Tackling Rape Culture in Québec Universities: A Network of Feminist Resistance

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Abstract
Québec university communities are facing intensified pressure to address the incidence of sexual violence on campus. The ESSIMU (Enquête Sexualité, Sécurité et Interactions en Milieu Universitaire) survey (2016) revealed that one third of respondents (students and employees from six universities, all genders combined) reported having experienced at least one form of sexual violence since arriving at university, committed by someone affiliated with the same university. As the issue is becoming increasingly institutionalized, a process that often erodes activism, this article highlights the role feminist activism has played in placing sexual violence on university campuses on the political agenda. From the dual perspective of feminist activists and researchers on the ESSIMU team, the article explores the backdrop of this mobilization, and the network of feminist resistance that fostered the ESSIMU study, itself a significant contribution to the increased recognition of sexual violence in universities. It also considers the role of university and government institutions in (re)producing such violence and the role of media in making it a public issue.

Keywords
sexual violence, rape culture, university, feminist activism, Québec

Introduction
Institutional responses to sexual violence on Canadian university campuses are now the focus of unprecedented scrutiny by student associations, individual feminists and

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feminist groups, researchers, the media, and governments (Quinlan, Quinlan, Fogel, & Taylor, 2017). Numerous incidents associating universities with rape culture have shaken institutions across the country in recent years (Quinlan et al., 2017; University of Ottawa, 2015). Québec’s university communities have also been confronted with an intensified focus on the prevalence of sexual assault on their campuses (Bureau de Coopération Universitaire, 2016), most notably after a string of break-ins including sexual assaults against four women that occurred at Université Laval’s student residences during the night of October 14-15, 2016. The university’s administration received criticism for the rector’s initial decision to remain silent and for issuing a message to all the students living on campus “to remind them of the importance of locking the doors to their rooms” (Université Laval, 2016), which was perceived as victim blaming (Canadian Press, 2016). These events, the institutional response, and the social mobilizations that followed, generated intense press and social media coverage, which propelled the notion of rape culture into a Québec-wide conversation (Shingler, 2016). In addition, university administrations and government bodies have had to address the findings of the first province-wide survey of sexual violence on a university campus (SVUC), known as Enquête Sexualité, Sécurité et Interactions en Milieu Universitaire (ESSIMU): Ce qu’en disent étudiant.es, enseignant.es et employé.es [Study on Sexuality, Security and Interactions on a University Campus: What Students, Teachers and Employees are Saying] (Bergeron et al., 2016).

After decades of administrations handling SVUC largely in a reactive rather than in a preventive or proactive manner (Quinlan et al., 2017), as well as “in an informal capacity” (Gialopsos, 2017, p. 141), this problem has recently been ensconced on the political agenda. Consequently, the fight against sexual violence in Québec universities is becoming increasingly institutionalized. This process notably involves the support of political elites for an issue or a social movement, followed by the creation of public policy (Ancelovici, Chicoine, & Dufour, 2017). In the context of neoliberal politics resulting in the decline of public funding for higher education and the increased corporatization of universities (Quinlan et al., 2017), the ongoing institutionalization of SVUC has to be understood in relation to the erosion of feminist political analysis of violence against women, more and more reframed through gender neutral individualizing discourses of security, campus climate, or risk management (Beres, Crow, & Gotell, 2009; Quinlan et al., 2017; Sheehy, 2012). Moreover, institutionalization often goes hand in hand with delegitimization of transgressive radical voices, by “shaping modes of action, gradually ruling out unconventional and disruptive ones while consolidating conventional and orderly ones” (Ancelovici et al., 2017).

We therefore consider it essential to make visible the feminist activism that played a decisive role in the recent advances in tackling rape culture in Québec universities. We argue that the gains we are experiencing, particularly in terms of policy outcomes, may be attributed to the actions of a wide spectrum of feminists that includes radical and institutional activists, students and professors, community organizations, and individual survivors. We also highlight the role of the media in these advances as many feminists have contributed to the news these last few years as experts, as activists, or as both.
These reflections are not based on a systematic sociological inquiry but on our perspective as feminist researchers on the ESSIMU team and our experience as institutional activists, in other words, feminists who work within the structures of the university to create change (Staggenborg, 2010). Given “the inherent division between grassroots activism and the academy” or, to put it in a more positive way, the need for bridges to link theory and action, as well as to connect francophone and anglophone communities in Canada, which tend to evolve each in their own solitude (Pagé & Lampron, 2006, p. 73), we thought it appropriate to familiarize English-speaking academics with the issue of feminists’ efforts to resist rape culture on Québec’s French-speaking university campuses. Particular attention will be accorded to activism at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), for two main reasons: first, because the ESSIMU survey emerged from work done by feminists at UQAM, and second, as discussed in greater detail in this article, because UQAM has been the theater of many debates and dramatic incidents involving SVUC in recent years (Allard, 2014; Boileau, 2015). From this angle, we also expose the historically inadequate institutional response to sexual violence in Québec’s higher education institutions. In the second part of the article, we discuss recent normative and practical advances to address this phenomenon, which are linked to the ESSIMU findings and recommendations we briefly present. Finally, we examine the impact of the survey and zoom in on the role of media in the recent exponential increase in visibility of SVUC in Québec.

