



# Gender and Sexual Harassment in Higher Education: The case of the Czech Republic

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# WHAT IS GENDER AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT (GSH)

- Unwelcome, unwanted and offensive behaviour that includes different forms of behaviour (from less explicit verbal comments and other forms creating a “hostile environment“ to more explicit forms of blackmailing, physical forms or assault – “quid pro quo“) (MacKinnon 1979; Dziech – Weiner 1984; Thomas 1997: 148; Huerta et al. 2006)
- **Socio-cultural theoretical models:** GSH set into the context of gender structure of society and gender power; GSH explained as a consequence and instrument maintaining gender order, keeping women in a subordinated position (x not by the sexual desire) → **GSH as sex-based discrimination** (MacKinnon 1979, Benson, Thompson 2001, O’Leary-Kelly et al. 2000)
- **GSH breaches the principle of equality in education**
- GSH often involves the abuse of unequal power (gender, formal): HEI as an environment with extreme power imbalance; the power imbalance is often denied and belittled
- Severe impact on students’ wellbeing and their professional and educational paths: mental health issues, poor educational performance, dropping out, etc. (Benson, Thompson 1982, Huerta et al. 2006)
- Est.: 45-55% (i.e. 83 million to 102 million) of women in the EU-28 have experienced sexual harassment at least once since the age of 15 (FRA 2014)

# LEGISLATION ON GSH

- Important formative role of legislation on GSH: *"It is not surprising either that women would not complain of an experience for which there has been no name."* (MacKinnon, 1979: p.27)
- USA: Legislation on GSH in the work environment (since 1964 Title VII of Civil Rights Act); legislation on GSH in education (since 1972 Title IX of the Education Amendments)
- EU: GSH explicitly prohibited since 2000, 2002/73/EC EU Gender Directive – GSH as discrimination (domains of access to employment, vocational training and promotion, working conditions) → **legally binding for all EU member countries**
- Czech Republic: GSH legislation since 2000, since 2009 GSH as sex-based discrimination (in the Antidiscrimination Act); GSH implemented for the purpose of CR accession to the EU, not "from the bottom".
- In the CR: GSH policies are neither an obligatory nor a common part of higher education policies and codices; GSH often belittled and denied (even by deans, teachers, etc.) → harsh and condemning reactions to the 1st initiative to redress the issue in higher education environment

# THE STUDY

- One of the first (and only) studies carried out in the Czech Republic
- Study of a faculty of a higher education institution based in Prague (2008/2009) (balanced ratio of men and women among students)
- Focus of the study: prevalence, perception and reaction/coping
- Harassment of students by teachers from the perspective of students
- Mixed research design
  - Questionnaire survey: 700 BA and MA students
  - In-depth interviews: 18 BA, MA and PhD students

# PREVALENCE AND MEASUREMENT

**Objective/behavioural definition: Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) (Fitzgerald et al. 1998, 1993):**

- **gender harassment:** improper or offensive behaviour aimed at men or women as a group; less explicit forms of harassment (slurs, comments, improper gestures, use of suggestive material creating a hostile environment) - **66%**
- **unwelcome sexual attention:** improper or offensive verbal and non-verbal conduct aimed against a concrete target who is treated as a sexual object, not tied to a particular condition or reward (remarks on appearance and behaviour, attempts to establish a sexual relationship, talk about sexual or intimate topics or a date invitation) – **18%**
- **sexual coercion:** an act of pressure to have sexual contact for a benefit or under a threat (an offer of intimate contact in exchange for a benefit or under a threat, experience with intimate contact, touching or other invasion of personal space, and physical assault) - **9%**
- **EXPERIENCE OF SH: 67% (FH: 78%)** (Working environment: 2/3, Křížková et al. 2006)

▪ **X ONLY 2.5% LABELLED THEIR EXPERIENCE AS GSH (→ gap between individual and expert def.)**

# PERCEPTION AND DEFINITION OF SH

- Only if people define a situation as a problem can we expect them to seek a remedy (Bacchi 2000, Blumer 1971, MacKinnon 1979) → GSH definition as a key issue for understanding and explaining it, reaction to GSH and reproduction of GSH
- **Students' definition:**
  - Narrow definition: extreme forms of behaviour of sexual and physical nature (sexual bribery, physical in form, sexual assault)
  - Gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention (sexist comments, flirting, physical touching, asking out) are perceived as normal and natural
  - Downplaying, belittling GSH and high level of tolerance towards less explicit forms of GSH
- Students construct GSH as an **extreme and remote phenomenon that does not concern them; they strongly disassociate themselves from being labelled as a victim/target of GSH**
- **Strong victimization of GSH targets/blaming the victim:** Targets were not able to defend themselves (young, naïve) or provoked the harassment (flirting, provocative clothes, "women's weapons") (→ a parallel between rape and GSH)

- Less assertive **internal strategies** predominated (aiming at emotional and psychological coping with GSH): silence; denial, downplaying and normalization of GSH
- **External strategies** (aiming at solution to the harassment) much less frequent, except for avoidance of the harasser
- Almost **no cases of resolution with institutional backing** and/or a direct confrontation of the harasser (x hypothetical situations, presenting spontaneous and immediate responses to questions about solution of GSH; assertive strategies depicted as easy and smooth solution)
- Internal strategies as an active decision based on careful weighting of pros and cons of more assertive external solutions
- What prevents students from use of external assertive strategies?
  - Extreme power imbalance between students and teachers
  - Doubts about interpretation of the gravity of GSH by authorities
  - Fear of secondary victimization and negative impact on further studies and mental well-being
  - Fear of being accused of false accusation
  - Lack of information on how to solve GSH
  - **Distrust in school representatives**

# CONCLUSIONS

- GSH and its reproduction as a complex phenomenon
- Important role of discourses and definitions (Bingham 1994, Wood 1994) and socialization in the reproduction of GSH
- Active role of all actors (including the targets and the perpetrators) in reproduction of GSH and its normalization (x blaming the victim)
- Importance of anti-harassment policies explaining and defining what GSH is and how to solve it (lack of information on GSH; lack of confidence in school management among students)



**Thank you for your  
attention!**

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