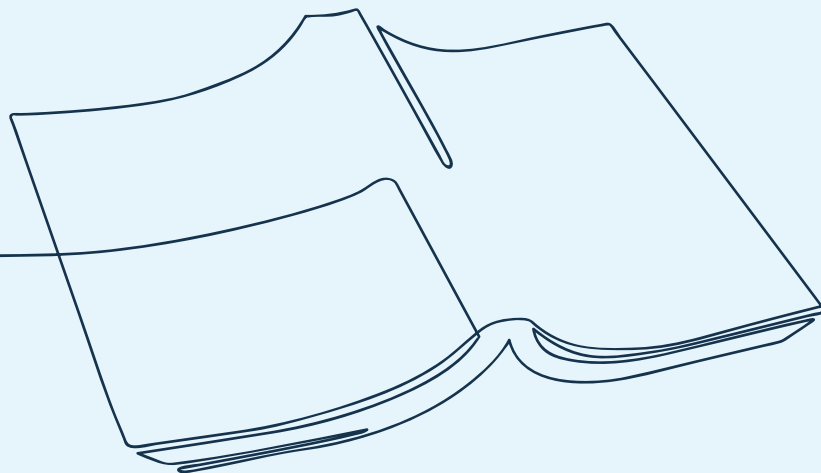


# Sexual harassment experiences among students in European higher education and differences between fields of study

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*ResearchNed*



**EUROSTUDENT 8**  
**Intelligence Brief**

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Exposure to sexual harassment has potentially severe negative consequences for students' educational achievements as well as outcomes in other life domains and later stages such as (mental) health, relationships and careers. On average, one in four female students in higher education reports to have been sexually harassed (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). For effective preventative measures, it is important to understand how sexual harassment experiences of students are tied to institutional and cultural systems within higher education. In some contexts, there may be a higher risk for both female and male students of being sexually victimized. To this end, differences between fields of study are explored. A clear difference between fields of study is gender composition: for instance, STEM studies are predominantly followed by male students, whereas in health studies, female students make up the majority of the population. Previous research has, for instance, shown that for workers, both men and women reported having experienced sexual harassment more frequently when they were the gender minority (Larsson, 2023). In this report, we will look at how the gender balance in fields of study relates to students' sexual harassment experiences.

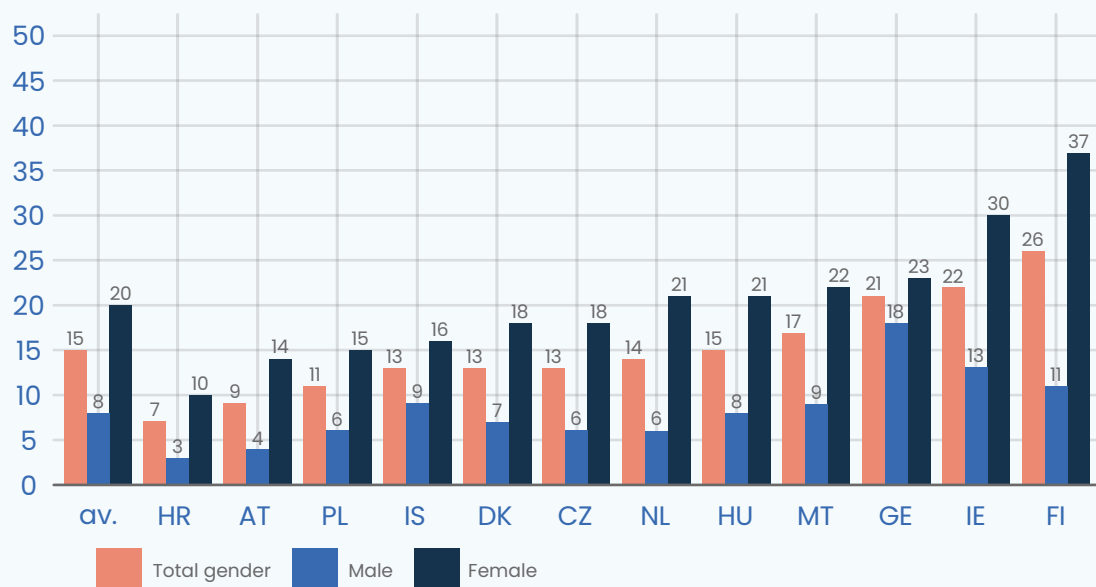
We will start by looking at differences in prevalence of sexual harassment between countries, after which we will focus on the differences which exist between fields of study, looking at it both in a bivariate and multivariate perspective. We use the EUROSTUDENT 8 Scientific Use File (Cuppen et al., 2024), which includes twelve countries with available information on sexual harassment experiences (Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Poland). This data was collected in the first half of 2022. Students were asked *whether in the context of their studies, because of who they are, they have been exposed to unwanted sexual attention (i.e. comments, unwanted physical touching or kisses)?* to which they could answer 'never', 'not in the last year', 'once or twice', 'many times'. In the following, the latter three answer categories define the group of students who report having experienced sexual harassment.

