voices From the Communicative Methodology of Research" (Vidu, A., Schubert, T., Muñoz, B., & Duque, E., 2014) about the voices of the victims in this movement. The Network allowed victims to become survivors. They maintained at the same time the continuous dialogue and collaboration with the organizations fighting against gender violence in the whole society and the publication of scientific articles in the top scientific journals of this matter and from different disciplines. This dialogic approach made them promote the criteria of social impact and co-creation, which is now a guideline and even a requirement of the current scientific programmes of research in all sciences in the European Commission (European Commission, 2018).

### **Citizens' Reaction Against the Isolating Gender Violence Campaign**

When it was known that the Rector (who recognized to the newspaper *El País* that JdM was his friend) decided to let JdM teach again, the students' movement and the Network strengthened their actions... but the lobby had been preparing their campaign against them for several months. From June 3 to 5 2016 the Network was invited to give a talk in the Feminist Conference of Barcelona. On June 8 2016 students, in collaboration with the Network, published a letter against the reinstatement of Professor JdM to teaching.

On 13 June 2016, a very cruel campaign of Isolating Gender Violence (hereinafter, IGV) was launched against the victims and the few professors who supported them (including attacks on their daughters and sons) in which several journalists collaborated, as some confessed, looking for an audience through morbidity. In the short term, this IGV obtained its objective and the mobilization stopped.

In the middle and long term, this IGV acted as a boomerang against the ones that launched it. The cruelty of the slander ended up discrediting especially those who launched them, whereas those who received them, in spite of suffering a lot in the beginning, have seen their scientific prestige greatly increase, first internationally and then in Spain. There is almost a unanimous consideration that not only have they been infinitely anti-sexist, solidary and brave, but that they have also been infinitely more intelligent than the members of the lobby of harassers.

On December 19 and 20 2016, the first conference on Isolating Gender Violence was held at the University of Barcelona, organized by CREA. Members of the Parliament and of all political parties, women's movements, representatives of governments and media were speakers in the conference. They were astonished by the cruelty of the Isolating Gender Violence campaign during the second half of that year against victims and supporters. They were also shocked by the process of evaluation of that dissertation.

At the beginning of 2017, Ana Vidu, who was doing a research stay in Stanford University, defended her doctoral thesis on gender violence in universities in the Sociology Doctorate program of the Faculty of Economics and Business from the University of Barcelona. The doctoral committee of the Department of Sociology in charge of evaluating the dissertation approved it by unanimity. However, the Dean and the Equality Commission pressed for the Faculty of Economics and Business to reject it. Even the Dean herself wrote the many words that Vidu should include in her own dissertation. All that was a scandal because it skipped all the university norms and did it with a student who had received the Award Best Student at the Bachelor's Degree in Sociology and the Award to the Best Student in the Master's Degree in Sociology.

Ana Vidu had to come back, ending her research stay at Stanford earlier than planned. She and her family and friends were extremely sad and disheartened. The director of her dissertation, Ramón Flecha, was working in Brussels as evaluator of the European Framework

Programme of Research. When he came back to Barcelona, everything was transformed, as was explained in the webpage of the women journalist of the main Spanish TV reproducing the following writing by Ana Vidu with the title “The croissant and the winning victim”:

“When my director and I received the first rejection of the dissertation, I was on a stay at Stanford; I decided to return to do what they asked and to be able to submit the dissertation again. At the University of Barcelona, I was waiting for an interview with the director of the equality commission and the dean at the time. The commission ended up presenting itself almost completely and, as on previous occasions, the criticism came towards me and towards the people who had always supported me. Both my family and I were devastated and very discouraged. That day my thesis director Ramón Flecha came back from a trip to wait for me after the meeting and surprise me. We went to the bakery that won the award for the best croissant in Spain. Ramón told me that we were going to celebrate everything, every rejection, because the reason for our struggle was so clear that those rejections were the result of injustice but also of the lack of intelligence of the harassers and their allies, and the more they attacked us, the more they would be exposed. We took this photo and I sent it to my family. They were stunned to see that we were celebrating, and they changed from sadness to celebration. I told them that there would come a day when everything was going to work out, and that we were going to be okay, that we were going to succeed in the fight against gender violence at the university and in my life. Thanks to excellent people like Curro Aguilera, Enrique Pérez, Gema Tomás, I am now very well at the University of Deusto. My family is now very happy and the victims no longer feel so alone, we are here to help them as they have helped me.”

