



## Article

# 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

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**Abstract:** This paper exposes the role of universities in creating silence around gender-based violence in higher education, drawing on narratives from 39 qualitative interviews with victims/survivors and bystanders about reporting incidents and experiences. In this paper, we extend concept of ‘network silence’ around sexual harassment to other forms of gender-based violence. Our research applies three components of the theoretical model of network silence, namely, self-silencing by victims/survivors, silencing, and not hearing by others, and analyses their contextual manifestations through the reporting experiences of victims/survivors and bystanders. This helps to identify the traits of the informal organisational structures and power dynamics, gendered attitudes, actors, and factors which facilitate silencing. The intersectional approach in our analysis of organisational contextual traits contributes to the research on inequality regimes in universities. The findings suggest that universities are making limited efforts to address silence around gender-based violence. We conclude that shared beliefs among the leadership about the reputation and prestige of the university facilitate the endurance of silence in universities. Our findings indicate reasons why universities fail to create spaces that are safe from gender-based violence.

**Keywords:** silencing; network silence; reporting; sexual harassment; higher education; institutional practices; qualitative analysis; inequality regime; intersectionality



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## 1. Introduction

Gender-based violence is a problem in academia globally. For years, prevalence surveys, as well as multi-site or nationwide studies in universities, have pointed to issues relating to sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in higher education. For example, a nationwide study in Australia found that 26% of students reported being sexually harassed (AHRC 2017). A recent cross-national survey of 45 academic organisations in Europe found that, on average, 30% of students and 36% of staff had been sexually harassed (Lipinsky et al. 2022). An Irish survey on sexual experiences found that 42% of female students reported experiencing unwanted sexual attention in college (Burke et al. 2021). Higher education institutions have a responsibility to protect their staff and students from gender-based violence and harm. They generally respond to their duty of care for staff and students by adopting policies and accompanying measures.

A recent policy mapping exercise of 48 universities and research organisations in 15 European countries found that approximately one in three organisations had adopted a general equality, diversity and inclusion policy that included gender-based violence

(Huck et al. 2022, p. 3). Only 12 universities and research organisations addressed intersectionality (Crenshaw 2003; Cho et al. 2013) in their policies. The most frequently mentioned intersections of inequality were ‘sexual orientation’, ‘gender identity and expression’, ‘race’, and ‘(dis)ability’ (Huck et al. 2022, p. 4). Universities often neglect their duty of care to ensure all their staff and students feel safe from violence. Victims of assault can receive social, emotional, and, eventually, legal support through important and well-established mechanisms. These mechanisms include contact points with trusted individuals, online reporting tools, or counselling offices within the university to which misconduct can be reported. An in-depth case study on 16 institutional responses to gender-based violence in universities found that although institutions design and approve these measures, on many occasions, there are gaps in the implementation that result in unclear procedures, a lack of resources, and a lack of gender and intersectional perspectives, among other issues, which hinder or even block their effectiveness (Ranea-Triviño et al. 2022).

We define ‘reporting’ as the disclosure of an incident of gender-based violence to a person or a body in the same work or study environment. Our definition of reporting includes both formal and informal disclosures (Shannon 2022) as well as filing a formal complaint against a perpetrator, while non-reporting practices are defined as the opposite. Reporting contributes to giving choice and voice to the victimised person with the aim of restoring their agency (Behre 2016), while non-reporting creates silence around incidences of gender-based violence. The research literature on reporting behaviours of students and employees mostly deals with cases of sexual harassment and sexualised assaults (Brubaker et al. 2017; Bull and Rye 2018; Cantalupo 2014; Dobbin and Kalev 2017; Duffy et al. 2023; Hart 2019; Hershcovis et al. 2021; Kirkner et al. 2020; Mennicke et al. 2022; Sanders 2019). There is a research gap in addressing other forms of gender-based violence. We use the term gender-based violence to refer to violence against a person’s gender, sex, or gender identity and expression, as well as sexualised forms of violence that disproportionately affect persons of one gender (EC 2021). It includes, but is not limited to, physical violence, psychological violence, economic violence, sexual violence and sexual harassment, gender harassment, online violence, stalking, and organisational violence (Strid et al. 2021, p. 13).

Quantitative research into the reasons why victims/survivors of gender-based violence do not report these incidents reveals a great deal of uncertainty in the assessment of whether the event they experienced is suitable for reporting. A large-scale quantitative prevalence survey on gender-based violence in academic organisations, which is part of the same project as the interviews we analyse in-depth for this article, reveals reasons for the low reporting rates (Lipinsky et al. 2022). Students were much less likely (7%) to report an incident than staff (23%), indicating high degrees of non-reporting in certain status groups. No significant differences in non-reporting were found between genders. The survey findings highlight selected reasons for not reporting an incident and show that the most frequent reason is the uncertainty of whether the incident was serious enough to be reported (47%). Additionally, victimised persons did not recognise incidents as violations at the time (31%) or did not expect anything to happen (26%) even if they reported it. Additionally, respondents were afraid of retaliation by the perpetrator and negative consequences for their personal well-being and professional advancement. In an experimental study with university students from Spain, Valls et al. (2016) demonstrated a causal link between violence not being recognised as violence and the phenomenon of non-reporting incidents. The non-reporting behaviour of students was supported by the attitudes of victims/survivors who did not want to see themselves as victimised and did not feel supported by the institution. Nearly one in three (27%) of those few students who reported an incident of violence felt unsupported by the university (Valls et al. 2016, p. 1530). All these factors prevent persons from reporting incidents that happened to them at university.

