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Power and responsibility in higher music education. Issues of bullying and harassment

The topic of power and responsibility in higher music education (HME) institutions, and specifically with regard to bullying and harassment as processes of inequality, has been discussed for quite some time (Carter 2011; Bull 2021), and the issues gained even more attention after the global #MeToo movement in 2017. Research into the issues of bullying and harassment in higher music education has been focusing on, for example, bullying of and discrimination against students, sexual harassment, and the power structures that enable these.

This article is based on the project *Conservatory Cultures,* and was written by all five researchers in the project, based in four European countries.[1] The project investigated belonging in terms of nation and gender in the Western Art Music programmes of three HME institutions in Estonia, Finland, and Hungary. The project's empirical material consisted of interviews with students, teachers, and leaders, together with participant observations of concerts, classes, and rehearsals. Further, it analysed webpages and written policy documents on equality, diversity, and ethics from the three institutions. All three institutions had such documents to prevent bullying and harassment. The results of those analyses are reported elsewhere (Werner & Ferm Almqvist *forthcoming* 2025). Here, we – all of the project members – engage in a reflection on four cases that, on one hand, provided examples of bullying and harassment in HME, and, on the other hand, displayed the institutional response to the cases in question. The cases occurred despite the existence of policies designed to curtail such activity, and we ask what discussions and actions these cases led to in the HME institutions, and what the outcomes of the institutional processes were. In doing so we engage with challenges related to gender equality, diversity, and work environment issues in HME today.

The article does not explicitly draw on interviews, observations, or policy documents included in the material analysed in the research project *Conservatory Cultures*. Instead, it is the result of a collaborative workshop in the project research

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group. Three members of the research group, who were based at the involved HME institutions, shared cases in which these institutions dealt with issues of harassment, bullying, and power, all issues that affect the work environment of HME institutions. With this article we hope to highlight that incidents such as the ones discussed here can occur in HME despite the existence of policy meant to curtail them, and that the incidents can sometimes happen suddenly. We also want to underline that such incidents always need to be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately, despite this not always being clear-cut and easy. In addition, we hope to provide suggestions for how HME institutions can approach bullying and harassment in the future by taking responsibility, considering power in the institutions, and by learning from our analysis of the four cases presented in this article.

Aims, material, and method

The aim of the article is to review higher music education (HME) institutions' actions in handling power and taking responsibility regarding issues of bullying and harassment. The questions asked are: What are the challenges that HME institutions face in becoming genuinely supportive and safe environments? And how can these challenges be met?

The current article was initiated in a workshop and a research-based group discussion between the five authors on-site at one of the HME institutions in January 2024. The discussion was based on earlier findings from the project and on the personal experiences of the authors. Before the discussions, all participants had submitted themes from the project findings that interested them. All five authors contributed to the discussion, even though Ann Werner mainly moderated, and Cecilia Ferm Almqvist mainly wrote minutes, since neither of them work in a HME institution. Drawing on collaborative feminist methods of sharing experience and analysing together (Pratt 2010), the group workshop allowed different specialities and different national cultures of HME to meet in discussions of themes that were identified as important challenges in HME institutions. In the workshop, the authors used the method of sharing experiences in the vein of feminist consciousness-raising methodology (Sankofa 2025). By using pre-set themes – initially several, but narrowed down to racism, sexual harassment, and bullying during the workshop – the participating authors talked about their experiences of working in HME.[2] The authors took turns talking, and the moderator lead the discussion when necessary and ensured the safety of the space by making an initial agreement about keeping the

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[2] The terminology was changed to "bullying and harassment" when working on the article, following Ahmed (2021). This terminology includes all kinds of power abuse, and therefore racism and sexual harassment, but also more forms of abuse. We chose to not call it misconduct because misconduct implies (by the term "mis") a rather clear distinction between right and wrong.

discussions between the five, until agreed otherwise. Safety is crucial for the feminist collaborative method to work (Sankofa 2025, 88), and the fact that the five authors already knew each other from being in the same project for three years helped with safety. As stated, the cases were gathered through three of the authors' experiences of HME institutions. The stories told in the four cases analysed here also mirrored the results from the material in the larger project, where similar incidents were brought up in interviews by students, teachers, and leaders in HME institutions.