**University Sexual Violence in Québec: An Historical Overview of Activism**

Women students have been mobilizing for decades against the sexism they experience on campuses, in the classroom, and in the workplace (Boyle, Barr, & Clay-Warner, 2017; Haaken, 2017). As university and government decision-makers are now confronting intensified efforts to protest the rape culture permeating academia, leading to unprecedented developments with this issue, it is certainly not a new problem. Despite plenty of research about SVUC, there is relatively little about activism against it. However, some specialized literature about student activism, as well as media archives, activist documentation, and testimonies, indicate Québec’s feminist students have long been protesting sexual violence in francophone higher education institutions (Anonym@s, 2015; Lacoursière, 2007). Along with student associations in different universities and decades before the recent legislation (Rentschler, 2018; Staggenborg, 2010), feminists at UQAM—mostly students but also members of the teaching staff—have done essential work identifying SVUC as a social problem in Québec (Anonym@s, 2015). Paving the way for intensified mobilization against rape culture in the 21st century, this is a collective effort whose story must be told.

The effort has been led largely by feminist student associations. Feminist students’ criticisms have long pointed to administrations’ lack of proactiveness and the inadequacy of institutional policies (when there were policies) and the decisions made when incidents of sexual violence occurred. Feminists’ claims, for example, addressed through the Women’s Committee at UQAM (WCUQAM), founded in 1975, frequently
focused on the ineffectiveness of institutional channels in addressing sexual harassment and protested against impunity in sexual assaults occurring on university campuses (Anonym@s, 2015). In the 1980s, WCUQAM worked in collaboration with other student organizations such as Organisation des femmes de l’ANE EQ (ODFA), a women-only feminist committee of the national student association (ANE EQ), to implement and sustain a women-only forum on different subjects, including sexual harassment (Fontaine, 1997; Lacoursière, 2007). The second women’s forum, which was held at UQAM in October 1983, included a workshop about harassment and rape and addressed issues such as sexual violence within the student movement (Muzzo, 1983). In March 1992, WCUQAM published a journal in which they condemned the fact that sexual harassment was not being seriously addressed, and that institutional procedures were mostly ineffective, despite the creation in 1989 of a Harassment Prevention Office and the adoption of Policy 16 on sexual harassment (Anonym@s, 2015). Remarkably relevant today, a brief presented in 1992 to the Parliamentary Commission on College Teaching by ODFA called on the communities concerned to seriously address the question of sexual harassment:

Most higher education institutions have sexual harassment committees. However, they are either inactive or ineffective. Certain educational institutions deny the existence, or question the veracity of women’s accounts of rape in these same institutions, rather than attempting to assist them or remedy the situation. The best way to address sexual harassment is to act. This means that educational institutions, through their administrations and student associations, must publicize their sexual harassment policies and encourage women to report incidents of harassment. (ODFA, 1992, p. 11)

Originating with WCUQAM, an independent radical feminist collective, the Brigade Rose, made a brief and controversial appearance in 1992 to 1993. Notably, the idea of creating this Brigade was born out of the experience of women activists in UQAM’s general student association, the AGEUQAM [Association générale étudiante de l’UQAM], to whom the women had reported having been harassed and assaulted, and not knowing where to go for help. (Anonym@s, 2015, p. 14 [Translation])

