TACKLING SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

AEGEE EUROPE

THIS PAPER HAS BEEN RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY **VIOLA BIANCHETTI**
POLICY OFFICER ON EQUAL RIGHTS 2019/2020.

YEAR **2020**

LAYOUT BY **ALEJANDRA PIOT PÉREZ-ABADÍN**

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is defined in EU law as "where any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature occurs, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment"[1]. Sexual harassment reflects power dynamics: it is a device used by those who hold power to reaffirm their superiority and exercise control.

Moreover, these power dynamics are interlinked with gendered norms and roles: men are perceived as having a right over the bodies of women, women are educated to consider normal and endure the overstepping of their personal boundaries. People of any gender can experience sexual harassment, but men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators: this is because gender, intended as the social construction of masculinity and femininity, is at play when sexual harassment occurs. Notably, for a man being a victim of sexual harassment means experiencing that their masculinity is compromised, attacked and belittled. The link between sexual harassment and power dynamics also means that people experiencing more than one form of oppression, such as LGBTQI people, religious, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, migrants and refugees, are all at greater risk of experiencing sexual violence.

Because sexual harassment reflects and reinforces gendered norms and roles, for centuries women, have endured it without making much noise. It can be argued that experiencing sexual harassment was, and probably still is, considered a part of women's lives and inextricably linked with womanhood.

Until, in 2017, something happened: the exposure of the widespread sexual abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein by different celebrities made the #MeToo hashtag viral on social media[2].

Much more than that: MeToo became a global movement where women finally spoke up about their experience of harassment and asked for a change. The power of the MeToo movement ended centuries of silence and challenged the common understanding that sexual harassment is a normal experience which women need to tolerate without seeking help or demanding redress. The MeToo movement also called upon men to end a widespread culture of complicity.

For these reasons, this movement powerfully shook our understanding of women's place in society and men's power over women.

The MeToo movement also sparked significant change on the policy level. Even though gender-based violence and sexual harassment were already addressed by many international and national instruments (since 2010, 40 countries worldwide changed their laws on sexual harassment[3]), the first documents tackling primarily and specifically sexual harassment are very recent: in November 2018, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the first resolution exclusively dedicated to the fight against sexual harassment[4]; in 2019 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) approved the Violence and Harassment Convention and Recommendation, which established the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

[1] Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services, art. 2d.

[2] Even though acknowledging that the origin of the "Me Too" phrase is to be reconducted to the activist and survivor Tarana Burke in 2006, it spread virally when used first by the American actress Alyssa Milano.

[3] Purna Sen, What Will it Take? Promoting Cultural Change to End Sexual Harassment (UN Women, 2019), p.25.

[4] United Nations, GA resolution A/RES/73/148 - Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: sexual harassment - https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/148

Importantly, the ILO Convention acknowledges that "an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach, which tackles underlying causes and risk factors, including gender stereotypes, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and unequal gender-based power relations, is essential to ending violence and harassment"[5].

These documents build on several international documents recognising the right of women to be free from gender-based violence: The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendations 19 (1992) and 35 (2017) affirm that women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence and therefore this constitutes discrimination and is contrary to the provisions of the Convention. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1995) includes sexual harassment in the spectrum of different forms of gender-based violence which women experience and calls for its elimination in educational institutions and workplaces. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention (2011), states that parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that sexual harassment is subject to criminal or other legal sanction[6]. All EU Member States have signed the Convention and only six did not ratify it yet (Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia). The elimination of gender-based violence is also one of the targets of Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (2015).

The primary importance of addressing sexual harassment appears self-evident if the dimensions of this phenomenon are considered. According to an EU-wide survey of the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), 55% of women have experienced sexual harassment at least once since the age of 15[7].

A 2016 Eurobarometer found that one in five respondents across the EU-28 says sexual harassment against women is very common in their country, and a further 50% says it is fairly common[8].

Even more worrying is that in Europe, awareness and attitudes towards sexual harassment and consent are still very backwards. 41% of Eurobarometer respondents, regardless of their gender, believe that making sexually suggestive comments or jokes to a woman in the street should not be against the law; almost one in five (17%) agree that violence against women is often provoked by the victim, and one in four (25%) male respondents believe that women often invent or exaggerate claims of abuse or rape. Finally, at least one in ten respondents think intercourse without consent is justified if the person is drunk or using drugs (12%), voluntarily goes home with someone (11%), wears revealing, provocative or sexy clothing or doesn't clearly say no or physically fight back (both 10%).

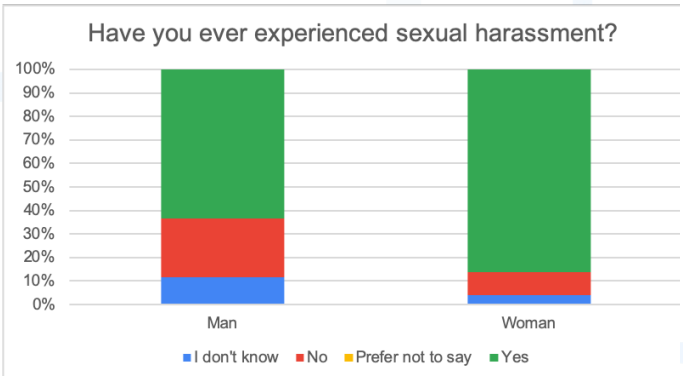
According to the FRA survey, among those who have experienced sexual harassment at least once, 32% indicated that the perpetrator was somebody from their employment context – such as a colleague, a boss or a customer. Almost one in five respondents of the 2016 Eurobarometer (18%) think that touching a colleague in an inappropriate or unwanted way should not be illegal. This explains why policies and measures to tackle sexual harassment have focused mainly on the workplace, so far.

The FRA survey underlines that young women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment: 38% of women aged between 18 and 29 years experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in the 12 months before the survey, compared to 21% in the total population. Despite this, to date young people have not been a significant target when it comes to preventing and reacting to sexual harassment.

[5] International Labour Organisation (ILO), Convention 190: Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, preamble.
[6] Council of Europe, Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), art.40.
[7] FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Violence against women: an EU-wide survey - Main results (2014).
[8] Special Eurobarometer 449 - November 2016 "Gender-based violence" Report, Survey requested by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers and co-ordinated by the Directorate-General for Communication.

