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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Prevention of sexual violence in the public university in Guatemala – qualitative survey on suggestions from students

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence is a global problem in higher education, with multiple adverse academic, social, and health outcomes. Universities can take several primary and secondary preventative actions to combat violence. The stakeholder (i.e. student) suggestions for universities have received some interest, but mainly in English-speaking, high-income countries. In this study, we report the findings of a qualitative survey in a middle-income Central American country, Guatemala. In an online study, students from the public university ($N = 863$) expressed their ideas on how to prevent sexual violence in the university. We analysed the data with the aid of inductive thematic analysis, creating four themes. The results highlighted how students thought that the university should take a major role in preventing and intervening in sexual violence. They also perceived collective action between students as an effective prevention strategy. Some ideas were gendered, shifting the responsibility to women (i.e. changing their behaviours/attire) and men (i.e. moral education about sexual conduct). The students also suggested how individual bystanders could address the situations with their actions. We discuss the results with reference to the global literature, as well as to the specific context of Guatemala.

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Introduction

Gender-based violence in the form of sexual harassment is a persistent challenge in universities globally (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Fedina et al., 2018; Klein & Martin, 2021). It has been linked to multiple adverse academic, social, and health outcomes (Klein & Martin, 2021; Molstad et al., 2023), making it a serious issue for public health. The scale of the problem is well-known, especially in the context of education institutes in English-speaking high-income countries (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Fedina et al., 2018; Klein & Martin, 2021), with much less knowledge in low- to middle-income countries (Hardt et al., 2023). Universities across the world have taken various actions to combat sexual violence through primary (i.e. with the intention to prevent violence through education, policies, and shifting social norms) and secondary (i.e. addressing violence when it has already taken place) prevention strategies (e.g. Dufour, 2024; Gretgrix & Farmer, 2026; Lombardo & Bustelo, 2022). Indeed, institutions have a major role in supporting or betraying ('institutional betrayal', see Smith & Freyd, 2014) students in sexual violence prevention at different ecological levels, from individuals to institutions and cultural norms (Dufour, 2024). However, most of the literature on this topic is from English-speaking high-income countries (Dufour, 2024). To develop socio-culturally appropriate programs, strategies, and policies, it is important to investigate ideas for sexual violence prevention in wider contexts, including the opinions of students (Akiyode-Afolabi et al., 2022; Camp et al., 2018; Crusto et al., 2024).

In this research, we explored students' ideas of how to tackle sexual violence in Guatemala, a middle-income country in Central America. Guatemala has a high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence both historically and at present, as well as a stifled progress in ensuring equal educational opportunities for

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all (Leon-Himmelstine et al., 2025). Sexual violence in universities is common, mostly perpetrated from men to women, with staff members and fellow students as the perpetrators (de Saénz & Buitrago Novoa, 2024; Véliz & Valenzuela, 2020). Although there are some internal regulations for appropriate sexual conduct, reporting, and punishment (García, 2021; IUMUSAC, N.D.), students do not feel that they are protected, especially when perpetrators are staff members (Dávila et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2024a, 2024b). Because sexual violence in universities reinforces gender inequalities (Täuber et al., 2022), addressing the issue is of great importance in Guatemala, where inequality and gender-based violence are embedded in the society (Leon-Himmelstine et al., 2025).

At an individual level, victim-blaming, failure to recognise sexual violence, normalisation, and the silencing of conversations form multiple barriers that prevent students from intervening in sexual violence (Dávila et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2024a, 2024b). At an institutional level, students feel that the university does not support them if they attempt to file a complaint. The perception that perpetrators are not punished, nothing will change, and that complaining could lead to retaliation could influence their hesitation to intervene (Dávila et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2024b). Similar to other countries and regions (e.g. Europe, Ríos-Albert et al., 2025), students in Guatemala are willing to intervene in sexual violence, providing that it is safe to do so, with a back-up from the university (e.g. anonymous reporting, awareness-raising, and sympathetic staff members; Lyons et al., 2024b). The problem could be addressed with robust institutional support, functioning at different levels of the ecological systems that universities are embedded in (Dufour, 2024).