One of the tactics of these masked avengers was to enter a class, circle an attacker, and stare at him silently for several minutes. The Brigade Rose also held a press conference on March 11, 1993, demanding that UQAM take the issue seriously and hire an outside feminist-run sexual assault resource, which it would do almost 25 years later. At best, these women activists were characterized as “radicals” and, at worst, “fascists,” “totalitarian,” or “terrorists” in the media (Anonym@s, 2015). Nevertheless, a few days after the Brigade Rose press conference, UQAM’s rector submitted a status report informing the Board of Directors about the institution’s sexual harassment policy and formed three committees, about training and awareness-raising activities, about investigations following a complaint, and about assistance to complainants (Anonym@s, 2015).
Several feminist student collectives have emerged over the past decades at UQAM, but few generated as much media attention as the Brigade Rose, until the Comité femmes GGI—Grève générale illimitée/general unlimited strike (Anonym@s). Created at the beginning of Québec’s student strike campaign of 2012 and originally a subcommittee of a larger UQAM-GGI mobilization committee, this group of a dozen feminist students has played a significant role in increasing the visibility of sexual violence, including in activist ranks (Allard, 2014; Hausfather, 2017). In addition to different controversial actions during the strike, the Comité femmes GGI produced a zine denouncing the racist, sexist, and homophobic nature of some “frosh” week (back-to-school) events at UQAM in the fall of 2012 (Anonym@s, 2015).

Through diverse strategies, from the more conventional tactics (such as a brief presented to the Parliamentary Commission) to more disruptive modes of action (such as Brigade Rose’s), feminist students have built what has become “a sustained conversation about rape culture on campuses” (Lalonde, cited in Quinlan et al., 2017, para. 1). At UQAM, as on many other campuses across Canada, “[a] new generation of activists is now pressing for change, asking important questions about institutional wrongdoing, and demanding that their universities are made safe for work and study” (Quinlan et al., 2017, p. 185).

**A Surge of (Cyber) Activism Against Rape Culture**

In the midst of and contributing to a resurgence in and popularity and visibility of feminist activism (Phillips, 2016), protests against sexual violence, particularly in academia, “forced a debate about rape culture in Quebec” (Shingler, 2016). Frequently an occasion for degrading practices or sexual violence, “frosh week” activities in several universities across Canada attracted intense media attention and sparked a variety of protests in recent years (Quinlan et al., 2017), including at UQAM, in 2013 (Anonym@s, 2015). In Québec, survivors and their allies have yet again accused university authorities of discouraging formal complaints and denying the scope of the problem (CBC News, 2017; Mercier-Dalphond, 2016). The widespread use of social media has opened up new spaces for victims and their allies to testify and organize (Rentschler, 2014).

Described as the Année du ras-le-bol [year women said “enough”] (Boileau, 2015), 2014 marked a turning point in this movement as tens of thousands of victims of sexual violence and their allies turned to the (social) media to break the silence (Lessard, 2017). Many of them recounted their stories in response to feminist-led campaigns in Québec identified by the hashtags #AgressionNonDenoncée and #BeenRapedNeverReported, a forerunner of the #MoiAussi (#MeToo) movement. Some controversial activists and collectives, often associated with radical feminists at UQAM by the media, such as les Hyènes en jupons, Alerta Feminista, or Les Hystériques (Allard, 2014; Anonym@s, 2015), took justice into their own hands by helping the public denunciation of attackers.

UQAM found itself in the center of a media storm in the fall of 2014, following an event that came to be known as “stickergate” (Anonym@s, 2015; Boileau, 2015). The
office doors of six professors were anonymously covered with stickers that said, “Harcèlement, attouchements, voyeurisme, agressions . . . Tolérance zéro! Non à la culture du viol. Brisons le silence. L’UQAM doit agir.” [Harassment, sexual touching, exhibitionism, assaults: Zero tolerance! No to rape culture. Let’s break the silence. UQAM must act.]

As they had earlier with the Brigade Rose, the administration and many other actors at UQAM strongly condemned the sticker action in the media, as a form of harassment and defamation (Lessard, 2017). They launched an investigation to find those responsible for applying the stickers, with no success. Many journalists and columnists also denounced the stickergate direct action, blaming radicalism (Boileau, 2015; Lessard, 2017) and UQAM’s Association facultaire étudiante des sciences humaines [human sciences students association—AFESH] for sharing “stickergate” photos on its Facebook page (Anonym@s, 2015). The Association also adopted a resolution in support of survivors and public denunciations in the fall of 2014 (Paquette, 2016).

Reflecting a sense of frustration in the face of institutional “wait-and-seeism,” anonymous denunciation is a tactic that elicits much controversy, as demonstrated by the (social) media debates around stickergate. Arguably, they were deflecting attention away from the main issue(s). In any event, critics of that direct action often invoked the principle of presumption of innocence to silence the victims and curb the #BeenRapedNotReported movement, as Lessard (2017) argues.