In this paper, we draw on the Hershcovis et al. (2021) concept of ‘network silence’ and Acker’s work on inequality regimes in organisations to understand how network silence around gender-based violence contributes to the ‘interlinked organising processes that

produce patterns of complex inequalities' (Acker 2006, p. 459) in academia. In her analysis of inequality regimes, Acker describes the role of and resistance by those who gain privilege from existing and widening gender inequalities, including organisations themselves as they benefit significantly from the invisibility of gender and interrelated inequalities. Research on organisational silence emphasises the role of individual victims/survivors who are both silent about gender-based violence in the workplace and responsible for speaking up. Silence can be interpreted as both a symptom and a response to employees' dissatisfaction or perceived mistreatment (Fernando and Prasad 2019). Drawing on the literature on organisational violence, Hershcovis et al. (2021) highlighted the framing of silence as a collective process to prevent voicing individual experiences because of the negative consequences or impact on those who choose to speak out. Duffy et al. (2023) examined formal and informal organisational structures and practices that construct silence around sexual harassment in the workplace. The authors argued that a structural silence and silencing of sexual harassment and assault is reinforced by relationships and practices which they position, following Acker, as an inequality regime (Duffy et al. 2023, p. 1388). By analysing narratives collected through qualitative interview narratives on experiences of different forms of gender-based violence in academic contexts, we explore how organisations contribute to the silence around abuse and violence from the perspective of victims/survivors.

We analyse narratives of gender-based violence experiences, including the interviewees' viewpoints, interpretations, and ways of coping with violations, and the subsequent organisational behaviour in relation to the structures (Duffy et al. 2023), actors (Fernando and Prasad 2019), behaviours, and beliefs (Hershcovis et al. 2021) that support and perpetuate network silence in academic organisations. Our approach helps to shift the focus from individualised understandings of victim–perpetrator relationships to more systemic factors and practices of silencing victims/survivors. The analysis includes the institutional responsibilities of universities to protect staff and students from harm, characterising the role of organisations and exploring what they have failed to do from the victim/survivor perspectives.

In numerous cases, feminist research has pointed to mechanisms in organisations that aim to protect the organisational (and gendered) power dynamics. Due to their self-interest in organisational stabilisation, the universities protect the persons who are endowed with privileges and power 'usually men who are the "institutional breadwinners"' (Shannon 2022, p. 909). Hearn and Parkin take silence to a more structural level by emphasising that 'silences include the very conceptualisation of organisation itself; the general understandings of how organisations are gendered; the specific structuring of organisations; and construction of gendered subjects in organisations. Noise, din, silence, and silencing, as part of the unspoken forces of organisational worlds, are thus gendered. Both literally and metaphorically, they are part of the gendered domination of organisations (Hearn and Parkin 2001, p. 11). Thus, analysing the intertwining of gendered inequality regimes and silence seems to be an insoluble subject.

Investigating the institutional responses to gender-based violence inspires the analysis of individual incidents, which helps to identify the contextual factors and actors that create, compel, and support silence in an organisation. Hershcovis et al. (2021) frame the concept of network silence that may include certain members within and outside the organisation and can be transmitted through social learning and social influence. The authors highlight the three mutually reinforcing components that build the network silence: 'being silent'—not an individual behaviour to withhold reporting, but behaviour which is socially learned and compelled; 'silencing'—an active effort among network members to discourage and prevent others from voicing concerns or filing complaints; and 'not hearing'—after someone has tried to complain or speak up, but network members dismiss, normalise, or invalidate the concerns, or make excuses for a perpetrator.

The pattern of these three interrelated components reveals the institutional contexts and responses ('top-down approach', according to Duffy et al. 2023) in which individ-

ual victims/survivors and bystanders deal with the experiences of gender-based violence. [Hershcovis et al.'s \(2021\)](#) conceptual framework of 'network silence' suggests the analysis of organisational social relations consisting of different actors and the belief system shared between them. Following this proposed conceptual framework, this article presents the argument that institutional hierarchical structures, power-dominant behaviours within institutions, and attitudes towards diverse gender identities contribute to the silence around gender-based violence in academia. Vulnerabilities are reinforced through socio-demographic and functional characteristics such as gender, physical appearance, or a person's position in the organisational hierarchy. Although institutions have policies in place to prevent and protect staff and students from unwanted behaviour in their environment, victims/survivors and bystanders fear negative consequences in their personal and professional lives if they report the incidents ('bottom-up practices' according to [Duffy et al. 2023](#)). In this article, we explore how silence and silencing are constructed through relationships, shared belief systems, and an organisations' practices, taking victims'/survivors' and bystanders' narratives as a point of departure. Our research contributes to studies on inequality regimes in academia ([Acker 2006](#)) and violence in organisations ([Hearn and Parkin 2001](#)) by highlighting gaps in institutional responses to gender-based violence in academia.

Our research proposes the question of how network silence around gender-based violence contributes to the persistence of gender inequalities in universities. By analysing how organisational factors and processes create and support silence in universities from a victims/survivors perspective, we identify the dynamics of gendered power-dependency in relationships in the structures of the university, actors, behaviours that stop survivors from speaking up about their experiences (retaliation, threatening, normalisation, ignorance, intimidation, humiliation), and attitudes (victim blaming, stereotypes) that are shared/accepted in the institutions (network silence theory).

As we do not intend to analyse the dynamics described in the interviewees' narratives at the level of an entire organisation, we have chosen to work with the concept of network silence within organisations, as opposed to organisational silence. The interview material represents the course of events from the perspective of the victim/survivor or bystander. The material allows us to see the experiences of violence and silencing through the eyes of those affected most. The material does not allow us to go beyond this, e.g., to analyse the same event from the perspective of another party in order to assess organisational behaviour in general. Instead, we understand the interactions between victim/survivor, bystanders, fellow students, colleagues, supervisors, and a university contact point for reporting as a socially interacting network to which the concept of network silence can be applied.

We hypothesise that the mechanisms surrounding network silence, which have been demonstrated in the context of sexual harassment, also apply to other forms of gender-based violence. These mechanisms contribute to the persistence of gender inequalities in academia. Our interviewees have experienced and witnessed various and multiple forms of gender-based violence in the context of universities. What they told us about how their universities dealt with the assaults suggests that reporting mechanisms, such as formally institutionalised support services, do not necessarily act in the interests of the victimised person and that the organisations prioritise their own interests. We show how universities tend to support the established networks of gendered power relations and dominance and, thus, fail to uphold their values and responsibilities to protect staff and students. Even within universities, the interest in processes free of disruption, in terms of questioning established power relations ([Duffy et al. 2023](#), p. 1399), can be so strong that 'universities oftentimes do not want to recognise violence against women as a problem and tend to remain silent about it' ([Valls et al. 2016](#), p. 1531). Supporting 'institutional breadwinners' ([Shannon 2022](#)) through silence stabilises the organisation's principles and protects power differentials within it. These mechanisms in universities can create hostile environments for victims/survivors and bystanders in which gender-based violence is tolerated.