Indeed, campaigns, workshops, policies and procedures have demonstrated some efficiency in tackling sexual violence in universities in English-speaking high-income countries (Lee et al., 2023; Mujal et al., 2021) as well as in low-to-middle income country contexts (Baeza Robba et al., 2026; Ritonga et al., 2025; Varela & MARTINEZ, 2025). Some of these strategies include social marketing campaigns (posters, flyers, website information, social media, talks) that aim to immerse students in information about sexual violence for a determined time period (Lee et al., 2023). Another approach is workshops that teach sexual consent (e.g. Ritonga et al., 2025; Varela & Martinez, 2025) or provide bystander education (e.g. Mujal et al., 2021). Working on institutional policies and procedures could also be effective as well as general improvements on campus safety (e.g. surveillance and creation of safe spaces; Rodriguez-Rodriguez & Heras-González, 2020). Together, these prevention strategies could reduce sexual violence, also potentially influencing social norms around what is acceptable behaviour. However, it is also important to note that the local context is important – what works in one university may not be directly applicable in others (Hamada et al., 2020; Munro-Kramer et al., 2025).

What is currently missing from the literature is student suggestions for concrete actions to address the problem of sexual violence in universities in Guatemala. To investigate this, we employed a qualitative, bottom–up, emic approach, which is recommended when exploring topics in new countries and contexts (e.g. Lyons et al., 2024b; Lyons et al., 2025). The aim of the current pilot study was to investigate students' perceptions of how to prevent sexual violence in the university context in Guatemala, using qualitative methods.

Methods

Participants and procedure

We advertised an online survey ('*Nos damos cuenta del acoso? Experiencias de espectadores frente al acoso sexual en la USAC'* translated as '*Do we notice harassment? Experiences of bystanders in the face of sexual harassment in the USAC')* via convenience sampling/snowballing through the projects and the researcher's social media during February-May 2022. The inclusion criteria were that the participants had to be over the age of 18 and current students at the public university, University of San Carlos de Guatemala (USAC). On entering the online survey, the participants first read the information sheet and then gave online consent by checking a box that stated 'I agree to participate in the study'. Participants filled in several questions/questionnaires around sexual harassment. In the current analyses, we included student participants (N = 863, mean age 25.50, SD = 10.40) who answered an open-ended question on 'List three ideas for actions that we can implement to prevent sexual harassment and violence in University' at the end of a survey. The survey is part of a larger project that investigated bystander behaviour in sexual harassment in the public university in Guatemala, and the other analyses have been published elsewhere (Dávila et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2025a). The current manuscript is

considered as a pilot study – while the data analysed here are not central to the primary project, they offer valuable directions for future research.

Out of the sample, 562 identified as female, 293 as male, and 8 as other. For sexual orientation, most individuals were identified as heterosexual (n = 685), followed by bisexual (n = 80), homosexual (n = 34), and various other categories (e.g. other, not defined, nothing, asexual, pansexual, demisexual, queer, transsexual; n = 64). The participants were from five different campuses in diverse locations in Guatemala, representing students from various faculties and departments (n's = 250 medicine and dentistry; 119 law; 118 pedagogy; 67 engineering; 45 economy; 37 management studies; 36 humanities, history, art, and architecture; 30 psychology and criminology; 28 social work; 25 veterinary sciences; 20 politics; 19 agricultural studies; and 19 communication studies). Most participants identified as Mestizo/Ladino (n = 753), followed by Maya (n = 103) or Xinca (n = 5).

The study received ethical approval. The study received ethical approval from the University of Liverpool Central University Research Ethics Committee (UREC reference: 5886; amendment 12th March 2021).

Data analysis

We used an inductive thematic analysis, which is also suitable for relatively short online responses (Braun et al., 2021). ML led in coding the responses, reading through the data file whilst taking notes for potential themes. Following this, ML developed an initial coding system and a suggestion for themes whilst going through the answers for a second time. The codes and the themes were subsequently discussed (in online meetings and via email) with all the co-authors, who refined the thematic structure and agreed upon seven emerging themes that were documented in a codebook to guide the auditing process.

Three trained research assistants (all native Spanish speakers at a university in Colombia) independently recoded the data using the thematic codebook to ensure consistency. Throughout the auditing process, MFR met regularly with the RAs to review coding decisions, resolve discrepancies and identify potential emerging themes. Finally, the results of the auditing process were discussed with the wider research team, and four themes were defined as final.

