



ADDRESSING ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE UNI4EQUITY PROJECT

A policy brief from the Uni4Equity Project

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Executive Summary:

Along with in-person sexual harassment (IPSH), online sexual harassment (OSH) is a significant phenomenon in European Higher Education institutions (HEIs) affecting different members of academic communities, such as students, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff. With extensive impacts on victims' psychological, physical, and social health, safety, and academic and professional performance, OSH has become a central focus when it comes to defining institutional prevention and combating policies and strategies. As digital content is massively accessible and shareable, OSH can lead to continuous revictimization, often resulting in serious harm and trauma. Benefiting from anonymity, perpetrators' proof of identity is difficult to obtain, aggravating victims' vulnerability and sense of powerlessness. The complexity of OSH is increased by Artificial Intelligence tools, which propagate victims' fake sexual content and complicate perpetrators' legal accountability.

Data from the Uni4Equity Project, combining quantitative and qualitative elements, revealed that OSH is a relevant problem, with an average prevalence of 16% across the six European HEIs involved, in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Spain. Thus, one in six individuals reported experiencing at least one form of OSH, with a higher prevalence observed among women and non-binary people.

Despite the prevalence of OSH and the recognition of its heightened risk, interviews with stakeholders revealed concerns about HEIs' capacity to identify and respond to such cases, which may explain why victims do not resort to internal services. The Uni4Equity Project concluded that only 17% of OSH victims used HEIs' services or asked for staff's support, with only 6% complaining to police authorities. Most of them asked for support from family and friends (41%).

The difficulty of HEIs in mapping OSH and establishing a multilevel strategy aiming to prevent and combat it limited avenues for early detection, monitoring, trauma-informed support for victims, and perpetrators' accountability.

The challenges associated with OSH in HEIs require the implementation of a Global Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender-based and Sexual Violence, distinguishing IPSH from OSH, alongside the development of targeted institutional, interpersonal, and individual interventions, framed in Human Rights and Public Health approaches, and based on three prevention levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. By operating within these three levels, HEIs increase their

potential to assure a safe, equitable, and inclusive environment, responding more effectively to OSH's challenges.

Summary of Policy Recommendations:

- Ensuring systematic mapping of OSH, integration of IT and Data Security Units into strategic planning and development of a campus-wide awareness campaign (*primary prevention*);
- Providing easy access to reporting systems, updating and implementing digital support tools, communicating policies clearly, and implementing immediate intervention when working with high-risk groups (*secondary prevention*);
- Delivering trauma-informed psychological support services for victims, structured accountability measures for perpetrators, and professional development opportunities for staff members and students (*tertiary prevention*).

Introduction:

OSH in HEIs is a pervasive problem, with severe consequences in victims' lives. Besides violating fundamental Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2021), OSH has negative impacts on health and safety, affecting individual and social functioning in diverse contexts, and constraining academic and professional performance (Buchanan & Mahoney, 2022; Fox, 2023; Kirkner et al., 2022). Despite OSH frequently overlapping with IPSH, its characteristics demand a specific approach, as its occurrence involves complex dynamics, for example, in terms of range and anonymity.

Abusive and offensive conduct, such as the non-consensual sharing of sexual content, like images or videos, sexualized cyberbullying, sexual coercion, cyberflashing, and the production of deepfakes using AI (European Institute for Gender Equality – EIGE, 2022), is frequently associated with lasting impacts, as digital content can be widely shared and difficult to control. Thus, victims are often exposed to ongoing harm (Buchanan & Mahoney, 2022), especially those who are more vulnerable, like women and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Hagerlid et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2021).