We conclude that this organisational behaviour reinforces gender inequalities, which manifest as an inequality regime, because the consequences for students and staff, predominantly women, on their well-being and academic performance and achievements, are damaging. Toxic work environments inhibit creativity and academic excellence in the long term. Consequently, we interpret network silence as an organisational trait which supports the organisation's short-term interests, e.g., reputational interests. Network silence can become a tool for the university to perpetrate organisational/structural violence. This causes secondary victimisation in those persons it is asked to protect.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Materials

The context of the interview material presented in this paper is the EU-funded Horizon 2022 research project 'UniSAFE: Gender-based violence and institutional responses: Building a knowledge base and operational tools to make universities and research organisations safe', which implemented a transnational multi-level and multi-site mixed-method research design to investigate gender-based violence in higher education in the years 2021–2024. An extensive policy mapping exercise and a large-scale web survey formed part of the research, collecting non-representative data from higher education and research organisations in 15 European countries. To complement the quantitative study, the research team conducted 54 semi-structured interviews with staff and students who experienced or witnessed gender-based violence in the university environment. The research team additionally implemented 16 organisational case studies on institutional responses from universities and research organisations to tackle gender-based violence. This article analyses data from the qualitative interview research with staff and students who experienced or witnessed gender-based violence. Purposive sampling was used to select research participants, with information and invitations to participate in the study disseminated through (a) the central website of the UniSAFE project and all project partner institutions; (b) social media channels such as Facebook and LinkedIn; (c) various academic networks such as the Women in Academia Support Network; and (d) using an optional invitation link, included in the quantitative survey of the UniSAFE project which was disseminated in universities and in one international network of researchers. Individuals who volunteered were immediately contacted by email by the principal investigator of the interview study, once they expressed interest in participating in an interview. The interviewees were given an information sheet introducing the study, its objective, and the expected outcomes of the project. Additionally, the sheet provided information on ethical considerations, data protection, anonymisation, and data storage. Interviewees agreed to participate in an interview or withdrew from further communication. As a result, 54 research participants were recruited and consented to be interviewed. The authors of this article supervised and/or conducted 39 interviews (out of a total of 54) with staff and students who experienced or witnessed gender-based violence. Transcripts of 39 interviews with individuals were included in the analysis for this paper.

### 2.2. Methods

This paper is based on interviewees' narratives of incidents of gender-based violence in academia, collected through individual semi-structured interviews with 36 women, two men, and one non-binary person studying or working in universities. By 'narratives' we mean descriptions of the chronological sequence of the events that a person has experienced, including the selection and interpretation of the events from the interviewees' perspective (Söderberg 2006). The interview guidelines provided a conceptual framework for the interview leading questions, but ample time was also allowed during the interviews to cater for diverse and multiple narrations of experiences of the forms of gender-based violence in universities, i.e., interviewers did not interrupt the narrative flow of the representation and only asked clarification questions after the narrative flow ended. The aim of this approach was to collect evidence on institutional responses to experiences of gender-based violence from the perspectives of victims/survivors and bystanders. Thus, capturing the

voice, position, and point of view of the interviewee. The victims'/survivors' perspectives are central to understanding the material we gathered. The interviewees chose which experiences to share and how to describe them. These stories revealed how individuals see the relation of first-hand experiences and the institutional contexts in which they happen, e.g., hierarchies, competitiveness, leadership style, gender+ and diversity policies, etc., patterns of behaviour (e.g., abuse of power, manifestations of forms of gender-based violence), and attitudes (e.g., tolerance of sexism, racism, homophobic and transphobic attitudes, etc.), which were extracted as categories for our analysis of silencing experiences around gender-based violence.

The interviews were conducted online in 2022 using the MS Teams or Zoom platforms and lasted approximately 45–60 min each. The majority of the 39 interviewees were women (36). Seven interviewees defined themselves as belonging to an ethnic group that was not the majority in the country where they worked or studied; three interviewees highlighted their migrant status to provide context for the incidents they experienced; six individuals disclosed belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, eight respondents considered themselves to have a disability or chronic illness. In terms of functional status, 13 interviewees were PhD students, 6 respondents worked on temporal contracts, 8 had permanent contracts, and 13 had another type of affiliation/employment status such as associate or full professor (7), scientific adviser, research director, mentor, technician, union chair, or member of the student union.

The interviewees were asked to share their views on the institution's context and the culture of the organisation (e.g., openness for gender+ diversity, leadership style, relationships with supervisors and colleagues), their career development, their feelings while studying, doing research, or working (experiences or observations about behaviours that the interviewees name as 'inappropriate', feeling of safety in such an environment), decision/motives/intentions to (not) report and explanations for this decision, reflections on the institutional response to gender-based violence and consequences for their private and professional life, and consequences for perpetrators and universities. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into verbatim text. Interviews were primarily conducted in English even though the interviewees and researchers were not native English speakers. In a few cases, interviews were conducted in the first language of the interviewee, when both the interviewee and researcher were from the same country. These interviews were then transcribed in their native languages and translated into English for in-depth analysis.

The main data analysis technique was thematic analysis, which involved organising and analysing textual data according to themes. Firstly, we organised data according to the interviewees' reflections about their intentions to report or not report the incidents that they had experienced or witnessed. In our analysis of the interviews, we used descriptive and interpretative coding, please see Table A1 in Appendix A for an overview of the categories and codes. For example, when we asked the interviewees about why they did not report an incident, they mentioned words such as, 'fear', 'not being trusted', 'not being believed', 'being powerless', 'being blamed', 'being retaliated', 'being called mad, insane, paranoid person', 'taboo to say', 'exaggerating about sexist jokes and comments', 'commenting about women's beauty and role', etc. These indications helped us to interpret them as attributes of silence and silencing. We followed deductive–inductive logic (Creswell 2013, p. 45) and grouped the descriptive codes according to the structure of network silence described by Hershcovis et al. (2021). We then took the contextual factors into account to code the underlying meanings of these descriptions. In addition, we systematised the data under these descriptions with the aim of identifying the institutional factors, actors, behaviours, and belief systems that support network silence. This led us to conceptualise the main themes of power dependency, hierarchical structures, male dominance, and sexist/racist/homophobic attitudes. We re-examined the transcripts to determine whether the suggested codes were recurrent in the interviews and to uncover the organisational traits that create and support silence about the experiences of gender-based violence in academia.

