

OR-29

Systemic silencing of gender-based inequality at universities: launching an independent European NGO in Belgium and the first survey on retaliation

Bertanne Visser¹, Danièle Zucker², Urša Opara Krašovec³, Jean-Pascale van Ypersele⁴, Caroline Nieberding⁴

¹ULiège, Belgium

²"Harassment, Enquiry, Recommendation", Belgium

³University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Slovenia

⁴Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

Risks for women and people associating to the female gender in academia have recently been quantified by the EU ("Unisafe" 2023; 1) and Belgium ("Behaves" 2024; 2), constituting power abuse, moral and sexual harassment, sexual aggression, as well as other forms of gender-based violence. What remains to be acknowledged openly is :

1) the systemic silencing of a large proportion of complaints associated to gender-based violence by the authorities of universities, and how this silencing is structurally organized through internal and legal procedures that targets must comply to (3,4,5).

2) How gender-based discrimination leads to misuse of large amounts of public money, like we experienced.

We first identify how silencing is organized by the academic institutions.

Second, as there is currently no organization in Belgium that is both financially and hierarchically independent of higher education institutions and the government, we present a novel international NGO that acts as an independent structure and focuses on advocacy, on data collection and on enforcement of non-discrimination by legal actions towards systemic change in higher education institutions, in Belgium, and in the long term in Europe. The NGO will develop strong ties with other networks to reach the following three main objectives:

1) provide support for individuals and groups encountering serious distress as a result of hostility, harassment, and violence in higher education and research environments;

2) conduct research to collect, analyse, publish, and disseminate data pertaining to barriers to women's progress and success in academia;

3) advocate for legislation change at the governmental and European level and provide a legal framework and support to enforce accountability of European academia.

With this contribution, we want to highlight the current state of affairs in Belgian campuses focusing on retaliation mechanisms of targets by institutions, introduce our new NGO and present the launch of the survey for quantifying silencing and retaliation of gender-based violence by authorities of university institutions across Europe.

References:

1 <https://unisafe-gbv.eu/outputs/>

2 https://www.student.uliege.be/cms/c_17774037/en/behaves-survey-on-well-being-harassment-and-discrimination-in-higher-education

3 Täuber, Susanne, et al. "Breaking the silence around academic harassment." FEBS letters 596.18 (2022): 2337-2344.

4 Sotirovic, Vilana P., Anke Lipinsky, Katarzyna Struzińska and Beatriz Ranea-Triviño. 2024. "You can Knock on the Doors and Windows of the University, but Nobody Will Care: How Universities Benefit from Network Silence Around Gender-Based Violence." Social Sciences 13(4):199.

5 Hershcovis, M. Sandy, et al. "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil: Theorizing network silence around sexual harassment." Journal of Applied Psychology 106.12 (2021): 1834.