

Article

Under the Radar: A Survey of Students' Experiences of Discrimination in the German University Context

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Abstract: Universities are commonly imagined as “enlightened institutions” that leave no room for discrimination. While studies from other countries and some studies from German universities cast doubt on this notion, the extent and characteristics of university students’ experiences of discrimination in Germany are not yet sufficiently researched. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess university students’ experiences of discrimination in a cross-sectional online survey. A total of 890 students completed the questionnaire. Of these, 45% reported that they had witnessed discrimination in the university, while 28% reported first-hand experiences. For those who had experienced discrimination themselves, it occurred repeatedly (68%) or regularly (15.5%). The most common grounds for discrimination were sex or gender (33% of all reported grounds for discrimination), non-German origin (12.5%) and having a chronic illness (7%). University lecturers were mentioned most often (by 80% of those who reported discrimination) as the perpetrators of discrimination. Taking these findings into consideration, universities should revisit their policies and structures that protect students against discrimination and support them in the case of harassment. This could entail obligatory training for university employees but should also consider that the university’s hierarchical structure facilitates abuses of power and can therefore be considered a variable in its own right.

Keywords: university students; discrimination; racism; sexism; xenophobia



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1. Introduction

Discrimination refers to the unfair treatment of a person or persons due to their (alleged) membership of a social group [1]. This unfair treatment is thereby embedded within power differentials between social groups that exist beyond the discriminatory situation and can thus be understood as an expression of “social relations of dominance and oppression” [2]. It can take various forms, ranging from interpersonal to institutional to structural discrimination [3].

Research in the last few decades has abundantly shown that discrimination has vast individual, social, political, economic and cultural implications. Overall, societies with high prevalences of discriminatory acts, which are often built on discriminatory structures, are less healthy [2], suffer economically [4], have weaker social security and are politically more polarized [5], have more crime [6] and have a lower life expectancy [7] when compared to more egalitarian societies. On the individual level, this corresponds to worse health and a higher risk for mental illness [8], fewer opportunities for upward social mobility and economic disadvantages [9]. Accordingly, from a whole-society perspective, it is desirable to strive for the abolition of discrimination and to dismantle discriminatory structures [5].

In this context, education that sensitizes students to this topic and teaches them skills to recognize and counter discrimination has been highlighted as a priority for policy-making and the practical work of teachers and other educators [10].

At the same time, education can also be a field where discriminatory worldviews are reproduced and where discrimination is acted out, which serves to uphold social inequity [11,12]. Therefore, researching experiences of discrimination within the educational field and developing strategies to counter it are of great importance in breaking this cycle.

Against this background, this article presents the results of a study of discrimination experiences in the context of the university and elaborates on some conclusions drawn from these findings. We hereby start with a section explaining the usual status of German university students regarding legal protection from discrimination. Next, we describe the current state of the literature on this topic and highlight some research gaps, before we introduce our research questions. Then, we introduce the methods of this study, present the results and discuss them in light of the literature.

1.1. Discrimination in the Context of the University

A student's time at university is a crucial point within their life, as it builds the foundation for future career prospects and presents opportunities for upward social mobility [13]. On the other hand, it is also a vulnerable time shaped by uncertainties about the future, the transition into adulthood, financial insecurities and the necessity to take responsibility for one's own learning process [14,15].

External disturbances in this vulnerable time have the potential to disrupt students' personal development and learning trajectories [14]. Accordingly, discrimination at university has been shown to have detrimental psychological and physical effects, which can negatively impact academic performance and career development, while acts of discrimination in the course of exams (such as receiving lower grades than justified by one's performance) can also directly lead to academic failure [16–18].

Therefore, universities should actively protect their students against discrimination. However, in the particular case of Germany, the legal framework that, in general, aims to ensure protection against discrimination explicitly excludes university students: the General Act on Equal Treatment (AGG) from 2006 provides protection against "less favorable" treatment on the grounds of race or ethnic origin, gender, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual identity. This protection covers the areas of employment and professional life, as well as access to retail facilities, the housing market, banking and leisure.

However, education is not a federal matter in Germany but falls within the purview of the individual states. Therefore, the AGG—which is a federal law—does not extend into the realm of university education and thus does not protect university students from discrimination that occurs within the course of their education [19,20].

