

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

Country: Italy

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, attitudes within the context of universities and research organisations in Italy have seen some improvements. This can be seen in the increase of specific researches, study courses and in the growing number of activities put in place to make the academic environment more equitable and safer. However, this first impression has to be analysed more thoroughly to understand the current level of awareness within universities and RFOs and the point at which general policies have produced effective measures. In the last years, actions within academia were directed by following principles expressed by the Council of Europe Convention.¹ Regarding education and the role of research in contrasting GBV. However, initiatives were conducted without any specific obligations and guidelines and without a control body that could coordinate. Thus, the consequence was of general confusion and a highly differentiated territorial framework, with some universities performing better than others. Moreover, if the incentives to develop researches into the GBV field saw an increase with respect to a general point of view, however, this did not concern researchers regarding GBV within academia. This latter aspect remained underestimated and elusive. Lacking prevalence data, the difficulty of identifying the problem emerged. This invalidated the possibility of designing effective tools and created a severe limit to raise general awareness.



2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

There is not specific Italian legislation on GBV in universities and research organisations nor legislation that mentions the phenomenon explicitly. Therefore, at the national level, to understand the system involved in the protection, prosecution of perpetrators and provision of services to victims, it is necessary to look at laws and policies regarding equal opportunities for workers that follow the general evolution of the national labour protection system. On the prevention and data collection, we have to look at the ministerial disposals towards students' education and the role of research.

With reference to the first dimension, the Code of Equal Opportunities in the workplace², contained the only explicit definition of sexual harassment in Italian legislation³ And defined the system through which the legislator intended to protect and prosecute against GBV in public places. With this regulatory provision, it was introduced a sanction to all administrations failing to present an action plan on equal opportunities and not adopting a Code of Conduct regarding harassment. However, it

¹ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

² Legislative Decree n° 198/2006.

³ Art. 26: "all those unwanted behaviours, carried out for reasons related to sex and having the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a worker and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading humiliating or offensive climate".

has been highlighted that the lack of specific guidelines on how to draw up Codes created a confusing system of differentiated protections among universities (Perini, 2019). Another arrangement was the setup of a protection system based on the figures of the Confidential Counsellor and of the Guarantee Committee of Equal Opportunities (*CUG*)⁴ within each university and research institute⁵. The Confidential Counselor was thought to play a crucial role in the management and resolution of harassment problems. Its room for manoeuvre is regulated under the institution's Code of Conduct, and its action: "must be a "buffer" between the person who manifests the "discomfort" and the managers of the work organization, proposing to all parties involved actions aimed at eliminating the problem" (Sangianantoni, De Paola & Hunstad, 2019, p. 154). The figure of Counselor of Equity⁶, within the regional administration, has remained an institution committed to all work situations present in the region, becoming, by necessity, a residual body that is used only when the controversy arising in the workplace cannot be resolved internally. Along with these figures, the *CUG* has the role of reducing the gender gap and of setting up courses aimed at raising awareness on equal opportunities. It also draws a triennial action plan (*PAP*)⁷ regarding positive actions. Overall, the system is more focused on gender balance policies rather than on policies to combat GBV, and it seems to mitigate the gender component by failing to recognise its importance in the development of discrimination within the workplace: the reference is mostly generic and disconnected from considerations on gender relations. The strong formalisation and mechanisation of this approach weaken the system efficiency, and it creates substantial differences between institutions since the most effective policies have been the result of autonomous initiatives of figures who have positively exploited the spaces of autonomy left open by the institutional system itself.

