



UniSAFE
ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

**Harnessing institutional
accountability:
Ending gender-based violence
in higher education and research**

**White Paper for policymakers
and institutional managers**



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This paper was prepared by Marcela Linková, Zuzana Andreska and Jana Dvořáčková with contributions from the UniSAFE consortium and revised and reviewed by the whole consortium.

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Introduction

Gender-based violence is 'any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity' ([Council of Europe](#)). [The European Commission](#) defines gender-based violence as acts that 'result in, or are likely to result in physical harm, sexual harm, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women'.

Gender-based violence occurs in every sphere and domain of life, in every organisation, and in offline and online settings. Higher education and research institutions are particularly prone to high levels of gender-based violence. Some of the specific features of higher education and research institutions – such as unequal power relations, the particular organisational culture, and the high concentration of young adults – may make the occurrence of gender-based violence more common in these institutions than in other settings (O'Connor et al. [2021](#)). Gender-based violence in higher education and research institutions not only harms the victims, it harms the purpose and integrity of the knowledge-making domain by:

- jeopardising the future of students and staff and negatively impacting their health, well-being, and study and career outcomes;
- causing institutional reputation loss and related economic costs resulting from the failure to provide a safe and respectful environment;
- impacting the future of society, as higher education and research institutions train future leaders.

To advance meaningfully towards a safe research and academic environment, the following features of gender-based violence must be recognised and put to the fore of institutional policies:

- Gender-based violence is a **continuum** (Kelly [1987](#); Walby et al. [2014](#); Hearn et al. [2022](#)), as different forms of violence correlate and overlap, and seemingly 'innocent', 'mild', and subtle forms of misconduct and transgressive behaviours – when not addressed – gradually escalate into more severe and graver forms of violence. This is reflected in students' and staff's **uncertainty as to what constitutes violence**.
- Gender-based violence reflects the **unequal power relations** in academia between students and academics and between hierarchically positioned groups of academic staff. It also reflects the power relations in society as a whole, which are structured not only by gender but also by other characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability, which interact with gender. The hierarchical nature of higher education and research institutions leads to the **underreporting of gender-based violence owing to fears of retaliation**.

- Gender-based violence should be regarded not just as inappropriate behaviour by individuals, but also as an expression of the **organisational cultures** that allow such behaviours to continue unabated. This is reflected, when a case finally comes to the fore, in the realisation that **everyone already knew about it**.

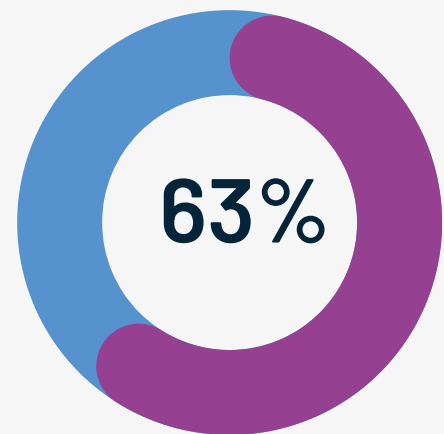
The goal of this document is to contribute to building a common understanding of gender-based violence. Specifically, we seek to establish the **root causes** of gender-based violence in higher education and research and introduce the holistic **7P model**, which has been developed and tested through research, as a starting point for further policy development. The primary target audiences for this White Paper are policymakers and institutional management responsible for the design and implementation of policies to eradicate gender-based violence.



The scope of the problem in Europe

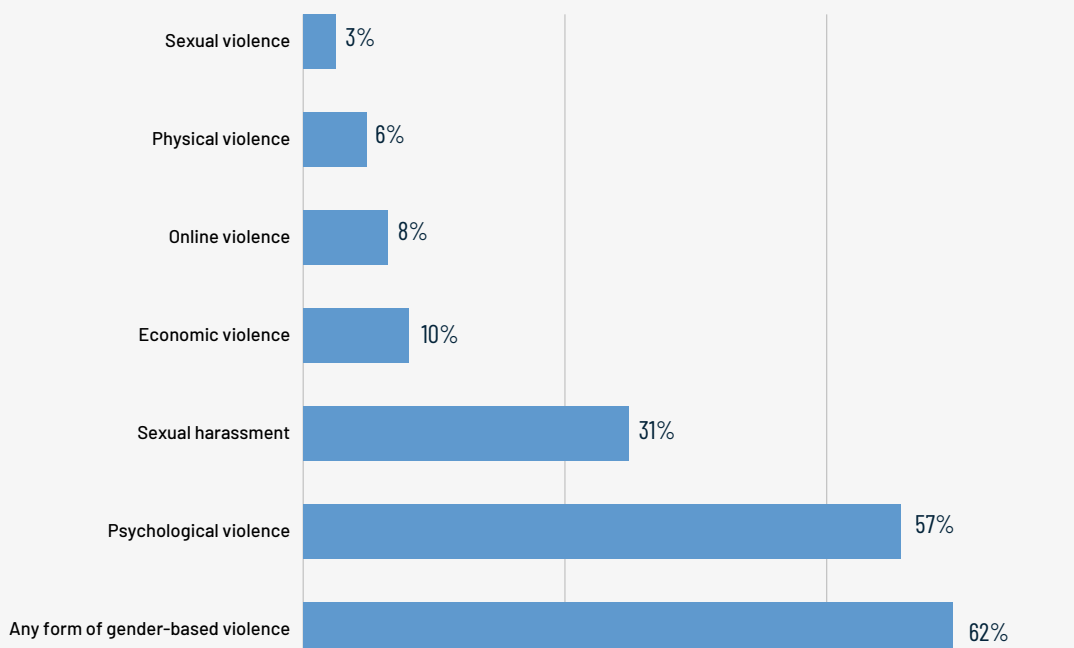
Nearly two in three (62%) of the over 42,000 respondents who took part in the UniSAFE survey on gender-based violence in research organisations in 2022 stated that they had experienced at least one form of gender-based violence within their institution (including physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and online forms of gender-based violence). Respondents from minoritised groups (based on gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or disability) were more likely to disclose having experienced gender-based violence. Women (66%) and non-binary people (74%) were more likely to have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence.