### 3. Results

In this section, we discuss the institutional practices and processes that create silence around gender-based violence by analysing the reasoning of victims/survivors and bystanders for remaining silent and refraining from reporting. As mentioned, [Hershcovis et al. \(2021\)](#) drew on sexual harassment and theorised network silence in terms of three interrelated components that include self-silencing by victims/survivors, silencing, and not hearing by others. The authors define network forces contained in the network composition and the network's belief system which are utilised and manipulated by perpetrators to maintain their dominance and influence. This contributes to reinforcing network silence and facilitates the conditions for sexual harassment to continue. Our research applies these three components of the network silence model and analyses their contextual manifestations through victims'/survivors' and bystanders' experiences in connection to reporting gender-based violence in universities. This helps to identify the traits of the organisation's informal structures and power dynamics, including actors who support silencing as well as gendered attitudes that normalise and ignore incidents of gender-based violence.

The findings of our qualitative interview study suggest that one of the main reasons why individuals do not report is because they doubt the organisation's willingness and ability to protect them. This finding is similar to what we found in our quantitative survey. However, the interview materials provide more nuanced information about the reasons for (non)reporting. We found that victims/survivors and bystanders either tried to find informal solutions for the situation they had experienced by approaching the responsible institutional actors (13 interviews) or did not disclose the incidents at all (13). When victims/survivors reported formally (9 interviews), they felt that they did not receive the necessary support and encouragement from the responsible bodies or persons they had hoped to receive support from. The interviews show that the reporting frequently marks the beginning of negative consequences for individuals who attempt to handle the situation. In only 2 out of 39 interviews were the victims/survivors encouraged to file a complaint after informally disclosing an incident.

The (non-)reporting experiences of the victims/survivors and bystanders analysed in this research reveal how organisational traits, such as hierarchical structures and power-dependency dynamics, gender, and intersectional inequalities, are supported by universities' top or middle management as well as team members. This support affects how incidents are handled, leading to self-silencing, silencing by others, and not hearing the voices of victims/survivors and bystanders.

#### 3.1. Organisational Traits That Support Silence about Gender-Based Violence

##### 3.1.1. Dependency Relations in the Hierarchical Structures of Universities

Frequently, the victims/survivors and bystanders describe feeling that their career is dependent on a specific supervisor, a professor, or highly established senior academic staff. This can affect their decision to refrain from reporting. Younger researchers, in particular, cannot be their "*own researchers, they have to be victims of somebody's power*" (woman/scientific adviser). Unbalanced dependency relations, as mentioned some study participants, are strengthened by nepotism and favouritism, showing that the "*university is almost run like a family business*" (woman/associate professor), where the powerful positions in departments are divided among partners or relatives (woman/scientific adviser) and those young researchers, usually women, who do not have a father, partner, or husband in the university, are excluded (woman/scientific adviser; woman/senior researcher on a short-term contract; woman/researcher on a short-term contract). In such a university environment, the relationships between those in power are reinforced by favouritism and loyalty (woman/researcher on short-term contract; woman/PhD student; woman/researcher). Persons at the top of the hierarchical structures manipulate staff in the dependent positions by suggesting favours in exchange for being included in the 'privileged circles'. Some interviewees revealed how women researchers choose to be silent, avoid expressing their opinions or demands, and obey any orders of the senior academic staff or management.

Staying silent and being loyal to superiors can be beneficial for dependent researchers or staff. It can help them to be promoted without delays and be invited to take part in scientific projects, important commissions, or other professional bodies (woman/researcher on a short-term contract; woman/associate professor). In such an environment, no one would testify on a victim's/survivor's behalf, and, in fact, would withdraw any support in exchange for favours. One interviewee described that her colleague initially supported her in the case of sexual harassment, but this stopped when *"they [university leadership] 'bought' her with some position, with some privileges. It's better to be with the majority and not to stay with a victim. She couldn't get any benefits from me, but from them she had benefits"*. (woman/researcher on a short-term contract). In such a hierarchical environment, some interviewees considered themselves disempowered vis-à-vis the institution because they believed that they would not be able to make the university responsible for taking action against the misconduct of those in power: *"I don't talk to anyone, because when I tried, they [...] failed, you can't win against an institution"* (woman/PhD student).

Hierarchical structures that maintain power-dependency dynamics lead to students and lower-ranked staff feeling inferior, powerless and lacking a voice because they are afraid of retaliation (woman/PhD student). A *"culture of retaliation"*, as one interviewee called it (woman/professor), is based on perpetuating the fear of the *"loss of a scholarship"* (woman/PhD student), *"not [being] considered for promotion"* (woman/associate professor), *"failing to gain an educational degree or finish the research"* (woman/PhD student). In some cases, professors engage in perilous behaviours that require dependent students and staff to adapt to such circumstances and accept these behaviours without any resistance for fear of retaliation. The fear of retaliation disempowers victims/survivors and contributes to the environment that leads the less powerful to be silent and 'reluctant acquiescence', as [Fernando and Prasad \(2019\)](#) described it.

### 3.1.2. Gender and Intersectional Inequalities as Factors That Affect Victim Blaming and Normalisation of Gender-Based Violence

Some previous research highlighted that universities are gendered, and that their leadership continues to be dominated by men ([Lombardo and Bustelo 2021](#); [O'Connor 2020](#)). Research on belief systems in organisations has added that support for male dominance and heteronormative masculine norms reproduces inequalities in institutions and contributes to the invisibility of sexual harassment or harassment ([O'Connor et al. 2021](#); [Acker 1990](#); [Naezer et al. 2019](#)). As [Duffy et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Shannon \(2022\)](#) pointed out, in a context where institutions tolerate inappropriate behaviour by more powerful supervisors (usually men) towards young researchers, doctoral students, and postdoctoral fellows (most often women), incidences of sexism, sexist comments, or other expressions of toxic masculinities would not be heard by the organisations because it does not seem to be in their interest to challenge practices which safeguard the institutions' performance. Our findings show a very similar pattern and uncover how male dominance, male leadership styles, and toxic masculinity norms, which perpetuate unequal gender structures and behaviours, reproduce dominance and gender inequalities in universities. Additionally, we suggest applying an intersectional approach that will help to identify the practices of universities to undermine the complex inequalities in institutional practices to deal with the incidents of gender-based violence

