

Article

Victorious Voices: Legal and Social Triumphs against Sexual Harassment in Higher Education—A Case Study

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Abstract: Sexual harassment in academia has gained attention due to legislative measures, university mechanisms, and student solidarity networks. This article explores the factors contributing to survivors winning when suing their university. The case described here relates to a North American university in a state with regulations against harassment and an active student movement. It delves into a case at the University of California, Irvine, where four individuals sued for the mishandling of sexual harassment complaints, resulting in the dismissal of a prominent professor. Drawing on data from the EU UniswithHeart research project, the article analyzes the impact of solidarity networks and the trial outcome. Through desk research and qualitative interviews, it identifies key elements leading to legal victories against universities, even in the case of a professor who made a big donation to the university, who was banned from campus, and who had his name removed from buildings. This study shows ten aspects that lead to winning a harassment case within universities, emphasizing the importance of addressing the consequences of harassment. It also illustrates the improvement of the academic environment and science when eliminating the hostile climate and silence. Successful outcomes inspire other survivors and urge universities to uphold policies for a safer academic environment.



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1. Introduction

Francisco Ayala died on the weekend when this article started being written [1]. His victims breathe a sigh of relief because, although his experiences marked his life, this person received justice. The investigation report that led to the expulsion of this professor from his university contains 97 pages and includes the following types of comments, as explained by *Science* magazine [2]: “his behavior included telling a pregnant colleague, “You’re so huge”, and regularly putting his hands under a female administrator’s jacket and rubbing them up and down her sides. According to the report, he told a female professor that she had been so animated while giving a talk that he thought she would “have an orgasm”. In another instance, he invited a junior professor to sit on his lap in a crowded meeting, saying he would enjoy the presentation more that way”.

Sexual harassment in academia is a prevalent phenomenon, extending across various disciplines, institutions, and geographical locations. Research indicates that a significant portion of both students and faculty members have experienced some form of sexual harassment during their academic careers [3,4]. This pervasive issue manifests in multiple contexts, including but not limited to classrooms, laboratories, conferences, and online interactions [5]. The hierarchical power dynamics inherent in academia can exacerbate the problem, making individuals vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by those in positions of

authority [6]. Moreover, the complexities surrounding reporting mechanisms and the fear of retaliation often discourage victims from coming forward, leading to underreporting and a culture of silence that perpetuates the cycle of harassment [7]. As awareness grows and conversations surrounding consent, respect, and accountability gain momentum [8], there is a growing imperative for institutions to enact robust policies, provide comprehensive support systems, and foster cultures that prioritize the safety and well-being of all members of the academic community.

The investigation conducted in this complaint includes interviews with 61 individuals who witnessed comments and off-color remarks and repeated unsolicited compliments on women's physical appearances. Based on this case, these individuals claimed to have suffered negative consequences [9]. In 2018, as a result of a sexual harassment complaint made against the university, his name was removed from the School of Biological Sciences, the Science Library, various graduate fellowships, scholarship programs, and endowed chairs [10]. The University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine) itself reported in an internal newspaper story that they are looking for a new name for the Biological Sciences building and the science library due to "sexual harassment claims against signature donor" [11].

The case study of UC Irvine exemplifies how survivors successfully sued the university, leading to significant repercussions for the accused individual and institutional changes. The article highlights ten key factors contributing to this success: altruism, the pursuit of fair and democratic academic spaces, administrative responsiveness, solidarity networks, and legal mechanisms. Moreover, it emphasizes the significance of focusing on the consequences of events rather than merely the acts themselves, highlighting the broader impact on victims and the academic community. Ultimately, the study offers valuable insights into addressing and preventing sexual harassment in academia, emphasizing the importance of support networks, legislative frameworks, and collective commitment to fostering safer and more inclusive academic environments.

Accordingly, two facts make this case attractive to the academic community: (1) the survivors joined efforts and sued the university, not the harasser; and (2) they won, and neither his fame, power, nor the money he donated to the university made him stay in his position. This article examines the elements that have made this case successful. The study answers questions such as (i) what strategies these victims follow, (ii) how they managed both to pursue the complaint and to get support, and (iii) which of these strategies are transferable to other contexts.

