

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

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Researcher: Ráhel K. Turai

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last five years, a number of cases became public about the degradation, sexual harassment and sexual violence against female students in higher education institutions across the country, from smaller ones to the ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University), which is the country's biggest and most renowned university, based in the capital, Budapest. The outrage resulted in public awareness, sanctions against the perpetrators, some research, as well as a few new measures and protocols in institutions.

Distinctively, it was a sexual violence case in August 2014 in an ELTE freshman camp that generated transformations in the following years. A 38-year-old man (who was also a student in another faculty), assigned with taking photographs in the camp, raped a female student. The investigation ended with firing the perpetrator from the university and with a 9-year-long prison sentence. The camp organiser, the Students' Council (HÖK), was also held accountable, as it turned out that they had been aware that the perpetrator had been sentenced for rape before. The case gave impetus for a number of steps regarding media coverage, public debates, criminal prosecution, institutional responses and protocols in and beyond ELTE, as well as statements and initiatives on the national level, from the Ministry of Human Resources (EMMI) to the Rectors' Conference to the National Students' Council (HÖÖK).

In the following years, especially between 2017 and 2019, sexual harassment of female students by male professors again emerged in the spotlight when old and recent cases of harassment of young actresses by theatre directors became public. As the directors were also professors at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, these events had an impact on higher education, resulting in professors being held accountable and fired and setting up investigative and reporting committees (see more in Section 3). The cases also attracted political controversies; as some perpetrators were oppositional figures, the government condemned the cases as illustrative of the morals of the political opposition, and they eventually used it as a pretext to transform the funding system of the University of Theatre and Film Arts (together with a number of other universities).

Most cases concern student victims, but employees accused two Deans of sexual harassment at two institutions where the vast majority of employees and students are female, in November 2017 and in 2019. In one case, it was the same ELTE Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education where the freshman camp rape case became public; the Dean acknowledged his responsibility and was fired. In the other case, the Dean of the Faculty of Child Education and Special Education in the University of Debrecen had to leave in April 2020, following the ethics investigation against him for sexually harassing a female professor (then the press reported on several victims from among both faculty and students in the past decades).



General awareness of the problem of violence against women in higher education definitely has risen (see more in Section 4). Nevertheless, meaningful actions have remained on the individual level of each institution, and there is still a huge lack of policies. There is not any intention on the side of the government to do otherwise, as is signalled by the fact that they withdrew from the Istanbul Convention in May 2020.

2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

There are not any central laws, policies, or strategies on the national level in place to combat gender-based violence in research institutions and higher education; it is either university-level policies or informal partnerships and initiatives that address the question. Although Hungarian legislation does not specify gender-based violence either in academia or in general as such, there is a basis for protecting victims of (sexual) harassment and domestic violence. The Equal Treatment legislation (Act CXXV. of 2003), including education and work relations, specifies sex and gender as primary protected characteristics against discrimination, and Article 10 on harassment includes sexual harassment. The Labour Law (Act I. of 2012) prescribes equal treatment in general, implying the employer's responsibility in harassment cases. The Hungarian Criminal Code (Act C of 2012, Section 197) defines and penalizes sexual violence (in gender-neutral terms) and specifies cases when it happens "3.b) by a family member or against a person who is in the care, custody or supervision of or receives medical treatment from, such family member, or if abuse is made of a recognized position of trust, authority or influence over the victim", which pertains to employer-employee as well as professor-student relations. The National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality – Guidelines and Objectives 2010-2021 (1004/2010 I.21) has a reference to women in science as well as violence against women, but it does not link the two.

The Ministry of Innovation and Technology is in charge of most funding sources for research performing organizations in Hungary, including the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), the Eötvös Loránd Research Network (ELKH), as well as the individual or group beneficiaries of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund (NRDI). For higher education, the Ministry of Human Capacities (EMMI) is in charge. Accreditation and quality assurance processes are performed by the independent Hungarian Accreditation Committee (MAB) (with a board including delegates from MTA, students organisations, the EMMI Ministry and other bodies). These entities have Equal Opportunity Strategies typically targeting women, parents, the Roma minority and disabled people, without specifying violence or harassment.

The wave of public scandals starting from 2014 pressed institutions and national authorities to react, from statements to task forces to some policy and legislation amendments. The Education Ombudsman executed an investigation in which he underlined that the freshman camps, in general, were characterised by a sexualising atmosphere and violence against women. He recommended modifications to the Higher Education Law so that it refers to gender-based discrimination. The Minister of EMMI promised amendments and to set up a task force focusing on higher education practice and legal documents. There is no further information available about this, but the Higher Education Law did get completed with a line on the requirement to "respect human dignity and rights" among faculty, staff, and students. The President of the Rectors' Conference agreed with the Ombudsman's report and promised that they would also make recommendations. However, to this day, among the annual reports of the Rectors'



Conference, there is no mention to be found regarding the rape case or gender-based violence in general. The President of the National Students' Council (HÖÖK) also welcomed the report and said that they started preparing a quality assurance system as well as a reporting program called "students' lawyer". But still today, beyond an email address of the students' lawyer for general legal aid, there is no systemic and specific sexual harassment reporting policy available on the webpage of HÖÖK. On the other hand, the Education Ombudsman reported in 2018 that the freshman camp scandal was still bearing an impact on Hungarian higher education, and HÖÖK requested recommendations from the Ombudsman again.

