



# EQUITY-CENTERED APPROACHES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT PREVENTION IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

*A policy brief from the Uni4Equity Project*

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**Main Authors:** Carmen Vives-Cases, Marina Berbegal-Bernabeu, Esther Ríos-Albert, Ariadna Cerdán-Torregrosa

**Contributing Authors:** Barbara Jankowiak, Sylwia Jaskulska, Sofia Neves, Mafalda Sousa, Joana Topa, Estefânia Silva

**Reviewers:** Emily Felt, José Miguel-Carrasco, Aitana Muñoz-Haba, Marlies Wallner, Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska, Maryna Manchenko, Iwetta Andruszkiewicz, Katarzyna Waszyńska

**Project Partners:** University of Alicante (Spain), University of Antwerp (Belgium), University of Maia (Portugal), University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (Austria), Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland), University of Verona (Italy), CESIE ETS (Italy) and APLICA Investigación y translación Soc. Coop. (Spain)



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## Executive Summary:

Sexual harassment is a pervasive form of gender-based violence and a serious violation of human rights that frequently takes place in European universities and undermines personal, community and social safety, as well as institutional integrity. Occurring both in-person and online, it affects the entire university community, including undergraduate, master's and doctoral students, and teaching, administrative and service staff. Although formal institutional resources and mechanisms to prevent and combat sexual harassment exist, they remain limited and are not always effectively used. Evidence from the Uni4Equity survey showed that most victims-survivors manage the situation on their own, with only 2% turning to formal university support. Fear of retaliation and asymmetrical power hierarchies within universities affect not only victims-survivors, but also bystanders' actions. Beyond its documented harm to health and well-being, sexual harassment victimization also negatively influences professional and academic trajectories.

Uni4Equity, a European project funded by the European Union, aims to strengthen the capacity of universities to identify, map and respond to cases of sexual harassment in the workplace and the academic environment (classrooms, virtual campuses) using a social equity, gender-transformative and intersectional approach. Through surveys, interviews, and implementation and evaluation of large-scale interventions, the project has identified key barriers to effectively addressing sexual harassment in universities.

As data from the Uni4Equity project show, not everyone in the university community is at equal risk of experiencing sexual harassment. Social inequalities drive differences in risk of being exposed to sexual harassment, reporting of cases and receiving formal institutional support. Women are nearly four times more likely to experience sexual harassment in university settings than men, and members of the LGBTQIA+ people face even higher risks. Multiple barriers prevent equitable access to institutional support resources and reporting mechanisms. As environments that concentrate people at higher risk of sexual harassment (e.g., women, young people, ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ students and staff), higher education institutions must take responsibility for minimizing these consequences, preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the university setting.

This policy brief presents key findings and makes equity-centered policy recommendations to strengthen universities' capacity to prevent sexual harassment, promote social equity and provide university spaces that are safe, inclusive and violence-free.

### Summary of Key Findings:

- **Social Inequalities Drive Unequal Risk of Victimization** - Women, LGBTQIA+ people, young university community members, people with disabilities and those without socioeconomic support are at greater risk of sexual harassment.
- **Formal Institutional Support is Undermined by Lack of Access and Trust** - Most victims-survivors first seek help from informal support (if any), such as family and friends. Formal institutional support resources exist but are underutilized and present multiple barriers to access.
- **Case Management Fails to Address Equity Concerns** - Barriers, including lack of recognition of sexual harassment as violence, lack of trust and confidence in the safety and effectiveness of procedures and fear of academic retaliation, hinder the effective reporting of sexual harassment.

### Summary of Policy Recommendations:

- **Address the Root Causes of Sexual Harassment** (*Primary Prevention*)

Primary prevention targets the entire university community and seeks to transform the structures and cultures that enable sexual harassment. Key actions include launching intersectional awareness campaigns, implementing mandatory training on the root causes of harassment, and integrating equity provisions into university equality plans that explicitly address power imbalances and gender inequalities. These strategies aim to change attitudes, reverse harmful norms, and restructure cultures that perpetuate harassment.

