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From gender equality to inclusive diversity? Discourses among equality workers in Scandinavia

Kai Lo Andersson
Department of Technology, Management and Economics, Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how diversity and gender equality workers at technical universities understand their possibilities for effecting change, focusing on how discourses of diversity, intersectionality and Scandinavian exceptionalism shape equality work in practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is based on semi-structured interviews with DEI workers from technical universities in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The interviews were analyzed by finding shared discourses among the interviewees.

Findings – The analysis shows that diversity and intersectionality are often conflated in DEI work at technical universities. Diversity is commonly framed as organizational value and the management of difference, while intersectionality is acknowledged in principle but remains difficult to operationalize in practice. These tensions are shaped by Scandinavian discourses of exceptionalism regarding gender and ethnic equality, which position equality as largely achieved and render structural power relations less visible. As a result, diversity and intersectionality are frequently adapted to fit meritocratic, measurable and non-disruptive organizational logics, limiting their transformative potential.

Originality/value – The study contributes to research on gender equality and diversity in Scandinavian technical universities by theorizing exceptionalism as a key discursive lens shaping DEI work. It highlights how exceptionalist narratives limit intersectional and transformative approaches, emphasizing the need for contextual understandings and power analysis in diversity, equity and inclusion work.

Keywords Gender, Academic staff, Equal opportunities, Qualitative, Organizations, Cultural studies, Critical

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The Nordic countries have been seen as frontrunners in gender equality (Silander *et al.*, 2024). Previous research has studied gender equality efforts and their effects across the Nordic countries via quantitative methods (Drange *et al.*, 2023; Silander *et al.*, 2022, 2024). In academia, gender mainstreaming has been researched, finding that meritocratic ideals hinder gender equality goals (Callerstig, 2022). A specific neoliberal governmentality and how Swedish gender equality workers position themselves have previously been studied in universities and the public sector (Keisu and Carbin, 2014; Rönnblom, 2011).

This article investigates the challenges faced by gender equality and diversity workers and scholars in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, particularly at technical universities striving for increased diversity and gender equality. It builds on prior research by analyzing how DEI workers and scholars discuss diversity and intersectionality, highlighting the frequent overlap and confusion between these concepts. Diversity is often treated as a matter of recruiting staff from various backgrounds, such as ethnicity, while intersectionality addresses how multiple identities and power dynamics interact, following Crenshaw's (1995) framework. Focusing on DEI workers – who translate policy ambitions into practice without much formal authority –

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offers insight into how gender equality and diversity work is shaped, adapted and sometimes constrained by institutional structures. This perspective complements policy-oriented research by showing how equality policies are interpreted and enacted on the ground.

The focus on increasing diversity and gender equality in academia is not new. Previous research, specifically regarding gender equality in academia, has explored institutional obstacles (Drange *et al.*, 2023; Silander *et al.*, 2024)) and cultural issues in Scandinavia (Callerstig, 2022; Skewes *et al.*, 2019, 2021). The findings of Silander and Pietliä (2023) that internationalization and diversity are sometimes muddled mirror the tension found in this study between diversity, gender equality and intersectionality.

While gender equality and diversity are related, they are distinct: gender equality seeks to address structural power relations, while diversity often emphasizes representation and difference as organizational strengths. At technical universities, diversity frameworks have increasingly shaped equality work, sometimes shifting focus away from deeper power analysis and structural change. This article examines how gender equality is redefined within diversity discourses and the resulting implications for intersectional and transformative work.

This article focuses on technical universities as a specific organizational context in which gender equality and diversity work unfold. Technical universities are analytically significant sites where strong meritocratic ideals, engineering epistemologies and problem-solving cultures shape how inequality is understood and addressed. Previous research has shown that STEM-oriented institutions tend to emphasize quantification, neutrality and technical solutions, which may sit uneasily with equality work that requires contextual, relational and power-sensitive analyses. By examining discourses among diversity and gender equality workers in technical universities, this study contributes specifically to the literature on gender equality and diversity in STEM, while offering insights that are relevant to higher education more broadly. This article contributes to studies of diversity and gender equality by analyzing how contextual factors shape what is considered possible and the DEI workers tasked with carrying out the work. It follows the lines of diversity as studied by Ahmed (2007a, b): what do they do with diversity? This is explored by analyzing discourses of diversity and intersectionality.

The central research question is: How do discourses among diversity and gender equality workers in technical universities shape what gender equality and diversity work can become? Rather than judging success or failure, the article investigates the mechanisms by which equality is defined and reshaped in practice, considering how interpretations, resistance, measurability and institutional norms shape the process.