After choosing the cases the group discussed the problems of responsibility and power, and finally this discussion was used as the start of a collaborative writing process in which all five researchers worked on the very first drafts of different sections of this article in the same room. The initial workshop was followed by a collaborative writing process continued over 2024, conducted online in shared documents and with regular meetings.

In feminist methodologies of collaboration for music research, participants that are not researchers can be involved in creating the questions, material, and analysis (Olszanowski 2012). As mentioned, the cases and conclusions of this article are based on the researchers' experiences, but they were acting as participants in a workshop that coincided with the final conference conducted after three years of project collaboration between the authors of this article. Letting participants speak about their experiences and drawing on differences to empower and promote equality is the ethos of feminist methods for teaching, community building, and research (hooks 2003; Shrewsbury 1993). Further, the feminist epistemology of collaborative research methods, including action research, states that knowledge claims are situated (Haraway 1991), thus neither objectively false nor true but partial truths from the perspectives of the participants. In our method for writing this article we used the perspectives of the researchers as insiders of their HME institutions and outsiders as researchers analysing those institutions from the perspective of the article's aim (for further discussion, see Collins 1986).

Ethical considerations

As already presented above, this article builds on four cases from HME institutions in Estonia, Finland, and Hungary. The appropriate administrative bodies of the three HME institutions involved had all given their formal consent to participate in the research project *Conservatory Cultures*. Two of the cases included experiences from persons who were close to the authors and had confided in them. In these two cases, informed consent was given by all participants (both authors and non-authors). In the other two cases the analysed material was firsthand experiences of the authors. Further, all cases were de-identified: firstly, by excluding names of persons and places and genders of persons, and secondly by omitting details and information

that could provide clues as to what places, institutions, and persons were involved.

In addition to the important research ethics practices of informed consent and de-identification, the cases were also analysed with an emphasis on how they were handled by the HME institution and what conclusions they led to. The authors of the article are working with the HME institutions, not doing work about them, an approach suggested as ethical in de-colonial music education research (Kallio 2020). The focus in our analysis is not on the individuals, or what was "wrong" in the actual incidents, but on the HME institutions, their actions, and what could be done to promote equality and prevent bullying and harassment. By focusing on the structural level, we aim to avoid any further harm to the persons involved. This focus also helps us deal with the ethical dilemma of autoethnography, where one person's narrative becomes the "truth" (Nichols 2016).

Theoretical background

In this study, the theoretical understanding of practices for handling bullying and harassment in HME institutions is that such practices are part of larger processes of identity formation, power, and norms in contemporary culture. On a meta level, Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that institutions of culture always take part in forming representations of gender and nation, reproducing and reshaping power structures in society. Yuval-Davis uses language and museums as examples where national images and gendered differences come to matter in the European context. Ahmed (2021) has theorised the processes of reporting and investigating unequal or unjust working conditions and abuses of power such as harassment and bullying in UK higher education (HE). In her conceptualisation, the policy work of HE that forbids bullying and harassment is non-performative, in that it does not perform what it says it will (Ahmed 2021, 30). She argues that university complaint procedures are silencing the complaints and complainants through institutional mechanisms, the way the institutions deal with complaints. Ahmed's starting point for examining the complaint process is Black feminist thought. Using the figure of the complaining Black woman, Ahmed (ibid., 3) argues that "[r]acism is often enacted by the dismissal of racism as complaint", and this starting point motivates her to listen to complaints of bullying and harassment across the UK's HE by employing a feminist ear.

