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Shiny on the Outside, Rotten on the Inside? Perceptions of Women Early Career Researchers on Diversity Policies in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Diversity policies have become an indispensable part of higher education institutions (HEI) of the Global North. The increased monitoring by the European Commission has led to changes in Belgian HEI policy especially regarding gender. While research shows that the implementation of diversity policies has a positive effect on redistributing power, critics point out how the initial aim of these policies has been answered by empty promises. This research is based on 50 in-depth interviews of the perceptions and experiences of women academics with diversity policies in five Belgian HEI. Results show that women perceive these policies as ways to window-dress equality externally, but do not have the expected effects internally. Women were divided on the utilisation of positive action. In addition, the policies lacked an intersectional perspective regarding ethnic minoritised backgrounds as well as family status for faculty. Studying their experiences and perceptions will allow the staff equality agenda in HEI to progress.

Keywords: Higher education, diversity policies, gender, ethnicity, equality, New Public Management

Introduction

Universities have in recent decades expanded their diversity policies with the aim to integrate marginalised groups better into the daily operations of the organization. Change agents such as diversity officers became essential to HR departments to concentrate on the inclusion of students and staff from different backgrounds working from a lens of equal opportunities. Although such diversity policies are implemented in higher education (HE), research still shows strong gender and racial disparities at all levels (Morley, 1994; Turner, 2002; van den Brink and Benschop, 2014; van den Brink and Stobbe, 2009). The disparities are observed as ‘a leaky pipeline’ (Blickenstaff, 2005) where the share of women and ethnic minoritised groups decrease in higher echelons. If we want to understand how the leaky pipeline comes about in the professorial tiers, we need insight into the reasons for leaving academia. Early-career researchers are often in unstable and precarious positions making them heavily dependent on supervisors and managers. Being heavily dependent can strengthen the effects of the management styles promoted by the HR regulations, guidelines and policies of the institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the (lack of) support from the

³³ Some changes have been made after publication of this paper for reasons of clarity; this mostly includes adaptation in terms of terminology (e.g. female changed into women, minority/majority changed into minoritised/majoritised).

top to those targeted by these policies, i.e. women academics and ethnic minorities. The aim of this paper is to study the experiences and perceptions of both ethnic minoritised women academics and those with a majoritised background on their university's diversity policies. We use the terminology of diversity policies instead of equality policies to make the transformations HEI have made in accordance with the content and connotation of equality explicit. This will be discussed in more detail in the literature overview.

The implementation of diversity policies has sparked different debates. One stream, significant in higher education institutions in the US and UK, but less known on the European mainland, concerns the resistance to affirmative action (US) or positive discrimination (UK) (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Affirmative action or positive discrimination are practices that provide equal access to education to students with protected characteristics such as gender, racial-ethnic background, colour or national origin (Kahlenberg, 2014). Critics find positive action and quotas to encourage 'reversed racism' towards students from the majoritised group (Dovidio, Mann, and Gaertner, 1989). Today, research is divided on the benefits of such compulsory measures (see reviews of Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2015; Crosby *et al.*, 2006). A second stream raises questions about the effectiveness of diversity policies. As New Public Management has been introduced within universities, the aims of social change and equality are mixed up with social marketing. As higher education institutions (HEI) have become captivated by the performance culture, diversity merely tends to become a 'performance indicator' (Ahmed, 2012).