Despite the fact that the six professors associated with problematic behavior by the sticker action remained in their positions or that it took 25 years to hire a resource as demanded by the Brigade Rose, the tactics of these radical activists were remarkably effective in exposing the problem of SVUC (Anonym@s, 2015). In fact, in the weeks that followed stickergate, harassment complaints at UQAM doubled (Montpetit, 2015), especially as multiple actions also took place during that fall of 2014, too numerous to mention here (Paquette, 2016). Together, these initiatives helped expose the inadequate institutional responses, as discussed below.

**Historically Inadequate Institutional Responses to SVUC**

A search in the media archives and a consideration of the campus mobilizations against rape culture in Québec universities lead to the observation that the institutional response has been historically inadequate (Boyle et al., 2017). As summarized in Gialopsos (2017), “To avoid both tarnishing the school’s reputation and negatively affecting student enrolment, administrators were often likely to quietly sweep sexual violence under the rug, thereby silencing its victims” (p. 141).

On February 6, 1989, the Montréal daily, La Presse, published an unsigned article titled “Le nombre d’agressions sur certains campus est un secret bien gardé” [The number of assaults on certain campuses is a well-kept secret], describing a series of attacks on Québec university students, and a certain reticence on the part of universities to provide statistics on this subject (La rédaction, 1989). Nearly 30 years later, the lack of transparency and assiduity in dealing with SVUC was once again making news, this time, with even more intensity, given the multiplication of events
Violence Against Women 25(11) (Charbonneau, 2014). Following its large coverage of the ESSIMU findings (Nadeau, 2016), a Montréal daily newspaper, Le Devoir, revealed that out of 65 public postsecondary institutions in Québec, only three universities and five colleges have a specific policy to counter sexual violence on campus, whereas only eight institutions have an office for victims. Moreover, in all the universities of Québec, only 106 official complaints had been registered during the past 10 years (Nadeau, 2017).

Even when official channels responsible for operationalizing the university’s policy to counter SVUC are in place, it does not mean they are connected to the victims’ needs. For example, a major challenge facing Québec universities, like other institutions across Canada (Quinlan et al., 2017), is the provincial privacy laws around employment records, which force the universities to keep information about sanctions against an employee secret, even from victims.

The testimony of a former UQAM student helped to reveal the tendency of some university administrations to deny there was a problem of sexual violence in their institutions. Widely covered by the mainstream media, the student’s forthright yet balanced testimony of sexual violence committed by a member of the teaching staff was critical of the confidentiality rules governing the complaint process. She stated,

The investigation, completed in 2015, ruled in [her] favour. It found the professor had acted inappropriately, and that his behaviour amounted to sexual harassment. Still, to this day, the university refuses to tell [her] what, if any, sanctions the professor faced. “I am one of the very few who won,” [the student] said. “But I don’t have the feeling that I won anything.” (CBC News, 2017)

This testimony may be considered as one telling example of the “institutional betrayal” (Smith & Freyd, 2013) survivors often experience after turning to their universities for support and rarely finding satisfaction in “formal mechanisms of redress and sanctions against perpetrators” (Quinlan et al., 2017, p. 1380). This suggests that few victims turn to the institutional channels and pursue actions against the perpetrator(s), as ESSIMU’s findings have shown.

Establishing the ESSIMU Network and Research Team

The ESSIMU research project and the dissemination of its ensuing results build on a legacy of feminist resistance to patriarchal violence, supported by student and feminist activism (Beres et al., 2009; Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993/2005). More specifically, in the course of the 2013 mobilization against sexist “frosh week” events at UQAM, feminist teaching staff, scholars, and university personnel allied with women students, some of whom identified as the Collectif opposé au sexisme à l’UQAM [Collective against sexism at UQAM], to engage the administration on SVUC. Working with student associations and feminist researchers, this activist group quickly realized the need for documentation of the SVUC phenomenon. Without a statistical overview of the problem, it seemed difficult to obtain social and institutional change. Conducted externally to the Collectif, the ESSIMU survey was a response to this need.
(Venne, 2016). The main goals of the project, independent feminist “action research” with the aim of generating social and institutional change (Bergeron et al., 2016), were to contribute to the production of knowledge on the phenomenon of SVUC and to formulate recommendations to sensitize government bodies, university management, and social stakeholders to this problem for the purpose of instituting effective prevention measures for the entire university community.

In 2014, we created an interdisciplinary research team at UQAM to conduct a survey on SVUCs. With financial support from Québec’s Network of Feminist Researchers (Réseau québécois en études féministes), we contacted other researchers to deploy our survey in as many universities across Québec as possible. We also worked closely with two allies, Québec’s coalition of sexual assault centers (Regroupement Québécois des centres d’aide et de lutte contre les agressions à caractère sexuel—RQCALACS), a nonprofit feminist organization that brings together 27 sexual assault centers, and UQAM’s Service aux collectivités, which cooperates with community groups on social change by establishing partnerships between these groups and members of the professorial corps. Despite important budget limitations, our team took advantage of various organizational and networking opportunities which resulted in the ESSIMU study becoming a multisite survey involving 12 women researchers in six French-speaking universities around Québec.

