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Embracing Paradox Realities: Racially Minoritised Women and Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education

Anke Lipinsky [1], Bruna Cristina Jaquetto Pereira [2], and Vilana Pilinkaitė Sotirovič [3]

[1] Department of Data and Research on Society, GESIS–Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Germany
[2] Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain
[3] Institute of Sociology, Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, Lithuania

Correspondence: Anke Lipinsky (anke.lipinsky@gesis.org)

Abstract

Although universities often adopt diversity and inclusion policies, the everyday experience of employees indicates multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination. This article discusses how institutional norms and practices reinforce power structures and stop those experiencing intersectional discrimination from voicing their experiences of gender-based violence in higher education. We employ the frameworks of "everyday racism" and "network silence" to analyse 12 interviews with racially minoritised women who experienced gender-based violence in academia and one bystander. Our findings challenge the assumption of universities that gender-based violence and racial discrimination are marginal concerns. The interviews point to institutional factors that generate, coerce, and support silence. They reveal a paradox combination of dynamics of hypervisibility and invisibility, structural barriers, institutional practices, discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices as factors contributing to silencing, othering, and marginalisation within academia. Women from ethnic minorities and marginalised groups demonstrate both self-silencing and the deprivation of their agency and voice due to cultural normative expectations. We conclude by exploring alternatives to promote transformational change that considers intersectional and multiple forms of discrimination. We suggest what change agents in higher education institutions can do to hear unheard voices and reduce the long-standing multiple disadvantages faced by intersectionally marginalised groups.

Keywords

diversity; everyday racism; gender-based violence; higher education; intersectionality; silence; transformational change

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1. Introduction

Writing an empirical article with a focus on racially minoritised women researchers and experiences of intersectional discrimination in the context of gender-based violence in academia is a challenging endeavour. We recognise it is important to reflect on our own positionality: Vilana Pilinkaitė Sotirovič is a White feminist researcher from an East European country; Anke Lipinsky is a White mid-career researcher from a family with migration background; and Bruna Cristina Jaquetto Pereira is a Black early career scholar from the Global South. English is not our first language. Nevertheless, we are aware of the different degrees of privileges available to us, as two senior academics and one early career scholar, and respectfully approach the lived realities of our interviewees fully recognising that we can only begin to understand the stories they shared. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the interviewees who placed their trust in us and disclosed their lived everyday experiences on a difficult topic.

Modern universities are globally networked and challenge themselves through research competitions and international higher education rankings, often cultivating an image of being open to an international workforce in connection to academic excellence. In response to the diversity of staff and students, diversity management has become the new standard for establishing equality and inclusion policies in higher education and research organisations. Diversity strategies often consider the diversity of their target groups as both, a starting point and an objective, including universities' educational mission and employment practices (Ahmed & Swan, 2006). For example, the League of European Research Universities (2019) published a manifest in 2019 outlining key steps on how universities can effectively promote a comprehensive approach to implementing equality, diversity, and inclusion policies. These strategies claim to guarantee for people of all gender identities, sexualities, with or without disabilities, as well as the racially minoritised, that everyone should be able to access and participate in academia without discrimination allowing everyone to fulfil their potential, which implies that institutions are prepared to prevent and address discrimination when it takes place. Moreover, in the context of the #MeToo movement, the societal awareness of sexual harassment has changed from a far-reaching normalisation to a behaviour that is not (or no longer) acceptable in the workplace, including academic institutions and associations (Zippel, 2021). Instances of discrimination, gender-based and sexualised violence can place universities and research organisations under immense pressure. Such incidents not only pose a risk to the reputation of these institutions, but also call into question their legitimacy as societal entities (Dee et al., 2023, p. 3).

Despite growing pressure to adopt diversity policies, the assertion by universities that they provide a secure environment for creativity, research, and learning (Gray & Pin, 2017, as referenced in Colpitts, 2022, p. 153) is found to be flawed. Diversity, equality, and inclusion units often lack a voice in major decisions of higher education institutions (Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022, p. 44). Given that deep and pervasive transformational processes in higher education can be the result of deliberate top-down planning as well as emerge bottom-up from activists (Dee et al., 2023, p. 9), it is surprising that current practices in developing countermeasures tend to exclude those who experience sexist and racist forms of violence. At the same time, strong institutional resistance to diversity and gender equality initiatives—including those targeting gender-based violence—has been well documented, revealing a persistent reluctance to acknowledge and address structural inequalities (Ahmed, 2012; Verge et al., 2018). In this article, we follow the definition of gender-based violence set forth in the Istanbul Convention report, which refers to it as "any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity" (Council of Europe, 2019, p. 18).

Today, experiences of intersectional discrimination in higher education tend to be the norm rather than the exception (Bourabain, 2020; Eaton et al., 2020; Esnard, 2019; Mählck, 2016). Likewise, episodes of gender-based violence in the context of intersectional discrimination are not isolated cases. Findings of a large-scale survey on the prevalence of gender-based violence amongst staff in academia indicate higher prevalence rates of the six tested forms of gender-based violence among women (78%) and marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities or chronic illness (82%), queer people (77%), and among ethnic minorities (75%), compared to cis-gender heterosexual men (65%) without a disability and no association to a racially minoritised group (Lipinsky, 2024). Ethnic minoritised status is associated with a higher prevalence of gender-based violence overall ($e^\beta = 1.358$, $p < 0.01$) and in all forms asked about in the survey, e^β ranges from 1.263 to 2.184, with $p < 0.01$ (Humbert et al., 2022, p. 78). Every case is one case too many. Focusing on the intersection of gender and race, we examine experiences of intersectional discrimination to make hidden structures and routines in academia visible, raise awareness, and ultimately contribute to transformational change of institutions and values.

