

S.A.F.E. Campus: Student Action for Eliminating Violence and Harassment in Campus Campaign

Maricar Laigo-Vallido, Kevin L. de Vera^{id}, Quennie Faye Maravillas

The Forum for Family Planning and Development

Corresponding Email: chi.vallido@gmail.com

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Abstract: In the Philippines, sexual harassment in urban public spaces is a pervasive threat, affecting up to 88% of women. To combat this, the Forum for Family Planning and Development partnered with UN Women to implement the S.A.F.E. Campus (Student Action For Eliminating VAW and Harassment in Campus) campaign from 2017 to 2018. The project aimed to organize, train, and mobilize student leaders to advocate for robust anti-harassment policies. Utilizing a multi-level advocacy framework, the initiative integrated empirical research—including focus group discussions and ethnographic campus studies—with targeted capacity-building workshops and high-impact media interventions, such as the #WalkFreeFromFear street fashion show. Key outcomes included the formation of the nationwide SAFE Campus Taskforce and the strategic integration of student advocates into the national Technical Working Group for Senate Bill 1326 (the Safe Streets and Public Spaces Act). Ultimately, the initiative demonstrated that equipping students with localized data and legislative advocacy skills effectively challenges victim-blaming cultural narratives and translates grassroots campus concerns into enforceable national law. The project underscores the critical role of sustained youth empowerment, continuous baseline research, and targeted media engagement in fostering safe, inclusive public spaces for women and girls.

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1 Introduction

In the Philippines, UN Women is implementing the country component of a global program called Safe Cities Global Initiatives (SCGI), which is a flagship program that contributes to the emerging international knowledge base on effective strategies to eliminate sexual violence and harassment against women and girls in urban public spaces, and aims to build more inclusive, sustainable, and safe cities for all [1].

Since 2015, the Forum for Family Planning and Development, Inc. has been an NGO-accredited partner of Quezon City since it joined the Safe Cities Global Initiatives along with 24 other cities around the world. In this project period (2017-2018), Manila City joins the campaign to address street harassment and VAW under the Safe Cities Metro Manila.

Data shows that eight to nine in every 10 women (88%) have experienced some form of sexual harassment at least once in their lives. Despite these experiences, more than half do report nor take action about it [2]. On the other hand, seven out of 10 girls aged 12-17 and nine

out of 10 women 18-24 had experienced such harassment [3]. Continuing the efforts of the Safe Cities Metro Manila Programme, the Forum for Family Planning and Development worked with UN Women in implementing the project titled – Student Action For Eliminating VAW and Harassment in Campus Campaign or S.A.F.E. Campus. A student led n campaign to address public space sexual harassment.

The Forum engaged student council leaders from universities and colleges in the cities of Manila and Quezon City to take a more active role in working with various stakeholders including the local government of these cities to address public space sexual harassment. The Forum worked with the Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP), an alliance of student political parties in 150 colleges and universities all over the country. SCAP has been a partner of Forum since 2009 and have collaborated on campaigns for the RH Law, Mental Health, Anti-Discrimination and the health budget. Working together, the project mobilized student leaders to advocate for policies and program that address sexual harassment and violence against women and girls in public spaces in their schools and nearby communities.

The project with the support of UN Women through Quezon City, for two years (2017 and 2018), aimed to improve the policy environment in addressing public-space sexual harassment in a university/campus setting and its surrounding communities and contribute to reducing the incidence of public-space sexual harassment in the country. Working with elected student councils/student government leaders provided an opportunity to scale up the campaign beyond the two cities since SCAP has member student councils in 150 colleges and universities all over the country.

The project was guided by four primary objectives aimed at empowering the youth to combat sexual violence. (1) it sought to organize a network of student leaders dedicated to advocating against public space sexual harassment; (2) the project aimed to build the capacity of these student leaders so they could effectively advocate for improved anti-harassment policies and programs on their respective campuses; (3) it focused on mobilizing student council leaders to lead the call in condemning sexual harassment in public spaces and to raise broader awareness about the issue; (4) finally, the initiative intended to increase the overall number of young people actively expressing support for these protective policies and programs, utilizing both social media platforms and public gatherings.