1.1. Expulsion from the National Academy of Sciences

The U.S. National Academy of Science (NAS) [12] is a highly relevant organization in the USA's natural sciences field. The prestigious academy comprises 2400 world-class scientists—190 Nobel laureates among them. Many female researchers dedicate their academic lives to achieving the merits required to be part of the NAS. Ayala joined the NAS when she was only 45 years old. The organization has a hierarchical structure, where a few people in the highest echelon have much power. This news has already spread around the world [13]. The NAS has removed evolutionary biologist Francisco Ayala from its membership, a move which occurred three years after he was found to have engaged in the sexual harassment of female colleagues. In 2018, Ayala resigned from UC Irvine following a university investigation that confirmed his guilt in a sexual harassment case [10]. This expulsion represents the second occurrence of the NAS removing a member due to allegations of sexual harassment. This action follows the organization's revision of its bylaws in the previous two years, which allowed the authority to expel members who breached its code of conduct.

1.2. Who Was Francisco Ayala?

Prof. Ayala was a neo-Darwinian biologist and professor at the University of California, Irvine, where he held the following degrees: University Professor (It is a restricted category, reserved only for a few renowned professors), Donald Bren Professor of Biological Sciences, Ecology and Evolu-

tionary Biology, Professor of Philosophy, and Professor of Logic and the Philosophy of Science. In 1961, he moved to the United States with his advisor, Professor Theodosius Dobzhansky, one of the fathers of the current understanding of evolution. His research was on population and evolutionary genetics, even though they called him the “Renaissance Man of Evolutionary Biology” (For more information, see: <https://history.ucsd.edu/news-events/burke/past-lectures/francisco-ayala.html#:~:text=Ayala%20is%20an%20internationally%20renowned,Renaissance%20Man%20of%20Evolutionary%20Biology%22>, accessed on 2 September 2023). In 1977, he was elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Ayala was president and chairman of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) board. Since 1989, he has been the head of the Department of Evolutionary Biology at UC Irvine.

In 2001, he was awarded the National Medal of Science (For more information, see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20080905000326/>; <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/article/4322>, accessed on 2 September 2023), and six years later, he was awarded the first of one hundred bicentennial medals at Mount Saint Mary’s University. Ayala received the President’s Award of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, the Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award, the 150th Anniversary Leadership Medal of the AAAS, and many other awards and medals from many countries and institutions. He was also a member of six scientific academies and held honorary degrees from twelve universities worldwide. In 2011, UC Irvine announced that Ayala would donate USD 10 million to the university’s School of Biological Sciences. The science library at UC Irvine was named after him from 2010 until 2018, when his name was removed after it was shown that his conduct violated university policies [14].

The scientist was removed from the university in 2018 following a detailed investigation that confirmed sexual harassment towards his colleagues. This was the same year that the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine published a report making it clear that sexual harassment in academia exists across the board (2018). The fact that he wrote about his charges is even more significant as evidence of the success of having him kicked out of academia. He was subsequently expelled from the National Academy, and his fellowship at the American Association for the Advancement of Science was withdrawn [1].

2. Policy Framework and Theoretical Context

Sexual harassment in academic settings has long been a silent yet prevalent issue for decades, influenced by power dynamics, institutional responses, and societal attitudes [15,16]. The data bear this out [17]. From an intersectional approach [18], systems of discrimination, such as race, class, and sexuality, intersect with gender to influence the prevalence and experience of harassment. There are also studies [19] on how individuals develop and internalize gender and power roles in institutions and how these roles influence their responses to harassment. Like other organizations, universities often fail to achieve their goals of egalitarianism and social justice [20]. Academia has the second highest incidence of reported sexual harassment, following the military and exceeding both the private sector and government [18,21].

The scientific literature and social movements for inclusion and women’s rights in academia have made unprecedented improvements in history [6,22]. Research [23–25] and social and student activism [26] over these decades have increasingly raised awareness of this scourge, including the awareness of sexual assault happening in other related fields [27]. Despite legislative measures and increased awareness, survivors often face significant barriers to reporting due to fear of retaliation, lack of support, and institutional betrayal [28]. Consequently, harassment and bullying are usually characterized as an epidemic within academic institutions [29], with retaliation against those who report misconduct being a significant contributing factor [30].