Gender equality work in Scandinavian universities

Nordic universities have promoted gender mainstreaming since the 1990s, yet research shows implementation has remained weak. Institutional autonomy and persistent meritocratic ideals pose significant barriers (Silander *et al.*, 2024). Even with legal mandates and policies, measures often focus on raising awareness without providing adequate support or accountability (Silander *et al.*, 2024). Narratives of excellence and management further shift attention from structural power, leaning on liberal strategies such as recruitment and mentoring instead (Callerstig, 2022). Studies indicate, however, that actions oriented toward structure – like offering dedicated funding and creating equality offices – produce more effective results (Drange *et al.*, 2023).

Silander *et al.*, studied proportional changes among women professors in STEM universities and the gender equality measures universities undertook between 2000 and 2018. They found that a variety of measures, including preferential treatment and targeted initiatives, positively affected the number of women professors. The latter is somewhat controversial and possibly discriminatory, depending on its use (Silander *et al.*, 2022, pp. 104–105).

The lack of recognition of sexism and gendered outcomes remains a key barrier to gender-equal universities. For example, Skewes *et al.*, found that sexist attitudes among Danish

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academics explained women's underrepresentation as professors. Rather than viewing exclusion as discrimination, many attributed it to women's abilities (Skewes *et al.*, 2019, p. 82). Respondents legitimized these attitudes by denying injustice, a tendency that undermines gender equality work (Acker, 2006). Reinforcing such views, national exceptionalism narratives – particularly Denmark's self-image as a gender equality forerunner – further diminish the perceived need for continued equality efforts. Skewes *et al.* (2021) identified similar exceptionalism regarding the #MeToo movement when some employees considered sexual harassment irrelevant in Denmark (Skewes *et al.*, 2021, p. 133). Swedish discourse also reflects a comparable exceptionalism (Martinsson *et al.*, 2016). Here, exceptionalism serves as a discursive frame shaping justifications for equality and diversity, often rendering structural inequalities marginal or seemingly external. Thus, the analytical focus is on exceptionalism's function as a frame guiding how diversity and equality work are articulated and justified in practice.

Diversity and ethnicity in Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, discussions of diversity often center ethnicity. However, Hervik (2019) describes a shared "racial exceptionalism" – the belief that racism is foreign or rare in the Nordic countries (Hervik, 2019, p. 18). This mirrors gender equality exceptionalism by placing prejudice outside national identities. National discourses interact and reinforce these tendencies (Hervik, 2019, p. 5). Gullestad (2002) notes that imagined sameness underpins equality in Norway, but categories like sexuality, class, dis/ability, ethnicity and race challenge this perspective. Diversity work that affirms difference may clash with majority ideals of sameness, and color-blindness exemplifies how ignoring differences can mask ongoing inequalities (Osanami Törngren, 2022; Wikström and Hübinette, 2021). Thus, similarity and difference are central for understanding and operationalizing diversity.

In Nordic academia, studies have explored ethnicity and immigration, mainly focusing on the marginalization or underrepresentation of immigrants or their descendants (Behtoui and Leivestad, 2019; Holter and Snickare, 2022; Silander and Pietliä, 2023; Steine, 2023). Behtoui and Leivestad (2019) present their data with the country of origin, and Holter and Snickare (2022) present immigrant backgrounds as Western or non-Western [1]. Steine (2023) and Silander and Pietliä (2023) do not present the country or region of origin. Silander and Pietliä studied how internationalization and diversity differ and interact. They studied the demographics of Swedish academics for 11 years, following the number of foreign-born academics, immigrant descendants and majority Swedes [2] across academic positions. Silander and Pietilä argue that the concepts of internationalization and diversity are used interchangeably, despite their distinct meanings; diversity includes social justice, while internationalization is often seen as a tool for research excellence (Silander and Pietliä, 2023, pp. 74–75). Further, they highlight the need to differentiate between the different groups based on their findings. The findings also reveal that, while the share of foreign-born staff has increased since 2008, the share of descendants of immigrants remains low, with only small changes across all job categories (Silander and Pietliä, 2023, p. 82). Differentiating between these groups is vital for diversity policies, as strategies might differ. Steine's (2023) statistical analysis of Norwegian academia shows similar results: Norwegians born in the country with immigrant parents are underrepresented in academic positions.