Promoted by national governments or institutions, diversity, equality, and inclusion mainstreaming sometimes reach strategies and interventions against gender-based violence (Ahmed, 2012; Huck et al., 2022). However, research on strategies to combat gender-based violence highlights significant shortcomings in effectively addressing individuals of gender-diverse, queer, and racially minoritised backgrounds. A meta-analysis of studies on sexual violence on US campuses found less than 22 percent of them addressed racism (Colpitts, 2022, p. 154). Moreover, studies find a large gap between policy and practice (byrd, 2022), showing how the implementation has yielded few of the desired results (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016), and even founding practices that conceal intersectional discrimination (Vandevelde-Rougale & Morales, 2022). The question of which role is allocated to diversity in policies addressing gender-based violence arises.

In those cases, in which multiple or intersecting discrimination is covered, it is often framed as a specific vulnerability of minoritised groups of students and staff. But the "structural and institutional dimensions of violence are rendered invisible when it is framed as a depoliticised, interpersonal issue" (Colpitts, 2022, p. 153). Regarding vulnerability as a deficient or deviant characteristic of individuals ascribed to people experiencing discrimination may lead to a counterproductive list of vulnerabilities that are set off against each other, creating a form of "oppression Olympics" (Hancock, 2007, p. 68). The challenge is not to eradicate vulnerability per se, but to transform vulnerability itself by recognising its power, meaning, and structure. Assigning vulnerability to specific groups also shifts the focus away from how institutional policies, processes, and norms support the perpetuation and normalisation of inequalities. The individualisation of risk neglects the systemic configuration of power that is central to understanding intersecting discriminations (Christoffersen, 2023; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Institutional drivers like racism, normative expectations, and stereotypes, as well as hostility against racially minoritised groups and homophobia, remain unnoticed and unaddressed. This combines with institutional power dynamics, which contributes to creating a work climate in which gender-based violence is normalised (Atkinson & Standing, 2019, as referenced in Colpitts, 2022, p. 152).

In this article, we analyse the experiences of women researchers from different racial and ethnic groups, cultures and nationalities that are marginalised in European academia and society, and which are referred to as "racially minoritised groups." Our findings show that in the context of hierarchical structures, power inequalities, and attitudes prevalent in higher education settings, the normalisation of gendered,

homophobic, and racist stereotypes and prejudices becomes an everyday practice that simultaneously supports and participates in gender-based violence. Gendered social and organisational norms interact and work as power structures in higher education. Following the concept of "transformational change in higher education as organisations" (Dee et al., 2023, pp. 8–10), we examine the needs for transformation expressed by people affected by sexist and racist discrimation. We expand on previous work on "network silence," i.e., how being silent, silencing, and not being heard reveal tacit structures, behaviours, and attitudes that support gendered hierarchies, masculine toxic norms, and prejudices by addressing forms of intersectional discrimination (Hershcovis et al., 2021; Pilinkaitė Sotirovič et al., 2024).

We employ intersectionality as an analytical tool to reveal how gender-based violence is shaped by the intersection of several systems of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). As a concept, intersectionality emphasises that different systems of discrimination—such as gender, race, class, nationality, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression—are mutually constitutive and interrelated, working together to produce injustice (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Additionally, we adopt intersectionality as a transformative framework that connects social analysis with concrete strategies for change (Hill Collins, 2019). Thus, this perspective not only informs our analysis but also shapes our recommendations for change agents within academic institutions.

We define racism as normative and social practices of domination that categorise individuals into different racial groups on the basis of perceived differences related to physical characteristics such as skin colour, hair texture, or eye shape, and cultural attributes such as origin, language, or religion. It operates by asserting the biological and cultural superiority of one group—typically identified as White—over others—Black, Asian, Muslim, among others—thereby legitimising the unequal treatment and subordinate social status of those deemed inferior. Although race is a social construct without any biological basis, it continues to profoundly shape social and societal structures by embedding associations between physical and cultural traits and assumptions about ability, morality, and behaviour (Clair & Denis, 2015; El Tayeb, 2011). In this article, we understand racial identities as socially constructed and focus on how race as a system of discrimination and privilege generates power imbalances through the continuous process of racialisation. Central to this process is Whiteness, understood as a socially constructed identity involved in normalising White experiences and which sustains racial hierarchies (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

We employ Essed's (1991) concept of "everyday racism" to bridge the structural (macro) and interpersonal (micro) dimensions in our analysis. According to Essed, as it becomes routine, racism manifests not only as open racial offenses but mainly as ambiguous meanings and practices that are regarded as mundane and trivial. To differentiate between everyday racism and other forms of racism, Essed identifies three key characteristics. Firstly, everyday racism is a process whereby socially constructed racist ideas are integrated into practices that are immediately definable and manageable. Secondly, practices with racist implications become familiar and repetitive. Thirdly, underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualised and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations (Essed, 1991, p. 51).

