



# Sustainable Measures To End gender-based Violence in Academia: What Lies between the ERA Policy Paradigm and Reality?

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## Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment (SH) represent phenomena of social concern that relate to issues of gender equality. This qualitative study explored responses to GBV and SH in academia in the context of the European Research Area (ERA) using the 7P Model: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Provision, Policies, Partnerships, and Prevalence. Interviews were conducted with key experts at Italian universities to identify the discrepancy between the EU policy framework and its practical implementation in the Italian context. Furthermore, it was investigated how cultural and institutional contexts influence this implementation. The results showed entrenched cultural barriers, in which a patronizing system contributes to the minimization of the problem and hinders open discussion and effective action. In addition, insufficient funding, limited expertise, and reliance on individual efforts weaken systemic initiatives. While significant progress has been made, such as the existence of dedicated services and awareness-raising programs, these measures often lack coherence and broad impact. Comprehensive and well-resourced strategies and cross-college collaboration are needed to promote sustainable change. Finally, work on capacity building, consistent application of strategies, and engagement at all academic levels is crucial to bring efforts in line with international standards.

**Keywords** Gender-based violence · Sexual harassment · Academia · Prevention measures

## Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to different forms of violent and abusive behaviors based on sex and gender (Hearn et al., 2022; Marco Francia, 2021; Strid et al., 2021), including sexual harassment (SH).

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SH is defined as any unwelcome sexual advance, any unwelcome request for sexual favor, any verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other conduct of a sexual nature that may be expected or perceived to be offensive, humiliating, or intimidating to the person (UN, 2008). These are issues that are deeply rooted in gender inequality, which severely affect people's well-being and thus constitute a major human rights violation and a global public health problem (WHO, 2021).

In the last ten years, the number of studies on GBV and SH in various contexts has increased considerably. Awareness of these issues has expanded, particularly at universities, first on campuses in the United States (Eriksen et al., 2022) and then around the world, including in Europe, where projects and strategies are being developed to prevent and combat GBV and SH in academia (Jones et al., 2021; Merzagora et al., 2022; Strid et al., 2021; UniSAFE Project, 2023; USV React, 2019; Zavos, 2018). Several recent studies (e.g., Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2024; Sotirovic, & Blažytė, 2024; Zara et al., 2024) have highlighted the extent of the problem and examined its characteristics, prevalence, and associated consequences and negative effects. Therefore, urgent and systematic action is clearly needed.

Recent examples of more targeted actions to enhance engagement in addressing GBV in the European Research Area (ERA) include several projects under Horizon 2020 (e.g., GENDERACTION) and Horizon Europe. Among these, the UniSAFE, GENDERACTIONplus, and GenderSAFE projects focus on analyzing and developing policies and strategies for GBV in universities and Research Funding and Performing Organizations (RFOs and RPOs). All of these projects refer to the 7Ps conceptual framework (Strid et al., 2021), a model first developed in the context of GBV in sport (Mergaert et al., 2016). This framework integrates and expands upon the traditional UN and EU 3Ps (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution) approach (EU, 2020; UN, 2017) and the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention (2011) 4Ps (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Policy) approach (Anitha & Lewis, 2018). Specifically, beginning with prevalence and incidence estimates assessment, which allows for a better understanding of the problem's extent, these projects aim to explore the role of universities in Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Provision of services, supported by Partnerships and Policies.

*Prevention* includes measures that promote changes in socio-cultural behavioral norms and attitudes, which may involve professional training, the production of educational materials, and awareness campaigns (Mergaert et al., 2016). *Protection* entails measures designed to ensure the safety of victims of GBV (e.g., arrangements to prevent contact between the victim and the alleged perpetrator or the suspension of alleged perpetrators while investigations are ongoing). *Prosecution* encompasses legal actions against individuals accused of crimes and related investigations and court proceedings, including criminal and civil offenses and internal disciplinary processes (Mergaert et al., 2016). *Providing services* to victims, as well as to families or bystanders, includes psychological support, medical aid, and legal counseling. *Policies* are documents that clearly and explicitly formalize the institution's commitment to addressing GBV through comprehensive and integral strategies. Finally, *Partnerships* refer to a collaborative approach to eradicating GBV that involves all key stakeholders at every level, from the micro to the macro system. This last point aligns with recent studies on sexual violence and sexual harassment (SVSH) in academia (Cruστο et al., 2024; Zara et al., 2024), which emphasize the importance of a social-ecological approach to preventing these issues or broadening the perspective to intervene at various levels: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal (Bloom et al., 2021; Bronfenbrenner, 1977,

2005; Shapiro et al., 2024). According to this approach, the goal of prevention is to create recurring messages that reinforce each other through evidence-based programs, initiatives, events, and communication campaigns implemented at different levels within multi-stakeholder networks. Within this framework, one of the most effective types of intervention is the bystander prevention program (DeGue et al., 2014; Fenton et al., 2016), which requires community involvement in finding ways to counteract the problem and promote a culture opposed to violence. Some examples include the evidence-based programs Green Dot (Coker et al., 2011, 2014; Cook-Craig et al., 2014), Bring In The Bystander (BITB, Banyard et al., 2004), and RealConsent (Salazar et al., 2014), which have been shown to have long-term benefits and have successfully changed behavior and raised awareness.

Several barriers in the ERA hinder an effective institutional response to preventing and reducing GBV in academia, such as the lack of understanding that sexual violence is not an individual problem but an institutional and societal problem. There is an over-reliance on quick fixes and simplistic solutions, as well as ill-informed and generic training (Crusto et al., 2024). The current state of research-based knowledge on preventive work, as well as targeted actions on an institutional level, is progressing slowly and is random, also with examples of both possible and factual setbacks in some national contexts (Bondestam et al., 2023). To date, preventive interventions are predominantly student-centered, although it would be essential to move toward a “whole campus approach”, with more attempts to include all members of the academic community (Zara et al., 2024). Moreover, the culture of prevention and institutional frameworks for implementing interventions and eradicating violence are still missing.