This gap in the legislation leads to unequal protection: university employees, as with all employees in Germany, enjoy protection by the AGG, but the general student body does not. This is problematic, since university employees—such as teaching or administrative staff—often hold positions of power concerning their students. They therefore have the twofold advantage of enjoying legal protection from discrimination in the course of their work, while also being placed in positions of power over those who have no protection. This serves to reinforce hierarchical power structures.

This situation is fairly unusual in the international context: in the US, university students are protected from discrimination by several federal laws [21], while, in the UK, the Equality Act 2010 protects persons in education [22]. In France, protection exists for the context of education [23], and Austria has an anti-discrimination law specifically protecting university students [24].

Against this background, it is interesting to determine the extent of discrimination within German universities and in which contexts it takes place.

1.2. State of the Literature

Looking at the discourse concerning discrimination at universities, the scientific literature but also policy-related discussions tend to focus on the situation in US American universities, while the situation in German universities is rather insufficiently researched [19,25]. Hereby, US American studies report some research on overall experiences of discrimination [26,27], but the majority of the articles focus on discrimination regarding individual protected characteristics, e.g., race [28,29] or gender and sexuality [30,31]. There is also a large number of studies on the experiences of international students [32,33], as well as research on discrimination occurring at particular faculties, such as medical schools [34,35].

Overall, these studies show that discrimination is a rather frequent phenomenon in American universities and follows similar patterns as discrimination in other fields of society.

In comparison to the US American literature, the academic literature on discrimination in German universities is rather sparse [19] and mostly focuses on the experiences of particular groups of students [25], e.g., medical students [36].

The first contributions to the topic were published in the 1990s and focused on sexualized violence at universities [37,38]. These studies found that female students experienced sexualized discrimination and other forms of sexualized violence on a regular basis and that university administrations were reluctant to take effective measures against it [20].

More recent studies confirmed these earlier results and found that female university students represent a demographic group that is frequently subjected to sexualized violence and other forms of discrimination at university [39–41]. In one representative study on the topic, more than half (54.7%) of all female students experienced sexualized discrimination at university [41].

Similarly, research conducted on the experiences of students with a migration background [42,43] and queer students [44] shows high levels of discrimination experienced by these students. Concerningly, 94% of participants in Bleicher-Rejdtitsch et al.'s sample stated that they would not know where to seek help in case of discrimination [42].

Since it is widely acknowledged that discrimination often occurs on overlapping axes [45], studies that focus on one group of students or one type of discrimination tend not to fully account for students' experiences, since they fail to take multiple pathways of discrimination into account.

To this end, studies that simultaneously focus on more than one group of students and on different types of discrimination are needed. As of now, there are a few studies with such an approach in Germany, mostly restricted to individual universities. These studies are particularly valuable, as their findings help to establish an overview of the different types of discrimination experienced at German universities. Studies of this type were conducted at the University of Bielefeld [46,47], the University of Kiel [48] and the University of Duisburg-Essen [49]. Hereby, Berghan et al. found that, at the University of Bielefeld, 51% of participants (students and staff) had experienced discrimination themselves, and 51% had witnessed discrimination at least once at the university [47].

In addition, surveys conducted across German universities also conclude that discrimination is frequent at German universities and not yet addressed adequately [25]. For instance, a survey among PhD students enrolled at the Max Planck Society reported that they frequently encountered discrimination (25% of the respondents), whereby this was more common among students of non-European citizenship (30%) compared to students with German citizenship (18%) [50]. The Nature survey among graduate students found a similar magnitude of discrimination among graduate students in Germany and a similar pattern when comparing students belonging to ethnic minorities with students not belonging to an ethnic minority (more than one third vs. 17%) [25]. Similarly, a Germany-wide survey among undergraduate and graduate students found that 26% of the participants experienced discrimination in the context of university [51].

Despite these findings, discrimination at university ranks low in discussions on education in Germany and there have been very few systematic endeavors to address this problem through policy [19,25].

One reason for this neglect can be seen in the widespread perception of universities as “enlightened organizations” [20] that are immune to the discriminatory habits and structures found in other parts of society due to the enlightened and emancipated nature of the university’s population [20,37]. Apparently, this notion is incorrect. To stimulate a debate on the topic and provide a factual basis for universities’ endeavors to move closer to the ideal of a discrimination-free space, the German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency has stressed the need for more studies targeted at the situation in universities as a means to reduce discrimination in university contexts [19].

