
FROM DATA TO ACTION: AN ALGORITHM FOR ADDRESSING GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract: *The article presents the development and piloting of an "Assessment Algorithm for Measuring Sexual Harassment" as part of the Erasmus+ "#Not me" project, which aimed to equip young people (aged 18-30) with the skills to prevent and address gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. A 66-question survey, administered to 309 young adults (185 females, 113 males, 11 other) across Romania, Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, and Lithuania in March-April 2022, explored their exposure, associated risks, behaviours, and beliefs related to these issues. The findings revealed a generally low overall level of reported exposure across all three categories in the five countries. Respondents generally believed that young age, race, physical appearance, and marital status could be influential factors, with physical appearance being particularly linked to sexual harassment. Identified risks included emotional disorders (primarily in Italy) and reduced work performance and physical inactivity (in Germany). The study suggests the low reported exposure might be due to the limited self-evaluation period and potential reluctance to disclose such sensitive information. The developed assessment algorithm is highlighted as an innovative tool to raise awareness among young people about their exposure and associated risks, proposing appropriate prevention and reaction strategies.*

Keywords: *gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, critical pedagogy*

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INTRODUCTION

Following the #MeToo Movement's widespread impact across the USA and Europe, issues of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault gained significant attention from the public, mass media, and educational institutions globally, as it is an issue that continues to plague societies worldwide (Kuhn et al., 2023). The sheer volume of online engagement, with 12 million Facebook posts within the first 24 hours and another 1.7 million Twitter messages from 85 countries focusing on #MeToo, demonstrates that the experiences highlighted in Hollywood resonate deeply with the daily realities faced by many individuals in workplaces, schools, universities, and various

other settings. The relatively low number of reported cases suggests that this remains a sensitive, if not taboo, subject, often because victims experience shame, guilt, or fear retaliation. The low frequency of significant consequences for abusers further discourages victims from reporting. This situation also points to a gap in knowledge and awareness among both employers and victims regarding prevention, attitude change, and the reduction of the far-reaching costs of this phenomenon at individual, organizational, and societal levels.

The Erasmus+ "Say NO to gender-based discrimination, sexual Harassment and sexual assault! - #Not me" joined together partners from Romania, Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, Lithuania aiming to provide skills and knowledge for young people aged 18-30, to prevent and react towards gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault, empowering them to navigate and challenge the pervasive nature of these harmful behaviors (Guarderas et al., 2023). The project also encouraged critical and anti-oppressive pedagogies as background approaches targeting youth workers, trainers, counsellors, mentors employers and HR staff in order to disrupt and challenge the reproduction of dominant heteronormative gender roles and ensure safe youth environments (Meyer, 2008).

The article is fundamentally grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), emphasizing education not merely as a process of transmitting knowledge, but as a practice of freedom aimed at fostering critical consciousness and empowering individuals to transform their oppressive realities. In the context of addressing gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault among young people, critical pedagogy provides the lens to help individuals move beyond a naive perception of their social reality to a deeper, critical understanding of the socio-political contradictions and power dynamics that shape their lives.

One of the "#Not me" project results was the elaboration and piloting of the "Assessment Algorithm for Measuring Sexual Harassment", a tool aiming to measure and navigate among risks, behaviours and beliefs associated with sexual harassment, which makes the subject of the present article.

The "Assessment Algorithm for Measuring Sexual Harassment" was designed to facilitate awareness. By asking young people to self-assess their exposure to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, and to reflect on associated risks, behaviours, and beliefs, the algorithm serves as a tool for self-discovery and critical awareness, prompting young people to identify and name instances of injustice they might otherwise normalize or dismiss, thereby making the implicit explicit. The algorithm itself is a problem-raising instrument as it doesn't just inform about harassment, but challenges young people to consider their own experiences and how they relate to broader patterns. The ultimate goal is to equip them with "appropriate prevention and reaction strategies," moving beyond passive victimhood or bystander attitude towards active, informed intervention.

A survey questionnaire was piloted for data collection from young people in order to build the algorithm of appropriate solutions for prevention and reaction to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault for young people.

