

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

Country: Latvia

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1. INTRODUCTION

There have not been any public cases or discussions regarding GBV in universities and/or RPOs. It is important to stress that GBV as terminology is not used in Latvia. Both on a policy level and public discourse main focus is on domestic violence. It goes without saying that the main victims of domestic violence are women; however, this notion is toned down by using the term domestic violence. There are no studies about the prevalence of GBV in universities and/or RPOs. There are neither policy initiatives nor measures to prevent GBV in universities and/or RPOs. GBV in universities and/or RPOs is not considered to be a problem.

It is important to stress that existing mechanisms of data collection on GBV are not capable to shed the light on GBV prevalence in universities and/or RPOs. There are three groups of data on GBV in Latvia. The first group are studies carried out by major international organizations like EU, WHO, UN, etc. These studies mainly characterize the prevalence of violence for a larger region, where Latvia is seen as one of the cases, often in a comparative perspective. The second bulk of studies is locally carried research with the aim to map the current situation in Latvia. They describe experiences or beliefs regarding violence (mostly domestic violence) that are directly or indirectly related to the prevalence of violence. Most of the time, the data are collected once, commissioned by the state, and therefore it is not possible to track changes in opinion or experience over time. The third bulk of data is information collected by governmental institutions on a regular basis. Program for Reducing Domestic Violence for the time period 2008-2011 obliges the Ministry of Welfare to compile data on cases of violence on an annual basis. There have been five reports in this time period. The data are presented in reports are collected from various institutions: Information Center of the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Welfare, Court administration, State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights, State and municipally police, National Health service, NGO's. The aforementioned institutions provide data on Injuries resulting from violence; Offenses related to domestic violence - recorded by state and municipal police officers; Children who have suffered from domestic violence; Information collected by NGOs about people who have sought help from domestic violence. The authors of the report themselves point out that a major problem is the reliability of the data, which is caused by various factors, such as the failure of victims to report incidents of violence, the systematic non-collection of data by institutions, different perceptions of violence, etc. Within this frame, it is near to impossible to single out cases of GBV in universities and/ or RPOs.

2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

There are no laws, policies, and strategies combating/ addressing GBV in universities and/ or RPOs both on the national and regional levels. There are no initiatives on the level of universities and RPOs themselves.

There is some regulation on violence (not specifying what kind of violence) in Education law, and Labour law prohibits sexual harassment.

Education law Section 54. "Obligations of an Educatee" states that an educatee has an obligation to prevent emotional and physical violence. However, it doesn't provide tools/systems for prevention or reporting.

Labour law Section 29. "Prohibition of Differential Treatment": (4) Harassment of a person and instructions to discriminate against him/ her shall also be deemed to be discrimination within the meaning of this Law. (7) Within the meaning of this Law, the harassment of a person is the subjection of a person to such action which is unwanted from the point of view of the person, which is associated with his or her belonging to a specific gender, including the action of a sexual nature if the purpose or result of such action is the violation of the person's dignity and the creation of an intimidating, hostile, humiliating, degrading or offensive environment.

Criminal law has provisions on sexual violence, see Section 160. "Sexual Violence".

However, GBV is not handled in Latvian legislation, and there is no legal definition of GBV. Since this issue is not addressed on a national level, on a general level, it is not addressed on the level of universities as well. I have to say that in the case of Latvia, universities are not proactive or progressive but rather oriented to maintain the status quo. That same applies to gender equality and GBV.

The Latvian research and innovation funding system are old-fashioned. Studies emphasize that the system is operated by agencies; there is heavy use of structural funds in research and innovation policy (European Commission, 2018). Two main funding agencies Latvian Council of Science and The State Education Development Agency have no specific regulation on either gender equality principle or harassment prevention principle. There are two major national funding programmes Fundamental and Applied Research Projects and State Research Programme. Both programs are regulated by the regulations of Cabinet of Ministries: Cabinet Regulation No. 725 Procedures for Evaluating Fundamental and Applied Research Projects and Administering the Financing Thereof and Cabinet Regulation No. 560 Procedures for the Implementation of State Research Programme Projects. None of them has any provisions when it comes to the prevention of GBV, for example, providing any kind of advantages for universities or research organisations if they have some policy in place.