Given all these shortcomings, Bondestam (2024) points to a discrepancy between the logic of the EC policy paradigm and EU-funded projects on the one hand (e.g., the 7P Model) and the realities of ERA institutions on the other. In many European countries, the contextual conditions need to be improved to actually implement the 7P Model. There is a lack of resources, funding, plans, commitment, expertise, and awareness of the serious consequences of not addressing GBV in academia and research institutions – from the individual to the institutional and community level (Bondestam et al., 2023; Bondestam, 2024). Bridging the gap between the model and reality by improving a valuable institutional framework has been identified as the greatest challenge to progress in implementing effective GBV policies in the ERA (Bondestam, 2024).

## **GBV and SH in the Italian academic context: cultural aspects and resources**

The Italian UniSAFE field research report (Brunello, 2021) on the policy framework addressing GBV in the academic context identifies two main general approaches in the policies developed in Italy: one linked to the improvement of equal opportunities among workers and another linked to the educational role of the academic institution. Academic institutions are both workplaces and learning environments, and given this dual role, they have a crucial responsibility to promote safe and inclusive spaces for students and staff (ERAC SWG GRI, 2020).

Concerning the first aspect, SH in the workplace is the focus of extensive international research that highlights its prevalence and impact (McDonald, 2012; Timmerman & Bajema,

1999) and the need for a regulatory framework to address it. Undoubtedly, the most important international instrument is the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190 on “Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work”, which was adopted in 2019 and ratified by Italy with Law No. 4/2021. It addresses the problem of GBV and SH by assigning precise responsibilities to governments and employers concerning the need to counteract it. Article 10 requires the establishment of monitoring mechanisms to ensure the enforcement of laws against violence and harassment in the workplace and to ensure access to compensation and protection measures. Measures include the possibility of filing complaints, the introduction of sanctions and the provision of legal, medical, and psychological support for victims and whistleblowers (Scarponi, 2021). In line with these provisions, Italian labor legislation extends anti-discrimination protection in the event of retaliation by the employer, which is often a reason for fear of reporting the harassment suffered. Specifically, any punitive action taken by the employer following a complaint is null and void (Scarponi, 2021). In the academic context, victims can claim compensation for non-material damages not only against the perpetrator of the harassment, but also against the employer who did not take any action despite the reports received.

Another relevant measure against violence and harassment within Italian universities was the enactment of Law No. 183/2010, which established the Equality Guarantee Committee (*Comitato Unico di Garanzia*, CUG) to promote the well-being of employees and combat discrimination. It is a mandatory institution in all universities with the aim of “ensuring gender equality and equal opportunities, the protection of employees against discrimination and harassment, and the absence of any form of physical and psychological violence”. A survey of activities to prevent and combat GBV, conducted by the Italian Academic Network UN.I.RE (Serughetti & Belliti, 2021) for the period 2016–2019, identified four main areas of intervention of the CUG:

- Analyzing and monitoring by introducing tools to evaluate the quality of organizational well-being and identify needs (e.g., the Gender Balance tool, which is useful for applying a gender mainstreaming approach in university spending policies (Arena, 2020).
- Offering services for internal staff and students, such as the psychological support service (*Sportello di Ascolto*) and the availability of the Confidential Counselor (*Consigliere di Fiducia*), an external lawyer to whom employees and students can turn to report incidents of violence, harassment, or discrimination.
- Training on gender equality issues and combating stereotypes and Violence against Women.
- Raising awareness of gender equality issues and GBV, e.g., by organizing initiatives in connection with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Given the educational role of universities, the current National Strategic Plan against Male Violence 2021-23 recognizes universities as having a strategic role in raising public awareness of the structural roots, causes, and consequences of male violence against women and in helping to break down the stereotypes underlying violence. The plan contains specific guidance for research and teaching in an academic context. Indeed, in recent years, national and international initiatives have been developed to highlight current data related to GBV and SH in academia. In addition to the European projects mentioned above, other examples related to the Italian national context include several studies focusing on the impact of SH

and GBV on the physical and mental health of university students (Bastiani et al., 2019; Romito et al., 2017, 2019), research on interventions and tools that can be used in the prevention of these problems (Tozzo et al., 2021) and a current inter-university PRIN 2020 research project on “Understanding Gender-Based Violence in Italian Universities”, that includes not only the collection of quantitative but also qualitative data to capture GBV in the university environment in its entirety. Again, qualitative studies that focus on understanding and exploring the conditions that lead to high levels of SH incidents at universities can provide important insights for the development of effective interventions. Some universities have established some courses on violence against women as part of their bachelor’s or master’s degree programs, while there are still few postgraduate or master’s degree programs on this topic, as well as research centers, laboratories, or interdisciplinary doctoral programs dealing with this issue. More common are community awareness activities by academics in the form of seminars open to the public, information sessions in schools, and advice to institutions.

Despite much progress, measures to combat GBV at Italian universities still seem to be lacking, and the need for further action has been called for not only by institutions but also by students. In 2021, the National Student Council submitted a motion<sup>1</sup> to the Minister, the Secretary General and the Director General of the Ministry of Universities and Research on the subject of *Codes of conduct for the prevention and combating of harassment and discrimination*: the request was to introduce a uniform definition of moral harassment<sup>2</sup> and SH at Italian universities and to promote forms of prevention, support, and information. More recently, in 2024, students in many universities, also after significant incidents of SH, have organized several protests that have led to what could be called an Italian academic #metoo movement<sup>3</sup>.

