

Chapter 5

The Hidden Problem: Sexual Harassment and Violence in German Higher Education

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Abstract

Sexual harassment and violence are taboo topics at German universities. Accordingly, there is a large gap in research on the prevalence and functioning of sexual harassment and assault in higher education as well as on social, cultural, and organizational conditions that foster and reproduce gender-based violence at universities. Previous research and our own data suggest that there is a perception among students, faculty and staff that normalizes, trivializes, and even legitimizes the problem. Based on a quantitative survey with students on the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence as well as the results of our analysis of how German universities deal with the issue, we relate this perception to the organizational structures of the higher-education system and discuss historically evolved hierarchies and androcentric structures as well as their reformulation in the wake of neoliberalization as causal for the tabooing and hiding of sexual harassment at German universities.

Keywords: Sexual harassment and violence; universities; hierarchies; androcentrism; neoliberalism; gender-equality policies

Introduction

Although the issue of gender-based violence has received more attention in recent years through public debates such as #Aufschrei and #MeToo, sexual harassment and violence in higher education remain taboo at German universities. Although

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the topic is being researched in the contexts of different fields, the university as a place where the incidents occur mostly remains unnoticed. Although various quantitative studies show that sexual harassment and assault are an everyday issue in German higher education, universities do not feature in the debates about sexual harassment nor is the issue discussed within universities. This makes sexual harassment and violence a hidden problem at German universities. Our personal experience with and first evidence of the hiding of the problem is the fact that in 2018, we were allowed to conduct a quantitative survey on the topic at a German university only on the condition that the data of the survey would not be published. We take this act of hiding as a starting point for a theoretical reflection on the structural causes of sexual violence in the German university context. Drawing on some overall results of the survey, the results of our analysis on how German universities deal with the issue (Schüz et al., 2021), and international research literature on the topic, in this article, we show that the subject is tabooed, normalized, and trivialized by students, faculty and staff alike. We analyze the many ways in which the problem is hidden. We situate our empirical findings within a specific set of cultural conditions, the ways (resulting from these conditions) in which society addresses sexual harassment and assault, and the organizational structures of the university that enable, favor, and legitimize the issue while ignoring its intersectional complexities. We discuss the latter in the context of the prevailing image of the university as a non-discriminatory place of research, teaching, and critical reflection, its historically evolved, androcentric hierarchies, and the neoliberalization that is increasingly changing the conditions of academic knowledge production and work environments.

The Problem of “The Others”¹: Perceptions of Sexual Harassment in Germany

The question of the recognition and articulation of violence is an expression of political power relations and the result of social negotiations. For this reason, societal, political, and media debates on sexual violence must be taken into account when we consider sexual harassment at universities. The peculiarities of a society as a whole can be found in the form of specific moments in its organizational contexts and organizations (such as universities) can only be understood in relation to the characteristics of society as a whole (cf. Türk, 2000, p. 17). It is these dominant patterns of argumentation, debate, and (non-)action in society that we encounter again and again in our academic and practical work on sexual harassment and violence in the institutions of higher education. We see these patterns as related to our understanding of universities as organizations that are

¹In the sense laid out by Stuart Hall (2019), the term “others” refers to stereotyped notions of people reduced to naturalized characteristics. This marks them as different in hegemonic discourse and excludes them from the dominant group. By using quotation marks, we simultaneously refer to and distance ourselves from the inherent discrimination of the term.

embedded in society and represent both a structural and structuring moment of it (Türk, 2000). As such, universities not only contribute to the analysis of societal and political debates about sexual harassment and violence but also reproduce these debates and therefore substantially shape them.

In Germany, we observe a culture of discussion in which it seems difficult to come to terms with one's own attitude toward violence and to show responsibility, which becomes particularly evident in the example of sexual violence. Germany is perceived by itself and others as a progressive and enlightened country in which emancipatory projects such as gender equality and gender justice have long been completed. Accordingly, sexual harassment and violence are perceived as a problem of "the others." These "others" can be other countries or people with "another" (actual or perceived) nationality, cultural background, skin color, or gender. Examples of this can be found in the political and public debate on sexual violence as well as in its legal treatment. One of these examples is the rejection of the term *Femizid* (femicide)² by German politicians, who at the same time recognize femicide as a crime in other parts of the world, namely in Latin America, for which they are willing to finance prevention initiatives. This is mirrored in the media coverage of murders of women as *Familiendrama* (family drama), which linguistically obscures the facts of the crime. A structural and linguistic reference to the actual problem appears only in the term *Ehrenmord* (honor killing). However, the focus here is again not on the murder of a woman but on the often-discussed "lack of integration" into German dominant society of supposed cultural "others" (Wischniewski, 2018). The events of the 2015 New Year's Eve in Cologne³ are an example of a reaction that others the perpetrators instead of problematizing sexual violence. The media debate surrounding the events was dominated by racist tones and the discussion was culturalized and used to stir up racist, anti-Muslim resentments (Hark and Villa, 2017). These debates even led to a change in legislation: The long-due reform of the Sexual Criminal Law (*Sexualstrafrecht*) was passed in a fast forward motion, but at the same time and in the shadow of the first law, a second law was passed that allowed the faster and less bureaucratic deportation of convicted non-German offenders. In the case of Cologne, sexual politics were activated for a racist production of truth and feminism was appropriated for the legitimization of European border regimes (Hark and Villa, 2017, p. 20).

²A parliamentary motion submitted in 2018 to introduce the term femicide into the official political and legal debate was dismissed by the federal government, which rejected the proposed adoption of the World Health Organization definition of femicide as too imprecise. In the same year, the German government supported the EU's and United Nations' "Spotlight Initiative" for the prevention of femicide in Latin America, which was scheduled to run for several years and financed with several million euros (UN Women, 2018).

³For more information, see the Final Report of the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry (*Schlussbericht des Parlamentarischen Untersuchungsausschusses*) on the matter.