The long-term results are thus ambiguous. On the one hand, sexual violence has become less accepted, and public discourse had a motivating impact on national stakeholders to initiate steps. On the other hand, without a political will to fight violence against women, most actions remained limited to general references to human dignity and to general regulations of freshman camps or students' councils (and not addressing sexual harassment or gender-based violence in universities). Moreover, the government used the case for legitimating their own political agenda: referring to the rape scandals, it curtailed the rights of HÖÖK, universities, and theatres.

As specific measures are up to the specific institution, promising steps have been taken since 2014, especially in some university Codes of Ethics with regard to sexual harassment; in groundbreaking prevalence research at ELTE (Gregor 2017); and in the form of informal partnerships between certain university entities and NGOs fighting gender-based violence. For example, a round table discussion was organised between universities (ELTE, BCE, BKF) and NANE, the most prominent women's rights NGO fighting violence against women outside of the higher education system (*Nők a Nőkért Együtt az Erőszak Ellen – Women for Women Together Against Violence*, operating a helpline and organising campaigns and training).

Directly reacting to the rape cases, ELTE University launched a long-term concept of prevention and victim protection. They created a Code of Ethics, requiring equal treatment and prohibiting abuse of power. ELTE Equal Opportunity Strategy refers to women's equality and includes a network of referents and committees, though the webpage only mentions disability topics. A university ombudsman position was introduced, and the prevalence study involved women's rights NGOs NANE and Patent (*Patriarchátust Ellenzők Társasága – Society Against Patriarchy*, an NGO offering legal aid for abused women). Also involving these NGOs, ELTE students, alumni, and employees initiated informal cooperation against violence with awareness-raising campaigns and round table discussions (see Gregor 2017). The University of Fine Arts, reacting to one of the students' art projects on #MeToo at the university, set up a working group and introduced revisions into the Code of Ethics, including a new service provision network for victims, consisting of counsellors and peer mentors.

As for other universities, a direct influence of the rape cases is hard to ascertain, but the Code of the University of Pécs, including protection against sexual harassment, dates back to 2015. The Code of Ethics of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, updated in 2018, includes a detailed section on sexual harassment and its forms, including those concerning the victim's sex, gender, gender representation or sexual orientation. In Semmelweis (Medical) University, completing the Equal Opportunity Regulations (2017) with opportunities for reporting and investigation, the 2020 Code of Ethics contains a section prohibiting sexual harassment, not only in connection with sexuality but also with gender and gender integrity. Freshman camp organising across the country became more regulated and transparent, and some university groups responsible for an organisation (like at Semmelweis University and at ELTE Faculty of



Law) regularly consult NANE and Patent and operate with counselling and professor-student mentor networks to prevent and prosecute gender-based violence in their events.

Social scientific RPOs from time to time engage with research projects on GBV, just as research is being carried out in universities (most notably, at ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Psychology, including prevalence and partnership foci, see Section 5).

As for higher education, the inclusion of the topic of GBV is not integrated into the curricula. It is rather up to individual initiatives of professors, who can discuss the topic or invite experts. In psychology, law, police, and social work education, GBV often does not exceed more than one or two single sessions in a mandatory course from psychology to law schools. In the 2015-16 period of cooperation between ELTE Faculty of Law and Patent NGO, an elective course on GBV was offered at ELTE: Partnership violence seminar with a court watch program. Domestic violence is part of the curriculum in the social worker MA of Semmelweis University. A partnership violence specialization for social worker students is being offered in the joint BA program of the University of Miskolc and the Calvinist Theology Academy of Sárospatak. NANE NGO also regularly offers training for experts (psychologists, social workers, police), as well as students; they can also be consulted for working out workplace protocols against sexual harassment. However, these are informal, ad hoc cooperations and universities, as a rule, do not incorporate gender-based violence into their curriculum and into the expertise of their faculty.

The Gender Studies MA at ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences only got Hungarian accreditation between 2016 and 2018. The Hungarian Rectors' Conference and the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (MAB) expressed their concern and stated that they do not support banning gender studies. In 2021, a new MA is launching at the Semmelweis University under the name of "Family Studies", including the topic of gender inequality.



3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

Before the Hungarian #MeToo movement in the art scene, an old rape case became public in sports in April 2016: media revealed that the 75 year-old coach of the national swimming team (also acting as a town mayor), back in 1961 as a professional swimmer, participated in a gang rape of a 18 year-old woman. Although he was sentenced together with his friends, after 20 months in prison, he returned to sports and remained in a high position. The case contributed to the change of public attitudes (see the next Section).