The issue of retaliation in academia against individuals who report sexual harassment is deeply embedded within a complex web of psychological, legal, and institutional dynamics. Among others [31,32], Sara Ahmed’s work [33] offers critical insights into the lived

experiences of those who file complaints about sexual harassment. She emphasizes how the act of complaining can itself become a site of trauma and resistance. Complaints often lead to further victimization, as institutions deploy various tactics to discredit, isolate, and retaliate against complainants.

Since the earliest allegations that we are aware of [34], the emergence of solidarity networks and advocacy movements has brought about crucial shifts in addressing this issue, highlighting the importance of community support and collective action in challenging harassment and holding institutions accountable [35]. These networks have made more victims dare to come forward, knowing they will be heard and supported, especially at the peer-to-peer level and through informal mechanisms [32].

Victim blaming, the lack of support for victims, the severe consequences suffered by survivors who complain, and even retaliation against people who support them have led to many cases never coming to light. In the same vein, institutions have not always responded favorably to survivors who dared to speak out. Perceptions of how the police or the judicial system handles cases can discourage victims from coming forward [36]. On the other side, there is a growing opposition against sexual harassment across the board [37]. Solidarity networks have a dual function in supporting survivors and pressuring institutions to change their measures and policies and improve their responses to victims [32,38].

Policies such as bystander intervention [39] and bystander training [40] have already been shown to have broad benefits, not only in supporting survivors but also in creating a context in which support is widespread; no one hesitates to help, to intervene in a discussion, to change the subject, to distract when necessary, both to prevent and to act in case an uncomfortable situation occurs [41]. Drawing on this, the literature has also demonstrated the importance of protecting those who protect to make real this support that victims need to pull forward and overcome sexual violence in the academy; the literature has defined this as Isolating Gender Violence (IGV) [42,43]. In other words, the lack of support impedes victims from breaking the silence [44].

Another essential aspect to consider is the retaliation, attacks, or adverse consequences that survivors may suffer for reporting a harassment case and actions that have been developed to overcome them [45]. These situations can even occur to people who support survivors [31]. That is why, in some situations, although citizens know how to intervene because they have completed the training, they decide not to do so for the possible fear of retaliation [7]. The recent campaign #AmINext is an example of support generated around a case of a person who may lose their workplace for supporting the fight against harassment at the university. That is why extending support to people who help others is vital. This reality has already been legislated in some regional legislations internationally [46].

3. Materials and Methods

This research, which was carried out as part of the EU-funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie UniswithHeart (European Commission: Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action. Project number: 894554. Horizon 2020 Research Program. Available at: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/894554>, accessed on 2 September 2023) project, examines university administrations' responses to reports of harassment involving a notable professor. It also investigates the actions taken by organized survivors to seek justice for themselves and future generations. The study aims to understand how survivors filed a complaint against the university. It is an example of academics and researchers advocating for policy adherence within their institutions.

This article, aligned with the UniswithHeart project, employs the communicative research methodology for data collection, involving in-depth interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis. The communicative methodology [47] has been previously widely utilized and accepted in various research projects and articles [31], and above all, it has proven to impact the analysis of research on sexual harassment issues in university settings [35].

3.1. Data Collection

Data for this research were collected in two phases. First, a comprehensive review of the existing scientific literature on sexual harassment in academia was conducted. Additionally, desk research was performed to gather information from published news articles about the UC Irvine case and the accused professor. In the second phase, interviews with individuals knowledgeable about the UC Irvine case and Professor Ayala were conducted. Some of the survivors who filed the complaint, and other people who were familiar with the case on their campus, were interviewed. To ensure confidentiality, the details of the interviewees are withheld.

Regarding the criteria for the participants' selection, participants were initially identified through published news articles (some of them containing their names) that researchers were identifying in the first phase of this data collection process. Then, participants were identified through a snowball method based on the initial survivors who complained in this case. These initial participants were referred to as "contact points". Then, they suggested other people involved in the case who were potentially interested in talking to us about it.