The Project result "Assessment Algorithm for Measuring Sexual Harassment" is covering a gap, as there is still a lack of studies and tools to measure the levels of sexual harassment. These are focused more on a clinical perspective, especially concerning sexual assault (designed to collect data about victims and aggressors) or on its negative effects (denial of discrimination, sexual harassment or sexual assault to oneself and in front of others, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, anxiety, depression, low work or academic performance, post-traumatic stress etc.), but not on the phenomenon itself (Gagne & Lavoie, 1993). In this sense, The #Not Me assessment tool is highly innovative, being designed to raise the awareness of young people, concerning their level of

exposure to sexual harassment and the associated risks, behaviours and beliefs and to propose appropriate solutions for prevention and reaction (Fineran & Bolen, 2006). The expected impact: the assessment algorithm will help young people to identify: levels of risks, behaviours and beliefs associated with sexual harassment manifested in different forms – verbal, physical, visual and psychological, as well as activities to be taken to prevent sexual harassment in accordance with the identified level of sexual harassment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The project partners designed the survey questionnaire for data collection from young people in order to build the algorithm of appropriate solutions for prevention and reaction to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault for young people.

The aim of the survey was to measure: the level of exposure to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault, the associated risks, behaviours, and beliefs.

The survey consists in 66 questions, it lasts for about 20 minutes to fill in and it is structured into 4 sections: 1. Socio-demographic data - 4 questions, 2. Gender based discrimination, its exposure, the associated risks, behaviours and beliefs- 33 questions, 3. Sexual harassment, its exposure, the associated risks, behaviours and beliefs - 16 questions and 4. Sexual assault, its exposure, the associated risks, behaviours and beliefs - 12 questions.

The 4-point Likert scale was standardized for identifying a level of exposure to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault, using two types of questions, one type reflecting the beliefs related to factors that can influence this level, and the second type related to the frequency of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault incidents and their consequences, as presented in Table 1. Questions 5-11, 38-41, 55-58 illustrate the level of agreement concerning respondents' beliefs related to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault, while questions 12-37, 42-54, 59-66 focus on the determining the frequency of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault incidents and their consequences.

Table 1. *The 4 point Likert scale in the survey questionnaire*

To be used for Questions 5-11, 38-41, 55-58	To be used for Questions 12-37, 42-54, 59-66
(1) Strongly disagree	(1) Never
(2) Disagree	(2) Rarely
(3) Agree	(3) Often
(4) Strongly agree	(4) Every time

The survey questionnaire was based on respondents' self-assessment. The distribution of the survey was done through a secure link via Google forms, over a time period of two months, March - April 2022.

A total number of 309 respondents, young people, aged 18-30, from Romania, Czech Republic, Italy, Germany and Lithuania took part in the survey. The survey population included 185 female respondents, 113 males respondents and 11 respondents who chose the category “other”. The repartition on the 5 countries was the following: 69 Romania, 61 Germany, 56 Italy, 63 Lithuania, 60 Czech Republic, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Survey results in socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents*

Nr	Question	Number of answers					
		Romania	Germany	Italy	Lithuania	Czech Republic	TOTAL
1	Which country are you from?	69	61	56	63	60	309
2	What is your gender:						
	a. Male	15	43	10	28	17	113
	b. Female	53	18	44	35	35	185
	c. Other	1	0	2	0	8	11
3	What is your employment status:						
	a. Employer	1	1	0	0	3	5
	b. Employee	9	4	17	5	24	59
	c. Student	59	54	39	58	33	243
	d. Entrepreneur	0	2	0	0	0	2
	e. Other	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	What is your educational level:						
	a. Secondary school	34	0	5	1	15	55
	b. High school	1	0	2	24	0	27
	c. Vocational school	1	0	1	1	0	3
	d. College	0	0	0	32	44	76
	e. University	33	61	48	4	0	146
	f. Other: please, specify	0	0	0	1	1	2

The data was collected by each partner, then integrated into a common file. After the data were translated from the national languages, they were cleaned and prepared for analysis. The data preparation also aimed at checking the connections between the question and the question number in the partner surveys.

