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## **A Brave New World: Technology and the #MeToo Movement in Romanian Universities**

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the 2024 events involving Romanian universities as part of the #MeToo movement and the role of technology in raising awareness of this issue, protecting victims under anonymity, and creating massive social response. By drawing on feminist institutionalism theory, this analysis takes as a starting point the case of university professor Alfred Bulai, as investigated by independent journalists at Snoop. Testimonials from students show a pattern of abuse, its discovery, and the respective institutional response. Technology amplified the voices of the victims and facilitated critical conversations in academia about accountability and change. This research underscores the need for the development of legal and institutional strategies to combat harassment and abuse, therefore supporting victims and ensuring a safer and more inclusive environment for all members of the Romanian academia.

**Keywords:** Feminism; #MeToo; Technology; Romanian Academia; Social Media; Feminist Institutionalism.

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### **Introduction**

Many scholars refer to the #MeToo movement (2017-2018) as a successful campaign that “generated tangible action” over several years.<sup>1</sup> Patriarchal societies, including those in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, have normalized gender violence and the harassment of women. While people once attributed such abuses to “sick” or “socially deviant” behavior, feminist activists and researchers showed that deeper connections existed between such actions and “rape culture”.<sup>2</sup> Social, cultural and political processes that facilitate violence against women are rooted in a culture that holds women accountable for such behavior, and assumes they were “asking for it”. The #MeToo movement proved that such behavior occurred frequently. It is a form of abuse normalized in unjust societies and widely spread in the workplace, politics, and academia.<sup>3</sup>

The #MeToo movement gained popularity once actress Alyssa Milano made public her sexual abuse at the hands of American film producer Harvey Weinstein. In 2017, her tweet reached so large

an audience that feminist activists considered it the tipping point of the movement.<sup>4</sup> However, long before Milano's confession, African American community activist Tarana Burke was fighting for female rights through her nonprofit organization, "Just Be Inc.". Burke, a survivor herself, stands alongside Milano as the founder of the #MeToo movement.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars believe that a "privileged white woman" like Milano eclipsed Burke's work.<sup>6</sup> While Burke talked about raising awareness and support for African American survivors in disadvantaged communities, Milano represented a "white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, American woman"<sup>7</sup> with which the American public resonated more closely. Others questioned the lack of inclusivity, the American focus, and the "low-impact" of the movement.<sup>8</sup>

Despite such contested beginnings, the movement has gained recognition for creating an online space for women to share their stories, and come together against patriarchal oppression. Inspired by the #MeToo hashtag, the movement emerged in democratic and autocratic countries alike, with its promoters hoping their work would expose and condemn male predators.<sup>9</sup> The movement's popularity also underscored the inadequacy of the institutional mechanisms meant to protect women's rights, and to ensure their safety.

This paper examines how gendered norms and informal practices shaped Romanian academic institutions' responses to sexual harassment, and how digitally mediated exposure influenced these dynamics. The study of the #MeToo movement within the Romanian academia is both timely and essential in light of recent investigations conducted by Snoop, which

uncovered widespread allegations of sexual harassment by male university professors. Similar stories emerged online, with people of diverse social backgrounds rallying against sexual harassment in schools and universities all over the country. These cases have sparked a national debate about the entrenched power dynamics and institutional silence that had until then shielded university perpetrators.

Against this backdrop, examining the #MeToo movement in Romania offers a critical opportunity to investigate how local academic cultures respond (or not) to gender-based violence. This research also illustrates the structural barriers victims face when pursuing justice, and the absence of robust complaint mechanisms and support systems in higher education. By aligning the local context with global feminist discourses, this research not only contributes to the international literature on gender and feminist studies, but also shows that Romanian academia has largely resisted meaningful change, refusing to address the patriarchal hierarchies revealed by such abuse cases. This paper shows that technology – especially social media – facilitated the birth of the #MeToo in the Romanian academia, raising awareness and protecting victims by offering anonymity. The Movement also triggered massive response within Romanian society more broadly.

### Theoretical Framework

Although feminists continue to campaign for women's rights, women remain oppressed, harassed, and abused in both autocratic and democratic political systems, all of them dominated by misogynistic, male-centered cultures. Feminist

movements have registered important achievements that have helped females regain their rights and independence: for example, the recognition of violence against women as a human rights violation by the Council of Europe in the form of the Istanbul Convention (2011)<sup>10</sup>, and the support for safe abortion services to women in need in EU member states (2026)<sup>11</sup>.

