

# Europe is ahead of the US on gender equity. So why is abuse in HE rife?

**The findings of the UniSAFE survey about the extent of gender-based violence at European universities are troubling, says Susan Sorenson**

November 15, 2022 [Susan Sorenson](#)



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Recently released initial findings from a European [study of gender-based violence in 46 universities across Europe](#) were described as “[alarming](#)” by the study authors. As a US-based professor who has studied violence against women throughout my career, I agree.

Europe is ahead of the US in efforts to reduce gender inequality – including [11 of the 15 countries whose universities participated in the recent study](#). Policies across Europe do more than nibble at the edges: they take on systems and structures that affect our daily lives. I mean, who else would pose and then *answer* the question, as Swedish local officials did, “[Can snow-clearing be sexist?](#)”. So it’s particularly unsettling that nearly two-thirds of the staff and students in the survey, carried out by the European Union-funded UniSAFE project, said they had been the

victim of sexual harassment, physical violence, sexual violence, psychological abuse, economic abuse, or online forms of gender-based violence.

On the other hand, what's surprising is how few – only about three per cent – indicated that they had been the victim of sexual violence. By contrast, in a [recent survey of students attending US colleges and universities](#), the rate of nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or being unable to consent was 13 per cent. It was much higher still among undergraduate women and LGBTQN students (25.9 and 22.8 per cent, respectively).

However, one problem that plagued both surveys was a low response rate. Only 21.9 per cent of eligible students participated in the US survey, and a far lower proportion still – only 2.7 per cent – participated in the UniSAFE survey. That is, 97 of 100 eligible students chose to not answer *any* of the UniSAFE questions about any of the forms of gender-based violence.

It is hard to judge whether the people who did participate in the surveys are representative of the entire student cohort. Still, these surveys are the best data we have on the extent and nature of gender-based violence in higher education.

There were a few similarities in the findings of the two surveys. Sexual harassment was not uncommon. Nor was it limited to women. About one-third of the European respondents said that they had experienced at least one of eight harassing behaviours. That number corresponds to the percentage of undergraduate men in the US survey who had experienced at least one of five forms of sexual harassment. The figure was substantially higher, nearly 60 per cent, among women undergraduates, and nearly all the harassers were other students.

Another commonality in the surveys is that nearly half of the victims weren't sure whether the incident was "serious enough" to report or seek help for. An important point is that US students seem to draw a [distinction between seeking help following an incident and reporting the incident or the perpetrator to authorities](#). Unfortunately, the US survey did not ask about reporting to police or the Title IX office, the campus unit tasked with investigating reports of sexual misconduct against students. Nor did the UniSAFE survey ask about either help-seeking or the various individuals or units to whom respondents could or did report the incident. The inclusion of such information in future surveys will provide data by which to craft policy.

Psychological violence, the most common form of gender-based violence in the UniSAFE survey, was not assessed in the US survey. Nor was economic violence or social exclusion. Both surveys assessed student victims, but the European survey also included staff, bystanders and perpetrators. As such, Europe is ahead of the US in measuring forms of violence in academia that are widely acknowledged to be related to gender.

What's troubling is that despite Europe's multiple progressive policies to increase equity, gender-based violence flourishes in higher education. Perhaps those general policies are too blunt an instrument to reduce sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. Prevention and intervention programmes specific to various forms of gender-based violence might prove to be a useful adjunct.

Or maybe, as could be suggested by the comparatively low rate of sexual violence reported in the UniSAFE survey, broad gender equality policies *are* having an impact. More time, more interventions and more data are needed. In the interim, there will be many more victims.

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