

WORKING TOWARDS SAFE AND RESPECTFUL HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH FOR ALL

Call for Action to End Gender-Based Violence



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Gender-based violence¹ is a societal, institutional, policy, educational, academic, and ethical issue.

The harmful impacts that gender-based violence in all its forms, including sexual harassment, has on victims, survivors, and bystanders have been known for more than fifty years. During that time, gender-based violence has moved from being an unnamed problem to one that is named and framed. Yet it persists as a part of academic culture and drives women, including women in vulnerable situations affected by other inequalities (age, sexism in the workplace, disabilities, marginalised backgrounds, instability, non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations etc.) and persons with non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations – out of academia and research. As a result, the well-being and participation of students and academics are being put at risk and this negatively affects the quality of research and teaching. Gender-based violence directly impedes access to academic freedom, which means that higher education and research as democratic institutions are consequently at stake.

These challenges are not limited to higher education and research institutions, as they also apply in connections between institutions, such as partnerships, research networks, multi-site projects, and relations between Research Funding Organisations and Research Performing Organisations.

FROM FIXING WOMEN TO FIXING THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

It is increasingly recognised that asymmetric power relations, hierarchies, ageism, nepotism, and secondary victimisation (such as victim blaming or discounting of experiences of violence) often make it impossible for people, mostly women, who are experiencing gender-based violence to speak up or take action against the perpetrator of the violence. Students, PhD candidates, and junior staff are, as has been historically established, in a position of dependence, which is currently compounded by extreme levels of precarity and competitiveness in the research system, which creates room for the abuse of power, silencing, and toeing the line.

Leaders and managers have a vital role to play. Those in positions of power need to take responsibility, accept accountability, and lead the way in creating and maintaining safe and inclusive study, training, and research environments built on respect, dignity, and recognition. To this end, ensuring prevention and early detection of any misconduct are key.

¹ The term "gender-based violence" is used to capture all forms of gender-based violence, violations and abuse, including but not limited to, physical violence, psychological violence, economic and financial violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, gender harassment, stalking, organisational violence and harassment – in both online and offline contexts. The concept of gender-based violence describes and includes a continuum of violence and violations, violent behaviours and attitudes based on sex and gender, and always intersects with and mutually shapes other dimensions of inequalities, such as for example age, class, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. It is an expression of power and structural dominance and reflects power relations in society as a whole.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, in higher education and research does not affect everyone equally. It is predominantly directed towards women, and especially those in less powerful positions due to race and ethnicity, junior and/or precarious status, disability, LGBTIQ identification², and socio-economic and migrant/international mobility status. The recognition that people are exposed to gender-based violence differently, in part due to intersecting inequalities, is therefore crucial in future preventive work.

NEW MOMENTUM

In recent years we have seen growing momentum to address gender-based violence as a critical issue for building safe and respectful higher education and research. The European Commission, the European Parliament, and EU Member States have identified gender-based violence in their policies as a challenge that requires action. [The Ljubljana Declaration on Gender Equality in Research and Innovation](#) (2021) includes gender-based violence as one of the six key challenges it addresses. The European Commission has included gender-based violence among the five recommended thematic areas to be addressed in Gender Equality Plans that are the new eligibility criterion in Horizon Europe, and it is funding the Horizon 2020 project [UniSAFE](#). Many countries and institutions are moving forward to adopt new or to revise existing policies. Students themselves are forming unions that demand gender-based violence be addressed and stopped and are actively coming forward with requests and recommendations for change. Alongside this, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of new forms of violence, in particular digital violence in online spaces, and the importance of taking intersectionality into account. One key incentive for addressing the issue of gender-based violence was the #MeToo movement, in which the younger generation, unafraid to be heard, played an essential role.

In November 2022, the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU is organising the conference [Ending Gender-Based Violence in Academia: Toward Gender-Equal, Safe and Inclusive](#)

[Research and Higher Education](#). One of the objectives of this conference is to launch the new [European Research Area Policy](#) Action 5 Promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness, one outcome of which is to develop a “strategy to counteract gender-based violence including sexual harassment in the European Research & Innovation (R&I) system and to ensure gender equality in working environments through institutional change in any research funding or performing organisation”. To this end, the conference addresses gender-based violence at the level of national authorities and the European Commission, research funding organisations, umbrella organisations as well as individual research and higher education institutions and their management, in order to finally make significant progress in the European Research Area.

WE NEED TO DO SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER THAN OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS.

Policies without effective implementation do not protect survivors, do not prevent violence, and do not result in institutional change.

Adopting policies without proper resourcing and accountability of responsible academic leadership, training of responsible staff, monitoring incidents and case management outcomes and evaluating the policies, has proven not to have the desired effects.

Recognising gender-based violence as a profound challenge in higher education and research is a crucial aspect of reclaiming core academic principles of scientific quality, meritocracy, research integrity and academic freedom.

The time to act is now!