- **Ensure Equality in Access to Formal Institutional Support** (*Secondary Prevention*)

Secondary prevention focuses on reducing barriers that prevent vulnerable groups from accessing formal support and reporting sexual harassment. Universities must ensure all resources are available in multiple languages, use inclusive and accessible formats, establish diverse reporting channels with flexible hours, and create targeted interventions for higher-risk groups such as women, members of the LGBTQIA+ people, international students and staff, people with disabilities and others. Strengthening partnerships with community organizations and providing specialized training for frontline staff ensures that those who need support can access it.

- **Protect Against the Unequal Impact of Sexual Harassment and Prevent Revictimization** (*Tertiary Prevention*)

Tertiary prevention protects individuals who have experienced sexual harassment by minimizing harm and ensuring they can continue their studies or work without penalty. Essential measures include guaranteeing free legal guidance and specialized psychological support (especially that which uses trauma-informed and intersectional approaches), eliminating academic or professional consequences for victims-survivors through accommodations and protections, and ensuring that safety plans place responsibility on perpetrators rather than victims-survivors. Specialized staff trained in gender and intersectional perspectives must manage cases sensitively to prevent academic retaliation and further harm to victims-survivors.

Universities must adopt equity-centered prevention strategies that address the root causes of sexual harassment and transform institutional cultures, reduce barriers to reporting and receiving formal support, and protect vulnerable groups from sexual harassment and additional harm to victims-survivors.

## The Issue: Sexual Harassment in Universities

### *A severe violation of human rights*

Sexual harassment, defined as “any form of unwanted conduct, verbal, non-verbal or physical, of a sexual nature, with the purpose or effect of violating a person’s dignity, particularly when it creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment”<sup>1</sup> is one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence in universities.<sup>2</sup>

It manifests physically, through non-consensual touching of the body, clothing or hair; verbally, through sexual comments and jokes or intrusive questions; non-verbally, through obscene gestures or intimidating glances; and digitally, such as through sending unwanted sexual messages or content.<sup>3,4</sup> Victims-survivors and bystanders of sexual harassment are affected by social pressure, sexist norms and by the normalization that contributes to these acts not being perceived as violent.<sup>4</sup>

### *Why addressing sexual harassment at universities is urgent*

Academic culture and institutions have traditionally been hierarchical, competitive and shaped by individualistic tendencies, all of which enable abuses such as sexual harassment.<sup>5,6</sup>

At the structural level, the university reproduces the roots of inequality and discrimination in contemporary societies —such as gender inequality, the feminization of poverty, the gender pay gap, and women’s underrepresentation in leadership—, creating unequal conditions that disproportionately affect women and intersect with other forms of violence. At the institutional level, the university reproduces inequalities through power hierarchies, the presence of invisible barriers and policies and programs that ignore gender inequalities. And at the individual level, behaviour is conditioned by socially learned attitudes —such as sexism, adherence to traditional gender roles, and internalized biases like the “Impostor Syndrome”. All these forms of social inequalities influence both the behaviour of perpetrators of sexual harassment as well as the capacity of victims-survivors to recognize, report and resist this violence.

It is thus essential not just to sanction sexual harassment in universities, but to fundamentally transform the structures that enable it. This can take place by adopting an intersectional perspective in policy design, considering, for example, how gender, ethnicity, disability, and other identities interact to create unique experiences of discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Policies should also aim to reconfigure gender dynamics, rethinking existing power relations and redistributing resources, responsibilities and expectations between women, men and non-binary people, referred to as the gender-transformative approach.<sup>8</sup> In addressing sexual harassment,

universities must raise awareness, engaging the entire university community in collective empowerment. Research shows that this equity-focused approach can help universities to build an egalitarian institution free from violence.<sup>9</sup>

Uni4Equity is a European project funded by the European Union that aims to strengthen the capacity of universities to identify, map and respond to cases of sexual harassment in the workplace/academic environment (classrooms, virtual campuses) using a social equity, gender-transformative and intersectional approach. Through surveys, interviews, and implementation and evaluation of large-scale interventions, the project has identified key barriers to effectively addressing sexual harassment in universities.