The survey results were analysed at the levels of each country, all the five partner countries, agreement and frequency in each category, namely gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault and at the level of the whole study.

FINDINGS

For a clearer and more accurate data analysis, the data collected was processed with SPSS version 17. Firstly, Alpha Cronbach was calculated for the questions in Section 2. Gender based discrimination, its exposure, the associated risks, behaviours and beliefs, Q12-37 related to gender discrimination and we obtained a reliable value of 0, 865. Next, we have obtained an average of the

306 valid answers of 17,7092 which we can interpret as a quite low level of gender discrimination perceived by most participants from the 5 countries.

Table 3. *Reliability statistics for gender discrimination questions 4-11*

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,865	14

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics for the variable Gender discrimination*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender discrimination	306	14,00	42,00	17,7092	4,72007
Valid N	306				

Next, a new variable was created, gender discrimination levels, summing up results obtained for questions 12-37, for 306 valid answers resulting 3 levels of discrimination, using percentiles points at 33% and 67%. Thus, 42,8% of respondents denoted a low level of gender discrimination, 24,3% of a medium level and 31,4% high level of gender discrimination. These scores show that gender discrimination is an important topic for one third of respondents.

Table 5. *Descriptive statistics for the variable Gender discrimination levels*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender discrimination levels	306	1,00	3,00	1,8758	,85943
Valid N (listwise)	306				

Table 6. *Frequencies Gender discrimination levels*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Low level	134	42,8	43,8	43,8
	Medium level	76	24,3	24,8	68,6

	High level	96	30,7	31,4	100,0
	Total	306	97,8	100,0	
Missing	System	7	2,2		
Total		313	100,0		

The Spearman correlations performed between beliefs about gender-based discrimination and gender-based discrimination levels show that all correlations done are significant and positive. Thus, it is a significant low and positive correlation between the belief that religion can have an impact on gender-based discrimination and the level perceived of gender-based discrimination, meaning that the higher the respondents' belief that religion can have an impact on gender discrimination, the higher the perceived level of gender discrimination.

In the same way, as the belief that physical appearance has an impact on gender discrimination increases, the level of perceived gender discrimination also significantly increases.

The belief that race has an impact on gender discrimination also correlates weakly, but significantly and positively, with the level of perceived gender discrimination, in the sense that the higher the degree of agreement with this belief, the higher the perceived level of gender discrimination.

Also, the higher is the belief that gender-based discrimination might impact respondents' employment, the higher is the perceived level of gender discrimination.

Table 7. *Spearman correlations for gender discrimination levels*

Variables correlated with the gender discrimination levels	Spearman's RHO
Religion	0,264
Physical appearance	0,221
Race	0,197
Impact employment	0,183
Marital status	0,170
Level of education	0,161
Young age	0,144

We have also used The Kruskal Wallis H test to check if there is a significant difference among countries regarding the perceived levels of gender discrimination and to describe the direction of the difference. As the control value resulted was 0,001, we drew the conclusion that such significant differences exist among the survey participants on the country variable. In Germany the level of gender-based discrimination reported ($p = 187,18$) is significantly higher than the level of gender discrimination reported in Italy ($p = 114,88$). It is also significantly higher than the level of gender discrimination reported in Lithuania (148,73), Czech Republic ($p = 154,25$) and Romania ($p = 157,73$).

Identified risks associated with gender-based discrimination included infrequent emotional disturbances among Italian respondents, such as timidity, anxiety, heightened sensitivity, shyness, feelings of vulnerability, and sleep difficulties. In Germany, reduced work performance was a commonly reported risk.

Table 8. *Kruskal Wallis Test for gender discrimination levels according to countries*

Country	N	Mean Rank
Romania	69	157,73
Germany	60	187,18
Italy	53	114,88
Lithuania	65	148,73
Czech Republic	59	154,25
Total	306	

Most participants indicated limited personal experience with gender-based discrimination, with very few reporting a moderate level. This pattern was consistent across partner countries, with the exception of Lithuania, where all participants perceived their exposure to be low. Identified risks associated with gender-based discrimination included infrequent emotional disturbances among Italian respondents, such as timidity, anxiety, heightened sensitivity, shyness, feelings of vulnerability, and sleep difficulties. In Germany, reduced work performance was a commonly reported risk.