The invisibility of sexual violence in German universities is reflective of broader German society that either fails to recognize sexual violence as its problem or, when recognizing it, does so in problematic ways. First, also in universities, the main attention is pointed to “others” (outside the university) when it comes to sexual harassment and violence: The problem is researched in its full range in the most diverse regions and contexts and from the perspectives of different disciplines. But there is hardly any research on the university as a place where sexual harassment and violence happens. Second, a structural discussion of the causes of sexual harassment and violence barely takes place in university contexts, although the few existing studies on the subject repeatedly and clearly name university hierarchies as a causal factor. Instead, as in socio-cultural discourse, a case-by-case perspective prevails, in which cases that arise are dealt with behind closed doors in order to attract as little attention as possible. As long as the problem is only considered structural when it can be politically abused as a problem of “others” and as long as we do not “name the problem” (Ahmed, 2014) with adequate terminology as in the example of femicide, sexual violence remains a hidden problem. The undifferentiated way in which sexual violence is negotiated in the dominant political, social, and legal sphere underlines the importance of intersectional analysis, which is usually left out of these discussions. Although the results of prevalence studies show the opposite, the view that sexual harassment and violence do not occur at universities dominates in Germany, both within and outside the university context.

However, various theoretical approaches emphasize the constitutive character of sexual violence for the reproduction of social power relations⁴ (cf. Brownmiller, 1975; MacKinnon, 1979). As such, it is a tool of oppression of men against women (Brownmiller, 1975) and, as Alison Phipps (2021) adds, of men against men, dominant society against marginalized communities, cis-heterosexuals against queer persons, white women against colored or black men, etc. In this sense, the German higher-education system, with its strict hierarchies and pronounced relationships of dependency and competition that result from the scarcity of positions for mid-level academic staff, represents fertile ground for sexual harassment and violence as tools to maintain historically evolved academic structures and power relations. Embedded in the societal context described above, universities produce and reproduce the discourse on sexual harassment as a problem of “others.” Moreover, ignoring the problem within their own ranks makes sexual harassment a hidden problem at universities. As we will argue throughout this article, the problem is both tabooed and normalized in equal measure, making sexual harassment not only possible but also tolerable and, if behind closed doors, even legitimate in German higher education.

⁴In Germany, the term sexualized (instead of sexual) harassment and violence has gained acceptance in recent years. It emphasizes that acts of sexual violence are not based in sexual desire, but are an instrument of creating and maintaining power. This terminology is also used in university contexts, for example, in policies or contact points.

Sexual Harassment and Assault at German Universities

The Prevalence of Sexual Harassment at German Universities

Since the beginning of scholarly research on sexual violence in higher-education contexts, a clear primary interest has been in quantitative assessments of prevalence, manifestations, and affectedness (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2018, 2020). The theoretical premise that sexual violence must be examined in its interconnection with power and social hierarchies has so far found little reception in empirical research practice, as the focus there continues to be on the category of gender in relation to the affectedness of women. In their international-scale review of research literature on sexual harassment in higher-education contexts published between 1966 and 2018, Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) summarized the following key findings from quantitative studies: Sexual harassment occurs in all academic disciplines and status groups; the prevalence of sexual harassment shows international variation in affectedness from 11–73% for women and 3–26% for men; students, younger women, women in temporary employment, and certain minorities (e.g., based on ethnicity or sexual orientation) are more likely to be exposed to sexual harassment (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020, pp. 7–8).

In Germany, a more in-depth examination of sexual harassment in academia began in the course of the feminist mobilization for higher-education policy in the late 1980s, when the first non-representative surveys on the topic were conducted (Färber, 1992; Löhr, 1994; Holzbecher, 1996). In each of these studies, a significant number of women (students and staff) reported experiences of sexual harassment. The most recent and comprehensive quantitative data on sexual harassment at German universities come from the 2012 EU-funded research project “Gender-based Violence, Stalking and Fear of Crime” (Feltes et al., 2012b). In this transnational project, relevant data on the topic were collected and comparatively analyzed for the first time for the European Union. In Germany, around 12,000 female students at 16 universities were asked about their perception of safety at university, whether they had been affected by sexual harassment or stalking, and its effects on their health (Feltes et al., 2012a). According to the study, 54.7% of female students had experienced sexual discrimination, 22.8% had experienced a stalking situation, and 3.3% had experienced a legally relevant form of sexual violence during their time at university (Feltes et al., 2012a, pp. 17–21). The authors identified gender, migration background, disabilities, age, sexual orientation, and status-group membership as key risk factors for being affected. In light of these findings, the study problematized the “neutral attitude of the university” (Feltes et al., 2012a, p. 36) in dealing with the issue and assumed a direct connection with the low reporting rate: The alleged neutrality and related avoidance of open debates on the topic normalize sexual harassment and prevent effective strategies against it. The skepticism of many university administrators regarding the topic is attributed to the fear that a public debate could have negative repercussions for the university’s reputation or ranking position (Feltes et al., 2012a). Thus, the study repeatedly pointed to the structural and discursive obstacles to addressing and ultimately combating sexual harassment in the university context.

There are no current figures for Germany on the affectedness of university staff. A representative survey conducted in 2018/2019 on behalf of the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (*Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes*) found that one in eleven employees (9%) had experienced sexual harassment at work in the last three years, with women being affected two to three times more frequently than men. As women in managerial positions and academic professions seem to be particularly affected, the authors assumed that higher qualifications and positions among women increase the risk for sexual harassment at work (Schröttle et al., 2019, p. 88).

Our Survey on Sexual Harassment and Violence at a German University

As part of a transnational research collaboration with universities from Costa Rica, Ecuador, India, Japan, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and South Korea, we conducted a quantitative survey on the prevalence of sexual harassment at a large German university with a total of 1,156 students⁵ from the faculties of social science (70%) and natural science (30%)⁶ in 2017/2018. In the questionnaire, students from the participating universities were asked about their experiences with, observations of, and reactions to sexual harassment at their universities. The aim of the project was to conduct a comparative data analysis to identify differences and similarities in the prevalence, functioning, and consequences of sexual harassment in different national and higher-education contexts. In contrast to the other participating universities, the study at the German university could only be conducted on the condition that the results of the survey would only be used internally. For this reason, we cannot publish a detailed analysis of the data. However, our findings largely confirm those of previous studies at German universities and can be summarized as follows: The reported cases of sexual harassment happened mainly between students; the harassers were usually identified as male; and there were no reported physical assaults by faculty.

Nevertheless, in order to give an impression of the survey results without revealing the detailed data, we have clustered the different situations of sexual acts or sexually charged settings described in the survey into the following categories: non-physical harassment (e.g., insinuating remarks, sexually charged looks, unprompted talking about sexual content), physical harassment (any form of unwanted touching as well as coercion to sexual acts), and feared harassment (e.g., invitations to work meetings at unusual times and/or at unpleasant locations, invitations to events for which sexual ulterior motives were suspected).