### *An equity imperative*

The Uni4Equity project surveyed over 7,500 members of the university community and interviewed 89 key stakeholders in six European universities (University of Alicante -Spain-, University of Antwerp -Belgium-, University of Maia -Portugal-, University of Applied Sciences Burgenland -Austria-, Adam Mickiewicz University -Poland-, and University of Verona -Italy-). We found significant socially-based inequalities in the risk of experiencing sexual harassment and severe inadequacies in access and effectiveness of institutional responses and formal support resources.

Because sexual harassment is directly linked to unbalanced power dynamics and social inequality, women, members of the LGBTQIA+ people, young people, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, international students, and those with precarious employment are more likely to suffer sexual harassment.

Given this context, universities must adopt social equity approaches to prevent and address sexual harassment effectively. Social equity refers to the absence of social inequalities and their consequences for the health and wellbeing of the population. Promoting social equity in the university involves designing intersectional policies that are sensitive to gender, diversity and power dynamics in order to build academic environments where all community members thrive.

***Without equity-focused prevention strategies, institutional responses to sexual harassment will fail those who need protection most.***

## **Key Findings**

The results of the Uni4Equity project show that sexual harassment affects the entire university community, including undergraduate, master's and doctoral students, researching staff,

teachers, administrative and service staff.<sup>10</sup> However, as the survey and the interviews showed, there are profound social inequalities in the risk of suffering from sexual harassment in the university setting.

### 1. Social Inequalities Drive Unequal Risk of Victimization

Women are nearly four times more likely to experience sexual harassment than men (30% vs. 8%). Similarly, in the interviews with key informants from universities, women are identified as the group most likely to be targeted by sexual harassment, especially those in situations of greater social vulnerability marked, for example, by job insecurity, economic precarity, having a disability, or having already suffered other forms of violence in the past.

*“Women... are a part of socially vulnerable groups. For example, there are economic patterns [...] or some type of disability [...] or they have a history of being bullied.”* — Institutional representative, women

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community had almost twice the probability of experiencing sexual harassment compared to heterosexual individuals. Among LGBTQIA+ community, bisexual people experienced sexual harassment most frequently (51%), followed by homosexual people (42%) and asexual people (40%). Cisgender men experienced sexual harassment less frequently (30%), while trans and intersex people (59%) had higher frequencies. Specifically, LGBTQIA+ phobic beliefs were mentioned in the interviews as an emerging factor that increases the risk of sexual harassment against LGBTQIA+ people.

*“You’re even more vulnerable when you have a sexual orientation that’s different from the norm.”* — Institutional representative, women

Frequently, situations of sexual harassment are related to power imbalances within academic and professional hierarchies. For example, young people, both students and staff members in lower positions in the academic structure are more vulnerable due to their economic and academic dependence.

*“Probably also doctoral students [...] I don’t like this hierarchical assessment, but, for example, service workers, who in our structure do not occupy very high positions, might not have the courage to report certain inappropriate behaviors.”*  
— Institutional representative, woman

The absence of social support networks nearly doubles the probability of experiencing sexual harassment. Project data shows 44% of people who lack social support have suffered from sexual harassment. For example, interviewees mentioned being an international student and coming from homes with less parental presence as factors contributing to a lack of social support. On the other hand, other situations of vulnerability emerged, such as having a disability or a low socioeconomic status.

*"I think of students who come from single-parent families or from families where parents aren't present much." — Student representative, woman*

*"People with disabilities, of course, any disability [...]. They tend to be vulnerable because harassers perceive them that way." — Staff member, woman*

**KEY MESSAGE:** *Sexual harassment is not randomly distributed, it systematically targets those with the least institutional power and social support.*

## **2. Formal Institutional Support is Undermined by Lack of Access and Trust**

The 7% of victims-survivors said they turned first to informal support networks such as family and friends, whilst about 2% turned to formal university supports such as faculty and university resources. Project interviewees suggested that women are more likely to use self-management strategies (such as blocking on social media or avoiding physical contact), than to seek support through the institution, sometimes because of previous negative experiences.