The team has diverse backgrounds and experiences, which have shaped our engagement with the topic. We consist of faculty members and postgraduate students from universities in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, and the United Kingdom. The members identify as white or mestizo. In terms of gender/gender orientation, the team includes cisgender women and a cisgender man, as well as a transgender man. All the team members have extensive experience in researching gender-based violence in various countries in Latin America, utilising mixed methods (including the thematic approach presented in the current study). The faculty members have also worked on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives. All the team members have knowledge of sexual harassment in universities in Latin America, either as bystanders, support staff, targets of harassment, or researchers. These diverse positionalities supported the analyses from multiple perspectives (e.g. cisgender, transgender, female, male, staff, and student). Potential risks of confirmation biases were addressed through discussions with the wider team.

Results

We constructed four broader themes from the responses: Theme 1 'University role in preventing and intervening in sexual violence'; Theme 2 'Student collective actions in preventing and intervening in sexual violence', Theme 3 'Shifting responsibility: Gendered logics of sexual violence prevention'; and Theme 4 'Suggested actions for individual bystanders'.

Theme 1: University role in preventing and intervening in sexual violence

In the first theme, participants wrote about prevention strategies at the university level, divided into two subthemes: primary preventative measures (i.e. actions that could prevent sexual violence) and secondary reactionary measures (i.e. actions that take place after the violence has occurred). The responses covered suggestions for primary preventative measures such as campaigns and educational strategies; creating and publicising policies; and working on improving the security of the physical environment. Some of the

secondary reactionary measures included listening to student concerns, helping students who have been targets, punishing perpetrators, and facilitating efficient, safe, and anonymous systems of reporting sexual violence.

In the subtheme of primary preventative measures, participants mentioned various educational strategies (e.g. campaigns, talks, courses) that raise awareness and provide tools for action. These were deemed necessary by both students and faculty members. This was summarised by one participant, who wrote 'Workshops, talks, training sessions' (p. 47) as the three best methods. The participants suggested workshops on self-defence for women, bystander training, and sex education. For instance, 'Conduct workshops where people learn how to help others who are being harassed or have been sexually assaulted' (p. 630); and 'Training teachers and students on what to do in these situations' (p. 654) were described as potential approaches. Education was considered as a key to reducing sexual violence in the university.

The participants also wrote how promoting empathy towards the targets of violence and increasing the understanding of in/appropriate conduct would be useful. This could be achieved in presentations and awareness-raising campaigns that create an atmosphere conducive to open discussions. For instance, '… show real-life cases where women suffer because of it (harassment)' (p. 448), and '…raise awareness of the profound damage that marks the life of the victim, both professors and students. To publicise sexist treatment and ideas so that it is no longer seen as 'normal' or as something we should remain silent about or that 'it's not a big deal,' and to take these inappropriate acts very seriously' (p. 479) were some of the suggestions. Understanding the lived experiences of the victims of sexual violence was proposed as an important part of the educational initiatives.

Indeed, raising awareness on what conduct is inappropriate, and embedding opportunities for discussions were suggested. For instance, 'Talk about these issues so we are informed and know when someone is being inappropriate' (p. 841) and 'Talk about the theme without seeing it as a taboo' (p. 90). Creating an environment where sexual violence is not a prohibited/censored conversation topic was important to the students. The awareness-raising campaigns could also take place in the physical environment. This was outlined in responses such as 'Put up murals of values, decorate the facilities with phrases related to improving behaviour' (p. 491), or 'Posting signs on campus indicating that it is harassment' (p. 802). Raising awareness through campaigns and open discussions was seen as useful for creating empathy and an open atmosphere.

Primary prevention of sexual violence also included ideas for improving the safety of the physical campus environment. Installing surveillance cameras, panic buttons, improving lighting, and having campus security that is trained to recognise sexual violence would be useful. 'Monitoring via cameras. Improved lighting in open spaces' (p. 478); 'Having a care system (guards) better trained and obviously a larger number of staff for it. Also, installing cameras and having someone monitor them' (p. 27); 'Lighting in all areas of the university. The presence of female guards or police officers' (p. 569) were some of the suggested actions. An environment where there is an increased risk of getting caught could deter potential perpetrators of sexual violence.