While most research has considered the discourse and content of diversity policies, there is an increased focus on the gap between the commitments of institutions and actual practice (Aiston, Fo, and Law, 2020; Deem and Morley, 2006). Taking Belgian HE as a case study, we report the perspectives and experiences of 50 women ethnic minoritised and majoritised early career researchers regarding their university's diversity policies from a cross-section of all 5 Dutch-speaking universities. This research takes Belgium as a context of study as it belongs to one of the Global North countries with the lowest share of women early career researchers. As a result, the share of full professors is dramatically lower compared to other Global North countries. In 2016 18.3% of professors were women, which is lower than the average percentage of 23.7% in the EU-28 (European Commission, 2019). Although no data exists on ethnic minoritised faculty in Belgian HEI, we can say that, comparable to other Global North countries, they are only marginally present (Advance HE, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, while most research focusses on gender equality, they often only refer to the ethnic majoritised women

turning a blind eye to ethnic minoritised women. For this reason, we took an intersectional perspective looking at the inextricable link between gender and ethnicity. We will start by laying out the history of diversity policies within Belgium and particularly Flemish HE. This allows for a contextualization of the results in which the perceptions and experiences of ethnic majoritised and minoritised women will be presented.

Higher education and diversity policy context in Flanders

Belgian academia is an interesting case as it is characterized by a lopsided pyramid with a high share of early career researchers and a shortage of full professor positions. More specifically, Belgium belongs to the countries with the lowest share of women early career researchers and a below EU-28 average share of women full professors. Looking at gender, 55.2% of the student population are women in undergraduate and graduate positions (Agentschap Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, Kwalificaties en Studietoelagen, 2019). This decreases to 47% of women students enrolling in doctoral positions and 41% in post-doctoral positions. In 2016, only 18.3% of full professor positions were occupied by women. Segregated along scientific disciplines, approximately 20% of full professors in the social sciences and humanities are women, and 19.4% in medical sciences. In the natural sciences 17%, in applied sciences 18.2% and in exact sciences only 11.7% of full professors are women (European Commission, 2019). No data is collected on grounds of race/ethnicity or migration-background. But we can, however, mention that their presence is extremely marginal compared to ethnic majoritised women as Belgium is known for its severe educational inequality between its majoritised and minoritised populations compared to other European countries (Unicef Office of Research, 2018). To respond to the shortage of women in the higher echelons of academia, each language community in Belgium has set up working groups within interuniversity councils, and thus separate for the Dutch-, French- and German-speaking universities. Focusing on Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, an interuniversity council (VLIR) was set up in 1976. Their primary aim was to be a platform for all Dutch-speaking universities in which they can collaborate on creating mutual standpoints regarding all facets of HE ranging from quality-assurance of education to inducing internationalization among academics (VLIR, 2020).

In 2000, VLIR set up an Equal Opportunities working group with the aspiration to create inclusive policies for students and staff at all universities. They were assigned to monitor the policy implementation of the universities and the consequential improvements regarding equality and diversity. They define diversity by covering characteristics such as gender, migration-background,

home-situation, disabilities, poverty, ideological or religious beliefs, and sexuality. This broad definition, however, is predominantly implemented on diversifying the student population (VLIR, 2018). In terms of staff, gender is the main concern. This was induced by a special decree composed in 2012 concerning the governmental bodies of public HEI. This decree included an obligatory gender balance for boards and management structures. A gender balance required a maximum quota of two thirds of voting members of the same gender. As a result, gender became a highly-prioritized issue as this had raised concerns among rectors. In addition to the Equal Opportunity working group, a separate High-Level Gender Task Force was introduced. This Task Force aims to produce short-term changes for gender equality. In 2013 they published a first action-plan targeted at women's academic career-trajectory which universities were obliged to implement within their HR-procedures. The starting point is a request for 'cultural transformation' referring to management support for a reformed 'gender-friendly' management culture that pays attention to the needs of men and women employees. They believe their engagement will encourage gender mainstreaming across the university. This is in line with the shift from employing positive action measures, popular in the 80s, to the introduction of gender mainstreaming, starting from the 90s, comprising the integration of gender in the creation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and practices at all levels (Danowitz Sagaria, 2007). This resulted in a focus on the recruitment and promotion of women to full professor positions. The renewed gender action plan of 2019 shows that more data has been gathered thanks to the increased emphasis on the need for monitoring gender equality in HEI. However, the data was not easily retrievable and accessible. In addition, no systematic data collection was conducted with regards to their main-focus which is the intake and career development of women to full professor positions. The 2019 action plan included a charter and campaign raising scientific awareness to the positions and experiences of women academics. The shift from a cultural to an individual perspective emphasizing the existence of implicit bias and new strategies, such as personal training, to eradicate differ from previous action plans (VLIR and JA, 2019).

