

Gender discrimination and good practices to combat it in Academia: The results of an exploratory research conducted in three Italian universities within the framework of the European project FREASCO

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a survey conducted within the framework of the European project FREASCO, *Free from sexism and sexual harassment at school* (EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme) which involved seven research institutes located in four European countries (Italy, Estonia, France and Greece) and of which the Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature and Psychology of the University of Florence is the lead partner. The project aimed to facilitate the early detection and reporting of incidents of discrimination (such as sexism and sexual harassment) that may occur within school and university contexts. In this paper, we focus on the results of the exploratory research conducted through focus groups with researchers, teaching and technical-administrative staff, scholarship holders, research fellows and PhD students from three Italian universities who were involved in capacity building activities.

L'articolo presenta i risultati di un'indagine condotta nella cornice del progetto europeo FREASCO, *Free from sexism and sexual harassment at school* (EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme) che ha visto il coinvolgimento di sette istituti di ricerca situati in quattro paesi europei (Italia, Estonia, Francia e Grecia) e di cui il Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia dell'Università di Firenze risulta il

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capofila. Il progetto ha avuto l'obiettivo di facilitare l'individuazione precoce e la segnalazione di episodi di discriminazione (come sessismo e molestie sessuali) che possono verificarsi all'interno dei contesti scolastici e universitari. Nel presente contributo si focalizza l'attenzione sui risultati della ricerca esplorativa condotta tramite focus group con ricercatori, personale docente e tecnico-amministrativo, borsisti, assegnisti di ricerca e dottorandi di tre Università italiane che sono stati coinvolti nelle attività di *capacity building*.

Keywords: gender discrimination; sexual harassment; sexism; gender differences; tertiary education

Parole chiave: discriminazione di genere; molestie sessuali; sessismo; differenze di genere; formazione terziaria

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1. Education as a key tool for the cultural prevention of gender-based violence: The pedagogical premises of the FREASCO project

Before going into the content of the research contribution, it's important to provide terminological clarification to make readers understand the focus of the study. At the heart of our paper are mainly the discrimination that women have suffered during their professional career within the University. Discrimination that sometimes leads to gender-based violence.

The European Institute for Gender Equality claims that gender-based violence is deeply rooted in gender inequality and continues to be one of the most important human rights violations in all societies (EIGE, 2014). Both women and men experience gender-based violence, but the majority of victims are women. Often the terms “GBV” and “violence against women” are used interchangeably as it's widely recognized that most “GBV” is inflicted on women by men. As enshrined in the Istanbul Convention, violence against women is nothing more than the manifestation of historically unequal power relations between the sexes which have led to the subjugation and discrimination of women, preventing their full emancipation (Council of Europe, 2011)¹. EIGE also specifies that using the term “gender-based” is important because it underlines the fact that many forms of violence against women are entrenched in power inequalities between women and men (EIGE, 2014). Nevertheless gender-based violence not only has its roots in an asymmetry in power relations between men and women, but also in a symbolism of masculinity that is based on a nefarious equation according to which masculinity includes violence. The physical violence that men act on women – but also within the male group (Burgio, 2017) – is thus grounded in a historically sedimented symbolic violence that characterises gender relations (Bourdieu, 1998). Male violence, as Delphy and Leonard argue and Romito reiterates, requires an organised system of support and complicity at a social level (Delphy & Leonard, 1984; Delphy, 2002, Romito & Volpato, 2005). Therefore the gender-based violence is not the result of a pathology, nor can it be considered a phenomenon attributable to “male nature” (Melandri, 2011), but must instead be interpreted as the logical product of a sexist culture with which we are accustomed to relating to and living with from the earliest stages of life. This culture is reiterated in the most unsuspected places: among them, unfortunately, also schools² and universities (Calloni, 2020; Romito, 2019). It is precisely in the school-educational environment that boys and girls absorb gender stereotypes, rigid and anachronistic models of femininity and masculinity, even though the school knowledge handed down in textbooks (Biemmi, 2010). But at the same time it is precisely schools that should promote a culture of equality, respect and non-violence (Ghigi, 2019; Gamberi et al. 2010). Even at an institutional level, there is an increasingly clear awareness that the most effective tool for preventing gender-based violence can only be the cultural-educational one. The educational action, at the basis of this hypothesis, should therefore be well structured and not episodic in order to be able to modify the structure on which gender discrimination, and therefore violence, finds its foundation, i.e. a culture centred on the male (Pasinati, 2017). Italian Law no. 107 of 2015 on the “Good School” provides for “education in gender equality, the prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination, in order to inform and raise awareness among students, teachers and parents”. The theme of gender equality education, linked to a political project of cultural prevention of gender-based violence, is thus beginning to take root in Italy too, albeit in an uneven manner. Although, in fact, the social climate is sometimes hostile and refractory to accepting changes involving gender relations and gender equality policies - or perhaps precisely because of this - the pedagogical task of promoting criteria of freedom and responsibility to build a welcoming, inclusive, and non-violent society must remain firmly in place. School and university education should be the cultural bulwarks through which to activate gender culture awareness paths in our country, but often, as anticipated, academic and school contexts represent places where

