



**RESTORING A SENSE OF SAFETY AMONG
SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN
HIGHER EDUCATION: POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE UNI4EQUITY
MULTINATIONAL STUDY**

A policy brief from the Uni4Equity Project

Main Authors: Sylwia Jaskulska, Barbara Jankowiak, Vanesa Pérez-Martínez, Stefano Porru, Angela Carta, Marlies Wallner, Viktoria Stifter, Iwetta Andruszkiewicz, Katarzyna Waszyńska, Aitana Muñoz-Haba, José Miguel Carrasco, Carmen Vives-Cases

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 APLICIA Investigación y traslación Soc. Coop. (Spain)



Co-funded by
the European Union

Uni4Equity is a project funded by the cerv-2022-DAPHNE Programme of the European Union. **Project Number: 101094121** - Uni4Equity. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Executive Summary:

Sexual harassment (SH) is a global public health concern that remains widespread in higher education, affecting individuals, groups, and institutions. This study, based on the UNI4EQUITY multinational survey involving 7,563 participants from six European universities, offers policy recommendations aimed at enhancing institutional safety for survivors. The results indicate a 37% prevalence of SH, occurring both offline and online. Among individuals with SH experience, women, LGB persons, and those aged 25–39 report lower perceptions of university safety. Trust in institutional support networks is positively associated with perceived safety, whereas reporting SH is linked to decreased feelings of safety. These findings highlight the need for a multi-level, systemic response, including awareness-raising, transparent governance, accessible support services, clear reporting mechanisms, and effective survivor protection to promote safety, trust, and institutional accountability.

Keywords: sexual harassment, higher education, university climate, institutional trust, restoring a sense of safety

Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH), recognized as a global public health concern, remains a widespread problem in higher education despite ongoing efforts to address it, affecting individuals, groups, and institutions alike (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines SH as any unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical sexual behavior that violates a person's dignity or creates a hostile, degrading, or offensive environment, including cyber-harassment (Walker et al., 2019). SH in higher education (HE) has serious consequences for both individuals and institutions. Exposure to SH leads to a range of physical, psychological, and professional consequences, such as stress, discomfort, feelings of powerlessness and humiliation, depression, symptoms of PTSD, sexually transmitted infections, limited career opportunities, and reduced job motivation. Institutions, in turn, face substantial costs related to staff turnover, recruitment, and complaint investigations (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020). Moreover, SH functions as an independent occupational stressor that cumulatively undermines well-being and functioning (Sojo et al., 2015).

Organizational climate refers to the shared perceptions within a community and plays a key role in shaping behavior in organizations (Walker et al., 2019). Although definitions vary, researchers agree that identifying the factors contributing to a safe climate can help universities reduce experiences that undermine students' and staff members' well-being and success (Minnotte and Pedersen, 2023; Moylan et al., 2021). A safe organizational climate is crucial not only for preventing SH but also for supporting individuals who have experienced it. When universities foster a culture that is intolerant of SH and actively address the structural and relational norms that sustain it, they help strengthen survivors' coping mechanisms, resilience, and sense of security (Ford and Ivancic, 2020). Conversely, the mishandling of complaints undermines trust in reporting systems and discourages victims from seeking help (Vijayasiri, 2008). A safe and responsive climate, where disclosures are met with empathy, credibility, and tangible support, can significantly influence recovery and professional stability (Ford and Ivancic, 2020; Vijayasiri, 2008). While informal support from colleagues within an organization is often perceived as helpful, formal interventions are frequently viewed as overly cautious and skeptical (Lorenz and O'Callaghan, 2022). Therefore, creating a trustworthy, transparent, and survivor-centered climate is essential for survivors' well-being and for cultivating a healthier, more equitable academic environment. Specifically, prior findings suggest that organizational culture shapes survivors' coping, resilience, and vulnerability (Ford and Ivancic, 2020).