A crucial reference for gender policies, in terms of prevention and data collection, within universities and research organisations, is contained in the Strategic National Plan on Male Violence 2017-2020⁸, issued by the Department of Equal Opportunities⁹. Following the principles of the Istanbul Convention, it declared the will of strengthening the role of the educational system by introducing GBV subjects in curricula, developing specific training for professionals, and increasing researches. However, these aspects saw only timid concrete applications as stated by the GREVIO report on Italy¹⁰. The main action was the setup of a network among universities called *UNIRE*, through direct public funding from the Department of Equal Opportunities¹¹ for the development of a system of coordination in GBV research activities. The set of strategies conceived within the strategic plan fell within the more general context of policies aimed at schools of all types and levels. Thus, as academia is considered only as a part of a larger macro-area, conceived all together, policies at the national level failed to take into account that degree of specification and in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the academic environment necessary to tackle GBV in an incisive way. Furthermore, regional policies were mainly mirroring national ones.¹² The only financial support within the Plan, partially dedicated to the field of the university system and research, was the five million euros aimed at supporting projects planned for



⁴ *Comitato Unico di Garanzia per le pari opportunità.*

⁵ The action strategy is based on the synergy between *CUGs*, Confidential Counselors and the trade union representation for the relevant arguments. Also, the involvement of personnel and top management is essential for a preventive methodology within the behavioural rules established by the organization (Code of Conduct).

⁶ *Consigliera di Parità.*

⁷ *Piano di Azioni Positive.*

⁸ *Piano Strategico Nazionale sulla violenza dell'uomo contro le donne 2017-2020.*

⁹ *Dipartimento di Pari Opportunità della Presidenza del Consiglio.*

¹⁰ <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-report-italy-first-baseline-evaluation/168099724e>

¹¹ 125.000 euros for the duration of 18 months since 2018.

¹² Education and Labour policies are of national competence for what general concern strategies. In the *Piano Strategico*, it is stated that regional measures must follow those of the national level, and regions must coordinate local activities following directives developed by the *Cabina di regia nazionale* (National Control Room) and the national *Comitato Tecnico di supporto alla Cabina* (Support Technical Committee), collecting data and information to be sent to the national directorate for the development and improvement of general strategies.

institutes of all types and levels. Even if the Minister of Instruction, during her speech in the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry about Femicide in 2017¹³, declared that university was a priority, when we look at dedicated funds and actions taken, it is clear that much remained stuck in formal declarations. Also, the creation of a National Observatory for the Monitoring and Promoting Educational and Training Initiatives on the issues of gender equality and the fight against GBV¹⁴, on the thrust of the Plan, gathering main Italian non-profit associations for women and against GBV has not yet led to an incisive approach to the phenomenon of GBV in academia.

If the multilevel governance¹⁵, conceived within the Plan, fell to identify the specific needs of universities, this lack of capacity of general coordination and impact, led some, among Confidential Counselors, *CUGs*, single researchers, teachers, administrative staff and management, to define autonomous forms of association and informal partnership, joining other more formalised associations. This was the case of the *CRUI*, the Conference of the Rectors of Italian Universities, which promoted initiatives of influence towards the decision-making sphere.¹⁶ And which placed itself as a central actor in the attempt to standardise equal opportunities measures within universities¹⁷. Another example was the constitution of the Congress of Guarantee Committee of Equal Opportunities.¹⁸ Which allowed these bodies to organise common initiatives and to modulate their intervention strategies in a more uniform manner. Also, the network *UNIRE*, with the aim of defining common strategies in the field of research, had a crucial role in the sharing of experiences. Along with these, the Association of Women and Science¹⁹ Was another important network able to improve the system and to balance the gap between different situations? The Association' initiative of creating the Conference on Sexual Harassment in Higher Education Institutions and Research Organisations²⁰ It can be considered the highest awareness point reached within Italian academia.

To sum up, the two main general approaches in policies developed to fight GBV in universities and RFOs, and to foster their role in building a new cultural horizon, one linked to its educational role and the other linked to the increase of equal opportunities among workers, produced a system mainly heterogeneous, generic and poorly funded, whose most incisive weaknesses have been the lack of coordination and the inability to recognise and value the specificity of the academic world. Overall, there can be identified four main factors regarding organisation, knowledge, cultural and political dimensions. The system's organisation has been affected by the generality of principles directed to all types of schools, with very few direct references to the specific context of academia. Moreover, from the perspective of the protection of workers, the organisation has shown a non-integrated system, without any specific control body with sanctioning powers. Second, the aspect of knowledge shows crucial links with the organisational weakness: the lack of up-to-date data and of an intersectional approach which would have allowed to understand the multidimensionality of GBV has produced an inability to build effective legislative tools. Regarding the cultural dimension, institutional