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forms of gender discrimination occur, as demonstrated by numerous Anglophone studies (Morley 1994; Knights & Richard, 2003; Monroe et al., 2008) as well as by more recent researches developed in European countries (Angerval & Beach, 2018; Naezer et al., 2019; ERAC, 2020).

It is from these assumptions that in 2021 the two-year *FREASCO* project started, an acronym for *Free from sexism and sexual harassment at school*, promoted by the *EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme* involving seven partners from four European countries: Italy, France, Estonia and Greece³. The project's coordinating partner was the Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature and Psychology of the University of Florence, an interdisciplinary department whose founding elements include a cultural and educational project for the construction of a democratic and inclusive society attentive to the value of the differences that cross a complex society (ethnic, gender, physical ability differences, etc.). An innovative area of study and research opened up by a research team in the Department involves the promotion of gender education and teaching.

The *FREASCO* Project set out to implement a series of strategic actions to counter gender discrimination and implement a culture of equality in education, academia, and the wider social context. In particular, its specific objectives were to provide training sessions aimed at facilitating the early detection and reporting of incidents of discrimination in the school context and to carry out focus group with academic staff; to design and provide a set of tools to help schools and university departments address the phenomena of gender discrimination. These objectives were pursued through the creation of an online self-assessment tool for teaching and technical-administrative staff and school management, combined with a database of resources that can be consulted online; the introduction of a "quality label" for schools and departments that meet minimum standards, provide tools and resources for anonymous reporting incidents of gender discrimination; the creation of a guide and collection of best practices for designing public policies to counter incidents of sexism and sexual harassment with the aim of giving victims the possibility to report such incidents; the creation of a guide to promote an aware use of the Internet; and finally, the creation of an online tool for making reports.

Thanks to these tools, the results obtained have been an increase in awareness and knowledge among the student body and teachers about the impact that gender discrimination has on those who suffer it. The expected results in the long term are to achieve a higher quality level of prevention policies at national and European level, through the involvement of local administration and finally, to guarantee greater protection for victims.⁴

The project also involved the implementation of capacity building which for the Italian context consisted of focus groups, in the academic sphere, and training meetings, in the school environment. In this article, we focus on the results of the exploratory research conducted through focus groups with researchers, teaching and technical-administrative staff, scholarship holders, research fellows and PhD students from three Italian universities.

2. Methodological note: the choice of focus group for the qualitative research and the universities involved

The field research on the emergence of harassment in the university environment and the exploration of the countermeasures adopted by the universities envisaged holding three focus groups involving researchers, teaching and technical-administrative staff, scholarship holders, research fellows and PhD students, differentiated by age and gender. The focus groups were structured, conducted, entirely transcribed, and analysed by the *FREASCO* project research unit of FORLILPSI Department of the University of Florence. The choice of the focus group instrument as a qualitative methodology⁵ was dictated by the need to compare the various points of view and experiences of the people involved through a multi-voice dialogue and discussion. Apart from the

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focus groups that included the teaching and technical-administrative staff of the three universities, three training sessions were conducted with teachers from 9 high schools. However, we will delve into this in a subsequent contribution.