1.3. Aims and Objectives

In light of policy-makers’ demands for more data and the state of the literature, this study seeks to narrow the gap in the literature by examining students’ experiences of discrimination within the context of one German university and by describing the contextual details of these experiences. In particular, it aims to assess in which situations discrimination happens, who discriminates and for which reasons.

2. Materials and Methods

This study used a cross-sectional survey design within the broader context of a participatory [52], explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design [53]. The survey was conducted between 18 March 2021 and 31 May 2021 using the survey software Limesurvey. The results of the subsequent qualitative research phase will be published elsewhere.

2.1. Sampling

We aimed to invite all students of one Eastern German university. Invitations were sent via the mailing lists of several university departments and student organizations, the study was advertised on the university’s online learning platform, and a number of anti-discrimination support groups shared the invitation on social media. Since we had no means to establish the success of this sampling method, we could not account for the number of students who actually received an invitation for participation and were thus unable to calculate a response proportion.

2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed collaboratively in a workshop with different stakeholders. We hereby followed established principles for participatory research [54] and included a wide range of stakeholders early on in the process. To this end, we recruited representatives from university consultation offices as well as external consultation offices specialized in anti-discrimination work, students from various backgrounds representing different minority groups and a multidisciplinary team of researchers (social anthropology, public health, medicine, educational science, psychotherapy, religious studies) for participation in a workshop. This workshop aimed to utilize these experts’ experiences to shape the questionnaire’s development [52].

Before the workshop, the first draft of the questionnaire was created by the research team using similar research as templates [47,48]. This draft was then discussed item by item during the workshop and was revised until a consensus among all participants was reached.

The final questionnaire consisted of four parts. (1) After a few icebreaker questions, participants were asked whether they belonged to a group potentially affected by discrimination and were then asked to name the group. (2) We then gathered sociodemographic information. (3) The third part asked whether they had ever witnessed or experienced discrimination in the context of university. Respondents who reported first-hand experiences of discrimination were asked for details concerning this experience and their endeavors

to seek help. (4) In the fourth part, all respondents were asked to fill in the quality of life instrument SF-12 in the format of a piggyback survey. The results of the fourth part will be published elsewhere.

To ensure a shared understanding of the term “discrimination” among the study participants, we provided respondents with a definition of discrimination at the beginning of the survey and hereby used the legal definition, which is also employed by German government authorities [19].

The final questionnaire was implemented in Limesurvey and pretested by the researchers, students from another university and counsellors working in anti-discrimination consultation offices, following Dillman’s recommendations [55].

2.3. Data Analyses

We analyzed the data using descriptive statistics. We report absolute and relative frequencies. To facilitate comparisons between subgroups, we performed stratified analyses. In line with recent guidelines, we did not employ statistical tests due to the exploratory approach used in this study [56]. Statistical analyses were performed in SAS.

For the analysis of text variables, we used *in vivo* coding based on emic categories, following the approach of thematic analysis [57]. Thus, the resulting categories reflected respondents’ self-reports and aimed to be close to the terms that the respondents used in their answers. With respect to the reported membership of certain groups, this implies that the categories expressed respondents’ identification with the respective group (e.g., “lower class”), which does not necessarily align with objective measures (e.g., income or wealth).

To ensure the high discriminatory power of the categories derived from the text variables, we constructed categories that were as specific as possible and only resorted to broader categories for characteristics that were only vaguely defined in the data. For example, we categorized descriptions referring to respondents’ body weight or body shape under the self-imposed term “fat people”, as distinct from the broader (and less well-defined) category, “people with particular physical characteristics”, with the latter category serving as a residual category.

Coding was performed by two researchers (KW and AF) in a collaborative approach; discrepancies were discussed with the larger research team until a consensus was reached. After the completion of the analysis, the categorization of the text data was discussed with the initial group of stakeholders and adapted accordingly. The derived categories were then used as nominal variables in the above-mentioned statistical analyses.

2.4. Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (Registration Number: 2020-144). Data collection was anonymous and in accordance with the respective data protection laws. Before starting the survey, respondents were informed about the aim of the study, their anonymity and the measures of data protection and gave their consent to participate by clicking the respective field.

