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INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ACADEMIA

Executive summary
of the analysis of interviews with researchers at higher risk of gender-based violence

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Partners

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Page | 2

Introduction

UniSAFE is an EU-funded project that aims to produce in-depth knowledge on gender-based violence and sexual harassment in research performing organisations, and to translate this research into operational tools for higher education and research organisations. The project collects empirical evidence of the prevalence of gender-based violence, understanding how this relates to its determinants and consequences, but also how it responds to the roles of universities and research organisations in preventing, protecting, prosecuting, providing services, supported by policies and partnerships (7Ps model). These mechanisms are investigated at national, organisational, and individual levels, using a holistic research model.

This report provides a summary of the analysis of qualitative research data collected from 54 individual interviewees about the experiences and/or witnessing of gender-based violence in academia and their impact on individuals and research organisations.

In the UniSAFE project, the term 'gender-based violence' is used to capture all forms of gender-based violence including physical violence, psychological violence, economic and financial violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, gender harassment and organisational violence – in both online and offline contexts (Strid, S, Humbert, A. L., Hearn, J., Bondestam, F., & Husu, L. (2021). UniSAFE D3.1 Theoretical and conceptual framework, p. 13-14)

Definitions of the forms of gender-based violence used in UniSAFE project:

- *Physical violence* includes any act that cause physical harm.
- *Sexual violence* includes sexual acts or attempts to obtain a sexual act without a person's consent.
- *Psychological violence* includes psychologically abusive behaviours, such as controlling, coercion, verbal abuse etc.
- *Economic violence* includes behaviours that cause an individual economic or financial harm.
- *Sexual harassment* includes unwanted verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature.
- *Gender harassment* includes harassment on the grounds of sex but without sexual connotations.
- *Online violence, abuse, and violation* includes cyberstalking, cyberbullying, internet-based sexual abuse, non-consensual distribution of sexual images and text.
- *Organisational gender-based violence* includes important manifestations at the more collective, group and organisational levels of RPOs.

This summary report provides the findings of the analysis of the individual experiences of researchers at higher risk of gender-based violence and illustrates its prevalence and

consequences. Higher risk might be related to the identities of interviewees, along the axes of different diversity grounds (e.g., gender/sex, age, ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, and disability) and functional characteristics (early-career researchers, short-term or temporal contract holders, mobile status). Thus, this analysis contributes to one of the main objectives of the UniSAFE research project, that is to produce robust knowledge on gender-based violence in universities and research performing organisations.

Research methods

- The research was based on qualitative methods consisting of individual semi-structured interviews with researchers who have indicated that they have experienced and/or witnessed gender-based violence in the context of their institution. A qualitative approach was chosen to collect diverse insights on the experiences, perceptions and interpretations of people whose voices are not often heard. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online in the period of February-May 2022.

- The analysis was based on the personal stories and witnessed incidents of 54 research interviewees (48 women, 5 men and 1 person who identified as non-binary). To recruit interviewees, we shared a call via the UniSAFE and project partners institutions' websites, various academic networks, social media channels and an optional link in the quantitative survey (conducted in the frame of the UniSAFE project) in research performing organisations and the Marie Curie Alumni Association. The recruited interviewees represented 20 different nationalities (both EU and non-EU countries). Of the interviewees, 18% identified as belonging to an ethnic minority group and 15% indicated that they belong to the LGBTQI+ communities. During the research process, the interviewees were at various stages of their career, from PhD candidates (23%) to researchers on temporary contracts (17%) and early career (10%), to full professors and senior staff who held different lengths of work contracts (31%) in research performing organisations.

Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence in RESEARCH performing Organisations

Findings on patterns of incidents, victims and perpetrators

- The interviewees' experiences showed a very similar pattern: victims of gender-based violence were mostly women, incidents were frequently repeated, lasting for months and years, demonstrating the interplay of multiple forms of gender-based violence. The majority of perpetrators were persons in position of power – supervisors, managers, professors, lecturers. Around a third of perpetrators were colleagues. Perpetrators who were students were quite rare among the interviewees. Most perpetrators were also men. In sum, gender-based violence was perpetrated by the
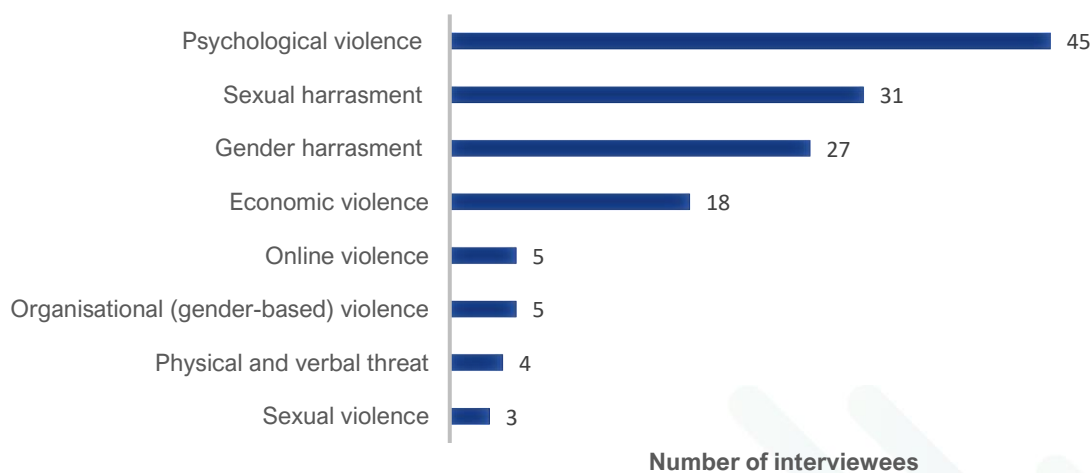
relatively powerful and privileged, and towards the relatively powerless and disadvantaged.

- The majority of the interviewees had both direct and indirect experiences of gender-based violence: they experienced gender-based violence themselves as well as witnessed incidents in their immediate work or study environment.

- The analysis suggests that LGBTQI+, race and migrant status, working on temporary contracts and physical/mental disability are factors that may increase the risk of experiencing gender-based violence.

Prevalence of the forms of gender-based violence and their interconnectedness in research performing organisations

- The analysis suggests that experiences of gender-based violence in research performing organisations were usually not single, isolated or accidental cases. The most frequent manifestations of gender-based violence were psychological violence, gender harassment, sexual harassment and economic violence. Less information was provided about sexual violence, online violence and organisational violence. Physical violence was almost absent in the stories of the interviewees.

Figure 1: Prevalence of gender-based violence and its different forms (number of interviewees out of 54 research participants)

Category	Number of interviewees
Psychological violence	45
Sexual harrasment	31
Gender harrasment	27
Economic violence	18
Online violence	5
Organisational (gender-based) violence	5
Physical and verbal threat	4
Sexual violence	3

Number of interviewees

* Sexual violence: 3 out of 54 interviewees revealed their personal experiences, while 12 out of 54 interviewees mentioned that they knew of rape cases conducted by students against students (women) on campus.

** Physical and verbal threat: 4 out of 54 interviewees said that they experienced physical violence and verbal threats themselves, and 3 out of 54 saw certain acts of physical violence on campus or in the classroom.

Institutional responses

- Many interviewees who experienced or witnessed gender-based violence, tried to find a solution to cope. Almost half of the interviewees approached their supervisors or other staff of the university's administration informally to inform about incidents. Many (17 out of 54) wrote formal complaints or formally approached the top administration or office of the Ombudsperson. In a few cases, the interviewees proceeded with both formal and informal reporting on these experiences of gender-based violence. Almost a third of interviewees did not report the incident to anybody.

Types of response to incidents presented by interviewees

- The analysis shows that no response was provided to the victim in almost half of the cases reported either formally or informally . Often, the interviewees described that their institutions made efforts to hide incidents of gender-based violence. In 14 interviews out of 54, the interviewees explained that there was no officially appointed person or body they were aware of and to which a formal complaint could be made.

- Interviewees who chose to avoid complaining (formally or informally) explained that their decision was based on wanting to protect themselves from being identified as troublemakers or being negatively affected in their personal and professional life

Reflections on Prevalence, Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Provision of services, Partnership and Policies (7Ps)

- The UniSAFE project adopts a holistic 7Ps model to collect data on the prevalence of the diverse forms of gender-based violence and analyses the role of research performing organisations in preventing, protecting, prosecuting, and providing services, supported by partnership and policies.