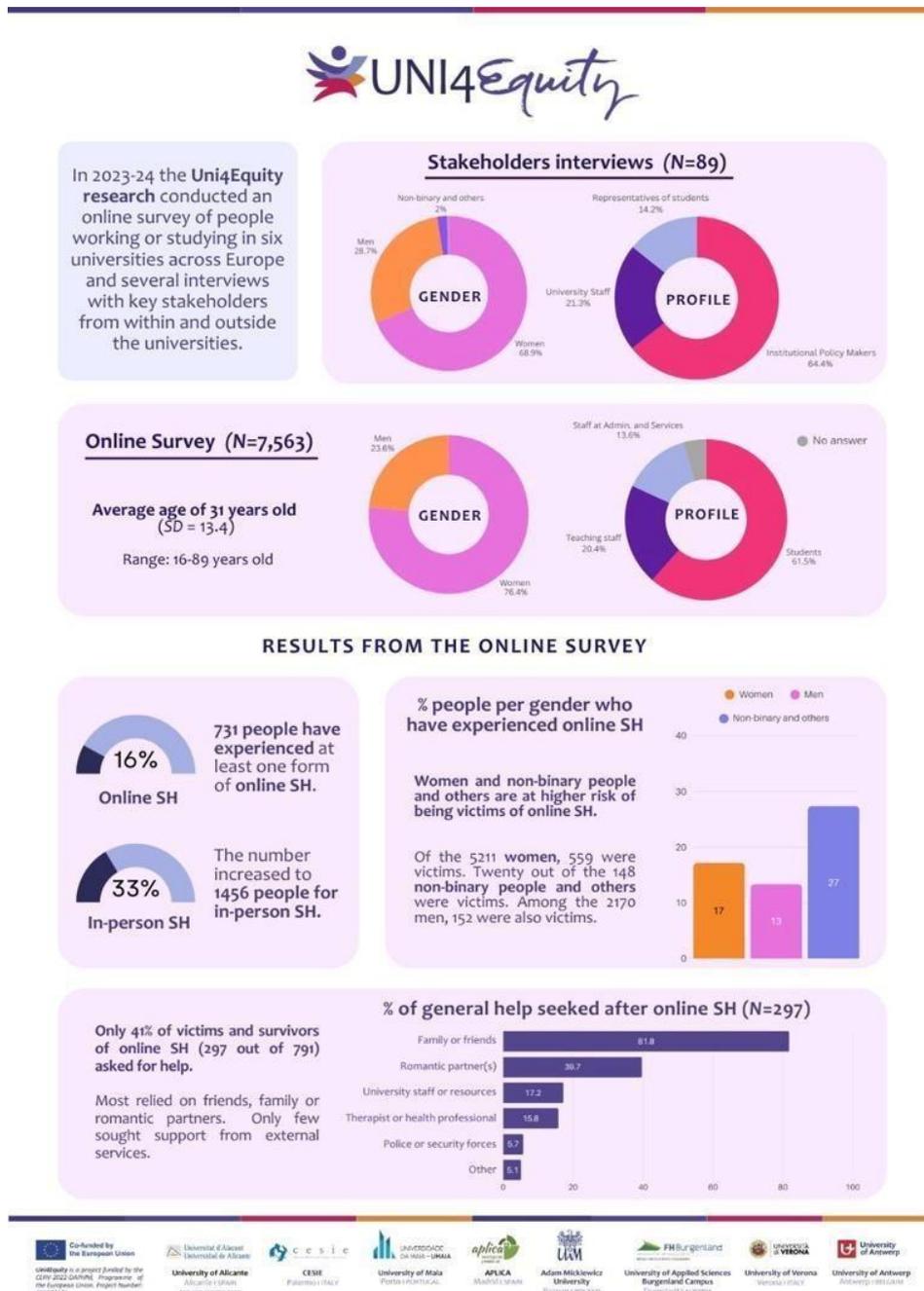
As perpetrators' identification and accountability are difficult to achieve, due to the increased potential of anonymity in cyberspace, victims tend to feel more exposed and unprotected, intensifying psychological, physical, and social damage, and interfering with victims' reputations. The advance of AI technology has further increased OSH, with deepfakes and fake nudes amplifying image-based sexual violence, in general.