Ahmed states that making complaints about sexual harassment or racism at universities takes a lot of work, and that lack of anonymity poses a large risk to those complaining. Complaints, she argues, also go further when they are posed by those higher up in the academic hierarchy (Ahmed 2021, 6). Therefore, students are in the most vulnerable positions. She is guided by investigating the institutional mechanics, focusing on how HE institutions handle or stop complaints. The way the mechanisms work, she argues, is to ultimately reproduce and reaffirm the institu-

tions (ibid., 100). The tools of the complaint procedures can also be used to bully or harass those who have complained, or others who support them, since power always operates in contradicting ways (ibid., 24).

Drawing on Crenshaw (1990) in understanding how power trajectories such as gender, race, and class are co-constructed, Ahmed (2021, 24) contends that investigating complaints requires an intersectional lens. One way of applying this lens is to investigate "bullying and harassment", as we do here, without a predefined idea about what power trajectories will be involved. In this way of approaching institutional mechanisms around complaint, the idea is that it is not always clear if abuse of power is sexist, racist, ableist, or other. In her conclusions, Ahmed (2021) argues for collectivity in activism as the tool to use to change the institutional mechanisms ruling HE institutions today. Collectivity defies the traditional individualisation of abuse, with one victim and one perpetrator, to identify and highlight patterns and ways of working together.

We draw on Ahmed's concepts in the analysis and conclusions of this article. When we analyse the institutions' actions in the four cases, we discuss what modes of collectivity might do to improve the work against bullying and harassment in HME today. We recognise that the cultural critique of institutions, as articulated by Ahmed, is simultaneously a critique of power in culture and society in general. It will be impossible for a single institution to end bullying, harassment, and inequality, but what they can do is to develop strategies to handle their power and take responsibility, and act as models for others' behaviour.

Bullying and harassment in higher music education: the state of the art

Even though bullying and harassment in higher education has been widely studied, it remains difficult to address (Higgins 2024, 30). This is also true for music educational settings, where bullying seems to be a common scenario in the parts of the world that have been investigated, such as Northern America, Australia/New Zealand, as well as parts of Europe. Researchers have been looking more closely at both gender (Ramstedt 2023a; Hennekam & Bennett 2017) and race (UK Music 2020) as power trajectories. For instance, the common band situation in US music education has been explored by focusing on students' peer victimisation connected to physical, verbal, and socially aggressive acts (Rawlings & Young 2021; Rawlings 2015; 2016; Elpus & Carter 2016).

Research findings show that HME students are exposed to power dynamics resulting in bullying and harassment, and that such experiences have not been in focus for teachers and leaders in HME (Büstle et al. 2024). The small groups and individualised learning cultures that characterise HME have been identified by researchers

as sources of risk for bullying and harassment of students (Wickström 2023, 57). When it comes to marginalised groups defined by race or gender, Fitzpatrick et al. (2014) discovered that students from such marginalised groups did not get the support they needed to prepare for admission to, nor retention in, a music degree programme. In line with these findings, researchers in the US have argued that there is a need for music teachers to gain an understanding of various forms of harassment and consider their role in creating a welcoming and secure environment for students (Carter 2011; 2013). Still, in recent years advancements have been made in examining bullying and harassment in terms of power in HME – for example, by The Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC) in the project PRIhME (se Büstle et al. 2024). Proposals have been made on how to improve HME; these have included revising existing pedagogical approaches (Wickström 2023). At the same time, researchers have suggested that the recent move to discuss inequality in HME might not automatically lead to change (Scharff 2021).

Bull (2021) has mapped hierarchies of values in the UK, using them as an explanation for why behaviours of bullying or harassment can be seen as "normal" in music educational settings. She suggests that hierarchies of value in music education can be based on real or perceived differences on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. On the macro-level, we recognise discrimination categories such as ethnicity, gender, disabilities, sexuality, et cetera; on the meso-level, study levels, genres, instruments, prizes, and such symbolise values within the institution; and finally, on the micro-level, there are personal or inter-relational differences. Bull (2021) underlines that the three levels are intertwined, and stresses that, for instance, status within the institution is easier to achieve for some social groups, such as white people or men, than others. Further, Bull (ibid.) found that these hierarchies of value are often maintained through invisible scenarios, where accepted behaviours are visible as bullying and harassment only to those subject to it.