In order to understand the difficulties in implementing the 7P Model in Italy, some specific contextual variables must be taken into account. For example, the European Gender Equality Index 2024 shows that gender inequalities are very pronounced in the labor sub-sector, where Italy has consistently ranked last among all European Member States since 2010. The country achieves the lowest score in the segregation and quality of work sub-area, where Italy has fallen from 19th to 22nd place since 2020, reflecting slower progress in comparison with other EU countries (EIGE, 2024). Furthermore, concerning the specific Italian academic work context, its gendered nature has been emphasized, in which power hierarchies privilege men and the «masculine», and, at the same time, devalue women and the «feminine» within academic institutions. For example, the analysis for the years 2010–2018 by Roberto et al. (2020) highlighted gender inequalities in the distribution of academics across different disciplines and revealed a high degree of horizontal segregation in the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cnsu.miur.it/argomenti/documentazione/mozioni/2021/mo\\_2021\\_05\\_20\\_009.aspx](http://www.cnsu.miur.it/argomenti/documentazione/mozioni/2021/mo_2021_05_20_009.aspx).

<sup>2</sup> The term «moral harassment» refers to any hostile, physically or psychologically persecutory conduct directed against a person that is characterized by persistent and systematic offensive behavior and is likely to create an environment that is disrespectful, humiliating, or harmful to the psychophysical integrity of the person. Discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and opinion, including political opinions, may also constitute harassment.

<sup>3</sup> After the femicide of another Italian student at the end of 2023, there were systematic protests and marches at some universities. In addition, some student groups have initiated surveys on the prevalence of GBV and SH in academia, which have highlighted the existence and importance of the problem. Therefore, several groups of female students called for the university’s duty to intervene in the face of such unacceptable incidents.

Italian academic world. Women were best represented in the natural, social, and human sciences, where their percentage was roughly equal to that of men, while a significant gender gap in favor of men emerged in engineering and technology, supporting theories on the glass-ceiling effect. In line with these findings, the She Figure Index offers a detailed picture of the extent to which EU Member States have achieved gender equality in the ERA, showing that Italy is located in an intermediate position compared to other countries (Aloè et al., 2024)<sup>4</sup>.

Another study by IPSOS, which was conducted in 2018 on behalf of the Italian Ministry for Equal Opportunities, shows that gender stereotypes are particularly prevalent in the South. Another survey conducted by ISTAT in 2018 looked at the most common stereotypes about gender roles: in southern Italy, 42.2% of respondents strongly or moderately agreed with the statement “Women who do not want sexual intercourse manage to avoid it”; in the northwest, the figure was 36.1%. All these results and differences are confirmed by the Italian Patriarchy Index, first introduced in Italy by Aloè and colleagues (2024), which shows social and economic imbalances between men and women within families, both in terms of income and control over money and education, also taking into account the importance of patriarchal ideology using data from surveys on gender attitudes.

This cultural framework inevitably affects the institutional resources that Italian universities deploy to prevent and combat GBV. Recent research shows the lack of financial resources and the absence of a systematic approach in which teaching, research, data collection, and internationalization experiences are embedded (Brunello, 2021; Serughetti & Belliti 2021). Thus, a variety of projects and initiatives are related to the efforts of individual academic members rather than the planning of the universities themselves. Accordingly, it is appropriate to accompany research that systematically examines existing measures, best practices, and policies at the national level, but also focuses on specific cultural and institutional resources that play a crucial role in implementing the 7P Model.

## Objectives

This qualitative research aims to analyze how the 7Ps measures against GBV and SH are implemented in Italian universities. Through a semi-structured interview with key experts on GBV in Italian universities who have already developed research or projects on this topic, the aim is to provide a description of the Italian discrepancy between the EU model and reality through a systematic inventory of the initiatives currently in place. Specifically, two objectives will be pursued:

- Examination of the Italian contextual conditions for the implementation of the 7P Model with particular attention to the cultural aspect and the institutional resources available.
- Focus on the strengths and weaknesses in the Italian implementation of the 7P Model, analyzing each level: Prevention, Prosecution, Prevalence, Partnership, Provision of Services, Policies, Protection.

<sup>4</sup> For details see <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/rtd/shefigures/2024/files/shefigures2024fiche-it.pdf>.

We assume that in the Italian context, the progress and relevance of preventive incentives through the 7P Model depend first of all on specific cultural aspects and then on adequate institutional resources. These two contextual prerequisites are key aspects for promoting institutional change and effective interventions to end GBV in academia and are closely related to all 7Ps.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to gather information from key experts on GBV and SH prevention in academia. The questions specifically addressed all areas of the 7P Model, the cultural background and resources underlying the development of the 7Ps, and the knowledge and/or application of prevention programs in Italian universities, relating them to evidence-based programs in the international context.

Potential key experts in the field of GBV and SH in academia were identified using several strategies, including (1) searching and monitoring scientific publications on the topic by Italian researchers/professors; (2) identifying key experts already recruited based on relevant experience in other Italian universities; (3) activating notifications on personal devices about advertisements in newspapers of interest documenting news on these topics to identify universities active on this topic.

The key experts ( $n = 12$ ) were recruited through an email introducing the study and inviting them to participate in the interview. Appointments for the interview were then scheduled with the key experts who agreed to participate.

The interviews, which lasted an average of one hour, were conducted on an online platform between May and July 2024. Only the audio was recorded for transcription.

The universities to which the participants belong are the following: Modena and Reggio-Emilia, Turin, Milan Bicocca, Trieste, Verona, Trento, Pisa, Padua, Bologna, Genoa, Calabria, and Bergamo.