The survey findings from Section 3. Sexual harassment, its exposure, the associated risks, behaviours and beliefs indicated that young people's physical appearance was perceived as a strong potential factor influencing sexual harassment. Furthermore, most respondents agreed that young age, race, and marital status could also play a role. Overall, young participants from partner countries reported a low level of exposure to sexual harassment, with only 18 respondents across Romania, Italy, Germany, and the Czech Republic indicating a medium level of exposure. Specifically, the reported forms of sexual harassment varied:

- Unwelcome verbal comments: rarely reported in the Czech Republic.
- Jokes: often reported in Romania and rarely in Germany.
- Gestures (body language): often reported in Germany.
- Provocative posters displayed: often reported in Germany.
- Comments on photos (Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat): often reported in Germany and rarely in Lithuania.

The study identified physical inactivity, often reported in Germany, as a risk associated with sexual harassment.

According to Section 4. Sexual assault, its exposure, the associated risks, behaviours and beliefs of the survey, young people believed that physical appearance, young age, race, and marital status could influence sexual assault. Most respondents reported a low level of exposure to sexual assault, with only 6 participants indicating a medium level. Notably, the respondents did not report experiencing negative effects related to their exposure to sexual assault.

The final section of the survey calculated a total level of exposure to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, with the results presented in table 9.

Table 9. *Survey results related to total level of exposure to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault*

The level of exposure	Number of respondents					
	Romania	Germany	Italy	Lithuania	Czech Republic	Total
Low	68	59	53	63	58	301
Medium	1	2	3	0	2	8
High	0	0	0	0	0	0

Overall, the findings indicate that young respondents across the five surveyed countries generally experienced a low total level of exposure to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Specifically, in Lithuania, all participants reported a low level of exposure across these categories.

The data analysis indicates a generally low overall level of exposure to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Specifically, the overall exposure levels were low for gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault individually. Participants reported a medium level of exposure more frequently for gender-based discrimination (24) compared to sexual harassment (18) and sexual assault (6).

Table 10. *The level of exposure according to the type of aggression*

The level of exposure	Gender-based discrimination	Sexual harassment	Sexual assault
Medium	24	18	6

In general, respondents tended to agree that young age, race, physical appearance, and marital status could influence gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. They considered physical appearance particularly relevant to sexual harassment, while marital status was perceived as less significant for gender-based discrimination. Respondents from Germany, Romania, Czech Republic reported a higher level of exposure to gender discrimination, while respondents from Lithuania and Italy perceived their exposure to be low. Data collected from partner countries, especially Germany and Italy, suggests that the risks associated with gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment include emotional disorders such as timidity, anxiety, sensitivity, shyness, feelings of vulnerability, and sleep difficulties, as well as lower work performance and physical inactivity.

DISCUSSIONS

These findings should be interpreted cautiously in light of existing literature, which consistently reports higher prevalence rates of harassment and discrimination among young people. For instance, a large European study of university students found that approximately one in four students reported experiences of sexual harassment, with women reporting significantly higher rates than men (Blahopoulou et al., 2024). Similarly, research examining youth experiences of harassment demonstrates that gender-based harassment is common in educational environments, often taking the form of verbal comments, sexist jokes, and unwanted attention related to physical appearance (Fineran & Bolen, 2006).

The discrepancy between the relatively low levels of exposure reported in the present study and the higher prevalence rates documented in previous research may reflect the well-established problem of underreporting in studies of sexual harassment and gender discrimination. Victims often hesitate to disclose such experiences due to fear of retaliation, social stigma, or internalized feelings of shame and guilt (Kuhn et al., 2023). Furthermore, certain forms of harassment, particularly subtle or normalized behaviors such as sexist jokes or comments on appearance, may not always be recognized as harassment by those experiencing them. Previous studies on adolescent and peer harassment emphasize that many young people interpret these behaviors as socially acceptable interactions rather than discriminatory acts (Fineran & Bennett, 1999).