In relation to these findings, Bull, Calvert-Lee and Page (2021) have suggested a changed process for complaints in UK HE to put the student in focus. As a counter action, Page et al. (2019) have also established the concept "slow activism", where making a map of connected scenarios at the three visible levels constitutes one part of the action. Further, slow activism builds on a collective process, as recommended by Ahmed (2021). Fernández-Morante (2018), who has performed a literature review on the subject, states that psychological and sexual harassment takes place in European HME institutions in current times, and Özevin (2022) has also identified the same in Turkey.

According to Ramstedt (2023a), emotional abuse, including verbal abuse and emotional neglect, have been normalised in Western classical music culture. In her interview study with Finnish (female) classical music students and graduates, she found that experiences of emotional abuse ranged from maleficent demeaning

comments and rejection to intentionally being set up for failure. Based on theories similar to Bull's (2021), Ramstedt (2023a, 215) claims that the prevention of emotional abuse needs to take place not only in classrooms but also more broadly on institutional and cultural levels by a critical consideration of how power hierarchies in Western classical music culture may contribute to harmful social norms. Further, Ramstedt (2023b) argues that the power asymmetries of students and teachers in HME contributed to the occurrence of sexual misconduct in Western classical music training.

While the hierarchical relational situations within the frames of HME identified in research put students at risk of bullying and harassment in general, assessment situations are special risk situations, well known for functioning as arenas where teachers risk misusing their power. As stated by Boud et al. (1999), assessment influences learning, and a poorly designed assessment, with possibly only one teacher misusing their power, can undermine the positive features of the course work. If assessment criteria are not collegially discussed, and used professionally, there are risks of teachers favouring, or oppressing, any student, or even their fellow teachers in the assessment committees (Ferm Almqvist & Kiilu 2024; Sandberg-Jurström 2022; Harrison et al. 2012).

THE FOUR CASES

The following four sections describe the cases we will proceed to analyse in this article. We describe them in such a way that the institution or persons are de-identified in the descriptions.

Case one

A young queer student experienced sexual harassment by a leading professor in their field. According to the student, this consisted of rude, insulting, and degrading remarks about their appearance, body, and clothing. After experiencing such insults on a couple of different occasions, they decided to approach the HME institution staff member responsible for handling cases of bullying, harassment, and discrimination with a complaint. The institution had implemented a policy requiring equal treatment of students, as well as a set of rules on how to deal with these problems when they occur. The complaint was dealt with in accordance with the rules and the case was closed as resolved. Exactly what was recommended in the investigation is confidential and unknown to the authors. However, the professor did not issue a mandatory apology, as was required in the finalising of the case. This is known since the student was asked if they had received said apology. The student's contact with the professor was also reduced, but could not be completely cut off because the professor, as the head teacher of their specialisation, was a member of several evaluation committees.

Six months later, the student still felt that nothing had changed in terms of substance, and thought that it would not be possible to change people's prejudices and worldview. They had learnt to keep a "low profile" – trying to dress like everyone else and look as ordinary as possible so as not to give anyone a reason to bully them. They also kept their distance from the professor in charge because they sensed their hostility. Now, they still feel that the professor judges their musical contributions not on the basis of their musical skills, but on personal prejudices. Other professors in the field have told them in private that they would support a higher evaluation (a higher grade) of the student's musical performances, but since the leading professor is against it, nothing more can be done.

Case two

Assessment at university: The HME institution uses a committee of professors and lecturers to assess examinations in a way where each member assesses individually first, without discussing or consulting their assessment with others. Then the marks are averaged to produce the examination result. Individual grades are not supposed to be disclosed to other members of the committee.

