

# Dealing with Sexual Discrimination and Violence in German Universities: An Inventory<sup>1</sup>

*Lidiar con la discriminación y la violencia sexuales en universidades alemanas: un inventario*

*O tratamento da discriminação e a violência sexuais nas universidades alemãs: Um inventário*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a translated version of the German article “Der universitäre Umgang mit sexualisierter Diskriminierung und Gewalt. Eine Bestandsaufnahme” by Schüz, Pantelmann, Wälty, and Lawrenz (2021), <https://doi.org/10.17169/ogj.2021.120>. The German original has been slightly adapted for an international readership.

**Abstract:** Sexual discrimination and violence can be found in all areas of society, and universities are not the exception. Often regarded as safe institutional spaces, universities are far from rid of these problems. This article shows how sexual violence has long been tabooed and normalized in the German university context, and how this is reflected in the ambivalent approach German universities have adopted on this issue. Based on an evaluation of the way universities address the problem on their websites, as well as on telephone interviews with university internal experts, we show and discuss the way these institutions handle the problem and their legal anchoring. The results help to identify relevant actors and practices, providing a starting point for the development of strategies for action so as to better address and combat sexual violence in universities.

*Keywords:* Gender relations; Gender equality policy; Institutionalization; Sexual discrimination; Sexual violence; University

**Resumen:** La discriminación y la violencia sexuales pueden encontrarse en todas las áreas de la sociedad, y las universidades no son la excepción. A menudo consideradas como espacios institucionales seguros, las universidades están lejos de haberse librado de estos problemas. Este artículo muestra la forma en que la violencia sexual desde hace mucho se ha vuelto tabú y se ha normalizado en el contexto universitario alemán, y la forma en que esto se refleja en el enfoque ambivalente que las universidades alemanas han mantenido sobre este problema. Con base en una evaluación de las formas en que las universidades encaran el problema en sus sitios web, así como en entrevistas telefónicas con expertas internas de las universidades, mostramos y discutimos la manera en que estas instituciones manejan el problema y su anclaje legal. Los resultados ayudan a identificar actores y prácticas relevantes, y aportan un punto de partida para el desarrollo de estrategias de acción a fin de mejorar el enfoque y el combate de la violencia sexual en las universidades.

*Palabras clave:* Relaciones de género; Política de igualdad de género; Institucionalización; Discriminación sexual; Universidad

**Resumo:** A discriminação e a violência sexual afetam todas as áreas da sociedade, incluídas as universidades —muitas vezes vistas como espaços institucionais seguros. Este artigo mostra a ambivalência do tratamento da violência sexual nas universidades alemãs, questão tabu e normalizada há muito no contexto universitário do país. A partir de uma avaliação da informação apresentada sobre o problema nos sites dessas universidades, e de entrevistas por telefone com especialistas internos, mostramos e examinamos as ações institucionais e sua ancoragem legal. Os resultados permitem identificar atores e práticas relevantes e fornecem pautas para desenvolver estratégias de ação no combate à violência sexual nas universidades.

*Palavras-chave:* Relações de gênero; Política de igualdade de gênero; Institucionalização; Discriminação sexual; Universidade

## Introduction

Particularly affecting women and LGBTIQ\* persons, sexual discrimination and violence are omnipresent and can be found in all areas and strata of society.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, this has been brought to public attention by social movements gathered under hashtags such as #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos.

The problematization of sexual violence in Women's and Gender Studies is not new (cf. Hagemann-White, 1992, p. 26), and it has been one of the central concerns of feminist movements and research for a long time. In Germany, the notion of sexualized (instead of sexual) harassment and violence is increasingly gaining ground, especially in scientific discussion. It refers to the use of sexuality as a means to exercise power.<sup>3</sup> 'Sexual-discrimination-and-violence' denotes the multiple dimensions and forms of sexual harassment and assault, and its various manifestations and levels of impact are thought of as a continuum (Kelly, 1996; MacKinnon, 1979). This allows to establish a conceptual link between those assaultive behaviors that rarely attract attention in everyday life and the less common, more serious incidents of gender-based violence. The former, in their normalization, provide the scaffolding for the latter. Thus, at one end of the spectrum, crimes like rape or femicide cannot be addressed without problematizing the everyday manifestations of sexism and gender-specific discriminations at the other end.

