

The Impact of Feminist Self-Advocacy on Ambivalent Sexism in Mothers of Children with Disabilities, a Mixed Study from Peru

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the implementation of a feminist self-advocacy programme in Peru to achieve changes in ambivalent sexism in mothers with children with disabilities, of medium and low socioeconomic level. A mixed methodology was used, a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-test evaluation and a qualitative content analysis with qualitative interviews to evaluate the experiences of the mothers. The sample consisted of 30 mothers from the city of Arequipa in Peru, aged from 19 to 69 years of age, the programme had 3 phases and 5 sessions, for 5 months, each session with a duration of 40 minutes, obtaining a decrease in the mean of ambivalent sexism: benevolent and hostile ($p < .00$) with effect sizes greater than 0.8. The qualitative research aimed to map the lived experiences regarding the workshop participants who were evaluated in order to promote equal treatment between men and women, resulting in a significant change in their perspective regarding the marked sexism they have experienced throughout their intrapersonal development. This article describes the effectiveness of this programme in search of broader equal opportunities in Peru, and in the reduction of ambivalent sexism in order to promote their better psychological well-being.

Keywords: feminist self-advocacy, ambivalent sexism, mothers of children with disabilities, empowerment, mixed study

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations organisation recognises violence against women as one of the most common aggressions against human rights in the 21st century; the UN draws attention to the beliefs that a person's gender is used to reflect a certain hierarchy. Many empirical studies have affirmed the existence of gender inequalities, generally driven by the non-recognition of social rights. Likewise a sexist perspective can be seen towards the roles people must fulfil within a stereotypical society (for example, Kshirsagar et al., 2019).

During the 2020-21 COVID-19 global pandemic, cases of violence against women in Latin America increased due to confinement, as there was greater isolation within the family sphere. Likewise, several studies estimate that 30% of all women in the world suffer gender mistreatment, with an increase in explicit and implicit behaviours that denigrate women during the pandemic (Terán et al., 2020). Such gender-based violence has been observed for decades. Gender violence is catalogued as a global phenomenon, which crosses cultural, social, ethnic and geographic boundaries, in which there are countless types of aggression towards women around the world, regardless of religion and dominant political ideologies (Knaul et al., 2022). La Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (2022) reports the highest statistics of femicides worldwide: in 2021 – at least 4,473 women were murdered in Latin America. In relation to our society, we can observe that the psychological damage caused by the circles of violence to which women are exposed, produces consequences in the health and economic status of the victim, silently settling into many families and leaving consequences at the social level (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2023; Francis, 2023; Saldarriaga, 2022).

Prejudice is a negative perspective that explains and shapes the antagonistic relationships between gender differentiation (Barreto and Doyle, 2023) and prejudices against women are many, minimising them or not recognising their attitudes and ways of life, treating them in a hostile way, pigeonholing women in stereotypical behaviours (Roynance et al., 2016). Despite the global and national legislative efforts made in favour of women's

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rights, these continuing prejudicial attitudes have a negative impact on all areas within which women develop, deteriorating their family environment, and both their physical and mental health (Keyser et al., 2022).

Sexism is another factor, for example, which results in fewer women wanting to have children, even in committed and stable relationships, because they realise that motherhood requires them to leave their studies or work. Sexism is defined as a set of beliefs that are based on the polarisation of the sexes (Castañeda, 2019). The theory of ambivalent sexism, states that sexism possesses ideologies based on a hostile component (overtly negative attitudes with a macho undertone) and a benevolent component (attitudes that appear positive but are actually harmful). These elements, although differing in tone, are related in how a person's identity is categorised in today's society (Glick and Fiske, 2001). Likewise, Eagly and Wood's Social Role Theory (2012), states that there are gender differences in the personal characteristics and behavioural development of people; these behaviours are influenced by the beliefs and expectations of each person's gender role, whether seen in their work, emotional or family development, denoting strict roles between men and women that older generations 'knew how to follow' (Eagly et al., 2000).

The concept of social vulnerability has two explanatory components: first, the frequent insecurity and defencelessness experienced by individuals in their living conditions as a consequence of some traumatic economic-social event (for example, the fact of believing that men possess certain desirable characteristics just because they are men generates the dichotomy that characteristics considered feminine should be rejected and therefore be undervalued (Glick et al., 2015); second, the lack of resources and strategies to face the effects of the traumatic event generating discomfort, and which is understood as the inability to cope with the problem and the impossibility of envisioning opportunities (Pizarro, 2001) (for example, the lack of resources makes institutional support, access to health, education and social services more difficult and out of reach, a situation in which many women are and more so if they are mothers and/or have one or more children who suffer from some type of disability). In these cases, gender-based violence affects women significantly (Brey et al., 2023).