3. Results

A total of 1671 people participated in the survey, 890 of whom completed at least the first three parts of the questionnaire and were subsequently included in this analysis.

3.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics

The study population was mostly between 20 and 30 years old, with a median age of 23 (range: 17–53 years). There were more women than men (67% vs. 31%), and most participants were of German nationality (95.7%), while about 16.2% had a migration background (defined as having their own migration experience or having at least one parent with a non-German nationality). The most common university subjects were Medicine

(17.7%) and Law (15.8%), but a wide range of other subjects was also represented in the survey. For more sociodemographic details, see Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic details of the study population.

		N = 890	
		<i>n</i>	%
Age	<20 years	88	9.9
	20–24 years	547	61.5
	25–29 years	170	19.1
	>30 years	85	9.6
Sex	Female	590	67.1
	Male	277	31.5
	Prefer not to answer	10	1.1
	Ambiguous answer	3	0.3
Nationality	German	851	95.6
	Other nationality	39	4.4
Migration background	Yes	144	16.2
	No	746	83.8
Faculty at university	Faculty of Medicine	208	23.3
	Faculty of Educational Sciences	198	22.3
	Faculty of Law, Economics and Business	165	18.5
	Faculty of Social Sciences and Historical Cultural Studies	115	12.9
	Faculty of Philology, Communication and Music Sciences	63	7.1
	Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, Geosciences and Computer Science	48	5.4
	Faculty of Biosciences	45	5.1
	Faculty of Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics	37	4.2
	Faculty of Theology	5	0.6
Others	6	0.7	
Aspired degree	State Examination	504	56.6
	Bachelor	247	27.7
	Master	89	10.0
	PhD	39	4.4
	Diplom	4	0.5
	Others	7	0.8
Semester (at university, irrespective of the subject)	1–6 semesters	412	46.3
	7–10 semesters	285	32.0
	10–15 semesters	151	17.0
	>15 semesters	42	4.7
Source of income (multiple answers possible)	Parental support	589	66.2
	Work	378	42.5
	Government stipend (BAföG)	282	31.7
	Scholarship	62	7.0
	Student loan	18	2.0
	Other	66	7.4
No sufficient financial means (independent of source of income)		163	18.3
At least one parent with university degree		536	60.2
Own underage children	No	848	95.3
	Yes	42	4.7

Table 1. Cont.

		N = 890	
		n	%
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	551	69.2
	Bisexual	99	12.4
	Homosexual	55	6.9
	Pansexual	36	4.5
	Unsure/don't know	16	2.0
	Queer	14	1.7
	Miscellaneous	13	1.6
	Asexual	10	1.3
	Demisexual	2	0.3
Gender	Female	514	63.1
	Male	242	29.7
	Non-binary	31	3.8
	Queer	13	1.6
	Ambiguous answer	7	0.9
	Non-binary trans	5	0.6
	Transmale	2	0.3
Disability	No	848	95.3
	Yes	42	4.7
Chronic illness	No	700	78.6
	Yes	190	21.4
Religious affiliation Of those:	No	565	63.5
	Yes	325	36.5
	Protestant	135	43.4
	Catholic	47	15.1
	Other or unspecified Christian denomination	89	28.6
	Muslim	19	6.1
	Orthodox Christian	6	1.9
	Hindu	3	1.0
	Jewish	3	1.0
	Buddhist	2	0.6
	Wicca	2	0.6
Others	5	0.6	

3.2. Belonging to a Potentially Discriminated Group

Of the 890 participants, 376 (42%) answered that they belonged to a group potentially affected by discrimination. When asked which group or groups they identified with (or were identified with by others), the most common answer was “women” ($n = 203$, 32% of all answers), followed by “queer people” ($n = 92$, 15%) and “migrants” ($n = 52$, 8%). More details are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Potentially discriminated groups represented in the survey *.

	<i>n</i>	%
Women	203	32.37
Queer people	92	14.67
Migrants	52	8.29
People of color and other racialized groups	39	6.22
Lower class	29	4.63
People with chronic illnesses	24	3.83
People with disabilities	21	3.35
Religious minorities	17	2.71
Mothers	16	2.55
People from certain regions or federal states within Germany	12	1.91
Transgender individuals	12	1.91
Men	11	1.75
Students of certain subjects	9	1.44
Gender (unspecified)	7	1.12
Age	6	0.96
Fat people	5	0.8
Jews	3	0.48
Students with child/children	1	0.16
Miscellaneous	68	10.85

* This includes both self-identified characteristics and group memberships ascribed by others. Reported group membership can be read as, e.g., “People often treat me as somebody belonging to the lower class”. For the category descriptions, we were guided by the terms used by the respondents.