### Data Analysis

The data obtained from the recorded and transcribed interviews were analyzed independently by two researchers, focusing on two main themes:

1. Cultural aspects and resources
2. Strengths and weaknesses of the 7Ps.

Subsequently, the two coders consulted and decided to group the themes of *Policy*, *Protection*, and *Prosecution* into a single category, as they appeared to be closely linked to what was happening in the Italian academic context. Again, together they set out to identify the links between the two macro-categories, i.e., how cultural background and resources intersect and influence the 7Ps.

Finally, all coded data were independently reread to link the themes that emerged in the macro categories to the universities mentioned by the respondents. A final comparison between authors was useful to check the accuracy of these counts.

It is important to emphasize that the working group consisted only of women, which may have had some influence on the research design and the interpretation of the results. In particular, the interviews and the coding process were carried out by female researchers, whose professional positioning may have helped to give the interview work a special significance. The two coders were women in precarious positions within the university and, as such, were particularly sensitive to the power asymmetries that exist in this context. The contribution of the female co-authors in stable academic positions and, as such, involved in gender policy issues within academia, enabled the integration of both professional expertise and a pluralistic view of the topic.

## Results

The qualitative data from the interviews were categorized into main themes, coded and divided into two topics according to strengths and weaknesses: (1) cultural aspects and resources; (2) 7P Model. [see [Supplementary Material](#) and [Table 1](#) for details]. The main results of the interviews are summarized as follows.

### 1. *Cultural aspects*

Most respondents explicitly attributed the obstacles to implementing prevention measures to a patronizing system in which the «realm of hierarchical power» prevails.

In concrete terms, this means a series of cultural barriers, which manifest themselves as follows:

- Ingrained belief that SVSH does not occur in academic contexts where cultural standards are high (this barrier manifests itself in denial and trivialization of the topic).
- Devaluation of the research and intervention topic, which is seen as irrelevant or of secondary importance, and therefore suitable for female researchers (this barrier often manifests itself in irony and mockery).
- Perception of the topic as dangerous and capable of challenging long-standing power relations (manifested in avoidance and disinvestment).

The topic of SH, which is dismissed as «girly», causes some professors to «giggle in the corner», as explicitly stated by an interviewee, when various initiatives are presented. However, according to some respondents, this topic would indeed be «a bombshell in the academic context», as they fear losing their sanctity and power.

These obstacles are not evenly distributed across the departments. They increase with the age of the department and in STEM departments, whose scientific background is further removed from these issues. However, according to the interviewees, STEM departments could be valuable allies when it comes to designing interventions from an evidence-based perspective and overcoming the mistrust of a proactive model of intervention research that has difficulty gaining a foothold in the Italian context. This aspect is clearly described in

**Table 1** An overview of the topics that emerged from the interviews with key experts involved in the study

<b>Cultural aspects</b>									
Raising awareness of the issue through cultural events	Acceptance of the need for long timelines to achieve results	A patronizing culture embedded in hierarchical power	Strong theoretical foundation, little orientation to practice	Students' distrust of institutions, more trust in collective movements	More interest from academic governance needed	Culture of minimization and normalization	Culture of collaboration yet to be developed	Conviction that high cultural level of academics means immaturity from SH	Gap in sensitivity toward SH among departments, due to different scientific and cultural backgrounds (STEM are more distant)
6	2	3	3	7	2	11	2	2	6
<b>Resources</b>									
Introduction of dedicated staff	Guarantee Committee of Equal Opportunities (CUG)	Research centers on gender issues	Cross-cutting working groups (faculty, staff and students)	Lack of institutionalized resources, greater reliance on individual free initiative, with disproportionate workloads		Lack of specific expertise		Lack of continuous fundings	
3	12	5	7	10		10		10	
<b>Prevalence</b>									
More research on the topic	Participation in EU Projects	Topics yet to be explored: online harassment, harassment-friendly organizational cultures	Need for better and transparent dissemination of research results	Few research studies, low response rates, high dark number		Dishomogeneity in research tools		Almost exclusively female research teams	
12	3	3	3	3		3		2	
<b>Prevention</b>									
Faculty and staff training	Thematic classes for students	Awareness-raising cultural events	Environmental prevention	Peer-to-peer and bystander programs for students	Too much emphasis on prosecution away from prevention	Lack of training monitoring and evaluation also for cultural barriers		Need for adaptation of bystander programs to Italian context	
8	8	6	3	4	2	6		7	

Table 1 (continued)

<b>Provision of services</b>					
Anti-violence counters	External lawyer (Confidential Counselor)	Campaigns and communication channels to increase awareness of existing resources	Making first access to services easier	Still poor access to counters and Confidential Counselor	Need for greater homogeneity in services offered across the Country
8	12	9	4	7	6
<b>Partnerships</b>					
More networks between different Italian Universities	Network between the Italian CUGs	Strong networks with external territory	Sharing best practices through European projects	Internal University network to be improved (risk of overlapping services)	Lack of network between the external lawyers
8	4	10	4	4	2
<b>Policy/Protection/Prosecution</b>					
Constant updating of dedicated policies	Code of Ethics and Code of conduct against SH		Formal and informal complaint procedure	Lengthy procedures	
2	6		6	2	

The figures refer to the frequency with which the respective topic was mentioned by the key experts

the words of one interviewee, who said that designing interventions is a process that is still «dedicated to chatter», so that great speeches and proposals for action often remain many words and few deeds.

Where some departments and professors have set themselves the goal of cultural change, there is an awareness of the need for long-term, partnership-based interventions aimed at creating safe spaces for reflection and action.