A total of six in-depth interviews were conducted (with women aged between 25 and 60 years old). The duration of the interviews was between one and two hours each. All interviews were conducted in person and documented through notetaking, with no recordings made. Interview data were triangulated with findings gathered in the first phase (from the literature review), the documentary analysis, and informal discussions (consisting of unplanned conversations through authors' professional networks, who were speaking about this very well-known case, at conferences, dinners, academic talks, and even during coffee breaks and dinners). More than ten scientists—from the area of biology—including scientists from other universities, were informally asked about the Ayala case. In some cases, they were not even asked. Still, coinciding with the researchers in conferences, talks, or debates about harassment in academia, they opened a conversation to talk about what was known as the "Ayala case". Their thoughts and feedback were also helpful in gathering critical information for this study.

3.2. Data Analysis

Interviews focused on topics concerning two main blocks. (1) The first block (effectiveness of university policies against harassment) included the following items: application of the policies; challenges encountered and ways of overcoming them; channels to reach out to students; the role of faculty and staff responsible for executing these mechanisms; and their link with social impact and their commitment to zero tolerance. (2) The second block (solidarity networks of support against sexual violence in academia) included the following items: the Student Network of Support (SNS)'s action concerning this specific case; perception of survivors' empowerment connected with SNS support; features of the SNS in terms of gender, organization, responses, and leadership; the impact of SNS in terms of offering additional resources and support spaces; and the impact of SNS in terms of social and policy changes.

For the data analysis, analytical dimensions informed by the existing scientific literature on sexual harassment in academia were considered from three perspectives: (1) university administration, (2) student networks of support, and (3) the connection between the two. A first coding scheme was drafted by the co-author, who conducted the in-person interviews and contrasted with the scientific literature. The co-author applied this coding scheme to all data and then presented their initial findings for a discussion with the entire author team. This internal discussion aimed to evaluate the coding scheme's appropriateness and refine some codes to ensure they aligned with the scientific literature and accurately represented the themes that emerged during data collection.

This study and its foundational studies adhere to a communicative approach [47]. This approach prioritizes not just describing a social reality but also identifying and highlighting latent elements within it that, once recognized, can be used to enhance that social reality. Following the communicative methodology and its approach to the transformative

vs. exclusionary analytical dimension [35], this study involved not only looking at those elements related to this case and the role of their participants, but also identifying those positive strategies that helped them in this situation and could potentially be implemented in other similar cases. In this case, the exclusionary dimension identifies elements that prevent survivors from winning a case and being believed and successful in their complaints; the transformative dimension identifies elements that advance ways of complaining in academia, feeling supported, and legally protected. Table 1 describes the coding scheme, including the analytical dimensions, code categories, and the communicative approach.

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Analytical Dimension	Code-Categories	Communicative Approach
The examination of public policies against harassment, university programs, and protocols against sexual violence at their quarters	application of the policies	Crosscut by exclusionary/transformational dimension
	challenges encountered and ways of overcoming them	
	the role of faculty and staff responsible for executing these mechanisms	
	their link with social impact and their commitment to zero tolerance	
Solidarity Networks of Support against sexual violence in academia	Student Network of Support (SNS)'s action concerning a specific case	
	perception of survivors' empowerment connected with SNS support	
	features of the SNS in terms of gender, organization, responses, and leadership	
	the impact of SNS in terms of offering additional resources and support spaces	
	the impact of SNS in terms of social and policy changes	
The Connection between SNS and the administration within and beyond the academy	the ways students mobilize against sexual violence	
	Mechanisms through which the university must address potential cases of sexual violence	
	the networks student weave to support survivors and act for justice	

Drawing on this, the analysis was structured around five key research categories:

1. The role of survivor-professors in taking responsibility;
2. Consequences of harassment within academia as opposed to the acts themselves;
3. Support from other faculty members;
4. Distinctions between legal action against the university versus the harasser;
5. The legal and policy implications at the university level.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Interview and focus group data were appropriately anonymized to safeguard the confidentiality of the participants' identities and personal information. All participants were given consent forms that provided comprehensive information about the study and clarified that they could withdraw from the research at any given time. All data gathered

under the UniswithHeart project, in which this specific study is framed, complies with the Ethics Approval Procedure required by the Horizon 2020 research program, funded by the European Commission. As needed, this research investigation follows Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the EU's new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In addition, the UniswithHeart study was ethically approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Berkeley (protocol code 2022-04-15258).