The four waves of feminism triggered debates concerning the role of women not only in society, but also in fields once dominated by men.<sup>12</sup> The fight for women's suffrage marked the first wave of feminist struggles at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. A focus on equality in the workplace (laws against gender discrimination), gender roles (in private life) and reproductive rights (access to birth control and abortion) characterized the second wave, between the 1960s and the 1980s. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the third wave of feminist activism raised new demands regarding body positivity, reclaiming femininity, breaking stereotypes, and advocating the rise of the riot girl culture. The most recent wave, initiated in the 2010s, focuses on digital activism, sexual harassment, consent culture, and social justice.<sup>13</sup>

The #MeToo movement rapidly spread across the United States and within the Hollywood film industry, exposing aggressors and supporting victims. The growing number of harassment allegations and pressure from the general public generated a host of legal and institutional changes meant to prevent and punish future abuses. The #MeToo movement spread with the use of the original hashtag, revealing predators in other countries or industries. Social media users popularize these new hashtags as local forms of

rallies against sexual male abuses: #*BalanceTonPorc* (#DenounceYourPig) and #*NousToutes* (#UsAll) in France, #*QuellaVoltaQue* (#TheTimeThat) in Italy, #*NisiSama* (#YouAreNotAlone) in Serbia, #*YoTambien* (#MeToo) in Spain, #*WoYeShi* and #*RiceBunny* in China, #*WeToo* in Japan, #*YoSiTeCreo* (#IBelieveYou) in Venezuela, as well as #*AnaKaman* (#MeToo) in Palestine. These examples show that the hashtag was culturally adapted, while still promoting the same values, exposing, and condemning all forms of sexual aggression.

In democratic countries, the outcomes of these movements were usually legal reforms and institutional accountability, new public discourses as well as the creation of safer environments for women, survivors, and victims.<sup>14</sup> In some autocratic countries, the discussion about women's right to speak about male oppression generated an iron curtain through government suppression and censorship, with limited media support.<sup>15</sup>

Social media platforms played an important role in amplifying the voices of sexual violence survivors. The rapid spread of the hashtags facilitated the emergence of a global conversation by enabling individuals to share personal experiences and to break the silence surrounding sexual harassment and assault. These social media platforms also served as tools for advocating systemic change. The online spaces created by the #MeToo movement have functioned as alternative fora for justice, allowing survivors to express their experiences and to challenge prevailing rape culture narratives. These digital arenas enabled a boarder discourse on sexual violence, pushing for legal reforms and greater accountability across various sectors.

To examine critically the #MeToo movement within the Romanian academia, the article relies on the theoretical lens of feminist institutionalism.<sup>16</sup> This relatively new approach looks at the ways in which gender roles operate within institutions and how the institutions themselves construct and reproduce them. This gender power dynamic fuels and shapes our political life. Feminist institutionalism posits that institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, they constitute and perpetuate gendered hierarchies and practices.<sup>17</sup> This theory touches upon all elements involved in institution-building and has direct effect on their outcomes: policies, norms, rules, and even gender. Masculinity and femininity turn into a power relationship, where the feminine is subordinate to the masculine.<sup>18</sup>

In the early 2000s, feminist institutionalism emerged as a critical response to the limitations of both traditional new institutionalism and early feminist political theory in addressing the gender aspect of institutional structures.<sup>19</sup> While new institutionalism focused on how institutions shape behavior through norms, rules and routines, it often failed to address the gendered nature of the processes unfolding in these institutions. Therefore, feminist scholars began to question the ways in which political institutions reproduced a gendered hierarchy of power. They added new dimensions to classic understandings of power, inclusion and exclusion.<sup>20</sup> Such studies argued that men created and designed political institutions from a patriarchal perspective, excluding the positions and interests of women.<sup>21</sup> Feminist institutionalism theory succeeded in carving a place for women in these institutions. For example, after World War II, in Canada

and the United Kingdom, society at large was resistant to such initiatives, leaving women outside of power positions and marginalizing them. In contrast, in Australia, between 1975 and 1995, feminists' work successfully led to the creation of new institutions, bringing about policies that addressed welfare issues traditionally linked to women, such as childcare, budget, pensions and violence against women.<sup>22</sup>

More recently, feminist institutionalism has expanded to include analyses of resistance and agency, which acknowledge that actors inside institutions can subvert or reinterpret norms to advance feminist goals.<sup>23</sup> Today, this theory represents an important framework in gender and politics research, particularly in policy implementation and political representation. Scholars use it more often to examine how institutional design and culture create gendered outcomes and how feminist strategies of reform can change institutions and culture.