In some departments, these cultural initiatives are increasing, and some sensitivities seem to have changed. However, the cultural barriers mentioned above still have a concrete impact on victims, who are reluctant to share their experiences with specialized services and often prefer less formal channels, such as participation in complaint initiatives promoted by collective movements, which in Italy are particularly active in the field of SH in academia (see above). The late and only partial recognition of the issue by universities has led to a discrepancy between student activism and institutional commitment. This lack of alliance has led to a multiplication of surveys and initiatives, not always methodologically sound, with overlap and disorientation about the possible services and opportunities offered to victims at institutional and non-institutional levels. For example, an interviewee referred «The student unions decided either to take the law into their own hands or to become anti-violence listening desks [...]. So, there was a long and arduous mediation effort to make it clear that listening to a victim of violence is not a process that can be improvised». It is clear from the interviews that the feminist student movements – which tend to be strongly committed to women’s rights – have a style of communication and a view of the phenomenon that is more in line with the sensitivities of some students, who reject the institutional help offered by the university. More specifically, they struggle to identify themselves as “victims”, avoiding the image of vulnerability that the various services offered by the institutions would implicitly convey to them. Bridging this cultural gap is certainly one of the priority areas of improvement to intervene in order to implement the 7P Model in this specific context.

## 2. Resources

All respondents lament the lack of financial resources, professional personalities, and solid organizational structures. Initiatives are often left to the goodwill of individual professors, who complain about the difficulty of reconciling their commitment to GBV with research and teaching duties. This lack of investment leads to a strong discontinuity that causes initiatives to lose steam every time a professor involved in these issues retires or decides to withdraw due to work overload.

One positive aspect reported is the introduction of administrative staff at some universities to support various initiatives on gender issues. These professionals provide continuity of action. However, some universities still report a lack of specific expertise in terms of planning, monitoring, and evaluating measures taken to prevent and combat SH in academia. «I am an expert in constitutional law», says one lecturer interviewed to emphasize that individuals working to end discrimination have not always received specific training in social intervention. «We don’t need funding, we are lucky, but we really need expertise», affirmed another interviewee. Gender research centers and anti-discrimination committees (CUGs) are an important resource for supporting preventive and anti-SH measures in academia: they are catalysts for expertise and ensure the sharing of best practices between universities

across the country. The Equality Plan is also recognized as a useful resource to promote organizational reflexivity and ensure that the college is committed to addressing SH.

However, respondents still consider these resources to be insufficient to be able to act effectively, also due to the turnover of the professors involved. In addition, many respondents stated that greater commitment from top management, particularly chancellors, was needed to improve existing measures, address shortcomings, and ensure continuity. «There needs to be more commitment from the top so that resources can be utilized effectively», affirmed one respondent.

Finally, strengths include the establishment of cross-departmental working groups and, in particular, the involvement of students in some of these groups, as recommended in the international literature on SH prevention measures.

### 3. *Prevalence*

In recent years, the number of research projects on this topic has multiplied, with research initiatives by individual universities and participation in European research projects playing a role. Nevertheless, there is still much room for improvement. Firstly, research is conducted almost exclusively by female researchers, as if GBV only affects women. Research tools and approaches are also not uniform and seem to be based on the goodwill of individuals or small groups of researchers, with no real inter-university comparison, apart from some sporadic cases. «Everyone conducts their own little research, but without using shared survey tools that make the data comparable», as one interviewee pointed out. There are still only a few projects with low response rates and a high number of unreported cases. In this context, the bottom-up research initiatives promoted by student movements with high participation and immediate results have sometimes led to a slowdown in the development of rigorous surveys conducted institutionally by universities, or to fears about the inevitable discrepancies between the data collected. Due to the cultural barriers mentioned above, in some cases, research results were not published transparently because the university itself discouraged dissemination in order not to tarnish its image, thus reinforcing the gap between the institutional communication style and the logic of “immediacy” pursued by the student movements. An example: «In a survey conducted some time ago, about 50 per cent of female students said that they had been harassed in some way [...]. In response, the chancellor and the management told us more or less explicitly that they did not want the university to make the headlines as a university where there was harassment or any kind of danger, and asked us not to publish the data».

Some other suggestions were made to broaden and diversify the lines of research by conducting targeted research on online harassment or on harassment-friendly organizational cultures by identifying, for example, doctoral programs with high dropout rates or departments where there is a higher concentration of harassment reports.

### 4. *Prevention*

Although a more prosecution-oriented approach has always prevailed in the Italian academic context, more emphasis has been placed on prevention in recent years. Key initiatives include the introduction of courses for students on GBV and SH, as well as training for departments and staff to impart skills and generate expertise. Interestingly, peer-to-peer

programs for students aimed at disseminating knowledge and skills are often organized; one interviewee reported an early attempt to implement a bystander program at an Italian university, with the corresponding evaluation of its effectiveness. However, respondents overall agreed that importing these intervention models, mainly from the US, would represent a major advance in the field of SH prevention, but that adaptation to the specificities of the Italian context is certainly required. In this respect, Italy is probably still lagging behind the evidence-based approach, which focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of interventions; in fact, most training for students, lecturers, and staff lacks monitoring, which risks making them "isolated" initiatives that end in themselves. «You have to be prepared to prove the effectiveness of your work, because otherwise it's just talk»: the words of this interviewee clearly summarize this concept.

Environmental prevention emerged as a cross-cutting aspect in several interviews. Many universities have taken steps to increase security in spaces inside and outside academia, such as improving lighting systems in more remote areas or increasing surveillance staff at later times. Making the university a structurally safe space means encouraging people to move and live in this environment without worry.

