



How to end gender-based violence in academia and research? Stakeholders and experts met in Prague to discuss solutions and ways forward

25 November 2022, Prague | On 24 and 25 November 2022, the Centre for Gender and Science at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences organised an international conference *Ending gender-based violence in academia: Toward gender-equal, safe and inclusive research and higher education* under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, within the framework of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. With 140 participants and over 400 people attending online, the conference brought together representatives of student and early-career researchers, Research Performing Organisations and their umbrella organisations, Research Funding Organisations and national authorities. The goal was to advance the debate on the actions needed to improve the protection of students and staff from all forms of violence in academic settings, including issues of internationalisation, intersectionality and epistemic injustices. By signing a [Call for Action Working Towards Safe and Respectful Higher Education and Research for All](#), endorsed by the Czech Minister of Education Vladimír Balas, anyone can join the effort for gender-equal, safe and inclusive research and higher education.

This high-level conference addressed the persistent and damaging problem of gender-based violence in academia, including sexual harassment. “*Gender-based violence compromises the integrity and trust in academic and research institutions and their credibility. The issue is clearly a policy concern to be tackled at the EU level and in national and institutional policies in European countries,*” stated Marcela Linkova, the head of the Centre for Gender and Science, in her opening statement. In his opening remarks, Czech Minister of Education Vladimír Balas stated: “*Ending gender-based violence is a priority for the Ministry and we can’t keep closing our eyes to it*” and invited others to join the call for action. Commissioner for Equality Helena Dali assured the audience that together with Commissioner Mariya Gabriel the work will continue to achieve a Union of Equality free from gender-based violence.

Among those who emphasise the need to eradicate gender-based violence in academia the most, are student and early-career researcher associations. Their representatives opened the conference discussing the persistent issues at the institutional level, including the unwillingness to address incidents and downplaying their seriousness, lack of responsible staff and institutional procedures, and unclear competences and mandates, as well as the need to coordinate institutional policies across Europe because of international mobility. The

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associations also shared information on the types of support and activities they provide in response to violence and harassment.

The issue of dependence and hierarchical relations was stressed. Sara Pilia from eurodoc likened the relationship of a PhD candidate and his/her supervisor to a marriage but without the possibility to divorce. Anna Bull from the 1972 Group added that dealing with unequal power positions of victims remains a huge issue, adding that "a big challenge is the disciplinary process, it must give rights to the aggrieved party. People are scared to report because of retaliation and threats."

To support the struggle for a safer and more respectful higher education with data, the Horizon 2020 UniSAFE project conducted the largest prevalence study to date among 46 participating universities and research organisations in 15 countries in Europe. The survey shows that 62% of the respondents have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence since they started working or studying at their institution. Presenting the findings, Anne Laure Humbert from Oxford Brookes University stated: *"Numbers are political. It's not about percentages, but the amount of people affected and how it affects their lives. One incident is one too many."*

The UniSAFE prevalence findings bring into focus that this is a systemic problem, not a failure of individuals. According to Fredrik Bondestam from the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research: *"The shift in perception of GBV is necessary. We must consider violence as a process, not a one-time exceptional act."* Miguel Lorente Acosta, Associate Professor in the School of Medicine at the University of Granada, stressed that: *"We need to move from personal commitment to structural solution and make the academic community understand that gender-based violence is an expression of gender inequality."*

Discussing the role of national authorities, Gemma Irvine, Vice-President for Equality & Diversity at Maynooth University, Ireland, said: *"National surveys are a baseline, it is important to have advisory boards and sharing the good practice, having implementation plans with funding available for institutions. Having a national framework creates common language and puts pressure on laggards."*

Representing Research Funding Organisations, Rhonda J Davis, Head of Office of Equity and Civil Rights, National Science Foundation in the USA, stressed the participatory process for developing the policy to end gender-based violence at NSF: *"The comments on it were contradictory, and the result ended up in the middle: Nobody was happy. But, in the end, the feedback was positive."* Anne Taylor introduced the strategy taken by Wellcome Trust, with time-limited sanctions to allow people and institutions to improve in the future. Wellcome Trust sends regular reminders to institutions and requests information about GBV cases.

In a discussion about the role of umbrella organisations Vera Sokolova, Vice-Chair of the Equality & Diversity Working Group at Coimbra Group and Chair of the Board for Equal Opportunities at Charles University, said: *"A crucial role of umbrella organisations is to be values-setters and inspirational leaders on such topics"*. Rona Jualla van Oudenhoven,

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member of the Gender and Diversity working group in the Guild, stressed the importance of working together and striving to *“have a shared understanding of the issues”*. Representing LERU, Karin Gilland Lutz, Chair of the LERU Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy Group, stated that despite the differences in the approaches within the LERU institutions, there are some clear communalities: *“There is a growing sense that gender-based violence ultimately impedes a university’s ability to deliver on its core functions in terms of research, learning and teaching, and innovation. It is about the values our members stand for, without exception, and it’s also about the excellence-driven goals of each and every one of LERU’s members, and about seeing how gender-based violence is contrary to our values as well as to our goals.”*

To conclude the conference Joanna Drake, Deputy Director General of the European Commission's DG Research and Innovation underlined the need for concrete action backed by cooperation, legislation but also funding. *“Funding is key to research, and we should make money talk in academia... by having a convening of minds and actions that we shall not work with organisations that continue to practice gender-based violence. Full stop. Because at the end of the day we need to get to a situation where behaviour and culture really change.”* On behalf of the Czech Presidency, Radka Wildova, Deputy Minister responsible for Higher Education and Research at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports concluded: *“I am convinced this conference gave us all an important impetus to further work for ending gender-based violence in academia. I believe that the call for action launched today will wake up reactions on all the addressed levels.”*

[Call for Action](#)

[Endorsement of the call for action](#)

Conference website gbv2022.eu

[Results of the UniSAFE project](#)

More about the UniSAFE project: unisafe-gbv.eu