In the last decade, and reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational settings, including HEIs, experienced a digital transformation (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The use of digital devices is widespread among students and staff, elevating the risk of sexual harassment facilitated by technology. Scientific research has been showing that OSH has high incident rates, manifests in several forms, and is characterized by gender differences (Oksanen et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2018). In consequence, HEIs have been investing in enhancing the quality and efficiency of their institutional policies concerning OSH prevention and intervention, and implementing specialized psychological services for victims and accountability measures for perpetrators.

Key Issues & Challenges:

The Uni4Equity is a Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) Project, funded by the European Commission. Using a multi-country and mixed-method approach (Vives-Cases et al., 2025), the results confirmed what previous studies have revealed, i.e., that OSH prevalence in European HEIs is significant. Among the 7,563 participants surveyed in HEIs located in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Spain, students and staff, 16% reported having been exposed to at least one form of OSH, with 36% having suffered IPSH (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Uni4Equity's results - OSH



Women and non-binary people were those who experienced OSH the most. In consequence, and as widely documented in literature, an intersectional approach that considers how multiple forms of oppression (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, social class) shape the experience of victims of OSH and their opportunities for access to justice is necessary to adequately assist them.

Data from interviews with 89 institutional stakeholders showed that OSH is perceived as a relevant problem characterized by aggravated risk. Nevertheless, participants manifested their concern about HEIs' capacity to identify, intervene, and manage OSH cases, especially when they occur outside the university's online channels, or Artificial Intelligence (AI) is used to create deep-fake images or videos, namely fake nudes.

Additionally, the Project concluded that victims' reluctance to use formal reporting mechanisms is notorious. Only 41% of victims of OSH asked for help, mostly relying on their family and friends, whilst only 17% resorted to HEIs' services or staff, and only 6% to the police authorities. This aligns with previous research, which indicates that formal complaining to official authorities is often limited (Lawler & Boxall, 2023), leading to comparatively low official registration rates.

The gravity of OSH and its impacts, along with the difficulty in signaling and handling cases, hinder effective responses for victims and perpetrators, but also for the HEI's communities. The results of Uni4Equity address several important challenges that need to be overcome to safeguard OSH's prevention and combat. Diminishing OSH's prevalence by promoting cultural and social awareness and digital literacy, developing mechanisms to map and respond to OSH, adopting an intersectional approach in assessment and intervention, which recognizes the increased risk of women and non-binary people being exposed, improving HEI's capacity to identify, intervene, and manage OSH cases, especially those that involve the use of AI tools, and enhancing victims' confidence to report to internal services and police authorities.

In sum, the Key Issues & Challenges of Uni4Equity are systematized in Table 1.

Table 1. Key Issues and Challenges

| Key Issues | Key Challenges |
|---|---|
| High prevalence of sexual harassment in HEIs – 16% of OSH | Diminishing OSH's prevalence by promoting cultural and social awareness and digital literacy. |

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| Low HEIs' capacity to identify, intervene, and manage OSH cases – especially when they occur outside the university's online channels. | Developing mechanisms to map and respond to OSH. |
| Gender differences in OSH victims - women and non-binary individuals are the most affected. | Adopting an intersectional approach in assessment and intervention, which recognizes the increased risk of women and non-binary people being exposed. |
| High concern with AI tools – especially with deep-fake images or videos, namely, fake nudes' production and dissemination. | Improving technical knowledge and skills to address AI-driven OSH, integrating IT and Data Security Units. |
| Victims' disclosure of OSH: - 41% asked for help, mostly relying on their family and friends; - 17% resorted to HEIs' services or staff, and only 6% to the police authorities. | Enhancing victims' confidence to report to internal services and police authorities, by disseminating information on internal and external specialized services and resources. |

Policy Recommendations:

HEIs should implement a Global Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender-based and Sexual Violence, distinguishing IPSH from OSH, as they have specificities. The Policy Recommendations resulting from the conclusions of Uni4Equity are organized in three levels, reflecting primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies.