One of the spaces where sexual harassment, discrimination and violence are least suspected is the university. As sites of science and reflection, universities are largely imagined (cf. Castoriadis, 2009) —as much by members as by outsiders— as immune to discrimination, and thus as *enlightened organizations*.<sup>4</sup> However, as places of study and work, universities are characterized

<sup>2</sup> 'Sexual-discrimination-and-violence' is a compound term commonly used in German higher education circles to refer to sexual assault. Our definition is based on that by the Federal Conference of University Representatives on Women's and Gender Equality: "Sexual discrimination and violence are practiced in many ways, be it verbally, non-verbally or through physical attack. All behaviors and actions that are insulting, humiliating, not desired and experienced as devaluing and degrading by those affected, are considered sexual-discrimination-and-violence" (AGG §3, Abs.4). Sexual-discrimination-and-violence has nothing to do with sexuality, but rather with power: "The pleasure gain lies in the exercise of power over subordinates and in the humiliation of the victim." (<<https://bukof.de/online-handreichung-sdg/#1492508190062-38ff2c70-ee02>, 16.07.2020>) (translation by the authors).

<sup>3</sup> Since the term 'sexualized violence' is not commonly used in English, we shall stick to that of 'sexual violence', but our emphasis is on the power aspect rather than on sexual or erotic desire.

<sup>4</sup> The hypothesis that the university is regarded as an *enlightened organization* or as a place "of enlightened, emancipated togetherness" (Bußmann and Lange, 1996b, p. 10) has been discussed

by having gendered power structures that produce personal relations of dependency. The first large-scale study on the topic has shown that sexual discrimination and violence do exist in German universities and have far-reaching consequences for those affected (Feltes, List, Schneider, & Höfker, 2012). The German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (*Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes*) describes sexual boundary violations as a “‘frighteningly normal’ experience in German universities”, especially for women and LGBTIQ\* persons, “but also for men to whom ‘unmanliness’ or homosexuality are ascribed” (Kocher & Porsche, 2015, p. 53).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, an ambivalence in dealing with the issue in the university context is apparent: while German universities are portrayed as places of supposed equality in their external presentation, various studies have shown a connection between university structures and the prevalence of sexual harassment, discrimination and violence.

It is in this field of tension that we situate universities’ handling of the problem. In order to understand how sexual discrimination and violence can be addressed and tackled in the university context, and to develop perspectives for strategies of action, we will first make an inventory of the academic work on sexual violence in German universities and, in a second step, on the basis of their websites and interviews with internal experts, we will examine the institutional anchoring of the university’s handling of the issue.

The consideration of institutional anchoring makes sense for several reasons. So far, there is little information and data on sexual discrimination and violence in German universities. Our inventory provides a basic overview of the research to date and of how the topic is handled within the university institutional structure, who the relevant actors are, and how the issue is discursively negotiated. By addressing the institutional functioning, we point to the specific power relations at work in the university organization that are particularly relevant in the context of sexual discrimination and violence. This creates a basis for further research on the specific institutional and organizational conditions in which sexual violence occurs in universities.

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internationally as part of the research on the structural causality of sexual violence in higher education (cf. Anitha and Lewis, 2018; Haß and Müller-Schöll, 2009; Lozano Hernández and Bautista Moreno, 2015; Mingo and Moreno, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> All citations from the German research literature used in this article have been translated into English by the authors.

## Research on Sexual Discrimination and Violence in the German Higher-Education Context

The scientific examination of sexual violence in universities began in the field of women's political activities, often within women's and equal-opportunity offices. In the 1990s, the first empirical (though not representative) studies were conducted at German universities. Examples include a questionnaire survey at Freie Universität Berlin (Färber, 1992), a survey and interview-based study at an anonymous university of applied sciences (Holzbecher, 1996), investigations at the University of Mainz (Löhr, 1994) and the University of Applied Sciences of Northeast Lower Saxony (Kaffsack, 1993), and later a survey at the University of Applied Sciences in Cologne (Felten-Biermann, 2005). These studies showed, for the first time with empirical data, that a considerable number of students and university employees reported experiences of sexual discrimination and violence in German universities.

