

Sexual Harrassment in Academia: Where do we Stand

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Abstract

A vast interdisciplinary literature shows that gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, (GBV) has high prevalence rates with severe consequences for survivor/victim and with high costs for employers and society as a whole in terms of added inequality, lost human capital and productivity. The scant literature on GBV in academia also shows high prevalence rates. Here we briefly overview some of these studies.

Keywords: Gender-based violence; sexual harassment; academia.

Since the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment began in the US on October 5th 2017, awareness about gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, (GBV) has been mounting in European universities and research organisations, research funding organisations (ROs). Deeply rooted in traditional gender norms and gender stereotyped culture, GBV adds to discriminatory treatment of women, and other minorities, and represents a dramatic obstacle to equality of opportunity for women and for all in academia.

A vast interdisciplinary literature shows that GBV has high prevalence rates - roughly over one in three women and fewer men have become targets at some point in their working-life, with targets often combining several minority-group threads (phenomenon defined as “intersectionality” by Crenshaw Williams, K., 1998), with severe consequences

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for survivor/victim mental health, physical health, and various work-related outcomes (European Commission, 1998; Welsh, 1999; Basu, 2003; Berdhal and Moore, 2006; Berdhal, 2007; McDonald 2012; EIGE, 2014; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission - EEOC, 2016; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014; Fitzgerald and Cortina 2018; Brown et al., 2020).

The scant and fragmented literature on GBV in academia (reviewed by e.g., Swedish Research Council, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Avveduto et al. 2019) also shows high prevalence rates in all European universities (including also countries considered champions of gender equality) and in all academic disciplines, with a concentration of targets among individuals belonging to several minority groups (e.g., LGBT staff on a short-term contracts). Internationally adopted policies, such as the Council of Europe Convention (Istanbul Convention adopted in 2011) and the International Labour Organisation Convention (C.190, adopted in June 2019), address GBV and place responsibilities on governments and employers to implement preventive and remedial measures. Nonetheless, to date the measures taken against GBV in European academia are scant and fragmented.

Most of these earlier studies have focused on North-America and/or on non-academic workplaces (e.g. TUC, 2016), with the literature to date being mainly focused on GBV in US academia (reviewed e.g. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). In European universities there is less research (e.g. Swedish Research Council, 2018).

It emerges from this limited literature that: there is little agreement to date on the definition of sexual harassment while other forms of gender-based violence are easier to capture; prevalence rates are high in all fields of study and in all European countries, and tend to proliferate under strictly hierarchical settings; most targets are women but other genders are

also exposed to GBV, with intersecting identities playing an important role in how GBV is experienced; most cases of GBV still goes unreported, and when reported, there is often bullying and retaliations (i.e. reporting results in negative consequences for the victims and/or academic/career sabotage); institutional tolerance levels tend to be high (i.e. GBV allegations are not often investigated or take a long time to be addressed) (in the UK, National Union of Students 2018); most perpetrators are men in positions of power over victims; often “serial” perpetrators are involved and operate mostly undisturbed (in the case of the US, Cantalupo and Kidder 2017); institutional responses are inadequate (Report commissioned by the Dutch Network of Women Professors, 2019; research on UK university responses to staff sexual misconduct, Bull and Rye 2019).

In particular, most studies of GBV in academic setting have focused on campus assault and on female targets. For instance, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) concluded that a quarter of Australian university students were sexually harassed in university settings in 2016. The largest national survey on college campus sexual violence in the US, conducted from the association of American Universities, recently found that about one every four female undergraduates had been the target of sexual assault. Academic workplaces were indicated as second only to the military for the highest rates of sexual harassment among U.S. activity sectors, with incidence rates as high as 58% (Ilies et al., 2003).

The rare studies on GBV in European education and research settings focused mostly on female victims, only one country, and specific research sectors/fields (Lebugle et al. 2018; www.gendercrime.eu). Estimates of GBV extent vary widely from one study to the other (e.g. Swedish Research Council, 2018 and Report commissioned by the Dutch Network of Women Professors, 2019), though at least one-in-every-three women (roughly forty per cent; but

estimates vary widely, depending on the study) and fewer men (roughly up to 20 percent, but often less than ten per cent; again with wide variations) in European academia were confronted with GBV during their studies/academic work-life.

Overall, the scant and varied estimates of academic victimisation rates are in line with those reported more globally for GBV during an individual life-course. For example, the National Violence Against Women survey of the US Department of Justice (2000) shows that 51,9% of women are victims of physical abuses, 17, 6% of sexual abuses and 8,1% of stalking. UN (2011) report that 70% of women suffer physical or sexual abuses during their lifetime, with women aged between 18 and 34 experiencing the highest rates of violence. Other surveys reported that 46,4% of lesbian women, 74,9% of bisexual women and 53% of black trans people experience sexual violence (Rosking-Frazer 2020). The WHO (2013) found that 35% of women globally were victims of different forms of sexual violence or other forms of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The IVAWS showed 35-60% of women victims of violence during their lifetime, 22-40% experienced IPV and less than one third reported the case to the police and even more rarely reported their victimization to somebody else (Johnson et al. 2008). More specifically, one in three European women has experienced one or more acts of physical violence; one in five has been target of stalking; one in ten has experienced online violence; and one in twenty has been raped; with 43% of women across the 28 EU countries having experienced some form of psychological violence by an intimate partner (<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/what-is-gender-based-violence>).

This huge variation in reported GBV incidence rates reflects the fact that some studies ask about life-time occurrences of GBV, others only about recent experiences; others specify

specific perpetrators (such as only students, or faculty); and some studies adopt different, broader or narrower, definitions of gender-based violence and/or sexual harassment.

Although the individual consequences (e.g. health and work/study performance impacts) of GBV in academia have been documented in the literature, to the best of our knowledge no systematic attempt has been made to estimate the financial and associated costs, which are likely to be very high.

Indeed, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE 2014) identified significant costs related to GBV from lost economic output, the cost of services (health, criminal justice, legal, social welfare and specialist services), and the physical and emotional impact on the victim. For the EU, the overall costs of domestic violence against women to the economy are estimated at € 109 125 574 091. Lost output as a result of injuries alone was estimated to be 12% of these costs. Spending on specialised services and prevention (at just 3% of these costs) was relatively small (EIGE 2014). These estimates drew on earlier work looking at the impact of domestic violence on the UK economy, which estimated £1.9 billion (€2.2 billion) in lost economic output as a result of time taken off work owing to injuries, decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and increased employee turnover (e.g. Ashe et al. 2017). Further estimates have been made under the European Added Value Assessment showing the annual cost to the EU of gender-based violence against women in 2011 was around €228 billion (1.8% of EU GDP) (European Parliament, 2014). According to the European domestic violence organisation WAVE (2016), an investment of only 10% of this cost (equal to €45 per citizen, per year) in violence prevention would make a significant contribution to reducing the financial impact of gender-based violence on national budgets.

Moreover, it emerges from this literature a lack of evaluation studies on the performance of the measures in place to address GBV (e.g., National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018), which also reflects the fact that existing measures are both limited and disparate, varying dramatically across European universities and research workplaces. This contrasts with the fact that GBV is illegal and should be addressed systematically. Indeed, the Council of Europe Convention (Istanbul Convention adopted in 2011) and the new International Labour Organisation Convention (C.190, adopted in June 2019, with the accompanying Recommendation, R.206)) address GBV and place responsibilities on governments and employers to tackle GBV. Despite these provisions, only a handful of European Universities to date explicitly discuss GBV in their regulations.

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