Respondents who identified as LGBTQ+ (68%), who reported a disability or chronic illness (72%) or belonged to an ethnic minority (69%) experienced at least one incident of gender-based violence more often than those who did not identify with these characteristics (Lipinsky et al., [2022](#)).



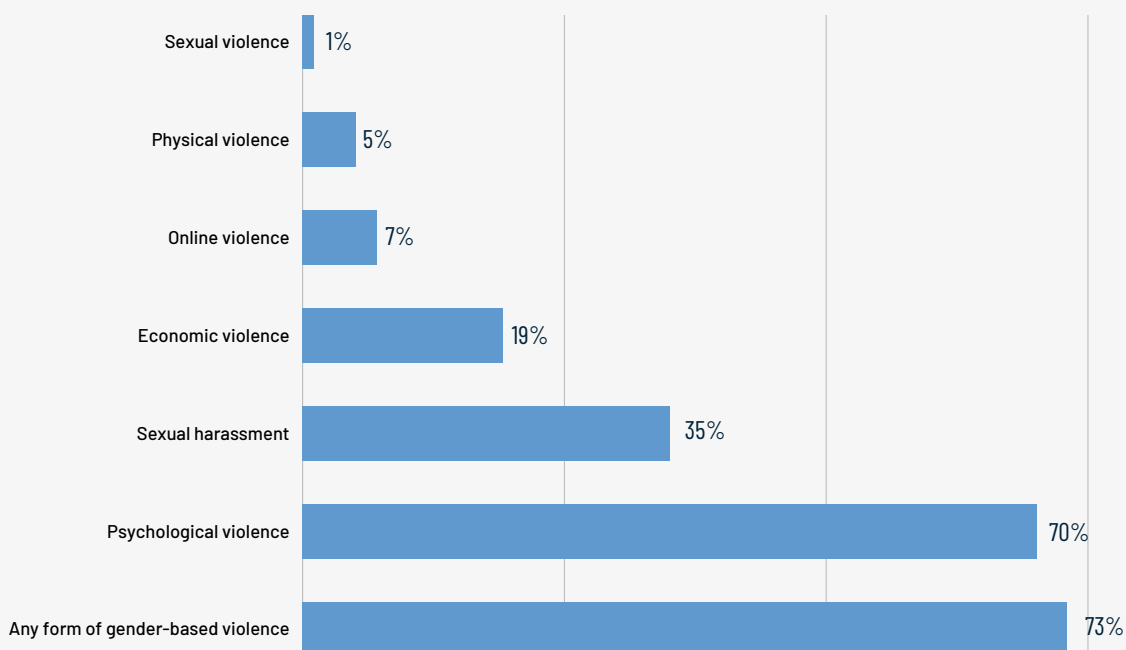
of respondents have experienced gender-based violence

Figure 1: Prevalence of any form of gender-based violence and by form of gender-based violence



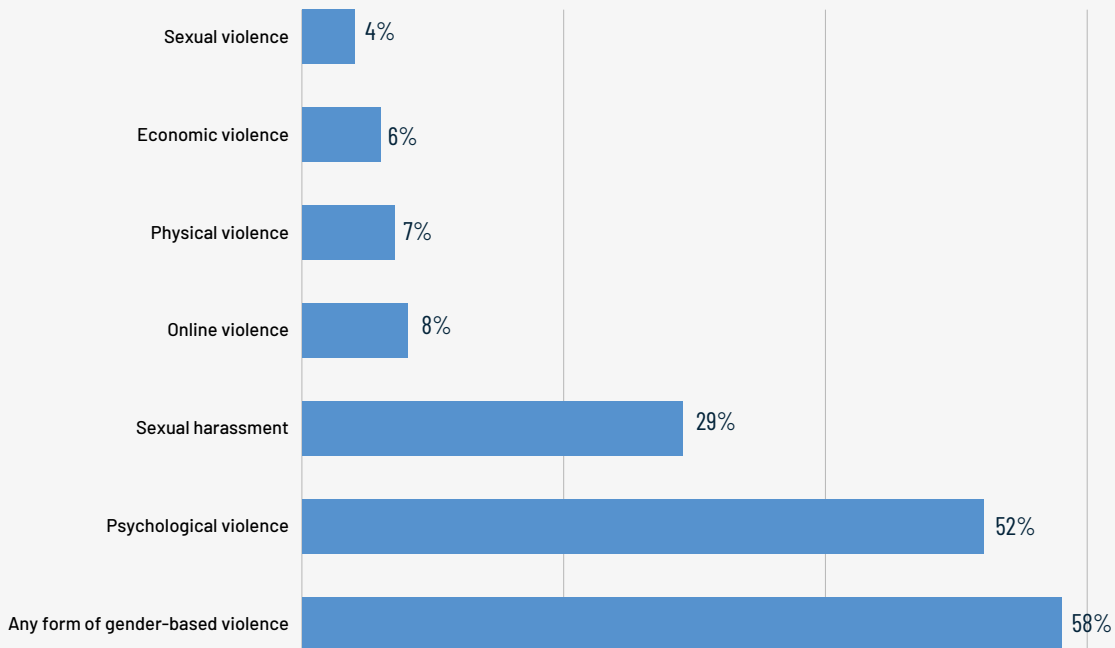
Source of data: Lipinsky, Anke; Schredl, Claudia; Baumann, Horst; Humbert, Anne Laure; Tanwar, Jagriti; Bondestam, Fredrik; Freund, Frederike; Lomazzi, Vera (2022). UniSAFE Survey – Gender-based violence and institutional responses. GESIS – Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften. Data file Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.7802/2475>

Figure 2: Prevalence of any form of gender-based violence and by form of gender-based violence, staff