Data on university climate was obtained from a multinational study on SH conducted among students, academic and teaching staff, and administrative personnel as part of the UNI4EQUITY project (CERV-2022-DAPHNE GA: 10109412) (Vives- Cases et al., 2025). The aim of the study was to assess the capacity of European universities to respond to sexual violence and to inform preventive measures in the academic environment. Data was collected between November 2023 and March 2024. The project involved a consortium of six universities—University of Alicante (UA), University of Antwerp (UAntwerp), Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU), University of Maia (UMAIA), University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (UASB), and University of Verona (UNIVR)—as well as two research entities with expertise in gender, sexual health, and violence prevention: Centro Studi e Iniziative Europeo – Ente del Terzo Settore (CESIE ETS) and Cooperative APLICA (Vives- Cases et al., 2025). Ethical approval was granted by the respective university research ethics committees: University of Alicante (Vice-Rectorate for Research, Ref. no. UA-2023-03-27); University of Verona (Comitato di Approvazione per la Ricerca sulla Persona, Ref. no. UNIVR-24/2023); University of Antwerp (Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities, Ref. no. EX_SHW_2023_38_1); Adam Mickiewicz University (Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Participants, Ref. no. UAM_19/2022/2023); University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (Ethics Committee, Ref. no. UASB_28/08/2023); University of Maia (Conselho de Ética e Deontologia, Ref. no. UMAIA_151/2023) (Vives- Cases et al., 2025).

Analysis

Data were collected from 7563 participants, predominantly women. Regarding university positions, the sample consisted of students, research staff, residents, professors, lecturers and administrative and support services staff. The results indicate that the overall prevalence of SH — whether online or in person — was 37% among respondents, with 20% reporting such experiences within the past 12 months. In-person SH was more commonly reported than online SH: 31% of respondents had experienced in-person SH since starting at the university and 16% within the last year, compared to 17% and 8%, respectively, for online SH. Data were analyzed using Ordinal Logistic Regression (OLR), adjusting for sociodemographic variables (Table 1) and perceived institutional response to SH (perception of institutional capacity to deal with SH, general help seeking, knowledge of the process or resources to report SH, trust and official reporting SH) (Table 2). The analyses included only individuals who had experienced SH, either in person or online.

Among individuals who had experienced SH, being female (compared to men) (IRR [95% CI]: 0.509 [0.343–0.755]), having between 25-39 years (compared to <19 years) (IRR [95% CI]: 0.523 [0.276-0.989]), and having LGB orientation (compared to heterosexual orientation) (IRR [95% CI]: 0.626 [0.456-0.860]) was associated with a lower likelihood of perceiving the university climate as safe in terms of the perceived risk of SH. On the other hand, having a medium-high socioeconomical level was associated with a higher probability of perceiving the university climate as safe, compared to people with low socioeconomical level (IRR [95% CI]: 1.525 [1.072-2.168]) (Table 1).

Table 1. Model 1* Sociodemographic characteristics – Ordinal Logistic Regression for perceived SH climate at the university. N=1289

	Model 1* Sociodemographic Characteristics					
	IRR	std. err.	z	P>z	CI 95%	
Sex at birth (ref: men)						
women	0.509	0.102	-3.360	0.001	0.343	0.755
Age (ref: 19 or less)						
20 to 24	0.968	0.261	-0.120	0.904	0.571	1.642
25 to 39	0.523	0.170	-2.000	0.046	0.276	0.989
40 and more	0.504	0.203	-1.700	0.090	0.229	1.112
Sexual orientation (ref: heterosexual)						
LGB	0.626	0.101	-2.890	0.004	0.456	0.860
Relationship status (ref: Not in a steady relationship)						
Steady relationship	1.103	0.162	0.660	0.506	0.827	1.471
Ethnic minority (ref: no)						

Yes	0.614	0.169	- 1.770	0.077	0.358	1.055
Socioeconomic level (ref: low)						
Medium-high	1.525	0.274	2.350	0.019	1.072	2.168
Position at university (ref: undergraduate student)						
Graduate student	0.875	0.254	- 0.460	0.646	0.496	1.546
Research staff or resident	0.789	0.219	- 0.850	0.393	0.458	1.359
Professor or lecturer	1.284	0.456	0.700	0.482	0.640	2.575
Staff working in administration or services	1.227	0.413	0.610	0.544	0.634	2.372