As well as education, campaigns, and campus security, participants shared ideas for diverse policy-level strategies that the university administration should implement. These included establishing codes of conduct and protocols, and ensuring that they are followed (e.g. making sure there are repercussions for the perpetrators). 'Perhaps creating regulations to outline prohibitions, as well as rights and obligations, to maintain a peaceful and violence-free environment' (p. 49) was one suggestion. Official protocols could 'Maintain a zero-tolerance policy toward sexual abuse and harassment, regardless of gender, position, or cultural group' (p. 687). The university should establish 'More drastic norms against abuse' (p. 522). The university should go through a culture change, where there is a fostering of '…a culture of reporting wrongdoing…encouraging unity within the university community' (p. 753). Students acknowledged that policy-level preventative strategies only work if the university makes sure that they are followed.

The second subtheme, secondary reactionary measures, includes student suggestions for actions that could be implemented after the sexual violence has occurred. Here, the participants wrote about the University's role in dealing with complaints. Some of the recommended actions were to establish a '…dialogue through a commission between students and university authorities so that victims of harassment can report their harassers and university authorities can take administrative, criminal, or judicial action against them' (p. 685). To achieve effective management of complaints, there should be dedicated teams/groups for handling them. For instance, participants suggested '…a suitable office to which people can go to resolve these problems' (p. 833);

'Create a special council or group to handle complaints' (p. 734); 'Establish rapid response teams to identify signs of harassment' (p. 795) as some of the actions. One participant mentioned how 'Prevention and care protocols, incorporate institutional policies of equality and equity, and introduction of qualified personnel for handling complaints and cases of violence originating in university centers' (p. 109) would be the way forward. These suggestions highlighted how it would be beneficial to have specialised offices and personnel that deal with the sexual violence cases, independent of other academic or administrative bodies.

However, participants also expressed their concern about university authorities and how they may not act on the complaints. This could be because sexual violence is not taken seriously; students are not believed; or the university protects the (staff member) perpetrators. 'Protection for students, the idea that if they speak up they won't be judged and will be helped, not protecting the perpetrators no matter who they are' (p. 111); 'Make things happen: That the authorities take situations like these more seriously to prevent them from happening again' (p. 683); 'That university authorities take legal action against offenders' (p. 681); 'Having trustworthy authorities to turn to in these cases, ensuring that the authorities take what they are told seriously' (p. 654), and 'Take into account the students' comments, no matter how insignificant they may seem' (p. 18) were some of the comments that placed the responsibility to the university authorities. Many participants raised the issue of staff members who are abusers, and how the university should take measures to control it, for example, 'The university should look at the values of the professors since there are several who harass students' (p. 842). In comments such as these, trust was a key factor. If the university authorities do not believe the students, take the side of the staff members, and do not punish perpetrators, complaining about sexual violence is seen as pointless.

To avoid potential retaliation that could arise from reporting, participants had concrete ideas for how to maintain anonymity. For instance, a university should 'Guarantee institutional protocols that facilitate reporting and action, as there is often fear of retaliation. We could have an anonymous mailbox with the authorities so we could put the name of the abuser' (p. 692). There could also be online 'Apps to report harassment or violence' (p. 534). Indeed, anonymity was a key, for example, 'Having a place where we can report without it affecting our career performance or facing retaliation for speaking about what happens to us' (p. 28). The secondary, reactionary measures should focus on student safety and anonymity, as they could otherwise risk of being betrayed by their university if they try to report sexual violence.

The targets of sexual violence should also receive appropriate support. This could be done systematically, such as 'Having consultants in each educational centre who can help women who suffer from harassment…' (p. 43), or 'Form safe support groups for women and men who have suffered harassment or seek the intervention of a psychologist in these support groups' (p. 735). Psychological help was a key to improving the care for students who have been victims.

Overall, this theme underscores the centrality of structural and institutional transformation in the prevention of sexual violence. The participants framed prevention and interventions as a matter of institutional accountability requiring policies, clear protocols, effective reporting systems, safety surveillance and accessible psychosocial support. To ensure the sustainability of useful strategies for preventing sexual violence, it should be supported by institutional policies that also guarantee student safety when reporting violence.