Attempts to address the topic of sexual harassment in youth contexts have so far been very episodic. For the International Youth Day 2018, the United Nations chose the topic of Safe Spaces, defined as "platforms where youth can come together, freely express themselves, engage in activities related to their diverse needs and interests and participate in decision-making processes"[9].

Sexual harassment is mentioned only in relation with physical spaces, which should be "designed in a way to deter gender-based violence"[10] and this angle is far from the focus of the initiative. The Youth Progress Index (2017), which "represents the first comprehensive framework for measuring social progress that is independent of economic performance"[11] does not contain any information about sexual harassment or gender-based violence. Nevertheless, this shortcoming cannot be fully attributed to the authors of the Index, since worldwide age-disaggregated data on gender-based violence is non-existent. Indeed, the authors themselves underline that "many indicators – such as those on minority groups, people with disabilities, LGBTQI, women and girls – are either non-inclusive or not collected at all"[12].



Data on young people's awareness about, and experience of sexual harassment are scattered and non-systematic. In order to partially fill this data gap, a survey was sent to AEGEE members in April 2020.

The survey received 160 answers from members between 18 and 35 years of age, the average age being 24. The gender ratio of the respondents is 63% of women, 33% of men, 3% who prefer not to say and 1% non-binary (since only one respondent identified themselves as non-binary, no gender-disaggregated data for non-binary persons is shown here, but their answers are taken into account when considering the full sample).

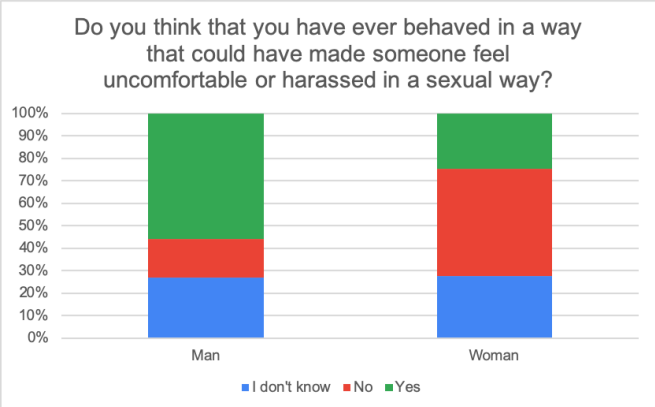
Their general awareness regarding sexual harassment can be considered high: 92% of them declared that they could explain what sexual harassment is.

When asked which behaviors can constitute sexual harassment, several forms of verbal harassment were correctly indicated, such as making sexual comments about appearance, clothing or body parts (98%) and whistling (84%). Also sending pornographic images was considered by 93% of the respondents as a form of sexual harassment, showing their awareness regarding online harassment and cyber violence. Nevertheless, fewer respondents believed that telling dirty jokes (66%), staring at someone (58%) or sharing sexual anecdotes about yourself (55%) can constitute sexual harassment. It is also true that these statements were out of context, and that harassment is defined crucially as an unwanted behaviour, leaving some ambiguity in the interpretation of those cases. When it comes to young people's experience of sexual harassment, almost four every five respondents (63% of men and 86% of women) declared to have been victim of sexual harassment at least once.

[9] International Youth Day 2018: Safe Spaces for Youth - Informational Packet, p.3. https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/07/PPT-min.pdf
[10] Id., p.8.
[11] Youth Progress Index 2017: Measuring Young People's Social Progress Globally, full report, p.13.
[12] Id., p.41.

This percentage is much higher than the one revealed by the FRA survey, but on a more positive note also the number of survivors who talked about what happened (72%) is higher (the figure of the FRA survey is 63%). Four out of five respondents experienced harassment during a party, and almost three out of five in the streets. Alarmingly, 35% of survivors of sexual harassment faced it during the formal part of a youth activity.

Finally, half of male respondents and one quarter of female respondents believe that they might have behaved in a way that could have made someone feel uncomfortable or harassed.



Engaging young people on the topic of sexual harassment and consent, especially in the context of youth activities, youth organisations, and non-formal education, can present many advantages. Not only are young people a group at higher risk of sexual harassment, but raising awareness and educating them about this topic can trigger long-lasting positive change.

As underlined above, sexual harassment is strongly linked with gendered expectations, social roles and norms. Therefore, in order to eradicate sexual harassment a cultural change is necessary in the way that women and men see and treat each other.

Having open, honest and in-depth conversations with young people of all genders about consent and respect, at an age when their social behaviours as adults are still shaping, is extremely important. Doing so in a context of peer-to-peer learning and education, such as the one to be found in youth organisations, is even more important, as it allows young people to have ownership of this process of collective learning and to tailor it to their own context and needs.

The aim of this paper is therefore to review international recommendations on preventing sexual harassment, confront those with current practices and policies of youth organisations, and draw conclusions on what can be done to effectively prevent, detect and react to sexual harassment in the youth sector.

Photo from SMASH training in Tbilisi, April 2019

INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

Guidelines on what constitutes an appropriate response to sexual harassment are not abundant.

The ILO Convention requires employers to adopt and implement a workplace policy on violence and harassment; to take into account violence and harassment in the management of occupational safety and health; to identify hazards and assess risks with the participation of workers and their representatives; and to provide workers with information and training[13].

The Recommendation 206 further explains the content of the workplace policy mentioned above: it should state a zero tolerance for violence and harassment; establish violence and harassment prevention programs; contain information on complaint and investigation procedures and ensure that all reports are duly considered; specify the right to privacy and confidentiality and include measures to protect complainants[14].

In 2019 UN Women published comprehensive guidelines "to support efforts towards ending sexual harassment including by [...] NGOs and students"[15]. The report then describes five steps which should be followed to tackle sexual harassment:

1. Zero tolerance

Zero tolerance implies that all allegations are taken seriously, that different and proportional sanctions are provided, and that anyone can safely denounce harassment, no matter their position or legal status. In order to realise a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment the role of the leadership is of primary importance. In this sense, it is also crucial to choose a leadership that represents and upholds the values of the organisation, that shows real commitment to the elimination of harassment and discrimination, that is transparent about their efforts and is held accountable for them[16].

2. Focus on the survivor

This approach means that the victim's wishes, safety and well-being take priority. In practice, an approach centred on the survivor aims at giving back control to whom has experienced sexual harassment; at ensuring privacy and confidentiality; at listening and asking without judgement; at keeping the survivor informed throughout any processes and before any further actions is taken; at ensuring continuous protection and safety; at guaranteeing timeliness in communications and investigations; at warranting equal treatment of survivor and alleged perpetrator; and at foreseeing a range of possible actions which the victim can choose from[17].