Evidence from victims/survivors and bystanders shows, that regardless of the official positioning of their universities as being open to mainstreaming gender equality and diversity, in practice, the adopted policies/protocols/measures remain on the declaration level. Frequently, universities continue to undermine the actual implementation of gender equality and diversity commitments and remain white-straight-male institutions where it is difficult to imagine *"how it must be for people of colour"* (woman/associate professor; woman/senior researcher). Some interviewees mentioned that universities consider themselves as very elitist institutions where: *"elites reproduce themselves. And they don't*



look favourably on women in general and it's heart-breaking because we know from research that innovation and quality all are better if you have diverse teams" (woman/associate professor).

However, as research findings show, university leadership prefers to make the gender equality agenda invisible and vaguely engages in the work in favour of diversity, inclusion, and safety. One interviewee aptly summarised the experiences of many interviewees: "There are all sorts of campaigns, posters, everything, but in practice, it just doesn't work." (woman/PhD student).

In such an environment, female researchers are made to feel unwelcome ("insisted that I leave the office or removed from teaching"), invisible and isolated ("cut-off meetings"), or excluded ("cut-off planning") (woman/assistant professor). Women's achievements and merits are "not recognised" (woman/professor), they are ridiculed (woman/researcher on a short-term contract), and when it comes to promotion or leadership, their career perspectives are blocked. Male-dominated leadership is often manifested in terms of controlling the policy agenda and research content of the programmes: "We could see the team leaders who are men, deciding about our world, deciding about our programme of research and so on without taking our opinion or desires into account. In my view, this is much worse than direct violence" (woman/researcher on a short-term contract). Additionally, some interviewees mentioned that women's leadership sometimes follows the same pattern of dominance as men's, creating a hostile environment perpetuated by the modes of humiliation, and denigration (woman/PhD student; woman/lecturer; woman/PhD student). For example, one interviewee mentioned that although the director of the institute was a woman, and there were more women staff than men, "the leadership was really male-dominated. The director behaved like a man to project this image of authority over her employees and senior researchers" (woman/PhD student).

In the university environment where gender equality and diversity policies are "card-board things" (woman/PhD), sexism and sexist comments continue to be present, and experiences of gender-based violence are not taken seriously. When professors openly make jokes about "miniskirts and mini-brains", the other actors in the university will not take complaints seriously (woman/language instructor). Incidents are often trivialised, with people saying things such as the following: "he [a perpetrator] was just joking or he is married and can't behave like that, or these are just naughty boys; boys will be boys, men will be men." (woman/associate professor) while a victim/survivor is treated as someone who "exaggerates" their experiences (woman/associate professor). Similar findings about 'normalised' and ignored sexism were identified by other researchers who argued about the increasing prevalence of sexism if no efforts and measures were made to stop it (Bravo-Moreno 2022).

Our research proves that, in the academic environment, the experiences of victims/survivors of gender-based violence are usually questioned. The victim is often blamed for the violence, with people suggesting that they were "drunk", or were dressed or behaved inappropriately. The tendencies of victim blaming contribute to making an assault invisible and protecting a university from reputational damage. Treating the person who is being victimised as the source of the problem saves the university from questioning its processes and practices. Usually, "it is the culture of the university" (woman/position not identified) to consider a victimised person the one who did something wrong; therefore, an incident happened. The results of our analysis of victim-blaming experiences confirm the findings of other studies that critically reflected on victim blaming in workplace bullying. Sims (2019) summarised that individualising the blame and positioning individuals as responsible for their choices and deeds is reflected in the way that institutions do not take responsibility for addressing bullying in the workplace effectively. Victims/survivors may feel that remaining silent is the safest way to avoid being blamed.

Intersectionality matters when it comes to normalising gender-based violence and ignoring the voices of victims/survivors and bystanders. Previous research proposed to apply intersectional analysis as a fundamental heuristic approach to 'explore gender/race and other axes of power' in the context of sexual harassment and assault (Cho et al. 2013; Duffy et al. 2023). In our research, some interviewees reflected on intersectional power

dynamics that are relevant in the context of gender-based violence. For example, an interviewee mentioned incidents of a senior academic staff member telling homophobic and transphobic anecdotes, making comments, or saying slurs, where the rest of the team preferred to accept these behaviours as allowed and the *norm*. Although a leadership person was informed about these inappropriate comments, “*nothing happened; so he [the professor] is still there. I think that they [leadership] do not care*” (woman/PhD student). Similarly, racist jokes and comments made by professors are not taken seriously by the university leadership, and persons perpetrating these forms of verbal violence continue to teach (woman/PhD student; woman/researcher on a short-term contract). Racialised prejudices and stereotypes that emphasise racially sexualised images of women students continue to be a part of seemingly acceptable communication in academic environments, despite the fact that universities have “*systems in place and training against racism, gender prejudice and other prejudices*” (woman/position not identified; woman/chair of the trade union).

In sum, the described experiences reflect the universities’ contexts of hierarchical structures, power inequalities, and attitudes that normalise gendered/homophobic/racist stereotypes and prejudices. In such organisational contexts, victims/survivors tend to avoid speaking up and reporting because they fear secondary victimisation triggered by formal and informal processes and practices of the organisations and negative professional and mental health- or well-being-related consequences.

### 3.2. Silencing as an Institutional Response to Gender-Based Violence

The silencing of a victim/survivor or bystander discloses an institutional response to gender-based violence experiences. According to [Hershcovis et al. \(2021\)](#), silencing provides evidence of network actors who discourage victims/survivors or bystanders from voicing concerns or submitting complaints and allows the perpetrators to avoid any consequences and continue their behaviour. Our interview analysis of formal and informal reporting about the incidents of gender-based violence suggests identifying the actors in the structures of the universities that support the power-dependency dynamic. The behaviours of the institutional actors who are in charge of dealing with formally or informally reported incidents of gender-based violence help to identify their role in silencing the victims/survivors and bystanders. This perspective opens up opportunities to examine the institutional position in allowing gender-based violence to persist.

