

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

Country: Finland

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Date: 09/06/2021

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence is acknowledged relatively well in society. However, it is not visible in legislation and policies specifically related to universities and funding organisations. Finland has a Gender Equality Act originating from 1986 and a Non-Discrimination Act from 2015. These guide all authorities, employers and individuals. Further, there is a relatively wide policy on occupational health and safety, including an obligation to act if harassment or other inappropriate misconduct appear. Further, employers and authorities are obliged to proactively prevent discrimination and harassment. These policies do not specify GBV, nor do they point out universities and research organisations, but rather oblige all employers and education institutions. The law for universities, as well as the law for institutions for applied sciences, have decrees about students' rights to a safe study environment. Criminal law includes slander and circulation of private information. There is a separate law on sex crimes, and a reform of the legislation is ongoing.

The attitudes towards GBV in universities and research organisations are in line with GBV anywhere; Finland is a strong supporter of the Istanbul convention and a country with long traditions in gender equality in some spheres. Finnish women have worked outside of homes since the industrialisation of the country, and we have a relatively equal representation of women in national and local decision-making. However, the developments in management positions in the private sector have been slower. And, perhaps paradoxically, Finland reports high numbers of violent and intimate partner violence. The prevalence of gender-based violence at work or in higher education is, however, not discussed very widely. The #MeToo-movement has initiated some discussions within the university sector, and The Helsinki Association of Women Researchers conducted a survey to map sexual harassment in the Finnish academia.

2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

- The laws, policies, and strategies that exist at different levels (national level, regional level, RFOs)

As mentioned above, Finland has a Gender Equality Act originating from 1986 and a Non-Discrimination Act from 2014. These guide all authorities, employers and individuals. Further, there is a relatively wide policy on occupational health and safety. GBV is indirectly linked to these but not specifically pointed out. Further, the current Government has an Action Plan for Gender Equality 2020–2023. In this plan, approximately 50 measures in different areas are listed. As violence against women remains a serious human rights problem in Finland, the Ministry of



Justice has prepared a separate (but linked) action plan for combating violence against women. This is to cover prevention of violence and perpetrator rehabilitation, protective measures to assist victims of repeated violence and honour-related violence and new forms of violence such as digital violence and harassment. More about this action plan is below, as the main reported national strategies and programmes from the survey are also presented here to give a short overview.

1. Prevention of violence against women 2020-2023

This is an action plan for combating violence against women. It was initially in the Government Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government, and the plan was made public in January 2020. The implementation period of the Action Plan extends from autumn 2020 until spring 2023. The working group will monitor the implementation of the Action Plan and prepare a report on it in early 2023. An external assessment of the implementation of the Action Plan will also be carried out. The plan can be accessed here: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-259-835-6>.

2. Towards accessibility to higher education and university

This plan in the process is also a part of the strong equality focus that the current Government has, as free education has for a long time being something that evens out the different starting points of individuals. The plan is currently in the stage of receiving comments from experts and the general public. The plan is going to include many elements around equality and accessibility to higher education more generally, but will also include plans and codes of conduct for tackling, e.g. bullying, harassment, racism and discrimination in universities.



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3. Harassment and discrimination don't belong to the university

The council of Finnish university deans, UNIFI, published a statement against harassment and discrimination in academia in December 2020. The statement also informed about a strategy against harassment and discrimination in academia being in progress.

4. Vision 2030

The vision document of an overall vision for universities until 2030 has an appendix/action plan specifically about harassment, including sexual and gender-based harassment.

- The main actors/stakeholders

The main actors would be the Government with an active approach to ending violence against women and to gender equality and non-discrimination more generally. Key Ministries are the Ministry of Justice, where also the Ombudsman for gender equality and the Ombudsman for no-discrimination are situated. Further, the Ministry of Education is very active and central in working on prevention of discrimination and harassment in schools and other educational institutions; the Ministry of Labour Market and Employment monitoring the labour market issues and legislation; as well as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health with a special division for gender equality issues, are very important actors. There are also several national and international NGOs (such as Amnesty and The National Council of Women of Finland), as well

as women's organisations of political parties, who keep GBV high on their agenda. Finally, in work against GBV in academia, the individual universities and the UNIFI collaboration is key.

- An expert assessment of the extent to which the national and/or regional as well as RFO policies have an impact on the organisational level of HEIs and RPOs in the country

This will become more clear during the mapping at the institutional level, which is a following step of this research. Now a joint effort can be seen, but I have no information about individual institutions. UNIFI reported that a strategy against harassment and discrimination in academia is in progress.

- Other relevant activities to combat GBV in universities and research organisations (national and regional level, RFOs)

In connection to *Towards accessibility to higher education and university* (please see above), a wider programme to tackle bullying, violence and harassment in schools and other education institutes is prepared in collaboration between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and Ministry of the Interior. However, actions targeted to the university level are in the plan *Towards accessibility to higher education and university*.

Further, a conference called *Interpersonal Violence Interventions - Social and Cultural Perspectives Conference* is held in Jyväskylä in June 2021, with new research being presented.

- An expert assessment of the extent to which the national and/or regional as well as RFO policies have had an impact on the organisational level of universities and research organisations in the country

Gender equality as a broad theme is relatively well-integrated, but GBV is not targeted specifically.

- The role of RPOs in providing knowledge on GBV and whether and how GBV is included as a topic in relevant curricula and in teaching in universities (e.g., medicine, police and the army, etc.).

Some elements in the curricula for e.g. medical doctors and police.

3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

The Finnish debate related to the #MeToo movement was relatively moderate and less active than in many other countries (including, e.g. the US and Sweden). There has been some rising debates, especially in the culture and performing arts-fields, and perhaps the issues are more in the open now. At least they cannot be silenced as easily as before.

Public discussions and debates (mostly positive) regarding the Istanbul Convention has been, on one hand, authority-lead, including the Government and different Ministries (mainly the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, being in charge of the execution plan of the convention;



Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Justice), and, on the other hand, strongly engaging NGOs, such as Amnesty, the National Council of Women in Finland, Monika-Naiset (and organisation for migrant women), and the Finnish League for Human Rights.

4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV

Public opinion largely condemns violence and GBV, even if that does not seem to decrease the prevalence remarkably.

One example is the ongoing reform in legislation on sex crimes in Finland. This process has broad public support and was supported by a very successful campaign to include the requirement of consent in the law. The campaign consisted of individual people, NGOs, youth organisations and politicians, starting a citizens' initiative on consent, gaining more than 55,000 signatures, and giving visibility to the question in public and social media.

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

There have not really been any discussions about GBV in universities and research organisations that would have been impacted by COVID-19. Discussions around violence and GBV have then mostly been around concerns about increased domestic violence and decreased wellbeing of children in COVID-19-times and whether or not schools should be closed or open.

6. CONCLUSION

As already several times mentioned, gender-based violence is relatively well-acknowledged and unfortunately frequent in Finnish society (Niemi et al. 2017). Perhaps because of its high prevalence, the stipulations are more general and not targeting especially universities. However, ever since some very unfortunate events among young people, gaining a lot of media attention, many actions for preventing violence among young people, and harassment and violence at school, have been started. This is not excluding discussions in academia, but targeting at present resources to early education, primary and secondary school, as well as vocational training. Gender-based violence in universities is included in the accessibility-work-in-progress. I believe that this can open up avenues to more targeted work against GBV in universities.

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101006261.

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union.