When choosing universities, an attempt was made to differentiate the geographical areas between southern/in-sular, central and northern Italy. Thus, the University of Enna “Kore” in Sicily, the University of Florence for Tuscany and the University of Bologna for Emilia Romagna were involved.

As far as the University of Florence is concerned, several departments were involved, in particular that of FOR-LILPSI, that of Physics and Astronomy and that of Legal Sciences, as well as three bodies linked to communication and publishing: the Multimedia Laboratory, the Florence University Press and the Rector’s web communication office, while for the University of Enna “Kore” the focus group was conducted with personnel belonging to the Faculty of Classics, Linguistics and Education. Finally, as far as the University of Bologna is concerned, the departments of Educational Sciences, Sciences for Quality of Life and the Institute of Nuclear Physics. The implementation of the focus groups included two phases:

- preparatory phase in which the subjects to be involved were carefully chosen following the indications given in the project: therefore, the target was made up of teachers (fixed-term and permanent) and technical-administrative staff;
- Implementation phase in which focus groups were held aimed at collecting the experiences and reflections of the participants on specific topics.

Each focus group lasted approximately two hours, they were recorded, transcribed and subsequently analysed (Acocella, 2008; Albanesi, 2004; Cataldi, 2012). The participants were involved starting from the university knowledge of the research group and extending up to people intercepted by the attendees members. The participation was extended to both women and men. To achieve the focus groups, a track composed of 6 thematic areas was followed: leadership, training, gender-discrimination, future expectations, and proposals for change. Lastly each area included a series of stimulus questions to start and fuel the discussion.

All three focus groups were held in May 2022 in online mode due to the pandemic containment measures that made it impossible to carry them out in person. The first focus group was held in Florence with the participation of ten women and one man as follows: a female professor from the Department of Physics and Astronomy; a female professor from the Department of Legal Sciences; six people from the Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature and Psychology of the University of Florence of whom one, a scholarship holder (male), a research fellow, a fixed-term researcher, an associate professor, a subject expert, and an administrative employee; an administrative employee of the Multimedia Laboratory; an administrative employee of Florence University Press; an administrative employee of the Rector’s web editorial office.

The second focus group involved the group from the University of Enna “Kore” all belonging to the Faculty of Classics, Linguistics and Education. The participants were three women and one man: an associate professor and an associate professor, a doctoral student and an administrator. Finally, the last meeting involved the University of Bologna with the participation of eight women and three men, in detail: six people from the Department of Educational Sciences of whom three associate professors, two researchers and a school teacher involved in the Department’s training courses and activities, a professor from the Institute of Nuclear Physics; three administrative employees from the Department of Sciences for Quality of Life of whom one woman and two men; an administrator from the Department of Psychology. So a total of twenty-six people took part in the focus groups, of whom twenty-one were women and five men, nine administrative employees, nine professors, of whom one was a full professor and eight associate professors, two type B and one type A fixed-term researcher, a research fellow, a doctoral student, and a young researcher who had just completed her doctorate, a scholarship

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holder and a subject expert. To protect the identity of the persons involved in the research, they were given pseudonyms. Consequently, the names used in this article are fictional.

For the analysis of focus groups, we chose to employ the thematic approach, identifying and categorising the main themes that emerged during the discussions. Specifically, we started with the integral transcription of the focus group discussions, identifying recurring themes and organising them into categories.