The first study on the role of women's and gender-equality officers and on how sexual violence is dealt with within universities was conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia in 1999 (Geisweid, Sommerfeld, Tillmann, & Wedel, 1999). The officers interviewed confirmed the existence of a wide variety of forms of sexual discrimination and violence in universities. They declared that the reported cases were only the "tip of the iceberg" (Geisweid, Sommerfeld, Tillmann, & Wedel, 1999, p. 51). However, as one study has noted, women's and gender-equality officers often lack "not only legal and psychological competence, but also solidarity and support from university administrations and the university public" (Bußmann & Lange, 1996b, p. 9).

Since the early days of political mobilization around women's rights within universities, a number of academic works have linked sexual discrimination and violence in universities to their historical and structural constitution (Brunner, 1991; Bußmann & Lange, 1996a; Komitee Feministische Soziologie, 1996; Schultz, 1985). Some of these works refer to the very salient hierarchies and academic dependencies that facilitate sexual violence and prevent open debate on the issue (Bußmann & Lange, 1996b, p. 11; Holzbecher, 2005, pp. 59-61). Similarly, attention is often drawn to the gendered history and organizational form of the university and the establishment of an androcentric norm in higher education (Bußmann & Lange, 1996b, p. 11; Holzbecher, 2005, pp. 59-60; Kaffsack, 1993, pp. 17-28). Monika Holzbecher identified several of the typical defensive forms adopted by universities when dealing with this "uncomfortable topic". She lists, for example, the individualization and

trivialization of assaults, the delegation of responsibility to those affected, and the denial of university power structures (Holzbecher, 2005, pp. 62-64). Reflected in relations of dependency, power structures are key to the occurrence of sexual assaults. In the higher-education context as well as in other areas of society, such as the cultural and media industries, power structures create a climate in which sexual discrimination and violence are normalized and, in most cases, their denunciation has negative consequences for the survivors rather than for the perpetrators. Holzbecher further notes a tabooing of the topic in German universities, which derives from the centrality afforded to scientific 'objectivity' as a value and the concealment of power relations. Naturally, a public and transparent discussion of this issue would adversely affect the universities' prestige (Holzbecher, 2005, pp. 62-64). As early as the 1990s, Christine Färber (1994, p. 229) had noted that the issue had become taboo as a result of the unwillingness of the university administration to deal with it. Hadumod Bußmann and Katrin Lange (1996b, p. 10) echo this when they state: "In the consciousness of most of its members, the university is still considered a place of enlightened, emancipated togetherness, where incidents such as sexual assault cannot occur". They, too, criticize the way universities deal with the issue and point to the lack of knowledge about harassment in the university context as "a direct consequence of the academic way of dealing with the issue" (Bußmann & Lange, 1996b, p. 11).

The research literature of the 1990s and early 2000s also provides clues to the question of institutional responsibility. On the one hand, it is apparent that most studies were initiated and carried out within women's and equal-opportunity offices; on the other hand, Geisweid *et al.* (1999, p. 51), for example, note that the women's representatives they interviewed often did not learn of cases of sexual violence in this capacity, but rather in other positions, such as staff councilor or academic advisor. This shows that, in the absence of clear regulation as to who is responsible for the problem, the question of internal responsibilities cannot always be answered unambiguously. Against this backdrop, it is important to highlight our findings in later publications that point to the need to understand sexual discrimination and violence as a "joint task" (Holzbecher, 2005, p. 66) in which all university members should be involved.

The most comprehensive study on sexual harassment, discrimination and violence in German universities was published in 2012 as part of the European research project "Gender-based Violence, Stalking and Fear of Crime", which

examined the question of whether and how female students are affected by sexual violence (see Feltes, List, Schneider, & Höfker, 2012). This first representative study confirms some of the findings of earlier, smaller research projects. For example, 54.7% of the female students surveyed in Germany had experienced sexual discrimination during their studies, 22.8% had experienced a stalking situation, and 3.3% had experienced sexual violence in the criminal-law sense (Feltes *et al.*, 2012, p. 19). This study problematizes the 'neutral attitude' (Feltes *et al.*, 2012, p. 40) universities adopt when dealing with the issue, and links it to the low reporting rate. This attitude, and the tendency to avoid open debates on the topic, normalize sexual violence and jeopardize effective strategies against it (Feltes *et al.*, 2012, p. 40). Similarly, the study reports the resistance of many university administrators to openly address the issue, as they fear repercussions for the university's reputation and ranking (Feltes *et al.*, 2012, p. 51). Other studies refer to the ambivalent attitude of many universities: although formal guidelines against sexual violence on campus do exist, the problem is seldom treated as priority (List & Feltes, 2015, p. 115). Thus, several publications have repeatedly referred to the structural and discursive obstacles that exist in addressing and ultimately combating sexual harassment, discrimination and violence in the university context.