Source of data: Lipinsky, Anke; Schredl, Claudia; Baumann, Horst; Humbert, Anne Laure; Tanwar, Jagriti; Bondestam, Fredrik; Freund, Frederike; Lomazzi, Vera (2022). UniSAFE Survey – Gender-based violence and institutional responses. GESIS – Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften. Data file Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.7802/2475>

Figure 3: Prevalence of any form of gender-based violence and by form of gender-based violence, students



Source of data: Lipinsky, Anke; Schredl, Claudia; Baumann, Horst; Humbert, Anne Laure; Tanwar, Jagriti; Bondestam, Fredrik; Freund, Frederike; Lomazzi, Vera (2022). UniSAFE Survey – Gender-based violence and institutional responses. GESIS – Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften. Data file Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.7802/2475>

What is alarming is that only 7% of students and 23% of staff who participated in the UniSAFE survey and stated that they had experienced gender-based violence within their institution reported the incident.



of students having experienced gender-based violence in the context of their institution have reported it

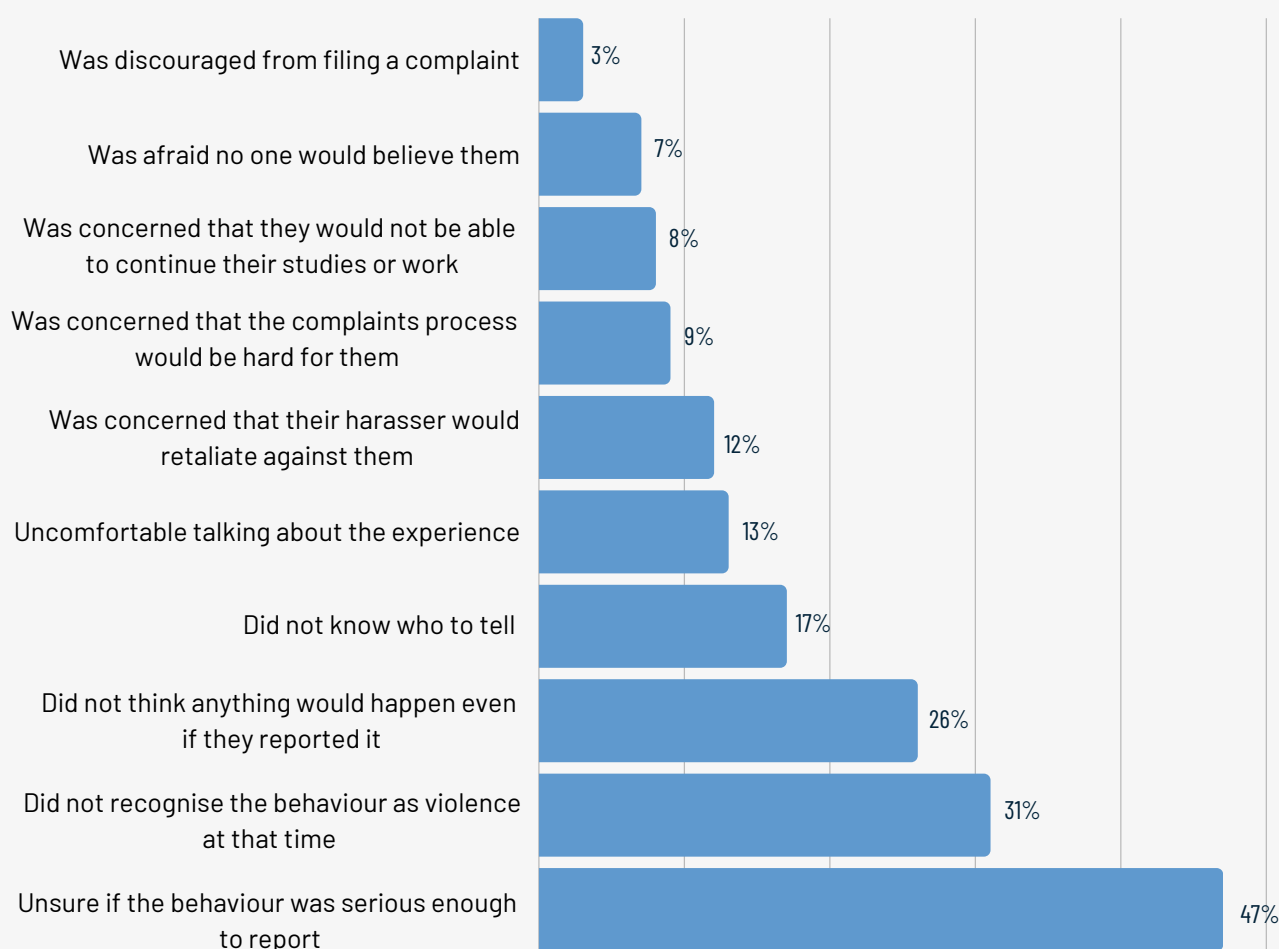


of respondents working in higher education and research having experienced gender-based violence in the context of their institution have reported it

Almost half of the victims (47%) did not report the incident because they were not sure that the behaviour was serious enough to report. Other common reasons for not reporting were that the survivors did not recognise the behaviour as violence at the time it occurred (31%) or did not think that anything would happen if they reported the incident (26%).

This underscores the permissiveness and normalisation of violence in higher education and research and the failure of institutions to take action against all forms of gender-based violence, including psychological violence and other forms that are not covered in legislative definitions of gender-based violence.

Figure 4: Reasons for not reporting incidents of gender-based violence



Source of data: Lipinsky, Anke; Schredl, Claudia; Baumann, Horst; Humbert, Anne Laure; Tanwar, Jagriti; Bondestam, Fredrik; Freund, Frederike; Lomazzi, Vera (2022). UniSAFE Survey – Gender-based violence and institutional responses. GESIS – Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften. Data file Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.7802/2475>



Vision for a safe and respectful higher education and research

Increasing numbers of students and academics, as well as institutional leaders, civil society organisations, and national policymakers, are concerned about the high rate of gender-based violence in higher education and research and about the lack of appropriate institutional measures. Gender-based violence is one of the six priorities highlighted in the strongly endorsed [the 2021 Ljubljana Declaration](#) and is one of the topics that need to be addressed by all relevant stakeholders in the European Research Area.