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<https://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg17/file/repository/commissioni/femminicidio/stenografici/RESO.STENO. N. 11.pdf>

¹⁴ *Osservatorio Nazionale per il Monitoraggio e la Promozione di Iniziative in ambito educativo e professionale.*

¹⁵ It is conceived in three levels: a national control room (Ministers and Representatives of Regions) supported by a technical committee (national associations, *CRUI*, *ISTAT*, *CNR-IRPPS*, national trade unions); a regional level with the function of coordination; a local level including the main actors (*CUGs*, Associations, Anti-violence Centers, Social Services, police force, judiciary..).

¹⁶ *CRUI* produced significant hearings in the Italian parliament on issues related to GBV and the role that the university can play in this regard.

¹⁷ *Gruppo CRUI per il Bilancio di genere, Linee guida per il Bilancio di genere negli atenei italiani, 2019 (CRUI group for gender balance, guidelines for gender balance within Italian universities).*

¹⁸ *Congresso dei Comitati di Pari Opportunità.*

¹⁹ *Associazione Donne e Scienza.*

²⁰ <http://www.donnescienza.it/2018-wetooinscience/>

practices and socio-cultural traditions have reproduced a gender bias, reflected into the world of academia, where power dynamics and strong unbalanced sex ratios produced an organisation culture where harassment and gender discrimination remained a tolerated and hidden practice, thus preventing the phenomenon from emerging and being perceived within academic circles as serious and urgent. Last, from a political perspective, we can observe a process of de-politicisation of GBV: for instance, in the Italian legislation regarding GBV, the gender dimension and perspective has been mostly removed, and we see generic definition of violence and harassment without considering historic and power reasons. This approach has resulted in a formalised system with only technical tools deployed. As Perini (2019) wrote: “the progressive abandonment of the feminist perspective ... and the replacement of the “policy approach” with top-down technical “measurement tools approach”, has achieved a bad side effect: the de-politicisation of the gender equality issues (especially in Academia), holding them at a technical level, perceived only as quantitative ... So much attention has been paid to the tools and little to the actions, to the policies and the practices and, above all, even less to the feminist point of view” (pp. 122-123).

In the development of knowledge related to GBV, the role of RFOs has a fundamental place. This role has been underlined by government policy documents and has found incentives through European funding mechanisms and in the institutional push towards the collection of data. The aim has been that of developing legislative tools capable of increasing awareness and building a more effective system of prevention. Among Italian RFOs, the main protagonists were *ISTAT*.²¹, to which the state has entrusted the systematic collection of data on GBV, and the *CNR* - in particular, the *CNR-IRPPS*²² - which has developed projects through regional, national and European mechanisms: Viva, Genera, MindTheGeps, to name but three²³. An interesting fact that emerged from the most recent *ISTAT* research²⁴, is that often at high levels of education correspond to high levels of GBV. It is therefore evident that the possible dissemination of this information could contribute to eliminating the widespread prejudice according to which gender violence is linked to low levels of education, which a lot has to do with the little attention paid to GBV within universities. Thus, the aspect of the systematic introduction of GBV subjects in the curricula of professionals has remained largely an open question. If the planning documents underline its importance, the lack of clear mechanisms and specific supervisory bodies have produced a great diversity. There are few examples in which one can see a precise political will towards concrete implementation: this is the case of the Lombardy Region which supports, in its Four-Year Plan²⁵, the introduction of GBV themes in the curricula of specific degrees with the aim of increasing the skills of future professionals.