Compared to other Global North countries (Claeys-Kulik *et al.*, 2019), Dutch-speaking universities only established diversity offices in 2009 after receiving incentive funds from the Flemish government. These funds were available until the period 2013-2017 providing universities with ample time to invest individually in diversity services and projects. All universities have installed diversity councils with representatives from different segments of the university to act as watch dogs ensuring an inclusive climate. Additionally, the instalment of reporting offices for

transgressive behaviour is another initiative that encourages both students and faculty to file a complaint if experiencing any form of harassment.

The overemphasis on gender compared to other faculty characteristics constitutes a significant gap in diversity policies at the European, national and organisational level. Although they talk about gender equality, the policies enacted and undertaken predominantly measure the issues of the ethnic majoritised group. Recently, research has presented the ‘concrete ceiling’ that women ethnic minoritised faculty face, referring to the double exclusion they experience due to their identity intersecting both grounds for discrimination of gender and ethnicity (Bhopal, 2015; Bourabain, 2020; Gregory, 2001; Puwar, 2004; Stockfelt, 2018). Although no data is gathered EU-wide, the share of 4.6% BME full professors in the UK and 6% black and Hispanic full professors in the US (including both men and women) expose this concrete ceiling (Advance HE, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

New Public Management and diversity policies

With the private market as an ideal type, New Public Management (NPM) encompasses management styles that were globally introduced to modernize public sector organisations with the aim to enhance their performance and increase effectiveness and accountability towards their ‘customers’. For more than two decades, HEI underwent a profound organisational transformation reforming their modes of governance that revolve around features of profit, accountability, assessment and productivity (Paradeise *et al.*, 2009). While scholars argue that the introduction of NPM allows HEI to become fully developed organisations (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Kretek *et al.*, 2013), others observed a corporatization of HEI. The Bologna-process played a crucial role in the standardization of HE across Europe (Curaj *et al.*, 2012). As students now have an extensive choice to study anywhere in the EU, internationalization created a dynamic of ranking HEI according to indices of excellence. To measure excellence, an audit culture became of paramount importance. Therefore, HEI started investing in (corporate) branding to differentiate themselves from other institutions. Like private businesses, students and staff are increasingly treated as consumers and customers to be attracted via branding-strategies (Sataøen, 2015).

Although the initial belief was that the implementation of corporate management models would automatically enhance public organisations, discontent has been voiced over the years against

NPM. In HEI particularly, researchers reveal the side-effects of HEI imitating corporate productivity and transforming into “cultural clones” of business organisations (Essed, 2018).

NPM also contributed to an evolution in the content of diversity policies. According to Ahmed (2010), the corporatization of universities has given a commercial value to diversity. The concept of diversity is mainly used externally to rebrand the university in the marketplace, but diversity loses its meaning internally. There is fair agreement in the literature that diversity is an empty shell, a ‘hopeful performative’ (Ahmed, 2010, 200) employed in various ways (Bannerji, 2000; Mirza, 2009; Puwar, 2004). As Essed (2002, 8) questions, there is confusion about whether it concerns ‘demographic categories, about identities, about perspectives, about life careers and conditions, or about all of these?’. Research by David (2009, 76) on the influence of the marketization of HE on diversity and equality policies demonstrates how ‘social democratic notions of equality and fairness’ have been replaced by ‘neo-liberal policy concepts of equity and fairness’. The importance of making HE equal has been subordinate to this neo-liberal view on diversity. Also Deem’s (2009) work shows how universities are captivated by indices of excellence and merit, which university leaders find difficult to combine with diversity and equality. Furthermore, diversity becomes subject to monitoring and is, furthermore, converted into quantifiable measures. One example is the ‘body count’ (Puwar, 2004); the success of being a diverse institution is measured through the numeric presence of ethnic minorities or women. Since 2007 HE government funds in Flanders included a “diversity coefficient” in their distribution of funds. This means a percentage of funding is no longer allocated solely based on the number of persons who received a doctoral degree or have been working at the university for several years, but is also based on the share of women personnel. However, this does not consider the level and position in which these women are employed as no difference is made between faculty and (administrative) staff (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2008). VLIR also shifted its aims stating in their 2018 report that the concept of ‘equal opportunities’ has been replaced by ‘diversity’ to move beyond anti-discrimination and acknowledge the educational benefits of diversity (VLIR and JA, 2019).

