

Recommendations for student associations and unions towards ending gender-based violence

This factsheet addresses student associations and unions which bring together and represent students from higher education organisations and research institutions. It provides recommendations in relation to their role towards ending gender-based violence. These recommendations are based on the findings from the EU-funded UniSAFE project.

Readers of this factsheet may want to consult [UniSAFE's toolkit section on concepts and meanings](#). Background information about the root causes of gender-based violence in research and academia are laid out in the [White Paper for Policymakers and Institutional Managers](#), together with a presentation of the [7P model](#) (Prevalence, Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Provision of services, Partnerships, Policy).

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Gender-based violence in research and higher education



Definition of gender-based violence

According to the Council of Europe, **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.** On the 1st of June 2023, the European Union acceded to Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It is important to clarify that while women and non-binary people are most affected by gender-based violence, it is relevant to everyone due to intersecting inequalities related to their gender and other characteristics.

UniSAFE adopts a broad understanding of gender-based violence, encompassing all forms: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, economic violence, sexual harassment, harassment on the grounds of gender, and organisational harassment – in both online and offline contexts.

Gender-based violence occurs in every sphere and domain of life and in every organisation. 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 specific 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, but it also harms the purpose and integrity of the knowledge-making mission of academic and research institutions by:

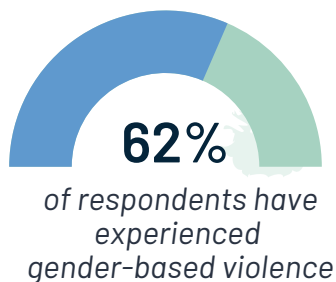
- jeopardising the future of students and staff and negatively impacting their health, well-being, and their study or career outcomes;
- causing institutional reputation loss and related economic costs resulting from the failure to provide a safe, inclusive and respectful environment;
- impacting the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

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 are interrelated 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**, because different forms of violence of this spectrum are not recognised as such.
- 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 and lead to intersectional inequalities. The hierarchical nature of higher education and research institutions contributes to the **underreporting of gender-based violence owing to fears of retaliation and negative impact on one’s career**.
- Gender-based violence should be regarded not just as the inappropriate behaviour of an individual, but also as **an expression of the organisational culture** that allows 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 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 experience of 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).

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.



Only 7% of students of students 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 institutions and the failure of institutions to take action against *all* forms of gender-based violence, including forms that are not always covered in legislative definitions of gender-based violence (Linková et al., 2023).

The role of students' associations and unions in ending gender-based violence

Student associations and unions play a crucial role in addressing gender-based violence by raising awareness and organising events for students, advocating for change, providing support to survivors and the resources to act, and fostering a culture of respect and equality in higher education settings.

However, the burden of implementing an institutional policy to address gender-based violence must not be placed on such associations and unions. The aim of these recommendations is to support student representatives in advocating for and holding institutions accountable for addressing gender-based violence and in promoting a safe study environment for all.

Recommendations



Cross-cutting recommendation

- When it comes to students' involvement in institutional policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and any other engagement, ensure that students' labour is recognised and acknowledged. Demand that students' study, assignments and exam schedules are considered and that they get rewarded for their labour in the form of study credits, as institutional policy work on gender-based violence has educational value too.

Recommendations related to the 7P framework



Policy

- Seek opportunities to contribute to co-designing institutional policies and actions to protect students from all forms of gender-based violence, with specific attention to intersectionality.
- Adopt and promote a charter for student associations and unions with values and principles related to safety, inclusion, respect, consent, non-discrimination, including ending gender-based violence, with attention to intersectionality.
- Advocate for institutional monitoring of the implementation of existing policies.
- Reflect on the experience of students with the institutional policies, paying attention to intersectionality, and seek opportunities to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the institutional policies to the responsible institutional bodies.

- Monitor and evaluate students' involvement in institutional policy-making, implementation and monitoring.



Prevalence

- Use your network to collect data from members about their experience of safety at their institution.
- Collaborate, in your own country and abroad, on the collection, analysis and reporting of quantitative and/or qualitative data on gender-based violence experiences and institutional responses.



Prevention

- Put pressure on institutions to run campaigns, implement campus safety assessments, define all forms of gender-based violence as unwanted behaviours in the institutional code of conduct for staff and students, improve services, etc.
- Organise workshops, seminars and awareness-raising campaigns to educate students about all forms of gender-based violence and its effects.
- Promote a culture of safety, inclusion, respect, consent and bystander intervention in all self-organised events.