Consequently, the female population in Peru may experience these retrograde attitudes that are contrary to gender equality, reflected in 72% of the population with sexist thinking, and corroborated by the continued increase in cases of violence against women: more than 15% of women have suffered physical, psychological, sexual and racial violence; last year there were 207 cases of attempted femicide in adult women and 287 teenagers disappeared, while 16 femicides considered by the National Police of Peru (PNP) were recorded, resulting in 67,000 cases of family violence (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2024).

With respect to the Peruvian economy, 30.3% of women in urban areas and 43.1% in rural areas have no income of their own; 34.5% in the jungle, 34.2% in the highlands and 31.2% on the coast have no income, which would reflect a clear discrimination against women and a form of hostile sexism (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2023; Gutiérrez, 2021). According to information from the AURORA¹ programme to combat violence, so far in 2024, there have been more than 67,6603 cases of family violence, of which 85.1% are victims of violence against women; 17,916 cases in Lima and 6,641 cases in Arequipa (La República, 2024).

Sexism can be represented in various ways, some more subtle and others more hostile, verbally through sexist insults; physically reflected in sexual harassment, which can vary according to the cultural and psychosocial context, women as victims can assume a learned helplessness, resigning themselves to the coexistence of power differences based specifically on gender ideology, developing psychological symptoms such as inferiority complex and post-traumatic stress in their marital environment (Dardenne et al., 2007; Barreto and Doyle, 2023). Sexism is a multidimensional construct and is characterised by gender inequality in all areas in which they develop throughout life and which differentiates them (Agut et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2021; Bareket and Fiske, 2023); this concept is understood as 'the less favourable or unequal treatment of women in relation to men, who are in equal conditions or circumstances, which excludes them from adopting certain roles and restricts them from exercising their rights'. This inequality is reflected by positive or negative stereotypes determined by preconceived sexist ideas, inherited or imposed by society itself (Gothreau et al., 2022).

Ambivalent sexism is perceived as the combination of two symbolic elements with antagonistic affective charges, which are seen as a consequence of the complex relations of approximation/avoidance that characterise the sexes, oriented towards female behavioural punishment or reward in a context given by the male perspective. Hostile sexism is based on beliefs related to women's inferiority and benevolent sexism is dominated by the emergence of overprotective thinking, based on prejudices of a macho nature based on women's obedience and submission (Bustamante, 2020; Garrido-Macías et al., 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2013), thus thinking that women should not be respected because they are 'weaker and more passive and therefore easier to assault' (Martin, 2013: 84). This clearly transgenerational sexist behaviour is based on the violence exercised in toxic relationships between men and women (Arnoso-Martínez et al., 2017). Ambivalent sexism has three fundamental pillars: paternalism,

¹ The National Program for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women and Family Members (AURORA) develops interventions to prevent violence and provides care and protection services for people affected, women and family members and sexual violence victims, regardless of their sex, age, or nationality.

which is the set of beliefs by which a woman is subjected, based on male dominance; gender differentiation, in which the roles of men and women are established, devaluing feminine abilities over masculine ones; and finally, human sexuality, which consists of highlighting the sexualised characteristics of women (Cárdenas et al., 2010). This can be reflected in social prejudice, where 68% believe that people are less likely to think that inequality and discrimination between the sexes currently exists and only 24% of the population is likely to remain silent about this type of abuse (Vásquez et al., 2022; González-Rivera and Díaz-Loving, 2020).

Faced with this situation of violence against women, it is known that feminism is defined as a movement that seeks recognition of the same capabilities and rights as men, this was seen in four waves, the first oriented towards feminist ideology that criticised unequal thinking, the second oriented to the fight against patriarchy; the third sought to rescue femininity and currently we are located in the fourth wave, where empowerment is evident in the face of male idealism based on equity between both sexes, starting from environmental and external factors (Cahill and Hunt, 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2017). Throughout different decades, Peruvian women have suffered from machismo in order to be able to fit into society. Because of this, the current feminist movement that advocates for the development of equal employment opportunities began in the 1990s (Barrientos Silva and Muñoz, 2014; Falquet, 2003); it began as a political movement, which sought to change the lives of women and their close environments, such as their partners, families and bodies. Feminism sought a new political practice that would allow women to have a place in the public and private spheres. The search for new opportunities for women began with the search for political goals in an egalitarian way, with equal access to education (Barrientos Silva and Muñoz, 2014; Salvatierra, 2020). However, although feminism appeared in Peru in the 1990s, it has not been developed in throughout the population and it has not addressed sufficiently social roles such as motherhood. For this reason, different methodologies have been proposed in the field of action, from socio-community psychology to achieve better results; such as feminist self-defence which is defined as the generation of behavioural changes and psychological well-being, promoting female empowerment against ambivalent sexism which is an insidious and volatile phenomenon; and in which benevolent and hostile sexism reinforce each other and allow ambivalent sexists to rationalise their behaviour and feelings (Díaz et al., 2020).