Creating a safe, inclusive, and respectful higher education and research sector for all has a critical urgency, not only because of the implications for current staff and students, but also because of the impact on wider society. National authorities (Fajmonová et al. 2021), leaders of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Huck et al. 2022), and umbrella organisations in the EU are increasingly acknowledging and accepting the responsibility they bear for building study and work environments that are free from the harmful and unacceptable behaviours that prevent active and full participation in the life of HEIs and research organisations.

The UniSAFE vision for future higher education and research is one where:

- No form of gender-based violence is tolerated.
- The existence of intersectional inequalities and other vulnerabilities that arise as a result of the different positions people occupy within hierarchical structures is acknowledged and actively tackled by institutional measures and actions.
- Staff and students are expected to act with integrity in a continuous effort to learn and reflect on ways to improve organisational cultures.
- Teachers are trained to acquire skills on how to approach students in a respectful and inclusive way inside and outside the classroom.
- Members of the academic community treat each other with respect and acknowledge that, in an unequal society, different people may have different ideas about what constitutes disrespectful behaviour depending on their position within the social and institutional hierarchy.
- A victim-centred approach is ensured.
- Members of the academic community care about the academic environment and are engaged in a joint effort to build this vision for future academic and research settings that are free from gender-based violence.
- Members of the academic community trust their institution – its processes and responsible staff – to protect staff and students from gender-based violence. When an act of violence occurs, the responsible staff treat it with the attention it deserves and adequately address the reporting and investigation of any act of violence.



**FACTORS THAT
ENABLE
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**



Power imbalances and hierarchical structures

"When he invited me to discuss my thesis in his office outside work hours, I did not think there was anything unusual about it. You do not say no to a consultation and potential networking opportunity. Only there I realised that was not his plan.

... When you report this, at least in my case, people give you the cold shoulder, all my colleagues stopped talking to me because the boss asked them to and because they didn't want to be involved..."¹

The inherently unequal distribution of power in the academic environment produces a context in which some individuals may be more at risk of gender-based violence. Hierarchical structures are typical for any work environment. However, in academic settings, power imbalances are manifested in three ways: 1) in the organisation of the academic career with organisational and cognitive dependence; 2) in the relations between (older) teaching staff and (younger) students; and 3) in peer contexts where power acts as an intrinsic part of interactions (Strid et al. [2021](#)).

1 Academic careers are organised in stages with a high degree of dependency of people in subordinate positions such as doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers. Success in reaching an independent academic position depends not just on individual skills but also on the support that doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers receive. This support is gendered and may be affected by instances of gender-based violence. Those in management and senior positions serve as gatekeepers who can offer – or withdraw – the support and opportunities that are necessary in order to study and to advance one's career. There are also power differentials between different categories of staff, with various strata of senior academics, early-career academics, managers, administrators, and other support staff, who can also create mechanisms of subordination.

2 Secondly, power differentials are also manifested between students and staff. Despite the common myth that students and teachers in higher education interact as mutually independent adults, teachers at all levels of education possess formal and informal power and authority. Formally, they decide on grades, exams, evaluations, job opportunities, and contacts.

¹The quotes used are indications of experiences with gender-based violence collected through interviews within UniSAFE and resistances to combating gender-based violence experienced by people working in the field. For more see Pilinkaite Sotirovic and Blazyte 2022)

Informally, they represent authority in their academic field and because of their institutional position and reputation their behaviour may be difficult to question. This is compounded by the age differentials between students and teaching staff and by the reality that leadership roles continue to be predominantly held by (older) men. The unequal power imbalance in the teaching environment can thus be conducive to abuses of power.

3 Thirdly, the high concentration of young adults in the higher education setting, who are exploring gendered ways of being as well as their sexuality (Jordan. et al. [2022](#)), is a factor that contributes to the high prevalence of peer gender-based violence among students. The interactions among young adults are a reflection of the normalised manifestations of power differentials in society more broadly and can be compounded by campus culture, age, experimentation with substance abuse, and the process of transitioning to adulthood.



Persistent gender stereotypes

"Once I was told: 'What is a pretty girl like you doing? ...these are difficult studies. This is hard work. You will spoil your beauty... why don't you go do some modelling. Find a rich husband'..."



Persistent gender stereotypes can contribute to and reinforce gender-based violence. They make gender-based violence a common phenomenon in higher education and research institutions and lead to gender-based violence (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [2022](#)). They are reflected in beliefs about how women and men should behave and typically draw on a binary understanding of gender that fails to recognise diverse and non-binary gender identities. These stereotypes can create unequal gender power dynamics, leading to discrimination and contributing to violence itself, as well as a fear of intervening in or reporting violence. Gender stereotypes are compounded by stereotypes related to other axes of inequality such as ethnicity or age, and these reinforce each other intersectionally.

For example, men are associated with the public sphere and the world of work, while the role of women is primarily seen as lying in the private sphere and in care. Therefore, women's pursuit of professional careers or their abilities related to higher education and research may be questioned by everyone, irrespective of their gender (Faniko et al. [2021](#)). In the UniSAFE survey, the majority of respondents (58%) tend to agree or totally agree that academia is dominated by men who do not have enough confidence in women.