In Romania, the institutionalization of feminist thought and gender studies has faced significant challenges. Post-communist academic structures have resisted integrating feminist perspectives, often viewing them as foreign imports or ideological threats. This resistance is the result of a conservative society that sees discussions about sexual harassment and gender-based violence and abuse as taboo.<sup>24</sup> The absence of comprehensive policies and mechanisms to address sexual harassment in the academia highlights the institutional negligence of abuses. Many Romanian universities lack clear definitions of sexual harassment in their ethic codes and few provide accessible reporting procedures for victims.<sup>25</sup> This institutional deficiency not only perpetuates a culture of silence but also reflects the gendered power imbalances that

feminist institutionalism seeks to uncover and challenge.

When it comes to technological implications – especially social media platforms – feminist institutionalists argue that institutions consist of both formal rules and informal norms, practices and power dynamics that history has gendered.<sup>26</sup> In this context, technology can disrupt the status quo by giving an alternative space for feminist mobilization, testimony and resistance in order to pressure institutions into acknowledging and reforming.<sup>27</sup> Digital platforms also reshape institutional visibility and accountability. By documenting and publicly sharing their experiences, survivors and activists leverage technology to change the institutional approach. At the same time, technology can turn against survivors by exposing them to online harassment or by amplifying the voices of the digitally literate and socially privileged groups.<sup>28</sup>

Following Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, the present study analyses the informal institutional culture that shields men, especially those in power positions, the ways female students internalize or resist organizational norms, and the disconnect between official university rhetoric and lived experiences.<sup>29</sup> While feminist institutionalism focused primarily on understanding how formal and informal rules reproduce gendered hierarchies within political institutions<sup>30,31</sup>, less attention was paid to academic institutions. By examining sexual harassment cases within Romanian academia, this article extends the feminist institutionalist analysis beyond conventional political institutions, and conceptualizes universities as gendered political institutions themselves. Consequently, while feminist institutionalism has provided significant insights into the role of

critical actors and internal reforms in producing institutional change<sup>32</sup>, it is important to observe that the pressure of change can also come from outside formal institutional structures. Therefore, this article argues that digital investigative journalism and societal pressure through digital platforms can both operate as external actors, challenging institutional gendered norms and demanding change. Finally, this paper answers the research questions: what can feminist institutionalism tell us about gendered norms and informal practices in Romanian academic institutions, and how does digital exposure (through digital investigative journalism and social media) affects these dynamics?

## Methodology

This qualitative case study relies on a feminist institutionalism-driven thematic analysis, highlighting the interaction between formal institutional structures and informal organizational norms. More specifically, I analyze how gendered power relations shape Romanian academia and how actors contest them, highlighting the importance of technological tools such as social media.

This study relies on Snoop's initial investigation into Alfred Bulai's case (from July 2024), which included 18 personal statements of sexual harassment taking place within the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNS-PA) in Bucharest.<sup>33</sup> These declarations are used as primary qualitative data. Although gathered through a journalistic investigation, these statements constitute first-hand accounts from students describing their experiences within SNSPA's institutional environment. The corpus was selected because

it provided detailed, narrative descriptions of interactions, perceptions of power, and institutional responses, making it suitable for qualitative thematic analysis. My study relies on these testimonies, which form the core empirical basis for identifying recurring patterns of abuse, institutional dynamics, and accountability framing.

Snoop did not mention the timeline of their research. The initial study included victims and witnesses drawn from students who attended Bulai's courses between 1995 and 2024. The investigation resulted in a wealth of information, consisting of audio and video recordings of interviews with these students. Given the sensitivity of the topic, even if information related to the case was already made public, I abided by ethical principles of non-disclosure and respected the anonymity and vulnerability of survivors. From the information collected by Snoop, we know that Bulai displayed controlling behavior in his courses, mentorship responsibilities, and during internships, manifested through rigid and

exhausting activities, strict schedules, and other subtle forms of control.

Thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke was used to analyze these 18 statements.<sup>34</sup> My objective was to identify within these texts, systematically, recurring patterns and categories. I relied on an inductive procedure, allowing themes to emerge directly from my sampled corpus, rather than from pre-established theoretical categories. A feminist institutionalism-informed interpretive framework was applied the data only after the themes had been inductively identified, fulfilling the role of an additional analytical lens, rather than a coding template. In order to reduce the impact of any biases, I used code memos – an explanation of the meanings behind each code – during the coding process. To separate descriptive observations from evaluative judgements, I consistently referred back during the analysis stage to these memos. This approach ensured transparency and rigor in linking empirical findings to the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism.

RESEARCH STEPS	EXAMPLES
1. Familiarization with data – I carefully read the entire article and highlighted all relevant testimonies and institutional reactions;	A relevant testimony would be “he told me that I was the one who seduced him”, and a relevant institutional reaction would be “SNSPA will act in accordance with the law, without hesitation. Such things are not acceptable in an educational institution”.
2. Generating codes – I manually identified and labeled recurring ideas or experiences;	Some common experiences were that: 1) the professor had inappropriate (sexual) behavior towards his students; 2) the professor manipulated the students, sometimes relying on his charisma; or that there was 3) a general silence from the representatives of the institution. Some labels included references to control, isolation, normalized behavior, emotional pressure, institutional inaction.

Table 1: Steps and examples of analytical process

<p>3. Searching for themes – I grouped codes into broader patterns or themes that captured meaningful concepts;</p>	<p>Recurring codes were grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity and repetition across multiple independent testimonies. Only patterns that appeared consistently across different accounts were retained as candidate themes, such as charismatic authority, emotional grooming, institutional silence, and preserving gender roles in academia.</p>
<p>4. Reviewing themes – I refined the themes by checking them against the full dataset to ensure they were distinct and well-supported;</p>	<p>Themes were then reviewed for internal coherence and to ensure their distinctiveness.</p>
<p>5. Defining and naming themes – I defined each theme and gave them suitable labels.</p>	<p>Charismatic authority became charismatic authority as informal power. I defined this theme institutional status is used to justify or to mask abusive behavior; emotional grooming became emotional grooming framed as mentorship, defined as manipulation of students under the pretext of educational mentorship of personal development and so on.</p>
<p>6. Writing up – I selected powerful excerpts to support each theme and interpreted their significance through a feminist institutionalist lens.</p>	<p>The purpose of the selection of the excerpts was to provide representative examples of the theme. For example, for charismatic authority as informal power, one significant testimony was “he had a talent for connecting with students”.</p>

**Historical Context of the Case Study**

At the time when the revelations became public, Alfred Bulai was a sociology professor, a political analyst, and the Chair of the SNSPA Sociology Department. A former Vice-Dean and deputy minister, he joined the SNSPA in 2001 when he became Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Political Science.

SNSPA, established in 1991, enrolls yearly hundreds of students for Bachelor, Master or Doctoral studies. Its 2023 Charter mentions discrimination only in Chapter III, “Human and Material Resources of the University”, section 1.4 “Students”, Article 123, which outlines the principles students must abide by.<sup>35</sup> The SNSPA Code of

Ethics and Academic Conduct, amended in 2024, institutes a zero-tolerance policy towards harassment, defined as “misogyny, sexism, racism, chauvinism, xenophobia, homophobia, harassment based on religious or political beliefs”.<sup>36</sup> The Code includes a definition of sexual harassment previously criticized by experts for being too “abstract” and “vague”, failing to describe clearly such behaviors.<sup>37</sup> Any violation of these regulations would result in a hearing before SNSPA’s 11-member Ethics Committee.