Equality work has become a way to judge the efficiency and accountability of the institution’s functioning. It does not measure whether equality has been achieved, but rather whether the university is doing well in following the right procedures. Diversity practitioners confirm this feeling of conducting “performative work”, work in which they describe the intent, commitments and goals of what they would like to achieve, but are unable to execute these commitments. This inability arises, among others, from the lack of resources and support from university executives.

Belgian research shows that equality work can be considered “defensive institutional work” (Maguire and Hardy, 2009, 148) for management as it touches upon the power relations within the university and, therefore, may be perceived as their own position to be threatened (Roos *et al.*, 2020). They resist to maintain the status quo which means diversity practitioners hit ‘a brick wall’ (Ahmed, 2012, 26) as the will to change does not necessarily go along with action for change. Not only executives are resistant to equality work, but staff at different levels of the university differ in their support for diversity policies. Voorspoels’ work (2018) shows how diversity policies are more likely to be supported by women and staff working in the social sciences and humanities.

Data and methodology

This paper focusses on PhD and post-doctoral researchers employed at five Belgian universities. We only focus on Dutch-speaking universities which is the largest language group in Belgium.

Research participants

Our analysis is based on the personal experiences of 50 women academics. More specifically we interviewed women ethnic minoritised and majoritised PhD and post-doctoral researchers. Ethnic majoritised women are defined as women whose parents and grandparents were all born in Belgium. Ethnic minoritised women include three first-generations from the Global South and 21 second-third generation who were born in Belgium, having one or both parents and/or grandparents who migrated from the Global South. From the 50 respondents, there were 29 PhD students and 21 post-doctoral researchers. In addition, 17 of them worked in the fields of life and exact sciences while 33 respondents worked in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences.

We located 50 interviewees through diverse channels. The first respondents were contacted through an internet search of the different departments at the selected universities. After having the first interviews we worked with a snowball-sampling method which helped to obtain names of potential respondents. To avoid sampling-bias women were randomly contacted and asked to participate in an interview about their general experiences as an academic. It should be mentioned that this research includes women who were open to discuss their experiences. Many respondents were concerned about data-use and anonymity. After conducting several interviews, some interviewees requested follow-up meetings because of worries about revealing their identity. While there was a small non-response, four women (6%) decided not to participate for reasons of fear of recognition. They often requested to see the topic list and informed consent formulary in advance. While some explicitly mentioned they could not participate as they feared their privacy would not be guaranteed due to being the only woman in their department, others ended the

conversation telling us they would think about it and get back to us at a later time. This shows a fear culture of sharing your experiences and opinions on what might be going wrong within the university.

All interviews were carried out by the first author who is a women researcher with an ethnic minoritised background who is currently a doctoral student. This had some advantages for studying this particular topic as the interviewer perceived feelings of open-heartedness and safety from the interviewees. Some interviewees explicitly mentioned feeling safe talking to the interviewer and others indicated feeling they were talking to their psychologist referring to the complete honesty and sincerity in their stories. In addition, many women related back to the interviewer's cultural background or gender-identity constructing a sense of 'us' in expressions such as 'you probably also know', and 'I don't need to tell you that we as women..'. At the same time, we can expect that sharing the same background might lead respondents to explain less by assuming the interviewer knows the answer. We tried to pay close attention by asking for explicit explanations. Ethical approval has been granted by the ethical committee of the humanities and social sciences of the university in which the first author is employed.