## **University measures and intentions to deal with sexual discrimination and violence**

One of the essential tools for combating sexual discrimination, harassment and violence in higher education in Germany is legislation, a very complex field given the diversity of higher-education laws in the various states of the federation, as well as internal university regulations and guidelines, which apply differently to different groups of students and staff members (Kocher & Porsche, 2015, pp. 14-19). In view of such complexity, dealing with the legal aspect of the problem is outside the scope of this article, and it is hoped that further studies will tackle an inventory of the legal situation regarding sexual discrimination and violence in German universities.

No less important than having laws and rules to combat sexual discrimination and violence is the way universities address the issue and the information and compensation they provide in each case. To collect this data, we examined the way universities represent themselves in relation to this problem.



There are 394 higher-education institutions in Germany, 121 of which are universities.<sup>6</sup> A total of 268 of them are enrolled in the German Rectors' Conference, covering 94% of all students in Germany.<sup>7</sup> We selected 90 of the universities represented in this Conference for our analysis.<sup>8</sup>

We analyzed how these universities address the topic on their websites. The way universities present themselves to the general public provides some clues as to whether and how the issue is addressed, where the responsibilities lie and who are the main actors. By studying a large number of cases, some general guidelines can be drawn regarding the question of how sexual discrimination and violence is being dealt with in the German university context. We are aware that the information was obtained from such an analysis and it is not possible to draw conclusions about how policy is implemented in practice. But as Sara Ahmed (2012) shows with reference to diversity policies, certain policies and procedures are difficult to carry out, since often the enunciation and naming of the problem is understood as its solution, and hardly anything is ever done beyond collecting documents and conjuring guidelines or procedural paths. To contextualize and supplement the analysis of university webpages, telephone interviews were conducted with experts working in the only three university-based drop-in centers nationwide that specialize in sexual discrimination and violence. The interviews focused on the history of the respective center, its working methods and their cooperation with universities, the evaluation of the latter with regard to sexual violence as well as the public relations work in the university.

<sup>6</sup> Data based on the listing of the Higher-Education Compass, a web service of the German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulkompass, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The German Rectors' Conference (HRK) (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*) is an association of state and state-sanctioned universities in Germany, represented by their heads. It sees itself as "the voice of the universities *vis-à-vis* politics and the public and the central forum for the joint opinion-forming process of the universities" (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> The German Rectors' Conference lists a total of 99 universities. We had initially included in our analysis the nine philosophical-theological and church universities represented in it. However, since these are very small universities and often do not have any corresponding facilities for gender equality, the results were distorted because they have almost no structures for dealing with sexual violence. Including them in our analysis would thus have doubled the number of universities who do not mention the issue under investigation. In order to get a more realistic overall picture of the way German universities deal with sexual violence, we have excluded these smaller universities from our sample.



With regard to the legal regulations on sexual violence, we found that 46 universities have a policy or guideline, 36 of them with an explicit title, such as “Guidelines Against Sexual Discrimination and Violence”, and 10 of them with a more general title, such as “Policy on Respectful Interaction” or “Policy on Fair Play”. In these guidelines, sexual discrimination and violence are usually not addressed specifically but as one of several topics of equal-opportunity policy. A total of 74 universities has a counselling service, but their approach to sexual discrimination and violence varies greatly in both methodology and scope. At almost all universities, the webpages of the women’s and gender-equality officers refer to the issue as an area of responsibility and name the corresponding officer as the contact person. In some cases, they offer no further information; in others, more detailed information is provided. Often, several contact names are listed, and their professional expertise is uncertain, as training in the area of sexual discrimination and violence is not currently mandatory for women’s and gender-equality officers in Germany. There are hardly any counselling centers specifically devoted to this issue and with specialized personnel. At one university, a working group on sexual discrimination and violence has been operating since 1993, with an expanded scope of tasks. Two other universities have specific counselling centers but have no staff of their own. They rely on a rotational system or the service is provided exclusively by the women’s representative. One university has a contact and counselling center for sexual discrimination and violence, offering students a psychological counselling service and an appointed person of trust for employees. In one case, there is a Discrimination and Sexual Harassment Prevention Office, responsible for implementing the directive at the university, but without counselling service. Three universities have a counselling service by external women’s counselling centers on campus, and several others list student-run emergency phone numbers. Our analysis shows that the offer on the issue of sexual discrimination and violence is almost exclusively directed at women and lacks a diversity-conscious, intersectional approach. It is also significant that university drop-in centers often refer to external counselling centers and professional services. A total of 38 universities provides printing material online, such as flyers, brochures, hand-outs or posters on sexual discrimination and violence. Only five universities publish results of internal university surveys or statistics, two of them being university-specific evaluations of the aforementioned EU study by Feltes *et al.* (2012). At eight universities, sexual