The framework of everyday racism provides a useful lens through which to examine intersectional discrimination as embedded in everyday interactions in institutions of higher education and research. By focusing on the dynamics of individual and institutional (structural) interactions, we gain insights into the complex ways in which sexism and racism intersect and manifest in academia. The network silence

framework is employed to analyse institutional normative expectations towards the academic staff and doctoral students that have diverse minoritised backgrounds and identify the dynamics of interactions between the institutional structures, actors, processes (macro level), and individuals (micro level) through the perspective of victim/survivor and bystander experiences.

2. Methodology

The interview material presented in this article is drawn from the EU-funded research project UniSAFE. The project investigated the prevalence, determinants, and consequences of gender-based violence in academia by collecting evidence through a large-scale web survey in 46 European higher education and research institutions. As part of the research, 54 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff and students who had experienced or witnessed gender-based violence in universities. In addition, the study identified and compared the institutional responses to gender-based violence, mapped national and institutional policies, and identified factors that facilitate or hinder adequate institutional responses. The multi-level, mixed-method research design proved an effective basis for the development of practical tools and the formulation of evidence-based policy recommendations for higher education institutions and policymakers. The qualitative interview research in this project was organised and led by one of the authors of this article. All three authors were involved in the research by conducting interviews and/or supervising data collection. The qualitative interview research was approved by the Working Group on the Compliance of Research Ethics of the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, no. SR-103, on 31 December 2021.

The interviewees were recruited via the UniSAFE project communication channels and project partner organisations' websites, social media platforms (Facebook and LinkedIn), and academic networks, in addition to an invitation link in the exit page of the UniSAFE online survey disseminated in 46 universities, and one network of international researchers. A purposive sample of 54 academic staff and students was drawn up for the study. Demographic information collected included self-reported gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, and position in the university. In total, 13 individuals out of 54 identified as racially minoritised (regarding their racial, ethnic, or national background). Data from these interviewees were subsequently extracted from the corpus and re-analysed for this article. We present the findings of an examination of the experiences of 12 women and one man, who shared their experiences about incidents of gender-based violence in academia where they were studying or working at the time of the interview.

The 13 online semi-structured interviews were conducted in English on an online platform between January and May 2022. Each interview lasted up to 60–80 minutes. Out of the 13 participants, eight were between 30 and 39 years old; two interviewees were in the 25–29 age range; two were in the 40–49 range; one was in the 50–59 range. In terms of academic status, five of the 13 interviewees were doctoral students; three respondents indicated being junior researchers when an event occurred at an early stage in their careers, and four respondents were employed on temporary contracts at the time of the interview. One interviewee was a senior researcher with a permanent employment contract. The one interviewee who identified as male offered insights from the perspective of a bystander.

The interviewees were asked to describe the institutional context of their studies, research, and work. The guiding questions focused on the respondent's perception of and reflections on any misconduct they

experienced or witnessed in the work or study environment, their communication practices with their supervisor(s), the experiences they had during reporting violence or reasons for non-reporting, and consequences for their personal and professional well-being. The questionnaire did not include direct questions pertaining to incidents of gender-based violence. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim. Data have been pseudonymised and presented as such in the article.

Because of its many advantages (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 96–97; Naeem et al., 2023), thematic analysis was chosen as the main technique for "thematising meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78) to "unravel the surface of reality" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) of intersectional discrimination. We ask, in the context of gender-based violence, when and how gender and race become relevant in higher education. The data analysis followed the established steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006): Interviews were read several times to identify the keywords the informants used. Thematic codes were then generated following established themes and patterns depicting how the intersection of interviewees' racial, ethnic, nationality, or migrant status with gender was experienced. By analysing the interview data, we aim to grasp the tacit meanings created by patterns of intersectional discrimination in the interviewees' descriptions of feelings of being excluded, feeling safe or unsafe, deprivation of space and voice, and victimised in their everyday lived experiences. Using an inductive deductive qualitative method (Creswell, 2013), we grouped the descriptive codes according to the everyday experiences of non-Whiteness, non-Western, non-privileged, being "othered," being "silenced" and analysed them within the broader context of intersectional dominance, power dynamics and gender-based violence in academia. Finally, we derive from the findings how change agents in higher education could better embrace the paradox realities and propose concrete measures.

3. Results

The results of our research can be assigned to either the interpersonal or structural level, although this is not always unambiguous, as identities and experiences, including everyday discrimination (Essed, 1991), are necessarily associated with inequality structures and systems of discrimination (Christoffersen, 2023). Experiences of intersectional violence often involve an interplay between these two levels, while the pattern of silencing and being silent is more evidently cross-cutting. Nevertheless, we have processed the results according to thematic considerations and present them in four broad thematic clusters: (a) the paradox of visibility, (b) precarity and discrimination as barriers in early careers, (c) institutional factors undermining diversity policies, and (d) attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices maintaining everyday racism.