The outline of the in-depth interviews is divided into 4 major themes. First, they were asked about their position in academia, such as their recruitment-procedure, contract type and current timing of their PhD or post-doctoral trajectory. Secondly, we asked for a description of the work climate and their relationship with key constituents. Thirdly, we discussed their experiences with inequality within their working environment. And finally, which is the main subject of this paper, we discussed the women's knowledge, perceptions, and experiences regarding the existing diversity policies from their institution. We first started with some general questions regarding their knowledge of diversity policies. If the respondents had considerable knowledge and awareness of the existing policies at their university, we delved more deeply into their perceptions and possible encounters with these policies. Respondents who knew less about their universities' diversity policies received more specific questions. To give an example, if the participants did not mention the practice of quota themselves throughout the interview, we started off with general questions: "Do you know about the current quota's regarding gender or ethnicity being used within your university or department? If so, what do you think about this practice?". Based on this general question, we either picked up on the quotas they had heard about most and their attitudes towards them or we provided the participants with specific information regarding the current quotas at their universities which allowed us to discuss their opinions towards specific forms of quota (e.g.

quota in boards, in recruitment..). The duration of the interviews ranged from between one to two and a half hours.

We followed the strategy from Braun & Clarke to analyse the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clark's framework provides six steps for conducting thematic analysis. The first author first became familiar with the data by going through the interviews several times. After reading an interview for a few times the author created initial codes that were most salient. Open coding allowed the development of codes and their modification at a later stage. After this step we looked for themes relevant to our research question. The codes that were interlinked and fitted together were assembled in a theme. Combining the codes into different general themes, these were again reviewed by checking whether each code supported the theme and suited the context of the data. In the final step we considered the essence of each constructed theme to agree on the final themes.

Results

Our findings suggest four themes that women discussed in view of their experiences with diversity policies. These themes are 1) perceiving diversity policies as window-dressing, 2) contradictory perspectives on compulsory measures such as quota, 3) the lack of attention to ethnic minoritised women, and 4) the lack of attention to the needs of mothers and/or parents.

Window-dressing

When discussing the diversity policies at their universities, it was interesting how few women had heard or knew anything about the policies. As Ahmed indicates, although universities are using the term diversity excessively to show their commitment, the real work often gets stuck in the HR-silo with the diversity practitioners (Ahmed, 2006). Diversity practitioners discuss the difficulty of dispersing knowledge as the majority do not conceive it to be a prioritized matter. The plans at the different universities were rarely an agenda point in meetings within their research group or department. R18 was surprised when I mentioned the diversity plans at her university:

It's really odd that we do not discuss this at our department meetings. Instead of all the formal stuff, I would rather find it more interesting if they [talk about the diversity policies]..is this plan from my university?

Most women indicate that these policies are not 'an issue high on the agenda' demonstrating the disinterest in generating a gender-friendly and equal work-environment. According to R7, the absence of diversity plans within the close work-environment might be to avoid conflict and/or resistance:

I also think that it would lead to a lot of resistance... just imagine talking about the plans at our department meeting. They would just immediately mock and joke about it.

This aligns with the notion of defensive institutional work as attention to topics regarding diversity and equality are perceived as inherently moving the attention away from the status quo. Change towards equality is perceived as resistance that can turn out to be threatening for those in power. The strategy of silencing is introduced. As we discussed previously, a fear culture pressures women not to speak about inequality and the mismanagement at their university. This silencing at an individual level is simultaneously silencing the work place as a whole. This strategy has been discussed by Essed (1991) as a way to push back perceived resistance.