Feminists face many challenges in nonfeminist institutional settings, linked to the varying degrees of “friendliness to feminism in the organization” (Roth, 2004). The universities in which we conducted the ESSIMU survey range from relative “feminist-friendliness” to “outright hostility” (Roth, 2004, p. 150).

**Feminist Framework and Methodology**

Our feminist analysis framework was based on a broad definition of sexual violence which aligns with a paradigm proposed by numerous feminist researchers and activists, going back to the pioneering work of Kelly (1987) and Hanmer (1977), in which sexual violence is conceived as gendered, systemic, and part of a continuum; it is also in line with the approach supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States in its recommendations on monitoring sexual violence (Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, & Mahendra, 2014). The notion of rape culture was included in the analysis to highlight social and institutional practices that (re)produce forms of violence that mainly target women and blame the victims while absolving the perpetrators of all responsibility (Buchwald et al., 1993/2005; Phillips, 2016; Rentschler, 2014).

Sexual victimization was measured using a French adaptation of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, & Waldo, 1999), which has previously been used to assess sexual violence among university populations. The measure includes a total of 21 items and distinguishes three categories of sexual violence: sexual harassment (verbal and nonverbal insults and hostile or degrading behaviors), unwanted sexual behavior (verbal and nonverbal behaviors of a sexual, offensive, unwanted, or nonreciprocal nature, including rape/sexual assault), and sexual coercion.
(blackmail or threats to obtain sex), as detailed in Bergeron et al. (2016) and, in English, in Martin-Storey et al. (2018).

From January to April 2016, 9,284 students, faculty, and staff respondents on six French-speaking university campuses completed the ESSIMU online questionnaire. Following approval from the ethics review boards, they were mainly recruited through massive e-mail invitations to answer the questionnaire sent to the entire university community at each site, using the institutional email lists. Furthermore, the study launch, as well as preliminary findings delivered in the spring of 2016, received widespread media coverage and public attention (Elkouri, 2016; Gauvreau, 2015; Nadeau, 2016), which facilitated recruitment.

The breakdown of the sample \((n = 9,284)\) was as follows: 70.6% undergraduate and graduate students, 13.1% professors (including lecturers and thesis directors), and 16.3%, employees (including 1.5% participants who hold managerial positions). A total of 71.3% of respondents identified as women, 27.3% as men, and 1.4% as gender minorities (on this last point, see Martin-Storey et al., 2018). The survey provided two reporting periods that were included in the analysis: within the past 12 months and since arrival at the university.

**Findings of the Survey and Parallel Developments**

The findings (which are reported in full in Bergeron et al., 2016) revealed that one out of three individuals reported having experienced sexual violence at some point since arriving at university, committed by someone affiliated with the same university, a victimization rate of 36.9%, for a total of 3,430 individuals, all genders and statuses combined. Of these, 60.2% reported they were undergraduate students at the time of victimization. Another 23.6% were graduate students, 15.7% staff, and 12.8% professors (including lecturers and thesis directors). Certain groups were particularly likely to have experienced at least one incident of SVUC since they began studying or working at the university: those who identified as sexual or gender minorities (55.7%), women (40.6%), individuals living with a disability or health problem (46.1%), and international students (41.6%). The perpetrator was identified as male in at least one incident of SVUC experienced since arriving at the university, whether involving sexual harassment (89.7%), unwanted sexual behaviors (86.6%), or sexual coercion (84.3%). Moreover, incidents are repeated and accumulate over time: Among the numerous victims, 41.8% experienced two or even three forms of sexual violence since arriving at university, and 47.3% described negative repercussions on their lives.

The findings also revealed that SVUC is an ongoing problem, as one out of four respondents stated they had been attacked during the 12 months prior to the survey while pursuing academic activities or work at the university, a victimization rate of 24.7% for a total of 2,291 individuals. Such a contrast with the very low official statistics subsequently reported by the *Devoir* journalist (Nadeau, 2017) confirms that the number of complaints filed through institutional channels is not a valid indicator of the presence or absence of SVUC. Moreover, we found that complaints pursued by the
institution represent only the tip of the iceberg, as only 10% of incidents are reported to university authorities (Bergeron et al., 2016).

