



# Cyprus Focus Group Report - Staff

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## INTRODUCTION

**COUNTRY:** Cyprus

**PARTNER ORGANISATION:** Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies

**DATE:** 28/02/2018

**INSTITUTION:** University of Nicosia

**STAFF (for internal use purposes only):** Head of Student Affairs, Student Affairs Officers, Professors, Executive VP of Administration, Clinical Counsellors, Counselling Service officer, Counsellors.

**ATTENDANCE<sup>1</sup> (NUMBERS):** 9 (3 men and 5 women)

This report summarizes the findings of a focus group and one semi-structured interview conducted within the framework of the 'Ending Sexual Harassment and Violence in Third Level education (ESHTE)' project, co-funded by the European Union. Focus group participants were recruited among university staff including professors, senior administration officers and counsellors during a 3-month period in 2017 and 2018. The main aim of the focus group was to explore university staff's experiences with disclosures of sexual violence and harassment (SVH) cases on campus, as well as any knowledge they have on existing procedures and policies in handling cases of SVH. Their personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs around SVH, as well as any suggestions they have towards the improvement of university SVH practices are incorporated throughout the report.

### A. Main Concerns

The main concerns of the focus group participants is the lack of a comprehensive university policy on SVH and the lack of clear and transparent procedures on disclosure, investigation and support in dealing with cases of SVH. Currently, there is no comprehensive policy with clear procedures that foresees staff trainings or workshops on how to deal with SVH disclosures or awareness raising campaigns on campus defining SVH.

Specifically, the focus group and interview highlighted the following gaps:

- There are **no comprehensive policies and procedures** that include step-by-step actions when handling SVH cases, from disclosure to the investigation of the cases. The internal university regulations manual reserves 2 lines in which the procedure is explained.<sup>2</sup>
- There have been **no trainings of front line officers, or any staff members across departments** to whom students might want to disclose a SVH case. This can lead to various problems such as mishandling a SVH case, re-traumatising the victim and promoting a victim-blaming rhetoric on campus which can instigate the circle of violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Please keep attendance lists as a permanent project document

<sup>2</sup> See page 14, under subchapter "Official Policies"

- There have **been no on-campus awareness raising initiatives on SVH or on any national legislation concerning SVH** have been implemented within the university. Therefore the staff members, in most cases, are unaware of the exact definition of SVH and what it consist of as well as any legal consequences the perpetrator might face.
- The university **does not keep records of previous or ongoing SVH cases**. Therefore, there is no available data on reporting rates or case outcomes. Thus, it is not possible to evaluate the extent to which current procedures on the handling of SVH are adequate or effective.

The focus group discussion revealed that staff members are not properly informed regarding issues of SVH, both within the university context as well as on the national context. Despite that, they showed a great interest and eagerness in participating in training workshops since they don't feel confident enough to carry on their tasks with such limited knowledge on the issue. Finally, there was a general sentiment of discontent in relation to the lack of a comprehensive policy framework provided by the university on SVH, as well as the lack of an efficient internal communication from the department in charge of handling SVH cases.

## B. Innovative ideas

Despite the lack of a specific policy framework on SVH, the participants did provide suggestions that could enable the development of more effective and transparent procedures for the handling of SVH:

For example, they suggested:

- The creation of a sub-committee, formed under the existing Health and Safety committee<sup>3</sup>, which will act as a mediation committee between the university and other services (e.g. support services, police and lawyers). This sub-committee can be composed of university staff members and NGO representatives with expertise in different areas relating to SVH and can discuss and evaluate each SVH case individually accordingly.
- The counsellors could organise workshops and trainings to raise awareness on trauma inflicted by SVH.
- The creation of an ambassador program for the university students that would help raise awareness on gender-based violence, gender equality and SVH. This could create bigger movement in the campus and could motivate more students to be involved with such issues.

## C. Organisational analysis/ Learning for the Project

The focus group has not shown that we are at a stage where we can offer any innovative ideas but a minimum standard of code of conduct in relation to handling SVH disclosures as well as raising awareness ideas. As it will be discussed later on, the university has very few procedures when handling SVH disclosures, and most of the time the staff are not aware of them.

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<sup>3</sup> See page 19.

## PRIMARY PREVENTION - Culture-Education-Campaigns

### A. Sexual violence and harassment on campus

One of the most interesting findings of the focus group (and interview) discussion was the very low number of reported SVH cases encountered by the participants. Moreover, the participants<sup>4</sup> reported five distinct cases without having any overlapping cases, which is notable considering some of them came from the same department. One could assume that this is due to the staffs' will to protect students' privacy but eventually it was proven to be due to the inefficient communication between the different departments and the department in charge of handling SVH cases. This was determined after hearing that none of the cases were properly handled since no further actions were taken by any of the responsible departments. This problem stems from the lack comprehensive procedures enabling the students to report a case of SVH, as well as a unified database where records of SVH can be kept in order to evaluate the efficiency of the procedures in place as well as conduct any further research.