3.1. The Paradox of Visibility in Academic Spaces

The first set of findings addresses the interpersonal level (micro) and unveils problematic cultural norms and values within higher education. These norms can be considered as signs of ongoing colonial discourses, manifesting in discriminatory practices and gender-based violence against racially minoritised women. Racially minoritised researchers are perceived and addressed as "other," "inferior," or "deviant" based on the implicit norm of Whiteness (Tate, 2014). As researchers, racially minoritised women experience doubt-raising instead of support for their career aspirations and academic abilities. Instead, gendered and racialised stereotypes take hold and lead to a hyper-sexualisation of their bodies. In addition, there is a subtle expectation of gratitude, servitude, and subservience on their part, especially if they are early career

women researchers: "Being a women, being from the [non-Western European] region, being a temporary employee—you constantly experience not exactly the same rights as the rest of the faculty" (women/ researcher at an early career stage). Tasks that come with a certain amount of prestige are not assigned to them; instead, their White colleagues and superiors expect them to take on academic care work that has little visibility and is not valued (see also Section 3.2).

Universities are generally regarded as sophisticated and post-racial even though they can be described as White and male-dominated institutions (Diallo, 2019). They are permeated by processes leading to the marginalisation of bodies racialised as non-White, including barriers in access to career opportunities, hostility, lack of progression, and overall career success (Arday, 2022; Bourabain, 2020). Within academia, these processes are often experienced by racialised women as being overly visible, while at the same time not having a voice. Hypervisibility as a Black researcher in a White university is paradoxically coupled with minimisation of merit and low visibility accorded to the academic work and achievements of racialised and racially minoritised women academics. The interviews reveal dynamics generating hypervisibility when "you are the only Asian and non-native speaker among the staff" (woman/researcher at an early career stage), or "the only one from the Global South among the other White European PhD students" (woman/PhD student) that increases the feeling "that I am not equally treated, and I do not have the same resources" (woman/researcher at an early career stage). The discomfort does not stem from being "unique" in this environment but instead from being regarded as "bodies out of place" (Tate, 2014, p. 2478). The presence of racialised and racially minoritised women in higher education challenges traditional power relations as operative structures of oppression. The contributions of racially minoritised women to research and other forms of scientific work tend not to be adequately acknowledged. One interviewee described that being an early career researcher she prepared an entire project proposal, but the supervisor "did not let me say a word in the project presentation" and "when I stayed [voiceless], I actually granted him the project" (woman/senior researcher).

Research on physical hypervisibility and concurrent professional invisibility of these women reflects upon patterns of White male organisational norms which serve to maintain the status quo of privileges (Nash & Moore, 2022). In her study on racism and sexism in Danish universities, Guschke (2023) identifies patterns of marginalisation, especially feelings of not belonging and discomfort, embodied by racially minoritised individuals, and conversely, feelings of superiority associated with White bodies. Investigating the experiences of Black women, Showunmi observed that their hypervisibility within the academy, without commensurate inclusion, reflects the practices of being "seen but not heard" (Showunmi, 2023, p. 5). Our findings corroborate the observations made by Guschke (2023) and Showunmi (2023) on how Whiteness in the academic environment is a driver of structural domination by not-hearing, devaluing, and not recognising the merits and contributions of non-White doctoral students and early career researchers.

3.2. Structural Barriers for Career Progression: Precarity, Exclusion, Discrimination

The interviewees report processes and practices in higher education (structural level) that tend to perpetuate a culture of silence and being silent in complicity regarding intersectional discrimination and gender-based violence. Universities' practices include the pattern of referring to the interpersonal level as a rule, effectively delegating general decisions to the interpersonal level. This is particularly apparent through the ways in which precarious employment and informal career support are structured. Subtle mechanisms of

career advancement and disadvantage become apparent in the allocation of underappreciated tasks. The structural conditions that only allow academic independence in the position of professorship make early career researchers even more dependent on informal forms of support based on homosocial co-optation.

Racially minoritised interviewees express concerns about the lack of recognition and feeling disadvantaged in their academic environment. The analysis suggests that having completed a doctorate, attaining an academic position, teaching courses, doing research, and publishing in high-impact journals—these academic merits were devalued by White peers, senior professors, and university leaders, who had formal power over the professional prospects of the early career researchers. Two interviewees expressed concerns about being treated fairly because of the lack of diversity at the top of the hierarchy. The authority to include or exclude early career staff, and even to impede their career progression, is vested in White senior staff. This authority may be exercised based on vague doubts about a person's commitment to an academic career (as one woman/PhD student said: "The professor constantly said that I was not working for the project, or [that] I did not make any kind of progress"), the degree obtained, and the accuracy of publications (a woman/researcher at an early career stage told us: "[The professor] accused me of plagiarising and fabricating my degree"). In this sense, both Mirza (2006) and Tate (2014) refer to constant doubt-raising surveillance practices employed by colleagues, superiors, and students, questioning whether women from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds are even fit for the job.

