EUROPEAN
POLICYBRIEF

UniSAFE POLICY BRIEF 2

Addressing gender-based violence through institutional change.

31 January 2024

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based has recently gained increased attention in the European policy landscape. Since 2019, multiple calls and recommendations addressing gender-based violence have been produced (the Helsinki Call for Action 2019, SWG GRI 2020). In a significant move in 2021, the European Commission (EC) introduced Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as an eligibility criterion for Horizon Europe (2021–2027), with measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, as one recommended thematic area. Simultaneously, the 2021 European Parliament (EP) resolution (2019/2164(INI), drew attention to sexual harassment among women students in science, technology, engineering, and medicine fields, urging EU Member States and educational institutions to enact zero-tolerance policies, establish codes of conduct, create safe reporting channels, and report cases to relevant authorities. Acknowledging the need for coordinated efforts, in 2021, the Ljubljana Declaration on gender equality in research and innovation, endorsed by 37 parties, including the EU27, the EC, Associated Countries, Accession Countries and third countries, emphasised the lack of cohesive infrastructure and procedures addressing gender-based violence in academia.

These developments further prompted the adoption of the European Research Area (ERA) policy actions for 2021-2024, focusing on promoting gender equality and inclusiveness, as an annex to Council Conclusions on the future governance of the ERA (14308/21). Action 5 specifically outlined a strategy to counteract gender-based violence, emphasising institutional change in research funding and research performing organisations. In 2023, the EP adopted Resolution of 14 December 2023 on young researchers, calling for the Member States to ensure fair and transparent procedures to deal with harassment and abuse in academia, particularly affecting the careers of early-stage researchers, who remain heavily reliant on references and referrals from senior academics for their academic careers. Finally, in December 2023, the Competitiveness Council adopted the Council recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe with an accompanying European Charter for Researchers, addressing gender-based violence as part of the inclusive gender equality agenda.

These adopted documents signify a growing recognition of the problem of gender-based violence across all the actions in the European research and innovation (R&I) system. **However, the recent policy evolution at the EU level does not translate in a uniform manner into actions at the level of Member States where divergence persists.** Despite these differences, **there is a converging agreement on the lack of effective instruments to address the issue, emphasising the necessity for combined action at both EU and national policy levels within the ERA.**

The results and recommendations produced by UniSAFE directly contribute to the knowledge base underlying these policy developments while shedding light on the differences in policy across the Member States and identifying gaps and shortcomings in institutional policies to comprehensively address the issue. The practical [UniSAFE Toolkit](#) provides the much-needed tools and guides to start rectifying these continued challenges to ending gender-based violence in European Research Area.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Gender-based violence in European higher education and research organisations, including universities, is highly prevalent across institutions and countries. Nearly 62% of the over 42,000 respondents of the 2022 UniSAFE survey on gender-based violence in academia and higher education disclosed having experienced at least one form of gender-based violence, including incidents of physical, sexual violence and harassment, psychological, economic and online violence, in their place of work or study (Lipinsky et al. 2022a; Humbert et al. 2022). Among respondents, 66% of women, 56% of men and 74% of non-binary respondents disclosed experiences of at least one form of gender-based violence. Non-binary, trans and LGBQ+ students and staff, as well as students and staff from ethnic minorities, and students/staff with a disability or a chronic illness were affected more often. However, only 7% of students and 23% of staff who had experienced gender-based violence in their institution reported the incident, mainly because they did not consider the behaviour serious enough to report, did not recognise the behaviour as violence at the time of the incident or did not think that anything would happen if they reported the incident (Lipinsky et al. 2022b). Combined with continued lack of effective policies, poor policy design and the failure to implement them when adopted (Huck et al. 2022; Pilinkaite Sotirovic & Blazyte 2022; Linková et al. 2023; Ranea-Triviño et al. 2022), **these figures suggest the permissiveness of violence in organisational cultures and that higher education institutions and research organisations are failing to define and address unacceptable behaviours**.

