

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

This factsheet addresses staff associations and unions in higher education and research institutions. It provides recommendations on their role towards ending gender-based violence. 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:

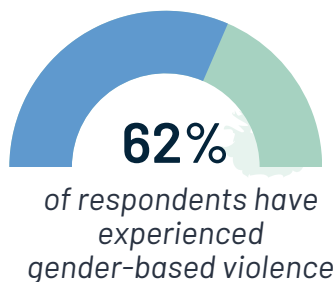
- jeopardising the future of students and staff and negatively impacting their health, well-being, and their study or career outcomes;
- causing institutional reputation loss and related economic costs resulting from the failure to provide a safe, inclusive and respectful environment;
- impacting the 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 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 staff associations and unions in ending gender-based violence



This set of recommendations is addressed to associations of staff, including trade unions, professional/academic associations, and institutionalised networks of staff, and concerns the issue of gender-based violence in higher education and research institutions. These associations have a voice in the institutional governance and can use their power to exercise pressure on the institution to reinforce its efforts towards ending gender-based violence.

By taking action, the association can demonstrate its commitment to creating a safe and inclusive workplace for all staff and other members of the institutional community and hold institutions accountable for addressing gender-based violence.

By leveraging their collective power and advocating for change, staff associations and unions can play a vital role in creating safer, inclusive and more equitable workplaces, free from gender-based violence. They can advocate for safer workplaces through collective bargaining and pushing for adoption of comprehensive policies including strong enforcement mechanisms, grievance procedures and disciplinary action. They can raise awareness of the issue in the organisation and provide educational opportunities. They can also provide support and resources to victims, promote gender equality and non-discrimination as values for the organisation, and influence policy and legal reforms.



Recommendations



Policy

- Ensure that the staff associations and/or unions has its own policy against gender-based violence, ideally aligned with the institutional policy framework, and that the policy is monitored and evaluated annually. Such a policy should take a clear stance and recognise power imbalances as a root cause of gender-based violence.
- Use the influence the staff associations and/or unions has and advocate to encourage institutions to implement policies and practices that prioritise the safety and well-being of all. The staff associations and/or unions should also monitor institutional efforts and make recommendations for the improvement of policies and measures.

- Contribute to institutional policy-making by taking part in the design, monitoring and evaluation of the institutional policies and actions towards safeguarding all categories of workers with attention to intersectionality. In particular, ensure that the place and role of staff associations and unions is considered in the design of the institutional policy, e.g. in receiving (informal) complaints about gender-based violence.



Prevalence

- In the absence of institutional surveys, staff associations and unions can themselves carry out regular surveys on gender-based violence and/or well-being of staff (including at least some specific questions on gender-based violence) among their members. Staff associations and unions should also use their powers to convince the institution to run prevalence surveys as a way to create solid, measurable evidence on gender-based violence.
- Collect systematic information/reports of incidents and liaise with the reporting services inside the institution to ensure that the information known to the staff associations and/or unions is included in the institutional knowledge base and considered in institutional monitoring efforts.
- Cooperate with the established institutional services to help identifying any patterns and signals to be acted upon using aggregated and anonymised information on complaints and reports about incidents of gender-based violence.
- Systematically advocate to integrate questions on gender-based violence in more general institutional surveys on well-being and safety at work.



Prevention

- Raise awareness about gender-based violence and available support services. This can be achieved through educational programmes, awareness-raising campaigns, or codes of conduct for conferences.
 - Associations of staff and unions can either develop their own educational programmes, awareness-raising campaigns or codes of conduct, or increase the visibility and reach of existing ones. By doing so, they contribute to the awareness of the risks associated with gender-based violence and available support in case of incidents among their members and staff in general.
- Suggest to the institutional leadership to adopt rules about participation in field trips and outside events to protect staff and students from gender-based violence.



Protection

Participate or engage in risk assessments undertaken within the institution. Risk assessments allow to identify profiles at risk as well as situations, circumstances and/or places where there are higher risks of gender-based violence.

- Act as a contact point to potential victims and communicate this role.
 - Representatives of staff associations and unions can act as a trust person, to accompany the victim/survivor through the different steps of the institutional procedures.
- Train union staff on the specifics of gender-based violence, including a trauma informed and victim-centred approach, so that they can act professionally and appropriately when people report instances of gender-based violence to them.



Prosecution

- Advocate for a victim-centred and trauma informed institutional approach in dealing with cases of gender-based violence.
- Ensure that any member of the staff associations or unions that sits in an investigation or disciplinary committee is properly trained and knowledgeable about the topic of gender-based violence and its impact on victims/survivors.



Provision of services

- Recognise the staff associations' or unions' role as a key stakeholder and also a possible contact point for members and staff in general who have experienced gender-based violence.
- Organise training for contact points and ensure adequate support for survivors, liaising with and referring to the established institutional services, as needed.
- Consider the range of support services that can be provided to members who experience gender-based violence, as needed: advise on reporting options, provide referrals to professional services, advocate with the institution for protection measures, offer legal assistance and financial support when a case is brought to the criminal justice system, etc.



Partnerships

- Work in close liaison with the established institutional services in charge of dealing with gender-based violence.
- Establish partnerships with student associations, employers and governmental agencies to broaden the scope of prevention measures (e.g. educational programmes, awareness-raising campaigns, or code of conduct for conferences) and support services. By doing so, the association can help to reinforce policies and measures addressing gender-based violence.
- Partner with other employer associations and unions nationally as well as at the EU level within their remit, to learn from each other and share experience about institutional roles, policies and procedures.



Inspiring practices

- ** The German trade union, Ver.di, run an awareness raising campaign and designed a strategy on sexual harassment in the workplace. [Explore further](#).
- ** The French trade union, CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail), run a series of webinars, addressed to representatives of the Social and Economic Committee (CSE), to raise awareness and educate them on the topic of gender-based and sexual violence in the workplace. [Explore further](#) (in French).
- ** The UK trade union, UNISON, published a guide with recommendations addressed to the government and employers in partnerships with trade unions to address violence and support victims. [Explore further](#).
- ** The Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities, Crue (Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas), published a policy named “[Manifiesto de Crue Universidades Españolas por la eliminación de la violencia contra la mujer – CRUE/ Manifesto of Crue Spanish Universities for the elimination of violence against women](#)”. [Explore further](#) (in Spanish).
- ** The German institutionalised network of staff, bukof, designed the policy paper on sexual discrimination and violence. [Explore further](#) (in German).
- ** The policy of the American Sociological Association (ASA) details the expected and unacceptable behaviours for the attendees of ASA meetings, as well as the ethics disclosure policies in regards to awards nominations. [Explore further](#).
- ** The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission designed the Code of Practice on Sexual Harassment at Work, which is a practical guidance to employers, organisations, trade unions and employees, and it outlines the definition of sexual harassment and harassment, and suggests preventative measures and procedures that should be in place to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. [Explore further](#).

** In 2020, the Conference of University Rectors adopted the Guidelines for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Investigation of its Incidences. 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. [Explore further](#) (in Czech).

Further reading



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

- Recommendations for Higher Education and Research Institutions, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for research funding organisations towards ending gender-based violence, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for Student Associations and Unions towards ending gender-based violence, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for Policymakers, available [here](#).
- Recommendations for higher education and research institution associations and umbrella organisations [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 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.

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