

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

Country: Lithuania

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in general, as well as sexual harassment and gender harassment in particular, is not the priority in the national policies for higher education, science and research in Lithuania. This is the general context of a country where gender equality is perceived as something artificial and non-important. The international #MeToo movement in 2017 had an impact on the Lithuanian academic community, and even though it has not brought about significant systemic changes, it has raised awareness around sexual and gender harassment in universities and the academic environment. The Guidelines for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Investigation of its Incidences adopted by the Conference of University Rectors in 2020 could be indicated as the best accomplishment in tackling sexual harassment in universities over the last five years. Even though the guidelines do not impose obligations on the universities, they provide a good platform on which to develop institutional policies and implement activities to better prevent and stop sexual harassment.



2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

The Labour Code¹ (2016) and the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men² (last amendment 2017) address the issues of GBV at work and in education on the national level in Lithuania. The amended Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men obliges research-performing institutions to ensure equal rights for women and men and to undertake measures to stop any sexual harassment and to protect students and staff in these institutions (2017, Art. 5 para. 5). These are the key legal acts that have an impact on universities and RPOs and which aid them in building their own policies on prevention, protection, and investigation of cases of sexual harassment and gender harassment.

Legal acts and policies on education (Law on Education, 1991³) and higher education (Law on Science and Studies, 2016⁴) in particular provide principles of scientific, academic ethics, equal opportunities, transparency, integration, quality, fair competition etc... However, gender equality as a concept, goal or principle is not specifically addressed.

¹ Labour Code, No. XII-260 (2016, last amended 2021). <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/f6d686707e7011e6b969d7ae07280e89>.

² Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, No. XII-2767 (2016, last amended 2017). <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/d6ed8e50a74a11e68987e8320e9a5185>.

³ Law on Education, No. I-1489 (1991, last amendment 2021). <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.1480/asr>.

⁴ Law on Science and Studies, No. XII-2534 (2016, last amendment 2018). <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/81a7b822444a11e68f45bcf65e0a17ee>.

In 2014 the Ministry of Education and Science adopted ‘Recommendations on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in Higher Education and Studies’⁵ Which covers equal representation in universities, balanced choices for women and men to occupy technical and social disciplines, measures for reconciliation of family and work obligations etc., but does not include any provisions on prevention and/or protection of GBV, sexual harassment or gender harassment.

The Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures adopted the Recommendations on the Approval, Embedding and Monitoring of Academic Ethics Codes by Research and Higher Education Institutions.⁶ (*hereinafter the Recommendations*). One of the goals of the Recommendations is to connect the system of science and studies with the laws directly or indirectly regulating its acts, including the Law on Equal Opportunities and the Law on Equal Opportunities of Women and Men. The Recommendations do not particularly mention GBV in universities, and research organisations, the main principles of academic ethics include principles of integrity, justice, trust, equality and responsibility.

The Government of Lithuania and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport are the key policy players that regulate higher education policies. The Government of Lithuania should prioritise or at least include prevention and protection against sexual harassment or gender-based violence in education institutions on its agenda. When this is done, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport as an executive body will undertake to draft, adopt and implement the policy or strategy. So far, gender equality and gender-based violence are not priority targets in higher education or education in general.

The Office of Equal Opportunities plays an important role in the prevention of sexual harassment in any work environment, including higher education institutions. The legal officers participate in working groups or public events when invited to give their expert opinion on the prevention and protection of any form of sexual harassment.

In 2020 the Conference of University Rectors adopted the Guidelines for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Investigation of its Incidences.⁷ (*hereinafter the Guidelines*). It was initiated by the Ombudsperson on Academic Ethics and Procedures in close cooperation and consultation with legal experts from the Office of Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson. This document was developed as a result of the #MeToo campaign and public disclosure of several testimonies about sexual harassment experienced in universities 10 or more years ago. In 2018 a survey of institutions of higher education by the Office of Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson (OEEO) revealed the lack of an institutional response for receiving or investigating incidences of sexual harassment. OEEO ran a very short survey in universities and collegiums⁸ asking

⁵ Recommendations on the Approval, Embedding and Monitoring of Academic Ethics Codes by Research and Higher Education Institutions, No. V-1265 (2014, last amendment 2015). <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/7141ebc0907011e48028e9b85331c55d/gvwNddPZVt>.

⁶ Mokslo ir studijų institucijų akademinės etikos kodeksų priėmimo, įgyvendinimo ir priežiūros rekomendacijos, V-16, (2015, last amendment 2020, V-38). <https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/V-38.pdf>.

⁷ The Conference of Universities’ Rectors (2020). *Guidelines for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Investigation of its Incidence*. https://lurk.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Seksualinio-priekabiavimo-prevencijos-ir-atvej%C5%B3-nagrin%C4%97jimo-gair%C4%97s-2020m-be-nuorod%C5%B3_T.pdf.

