

Recommendations for higher education and research institutions towards ending gender-based violence

This factsheet provides recommendations on the role of research and higher education institutions towards ending gender-based violence. Recommendations are based on the findings from the EU-funded UniSAFE project. for ending gender-based violence.

Readers of this factsheet may want to consult [UniSAFE's toolkit section on concepts and meanings](#) of gender-based violence in research and academia are laid out in the [White Paper for Policymakers and Institutional Managers](#), together with a presentation of the [7P model](#) (Prevalence, Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Provision of services, Partnerships, Policy).



Gender-based violence in research and higher education



Definition of gender-based violence

According to the Council of Europe, **gender-based violence** is 'any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity'. On the 1st of June 2023, the European Union acceded to Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It is important to clarify that while women and non-binary people are most affected by gender-based violence, it is relevant to everyone due to intersecting inequalities related to their gender and other characteristics.

UniSAFE adopts a broad understanding of gender-based violence, encompassing all forms: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, economic violence, sexual harassment, harassment on the grounds of gender, and organisational harassment – in both online and offline contexts.

Gender-based violence occurs in every sphere and domain of life and in every organisation. Higher education and research institutions are particularly prone to high levels of gender-based violence. Some of the specific features of higher education and research institutions – such as unequal power relations, the specific organisational culture, and the high concentration of young adults – may make the occurrence of gender-based violence more common in these institutions than in other settings (O'Connor et. al., 2021). Gender-based violence in higher education and research institutions not only harms the victims, but it also harms the purpose and integrity of the knowledge-making mission of academic and research institutions by:

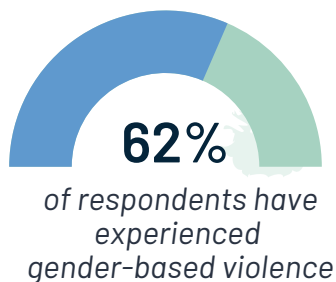
- jeopardising the future of students and staff and negatively impacting their health, well-being, and their study or career outcomes;
- causing institutional reputation loss and related economic costs resulting from the failure to provide a safe, inclusive and respectful environment;
- impacting the future of society, as higher education and research institutions train future leaders and shape societal progress.

To advance meaningfully towards a safe research and academic environment, the following features of gender-based violence must be recognised and put to the fore of institutional policies:

- Gender-based violence is a **continuum** (Kelly, 1987 ; Walby et al., 2014; Hearn et al., 2022), as different forms of violence are interrelated and overlap, and seemingly ‘innocent’, ‘mild’, and subtle forms of misconduct and transgressive behaviours – when not addressed – gradually escalate into more severe and graver forms of violence. This is reflected in students’ and staff’s **uncertainty as to what constitutes violence**, because different forms of violence of this spectrum are not recognised as such.
- Gender-based violence reflects the **unequal power relations** in academia between students and academics and between hierarchically positioned groups of academic staff. It also reflects the power relations in society as a whole, which are structured not only by gender but also by other characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability, which interact with gender and lead to intersectional inequalities. The hierarchical nature of higher education and research institutions contributes to the **underreporting of gender-based violence owing to fears of retaliation and negative impact on one’s career**.
- Gender-based violence should be regarded not just as the inappropriate behaviour of an individual, but also as **an expression of the organisational culture** that allows such behaviours to continue unabated. This is reflected, when a case finally comes to the fore, in the realisation that everyone already knew about it.



The scope of the problem in Europe



Nearly two in three (62%) of the over 42,000 respondents who took part in the UniSAFE survey on gender-based violence in research organisations in 2022 stated that they had experienced at least one form of gender-based violence within their institution (including physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and online forms of gender-based violence).

Respondents from minoritised groups (based on gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or disability) were more likely to disclose experience of gender-based violence. Women (66%) and non-binary people (74%) were more likely to have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence. Respondents who identified as LGBTQ+ (68%), who reported a disability or chronic illness (72%) or belonged to an ethnic minority (69%) experienced at least one incident of gender-based violence more often than those who did not identify with these characteristics (Lipinsky et al., 2022).