In the case of mothers who have children with disabilities, they fulfil the role of providing direct or daily care for their disabled children, as caregivers they do not have time to devote to other work and there is no opportunity to help financially at home. In addition, caregiving is seen more as an obligation than as an activity that generates wear and tear and requires financial remuneration to meet the needs not only of the cared-for persons but also of the caregiver (Alban-Villacres and Cueva-Rubio, 2024).

The feminist self-defence programme is defined in our article as a tool for the empowerment of women, as well as for reorienting sexist behaviours in different contexts. Likewise, it encompasses categories such as mental, emotional, verbal and physical self-defence, and seeks the reduction of ambivalent sexism (Monroy, 2023). Research corroborates a significant change in the application of this methodology, giving conclusive results of a change in women's perspective focused on general wellbeing, and the reduction of the development of ambivalent sexism was sought through the acquisition of strategies that favour self-improvement (Kahraman, 2017; Yalcinoz-Ucan, 2022).

Finally, we can see that these strategies that seek to change social thinking are generating positive results in their search for equal opportunities, post pandemic, and finding an encouraging outlook in the search to empower women to catalyse their own resources, guiding them towards their personal development.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The population studied were mothers living in the city of Arequipa in Peru who had children with various physical and mental disabilities such as intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, neurodevelopmental disorders or any physical disability. These children were enrolled in Special Basic Education Centers in Peru called CEBE. The sample consisted of 30 mothers between 19 and 61 years of age ($M = 36.87$); and all of them were of medium (50%) and low (40%) socioeconomic level. A Feminist Self-Defence Programme was developed, based on Glick and Fiske's theory of ambivalent sexism, which sought to conceptualise female empowerment. This programme had 3 phases: the first phase had two sessions, where concepts such as gender differentiation was worked on; the second phase had two sessions conceptualising aspects related to human sexuality; and the third phase had a last session related to paternalism that reinforced all the previous concepts. There were 5 sessions in total. Each session was worked on once a month and lasted 5 months from December to April 2023.

This feminist self-advocacy programme aimed to strengthen women's self-perception of themselves, reorient their thinking and provide strategies for recognising the effects of sexism in the intrafamilial environment. In the first phase, the theoretical development of gender roles and how they relate to the intra-family environment was

conceptualised. In the second phase, the conceptualisation of self and self-esteem was reviewed, as well as the identification of the traditionally gendered and symbolic if not actually violent context of the home. In the third phase, integrative dynamics were carried out through the sharing of experiences. Each session of the programme began with a dynamic to motivate participation, followed by the conceptualisation of various theoretical topics, followed by an integrative dynamic aimed at reinforcing women's self-perception, reorienting thoughts related to self-esteem and personal self-worth, as well as providing strategies to recognise the effects of sexism in the intra-family environment, and then closing the module with feedback.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Santa Maria (UCSM) and the management of the Educational Institution for Children with Disabilities (CEBE). Each mother was informed about the objective of the intervention programme, as well as the structure of each module. Each mother signed a consent form to show that their participation was voluntary, and their data was anonymised. At the end of each session where promotional and preventive dynamics were applied for greater integration by the participants, optional tasks were left for them to perform at home to generate a commitment on their part, through discussion forums and opinions. The research had a quantitative phase, which consisted of an evaluation of mothers of children with disabilities on ambivalent sexism, using the ASI of Glick and Fiske, this was done before and after the application of the programme. In addition to this and understanding that perhaps a test was not enough due to the complexity of the topics covered, interviews were conducted to know the participants' views. Interviews were analysed in order to give us information about the process of empowerment of each one of them during the application of the programme.

Measures

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) was constructed by Glick and Fiske in 1996. It consists of 22 items with a Likert-type scale distributed in two dimensions: hostile and benevolent, composed of 11 items each, hostile sexism items (1–11), benevolent sexism items (12–22), giving the sum total score of ambivalent sexism, with response options from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The minimum score was 1 and the maximum score 5, with three sublevels: high (110–high), medium, and low (22–low), showing an acceptable consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .84, having a reliability index for each of the subscales of .74 and .85 respectively (Cárdenas et al., 2010).

