

**IT  
STOPS  
NOW.**



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# Toolkit

Ending Sexual Violence  
and Harassment in Third-Level  
Education



Funded by  
the European Union

**There's really no such thing as the "voiceless". There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.**

Arundhati Roy



# Section One

Understanding sexual violence  
and harassment, challenges  
and responses

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## Introduction

The ESHTe project was established in October 2016, and aimed to 'prevent and combat SVH and build a culture of zero tolerance in universities and third-level institutions throughout Europe through developing a feminist understanding and analysis of the causes and effects of SVH against women students'.

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) stood as the project lead, and project partners were the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) in Cyprus, the Women's Issues Information Centre (WIIC) in Lithuania and Rape Crisis Scotland (RCS) in the United Kingdom (UK), with the Office of the Women's Representative (Germany) joining the project as an associate partner. The project was funded by the European Commission: Directorate-General, Justice and Consumers through Daphne III.

Two core pieces of European Union (EU) research informed the development of the ESHTe project. Firstly, the European research study, "Gender-Based Violence, Stalking and Fear of Crime", which researched women students' experiences of sexual harassment, abuse and stalking in Germany, Poland, the UK, Italy and Spain, identified:

- A high prevalence of SVH amongst female students, with significant consequences for their wellbeing and academic performance
- The majority of incidents go unreported and undisclosed due to the widespread preconception that violence tends to happen to underprivileged, uneducated women. Women students therefore found it difficult to reconcile the experience of sexual violence with their self-image as confident, independent women.<sup>2</sup>

The research articulated the need for a strategy that targets both students and university authorities, including:

- Information, recognised as a crucial means of reducing feelings of shame and guilt and thereby increasing rates of disclosure amongst students
- A general university policy that refuses to tolerate gender-based sexual violence.

Secondly, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) surveys on violence against women, conducted in 2014 in the 28 EU member states, identified that violence has the highest prevalence among women who are 18-29 years old, overlapping with the average student going age.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the production of this Toolkit, the ESHTe project team undertook a range of activities in order to achieve these objectives. These activities included:

- The production of a review of data on the prevalence of SVH of women students in higher education in the EU
- The conducting of SVH focus groups with HEI staff and students in universities in Cyprus, Ireland, Lithuania and Scotland
- The delivery of eight pilot training sessions relating to SVH for HEI staff in partner countries
- The dissemination of project learning through an end-of-project conference in Dublin, with further dissemination seminars in each of the partner countries
- The development and rollout of a SVH culture change campaign, "It Stops Now", in HEIs across Europe
- The production of informational online seminars on SVH topics.

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## Underpinning feminist principles

### ▶ Building a community approach through shared experience-based learning

While individuals can act as catalysts for change, cultural transformation requires a collective community and societal effort. Each ESHTe partner organisation worked closely with HEI partners committed to tackling SVH. NWCI, the lead project partner, established a National Advisory Committee (NAC) to guide the work of the project's national activities. The NAC comprised representatives from participating HEIs and Student Unions (SUs), the Department of Justice and Equality (DoJE), specialist sexual violence non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and An Garda Síochána (the Irish national police force). This was a collective, supportive space, allowing for different perspectives and approaches to be shared, and working to overcome any siloed, sectoral thinking that can often be a barrier to change.

### ▶ Challenging power dynamics

SVH does not exist in isolation; it is inextricably linked to inequality in social, economic and political frameworks. Women and marginalised groups are traditionally underrepresented within decision-making and power structures. Their experiences and perspectives are excluded, and laws, policies, and priorities are defined by those in power. HEIs cannot adequately tackle SVH without transparently challenging the power dynamics within their own institutional cultures and ensuring that equality and representation are delivered at every level within their institutes.

### ▶ Intersectionality

Sexual violence impacts all communities; however, some cohorts are disproportionately impacted through a multi-layering of lived experiences of inequality. Intersectionality requires programmes, policies, training, and campaigns to integrate how different identities - including race, gender, class, sexual orientation and abilities - interact with each other and those who experience SVH.

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## Existing international and European frameworks relating to gender-based violence and sexual violence and harassment

The ESHTe review of data on prevalence on SVH in HEI in Europe contains a more detailed examination of gender-based violence (GBV) frameworks; however, an overview is outlined below.