⁸ Collegium is an institution of higher education but does not have the status of a university



questions about the instruments available to eradicate harassment, sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. The answers received from the universities and collegiums represent their official position. They reveal that there is very little knowledge about gender equality and equal opportunities; the issue is still considered as non-important and irrelevant because there are no cases of discrimination or harassment in their institution.⁹ This suggests that policies or recommendations must be developed for universities to assist them in promoting the prevention and investigation of incidences of sexual harassment. The adopted Guidelines (2020) could contribute significantly to carrying out these tasks.

3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

The international #MeToo campaign in 2017 had an impact on the Lithuanian academic community. Several former graduates disclosed incidences of sexual harassment which they experienced by their professors, who are well-known artists in Lithuania¹⁰. On the one hand, the public debates provoked discussions about the prevalence, prevention and protection against sexual harassment and gender harassment in universities. These discussions showed that both students and academic staff did not recognise and tended to remain silent on experiences of sexual harassment in universities. Additionally, it demonstrated that only limited instruments have been available to stop and prevent the phenomenon on the institutional level¹¹. On the other hand, there were counter-reactions to the public disclosure, which manifested in victim-blaming and public defence of the alleged perpetrators¹². Although there were many discussions on the topic of sexual harassment during the #MeToo campaign, they did not lead to significant systemic changes¹³.

As NGO feminist activists, based on their observations in media, have noticed, institutions and society, in general, assessed the publicly disclosed sexual harassment cases as something that happened to a concrete individual. The approach that this is an individually experienced problem suggests the recurrent tendency that the population does not recognise sexism and sexual harassment as a manifestation and manipulation of power. Rather it treats sexism as a “norm”¹⁴.

⁹ The Office of Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson (2018, May 17). *Aukštosios mokyklos nėra pasirengusios reaguoti į seksualinio priekabiavimo atvejus* [Press release]. Retrieved from: <https://lygybe.lt/lt/pranesimai-ziniasklaidai/aukstosios-mokyklos-nera-pasirengusios-reaguoti-i-seksualinio-priekabiavimo-atvejus/920>

¹⁰ Bernardinai.lt (2018, January 31). #metoo Lietuvą krečia toliau: seksualiniu priekabiavimu kaltinamas VDA dėstytojas Jonas Gasiūnas. *Bernardinai.lt*. Retrieved from: www.bernardinai.lt/2018-01-31-metoo-lietuva-krečia-toliau-seksualiniu-priekabiavimu-kaltinamas-vda-destytojas-jonas-gasiunas/; Kaziliūnaitė, A. (2018, February 6). Aušra Kaziliūnaitė: Bandymai užčiaupti VDA skandalą. *15min.lt*. Retrieved from: www.15min.lt/kultura/naujiena/asmenybe/ausra-kaziliunaite-bandymai-uzciaupti-vda-skandala-285-921660?copied

¹¹ Jackevičius, M. (2018, March 14). Mindaugas Jackevičius. Merginos, ruoškitės – maestro sugrįžta. *Delfi.lt*. Retrieved from: www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/mindaugas-jackevicius-merginos-ruoskites-maestro-sugrizta.d?id=77409457

¹² Gerulaitytė, E. (2017, November 15). #metoo atgarsiai Lietuvoje: dinozaurai, saugokitės meteorito! *15min.lt*. Retrieved from: www.15min.lt/gyvenimas/naujiena/santykiai/e-gerulaityte-metoo-atgarsiai-lietuvoje-dinozaurai-saugokites-meteorito-1024-881568?copied.

¹³ Litvinaitė, U. (2019, November 15). Dveji metai po #MeToo: sistema neapvirto, bet pokyčiai vyksta. *15min.lt*. Retrieved from: www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/dveji-metai-po-metoo-sistema-neapvirto-bet-pokyčiai-vyksta-i-dalis-56-1232556?copied

¹⁴ Aržuolaitienė, K. (2018, September 3). #MeToo judėjimas Lietuvoje: sisteminių pokyčių neįvyko. *15min.lt*. Retrieved from: www.15min.lt/gyvenimas/naujiena/santykiai/metoo-judejimas-lietuvoje-sisteminiu-pokyciu-neivyko-1024-1023060?copied&copied&copied.

Victim blaming is another prevalent attitude in Lithuania. Generally, victims, who spoke openly about their experiences, were accused of provoking such behaviour. Most often, men, directors/managers in the organisations and persons in the age group 50+ refuse to recognise incidences of sexual harassment and do not believe the testimonies of victims¹⁵. Additionally, experts have identified that in the two years following #MeToo there were no initiatives to amend any laws or policies in Lithuania in order to effectively prevent, protect and prosecute sexual harassment in universities and to provide needed counselling for victims¹⁶.