2 Methods

The S.A.F.E. Campus project utilized a multi-level advocacy strategy structured around four core pillars: consensus building with educational stakeholders and decision-makers, capacity building for student leaders, high-impact media interventions, and direct policy advocacy at both local and national legislative levels. To rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, the methodology triangulated quantitative metrics, such as participant reach and event attendance, with robust qualitative data. This qualitative assessment was grounded in primary research, including key informant interviews conducted across multiple universities, an ethnographic study on campus safety, photo documentation, and narrative reflections from both the project team and student beneficiaries.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Consensus Building Activities

A foundational element of the project was establishing strategic alignments with key stakeholders to ensure the advocacy was both empirically grounded and broadly supported. Successful stakeholder engagement requires early involvement of diverse actors, transparent

communication, and collaborative planning processes that build trust among participants [4, 5]. The project successfully facilitated coordination meetings with the Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP), effectively securing the support of an alliance that represents student political parties across 150 colleges and universities nationwide.

To build an evidence-based consensus on the realities of campus safety, the project conducted six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with respondents from eight major institutions, including the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman, Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), and De La Salle - College of St. Benilde, among others. Focus group discussions have been recognized as effective qualitative methods for exploring community perceptions, gathering stakeholder feedback, and identifying implementation challenges [6]. The methodology enabled researchers to capture comprehensive community perspectives through triangulation of multiple data sources, thereby strengthening the validity of findings [7].

Furthermore, the project supported an ethnographic study at UP Diliman, wherein 16 anthropology students developed localized safety metrics identifying physical, emotional, and public health dimensions of campus vulnerability. Community-based participatory research approaches that involve stakeholders throughout the research process ensure that findings are grounded in actual perspectives and lived experiences [8]. This participatory methodology enables the development of contextually relevant and culturally tailored interventions.

Implications: These consensus-building activities were critical in shifting the project from a top-down intervention to a grassroots-driven initiative. Understanding and considering community members' views regarding contextualized and locally relevant participatory approaches facilitates more effective program design and implementation [9]. By directly involving 150 student councils and grounding the campaign in empirical FGD data, the project ensured that proposed solutions were highly contextualized to the actual lived experiences of students. Effective stakeholder participation necessitates localized knowledge dissemination, capacity-building among community structures, and participatory inclusion mechanisms. This approach thereby increased the legitimacy and acceptance of the advocacy among the student body.

3.2 Awareness Raising and Capacity Building Activities

To transition students from passive stakeholders into active advocates, the project executed targeted capacity-building interventions. The primary output was the SAFE Campus Workshop, which successfully trained 40 student leaders representing nine different universities. This intensive workshop utilized campus mapping and visioning activities to identify safety issues, ultimately culminating in the formation of the SAFE Campus Taskforce.

Co-learning training programs that incorporate both educational and workshop activities can develop students' interprofessional competence, with students reporting increased competence particularly associated with participation in active, hands-on training rather than didactic education [10]. The project also expanded its reach through campus-specific forums, such as the orientation seminar at PUP, which engaged 67 student organization officers and campus journalists in discussions on gender equality and safe spaces.

Additionally, the project sponsored nine youth leaders to participate in the International Youth Forum on Public Health in Iloilo City, cross-pollinating the S.A.F.E. Campus advocacy with over 1,000 national youth delegates. Such strategic networking and knowledge exchange opportunities are essential for building collaborative relationships and expanding advocacy reach [11].

Implications: The quantitative reach of these workshops translates into a significant qualitative impact on campus governance. Capacity building programs that focus on increasing awareness, improving technical knowledge, and providing structured support are crucial for developing sustainable advocacy infrastructure [12]. By equipping student leaders with technical knowledge on gender-based violence and advocacy frameworks, the project created a sustainable infrastructure of advocates. The formation of the Taskforce ensures that the demand for safe spaces remains an institutionalized priority within student governments, capable of surviving annual student electoral turnovers. Youth participants in civic engagement activities develop stronger civic commitments, enhanced sense of agency, and clearer beliefs about effective mechanisms for social change [13].

3.3 Media Activities

Recognizing the necessity of broad public support, the project deployed high-impact cultural and media activities to challenge prevailing societal norms. The flagship event was the #WalkFreeFromFear Street Fashion Show, held at Plaza Salamanca along Taft Avenue. The event featured 20 models—representing the demographic reality that up to 140 women may experience harassment weekly in Manila—who publicly tore off garments containing victim-blaming inscriptions.