The most frequently mentioned forms of harassment happened in the category of non-physical sexual harassment, such as sexually charged looks, comments,

⁵33.7% of the students described themselves as male (m), 63.5% as female (f), 0.7% with another gender (other), and 2.1% of the respondents did not specify their respective gender (n/s).

⁶At the time of the survey, 37,984 students were enrolled at the university in question (22,526 registered as female, 15,458 as male).

or messages as well as conversations with sexual content. 42.8% of the students⁷ reported having been affected by these at least once in the university context. These types of assaults are particularly difficult to grasp and prosecute since they are legally not defined as criminal acts and their liability thus depends on whether or not they are regulated in the particular university policies, provided that such policies exist at all.

15.6% of the students reported having been in a situation where they feared sexual harassment; 70.6% of these students were female.⁸ This indicates that it is more common for women to examine situations for their possible potential for violence and to take precautions in the form of (non-)action patterns.

5.1% of the students⁹ reported having been physically assaulted. At first glance, this relatively low percentage can be read as a positive result. However, such data is problematic and partly misleading, especially with regard to political measures against sexual harassment at universities. Expressed in percentages, the problem of physical assaults appears to be almost non-existent. However, expressed in absolute numbers, of the 1,156 students that responded to the survey, 59 experienced physical sexual violence at the university (some of them multiple times). There were 55 reported cases of inappropriate touching and 12 incidents in which individuals were physically harassed or held against their will. In two cases, students were coerced into providing sexual favors in return for better grades or other advantages in their studies.

The results of the survey must be located in a context that has shortcomings and methodological weaknesses in a number of points. In order to comply with data-protection regulations, the only socio-demographic data we could collect was students' genders. This makes a more in-depth and critical evaluation of the data from an intersectional perspective impossible. Studies have shown that certain groups are more frequently affected by sexual violence than others. These groups include women, LGBTIQ* persons, racialized persons, and persons with physical or mental disabilities (cf. Feltes et al., 2012b). This seems to indicate that discrimination and sexual violence are interrelated; however, we cannot further illuminate this with our own data.

In order to be able to survey as many students as possible in the short time frame we were granted to undertake the study, we conducted the survey in well-attended lectures. These were predominantly introductory lectures, which means that mainly first-year students participated in the survey, that is, people with little university experience. Another problem was the survey setting: Surveys on a sensitive topic such as sexual violence require a safe and anonymous surrounding, which was not provided in the crowded lecture halls. Some students were visibly amused by the questions, which may have had an intimidating effect on others. In addition, lecturers' attitudes proved to be crucial: If a lecturer announced the

⁷f = 66.7%; m = 30.9%; other = 1.0%; n/s = 1.4% (*n* = 495).

⁸m = 27.8%; other = 0.6%; n/s = 1.1% (*n* = 180).

⁹f = 62.7%; m = 33.9%; n/s = 3.4% (*n* = 59).

survey with interest and emphasized the importance of the research project, the students' willingness to participate seriously was noticeably higher.

With these problematic aspects of the survey in mind, we nevertheless think that its results can provide some interesting starting points for a critical reflection on the multifactorial complex of conditions and modes of operation of sexual violence at androcentric, hierarchical, and neoliberal German universities. The impossibility to publish exact numbers from our study lays the foundation for our approach and our argumentation that the problem of sexual harassment and violence is hidden in German academia. It shows the very ambivalent attitude to the issue: Universities have to implement equality measures (including measures against sexual harassment) prescribed by law. On the one hand, they thereby signal to third-party funders that they do not ignore the problem. However, on the other hand, they must present the best possible image in order to obtain third-party funding and to be able to compete internationally, an image that gets tainted by sexual harassment as a reality in the university setting. This same ambivalence is reflected in the fact that our study was permitted but only for internal evaluation. We take this ambivalence as a starting point to think more deeply about these structural dynamics that make sexual harassment and violence a hidden problem. For this, we take the comments that students left in the open-question section of the survey in response to questions about how they had reacted to incidents of sexual harassment as well as their general assessment of the survey. These comments address institutional problems in handling sexual harassment as well as personal perceptions of it and reveal both how harassment is dealt with in society and how the mechanisms that hide the problem work. For this reason, we chose them also as titles for the sections below.¹⁰

Questions about the organizational structures of higher education that foster sexual harassment as well as the ways in which harassment interacts with other forms of discrimination and the social positionality of individuals have so far been insufficiently considered in research, especially in the German context. Only in recent years has a branch of research been developing internationally that increasingly addresses the academic conditional structures of sexual harassment from power-critical, intersectional, and structural theory approaches. In order to contribute to research on organizational structures and, in particular, to better understand them within the German higher-education context, we draw on this international research and combine it with findings from organizational research and gender-critical research on higher education for our critical analysis.

***“Sexual Harassment is a Problem, But Not at the University”:
The University as an Enlightened Organization***

Various comments from the open-question section at the end of our survey indicate that while students are aware of sexual violence as a problem, they tend to

¹⁰The survey was conducted in German. The comments used here have been translated from German to English by the authors.

locate it outside the university and, in line with the socio-cultural discourse on the subject, understand it as a problem of (non-university) “others”: “I have encountered most of the situations [of sexual harassment described in the survey]—just not in a university context”; “Sexual harassment is a constant problem in society, however, the questionnaire is in part very exaggerated and at the university, sexual violence is not an everyday issue, rather the opposite”; “While it is an interesting survey, our university is rather devoid of such behavior.” The respondents locate sexual harassment in the street, in public transportation, or in clubs but not in the lecture hall, the cafeteria, or a professor’s office. While, in the case of our survey, this is certainly related to the limited university experience of most respondents, it also points to the widespread cultural perception that “educated” and “intelligent” people have a higher awareness of inequalities and thus create a climate that contains fewer hierarchies and thus less potential for violence (Haß and Müller-Schöll, 2009; Lozano Hernández and Bautista Moreno, 2015). In organizational research, such institutional myths are considered self-evident “doctrines of social reality” (Hofbauer and Striedinger, 2017, p. 502) that function as prescriptions for organizational action. Such cultural and organizational assumptions and institutional myths as well as the accompanying loss of critical and questioning perspectives can contribute to the naturalization and normalization of sexual violence in the university context, which, as the authors of the representative prevalence study at German universities (Feltes et al., 2012a) criticized, is reflected in the university’s “neutral” stance toward the issue and the related avoidance of an open debate about it, which in turn trivializes sexual harassment and negatively affects the reporting rate. Typical ways of universities’ defensive handling of sexual harassment, such as individualization of the crime and delegation of responsibility to those affected (Holzbecher, 2005), can be read as a consequence of the institutional myth of the university as an enlightened organization. The image of the enlightened university fits seamlessly into the self-image of German society as described above, in which the projects of emancipation and gender equality appear to have long been completed and where sexual harassment, if at all, is seen as an “imported” problem.