Victims/survivors and bystanders most frequently approached the relevant persons, units, and contact points in their universities informally to speak up and disclose the experienced abuse. They went to rectors, deans, human resources heads or officers, ethics commissions, directors of doctoral programmes, and other responsible officials. While seeking support and some active intervention to stop the inappropriate behaviours of perpetrators, the victims/survivors and bystanders were confronted with organisational efforts to silence and prevent them from taking further steps: “*the rector and vice rector just wanted us to shut up and warned us that we would be sued for defamation if we dared to persist*” (woman/researcher on a short-term contract). Attempts to approach the higher bodies informally showed a broadly spread pattern of institutional silencing by calling victims/survivors and bystanders *crazy*, *mad*, or *paranoid* regardless of what position they occupied (examples given in the interviews included women directors of research, professors, associate professors, researchers, and PhD students). One victim/survivor illustrates how the silencing by institutional authorities worked in practice as follows:

*“I had engaged with the dean and HR ten times, [. . .]. And then the HR people talked to him [perpetrator]. And you see how this escalates. At one point in time, nobody was actually listening to my story anymore. They saw me as hostile [. . .]. I was called a troublemaker, they said I was insane. I was forced to undergo improvement training and coaching.”* (woman/associate professor)

To silence victims/survivors and bystanders, the responsible institutional actors either mistrusted their testimonies or used their authority to remind them “*to be little, submissive and wait until their voice grows*” (woman/lecturer). As demonstrated below, institutional

authorities place greater value on established professors and their contribution to the university and hardly ever question their behaviour.

The interview evidence shows that the responsible contact points in the organisation reproduce the dominance of power-dependency relations by locating potential perpetrators within the network with the authorities and excluding victims/survivors and bystanders. This pattern of behaviour is similar to the network composition patterns described by [Hershcovis et al. \(2021\)](#), and the ties of third-party actors to perpetrators ([Duffy et al. 2023](#)). Even in cases where the rector, dean, or director of the study program listened to the stories and supported a victim/survivor, the silencing of the cases would be performed more subtly. When a supervisor is known for his inappropriate relations with doctoral students, the organisational contact point often suggests solving the incidents quietly: *“the director of the doctoral programme asked me not to be dramatic, not to make trouble for anybody or our school. . . .at the end we hid everything under the carpet”* (woman/PhD student). Collected evidence suggests that, in an environment where any sexist and sexual harassment misconduct is a taboo issue, no one hears nor wants to hear about such incidents (man/mentor; woman/technical staff).

Additionally, the analysis of the interviews supplements some previous research findings about male colleagues' behaviours to silence women victims/survivors and make them vulnerable to sexual harassment ([Naezer et al. 2019](#)). Our research shows that colleagues often silence the victim/survivor and bystanders by refusing to provide any support to them, instead they prefer to maintain cooperation and other relations with the perpetrators and their networks of powerful academic leaders. Some examples illustrate that, when victims/survivors and bystanders raised their voices, colleagues would say that this is the battle of the victim/survivor, not theirs (woman/scientific adviser) or would *“give me the cold shoulder and stop talking to me because the boss asked them, because they didn't want to be involved with me”* (woman/position not identified) or *“look at me with sadness like ‘phew, poor thing’ but did not do anything, [because of] law of silence among the associate professors.”* (woman/professor). The practice of silencing victims/survivors and bystanders by co-workers contributes to the expansion of social networks that support perpetrators.

The interview findings on how silencing is processed by the institutionally responsible actors reflect on the work of other researchers who argue that victims'/survivors' experiences become invisible in the institution through the practice of active or passive silencing (e.g., [Duffy et al. 2023](#); [Fernando and Prasad 2019](#)). Our analysis shows that often both the institution's leadership/management and colleagues/team members silence the victims/survivors and bystanders by preferring and maintaining social ties with the perpetrator. This contributes to the understanding of the structure of the social relations that locate perpetrators within the network that holds and supports the organisational power. The silencing of victims/survivors and bystanders helps to maintain the dynamics of power dependency and suggests tendencies for the continuation of gender-based violence perpetrated by those in the network of power ([Hershcovis et al. 2021](#); [Bravo-Moreno 2022](#)).

### 3.3. Networks of Power That Support the Persistence of Gender-Based Violence

[Hershcovis et al. \(2021\)](#) refer to previous research findings that stress how strong ties in the institutional network prove beneficial to advance in terms of solidarity and trust, as power comes with responsibilities, organisational knowledge, and broad networks. Frequently, networks within and outside a university are linked to financial resources generated by professors and their contribution to the university's well-being. The universities' leaderships tend to highly value these inputs that bring prestige and reputation rather than question any misconduct by those in powerful positions.

Support for perpetrators continues regardless of whether a university has a policy in place to sanction inappropriate behaviour by giving perpetrators a warning, disciplining, or suspending them. Any attempts of victims/survivors and bystanders to complain about the unacceptable behaviour of a professor or supervisor are not heard. As the interviews show, victims/survivors would receive no answer from the rector, dean, or other responsible offi-

cers, and no consequences for the perpetrator would materialise. According to our evidence, support for perpetrators prevails because of the status of professors (woman/associate professor), their personal relationships with the top management (woman/professor), and the power that they share in the hierarchy of the university (woman/scientific adviser). A good illustration of these mechanisms was given by the interviewee, who stated:

*“It’s an absolutely elite university, but they [senior staff] don’t even try to hide it [their bullying behaviour]. So, they obviously extend their elbows, they don’t try to hide anything. . . They just do it because they have no problem with it. They always pretend to be so insanely friendly and ‘We have such great programmes and we have this specific study.’ [ . . . ] So, it’s always pretended that everything is perfect and that’s dangerous.”*  
(woman/professor)

Our findings confirm the role of the neoliberal ethos in the academy, outlined by O’Connor et al. (2021) and Shannon (2022), which requires universities to attract talent and maintain high positions in national and international rankings. In such a context, support for perpetrators by top management implies the need to be a prestigious university, have extensive networking relationships with various academic and non-academic institutions, build a strong reputation, and meet other challenges of academic competitiveness. The perpetrators know that *“they are not replaceable, they are untouchable and can do what they want because they are the bosses”* (woman/professor). The university does not do anything about a perpetrator’s/harasser’s inappropriate behaviour because *“he is too valuable for the university, teaches very specific and high-quality courses”* (woman/PhD student), *“generates a very large business-level network”* (woman/PhD student), and *“brings money to the university”* (woman/PhD student). One interviewee aptly sums up the context of support: *“You can knock on the doors and windows of these institutions, but they [the leadership of a university] don’t care, because he’s a good, calm professor, well-behaved, and so on”* (woman/PhD student). Perpetrators are promoted, respected, granted *emeritus* status and continue teaching, because *“they have power, know how to move”* (woman/PhD student) and *“use their own social ties that maintain the university’s prestige”* (woman/associate professor).