[13] International Labour Organisation (ILO), Recommendation 206: Recommendation Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, art II.7.
[14] Id., art.9.
[15] Sen, What Will it Take?, p.11.
[16] Id., p.28.
[17] Id., p.30.

3. Training

Training should be designed specifically for each organisation and for different target groups inside the organisation, it should be in line with its values, and should respond to specific objectives. Training should be based on an assessment of the extent and nature of sexual harassment in the organisation, and should provide the link between the description of the present situation and the ideal future scenario. Based on this assessment, the aim of the training could be to raise awareness on what constitutes sexual harassment, to foster a proactive approach in preventing sexual harassment, to tackle sexist behaviors and so on. In any case, the focus of the training should be not only on informing, but also on changing values and cultures.[18]

4. Collective ownership

It is important that all members of an organisation are involved in this process of cultural change and of establishing new norms and values, and take responsibility for ensuring collectively that the space of the organisation is free from violence and discrimination. Training members and supporting bystanders and witnesses is central to this[19].

5. Making reporting rational

Reporting should be easy, accessible, safe and free from tangible and intangible costs for the survivor[20]. Designing a reporting mechanism should start from an analysis of the factors which stop survivors of sexual harassment from speaking up: their reports are often minimised; the survivor is seen as not credible or malicious; the perpetrator has power that will continue to protect them; the survivor is afraid of experiencing retaliation; reporting is costly or overly complicated; survivors face stigma and victim-blaming; and finally survivors are socialised to think that men have an entitlement to sex and to control over women's bodies[21].

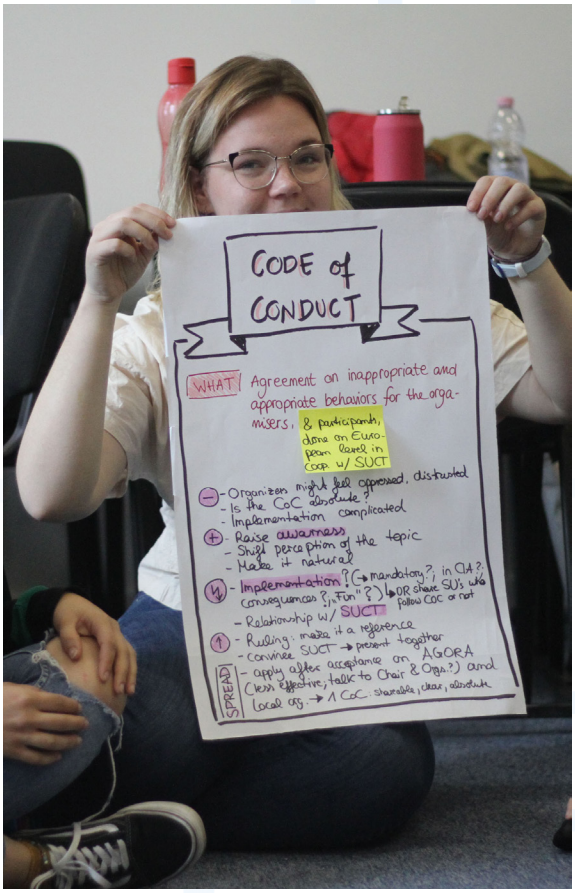


Photo from SMASH training in Tbilisi, April 2019

[18] Id., p.35.
[19] Id., p.40.
[20] Id., p.44.
[21] Id., p.18.

YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The information on practices in youth organisations has been obtained through a request for information sent to all members of the European Youth Forum (National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations). Of the over 100 organisations contacted, 12 answered: Federation of Young European Greens (FYEG), European Liberal Youth (LYMEC), National Youth Council of Russia (NYCR), National Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS), the International Falcon Movement - Socialist Educational International (IFM-SEI), the National Youth Council of Finland (Allianssi), the British Youth Council (BYC), the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA), the National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCU), the European Students' Union (ESU), Consell Nacional de la Joventut de Catalunya (CNJC), the Young European Federalists (JEF) and the Erasmus Students' Network International (ESN).

These organisations agreed on being featured in this paper and had the chance to check it before it was finalised, in order to make sure that their policies are correctly represented. The code of conduct of the European Youth Forum (YFJ) has been retrieved online. Because of the small number of organisations that provided information on their policies on sexual harassment, it is not viable to make a comprehensive review of the situation of youth organisations in Europe, but it is still possible to draw some observations and conclusions from the small sample analysed.

Most organisations have in place a code of conduct which defines their core values, describes the behaviours which are not accepted, sets a complaint mechanism and spells out clear consequences for breaches. In five cases (FYEG, IFM-SEI, LYMEC, JEF and ESN) a zero-tolerance policy is explicitly stated (this is the case also for the code of conduct of YFJ).

However, most codes of conduct focus on equality and diversity in a broad sense, or on the right to equal participation, and hardly incorporate a gender perspective. Three codes of conduct do not mention explicitly sexual harassment as a punishable behaviour.

Similarly, the values underpinning the codes of conduct are mostly related to respect, equality, dignity, tolerance, without a clear commitment to gender equality.

Exceptions are IFM-SEI, FYEG and ESU, which adopt an explicit feminist approach. The code of conduct of IFM-SEI states that "we are a feminist organisation fighting for equality between genders and against patriarchy"[22]. Similarly, "FYEG declares itself a feminist organization.

Feminism, to us, refers to both the fight against patriarchy and the desire to go beyond binary gender divisions"[23]. ESU follows a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy, based on an intersectional approach and on the belief that gender is a social construction and that patriarchy and heteronormativity are root causes of gender inequalities[24]. IFM-SEI, ESU and FYEG also put an emphasis on the creation of safe spaces.

[22] IFM-SEI Code of Conduct, p.4.
[23] FYEG Political Platform, Adopted by the General Assembly, May 2012 - Updated by the General Assembly, August 2019, p. 28.
[24] ESU, BM74 - BLED Gender Mainstreaming Strategy, p. 1-2.

The anti-harassment protocol of FYEG explicitly states that making a space safer means different things depending on the group of people involved as each group has different needs, thereby promoting a complex understanding of safe spaces[25].