Snoop is an independent investigative journalism platform, founded in 2024, exposing social injustice and institutional misconduct through articles that combine investigative journalism with academic

insight to create well-documented reports.<sup>38</sup> Two days after the Snoop investigation was made public on 30 July 2024, the SNSPA Senate suspended Bulai from all his academic and administrative positions.<sup>39</sup> The university reaffirmed its commitment to fostering a safer academic environment for all students, professors and administrative staff<sup>40</sup>, and to updating the Code of Ethics and Academic Conduct.<sup>41</sup> Public pressure pushed the SNSPA to react swiftly and decisively. After the Committee found him guilty, the President terminated Bulai's employment contract.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the judiciary acted promptly after the SNSPA investigation concluded. On 29 July 2024, prosecutors opened a criminal case against Bulai, and encouraged victims and witnesses to come forward.

### Findings

All 18 statements were considered collectively as the primary corpus of analysis. As a result of my inductive-interpretive procedure, I identified four major themes: 1) charismatic authority as informal power; 2) emotional grooming framed as mentorship; 3) institutional silence and protectionism, and 4) academic gender roles and expectations. Table 1 provides examples of the most relevant and poignant quotes that justify each theme, but does not include all relevant quotes for each theme. The third column includes the most relevant quotes and facts, in my own translation, selected from declarations that illustrate each of the four themes identified above.

The Snoop investigation exposed gendered power dynamics and institutional complicity within Romanian academia. My

own feminist institutionalist and thematic analysis of the testimonials collected by Snoop shows that informal practices converged with a misogynic institutional culture and unresponsive institutional structures to help prioritize male authority and protect perpetrators of sexual harassment.

Regarding *charismatic authority* as informal power, the data indicate that Bulai's status as a charismatic professor played an important role in facilitating harassment. His position of power enabled Bulai to manipulate students by exploiting their professional aspirations, and to misuse his authority by concealing abusive behavior under the guise of mentorship. Students perceived him as a "guru", a mentor whose influence was needed for their professional success. Because students found it difficult to challenge his authority, Bulai was able to demand virtually anything in exchange for professional guidance. These findings align with the feminist institutionalist understanding of how gendered hierarchies persist within educational institutions. His charismatic aura not only protected Bulai from investigation, but also silenced students who feared they risked their academic careers if they decided to report his misconduct.

A recurring theme in these testimonies is *emotional grooming framed as mentorship*. Bulai's behavior was framed as a form of personal growth, with some students describing how they were encouraged to trust him emotionally and to "let go of inhibitions" as a way to achieve professional success. Although most of his actions occurred off-campus, the university administration both encouraged and fully funded his internships. Students valued those internships highly, and one "was considered lucky

THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES FROM SNOOP INVESTIGATION
Charismatic authority as informal power	How institutional status is used to justify or to mask abusive behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The professor successfully gathered around him female students “willing to do favors for him. It was like a cult of Bulai.”</li> <li>• “He had a talent for connecting with students.”</li> <li>• “He was enjoyable because he had a sense of irony.”</li> </ul>
Emotional grooming framed as mentorship power	Manipulation of students under the pretext of personal development and educational mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During a one-to-one session, the professor manipulated a female student to undress completely in front of him and to let him touch her.”</li> <li>• During the internship, one female classmate had a panic attack and the professor “was very touchy with her, he rubbed her leg”.</li> <li>• Under the mask of academic feedback, the professor tried to kiss a female student in his Vice-Dean office and asked her to come to his house.</li> </ul>
Institutional silence and protectionism	Inaction or passive complicity of academic institution when faced with misconduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[All professors knew], all closed their eyes. It seemed normal.”</li> <li>• “I would have been super-embarrassed to tell anyone, precisely because they [the Faculty staff] gave me the feeling that I should keep my mouth shut.”</li> <li>• “[The Faculty staff members] cover each other and give you the feeling they are intangibles.”</li> </ul>
Academic gender roles and expectations	Norms that reinforce male dominance and marginalize women’s autonomy or credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[The professor] enjoyed playing mind games (...), it really gave the impression that you are the one who initiated (...), that he is the victim.”</li> <li>• The professor asked two female students to come to class dressed in a way that showed their femininity by saying, “[they] have grown up, matured and are now women”</li> <li>• The professor appreciated the “maternal instinct” and “the ideal body for motherhood” of a female student while commenting on her attitude and body.</li> </ul>

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Snoop’s Coverage of Alfred Bulai’s Case

if chosen to take part in it". Gendered power dynamics still play a role in Romanian academia. Female students are supposed to be obedient and to acquiesce to their male professors' expectations, behaviors, and attitudes, even when they are inappropriate. Feminist institutionalism helps explain this manipulative behavior: patriarchal structures condition women to obey male authority, with academic progress often made contingent on their ability to fulfill traditional feminine roles. Bulai's actions reflected a broader patriarchal institutional culture that frames women's roles as subordinate, pressuring them to accept the trespassing of boundaries or abuses as stepping stones in their professional careers.