4. Results

Here are ten factors that contributed to the survivors' winning this case. A prominent professor was expelled from the university for failing to uphold its policies safeguarding its academic community members.

4.1. Altruism for Fellow Survivors

"I will do it again". This is how the interview with the person who initiated the complaint against this professor began. This courageous act brought about significant changes in her life, demonstrating its profound impact. "This is not free for the people who do it", she mentioned. This is valid for all cases interviewed here and for survivors in general. This is one of the reasons people do not dare to report. Taking such a stand is very challenging, especially when facing repercussions while holding an important position within the department; it is a lot of responsibility. This person gave up some of her ambitions from academia. "This also made me change my research focus to community care, community research, more focused on the most vulnerable people", she said.

Further evidence of her altruism lies in the decision to donate the settlement money to a crime survivor center, aiming to develop programs safeguarding victims beyond the university. Reflecting on the support from centers like this, she wished for earlier access to such resources, underscoring their vital role in her journey. "I wish I had found that place sooner", she said.

Another interesting element to be highlighted is that the professor sued for harassment had previously faced repercussions at another university, where he was 'invited to leave,' which aligns with what research defines as the "pass the harasser" mechanism [48]. In this case, they wanted him not to be able to go anywhere else, illustrating altruism and a commitment to preventing further harm by ensuring accountability.

4.2. Fostering Fairness and Democracy in Academic Settings

"Now there is a new energy". The interviewees shared a current sense of optimism in the department when reflecting on the unique atmosphere among women. They also mentioned that his removal from the National Academy of Sciences marked a pivotal moment, catalyzing policy changes and improving science as we know it.

The journey began with one survivor filing a complaint supporting a graduate student. Eventually, it snowballed into eighteen formal complaints—four as primary complainants and fourteen as witnesses—[49], culminating in a trial against the university. The researchers were told, "When you look at the situations of the people who counted as witnesses, those situations could also be considered as victims", but not everyone dared to count as such in the report.

In another situation, a doctoral student who was interviewed talked about another case involving a professor accused of internal harassment complaints who continued teaching, albeit with restrictions such as exclusion from having female teaching assistants. Graduate students expressed discontent with such measures, citing the negative impact on their training and career prospects. She said: "This is a detrimental measure to graduate students. As a graduate student, I see my options to be a teaching assistant restricted, and that means fewer possibilities for me to advance because women already have fewer possibilities than men in these fields". Therefore, removing such professors from academia represents a significant step toward progress in both scientific advancement and gender equity, particularly in fields traditionally dominated by men.

4.3. Evolution in Administrative Support

The level of support university administration provides has seen marginal improvement, though it remains inadequate. “Very little support”, said one of the interviewees. This may be a slight improvement compared to a few years ago or previous cases when the answers refer to the administration: “They don’t care, there is no support, they won’t take it seriously”. Responses nowadays include directing individuals to relevant resources and indicating avenues for seeking assistance.

One aspect of university support that needs improvement is giving answers to the whole community. “Sometimes it is taken for granted that professors do not suffer harassment”, said one of the people who had information about the case. Most often, support is provided to students and graduate students, leaving faculty members to seek counseling or assistance. Nevertheless, universities’ growing recognition of the importance of addressing this issue indicates progress in administrative responsiveness.

4.4. Solidarity Received amid Retaliation against Supporters

On numerous occasions, those complaining within academia proved that support is crucial during the entire process. In this case, it was also acknowledged that, without the solidarity received, navigating the challenges related to coming forward would not have been possible. “There was another teacher who at that moment became very nervous and began to retaliate against the seven professors who supported Ayala’s case”, a woman mentioned during the interview. These instances where individuals who stood up in support of victims faced retaliation exemplify what the scientific community has defined as Isolating Gender Violence [23,42,46,50].

