

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

NATIONAL FIELDWORK REPORT

Country: SLOVAKIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

GBV in universities and research organizations has been almost non-existent as an issue. Despite the fact that some cases of it were presented in the media, they were mostly treated as individual instances without further developments on policy or institutional level. Slovak GBV policies concentrate mostly on intimate partner violence and, to a certain extent, on sexual violence outside the partnership. In relation to sexual violence, the focus is on the introduction of services for its victim that are currently almost non-existent. As a result, GBV or violence against women as it is referred to in Slovakia is mainly framed as intimate partner violence against women. As such, GBV falls out of the institutional setting and is rarely regulated by policies of sectors other than law enforcement or social services.

Currently, universities rarely have special regulations regarding GBV. In most cases, reference to sexual harassment or to the Antidiscrimination Act is part of universities' ethical codes. Nevertheless, no particular structures devoted to dealing with it exist. The issue of GBV in universities has been introduced by the Institute for Labour and Family Research that has conducted a survey among university students on gender and sexual harassment in 2019 – 2020. The survey proved significant experience of these types of GBV among students – 76 % experienced gender harassment, 46 % unwanted sexual attention and 3 % sexual coercion (Kuruc and Valkovičová, 2020). The Institute has also published guidelines on gender and sexual harassment for universities and higher education institutions in order to facilitate the introduction of institutional policies. In the following years, the Institute offers training on the prevention and elimination of sexual harassment to universities and higher education institutions (Institute for Labour and Family Research, 2021). These activities might facilitate the development of the issue of GBV in universities and encourage universities to introduce or modify their internal policies.



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2. MAPPING OF POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Gender-based violence is not defined in the Slovak legislation. Various acts of gender-based violence are included in the Penal Code. However, the legislation tends to be gender-neutral, with the exception of the offence rape that can be committed solely against a woman in Slovakia. Harassment and sexual harassment are not considered criminal offences and are regulated by the Antidiscrimination Act that is a subject of civil law procedures. Sectoral legislation, e.g. employment law, only refers to the Antidiscrimination Act.

National policy on gender-based violence is formulated by the National Action Plan against Violence against Women (NAP). The former NAP has expired, and the version for the upcoming

period is under preparation. Its draft addresses mostly intimate partner violence and partially sexual violence. One measure aims at better reporting of sexual harassment, but without relation to particular contexts or areas. Consequently, it does not address research organizations, universities and higher education institutions. Similarly, the proposed Gender Equality Strategy (currently in the process of adoption) contains a chapter on research and education. Nevertheless, it addresses mainly vertical and horizontal segregation in education, gender-based violence is not considered.

Research and higher education fall under the competencies of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport. However, the policy documents of the Ministry concerning research and higher education rarely take gender into account and does not mention gender-based violence at all. The strategy for science and research - the Smart Specialization Strategy for Slovak Republic is completely gender blind. Similarly, the accreditation criteria for universities and higher education institutions do not contain any gender-related criteria and, subsequently, no provision on gender-based violence. Correspondingly, Slovak Rectors' Conference, the university association in Slovakia, has not incorporated gender-based violence into their scope of work. As a result, gender-based violence in universities and research organizations has not been a policy topic in Slovakia.

Nor gender equality neither gender-based violence in universities and research organizations has been a priority by national research funding organizations, and it is not mentioned among their funding schemes conditions. Most of the research on GBV conducted in past years has been funded by the European Social Fund or EEA and Norway grants. Research performing organizations are the main drive in providing knowledge on gender-based violence, namely the Institute for Labour and Family Research that is a research organization under the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. It has conducted all national prevalence studies so far and several other quantitative and qualitative studies related to the issue. The topic is often covered by legal faculties or social work departments of universities in the form of specific studies or issue related conferences. NGOs also carry out research in the area, however, mostly qualitative. Concerning the inclusion of gender-based violence in higher education curricula, it seems to be no separate specific course on GBV in Slovakia. Nevertheless, it is often covered by social work studies in various courses (Bosá et al., 2017), similarly, certain information on GBV can be found in courses of the Police Academy, recently GBV has been included in a gynaecology textbook for medical students.



3. DEBATES REGARDING #METOO AND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

Although both, #MeToo movement and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention have been a subject of public debate, it has not been related to universities and research organisations.

Since the beginning of #MeToo movement, it has been covered by the media mainly as the international movement despite the fact that on social networks, Slovak women shared their experiences. Some individual cases have been described in the media as well, nevertheless, not related to universities or research organizations. The situation has changed after the publicized case of sexual harassment in one of the TV companies that was even broadcasted. The incident

has opened up the debate in the Slovak context. For example, the daily SME published testimonies of 22 women, including the President of Slovakia, on their experiences of sexual harassment. The debate has been mostly oriented on the fact that sexual harassment is widespread and it happens in all areas and contexts. As a result, it has aimed more at justification of the existence of sexual harassment and violence rather than on discussing the issue in particular contexts and ways how to overcome it.