Theme 2: Student collective actions in preventing and intervening in sexual violence

This theme outlines ideas around students themselves as active collectives. The participants wrote about developing safety codes among students, organising people into collectives, moving together around campus as a group, and increasing belongingness and togetherness to help to combat sexual violence.

Community building and looking out for each other were mentioned as actions. Building trust, empathy, and belongingness could increase the readiness to act as a bystander. For instance, 'Build community. The better we know each other, the easier it will be to act because we will feel empathy for the person' (p. 794), and 'Be friendlier, build more trust, be closer as students' (p. 67) were some strategies. Indeed, looking out for each other, and not leaving people alone were suggested, 'We should always look out for each other, especially women, by advising each other and knowing where each other is so that no one is alone' (p. 691), and 'Always be aware of our surroundings, never leave any woman or man alone, and take action when someone is already facing rumours of sexual harassment or any other kind' (p. 55). Trust and togetherness among students were seen as a primary (reduced likelihood of offending; increased vigilance among students) and a secondary (helping the victims) prevention measure.

The participants also shared ideas for student-led collectives and societies. One person advised how students should 'Form and manage student leadership teams responsible for ensuring the safety of both men and women…' (p. 772), and 'Implement volunteer-run support groups so that victims who are unsure about filing a complaint can talk to someone who can advise them on legal and emotional matters' (p. 687). It would be beneficial 'To have an organization of female members to whom reports of harassment/sexual abuse can be sent' (p. 18); and 'Support groups where people are educated about their rights and reminded that they have backing if they want to speak up' (p. 58). This would make the collective student action more formalised, influencing both primary and secondary prevention.

Another suggestion was to develop 'safety codes' among students to facilitate the recognition of sexual violence. The participants wrote that how 'Develop safety codes among women to help identify these types of situations' (p. 705) and '…implement a common language, like a 'code,' so that victims don't feel uncomfortable speaking out or reporting what is happening' (p. 814) would be useful actions. Having a special language among students would facilitate the recognition that abuse is taking place.

In summary, Theme 2 points towards the importance of recognising students as active agents capable of working in collectives, impacting campus climate. Collective, organised work among students could also impact on belonging, togetherness, and empathy towards the targets of violence.

Theme 3: Shifting responsibility: Gendered logics of sexual violence prevention

This theme comprises responses that frame the prevention of sexual violence primarily as a matter of individual, often explicitly as a gendered and moral responsibility. Across the data, a clear central axis emerged: responsibility for prevention is unevenly distributed and repeatedly displaced onto women's behaviour and men's moral education. This theme is organised into two subthemes: Women's responsibility to prevent sexual violence, and the moral education of men.

The first subtheme centres on women's self-management and vigilance, positioning women as primary agents responsible for preventing sexual violence through behavioural regulation. Some participants suggested that women could reduce their risk by dressing modestly, behaving prudently, avoiding intoxication, and regulating their interactions with men. These responses often reflected the conservative and patriarchal social values prevalent in the Guatemalan context, in which girls and women are expected to be educated to behave in a 'correct' manner from an early age. Several participants emphasised the family as the key site of prevention, arguing that 'parents should be the main figures to address these types of issues with their daughters and, therefore, prevent these problems' (p. 541). Other responses explicitly policed women's clothing and behaviour, attributing potential victimisation to perceived lack of self-respect or moral restraint, such as claims that 'inappropriate clothing and suggestive behaviour sexually attract rapists' (p. 410), or that women should 'dress modestly, not consume alcohol or drugs, and not talk about their sexuality' (p. 638).

At the same time, this subtheme was not internally homogeneous. Some participants explicitly rejected the notion that women's clothing or behaviour should be blamed for sexual violence, asserting instead that 'clothing is not a reason to judge or harm someone' (p. 361), that 'the way someone dresses is not an invitation to rape them' (p. 665), and calling to 'abandon the absurd notion that a woman is to blame for her clothing' (p. 782). While these counter-claims challenge victim-blaming narratives, their very presence underscores how central women's bodies and behaviours remain within dominant preventive discourses.

The second subtheme, the moral education of men, frames prevention as a matter of teaching men respect, consent, and appropriate behaviour towards women. The participants suggested that sexual violence could be prevented if 'men learned to respect women and the correct way to treat women' (p. 765), if men were educated to 'respect any decision a woman makes' (p. 773), and if greater value were placed on 'a woman's word' (p. 369). Although these responses acknowledged men's role in preventing violence, responsibility was frequently articulated through pedagogical and moral terms, often displaced onto family upbringing or early socialisation rather than framed as direct accountability for perpetrators. As a result, men appear as subjects to be educated rather than as agents held responsible for violent behaviour.