What is alarming is that only 7% of students and 23% of staff who participated in the UniSAFE survey and stated that they had experienced gender-based violence within their institution reported the incident.



Only 7% of students of students having experienced gender-based violence in the context of their institution have reported it

Almost half of the victims (47%) did not report the incident because they were not sure that the behaviour was serious enough to report. Other common reasons for not reporting were that the survivors did not recognise the behaviour as violence at the time it occurred (31%) or did not think that anything would happen if they reported the incident (26%). This underscores the permissiveness and normalisation of violence in higher education and research institutions and the failure of institutions to take action against *all* forms of gender-based violence, including forms that are not always covered in legislative definitions of gender-based violence (Linková et al., 2023).

The role of research and higher education institutions in ending gender-based violence



Research and higher education institutions are responsible for addressing gender-based violence, both in their role as employers and as providers of education.

They have a duty to ensure safe and inclusive environments in which all can thrive: students, academic and professional and administrative staff. Research and higher education institutions should work towards ending gender-based violence through a holistic 7P approach, including prevalence measurement, prevention and protection work, prosecution and provision of services, supported by partnerships and policies.



Recommendations

Cross-cutting recommendations

Institutional framework for addressing gender-based violence: A strong institutional framework addressing gender-based violence encompasses clear values and procedures embodied for example in a code of conduct and a protocol. The framework should outline the organisation's stance on gender-based violence, including how incidents are addressed. Moreover, roles and responsibilities should be clear, supported by clearly allocated budgets. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of gender-based violence policies and measures should inform institutional programmes and processes, promoting a holistic approach to addressing gender-based violence.

Ensure a comprehensive coverage of different forms of gender-based violence, including an intersectional perspective, and provide definitions:

- The institutional framework should cover a broad range of forms of gender-based violence explicitly recognising their interconnectedness and placement along a continuum. These definitions should reflect the gender power relations within institutions.
- Incorporate an intersectional perspective into all relevant institutional policies and measures, with an understanding of intersectionality as structural power relations rather than merely the effects of individual inequalities.

Adopt a victim/survivor-centred approach for addressing gender-based violence: All policies and measures addressing gender-based violence should be consistently victim-centred and trauma-informed in their design, implementation and evaluation.

Embed knowledge and internal expertise on gender-based violence:

- Ensure that knowledge and expertise on gender-based violence are structurally embedded in the design, implementation and evaluation of measures and policies. This can be achieved by involving professionals with relevant expertise in the decision-making processes and ensuring their input is considered at all stages.
- Conduct regular and systematic gender-based violence capacity-building initiatives and activities for students and staff at all levels.
- Establish mandatory training for professionals dealing with gender-based violence. Assess the quality and approach of the materials provided to ensure they effectively meet the needs and understanding of the intended audience.
- Ensure that a variety of support materials are available and accessible to both staff and students, relating to the different dimensions of the 7P model. Regularly review and update these materials to reflect current good practices and evolving understanding of the issue.

Foster leadership commitment to addressing gender-based violence: Ensure that leaders explicitly demonstrate their commitment to addressing gender-based violence through public and internal communications. Connect this commitment to a vision and strategy that are expressed in institutional policy documents and operationalise it through an action plan.

Enhance internal transparency of policies, data on prevalence, measures, knowledge, and support structures:

- Implement a clear, broadly accessible communication strategy focused on gender-based violence.
- Continuously review, revise and keep policies, existing measures and support for staff and students up to date.
- Regularly collect and provide accessible data on the prevalence of gender-based violence. This approach will ensure that stakeholders have accurate and current information, fostering transparency and awareness within the institution.

Establish monitoring and evaluation structures Implement structures or incentives for monitoring and evaluating all policies and measures addressing gender-based violence. Allocate necessary resources to support these monitoring and evaluation activities. Regular evaluations should inform the development and implementation of both existing and new measures, ensuring a data-driven approach and continuous improvement in addressing gender-based violence.