The five cases described were as follows:

**Case 1:** According to one of the Student Affairs officers, they had only come across one case of SH in 2008, where a female Erasmus student claimed she was harassed on the university campus. The case was handled by the Erasmus office, but no further actions were taken as the student decided not to proceed with a formal complaint.

**Case 2:** The next case was brought up by one of the counsellors at Counselling Services (CS)<sup>5</sup> involving a Cypriot female student (psychology trainee) who was harassed by one of her male tutors during the 2017 academic year. This case was quite serious as the SH triggered some existing psychological problems the student was facing, causing her to experience a psychotic episode and to be hospitalised. No actions were taken against the perpetrator as the student's claims and formal report was discredited due to her condition. This case highlighted several serious problems and gaps in the university's current policies and procedures. Such being, the lack of a detailed formal procedure guideline where staff members from different department can follow as well as staff trainings on how to handle such cases efficiently. Such trainings can also prevent any possible misconduct and mishandling of a SH disclosure as it is not left up to each staff members' judgment to decide on how to proceed with such an incident. Furthermore, in a society where victim-blaming is quite prevailing as well as gender biases such trainings are needed in order to ensure that every victim that comes forward and reports their experience is treated with respect and sensitivity. Continuing, the cultural context's role was also reaffirmed by the participant who recounted the case who stated that,

*"I am not sure what went wrong with this case procedure-wise but I know that culture in Cyprus played a decisive role. We usually belittle such cases. But it was serious because she was hospitalised. He was harassing her, asking her to do extra things." (Counsellor, CS)*

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<sup>4</sup> From various departments such as the Vice-Presidents office of Administration, the Students' Affairs office and the Counselling Services (CS).

<sup>5</sup> See page 17.

Moreover, the lack of sensitisation towards such cases and the social construct that enables such behaviours also played a defining role in the case's outcome since there is a great possibility that the perpetrator choose that particular student because she was more vulnerable due to her existing psychological problems.

Finally, another issue that surfaced from this case is the accessibility of such supportive services, which are free to all students and staff, by psychology students who are doing their training at CS. Most avoid seeking psychological support at CS since they are familiar with the majority of the counsellors in charge. This issue could be solved by also having an external partner to which the university can refer students to, under the same conditions as to CS.

**Case 3:** There was another recent case, which was provide by another senior counsellor at CS, involving an international male student. The student was an attempted rape victim as his male professor followed him into his home. Apparently, the victim made a formal complaint and was referred to by the admissions' office to CS in order get psychological support, as he was really traumatised. But the next part of the case is not confirmed. The counsellor also stated that, *"Instance like that, of violence in general, you hear them through the grapevine but what really bothers me is that no one really knows how to address it."* (Senior Counsellor)

**Case 4:** This case took place 3-4 years previously and involved a 21 year old female student. According to one of the counsellors, she was in her last year of Bachelors when she decided to go to CS for counselling. During the course of the counselling she stressed the fact that she had a difficulty in communicating with her thesis supervisor so the counsellor decided focus on that. At first she was very scared to talk about it but after a few months of counselling she felt safe enough to confess that the professor was sexually harassing her as he kept on inviting her out for coffee and telling her she's beautiful and so forth. The reason she was afraid to say something about this to the other tutors, or report this, was because she didn't know how they would deal with the case and whether she would face any repercussions. Moreover, the tutor was the one that would mark her thesis therefore he had the power to cut her or pass her. In the end, she didn't report him and she waited until she could graduate and left.

**Case 5:** Finally, a senior staff member of the Vice-President office for administration recollected a couple of cases of violent behaviour but when it came to cases of a sexual nature such as those of SVH, he stated that some female students reported some instances where unknown men were lingering at the parking lot and followed them to their car. In order to eradicate such instances the university has increased the lighting in the area and they are now in the process of increasing the patrol as they have group4 security and cameras. After these measures there was only 1 incident reported last year but no attack.

As mentioned before, the fact that only five SVH cases were mentioned in the focus group, in such a big university, raises a lot of questions and concerns as it clearly shows that the structures in place, both supportive and procedural, do not serve their purpose. Moreover, none of the staff members truly believes that the reported cases are the only SVH cases but are merely the ones that were formally reported and some sort of informal procedures was followed.

When the participants were further questioned on why there have been so few reports most of them agreed that the main reason is students' lack of awareness of what SVH comprises, which leads them to believe that they might not even realise they've experienced SHV. According to one of the senior officers another problem is that,

*"At the end of the day what you really need is evidence, because there's a lot at stake. You can't dismiss a faculty staff without a specific accusation [...] We need the permission of the victim to allow the use of the testimony against the accused so that when we are challenged by the accused to have evidence to back up the claim."*(Senior officer)

Although the current law on *Equal Treatment for Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Law of 2002 to 2007 (L. 205(I)/2002)*<sup>6</sup> where currently SH is defined, puts the burden of proof on the perpetrator and not the victim. This come to show the lack of knowledge and awareness around SVH and the way the current legal system works but is based on personal beliefs.