In Lithuania, debates on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (IC) and the content of the concepts of gender had continued since 2013 when it was signed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. So far, it has not been ratified. The continued disagreement over the concept of “gender” as a social construct is the main reason for this deadlock. The Catholic Church and conservative and populist politicians are the main opponents of this Convention. The Catholic Church promotes traditional family values and has a very strong voice in influencing public opinion and policymaking on any issues that cover women's rights to abortion, protection of domestic violence, sexual education, civil partnership and other related topics. It supports and is supported by pro-family NGOs. Other believers’ communities are very small in Lithuania, and their voices are not publicly heard openly.

In regard to the ratification of the Convention, both the Catholic Church and conservative and populist politicians argue that it will require Lithuania to change the concept of gender as a biological reality and that it will propagate homosexuality. In their opinion, ratification will create opportunities to register as many as possible sexualities and sexual identities, impose rights for transsexuals, permit marriages of LGBT, allow adoption of children by LGBT persons and oblige lessons about sex to be provided to children in kindergarten¹⁷. The conservative and populist politicians and the Catholic Church repeatedly reproduce these myths in public and create an atmosphere of distrust of and the threat of the international instruments for Lithuanian society. As a result, ratification of the Istanbul Convention is constantly suspended in parliament and not included on its agenda. The issue is postponed until autumn 2021 or spring 2022. On the governmental level - there were no discussions.

There are two poles of debates about the Istanbul Convention among NGOs and in society:

- pro-human rights attitudes which support ratification of IC and promote its purpose and provisions and consider them as effective measures to stop gender-based violence;
- Pro-traditionalists who base their arguments on the preservation of traditional family values and traditional gender norms.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Litvinaitė, U. (2019, November 15). Dveji metai po #MeToo: sistema neapvirto, bet pokyčiai vyksta. *15min.lt*. Retrieved from: www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/dveji-metai-po-metoo-sistema-neapvirto-bet-pokyciai-vyksta-i-dalis-56-1232556?copied.

¹⁷ BNS (2018, June 13). Vyskupai: Stambulo konvencijos ratifikavimas nepadėtų sumažinti smurto prieš moteris. *Lrt.lt*. Retrieved from: www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/215959/vyskupai-stambulo-konvencijos-ratifikavimas-nepadetu-sumazin-ti-smurto-pries-moteris; Karbauskis, R. (2021, March 12). Ramūnas Karbauskis. Kodėl nepritarsime Stambulo konvencijos ratifikavimui. *Lrt.lt*. Retrieved from: www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pozicija/679/1361292/ramunas-karbauskis-kodel-nepritarsime-stambulo-konvencijos-ratifikavimui; for more information www.15min.lt/tema/stambulo-konvencija-72056.

However, the discussions and debates on ratification of the Istanbul Convention did not affect leadership or communities of universities and/or RPOs. This is most probably due to the exceptional focus on domestic violence and the concept of gender in these debates, and higher education institutions have not associated themselves with these topics in the debates.

4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV

Following the #MeToo movement, a public opinion poll was organised by two human rights organisations – the Lithuanian Human Rights Centre and the Centre for Equality Advancement – in 2018. The survey aimed at asking the population about their attitudes towards sexual harassment, its prevalence, and ways to combat it. The survey revealed that up to 63 % of the population (65 % women and 60 % men) thinks that sexual harassment is a serious problem in education. Nevertheless, almost two-thirds of respondents (63 %) stated that victims are guilty of provoking sexual harassment by improper appearance, dress code or behaviour (67 % of men and 59 % of women agreed with this statement). Almost half of the respondents (47 %) argued that victims enjoy the publicity (52 % of men and 43 % of women agreed with this statement) and do not understand flirting (40 % in total, 51 % of men and 40 % of women agreed with this statement)¹⁸. Data suggest that women tend to have a less victim-blaming attitude. However, the difference between women and men is not significant.

In 2018, the Office of the Ombudsperson of Equal Opportunities initiated a simplified questionnaire for universities and collegiums to map the practices at universities and collegiums to deal with incidences/cases/allegations of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in their institution. The answers provided by the administration departments of universities and collegiums suggest that institutions of higher education did not consider sexual harassment as a serious problem because its prevalence is very low. Therefore, higher education institutions did not see any need to invest in developing policies, prevention strategies or support services for victims. Only two universities reported that they provide information on available counselling in case of sexual harassment on their website¹⁹.

The Lithuanian students' union²⁰ conducted two surveys in 2018²¹ and in 2021²² and asked students in all universities of Lithuania about the prevalence of psychological and sexual violence and the effectiveness of preventive measures, awareness of students themselves about violence and measures available in universities to help students to cope with any psychological hardship.

