



Redesigning
Equality and
Scientific
Excellence
Together



UNIVERSITY OF OULU

RUHR
UNIVERSITÄT
BOCHUM

RUB

Anti-sexism and anti-racism work at HEIs. Intersectional perspectives from Northern Finland and Germany

VIKTORIA NIEBEL M.A.

Social Scientist & Local Project Manager for RESET
Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany

MERVI HEIKKINEN, DR.

Researcher in Gender Studies & University Lecturer in
University Pedagogy at the University of Oulu, Finland

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are shaped by inclusion, exclusion, politics, and societal influences, which often conflict with the meritocratic ideals of equal opportunities, particularly for marginalized groups such as individuals from low-income, migrant backgrounds, and people with disabilities. HEIs play a critical role in studying and addressing structural barriers while promoting democracy and participation.

Objective: We explore the connections between notions of anti-sexism, anti-racism and the policies governing equal participation and representation in German and Finnish HEIs.

Methodology and Data: Comparative approach focusing on national and institutional policies and their practical implementation in institutional identity building which becomes visible e.g. on institutional web-sites and intranet [1],[2].



WHEEL OF POWER*

The wheel of power visualises different dimensions of social categories and inequality. It illustrates the need to integrate the intersections in any region, including the **arctic region**, access to higher education, and acknowledgement of traditional ecological knowledge as well as the intersection between these categories further into Higher Education Research and the development of diversity, equality and inclusion measures at universities.

*Based on CCRWEB.CA and Sylvia Duckworth edited by Eveliina Ylitalo.



FINLAND



In Finland, the Act on Equality Between Women and Men (1987) and the Non-Discrimination Act (2005) were established to promote gender equality and non-discrimination in labor market and education, encompassing universities as both workplaces/educational institutions. HEIs have prioritized gender equality and diversity, with policies focussing on creating inclusive environments and advancing equal opportunities for marginalized groups within academia. Finland has a population of 5,5 milj. and 0,5 milj. of them moved from abroad. 42,3% of the Finnish population (25-64 y.) have a university degree: 41%(m) - 59%(f). 41% of people with migratory background have a tertiary degree, both men and women almost equally. 11,6% of HEI students have migratory background. Finland has 33 HEIs (13 Universities, 22 Universities of applied sciences).



RACISM

Racism is a system of social power relations that operates through discourses, structures, practices, and ideas of identity. It is transmitted through a body of knowledge implicitly and explicitly shared within society that legitimizes racism and creates racialized power hierarchies, aligned with social and cultural meaning. Racism takes multiple forms: Modern racism often justifies group differences by framing certain cultures as "superior" or "incompatible" with others [3].

Institutional racism is embedded in the everyday processes and structures of organizations through administrative measures, legal regulations, and bureaucratic norms [1].

GERMANY



In Germany, the Equal Treatment Act (AGG) was established in 2006, and aims to prevent gender- and sex-based, as well as racialized discrimination at the workplace.

Initiatives like the Excellence Initiative and gender equality programs have shaped policies to improve gender equity, though challenges remain. Germany has a population of 84,5 milj. and about 16 milj. of them moved from abroad. 32,3% of the German population (25-64 y.) have a university degree: 49,2% (m) - 50,8%(f). 39,13% of people with migratory background have a tertiary degree. 20% of HEI students have migratory background. Germany has 426 HEIs (106 Universities, 216 Universities of Applied Sciences, 52 colleges of art, 16 theological universities).



SEXISM

Sexism refers to prejudices or discrimination based on sex/gender and is entangled with daily life in academia: subtle, and difficult to identify and counteract. In some perspectives the relevance of sexism is downplayed as outdated, suggesting that any existing inequalities are either remnants of the past, or specific to other societies, often accompanied by racist or Islamophobic undertones [4]. Institutional structures, still contribute to systemic inequalities, and academia can be seen as an *inequality regime*: institutional practices and processes generate hierarchies across gender, class, and race [5]. **HEIs often fail to align their practices with the meritocratic ideals they claim to uphold [6].**

FINDINGS



Issues of anti-sexism are often subsumed under the broader terms of diversity and anti-discrimination. The challenge for diversity policy is to effectively address anti-racism and anti-sexism by explicitly naming and combating racializing and sexist discourses and structures. It is necessary to combine anti-racism and anti-sexism efforts, finding synergies among diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) policies, and as a community of practice (CoP), building an alliance of DEI specialists and feminists [1].

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ It is essential that structural causes of unequal treatment and social obstacles are addressed in DEI measures, and that institutions proactively advocate their mitigation in their institutions as well as on societal level.
- ▶ This means critically rethinking the understanding of concepts such as scientific excellence in its various dimensions, and counteracting precarious working and study conditions in academia while also focusing on the institutional and personal overcoming of exclusionary practices.
- ▶ This requires the commitment of top management, of researchers, teachers, and administrators, with particular consideration of their power, gatekeeper functions and potential as equality promoters. The institutionalization of these measures requires binding processes and responsibilities in diversity-competent personnel and organizational development [1].

RELATED LITERATURE

- [1] Niebel, Viktoria & Heikkinen, Mervi (2025): Intersectional approaches to anti-sexism and anti-racism in German universities: analysis of a case study". Zeitschrift für Diversitätsforschung und -management (accepted / in print).
- [2] Niebel, Viktoria & Heikkinen, Mervi (2024): Anti-sexism and anti-racism work at HEIs. Intersectional perspectives from Northern Finland. Arctic Congress, Session: Intersectional Gender Equality within Academia - Exploring Sustainable Futures in the Arctic. Bodø, Norway.
- [3] Hall, Stuart (2017): Race - the sliding signifier. Hall, Stuart/Mercer, Kobena (eds.): The fateful triangle: race, ethnicity, nation. Cambridge, MA/London, England: Harvard University Press, 31-79.
- [4] Ahmed, Sara (2012): On being included. Racism and diversity in institutional life. Durham: Duke University Press.
- [5] Walby, Sylvia (2020): Varieties of Gender Regimes. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 27(3), 414-431.
- [6] Bourabain, D. Everyday sexism and racism in the ivory tower: the experiences of early career researchers on the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the academic workplace. Gender Work Organ. 28, 248-267 (2021)



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Framework Program for Research and Innovation under Grant Agreement no 101006560.