Moreover, men tend to be perceived as active, dominant, and aggressive. They are stereotypically expected to have a stronger sexual desire, which is said to be 'hard to control'. This is especially common in popular discourse, where men's behaviour is sometimes biologised: men are seen as 'hunters', who court women to establish an intimate relationship with them, and as unable to control their sexual desires in the face of an attractive woman. Women, conversely, are stereotypically viewed as more passive and submissive. It is expected that they want to be seen as attractive by men, receive compliments, and be 'conquered' by men. Women who do not conform to the popular ideal of beauty and attractiveness are not seen as potential victims of gender-based violence and their reports of gender-based violence are questioned or interpreted as attention-seeking. These stereotypes can lead men to feel entitled to exert control over women through violence and can make women more vulnerable to violence and less likely to seek help. Research shows that the endorsement of gender stereotypes correlates with greater tolerance for various forms of gender-based violence (Sundaram [2018](#); Jackson and Sundaram [2020](#)) and that the prevalence of traditional gender beliefs and attitudes predicts rates of violence against women (York 2011).

Gender stereotypes foster a culture of victim blaming, where victims of gender-based violence are blamed for their own victimisation based on their perceived failure to conform to gender norms. For example, a victim of sexual assault may be blamed for dressing provocatively. Conversely, victims can be held responsible for not standing up against the abuser, even in hierarchically unequal situations such as between a professor and a student. Gender stereotypes can also lead to the underreporting of acts of gender-based violence, as victims may fear being socially stigmatised or retaliation for speaking out. In this way, gender stereotypes can perpetuate a cycle of violence and silence.

In higher education and research, these stereotypes play out in the relationships between teachers and students, between supervisors and postdoctoral researchers, and within each of these groups as well. These stereotypes fuel the dynamics of violence and contribute to the objectification of women's bodies, gender harassment, and the normalisation of sexual harassment.



Organisational cultures

"...We tried to look for help and talk with the director... And that didn't work. Basically, she said 'Yes, I know that she is a very difficult person, but that's the way she works. And she brings a lot of money to the university.'"

"Bystander training? For what? I do not need anyone telling me how to behave. We are a group of intelligent adults; this is not primary school."

Higher education and research are fields dominated by men and, consequently, are characterised by masculine culture. Only 30% of researchers in the world in 2017 were women (UNESCO [2019](#)). While women represented 48% of doctoral graduates in the EU and Associated Countries in 2018, they were over-represented in the field of education and underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (European Commission [2021](#)). In 2018, women in the EU and Associated Countries made up only one-fourth (26%) of full professors, the highest position within academia, and these percentages vary greatly across countries (European Commission [2021](#)). The leaky pipeline phenomenon (Dubois-Shaik, F. et. Al. [2015](#)) contributes to a lack of diversity within higher education and research institutions and thus to the preservation of the status quo.

Feeling unsafe, unwell, or socially excluded can be mitigated by institutional measures (Humbert et al. 2023). Confidence that an institution will believe a person reporting violence or harassment, will play an active role by providing services; won't suggest the report might harm the institution's reputation, will support the person making the report, and will take action to remedy the factors that may have led to the reported incident(s) are all associated with lower feelings of social exclusion. Feeling unsafe is lower in institutions where people are confident that the institution will take steps to protect the safety of the person making the report, will believe the person making the report, will take action to remedy the factors that may have led to the reported incident(s), will not create an environment where staying at the institution will be difficult for the person, and will not suggest the experiences being reported might affect the institution's reputation. Finally, feeling unwell was lower where there was a perception that the institution will take steps to protect the safety of the person making the report and will take action to remedy the factors that may have led to the reported incident(s).

Organisations are inherently gendered (Acker 1990) and so are their cultures. This is reflected in organisations' values and symbols, their institutional procedures, and their rules and practices and it is enacted in the way people relate to and treat each other. The seemingly gender-neutral organisational structure and characteristics attributed to individual positions carry gendered expectations. In research and higher education, the stereotypical image of an old, white, heterosexual man may gradually be fading from the pervasive imaginary; nonetheless, research culture still tends to stress values such as competition, aggression, and assertiveness, which are stereotypically associated with masculinity.

Another strong and frequently invoked value is academic autonomy, which is related to the traditional notion of academia as a special place, 'an ivory tower' for the select few who govern themselves independently from other segments of society. While the notion of science as an ivory tower has been losing its hold, academic autonomy and freedom are important values that can safeguard research from political interference and protect critical thought.

Although the degree to which national academic systems are autonomous differs in Europe, the argument of academic autonomy can be misused when it is invoked by academics or academic managers to resist and oppose the adoption of measures to ensure non-discrimination and safety. Opening discussions about human behaviour, talking about gender-based violence, measuring its prevalence, and introducing preventive workshops and protective measures are often completely new to the organisational cultures within academia. **Academic autonomy must not be abused as an excuse to protect organisational cultures where old boys' networks can flourish, where perpetrators tend to be protected, and where their 'rights' may overrule the rights of their victims.**

Importantly, ending gender-based violence is in itself a way of ensuring academic freedom, as academic cultures free of gender-based violence are the necessary precondition for enabling everyone, but especially vulnerable groups, to engage fully in research and teaching and to act independently as students, teachers, and researchers, free from repression of any kind.



Violence as a continuum

Gender-based violence is often portrayed as an isolated incident that occurs in a vacuum. Instead, it must be seen as occurring on a continuum of violence and violations, violent behaviours, and attitudes about sex and gender. This continuum can range from inappropriate sexist verbal and physical expressions, such as questions about people's private lives, comments about a person's looks, 'unintended' bodily contact, sexist jokes, and manoeuvring victims into unwanted 'intimate' encounters, to situations that involve physical and/or sexual violence and even rape and other attacks on the dignity and physical integrity of people. In this understanding, 'violence' is the umbrella term that encompasses all stages of the continuum.

"Of course, those cases of rape are horrible. Those are simply bad manners and criminal behaviour. Police will take over and we can finally relax and focus on what is really important."



The continuum concept also underscores the fact that all forms of gender-based violence are correlated and are serious and have effects, though some may be more common and may even be defined as acceptable behaviour that can be brushed off as fun or a joke (Kelly [1987](#): 49). This makes it difficult to 'see' some acts as violence and recognise the cumulative effect of the range of violence experienced. Empirical evidence from the UniSAFE project (Humbert et al. [2022](#)) has confirmed this by showing how all incidents of gender-based violence are correlated within and across each of the six forms measured in the survey.