The reasons for not reporting reflect victims’ lack of confidence in institutional channels and speak to the shortcomings of existing practices at Québec’s universities. The most common reasons given for not reporting SVUC (from a list of 15 reasons) include the following: “I thought the incident was not serious enough to report,” “I worried that university people would not take the situation seriously,” and “I didn’t know who to contact at the university.” Some 96.1% of the ESSIMU sample agrees with the premise that the university should “adopt clear and transparent policies to inform the university community about the existing processes and channels to support victims and witnesses of unwanted remarks or acts of a sexual nature” (Bergeron et al., 2016).

The recommendations of the ESSIMU team put particular emphasis on the Québec government’s need to adopt framework legislation and an action plan to oblige post-secondary institutions to implement effective measures to counter SVUC. We understand framework legislation as an Act defining the general principles of a matter and leaving it to the executive to fix the terms of its application by using its regulatory power (“Loi-cadre,” n.d.). The team also stressed the importance that postsecondary institutions implement anti-SVUC stand-alone policy (as many policies incorrectly tend to include both psychological and sexual harassment); adopt more uniform institutional reporting mechanisms; provide education and training to the entire university community, especially individuals likely to be involved in handling complaints; and set up specialized feminist-run support interventions accessible to the whole university population. As is discussed in the next sections, the survey findings and recommendations (Bergeron et al., 2016) have made their way within the institutions, on to the political agenda, and into the forefront of student mobilizations.

**Responses to the Survey Findings and Recommendations**

A central ESSIMU recommendation and source of collective action from university communities across Québec was the creation of a specific framework law on SVUC. In the heat of the public and media furor following the sexual assaults in the student residence at Université Laval in October 2016, Hélène David, then Minister of Higher Education and also Minister responsible for the Status of Women, announced her intention to begin a process to address the problem of sexual violence in institutions of higher learning (Québec National Assembly, 2016). She proposed a timeline which involved the tabling of legislation in barely over a year.

After a parliamentary committee hearing, Bill 151 was unanimously adopted by the Québec National Assembly in December 2017 (and became Bill 22.1). Presented as an “Act to Prevent and Fight Sexual Violence in Higher Education Institutions,” this bill calls for the implementation of prevention, awareness, accountability, support, and assistance measures (Québec National Assembly, 2017). University administrative leaders have until September 2019 to adopt stand-alone policies on the prevention and
countering of sexual violence within their institutions, which must also include a code of conduct specifying guidelines for such matters.

This recent political undertaking is definitely a step in the right direction and should ensure that postsecondary institutions begin work immediately to more effectively counter SVUC, but several actors from UQAM and other universities—survivors, students, sexual assault workers, and so on—have expressed concern that Bill 22.1 might not be followed up with sufficient financial aid for its implementation (CBC News, 2017).

Following the mobilizations and flurry of media coverage in 2014, UQAM administration agreed to form a committee to review Policy 16 on sexual harassment that included several members of the Collectif opposé au sexisme à l’UQAM. After 4 years of work, the revised version of the policy is, at the time of writing, the subject of a consultation with the UQAM community. Tentatively titled “Politique sur le sexisme et les violences à caractère sexuel” [Policy on Sexism and Sexual Violence], it has considerably broadened the spectrum of behaviors to be collectively proscribed. Importantly, UQAM’s draft policy 16, which is unpublished, includes a code of ethics that goes further than Bill 22.1: It clearly prohibits all staff members who are in a teacher/student or authority relationship with a student from having a sexual or intimate relationship with said student, stating their “consent cannot be given freely and in an informed manner.” This approach is an adequate response to the ESSIMU team’s recommendations, made in several discussions, both formal and informal, with committee members since they commenced work on the policy.

In 2013, much in line with the stand student activists had taken in the 1990s, the Collectif opposé au sexisme à l’UQAM demanded the creation of a university sexual assault center resource similar to the CALACS or Canadian sexual assault/rape crisis centers, which “constitute a vital network across Canada, providing support and advocacy for survivors, and crucially, engaging in social and political struggles against sexual violence” (Beres et al., 2009, p. 136). ESSIMU then recommended that such a resource be created in as many university communities as possible, and that it be permanently funded and established within a reasonable time frame (Bergeron et al., 2016).

In the fall of 2017, UQAM formed a partnership with a CALACS. Three days a week, a feminist social worker has a mandate to offer various types of services to the UQAM community: counsel and support to victims of SVUC, information and accompanying measures if they want to lodge a complaint (institutional or judicial), awareness and training about sexual violence, consent, bystanders’ role, and so on. Québec’s Ministry of Education and Higher Learning is funding this pilot project, which is a first for Québec universities. This initiative is a concrete example of an ESSIMU recommendation to fund a specialized feminist resource that would be as independent as possible from the university administration.