¹⁸ Manoteises.lt (2018, December 5). Pirmasis tyrimas apie seksualinį priekabiavimą Lietuvoje: visuomenė smerkia priekabiavimą, bet kalte permeta aukoms. Retrieved from: <https://manoteises.lt/straipsnis/pirmasis-tyrimas-apie-seksualini-priekabiavima-lietuvoje-visuomene-smerkia-priekabiavima-bet-kalte-permeta-aukoms/>. Gender disaggregated data is shared by the NGO Center for Equality Advancemnet.

¹⁹ The Office of Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson (2018, May 17). Aukštosios mokyklos nėra pasirengusios reaguoti į seksualinio priekabiavimo atvejus [Press release]. Retrieved from: <https://lygybe.lt/lt/pranesimai-ziniasklaidai/aukstosios-mokyklos-nera-pasirengusios-reaguoti-i-seksualinio-priekabiavimo-atvejus/920>

²⁰ More information: www.lss.lt.

²¹ Lietuvos studentų sąjunga (2018). „Psichologinės studentų būklės ir pagalbos tyrimas 2018“. Retrieved from: www.lss.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tyrimas-%E2%80%99Psychologine-studentu-busena-ir-pagalba-.pdf.

²² Lietuvos studentų sąjunga (2021). Tyrimas „Psichologinė studentų būseną ir pagalba“. Retrieved from: www.lss.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tyrimas-%E2%80%99Psychologine-studentu-busena-ir-pagalba-.pdf.

The survey in 2018 showed that up to 37 % of respondents had experienced psychological violence (unpleasant sarcasm, attempt to bully and humiliate, repeated negative remarks and comments) in the academic environment. Most often (76 %) students (74 % female students; 69 % male students) experienced violence from their professors, up to 56 % (59 % male students; 56 % female students) – from their peers, and 16 % (17 % female students; 15 % male students) from other non-academic staff. Sexist jokes prevail as a form of sexual violence in universities.

Only 5 % of students said that they experienced sexual harassment: 55 % of students (58 % female students; 22 % male students) experienced sexual harassment from their professors, up to 49 % (56 % male students; 49 % female students) – from their peers, and 6 % (22 % male students; 5 % female students) from other non-academic staff. A majority of students (56 %) indicated that they experienced humiliating and sexist jokes; 44 % – lustful glances; 41 % – lustful hints or conversations.

Results of the student surveys show that up to 64 % of respondents do not know whether psychological counselling or other support is available in their university. Most often, students (91 %) (both female and male students) do not report psychological or sexual violence that they have experienced and repeated that they (64 %) try to solve the problem by themselves and/or seeking support from their close social networks (friends, parents). The fear of reporting incidences of violence is based on students' beliefs²³ that reporting will negatively affect their academic results, and nobody will take their case seriously²⁴. The survey in 2021²⁵ Shows that sensitivity to identify incidences of psychological and sexual violence increased. Additionally, awareness about available psychological counselling in universities increased, and students are applying for this service more often compared to 2018. The availability of online psychological counselling during the COVID-19 lockdown was highly appreciated by students²⁶.



5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities and other higher education institutions focused their discussions on moving the education process online under lockdown.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was noted that legal and policy instruments to tackle gender-based violence in universities and RPOs are very general and encompass labour relations. Sexual harassment and harassment in education are covered under the anti-discrimination laws and indirectly by academic ethics codes, which enshrine principles of equality and equal opportunities. On the

²³ 39 % of the respondents – 39 % of female students and 27 % of male students. Lietuvos studentų sąjunga (2018).

²⁴ 34 % of the respondents – 35 % of female students and 31 % of male students. Lietuvos studentų sąjunga (2018).

²⁵ 77 % of respondents of the survey constituted female students; 22 – male students. The concept of GBV is not defined in the survey. Lietuvos studentų sąjunga (2021).

²⁶ Lietuvos studentų sąjunga (2021). *Tyrimas „Psichologinė studentų būseną ir pagalba“*. Retrieved from: www.lss.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tyrimas-%E2%80%9E9Epsichologine-studentu-busena-ir-pagalba-.pdf.

national level, some developments to address sexual harassment in universities have been initiated after the #MeToo campaign when the Conference of University Rectors adopted guidelines to prevent and investigate incidences of sexual harassment in 2020.

Population surveys, media discourse and policy debates on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention show the cultural context of Lithuania. Victim blaming attitudes and prejudice about the gender concept prevails in society. Universities recognise the lack of instruments to protect and support victims of sexual harassment. Student surveys reveal that victims do not report violence experienced and prefer to remain silent or solve the problems individually, relying on close social networks.

This short report suggests that national policies on science and higher education should prioritise policies to promote gender equality. In addition, there is a need to develop and implement effective measures for prevention, protection, prosecution and provision of support services to tackle GBV in universities and RPOs.

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