Holter and Snickare (2022) surveyed Norwegian academics looking at class, ethnicity and gender; they found that although minorities report higher instances of bullying, being careful of expressing opinions and feeling they have to work harder than colleagues to get recognition, gender oppression was expressed more structurally through segregation. This includes gender segregation between disciplines and vertical and horizontal segregation within disciplines. One oppression is expressed more through interpersonal contact, ethnicity and the other is built into the university's disciplinary structure and advancement through rank, gender, in their analysis (Holter and Snickare, 2022, pp. 194–196).

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Discursive constructions of gender equality, diversity and resistance

Previous research has shown that gender equality and diversity work is not only shaped by formal policies or technical tools, but by discursive struggles over meaning, legitimacy and scope. Across organizational and policy contexts, equality is repeatedly constructed through competing, and often contradictory, interpretative repertoires, which delimit which interventions appear possible, reasonable or disproportionate.

Nentwich (2006) highlights how equality work is shaped by feminist dilemmas of sameness and difference, with practitioners shifting strategies in response to context and resistance. Equality thus becomes situationally defined, creating instability in goals and practices. Rather than resolving the dilemma, practitioners must continuously navigate it, which makes equality work vulnerable to reframing. Lombardo *et al*. (2010) argue that gender equality is constructed through discursive politics, where meanings are fixed or stretched in relation to other policy goals. These reframings might depoliticize equality and narrow its transformative intent, as discourses set boundaries on what is possible. Even feminist scholars may reproduce dominant framings.

This entanglement between equality work and resistance is further developed by Stierncreutz and Tienari (2023), who show how covert resistance shapes the conditions under which equality work is conducted. In Nordic organizational contexts characterized by strong egalitarian self-images, resistance often takes the form of claims that equality has already been achieved, or that further interventions threaten meritocratic principles. Equality experts respond by shrinking equality to measurable outcomes, bending it toward business imperatives or switching terminology to avoid provoking opposition. Resistance is thus not simply an obstacle but a constitutive force that molds how equality is defined and practiced, often limiting its political edge.

Christensen and Muhr (2018) conceptualize diversity as an empty signifier structured by lack. Because diversity has no stable referent, organizations continuously desire idealized but unattainable forms of diversity, producing anxiety and a sense of persistent failure. This anxiety fuels ongoing activity while simultaneously hindering meaningful change, as diversity initiatives become oriented toward managing discomfort rather than addressing structural inequalities. Diversity, in this sense, becomes both necessary and impossible, sustaining organizational motion without resolution. Intersectionality has been introduced as a corrective to these limitations, yet research suggests that it is frequently diluted in practice (Collins and Bilge, 2020). Christoffersen (2021) demonstrates that intersectionality is operationalized through multiple, competing applied concepts, many of which reproduce siloed or additive approaches to inequality. When intersectionality is treated as an extension of diversity rather than a challenge to existing inequality structures, its critical potential is nullified. Instead of foregrounding power relations and mutually constitutive inequalities, intersectionality may become another managerial tool, aligned with existing institutional logics.

Taken together, this body of research suggests that equality, diversity and intersectionality function less as stable frameworks than as contested discursive practices. Their meanings are continuously negotiated in relation to resistance, organizational norms and broader political imaginaries. In contexts marked by exceptionalist narratives of achieved equality, such as the Scandinavian countries, these negotiations are particularly constrained. Claims of egalitarianism render inequality difficult to name, while meritocracy and efficiency discourses provide powerful counter-frames that delegitimize intervention.

Methods and materials

The interviews for this study took place from late 2021 to early 2022 and spring 2023. They were semi-structured and focused on different DEI workers in technical universities in Scandinavia. The eight interviews ranged from 36 to 90 min. The first round of four interviews in 2021–2022 was with gender equality officers at a Swedish technical university. This group comprises engineers and non-engineers with backgrounds in social sciences. The second

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round of interviews in 2023 focused on DEI workers in Scandinavia, Europe and the US; five interviews from Norwegian and Danish technical universities are included in this article [3]. Two of the interviewees are in the Human Resources department. The researchers, one social scientist and one engineer, were included to provide their analysis of their university's gender equality and diversity work, either as researchers specializing in gender equality and diversity research or as employees who experience DEI work within their organizations. DEI workers were selected as interviewees because they occupy mediating positions between policy and practice, where equality ambitions are interpreted, justified and translated into action, often with limited formal authority. The study examines universities in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, focusing on common discursive patterns rather than systematic national comparisons. While these countries share similarities in equality policy and discourse, notable national differences persist. Thus, the findings reflect broader regional trends, not uniform Scandinavian dynamics.