- During the interviews the interviewees shared both what they know about the various measures, what they used and what they expected to be present in the research performing organisations to tackle the problems of gender-based violence seriously and effectively.

- Most often the interviewees reflected about prevention measures, protection issues and provision of services. Partnership and policies were mentioned significantly less often. Prevalence and prosecution were the least discussed by the interviewees

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Institutional contexts of research performing organisations facilitating gender-based Violence

- Overall, the results of the interview analysis show that discriminatory practices, men's domination in leadership positions, power inequalities and gender stereotypes create the environment that tolerates gender-based violence in research organisations. In these organisational contexts, victims tend to avoid reporting because of fear of exposure to more serious violence or negative economic/financial and mental/well-being harm.

Consequences of gender-based violence for individuals and research performing organisations

Consequences for the victims

- The research findings suggest that incidents of gender-based violence and inadequate responses had negative consequences for the victims' physical and mental health, well-being and professional career development. Most interviewees reported negative consequences, only a few interviewees described that the incident did not bring any consequences. For example, a survivor of sexual harassment described how the experienced trauma led to depression and self-exclusion:

I went through a very big depression that has made me isolate myself a lot from others. I don't have the same patience, I experience everything as a personal attack, then you have answers that sometimes are not in accordance with the real circumstances, so that also makes people distance themselves from me. […] But on a personal level it affects you because nobody understands you […] like it seems that it's your fault [if you experienced sexual harassment], nobody understands the mental illness associated with depression or trauma, or post-traumatic shock (University staff member at the time of the interview, woman, age 40-49)

Another example illustrate negative consequences in advancing future career:

You hear these stories that people say […] you should actually file a complaint about that, but people say 'Yeah, but it wouldn't make a difference'. And it would only be hard on me and my career. So, people self-silence […] to protect themselves. (Associate Professor at the time of the interview, woman, age 40-49)

Consequences for the perpetrators

- The majority of the interviewees (43) stated that they did not know of any consequences for the perpetrators. According to the interviewees, the perpetrators did not receive any sanctions, mainly because they tend to be in more powerful positions compared with the victims. In some cases, the perpetrators not only did not receive any punishment, but on the contrary, were promoted and remained respected members of the research performing organisation.

Consequences for the research performing organisations

- About half of the interviewees (23) were not aware of the consequences of the incidents for the institution, and 28 interviewees in the study talked about either the positive, or negative consequences for the institution. Negative consequences were mainly related to the loss of the employees or students, negative impact on reputation of research performing organisations and/or financial loss.

- Few positive consequences for the research performing organisations were mentioned by the interviewees. They mainly identified the establishment of new rules and guidelines, development of training for staff members, as well as brought positive changes in the work or study environment due to the suspension or dismissal of the perpetrators.

OVERALL INSIGHTS

- The analysis of 54 individual interviews suggests that it is mostly women who experience various forms of gender-based violence in academia. Perpetrators are mostly men who are in a supervisory role and/or occupy leading academic or management position in research performing organisations.

- Intersecting inequalities in terms of gender and race, ethnicity or migration status significantly increased the risks of experiencing gender-based violence because of the dependency on the supervisor and, relatively powerless position. Normalised homophobic and transphobic attitudes in research performing organisations also facilitate a hostile work and study environment.

- The research findings showed that men-dominated leadership, hierarchical structure and unequal power relations created a hostile institutional environment for all who depend on those in more powerful positions. Being in a more powerful position gave freedom to escape any accountability. Meanwhile, dependency led victims to either keep silent about their harmful experiences, leave the institution or change their professional aspirations.

- The analysis revealed the negative consequences for the physical and mental health, as well as the professional lives of the victims. In contrast, the majority of perpetrators rarely faced any consequences. Research performing organisations handled more negative effects than positive ones due to the loss of talented researchers, the negative impact on their reputation or financial sanctions.

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List of UniSAFE project deliverables

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More information about the UniSAFE project is available at https://unisafe-gbv.eu/