Araceli Mingo and Hortensia Moreno’s (2015) analysis of sexual violence in the Mexican university context discussed two cultural agreements that form the conditioning structure of sexual violence within the university organizational culture: The “right not to know” and the “right to ignore” allow privileged university members to habitually ignore their advantages grounded in institutional power relations and affirm their individual innocence in relation to the systemic exercise of privilege. This perpetuated practice of ignorance justifies the lack of institutional action in the face of claims against systemic inequality and is thus part of institutional mechanisms that hinder the reporting of assault and silence those affected, which in turn prevents recognizing sexual violence as a systemic problem. The “right not to know” and the institutionalized culture of ignorance show not only that universities are perceived as enlightened organizations from the outside but also that academics often perceive themselves as being immune to assaultive behavior. Sara Ahmed referred to this as “critical sexism,” that is, “the sexism reproduced by those who think of themselves as too critical to reproduce

sexism” (2015, p. 11). If the university and its members are considered (including by themselves) as being too critical to reproduce sexist or harassing behavior, the problem again becomes individualized and each instance of the problem is dismissed as a singular experience. At the same time, the privileged right “not to know” and/or “to ignore” sexual harassment institutionalizes a harassing culture by enabling and rewarding it—Ahmed described this with the example of sexist banter. While participating in sexist culture might be rewarded through the affirmation of peers and group membership, refusing to participate is costly, as the disapproving person is being judged as taking something the wrong way. Disapproving not only leads to being judged for being wrong but also for wronging someone else (Ahmed, 2015, p. 9). Addressing sexual harassment, sexism, and violence inside the enlightened organization is thus often seen as damaging its reputation (Feltes et al., 2012a).

“It’s a Men’s World”: Academic Androcentrism and Hierarchies

Historically, the enlightened university is a male project. The presence of women at German universities is still a relatively new phenomenon: About 400 years passed from the founding of the first universities (at around 1500) to the enrollment of the first women. Compared to this long period, during which access to knowledge was reserved for men, much has been achieved in the last 120 years. And yet, women are still the exception rather than the rule. While women now account for half of first-year students, undergraduates, and graduates, they are underrepresented at higher qualification levels and in management positions. Their share of professorships stands at 22%; just over 17% of university management positions are held by women (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, 2019). In light of three decades of gender-equality policies in higher education, little seems to have changed in the androcentric structure of the German higher-education system over the past 100 years. Today’s universities are founded on a long (cultural) history marked by the exclusion of women; gender is thus inscribed as a fundamental constitutive factor in the organization of the modern university (Kortendiek, 2019, pp. 1330–1331).

Although the German higher-education system is deeply androcentric, as pointed out by German sociologist Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018), gender is not the only constitutive factor of university organization. Universities, as sites of knowledge production, were instrumental in designing a colonial system of thought based on a racialized and hierarchized view of humans and the world. Despite the decolonization of Latin American, Asian, and African countries, colonial patterns of racialization and systems of social classification have endured and constitute the foundations of the most important stratification mechanisms not only of contemporary societies but also their institutions. Universities, as places of institutionalization of knowledge production, are strategic *loci* for the establishment of cultural and political hegemony and reflect deeply rooted social inequalities marked by class, race, religion, migration, disability, gender, and sexuality (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 106). The social hierarchization along these categories is reproduced in the personnel structure and

organizational culture of academia. Referring to [Pusser and Marginson \(2013\)](#), Gutiérrez Rodríguez described German universities as preferred sites for the reproduction of white German elites, as they recruit their staff mainly from the white German dominant society (2018, p. 107). And as [Laufenberg et al. \(2018\)](#) pointed out in their edited volume on gender equity and precarity in German academia, as a result, a social group is structurally advantaged that, viewed in terms of society as a whole, represents a numerical minority—namely white male academics with upper- and high-social-class origins. Access, career opportunities, and promotion in academia cannot simply be secured according to the neoliberal credo of individual achievement, diligence, and luck but are regulated by political, institutional, and cultural practices that secure the status reproduction for the socially dominant classes and positions ([Laufenberg, 2016](#); [Möller, 2015](#)).

The historically androcentric university perpetuates itself in the present day as what US-American sociologist [Joan Acker \(2006\)](#) called inequality regimes, in which gender and other interwoven categories of difference have a constitutive role in the organizational context. In order to understand the set of interdependent (structural) conditions that underlie sexual harassment at German universities, it is fundamental to examine universities as gendered ([Acker, 1990](#)), heteronormative ([Musselin, 2006](#); [Wroblewski, 2014](#)), and hierarchized organizations whose organizational culture and personnel structure are continuously reproduced and solidified through the process of homosociality ([Elliott and Smith, 2004](#); [Kanter, 2000](#)). As Phipps discussed for the British context, at universities that are set up and structured in this way, acts and threats of sexual violence become tools to “articulate and preserve the power relations of the institution,” reserving the shaping of “the space of the university for privileged white men (and some white women, too)” ([Phipps, 2021](#), no pagination).

For the German university context, there are hardly any studies that deal in depth with the structural conditions of sexual harassment. In the international research literature, three main structural factors are discussed as the causes for the occurrence of sexual harassment: university power hierarchies, the (re)production of gender stereotypes, and the academic organizational culture ([Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2018](#)).

There is consensus in organizational research that sexual harassment in the workplace occurs more frequently in organizations with large power imbalances (cf. [McDonald, 2012](#); [Schröttle et al., 2019](#)). Studies on the university context suggest a direct link between the hierarchical structures typical of universities, which are characterized by personal dependency relationships, and the prevalence of harassment (cf. [Blome et al., 2013](#); [Bußmann and Lange, 1996](#); Feltes et al., 2012b). The question of how the positions of individuals within intersecting inequality regimes affect their exposure to violence is, at least for the German academic context, largely unexplored. Racist and classist attributions in particular seem to have a significant impact inside and outside universities on who is identified and punished as a perpetrator and which survivors are considered “credible” and “worthy of protection” (cf. [Calafell, 2014](#); [Hark and Villa, 2017](#)).