Protection

- Underline the responsibility that institutions have in ensuring that all actors involved in handling cases of gender-based violence are adequately trained, especially on victim-centred and trauma-informed practices (e.g. trust persons, counsellors, investigators, members of disciplinary committees, etc.).

Regarding social events organised by students:

- Ensure that gatekeepers are appointed at all events and are properly trained in how to support victims/survivors of gender-based violence.
- Provide information to participants on available support services, including in emergency situations.
- Support victims/survivors of gender-based violence to enforce their rights vis-à-vis the institution, ensuring that victims/survivors are adequately protected by institutions and can continue with their studies in a safe environment.



Partnerships

- Support informal activist student groups to get organised to work against gender-based violence
- Collaborate with all student groups at regional level to ensure that all voices are heard.
- Collaborate with regional, national or international associations and unions to strengthen efforts against gender-based violence.



Inspiring practices

** The Student Support and Wellbeing team at University College London's Students' Union is committed to providing confidential, empathetic, and expert support to students who have experienced sexual violence and harassment. Their services include confidential support, trained professionals offering emotional support and guidance, assistance with reporting and advocacy, access to comprehensive resources, educational workshops, peer support networks, policy advocacy, and a focus on holistic well-being. [Explore further](#).

** [CLASCHEs](#), an anti-sexist collective to fight against sexual harassment in higher education, is a feminist association fighting against sexist and sexual violence in higher education. Their aim is to lift the silence on the issue of sexism and sexual violence, to raise awareness, to disseminate legal information, and finally to work towards the reform of university and research institutions. CLASCHEs also provides information to victims and directs them to structures and services capable of best supporting them. CLASCHEs designed a guide for students giving them information on where to get support, legal assistance, and more, and in 2014, they launched the first edition of "Sexual harassment in higher education and research. A guide for information and self-defence" (1st edition [in French](#), 3rd edition in English). [Explore further](#).

** CLASCHEs and CPED (Conférence Permanente Egalité Diversité / Permanent Equality Diversity Conference) published the guide on "Sexual Harassment in Higher Education and Research" (2015) which aims to support higher education and research establishments in implementing actions against sexual harassment. [Explore further](#).

** The Student Association named "Initiative Out Loud (Iniciativa Nahlas)" at the Faculty of Philosophy, Charles University, formulated an open letter sent to the university administration, discussing the topic of gender-based violence and presenting their demands (Iniciativa Nahlas, 2022). [Explore further](#).

** The student union at Aston University issued a policy on Sexual Harassment or Sexual Misconduct to protect students from unacceptable behaviours, providing guidelines to report incidents. [Explore further](#).

** "Why we did not report" originally came as a student initiative at Charles University in Prague with online and offline posters with anonymised cases, presented e.g. at the Faculty of Philosophy as an exhibition or in the University cultural centre and accompanied by panel discussions inspired by the US why I did not report movement.

** The student union at the University of Stirling run the campaign “Erase the Grey” to address gender-based violence by raising awareness on the forms of gender-based violence, and by providing information on reporting mechanisms and support services offered at the university. The campaign was originally created and launched by Glasgow Caledonian University. [Explore further](#).

Further reading



Explore the recommendations for other stakeholder groups, developed by UniSAFE:

- Recommendations for Higher Education and Research Institutions, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for Higher Education and Research Institution Associations and Umbrella Organisations, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for research funding organisations towards ending gender-based violence, available [here](#)
- Recommendations for Staff Associations and Unions, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for Policymakers, available [here](#).

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About UniSAFE

UniSAFE is a three-year, EU-funded research project, which 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 has analysed the mechanisms of GBV - its social determinants, antecedents, and consequences - at three different levels, using a holistic research model: 1) Prevalence and impacts of GBV by a survey at 45 RPOs (micro level); 2) Organisational responses and infrastructure via data gathered by in-depth case studies, interviews, and a strategic mapping of research organisations in 15 member states (meso level); and 3) Legal and policy frameworks in 27 European states and 3 associated states (macro level). These results have been translated into an operational toolkit for research and higher education institutions and recommendations for relevant stakeholders.

Disclaimer

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