Table 2. Model 2* Perceived response of the university to SH – Ordinal Logistic Regression for perceived SH climate at the university N=427

	Model 2* Sociodemographic Characteristics + Perceived Response of the University to SH					
	IRR	std. err.	z	P>z	CI 95%	
Sex at birth (ref: men)						
women	0.514	0.200	- 1.710	0.086	0.240	1.100
Age (ref: 19 or less)						
20 to 24	1.176	0.678	0.280	0.779	0.380	3.642
25 to 39	0.810	0.531	- 0.320	0.749	0.224	2.930

	Model 2* Sociodemographic Characteristics + Perceived Response of the University to SH					
	IRR	std. err.	z	P>z	CI 95%	
40 and more	0.960	0.780	- 0.050	0.960	0.195	4.724
Sexual orientation (ref: heterosexual)						
LGB	0.727	0.224	- 1.040	0.301	0.398	1.329
Relationship status (ref: Not in a steady relationship)						
Steady relationship	1.621	0.427	1.830	0.067	0.967	2.716
Ethnic minority (ref: no)						
Yes	1.017	0.492	0.030	0.973	0.394	2.625
Socio-economic level (ref: low)						
Medium-high	1.818	0.568	1.910	0.056	0.985	3.355
Position at university (ref: undergraduate student)						
Graduate student	1.094	0.564	0.170	0.861	0.398	3.008
Research staff or resident	2.106	1.037	1.510	0.130	0.802	5.528
Professor or lecturer	1.993	1.327	1.040	0.300	0.540	7.353
Staff working in administration or services	1.601	0.975	0.770	0.440	0.485	5.280
Assessment of institutional capacity to deal with SH	1.030	0.019	1.630	0.103	0.994	1.068
General help seeking after SH and sexual violence (SV) (ref: no)						

	Model 2* Sociodemographic Characteristics + Perceived Response of the University to SH					
	IRR	std. err.	z	P>z	CI 95%	
Yes	0.845	0.265	-0.540	0.592	0.457	1.562
For some experiences, I did tell them to someone, and for other experiences, I did not.	0.877	0.290	-0.400	0.692	0.459	1.677
Knowledge of the process or resources to report SH (ref: no knowledge)						
Yes, at least one	1.195	0.346	0.620	0.539	0.678	2.107
Trust in the closest help in case of SH victimization						
1.110	0.044	2.650	0.008	1.028	1.200	
Trust in the university or people in case of a SH situation						
1.450	0.112	4.820	0.000	1.247	1.686	
Official reporting SH and SV at university resources, or elsewhere (ref: no, they did not report)						
Yes, they reported (n=90)	0.240	0.105	-3.260	0.001	0.102	0.565

People who have a medium-high socioeconomical level (compared with those who have lower socioeconomical level) were associated with a higher probability of perceiving the university climate as safe, compared to people with low socioeconomical level (IRR [95% CI]: 1.818 [0.985-3.355]). Trust in the closest (e.g., classmates or colleagues) to provide help in case of SH victimization, for instance, by offering information on how to deal with the incident and/or providing emotional support, was associated with a higher likelihood of perceiving the university climate as safe (IRR [95% CI]: 1.110 [1.028–1.200]). Similarly, trust in the university and its community in situations involving SH, such as believing that university officials will adequately

protect victims and that peers will report those who engage in harassment, was also positively associated with perceived safety (IRR [95% CI]: 1.450 [1.247–1.686]). Contrary, reporting experiences of SH and sexual violence was associated with a lower likelihood of feeling safe at the university (IRR [95% CI]: 2.40 [0.102–0.565]).

These findings highlight the importance of institutional trust, perceived fairness, and leadership accountability as central components of safety in higher education settings. Building on these insights, the following policy recommendations outline practical strategies to strengthen institutional responses to SH.

Policy Recommendations

Preventing and addressing SH in European universities aligns with several equality frameworks, including the EU Gender Equality Strategy (2022–2025) and the 2019 International Labour Organization Convention. Higher education institutions must foster a workplace atmosphere that does not tolerate SH and take active measures to restore a sense of safety for those who have experienced SH or sexual violence (SV).