Recommendations related to the 7Ps Framework

Policy

- Adopt policy documents that explicitly demonstrate the organisation's commitment to addressing gender-based violence. Develop a comprehensive strategy within a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) that addresses gender-based violence issues.
- Implement ongoing monitoring and evaluation of policies to ensure that information is available on the uptake of these policies and their effectiveness.

Prevalence

- Regularly collect and analyse data from internal and external surveys, as well as administrative sources (such as records of complaints and reports) to inform institutional policies and practices. Conduct qualitative analysis of case pathways to detect shortcomings and identify areas for improvement in institutional responses to gender-based violence.

Prevention

- Implement regular and systematic measures to promote change in behaviours and attitudes toward gender-based violence among staff and students at all organisational levels. Raise awareness about the different forms of gender-based violence and their occurrence in both offline and online settings. Emphasise the importance of bystander intervention and provide training for all members of the institutional community. Clearly define and outline prohibited misconduct in a code of conduct along with sanctions for violations.

Protection

- Establish a range of protective actions and measures for (potential) victims, both students and staff, based on case-specific risk assessments. Activate precautionary measures as soon as incidents are reported, pending further investigation and decisions.

Prosecution and internal disciplinary processes

- Differentiate between external prosecution and internal procedures for handling cases, whether they constitute criminal offences or not. Ensure well-established, widely known, and transparent internal procedures that are regularly reviewed for effectiveness. Train professionals involved in handling cases to apply victim-centred and trauma-informed approaches.

Provision of services

- Ensure the provision of services to victims/survivors, their relatives, accused persons, offenders, bystanders, whistle-blowers, and the wider affected community. Actively publicise and make the availability of services transparent. Provide specific training on gender-based violence, intersectional-sensitive responses, and trauma-informed approaches to service providers.

Partnerships

- Engage relevant internal and external actors systematically in the development and implementation of institutional measures. In times of stretched personal and financial resources, partnerships with others and collaborations across organisations allow for improved efficiency and mutual learning, as well as to ensure the provision of services for which the institution lacks the required expertise.
- Internal actors, such as representatives of staff and student associations, can voice the lived experiences of recipients of the institutional policies. These different stakeholders are to be involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and actions.

- Students who take on roles and responsibilities in institutional policy design, implementation (such as in disciplinary committees) or assessment are to receive recognition for the labour they perform (e.g., through awarding them study credits) and their study, assignment and exam schedules must be considered.
- External actors, such as the police, medical service providers and others should be engaged when internal expertise is missing.

Inspiring practices



**** Call for Action to End Gender-Based Violence by the EU Czech Presidency conference**

Institutions can make their commitment visible by endorsing a Call for Action to End Gender-based violence. The specific call “Working towards Safe and Respectful Higher Education and Research for All” is an outcome document launched during the Czech Presidency conference Ending gender-based violence in academia: Toward gender-equal, safe and inclusive research and higher education organised by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic and the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences on 24 and 25 November 2022 in Prague. The full version of the Call for Action is available here, and the link to endorse here. Explore further.

**** Code of Conduct – TU Delft University, Netherlands**

The Code of Conduct of the TU Delft University is part of the Integrity Policy of the university. The code lists the core values of the university, gives directions on acceptable behaviours, and outlines the responsibilities of all staff members, students and guests. In addition, the Integrity Policy provides statements on Social, Academic and Organisational Integrity. Undesirable conduct, including sexual and general harassment, aggression, bullying or discrimination is integrated under Social Integrity. Explore further.

**** Report and Support – United Kingdom**

In British Universities, ‘Report and Support’ provides the possibility for staff, students, and visitors to report a concern, and choose to do so anonymously, or to give their name to receive follow-up support. The site gives advice on definitions and pathways to support, reassurance about confidentiality, and data protection and advice. Links to ‘Report and Support’ have also been distributed via student websites. These activities directly address online, sexual, and physical violence and harassment. Explore further.