*Institutional silence and protection* allowed Bulai's harassment to persist over time. The testimonies indicate that students feared addressing these issues, worried they would not be believed or that they would be blamed themselves. Even when students complained about the professor's attitude, university officials either ignored, or dismissed such allegations, demonstrating institutional complicity in sustaining a culture of silence around sexual harassment. This silence resonates with feminist institutionalism's focus on institutional inertia – the tendency of institutions to avoid addressing issues of gender inequality, especially when powerful individuals are involved. In this case, the lack of institutional action shows how gendered power relations are entrenched, with the university prioritizing its reputation rather than ensuring the safety and well-being of its students. Bulai's implicit protection demonstrates how patriarchal structures are reproduced through informal norms that ensure powerful men's immunity.

Finally, my analysis revealed that *academic gender roles and expectations* contributed to the persistence of sexual harassment in academia. The professor's discourses pressured female students not only to conform to a traditional understanding of femininity, but also to navigate complex expectations of sexuality and submission. Bulai's manipulative comments about "femininity", obedience and the role of a man in disciplining a woman ("you should be beaten") enforced conformity to patriarchal ideals, making it more difficult for women to assert their rights and to resist exploitation.

### #MeToo – Societal Reactions

Finally, I examined institutional and social reactions to these testimonies. The publication Snoop's investigation sparked institutional and public debate while also triggering an online movement. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, became spaces where survivors and their allies shared their experiences, offered support, and called for meaningful change. A Romanian #MeToo movement emerged, even though the hashtag was not widely used. The most common calls were for solidarity<sup>43</sup> and systemic change against institutional inaction and complicity.<sup>44</sup>

On 02 August 2024, volunteers from Declic – an NGO that militates for "public involvement and participation, democracy, non-violence, solidarity, social and environmental justice"<sup>45</sup> – gathered in Bucharest to support a social resistance movement against sexual harassment. Participants wore black clothes stained with white palms – representing the lack of consensual touching – having both hands held as if in cuffs, with the message "Out with the sexual predators



Image 1: Photo-manifest. Solidarity event to support victims of sexual harassment



Image 2: SNSPA students protest at the beginning of the academic year

in universities” (Image 1). This image was used to promote Declic’s petition from 28 July 2024<sup>46</sup> for introducing clear and firm rules in The Framework Code of University Ethics issued by the Government in April 2024 (Government Decision no. 305/2024).

Before this Decision, Romanian universities each had their own Code of Ethics and Academic Conduct. At present, universities must align their ethical standards with the requirements of the Framework Code, ensuring that internal regulations do not conflict with its provisions. Furthermore, the Framework Code of University Ethics sets mandatory minimal standards and takes precedence over universities’ Codes of Ethics and Academic Conduct. While university autonomy remains significant, it is conditional on adherence to the legal framework set by the Government.

Declic criticized this document, stating that “the current Framework Code of University Ethics issued by the government does not include actual regulations

against sexual harassment”, therefore allowing universities “to ignore the problem, to discourage reporting, and to allow harassers to go unpunished”. What they ask for is the Framework Code to include “a precise definition, concrete examples, clear procedures, and simple models for reporting abuse, including anonymously”.<sup>47</sup> The petition, “We want clear rules against sexual harassment in universities!” gathered over 30.000 signs in just two days.<sup>48</sup>

After Snoop made its investigation public, SNSPA students protested against abusive professors in front of their university’s main building. They called for accessible procedures to lodge and resolve complaints, as well as for authorities’ support in ensuring a safe space in universities. The messages on their banners included: “I am confident without taking my clothes off,” “Shame on perpetrators,” “No abusers in university!,” “SNSPA, remember, the abuse is your fault too!” (Image 2). This shows a community mobilization of both female