Issues such as the victim's agreement to fully collaborate and being willing to testify can be overcome if the necessary supportive services are provided to the her immediately after such an incident takes place. Apart from re-traumatisation there is always the fear of being stigmatised if the incident becomes public, this especially affects local students as SVH is still a taboo topic in Cyprus. According to one of the CS counsellors, even though there is the client confidentiality policy at CS, the students are still afraid to discuss such incidents with them. The main reason according to one of the counsellors is that if the perpetrator is a member of the university staff he can easily find out about it and retaliate.

Continuing, the formal procedures in place to disclose a SVH incident, as mentioned in the *internal regulation manual*<sup>7</sup>, (*All persons who allege sexual harassment must submit a Sexual Harassment Complaint Form to V.P. for Administration. All complaints will be investigated and appropriate action will be taken accordingly.*) is extremely vague as it only states that the victim should file a complaint. As one participate pointed out this,

*"Creates a lot of ambiguity. Also, we are in Cyprus, it's a small country, it's a university, what happens next? People might not know how to proceed next, who are they going to talk to, they are also probably afraid of any consequences (stigmatisation? breach of confidentiality?). Such a vague description doesn't create a sense of safety because if the exact steps where to be included then it would be easier to frame it and help the victim."* (Counsellor, CS).

Therefore, the lack of awareness about what client confidentiality is, in combination with the fear of retaliation the victim may face from the perpetrator makes disclosure very difficult for students.

What was suggested by one of the counsellors at CS was that,

*"It is important for the victim to feel empowered as soon as possible so she can act in an assertive way towards the perpetrator at the work environment or in a place where his power is superior than hers. If possible to prevent the abuse by empowering the persons to act more assertively. We need to create a culture of zero tolerance in places such as universities,*

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<sup>6</sup> **Article 14(2)** (as modified in 2009) states that burden of proof is put on the accused during trial.

<sup>7</sup> Last updated in 2011.

*especially as a public institution, and adopt policies to follow such line of thinking. The more developed a culture is in relation to such issues the more the students/staff is sensitised to such issues. SH does not happen in a day, it happens during a long period of time. It builds up and develops gradually, and usually perpetrators search for more passive and less assertive people and they start cornering them (comments, "oh you are beautiful today"). So victims that are less assertive do not put boundaries on such actions. If NGOs or bodies dealing with such cases can raise awareness on the rights each person has concerning their bodily integrity, the right to be respected and to their privacy. If the student union is sensitized about this issue maybe the union can find ways on social media e.g. to have some spots on raising awareness on this issue. Also, for people who are more susceptible to harassment to know in advance that they have a reliable service or person they can go to, in case they are ever found in such a position."*  
(Counsellor, CS)

Finally, considering how the previous SVH cases were handled one can only assume that students do not report such incidents due to fear and lack of trust towards the university. The fact that no disciplinary actions were ever taken against the perpetrators<sup>8</sup> which are currently employed there, further demonstrates how problematic and insufficient the current procedures are.

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<sup>8</sup> The participants were not aware of anyone being dismissed or formally being accused on such charges, even though the victim's testimony involved university staff members.



## B. Awareness of available programmes and campaigns targeting SVH on campus

### i. University actions

When discussing awareness raising initiatives on prevention of SVH as well as any actions promoting gender equality the examples provided by the participants were very limited. The first example was about a workshop on equality that happened years ago of which none of the participants could remember the exact content of. Another example was about a survey on gender equality in the workplace which was conducted and coordinated by the government. While the last one was about a recent series of workshops, which were part of EU project, and were focused on human trafficking. Even though, such disperse actions organised throughout the duration of more than two decades<sup>9</sup> are not enough to create a sustainable change or even less, build a culture of zero tolerance against SVH on campus. In all fairness, the aforementioned workshops on trafficking was indeed a good initiative, but discussing such topics without firstly addressing gender-based violence and gender-based discrimination, which are the root cause of it, seems quite inefficient.

Nothing has been done to raise awareness of the existing policies and support services either. Also, it is important to mention that during the orientation week<sup>10</sup> the students are briefly given some general information about CS and its services. But there is no specific information related to SVH specifically. On this note, a good initiative proposed by the participants was to have an in-depth information session with students throughout the year, where counsellors can have the chance to discuss different topics, such as SVH, in greater extent. In this way, the students can be made aware of what SVH is, the signs of it and how it can affect them emotionally and psychologically. This idea was well received by the counsellors and they agreed that such initiatives can have more sustainable results.

The main questions that were raised after this discussion were two. What is the current level of awareness when it comes to SVH among students and staff and why has not there been any initiatives to raised awareness on this topic. The answer to the first question was shared among all the participants who believe that the majority of the students and staff are probably very confused about what SVH is and they probably cannot recognise all its forms. As one of the participant's stated,

*"There are not always clear cut instances of SVH and they don't always start as aggressively as one would have imagined."* (Counsellor, CS)

An interesting suggestion to solve this issue was to do a survey that would examine this magnitude of the problem. That way the university can also identify the needs and gaps of the current procedures for handling SVH cases as well as raising awareness on what it is.