“In academia, support is informal; it’s one-to-one, some people you know are with you”, one of the complaints mentioned during the interview. While institutional services exist, such as a graduate service and a counseling system, their effectiveness in addressing such severe cases was questioned, highlighting the need for more comprehensive support mechanisms.

4.5. Significant Peer Support

Seven department members have provided crucial support to the victims throughout the process. This means a significant shift in terms of power dynamics within the university has taken place. This supportive attitude, a departure from past practices, where peers often turned a blind eye to misconduct by influential colleagues, marked a significant change in academia. “For a long time, department’s peers have looked the other way, benefiting their influential peers in whatever situation they committed”, was shared by a woman who made a complaint.

The victims themselves were positively impressed by the support they received from their colleagues. One victim said the following: “You can understand why someone doesn’t support, why they don’t want problems, supporting is a mess, it’s going to cost you, you’re going to lose, it’s going to have repercussions on you”. One victim expressed the impact of this support, highlighting instances where peers reached out late at night to offer comfort and discuss relevant news stories. “Some people were close daily, which was very important for me”, one of the complainants said.

4.6. The Influence of Support Networks

Examining the role of support networks in academia shows the significance of those beyond the university. These external networks possess unique characteristics: they are not tied to specific individuals and provide broad social support. At the same time, they pressure the university and help without fear. This highlights the importance of protecting supporters within the university.

Internally, the CARE center emerged as a well-functioning resource within the university, operating as a well-organized Campus Assault and Resources Education office. The CARE centers are positioned discreetly, emphasizing confidentiality to ensure anonymity

for visitors seeking assistance, as acknowledging their presence might indicate involvement in a case. The resources provided were designed for victims and driven by student initiatives.

4.7. The Impact of Reporting on Survivors

During the two-year duration of the internal complaint process, survivors experienced insomnia, difficulty concentrating, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and some even required hospitalization. Beyond the harassment incidents themselves, the focus shifts to the repercussions endured by the victims, with many contemplating dropping out of college [51]. As one interviewee mentioned: “Many women abandon their academic careers or do not want to be in this department forever if they see that unacceptable and uncomfortable behavior is tolerated”.

Additionally, survivors express disappointment and feelings of betrayal by the university, which is known as institutional betrayal [28] in the scientific literature. One survivor described feeling shocked and let down by the university’s response when seeking support from the anti-harassment office. She told it as it all started: “We have to go to the anti-harassment office”. There, she noticed that the office did not help them. Shockingly, she could not do anything else that day; she even had to cancel her classes. That meeting made her realize the university was not going to protect them. Initially, she thought there were two sides: the harasser and the university, with the four as complainants. The harasser would have his lawyers, and they and the university were one team. But, at that meeting, they knew they would need to hire a lawyer and sue the university, not the harasser.

4.8. Shifting Focus to the Consequences of Events Rather Than Actions

The consequences for survivors are an essential aspect, since the literature has often shown that reporting harassment in academia can be worse than experiencing the harassment itself [32,35]. Beyond the reprisals for reporting mentioned above, in this section, we delve into the implications of the incidents on individuals beyond the mere act of harassment. For instance, what may initially seem like harmless jokes or comments can escalate into sources of insecurity and hinder one’s ability to work comfortably. A departmental comment becomes annoying when it prevents the victim from performing their work under normal conditions.

One of the survivors said the following: “Really, what Ayala did were annoying comments. They never went to more than comments, but he would pick on the women; he would make comments to them about their physical appearance, about the weight their body gained”. There were the “lift comments” and “common room comments” from this professor. “You were in the same room as him and had to listen to uncomfortable comments. Everybody talked about it, but nobody spoke about complaining until these comments had consequences on the development of the work”.