3.3. Experiences with Discrimination

In the study’s sample, discrimination within the university context was a rather frequent occurrence: 45% of all respondents ($n = 406$) reported to have witnessed other students becoming victim to discrimination in the university context, 28% ($n = 253$) reported their own experiences with discrimination in the university context and 49.8% ($n = 443$) reported either or both. Of those who experienced discrimination first-hand, 68% reported that it happened “repeatedly” ($n = 172$) or “regularly” (15.5%, $n = 39$).

The reports of experienced discrimination differed between the faculties. Respondents studying at the Faculty of Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics (16%) and the Faculty of Law, Economics and Business (18%) reported the lowest frequencies of discrimination experienced. These frequencies were compared to 33% at the Faculty of Philology, Communication and Music Sciences, 34% at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Historical Cultural Studies and 35% at the Faculty of Medicine. The Faculty of Biosciences, the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, Geosciences and Computer Science and the Faculty of Educational Sciences were between these, with reported frequencies of 24%, 25% and 29%, respectively.

To adjust for the differing compositions of the student body in the various faculties, we additionally calculated the prevalence of discrimination experiences among those students who reported belonging to a potentially discriminated group. Hereby, we found the highest value for the Faculty of Medicine (59% of those students who reported belonging to a potentially discriminated group experienced discrimination at university), followed by the Faculty of Educational Sciences and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Historical Cultural Studies (57% and 50%, respectively). Again, the lowest frequency of discrimination was reported by respondents studying at the Faculty of Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics (38.5%). More details are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Experiences of discrimination across the faculties.

Faculty	Total Number of Respondents from Each Faculty	Proportion of Respondents Reporting the Experience of Discrimination %	Proportion of Respondents Reporting Membership of a Potentially Discriminated Group %	Proportion of Respondents Reporting the Experience of Discrimination at University among Those Reporting Membership of a Potentially Discriminated Group %
Faculty of Medicine	208	35.58	43.27	58.9
Faculty of Educational Sciences	198	29.29	41.41	57.3
Faculty of Social Sciences and Historical Cultural Studies	115	33.91	52.17	50.0
Faculty of Biosciences	45	24.44	26.67	50.0
Faculty of Law, Economics and Business	165	18.18	32.12	49.1
Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, Geosciences and Computer Science	48	25.00	41.67	45.0
Faculty of Philology, Communication and Music Sciences	63	33.33	66.67	40.5
Faculty of Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics	37	16.22	35.14	38.5

When asked for more details concerning the experienced discrimination, university lecturers were mentioned most often as the perpetrators of the discrimination. They were named by 202 individuals, which amounted to 80% of all respondents who reported discrimination. Furthermore, the respondents named other students ($n = 129$, 51%), the university's rules ($n = 63$, 25%) and administrative staff ($n = 36$, 14%) as sources of discrimination.

Regarding the context of the discrimination, 83% ($n = 209$) mentioned seminars and lectures, followed by exams ($n = 102$, 40%) and encounters with university administration ($n = 43$, 17%). Voluntary or informal circumstances such as the university's sports grounds and cafeteria, the library and the university's social media were mentioned substantially less often ($n = 20$, 8%; $n = 25$, 10%; and $n = 14$, 5.5%, respectively).

The reported discrimination took a wide range of different forms, from being ridiculed to physical violence. In total, 170 students (67% of those who experienced discrimination) reported that they were humiliated and ridiculed, 104 (41%) reported being excluded by not being considered (e.g., the use of excluding language) and 103 (41%) reported their performance being disparaged due to discrimination. Compared to these, openly aggressive and bodily forms of discrimination were less prevalent: 43 (17%) respondents reported verbal insults, 32 (13%) sexual harassment, 13 (5%) the threat of bodily harm and 8 (3%) physical violence.