Other positive aspects include organizing cultural awareness events, such as seminars, film screenings, theater performances, or exhibitions, especially on special days (e.g., 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women), open to the whole community. Art, in particular, is an important communication channel that can convey meaningful messages more easily through a common form of language. In this context, the University of Trento launched the "Out of the Shadows" project in 2021 to raise awareness and engage the university community on the issue of violence against women. The initiative, which is primarily intended to involve STEM students, revolves around the design and construction of red wooden benches, which symbolize a place that has been abandoned by a female victim of violence. The idea is to invite passers-by to sit and express their thoughts on this topic. These structures have become an innovative tool and a language for reflection, giving the architecture a social function. «Even a "cold tool", so to speak, such as an object, a bench, which is simply street furniture [...], has become a means of encouraging and educating people to think». It's also a meaningful project because it allows us to raise awareness through the sharing and active participation of the whole community. Indeed, thanks to the collaboration of public and private institutions, the university has built an important network with the communities outside. In line with a socio-ecological approach to SH prevention, an effective intervention means looking beyond the academic community and also involving key stakeholders in the surrounding area.

## 5. *Provision of Services*

The services dealing with GBV and SH in the academic field have increased significantly, although Italy still seems to be a «leopard spot». There is a heterogeneous geographical distribution and a very different degree of organization, with some academic institutions far ahead, while others are still lagging behind in preventing and combating this phenomenon.

In most Italian universities, except perhaps the smaller ones, the figure of the Confidential Counselor has been introduced. This is an external lawyer to whom all academia members who feel victimized by acts that violate personal dignity or cause psychological and physical suffering, can turn for advice, help, and intervention. The activity is characterized

by impartiality and confidentiality, and aims to receive and examine complaints and reports of distress in order to identify and seek possible solutions. The Confidential Counselor acts in full autonomy but can also call on the assistance of experts, if this is compatible with the obligation of confidentiality. However, the usage of the services of the Confidential Counselor is still low, which is probably not because there are no reports, but rather because it is not yet known, and its role is not yet clear. This means that there may be fears, particularly among students, of possible retaliation or breaches of confidentiality, which discourage the use of this service. «They think going to the Confidential Counselor means coming forward and getting out of anonymity, so they don't book an appointment because they fear there will be retaliation against them», said one interviewee. The same problem arises with the psychological counseling service, which has been set up at some universities specifically to deal with acts of violence and work with external anti-violence centers. Here too, the still limited access rate can be an expression of the fear of stepping out of anonymity and fearing consequences. To overcome these difficulties, many universities have organized information campaigns on SH services, using functional communication channels to reach the entire academic community. Posters, social media, and weekly magazines are the main means used to improve knowledge about the available resources, especially among students.

Another aspect to be improved is the quality of the initial contact experience with these services, which needs to be ensured by having specially trained staff, who can reassure and properly inform people. This would ensure that users perceive a safe space and trust that there is someone who can help without fear of negative consequences.

## 6. *Partnerships*

The involvement of key stakeholders is a central aspect of GBV prevention and the provision of specialized services. Fortunately, Italian universities are taking steps to create networks with external bodies and institutions that can bring specialized expertise, increase the quality of internal resources, and enable the implementation of meaningful projects. For example, as already mentioned, the “Out of the Shadows” project was possible thanks to the collaboration of numerous private and public centers, organizations, and institutions, which provided the material for the benches, as well as spaces outside the university where they could be installed. In this way, the benches have become part of the urban environment and have succeeded in spreading the message to the entire community.

In addition, there is now frequent collaboration with anti-violence centers, so that many universities have set up special anti-violence units. This is a free service aimed at those who are or were victims of any form of violence, from the most serious to the hidden ones. Measures that can be offered include: individual interviews in a protected space managed by experts in GBV; information on the services, people and institutional bodies of the university on the subject of violence and gender discrimination, as well as on the legal aspects and the most appropriate ways to contact the competent authorities; telephone consultation, including the activation of the procedure to place the victim in a shelter, if necessary; interaction with the network of services and specialized local associations to deal with the most complex situations.

Law enforcement agencies, city councils, and health facilities are other partners most frequently mentioned in the interviews.

In addition to community involvement, the growth of networks between different Italian and foreign universities is also noteworthy, promoting the exchange of best practices. Increased collaboration between universities is supported by the existence of the institutionalized network of CUGs, which organizes a national conference every year to share information and experiences. In this context, it would also be desirable to create a formal network of Confidential Counselors, which does not exist as such: «Although Confidential Counselors are in contact with each other through informal channels, there is no institutionalized and recognized network of them, which would be desirable», an interviewee stated. Indeed, it is important to make institutional agreements that formalize the collaboration so that it is actually confirmed: «[...] making formal agreements with other experts could make a difference [...]. So, you have to make a written agreement, otherwise it's just talk». This does indeed lead to greater recognition involving external institutions, where science then has greater advocacy.

Equally important are internal networks and intra-university resources. On this point, the interviewees agreed that there is still much to improve, starting with the organization of the relevant services. For example, there is no clear job description for psychological counseling services, which in some cases deal with more general matters, while in other cases they are specifically organized to deal with violence, and work in collaboration with external centers. Students are not always aware of the difference, which leads to one service being used for reasons relating to the other. This can lead to delays and a high risk of dropout, if the person needs to be referred to the other service.

Generally, internal communication and collaboration should be improved to avoid everyone doing their own work, which, if not functionally networked, becomes an end in itself. Resources are increasing, but they need to be strengthened and, especially, used effectively.

## 7. *Policy, Protection, Prosecution*

The contents related to Policy, Protection, and Prosecution are not only the rarest in the interviews, but also appear closely related in the Italian academic context. For this reason, the results on these 3Ps are presented together.