Studies on the effects of workplace gender composition on the incidence of sexual harassment have demonstrated that harassment is more likely to occur in

male-dominated contexts (cf. [Kabat-Farr and Cortina, 2014](#)) and in work areas where typical tasks are considered “masculine” (cf. [Hunt et al., 2010](#)).¹¹ German universities fit both these criteria. In addition, the organizational culture plays a significant role in encouraging (or discouraging) harassment at work. For universities as organizations, women are still “new” or “intruders.” In the course of a long and self-reinforcing development, which the German organizational researcher [Günther Ortmann \(2005\)](#) called “a thousand loops,” the androcentric structure of universities has been and is being perpetuated: Since women were not there initially, they cannot join later. There is a path dependency—loops, especially when there are so many, are extremely difficult to break. Those who have always been there have shaped the structures and change to these structures is hard to achieve. Those who are less compliant with the present structures and do not meet organizational role requirements must enter into negotiation for change, becoming vulnerable in the process.

In our own study as well as in the analysis of the quantitative data by [Feltes et al. \(2012a\)](#), almost no assaults by teachers on students were mentioned, which means that such a factor of power difference cannot be statistically proven. However, both the qualitative research section of [Feltes et al. \(2012a\)](#) and international studies (cf. [Naezer et al., 2019](#)) on junior female academics indicate that hierarchies and power differentials come into play primarily after graduation, when supervisory relationships tighten and dependencies grow. To survive in the highly competitive neoliberal university system, young academics have to somehow play the game, which leaves little room to defend themselves against harassing behavior. Often, there are only two options: stay and cope or give up and leave. This makes a proactive and preventive approach to sexual harassment on the part of universities all the more important. However, this is hardly to be found at German enlightened and androcentric universities.

“I Didn’t Know Who to Talk to”: The Universities’ Handling of the Problem

One of the key frameworks for universities’ handling of sexual harassment and violence is legal regulations. The legal situation regarding sexual harassment and violence in the university context is relatively complex and inconsistent in Germany, since it derives its legal basis from laws at the federal level, the higher-education acts of the respective states, and autonomous higher-education regulations. University staff is legally protected from sexual harassment and violence by the General Equal Treatment Act (*Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz*), but there is no such federal law for the legal protection of students. Specific

¹¹Most studies on the influence of gendered organizational culture on the incidence of sexual harassment assume a binary gender order. To the extent of our knowledge, there is no analysis of data on German universities that examines the interaction of homophobia or transphobia and sexual harassment or the frequency of assaults on gender non-conforming people.

higher-education laws in Germany are regulated at the state level. These laws require universities to implement an imperative for gender equality and against discrimination, but sexual harassment is rarely explicitly mentioned as a component of the latter (Kocher and Porsche, 2015, pp. 19–21). Under these conditions that lack a uniform regulation, university-specific regulations, especially in the form of guidelines, play a central role in how universities deal with the issue. In order to protect students, institutions of higher education are authorized—but not required—to adopt policies also for them. In such guidelines, many universities define the handling of sexual harassment and violence and regulate university-specific measures mostly for prevention and, sometimes, concrete procedures in the event of violations and sanctions (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes, 2015). Regulations on sexual harassment and violence often appear in the framework of gender-equality policies, making women’s and gender-equality officers at universities the central actors in this field (Kocher and Porsche, 2015, p. 25). This in turn makes women the main addressees of prevention and protection measures; other potentially affected individuals are mostly not mentioned or addressed. The inconsistent and confusing legislation at the state level and the lack of direct protection at the federal level result in a significant gap in legal protection from sexual violence for students.

In order to understand how universities deal with sexual harassment and violence beyond the elaboration of guidelines, we examined the ways in which the issue is addressed at German universities, what information and services can be found on the subject, and where responsibility for the topic lies within the universities (Schüz et al., 2021). In our research, we found that out of the 90 universities analyzed,¹² only 3 have university focal points explicitly specializing in sexual harassment and violence. 46 universities have a relevant policy or guideline. Of these, 36 explicitly mention sexual harassment and violence in their name, for example, “guideline against sexual discrimination and violence.” At 10 universities, such names are phrased more generally, such as “guideline on respectful interaction” or “guideline on fair play.” In these guidelines, sexual harassment is usually one of several issues targeted, so the issue is not addressed specifically but along with other equality-policy topics and issues as one of many. Seventy-four universities have counseling services, but it varies widely how specifically these are geared toward sexual harassment and how broadly information about these services is provided. At almost all universities, sexual harassment is referred to as an area of responsibility of the women’s and equal-opportunity officers, where the topic is just one of many responsibilities in the field of equality policies. Especially in the context of the neoliberal university, we have to assume that sexual harassment is not a prioritized topic on this long list of responsibilities of gender-equality officers and that gender mainstreaming and diversity management are more likely to be found at the top instead (cf. Binner and Weber, 2018). The prioritization of such officers’ fields of activity becomes clear in the German Handbook on

¹²There are 394 higher-education institutions in Germany, of which 121 are universities (Hochschulkompass 2021).

Gender Equality Policy at Universities (*Handbuch zur Gleichstellungspolitik an Hochschulen*) (Blome et al., 2013): The topic of sexual harassment and violence appears as the penultimate of 14 chapters on fields of action in gender-equality policy. The topic of the very last chapter is multidimensional discrimination. Yet, the handbook admits that the field of sexual harassment and violence is more taboo than any other area of gender-equality policy work at universities (Blome et al., 2013, p. 419). Moreover, the positions of women's and equal-opportunity officers at German universities are elective offices. Accordingly, there is no prescribed professional education for this position and it can be assumed that many people holding the position have had no specific preparation for dealing with people affected by sexual harassment and violence—although they are named as primary contacts at most universities.

The research literature repeatedly points out that university responsibilities and contact points for those affected, especially for students, are often unknown. For those who are genderqueer, trans or intersexual as well as for men, institutional responsibility proves to be particularly unclear, as many policies and preventive measures are explicitly aimed at women. In their representative study on sexual harassment at German universities, Feltes et al. (2012a) show that universities need to actively de-taboo the issue and communicate university support structures more openly, effectively, and clearly (Feltes et al., 2012a, p. 73).