This article includes one Norwegian, one Swedish and two Danish universities. In both rounds, most interviewees were approached via email, including the interview topic and a note on the level of anonymity [4]. When interviewees accepted, they received interview themes focused on how gender equality work is carried out in their university or department. Informed consent to record and publish the findings was granted during the interviews. In 2023, all but one interview was done face-to-face in the interviewee's workplace and recorded on a phone. The digital interview was performed on Zoom. Three interviews in 2021–2022 were conducted and recorded via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, English and Norwegian/Swedish. Translated interviews will not be indicated, as that can aid in identifying the participants. Figure 1 presents the interviewees' pseudonyms, roles and countries.

Discourses and analysis procedures

A discourse analytical approach was used to examine how meanings of gender equality and diversity are constructed and constrained, moving beyond merely listing topics to analyze how language shapes and limits equality work.

In analyzing discourses, meaning speech acts and what is spoken of, is how I understand talk and practice. In this case, talk of gender equality, intersectionality and diversity. There are discourses that govern, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, how the interviewees do their work. Predicting what effect governing discourses will have on their work is difficult.

Name	Role	Country
Rasmus	HR: Diversity, equity, and inclusion manager	Denmark
Silje	HR: Senior advisor in equality and diversity	Norway
Jakob	Departmental gender equality officer	Sweden
Daniel	Departmental gender equality officer	Sweden
Ulrikke	Researcher, STEM	Denmark
Nanna	Researcher, social science	Norway
Kristina	Departmental gender equality officer	Sweden
Tanja	Departmental gender equality officer	Sweden

Figure 1. Interviewees' roles. Source: Author's own work

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The interviewees are different and have different experiences, and there are many governing forces. I have been inspired by Foucault and Hall's thinking about what is said and what is unsaid (Foucault and Nazzaro, 1972; Hall, 1992). What manner of speech is deemed legible by the interviewees? How does this affect their understanding of their work and their surrounding organizations? The interviewees also refer to what they see as being unspoken by their organizations and in society at large. While interviewees describe norms and practices, my discourse analysis is a metanarrative of the corpus of interviews, identifying which discourses overlap, speak to or speak against each other. In this sense, the discourses signify what is taken for granted, norms they ascribe to and what interviewees resist as truths or dominant discourses. There are also aspects of discourse that deal with structural issues, often a lack of resources, some overt and others that I interpret from the interviewee and their context. Positionality matters in this case, as I found a divide between HR employees and academic gender equality officers' estimation of resources and support. The different positions and individuals interpret their possibilities for enacting practical change and changing structures vary. In some cases, there are practical constraints that they cannot overcome; others have chosen not to engage further for various reasons.

In practice, this process of analyzing discourses began with listening to interviews in full, with the author writing discussion themes, time-coding interview questions and parts of quotes. After all interviews were time-coded, interview questions and recurring themes were transcribed in detail and entered into NVivo for computer-aided analysis. The data-driven concepts, answers to interview questions/themes and discourses such as "policies/infrastructure" and "resistance" created a mixed coding framework for analyzing the material in NVivo (Schreier, 2012). The NVivo codes of all interviews, both data-driven and meta-narratives, were then compared, and similarities/differences were transcribed into quotes. This helped find the central discourses analyzed in this article through open coding inspired by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Results: discursive enactments of exceptionalism in technical universities

This section analyzes how a broader discourse of exceptionalism is enacted through five distinct but interconnected sub-discourses among gender equality officers, diversity workers and scholars. Rather than representing isolated themes, these discourses function as meaning-making configurations that shape what equality and diversity work can legitimately address, prioritize and accomplish in technical universities.

Exceptionalism through achieved equality – ethnic equality by proxy

This discourse constructs gender equality as largely achieved in Scandinavian and technical university contexts. Inequality is framed as marginal, historical or external, which makes further intervention appear excessive or unnecessary. However, when other aspects of diversity are included, exceptionalism is called upon to exclude such issues from the self-image of being equal. This becomes especially clear when discussing ethnicity and race, where a narrative of progressiveness impedes critical self-examination.

Danish Rasmus discusses what he calls the "narrative" that Scandinavian countries are the most equal in the world. He sees this as "blinding us" to inequalities and causing inaction to address them. It could be seen as a discursive obstacle to change. This narrative about Scandinavian countries could also be a performative discourse. A discourse related to Hervik's (2019) description of the tendency in the Nordic countries to distance themselves from racism and discussions about race or ethnicity, placing it somewhere else, either in other people or cultures, or seeing that they are beyond it because of their status as "equal" countries, which can result in color-blindness. This exceptionalist attitude aligns with constructions of the Scandinavian countries as homogeneous, which are seen as a strength for equality because imagined shared "sameness" evens out differences (Gullestad, 2002).