**** Guide for first responders, Central European University, Austria**

The Central European University has developed an official document which serves as a guide for first responders in handling emergency situations related to sexual assault, other types of assault and sexual harassment. First responders are the first person with whom someone shares the information about a sexual or other type of assault. The guide provides a three-steps approach, first to establish immediate safety (step 1), then to listen and be supportive (step 2) and to facilitate access to services (step 3).

The guide provides specific instructions for first responders to handle such incidents effectively and sensitively, ensuring the well-being and safety of the individuals involved. [Explore further.](#)

**** Universities Against Harassment - A cross-sectoral collaboration between universities, Switzerland**

The initiative "[Universities Against Harassment](#)" is a Swiss-based campaign aimed at addressing and preventing sexual harassment and gender-based violence in higher education institutions. It was launched in 2019 by a group of Swiss universities to raise awareness and promote a culture of respect and inclusivity, providing resources to those affected by harassment. The campaign involves various activities such as training sessions, events and online resources, and fosters collaboration and exchange among different stakeholders, including staff and students. The unique element of this collaboration is that it is cross-sectoral in Switzerland, there are several university sectors divided by type of institution, for example full universities, pedagogical universities, technical and specific field-oriented universities and institutes. [Explore further.](#)

**** Help desk against gender-based violence, University of Bologna, Italy**

The University of Bologna offers a wide range of services to university stakeholders, including language trainers and research fellows. The services include: online support programmes; initial orientation and basic information on the legal aspects and on the most appropriate ways to contact the competent authorities; liaison with the network of services and specialised local associations for handling more complex situations that require a multidisciplinary intervention. [Explore further.](#)

**** Partnership with the Government sub-delegation on gender-based violence Universidad de Granada, Spain**

The university cooperates with the Government Sub-delegation on gender-based violence to create common lines of work around gender-based violence through which the university carries out projects subsidised with funds from the regional Institute for Women and the State Pact against Gender Violence. The university also develops other relevant activities with the support of a regional Directorate of Equality. [Explore further.](#)



Further reading

UniSAFE - Good practice standards for a policy

The following is a checklist of good practice standards that can be used during the policy design phase to ensure the quality and comprehensiveness of the institutional approach.

“Dignity and Respect” policy - Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

This policy sets out a framework for the resolution of any dignity and respect matters that may arise and details the sources of help available to staff and students. The University promotes and encourages the resolution of dignity and respects complaints through informal means in so far as possible. [Explore further](#).

Social Safety in Dutch Academia - From Paper to Practice

This guide was developed by the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science, and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (the “Academy”). It includes recommendations and tips for preventing or tackling inappropriate behaviour at an early stage. Its purpose is to initiate a process for increasing social safety in Dutch academia. [Explore further](#).

Explore the recommendations for other stakeholder groups, developed by UniSAFE:

- Recommendations for research funding organisations towards ending gender-based violence, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for Student Associations and Unions towards ending gender-based violence, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for Staff Associations and Unions, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for Policymakers, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for higher education and research institution associations and umbrella organisations [here](#)

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About UniSAFE

UniSAFE is a three-year, EU-funded research project, which aims to produce in-depth knowledge on gender-based violence and sexual harassment in research performing organisations, and to translate this research into operational tools for higher education and research organisations. The project has analysed the mechanisms of GBV - its social determinants, antecedents, and consequences - at three different levels, using a holistic research model: 1) Prevalence and impacts of GBV by a survey at 45 RPOs (micro level); 2) Organisational responses and infrastructure via data gathered by in-depth case studies, interviews, and a strategic mapping of research organisations in 15 member states (meso level); and Legal and policy frameworks in 27 European states and 3 associated states (macro level). These results have been translated into an operational toolkit for research and higher education institutions and recommendations for relevant stakeholders.

Disclaimer

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