3. Results of the focus group analysis

3.1 Gender policies in the three universities of Florence, Bologna and Enna “Kore”

From the presentation of the sample, a preliminary fact emerges on which to reflect. Out of a total of twenty-six participants, only five are men, despite the fact that when the sample was being built the invitation to participate had been extended to numerous professors and administrators. As reported during the focus group by Giovanni, a lecturer at Enna “Kore”, when we talk about issues such as gender equality, gender inequalities, gender violence “this causes a natural selection” whereby it is more often women who come forward and attend seminars, study courses or conferences on such issues. This testimony brings us back to a long-standing issue: there has always been a tendency to consider “gender issues” as “feminine/feminist issues” that must somehow be discussed, analysed, and resolved among women. This custom brings with it a misunderstanding about the very meaning of the concept of “gender” that is worth disambiguating in order to make the following discussion clearer. Gender - as used in English - is a binary term that encompasses both genders and is based on their mutual relationship. Gender is a relational construct and a social practice that is constructed and modified according to the different ways in which men and women mutually structure their relationships (Piccone Stella & Saraceno, 1996). It would therefore be desirable, not to say necessary, for men and women to have shared opportunities to discuss and problematise the dynamics related to the construction of gender identity and gender roles. This would produce a fundamental paradigm shift: the transformation of gender roles based on an idea of equality of opportunity would no longer be experienced as a threat to male privilege, but as an opportunity for the real growth of society as a whole and an increase in individual freedoms, for both women and men.

Starting from this premise in the first part of the focus groups, an attempt was made to sound out the policies and good practices on gender equality implemented by the universities surveyed. It emerged that all three universities involved carry out initiatives and projects to raise the awareness of academic, administrative and student staff on gender issues. In particular, both in the Florentine and Bolognese universities have a “Single Committee to Guarantee Equal Opportunity, Non-discrimination and Wellbeing of those who work” (CUG - Comitato Unico di Garanzia per le pari opportunità), a body that has propositional, consultative, verification, monitoring and study functions for internal policies aimed at safeguarding working wellbeing and ensuring that there are equal gender opportunities in the research, study and work context. Furthermore, Department of Educational Sciences of the University of Bologna in 2009 the CSGE-Center for Studies on Gender and Education was established a centre dedicated to interdisciplinary research on gender and education from the perspective of gender studies⁶. At the University of Florence, on the other hand, there is “Octopus Lab”, a permanent laboratory designed to spread awareness on the causes and effects of gender inequality in academia and research⁷. From the initial idea of proposing seminars focused on gender inequality in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) disciplines within the community of the scientific hub of Sesto Fiorentino, the project rapidly expanded to talk about the topic of gender inequality in academia and research involving those who study and work within the University of Florence and research organisations. This is how Milena, a member of “Octopus Lab”, describes the objectives and composition of the group: “Ours is an informal group of people who

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revolve around the University, not only lecturers or administrative staff, but also students and PhD students. We can say that ours is an open group that does self-education and training by intercepting experts on gender issues, and recently we have been working on the issue of sexual harassment by preparing an anti-harassment handbook to try to provide support to people who may be in difficulty from this point of view”. At the University of Enna “Kore” the situation is a little different, as Giovanni recounts: ““Kore” has the Ethics Committee that also acts as a CUG, and this in my opinion is not a good thing because the Ethics Committee has so many other duties and therefore cannot fully deal with gender issues”. The lecturer goes on to say that, on the whole, the university where he works is nevertheless active in promoting gender issues: “The climate in my faculty is absolutely open-minded, in fact this year we celebrated “LGBT+ History Month” and on the occasion of the project with “Lenford-Advocacy Network” for LGBTI+ rights⁸ we did a training day open to all on the inclusion of LGBT+ people in university contexts.» To continue on the track of inclusion, Maria testifies that in the Florentine context “The Florence University Press has drafted guidelines to be followed, both for monographs and articles, to promote gender equality and gender equity in publications⁹. It also has guidelines for transgender people in the works”. Already in 2020, the University of Florence had drafted “Guidelines for promoting gender balance and inclusion in scientific events at the University of Florence”.