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The sensitivity of discussing certain isms, namely racism and heterosexism, was brought up by interviewees. Norwegian Silje sees this as a cultural problem of people feeling uneducated and not wanting to seem ignorant on these topics:

> Silje: People avoid those discussions and topics because they're complicated. You don't know how to deal with it. Then you would rather not talk about it, and then you blame something else [. . .] because you don't want to admit that you don't understand.

This issue makes inequality unspeakable, as one avoids or ignores the issues. Apart from ignorance and avoidance, Silje believes some people oppose increased diversity and equality and will not participate in equity and equality work. On an organizational level, Silje sees that university support functions need to be able to "support diversity" and have "multicultural competence". Multicultural competence comes from having varied backgrounds and experiences working in and with diverse groups. While these skills should be valued across all employees, operational support is often not prioritized in such efforts, according to Silje, and it is quite homogeneous at the studied universities, according to interviewees' accounts. Research consistently shows that academics from minority and immigrant backgrounds experience social marginalization, wage disparities and fewer opportunities for advancement within elite universities. For instance, Swedish-born or Western European academics are favored over their non-Western peers in hiring and compensation (Behtoui and Leivestad, 2019) a trend echoed by findings from the UK and USA, where faculty of color often feel excluded and overlooked for promotion (Bhopal, 2022).

Norwegian social scientist Nanna brings up how she has experienced discussions of sexual harassment at her university. Nanna has experienced discourses that focus more on potential perpetrators than on those potentially victimized and in need of protection. During a departmental presentation, some examples were that the perpetrator was "a man from a different culture" or "cultural barriers" as a reason for harassment. Placing the behavior of sexual harassment outside of Norwegian culture. This made Nanna uncomfortable; she feels the focus should be on protecting people on precarious contracts and junior international academics, whom she sees as being in the risk zone for harassment because of their vulnerable positions. In Holter and Snickare's (2022) study of ethnicity and racism in Norwegian academia, they found a narrative that similarly stereotypes international male academics: "The idea is that international competition means that male applicants, with less background and work methods based on equality, will oust a Norwegian 'bedrock' of researchers, especially women" (Holter and Snickare, 2022, p. 178). Holter and Snickare found this narrative more prevalent among the interviewed men than the women. A kind of exceptionalism in which sexism or inequality is placed on a man from a "different" culture, similar to Skewes *et al.*'s (2021) findings, in which #MeToo was seen as exaggerated by some respondents because Danish culture was seen as gender-equal. Racializing harassment onto other groups can be mobilized to bolster national exceptionalism while simultaneously promoting xenophobia (cf. Martinsson *et al.*, 2016).

Exceptionalism through meritocracy and neutrality

Here, exceptionalism is enacted through strong commitments to meritocracy and neutrality, particularly salient in STEM and engineering environments. Equality work is seen as legitimate only if it does not disrupt existing evaluative systems. In this discourse, gender equality work is narrowed to meritocratic ideals. The narrative of "unqualified" women replacing qualified men is a discourse many of the interviewees have observed in STEM institutions when working with gender equality issues. It is often seen as a threat to meritocracy, as Stierncreutz and Tienari (2023, pp. 1188–1189) describe. Going beyond the narrowed scope risks the perceived neutrality of STEM institutions and can be perceived as "ideological".

Ulrikke is a STEM scholar at a Danish technical university, and we discussed how she perceived gender equality efforts at her university. She describes how activities are ongoing but questions their effects. When asked how she perceives the efforts, she says:

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> Ulrikke: I think here I experience that it's still very much a numbers game; it's all about the statistics. I mean, there are initiatives where it's let's have a workshop on inclusive language, and then they ask all associate professors to come at the same time. Those kinds of events make [you] aware of the problem, but it doesn't go further than that.

Swedish gender equality officer Kristina and I discussed her university's gender equality project, led by engineers and natural scientists. Kristina brings up a tendency among engineers as a possible problem or explanation for technical universities' continued underrepresentation of women: "I can sometimes feel that; I like engineers, but they are a special kind with their 'We're going to solve a problem' and that all problems are solvable". Kristina thinks this way of "problem-solving" is too mechanical and lacks power analysis, impeding the possible success of gender equality efforts. The opposite of the attitude of problem-solving is the gender agnotology described by Beddoes among engineering professors, where gender inequality, its reasons and workings are unknowable and, therefore, unsolvable (Beddoes, 2019, pp. 127–128).