Regarding the second question, this was answered by a senior officer<sup>11</sup> who stated that due to the lack of SVH reports the university did not consider it as a priority. One of the participants commented on this by saying,

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<sup>9</sup> Creation of the college 1980, accredited as university in 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Takes place in September.

<sup>11</sup> Senior officer of the VP office of Administration

*“[...] sometimes there is the misconception that In Cyprus SVH cases don’t exist but this is not the case. I think we are just afraid to admit and report such incidents because most of the time the perpetrator is someone who is close to us. Maybe it’s the boss, maybe is someone in the family. It’s not like in other countries, where even famous and well-known people such as actresses and actors have come forward and admitted that they have been victims of SVH (#metoo campaign). In Cyprus people are still afraid to admit such experiences happened to them because they are afraid it will destroy their public image. But they don’t understand how beneficial and empowering it will be for other women, who can follow their example.” (Officer, Student Affairs)*

In conclusion, the university’s actions to raise awareness on SVH, or gender equality in general, are very scarce to non-existent. As a result, the majority of the staff members and students are unable to recognize SVH incidents, since they do not have a clear definition of all its forms, as well as the psychological, emotional, and physical effects it has on the victim. Also, the fact that no SVH reports have been made comes to prove the lack of awareness and information around SVH. The university’s attitude around SVH is closely linked to the general local sentiment towards SVH as it is still considered to be a taboo topic. Even so, it is the responsibility of the university to take the necessary precautions and measures to protect the students and staff members as well as to educate them on such important issues that can impact them. Prevention is as important as protection since it can stop such crimes from happening.

## ii. Student Unions and Student Society actions

Student unions (SU) in Cypriot universities tend to differ to those in other countries. For starters, the members of the SU board are usually students that belong to various student organisations/fractions which are much politicized. So much in fact, that they are even characterised as being the “extensions of political parties”<sup>12</sup>, as one of the participants stated. As a result, when those students get elected in the SU they tend to push their party’s political agenda. On the one hand this could have been considered as an asset since the students might be more skilled in negotiating and organising different events but what happens in reality, according to the participants, is that they use those skills to only promote issues that cater their political party and not their fellow students’ needs.

Continuing, the SU is considered to be an independent body with its own constitution<sup>13</sup> and therefore has no obligation towards the university per se. What is more, this particular SU’s constitution has proven to be discriminatory as,

*“[...] they have found a way to exclude international students. In the past there was a specific number of international students that had to be included in the SU but this policy came from the national SU. What happens now though is that each SU of each university uses that constitution as a template and they create their own constitution. Including some basic articles from the national one. As a result the SU adjusted their constitution so it would fit their political agenda but also made it impossible for any independent student to put forward their candidacy, (moneywise, SU structure etc.). “(Senior officer)*

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<sup>12</sup> (Φ.Π.Κ. Πρωτοπορία, Προοδευτική Κ.Φ., Αναγέννηση, Αγώνας, και Α.Φ.Π. Έπαλξη)

<sup>13</sup> There is a national SU constitution but each SU can make any changes they want.

Apart from excluding international students' interests and pushing their party's political agenda, as mentioned before, there is also a lack of interest towards the students' general welfare. This was concluded after one of the senior officers stated that the majority of their activities, after the election period, consists of organising parties and event nights. Even though the university made several recommendation of possible activities the SU could implement and would benefit their fellow students, none of them were ever taken into consideration. For example, one of those suggestion was creating and circulating a newsletter, which could therefore provide students a platform to discuss their problems and concerns. Aside from the SU, there are also various student societies (SS) that could take upon themselves the responsibility of raising different issues as part of their activities. For instance, the psychology society use to be very active in raising awareness on different issues like mental health, drugs for medical uses and so forth, but lately due to lack of leadership and interest by the students such activities are very limited.

The general situation concerning SU and SS highlights the culture around activism in the local context. In Cyprus, posing as an "activist" in a youth political party or a student organisation/fraction is considered to be more appealing than trying to bring about political and social change. The reason for that is that most students put great emphasis in improving their CV and not necessarily doing something more constructive. These kind of attitudes also translate into the Cyprus society as well. In all fairness, what played a defining role in adopting or developing such passiveness to activism was the country's history. Cyprus has been under constant occupation and it has only been 58 years since it became an independent state<sup>14</sup>. Even so, few years later, the Turkish invasion and occupation<sup>15</sup> of the norther part of Cyprus took place. Therefore, all these historical events have greatly contributed in the shaping of the Cypriot culture and perception towards notions such as activism and so forth.

In conclusion, the student led organisations/societies (SU, SS) have been very lax when it comes to organising any sort activities and/or events that could have any social impact on campus. This lack of ambition and leadership from the students is further enabled by the fact that they are never hold accountable for this. What is more, the local context regarding activism has greatly influenced the way this societies and organisations perceive their roles. Therefore, it would be a good idea if the SU had certain responsibilities included in their constitution, such as having a newsletter or organising a certain number of events on different issues each year.