From the testimonies that have been collected, one can state that the three universities are, on the whole, sensitive to gender issues and at an institutional level carry out initiatives, projects and work groups to promote an inclusive climate that respects differences within their working and research contexts as requested by the International guidelines and tools such as CEDAW (UN, 1979), ERAC (2020) and EIGE (2023).

3.2 Discrimination and harassment in the academic context. A question of power?

Despite the fact that there are active proposals in universities to promote gender equality, there are still phenomena of discrimination and harassment that remain submerged and go on almost unnoticed. During the course of the three focus groups, episodes emerged that undoubtedly marked the personal and professional lives of those who suffered them, and which confirmed what emerged from other researches in Europe and Italy, in particular, but not exclusively, in STEM field (Settles et al., 2006; Smith, 2014; Casad et al., 2020; Filandri & Pasqua, 2021). For example, Patrizia, from the Department of Physics and Astronomy, recounts that in STEM fields discrimination against women and harassment are frequent, and these phenomena exist, according to her, for “cultural reasons, science has always been thought of as male territory, but there is more to it than that, it is really an academic attitude”. Alessia - who before settling down to work at the University Multimedia Laboratory was a researcher, scholarship holder and research fellow at the Department of Political Science - says that “in the academic context there is a different perception of gender, you can’t do anything about it. Power, top positions are predominantly male, there is a kind... At least I perceived it that way, of cultural racism towards women who do exactly the same job as their male colleagues. Here’s an example: in order to discredit the work of a female colleague, I have heard her referred to as ‘Mrs so and so’ instead of as ‘professor’ or ‘doctor’”. This aspect of not qualifying a woman based on her job position emerged in all the focus groups, in which the participants stated that female lecturers or researchers are frequently addressed as ‘madam’ even when they hold institutional positions. Discrimination also affects men if they do not conform in some aspect to the normative male image, for example in relation to sexual orientation (Boustani & Taylor, 2021). Alberto takes the floor in this regard and recounts that he was discriminated against because “I’m a guy who does gender studies” and then given his sexual orientation, he was told by some lecturers: “Ah, it would have been nice if you were straight. A straight guy doing gender studies”. Margherita goes on to say that when she was doing her doctorate

she suffered double discrimination, both as a woman and as a function of her age. This is her testimony: “[I was] old and a former primary school support teacher, which for the university is a disgrace. Not only that, I was also a mother, so at a conference I was told by a professor, since you are a family woman, why don’t you serve the lasagne?” But as Daniela reiterates, discrimination against women also affects, as in her case, young women who are not mothers. In the workplace, for example, she has been told that “since you are not a mother, then you cannot understand...”, and says that in the university context “we still go on a lot about categories that are feminine, age, the role of mother, etc. despite theoretical work being done to overcome them”¹⁰.

The CSGE-Center for Studies on Gender and Education also suffered for a long time from the fact that it was dedicated to gender issues, interpreted by some colleagues as only pertaining to the feminine: as Rachele recounts, the CSGE was belittled and mocked by people in more prestigious roles in the university with phrases such as “Ah, there’s the Women’s Centre!”, overshadowing its academic role as a study centre and reducing gender to just one of its dimensions. Again, Rachele recounts that on a personal level, as a student, she suffered more or less explicit harassment from a professor she called “somebody who thinks he is seductive”. According to Matilde, a temporary type A researcher, reflecting on her personal experience, the intertwining of discrimination, power and gender is very strong (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021). In fact, in a position of subordination such as hers, she happened to be discriminated against for being a woman and for holding a position not at the top of her academic career, and such discrimination was done to her “not only by people in positions of superior power, but also by administrators, and I often found myself thinking that if I had been another interlocutor, perhaps male, with the same job position, I don’t know if the conversation would have gone the same way”.

3.3 “Being reduced to ‘bodies’ in a context where by definition we are there as ‘minds’”

After several stories, the atmosphere during the Bolognese focus group was charged with pathos, in fact Sabrina said: “I don’t know if you are noticing that we are all very delicate...” and began to recount various episodes that concerned her, especially when she was a researcher, and her body (Fotaki, 2013) “The first time I realised that in the work context the body mattered was one day, 20 years ago, when I found myself walking behind two full professors who were commenting on the bodies of two female colleagues walking in front of them. It was on this occasion that I really realised that we were not just there as professionals, researchers in training, lecturers and so on. But there was a body that we were carrying around and being commented on”.