Exceptionalism through measurability and auditability

In this discourse, equality becomes legitimate only when it is measurable. Measurability operates as a discursive technology that transforms political problems into technical tasks. The interviewees report that qualitative methods and organizational work depend on passionate individuals who take time from their research to learn or educate colleagues.

What is measured and what *can* be measured was a recurring interview topic. One such discussion was about the limitations of using nationality as a stand-in for ethnicity or race. Danish DEI worker Rasmus sees that intersectional aspects are being lost and that diversity, more broadly, is not treated the same way as gender equality, partly because of this gap in what is measured and how. The discourse on what data are deemed neutral, binary gender, in this case, can be connected to the tendency among diversity and equality workers to create effective administrative routines for their work. Creating measurable data points to evaluate success. Keisu and Carbin (2014) find similar discourses among higher education gender equality workers in Sweden; they wish for their work to become audited and, as such, become important to the universities that wish to produce good audit results. Keisu and Carbin problematize the wish for auditing as audits or good results might not reflect employees' changed practices and experiences (Keisu and Carbin, 2014, pp. 210–211). Similarly, Rönnblom (2011) characterizes Swedish governmental gender equality work as depoliticized and as following a neoliberal governmentality, in which measurability and routine render the work technical rather than political. Interviewees partially express this wish for greater measurability and accountability; for example, Keisu and Carbin's informants' numbers are seen as ways of conveying change or the seriousness of a situation, but in this study, it was experienced as a wish for qualitative measures to be valued. This comes through in Rasmus's critique of how DEI work has often been implemented as only focusing on recruitment of "white women", which he sees as a narrow view of diversity and does not address inclusion or equity. However, how to move beyond recruitment and what strategies or practices would change their universities is unclear to most interviewees. As many have structural approaches to inequity, their perceived impact on changing society through their positions might be limited. Structural, meaning they believe societal power structures permeate the local university context.

At the Swedish university, gender mainstreaming has been the focus, as has achieving specific percentages of women professors. The gender equality officers do not work directly on recruitment, as their role is to inspire and support department heads on gender equality. At the university, a large gender-equality initiative addresses both numerical goals and structural obstacles for women. The work of the project and gender equality officers' overlaps, as does that of HR workers, on these issues. Most gender equality officers are faculty members and have limited time for education and creating local projects. This time is usually 10% of their

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full-time position. One gender equality officer, Jakob, wishes he could learn more qualitative skills to aid in his role. This reflects that most gender equality officers at the Swedish university have an engineering background and receive little training in gender equality, diversity and qualitative research methods. Gender equality officer Daniel echoed Jakob's experience with time; we discussed the conundrum of being both a gender equality officer and an ambassador for the university's gender equality project. I brought up the vulnerability of placing all those responsibilities on one person, as there are different meetings, seminars and forums for those positions. Daniel replied: "In the time I'm allotted, I can't be active in all those different arenas" which hint at the limitation of the 10–20% of a researcher's time as a gender equality officer. The interviewees somewhat internalized this lack of time for gender equality work. Feeling that they could do more, Jakob points out that there should be more resources to do the work centrally.

Danish scholar Ulrikke's experiences in the previous section about gender equality being a "numbers game" are bolstered by a lack of structure in the work, where the university organization takes little responsibility for gender equality and diversity work. Ulrikke had suggested equality as a theme for a department retreat, stating that she did not want to be the one facilitating. The day came, and no one wanted to facilitate:

> Ulrikke: So, okay, you shouldn't be allowed not to have this theme. I will facilitate this meeting now [. . .] There was a mix of genders there [. . .] It was more than a focus on gender bias, but also seniority, cultures, countries [. . .] For me, that helped a bit, but women are still at the bottom, and of course, women of color are even further down.

Ulrikke also has mixed experiences of women-only events. She describes one for women in research: "It just becomes a meeting where we complain about our male colleagues [. . .] It makes you sad or angry, not something that empowers you to do something and keep on fighting". Ulrikke's reflections show that women-only meetings can be emotionally draining without institutional support and structure but professionally facilitated networking events are more empowering and effective. She advocates for the university to take responsibility for organizing such initiatives.

Ulrikke, Jakob and Daniel are STEM scholars. Daniel and Jakob have official roles as gender equality officers, but Ulrikke is not officially engaged in such work. Ulrikke's experience of having to take responsibility for bringing up the topic of gender equality, encouraged by the university's events and her experience that statistics are centered as indicators of equality, show how people who are passionate or conscientious can take on responsibilities outside of their roles without acknowledgment outside of the university's administration of gender equality work.

