

CONFERENCE ON GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE UNIVERSITY – WEPS

Extended Summary

(For a detailed conference report, refer to the full transcript)

In a context where the extent of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) in the university environment has recently come to light, WEPS (Women in Economics Paris Saclay) organized a conference on May 16, 2023, addressing GBSV in higher education and research (HER). The conference took place at ENSAE Paris with the support of CREST. The discussion was divided into two parts: i) measuring GBSV in HER and the unique dynamics within the academic context, and ii) strategies and solutions to combat these forms of violence.

The speakers, experts in the field, included Viviane ALBENGA, a sociologist at the University of Bordeaux-Montaigne; Armelle ANDRO, a demographer and professor at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and scientific coordinator of the public health department of the City of Paris; Farah DERUELLE, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Toulouse II Jean Jaurès; and a member of CLASCHES (Collective Against Sexual Harassment in Higher Education).

The first part of the discussion addressed the challenges related to measuring GBSV in higher education and research in France. Few official and scientific surveys exist on this subject. The VIRAGE survey (*Violence et rapports de genre*) conducted by INED in 2015 began to fill this gap by revealing a significant prevalence of GBSV among students, but it did not provide specific statistics for faculty members nor administrative staff. The speakers highlighted the complexity of measuring these forms of violence in questionnaire-based surveys, which depends on the respondents' ability to identify and disclose them.

Perception of GBSV in the academic environment is a key point in understanding its dynamics. There is often a collective denial, fueled by the belief that academia is more educated and enlightened than the average society. GBSV cases are often perceived as anomalies, hindering efforts to combat these forms of violence. The competitive nature of academia was identified as a factor that promotes GBSV as a tool of domination. Furthermore, impunity prevails at both ends of the spectrum: for senior faculty members who benefit from their positions of power but also for precarious staff members who frequently change institutions and can thus evade procedures. Informal structures and job precariousness in HER create an environment where inappropriate behaviors can thrive without consequences.

The discussion also addressed the role of qualitative approaches, particularly interviews, in understanding GBSV. Interviews help uncover and describe the gray areas that escape institutional control and quantitative approaches, thereby complementing questionnaire-based surveys. This approach, for example, revealed that spaces such as academic conferences, which blur the boundaries between formal and informal, professional and personal moments, can be conducive to GBSV. The ambiguity of interactions was highlighted as an additional challenge in identifying and combating GBSV in HER.

Finally, the discussion touched on the influence of evolving social norms and the #MeToo movement on the identification of GBSV, especially among students. Testimonials and increased visibility have helped individuals recognize the violence and take action against it. However, the

taboo surrounding GBSV in HER persists, and victims often hesitate to report it due to potential consequences for their academic careers, making it difficult to address these forms of violence. The extent of the impact of GBSV on victims' careers and health remains insufficiently studied, although examples were provided of victims facing significant obstacles, such as discontinuing their doctoral studies, losing financial support, and experiencing manipulation of professional networks to harm them.

In conclusion, the discussion emphasized the importance of measuring GBSV and understanding the mechanisms used by perpetrators of these forms of violence in the academic environment to effectively combat them and create a safe and equitable academic environment.

In the second part of the conference on strategies to combat GBSV in HER, several key points were addressed:

1. **Support for victims by CLASCHES:** The CLASCHES collective intervenes when victims of GBSV in HER reach out to them. They form volunteer pairs to understand the situations and needs of the victims, ensuring they are met. However, it should be noted that CLASCHES does not provide legal nor psychological support.
2. **Obstacles to addressing GBSV by institutions:** Higher education institutions face numerous obstacles in effectively addressing cases of GBSV, including poorly organized listening cells, delays in disciplinary procedures, and a lack of ambition in GBSV prevention policies. Internal handling of denunciations has been criticized for its slowness and inadequacy, often leaving victims in vulnerable positions.
3. **Limitations of disciplinary law:** Disciplinary law has limitations in combating GBSV, partly due to a lack of understanding of the terminology and procedures, opacity, the principle of peer judgment, and the disempowerment of victims in these proceedings, making recourse nearly impossible. It should be noted that disciplinary law can only condemn individuals for ethical breaches of professional conduct.
4. **Student initiatives:** Students mobilize to address institutional shortcomings in combating GBSV. They form collectives, use social media to share experiences and information, and provide mutual support to prevent secondary violence caused by institutions mishandling reports.
5. **Role of media and word-of-mouth:** The media's coverage of GBSV cases has played a crucial role in highlighting the issues, breaking the silence, and pressuring institutions to take more effective action. Due to the taboo surrounding GBSV in HER and inadequate institutional responses, an informal solution has been to discreetly warn potential victims of inappropriate behavior by aggressors through word-of-mouth. However, this raises concerns about the effectiveness of this approach, which can contribute to maintaining power imbalances. It is a practical tool in the absence of better options but is not a satisfactory solution.
6. **Supporting victims:** It is essential to support victims in the long term, ensuring they can continue their studies and careers without suffering harm. This involves providing psychological and legal support, as well as ensuring their safety. It was emphasized that a rapid response and protective measures are essential to support victims and witnesses. To address the lack of institutional protection, collective support mechanisms to compel aggressors to leave events where victims are involved can be effective strategies.
7. **Harmonizing institutional mechanisms:** It is necessary to harmonize reporting and support mechanisms for GBSV in institutions to ensure a consistent and effective approach.

These points highlight the complexity of combating GBSV in the field of HER and the need to combine institutional and individual efforts to advance prevention and victim support.