## Sexual harassment experiences in different countries

In an earlier EUROSTUDENT publication, Menz & Mandl (2024) presented the result of certain countries having relatively more (female and male) students reporting to have been sexually harassed (as well as experiencing other discriminatory acts) than other countries. These figures are presented in Figure 1. Finland (26 %), Ireland (22 %) and Georgia (21 %) have the highest share of students reporting to have been sexually harassed (above 20 %), while Croatia (7 %) and Austria (9 %) have the lowest share (below 10 %).

It was also demonstrated that gender differences in sexual harassment experiences vary between countries. For example, in Georgia, a high share of sexually harassed students is found among both male and female students, whereas in Finland, a higher share is found particularly among female students. However, in all countries, female students reported experiencing sexual harassment more often than male students.

Figure 1. **Share of students (%) who report having experienced sexual harassment in the context of their study, per country**



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except AT (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

**EUROSTUDENT question:** M4.3. In the context of your studies: Because of who you are, have you been exposed to unwanted sexual attention (i.e. comments, unwanted physical touching or kisses)?

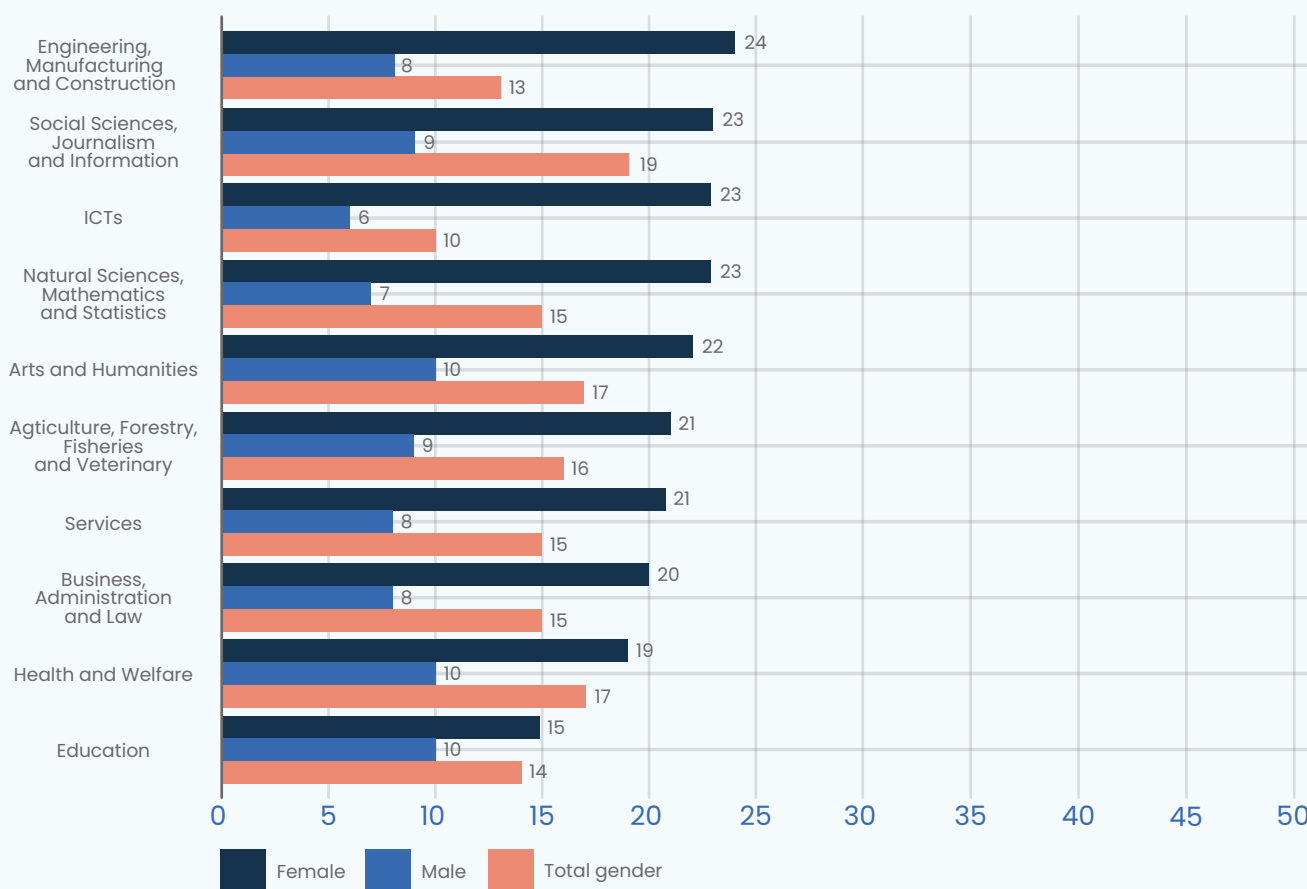
**Deviations from Eurostudent standard target group:** IE, NL.