Student Councils have not been vocal about this issue. However, Latvijas Studentu Apvienība (Latvian Students' Union) has signed a resolution on sexual harassment and emotional abuse in higher education. Latvijas Studentu Apvienība represents the interests of all students in Latvia on a national and international scale. This organization is formed by the student associations of all major Latvian higher education institutions. The aforementioned document is the Network of Baltic Student Associations *Resolution on sexual harassment and emotional abuse in higher education*, signed by the Estonian Student Federation (Eesti Üliõpilaskondade Liit), Latvian Students' Union and Lithuanian Students' Union (Lietuvos studentų sąjunga). Resolution is an agreement from involved parties about several notions:

- sexual harassment and emotional abuse in academia is not acceptable;
- surveys and studies are needed to gather representative data and develop a concrete action plan to understand the urgency, dynamics and challenges of each country;



- representative data are needed and develop a concrete action plan to understand the urgency, dynamics and challenges of each country;
- the terms 'sexual harassment and 'emotional abuse' must be clearly defined in the legislation of all three countries;
- the internal policies of higher education institutions for dealing with sexual harassment and emotional abuse need to be established, implemented and regularly reviewed;
- clear systems of prevention measures need to be developed and implemented in order to prevent the above problems from materializing in the future;
- In order to overcome the identified challenges, there is a need to raise awareness of the importance of these issues for all parties involved in shaping the higher education environment.

The resolution is signed on 22nd August 2019. Unfortunately, there is no follow up to this resolution, and no action is taken.

Research of curricula of medicine, police, army, sports education show no information on GBV included in study plans (overview of curricula of following higher education institutions: Stradiņš University, Police College, The National Defense Academy of Latvia, Latvian Academy of Sport Education). However, this information might be included within courses on ethics or other courses on social sciences and society.

There has been debate in public discourse about of lack of awareness about GBV issues in police forces. To less extent, there has been a debate that doctors fail to report their suspicions about cases of domestic violence.



3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

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There have been no known cases of GBV in universities and/or RPOs. #MeToo didn't turn into a major discussion or awakening point. There is no definitive answer why there has not been any or has been so little progress about this issue.

#MeToo didn't turn into the mass movement in Latvia. There were several women sharing their experiences on social media without naming any names. The discourse of #Me Too in Latvia was more about how unprotected and vulnerable women are in public space. Universities were never mentioned. It is important to stress that issue of GBV in Latvia is discussed and addressed in terms of domestic violence. It is almost as if there is sexual violence (rape) and domestic violence and nothing in between.

Recently there was a great breakthrough in discussing domestic violence in Latvia. Last year (2020), before Christmas public broadcasting organisation held a fundraising marathon that was dedicated to raising help for people who want to escape from violent relationships. For the first time, the issue of domestic violence and violence against women were discussed in-depth and with passion and with such compassion. However, the focus was on domestic violence. Thus violence was treated as something that happens in private space – in family and relationships.

The single relevant case is a public scandal that took place in February 2021. Male professor of history complained that the Latvian Academy of Culture didn't prolong his contract due to the complaints from students about his conduct. Professor did not have tenure in the Latvian Academy of Culture, and he had one course of reading. After each semester, it is common for universities to conduct a survey of students about the quality of study courses. Surveys are anonymous and measure both contents of course and performance of lecturer. Universities

consider this tool as a quality assurance measurement. Conservative (right-wing(-ish)) media used this case to complain about cancel culture. See “Vai Kultūras akadēmijas feministes dejos kailas?” [Will feminists from Academy of Culture dance naked?] <https://neatkariga.nra.lv/komentari/elita-veidemane/338528-vai-kulturas-akademijas-feministes-dejos-kailas>. From another side of the political spectrum, there were some discussions on social media – *Twitter* and *Facebook*, explaining that the professor used sexist, homophobic, racist and xenophobic speech. But it didn't catch wider attention from the media or the general public. The case went down after this one publication and didn't spark any further debate.

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence caused heated discussion in Latvia. The controversy was caused because Convention is based on the understanding that violence against women is a form of gender-based violence that is committed against women because they are women. The discussion showed that there are various interpretations and misinterpretations of gender as a concept, as well as hostility towards gender equality interpreted as propaganda against so-called traditional family values. The discussion about the convention is not about victims or how to prevent violence, so it doesn't address real issues and real-life experiences. Discourse, on the one hand, is about how evil so-called gender ideology is, but on the other hand, it is about how narrow-minded defenders of traditional values are. It never addresses how the convention would prevent violence. The convention is never addressed as a helpful tool in combating violence against women in the public discourse. For more see: Zitmane, M. (2018). Evils of the Istanbul Convention. *Discourse Analysis of Latvian Press Publications (2016)*, *Femeris: Revista Multidisciplinar de Estudios de Género* 3:1, 111-124 <https://doi.org/10.20318/femeris.2018.4077>

It is quite challenging to predict if the Istanbul convention is going to be ratified in the near future. There must be political will to ratify the convention. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent economic crisis it generated, ratification of convention is not at the top of the list for both government and Parliament. A possible turning point is expected with a ruling of the Constitutional court. The constitutional court on the May 5th 2020, will start hearing case "On Compliance of Para "c" of Article 3, Para 3 of Article 4 and Para 1 of Article 12 of the Council of Europe Convention of 11 May 2011 on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence with the Preamble, Article 1, Article 99 and Article 110 of the Satversme of the Republic of Latvia and of Para 4 of its Article 4 with Article 91 of the Satversme of the Republic of Latvia and its Article 14 with Article 112 of the Satversme of the Republic of Latvia". The ruling which approves that convention is in line with Constitution would boost the possibility of ratification.