Likewise, the KMO value was 0.90 in terms of Bartlett's sphericity ($p < .00$) and with factor loadings above 0.3 for each item (Fernández et al., 2017). The socioeconomic level of participants was determined with a sociodemographic card, which asked if the participants had basic services such as water, electricity and others in their community, quantifying the results to determine the socioeconomic level of the participants as high, medium or low.

Qualitative Interview

The design used for the qualitative interview part of the research is called qualitative content analysis, which is defined as a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications and whose purpose is to interpret them (Bardin, 1986). In the research, the concept of ambivalent sexism that the mothers of children with disabilities had before, during and after the sessions was analysed and reevaluated through interviews, which served to know their opinions, in order to provide information on the process of empowerment of each one of them during the application of the programme.

Data Management and Analysis

The present research is situated within a mixed methodology approach through two stages or phases comprising a quantitative and qualitative analysis. In the quantitative part, a pre-experimental single-group design with a cross-sectional pre- and post-test was used, because it is about studying the impact of the feminist self-advocacy programme on ambivalent sexism in mothers of children with disabilities, the whole procedure was developed in a face-to-face manner (Quintanilla et al., 2020). Simultaneously, an interview was applied to collect the opinions during and after the feminist self-advocacy workshop to the participants, collecting the information through open coding of the data, processed through a thorough analysis of the transcription of the interviews, to identify and establish relationships between the meanings of the data, resulting in a graph that was divided by dimensions through the programme Atlas.ti v 9.1.7 (San Martín, 2014). Once the pre- and post-test inventory data were collected, they were digitised in the software R and R studio v 4.3.1, and the data was stored securely using password protected folders.

Table 1. Analysis of the differences between pre- and post-test in benevolent, hostile sexism and total score

Subscale/group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		t	p	Cohen's d
		M	DE	M	DE			
Benevolent sexism	30	18.63	4.23	7.00	3.48	10.37	< .01	6.145
Hostile sexism	30	21.53	4.12	7.00	3.04	13.63	< .01	5.841
Sexism	30	40.17	3.86	14.00	3.76	25.12	< .01	5.706

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Student's t-test for related samples was used to analyse group differences before and after the application of the intervention discussion programme in benevolent sexism, hostile sexism and total sexism. The results show that there are significant differences in the pre-test and post-test, significantly decreasing the results obtained at the end of the intervention programme in the two types of sexism and in the final score, in addition to obtaining high values in the effect size above 0.8 (Table 1).

These results showed that participants developed awareness of sexism, achieving empowering attitudes that are the ultimate goal of the intervention programme.

Qualitative Results – Perception Analysis

In the following table, the mothers' experiences were collected for qualitative analysis using the open coding method, showing that before and after the feminist self-defence programme there was a change in perception in relation to sexism, since before the mothers did not identify it, causing intrafamily problems. At the end of the programme, commitments to assertive communication were assumed. Likewise, a collective perception of improvement towards their development as intrapersonally empowered women was obtained, due to the follow-up given to them during the duration of this research, thus demonstrating that, at a qualitative level, the sociocultural representations associated with established and traditional gender roles would be predominant and would influence their life perspective. Phase I was also developed, which included modules I and II oriented to gender differentiation, where the information was grouped based on the dimensions of competitive differentiation, having gendered phrases such as: 'I think I am very sensitive and that men and women are not the same'. Similarly, by the end of the sessions there was a noticeable shift towards more complementary gender differentiation, evidenced in phrases such as: *'This module has helped me understand myself as a woman and as a mother.'* This reflects the necessary motivation on the part of the population to continue with psychological and community support at CEBE.

Consequently, Phase II was developed, which included Modules III and IV oriented towards human sexuality, being able to appreciate the dimension to work with mothers denominated as hostile heterosexuality, demonstrated in phrases of macho context, such as: *'Marriage is obedience only for the woman.'*

After the session entitled Heterosexual Intimacy, a progressive change was observed in the development of the feminine role within the couple relationship in the intrafamily sphere, with phrases such as: *'I'm a woman': 'Doing things together, it brings us closer together as a family.'*

The feminist self-defence programme ended with the development of Phase III, which included Module V, oriented to paternalism: *'If he leaves, I couldn't handle my house.'* was challenged. While after this session, a general feedback session was applied to achieving a progressive change in the thinking of each participant in an effective way, based on Peruvian ideals of a Protective Paternalism, represented in phrases such as: *'This programme has helped me a lot because I now understand that my husband only wants the best for me and my family in all aspects of my life.'*