## Sexual harassment experiences in different fields of study

Another context that, next to countries, captures variation in (female and male) students' indicating having experienced sexual harassment is their field of study. In Figure 2 it can be viewed that female students in 'Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction' are reporting the highest share of having experienced sexual harassment (24 %), followed by the field of study 'Social Sciences, Journalism and Information' (23 %). For female students, the rate is lowest for the field of Education (15 %). For male students, the differences between fields of study are much smaller, ranging between 6 and 10 %.

Why students experience sexual harassment more or less often in certain fields of study can be related to the gender composition: as female students are more likely to experience sexual harassment than male students, in a field of study with more female students, the overall rate of having experienced sexual harassment could be higher. However, the specific context of a field of study can also play a role.

Figure 2. **Share of students (%) who report having experienced sexual harassment in the context of their study, per field of study**



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except AT (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

**EUROSTUDENT question:** M4.3. In the context of your studies: Because of who you are, have you been exposed to unwanted sexual attention (i.e. comments, unwanted physical touching or kisses)? 1.7 What is your current study programme?

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions:** 1.7 DK, IS, PL .

**Deviations from Eurostudent standard target group:** IE, NL.

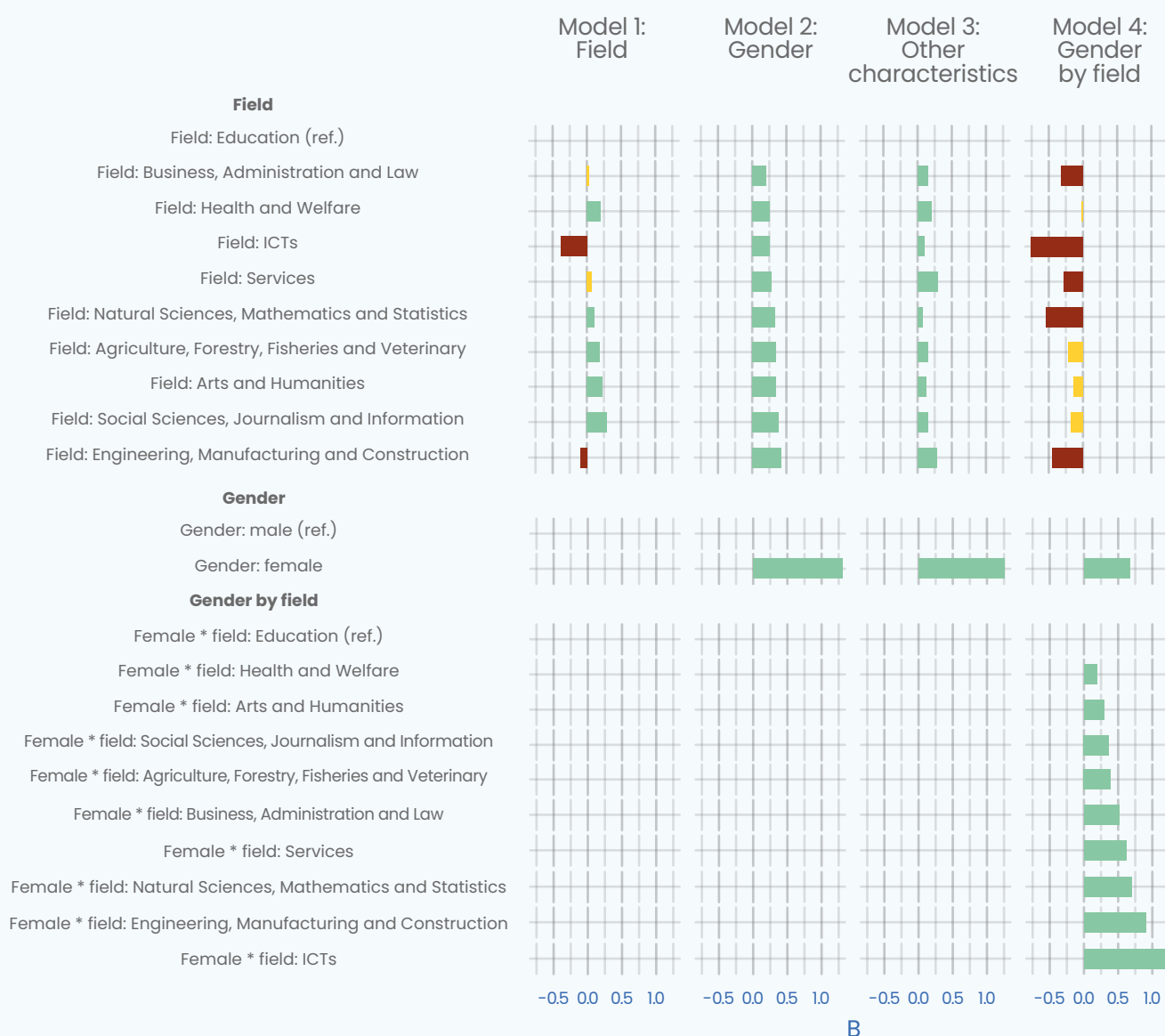
By using a multivariate approach, we can see if the differences between fields of study are explained by possible other differences which exist between fields of study. For instance, if part-time students are less likely to experience sexual harassment, and if the number of part-time students in a particular field of study would be much higher, the prevalence of sexual harassment in that field of study is related to the student composition: the prevalence of sexual harassment is lower because there are more part-time students (a group who, on average, experiences sexual harassment less often).

The results of this regression analysis are shown in Figure 3 (a green bar indicates significantly more sexual harassment reports by students, a red bar indicates significantly less sexual harassment reports by students and a yellow bar indicates a non-significant difference). This analysis shows that the differences between fields of study with regard to the prevalence of sexual harassment are partly explained by differences in their composition. However, also controlling for several other student characteristics (see note figure for the list of other student characteristics), the results in model 4 indicate that female students in 'ICTs', 'Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction', 'Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics'

experience sexual harassment more often compared to female students in other fields of study, such as 'Education' and 'Health and Welfare'. That is, for example, the green bar for female students in the field of 'ICTs' (the combined green bar

'gender: female' + 'female\*field: ICTs') is larger in size than the green bar for female students in the field of 'Health and Welfare' (the combined green bar 'gender: female' + 'female\*field: Health and Welfare').

**Figure 3. Field of study and having experienced sexual harassment in the context of one's study among female and male students**