This event successfully captured widespread mainstream media coverage from major outlets including ABS-CBN, Philippine Star, and Inquirer, causing the hashtag to trend on social media. This was supplemented by a #FreeFromFear photo exhibit in collaboration with the Senate during Women's Month, and a "Battle of the Bands" where student musicians composed original songs advocating for violence-free public spaces. One highlight is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Mainstream media picked up "Media Activities"

Implications: The media strategy successfully transcended traditional academic boundaries, sparking a national cultural dialogue. Mass media campaigns, when combined with

interpersonal communication and participatory dialogue, significantly contribute to awareness creation and normative change regarding gender-based violence [14]. By utilizing performative activism like the street fashion show, the project effectively subverted entrenched victim-blaming narratives, visually demonstrating that harassment is rooted in the objectification of women's bodies rather than their clothing choices.

Communication strategies targeting gender-based violence must be culturally tailored, survivor-centered, and multi-channel, integrating both traditional and digital platforms to achieve sustainable behavioral change [14]. The extensive media reach amplified the grassroots student voices, creating external public pressure that became highly advantageous for subsequent legislative lobbying. Public awareness campaigns that raise consciousness, challenge societal norms, and promote discussions on gender-based violence contribute to broader societal change [15].

3.4 Policy Advocacy Activity

The culmination of the project's data gathering, capacity building, and public mobilization was its direct engagement in legislative processes. At the national level, the Forum and the newly established SAFE Campus Taskforce, shown in Figure 2 were integrated into the Technical Working Group (TWG) for Senate Bill 1326, the Safe Streets and Public Spaces Act authored by Senator Risa Hontiveros. The student advocates and project directors provided direct technical assistance during the inaugural committee hearing in March 2018 and the Senate interpellation in August 2018.



Figure 2 Launching of student-led SAFE Campus Taskforce

Successful policy advocacy requires collaborative planning, sustained stakeholder engagement, and the integration of community feedback into program design [16]. The development of effective health and social policies benefits from transparent expert consultation, multistage consensus procedures, and high-level advocacy meetings [13]. Concurrently, local advocacy efforts successfully engaged Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) officials

and federations across multiple provinces, including strategic municipalities within Cebu, Albay, and Ifugao.

Implications: The integration of student leaders into the Senate TWG represents the most profound systemic impact of the S.A.F.E. Campus project. It demonstrates the successful elevation of localized campus issues into enforceable national law. Organizations and stakeholders seeking to influence public policy can achieve significant impact through clarity of objectives, sustained commitment, and systematic consensus building among diverse stakeholders [12, 16].

Furthermore, the parallel engagement with local SK officials ensures a decentralized policy impact, guaranteeing that even outside the immediate scope of Metro Manila, local youth councils are actively institutionalizing mechanisms to penalize and prevent public space sexual harassment. Youth involvement in policy-making processes develops their sociopolitical identities and strengthens their understanding of effective mechanisms for achieving social change [17]. The project's multi-level approach—combining national legislative advocacy with local government engagement—creates sustainable policy infrastructure that can endure beyond individual political cycles.

4. Conclusion

The S.A.F.E. Campus project exemplifies how integrated approaches combining consensus building, capacity development, media mobilization, and policy advocacy can effectively address gender-based violence in public spaces. The project's success demonstrates that meaningful stakeholder participation, particularly youth engagement, when supported by empirical evidence and strategic communications, can achieve transformational policy outcomes. By grounding interventions in community perspectives, building sustainable advocacy infrastructure, leveraging media platforms to shift cultural narratives, and directly engaging with legislative processes, the project created multiple pathways for systemic change that address public space sexual harassment at individual, institutional, and societal levels.

5. Recommendations

Based on the lessons learned from the S.A.F.E. Campus project, the following actions are recommended:

1. **Sustain Campus Advocacy:** Maintain continuous linkages with student political parties to integrate anti-harassment advocacy into their annual student election agendas.
2. **Advance National Legislation:** Actively support the passage of the proposed Safe Public Spaces Bill (authored by Sen. Risa Hontiveros) to ensure nationwide implementation and enforcement.
3. **Replicate Best Practices:** Promote the successful implementation of the Manila and Quezon City Safe Cities Programmes to serve as models for other cities to adopt.
4. **Conduct Baseline Research:** Commission comprehensive baseline studies on sexual harassment within campuses to inform evidence-based policy and program formulation.

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