When it comes to the reporting mechanism, in most of the cases the points of contact for survivors are the Chairpersons or the facilitators of the meeting; an ombudsperson who is tasked with conflict resolution and mediation; or Board members of the organisation in question. Usually, these figures have a background in facilitation and mediation, but only in a few cases the people appointed to receive reports of harassment have knowledge on the topic of equality and gender.

In IFM-SEI trust teams are appointed, when possible, as 'first responders' for victims of harassment, and these trust teams receive some form of training from more experienced team members or from external trainers; member organisations of Allianssi have harassment liaison officers; IFMSA has a Code of Conduct Committee whose members are selected for each event on the basis of their knowledge on the topic; FYEG has an Awareness Group appointed by the Executive Committee; in the context of the YFJ General Assembly (COMEM) the points of contact are the co-chairs and the mediation group, which includes one trained member of the secretariat. In ESU, the Equality Coordinator is involved in the follow-up of a complaint, though they are not a point of contact for reporting.

All the codes of conduct describe an array of measures to be taken in case of a breach.

Some of them (ESU and LYMEC) adopt the same measures indicated in the code of conduct of the European Youth Forum (YFJ).

The anti-harassment protocol of FYEG presents different possible paths: informal complaint procedure, formal complaint procedure, outside complaint mechanism (involving the police or the judiciary)[26], while the other codes of conduct only propose formal and internal complaint procedures.

The FYEG protocol also stresses the importance of ensuring a proper follow-up of the complaint, to guarantee that the measures taken are implemented, that the behaviour has stopped, and that the survivor is satisfied with the outcome. The code of conduct of IFMSA states that "in case of rape or sexual assault, the participant will be excluded from the meeting immediately and reported to the local authorities"[27].

Even though sexual assault is different from sexual harassment, this is an important sign that the topic is taken seriously within the organisation.

The concept of consent is central in the codes of conduct of IFMSA and FYEG. The code of conduct of IFMSA spells out that "consent is always mandatory in any context, whether relating to alcohol consumption, physical contact, sexual activity or any other situation."[28] The FYEG anti-harassment protocol states that members should "respect each other's physical and emotional boundaries, always get explicit verbal consent before touching someone or crossing boundaries. Don't assume your physical and emotional boundaries are the same as other people's."[29] Moreover, FYEG defines rape by lack of consent, not by threat of violence.

[25]FYEG, Internal Rules of Procedure, 2019 Update, 7.4 Annex 4: Safer Spaces.
[26] FYEG, Internal Rules of Procedure, 2019 Update, 7.4.2 Anti Sexual Harassment protocol.
[27] IFMSA Code of Conduct, Code violation.
[28] Id., General rules and behavior.
[29] FYEG, Internal Rules of Procedure, 2019 Update, 7.4 Annex 4: Safer Spaces.

As explained in the section above, an important component of preventing sexual harassment is awareness-raising and training, which can range from a short presentation of the code of conduct during events to comprehensive trainings on gender equality. In IFM-SEI, at the beginning of each activity the participants are informed about the "No Means No" policy of the organisation. Moreover, IFM-SEI seeks to "educate [...] young people about sexuality, gender and identity in a sex-positive, open and inclusive way"[30]. In 2016, IFM-SEI conducted the project "I Act" to educate its members about consent and active bystandership. IFMSA holds a presentation on consent (including but not limited to sexual consent) at the beginning of their events and runs a program on gender-based violence.

The NYCU engages in policy and advocacy on the topic of sexuality education and gender-based violence, and many of its member organisations run informative activities and projects on gender-based violence. FYEG offers training and exchange of good practices organised by the Gender Officer and the Feminist Network. As part of the Gender Mainstreaming Strategy of ESU, there must be a session related to the topic of gender equality in every event.

Moreover, ESU adopted an anti-discrimination statement regarding discrimination in higher education institutions, stating that "misogynistic attacks, both verbal and physical, generate a feeling of unsafety for women and gender minorities in the school environment. Sexual harassment and sexual violence are happening on a daily basis on campuses, often perpetrated by other students or staff members.

A lack of proper procedures to deal with these incidents can be considered as the HEIs being complicit in these attacks. It is of high importance that HEIs implement effective procedures to make victims feel secure to report aggression".[31] Even though advocacy is not directly related with prevention of sexual harassment inside the organisation, it reinforces the message that the association is strongly committed to combating gender-based violence.

Almost no organisation provides guidance on how to approach survivors of sexual harassment. Only FYEG provides clear recommendations and advice on how to help a survivor of sexual harassment, based on the following principles: listen and support; believe; reassure; be patient; encourage; respect privacy and confidentiality; establish safety.[32] Moreover, FYEG stresses that they believe, as a feminist organisation, in the principle of trusting the survivor and putting the burden of proof on the alleged harasser. The importance of respecting the choices of the survivor is also stressed throughout the protocol.

A different but interesting approach to tackling sexual harassment has been adopted by the CNCJ. They underwent a diagnosis that led to a Plan for Equality, which included recommendations on tackling sexual harassment inside the organization. In order to run a diagnosis and design the Plan for Equality they hired a specialised organisation, and all the officers and the board were involved during the process, that lasted for several months. Once the Plan for Equality was approved, the pool of trainers of the CNCJ helped member organisations to design their own plan of action and protocol against sexual harassment.

[30]IFM-SEI Code of Conduct, p.7.
[31]ESU, BM75: Anti-discrimination Statement.
[32]FYEG, Internal Rules of Procedure, 2019 Update, 7.4.3 Guidelines for persons of contact.

THE SAFE PERSON PROJECT

HISTORY

The Safe Person project of AEGEE-Europe is a prime example of a grassroots and members-led project. For a long time, AEGEE-Europe did not have an explicit commitment towards gender equality. The Statement of Principles of AEGEE-Europe, approved at the 2013 Autumn General Assembly states that "human rights are essential elements of a European society" and that "a strong Europe is built upon the foundations of respect, tolerance and solidarity", but it does not go further than this.

Gender equality slowly started being on the agenda of AEGEE-Europe when an international Convention, part of the 2014 Y Vote projecy, was dedicated to this topic. In August 2014 a Policy Officer was appointed to further develop the topic in AEGEE. As a result of her work, an active community was built around discussions on this topic, and in May 2016 the Gender Equality Interest Group was established. The main purpose of an Interest Group is to bring together AEGEE members who share a common interest, provide a platform for discussion, spread information and raise awareness on the topic: still at this stage there were no structured activities at the level of AEGEE-Europe about gender equality. Nonetheless, in 2017 one of the thematic Focus Areas chosen by AEGEE-Europe for its triannual Strategic Plan was Equal Rights, aiming to acknowledge and tackle discrimination based on gender identity, expression and sexual orientation, promoting equity from an intersectional perspective.