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

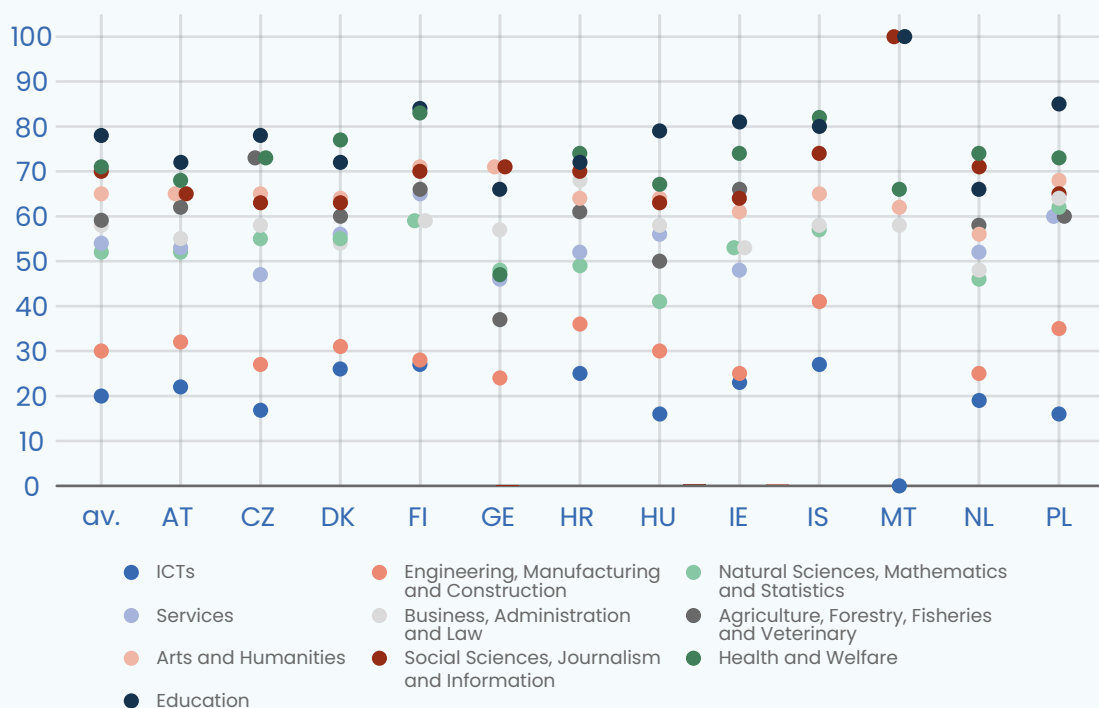
**Notes:** Summary of logistic regression analyses ( $b=\text{logit}$ ) with students nested in countries. Other (personal and study) characteristics were included in the analyses in model 3 and 4, but not shown in this figure. The other characteristics are: parental wealth, age, migration background, having a disability, parental tertiary education, living with parents, working hours, having children, type of HE (university or not), qualification of HE (master level or not), study phase of HE (first year or not), student status (full-time or part-time).

## The role of gender composition

Between all twelve countries included in this brief, there is not much variation in the gender composition of fields of study (Figure 4). The fields 