The dissertation was presented again including all words imposed by the Dean, but as quotations by her, instead of assumed as the candidate's words. The dissertation was approved and obtained the highest qualification by the committee. Almost all newspapers and TV



channels published about the very brave and honest action of Ana Vidu, the Network and CREA and about the cruelty that they received from the harassers and their accomplices. On May 31 2017 the documentary "Voices against silence" was released by TVE, the most important Spanish public TV channel, which included a long explanation of Ana Vidu's case. On May 16 2018, "Voices against silence" won the Golden Globe of the World Media Festival of Hamburg. It was a great success for quality journalism and MeToo University.

### **The MeToo University and the Legislations Against Isolating Gender Violence**

When the MeToo Movement was founded worldwide in 2017, many movements and persons in different parts of the world felt supported; some of them have adopted the same name and one of these was the MeToo University as the new name of the Solidarity Network of Victims of Gender Violence in Universities. It is obtaining incredible victories in Spain and now also in other countries. Their members are altruist that they proclaim to be working in favor of a violence-free and safe university for all, including the daughters and granddaughters of the current harassers. On January 23, 2022, the front page of one of the most read journals in Spain, was dedicated to a "U" occupying the whole page and inside the pictures of 25 women that were victims and survivors from sexual harassment in universities (El Periódico, 2022). Inside, a long and excellent report elaborated by three female journalists during six month. Their difficulties to find 25 women willing to be there expressed that the fear is present in an institution where the harassers and their isolating gender violence are very powerful. This report moved to talk about this issue in almost all newspapers and TV.

Those victories are the result of the outstanding scientific, policy and social impact of both their studies and their actions. Their policy impact includes the approval of the legislation for the first time in the

world against Isolating Gender Violence. On December 22 2020, the Parliament of Catalonia was a world pioneer in incorporating Isolating Gender Violence in its legislation by unanimously approving it in law 17/2020. On March 17 2022 the Basque Parliament incorporated Isolating Gender Violence in its legislation, in the Law for the Equality of Women and Men, Article 50, point 4. In this case the approval was not by unanimity, but by the majority of votes in the Parliament. This was not because some members of the Parliament were against this proposal, but because there was only one voting of the whole law and those not voting in favor did not do so because of this point, but because they disagreed in other points of the same law. This kind of disagreement was also seen in the Catalan parliament, but the approval of this point was by unanimity because it was voted separately from the other points of the same law.

Other Parliaments from Spain but also from other countries are in the process of approving legislation against Isolating Gender Violence as well. Besides Parliaments, many diverse organizations and even enterprises are initiating similar processes responding to the proposal made by MeToo University. Its proposal has been also approved by organizations like the European Sociological Association and Ana Vidu has been nominated member of the ESA's Research Network on Women's and Gender Studies. Members of Metoo University and their supporters are teaching professionals from very different fields about how to face Isolating Gender Violence, the only way to overcome all kinds of gender violence; even they have been asked by Ministers of Justice to train judges and prosecutors on this subject. This political impact is changing society in this matter, it is generating an increasing social impact in terms of the decrease of cases in diverse settings and institutions and breaking the silence about the existing cases.

In all, this policy and social impact is possible also because of the scientific impact of the studies made by the members of MeToo University and their supporters. Several articles have been published in top-ranked scientific journals of different disciplines analyzing: the

quantitative and qualitative dimensions of gender violence in Spanish universities (Valls, Puigvert, Melgar & Garcia-Yeste, 2016), the concept and the name of Isolating Gender Violence (Vidu, Puigvert, Flecha & López de Aguileta, 2021), the IGV as the first reason to do not support victims (Melgar, Geis-Carreras, Flecha & Soler, 2021), the consequences of IGV for the health of supporters (Aubert & Flecha, 2021), the typology of the victims of IGV (Flecha, 2021), the pioneer legislation on IGV (Vidu, Tomás & Flecha, 2021), the media that take position in support of harassers (Madrid, Joanpere, De Botton, Campdepadrós, 2020), the media working with the professional criteria of journalism (Pulido, Villarejo, Vidu, Ramis, & Flecha, 2021), the first international conference of IGV (Vidu, Valls, Puigvert, Melgar & Joanpere, 2017), how new alternative masculinities respond to the demands of support of victims (Nazareno, Vidu, Merodio & Valls, 2022), and also concrete cases that happened during the hard lockdown imposed in Spain due to COVID-19 (Puigvert, Vidu, Melgar & Salceda, 2021).

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