Tales abound and there are those like Sonia who say that “when I was a PhD student, I suffered humiliation from my professor. For example: “when do you get your hair dyed?” or “we could do with a nice coffee, who’s going to get it?”. Once on the way back from lunch and heading for the study, he gave me a nod that I did not immediately understand. He wanted me to lend my back so that he could put down a sheet of paper to write a note”. This is where Rachele comes in, reporting on her experience when she was a PhD student and during a research stay abroad she suffered “unpleasant episodes”. This is her testimony: “In particular, I remember a professor who told me that he really appreciated my research and while he was telling me this he was holding his hand on my knee and always with this hand on my knee he concluded by saying that he would have been very happy to continue working with me if I had wanted. I felt almost paralysed and got away”.

There are many testimonies, and before turning to what emerged from the Sicilian group, it is important to point out that the three men present at the focus group at the University of Bologna declared that they had never suffered discrimination or negative comments on their bodies or their roles. Only Valerio, who is of African origin, happened to receive racist jokes to which, however, he said he gave little weight because they were made by colleagues he has known for a long time: “from a few friends I get some jokes that were a bit stupid,

about black people, ok, but this is part of the game, and I don't pay attention to it"¹¹. As if to say that if you are black, you should expect this kind of treatment. However, when men receive physical appreciation in the workplace, they tend to downplay it. Angelo, recounting such an episode, comments that it was "such a genuine, peaceful, normal thing, that there couldn't have been anything else behind it." Furthermore, the three men agree that discrimination and comments affect their female colleagues to a greater extent; in fact, they are not aware of any incidents involving their male colleagues.

Another aspect to draw attention to that characterised the Florentine group and the Bolognese one is that some participants received, in the workplace, an appreciation of their body or "a hand on their hip" and did not consider such gestures harassment, indeed they interpreted them as almost gratifying gestures. Rachele recounts: "what I felt was ambivalent. My superior was much older than me, he did not reflect my tastes, so I was not interested in him at all. But I felt honoured that he had, as it were, this preferential look on me". So, there was also a reflection on the tendency to "minimise the seriousness, because what happened to us as harassment is still something that affects our identity, our dignity, and also for self-protection we sometimes need to reduce the seriousness". However, the habit of downplaying the significance of certain events, also through expressions such as "not real harassment", "nothing violent", merely manifests "the fear of calling things by their proper names" and therefore corresponds once again to "an attempt to minimise"¹².

Of course, as is well known, the spectrum of the seriousness of harassment is broad, but often those that do not result in a sexual act are not considered relevant by those who suffer them, as some of the testimonies within the various focus groups have shown. The reason probably lies once again in the gender stereotypes that have been incorporated by each of us since childhood, sometimes giving us an altered interpretation of reality. Certain behaviours can be interpreted as harmless comments, so it seems excessive to take offence¹³. On the other hand, the way of thinking instilled and handed down by the sexist culture according to which it is the woman who provokes the man because of her body, her attitudes or her clothing means that when faced with "less serious" episodes, the tendency is precisely to play down and therefore belittle what has happened.

