

“Gender-based and sexual harassment in higher education”

Summary

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Background of the study

There has been no previous research done in Estonia regarding gender-based and sexual harassment in higher education. This study was deemed necessary for several reasons. Most importantly, there was a lack of overview on the prevalence and character of gender-based and sexual harassment or the perception of it in Estonian higher education institutions. The instigation of the study was also driven by the public and academic interest in placing recent harassment cases covered in Estonian media from higher education institutions into a broader context, as well as to discover best international practices for addressing these issues, reporting cases and handling them.

Gender-based and sexual harassment in a higher education setting restricts equal access to education and therefore the job market, in addition to the direct negative impact on the victim. Due to widely spread societal and cultural norms, higher education leaders generally do not acknowledge gender inequality as a major problem and although its importance is occasionally acknowledged in writing and rhetoric, it is not actively considered in daily practices and decision making.

Data collection and analysis

The gender-based and sexual harassment study was carried out in six Estonian public universities (EKA, EMÜ, EMTA, TÜ, TLÜ, TalTech) from April 2019 to January 2020. The study was divided into two phases on the basis of data collection and research methods:

1. Quantitative data collection and analysis phase (April–September 2019). The population of the study consisted of students from the aforementioned six public universities. After data cleansing the study ended up with 1501 answers. The sample for the survey was determined to be random (as opposed to representative) because of the varying response rates between universities, with three universities each clocking in below 5%. Additionally the sample isn't representative of the student body in features such as sex, age, field of study and level of education, which means generalisations about the entire Estonian student body cannot be made based on the results of this study.

2. Qualitative data collection and analysis phase (September–December 2019). 30 individual interviews were conducted during this phase with either recently graduated or current university students that had experienced harassment at the time of their studies. There were 10 group interviews in order to map out general attitudes and stances towards harassment in higher education institutions. Separate groups were formed for native Estonian students, foreign students, but also for faculty members; the groups were separated by gender as well. The qualitative phase of the study additionally enquired from university rectorates about current practices used in universities regarding processing harassment cases and accusations. In addition two expert interviews with university's student psychologists were conducted.

The study followed the definitions set in Estonian Gender Equality Act (SoVS) which differentiate gender-based and sexual harassment.² **Gender-based harassment** is defined as “unwanted conduct or activity related to the gender of a person which occurs with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating a disturbing, intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment”. **Sexual harassment** takes place when “any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct or activity of a sexual nature occurs, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating a disturbing, intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment”, which, in the context of this study occurs among faculty members, students, staff or other employees of a higher education institution. This might span from unwanted sexual jokes and flirting

2 SoVS §1 (1) 5) & 6)

to direct propositions of exchanging sexual favours for higher grades or academic success. People regardless of their gender may experience gender-based or sexual harassment, although earlier studies have shown that, in Estonia and internationally, harassment is a highly gendered behavior in which most victims are women.

Results

The participants of the study generally perceived gender-based and sexual harassment similarly to the definitions found in law: it is a subjectively uncomfortable situation, unwanted behaviour. The participants found it easier to recognise, understand and explain sexual harassment, which was often linked to physical actions – unwanted touches or other physical contact. Gender-based harassment was more difficult to explain, key phrases such as inequality and discrimination, “differentiating based on gender” and “gender stereotyping in an uncomfortable way” were mentioned. Many participants used examples to demonstrate gender-based and sexual harassment, in which men were the agents and women the victims. The wording remained neutral, however. The phrase “lecturer” was often used, without adding any gender references. Such gender neutrality was seen throughout the harasser discourse whenever interviewees would talk about general attitudes, not their personal experience.

The survey results revealed that 12% of respondents regarded gender-based harassment as somewhat of a problem or a major problem in their university. 6,5% of the sample found sexual harassment to be a problem in their universities. According to the study, harassment was seen as a major problem mostly by people who had had personal experience with such cases. Women perceived gender-based and sexual harassment in higher education institutions as a bigger problem than men.