discrimination and violence are neither addressed nor informed about, nor are contact persons named. This points to the fact that the issue is still taboo and that universities need to address it in greater depth as well as develop expertise in the training and continuing education of staff.

From the telephone interviews with experts, it became clear that the temporary nature of employment contracts, as well as the lack of thematic expertise and counselling competencies, adversely affect the quality of the consulting and prevention services offered on sexual discrimination and violence. One expert mentioned that a permanent team of at least two people with appropriate qualifications and experience would be needed. In particular, she referred to counselling qualifications, knowledge about discrimination and inequality, as well as forms of conflict at work and training relationships. The expert emphasized the importance of a clear understanding of organizational conditions and modes of operation in universities at the structural level, as well as a high degree of reflective ability and awareness of one's own affectedness, privileges and role at the personal level.

We found that most universities do not meet these basic requirements and sexual discrimination and violence are not treated as a separate issue. Those responsible for dealing with the issue usually have other tasks to tend to and the extremely sensitive problem of sexual assault is often 'covered' as part of other functions. Clearly, in most universities, sexual discrimination and violence are not a priority and have a subordinate status. Though our inventory does not reveal the qualifications of the persons in charge, the fact that this is an elective position often held by members of different staff groups on a part-time basis leads us to assume that women's and gender-equality officers do not necessarily have the required qualifications. Moreover, such elective offices, like many other positions at universities, are always temporary and staff turnover is high. One expert said that this makes it even more difficult to raise awareness, as well as build up and communicate relevant experience; in her opinion, this is one of the central problems for dealing appropriately with sexual discrimination and violence in universities.

In our interviews, we obtained different assessments of the staffing of these offices. Two experts reported that there was hardly any counselling at their universities; a third one reported that often she and her colleagues could no longer accept new requests for counselling appointments due to capacity restrictions. This interviewee stressed the importance of events and campaigns for building preventive awareness and sensitization, but

admitted that these always result in more inquiries, which in turn cannot be answered for reasons of limited capacity. Moreover, comprehensive and qualified preventive work on the issue of sexual violence often fails due to lack of resources, as the existing counselling and training requests exhaust the financial budget. Another expert also referred to the connection between awareness campaigns and the number of inquiries, which confirms the existing relationship between the public discussion of sexual violence and the demand for counselling services. Public relations work thus becomes a slippery slope in some workplaces, thorn as they are between acknowledging the issue and tackling it with limited resources. Similar indications of such a connection in earlier surveys (cf. Färber, 1994) confirm what the two experts said about the lack of counselling cases and the strong tabooing of sexual violence in the university context. The analysis and classification of existing services at universities must therefore be carried out in connection with the question of the significance accorded to the topic of sexual violence. It is only against this background that an inventory of how sexual violence is dealt with in the university context can be properly interpreted.

## **On the importance of the topic at universities**

The experts we interviewed agreed that the topic of sexual discrimination and violence is taboo at the university on several levels. On the one hand, hierarchical structures of dependency do play a role, as confirmed by the experts in their practical work and the research literature. On the other hand, there are indications that universities themselves do not want to be associated with the issue. The interviewees referred to instances in which universities refused to put their logo on an exhibition on the issue, or to set up an explicit counselling center, for fear of being identified as having a particular problem with sexual violence. This suggests that the university is still seen as an organization supposedly free of sexual violence, and its occurrence is largely denied or hidden out of fear for reputational damage (cf. Feltes *et al.*, 2012; Phipps, 2020; Whitley & Page, 2015).