Women who have, to a certain extent, engaged with diversity policies described its goals as 'vague' (R2), 'to keep up appearances' (R10), 'to sell a good image of the university' (R21) and 'not ambitious' (R3). In line with the critique on the non-performativity of diversity, they predominantly considered it as part of the university's marketing-strategy:

Especially those small things that the university does, it angers me. I think it's just so they can go to the press and say we did this and it's amazing. They should handle real problems, but no one wants that. I think, on university level, it is just about doing something that doesn't cost too much money and doesn't change too much not to get people mad.

Again, reference is made to how handling 'real problems', in this context that of resolving structural impediments for women, gives offence and makes people 'mad'. She also describes the underlying reason that change may not be allowed to happen. Strategically, 'small' actions in terms of their impact are organised to instil a perception that they take the matter seriously. While externally this perception may be instilled, internally employees see through the diversity-branding.

Most women demand actual change, referring to structural and cultural change instead of only touching the surface. R2 provides a great example of a gender-friendly management style that could enhance the structural recruitment of women faculty:

We need active encouragement. Now every university is putting a sentence at the end of their job vacancy that women are encouraged to apply. But they should be encouraged on a personal level. Like with me, if my supervisor never proposed me to [do a PhD], I would have never done it. And that's way more important and much more effective if you know somebody believes in you.

The performativity of diversity policies induced by the NPM-transformations at the universities have been noticed by the respondents. Women do not feel that these diversity policies are

fundamentally built around the notion of change. Instead they mention the branding-strategy behind the supposed diversity work.

Positive actions: separating women along disciplinary lines

While positive action such as quota are much more common in the American and British HE systems, European HEI have less experience with its implementation. Our respondents' views on quota are mixed and, notably, divided along disciplinary lines. Women working in the social sciences and humanities called for the implementation of compulsory measures, because 'this is a public institution and it's so not a reflection of society (laughs)'. R22 mentions the importance of quota for the next generation academics. She believes that having more women professors will encourage women graduates to apply:

A lot is said about the will to hire more women professors, but no money comes from the university top. I think they [management] want to commit to gender equality, but in practice I feel not much is happening, actually nothing is. I personally am an advocate for quotas, it's so important for students to have role models so they see it's possible.

On the contrary, many women from life and exact sciences considered these policies to work to women's disadvantage (R21):

I understand there's a serious backlog for women .. but I know that certain people will then receive a position that they do not earn. And I think that puts us in a bad light .. in the past we weren't taken seriously, we didn't exist, it was like oh you're still there. Now they see us, but in a bad light. That makes me more uncomfortable to be a woman than in the past.

The main reason for the dislike of compulsory measures is because they perceive it as 'flirting with positive discrimination' and women would be tokenized and as R8 says 'I would not want to be her'. R16 and R19 agree as they deem that we cannot expect an equal share of each gender in boards because the impediment lies in the marginal inflow of women students in these disciplines. Therefore, they define quota to be discriminating towards men:

As a man of course you must.. feel discriminated if you have been working so hard but a woman is given priority for a job application just because she's a woman.

Positive action has always been the centre of discussion within HE. The results show that opinions regarding the implementation of positive action seem to be divided along disciplinary lines. We can suggest that women from life and exact sciences, compared to women from social sciences and humanities, employ meritocratic ideologies instead of structural explanations for women's

positions (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010). Academia is often described as a place of merit and equal opportunities and is built on the principle of achieving one's position through hard work, effort and abilities. This ignores the structural inequalities that are omnipresent within the academic institution. As Deem finds that merit and excellence are considered the most relevant indices of an academic for university leaders and management, this idea of the university as a 'culture-fair meritocracy' may trickle down to employees who are less aware of the hidden structural dynamics that contribute to the reproduction of the university as an inequality regime (Acker, 2009; Deem, 2009).

Ain't I a woman? The exclusion of ethnic minoritised women in diversity policies.