The university response to sexual harassment and violence is contradictory, which becomes particularly clear in our discussion of the neoliberal development of universities in the following section. However, this inconsistency also manifests itself in the area of university responsibility and expertise, which, as has been shown, in most German universities is assigned to women's and gender-equality officers. In the context of a problematization of the theoretical foundation of institutional gender policy (cf. Lüdke et al., 2005) from a feminist or gender-studies perspective, the critical question must be raised whether the topic of sexual harassment, as part of university gender-equality policy, is assigned to the right place. Unknown support structures, the low priority of the topic within gender-equality policy, and the almost exclusive addressing of women as those affected due to a persistent binary concept of gender point to existing structural obstacles in the area of responsibility of the women's and gender-equality officers, which, moreover, has become enmeshed in the mechanisms of organizational development of the neoliberal university.

“As an Emancipated Woman, I Can Handle This Myself”: Sexual Harassment in the Context of the Neoliberal University

The quote in this section's title is a student's response to a survey question that asks why affected students did not seek institutional help after experiencing sexual harassment. We consider this quote as emblematic for the ways in which society, organizations, and individuals perceive, evaluate, and react to sexual harassment in a neoliberal age. Recent feminist research on contemporary western societies depicts women, and young women in particular, as “ideal neoliberal subjects” (Scharff, 2020) that can achieve an autonomous and self-determined life

through effort, self-application, and consumption (cf. McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008) and cope with challenges and problems independently (Scharff, 2020).

In the sense of the neoliberal promise that nothing is impossible and of the related construction of the alleged autonomous and free subject, the handling of social problems is removed from collective responsibility and placed into the responsibility of the individual—often under the guise of emancipation. In neoliberalism, the entrepreneurial self is elevated to the ideal and each individual is personally responsible for their own happiness, well-being, and success (cf. Brown, 2006; Ludwig, 2010). In turn, this also means being personally responsible for *one's own* failure, which obscures and disarticulates both the continuity and the structural dimension of gender, racial, class, and other social inequalities, as British sociologist Louise Morley pointed out in her analysis of gender in the neoliberal research economy (Morley, 2018). Neoliberalism promises to complete the enlightenment project of emerging from self-inflicted immaturity through achievement, diligence, and ambition. However, the neoliberal merit system has not changed the rules of the game but merely redefined social hierarchies under the guise of liberation, individualization, and emancipation. While women undoubtedly now have more social and economic participation, this participation continues to occur under patriarchal domination and is reflected, for example, in the gender pay gap, the incompatibility of family and career, and the persistence of pregnancy and children as career obstacles for women (McRobbie, 2009).

The neoliberal image of the emancipated and (economically) independent, white, western subject is elevated to the norm, defaming everyone else who does not correspond to this norm as unfree *per se* and thereby reinforcing racist prejudices (Scharff, 2011). With the pretense of fake social mobility through individual enterprise, agency, and endeavor, neoliberalism in most societies is performed through a disarticulation of structural inequalities and simultaneous representation of the dominant groups' interests (Morley, 2018). As a result, there is no choice at a systemic level. Instead, the workers' power "lies in their individual choices to become appropriate and successful within that inevitable system" (Davies et al., 2006).

These developments have also found their way into the halls of the enlightened university. Promising autonomy and freedom, neoliberalism has undermined academic independence and freedom in research and teaching by creating a merit-based scientific system through developments such as a focus on excellence and competition, entrepreneurialism, an emphasis on cost efficiency, and a rise of part-time and fixed-term contracts (Herschberg, 2019, p. 11). Gutiérrez Rodríguez listed three defining elements for the neoliberalization of universities: First, the introduction of a European modulated Bachelor's degree for the creation of EU-wide quality standards for educational qualifications. Second, the reduction of public funding for universities in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008. Third, the increasing marketization of public education initiated in the 1990s. As a consequence, market-based learning formats, concepts, and strategies for quality assurance and control as well as marketing of the universities through branding have been promoted (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, pp. 103–104).

The pursuit of excellence and of high international rankings requires a contemporary marketing of the university as an accessible, diverse, and gender-equitable institution for everyone. Equality and diversity programs are now a core element of academic quality-assurance programs and human-resource management. Nevertheless, the structurally gendered and racialized division of labor in leading management and research positions at universities has hardly changed. Feminist scholars from the UK have elaborated on how neoliberal policies reproduce and even reinforce androcentric and white power structures in the university. Ahmed (2012), whose research has been fundamental for addressing and problematizing sexual harassment in the higher-education context, developed the concept of the “non-performative” to describe policies and commitments that pretend to do something while in fact enabling institutions to do nothing. While claiming, in a neoliberal marketing logic, to make themselves more diverse, universities “continue to work in favour of the ruling class” (Phipps, 2020, p. 229) by reproducing white and male senior management and research positions. By promoting individualism, toughness, and competitiveness, the neoliberal university stands for characteristics that are considered typically masculine, leading to the establishment of a “virility culture” (Morley, 2016, p. 32) or a “re-masculinization of the university” (Thornton, 2013, p. 128) “by valuing and rewarding the areas and activities in which certain men have traditionally succeeded” (Morley, 2018, p. 15).

This wider organizational culture in the neoliberal university affects not only the perception of sexual harassment but also the ways in which it is dealt with. These have to be contextualized in a marked-based approach in which universities are created as a brand (Giroux, 2002) in order to compete for excellence and international rankings. The transformation of the German higher-education system in the course of the neoliberal economization of universities and the introduction of the “Excellence Initiative” (*Exzellenzinitiative*) in 2005 have led to previously unknown processes of competition, which, as Birgit Riegraf (2018) argued, have resulted in new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion as well as the precarization of employment. While the latter has led to a conditional opening of the academy to women (Riegraf, 2018, p. 242), it has at the same time reinforced hierarchies and dependency relationships through fixed-term employment contracts and uncertain career prospects. As discussed in the previous section, there is a direct link between unequal power relations in the workplace and the incidence of sexual harassment.