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<sup>14</sup> Cyprus was part of the British Empire, as a Military occupation from 1914–1925, and a Crown colony from 1925–1960. **Cyprus became an independent nation in 1960.**

<sup>15</sup> The Turkish invasion and occupation took place in 1974.

### C. Awareness and understanding of the legal context of SVH

*"[...] in Cyprus we don't really believe in justice."* (Staff member, Student Affairs office)

While discussing the legal context of SHV it is important to note that the Cyprus legislation criminalises sexual harassment only under the *Equal Treatment for Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Law of 2002 to 2007 (L. 205(I)/2002)*.<sup>16</sup> More specifically it defines sexual harassment as,

*" [...] any form of unwanted verbal, non/verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, which has the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.*

Also,

*"The person who sexually harasses is primarily responsible for sexual harassment. However, according to Law 205(I)/2002, the employer can also be held responsible for acts of sexual harassment done by his/her employees, whether they are supervisors or co-workers of the victim. [...]"*

*"EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITY" is also quite strict in cases of sexual harassment. The Employer,*

- *is obliged to take your complaint into serious account and investigate it thoroughly and objectively, as quickly as possible.*
- *must take all appropriate action, while the examination procedure is underway, to stop the sexual harassment, lift any unfavourable effect the unlawful actions will have had on you and protect you from possible future instances of the offence.*
- *must not use your rejection of or submission to the unwanted sexual conduct as a basis for a decision that will affect you in a negative way.*
- *can be found guilty of the offence, alongside and to the same degree with the person who is responsible for the sexual harassment, if no action is taken to comply with the abovementioned.*
- *can be held accountable of a failure to act, as mentioned above, even where the sexual harassment is brought to his/her attention by a third party and not by the actual victim of the offence."* (Law 205(I)/2002)

In addition to this law, last year in March Cyprus also signed and ratified the Istanbul convention and currently a new legislation on violence against women is under progress. The latter legislation will be criminalising SVH against women for the first time outside the spectrum of family violence.

None of the staff members was aware of the current legislation. Even so they all shared their dissatisfaction with the justice system, especially when dealing with cases of SVH (in the workplace). Their concerns were directed towards the low sentences handed and the low conviction rates. One of the participants also drew attention to the effects such trials have on the emotional and physical wellbeing of the victims.

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<sup>16</sup> There is also legislation criminalising sexual violence and exploitation of children.

Continuing, the majority of them agreed that legislation is important in changing the culture around such issues since,

*“The legislation is there because society has failed to do the things it needs to do in order to protect people. If you don’t have the social norms and behaviours that protect people or make this environment safe for everybody then you need laws. Because if people do not obey social norms then you have to have other measures.”(Professor)*

## SECONDARY PREVENTION – RESPONSES, INTERVENTIONS, SUPPORT SERVICES

### A. Institutional Structures and procedures in place to handle SVH

#### i. *Official Policies*

Only two out of all the participants were aware of the university's policies regarding SVH disclosures. The participants claimed that there should be a more targeted dissemination of such information since the internal regulation manual (IRM)<sup>17</sup>, in which they are included, also includes a great volume of information that rarely any of the staff members read. Another suggestion was to create a separate manual focusing specifically on SVH and all its policies and procedures.

Currently, the provision on SH as well as the official procedures in place are as follow,

“Sexual harassment is defined as:

- a) *Unwanted sexual advances,*
- b) *Unwelcome request for sexual favours,*
- c) *Sexually motivated physical conduct or,*
- d) *Other verbal or physical conduct or communication or a sexual nature where:*
  - *Submission to such conduct is made a term or condition, either explicitly, of obtaining or retaining employment, educational opportunities and other benefits provided by the College;*
  - *Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment or academic decisions affecting the individual'*
  - *Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's academic or work performance, or of creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive educational or working environment.*

*All persons who allege sexual harassment must submit a Sexual Harassment Complaint Form to V.P. for Administration. All complaints will be investigated and appropriate action will be taken accordingly.”<sup>18</sup>*

As it can be seen, SH is vaguely defined in comparison to the national legislation<sup>19</sup> (see page 11) and key definitions such as *sexual violence, sexual harassment, consent* as well as the exact forms of SH are left out. Apart from the lack of substantive information regarding SVH there is also a dearth of a comprehensive framework which dictates how a SVH case will be handled from start to finish. Starting from disclosing the case, to the way it will be assessed, what support services are available to the students during this process, to how it will be investigated and so forth.

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<sup>17</sup> The Internal Regulations Document supplements the university Charter and was last updated in 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Internal Regulations manual, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> L. 205(I)/2002

In addition, SH is defined as a disciplinary offence and the penalties towards offenders of SH are as following,

- a. Oral warning;*
- b. Written reprimand;*
- c. Postponement of salary increase;*
- d. Loss of salary increase;*
- e. Fine not exceeding the equivalent of three months' salary;*
- f. Downgrading of salary scale;*
- g. Suspension without pay from duties for a period up to one academic year;*
- h. Demotion on academic rank;*
- i. Compulsory retirement;*
- j. Dismissal;*
- k. Other penalty as may be warranted in the circumstances and justified by the facts and circumstances of the case, whether or not in addition to the foregoing."*

The aforementioned information, according to a senior officer, is also made known to the staff when they sign their contract.