The Hungarian #MeToo movement in the art scene started in October 2017 with an actress's (Lilla Sárosdi) statement about a theatre director having sexually abused her, a 17 year-old student at the time, 20 years before. Soon another 10 victims also came out (mostly anonymously) about having suffered abuse by the same man. The scandal quickly impacted higher education, as he was still teaching at the University of Theatre and Film Arts. In the theatre scene, further allegations became public, including male directors as well as a female director abusing verbally, sexually, or physically actors/actresses. In 2019 another acclaimed director-professor was confirmed to have sexually abused a young actress when they were working together in a play. The investigation of the Ethical Committee at the University of Theatre and Film Arts resulted in firing the professor. The consequences were ambiguous: directors

faced ethical investigations, and some quit/got fired/retired either from their university or theatre positions, while some were also offered new opportunities to direct elsewhere.

There was a heated debate in Hungary around the Istanbul Convention, but it did not touch its relevance for universities/RPOs. Women's rights defenders had been demanding the ratification of the Convention since Hungary signed it in 2014 – but in May 2020, the Parliament rejected the Convention itself.

4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV

Olga Tóth's article (2018) summarises research on intimate partner violence against women in Hungary in the past 20 years. Giving an overview of prevalence studies, Tóth presents a 2017 representative national survey that included a question regarding rape attitudes. 22.9% of women and 27.6% of men responded affirmatively to the statement that "The majority of raped women were also responsible for becoming a victim".

The non-representative survey by Nyúl et al. (2017) investigated rape myth acceptance. Respondents were asked about the rape by the swimming coach (see Section 3) at two points in time: when the allegation became public and a few weeks later, when the perpetrator owned up to the charge. Whether respondents labelled the case 'rape' also depended on whether they self-identified strongly as sporty or a right-wing voter, or, as a parent, a woman/man, or as someone concerned by rape. The more respondents believed in rape myths, the less they condemned the case; but this correlation ceased after the coach acknowledged the accusations.

Most research on gender and academia address the low proportion of women (mostly in STEM), mentioning discrimination; the topic of gender-based violence is reduced to passing references to sexual harassment of female students by male peers and professors.

Part of the prevalence research carried out among ELTE students (see Section 1 and 2), Johanna Giczi and Anikó Gregor (2017) surveyed students' opinions on the two rape cases in ELTE freshman camps (see Sections 1 and 2). Upon 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews, Giczi and Gregor point out that victim-blaming opinions can still be found, shared more by men. Both sexes, however, project responsibility on the individual level (perpetrator, victim), or, at most, on the organisers of the camp, and they do not link it to sexism inside the university institution and in the broader social environment.

Besides academic work, a leading online newspaper, *Index*, also issued a representative survey in 2018 about attitudes on #MeToo in Hungary and worldwide, including the cases when professors sexually harassed students (Kovács 2018). The article concludes that the #MeToo movement and its media coverage did have an impact and resulted in greater awareness and condemnation of violence. Among the respondents, 73% heard of the main cases involving the director-professors; women's 28.4% and men's 13.3% had been closely following the developments. One-third of the respondents said that the news made them consider sexual harassment a more serious problem than before. 84% agreed with the statement that in institutions (from theatres to universities to offices), people in power positions force sexual acts without consent. 9% disagreed with the statement that "women should not be approached in a way uncomfortable to them", and 90% agreed that "women shall accept that men sometimes try to approach them a bit violently". At the same time, half of the respondents agreed that "women often deliberately falsely accuse men of harassment". Still, half also think that "in Hungary, people are too easily forgiven who had been sexually harassed others". 87% would



welcome if “in the future, men paid more attention to what they allow themselves against women”.

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

In Hungarian media, there has been discussion about the impact of COVID-19 on GBV in general: on the fact that it contributes to a rising number of domestic violence and to new forms of prostitution and girls’ sexual (online) harassment and exploitation. About COVID-19 and GBV with regard to universities and research organisations specifically, the most that can be found is information provided on university webpages about intensifying domestic violence during the pandemic, without reference to the university as a potential context of violence (e.g., the Coronavirus info page of the website of the University of Debrecen, providing help service contacts).

6. CONCLUSION

As the current government clearly uses anti-feminist rhetoric for political gains, it is only to be hoped that if a new government forms after parliamentary elections, that will be more considerate when it comes to GVB. They hopefully will ratify the Istanbul Convention and implement its suggestions.

Owing to the scandals of sexual harassment in universities, sexual violence got into focus; possible ways forward, both research and policy, would put other aspects of institutional GBV in the forefront, including gender harassment, degradation, and acts of physical violence against female students. Further, actions could specifically target female professors as well as female researchers at RFOs.



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