For example, a survivor explained that she had to present a program she had prepared in a meeting. The professor arrived and told her, “You can sit on my lap to make a better presentation”. She felt insecure and unable to focus after being subjected to such inappropriate remarks. She thought that she did not have confidence. She felt guilty that she was not doing well in her professional duties and thought the following: “I cannot allow this to affect me anymore”, which moved her to complain about it. The consequences are significant because “this person does not let me do my job, and his comments bother me”.

4.9. Numbers Matter in Addressing Harassment

The research elaborated in this article has revealed a key element: the number of individuals affected by harassment holds greater weight than the harassment itself. For instance, within the department of the accused professor, it was clear that the focus of a case lies not just on the severity of the harassment but on the number of individuals impacted by it. According to survivors, another faculty member has engaged in ‘even more serious’ acts

of harassment. Although all actions are severe because of their consequences, as we have seen in the previous section, the repercussions for perpetrators intensify when multiple individuals fall victim to the same misconduct.

One survivor said, “My feeling is that the university seems to care when multiple people are affected by the same individual’s misconduct. If there are a bunch of people experiencing harassment from the same professor or the same person, the university will do something about it. But if you are the only one suffering from that person, they won’t take it seriously; they don’t care. They would say that it’s a personal issue, that you are part of the conflict, and that’s matter”.

When, during the interviews, the researchers asked why those who were potentially harassing more are not in trouble, more than one survivor answered: “There were so many women victims of Ayala”. In other words, this underscores the importance of quantity over individual cases in addressing such misconduct. That result also seemed exciting, as did the fact that so many people knew about it.

4.10. Significant Legal Role

It is essential to acknowledge the instrumental role of legislation in this matter, particularly the dedication of the attorney who filed the complaint and the legal framework upon which it was built. All interviewed mentioned the attorney’s role and commitment to taking this case forward.

As a result, the professor faced severe consequences, including a campus ban and the removal of his name from various facilities, including the library and the science faculty building. He was also removed from his leadership roles, chairships, and labs, including the significant impact that was to be seen outside the National Academy of Science.

Despite residing in faculty housing at UC Irvine until his recent passing, he had no professional ties to any university. His expulsion from academia had far-reaching effects beyond the university’s confine.

Table 2 below summarizes the study’s key findings, contributing to the survivors’ success in their case against a university professor accused of sexual harassment.

Table 2. Summary of the study’s key findings.

Finding		Description
1	Altruism for Fellow Survivors	The complainant’s courage and decision to donate settlement money to a crime survivor center highlight the importance of altruism and community care in addressing harassment.
2	Fostering Fairness and Democracy	Creating an environment that promotes fairness and democratic principles in academic settings is crucial for supporting survivors and ensuring justice.
3	Accountability for Institutions	Holding institutions accountable for their failure to protect community members and enforce policies against harassment is essential for achieving justice and preventing future misconduct.
4	Solidarity Networks	Support from solidarity networks, including students, faculty, and external organizations, plays a significant role in empowering survivors and influencing positive outcomes in harassment cases.
5	Legal and Legislative Support	Legislative measures and legal frameworks that support survivors and hold institutions and harassers accountable are critical for successful legal outcomes.
6	Media Attention and Public Pressure	Media coverage and public debate can pressure institutions to take harassment claims seriously and act appropriately, contributing to successful case outcomes.
7	Shifting Focus to the Consequences	Survivors’ experiences highlight how consequences of the harassment can severely impact their professional and personal well-being, such as increased insecurity and dropping out.

Table 2. Cont.

	Finding	Description
8	Prior Incidents and Patterns of Behavior	Evidence of prior incidents and established patterns of harassing behavior by the accused can strengthen the case against them and demonstrate the need for institutional accountability.
9	Numbers Matter in Addressing Harassment	The number of individuals affected by harassment counts, as when multiple survivors report harassment by the same individual, universities are more likely to act.
10	Personal Sacrifice and Resilience	The personal sacrifices and resilience of survivors, who often face significant challenges and risks in pursuing their cases, are critical factors in achieving justice and driving institutional change.