*"The boss simply said: "Look at this," opened a drawer and said: "Here I put all the reports and I don't even open them." — Institutional representative, woman*

Across the university community, it is often unclear how to detect, prevent, respond to and report a case of sexual harassment. Currently, there are multiple barriers to accessing formal university support for victims-survivors of sexual harassment. This includes, for example, language barriers - for international students or staff - or when institutional websites use reporting tools that are not easily accessible, inclusive or user-friendly or not adapted to different languages, formats or channels.

Information is often scattered and not centralized, which creates confusion and weakens trust and use of resources. Currently, most EU universities do not have frequently asked questions (FAQs) pages on their websites that provide clarity about action protocols. People with

disabilities (visual or hearing impairments or developmental disabilities like autism) require accessible, inclusive and user-friendly explanations of how to access support that are currently lacking. Also, in the case of functional disabilities, architectural barriers often hinder in-person access.

*“A person, well, [...] to give you an example, is autistic or has problems communicating. Well, it's multiple times more difficult. Or if they have any disability” — Student representative, woman*

**KEY MESSAGE:** *Formal institutional resources exist, but multiple barriers still restrict access for those who need them.*

### 3. Equity Concerns Are Not Yet Fully Integrated into Case Management Practices

Finally, power imbalances that are frequent at universities, given their hierarchies and merit-based structure, lead to underreporting or lack of reporting of sexual harassment. Participants in our research, especially women (27%) and staff (34%), reported a lack of recognition of sexual harassment as a form of violence. Moreover, most participants in the survey, especially women (55%) and students (54%), recognized uncertainty about what constitutes a “serious” case as a major barrier to reporting. Interviewees also noted that people tend to believe that only the most visible and serious cases, such as those involving physical contact, are likely to be reported.

*“Only the most serious actions get reported.” — Student representative, woman*

Fear of retaliation and university power hierarchies affect not only victims-survivors, but also bystanders of sexual harassment. The interviews revealed that students and staff in lower positions tend not to intervene for fear of negative consequences (possible retaliation by the perpetrator, fear of professional or academic repercussions). However, women (79%) and staff (82%) show a greater willingness to intervene than men (67%) and students (71%), especially in situations that require empathy (for example, asking someone if they need help).

*“There's also a bit of fear, like, if I say something against this professor now, that could become a problem for my studies.” — Student representative, man*

“There are many types of retaliation in terms of professional promotion, academic advancement, etc. And then there is economic dependence; in many cases you can't take the risk.” — Staff member, woman

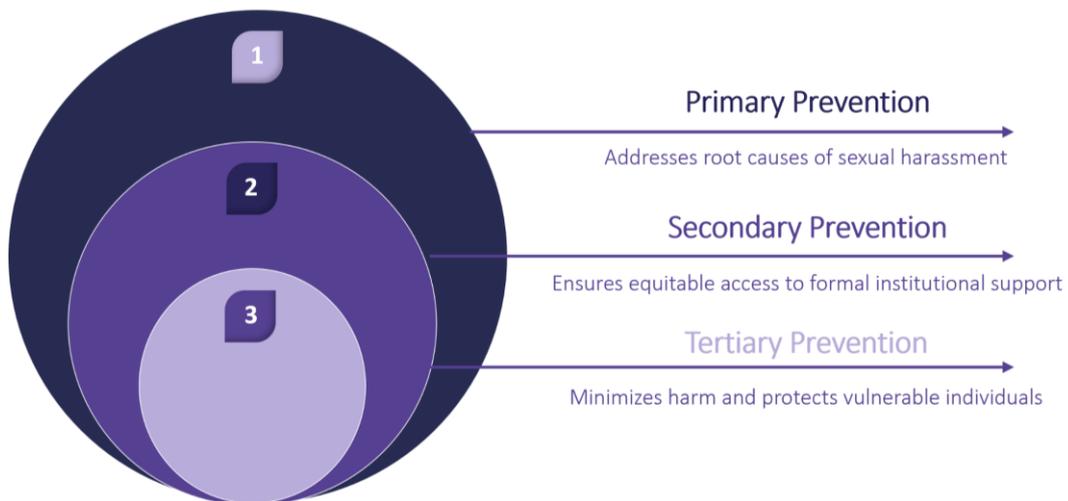
**KEY MESSAGE:** Current case management systems must address the power inequalities that contribute to sexual harassment.