Taken together, this theme reveals a prevention framework grounded in individual and relational responsibility, structured by gendered norms that place the burden of vigilance and risk management on women, while positioning men primarily as targets of moral education. Although some responses contest victim-blaming and call for greater respect toward women, the responsibility for preventing sexual violence is repeatedly displaced away from perpetrators and institutions.

Theme 4: Suggested bystander actions

In this theme, we outline varied actions that individuals could take as bystanders. The participants discussed interventions that fit in the 'D"s framework' (e.g. Right to Be, N.D.). The participants wrote about actions that could be classed as direct (e.g. verbally/physically addressing the situation); delegated (e.g. recruit other bystanders or authorities); distract (e.g. pretend to know the target to get them out of the situation safely); distance (e.g. take the target out of the situation); and document (e.g. take video). For instance, one participant outlined multiple actions (distract, document, direct, delegate) in their response: 'Help the boy/girl by saying they are your partner or that they are with you; Record evidence of the harassment or violence and then confront the aggressor to stop their actions; Seek immediate help from higher authorities' (p. 837).

Direct actions could be aimed at the perpetrator and/or the victim. These included 'Confront the harasser and don't stay silent. Tell the victim that they are not to blame for being harassed (p. 822); 'Intervene directly if witnessing a case of harassment' (p. 424); 'Talk to the other person and reason with them' (p. 743); and 'Try to approach victims, whether male or female, with empathy to talk and find a solution to the problem' (p. 690). Often, participants did not mention whether direct actions (e.g. supporting the victim) would be better to implement while the event takes place, or after the event (as a delayed action).

Students also suggested strategies for delegating help to other bystanders, staff members, or security. For instance, 'seek help from others' (p. 735); 'Ask for help, call security' (p. 140); 'Call the police, inform educational staff, or notify close friends' (p. 230) were some of the ideas.

Some of the proposed bystander actions were about creating a distraction that could diffuse the situation. The students wrote how bystanders could 'Create a distraction for the aggressor' (p. 152); 'Going in search of that person (victim) but doing it with a call, pretending that we know them, pretending distress over a call from their mom for not finding them' (p. 245); and 'Pretend to be a couple with the affected person, separate them' (p. 336) were seen as useful forms of help. Distraction strategies involved creating a disguise that could break the abusive situation.

Physically distancing the target from the perpetrator was another proposed bystander strategy. For instance, 'Try to take the harassed person to a safer place' (p. 731); 'what I do is take my friends by the hand and move them away from intense teachers or classmates' (p. 157); 'Even if we don't know the victim, we should tell them to come with us to prevent any kind of abuse' (p. 556); and 'If we see someone who may be a victim of harassment, approach them, try to take them away from the harasser' (p. 60) were actions of distancing. This kind of tactic was suggested for both friends and strangers who were at risk of sexual violence.

In addition to the previous suggestions, participants wrote about documenting the situations to have evidence for later. 'Try to take photos to have evidence' (p. 16), and 'Take videos and photos because later they won't believe you if you just say words' (p. 246) were some of the ideas for documenting.

To summarise, this theme consists of participants' suggestions for individual bystanders on intervention tactics. These ranged from direct intervention to distracting the situation, documenting to have evidence, delegating to others, and physically distancing the target from the perpetrator.

Discussion

In this study, we explored student suggestions for actions that could effectively address sexual violence in universities in Guatemala. We constructed four themes from the data, which were relevant at multiple socio-ecological levels of the university (e.g. from gendered social norms to university structures and policies to student communities to individual students and staff). Below, we will discuss each theme, linking the results to practical recommendations.