When asked for the grounds for the discrimination, 122 respondents named sex or gender (33% of all reported grounds for discrimination), followed by (perceived) non-German origin ($n = 47$, 12.5%) and having a chronic illness ($n = 26$, 7%). More details on the above-mentioned variables can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Experiences of discrimination.

		<i>n</i>	%
	Knowledge of other students being discriminated	406	45.6
	Experienced discrimination themselves	253	28.4
Discrimination perpetrated by *	Lecturers	202	79.8
	Other students	129	51
	University regulations	63	24.9
	Administrative staff	44	17.4
	Other university staff (e.g., cafeteria employees or janitors)	36	14.2
	External lecturers	25	9.9
	Access to university facilities (e.g., lack of barrier-free access)	25	9.9
	Physical environment	22	8.7
	University's counselling services	15	5.9
Context of discrimination *	Seminars or lectures	209	82.6
	Exams	102	40.3
	University administration	43	17
	Library	25	9.9
	University sport or catering facilities	20	7.9
	Social media pertaining to the university	14	5.5
	University childcare	9	3.6
	Student accommodation	7	2.8
Forms of discrimination *	Being humiliated and ridiculed	170	67.2
	Being excluded by not being considered	104	41.1
	Disparagement of performance	103	40.7
	Unjustified/unfair marks	93	36.8
	Discriminatory teaching materials	77	30.4
	Microaggressions	65	25.7
	Being denied access to information	64	25.3
	Bullying	53	21
	Insults, slurs	43	17
	Being denied access to services	36	14.2
	Being denied academic adjustments for disability/chronic illness	36	14.2
	Non-consideration of needs/requirements	33	13
	Sexual harassment	32	12.7
	Threats	13	5.1
Physical violence	8	3.2	
	Stalking	4	1.6
Frequency of discrimination *	Often	172	68.3
	Regularly	39	15.5
	Once	27	10.7
	Other	14	5.6
Grounds for discrimination **	Sex, gender or gender expression	122	32.9
	(Alleged/perceived) non-German origin	47	12.7
	Chronic illness	26	7
	Socioeconomic class	15	4
	Sexual orientation	15	4
	Family situation	13	3.5
	Disability	12	3.2
	Political orientation	11	2.7
	Religion	10	2.7
	Age	9	2.4
	Subject	9	2.4
	Being transgender	8	2.2

* Percentage referring to those students who reported the experience of discrimination. ** Percentage referring to the total number of grounds for discrimination.

3.4. Experiences with Support Services

Among all respondents, the support structures that could be contacted in case of discrimination were well known. All respondents knew at least one of the six contact points named within the survey. Among these, the student union was best known (by 838 students, 94%), followed by the gender equality officer ($n = 604$, 67.9%), psychosocial counseling within the student services ($n = 468$, 52.6%), the inclusivity officer ($n = 235$, 26.4%), the university service for the prevention of discrimination ($n = 172$, 19.3%) and the commissioner for foreign students ($n = 124$, 13.9%).

Despite the high awareness of these contact points, of the 253 respondents who experienced discrimination in the university context, only 54 (21.3%) reported seeking any sort of assistance. Among those who sought assistance, the majority consulted friends and family ($n = 42$, 77.8%), followed by the university's counselling services ($n = 26$, 48.2%) and non-university counselling ($n = 16$, 29.6%). The police were involved in one case.

When asked if they received the necessary help from the contacted services, 42% ($n = 22$) stated that they received the support that they needed, while 26.9% ($n = 14$) were not sure and 19% ($n = 10$) felt that they did not receive it.

3.5. Intersections of Discrimination

Belonging to potentially discriminated groups was not equally distributed in our sample but was clustered among some people. While the majority of the respondents (60%, $n = 534$) stated that they did not belong to a potentially discriminated group, 22% ($n = 199$) indicated belonging to one group, 12% ($n = 107$) to two groups and 4.5% ($n = 40$) described themselves as belonging to three groups. Moreover, 1.1% ($n = 10$) reported belonging to four or more groups, with the maximum number of groups being seven. The most often reported intersecting characteristics were stated as the following: queer women ($n = 18$, 2%), female migrants ($n = 13$, 1.5%), women with origins in certain geographic regions in Germany, women of color and women with chronic illnesses (each $n = 6$, 0.7%).