With regard to the Sicilian group, no such criticism emerged. The "Kore", as was repeated several times by the participants, is a "young, open, welcoming, inclusive" environment, so the episodes they told us about concern other universities they have attended during their university careers. Lara recounts in this regard that in one university she was enrolled in, whose name she does not mention, "unfortunately there was harassment and it was reported." She continues: "I myself had spoken to the president of the course and although she was a woman – so I thought she could be understanding, allied – she made a speech in which she in a way urged the harassed girls to defend themselves in another way and not to give too much weight to what had happened with phrases like: "Ok, whatever, just slap him", "Ok, whatever, he's a man", "Ok, whatever, he's a professor". That was a very serious fact, and it didn't come out". Giovanni goes on to state: "when I was a student at the University of Palermo, this issue of harassment of female students was absolutely common". Federica in this regard chipped in by saying in her turn that when she was studying Political Science at the University of Palermo, at the end of the Political Economy exam with a grade of 25, she heard the teacher say: "Well, for a female you got a good grade!" and added "in Political Science, harassment, comments, jokes were really tolerated and the order of the day". Samuela, on the other hand, recounts her master's degree experience at Bocconi, saying that she felt discriminated against above all by professors, but also by some colleagues, for being from the South. In addition to this episode of discrimination, Samuela gives a more delicate testimony related to an episode of harassment she suffered when she was attending the University of Catania. During the period of writing her three-year thesis, she carried out a year of research and observation at the child neuropsychiatry outpatient clinic run by her supervisor.

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On that occasion she recounts: “Apart from the labour exploitation, which deserves a separate discussion, the advances made by this medical lecturer were really nasty and embarrassing. There were indecent proposals, there were wandering hands all the time. I used to come home and feel bad, I didn’t even have the strength to talk to someone about it”. In the end, she says that she managed to talk to the director of the degree course about it, and to support her at the time, she was given another lecturer while waiting for more serious measures to be taken. Despite this, the professor in question decided to turn up at the dissertation session anyway, so much so that one of Samuela’s colleagues suggested she leave: “Let’s run away, let’s run away because he has eyes that look like a devil, let’s go to the bathroom!”. The professor followed the two students to the bathroom, where they hid, terrified. Samuela and her friend were asked not to report him with the promise that the management would take care of it; indeed, after some time the professor was expelled from the faculty and no longer taught.

4. To not conclude: Investing in lifelong learning to effectively identify and counter sexual harassment

Educational and training places such as schools and universities are, in fact, as we have seen from the theoretical and empirical framework reported above, environments in which people who are different from each other in terms of generational affiliation, roles and power, motivations, ambitions and expectations, often articulated and differentiated, meet, and interact at various levels. The intertwining of these dimensions gives rise to complex relational dynamics that are not always experienced with balance and harmony and in which differences in power, also related to gender, are highlighted, an aspect that emerged on several occasions within the focus groups in the three Italian universities where they were conducted.

What emerged from the results of the exploratory research presented above shows that sexual harassment is very frequent within academic contexts and in most cases involves young women at the beginning of their university career. More or less visible forms of harassment were at the centre of numerous testimonies, and often the victims’ reaction was to keep silent out of shame, guilt or fear of retaliation or repercussions on their still-to-be-built working future as various studies on the subject confirm (Lampman *et al.*, 2016; Monroe, 2019; Roosmalen & McDaniel, 2008; Sojo *et al.*, 2016). In Italy, research on sexual harassment occurring in school and university contexts is lagging, but in recent years there have been significant scientific contributions (Ayangma Pontiroli, 2021; Romito, 2017; Romito & Volpato, 2005; Romito *et al.*, 2017; Romito & Feresin, 2019). The investigation carried out by the research group of the FORLILPSI Department within the FREASCO Project is therefore part of an expanding area of research that aims to raise awareness on gender discrimination and sexual harassment perpetrated in a context, the academic one, characterised by hierarchies and power dynamics that make it very difficult to focus on, and therefore denounce, abuses of various kinds, including sexual ones. Specifically, each FREASCO project partner dedicated a significant part to prevention, awareness-raising and training policies through capacity-building activities that took place in the spring of 2022. As far as the Italian context is concerned, the issue of sexual harassment and discrimination should no longer be concealed, but should be addressed and solved through constant, systematic, structured, and long-term training actions. Because the transitory nature of training initiatives does not allow for the continuity necessary to trigger meaningful, effective and permanent change over time (Calloni, 2020)