Universities have a *Code of Ethics* that regulates the general conduct rules to be respected by all members of the academic world. In recent years, as awareness of this issue has increased, a *Code of Conduct against Moral and Sexual Harassment* has also been drawn up, which many universities have integrated into the more general *Code of Ethics* to create a uniform set of rules. This document is structured in two sections; the second section deals exclusively with moral and sexual harassment prevention in academia. In this document, one finds all the information on the sanction profiles (Prosecution) and the measures to protect victims (Protection), including the role of the Confidential Counselors and their intervention options. If harassing behavior – which corresponds to the definition in Article 1 of the Code – occurs at the university, the victim can contact the Confidential Counselor to initiate an informal procedure, which must be completed within 120 days of the report. The Confidential Counselor will assist in determining the most appropriate way to resolve the situation through various possible measures, including (1) summoning the alleged perpetrator for an interview; (2) obtaining witness statements and reviewing administrative records on the case; (3) if requested by the victim, facilitating joint meetings between the victim and the alleged perpetrator; (4) suggesting measures to the administration that are appropriate

to protect the psychological and physical well-being of the individuals involved. No action may be taken without the express consent of the victim, who is also free to withdraw the complaint at any time.

If the harassed person does not wish to contact the counselor or the counselor's intervention has not stopped the harassing behavior, the victim may file a formal complaint with the dean or director of the department, who will forward the report to the appropriate parties for disciplinary action. If the Disciplinary Committee finds the reported facts to be substantiated, it will take appropriate actions to protect the victim. Applicable sanctions under the *Code of Ethics* include measures such as reprimands, removal (temporary or permanent) from the university, suspension or termination of assignments, payment of fines, and others.

The existence of policy documents governing conduct within the university is certainly an important aspect, even if these documents are not without weaknesses in their practical application. The procedures mentioned take a long time to be set in motion, whereas intervention in such sensitive incidents should be much quicker. A «streamlining of these procedures is certainly a goal to strive for, which should be achieved more quickly», as one interviewee rightly stated.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to create a systematic inventory of existing prevention and countermeasures for GBV and SH at Italian universities and to compare these with international standards. In particular, all levels of the 7P Model were examined in interviews with key experts, and their strengths and weaknesses identified. Moreover, it was also examined whether the implementation of the Model was supported by two essential contextual conditions that ensure its continuity: cultural aspects and institutional resources. Therefore, each P refers to these two points, which were considered the basis for a solid implementation of the Model.

In this process, capacity building within the organization plays a key role. Capacity building initiatives concern different forms of knowledge exchange, e.g., training, education, supervision, mentoring, and mutual learning activities for different target groups (Bondestam, 2024). These should be aimed at all students, departments, and staff, although it can be challenging to include potential perpetrators, bystanders, specific vulnerable groups, and other stakeholders. It is therefore important to implement training programs for specific target groups, as well as mandatory orientation sessions and awareness-raising campaigns to promote a shared understanding of GBV and SH across the institution. All of this, of course, requires adequate resources, sufficient funding, expertise and skills, as well as dedicated and qualified professionals who have a clear mandate to oversee, design, and implement targeted activities. Furthermore, these capacity-building processes should adopt an intersectional perspective and distance themselves from approaches that focus either on “bad apples” or too much on individual factors. This perspective is necessary to prevent the implementation of “ornamental” and depoliticized interventions that align with the values of the neoliberal university (Colpitts, 2022; Gardiner & Finn, 2022).

In terms of these requirements and issues, Italian universities are still lagging, partly due to a lack of staff and dedicated professionals for these aspects, which often results in professionals being overloaded or having to manage things that go beyond their specific expertise,

or leading activities on the subject out of strong personal interest, but then not being able to ensure continuity. Prevention is a large task that is not, as such, within the remit of a researcher, as designing and implementing projects to raise awareness of GBV and SH (e.g., Prevalence) can be. Rather, prevention is a lengthy and even difficult process, considering that there is still strong cultural resistance in the Italian academic context, primarily related to the recognition of the existence of these phenomena and, consequently, to the application of evidence-based approaches in dealing with them. This, of course, also has an impact on prevalence: in a cultural climate that is often hostile to the dissemination of data for fear of «reputational damage» to the university, it is difficult to reliably and accurately measure GBV and SH in academia. Even in Italy, the neoliberal influence in universities is palpable, resulting in a focus on maintaining a marketable image at the expense of university welfare (Phipps, 2020). Unsurprisingly, most research projects on this topic are led by women, who have been trying for years to raise awareness and attention in a still highly patriarchal context, such as academia, where male participation is often met with more resistance or indifference. Fortunately, however, there is a considerable increase in research centers on gender issues, which are a great resource: not only do they involve several faculties in a multidisciplinary perspective, including those normally remote from these topics (e.g., STEM), but they also ensure the continuity of competent and trained staff, which cannot be guaranteed in other tasks.

The culture of denial, minimization, and trivialization also affects the effectiveness of the services provided by the university. In some specific cases, one can apply Ahmed's (2021) definition of "window dressing", where organizations appear to change, but in reality the inequities remain. This occurs when there is no emphasis on the importance of seeing GBV as an expression of organizational characteristics and power inequalities, and focusing too much on individual factors (O'Connor et al., 2021).