The ratification of the Istanbul Convention has been a subject of heated public and political debate. The ratification was postponed several times, mostly due to its contestation by the Catholic Church and vocal conservative organizations. In 2017, the campaign "Stop the evil from Istanbul" organized by the Slovak Convention for Families appeared. Although the organization is a lay entity and its activities have not been officially part of the Catholic Church activities, most of the campaign occurred in churches (outside of official ceremonies), and the most visible leader was a Catholic priest. The Istanbul Convention was portrayed as a Trojan horse of so-called gender ideology. The campaign attempted to delegitimize the IC portraying it as a tool of the international pressure adopted by non-democratic procedures and pursued by non-elected pseudo-experts. Furthermore, it aimed to invoke moral panic as gender threatens natural order, normality, families, child's development and national traditions.

The Istanbul Convention has been used as a tool in a pre-election political fight during 2019 and the beginning of 2020 as a way to divert public attention from corruption scandals appearing after the murder of an investigative journalist and his fiancé. The Parliament discussed the ratification several times, and shortly before the election in 2020, the resolution to refuse the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was adopted. In the debate, both proponents and contesters of the ratification were present. While the arguments of the proponents (liberal party) concentrated on data and seriousness of gender-based violence and the Istanbul Convention as an instrument how to eliminate it, the contesters (mainly from nationalist, conservative and anti-system parties) adopted arguments of the Church and vocal lay organizations presenting the Convention as an ideological tool. The violence and need to tackle it was not contested as such. Rather the opposition was directed against the term gender as being central to gender ideology perceived as a threat to families, traditions and moral standards.

In the public and political debate surrounding the Istanbul Convention, the very concept of gender has been contested, so the focus of proponents, experts and feminist organizations has been on its explanation and acceptance, defending the existent status quo rather than on expanding and developing the topic, e.g. to research and university context.

4. PUBLIC OPINION ON GBV

In February 2021, Amnesty International Slovakia published the results of the representative survey on opinions on sexual violence. According to the survey, 93 % of the population regard sex without consent being rape, 91 % agree that it should be considered a crime. Nevertheless, the responses to the question of whether forcing a partner to sexual intercourse should be considered as a crime varied - 30 % claimed that it is a crime already, and 43 % stated that it



should be considered as such. At the same time, 24 % agreed with a statement that it is not right, but it should not be considered a crime. 3 % perceived it as being OK (Focus, 2021). From the inconsistencies of the results, it is evident that consent and rape are not clear concepts to the Slovak public. It is impossible to analyze the reasons from published quantitative data. Either rape is perceived as a classical rape scenario that happens outside of a partnership or consensual sex is perceived as a value but depends on a context.

In 2020, the Institute for Labour and Family Research published some results of its survey among university and higher education students on gender and sexual harassment. According to the results, students are aware of both phenomena and are able to identify it from the side of teachers. 69 % of students know about the fact that harassment and sexual harassment are regulated by the Antidiscrimination Act, and 71 % knows that it can be suited in courts. Contrary, only 12 % agrees that higher education institutions sufficiently informed them about sexual harassment (Kuruc and Valkovičová, 2020). *(Note – the complete survey results are supposed to be published in April, once they are published, I can elaborate on it.)*

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GBV

COVID-19 has not changed gender-based violence policies significantly. The most significant action comprised of the introduction of new intervention crisis centres for domestic and intimate partner violence survivors. The legislation has been prepared and is currently under the process of its adoption. The discussion related to COVID-19 and GBV focused mostly on intimate partner violence. Other forms of GBV were less present. Although there were some media articles on online violence, they had rather

preventive character and they dealt with young people but not specifically university students or university and research organizations context.

6. CONCLUSION

Gender-based violence in Slovakia is mainly understood as intimate partner violence with the recent inclusion of sexual violence. Harassment and sexual harassment have been considered as the issue of gender equality, but education and research policies tend to be gender blind and not to take into account harassment at all. Nevertheless, public debate is shifting towards the higher awareness of various forms of gender and sexual harassment and the framing advances towards gender-based violence. Recent activities of the Institute for Labour and Family Research on gender and sexual harassment targeting universities also contributes to awareness-raising and might facilitate the introduction of institutional policies. Even so, although some changes on the bottom level might be expected, policy changes are rather unexpected considering long-term indifference towards gender equality in policymaking and the current contestation of gender as a concept.

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