

Long Abstract – Monographic Section

Rethinking Welfare to prevent and combat gender-based violence: challenges and opportunities for an integrated system

edited by Pietro Demurtas and Emiliana Mangone

Academia in the Mirror: An Analysis of Italian Universities' Policies for the Recognition, Prevention, and Response to Gender-Based Violence.

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In recent years, gender-based violence (GBV) has progressively shifted from being treated primarily as an object of academic inquiry to becoming a central institutional challenge for universities themselves.

This transformation reflects both the heightened prominence of denunciation movements and the increasing understanding of GBV as a structural issue embedded within academic organisations, rather than as an isolated or individual occurrence.

Academia is therefore increasingly compelled to address GBV not only in their role as centres of knowledge production but also as workplaces and learning environments responsible for the wellbeing, inclusion, and safety of their communities.

This article investigates how Italian universities have responded to this challenge through the development of institutional policies, governance tools and internal procedures, situating these efforts within a broader reflection on organisational welfare and the quality of academic work environments.

Drawing on a sociological and organizational perspective, the study examines how universities conceptualise, recognise and manage GBV not only as an individual or disciplinary issue, but as a structural phenomenon affecting institutional wellbeing, professional relationships and organisational cultures.

This reflection is based on the investigation of how Italian universities address GBV through their Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), focusing on the prevention and response measures they include and on how these measures are interpreted, implemented, and evaluated by key actors involved in policy design and implementation.

A sample of 47 GEPs of Italian universities was selected according to criteria designed to ensure its diversity in terms of size and geographical location.

The work also explores synergies and tensions between institutional policies against GBV and territorially based organisations engaged in this field.

The analysis draws on a content analysis of a broad sample of GEPs adopted by Italian universities, conceived as instruments for structural change and on ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of academic policies addressing GBV.

From an ergonomics-informed perspective, the article highlights how GBV, harassment and discrimination can be understood as organisational stressors that undermine individual wellbeing, team functioning and institutional performance.

The findings show that while universities increasingly acknowledge the importance of prevention and awareness-raising, significant gaps remain between normative frameworks and their practical implementation.

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In particular, challenges emerge in relation to reporting mechanisms, protection of victims, management of power asymmetries, and the integration of gender-sensitive approaches into human resources policies and organisational design.

The research also reflects on the ambivalent role of universities as both sites of knowledge production and workplaces characterised by precarious careers, competitive pressures and hierarchical governance structures.

In this context, GBV appears as a critical indicator of organisational vulnerability, revealing tensions between institutional values, formal commitments and lived experiences of staff and students.

By framing GBV as a welfare and organisational issue, the article contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable academic work environments and inclusive institutional cultures.

It argues that effective prevention requires moving beyond reactive and disciplinary approaches towards integrated strategies that combine policy, training, organisational redesign and participatory governance.

Such an approach, the article concludes, is essential not only to protect individuals, but also to enhance the overall quality, resilience and social responsibility of higher education institutions.

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