Hereby, the frequency of discrimination experiences seemed to correlate with the number of intersecting axes of disadvantage: while 13% ($n = 70$) of those respondents who belonged to no potentially discriminated group reported an experience of discrimination in the university context, for respondents belonging to potentially discriminated groups, this rose to 45% ($n = 90$) for one group, 55% ($n = 59$) for two groups, 65% ($n = 26$) for three groups and 80% ($N = 8$) for four or more groups.

4. Discussion

4.1. Prevalence of Discrimination

Overall, this study found high levels of observed and experienced discrimination among this sample of university students. This is congruent with the few extant studies from other German universities. At the University of Bielefeld, around 50% of respondents reported having either experienced or witnessed discrimination [47], which is very similar to the prevalence of 49.8% found in our sample. Similarly, in a study at another German university, 19% of all female students reported the experience of sexual harassment [40]. This compares to 31% of all women in our sample that reported the experience of discrimination, but this also included other forms of discrimination (beyond sexual harassment).

In an international comparison, these figures are relatively high. In a nationwide survey of 69,722 US undergraduate students, 5–15% reported having experienced discrimination [29].

4.2. Discrimination in Different Academic Fields

In our sample, students of medicine reported the highest prevalence of discrimination at 35%. A comparison between different academic subjects at different universities poses a problem, as the studies in Bielefeld, Kiel and Duisburg-Essen did not stratify the discrimination experiences by the area of study.

There is, however, evidence that medical students may be particularly strongly subjected to discrimination within the course of their studies: a survey conducted among medical students at Hannover Medical School on equal opportunities and sexual discrimination found that 29.2% of students had experienced at least one form of sexual harassment, whereas 53.9% had witnessed at least one form of sexual harassment [36]. A similar study at the University of Münster found that 58.9% of medical students had been exposed to sexual harassment within the context of their studies [58].

Research from the international context supports these findings, with gender-based discrimination and racism being the most prevalent grounds for discrimination within the context of medical education [34,35,59,60].

4.3. Discrimination Characteristics

The most frequently reported characteristic in our sample was gender-based discrimination at 32.9%, followed by actual or perceived non-German origin at 12.7%, chronic illness at 7% and socioeconomic class and sexual orientation at 4% each. In Bielefeld and Kiel, gender was also ranked first, whereas, in Duisburg-Essen, it was ranked second after “national background”. In Kiel, socioeconomic background was ranked second, and, in Bielefeld, which included both staff and students, it was the status group within the university, followed by age [46,48,49]. Considering this, gender-based discrimination and perceived non-German origin appear to be among the most prevalent grounds for discrimination at German universities. This is in line with the international literature that reports considerable levels of discrimination against these characteristics in the US [26,27,61] as well as in the UK [62,63].

4.4. Perpetrators and Context of Discrimination

Among the forms of discrimination reported in the study, interpersonal discrimination dominated by far: 80% of respondents who had experienced discrimination indicated university lecturers as the perpetrators, followed by other students. When considering all human actors named as the perpetrators of discrimination (rather than regulations, the physical environment or access), individuals employed by the university constituted 71% of the perpetrators of discrimination. As the contexts of discrimination most frequently described were seminars and lectures, exams and interactions with university administration, it becomes evident that a considerable amount of discrimination occurs within official or mandatory university settings, which would be difficult or impossible for students to avoid. Most of the named contexts were also group settings, which may explain the high number of reported cases of witnessed discrimination. The studies from Bielefeld and Kiel [47,48] and reports in the media [64–66] illustrate that these findings are not particular to our university, but that university lectures are a common venue for discriminatory discourses and practices. Findings from the US paint a similar picture, where between 30% and 40% of female undergraduate students report having experienced sexual harassment by a professor [67,68], compared to 28% of male undergraduate students describing this experience [67].

4.5. Help and Advice

Despite the relatively high awareness of the available support structures, nearly 80% of the students experiencing discrimination sought no professional support at all, and many of those who did so did not feel that they received the support that they needed. This aligns with other German studies, where students also reported friends and family as the main points of contact in the aftermath of discrimination experiences [47,48] and expressed reservations about their universities’ support structures because they lacked the legal and psychological competences to support students and were lacking the support of the university’s leadership to effectively take steps against the perpetrators [20].