Thus, the social network within the university is beneficial for perpetrators and university leadership as they manage to maintain dominance and *status quo* through mutual support, as Duffy et al. (2023) suggested. This facilitates silence about the incidents of gender-based violence and discourages victims/survivors and bystanders from voicing their traumatic experiences or observations. In an environment where no accountability measures were applied, no change in the university could be expected (woman/researcher on a short-term contract). Lack of punishment allows violent behaviours to continue without consequences (woman/researcher on a short-term contract).

#### 4. Discussion

Our research has revealed the hierarchical gendered power relations that manifest themselves in the form of power-dependency relations between and among senior gatekeepers and temporary staff, students, or junior staff (Lombardo and Bustelo 2021). The gendered power-dependency relations impact the composition of the organisational responses to gender-based violence within universities. Violent behaviour, as much as silence around it, contributes to the organising patterns that create complex inequalities in organisations. Our research on the silence created in universities around gender-based violence applies network silence theory, including three interrelated components: silent, silencing, and not hearing. We analysed empirical evidence collected in the narratives of 39 interviewed victims/survivors and bystanders who had experienced and/or witnessed gender-based violence in academia and described their motives, intentions, and actions to report or not report these experiences. In their narratives, victims/survivors and bystanders described that universities do have policies or protocols in place that address mainstreaming gender, equality, diversity, and protection from sexual harassment. We found that, regardless of existing formal policies and procedures for reporting incidents, institutional practices discourage reporting and disempower victims/survivors and bystanders from

voicing their experiences, thus facilitating the perpetuation of gender-based violence. The narratives provided us with insights into structural factors, processes, and belief systems in the universities that create silence about gender-based violence and maintain silence as an organising principle. The findings match the results of earlier studies dealing with the non-reporting of sexual harassment in academia.

What are the reasons why universities tolerate gender-based violence or even benefit from the silence of the actors involved? Firstly, universities are responsible for all internal processes and practices, including informal practices and solutions. No university has an interest in being made aware of possible dysfunctional practices through 'disruptions', such as incidents of violence and harassment. The university's interest is that established organisational principles and practices contribute to the realisation of the organisational goals, namely, to deliver achievements in research and teaching. This includes competing globally for excellence, prestigious research funding, and publications. The 'institutional breadwinners' (Shannon 2022) who help the university achieve its goals are protected in the institution's own interests. The fact that the university is also responsible for protecting its employees and students from harassment, violence, and discrimination means that there is a conflict between the university's interests and duties.

The institutional responsibility to prevent, protect, and prosecute abusive and harassing behaviour is embedded in the institutional policies (Lombardo and Bustelo 2021), but the research on social network silence suggests that, in reality, the opposite is taking place—a lack of interest and a failure by institutions to take responsibility for ending gender-based violence. Our research is consistent with previous research (Duffy et al. 2023) which found that, by reporting the sexual harassment experience, the victims/survivors and bystanders become the centre of the problem, so they prefer to be silent to avoid potential negative consequences such as retaliation, re-victimisation, blame, and professional disadvantage. Almost all our interviewees disclosed stories of their universities failing to resolve incidents of gender-based violence on behalf of the victims/survivors, regardless of the existing policies and procedures to report and investigate the complaints. Our research proved that victims/survivors and bystanders are well aware of the operations of support networks in the hierarchical structures of universities. They learned that reporting would mean a confrontation with an institution rather than getting institutional support and encouragement to go through the processes available at the university (Hershcovis et al. 2021, p. 1841).

The analysis of the collected narratives on incidents of gender-based violence showed that the high status of perpetrators in the university is connected to trust, prestige within and outside the university, and the university's opportunities to be competitive and highly ranked on national and international levels. Professors and other persons who perform supervisory or management tasks for the universities represent the interests of the organisation and decide, within the scope of their authority, which types of behaviour are accepted and tolerated. In the social network of the hierarchical structures of the university, where men continue to occupy most of the leading positions, the perpetrators are included in the central positioning of these power networks (Hershcovis et al. 2021; Duffy et al. 2023). Our research has shown, that regardless of their gender, the perpetrators' central role in the social networks of the powerful is rewarded. The few female perpetrators identified in our research follow the same mode of masculine power-maintenance behaviour that allows them to occupy a central position in the university hierarchy. Sims (2019) describes this as a habitual privilege embedded in universities and actively maintained by their leadership. By valorising the academic and symbolic assets of the perpetrator's contribution to the university's pursuit of excellence, competitiveness reinforces the perpetrator's membership of the privileged circle and tends to exempt them from accountability for any misconduct. This results from the accumulation of academic, symbolic, and organisational power. Victims/survivors and bystanders, being dependent on their professors and supervisors, are located on the margins of these social networks of the powerful. Being on the margins frequently means that rectors, deans, human resources officers, responsible bodies, and even colleagues refrain from any support for victims/survivors and bystanders

and actively engage in silencing them or passively reinforcing their preference for silence. The structure of power-dependency relations and university leadership's support of these dynamics significantly contribute to creating the silence around gender-based violence and its perpetuation.

The results of our study are based on narratives from interviewees who responded to a public call for participation. The narratives represent the events exclusively from the affected victims'/survivors' and bystanders' perspectives. Neither the perspectives of the perpetrators nor those of university officials are visible in our material. As described in the methods chapter, this interview study aims to capture as many facets as possible of the experiences of victimised persons with the universities' responses to gender-based violence. However, this focused approach of giving voice to and exploring the concerns of victimised persons does not diminish the reliability or validity of the results of our analysis. This is because the strong sense of perceived dependence on informal sponsors and the dominance of the university as an institution, which our interviewees talk about, is part of the subjective reality of academic careers.