One of the main purposes of the study was to map out personal experiences in regards to gender-based and sexual harassment. A list of 21 situation examples was used for that purpose, in order to find if and how the respondents have experienced harassment. The quantitative questionnaire revealed that 28,4% (427 out of 1501) had experienced none of these situations. Therefore, a large number of participants (72,6%) had in fact been a part of at least one of the 21 situations described. Further analysis exposed that most students had experienced gender stereotypical comments (59%). 44% of the respondents had encountered sexual or risqué jokes. 18,8% of students reported having been looked at in a way that made them uncomfortable. Thus, most harassment experiences had non-physical, mostly verbal gender-based or sexual undertones. Similar patterns emerged from individual interviews. Despite feeling uncomfortable in a situation, they were rarely directly described as harassment.

Harassment cases that included physical contact, such as hugging against one's will, kissing, touching intimate areas, pressuring into or forcing a sexual act on someone. The analysis of the questionnaire showed that most respondents did not have any such experiences, with 14,7% out of 1501 answers reporting at least one situation that involved physical contact.

The quantitative phase included an attempt to define more vulnerable groups through analysing which people had experienced harassment more than others. Participants that related to five or more situations were as follows: a fifth of all female respondents, a fifth of 26–30 year olds, 33% of bisexual respondents and 35% of English speaking respondents.

The qualitative phase of the study confirmed the gendered nature of harassment. Most of the interviewees who shared their cases regarding harassment were female. The nature of harassment as well as perceived power relations and possibilities to react accordingly were different between male and female victims. Female victims of harassment exhibited comprehensive psychological, educational and behavioral consequences.

According to the survey results, situations where gender-based harassment or gender discrimination occurred, the perpetrators were mostly male lecturers. Other students were more likely to be agents in situations with sexual undertones, touching or physical contact. In individual interviews, perpetrators were mostly faculty members – lecturers or supervisors. The interviews involved less stories of fellow students being the harassers. The disproportion between two phases might indicate that the qualitative study topic could have disproportionately drawn in people with experience with misuse of power.

Most respondents said that they took no action after experiencing gender-based or sexual harassment. That does not mean there were no effects or consequences for the victims. The interviewees reported psychological effects, changes in educational choices (switching their field or supervisor; changing educational institutions within Estonia as well as internationally); but also direct behavioral changes (changing one's clothing style, avoiding certain people, situations and lectures).

Interviewees with harassment experience would most often turn to their friends or fellow students for help and support. In case of psychological effects they would also seek help from a psychologist, although many would not do so until these experiences had led to depression or anxiety. One interviewee mentioned turning to the police and several had consulted with or filed a complaint to a staff member within the higher education institution. Disappointment in the lack of institutional support was a common theme in such cases. A lot depended on that certain staff member's attitude and awareness on the topic, with knowledge lacking in how to deal with complaints, what type of help or support the victim might need. Participants felt that universities do not raise enough awareness nor deal with harassment cases sufficiently. It was perceived among students that higher education institutions lack regulations and behavioural guidelines for those that have fallen victim to harassment.

International practices and suggestions moving forward

The study also analysed related scientific literature from the US and UK along with University of Cambridge and Cornell University case studies in order to compare international practices in terms of responses to campus gender-based and sexual harassment. While they might not be directly applicable in Estonia, the study found common themes which should be discussed in local higher education institutions. Suggestions based on international comparisons:

1. universities should implement all-inclusive policies from prevention to victim support and sanctions to offenders;
2. all stakeholders of university should be included in the policy making process;
3. regulations regarding intimate inter-university relationships should be implemented;
4. policies should be designed for students and standers-by.

Several problem areas arose repeatedly during the study, including in group and individual interviews. The study has emphasised the areas in which the differences between universities' institutional self-image and participants' answers were most apparent, and based on these, the study suggests that universities:

1. acknowledge the full, real importance of the problem at their institutional management level;
2. implement policies to change organizational cultures in addition to working out strict sanctions;
3. take a stand regarding intimate inter-university relationships that involve staff;
4. pay particular attention to problems among foreign students (integration etc.);
5. remove barriers that prevent students from sharing their harassment experience;
6. monitor the safety of student housing.