Features of Transformative Actions

Accounting for the success of a social movement is a challenging exercise: Different social and political actors may claim credit for the positive outcomes and construct
competing narratives of responsibility (Meyer, 2006). However, we would argue that recent advances, including the ESSIMU survey, reflect the impact of interlocking acts of feminist resistance, over 30 years in the making. A constellation of actions to combat patriarchal violence has fostered the creation of activist/academic partnerships that we believe have significantly contributed to the fight against rape culture on campus and beyond. In particular, the use of ESSIMU findings and the use of (social) media have contributed to the process of transformation.

In addition to confirming the high rate and repeated presence of sexual violence in Québec’s universities, the ESSIMU survey produced many observations and recommendations that have been mobilized by state and nonstate actors to tackle rape culture in postsecondary institutions. A detailed review and analysis of the assimilation and application of our research output is beyond the scope of this article, but diverse social and institutional actors have used these findings that were meant as a tool for action.

Along with survivors, student associations, union activists, and higher education stakeholders, the ESSIMU team was actively involved at all stages of the Ministry’s and various universities’ recent institutional actions. Our recommendations have guided the new legislation and the decisions of higher education institutions now engaged in implementing policies, prevention strategies, and victim support services. As noted earlier, the content of the Québec government’s Strategy and provisions of the Bill 22.1 draw in large part on ESSIMU’s recommendations (Bergeron et al., 2016). Moreover, the bill requires educational institutions to issue rules guiding all social activities, rather than “frosh” (back-to-school) activities alone. Our research demonstrated that these orientation week events are not a major site of SVUC in comparison with festive activities in general and study-related activities, such as book launches, conferences, and internships (Bergeron et al., 2016). Building on this outcome and its media coverage (Trahan, 2017), students and their associations persuaded the government to back down from banning frosh activities (Lecorps, 2018). There is reason to believe that this impact and overall advances in tackling rape culture in Québec universities are due largely to media attention, as is discussed below.

The media contribution merits mention with regard to its role in the exponential increase in visibility of SVUC in Québec these past few years. Quinlan et al. (2017) consider that media can be understood as “the Achilles heel of the corporate university” (p. 1357 of Kindle edition). Indeed, mass media and social media served to keep pressure on the institutional actors, as evidenced by the media storms generated by the feminist actions mentioned before or by the extensive press coverage of ESSIMU’s findings. Even if such coverage relies sometimes heavily on rape myths or victim blaming, access to media can be crucial to social movements as they mobilize resources (Quinlan et al., 2017). Moreover, as Barker-Plummer (2002) has argued, “media visibility is a political resource in itself, allowing groups to be heard in the public debate” (p. 200). Even the presentation of ESSIMU preliminary findings at a Scientific Congress in May 2016 generated extensive press coverage; members of our team gave several interviews to the journalists who attended our conference, including national television (Elkouri, 2016; Nadeau, 2016). This attention increased exponentially when, with the collaboration of UQAM’s press office, we released our global research
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report (Bergeron et al., 2016) in January 2017. More than 250 people attended this launch, including Minister David, politicians from different parties, members of UQAM’s management and of other postsecondary institutions, students, employees, activists, unions, and staff representatives. On the day of the launch and the following day, just about every local or national TV and radio station, newspapers in Montréal, and across Québec reported the event. Executing the strategy of “supporting women reporters” (Barker-Plummer, 2002), we had given scoop interviews to two female journalists several days before the release of our report, whose previous work in different newspapers had led us to believe they were feminist allies who might adequately frame the public debate on SVUC and disseminate our findings.

Not only did our research team have significant access to the news, we also became “primary definers” (Barker-Plummer, 2002) on the issue of SVUC. Furthermore, several student survivors and activists, some of whom spoke publicly at the launch of our report, have also been very present in the media, as mentioned in this article from a student association, which summarizes our collective efforts to fight sexual violence:

The disturbing data from the ESSIMU study and public testimony from many survivors in the media have largely contributed to a broad engagement by the university and college community. . . . In response, . . . several groups fighting sexual violence in higher education, including the Quebec Student Union, have called upon post-secondary institutions and the government to implement concrete measures to eradicate rape culture and sexual violence in universities and colleges. Since then, significant progress has been made, and though the Quebec model is not perfect, we are witnessing a cultural shift, as well as a greater collective awareness. (Lecorps, 2018, p. 24)