1. **Institutional policy frameworks are insufficiently implemented.**

Many universities and research organisations have policies or regulations in place to address gender-based violence, but fail to effectively prevent, protect, prosecute, provide services, and develop partnerships. Indeed, **the practical implementation of existing measures to eradicate gender-based violence remains limited and lacks efficiency.** Institutions claim having policies and regulations in place while still sweep incidents under the carpet: *"I'm very sceptical about new policies, I think we have good policies, we have it all in place. Discrimination, harassment: all unlawful, they [senior staff members/professors] shouldn't do it, they have a duty of care, they have to be held accountable. But what I do see is the university always tries to keep it very low profile"* (Woman, academic staff) (Pilinkaite Sotirovic & Blazyte 2022, p. 29). The gaps between the policy frameworks and their efficient implementation are to be found in multiple areas: in awareness about the diverse forms of gender-based violence; in the procedures – often long, complex, and opaque – to file a complaint; in protection; in the access to support services, which are not always qualitative. Where prevention and protection policies may be comprehensive, prosecution policies and measures remain the least effectively implemented: "*While the RPO does provide equality training and awareness campaigns on gender equality, this does not help to create a safer environment: it [the institution] can claim to be all about equality and gender and so on, the practice is completely different, you simply clash with the wall of the institution.*" (Pilinkaite Sotirovic, Blazyte 2022, p.33). Overall, the application in practice of the instruments to protect victims/survivors is not considered effective and sufficient by victims/survivors.

2. **Factors impeding structural change**

UniSAFE's analysis of 16 case studies conducted in 15 European countries (Ranea-Triviño et al. 2022) points out that most institutional policy frameworks lack **resources** for proper design and implementation, whether in terms of expertise, budget, human resources, space or time. Gender equality structures remain particularly under-resourced and reliant on individual change agents and activists who often work on an unpaid basis. This widespread institutional inaction, and more specifically weak leadership commitment, not only leads to individual exhaustion but also prevents victims and survivors' access to justice, eventual healing and overall impedes a systemic transition towards safer institutions (Ranea-Triviño et al. 2022).

Institutional policy frameworks lack an **intersectional approach** to their design and implementation; the importance of intersectionality when addressing gender-based violence is either ignored or the expertise to

adopt an intersectional approach is missing. When intersectionality is mentioned, the combination of gender and other systems of power is usually understood as a factor aggravating vulnerability to gender-based violence, but gender-based violence mostly or exclusively affecting minoritised groups is not considered (Ranea-Triviño et al. 2022).

Evidence shows that the **leadership** is often unsupportive and tends to express mistrust in victims/survivors, silencing them and protecting perpetrators. The high status of the alleged perpetrator in the institutional hierarchy and arguments situated in the requirements of privacy and data protection make prosecution very difficult: *"If anyone needs to be protected, it's always the perpetrator, because he is a professor, right? Everybody knows him. And the university doesn't do anything, because he is too valuable to the university"* (Woman, senior researcher) (Pilinkaite Sotirovic & Blazyte 2022, p. 34).

While generally lacking, research on prevalence and consequences, such as surveys, particularly when periodically repeated in the institution, have proven to be useful to understand the scope and size of the issue, point to new needs (e.g. relating to emerging forms of online violence), and help develop existing measures or create new ones. Furthermore, there is an overall lack of **monitoring and evaluation mechanisms** of the effectiveness of the institutional measures in terms of their impact and the new needs that emerge. These mechanisms can be supported by research on prevalence and consequence. Overall, there is a need to push forward an evidence-based policy agenda on gender-based violence in higher education.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The evidence produced by UniSAFE on the prevalence and significant consequences of gender-based violence on victims-survivors, bystanders, as well as entire academic communities underscores the need for further policy development, coordination, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

1. Institutional change

Addressing gender-based violence is a matter of institutional change. Firstly, it challenges the underlying value systems and organising principles, including the academic hierarchies and power differentials; secondly, it seeks to improve institutional policies, procedures, and practices; thirdly, it questions interpersonal relationships and personal conduct.

Addressing gender-based violence as an underlying element of institutional change
Given that various forms of intersectional gender-based violence – spanning a continuum – both stem from and reveal intersectional (gender) inequalities in higher education and research and innovation, this issue must be addressed as an integral part of institutional change towards gender equality, which in the EU is implemented through GEPs[1]. Furthermore, Gender Equality Plans have demonstrated important impact at the level of Member States and universities and research organisations since the introduction of the GEP eligibility criterion (GENDERACTIONplus 2023).

Gender-based violence as a mandatory element of Gender Equality Plans
The first and most critical recommendation is to make **gender-based violence a mandatory thematic area of the GEP eligibility criterion** in line with the UniSAFE toolkit and the zero-tolerance strategy delivered by the ERA Forum subgroup on inclusive gender equality[2]. A Code of Conduct and Protocol, assignation of clear responsibilities for procedures, allocation of funding and ensuring properly trained staff in victim-centred, trauma-informed approaches, should be minimum requirements.[3]

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[1] the Communication from the Commission "A new ERA for Research and Innovation" (COM/2020/628 final); Council Conclusions on the New European Research Area of 1 December 2020 (13567/20); Council Conclusions on the future governance of the European Research Area (14308/21) - ERA Policy Agenda Action 5: Promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness, taking note of the Ljubljana Declaration.
[2] Under preparation at the time of the writing of this policy brief.
[3] See Linková et al. 2023. See also GENDERACTIONplus position paper (2024).