A student of a senior professor did not obtain as high marks from the examination committee as they had expected because one member, a lecturer, had assessed the student lower than others. The senior professor whose student was assessed was not satisfied with this, and became so irritated that they attacked the lecturer verbally, accusing them of deliberate unequal treatment of the student, jealousy, arrogance, incompetence, and lack of responsibility. The professor was emotionally and verbally aggressive, raised their voice, shouted angrily, and gave the lecturer no opportunity to explain their assessment. This critical situation was witnessed by other members of the examination committee, who made no attempt to intervene. This one-sided exchange of words ended with the departure of the "humiliated lecturer". Because of the scene, one of the evaluation committee members, a junior lecturer, upgraded their mark of the student, fearing that the same situation could happen to them.

The victim of the brutal verbal attack lodged a complaint with the HME institution staff member responsible for handling cases of bullying, harassment, and discrimination, and the complaint was dealt with according to the protocol. The proper handling of the complaint included hearing the parties and discussing their positions, and it resulted in the senior professor receiving a formal reprimand and being obliged to apologise to the lecturer, which they have not done to date. The relations between all lecturers in the field, particularly around assessment, are tense.

Case three

The third case shows how bullying, assessment, and career prospects are linked. It happened a few years ago in one of the institutions. It was during a doctoral defence that was expected to go smoothly. Both opponents praised the dissertation in their written statements, which meant that the process could not be officially halted. The defence was a strictly choreographed event: the opponents read out their statements, the candidate read out their response, and this was the moment when the chair asks the other two members of the committee if they would like to speak. One of them, a respected scholar and professor, took the floor.

It was not an impulse that they wanted to take part in the discussion: they pulled out their written notes, which they had prepared beforehand. Their very first comment was offensive: "This is not a dissertation, but a parody of a dissertation" – a statement that seemed strange, as everyone present thought they were at the defence of a real dissertation, a document that must go through many filters over the years before it is finalised. The dissertation admittedly contained provocative thoughts, as the two opponents had noted; that was one of its attractions. But neither of them questioned the high academic quality of the text. If the claim that it was not a dissertation had been true, if a "parody of a dissertation" could have gone through the entire multi-filtered process, it would have profoundly undermined the reputation of doctoral education at the institution. Therefore, this was not only an insult to the candidate but also to the institution itself.

According to the professor, one of the weak points of the "dissertation" was that it was too long and had too much detail. One of the opponents mentioned that some parts could have been shorter and that some secondary topics had been dealt with in too much detail. The professor, however, summarised their opinion as follows: "You write and write and write, and at some point, the reader feels like they are being raped." The candidate's face contorted, the whole room, which was full of people (professors, students, family members of the candidate), was in a silent state of shock. The professor wanted to continue, but the chair stopped them: "No one is in a position to accuse others of rape, not even figuratively", the chair said, "and your words carry all the more weight since you are accusing a doctoral candidate from the authoritative position of a member of the defence committee." The professor decided not to share their opinion any further, and from that moment on, the pace of the process quickened. The tension remained, but the defence was ultimately successful. The candidate was awarded the doctorate.

The effect of the defence was ruinous for the mood of the institution. Some of the master students in attendance talked about their misgivings about applying to the doctoral programme, as they did not want such an experience in their lives. The professors debated what the institution should do. The PhD candidate, who was supposed to be celebrating after achieving a goal they had worked hard towards for years, almost broke down mentally because the day that was supposed

to be the most glorious start to a presumably brilliant career was ruined once and for all.

For some (but not all) members of the doctoral education at the institution, it was obvious that an immediate response was needed. Through correspondence, online and offline meetings, and after much discussion, the institutional body managing doctoral education decided to release a statement. Some members of the institutional body, who had other official connections to the professor in question, wanted to soften the message of the statement, while others felt it should be stern and specific. The final text was published on the institution's website a few weeks after the event. It was a compromise that did not name the professor or the case, but it was clear to the community to what and whom it was referring. Essentially, it emphasised the importance of humane behaviour in teaching and assessment. By the time the text was published, the professor in question had already resigned from their position. However, the story was not over yet. Due to the shortage of professors with doctoral degrees in the institution, the professor in question was rehired a year later without any debate, as if nothing had happened.

