

Mobilising to eradicate gender-based violence and sexual harassment:

A new impetus for gender equality in the European Research Area

Gender-based violence is prevalent at all levels of higher education and research and in all disciplines. It has destructive consequences for individuals and institutions as well as for the quality of research and education. Despite this, questions of gender-based violence in higher education and research have received little attention both in terms of research and on the policy level in Europe.¹ The ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation² calls on all stakeholders to take concerted action in order to make the European Higher Education and Research Area a truly safe environment where all talents can thrive.

Introduction

A persistent feature of work life in general, gender-based violence is increasingly recognised as a serious problem for academic institutions around the globe.³ In the fall 2017, the #MeToo movement erupted and spread quickly through social media. In some countries, the higher education sector was particularly affected owing to student mobilisation. Though the visibility and effect of the movement varied, it put the issue of sexual harassment higher up on the agenda in many countries.

The concept of gender-based violence⁴ (including gender harassment, sexual harassment, and sexual assault) describes a continuum of violent behaviours and attitudes on the basis of gender, intersecting with other dimensions of inequality.⁵

Research shows that gender-based violence is prevalent at all levels of higher education and research and in all disciplines.⁶ **The specific structure of the research and higher education sector, with its asymmetric power relations,**

insecure employment conditions, and high levels of international mobility, means that sector-specific measures need to be adopted to tackle the issue.⁷

International studies show that at least 25% of female students have experienced gender-based violence during their time in the higher education sector.⁸

While data on the prevalence of gender-based violence among research and teaching staff in the EU is lacking, a large survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental rights (FRA) estimates that 83 to 102 million women (45 to 55%) in the EU have experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15. Among these women, 32% indicated someone from their employment context – such as a colleague, a boss, or a customer – was the perpetrator.⁹

To map policy responses in the EU, the ERAC SWG GRI conducted a survey in Member States and Associated Countries covering policies, strategies, actions and measures taken at the national and EU level to address gender-based violence in higher education and research. **The**

recommendations presented in this policy brief are intended to contribute to one of the objectives of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which is to end gender-based violence, specifically in the higher education and research sectors.

Main messages

The survey reveals that even though the #MeToo movement has put the question of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in academia on the agenda in several Member States and Associated Countries, gender-based violence is, with a few exceptions, **an unrecognised issue and an underdeveloped field of knowledge** at the national level. There is a marked lack of policies, legislation, and regulations, responsible authorities, and up-to-date data. Measures to combat gender-based violence range from a **few well-financed and complex programmes to several short-term ad hoc initiatives**, such as campaigns, seminars, debates, statements from ministers, charters, codes of conduct, working groups and committees, surveys and/or reports. The kinds of activities and measures in place, the allocation of financial incentives, and the existence of relevant infrastructures differ significantly across countries.

Given the importance of international mobility in building the European Research Area, it is alarming that **the higher risk of victimisation for internationally mobile students and researchers is not recognised** in ongoing work against gender-based violence in academia or in ongoing work on academic mobility at the national and EU levels.

In terms of building an evidence base, **only three nationally funded research projects** specifically addressing gender-based violence in academia, implemented in the last five years, were identified in the survey of Member States and Associate Countries. An important milestone is the current Horizon 2020 Science With and For Society call 25, which promises to produce research data, tools, and measures to combat gender-based violence in Europe.

Recommendations

The research and higher education sectors have the responsibility to provide safe work and study environments, free from violence and harassment. Priority must be given to **developing knowledge, policies, and actions, at the national and European level as well as through the European Commission**, in a way that gives proper support to victims, prevents gender-based violence, and thus ensures that the European Higher Education and Research Area remain an arena of high ethical standards.

The first five recommendations are general in nature and address all the stakeholders at the EU and national levels. The report reveals considerable variance among countries, and thus these five recommendations may be of the most importance specifically for the many countries where the question of gender-based violence in higher education is unrecognised. The five recommendations constitute a basis for continued work to eradicate gender-based violence in the European Research Area.