In essence, the policies and procedures as they currently stand are very limited. Not only does the university IRM lacks a basic framework on how SVH disclosures should be handled, but the definition of SVH is left open to interpretation. These gaps have encouraged the use of informal practices by staff and has put the responsibility on them to handle such cases as they see fit. An example of such practice, according to a senior officer<sup>20</sup>, is to consult a SVH case with the counsellors of CS and then refer the victim to them. But again, this is not made known to all the staff members.

#### *ii. V.P. office of Administration*

The department in charge of handling SVH disclosures is the Vice-President Office for Administration, which usually refers such cases to CS as mentioned above. More specifically, when they came across such cases,

*"[...] depending on the nature of the case we decide where to refer the student. For instance we have CS, so if it's something that its better handled by a psychologist we refer it to them. We also ask them for advice regarding the code of procedure to follow, since as professional they know better, what to avoid saying etc. We also have another counsellor in the admissions department which mainly deals with students with learning difficulties but she can also help us with such cases. Also, we try to be very sensitive when it comes to the victim's need so if the victim is a female we try to have a female psychologist and we won't deal with it administrative until we get further information from the counsellor whether any actions need to be taken."*  
(Senior Officer)

The abovementioned practices are all quite informal as none of them are mentioned in the IRM, or elsewhere for that matter. More specifically, there is no further information on how students are

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<sup>20</sup> From the VP office of Administration

supposed to submit the complaint. For example, if there's a template for it or if there's someone in charge of handling such cases, if confidentiality will be kept, if there are other ways to hand in the complaint (e.g. online form), or what happens next. All these questions create a sense of uncertainty which might discourage students from reporting a SVH case.

When the senior officer in charge of disclosures was asked to explain how this process takes place, he stated that students need to write a letter<sup>21</sup> including all the details of the incident. This letter will then have to be personally handed in to the VP office. He then added that,

*“The confidentiality in this process is in the sense that they trust us and we will treat their case with respect. The fact that the might be seen in the VP office should not pose a inhibiting factor as many students go there for various reasons.”* (Senior Officer, Vice-President Office for Administration)

Then, depending on the severity of the case the victim will be referred to the CS and an investigation be initiated. The investigation is undertaken by the disciplinary committee (there are 5 members in total), which is made out of members of the senate. No information on how the investigation takes place was provided, mainly because there have not been any previous SH cases investigated in the past, according to the senior officer.

### *iii. Support Services (CS)*

As previously stated, when a SVH case is officially reported at the V.P. office for Administration or to a staff member the next step is for the victim to be referred to CS. CS is a non-governmental organization founded by the university. The centre was established to provide counselling services to both students and university employees as well as to meet the mental health needs of members of the wider community. It should be pointed out that the counselling services are free of charge for the students and the university staff while for the wider community the fees are noticeably lower in relation to other counselling services. The centre employs around 20 counsellors to which only 5 are connected to the university, while the rest are external partners that are mostly stationed to their offices, outside CS, and deal with external cases. Moreover, the CS also acts as a training site where our Psychology students can carry out their practicum.

Continuing, when a SVH cases is referred to the CS the procedures is as follows,

*“[...] we set the student up with a competent counsellor that we know can handle her/his case efficiently. When it comes to the legal part, the university takes that upon it, we are not involved in that process. If a student comes in and want to report it we can only advise her/him, we can't force her/him to report it but if the student is still a minor and is harming herself/himself or someone else and its ongoing then we are be mandated to report it to the police and the university.”* (Senior Counsellor)

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<sup>21</sup> Not template form available for the formal complaint.



When discussing one of the aforementioned cases of SVH<sup>22</sup>, the counsellor that was contacted by the admission's office stated that the staff was very confused on how to handle the case,

*"They were not sure what were the next steps, whether I should go through the V.P Office for Administration, whether we should involve lawyers, who should be informed and what should be said. I asked what was the university's procedure and people didn't know and I then realised that there was no committee in place to handle such cases. The way we deal with such cases at CS, is that the student can come here, we can make a referral, we can do cross intervention, we can offer psychological support, short or long-term treatments. But the initial steps, when coming across with such a case, of how it's done, to whom the students speak to is not clear to us or most of the staff at the university. What also worries me is whether the people are trained to handle such cases. Because it's traumatic for the victim."* (Senior Counsellor)

One of the participants suggested that in order to avoid such issues it would be more efficient to create a unit on campus that would function as a one-stop shop. If students were able to access all supporting services (e.g. CS) on campus then they might be more inclined to report such cases. The fact that the CS is located so far away from campus might deter students from going there. Although, the idea of creating a one-stop shop sounds quite appealing and most participants were on board with it, the counsellor were against changing the current location of the CS. They argued that by having the CS located outside the university's campus it makes the entire process more confidential and provides separation between the administrative staff and other students and the victims. Additionally, it was mentioned that in Cyprus it is still frowned upon and is a taboo when someone wants to go for counselling.