Since informal career support mechanisms dominate in higher education, it is particularly important for early career staff to make themselves heard and to present their work, skills, and ideas to established researchers. Failure to be recognised and listened to by seniors and professors contributes to feelings of not-belonging among doctoral students and academic staff from racially minoritised groups. Endeavours to conduct oneself in a manner that is perceived as appropriate, acceptable, or accommodating—simply "to fit in"—in the absence of an estimation of the expectations of powerholders, elucidate the effects that precarious employment and dependence on informal career support have. Controlling oral re-presentations in class ("I used to give my opinion in my courses, now I'm one of the most silent participants," said one female PhD student) and monitoring one's behaviour ("I retract myself") to escape possible public ridicule and enforced feelings of being devalued ("I think what I'm going to say might not be worth it, or it might not be well received," said a female PhD student) emerge in the data and reveal the strategic use of being silent to comply with the assumed expectations of academic supervisors.

Experiences of unequal treatment and exclusionary practices towards colleagues who do not use the dominant language as their first language at times become very subtle and nuanced but can also take a more contentious form. The feeling of non-belonging and non-recognition is reinforced by professors and team leaders by switching to the dominant language of the country (the first language of the state): "They will start speaking in [national language]. And that's a way to push you back, because then you will not be integrated into the conversation because they [leaders, supervisors, professors] don't want to talk to you" (woman/PhD student).

These practices also emerge as symbolic distancing when professors or team leaders mock the accents of non-native doctoral students or junior and sometimes senior academics. For example, a White woman director demonstrates their domination by instructing in the national language regardless of the diversity among a group of international doctoral students and researchers: "There were some meetings when the

director said: 'I'm now going to speak in [national language] and you have to learn it'" (woman/PhD student). Respondents describe similar situations in which they felt unwelcome and alienated because professors and team leaders distanced them from domestic peer group members. However, learning the national language of the country does not guarantee that a person will be accepted on an equal footing in the academic environment. For example, one interviewee observed that a name that is perceived as a "Muslim" name becomes a marker to treat a person as a migrant, non-European, and non-White—regardless of when the person migrated to the country of current residence. The interviewee shared her impression that a White migrant colleague was treated "more like a native" by colleagues than she was (woman/researcher at early career stage). The examples illustrate how the challenges associated with the perception of status and assumed otherness are mediated by the intersections of several axes of discrimination, including race and ethnicity, in addition to gender.

Domination manifests in a hidden way in everyday practices, including informal mentoring and task-assigning practices, such as providing orientation to junior researchers about the courses they need to teach to secure an academic position in the future. As indicated by the respondents, the courses and teaching responsibilities they were assigned to were regarded as "unattractive" courses that were not considered a priority for the department. They were given "leftovers," so-called "rubbish courses that nobody wanted to teach, and the workload was so heavy that there was no time left for research and other academic activities" (woman/researcher at early career stage). In academia, racially minoritised women are assigned the most challenging and undesirable tasks, while the most prestigious and decision-making positions are largely occupied by White men and, on occasion, White women. Women lecturers and doctoral students, especially the racially minoritised, are called "cleaners" (woman/researcher at early career stage) or "young secretaries" (woman/senior researcher) that "have the honour to do those things" and are expected to "honour majors" (woman/PhD student)—implying a need to defer to them. This reinforces the idea that some people are not seen as legitimate academics and that their presence on university campuses has no value in the pursuit of new knowledge. The prevailing assumption among university professors from the Global North seems that researchers from the Global South are deserving of a lower social and academic status "than they [university professors] have" (woman/PhD student). The informal mechanisms of career support in academia thus lead to social closure instead of a true opening for international researchers. As one interviewee noted:

> [She was] a part of the diversity quota that the institution tries to fulfil, saying that they are diverse and embrace identities, races, ethnicities. However, when they [university] opened new positions for PhD students almost all students are of White backgrounds. Thus, the same pattern is repeated. (women/PhD student)

Although higher education institutional policies for equality, diversity, and inclusion claim it in the public sphere, there are still no equal prospects for a scientific career for racially minoritised researchers, especially women.

3.3. Institutional Factors Undermining Diversity and Inclusion

Our findings indicate that experiences of inequality are understood and categorised differently by different positionalities. Academic institutions do not care to design equality, diversity, and inclusion policies from the

perspective of racially minoritised women as a standard practice, thus the problems affecting them remain unintelligible. In addition, minor incidents, those that are not legally actionable, are not taken seriously by the complaint services, or the services are unable to offer any remedy, even if they would like to address it. Without the necessary skills and the will of the top management to address racist, discriminatory, and exclusionary practices of silencing, universities are failing to live up to the values of diversity and inclusion that they promote in the public sphere.

The discrimination, othering, and silencing experienced by racially minoritised women make it difficult for them to create networks of support that are essential for sustaining and advancing careers and leadership (Showunmi, 2023). Some respondents (woman/researcher at early career stage; woman/researcher on temporary contract; woman/professor) illustrate that the persistence of White networks of men hampers their career prospects and increases risks for gender-based violence:

> When we as women come into academia, we don't have the network, the old-boys-network to benefit from. So, if they do something wrong to us [sexually harassing], there won't be any boomerang effect on them....[When] my young male colleagues...enter a new university, or new position, they are very much embedded in an old-boys-network. (woman/senior researcher)

These feelings of exclusion mechanisms lead racially minoritised junior women scientists to turn to more senior racially minoritised women scientists, from whom they expect informal support, a solidarity-based assessment of the professional situation, or a mentorship. This overburdens the senior scientists in purely numerical terms and makes their position appear exceptional. Regarded as role models, they lack the formal authority to represent the interests of racially minoritised women researchers as a group or to address their needs. It is the university's remit to ensure safety and address the specific situations of racially minoritised early career women scientists, particularly at the intersection of sexualised harassment and racial discrimination.