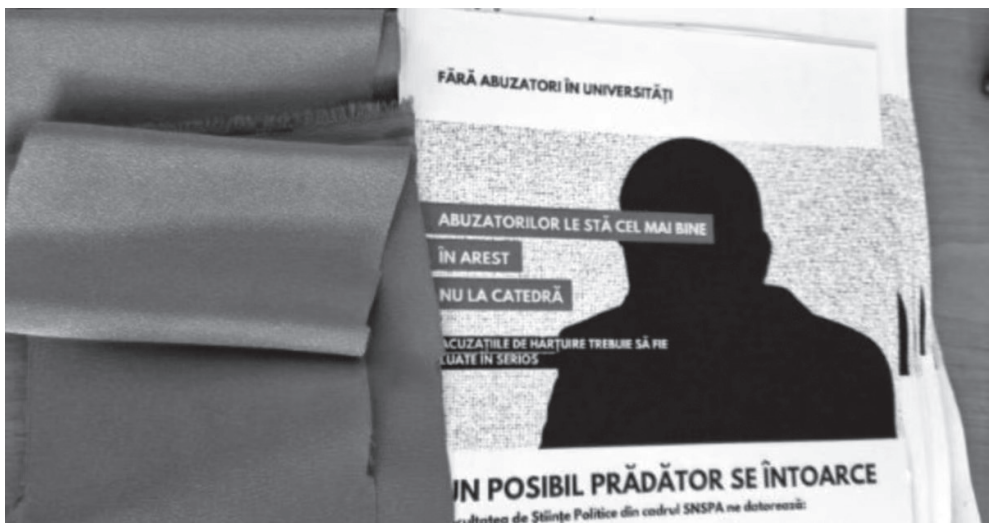


Image 3: Students protested with turquoise bands

and male students who hold the university accountable for not taking action, blame perpetrators not victims, and support their allegations.<sup>49</sup>

SNSPA students mobilized again against the Ethics Committee's decision to end the case against university professor Marius Pieleanu, another alleged perpetrator of sexual harassment, due to "lack of evidence". Disgruntled students began wearing turquoise bands and boycotting the "abuser"'s courses. This was part of a broader movement – "No Abusers in Universities" – initiated by SNSPA students after the Alfred Bulai case (Image 3). In preparation of their protest, the students distributed approximately 200 bands at the Faculty of Political Science and across other SNSPA faculties.<sup>50</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The study's findings illustrate how gendered norms and informal practices shape institutional responses to sexual harassment within Romanian academia, highlighting both patterns of institutional resistance and opportunities for change. Digitally mediated exposure, through digital investigative journalism and public response on social media platforms, emerges as an important factor influencing institutional behavior, demonstrating that external pressure can also trigger change. These insights contribute to feminist institutionalism by extending its application beyond political institutions to the academic context, and by looking at external informal actors that can challenge inherited patriarchal behaviors.

Using the case of Alfred Bulai, I argued that institutional silence and protectionism were not simply the result of lacking formal rules, but stemmed from deeply

embedded gendered power relations. Attitudes such as abuse tolerance, acceptance of gendered hierarchies, and the prioritization of institutional reputation over individual harm overrode formal commitments to ethics and equity. Even when formal structures, such as an Ethics Committees, do exist, they may be rendered ineffective by unspoken, informal rules, social pressure, or networks of protection surrounding powerful actors. The Snoop investigation not only exposed the inaction of internal accountability mechanisms, but also mobilized public pressure through digital platforms, forcing institutions to respond. Technology thus functioned both as a disruptive tool of patriarchal rule of law in academia, and as a space for the emergence of counter-institutional narratives, enabling victims and activists to contest dominant discourses and expose gendered power structures.

Ultimately, although this paper's research design has its limitations – too narrow, focusing on just one institution and one high-profile figure – feminist institutionalism offered a powerful framework for exposing these hidden gendered dynamics in Romanian academic governance. While the #MeToo movement has generated extensive academic literature globally, there are still noticeable gaps in scholarship focused on Romania and other post-communist Central and Eastern Europe countries. This paper aims to address this research gap and foster further discussion among scholars. Future research could build on this study by comparing institutional responses across different countries and different universities, or by exploring other forms of digital interventionism, further refining our understanding of how technology interacts with gendered institutional norms.

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