

ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE TO ENSURE ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Introduction

This policy advice outlines recommendations for the European Commission (EC) on the importance of securing the academic freedom of students, teachers, researchers, and other staff by ending gender-based violence in the European Research Area (ERA). This advice is especially important as a first step in conceptualising why and how the issue of academic freedom relates to the prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence in the ERA. The policy advice is also relevant because, according to policy and research studies on the subject (EPRS 2023; Kovács 2024; Massen 2024; Seckelmann et al 2021), the strengthening of academic freedom and gender equality is partly questioned in the ERA. Although ending gender-based violence has long been addressed as a priority area by the EC and other stakeholders (Bondestam, Lundqvist & Young Håkansson 2023; Call for Action 2022; EC 2024; Fajmonová et al 2021; Ljubljana Declaration 2021; SWG GRI 2020), there are still no concrete measures or policy advice in the ERA on ending gender-based violence to ensure academic freedom. The key message pursued in the policy brief is thus the need to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between academic freedom and gender-based violence, especially as the former cannot exist without ending the latter.

Definitions

Academic freedom is usually defined as a fundamental value of higher education and science, a prerequisite of a democratic society, and a necessary precondition for attaining high quality academic education and research (2020 Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research; EC 2000, 2020). In its most simplistic version, it concerns three basic dimensions: the freedom to do research, the freedom to teach and learn, and academic (not general) freedom of expression, dissemination, and collaboration. In some countries, students and other academic staff are not included in the concept of academic freedom. The conditions for exercising academic freedom often include institutional autonomy, the involvement of academic staff and students in higher education governance, and academic

labour conditions. This latter aspect is directly related to ending gender-based violence, although there are as yet no existing measures or policies in place in the ERA that clearly address the issue this way.

Gender-based violence is defined as 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, and organisational violence and harassment – in both online and offline contexts – and including emerging forms of violence, experienced as violence, violations, and abuse not yet necessarily named or recognised as violence (Strid et al. 2021, p. 13).

The ERA Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct on counteracting gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, in the EU research and innovation system (EC 2024) addresses this definition in further detail as well as the main logic for addressing gender-based violence on an institutional level. This logic rests on three pillars of policy development:

- **Commitment.** To acknowledge the existence and systemic nature of gender-based violence in research and innovation institutions and the responsibility of institutions to proactively create safe and inclusive working and studying environments.
- **Action.** All stakeholders in the ERA must take concrete actions to turn the commitment to creating safe and inclusive environments for research and innovation in the lived reality of researchers and students.
- **Accountability.** To establish an appropriate mechanism of institutional accountability to address all forms of gender-based violence, to handle cases, and to implement restorative measures for victims and survivors.

All three pillars are vital elements when ensuring and protecting the academic freedom of students, teachers, researchers, and other staff.

A statement of the issue

In recent years, major concerns about the state of academic freedom in the European Union have been raised by various stakeholders (EPRS 2024; Maasen et al 2023). Several different threats to academic freedom have been discussed in both policy and research, of which the following are the most relevant in this context:

- **Political interference.** Political pressures represent one of the most insidious threats to academic freedom. Governments, especially in authoritarian regimes, often attempt to control academic institutions, limiting scholars' ability to freely express and explore ideas. In certain EU MS, political leaders have used their power to censor academics, shut down universities, or influence curricula to align with government ideologies, often using anti-gender rhetoric to legitimise their actions. Even in full democracies, academic freedom is sometimes undermined when politicians exert influence over funding or research agendas, steering scholarship in politically favoured directions.
- **Social and cultural censorship.** Social movements and public outcry can also pose threats to academic freedom, especially in the form of a so-called 'cancel culture' or societal pressure to conform to certain ideological stances. In recent years, there has been

an increase in efforts to de-platform scholars or silence voices deemed controversial or offensive, especially by right-wing, populist, and anti-feminist groups. While universities should foster open dialogue, they also face criticism when academic freedom is seen as enabling speech or research that some groups consider harmful or unacceptable. For instance, some scholars have faced calls for the termination of their employment or have been ostracised for engaging in controversial research topics, such as gender and feminist research. These pressures can discourage researchers from exploring certain subjects or expressing opinions that might be unpopular, thereby stifling intellectual diversity and creativity.