Therefore, the current location of the CS not only does it provide a safe space for students who want psychological support but it is especially helpful for victims of SVH because,

*"[...] when a person experiences SVH the whole surrounding gets affected negatively by the experience so he person needs a place and a counsellor who won't belong to her surroundings, and outsider."* (Senior Counsellor, CS)

Even so, it has been noted that students are more likely to seek psychological support for other personal issues rather than for dealing with SVH trauma. This is again due to the stigmatisation surrounding SVH but also the lack of information and education around the issue.

#### *iv. Gaps - Suggestions*

Throughout the discussion it was noticeable that there are several gaps when it comes to having thoroughgoing procedures for handling cases of SVH. For starters, the definition, as it is now, is open to interpretation on what SVH exactly comprises of as well as whom is responsible and involved throughout the entire process. The ambiguity of the procedure can only instigate chaos among staff members when they come across such cases, as it has already been expressed by the participants. Therefore, it would be of outmost importance to clearly define SVH including terms such as *sexual consent, sexual violence, disclosure, consent, perpetrator, victim* and so forth, as well as provide

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<sup>22</sup> See pages 4-5.

examples of the different forms of SVH (physical, verbal and non-verbal). That way the students and staff member can be aware of what SVH actually means and can recognise its signs. As for the framework of how SVH cases are to be handled, every step of the process should be included. For example,

- Disclosure;
- Filing a complaint (how, where etc.);
- Assessment of the case (how, who etc.);
- Protection of the victim from any retaliation by the perpetrator;
- Dealing with retaliation and threats;
- Confidentiality (definition);
- Records of SVH cases (creation of a database to keep those records and evaluate the efficiency of the procedures in place);
- Obligatory annual initiatives to raise awareness (what should comprise, campaigns, workshops etc.); and
- Trainings of staff (who, what should the workshops include etc.)<sup>23</sup>

This way the entire process will be transparent and both staff and students can be made aware of their rights and responsibilities. It is important to note that a victim of SVH is already traumatised and scared to begin with, not knowing what would follow when she/he decides to file a complaint could only deter them from wanting to disclose such an instance or even seek psychological support. The students should also have the choice to either file a complaint to the respective office (a template for which should be available) or file the complaint online (an online reporting system should be therefore created/available).

When it comes to the efficiency of the support services there were not as many gaps since the counsellors are trained professionals that know how to deal with trauma. What is lacking though is a well-established path of communication between the university and the CS, as well as more targeted trainings on SVH and its effects. Since,

*“For other issues we have a lot of students being referred here. But that’s the problem, for other, for cases of SHV I don’t know if the students are aware of their rights. What constitutes SH, that such behaviour is wrong and they have rights and can file a complaint against the perpetrator. There’s not awareness and I think that the problem with the university.”*  
(Counsellor, CS)

An interesting suggestion from the participants that would improve the communication between the CS counsellors and the university staff is the creation of a sub-committee that would act as a mediator between them. Such committees already exist but not regarding gender-related issues or SVH. These committees are composed of staff members from different departments with a range of skills and expertise to support a broad range of the committees’ topic. Therefore, such a sub-committee can be

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<sup>23</sup> University of Guelph, “Sexual Violence Policy”, 2017  
URL: <https://uoguelph.civicweb.net/document/126417>  
& <https://uoguelph.civicweb.net/document/126539>

created to deal with SVH. It can be comprised of professors, counsellors and maybe NGO officers who would deal with each SVH case separately.

Finally, while discussing the gaps and possible solutions to the current situation regarding SVH procedures, one of the participants expressed that it would be better to firstly,

*"[...] assess if there is a problem. We most probably know there is a problem. Try to identify if possible the extent of the problem. If we have an idea of the extent of the problem and the issues involved then we might be better able to address them and find better ways of dealing with them. It's fine to mention such units but it's we are ahead of ourselves." (Professor, UTLI)*

On the other hand, another participant replied to that,

*"Maybe it should be the other way around. Maybe even if there is no problem right now maybe there will be in the future. So it's better to establish and have procedures in place and assign the people that will be responsible for this." (Officer, Student Affairs Office)*

Even though it is indeed important to study the prevalence of SVH cases that should not determine the need of creating and providing supportive services to victims. Also, SVH is something that is indeed happening in our society<sup>24</sup> and it sure happens on campus as seen from the cases provided. Therefore, taking preventive measures and creating structures that can assist and protect victims will also help evaluate the situation and try to find doable solutions for it.

## B. Trainings

The idea of having staff trainings was very well received by all participants since they do not feel confident enough to handle SVH cases. This is mainly due to lack of awareness around SVH and the university's procedures for handling such cases. The participants were also well aware of the damage they can cause if they mishandle such a case.