The long-term tolerance and downplaying of the more common and seemingly less serious types of incidents create a culture of permissiveness, and this leads to fear and silencing. Individual behaviour in an academic setting cannot be separated from occupational duties and downplayed as 'bad manners' or 'a matter of an individual's personality'.



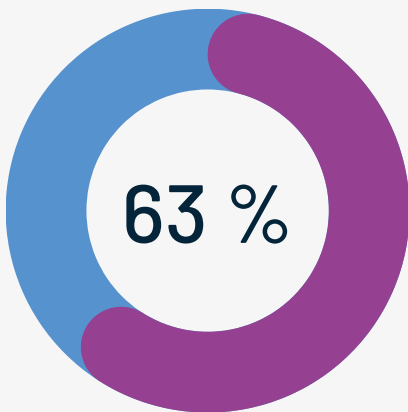
Consequences of gender-based violence

Gender-based violence has consequences on the individual, organisational, and societal levels.

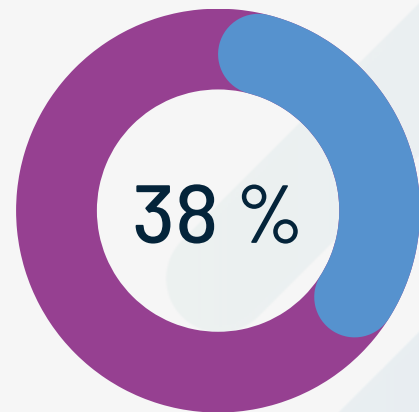
Individual level:

The experience of gender-based violence impacts the mental and physical well-being of individuals by making them feel socially excluded, unsafe, and unwell. This, in turn, impacts their educational and professional performance and development.

"People are so fragile these days. No one was complaining when I was a student."

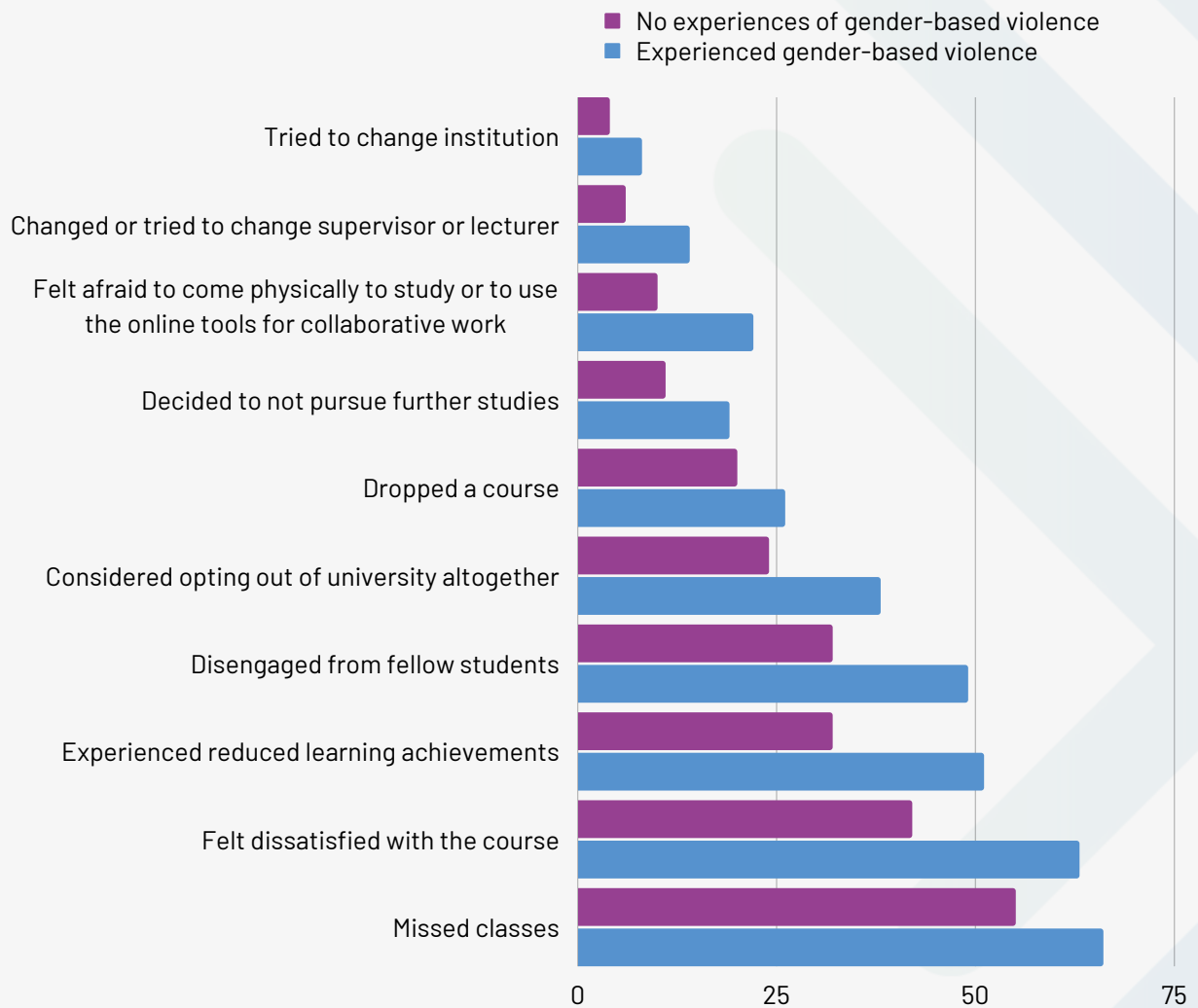


of students who had experienced gender-based violence felt dissatisfied with the course of their studies compared to 42% in the case of those who had not experienced gender-based violence.