According to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung*), the goal of the “Excellence Initiative” is in particular “to sustainably strengthen Germany as a location for science and academia in the international competition and promote its international visibility” (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2019, translation by the authors). The World University Rankings by Times Higher Education evaluate the international competitiveness of universities based on six metrics: academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty-student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty ratio and international student ratio. In this evaluation, the highest weighting by far is allotted to an institution’s academic reputation

score (40%), collated via over 100,000 expert opinions regarding teaching and research quality at the world's universities (Top Universities, 2021). As shown in this example, in the neoliberal age, reputation has become a university's most important asset—and that reputation must be polished (Ahmed, 2017, p. 102). In doing so, dealing with sexual harassment and violence openly and transparently is “reckoned up” against potential damage to the university's reputation in a market-based approach (Phipps, 2020). A case study we conducted in 2019 about the institutional handling of sexual harassment at German universities (Schüz et al., 2021) poignantly illustrates this “reckoning up” of sexual harassment and reputation. One of the experts interviewed in this study recounted how her university had refused to put the university logo on a poster campaign on the topic due to fear that this alone could be interpreted as indicating that the university had a particular problem with sexual violence. Another expert suggested that many universities were reluctant to create explicit sexual-harassment focal points for the same reason. The “institutional polishing” (Ahmed, 2017) of the academic reputation is incompatible with naming and addressing the problem of sexual harassment openly and transparently at universities. This goes hand in hand with protecting the well-being of those individuals deemed vital to university success. According to Phipps (2020), this is done in two ways: either concealment or erasure. In an arrangement she described as “institutional airbrushing,” acts are downplayed and survivors are asked to resolve the matter behind closed doors. Or, if this is not possible, perpetrators are asked to leave the university (often with a financial settlement) and are thereby airbrushed from the institution (Phipps, 2020). Similarly, discourse analytic studies from the U.S. showed how universities bureaucratize, privatize, and commodify the issue of sexual harassment through a neoliberal management discourse (Clair, 1993) and how the conservative and liberal dogma of academic freedom is strategically used to protect the accused when specific cases of sexual violence at universities become public (Eyre, 2000).

This individualized rather than structural view of the problem of sexual harassment and violence at universities is closely intertwined with the logic of neoliberalism that creates docile, individualized, and responsabilized subjects (Davies et al., 2006) that are characterized by “loyalty, belonging and acceptance, compensated by the rewards of self-interest and marked by the promotion of efficiency in the service of the inevitable” (Saul, 2005, p. 13).

In our survey, this is reflected in the fact that students rated the issue at universities as nonexistent, not bad enough to be addressed, or a problem to be solved by those affected on their own. Of the 69 physical—and thus criminally relevant—assaults mentioned, institutional support was sought in only 4 cases. On the one hand, this may be related to the fact that students, especially when they are at the beginning of their studies, do not know to whom to turn in these situations. Another reason may be a lack of trust in the institution, as Feltes et al. (2012a) found in their study, and survivors' awareness of their own position within university hierarchies. Students perceive sexual harassment at universities consciously or unconsciously in the context of power structures. There is an awareness that consequences must be expected if these structures

are questioned or challenged. Moreover, it must be assumed that sanctions are usually not directed against the structures but against the individuals who question them. This awareness of one's own position within the given power structures further implies that certain options for action cannot be imagined. This was expressed in the open-question section of the survey in statements such as "What can you do about it?" In line with neoliberal logic, it seems that in many cases, the reporting of an assault is reckoned up against the consequences for one's life, studies, and career. In addition, sexual harassment, at least in its everyday manifestations, is, as the statement of the student quoted in the section title shows, a matter that an emancipated woman regulates herself. In what Gundula Ludwig described as the "economization of the social" (Ludwig, 2010, no pagination), the market becomes the structuring principle of social relations, with the consequence that social responsibilities are privatized. This also (re) privatizes structural relations of inequality and the exploitation of women, black, and indigenous people, people of color, and genderqueer people. For the conditional structure of sexual harassment and violence, this economization of the social means that the myth of individual fate is cemented by neoliberal individualization (Ludwig, 2010). The neoliberalization of social relations as well as the intensification of economic dependencies, invisibilization, and the individualization of structural inequalities and the problems that results from it not only make sexual harassment and violence possible but continue to keep it a hidden individualized problem.

"This is Just What Men Do": The Normalization of Sexual Harassment

Androcentric hierarchies, the image of the discrimination-free, enlightened academy, and market-oriented organizational and management structures are some of the factors that (re)produce, allow, and sometimes even encourage sexual harassment and violence at universities. The university approach to the problem paints a picture of sexual harassment as an individual (women's) problem for which individual solutions must be found. Acts of sexual harassment and violence are normalized, minimized, and dismissed by patriarchal gender norms and power relations (Gavey, 2019) as well as by complex and uneven systems of loyalty and hierarchy (Phipps, 2020). These university attitudes have an effect on the way individuals perceive and evaluate sexual harassment and violence at the university as a problem of those affected and not of the perpetrators.

In the fourth part of our survey, we asked how students had responded to the sexual harassment they had experienced. The most common response (13,5%) was that no further significance had been attached to the incident. 10,7% of the respondents had perceived the situation as a joke. Similar reactions were also found in the open-question section, where we asked why affected students had not turned to university staff: "It was not that bad"; "It was not dangerous"; "That's male nature"; "I think a lot of little things happen that are unsettling (also toward men), but you don't take it seriously because of the frequency. I would feel weak if I talked to someone about it."

The fact that sexual harassment is often given no or only very low importance shows how much the topic is normalized and trivialized not only in the university context but in society as a whole. In their research report on sexual harassment at German universities, Feltes et al. (2012a) attributed trivializing reactions such as the ones quoted above to a feeling of helplessness in the face of the omnipresence of the problem, which cannot be solved by individuals. They found that

students were much more reluctant to mention the less serious assault (in contrast to sexual violence) because they are aware that it seems to be a matter of social consensus to put such assaults “in proportion” and therefore to have to “put up with” them. (Feltes et al., 2012a, p. 28)

The authors further argued that the individual burden of such incidents is often not taken seriously and that there is a feeling of coming across as oversensitive or uptight: “[T]he socially accepted trivialization of such assaults is internalized and the woman affected no longer trusts her own feelings” (Feltes et al., 2012a, p. 28).

A consequence of this social normalization and trivialization of sexual harassment is the associated silence, which was mentioned by affected students as the second most common reaction. In reply to the question of how they had reacted to a harassment situation, 12.3% ticked the answer “I didn’t say anything, but it annoyed me” and 6.1% chose “I didn’t say anything, but it deeply unsettled me.” In the research literature on domestic and sexual violence, this phenomenon is conceptually described as a culture of silence or self-silencing. The students’ answers further reveal a tendency of self-questioning: “I thought I had misinterpreted the situation”; “I did not know whether the incident was important enough.” Qualitative studies in particular show that self-doubt is very common in these situations. The intimate nature of the topic, the social taboo surrounding it, and the common cultural ideas regarding who is at fault prevent survivors from turning to someone who could dispel these self-doubts. Instead, those affected locate culpability in their own alleged “misconduct” and wonder whether they misinterpreted the situation or even did something to trigger the assault (cf. Feltes et al., 2012b; Naezer et al., 2019).