From 2017 until 2020, the implementation of this Focus Area was overseen by a Working Group of seven members and one policy officer, which has been supporting AEGEE local groups and European bodies in implementing activities related to this topic, and at improving AEGEE-Europe policies and practices towards a more inclusive and gender sensitive approach.

In 2017, during Autumn Agora Catania[33], a group of AEGEE members, with diverse backgrounds and positions in the organisation, came together and decided to set up an initiative to help survivors of sexual harassment during the General Assembly. The General Assembly of AEGEE-Europe is arguably a very challenging environment for tackling sexual harassment, as it gathers around 800 international participants who share sleeping space, usually in a gym, and many of whom often party all-night long. With the support of the international Board and of the Chair team of the Agora, they proposed themselves as contact points for survivors of sexual harassment, under the name of Safe Persons. The fact that during the General Assembly some serious cases were reported made it clear that a resolute response to the problem of sexual harassment was needed in youth organisations. Many people who later got involved in the project identified the episodes of Agora Catania as an important wake up call.

[33]Agora is the name of AEGEE-Europe General Assembly.

This initiative was repeated at the next General Assemblies in Kraków (Spring 2018) and Istanbul (Autumn 2018). In the latter two cases, the Safe Persons who volunteered to support survivors attended a half-day training.

The organisation of the Safe Person project was still left to the willingness and motivation of few volunteers: the initiative was not embedded in any AEGEE-Europe structures and did not receive specific resources from AEGEE-Europe. Nevertheless, the feedback from members about the project was overall positive. In Agora Kraków, furthermore, a modification to the Policy on Banning People (part of AEGEE internal rules) was passed which explicitly mentioned sexual assault or harassment as grounds for excluding a person from events, physical and online spaces according to the cases.

Finally, in 2019 the Safe Person project obtained the support of the European Youth Foundation, under the umbrella of the SMASH project – Structural Measures Against Sexual Harassment. Thanks to this cooperation, AEGEE was able to train 29 members on how to be Safe Persons and 10 youth trainers on how to train other volunteers on preventing, detecting and reacting to sexual harassment.

The training covered three aspects: how to prevent sexual harassment by assessing risk and minimising it (in cooperation with the organisers of the event); how to detect sexual harassment when it is happening, according to the active bystander approach; and how to respond to a case of sexual harassment, including both how to approach a survivor and what concrete measures can be taken to avoid further harassment from happening, as well as re-victimisation.

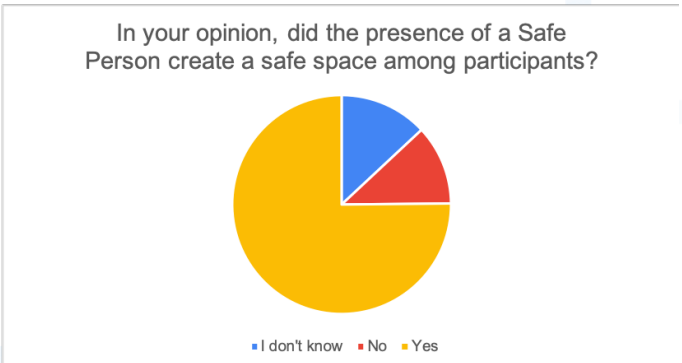
The newly trained Safe Persons applied what they learnt in 16 events, including 5 two-week summer youth exchanges (Summer Universities). The project developed a trainers' toolbox on how to conduct training events for Safe Persons and a series of guidelines on how to apply preventive measures, but a very important outcome of the project was also the creation of a pool of trained Safe Persons who could bring the project forward. The establishment, during the Spring General Assembly 2020, of a Safe Person Committee, making the pool of Safe Persons a formal working structure of AEGEE, has been a very important step towards ensuring the continuation of this project and towards embedding formal mechanisms to address sexual harassment in the design of the organisation.

Even though the review of good practices adopted by other youth organisations is extremely partial (see chapter above), a similar system has not been found in other contexts. A comparable approach is to be found in IFMSA, where the members of the Code of Conduct Committee, who are selected for their knowledge on the topic of harassment and discrimination, are the points of contact for reports related to sexual harassment. Similarly to Safe Persons, they wear specific clothes to identify them during the event (Safe Persons have purple t-shirts, even though they do not need to wear them all the time) and can be contacted through a dedicated phone number.

Photo from UYD 2018, Gender Mainstreaming in Youth Organisations, September 2018

IMPACT AND EVALUATION

As part of the research for this paper, participants of events where trained Safe Persons were present were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their perception of the project. In total, 162 AEGEE members were surveyed, who took part in different events taking place between Summer 2019 and Autumn 2020. The events covered by the survey are very diverse in terms of format, duration, and amount of participants, ranging from an Agora, Summer Universities, Network Meetings, European Planning Meeting and regional events. Moreover, three interviews with experienced Safe Persons were conducted to include their point of view in the evaluation of the project.



The Safe Person project aims primarily at creating a safe space in AEGEE events and at providing support to survivors. It follows a survivor-centred approach and it places much emphasis on making them feel believed and listened to, and to follow their will in terms of taking further action. Indeed, three quarters of the surveyed participants (80.39% of women and 67.24% of men) declared that the presence of the Safe Persons created a safe space among the participants.

Comments collected among the participants also underlined this aspect: knowing that there was a safe person present during the event made them feel safer and enabled them to enjoy the event even more. Many participants underlined that the presence of a Safe Person created a sense of trust and a safe space where people acted in a more conscious and respectful way.

As a part of the project, the Safe Persons also deliver at least one workshop on consent and sexual harassment at each event where they were present. The aim of the workshop is to raise awareness on the different forms of sexual harassment, talk about personal boundaries, and foster an active bystander attitude. Among the participants of Summer Universities where Safe Persons were present, one in four survey respondents declared that the cooperation with the Safe Person project improved their level of knowledge and awareness on sexual harassment (53% responded “yes, definitely”).