Hershcovis et al. (2021) argue that a shared belief system among leadership and other institutional actors promotes social network silence and reinforces the normalisation of gender-based violence. This paves the way for the persistence of harassing and abusive behaviour. Our research revealed that a belief system is at work in the universities, one which supports gendered norms of women's inferiority and cis-heteronormative masculine norms, including stereotyping gender roles that devalue women's contributions to, and advancements in, science. Analysis of the narratives showed that women's behaviour is often ridiculed, questioned, and/or blamed, regardless of their scientific status. Persistent comments and jokes follow women researchers throughout their entire careers. Incorporating an intersectional approach into the belief system, the research suggests that the persistence of intersectional power inequalities based on gender and race/ethnicity reinforces the silencing of any abuse (Lombardo and Bustelo 2021; Acker 2006). Our analysis adds to previous research suggesting that limited efforts by universities to address intersectional discrimination would have an impact on decisions to silence gender-based violence. Ignoring and normalising abusive and harassing behaviours and labelling them as 'innocent jokes' or 'impossible' behaviours serve as validating institutional practices to make gender-based violence invisible in a university and continue to tolerate it (Sims 2019).

In light of recent debates on the 'mental health crisis' of researchers (Hall 2023), in which the leadership non-responding to sexual harassment and bullying play key parts, our analysis confirmed that the behaviour of supervisors and contact persons to whom one should confide can have multiple detrimental effects for victims/survivors, bystanders, and the university culture, in addition to the destructive effect of the actual incident of gender-based violence.

This study set out to assess the occurrence of network silence around narratives of gender-based violence and its consequences in academic contexts. Previous research centred on the non-reporting and silencing of sexual harassment. Our set of interview narratives embraced a broader spectrum of gender-based violence that staff and students experienced at the university, such as physical and verbal threats, sexualised violence, on-line harassment, and multiple forms of violence. Our analysis found that the three elements of network silence, being silent, silencing, and not hearing, can also be detected in other forms of gender-based violence, not just in sexual harassment. From the victims'/survivors' point of view, the attitudes and behaviour of university stakeholders and their networks did not help to restore their voice or agency or do justice to the incident.

These results further support the idea that silence can be part of domination, 'as managerial silences to requests' (Hearn and Parkin 2001, p. 11) may form part of a network of silence among those in power. The numerous examples of 'not hearing' in our interview data speak volumes. They support a far-reaching normalisation of violence. Normalisation creates and maintains toxic work and study environments in which heteronormative beliefs devalue everything that appears different. This maintains the inequality regimes

in academia described by Acker (2006). Broader social movements inside and outside organisations can help to alter inequality regimes and accelerate changes (Acker 2006, p. 460), such as the #metoo and other grassroots movements. On the one hand, bottom-up feminist activism against gender-based violence can challenge existing heteronormative institutional practices supporting silence networks in academia. The hope for change lies with actors on the fringes of the organisation who challenge silence as an instrument of organisational stabilisation. Systematic support for feminist and anti-harassment agency groups should become the new normal at universities. On the other hand, change should be demanded by the public funding bodies of universities. Every university should report to its funders on how it is tackling violence and on the mental well-being of its staff and students. Victimised persons and bystanders must be given their voices back and be protected from any hidden and unfair self-interests of the universities to allow the neoliberal academic system to improve sustainably. There is still too much room for improvement.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** The final list of deductive–inductive categories of the interview analysis.

Area	Main Category	Subcategory
BEHAVIOURS	Normalisation of certain behaviours	Generalisation
		Downplaying of ‘minor’ harassment
	Treatment of women	Judging based on looks, appearance
		Women as sexual objects
		Being harsher to women, treating them worse than men
		Women that have personal/family relationships with colleagues or supervisors
		Intersections—ethnicity, nationality

Table A1. Cont.

Area	Main Category	Subcategory
ATTITUDES	Attitudes towards women	Sexist jokes
		Paying attention to appearance, looks
		Contempt towards women
		Perceiving women as ‘not deserving’ (e.g., career, success)
		Allowing women to do less than men (‘forgiving’ women less)
	Impact of national cultures	Treating women as tokens
		Cultural conservatism
	Impact of institutional culture	Not addressing certain (‘tabu’) problems
		Lack of reaction, acting as if nothing happens
		Macho attitudes
		Tabu culture
BEING SILENT	Reasons for not reporting	More general narratives of victim/survivors speaking about what kept them silent
		Feeling bad, uncomfortable, uneasy about sharing the experience
		Existing hierarchies (are believed to) stop others from believing the victim/survivor
		Existing hierarchies (are believed to) stop others from reacting to the victim/survivor’s report
		Reporting brings nothing (no results/actions) but hardship for victims/survivors
		Lack of support from colleagues, teams, bystanders, witnesses
	Procedures	Lack of procedures
		Lack of easily available information about procedures
		Non-transparent, unclear procedures
		Lack of follow up once procedure is started
		Wrongly constructed procedures
		Procedures not being followed (properly)
		Procedures being misused
	Fear of retaliation	Using procedures as a scare tactic (e.g., threatening with a report but staying silent when it turns to be enough to end abuse)
		Gaining bad reputation
		Hindering career and potential career opportunities
	Victim blaming	Mistreatment in revenge
		Mentality of the victim/survivor
		Not believing victims/survivors
SILENCING	Attempts to get rid of a victim/survivor	Position of power
	Threatening victims/survivors, causing fear	Fears of consequences if reporting
	Isolating victims/survivors	Invisibility of victims’ experiences
	Labelling a victim/survivor as troublemaker	Belittling incidents of gender-based violence
		Building networks of dominance
NOT HEARD	Normalisation	Downplaying incidents
		Window dressing (e.g., in competitive environments)
	Support for perpetrators	Making excuses on behalf of the perpetrator
		Inaction and malpractice of entities/subjects that should address the issue
		Letting perpetrator to come back to/continue work
		Promoting and praising perpetrators
		Protecting reputation of influential scholars
Colleagues taking perpetrator’s side		



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