In addition, it is possible that some students actively avoided the official services, as the university anti-discrimination services were themselves named as perpetrators of

discrimination (accounting for nearly 6% of all perpetrators). While we do not suggest that this is a typical experience, this finding may illustrate students' fears of retaliation when reporting discrimination and explain their reluctance to seek help through official channels.

There may also be a perception that, as employees of the university, members of the anti-discrimination service might side with the perpetrators, who—according to our findings—most often are also employed by the university. This issue of encountering closed ranks when trying to report discrimination via the official channels has been termed the “wall of silence”. It has been described in the context of discriminatory behavior perpetrated by police agents, as well as in other settings [69,70].

4.6. Limitations of the Study

As our university did not grant us access to the official mailing list to invite all students, we had no means to ensure that all students received an invitation to participate. It is therefore likely that certain groups of students and certain university faculties were over- or underrepresented, which may have skewed some of the findings.

In line with this, it is likely that students who had a particular interest in the subject matter were overrepresented in the survey. As a result, our findings do not allow conclusions about the overall prevalence of discrimination, and the prevalence of discrimination experiences in the sample might overestimate the discrimination experiences of the overall student population. Taking these considerations into account, we decided against reporting confidence intervals, which otherwise might encourage the drawing of generalizing conclusions from our data.

Still, considering that the absolute numbers of students experiencing or witnessing discrimination were high, our study nevertheless signals an urgent need for action to protect students from discrimination and ensure that the university and its employees and structures do not act as perpetrators of discrimination.

We also had no means to verify the accounts of discrimination. While example definitions of discrimination were provided within the survey, it is possible that the respondents completed the survey referring to incidents that would not usually be considered discrimination by others. In this context, different sensitivities and thresholds regarding what is considered discriminatory behavior might partially explain the differences between faculties: the lower prevalence of reported discrimination could reflect less discrimination but could, at the same time, also be the result of lower sensitivity to discrimination. In addition, the discrimination-related differences between the faculties could also have been influenced by the sociodemographic differences between them, rendering some faculties more prone to discrimination than others.

5. Conclusions

Our findings suggest a four-pronged approach to tackling discrimination at German universities: the first and most immediate priority must be to better protect students from discrimination in the first place, while also providing improved support for those who have experienced discrimination. To achieve this goal, universities should implement the guideline developed by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency specifically for this purpose [19] and consult other countries' experiences in reducing discrimination in universities [71,72]. Among other aspects, the guideline calls for the establishment of independent and adequately staffed complaint offices and—separate—anti-discrimination counselling. In addition, it demands focused information campaigns to raise awareness of the topic of discrimination both among university staff and students. Moreover, universities should regularly and systematically assess the risk of discrimination within the context of their administrative procedures. To this end, the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency has developed checklists that can be used free of charge [19].

Secondly, university staff at all levels need to develop a greater awareness of what constitutes discrimination and how to avoid it. Over the last few decades, a multitude of training programs have been developed that address sexual harassment or racism and

aim to foster diversity-related competences [73]. To be effective, such training needs to be integrated into overarching organizational policies [74,75] and should also convey mechanisms to recognize and address discrimination perpetrated by colleagues, in order to break the wall of silence that frequently surrounds misconduct in institutional settings.

Still, it has been pointed out in the literature that anti-discrimination training will not provide a singular solution to eradicate discrimination once every individual is trained [73,76,77]. In addition to training individuals, other strategies need to be employed that acknowledge the structural forces that facilitate discriminatory habits.

The literature of the last few decades has convincingly shown that—with regard to discrimination—universities are not “enlightened institutions” but suffer from similar discriminatory practices to other institutions. In addition, feminist scholarship has highlighted that universities are particularly hierarchical institutions where those who are lower in the hierarchy depend on their superiors’ personal goodwill [20,37], which is known to facilitate abuses of power.

Therefore, in addition to interventions aimed at changing individuals’ attitudes and behaviors, universities should consider addressing the outdated hierarchical structures that still characterize many areas of academic life in Germany [78,79].

Lastly, the anti-discrimination legislation in Germany is currently not effective in protecting students from discrimination. The different legal sources governing this issue may be difficult to comprehend for students experiencing discrimination, resulting in confusion and uncertainty at a time when help is most needed. As the AGG cannot be extended to cover the university context, it is imperative that more federal states provide clear and concise anti-discrimination legislation for universities and schools.

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