Case four

One HME institution took steps to concretise its strategy for equality work and, especially, anti-racist work. The need for the latter emerged particularly among students. If there were cases of racism motivating their wishes for more anti-racist work, they were not put forward. The institution decided to discuss the issue in a joint meeting of two high-level bodies of the institution. Both bodies included representatives from the academic and administrative staff as well as students of the institution, and one of the bodies also included members from outside the institution. The top management of the institution participated as well. Since the institution had lectures on anti-racism as educational material for the staff and students, a link to the material was included as preparatory reading before the meeting. The discussion focused on identifying concrete steps the institution should take to strengthen equality work and anti-racism.

The discussion revealed that there was racism within the institution, even though specific cases were not discussed. The agreed-upon point of view in the discussion was that all members of the institution were responsible and should learn to recognise the various levels of racism and to know how to address them as part of their institutional role. Recognising one's own prejudices and attitudes was identified as a first step, together with participating in anti-racism training.

The discussion also revealed difficulties in reporting racism. Even if the feedback channels were easy to find and use, and even if the instructions on how to handle inappropriate behaviour were clear and well internalised, the institution should have a follow-up mechanism to make sure that change actually takes place. The responsibility for making sure that things change is too often left to the victim, which makes

cases of racism (and other bullying and harassment) very burdensome and unfair for the victims.

As part of the outcome of the discussion, a list of suggestions for short-term and long-term actions was created. The short-term actions included defining racism in a clear way, making anti-racism education compulsory for each member of the institution's community, creating clear and quick mechanisms for handling cases, and giving support to the victims. One of the long-term actions suggested that the management should attempt to make anti-racism a part of the funding mechanisms of the institution and its units. The discussion and the outcomes were reported to the community in the institution.

At the moment of writing this article in late 2024, the suggested discussion with the institution's community is still not achieved, but other discussions between bodies of the institution (e.g. with the student union) have taken place. The HME institution has repeatedly informed the community of campaign materials dealing inappropriate treatment, safe space, and responsible behaviour.

Analysis

We have so far presented four cases of how power and responsibility played out in HME institutions when dealing with bullying and harassment. Three of the cases showed how the bullying and harassment of an individual was dealt with and what the consequences were, and one showed a more general approach to dealing with power in a structural way by the institution. Analysing the four cases above against the background of this study's theoretical approach and the previous research, the first significant finding is that bullying and harassment of individuals (and patterns that could lead to bullying and harassment in case four) exist in HME institutions today. As Ahmed (2021, 30) notes, the language of zero tolerance has not stopped bullying and harassment, nor has it provided the institutions with the tools to handle it satisfactorily. Our cases prove her point that a simple statement that institutions are opposed to bullying and harassment does not stop it. Further, there are procedures for dealing with complaints (addressed in cases one, two, and four), and there is also action taken by bystanders (in case three).

Returning to Ahmed's (2021) core question about what happens with the complaints in the institutional mechanisms, there are different outcomes in the different cases. As such, our research shows that complaints are not always silenced. In the first two cases it appears that not much change happened to the advantage of the complainants; they went through a time-consuming and difficult process without results. This is in line with Ahmed's (ibid.) findings about the outcomes of complaints in UK HE. The first two cases are also constructed as dealing with the individual level – because they were experienced by an individual that complained

about another individual, and because they were handled as individual conflicts by the institutions. Bull (2021) has argued that there is always interaction between the (individual) micro-level and the meso- and macro-levels of power in HME. Yet, focusing on the micro-level may obscure the other two levels and make the bullying and harassment seem individualised, as if the problem was about one bad person. In cases one and two the solutions were not perceived as helpful by the persons making the complaints. The outcomes were not understood as placing responsibility on the perpetrator or the institution, but rather as silencing the problem.