## Policy Recommendations: Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Promotion of Social Equity in the University Environment

Sexual harassment at the university requires a comprehensive approach that considers the diversity of the university community, addresses the root causes of sexual harassment, and promotes changes at different levels where gender relations occur. Training is an essential tool for promoting these changes, but it must be complemented by strengthening institutional policies, building alliances with key agents both within and outside the university, and improving resources and mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment and other forms of violence and discrimination at the university.

In order to be effective, actions must take place at three levels of prevention (see Figure 1 for a widely used public health framework prevention levels). *Primary prevention* focuses on addressing root causes of sexual harassment. *Secondary prevention* ensures equitable access to formal institutional support. And *tertiary prevention* focuses on protecting individuals and minimizing harm, particularly for those who are socially vulnerable and therefore at higher risk.

**Figure 1. Levels of sexual harassment prevention**



## Primary Prevention: Address the Root Causes of Sexual Harassment

Primary prevention of sexual harassment involves actions directed at the entire university community regarding factors that give rise to sexual harassment. It requires strategies that transform gender and power relations at the social, organizational and interpersonal levels. In our experience in the Uni4Equity project, the following are needed key actions:

- Increasing awareness raising campaigns regarding sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence that takes place at the university. These should make use of an intersectional approach in defining the problem and its main causes. The Uni4Equity project developed in-person and social media campaigns to spread the word about what sexual harassment is and how it can be handled in universities.
- Addressing the root causes of sexual harassment in training activities carried out for the entire university community. This is what we did, for example, in the Uni4Equity training workshop titled *Why does sexual harassment occur at the university? Discovering its roots*. The workshop was aimed at both students and staff of the participating universities.

**Figure 2. University of Maia’s workshop session with university students**



- Explicitly recognizing power imbalances and relationships of dependency that are deeply rooted in university hierarchies and academic cultures. These can be reversed through policies— such as university equality plans— with measures that address the gender and social inequalities in professional and academic trajectories, push back against gender stereotypes in career choices, and promote the use of gender-focused and intersectional approaches in teaching and research.

## Secondary Prevention: Ensure Equality in Access to Formal Institutional Support

A key course of action at this level is to reduce inequalities in access to formal support resources and to promote interventions targeted at groups that are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and other forms of violence and discrimination.

Based on the experience of the Uni4Equity project, improving accessibility to formal support resources requires:

- Ensuring that information about formal support resources, sexual harassment protocols and reporting channels is available in different languages, both local and international.
- Using inclusive and user-friendly language, ensuring that the language used on the website is accessible, non-judgmental and inclusive to encourage participation from a diverse audience.
- Providing clear and practical information, ensuring that resources are straightforward, useful and easy to understand.
- Offering a variety of reporting channels, with in-person and online services (standardized complaint form, telephone assistance, email, anonymous paper reports, virtual meetings).
- Making resources more accessible by incorporating elements such as audio description, as well as images and graphics that support the content and facilitate understanding.
- Including a frequently asked questions section that explains the protocol and reporting process of sexual harassment and other forms of violence (for example, gender-based violence) in accessible and user-friendly language.
- Organizing the institutional website so that users can easily find resources and frequently asked questions, keeping the content updated with new laws, best practices and scientific findings related to sexual harassment
- Creating regular activities, such as workshops or brief courses, where information on sexual harassment prevention and identification can be shared and discussed.