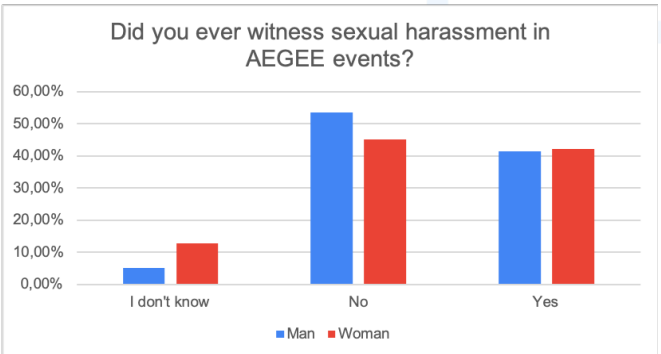
Their comments underlined the importance of this awareness-raising aspect. According to the participants, increasing the level of knowledge and awareness of the group regarding consent and sexual harassment is an important preventive measure, and allows everyone to behave as an active bystander in case they witness sexual harassment. A participant pointed out that often the aggressor is not aware of harassing another person, and therefore having open conversations on the topic is greatly beneficial.

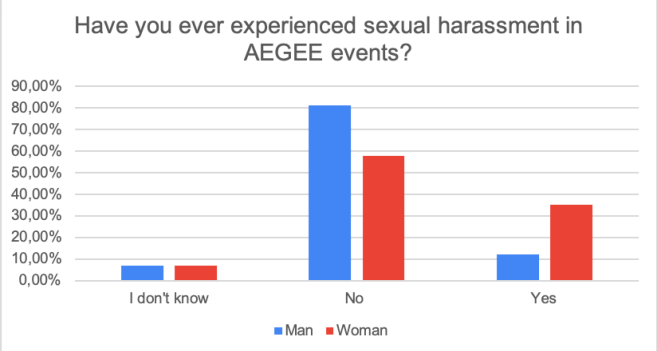
One participant admitted that they were not aware of the fact that they might be overstepping another person's boundaries with their actions, and that attending the workshop on consent and sexual harassment was very useful for them to recognise their own behaviour and be more conscious of it. Another participant observed that in an international setting talking explicitly about sexual harassment and consent is particularly important, as there are significant differences across Europe regarding the awareness on the topic, but also regarding the level of physical contact considered appropriate.

Even though there are many indicators that the Safe Person project is effective in creating a safe space and raising awareness about consent and sexual harassment, it is more difficult to establish whether it lowers the occurrence of sexual harassment episodes. Among the participants surveyed, 35% of women and 12% of men declared to have experienced sexual harassment during AEGEE events.

Moreover, two in five respondents declared to have witnessed sexual harassment in AEGEE, with a small difference between men and women. On the other hand, a relatively small number of surveyed participants declared to have witnessed or experienced sexual harassment during an event where a Safe Person was present (12%), but when asked whether the frequency of sexual harassment episodes was higher or lower than in other AEGEE events, half of the participants declared they did not know.

Nevertheless, interviews with project members suggest that the presence of Safe Persons is an important deterring factor, as people act in a more conscious and self-aware manner. Also surveyed participants felt that the presence of Safe Persons made them more aware and conscious of their own behaviour (65% of respondents).





Among the points of improvement for the Safe Person project, providing more human resources and support to Safe Persons is one of the most important ones. Some Safe Persons underlined that the project would benefit from professional psychological support, both for the survivor and for the Safe Persons.

They emphasised that oftentimes both figures are left alone after the event, and dealing with the consequences of sexual harassment can be very distressing. Also, both participants and Safe Persons highlighted that in big events such as the Agora, the ratio between the number of Safe Persons present and the amount of participants is too big, resulting in high pressure on the Safe Persons themselves. Safe Persons underlined similar challenges for long events, such as Summer Universities, where being "on duty" 24/7 for more than ten days can become extremely stressful.

When it comes to taking further action, the Safe Persons do not have any specific power inside the organisation. The Safe Person can recommend action to the organisers or chairing team, such as expelling a person from the activity or making sure that the perpetrator and the survivor do not share the same physical space. The Safe Person can also support the survivor in choosing whether they want to report to the police or go to a hospital.

Investigating on sexual harassment cases and taking official decisions on banning a person from any AEGEE-Europe activity is a responsibility of the International Board (Comité Directeur), while the Mediation Commission reviews their decision and the Juridical Commission can have an advisory role.

According to the Safe Persons interviewed, decoupling the point of contact for cases of sexual harassment with those in charge of follow-up and decision making have some positive sides: the Safe Person can focus on the wellbeing of the survivor, and also on preventing and detecting sexual harassment by keeping a watchful eye on all participants.

At the same time, the members of the Comité Directeur do not receive any specific training on gender and sexual harassment.

To date, AEGEE-Europe does not have a comprehensive code of conduct or a clear policy on how to respond to discriminatory, violent or harassing behaviours, besides banning (which is described in the internal rules of AEGEE). Furthermore, the Comité Directeur does not have to report on the decisions taken in response to sexual harassment, thereby making accountability difficult.

In the last few years, AEGEE has invested significant human and financial resources on opening a conversation about sexual harassment and consent and on putting in place structures to help survivors and to deter perpetrators.

This was possible also because there has been a number of Board members with an interest in and commitment for gender equality, leading to many initiatives which improved gender mainstreaming in the organisation.

In light of the fact that in recent years AEGEE has dedicated several projects and significant resources to social inclusion, a formal commitment towards gender equality, for example the adoption of a gender mainstreaming plan of the inclusion of equality between genders among AEGEE core values, as well as the provision of regular training on gender equality for the leadership of the organisation, would both be very significant steps forward.

Another obstacle to the continuation of the Safe Person project is the lack of financial resources that are needed to sponsor training and to cover the expenses of Safe Persons attending different events. Budgeting and decisions about financial allocations reflect the values and the priorities of the organisation: for this reason it is important that a formal commitment to gender equality and zero discrimination and violence is embedded in the identity of AEGEE.

In AEGEE, the Safe Person project is more and more well-known: more than four in five respondents to the survey for general AEGEE members declared to be aware of this project, and almost seven in ten attended an informative session, a training, workshop or lecture on sexual harassment. Even more importantly, 78% would like to receive more information and training on how to prevent, detect and react to sexual harassment, demonstrating a clear will among the AEGEE membership to continue working on this topic.

Most of the members perceive it positively, acknowledge the need for it, and see it as an established feature of AEGEE events. It can be stated that it became part of AEGEE's organisational culture. Even more importantly, the Safe Person project paved the way for more projects on gender equality and gender mainstreaming, which made it possible to work on sexist and gender discriminatory behaviours and practices beyond sexual harassment.