According to our research, supporting individuals affected by SH begins with building an institutional climate based on trust in the university, its leaders, and colleagues. Therefore, prevention should be approached at three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Primary prevention

- Conduct a regular, evidence-based diagnosis of SH using mixed methods to understand its scope and patterns. Surveys, desk reviews, and stakeholder interviews should identify risk factors and vulnerable groups and assess levels of institutional trust and perceived fairness. Such data help identify *grey areas* and vulnerable groups requiring particular attention
- Increase public awareness about rejecting all forms of SH. Social media campaigns and educational workshops play a crucial role in informing university communities and promoting safe and respectful environments. Information campaigns should highlight not only available resources but also the actions taken by university representatives to build a culture of support and trust.

- Integrate trust-building into leadership training, emphasizing transparent communication, fairness, and responsiveness to complaints.

Secondary prevention

- Develop bystander intervention and peer-support programs that empower students and staff to recognize, prevent, and respond to SH. These initiatives strengthen a culture of safety, accountability, and trust.
- Ensure that information about reporting channels, support services, and digital tools is clearly communicated and regularly updated.
- Offer targeted support measures for groups at higher risk of SH, such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Gender-sensitive and empowerment-oriented actions can help reduce exposure to harassment.

Tertiary prevention

- Provide training programs and workshops that equip community members with the skills to respond safely and effectively to both victims and perpetrators. These programs should promote inclusive and sensitive reactions to individuals of diverse genders, ages, and sexual orientations. Training on responding to SH should be particularly accessible to university leaders and student organization representatives.
- Guarantee specialized, free psychological support for survivors, delivered by professionals trained in trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and intersectional approaches. These services should provide a safe and confidential space to receive emotional support, rebuild a sense of security, and access further assistance.
- Establish and communicate clear, survivor-centered reporting procedures with defined protection measures, especially in cases involving power hierarchies (e.g., supervisor–student).
- Ensure consistent perpetrator accountability through fair and transparent disciplinary processes and communicate outcomes to reinforce institutional trust.

Conclusions

Restoring a sense of safety in universities requires building institutional trust and ensuring transparent, fair, and accountable responses to SH. Regular climate assessments, awareness campaigns, and leadership training focused on fairness and responsiveness should form the foundation of prevention. Accessible reporting channels, trauma-informed support, and targeted measures for vulnerable groups are essential to rebuilding confidence in institutional protection. Ultimately, protecting survivors and holding perpetrators accountable are key to creating a culture of trust, safety, and integrity in higher education.