Primary Prevention

Primary prevention targets the broader HEI community and seeks to prevent OSH from occurring. To achieve these goals, the recommendations are:

- Conducting a comprehensive institution-wide diagnosis assessment of OSH and follow-up periodic evaluations to understand the extent, nature, and determinants of OSH.

Using mixed methodologies, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation, to map and understand the phenomenon, identify grey areas, and signalize groups at higher risk of suffering OSH, is fundamental to picture it.

- Improving technical knowledge and skills to detect, monitor, and respond to OSH, involving IT and Data Security Units. HEIs should be responsible for establishing a secure digital environment, protecting the privacy of individuals' data, and promoting digital literacy, including for the use of AI-driven tools.
- Promoting cultural and social awareness through the development of social media campaigns, the creation and dissemination of training materials, and the integration of OSH into community engagement initiatives can foster a culture of digital safety and respect, while simultaneously reinforcing the HEIs' community's collective rejection of OSH.

Secondary prevention

Secondary prevention minimizes the impact of OSH through early identification. Thus, the recommendations are:

- Improving HEIs' communication systems regarding OSH policies and procedures by providing specific information, such as FAQs, newsletters, and targeted digital campaigns for vulnerable audiences (e.g., women, non-binary people).
- Developing sensitive and inclusive reporting systems. HEIs should be encouraged to create user-friendly methods and protocols of reporting, and digital filters/monitoring systems that permit the reception of reports on multiple digital devices.
- Making available digital platforms that are easy to access, where HEIs' members can use risk assessment tools, online counselling services, and peer support resources, in addition to other programs and services.
- Developing and implementing bystander intervention training.
- Establish protective measures based on the needs of vulnerable groups, as well as policies that reduce the risk of women and non-binary people, for example, becoming victims of OSH. Gender-sensitive empowerment programs and interventions may help to mitigate the negative effects of OSH.

Tertiary prevention

Tertiary prevention seeks to reduce harm and prevent re-victimisation by mitigating the wide range of consequences experienced by victims and supporting gradual recovery through established methods and mechanisms, while early identification helps to minimise the impact of OSH. Accordingly, the recommendations are as follows:

- Ensuring specialized psychological services for OSH victims, based on trauma-informed and intersectional approaches.
- Enhancing the management boards, staff members, and students' capacity for effectively responding to OSH. HEIs' members must be trained to develop competencies to support victims.
- Holding perpetrators accountable, reducing the risk of recidivism. Measures can vary from disciplinary and sanctionary actions to counselling or rehabilitative programs, aiming to change beliefs and behaviours.
- Using AI tools to assist OSH victims. AI systems can monitor criminal activity and systematize behaviour patterns and risk indicators. They give victims faster access to resources and information needed to report abuse.

Conclusion & Call to Action:

OSH in HEIs demands effective responses because of its magnitude and personal, interpersonal, and institutional impacts. A multilevel prevention framework, supporting Human Rights and Public Health approaches, might reduce OSH prevalence, increase HEIs communities' knowledge, skills, and resources, help victims, and hold perpetrators accountable. Efforts to build or reinforce a culture of zero tolerance to OSH, a Global Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender-based and Sexual Violence, distinguishing IPSH from OSH, must be implemented in accordance with the characteristics of each HEI. Considering potential vulnerabilities and risks, special attention should be paid to women and non-binary people, and to victims' resistance to seeking help within HEIs' services or resorting to police authorities.

HEIs are urged to:

- Frame OSH as a Human Rights and a Public Health issue, influenced by structural gender asymmetries.

- Systematically collect and publish data on OSH cases, identifying the adopted procedures and methods to handle the reports, and the obtained results.
- Promote digital literacy and monitor online practices, with a focus on AI tools.
- Define and disseminate information on policies, measures, and protocols clarifying their institutional responsibility to prevent and combat OSH, and to support victims.
- Offer specialized psychological services to OSH victims, based on trauma-informed and intersectional approaches.
- Ensure accountability measures and counselling for OSH perpetrators.

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