Nevertheless, this change in attitudes and behaviors came with time: who was involved in the project from the beginning underlined that they witnessed a significant improvement in the past three years.

At the beginning of the project, many members did not understand the need for such an initiative and were highly sceptical of it. Even though this change in attitudes is a positive sign, a reverse of this trend is always possible if continuous efforts are not made to educate our membership and take action to fight gender-based violence and gender inequalities.

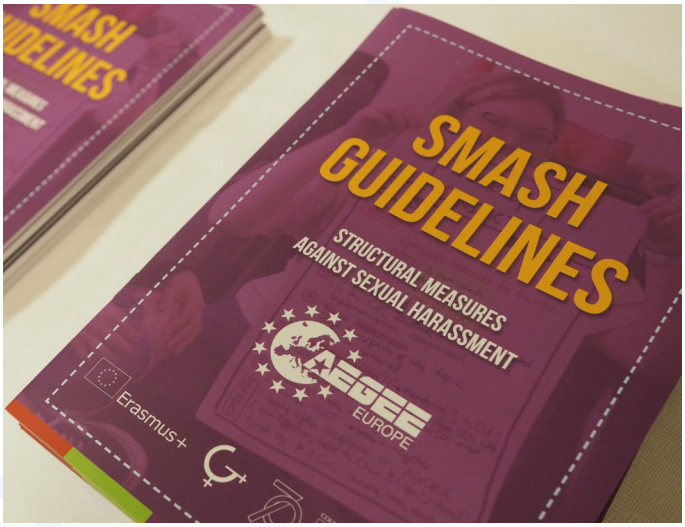


Photo from SMASH Final Conference, SMASH Guidelines, December 2019

RECOMMENDATIONS

After having reviewed the recommendations of international organisations on how to foster a culture of zero-tolerance for sexual harassment and what some youth organisations across Europe are doing to date, this paper aims to summarise the key measures that should be implemented by any youth organisation that wishes to seriously tackle sexual harassment.

It should be remembered that across Europe a society which fuels, justifies and romanticises harassment is still the default. Therefore, youth organisations need to make a strong and conscious effort in order to create a safer environment and foster a different culture.

It also needs to be underlined that having a code of conduct or structures in place to tackle sexual harassment is not enough without a cultural shift that places at the centre the right of everyone to be respected and valued, and that reaffirms the importance of consent, autonomous desire and bodily integrity.

Without this, victims will continue not reporting or not being believed, and harassment will continue to be discounted as normal. Obviously, changing an organisation's culture takes time and commitment, and is challenging especially in a youth environment where members' turnover is very high, but it is the only way to ensure long lasting and sustainable results.

The principles below, which should be adapted to the needs and circumstances of each association, can provide guidance in this process.

1. Recognise the problem.

In many cases efforts to tackle sexual harassment emerge because of the interest and goodwill of a small group of persons in the organisation, sometimes in leadership positions and sometimes not. In this initial stage, sexual harassment is not perceived as a problem: members and leadership truly believe that sexual harassment does not happen in their organisation.

Therefore, initial efforts should aim at making the problem relevant. This can be done by collecting data through surveys or focus groups, or by initiating conversations through workshops and presentations. The aim is to bring the organisation to the realisation that sexual harassment is an endemic problem, present in every part of society, that perpetrators often do not even realise that they are harassing other people, and that survivors are not used to speaking about their experiences, because of the way they are socialised.

It is important in this stage to focus not on punitive aspects and on sanctions, but rather on the need for educating aggressors and survivors alike on what behaviours fall in the spectrum of sexual harassment and on the need for positive consent.

Photo from SMASH training in Tbilisi, April 2019

2. The organisation as a whole and especially its leadership agrees on and continuously applies common values.

The values of an organisation are its DNA and should inform all its activities, formal and informal processes, habits and customs. Setting values based on equality of all genders, inclusion, diversity and zero tolerance for any forms of violence, discrimination and harassment is key in order to trigger the cultural change needed to eradicate sexual harassment from an organisation. At the same time, values should be practiced. This means that members should be aware of them and those who breach them should be called out and held accountable, especially if they cover a leadership position. Unequivocal and repeated messaging on creating an organisation where there is no sexual harassment is essential. This must come from the top and it needs to resonate with how members experience the organisation.

3. Adopt and implement a solid code of conduct and anti-harassment protocol.

Rules are needed in order to take measures in reaction to certain behaviours. Moreover, having a code of conduct increases visibility and awareness on the topic, and gives credibility to any effort to combat sexual harassment. Even though a code of conduct will cover several behaviours which are against the principles of the organisation, sexual harassment should be explicitly mentioned as one of those and a concrete protocol to report sexual harassment should be in place. This protocol should specify: who to contact in case of harassment; how to do that (offering multiple options, such as online and face to face, anonymous and personal); who will be informed about the report; what will happen after a report is filed; which measures and sanctions can be taken; which guarantees are in place to ensure the safety of the survivor, the confidentiality of the information given, and the privacy of the parties involved.
The leadership should be held accountable for how they handle breaches of the code of conduct. Organisations must develop ways in which to communicate the outcomes of cases, ensuring transparency but also confidentiality.

4. Offer survivors gender-sensitive support.

Providing a comprehensive anti-harassment protocol is not enough to guarantee that survivors will feel confident and empowered to report. Despite its traumatic nature, reporting should be made as accessible as possible, and the survivor should feel welcomed and protected in the organisation. In order to achieve this, the person receiving a complaint should be trained on how to respond, according to the following key principles: active and non-judgemental listening; believing the survivor and not questioning their account of facts; reassure the survivor that what happened is not their fault; respect privacy and confidentiality; respect the will and choices of the survivor.
The person receiving a first report should not aim at investigating what happened and at taking immediate decisions. They should rather focus on making the survivor feel safe, believed and listened to. Then, they should explain all the options which are on the table for further action and let the survivor decide. Not taking any actions is also a legitimate choice which should be respected. Throughout any possible follow-up process, the survivor should be kept continuously informed, while ensuring their safety and protection.

5. Context-specific information and training is provided to all members of the organisation and especially to those in leadership positions and those in contact with survivors.

Training and awareness-raising is a crucial component of any strategy to tackle sexual harassment. Training should be based on an audit and risk assessment of the organisation from the point of view of sexism, gender inequality and sexual harassment. Training modules should also be of different lengths and depths, target different audiences and have different aims. These trainings should follow a feminist approach: they should reflect the fact that sexual harassment is underpinned by gender inequalities, gender discrimination and everyday sexism.