The unequal access to and outcomes of career advancement of racially minoritised women limits the bottom-up emergent transformation of higher education towards inclusion and equality. The issue lies at the apex of the institution and the prevailing values and policies are unfit to resolve it top-down. One interviewee, a researcher in a Northern European country expressed frustration that keeping quiet seems to be an acceptable way of dealing with problems in their workplace.

> [People around here] do not want to look like they are very opinionated or very negative. So, when bad things take place, people stay quiet....They want everything just quiet on the surface, regardless of what is happening underneath. (woman/researcher at early career stage)

The social norm and the resulting practice of maintaining silence potentially cause significant issues when the legal protection of employees, which is the responsibility of universities, is compromised as a result of such silence. Another example of silencing describes inaction of the leadership in the case of racist language use:

> We had [a professor using] really racist language and racist features [were included] in the individual assessment at the end of the course. We [international students] informed the [faculty dean] about it, but nothing happened. So, he [the professor] is still [teaching] there [at this university]. So yeah, I just think that they [the leadership] just don't care. (woman/PhD student)

On the one hand, the short-term sense of helplessness regarding the situation and the early career researcher's perception of the university leadership's behaviour as unjust affects the relationship between the researchers and the university as an institution. On the other hand, these experiences of violence have the potential to impact negatively on the researchers' well-being and on the pursuit of their scientific careers, respectively considerations regarding their future role in academia considering these norms and practices of network silence.

Dissatisfaction with leadership practices, including all varieties of silence, from looking the other way, rebuking that one should not raise one's voice, or refusing to provide help and support, is present in many of the interviews. One doctoral student shared her observation about women leaders adopting the behaviours of male dominance in leadership:

> We [PhD students] could notice that she [supervisor] was harsher to us women….We tried to look for help and talk with the director, who is a woman. And it didn't work. Basically, she [the director] said: 'Yes, I know that she's a very difficult person, but that's the way she works. And she brings a lot of money to the institute.' (woman/PhD student)

The absence of a commitment to acknowledging diverse realities and positioning at the highest levels of an organisation has an impact on the limited implementation of diversity, equality, and inclusion policies. This is evidenced by the findings of our interviews and also by the academic literature on the subject. However, European universities still claim to be inclusive and caring for equality and diversity. Attracting international talent is one of the goals of the European Research Area (Council of the European Union, 2021). In practice, however, this frequently remains as "window dressing" (woman/PhD student). For example, one interviewee noted that, "in Europe, there are some [policy] measures for gender inclusion, but we [non-European women students] are not going to be taken into account in those measures" (woman/PhD student). Discrimination and abuse continue by favouring the "domestic" over the international students even though they have the same degrees (women/PhD students). Interviewees expressed their concern that postdoctoral positions are usually offered to male graduates from European countries (women/PhD students) and that European women are recruited or promoted over non-European women. Gendered and racialised practices emerge and continue as a consequence of the very limited practical impact of diversity policies in higher education institutions (Bourabain, 2020). Similar observations were made by other scholars who demonstrate that universities are willing and committed to meeting equality and diversity standards, but fail when it comes to implementing them (Ahmed, 2012; Showunmi, 2023).

3.4. Attitudes, Stereotypes, and Prejudices Perpetuating Everyday Gendered Racism

Racially minoritised doctoral students and junior researchers additionally experience everyday racism in the form of being treated as less knowledgeable and less advanced compared to juniors who enjoy more privileges (woman/PhD student; similar observations were made by the other female PhD student). The findings of our research show similar trends in scholarly work where racially minoritised women in academia are often positioned as "others" and are constrained by being labelled as "intellectually inferior" or "lacking leadership ambitions" (Nash & Moore, 2022, p. 697). Such practices stabilise the racial stratification of academia and negatively impact opportunities for career progression. Interviewees noted that being a racially minoritised women researcher often means being questioned about the commitment to an academic

career. Even when benefiting from talent attraction actions of diversity, inclusion, and equality programmes, they are assumed to have priorities other than their academic careers. Showunmi and Tomlin (2022, pp. 43–46) describe the phenomenon of superficial disapproval of racism, while the systemic nature of racial discrimination is not acknowledged as "sophisticated racism." In the interviews, we find evidence of prejudice whereby racially minoritised women researchers are perceived to be primarily interested in obtaining a European passport: "They just think that I'm not serious because I'm Latina, Black, I'm looking for a European passport" (woman/PhD student; similar observations were made by the other female PhD student). Such prejudices reveal gendered and racialised expectations of the sexual behaviour of racially minoritised women and their persistent representation as hypersexual (Diallo, 2019). In such environments, students and researchers identify barriers to sharing their experiences and prefer to keep them hidden and silent.