Gender-based violence to be addressed in schemes involving mobility

In addition, it is vital that this requirement applies not only to research institutions in the framework of Horizon Europe but also to those involved in **other funding schemes (such as MSCA and Erasmus+)** which support the mobility, training and career development of students and early-career researchers. These programmes should have robust provisions addressing gender-based violence in order to ensure that both host and sending organisations have policies in place. Lastly, the funding programmes should foresee **an emergency fund to allow emergency support in case of incidents, e.g. to cover for unforeseen travel.**

This is further supported by the revision of the Charter for Researchers which now includes Gender Equality Plans and actions to address gender-based violence. **This should translate into an explicit requirement of the adoption of such policies and activities for institutions applying to the HRS4R award.**

2. Legal issues

UniSAFE research and expert workshops have revealed numerous obstacles and forms of resistance to addressing gender-based violence. One of these is the need to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which often poses an obstacle to RPOs addressing the issue properly. Given the EU-wide application of the GDPR, **the Commission should formulate clear advice on the interpretation of GDPR in cases and processes related to gender-based violence.** Specifically, it is vital to establish what can and cannot be done, when GDPR applies or cannot be invoked, how to ensure in policy provisions that GDPR does not stand in the way of effective gender-based violence policies. In short, it is critical to clarify what is the legitimate use of data without risking GDPR infringements while pursuing protection, safeguarding and respect of victims' rights.

SUSTAINABILITY AND LEGACY

UniSAFE has produced robust knowledge on gender-based violence (including sexual harassment) in universities and research organisations and with the support of stakeholders has translated this knowledge into operational tools and recommendations for universities, research organisations, policy-makers and other stakeholder groups to contribute to reducing gender-based violence. The project's outputs have been made openly available on multiple platforms, including a dedicated website for the UniSAFE toolkit, and will be taken up in the GenderSAFE project starting in March 2024. Its recommendations have also been used by the ERA Forum subgroup action 5 and reflected in the development of the ERA's code of conduct. UniSAFE's main outputs are the following.

Robust evidence base

UniSAFE's research on the prevalence of gender-based violence in academia and research and institutions' responses has included policy mapping, qualitative and quantitative research, with a widescale survey – taken by over 42,000 staff and students from 46 organisations in 15 countries. The solid data have been analysed and compared with findings from interviews with researchers, policy mapping, and case studies of institutional responses, resulting in a report on the multi-level analysis and integrated dataset. Insights also include:

- Questionnaire used for UniSAFE survey

- Method handbook

- A European policy baseline

Recommendations

A set of factsheets respectively targeting policy-makers, higher education and research institutions, research funding organisations, higher education and research associations and umbrella organisations, staff associations and unions, student associations and unions, provides concrete recommendations to counteract gender-based violence. They each include a definition of gender-based violence, its social determinants, and

consequences; the extent of the problem in Europe based on UniSAFE results; a concise overview of each stakeholder's role; and focused recommendations addressing the 7Ps, along with inspiring practices.

White Paper: "From policy to practice: The evidence base for ending gender-based violence in higher education and research"

The white paper draws attention to the roles and responsibilities of higher education and research organisations in addressing gender-based violence, while explicating essential features and elements of effective policies and actions and highlighting the role of institutional leadership in making the policy frameworks and actions work. Read here.

The UniSAFE Toolkit

The UniSAFE toolkit offers extensive and practical guidance for higher education institutions and research organisations to address gender-based violence, supporting the design, improvement and implementation of effective policies and concrete measures, at all stages of policy development. The toolkit offers a holistic approach by thoroughly examining all steps towards institutional change, providing appropriate content for those at the beginning of policy development, deeply involved in policy design, aiming to enhance existing policies and their execution, or in search of resources to develop and implement effective strategies, ensuring a safe environment for students and staff. Resources include inspiring practices, a glossary of terms related to gender-based violence, and interactive map of policies and legal frameworks, as well as the following elements. Available at https://unisafe-toolkit.eu/.