Nevertheless, our inventory shows that most of the universities do name the occurrence of sexual violence on their official pages and that there are counselling services on this subject with varying degrees of equipment. In this context, several observations are in order. First, the topic is dealt with almost exclusively by women's and gender-equality officers. The institutional

differentiation described above is of relevance here: while in the 1980s and 1990s sexual violence was an issue of feminist movements at the university, from the mid-1990s onwards it was fed into the structures of the university in the context of equal-opportunity work, especially through the enactment of guidelines. Thus, as gender-equality measures got a place in the institutional structure of universities, so did the issue of sexual discrimination and violence. At the same time, the feminist movement in universities split up into the areas of Women's and Gender Studies and gender-equality work, with different fields of action and different logics (Lüdke, Runge, & Koreuber, 2005a). In order to understand how universities deal with sexual violence, it is important to look at how gender-equality policies work, where the issue is located in most German universities.<sup>9</sup> As can be seen in the flyers found during our research, the Federal Conference of Women's and Gender-Equality Officers at Universities (*Bundeskonferenz der Frauen- und Gleichstellungsbeauftragten an Hochschulen*, 2018) as well as the corresponding state conferences play a central role in the thematic elaboration: many flyers have similar designs and text modules and refer to the corresponding bodies. Moreover, dealing with this topic is also important for other, more economically motivated reasons in connection with the so-called entrepreneurial university. For example, one expert states that the existence of institutional structures for dealing with sexual discrimination and violence is becoming increasingly important for a university's competitiveness, for example in applications for third-party funding.<sup>10</sup> According to another expert, however, concrete initiatives or measures are usually initiated when incidents become public and there is corresponding pressure on university administrations and managements. Here, too, the institutional embedding of the topic runs simultaneously with taboo. Aside from the supposed danger that this issue can apparently have for a university's reputation, it has gained importance in the form of certain institutionally recognized forms in connection with the university's economy, and therefore contributes significantly to its prestige. The fact that the issue is located in the field of women's and gender-equality officers also indicates

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that sexual discrimination and violence receive little attention in the literature on gender-equality policy. Rather, topics such as the appointment of female professors or the reconciliation of work and family life are dominant.

<sup>10</sup> In other areas of university women's and gender-equality policy, the importance of this for the entrepreneurial university has already been demonstrated (cf. Blome, Erfmeier, Gülcher, & Smykalla, 2013, pp. 96-98).

that measures are aimed in particular at women. Even if women represent the largest group in terms of numbers, it must still be asked to what extent can LGBTIQ\* and other affected persons can find support through university channels. This is reflected in previous academic work on the topic, since in all surveys and studies only women were interviewed.

Ten universities frame the issue under their “Safety on Campus” initiative, which includes providing campus maps with basic information such as safe routes with artificial lighting, for example, and offering a night-time escort service from campus to parking lots or public transportation facilities. This is reminiscent of the EU study by Feltes *et al.* (2012, pp. 23-25), in which the locations perceived as unsafe for female students were compared with those of “crime scenes”, when the fact is that deserted public spaces, such as parking lots, are rarely crime scenes (Feltes *et al.*, 2012, pp. 23-25). This raises the question of the extent to which a focus on the idea of the safe campus might stand in the way of a necessary discussion of the role of structural conditions of university organization. In a similar vein are findings regarding the offering of established preventive measures against sexual violence, such as self-defense courses for women that have been integrated into the university sports program in some universities. Here, too, despite the good intentions and the certainly profitable expansion of the university sports programs, this amounts to addressing the symptoms rather than the structural and discursive mechanisms that promote the occurrence of sexual violence. Instead of focusing on the university and its patriarchal structure and the question of how this can be changed, only the potentially affected are offered a defense strategy, which individualizes the responsibility for sexual assault and shifts it to those affected.