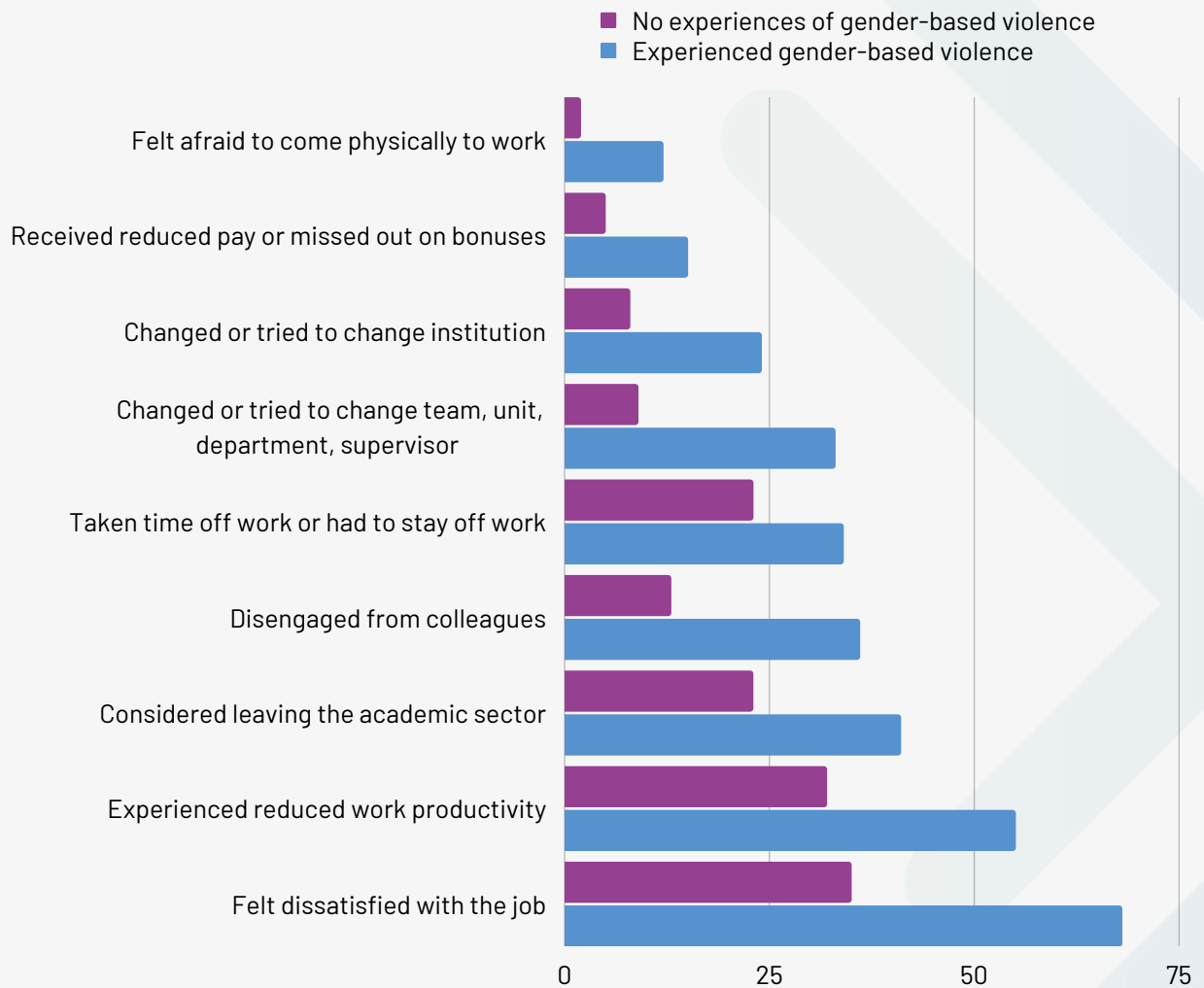
of students who had experienced gender-based violence considered dropping out of university altogether compared to 24% in the case of students who had not experienced gender-based violence.

Figure 5: Study-related consequences for students since they started working at their institution, by whether or not they experienced gender-based violence



Source of data: Lipinsky, Anke; Schredl, Claudia; Baumann, Horst; Humbert, Anne Laure; Tanwar, Jagriti; Bondestam, Fredrik; Freund, Frederike; Lomazzi, Vera (2022). UniSAFE Survey – Gender-based violence and institutional responses. GESIS – Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften. Datenfile Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.7802/2475>

Figure 6: Work-related consequences for staff since they started working at their institution, by whether or not they experienced gender-based violence



Source of data: Lipinsky, Anke; Schredl, Claudia; Baumann, Horst; Humbert, Anne Laure; Tanwar, Jagriti; Bondestam, Fredrik; Freund, Frederike; Lomazzi, Vera (2022). UniSAFE Survey – Gender-based violence and institutional responses. GESIS – Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften. Datenfile Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.7802/2475>

Organisational level

The consequences of gender-based violence on the individual level compound into more collective harm such as the erosion of trust in the organisation, absenteeism, or problems with retention and with turnover among both students and staff. An institutional culture that tolerates violence impacts the whole working environment – students and academics have to feel safe and respected in order to be confident about expressing their opinions and bringing forward new ideas (KNAW [2022](#)). Importantly, it is not just the victims or survivors who are negatively impacted, it is everyone who as bystanders witness or know of such acts.

Societal level

When victims of violence leave their institution, all of society loses. Talent, innovation, and people's potential are lost along the way. Moreover, gender-based violence generates costs in the form of healthcare and social support and decreased economic activity.



Institutional policies are largely not fit for purpose

“So, by law, the university has the right to choose or change the company with whom they work to solve the sexual harassment cases. When I fought my own case against harassment, what happened, of course, is that they said I was the problem, so that their contract would be prolonged.”