5. Discussion

The literature has long claimed that sexual harassment in academia contains some peculiarities based on power and silence. Often, reputation has been understood to lead to the ignoring of complaints against sexual harassment [52]. On the other hand, the student movement has long advocated that if harassment exists in the university, it is because the structure of the university is permissive to harassment [53]. This article represents a significant advancement in the literature by focusing on suing the university instead of the harasser. This case marks a breakthrough involving legal action against the university for failing to implement its policies effectively [54].

The harasser's conviction for violating university policy underscores key points: university policies are indispensable, providing a framework for accountability and critique. This article demonstrates how addressing hostile environments and silence enhances academic progress and scientific integrity. Today, science aspires to be inclusive, dialogic, and devoid of harassment, fostering an environment conducive to collaboration and innovation [55]. This also helps the academic community to regain a sense of belonging [56]. The improvements described in this article also meet Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals [57].

The outcome of the complaint described in this piece inspires other universities where this process has never been conducted, as in the case of Spain, for example. There, the movement is powerful, and many achievements have been made due to complaints against a prominent professor at a university [32], including legislative changes [46], but the university has never been sued. The focus has always been on professors who have been reported for harassment. Cases like UC Irvine's mark a different way of looking at the future of the academy, help more survivors come together as a network, and inspire other future complaints.

Future research might explore the integration of external mechanisms with university resources. Support networks, typically external to the institution, play a vital role, requiring some connection. For instance, networks within the city, rather than the university, offer broader societal support and exert pressure on academic institutions. Finally, it is essential to highlight the altruistic behavior of the survivors in the case described in this article. They emphasized the following: "We do it for other survivors. We have suffered reprisals, we have given up things in the academy, but we would do it again".

6. Conclusions

The case of sexual harassment at the University of California, Irvine, involving the renowned biologist Francisco Ayala, sheds light on crucial aspects that lead to the success of survivors in suing the university rather than the harasser. The comprehensive study reveals ten key factors that contributed to the survivors' victory, emphasizing the role of altruism, the pursuit of fair and democratic academic spaces, the changing role of administration, solidarity networks, and critical support from peers. The analyzed case underscores the importance of focusing on the consequences of events rather than actions and highlights the

significant impact of legislation in holding universities accountable. The case's successful outcome demonstrates that systemic change is possible when individuals come together to challenge harassment and advocate for fairness and transparency within their institutions. As a motivation for success, this case inspires other survivors worldwide. It encourages institutions to prioritize implementing policies to eliminate harassment, fostering a safer and more inclusive academic environment. Furthermore, continued research and advocacy are needed to raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and empower survivors to come forward and seek justice.

The article provides a detailed account of the Ayala case and contributes to the ongoing discourse on sexual harassment in academia. By exploring the multifaceted dynamics, challenges, and triumphs in this specific case, the study offers valuable insights for future research and initiatives to address and prevent sexual harassment in academic institutions. It reinforces the crucial role of support networks, the legal framework, and a collective commitment to creating a culture that prioritizes the well-being of all academic community members. The lessons learned from the UC Irvine case serve as a compelling narrative for universities worldwide to proactively address and eradicate sexual harassment, fostering a culture of respect, accountability, and justice within academic spaces.

Moving forward, the Ayala case at UC Irvine stands as a testament to the power of collective action and institutional accountability in combating sexual harassment in academia. Through the courageous efforts of survivors who chose to sue the university rather than the individual harasser, significant repercussions were felt, leading to the expulsion of a prominent figure and prompting institutional reforms. The study's findings underscore the importance of solidarity networks, legal mechanisms, and administrative responsiveness in addressing sexual harassment within academic settings. By prioritizing the well-being of survivors and fostering cultures of respect and support, universities can work together toward creating safer and more inclusive environments for all academic community members.

Recommendations for future research

In line with the research developed in this study, further research could be conducted considering several approaches: (1) longitudinal studies of analyses of complaints and survivors' academic trajectories; (2) comparative studies on similar cases across different universities; (3) policy implementation by examining institutional responses to sexual harassment complaints in different universities; (4) analyses of the influence of support networks and peer support systems in other universities regarding other harassment reports; and (5) research on the media as a prevention mechanism, specifically on the effectiveness of some public significant cases as a prevention measure for how other universities deal with future cases.

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