One of the participants mentioned that,

*"I am positive that many colleagues of mine have very sexist and stereotypical even racist way of thinking when discussing a SVH case. For example, if a female Russian student came and reported such a case I'm sure some will say well she was asking for it. This worries me because if such a case is handled in a wrong way it will do a lot of damage and students will not trust us anymore. [...] If such a close minded person will attend such trainings on SVH then she/ he will be made aware, even if she/he doesn't fully believe it, which things are tolerated to say*

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<sup>24</sup> Since there is no legislation specifically for SVH it is quite difficult to provide exact data on the prevalence of SVH but [SPAVO](#) (Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family) posted on their website that for 2017, **11%** out of 1680 cases they dealt with involved sexual abuse while **4%** involved SH against women.

Moreover, the cases of SVH against minors has increased greatly in 2017, with 1 out 4 girls and 1 out 6 boys being SVH. (source Cyprus News Agency:

<http://www.cna.org.cy/webnews.aspx?a=4bebf3376dad486e9422fd1409b14903>)

*and might think twice before thinking or saying something like that to anyone.” (Students affairs officer)*

When it came down to who should be trained, the majority agreed that it should be staff in all levels across the university, including academic staff, administrative staff, and so forth, since no one knows “[...] *who the student will reach to ask for help.*” (Officer, Student Affairs) One of the participants though stated that the Student Affairs department should be given extensive training, since they are the ones that come across such instances,

*“From personal experience we are the first to be contacted by the students but also we are the first to deal with the students during that stressful and difficult time and maybe we are not trained well enough to deal with that and might even cause bigger damage.” (Students affairs officer)*

One of the participants highlighted the importance of deciding on the content of each training and suggested that staff members should be adequately trained and informed on key issues on SVH, so that they are well prepared to do the initial screening.

*“The front-line officers should not take upon themselves the role of a police officer and clear cut what is and what’s not SH but just make an initial assessment of what the person needs. How to support the victim at that moment. Some basic information of the process (what happens after they report it, how long does it take). Inform them about support services available. Just don’t overdo it. By going overboard they might cause more damage than good.” (Counsellor, CS)*

This cleared the air as it gave a general idea of who should do what and subtly provided guidance on what each staff member should focus on, for the overall good of the victims. The emotional and psychological support should indeed be left up to the trained professionals, while the front-line officers should provide all necessary information to the victim. For example how to proceed if she/he wants to report the case and so forth. That way, the victim can feel safe enough to report the case and seek help. As for the format of the trainings the participants all agreed that by having workshops where they will have to deal with different scenarios would work best.

Finally, one of the participants expressed that by training the staff members then the students will also feel more at ease to report such cases because,

*“If we reassure that we handle these incidents very professionally, that we have structures and regulations. This will encourage people to trust us and they won’t be afraid that people will gossip about them. Unfortunately, sometimes in Cyprus, what we tend to do is we blame the victim for such incidents (maybe they wore provocative clothes etc.). We need to ensure that people, victims of SHV, will be treated with respect and the case will be handled with professionalism and that we will not in any way make them feel vulnerable or be blamed for what has happened to them. Unfortunately, what I strongly feel at the university is that there’s no confidentiality and a lot of things get leaked out that shouldn’t and I find this very sad. I feel this as a staff member so you can only imagine how the students might feel.” (Officer, Student Affairs)*

As seen from the participants' statements there is a need for trainings since most staff members might lack the necessary knowledge on what SVH consists of and even have gender biased opinions on the issue. This makes it very difficult for students to come forward and report such cases since they do not feel they will be treated with respect and discretion.

## INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

### A. Internal Structures (e.g. Management team, body involving students)

The internal structure of the university, as seen throughout report, is as follows,

1. *Vice-President office for Administration;*
2. *Student Affairs office;*
3. *The Counselling service(CS);*
4. [Student Union](#).

### B. Cross institution networks

The university has occasionally collaborated with different NGOs on issues such as violence and bullying but as stated from the participants it is not a common practice. The NGOs it has collaborated with are the [Cyprus Family Planning Association](#), Cyprus Youth Board, and the [Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family \(SPAVO\)](#).

**The Cyprus Family Planning Association (CFPA)** is a voluntary, non-governmental and non-profit organization founded in 1971. The Association is a member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (DOOP) since 1972. The primary goal of the Association is to defend the rights of all people, especially youth, on issues relating to Sexual Health and reproductive life. It offers high quality informational, educational and counselling services, as well as programs for sexual and reproductive health and rights. The CFPA is staffed by committed, qualified and experienced volunteers and staff.

**Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO)**, is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) which was created in 1990. Its aim is to provide support to people who experience domestic violence. Their mission is to provide, a) direct help to victims of Domestic Violence; b) housing and protection to victims of domestic violence (abused women and their children); c) training and educational courses to women, victims of Domestic Violence, in order to facilitate their social inclusion process; d) theoretical and practical training of people who are interested in supporting victims of domestic violence voluntarily; e) informing and sensitizing concerning issues of Domestic Violence, not only the appropriate governmental bodies, but also to the public; f) Identifying deficiencies or weaknesses in the relevant laws and legislation and submitting suggestions to the appropriate governmental bodies.