## Conclusion

Sexual discrimination and violence remain a contradictory issue in the university context. Our conclusion is based on two aspects: the attribution of responsibilities, and the inconsistency of policies. As has been pointed out, the issue of sexual discrimination and violence is mostly located under the wing of women’s and gender-equality officers, who, except in the case of an independent counselling center or the existence of fixed contact persons in Baden-Württemberg, are also named as the first contact persons on university websites. The responsibilities vary from state to state and are

based on the respective institutional structure of equal-opportunity work. Numerous references to the Federal Conference of Women's and Gender Equality Representatives at Universities and the corresponding state conferences can be found. A first glance at the literature suggests that the topic is apparently not of central importance for the area of equality policy at universities. In a widely used handbook on equality policy at universities (Blome *et al.*, 2013), sexual discrimination and violence are addressed as part of the field of activity, but are relegated to chapter 13 of a total of 14 chapters. The handbook itself admits that this field of work is tabooed like "no other area of equality policy work at universities" (Blome *et al.*, 2013, p. 419). This can be confirmed in the constant references found in the relevant literature to the lack of clarity and certainty as to who bears responsibility and whom those affected (especially students) must contact. Questions are also raised regarding the contact points for trans, intersex or gender-nonconforming persons, as well as for affected men. The problematization of institutional gender-equality policy from a Gender Studies perspective (cf. Lüdke, Runge, & Koreuber, 2005b) leads us to the question of responsibility and/or competence in the approach to sexual discrimination and violence in the university context. The appointment of women's and gender-equality officers as the personnel responsible for the matter is clearly inadequate, as demonstrated by the low status accorded to the problem, the irrelevance of the measures offered, the fluctuation of personnel, and the almost exclusive addressing of women as those affected. These structural obstacles will only be overcome when sexual violence is dealt with as a distinct and collaborative organizational development task, a demand already put forward by many authors. In line with Lüdke *et al.* (2005b), we consider a theoretical foundation and critical reflection, especially from the perspective of intersectional, feminist Gender Studies, as indispensable for the development of such a joint task.

This leads over to the second aspect, namely, the inconsistency of the treatment of the issue in the university context, a historical phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, it was through the merit of feminist movements that sexual discrimination and violence were made visible as a problem and embedded in the institutional structure of university organization. In the course of this institutionalization, however, the insights of feminist movements or early equality-policy actors seem to have been lost, and the extent to which current findings and assessments of sexual violence at universities coincide



with those from the early 1990s is startling. It almost seems as if the acquired knowledge has been lost in the two intervening decades. With regard to the office of women's representatives at universities, Dorothea Lüdke *et al.* (2005a, p. 14) write that this should be understood as "a result of the activities of the women's movement and the feminist critique of science" but that different "spaces for play and action", as well as objectives, have developed between these two areas over time. As a result, these areas of gender equality politics and the production of feminist knowledge appear to be separated from one another. Specifically, this means that "the everyday demands of gender equality practice leave little room for scholarly and scientific critical engagement with existing structures of discrimination" (Lüdke *et al.*, 2005a, p. 14). Moreover, it can be assumed that in universities, the approach to sexual discrimination and violence is governed by a similar mechanism to that of gender equality policy, in which the former is institutionally embedded. The seemingly endless loops of the discussion may be explained, at least in part, by the institutional differentiation of gender equality policy and the simultaneous distance this policy keeps from its activist beginnings in academia. Thus, in the course of this differentiation, discussions conducted in the 1990s may actually not have been passed on in bodies of knowledge, or may even have been lost. They are therefore repeated in a similar way when the topic is revisited today. Beyond the commonalities with the field of gender-equality policy, however, the specific mechanisms and modes of operation at work in the subject under scrutiny here need to be considered and examined. In particular, this involves exploring the structural and discursive obstacles that continue to lead to the tabooing and camouflaging of sexual violence at the university, embedded as it is in the institution. According to our findings, the specific hierarchical structures of the university, which are characterized by relations of dependence, stand out here in particular. Furthermore, the university presents itself as an *enlightened organization*. The imagination of the university as a supposedly discrimination-free space makes it possible to deny the existence of incidents. Thus, further research must begin by addressing the question of the specific functioning and mechanisms of the university, as well as the discourse of its being an *enlightened organization*. The deconstruction of such discourse can be seen as an important contribution to addressing and combating sexual violence in the university context. Especially when dealing with sexual discrimination and violence, it is important that both gender-equality policy



and Gender Studies pursue the common goal of “seeing through and shaping gender relations” (Lüdke *et al.*, 2005a, p. 18), in order to be able to name and transform gender-specific violent relations at the university.

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