1. Acknowledge gender-based violence in research and higher education as an unacceptable problem.
2. Step up the work for gender equality and diversity through Gender Equality Plans, in line with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention 2019.
3. Build alliances with key stakeholders, both nationally and transnationally.
4. Devote at the least the same level of attention and volume of resources to gender-based violence as research misconduct receives.
5. Cultivate sensitivity to the issue and awareness of measures through communication campaigns. Where relevant, these can be funded, for example, in synergy with the Structural Funds.

National authorities

6. Include actions to combat gender-based violence in the ERA National Action Plans and Strategies and other relevant strategic policy documents governing the research and higher education sector.
7. Set up protocols for the regular collection of statistics on gender-based violence at an institutional level.
8. Require that all research institutions and universities report annually on their activities/measures to eradicate gender-based violence.
9. Include measures against gender-based violence as a criterion for the evaluation of research institutions and universities, quality standards, and human resources management.

Umbrella organisations (the national and EU levels)

10. Organise a cross-stakeholder working group / platform for policy and knowledge exchange.
11. Develop joint policies and action plans for and with the research and higher education sector to promote institutional change.
12. Investigate the possibilities for research institutions and universities to impose 'academic sanctions' on perpetrators.

National Research Funding Organisations

13. Fund research on gender-based violence in higher education and research through specific calls at national and international levels.
14. Progressively introduce the requirement that policies against gender-based violence be in place as a condition for higher education and research organisations to apply for research funding.
15. Consider sexual harassment just as important as research misconduct in terms of its effect on the integrity of research.
16. In funding schemes where international research mobility is funded, the receiving institution should be required to have policy and infrastructure in place to address gender-based violence.

European Commission

The above recommendations targeting national research funding organisations also apply to the European Commission in its role as a European-level Research Funding Organisation, but additional specific recommendations for the European Commission are provided in its policy making role:

17. Formulate a European policy and plan of action against gender-based violence in higher education and research.
18. Revise the Charter and Code for Researchers so that it addresses gender-based violence and includes measures at the institutional level to combat gender-based violence in the assessment of the HR Excellence in Research Award.
19. Urge that policies against gender-based violence are put in place at both the sending and the receiving Research Performing Organisations as a mandatory condition in order to be

able to participate in programmes involving the recruitment and mobility of researchers.

20. Include dimensions of mobility and gender-based violence in higher education and research in calls for research funding – for example, in the SwafS calls.
21. Investigate the possibility to include systematic data collection and reporting on gender-based violence in academia in the future editions of She Figures.
22. Set up a pan-European taskforce/expert group to exchange information and knowledge on the broader situation regarding gender-based violence in the research and higher education sector at the European level.
23. Include provisions addressing protection against gender-based violence in grant agreements and in the rules of implementation in Horizon Europe.

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¹ See, for example, Lipinsky et al. 2019; Latcheva & Joanna 2017.

² The ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation is one of the ERA-related groups that is responsible for ERA Priority 4 gender equality and gender mainstreaming. The policy brief is based on the report *Sexual Harassment in the Higher Education Sector. National Policies and Measures in EU Member States and Associated Countries*, available at **TO BE SUPPLIED AFTER PUBLICATION IN THE PUBLIC REGISTER OF DOCUMENTS**. The report was prepared by the Sub-group on Gender Harassment in Academia, consisting of rapporteur Carl Jacobsson, SE, representatives from BE, CZ, NL, NO, and IS, and external experts Tamar Brosh, IL, and Maja Lundqvist and Fredrik Bondestam, the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, SE.

³ Bondestam & Lundqvist 2018; McDonald 2012.

⁴ Gender harassment refers to harassment on the grounds of sex, but without sexual connotations, such as diminishing or hateful comments, exclusion, silencing, or stereotypical prejudices. Sexual harassment refers to unwanted verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature, such as touching, comments on a person's looks or body, stalking, the sending of images with sexual content, or sexual jokes. Sexual assault refers to actions of a sexual nature regulated by law, such as rape or attempted rape.

⁵ This definition is in line with research and international understanding as expressed in the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, the Istanbul Convention (2011), and the ILO convention 190 (2019).

⁶ Henning et al. 2017; Benya et al. 2018; Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Clancy et al. 2014.

⁷ See, for example, Henning et al. 2017; Rubin & Borgers 1990.

⁸ Vladutiu et al. 2011; Voth Schrag 2017; Benya et al. 2018.

⁹ FRA 2015.