In Theme 1, 'University role in preventing and intervening in sexual violence', students shared ideas on how university administration should address both primary (i.e. preventative) and secondary (i.e. reactive) sexual violence prevention. Their advice included working on policies and procedures as well as education of staff and students, underpinned by a cultural change that creates a zero tolerance to sexual violence. Training and educating both students and staff on sexual violence-related topics (e.g. bystander workshops; sexual consent education) was one proposed strategy. Rather than just a one-off training, these suggestions could be turned into programs of continuing education, including multiple elements (e.g. campaigns, talks, workshops, curriculum). The suggestions from the students in Guatemala were similar to many of the best practices in universities in the English-speaking Global North (Dufour, 2024). Wholistic education programmes have the

potential to influence individual attitudes around victim blame, as well as impact the whole campus environment in a progressive manner (Freyd & Smidt, 2019). Employing a campus-wide education campaign could result in a positive change in the primary prevention of sexual violence in universities in Guatemala, also addressing the gendered myths around the topic.

The participants highlighted how the university has an important role in developing, implementing, and reinforcing policies and procedures, but had very little faith in the institutional ability and willingness to intervene in sexual violence, especially if the perpetrators are staff members (see also Dávila et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2024b for similar findings). Also globally, universities are often more interested in guarding their reputation rather than dealing with the abusers (Besley et al., 2022), leading to institutional betrayal of the students (Dufour, 2024). In our sample, the students recognised the importance of institutional support at multiple levels (see Dufour, 2024) but were also sceptical, perhaps because of their previous experiences with institutional betrayal. Indeed, implementing and reinforcing policies can be challenging in patriarchal societies where there is a culture of denial, minimisation, and trivialisation of sexual violence (see Ginocchio et al., 2025, for similar findings in Italy). Even if relevant policies exist, nothing will change if they are dysfunctional and/or not followed (see also Sidelil et al., 2022, for example, from Ethiopia). The student suggestions were a mixture of acknowledging the importance of universities while maintaining a scepticism regarding the possibility of change.

As well as an institutional responsibility, participants proposed various collective actions amongst students, which were outlined in Theme 2. Previous studies in Guatemala have demonstrated that students feel disillusioned with institutional support and prefer to work collectively in combatting sexual violence (Dávila et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2024b). Student-led collectives and organisations, enhanced belongingness, and the development of safety codes were some of the ideas for student-initiated violence prevention. Institutional betrayal can function as a catalyst for student campus activism (Linder & Myers, 2018). When the university does not engage in primary or secondary prevention, the students form into collectives that tackle violence. Knowing the rich history of student movements in Latin American countries (Ordorika, 2022), it is not a surprise that the students in our study suggested collective action as a weapon against violence.

Theme 3 highlighted a prevention framework that locates responsibility for sexual violence primarily at the individual and relational levels, structured through gendered norms that emphasise women's self-surveillance, men's moral education, and individual awareness, while obscuring perpetrator and institutional accountability. The prominence of women's vigilance reflects the logic of *rape avoidance advice*, which frames women's agency in ways that simultaneously produce implicit victim-blaming (Curchin, 2019) and reinforce the figure of the 'missing perpetrator' in prevention discourse (McMillan, 2023). The persistence of rape myths further sustains this displacement by shaping social judgments that transfer responsibility from perpetrators to victims, which was noted by similar research in Guatemala (Lyons et al., 2024a). Blaming the victims and excusing the perpetrators could also reduce the likelihood of bystander intervention, which has been demonstrated to be an effective secondary prevention strategy (Lyons et al., 2022, 2024a; Sliwa, 2024; Trottier et al., 2021). The students in our sample acknowledged how lived experiences of surviving sexual violence could be used to increase empathy towards the victims. Indeed, interventions that combine education with empathy seem to be effective in reducing rape myths (Hudspith et al., 2023).

In Theme 4, participants shared ideas on how individual bystanders could approach violence prevention with their actions. These interventions were direct (e.g. verbally/physically addressing the situation), delegation (e.g. recruiting other bystanders or authorities), distraction (e.g. pretending to know the target to get them out of the situation safely), distancing (e.g. taking the target out of the situation), and documenting (e.g. taking video). The participants' responses fit within the most investigated theoretical frameworks explaining bystander action, which circle around the letter 'D'. Various studies have reported different operationalisations of this framework, from '3 D's' to '5 D's' (e.g. direct, distract, delegate, delay, display discomfort, distance, document, diffuse; Casper et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2019; Moschella et al., 2018; York et al., 2021). Indeed, the students in Guatemala suggested a mixture of bystander actions that have also been used in other countries (e.g. United States, Moschella et al., 2018). Our results partially addressed the global evidence gaps in bystander literature (Labhardt et al., 2017; Pfaff et al., 2024), indicating that bystander frameworks can be developed and applied in the context of Guatemala as well.