Note

1. Similar definitions can be found in ILO (International Labour Organization) *Violence and Harassment Convention*, 2019; ERAC (European Research Area and Innovation Committee) - *Sexual Harassment in the research and Higher Education Sector: National Policies and Measures In EU*, 2020.
2. The first denunciation of the conservative role of the Italian school and the sexist attitudes of teachers was made half a century ago by Elena Gianini Belotti in her famous essay *Dalla parte delle bambine. L'influenza dei condizionamenti sociali nella formazione del ruolo femminile nei primi anni di vita* (1973). Since then, an area of study has opened up in Italy, now called “Gender Pedagogy”, which aims to monitor and deconstruct the sexist practices and knowledge that are conveyed in school and training contexts. Within the extensive literature on the subject, the pioneering contributions by Simonetta Ulivieri, Barbara Mapelli and Carmela Covato are among the pioneering contributions that should not be missed.
3. Specifically, the partners involved are: the University of Florence, Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature and Psychology; the Culture and Development Study Center, a non-profit organisation located in the centre of Pistoia that provides training services at a transnational level; the Iris Research Institute of Prato which deals with planning interventions in the social, territorial and economic fields and has active collaborations with international bodies; the Sc Psytel Cooperative based in Paris which operates in the field of information systems in the field of health and prevention of violence against children and women; Tartu Ulikool University located in the Estonian city of Tartu is the main university in Estonia and offers international study paths and high quality teaching; the first and so far only Estonian reception centre for abused women and their family members Mtu Naiste Tugi-Ja Teabekeskus and finally the Greek centre of excellence, leader in European entrepreneurship and digital innovation hub, the Institute Entrepreneurship Development.
4. More details can be found on the Project website at the following <https://freasco.eu/>
5. The focus group can be defined as a qualitative research technique that aims to generate within a group, of about six to ten people, a discussion on certain topics proposed by the researchers. For reflections and in-depth studies on the use of focus groups in social and educational research see for example Colombo (1997); Baldry (2005); Mortari, Valbusa & Ubbiali (2020), Cardano (2011).
6. Information on the centre can be found at the following link: <https://edu.unibo.it/it/ricerca/centri-di-ricerca/centro-studi-sul-genere-e-l-educazione-csge>
7. More information can be found at this link: <https://theoctopuslab.wordpress.com/>
8. More information can be found at the link: <https://www.retelenford.it/chi-siamo/la-nostra-storia/>
9. The “Guidelines for gender balance and inclusion in the editorial processes and products of Florence University Press” are available at the following link: <https://www.fupress.com>
10. Here the intersectionality perspective fits perfectly to explain how discriminatory aspects are the results of multiple elements. Crenshaw, K. W. (2017). On intersectionality: Essential writings in *The New Press*; Atrey, S. (2018). Comparison in intersectional discrimination in *Legal Studies*, 38(3), 379-395; Atrey, S. (2019). Intersectional discrimination in *Oxford University Press*, USA.
11. Sexism and racism are two forms of discrimination that are often closely related. Anti-discrimination and anti-racist literature denounces “good-natured” jokes made about social minorities as a violent and highly humiliating practice. Cfr. Rivera (2010).

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12. EIGE produced a review of definitions and laws regarding the sexism and sexual harassment at work: EIGE 2003 and 2014, *Sexism at work: how can we stop it?* https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/sexism-at-work-handbook/part-1-understand/what-sexual-harassment?language_content_entity=en#:~:text=EU%20law%20distinguishes%20between%20sex,harassment%20and%20some%20sexist%20behaviour.
13. Bielby, W. T. (2000). Minimizing workplace gender and racial bias in *Contemporary Sociology*, 29(1), 120-129. Foster, M. D., Jackson, L. C., Hartmann, R., & Woulfe, S. (2004). Minimizing the pervasiveness of women's personal experiences of gender discrimination in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 28(3), 224-232; Tinkler, J. E. (2008). People are too quick to take offense: The effects of legal information and beliefs on definitions of sexual harassment in *Law & Social Inquiry*, 33(2), 417-445.

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