As a consequence, the relatively low exposure levels observed in the present research may reflect differences in awareness and recognition rather than the absence of discriminatory behaviors.



The findings also highlight the role of perceived determinants of discrimination, with respondents identifying young age, race, marital status, and physical appearance as potential factors influencing exposure to harassment. Among these, physical appearance emerged as the most frequently mentioned factor associated with sexual harassment. This result is consistent with research suggesting that sexual harassment is often linked to gender stereotyping and objectification, particularly in youth cultures where appearance-based evaluation plays a significant role in social interaction (Roscoe et al., 1994). Studies in higher education contexts similarly demonstrate that physical appearance and gender expression frequently influence experiences of harassment and discrimination, especially among female students (Guarderas et al., 2023).

The correlation analysis conducted in the present study further supports the relationship between awareness of discrimination and perceived exposure levels. Respondents who expressed stronger beliefs regarding the influence of social and demographic factors — such as religion, race, or education — also reported higher perceived levels of gender discrimination. This finding can be interpreted through the lens of critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the role of education in fostering critical consciousness and enabling individuals to recognize structural inequalities and oppressive social practices (Freire, 2000). According to this perspective, individuals who develop greater awareness of social power relations are more likely to identify discriminatory behaviors in their environments.

The cross-national differences identified in the study also provide important insights into the cultural and institutional dimensions of gender discrimination. Respondents from Germany reported significantly higher perceived levels of discrimination compared to participants from Italy and Lithuania. Such variations may reflect differences in national discourses on gender equality, legal frameworks addressing discrimination, and public awareness campaigns. Research examining cross-cultural differences in harassment experiences indicates that countries with stronger gender equality policies and more visible public debates on discrimination often report higher levels of self-reported harassment, as individuals are more aware of what constitutes inappropriate behavior (Vasiliu, 2025). Consequently, higher reporting rates in certain contexts may reflect greater awareness and willingness to disclose experiences rather than higher actual prevalence.

Another important aspect of the study concerns the psychological and social risks associated with discrimination and harassment. Participants identified several negative consequences linked to these experiences, including anxiety, vulnerability, reduced work performance, and emotional distress. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that exposure to sexual harassment is associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes, including depression, anxiety, reduced academic performance, and social withdrawal (Briere et al., 2024). Studies focusing on adolescents and young adults similarly show that harassment experiences can undermine self-esteem and negatively affect both educational and professional development (Smith-Han et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Beyond documenting exposure levels, the present study contributes to the literature through the development and piloting of an innovative assessment algorithm designed to measure exposure to gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault while simultaneously raising awareness among young people. Existing measurement tools often focus primarily on victimization or psychological outcomes, whereas fewer instruments are designed to support self-reflection and awareness-building processes among youth populations (Gagné & Lavoie, 1993). The algorithm developed within the #Not Me project attempts to address this gap by encouraging participants to evaluate their own experiences, beliefs, and potential risk factors.

This approach aligns closely with educational frameworks emphasizing preventive and participatory strategies in addressing gender-based violence. Research on harassment prevention programs in higher education has demonstrated that interventions focused on awareness, bystander training, and critical reflection can significantly reduce tolerance toward discriminatory behaviors and increase reporting intentions (Blahopoulou et al., 2024). By integrating measurement with educational reflection, the algorithm used in this study represents a promising tool for empowering young people to recognize and challenge gender-based discrimination.

LIMITATIONS

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The research relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and reluctance to disclose sensitive experiences. Even in anonymous surveys, respondents may underreport experiences of discrimination or harassment due to fear of judgment or normalization of such behaviors. The cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to establish causal relationships between exposure to discrimination and the psychological or behavioral risks identified. Longitudinal studies would provide more robust evidence regarding the long-term effects of harassment experiences. Also, the sample size within each participating country was relatively limited, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader youth populations across Europe.



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