**Figure 3. Brochures in different languages and easy-to-read language that inform people about the sexual harassment protocol at the University of Alicante.**



In ensuring equal access to support, universities should take specific actions to support vulnerable groups:

- Strengthening networks with women's and feminist associations, LGBTQIA+ community representatives, ethnic and cultural organisations, such as Roma communities, and other civil society organizations. Organizing joint activities, such as training workshops or film series, on key dates such as November 25th or Pride Day, can facilitate this process.
- Promoting courses that use a gender and intersectional perspective that considers both the risk of sexual harassment toward women and the specific needs of other groups (for example, members of the LGBTQIA+ people, doctoral students, staff in precarious employment situations, international students, people with disabilities). It is important that this training also be directed at frontline professionals, such as technical staff from university equality units, violence response services, and department representatives, among others.
- Developing specific training for groups at higher risk of becoming a target of sexual harassment, such as women, LGBTQIA+ people, ethnic minorities, doctoral students, staff in precarious employment situations or international students. This training can include, for example, how to recognize sexual harassment and address it in legislation, development and use of institutional documents such as codes of conduct, navigating

reporting channels, how to behave as an active bystander and methods for accessing institutional support, among others.

- In developing training materials for LGBTQIA+ people, it is advisable to incorporate symbols such as the rainbow flag, rainbow lanyards or pins, and inclusive posters and stickers that address diversity and pride. For international students, it is important to include materials in different languages that use diverse cultural examples and provide explanations about legal and institutional contexts in the host country. This training should include both preventive and empowering content, such as recognizing early warning signs of harassment, understanding rights and reporting mechanisms, and reinforcing self-advocacy skills.
- Training can be delivered through tailored workshops, peer support programs, and awareness sessions co-designed with representatives of these communities to ensure relevance and cultural sensitivity. Additionally, integrating bystander intervention modules that emphasize sensitivity to the specific vulnerabilities and needs of at-risk groups may strengthen the capacity of peers to detect and act upon risky situations within their academic or social environments

### **Tertiary Prevention: Protect Against the Unequal Impact of Sexual Harassment and Revictimization**

Social inequalities have a negative effect on the impact of sexual harassment situations and on revictimization (when victims-survivors suffer additional harm). For this reason, addressing social inequalities is a priority in tertiary prevention. Specifically, we recommend:

- Ensuring free access to support resources, including legal guidance and psychological assistance, and offering psychological support or referral to specialized therapeutic services. Trauma-informed approaches are crucial in carrying out interventions with sexual harassment victims-survivors. Often the availability of these services at universities is limited or non-existent. In these cases, collaboration agreements and coordination with external specialized resources are key. The universities participating in the Uni4Equity project have had success with such types of collaboration.
- Including specialized staff trained in gender and intersectional perspectives in sexual harassment case management (committees) and support/assistance for victims-

survivors in equality units or other bodies responsible for addressing sexual harassment and other forms of violence and discrimination at the university.

- Ensuring that sexual harassment reporting is free of academic or professional consequences for the affected person, through curricular accommodations that facilitate continuation of studies, reduction of academic requirements for maintaining scholarships and exemption from paying academic fees. In the case of university staff, measures could also include considering absences or tardiness related to the physical and psychological consequences of sexual harassment as justified and paid, and guaranteeing workplace accommodation to facilitate reintegration. In all cases, the need to implement safety plans should be considered to ensure that changes of group, class or workplace fall on the perpetrator, and not on the victims-survivors.

## Conclusions

Sexual harassment in European universities is avoidable, because it results from power inequalities and institutional cultures that can be transformed. Universities have a key role to play as institutions with the potential to model equality between women, men, non-binary people, social diversity and inclusion.

The experience of Uni4Equity makes a case for equity-centered sexual harassment prevention strategies that **1) address the root causes of sexual harassment** to transform university culture, **2) ensure equitable access** to appropriate support for all community members, and **3) help victims-survivors** to cope with abusive experiences and **protect** them from further harm.

Training is a crucial tool that should reach all members of the university community, including socially vulnerable groups. However, it should be complemented by equity-centered actions—such as promoting institutional agreements with different groups within and outside universities, awareness campaigns, and equality plans. These actions can impact not only sexual harassment but have a wider impact on society at large.

Implementing **strategies using an equity-centered approach** can help universities create safer, more inclusive academic environments where all community members can learn, work and thrive free from violence.

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