Throughout themes 2, 3, and 4, the responsibility to engage in primary and secondary prevention was placed on the shoulders of individuals. Although calls to educate men acknowledge the role of masculinities

in the production of violence (Lacasse et al., 2021), framing prevention primarily in pedagogical terms risks diffusing accountability when not accompanied by structural changes in institutions. Likewise, approaches centred on bystanders rely heavily on individual moral labour and responsibility. Interventions alone without institutional support show limited impact on reducing violence (Porat et al., 2024). In contexts such as Guatemala, marked by colonial legacies and persistent impunity, these individualised prevention logics could be too risky for students in the absence of structural support. This underscores the need for prevention approaches that address sexual violence as a structural and relational phenomenon (Cabnal, 2018, 2010; Lugones, 2007).

Taken together, the results demonstrated that students perceived that structural strategies are necessary to ensure systemic and sustainable change. Indeed, in cultures where victim-blame is rife, there is a need for tactics that address all levels of the ecological systems in universities. In contexts where prevention is seen as primarily seen as rooted in the social norms that govern men's (e.g. normalisation) and women's (e.g. inviting harassment with clothing) behaviour (see also Bergenfeld et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2023), interventions must combine structural and policy reforms, with student-led initiatives that strengthen a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. This could have a positive impact on the willingness to intervene and to offer support, thereby contributing to safer and more responsive campus environments.

Limitations and future research

Our research also has some limitations. For instance, participants' responses were often brief and could have benefited from probing a bit deeper with follow-up questions. Future studies should expand the findings by employing interviews or focus group approaches to deepen answers. Indeed, there have been some debates on whether free-text responses in online surveys can afford a rigorous qualitative analysis (La Donna et al., 2018). However, the assumptions of the lack of rigour have also been deemed as misleading. Virginia Braun et al. (2021) provided a lengthy discussion on the advantages of online qualitative surveys, mentioning factors such as a larger geographical reach and elimination of power dynamics between the researcher and the participant. One of the strengths of our survey was that we obtained a large sample of students from diverse disciplines and various geographical regions. In addition, power dynamics and socially desirable responding are issues in qualitative research with sensitive topics (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). It is possible that the gendered perspectives presented in Theme 3 may have been more difficult to obtain in face-to-face interviews. Despite the brevity of the answers, they made sense in the context of violence prevention in universities in Guatemala, affording a hearing to diverse opinions on the topic.

Another limitation is that the insights from LGBTI students were not explicitly present. This is because our focus was on exploring student perspectives more generally, and we did not disaggregate the data for gender identity or sexual orientation. Previous studies have suggested that LGBTI community members are at higher risk of sexual violation in universities (Tilley et al., 2020), but they are often left out from university sexual harassment prevention programmes (Brush & Miller, 2023) . Future studies could focus more specifically on the LGBTI communities, the type of violence they experience in university, and suggested strategies for combatting the violence.

Conclusion

This pilot study shed some light on how students from the public university in Guatemala would prefer to address sexual violence in universities. The qualitative insights will be useful in informing future interventions, programmes, and policies that have relevance in the Guatemalan higher education context (see also Duggleby et al., 2020). Institutional primary preventative (e.g. policies, campaigns, education and interventions, improving the physical environment) and secondary reactive (e.g. anonymous and safe reporting, punishment of perpetrators, aiding bystanders and victims) strategies are fundamental to ensure sustainability, effectiveness, and visible backing. Generally, fostering a culture of care and reinforcing student-led collective initiatives could prove to be effective in Guatemala. At the same time, interventions must address machismo and patriarchal norms that continue to shape victim-blaming attitudes. The student voices in the present research demonstrated how universities should have continuous, multi-level (from institutions to student collectives to individual) strategies to combat sexual violence, potentially leading to a change in social norms.

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Minna Lyons:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Numa Dávila:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration; **Maria Fernanda Reyes-Rodriguez:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Maria Ines Gandolfo Conceição:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Jorge Sebastian Castro-Caicedo:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Glenda García García:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

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Data can be requested from the first author.

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