- **Technological and surveillance challenges.** Advancements in technology have introduced new challenges to academic freedom. The increasing reliance on digital platforms for research and teaching has raised concerns about surveillance, censorship, and data privacy. Governments and private entities can monitor academic work and online discourse, sometimes using digital surveillance to identify and punish scholars who engage in research critical of state policies or corporate practices. In some instances, academic institutions themselves may implement surveillance policies or monitoring systems, thereby limiting the free exchange of ideas. The rise of 'big data' in academia, while useful for research, also raises ethical concerns about privacy and control over information, especially when sensitive topics are involved. In addition to structural threats of this kind, different forms of digital and online violence are more often directed against women and minorities in research institutions (Lipinsky et al. 2022).
- **Violence, hate, threats, and other forms of harassment.** Recognising the above-mentioned dimensions of threats and challenges to academic freedom in the ERA is crucial. Even more so given that the conditions for doing research, teaching, and learning are constantly undermined as students, teachers, researchers, and staff constantly experience gender-based violence and other forms of threats to their security. Nearly two in three (62%) of the over 42,000 respondents in the UniSAFE survey on gender-based violence in ERA research organisations stated that they had experienced at least one form of gender-based violence within their institution (including psychological, physical, sexual, economic, and online forms). Similar findings have been observed in global research for decades (Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020). Gender-based violence has severe consequences for individuals, including stress, depression, anxiety, alcohol abuse, lack of motivation, an increased tendency to interrupt studies or leave work, and deteriorating mental and physical health, and it also impedes participation and affects perceptions of safety in the study and work environment in general (McDonald 2012; Selkie et al. 2015).

A recent pioneering study in the Swedish research and higher education sector showed also that 39% of researchers and teachers had been subjected to some form of threat or harassment. The results indicated that researchers and teachers specialising in subjects debated in the media, or those who had previously experienced hatred, threats, or harassment, reported higher levels of victimisation. Women reported greater exposure to threats, hatred, and harassment as well as greater concerns of victimisation. Students and colleagues were the main perpetrators mentioned by respondents, showing that hate, threats, and harassment are largely an internal problem within higher education institutions as organisations (Brax 2024).

Recommendations

Gender-based violence undermines the academic freedom of staff and students throughout the ERA. This ongoing epidemic not only puts individuals at risk. It also impedes the quality of research and education. Fostering zero-tolerance of gender-based violence is therefore the best way to ensure the future development of new knowledge and innovation. The EC is well-positioned to support EU MS and different ERA stakeholders in the effective implementation of measures ending gender-based violence and promoting the academic freedom of students, teachers, researchers, and other staff.

Recommendations for the European Commission...

...on gender-based violence

- Promote full compliance with the Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct (EC 2024) in ERA institutions.
- Ensure that ending gender-based violence becomes and remains a mandatory requirement in ERA GEPs.
- Emphasise the importance of monitoring and evaluating GEPs by the EC as a way of strengthening the implementation of the Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct.
- Act against gender-based violence in all ERA mobility schemes (including Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and Erasmus+) by requiring applying institutions to acknowledge their commitment to the Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct.

...on academic freedom

- Promote the responsibility of EU MS to enact laws that explicitly protect academic freedom as a constitutional or statutory right. Laws should shield academic staff from disciplinary action or dismissal for expressing controversial or dissenting viewpoints in their research or teaching.
- Push for an ERA policy framework that ensures universities and research organisations preserve the freedom of students, teachers, researchers, and other academic staff to make their own decisions regarding curricula, hiring, and academic standards without interference from political or commercial interests.
- Take a clear stance against EU MS that interfere with academic freedom through governmental or political control that inhibits teaching or research on topics deemed sensitive or controversial by the state or political actors.
- Ensure that EU MS protect academic staff and students from surveillance or monitoring that may infringe on their intellectual freedom, particularly in cases where research or teaching topics are seen as controversial.
- Push for an ERA policy framework that provides refuge to scholars and students from countries in which academic freedom is restricted and ensure that they can continue their work and studies in a safe environment.

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