Exceptionalism through diversity-as-value

This discourse reframes equality as diversity and diversity as an organizational value. The difference is celebrated abstractly, detached from power relations and inequality. Most of the interviewed DEI workers describe their work in ways that explicitly or implicitly engage with intersectional theory. This is natural, especially for those whose positions include diversity perspectives, but some interviewees hesitate about how to practically address categories beyond gender. Theoretically, many are aligned with an understanding that different identities can intersect to create different outcomes related to power and oppression. What that analysis does to the practical work, however, is unclear. Swedish gender equality officer Tanja sees it as a risk to add more categories to her role:

> Tanja: Maybe add them to the officer's role [. . .] Culture, race, religion, and sexuality, getting them and some other [discrimination grounds] in there but not putting them in a "PC-basket".

Tanja's point is that combining more categories might make it more easily dismissible as "politically correct" work. Her observation that this is a risk reflects the varied acceptance of which demographic or diversity categories are contentious.

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The discourses of diversity, intersectionality and measures of "success" highlight the difficulty of approaching success through the analytical lens of intersectionality while engaging in diversity discourse. Diversity, while it can include intersectional aspects, is in itself a valuation of difference, often mobilized in organizations or companies as a "strength" or in academia as a means to achieve excellence (e.g. Freeman and Huang, 2014; Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). In the Scandinavian context, emphasizing difference might not create a feeling of equality. Rasmus, at a Danish university, feels that when others are going out of their way to include you because of your "difference", it can exacerbate feelings of being an outsider. He dislikes: "This perverted extreme focus on how people are different and making people more exotic than they really are". He thinks differences need to be carefully addressed, but that we should not "over-universalize" and ignore important aspects of identity to create an artificial feeling of sameness either. The urge to create a sameness or universalize can be understood in relation to Gullestad's (2002) link between equality and sameness or color-blindness in Norway and Sweden, respectively (Osanami Törngren, 2022; Wikström and Hübinette, 2021). Sameness can, however, also be a way to exclude.

Intersectional and diversity perspectives both highlight difference, but intersectionality examines how these differences interact with power, while diversity initiatives often focus on increasing representation. This can lead to static identity categories and a preference for easily measurable outcomes, such as demographic statistics, which may not capture the complexity of lived experiences. Among DEI workers at technical universities, there is tension between the nuanced analysis offered by intersectionality and the more quantifiable, but limited, approach of diversity.

Exceptionalism and the containment of resistance

This discourse captures how resistance is anticipated and managed through softening, reframing and self-limitation on the individual and organizational level. Equality work is adjusted to avoid being seen as disruptive.

Gender equality officer Tanja's experiences of sexism at her Swedish university highlight the resistance to change through sexist stereotypes.

> Tanja: At [University name] we had to start with just doing some kind of report or investigation into whether men's and women's brains were different for mathematicians, because some mathematicians thought that women didn't have the same potential to think mathematically, so it's on a pretty basic level in a lot of areas.

One aspect of the discourses on gender and sex was brought up by Swedish gender equality officer Tanja, who describes how her university brought in a neuroscientist in the 2010s to "disprove" that women's brains differ from men's when it comes to mathematical skills, a biological form of sexism. Other interviewed gender equality officers confirmed that this belief was still held by some researchers in the 2020s, questioning women's aptitude for engineering based on "biology". A softer variation of that discourse holds that differing interests along gender lines are rooted in upbringing and norms, but that those aspects are nearly impossible to change due to their ingrained nature in society. These biological and societal explanations for women's underrepresentation cast women engineers as outliers or exceptional (see Myers *et al.*, 2019; Seron *et al.*, 2018).

In discussing the university's organization, gender equality officers Tanja and Jakob raise concerns about how gender equality, sexism and harassment are handled. Tanja describes witnessing an acceptance in top leadership groups of repeated sexist behavior towards colleagues and master suppression techniques. The behavior is described as systematically interrupting women who chair meetings, exhibiting patronizing attitudes and overlooking women for awards. Jakob describes a Janusian image of the university regarding gender equality: an external, positive image as a strong actor for equality and, internally, a weaker stance, which, at its worst, is characterized by the behavior described by Tanja. This

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inconsistency can indicate that the positive external image is not firmly rooted in organizational values but rather invested in increasing women's representation rather than changing how the organization works through gender mainstreaming.

Ulrikke's experience of being tasked by workshops on equality and diversity to educate colleagues exemplifies a strategy that makes minorities bear the brunt of resistance.