Training for general members of the organisation should aim at making them aware of the existence and of the content of the code of conduct and anti-harassment protocol, at opening a conversation about consent and sexual harassment, at discussing personal boundaries and at promoting an active bystander approach.

This means enabling and supporting all those who are aware of or witness to sexual harassment to intervene. Constant training of members at different levels is especially needed considered the high turnover of members in youth organisations. Sessions on consent and sexual harassment, even very short presentations, should be a constant feature of events in order to make sure that this message reaches everyone.

The leadership of the organisation should be the one to set the example for the whole membership and put in practice the values of the organisation. For this reason, they should receive a training to understand and acknowledge gender inequalities, and detect instances of gender-based discrimination and sexism.

Finally, all those who are in contact with survivors, both as contact points or in handling investigations and follow-up procedures should receive gender-sensitive training on how to respond to sexual harassment. All those involved in a sexual harassment case, including the survivor, should have access to psychological support provided by a professional. To ensure this, sufficient financial resources should be allocated, and/or special agreements and partnerships should be established with psychologists' associations.

6. Create a formal structure in support of the actions above.

Raising awareness, training members, offering support to survivors, detecting cases of sexual harassment, as well as advising on preventive measure, is a time-consuming activity which requires extensive knowledge and expertise on the topic. Setting up a team in charge of these activities and embedding it in the structures of the organisation has several positive consequences.

First, it reinforces the commitment of the organisation to ending sexual harassment and it provides a point of reference for all members who want to know or get involved more on the topic.

Second, it ensures that those who are in charge of tackling sexual harassment have the right experience and knowledge, and that expertise on the topic is retained in the organisation and passed over when needed.

Third, formal organisational structures are allocated adequate financial resources, thereby minimising the risk that activities to combat sexual harassment end up being underfunded. Fourth, establishing a formal structure raises the visibility of initiatives against sexual harassment and contributes to drawing the attention of new members.

To sum up, having a formal structure in place guarantees a long-term and continuous commitment to fighting sexual harassment.

Photo from SMASH training in Tbilisi, April 2019

7. Mainstream gender equality in the whole organisation.

Sexual harassment is gendered and is linked to the social understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman. Sexual harassment is used to underpin power relations, to reinforce a certain type of masculinity, to objectify women, and to re-affirm the idea that women exist for the sexual enjoyment of men.

For this reason, ending sexual harassment requires a cultural change and an in-depth, honest conversation on gender, gender roles, gender norms and gender-based discrimination. In this process, non-male spaces can be important in order to assess the needs of women and trans* people, to hear their voices, and to discuss gender stereotypes affecting them. Men-only trainings to discuss the construction of masculinity and reflect upon male gender roles is also of crucial importance. Ultimately, these efforts should aim at the recognition that all genders are valid and that the dignity of everyone is a core value.

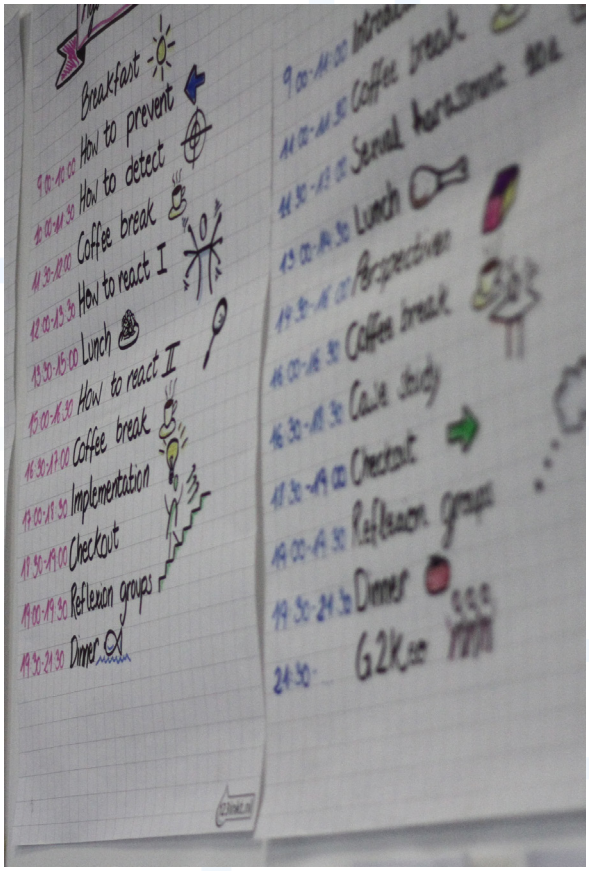


Photo from SMASH training in Tbilisi, April 2019

Therefore, raising awareness and discussing about gender-based discrimination is not enough. Gender equality should be a core value embedded in all the aspects of the organisation. This means promoting a shared commitment to equality and respect, identifying power dynamics, uplifting women in leadership positions, setting common ethical standards, creating a safe and supportive environment and making sure that everyone is held accountable for their actions.

Sexual harassment will not be eradicated in the youth sector if we continue to tolerate everyday sexism and microaggressions, from sexualised games, to inappropriate comments, discriminatory communication and non-inclusive practices. For this reason, creating a gender mainstreaming plan, based on a needs assessment of the organisation, is an important step towards creating an environment where all genders are safe and welcome, and where everyone takes responsibility for ensuring this.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services.

Council of Europe, Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

ESU, BM74 - BLED Gender Mainstreaming Strategy.

ESU, BM75: Anti-discrimination Statement.

FYEG, Internal Rules of Procedure, 2019 Update.

FYEG Political Platform, Adopted by the General Assembly, May 2012 - Updated by the General Assembly, August 2019.

FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Violence against women: an EU-wide survey - Main results (2014).

IFM-SEI Code of Conduct.

International Labour Organisation (ILO), Convention 190: Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work.

International Labour Organisation (ILO), Recommendation 206: Recommendation Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work.

Purna Sen, What Will it Take? Promoting Cultural Change to End Sexual Harassment (UN Women, 2019).

Special Eurobarometer 449 - November 2016 “Gender-based violence” Report, Survey requested by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers and co-ordinated by the Directorate-General for Communication.

United Nations, GA resolution A/RES/73/148 - Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: sexual harassment - https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/148

Youth Progress Index 2017: Measuring Young People’s Social Progress Globally, full report.