### ▶ International Frameworks

Article 5 of the 1979 **United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** calls on states to modify 'the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women'.

The 1993 **UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women** built on CEDAW through recognising how GBV is both a manifestation of gender inequality and a way in which discrimination, inequality, and gender injustice are perpetuated. The Declaration defined violence against women as 'any act of GBV that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women'. It stated that 'violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women'.

Subsequently, the 1995 **Fourth World Conference on Women** and its **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action** also focused on the elimination of all forms of violence against women, calling on states, international organisations, and NGOs to prevent and combat violence against women.<sup>3</sup>

## Sustainable Development Goals

### SDG 5 | Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

➤ **Target 5.2:** Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

### SDG 16 | Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

➤ **Target 16.1:** Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere

### ▶ European Union Frameworks

The EU has also focused on the SVH of women, with the European Parliament, European Council and European Commission having adopted a range of resolutions, conclusions, and strategies on the issue.

The **Istanbul Convention** is currently the most powerful legally binding document in the EU regarding violence against women.<sup>4</sup> It defines violence against women as ‘a violation of human rights... and shall mean all acts of GBV that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life’.

It names different forms of violence, including sexual violence, sexual harassment, rape, stalking and psychological violence, and requires states to adopt comprehensive measures to prevent violence, protect survivors, and prosecute the perpetrators.

The **Victims Rights Directive** creates minimum standards in relation to the rights, supports, and protection of victims of crime within the EU, regardless of their citizenship.<sup>5</sup> The Directive came into effect in November 2015, and introduces a number of measures which HEIs should be aware of, including the right to compensation for victims of crime and European-wide protection orders.

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## Illustrative data on sexual violence and harassment in higher education

# 68%

In a study across five European countries, 47% to 68% of women students reported feeling sexually harassed by verbal or threatening unwanted sexual advances during their HE studies.<sup>6</sup>

# 2%

In the UK, only 2% of those experiencing sexual violence felt both able to report it to their university and satisfied with the reporting process.<sup>10</sup>

# 62%

62% of students have witnessed or experienced some form of GBV on campus in Spain.<sup>7</sup>



1 out of 4 young women have been stalked or sexually harassed online at least once.<sup>11</sup>

# 7%

In Scotland and the UK, 7% of women students had been subject to a serious sexual assault, and 68% had experienced harassment, including groping, flashing, and unwanted sexual comments.<sup>8</sup>

# 92%

In Ireland, the 2015 National Sexual Assault Trauma Unit (SATU) Activity Report recorded that, from 685 people who attended for rape or sexual assault, 92% of patients were women and 45% of patients identified themselves as students.<sup>12</sup>

# 11%

In Ireland, 11% of women students had been subject to unwanted sexual contact, while 5% were rape survivors, with a further 3% survivors of attempted rape.<sup>9</sup>



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## Towards a whole of campus framework

There are a number of emergent frameworks for challenging SVH in HEIs. A common structure includes:

### Institute-wide approaches

- Take an institute-wide approach to developing policies and procedures for responding to incidents of SVH against women students
- Involve the SU in developing, maintaining, and reviewing all elements of a cross-institute response
- Assess interventions and policies regularly
- Develop a sectoral representative body to develop guidance on how to handle disciplinary issues that may also constitute a criminal offence.
- Ensure leadership buy-in in creating cultural change.

### Prevention

- Adopt an evidence-based programme seeking cultural change in the norms, beliefs, and values that contribute to sexual violence
- Develop partnership agreements between the student and university
- Embed a zero-tolerance approach across all institutional activities, including Human Resources (HR) processes

### Intervention/Response

- Ensure a range of well-advertised supports are available on campus for survivors
- Develop a clear, accessible, and representative disclosure response for incidents of sexual violence and rape, including a centralised reporting system
- Conduct staff training
- Develop and maintain partnerships with local specialist services
- Establish and maintain strong links with the local police and health services.

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## Listening to the whole campus: focus groups and exploring attitudes towards engagement

In addition to the production of SVH data prevalence reports, focus groups formed the primary information-gathering mechanism of the ESHTTE project, advising and shaping the Toolkit, the “It Stops Now” campaign, and development of staff training modules. The focus groups used community development approaches; they engaged stakeholders and explored their attitudes, experiences, challenges, and opportunities in relation to tackling SVH in a HEI setting.