> Ulrikke: . . . These workshops also ask the women, researchers who are there, to kind of point out to your colleagues that it is a problem. While you have your male colleagues tell you they don't believe it, so you have to persuade them, and then *you* have to solve the problem, and it's actually very taxing. So, following that, I have asked not to be invited to these meetings because they are really draining. Because I have asshole colleagues.

Ulrikke and others describe the burden placed on women to educate and persuade resistant colleagues about gender equality issues. This exacerbates a situation in which the minoritized group advocates for itself without institutional support. This echoes the findings of Heijstra *et al*. (2017) and Bird *et al*.'s (2004) on academic or institutional housework, where women researchers organize the work to address gender inequality.

Discussion and conclusion

This study highlights the challenges of broadening equality work in technical universities from gender toward wider diversity, such as ethnicity. Stakeholders had differing views: HR professionals were more optimistic, whereas engineers and scholars cited a lack of support, resources and time. Expanding diversity goals complicated problem-solving and target-setting for gender equality officers, who struggled to balance these tasks with their academic duties. The findings reveal a clear gap between the ambitions stated in policy and the realities of organizational practice.

Progress in gender equality and diversity work cannot be explained solely by a lack of commitment or resources. The analysis identifies a discursive mechanism. Equality work is reshaped to address resistance, institutional expectations and demands for measurability. Diversity and gender equality workers mediate between policy ideals and organizational reality. They often adapt equality work by narrowing its focus, aligning with business goals or prioritizing measurable results. While these changes make the work viable, they can also depoliticize it and limit its transformative power. Measurement and technocratic approaches are common worldwide. In Scandinavia, these intersect with narratives of achieved equality and ideals of sameness, shaping how diversity is interpreted in technical universities. The findings suggest exceptionalism differs across inequalities. Gender equality is often framed as a national achievement, while discussions of race and ethnicity are avoided. This may explain the stronger institutionalization of gender equality in Scandinavian universities compared to diversity initiatives for ethnicity and race.

The findings reveal ambivalence in operationalizing intersectionality. Many equality workers support the idea of intersecting power relations in theory, but its practical applications remain elusive. Avoiding ethnicity and race reflects broader color-blind tendencies and a focus on measurable results. This risks overlooking ethnic diversity and immigrant perspectives. As a result, equality work may focus on documentation instead of change, becoming "doing the document" rather than action (Ahmed, 2007b). Central to this ambiguity is a Scandinavian view of equality rooted in sameness and exceptionalism, complicating approaches that address difference and power (Gullestad, 2002).

These findings underscore that equality work is inherently political, even when framed as technical or neutral. Resistance should be understood not only as opposition but as a structuring condition shaping what equality work can become. Moreover, the turn to diversity and intersectionality does not automatically expand the scope of equality. Without sustained reflexivity and attention to power, these concepts risk being absorbed into existing repertoires that prioritize consensus and institutional comfort. The discursive politics of equality and

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diversity, therefore, require ongoing critical engagement rather than resolution if transformative ambitions are to be sustained (Christoffersen, 2021; Lombardo *et al.*, 2010; Nentwich, 2006; Stierncreutz and Tienari, 2023).

Theoretical contributions

This study adds to research by identifying exceptionalism as a discursive lens shaping DEI work in Scandinavian technical universities. Previous studies showed tensions between equality efforts and meritocratic ideals (Callerstig, 2022; Silander *et al.*, 2024). This study finds narratives of achieved equality influence understandings of diversity and intersectionality. Examining DEI workers' discourses shows that exceptionalism can enable ambitious policies but also limit practical responses to inequality.

Methodological contributions

Methodologically, this study focuses on diversity and gender equality workers as mediators between policy and practice. Instead of focusing solely on policy documents, the analysis shows how policies are interpreted and adapted daily. Studying these actors reveals how constraints and expectations shape the implementation of equality and diversity initiatives.

Practical implications

Technical universities must balance quantitative goals with qualitative assessments that reveal lived experiences of inequality, particularly around ethnicity and intersectionality. Relying solely on metrics risks overlooking essential aspects of inclusion and power. Equality work should never be marginalized; dedicated resources and strong accountability are crucial. Finally, although broad diversity initiatives may increase representation, they do not guarantee structural change unless they confront power structures and organizational hierarchies directly.

Notes

1. Descendants in cited studies are the first generation born in the country of study.
2. Majority as in non-indigenous, or part of another ethnic minority.
3. Part of a larger interview study, see Author, under review and Author, report.
4. A colleague recommended and booked an interview at one of the Danish universities. The interview theme, anonymity and informed consent were discussed and granted during the interview.

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Corresponding author
Kai Lo Andersson can be contacted at: kailoandersson@gmail.com

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