Key References

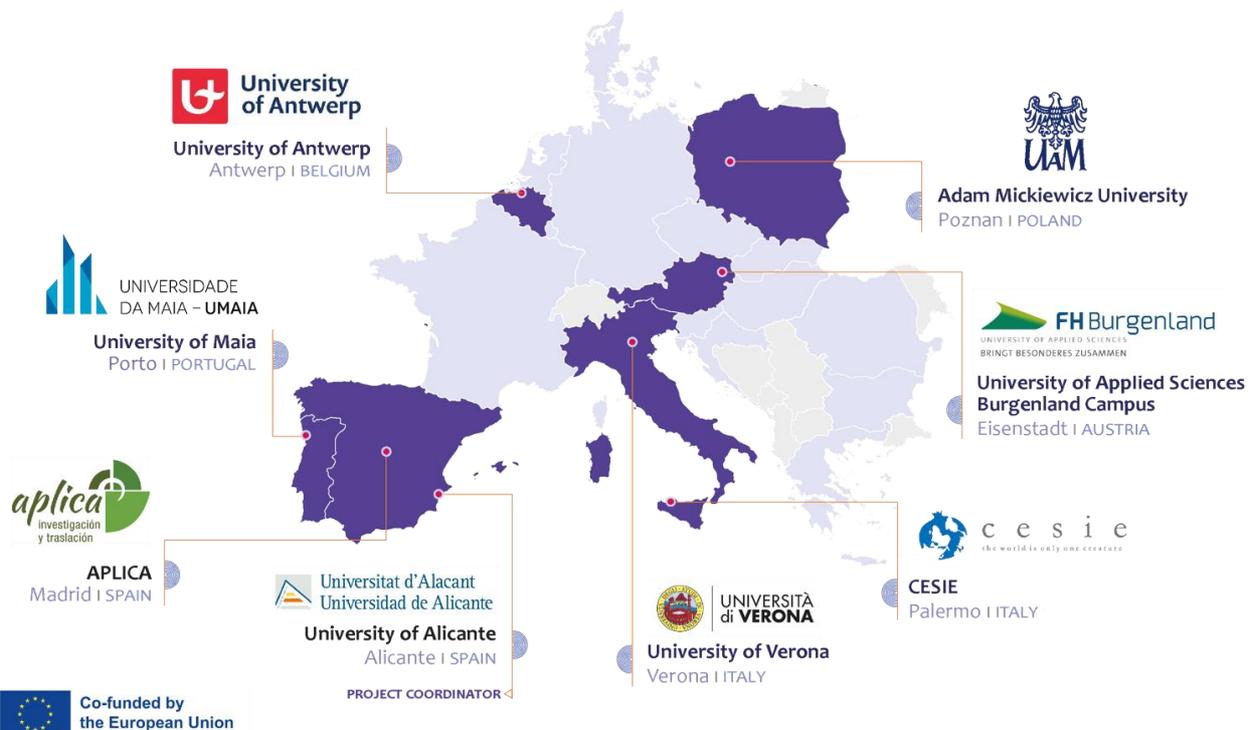
- Bondestam, F., and Lundqvist, M. (2020). Sexual harassment in higher education – a systematic review. *European Journal of Higher Education*. 10(4), 397–419.
- Ford, J. L. and Ivancic, S. R. (2020). Surviving organizational tolerance of sexual harassment: an exploration of resilience, vulnerability, and harassment fatigue. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. 48(2), 186-206.
- Lorenz, K., and O’Callaghan, E. (2022). “I Realized that I couldn’t Act Normal”: a Qualitative Study of Sexual Assault Survivors’ Experiences of Workplace Disclosure. *J Fam Viol*. 37, 381–393.
- Minnotte, K., and Pedersen, D. (2023). Sexual Harassment, Sexual Harassment Climate, and the Well-Being of STEM Faculty Members. *Innovative Higher Education*. 1-18.
- Moylan, C. A., Javorka, M., Maas, M. K., Meier, E., and McCauley, H. L. (2021). Campus sexual assault climate: Toward an expanded definition and improved assessment. *Psychology of Violence*. 11(3), 296–306.
- Sojo, V. E., Wood, R. E., and Genat, A. E. (2015). Harmful Workplace Experiences and Women’s Occupational Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 40(1), 10-40.
- Walker, S. S., Ruggs, E. N., Taylor, R. M., and Frazier, M. L. (2019). Reporting sexual harassment: The role of psychological safety climate. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. 12(1), 106-109.

- Vijayasiri, G. (2008). Reporting Sexual Harassment: The Importance of Organizational Culture and Trust. *Gend.* 25, 43–61.
- Vives-Cases, C., Berbegal-Bernabeu, M., Pérez-Martínez, V., Neves, S., Muñoz-Haba, A., Van de Velde, S., Jaskulska, S., Porru, S., Carta, A., De Cuyper, A., Carrasco, J. M., Manchenko, M., Jankowiak, B., Wallner, M., & Stifter, V. (2025). Strengthening universities' response to sexual harassment with an equity approach: the UNI4EQUITY mixed-methods study protocol. *BMJ open*, 15(7), e097265.

DISCLAIMER: *Uni4Equity is a project funded by the European Union's CERV-2022-DAPHNE Programme. Project number: 101094121 - Uni4Equity. However, the opinions and views expressed are solely those of the research team and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.*



PARTNERS



Uni4Equity is a project funded by the cerv-2022-DAPHNE Programme of the European Union. Project Number: 101094121 - Uni4Equity. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.