Racially minoritised women also experience discriminatory practices regarding the curriculum, the research agenda and the adoption of marginalised epistemological perspectives. Interviewees point to informal ways of intersectional power dynamics that demonstrate the unwillingness of White European professors to engage in "welcoming diverse communities and decolonising the curriculum" (woman/PhD student), and assume the Western view of knowledge to be taken for granted: "I [the professor] will teach you [doctoral student from global South] how we in [Global North] contribute to feminist knowledge" (woman/PhD student). The same interviewee expressed:

> [My] way of doing gender, performativity of gender in the department is not welcomed….I have been isolated and the comments that I have heard, not in a direct way, but mostly in a very diplomatic way saying, 'You are not welcome, nor your approaches of gender.' (woman/PhD student)

This creates contradictory norms and practices on the part of institutions: on the one hand, women researchers from racially minoritised backgrounds are portrayed in their brochures to advertise the university's openness to staff diversity and attract new international students; on the other hand, their academic contributions are invalidated (Bourabain, 2020; Mirza, 2006; Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022).

Being a racially minoritised postgraduate student and/or researcher often involves experiencing racist prejudice fuelled in everyday interactions:

> Because I know what it can be like to be a Black woman. As a Black [person] you have to be prepared that [other people can behave badly]. So, I don't have deep conversations that I know might turn into comments that I don't want to hear. (woman/PhD student)

Other examples illustrate that the harassment experienced was based not only on gender "but because my appearance and behaviour showed that I am not a native. If I were a man, things would not have been the same" (woman/researcher at early career stage). Interviewees describe that professors keep abusing and harassing junior researchers (woman/PhD student), misusing and sexually abusing Erasmus students (woman/PhD student), allowing themselves to make comments about "hot Latin American girls" (woman/senior administration staff) and "gaze at you" (woman/PhD student). The incident of sexual harassment happened when a male supervisor "waited for the moment [to unpleasantly hug me and feel my body] and at some point, took advantage" of the doctoral international student. However, "nothing will happen [if you complain], and you just keep going" (woman/PhD student).

A more nuanced situation of harassment occurs when senior professors or supervisors behave in a patronising way (Bourabain, 2020), that marginalises while claiming to protect. One example of this was the relocation of Black women students' workspaces from the main building and into some remote rooms as a "safety" measure, at the instigation of their supervisor. The supervisor later explained that the majority of students were men and to protect the women doctoral students, their places of work were moved out of the main building. "All European doctoral students get offices in the main building, but women doctoral students, especially those from minority backgrounds, got offices in remote buildings" where they felt less safe (woman/PhD student). Bourabain (2020) argues that such gendered racism occurred through the practice of monitoring and controlling women's appearance, body, and sexual behaviour. One interviewee added in frustration:

> [Professors are] constantly checking my uterus, asking: 'Are you planning to have babies soon? Do you have a boyfriend? Are you planning to get married?' These questions are asked every six months because they will plan in advance whether to include you in [a] project. This doesn't happen with the male students. (woman/PhD student)

Our empirical findings show that those who experienced any form of gender-based violence and discrimination sought support and help. Support resources most often came from colleagues, team members, friends, or close family members. The existing support channels and units available in universities were not often used by victimised students or staff, both because of mistrust of institutions and the fear of re-victimisation. Understanding the hostile atmosphere faced by racially minoritised women in universities, we contribute to explaining how this paradox situation originates in everyday gendered racism.

4. Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

The silence around racism and sexism is part of the reality of women researchers and students with racially minoritised backgrounds. Our results indicate that on the one hand, higher education institutions need to establish tools to be able to hear the voices of the persons concerned by gender-based violence, and on the other hand they need to develop more meaningful implementation mechanisms for established diversity, equality, and inclusion—if they want to ensure effective safeguarding from intersectional, multiple discrimination and gender-based violence. Our research demonstrates how listening to academic staff from a variety of national, ethnic, and racialised backgrounds can play a fundamental role in fostering emergent transformations in higher education. However, our examination of how universities advance inclusive environments, and the limited extent to which they succeed in achieving it, show how norms and practices fail to do justice to racially minoritised women researchers. The pervasive presence of sexism and racism, which are too often silently facilitated and tacitly accepted, have a detrimental and enduring impact on the social integrity of higher education institutions. The higher education sector in Europe has been too slow to address institutional gaps and failures in this regard.

The impact of how the perceived "other" and "inferior" come to matter within and for the organisation is often overlooked. Instead of acknowledging the systemic nature of gender, racial, and intersectional violence, policies and practices tend to focus on the individual level only, which ultimately hinders the transformation of higher education institutions. Policies and practices that focus exclusively on the vulnerability of racially minoritised and marginalised individuals seem unfit to drive meaningful change in

higher education. By individualising vulnerability, policies and practices inadvertently hinder the agency of minoritised and marginalised groups within the academy. In addition, diversity, equality, and inclusion policies and practices in higher education can become smokescreens for racism (Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022, p. 46) as they often perpetuate the legacy of colonialism, including in practices that aim to address gender-based violence.