We believe this collective work has contributed to dispelling long-held attitudes expressed by university administrations and others and considered credible by anyone who lacks real knowledge about sexual violence, in other words, most of the population. We refer, in particular, to attitudes that minimize the scope of SVUC (e.g., declaring in a media report that it is an isolated act) or denying the presence of SVUC in a particular institution (e.g., claiming that it is not an issue here, because the university has had few or no complaints). In this respect, it could be concluded that the ESSIMU survey contributed to a breakdown of the dominant discourse. In any event, the plethora of initiatives associated with the surge of women breaking the silence in 2014 and the related media coverage, including ESSIMU’s, made rape culture a subject of conversation in households throughout Québec.

Conclusion: Perspectives on Institutionalization

Initially set up as an independent feminist action research team, it must be acknowledged that the ESSIMU team, mainly composed of researchers and “institutional feminists” (Staggenborg, 2010), works increasingly in partnership with the government and higher education institutions and bodies. Although it has provided weapons to the movement against rape culture on campus, our work has definitely contributed to the
institutionalization of this movement, a process experts say “goes hand in hand” with “de-politicization, de-radicalization, and normalization or domestication” of social movements (Ancelovici et al., 2017). Institutionalization may mean a social movement has achieved its goals, but we can also frame it as co-optation of feminist or student work, “losing touch” with the grassroots movement and its ideals, and overall “feminist-fading” (Roth, 2004). It is, indeed, legitimate to worry that the dynamics of institutionalization will obscure the social activism that brought the issue to public attention in the first place (Beres et al., 2009; Delage, 2017), resulting in activists going unrecognized and, sometimes, not even being consulted. In this regard, several social actors, including student groups and RQCALACS, have expressed their discontent over the Québec government’s decision not to include students on a committee tasked with guiding university administrations to comply with Bill 151 and to implement their policy on SVUC (Hendry, 2018).

It is therefore crucial to remember the genesis of ESSIMU and highlight the feminist activism that resulted in a survey that has made a significant addition to the knowledge about sexual violence in universities and, in return, has fostered collective action. From the use of anonymous denunciation and defiant direct actions that are reviving the activism of anarchists and early radical feminists (Gotell in Sheehy, 2012, p. 259) to “institutionalized forms of action often neglected in accounts of social movements” (Staggenborg, 2010, p. 96), including the production of a scientific study such as ESSIMU, this network of feminist resistance resulted in a diversity of tactics which allowed us to be catalysts for change. Despite institutionalization, we still believe feminist studies can be considered as an integral part of the feminist struggle, if not as “the educational arm of the Women’s Liberation Movement” (Bart et al., 1999).

After being confronted with various situations involving sexual violence and criticized for the inadequacy of their institutional response—even imperviousness—to the demands of women students for campuses free of violence, universities and government bodies in Québec are finally dealing with the issue. After so many years of status quo, one may wonder why sexual violence in higher education has at last become a political concern. We will likely be seeing in-depth examinations of the conditions underlying this apparent transformation. To comprehend the process leading to the establishment of a political priority, whereby a social problem becomes the object of public intervention, we would have to examine the forces underlying social mobilizations, media coverage, and politicization of a particular cause (Hassenteufel, 2010). Government and institutional actions might then be conceived as responses to media coverage of sexual violence. Nevertheless, when a cause enters political speech (and the political agenda), it is because feminists have managed to construct it as a social problem, as highlighted by the work of Bereni (2007) on parity and Delage (2017) on domestic violence.

One thing is certain: University administrations’ actions are now being monitored. It is to be hoped that Bill 22.1 will translate into actions supported by every higher education institution in Québec, but as Gotell reminds us, “such victories, to be lasting and meaningful, must be reasserted, reclaimed, and brought into the streets” (in Sheehy, 2012, p. 265). This is all the more important in a context of daily media
reports of sexual violence in which there exists a real risk of administrations and elected officials opting for quick solutions to satisfy a political agenda or improve their public image, rather than making reasoned decisions supported by the expertise of practitioners, activist groups, and researchers. This is why feminists must keep on acting from within the institutions to achieve collective goals, in line with a “defiant institutionalization” (Ancelovici et al., 2017). Still, student associations and newly emerged actors, like Our Turn (Hendry, 2018) or the Association for the Voice of Education in Québec, which have put the struggle against SVUC high on their priority list, may enable the movement against rape culture in Québec universities to remain a disruptive force and ensure the perspectives of feminists/survivors are put at the heart of the remaining work and the challenges ahead.

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