² In line with the European Commission's [LGBTIQ Strategy 2020-2025](#), LGBTIQ people are persons who are attracted to others of their own gender (lesbian, gay) or any gender (bisexual); whose gender identity and/or expression does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth (trans, non-binary); who are born with sex characteristics that do not fit the typical definition of male or female (intersex); and whose identity does not fit into a binary classification of sexuality and/or gender (queer).

In recognition of and in agreement with the above stated, the following recommendations are aimed at the key categories of stakeholders:

TO RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR LEADERS

Universities and research organisations are key actors in eradicating gender-based violence. Academic autonomy cannot override the duty to make sure that everybody feels safe and respected. Leaders and managers have a crucial role in moving things forward, with gender mainstreaming strategies being important for creating conditions for the leadership to take an active role in this work.

- Take gender-based violence seriously by giving it a prominent place in your gender equality plans.
- As a starting point, establish the situation at the institutional level by conducting prevalence surveys and collecting intersectional gender-disaggregated statistics on incidents and case handling.
- For the institutional leaders specifically, use your role and engage senior members of your communities in particular to drive institutional changes that serve all but especially those who are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence.
- Appoint units responsible for addressing gender-based violence and ensure their well-informed and gender-sensitive training and institutional resourcing.
- Adopt and disseminate among all staff and students relevant robust institutional policies and protocols for prevention, protection and case handling, including measures to prevent revictimisation and stalking of those reporting cases, that reflect the intersectional, gender-based and systemic nature of violence. These should be developed in partnership

with relevant stakeholders including student and early-career researcher organisations and should address the broader campus environment.

- Create and disseminate specific and confidential channels for reporting cases that assure confidentiality and speed in the process of investigation.
- The responsibility for a safe environment lies with the higher education institutions and research organisations and it is their role to support the students, PhD candidates and staff.
- Advocate for the adoption of gender-based violence policies, consider the impacts of gender-based violence on the institution's goals at all levels of decision-making, and lend support to other leaders who are advocating for shared outcomes, especially those that are in initial stages of institutional policy development.

TO RESEARCH FUNDING ORGANISATIONS

Because competitive funding plays such a crucial role and because contract research staff on precarious contracts are some of the most vulnerable segments of the academic labour market, research funders have an important function in the system.

- As part of the application process, consider to require information about whether gender-based violence policies or protocols are in place, and require a specific mention of actions to combat gender-based violence in the gender equality plans put in place as an eligibility criterion.
- Engage in dialogue with research funders in Europe and beyond, learning from existing

practices and experience, and contribute to safeguarding secure research career paths.

- Support, where the RFO's strategy allows, the creation of scientific knowledge and evidence about gender-based violence and gender equality in R&I for example through funding programmes. Support this knowledge to be broadly disseminated in higher education and research and in society at large via open science practices.

TO EU MEMBER STATES

National authorities have the power and responsibility to coordinate with the different actors in the national higher education and research systems and to set the framework, provide incentives, impose sanctions and require reporting to ensure compliance with the mission of higher education institutions and research organisations in line with [Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention](#).

- Engage with Higher Education Institutions, Research Performing Organisations and Research Funding Organisations to stimulate institutional policies through, for example, requiring information on gender-based violence policies and case handling to be included in annual reports, contracts and compacts or through providing incentives.
- Create opportunities at national level for exchange of experience and mutual learning among the staff responsible for gender-based violence policy implementation at the institutional level.
- Ask for feedback from Research Performing Organisations and academics and students on how national authorities can contribute to achieving progress.

TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

In recent years, the European Commission has taken a lead on gender equality actions including

gender-based violence, and supported research into gender-based violence in academia through funding the Horizon 2020 UniSAFE project.

- Initiate a strategic engagement of the European Commission, EU Member States, Research Performing Organisations and Research Funding Organisations as well as stakeholder organisations through the ERA Forum (such as a subgroup) with a view to developing an EU baseline on gender-based violence in R&I and a monitoring framework for gender-based violence policies in R&I, within the framework of the implementation of ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024 Action 5.
- Given the policy priority given to international mobility and cooperation by DG RTD and DG EAC, initiate dialogue with EU Member States and international, non-associated third country partners to effectively include gender-based violence in mobility schemes and bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, as part of the gender equality, diversity and inclusiveness priority of the [Global approach to Research and Innovation](#).

AND FINALLY, WE CAN ALL ACT

Even though most responsibilities lie at the institutional level, we can all contribute towards safe academia for all.

- Use whatever power and resources available to take a stand and become an active ally.
- Do not be a silent bystander. Speak up against gender-based harassment and denigration when you see it, not only in the higher education and research sectors but outside as well!

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, holding the Presidency of the Research configuration of the Council of the EU in the second semester of 2022, hereby strongly supports this Call for Action and invites all relevant stakeholders in the EU, including Research Performing Organisations, Research Funding Organisations, EU Member States and European Commission, to take action and to build on this call, when implementing the ERA Action 5 in order to end gender-based violence in higher education and research institutions.