Focus groups were facilitated by the ESHTTE organisational partners, with the support of HEI partners. In total, 12 HEIs across Cyprus, Lithuania, Ireland and Scotland participated in 25 separate focus groups with staff and students.<sup>13</sup> Focus groups were carried out through structured questions, generating group discussion; however, participants were given the space to explore relevant issues specific to their institute.

The focus groups explored the issue of SVH using a whole of campus framework, which covered:

### 1. Primary Prevention | Culture, Education and Campaigns

- Awareness of incidences of SVH within the HEI (on and off campus)
- Awareness of any campaigns or initiatives tackling SVH by the HEI or others
- Understanding of the legal context of SVH.

### 2. Secondary Prevention | Institutional Response and Supports

- Knowledge of the policies, processes, people and procedures
- Role of external stakeholders (such as the police)
- Training available.

### 3. Tertiary Prevention | Institutional Frameworks

- Knowledge of any HEI staff or student groups working on the issue of SVH
- Cross-institutional frameworks
- State-supported frameworks.

Country	Number of HEI staff focus groups	Number of HEI staff participants	Number of student focus groups	Number of student participants
Cyprus	1	9	2	12
Lithuania	1	16	1	19
Ireland	6	31	10 <sup>14</sup>	118
Scotland	2	9	2	12

### ► Overview of focus group findings

For the vast majority of focus group participants, this was the first time they had been consulted in relation to SVH within the HEI. Despite varying legislative and political contexts across Ireland, Scotland, Cyprus and Lithuania, the greater part of the issues identified by staff and students were similar. In some focus groups, a broader issue of gender equality was raised in relation to harassment: one staff participant said ‘there is a culture within the institute that is problematic when it comes to women’, while another commented that ‘female staff feel disempowered around speaking up about a number of issues, such as harassment and pay gaps’. It was clear that, for many participants, SVH could not be addressed solely in relation to students, and a whole community approach should be implemented. There was general agreement that institutes were not doing enough to tackle the issue of SVH.

### ► The prevalence of sexual violence

All focus groups were aware of incidences of SVH within their HEI community. This ranged from rape, stalking, covert filming and photographs to online harassment and unwanted sexual advances. Most of the incidences raised were related to student experiences – ‘it’s happened to so many of my friends’ – while the vulnerable position of post-doctorates who are not easily categorised as either staff or students was also noted.<sup>15</sup> The majority of sexual violence reported took place off campus at a variety of social events, while

online sexual harassment was raised as a growing issue for students. A number of participants highlighted the importance of initiatives in first year in order to establish expectations of behaviours. SVH against staff was not raised in the majority of focus groups, but, when it was, it was articulated as a serious problem.

### Consensus existed across almost all groups that:

- HEIs have a role to play in tackling the culture of SVH, but had failed to adequately respond to the issue of SVH.
- There was a lack of a clear framework (eg: gender equality) to address SVH within the institutes.
- Staff and students had a lack of understanding relating to the criminal nature of forms of SVH behaviours.
- There was a lack of any specific policies and procedures relating to SVH.
- There was no general training for staff to deal with disclosures and no clear referral pathways to additional services for students who disclose
- Some SVH behaviours have become ‘normalised’ and are therefore not always recognised as SVH.
- Victim-blaming rhetoric and fear of consequences (for both the institute and for the perpetrator) compound the issue and prevent it from being addressed.

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## Creating cultural change through leadership

Addressing SVH through leadership is an integral part of any HEI equality framework, and transformative cultural change is required to remove barriers to women and other marginalised groups in advancing in their education and careers, and in fully participating in the HEI community.

A small number of institutes had gender equality initiatives, but almost none highlighted GBV or SVH as issues.

### ► Recommendations

- HEI senior leadership must be committed to tackling SVH as a core element of the institutional mission
- There should be gender balance and representation of marginalised groups in positions of power and decision making structures within the HEI to promote a more conducive context for cultural change
- HEIs should engage with grassroots activism as a key driver for change
- Leadership should promote a culture of transparency at every level within the institute, including the publication of data and research, clear signposting of supports and policies, and awareness-raising initiatives