3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

The cultural theme of collective awareness of the seriousness and complexity of the phenomenon is fundamental. Therefore, the public debate arisen in recent years thanks also to the influence of the *#MeToo* movement has helped to bring the question to the centre of the public debate. However, in Italy, the movement did not receive the attention received in other western countries. For instance, Lorenza Zanardo, an Italian entrepreneur, during an interview²⁶, highlighted that the movement was mainly followed by a limited number of educated women. Its main follow-up is the project *#WeToolnScience*²⁷, carried out by “Women and Science” association with the aim of shedding light

²¹ National Statistical Institute.

²² National Council of Research, Institute for Research on Population and on Social Policies.

²³ <https://www.irpps.cnr.it/progetti-irpps/>

²⁴ <https://www.istat.it/it/violenza-sulle-donne/il-fenomeno/violenza-dentro-e-fuori-la-famiglia/chi-sono-le-vittime>

²⁵ *Piano Quadriennale per le Politiche di parità e il contrasto alla violenza contro le donne 2020-2023*, p. 32.

²⁶ <https://www.vanityfair.it/news/diritti/2019/12/16/il-metoo-italia-non-e-mai-stato-pop>

²⁷ <https://www.unipi.it/index.php/eventi-area-scientifico-tecnologica/event/3968-wetooinscience>

on the hidden situation present in Italian universities. In this perspective, some researchers have talked about a crystal glass first cracking in the academy: “at present, gender bias, sexual harassment and sexist discriminations are finally seen as real issues (Orsi & Somma, 2019, p. 179). Another important trigger for public debate was the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which was unanimously approved by the Italian Parliament, and around which the public debate has been, for the most part, favourable. Political forces have promoted ratification as a great opportunity. However, in the case of academia, the reference to the Convention is found only in the non-specific insistence on the role of the educational system, leaving out any reference to the question of the historicity of male domination and to the socio-cultural aspects represented in all spheres of society, which, on the contrary, were quite clear in the Convention.

4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV

When one looks at the opinions of Italians, it appears clearly that the GBV phenomenon is primarily a cultural issue. Statistical research conducted by Amnesty International, in collaboration with Doxa²⁸ highlighted how 40% of Italians (over 50% considering only the male sample) do not judge the evolution of the situation in Italy as urgent and as an emergency.

5. GBV IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

The impact of COVID-19 on Italian society has made GBV even more evident, and therefore this increased perception prompted the production of some researches relating to confinement periods and has stimulated debates within academia. However, it should be emphasised that this further push has increased the differences between individual universities and research institutes.



6. CONCLUSION

By observing the Italian experience, it can be concluded that the most innovative and effective initiatives have matured in those spaces of autonomy left open by extremely formal and technical protection and prevention system. It was the free bottom-up initiative of some CUGs and associations, of individual researchers and professors, that opened a gap in the wall of non-recognition and minimisation of GBV within academia. The initiatives were motivated by the personal adhesion of individuals, through the thrusts of a movement that is, first of all, a cultural movement that wants to look at the phenomenon in its complexity, in its deep historical reasons, without hiding the most uncomfortable causes such as the rooted spread of prejudices, justificatory and discriminatory practices within all socio-cultural spheres of the country. Thus, the de-politicisation of the system, its technicisation, seems to be linked to the deep-rooted desire to keep away from "revealing" this bad conscience within society, thus supporting the resistances and minimisations of a still "male" gaze on the phenomenon so much present in academia and research. On the contrary, re-appropriating a political component, a "feminine" point of view, open to political decision-makers, seems absolutely necessary for these virtuous initiatives of individuals to find the right place within a system capable of enhancing them, in terms of regulatory, organisational and financial support and capable of coordinating their actions in order to produce an integrated and homogeneous system throughout the national territory. The question cannot be tackled solely from a technical and formal point of view but needs to recognise its great political and cultural significance. The academic world, being in a privileged position as an engine in the production of knowledge in the country, must promote this

²⁸ Indagine Doxa: per gli italiani discriminazioni ancora diffuse nel nostro paese.

necessary cultural re-affirmation in the fight against gender violence, starting with understanding and addressing the real situation of its internal dynamics in work and study relationships.

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