Although the results of a number of quantitative studies demonstrate comparatively few assaults by faculty members, there is consensus in the research community that the estimated figure of unreported cases is many times higher. When cases of sexual harassment are reported to university staff, they are usually heard and dealt with behind closed doors. In this context, confidentiality and the protection of those affected are of fundamental, primary importance. And yet, this has the negative side effect of also protecting perpetrators and universities, allowing sexual harassment and violence to remain a hidden problem in the university context. This prevents awareness raising and a lack of awareness results in the assumption that sexual harassment and violence is “just what men do.”

Conclusions: Conducting Tabooed Research on a Tabooed Subject

Drawing on comments from students that had participated in our quantitative survey on the prevalence of sexual harassment at university, in this article, we highlighted possible causes and factors that enable, favor, and legitimize sexual harassment in the higher-education context. We located the problem in the historically evolved hierarchical structures of the androcentric university, discussed the social (self-)image of the university as an enlightened organization, and looked into the effects of neoliberal academic working environments on the prevalence and handling of sexual harassment. Based on this location of the problem, we explored how it is negotiated in the context of the legal and equality-policy framework and problematized normalization as one of the key issues at the university. While our considerations can be substantiated with studies from other work contexts and countries, there is a lack of empirical and ethnographic data on the conditional structure of sexual harassment and violence in the German university system. Established research institutions in Germany show great reluctance to address the issue of sexual harassment in the university context (Bange, 2016, p. 45). The lack of relevant research is also reflected in the fact that many of the available studies are graduation theses or were conducted by women's and gender-equality officers and it is reasonable to assume that researching sexual violence at universities could be a career obstacle (Bange, 2016, p. 46). In terms of content, most of these studies are prevalence studies on the occurrence and type of sexual harassment at German universities. In order to better understand the set of conditions, structures, and internal university dynamics that enable sexual harassment in academia, more ethnographic research is needed. However, producing ethnographic research in and on academia could not only be harmful for researchers' academic careers but, as Maria do Mar Pereira (2013, p. 191), referring to Butterwick and Dawson (2005), puts it, is "one of the greatest taboos" of academic practice" in general. The relative lack of ethnographic research on universities is "a form of collective averted gaze from the inner workings of academia" (do Mar Pereira, 2013, p. 191). The fact that academics do not see themselves as research objects but as subjects that turn others into objects (Friese, 2001, p. 288) makes sense especially in the cultural perception of the university as an enlightened organization as discussed above.

Given that critical examination of the higher-education system is itself taboo, examining the taboo topic of sexual harassment and violence in this context becomes a particularly difficult challenge. The university's handling of our own sexual-harassment study is a particularly striking example of this. As Sara Ahmed (2015) pointed out, "when we give problems their names we can become a problem for those who do not want to register that there is a problem (but who might, at another level, *sense* there is a problem)" (p. 9, emphasis in original). Ahmed herself is a very powerful example of how overwhelming and destructive scholarly and political engagement against sexual harassment can be to one's career at the university: She resigned from her post at Goldsmiths, University of London, in protest against the university's failure to address sexual harassment.

Louise Morley showed in her analysis of gendered implications of the neoliberal research economy that the competition for employment and funding in the academy has made such forms of protest and resistance very rare, as solidarity and the sense of the collective have been eroded: “Resisting takes one out of the game, leaving the path clear for voracious competitors. Playing the game is central to survival for individuals, organizations and nation states” (Morley, 2018, p. 23).

The challenges of researching and addressing sexual harassment and violence in the higher-education context are vast, multi-layered, and complex. Researchers have to find the balance between critical distance, loyalty, and discretion (Friese, 2001, p. 307). Universities must recognize that critical university research should not be perceived in terms of reputational damage but as a fundamental contribution to modern university development—in Germany and elsewhere. Especially in the course of the internationalization of universities and the growing competition for students and “excellent” research, diversity has become an increasingly important strategic field of action at German universities over the last 20 years. In the university discourse, the importance of equal opportunities and the potential of variety and inclusion is emphasized and celebrated, which often reduces diversity to the “shorthand of inclusion” and “the happy point of intersectionality” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 14). Issues that do not contribute to this shiny and inclusive discourse are relegated to the background. This includes sexual harassment and violence. In terms of modern university development, universities need a diversity policy that allows addressing the “dark side of organizations” (Vaughan, 1999). Addressing this dark side not only helps to unveil the myth of universities as enlightened organizations but might also encourage more critical research on academia and breaking mechanisms of androcentric knowledge production and homosocial structures. In order to de-taboo the issue of sexual harassment and violence at universities in research, but also to combat it in everyday university life, a new framing of the problem is needed. For modern university development and the successful internationalization of German universities, anti-discrimination measures must become a joint task of organizational development. There is a need for policies against sexual harassment and violence that do not merely serve the neoliberal project of institutional polishing to strengthen universities’ market positions. Intersectional research on how sexual harassment interacts with other forms of discrimination is needed. Sexual harassment must be challenged as a structural problem that demands collective solutions. This, however, must not mean losing sight of the individual, because as Ahmed rightly notes, “if the ‘institution’ becomes the problem, it becomes rather easy for individuals to say, ‘it has nothing to do with me’ ” (2015, p. 12). The critical university research needed for this can only be de-tabooed if it is actively encouraged and promoted by university management and third-party funders.

All of the above has already been discussed and debated many times in different academic settings. It is alarming to see the extent to which current findings and analyses of sexual violence at universities coincide with those from the early 1990s. It seems as if the acquired knowledge of the women’s movement, which was the first to bring the issue onto the political agenda of German universities, was lost in two decades of increasing economization of the social and

universities and of the accompanying institutionalization of gender equality. This reveals once more that as long as sexual harassment and violence are seen as individualized experiences rather than symptoms of an androcentric and neoliberal higher-education system and as long as both the problem and its investigation are tabooed, nothing will change and sexual harassment will remain a hidden problem at German universities.

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