'ICTs' and 'Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction' have the lowest share of women among students: around 20 % and 30 % respectively. Also, in all twelve

countries, 'Education' and 'Health and Welfare' are among the fields with the highest female share: with approximately 78 % and 71 % respectively. As we have seen in the previous paragraph, these fields also have, respectively, the highest and lowest prevalence of sexual harassment.

Figure 4. **Share of female students (%) in each field of study, per country**



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except AT (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

**EUROSTUDENT question:** 1.7 What is your current study programme?

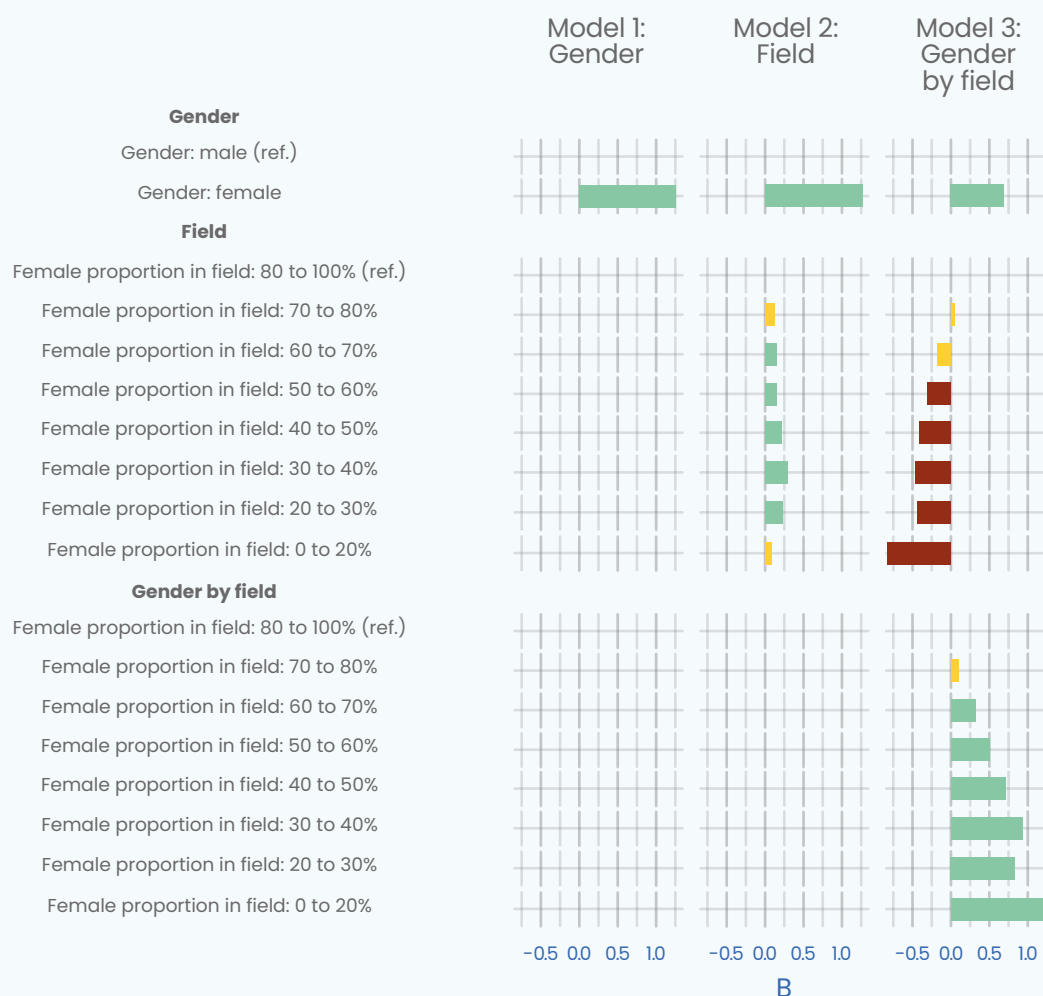
**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions:** 1.7 DK, IS, PL.