Certainly, the significant increase of services is a major step forward, as it demonstrates increased awareness and attention to these issues. A recent CRUI<sup>5</sup> survey (2024) of 94% of Italian universities ( $n=80$  out of a total of  $n=85$ ) found that around 25% ( $n=18$ ) have an anti-violence center, 65% ( $n=51$ ) have a psychological support service, and 80% ( $n=61$ ) have a counseling service. Overall, this report shows some progress in GBV and SH prevention at Italian universities, with larger institutions tending to be further along – certainly due to their greater resources –, while smaller institutions are still in the early stages of this process. However, quantity and quality do not always go hand in hand, as evidenced by the fact that access to the Confidential Counselor, psychological support services, and violence prevention services is still low. This is partly because the existence of these services is not known, as they are often not yet sufficiently publicized through university communication channels, and partly because there is some reluctance to use them. One interviewee pointed out that «Anti-violence services represent an important space. However, to ensure the continuity and expansion of these services, it is essential to publicize their existence so that they can respond to a demand that often remains hidden [...]. Sometimes communication is not very effective». However, even when the services are known, the fear that they will not be

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1963 as a private association of Italian Rectors, since 2007, CRUI (*Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane*) has become the association of recognized Italian state and non-state universities. It is proposed as a tool for guiding and coordinating universities, a privileged place for experimenting with models and methods to be transferred to the university system, a laboratory for sharing and disseminating best practices, as well as a modern center for study and analysis available to academic institutions. For further details see: <https://www.cruai.it/>.

believed, but rather belittled, or that retaliation could follow a report, is one of the main reasons why it is difficult for the university to be perceived as a «safe space», especially among students. However, there is an increase in communication campaigns aimed at promoting the existing services at universities and explaining their features and possibilities, which represents a good sign in reducing the distrust of students, and sometimes staff, towards the proposed institutional pathways.

Another positive aspect is that universities are also increasingly looking outwards, where they are building important networks. For example, anti-violence services are being opened up through collaboration with external anti-violence centers, that ensure the presence of specially trained professionals at universities. The trend, therefore, seems to be moving towards a socio-ecological approach to the prevention of violence against women and girls, aimed at involving society as a whole. Nevertheless, work still needs to be done on networking between universities, which do not yet appear to have joined forces sufficiently in the fight against these phenomena. Certainly, the lack of common national guidelines is not helpful, but this is precisely why a greater exchange and sharing of resources and best practices would be useful. This shortcoming is probably also the result of a certain competitive culture between universities, with each site pursuing its own project or initiative to differentiate itself from the others. This is just one of many factors leading to an uneven distribution of GBV and SH activities across the country.

Networks between universities to share resources and best practices would be the first step towards establishing national guidelines that would make our country more homogeneous in the prevention of GBV and SH in academia. This also means capacity building. Sharing what works and what does not, what measures and interventions are effective based on personal experience, thereby promoting the dissemination of knowledge, skills, and competences. At least the Italian universities have one thing in common: the *Code of Ethics* and the *Code of Conduct against Moral and Sexual Harassment*. This is probably where we should start. These policy documents need to be constantly updated to adapt them to the needs of practical life, and, in this sense, the exchange of experiences and best practices can be helpful. Otherwise, many written documents might lose their usefulness because they are outdated.

## Limitations

The main limitation of this qualitative research relates to the selected target population. The focus was on universities that are ahead in terms of preventing and combating GBV and SH, i.e., that already have specific initiatives, measures, and interventions in place. Instead, a detailed analysis of the obstacles in the standards for effective prevention should certainly have included all universities to obtain a more realistic picture of the current Italian situation. Therefore, an in-depth study of the entire Italian panorama on these issues is desirable in terms of equity, inclusion, and sharing of good practices. Nonetheless, even with this small and targeted sample, the study made it possible to identify some important areas for improvement that should be worked on for Italy to adapt to international standards for effective GBV and SH prevention.

## Conclusions

Based on the situation in Italy described here, systematic capacity building is a priority to consolidate the efforts already undertaken in the field of GBV and SH prevention in the academic world. Although this is certainly less «catchy» – to quote the words of one interviewee – than organizing events for students, which is nevertheless important, if we want to make a difference among the new generations, it is also necessary to invest in the «slow work» of capacity building and to raise awareness among institutions and administrations. As some universities have already started to do, it is crucial to organize continuous capillary sessions in all departments to adequately train staff and students, equip universities with the necessary knowledge and skills to address GBV and SH issues, and promote awareness of the problem. All this would ensure rotation between competent professors and staff, and thus continuity of expertise in the long run.

From a broader perspective, capacity building also means collaboration and exchange between universities, creating networks to share resources, practical knowledge, skills, and effective interventions that take an intersectional approach. This is a crucial first step towards setting national standards that would lead to greater coherence in addressing GBV and SH in academia. In this sense, existing institutional networks, including the above-mentioned one of CUGs and the Italian Academic Network UN.I.RE<sup>6</sup>, should be the key starting point. For example, more frequent regular meetings, such as conferences, seminars, or other special occasions, could enable both continuous updating and an exchange of proposals for measures to be implemented uniformly by the universities. The aim must be to find an effective and, at the same time, sustainable way forward in everyday university life. A continuous exchange of experiences is therefore essential to find common ground on which we can jointly build concretely implementable solutions, and work towards fairer organizations by distancing ourselves from “decorative” approaches.

Finally, greater cooperation between institutions and activist, bottom-up movements would also be desirable. As already mentioned, these are often two forces working in parallel and with different means for the same cause. Both have significant potential which, if they worked better together, would optimize efforts towards a common goal. So far, this dialogue is still difficult at some universities due to closures on both sides. It is therefore important that universities taking a campus-wide approach act as role models for those lagging behind in this process by sharing strategies for structured engagement with activists, and giving them space and advocacy.

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<sup>6</sup> UN.I.RE is composed of universities, research centers, and researchers who share the goal of applying the Istanbul Convention, starting with the academic system. It is the first academic network recognized by the Council of Europe, as part of the OCEAN project (Open Council of Europe Academic Network). UN.I.RE's activity is mainly concerned with training, research, data collection, and civil society awareness to affirm a culture of respect for gender identities and nonviolence. For details see: <https://unire.unimib.it/>.

## Declarations

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee (CEAR of the University of Modena and Reggio-Emilia, Protocol 2024-UNMRCL-0119950) and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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