21-22 September 2026

Implementing the Istanbul Convention after the EU's Accession in the Academic System. Backlash, Gaps and Institutional Responsibility

A Pan-European Conference

Working Group 1.1.

Anti-Gender Movements and Backlash in Academia.

Impact on University Policies, Research and Academic Freedom

Final Report

Academia is not an accidental target for anti-gender movements.

Universities produce the knowledge that underpins equality policy: they train the professionals who will apply the Istanbul Convention, certify what counts as legitimate research, and confer authority on the concept of *gender* itself as a category of analysis. Discrediting gender studies, or making individual scholars and courses costly to sustain, is therefore an efficient way to weaken the evidence base and the professional pipeline that equality policy depends on.

We have seen this play out **differently across the continent** — from the effective expulsion of accredited gender studies programmes in Hungary, to funding freezes and political attacks on gender research elsewhere, to more diffuse but pervasive

harassment campaigns and reputational attacks against individual researchers, including here in Italy.

Not always anti-gender attacks are operated through open censorship; often what happens is a slower **erosion of legitimacy**, resources and institutional protection.

What we did in the group:

1. We shared experiences of backlash in participants' own institutions — as open opposition, or as quieter – procedural – friction. What made it effective, or what stopped it.
2. We asked ourselves what institutional safeguards can actually protect researchers and courses under attack — legal support, public solidarity statements, funding guarantees, something else — and which of these exist in your universities.
3. How should universities distinguish legitimate academic debate about gender research from bad-faith campaigns designed to delegitimise it.
4. And what would a minimum, realistic set of commitments look like for a European Code of Conduct on this specific issue.

We shared our different experiences then moved towards a number of proposals:

- From the experience of the PhD programme in Gender Studies at the University of Bari, which involves 30 universities, one of the main lessons we have drawn is the importance of building **networks**, also as a form of protection for those engaged in research and teaching on gender.
- Networking is also important as a way of preventing and countering more subtle forms of obstruction, such as informal norms or procedural barriers. Equally important are networks connecting academics and practitioners.
- Another key lesson is the importance of encouraging **young scholars** to pursue advanced and doctoral studies on gender and violence against women. And support them. Young scholars are, in fact, often those who are most vulnerable to the consequences of anti-gender attacks.
- It is also important to distinguish between attacks carried out by **private actors** and those coming from **political actors**, state institutions, or religious organisations. In different contexts, attacks may come from different actors and take different forms.

- For this reason, a proposal emerging from the group is to **map** the issue of anti-gender attacks on academic freedom across different contexts, as these may require different mechanisms of response.
- A further question is how universities should distinguish **legitimate academic debate** and research on gender and violence — which may involve different understandings of feminism, gender, gender identity, and related concepts — from bad-faith campaigns aimed at delegitimising such research, however difficult it may be to prove bad faith.