Action Plan: Setting up a comprehensive policy framework addressing gender-based violence in academia: a step-by-step guide

An instrumental guide for those at the initial stages of formulating and applying a policy framework to address gender-based violence in academia. It provides a detailed roadmap, the Action Plan, outlining clear and specific actions for designing, implementing, enforcing, monitoring, and evaluating the plan. Access here.

Protocol: "Developing a Protocol for addressing gender-based violence in research and higher education institutions: UniSAFE guidelines".

This guidance document is a supportive tool for institutions aiming to establish protocols for gender-based violence. It includes UniSAFE's definition of a Protocol, its essential elements, practical advice and tips, and examples of inspiring practices. These guidelines are primarily designed for staff members tasked with the development and implementation of protocols for addressing gender-based violence within their respective institutions. Read here.

Capacity-building materials

Designed for trainers and change agents, a set of trainings and materials support capacity-building activities in academia, with detailed training scripts, formats, and customisation guidelines. They cover topics such as developing and implementing institutional policies, bystander intervention, addressing gender-based violence without formal complaints, awareness-raising for teachers and students. Available here.

Step-by-step guide to awareness-raising campaigns on gender-based violence

This comprehensive guide is designed for representatives from universities and research organisations, offering valuable insights into developing awareness-raising campaigns, with examples and resources for

customisation and replication. Additionally, for a thorough understanding of the guide's key steps and principles, a recorded webinar is [available online](#).

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGIES

UniSAFE is a Horizon 2020 project (contract number 101006261) funded under the call topic SwafS-25-2020: Gender-based violence including sexual harassment in research organisations and universities. It has a dual objective: (1) to produce robust knowledge on gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, in universities and research organisations and (2) to translate this knowledge into operational tools and recommendations for universities, research organisations, and policymakers designed to reduce gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

In analysing the prevalence, determinants, consequences, and responses to gender-based violence, UniSAFE is centred on three research pillars that are combined in a holistic research model and multi-level research design to collect, analyse, and synthesise qualitative and quantitative data along these three research pillars:

1. The first one, at the micro level, is the study of the prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence at 46 research performing organisations in 15 Member States, a Europe-wide survey, and an interview-based study of researchers at increased risk of gender-based violence.
2. The second one, at the meso level, is a study of organisational responses and infrastructure, using in-depth case studies, interviews, and a strategic mapping of 48 research performing organisations in 15 EU countries.
3. The third one, at the macro level, is an analysis of legal and policy frameworks that focuses specifically on gender-based violence in universities and research organisations, carried out in cooperation with national experts in the 27 EU Member States, four Associated Countries, and two Third Countries.

An ambitious and holistic 7P model, covering prevalence, prevention, protection, prosecution, provision of services, partnerships, and policy, is used to collect and analyse data on each level. The model is better suited to collect data, analyse their relations, and translate findings into operational tools than the conventional 3P model or the Istanbul Convention 4P model. The same 7P model is used to co-design a comprehensive set of measures and tools to be applied inside universities and research organisations and by other stakeholders, including policymakers and RFOs (Strid et al. 2021).

UniSAFE relies on a strong multi-disciplinary consortium of nine European partners. Its strength is based on the partners' in-depth knowledge and extensive track record in researching gender-based violence, translating academic insights into operational tools, including the GEAR-tool, disseminating knowledge, including a direct link to the Gender Equality Academy, developing policy recommendations at the EU level, and empowering stakeholders to exploit project results, with a carefully designed impact plan.

UniSAFE adopts a participatory and co-design approach throughout the project conception and implementation to ensure citizen involvement in understanding gender-based violence (norms and attitudes), with a view to transform the knowledge into tools that will effectively be used. UniSAFE makes research data available on an open access basis where possible, and follows Open Access as standard approach to publications, to ensure maximal reach to the scientific community and that the new knowledge created by the research activities of the project is taken up widely as an input for further research.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME

Gender-based violence and institutional responses: Building a knowledge base and operational tools to make universities and research organisations safe (UniSAFE)

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Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences – LCSS – Vilnius, Lithuania

Oxford Brookes University – OBU – Oxford Brookes, United Kingdom

Universidad Complutense de Madrid – UCM – Madrid, Spain

University of Gothenburg – UGOT – Gothenburg, Sweden

Yellow Window – YW – Antwerpen, Belgium

Örebro University – ORU – Örebro, Sweden

FUNDING SCHEME

SwafS-25-2020: Gender-based violence including sexual harassment in research organisations and universities

DURATION

February 2021 – January 2024 (36 months)

BUDGET

EU contribution: 3 198 540 €.

WEBSITE

https://unisafe-gbv.eu/
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