In line with institutional policies, cases one and two were dealt with confidentially. In cases three and four a larger number of persons were involved, and confidentiality was not an option. According to Ahmed (2021), the confidential treatment intended to protect the complainant (and accused) from further harm might, instead, protect the institution, since no information is available for outsiders to scrutinise. And, when the case is unknown, other complainants cannot come forward. The problems of bullying and harassment in the institution remain hidden, and the policy of zero tolerance may seem true. Nobody knows about the ongoing cases and thereby the institution appears to be "good".

In cases three and four confidentiality was not an option, since they happened in institution organs or public events. The institutions involved became accountable to the public. Therefore, it was impossible to keep the processes secret, or to blame the persons exposed to (patterns of and actual) bullying and harassment. This creates a different situation where collective action, as described by Ahmed (2021) as the most efficient tool against bullying and harassment, can be used. Therefore, the outcomes of cases three and four were (initially) significant. Change was implemented and communicated in both cases. It is worth noting here, however, that the professor in case three has since returned to the institution, and that the continuation of the process in case four has consisted of events other than those discussed in the meeting. Creating long-lasting changes to prevent bullying and harassment on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels is here shown to be difficult. It is especially important to uphold momentum in the collective processes to change the mindset of whole institutions.

Conclusions

The cases included in this article showed that HME institutions do work to promote equality and prevent bullying and harassment; the work involves various levels of the institution. It is sometimes possible to make decisions quickly, but it takes time to involve the whole community in the discussions and to make sure that all members of the community become aware of both the problems and the possible solutions. Confidentiality is important for the victim. Yet, since it is not possible to

tell anyone about the ongoing cases (and sometimes one cannot even tell anyone after they are concluded), or about how they are dealt with, the institution's general knowledge does not increase. General discussions without a specific case involving members of the community can be organised, but such discussion remains on a general level and might not get to the heart of the problems.

It is difficult to reach everyone working in a HME institution. Even when the discussions take place in central bodies of an institution (as in case four), they are accessible to a limited number of employees. And, even if there is public documentation of the discussions and the decisions, it is difficult to disseminate the documentation in a way that the members of the community read it and integrate the content into their professional activity. Often those who are already aware of inequality issues read instructions, participate in training, and maintain discussions, while those who do not feel the need to participate are not as knowledgeable and would probably benefit most from doing so.

We have seen that there are policy documents in the HME institutions, and we know the institutions are also bound by national legislation on working life. Yet, following Ahmed (2021), we have also seen that documents are enough neither to prevent bullying and harassment nor to create confidence that the institution is able to deal with the problems and handle complaints in a proper way. As Ahmed (ibid.) states, the confidential treatment is intended to protect the involved parties from further harm, but at the same time it keeps the cases, processes, and outcomes hidden from the community. Sometimes the power relations between individuals or on meso-level have existed for a long time and are relatively well known, but the institution's community lacks the courage, support, skills, or strength to work on the problems. How, in such cases, could the victims be encouraged to report on bullying and harassment, and how could they get involved in a process that would support them psychologically, occupationally, and legally?

The cases analysed in this article showed that inappropriate behaviour can take place in private situations, in small-group discussions, or in public events. This presents challenges for HME institutions, as sometimes (as in case three) the situation can be very unexpected and need a quick, yet appropriate, reaction – a situation that is demanding for all participants. To meet these challenges, we propose that clear instructions should be given to, and early discussions on the issues should be held in, all groups of the institutions, as this will help prepare all participants. Another suggestion is to make bystander training part of the diversity and anti-racist materials of HME institutions. Taken together, the anti-racism work, acceptance of diversity, and efforts to create a genuinely supportive and safe environment without any bullying or harassment is a challenge that requires continuous effort in the institution. Equality work is a marathon – it takes a long time to reach the finish line, but being on the move is important, and needs to be done in groups and continuously.

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