Despite the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in higher education and research institutions and its severe consequences, institutional policies to prevent and address gender-based violence remain limited (Bondestam, Lundquist [2020](#)). The UniSAFE project analysed policies and institutional measures designed to respond to gender-based violence in 48 universities and research organisations. Not all these institutions had relevant policies in place, and 18 had only general policies (e.g., anti-discrimination policies or codes of conduct), where gender-based violence was addressed as one issue among topics without defining the institutional response (Huck et al. [2022](#)).

The forms of gender-based violence these policies and measures addressed were limited. Most institutions focus their policies on 'sexual harassment' (44 out of the 45 institutions with a policy) and 'gender-based harassment' (42 out of the 45 institutions). Only about half of the institutions addressed 'sexual violence', and the other forms were covered to an even lesser extent. More forms were addressed in the case of policies specifically dedicated to gender-based violence (in place in 27 institutions).

The level of complexity with which these policies address gender-based violence also varies. In most institutions, the primary focus, at least on paper, is on protective measures, prosecution, and prevention. Many policies do not consider all the relevant target groups (both students and staff) and their potential constellations in incidents. In addition, a high proportion of institutions do not address the needs of groups that are specifically at risk of gender-based violence (students and staff with a disability or chronic illness, LGBTQIA+, people with migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, etc.).



**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR POLICY DESIGN**

Given the features of gender-based violence outlined above, there is a need for comprehensive policies that tackle all the different aspects discussed above as cross-cutting issues: power, intersectionality, the continuum of violence, and organisational culture.

A comprehensive, holistic approach to addressing and combating gender-based violence is conceptualised through the 7P framework, where the Ps stand for Policies, Prevalence, Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Provision of services, and Partnerships. This framework makes it possible to assess the efficiency of national and institutional strategies to eradicate GBV in the academic environment.

7P Conceptual Framework

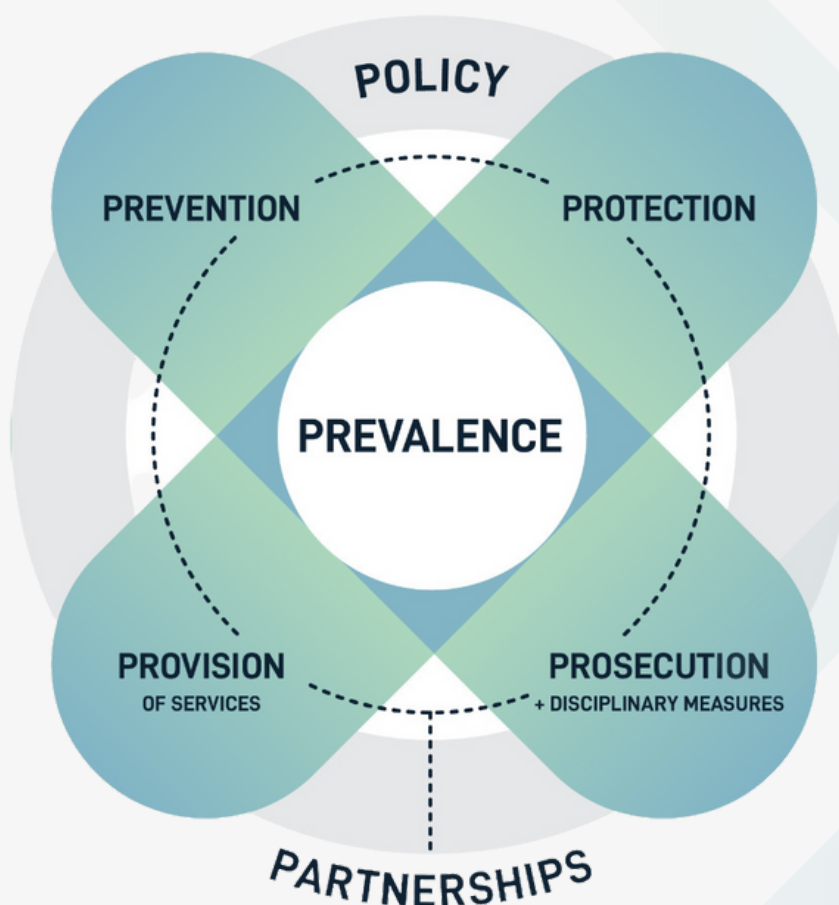


Figure 7: The 7P model and the inter-relations between the Ps.

Policies is the foundation and refer to a coherent set of measures with a clear vision and strategy or to specific documents detailing such measures.

Prevalence and incidence estimates contribute to evidence-based policymaking. Importantly, prevalence must apply an intersectional approach that takes into account people's ethnicity and origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, and their position within the organisation.

Prevention refers to measures that promote changes in social and cultural behaviour. In academia, this may include induction materials for both staff and students, internal and external publicity and training, and public statements and visuals.

Protection aims at ensuring safety and meeting the needs of potential victims and survivors. This includes clear processes, procedures, and infrastructure for reporting incidents and supporting victims and survivors and training for those responsible for handling cases.

Prosecution and disciplinary measures cover legal proceedings against suspected perpetrators and related investigative measures and judicial proceedings. This includes – as legally appropriate – possible warnings, suspension, rehabilitation, and termination of employment and study, as well as liaison with legal, police, and criminal justice organisations and professionals.

Provision refers to the services offered to support victims, families, bystanders, whistle blowers, perpetrators, and affected members of the community. In academia, it can include counselling and psychological and medical support. Importantly, staff, students, managers, and supervisors need to be made thoroughly aware of the availability of these support services.

Partnerships relates to the involvement of relevant actors at all levels, such as governmental agencies, civil society organisations, trade unions, and staff and student associations.

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About UniSAFE

UniSAFE is an EU-funded project (contract number 101006261) that aims to produce better knowledge on gender-based violence and sexual harassment in research performing organisations and to translate this knowledge into operational tools for universities, research organisations and policymakers to reduce gender-based violence.

More outputs from UniSAFE available at <https://unisafe-gbv.eu>

Contact: unisafe-eu@esf.org