Despite the good intentions of policies aimed at fostering equality, diversity and inclusion, instances of sexism and racism continue to persist. Our analysis of the stories of the racially minoritised early career researchers suggests that the practices of silencing, appropriation of their work, and expectation of obedience and appreciation reveal how colonial legacies shape academia. The findings are consistent with research confirming that such practices reinforce the reproduction of White male power relations (Hershcovis et al., 2021) and reinforce homogeneity ensuring who maintains "control, predictability and order" (Essed, 2004, p. 120). Following Essed (2004), homogeneity embedded in Whiteness and masculinity is a key trait of modernity that guarantees the uniformity of structures and processes. Nevertheless, racially minoritised early career women, as a marginalised group, demonstrate both self-silencing and the deprivation of their agency and voice due to cultural normative expectations. It would appear that the act of voicing one's own experience as a victim of gender-based violence is not perceived as acceptable, largely due to the prevailing expectation of submissiveness of racially minoritised individuals. In our study, we find that their silence is both a strategic angle of their own actions to "fit" in the normative expectations and a result of external forces, i.e., self-silencing and being silenced, based on institutional practices. Those belonging to marginalised and racially minoritised groups are expected to conform to the dominant norms of White privileges (submissiveness). In such situations, a lot of room for power abuse emerges. The hypervisibility of difference plays a significant role in this process. Racialised minorities hardly fit into the normative expectations that have emerged from preferences for homogeneity. A wilful decision by leadership would be required to critically question these norms and mindsets, disrupt them, and transform the culture and practices in universities to the benefit of the whole academic system in the long term.

A cultural turn is needed to make all employees, students, and members of higher education institutions aware of the scope and processes pertaining to racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and their consequences. Higher educational institutions should establish platforms for discourse that enable an open discussion of, e.g., racial and intersectional discrimination and sexual harassment, which should no longer be considered taboo subjects.

The increasing precarity of academic jobs (Arday, 2022) and the dependence on informal relations to advance in the academic career are structural factors that further contribute to silence racially minoritised women. Structures of power imbalances, which privilege men and Whites, are deeply entrenched in everyday interactions and practices, and are frequently overlooked or inadequately addressed by policies and procedures. Our findings resonate with research on managerialism and organisational culture in universities which show that women in academic leadership positions remain in a minority and therefore, precarious (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Being in such a minority position makes it difficult to create change, as their minority status is constantly challenged as being different or as being seen as different within the leadership of academia. The findings reveal that universities serve to perpetuate the reproduction of White male power relations. This is facilitated through the managerial organisational culture; whereby White women leaders frequently align themselves with men, in accordance with the prevailing masculine organisational culture, to overcome their status as a minority in leadership. However, this simultaneously

serves to perpetuate White male structural dominance (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). The representation of White men in leadership positions, their privilege to maintain power, and their support of White male networks, that uphold White cultural and gendered norms, create conditions that tend to increase gender-based violence (Amstrong et al., 2018). Therefore, the representation of gender and racialised minorities in leadership roles must be increased as must the necessary skills to address the structural factors that facilitate silence around racism and sexism within higher education institutions in Europe. Participation in training programmes on intersectional discrimination and sexualised and gender-based violence should become a standard practice and access criteria for all positions in higher education that include leadership as well as supervisory and teaching roles, including project team leaders and principal investigators.

The structures of knowledge production, i.e., of performing White research (Swan, 2017), also need to be addressed. Although the UniSAFE study did not intentionally open a space for questions about racism, and therefore, must be considered a White research project, the issue of multiple and intersectional discrimination clearly emerged in the qualitative and quantitative parts of the research and subsequently in the project's recommendations to policy-makers. Intersectional perspectives on violence and discrimination should be considered in the development of, e.g., evidence-based sexual harassment policies. The collection of data pertaining to the prevalence of intersectional violence can be a valuable exercise for any university seeking to gain an understanding of the scale of the issues it is required or willing to address, and for raising awareness on the topic at the same time (Lipinsky, 2025). In order to obtain a reliable estimation of the problem at the organisational level, repeated survey data collection must be carried out.

We conclude that change agents aimed at reducing discrimination and gender-based violence in higher education institutions need to take the intersectional discrimination of minoritised groups into account, e.g., by diversifying professional skills in established contact points and complaints offices as well as at the leadership level. It would be valuable to enhance the expertise on intersectional discrimination and step up the resources of equal opportunities and gender equality officers for monitoring and evaluation in this field. Providing additional funding for advice and complaints units for the racially minoritised, who experience racialised violence would be conducive to the advancement of this field of practice in higher education. It is imperative that the deeply entrenched norms and practices in higher education are acknowledged and tackled by any measure aiming to reduce sexism and racism if transformational change is to be achieved.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

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About the Authors

Anke Lipinsky (PhD) is a senior researcher at GESIS, in Team CEWS. Her work focuses on gender inequalities in academia, including gender-based violence, policy evaluations, and research methods.

Bruna Cristina Jaquetto Pereira holds a PhD in sociology (University of Brasilia, 2019). She is a postdoctoral fellow at the Complutense University of Madrid, researching gender and race in European higher education. In 2025, she received the Emma Goldman Award from the Flax Foundation.

Vilana Pilinkaitė Sotirovič (PhD) is a research fellow at the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, Institute of Sociology, Vilnius, Lithuania. Her research focuses on the quality of gender equality policies and the prevalence and responses to gender-based violence in intimate relations and public institutions.