Finally, when analysing each session that was experienced, it was found that the mothers had a reduced hostile or sexist thinking, represented in their doubts and affirmations, being single-parent families, which added to the social disenfranchisement of their youngest child, could have generated a feeling of procrastination, which changed later into more positive thoughts such as being a free and independent woman, a response that was seen as a feminine overcoming, self-affirming, assuming commitments to herself and her wellbeing, because of the programme.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this research was to evaluate the impact of a feminist self-advocacy programme on ambivalent sexism in mothers of children with disabilities in a town in Peru. It was corroborated by the research that there are significant differences between pre-test and post-test measures, in addition our research added to

the importance of providing these programmes that seek to renew the perspectives on sexism, in a highly sexist society, historically marked by gender stereotypes established in Latin America, where the capabilities of women are generally underestimated, particularly with mothers who have children with disabilities. Where they often live in a single-parent home, where the father visits the children and the mother often suffers abuse that remains silent, sexism persisted as a multidimensional construct, which is constituted by unfair sexist attitudes between both sexes, a reality that can be changed through the implementation of programmes such as this that promote gender equality (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Ambivalent sexism does not help to empower women to have a quality of life based on gender equality; our society in Latin America is unequal, and levels of sexism are relatively high particularly in early adulthood, lower in middle adulthood, and high in late adulthood. This self-feminist promotion programme for mothers of children with disabilities, which worked on physiological and cognitive aspects to achieve the mother's self-improvement and empowerment, showed positive consistency in its results, generating a decrease in the frequency of aggressive behaviours, sexist attitudes and beliefs in romantic myths based on the gender role after the programme was implemented. We witnessed how each participant had a change of perspective to analyse their rights and duties as a mother or woman (Brey et al., 2023).

Other research confirms the results we found, for example, a study that analysed the effect of a feminist self-defence workshop on benevolent sexism in a university with ages between 18 and 24 years and with 32 students respectively, obtained as a result a reduction of ambivalent sexism (Díaz et al., 2020). The differentiation between rural and urban is also seen, mentioning that promoting these investigations within a rural territory would help contribute to the social and economic development of a region in a cultural way for the increase of human capital resources (Christian Conference of Asia, 1998). That is why our study is oriented to populations with medium-low socioeconomic level, in search of generating agreements and empowerment in women to improve their integration in the vital economic and cultural development of areas of poverty. This is why we must work in the future with the implementation of these empowerment programmes, since they not only generate the increase of cognitive variables such as self-concept and self-esteem, but also empower and generate in the participants strategies in search of quality of life and that of their families, promoting greater participation of both the institution and the state, through a community plan based on equal opportunities for mothers with children with disabilities.

Other research indicates that when women face various physical changes that could affect the perspective of their social thinking within and outside a community, they do so from a perspective tending toward hostile sexism, while in adulthood they face various changes from a perspective tending to benevolent sexism, which was evidenced by what was found in our research. Since the participants were adult women who entered the programme with a perspective toward marked sexism, facing a change of perspective after the programme with a tendency to benevolent sexism, constituting for them the appearance of this new concept as a change in their thinking and in their family life, all this obtained through semi-structured interviews (Yalcinoz-Ucan, 2022).

Several authors mention the importance of feminist research as it orients towards reflection, putting into practice the knowledge acquired, promoting the search for alliances, corroborating the empowerment of mothers seeking not only their psychological well-being but also the search for agreements that allow their economic development, also specifies the challenges encountered at the time of conducting their research such as: the time management of the participants, mentioning that they had almost no time, due to the workload they faced, the attitude presented by the participants, by requiring the permission of their partner to attend the programme. Likewise in our research we found something similar, due to the attitude of the mothers at the beginning of the programme, since they had fixed perspectives regarding sexism. Some mothers did not even identify sexism they rather preferred to see sex and gender differences as fixed, showing a hostile attitude to a change of perspective, and due to this the workload, the programme had to be adapted to the needs of the mothers and we had to adjust our expectations (Royslance et al., 2016). Finally, it is necessary to mention some limitations and difficulties of the study that arose during the research, such as the need to continually adapt the concepts to the mothers of the families considering their social status, level of education, and religious beliefs. Because the institution for children with disabilities, where the research was conducted, is Roman Catholic and some topics are still considered taboo, this required permissions and working with these religious biases from both the institution and the mothers of the families with whom we worked. This because in Peru negative perspectives towards topics such as feminism still continue.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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