4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV

There are no public opinion surveys about GBV in universities and research organisations in Latvia. There are two public opinion surveys on violence against women and domestic violence. There are no studies addressing GBV, and the term GBV is not used in public discourse and policymaking. Both studies show that people are aware of violence as a problem within society.

1. SKDS (2020). *Stiprinot ģimenes, kopienas un attiecības: antropoloģiska pieeja vardarbības izpētē. Iedzīvotāju aptaujas rezultāti [Strengthening Families, Communities, and Relationships: An Anthropological Approach to Violence Research. Results of population survey]*. Rīga. Latvijas Universitāte.



Overall, 55% of respondents say they have never been victims of violence. However, 24% of respondents have experienced physical violence, 27% emotional, 2% sexual, 8% economic forms of violence.

51% of respondents agreed that “domestic violence is never justifiable”, 44% agreed that violence is “justified by some reason”. Men are slightly more likely than women to justify violence (46% male respondents and 42% female respondents). The most common excuse is self-defence (it is supported by an average of 41% of respondents). Men are more likely to support the claim that violence is justified if the victim is provocative/ acts provocative – it is supported by 12% of male respondents and 5% of female respondents. 6% of male respondents and 4% of female respondents support violence as a method of punishment and discipline.

Overall, 63% of respondents agree that violence is preventable (information, education, training and seminars on conflict resolving techniques).

Overall, 73% of respondents agree that they are active against violence. Despite the aforementioned, on average, only 12% of respondents agree that every inhabitant of Latvia is protected from violence.

2. SKDS (2018). Izpratnes veidošanas kampaņa par nulles toleranci attiecībā uz vardarbību pret sievietēm. “Vardarbībai patīk klusums”. LR pilsoņu aptauja [*Awareness raising campaign on zero tolerance to violence against women. "Violence likes silence." Survey of citizens of the Republic of Latvia*]. Rīga: SKDS

20% of respondents know someone (woman, man or both) in the immediate vicinity, who has suffered from domestic violence, 17% know one in friends or family circle, 5% - at work or at school.

Attitudes towards various statements regarding violence against women: 39% of respondents agreed that "violence against women is often provoked by the victims themselves", but 42% did not agree with this statement.

29% of respondents agreed to expressed the view that women often invent or exaggerate allegations of violence or rape (46% disagreed), while 27% agreed that women are more often raped by strangers than someone they know (34% disagreed).

Less often, respondents agreed with the statement "domestic violence is a private matter and should be dealt with in the family" (agreed: 19%, disagreed: 71%).

Both studies show that there is a high level of tolerance against violence against women. This is not expressed directly, but rather indirectly by supporting statements as women victims provoke violence, exaggerate allegations, and that violence can be justified if a valid reason is provided. It is important to stress that both surveys focus on domestic violence, violence against women. They do not provide information on GBV.

Both surveys are products of particular projects; they are not part of a permanent prevalence measurement system. Since both surveys are done only two years apart, they provide no information on the persistence of the aforementioned views.

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

COVID-19 situation didn't provoke meaningful discussion about GBV. There were some stories in mass media NGO's who work with domestic violence victims, expressing concern about a spike in cases of abuse. For example, *Marta Center: The murder of a victim of domestic violence was reported during the Covid-19 crisis* (<https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/centrs-marta-covid-19-krizes-laika-zinots-par-gimenes-vardarbibas-upura-slepkavibu.a361236/>). NGO Marta



Center is a women's rights organization in Latvia, which is best known for its work with issues of domestic violence and violence against women. The little discussion we have was focused on domestic violence. It did not touch subjects like GBV nor went beyond violence committed within the private sphere.

6. CONCLUSION

Since there is basically nothing on GBV in universities and RPOs in Latvia, any initiative would be very useful.

In my opinion, it would be necessary to start with a study on the prevalence of GBV in universities and RPOs. There is a need to assess student level, academic personnel level, and level of administration. There is a need for both information on the student-student level and student-academic personnel level. As a starting point, it could be done on the basis of a survey. It would be very important to establish the continuous gathering of data.

The next step would be establishing a mechanism for reporting, adopting existing good practices from other countries.

Plus, it is absolutely essential to have an awareness-raising campaign for students. In Latvia, people still have difficulties recognizing violence and/or harassment. Other aspects of awareness rising should be removing the stigma of shame.

To summarize information is key; there is a need both for information on the prevalence of GBV and information for the public about GBV.

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