**Deviations from Eurostudent standard target group:** IE, NL.

When we look at the gender composition and the prevalence of sexual harassment, we can indeed see that, also in a multivariate analysis, the more male dominated the field of study is, the higher the prevalence of sexual harassment of female students. Figure 5 shows that, when taking into account the differences in gender composition

for female students in the third model, the lower the proportion of female students is, the higher the prevalence of sexual harassment of female students (see the increase in size of the green bar 'female \* female proportion in field' when the proportion of female students decreases).

Figure 5. **Gender proportion in field of study (within country) and having experienced sexual harassment in the context of one's study among female and male students**



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

**Notes:** Summary of logistic regression analyses ( $b=\text{logit}$ ) with students nested in field of study per country nested in countries. Other (personal and study) characteristics were included in the analyses in all models, but not shown in this figure. The other characteristics are: parental wealth, age, migration background, having a disability, parental tertiary education, living with parents, working hours, having children, type of HE (university or not), qualification of HE (master level or not), phase of HE (first year or not), student status (full-time or part-time).

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

To conclude, we have seen that female students experience sexual harassment far more often than male students: in all fields of study, female students reported being sexually harassed more often than male students. When focusing on specific fields of study, we can also see that there are clear differences in the prevalence of sexual harassment, and that these differences are related to the share of female students. In fields of study with more male students, female students are much more likely to have experienced sexual harassment. It is therefore advisable to pay special attention to these specific fields of study when designing policy measures that tackle and

prevent sexual harassment. To prevent sexual harassment (in certain fields of study as well as in higher education in general), higher education institutions can (create a special position to) raise awareness among (teaching) staff, give targeted information/support to women, involve professional institutions.

In addition, in several countries, there is a high demand for female STEM graduates (such as Engineering). In order to attract (and keep) female students, improving the study climate for female students by reducing the occurrence of sexual harassment is therefore highly advisable.



## References

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# Methodological notes

## Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions

*Figure 2, Figure 4*

**Question 1.7 — DK:** Register data was used. **IS:** Information was approximated with information about the sample. **PL:** Additional response option: 'If you have comments to the answer, write here [open field, optional]'.

## About EUROSTUDENT

The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education, collecting data on a wide range of topics, e.g. the socio-economic background, living conditions, and temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented here stem from the eighth round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2021–2024).

## Countries participating in EUROSTUDENT

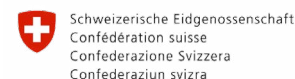
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- Austria (AT)
- Croatia (HR)
- Czech Republic (CZ)
- Denmark (DK)
- Estonia (EE)
- Finland (FI)
- France (FR)
- Georgia (GE)
- Germany (DE)
- Hungary (HU)
- Iceland (IS)
- Ireland (IE)
- Latvia (LV)
- Lithuania (LT)
- Malta (MT)
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