Diversity policies in most universities prioritize gender equality. Ethnic minoritised women, however, do not recognize that the barriers they experienced are being tackled. While most diversity policies are predominantly related to student issues, gender policies are focused on the struggles of ethnic majoritised women. Women ethnic minoritised staff fall in-between and their different struggles – although in the same setting – are neglected. As R3 says 'we have to get rid of the barriers, but for all women. And not all women have the same barriers'. She backs this up by mentioning how the gender policies 'mainly focusses on white women and professors' implying the privileged group of ethnic majoritised women who already have the chance to land a post-doctoral position and a chance to tenure. This non-belonging in policies trickles down to a disconnection with the issues of their ethnic majoritised women co-workers (R5):

Sometimes I have the feeling that it's a luxury, a privilege to be dealing with those issues. There are other forms of discrimination that I have to deal with. It is because they do not see me as a woman, but as [ethnic minoritised group]. That's what it's about.

As Mirza's work (2006) shows, black women in the UK often decide to leave academia because they are invisible as diversity policies have not granted a safe and open space with equal opportunities for them. They indicate a need for more inclusiveness in the definition of a women researcher allowing for attention to the different forms of impediments they experience (R13):

Women are taking up more space and demanding to climb up in academia, and I think the same should be done for people with an ethnic background. You cannot do it alone .. that's why we need more solidarity towards academics with an ethnic background.

R13 expresses the slow transformation regarding gender, as they are taking up more 'space'. This academic space is constructed around the 'ideal academic' which primarily comprises heteronormative, white, masculine traits (Bourabain, 2020). While cracks are starting to unfold concerning the inherent masculinity of the job, whiteness tends to remain invisible. As these

policies are consciously or unconsciously built on this ideal type, they are unable to grasp the change necessary for women from different ethnic backgrounds.

Although Crenshaw (1991) came with the concept of intersectionality in the eighties, HEI diversity policies in the EU are still struggling with how to integrate this framework. Crenshaw had shown how black women in the US slipped through the cracks of the anti-discrimination law that was focused on gender discrimination or race discrimination, but no attention was offered to the combination of both forms (Crenshaw, 1991). What the ethnic minoritised respondents discuss is similar as they do not recognize themselves in these policies because they are directed to a restricted view of a women researcher. With the slow increase of ethnic minoritised women in HEI, the need for an intersectional approach is becoming more pressing.

Family-friendly policies: mothers of academia

When women talk about their expectations on the university's support, the most discussed topic was the need of family-friendly policies as their main hardships concerned being a parent. Women feel there is no space to be a mother and an academic and as R16, who is a mother of two children, phrases 'it should be okay to be a mother'. Several mentioned that these diversity policies have a blind spot for creating a family-friendly organisation:

It seems like you either should not have children and if you have don't make it appear you're a mom .. I worked in family-friendly companies, and I don't have the feeling this [university] is it.. It shouldn't be in your disadvantage to be away for a few months. I am convinced that being a parent is also a form of diversity that brings along its unique richness.

In Belgium women are allowed to take 15 weeks off for pregnancy leave (Fedweb, 2015). Although this national regulation is set in place, a variety of pregnancy regulations exist due to the amalgam of contracts for academics funded not only by the university but also external private and public agencies. R1, who wants to have children, in the near future, mentions how her funder would terminate her contract if she would take leave 'even though it's my right as an employee'. R7, for example, has had her children during her PhD but lost a year of funding because the funding agency had no regulations on pregnancy leave:

Having my children practically fell together with the duration of my PhD. So yeah, pregnancy, giving birth, breastfeeding.. I lost a lot of time. But the deadline stayed the same. I asked for an arrangement, but they did not want to pay me anymore. So, I had to solve it by participating to side-projects to finish my PhD.

Women who could take leave, discuss the disadvantages it brings about for their career. Taking time off would result in a gap in their CV:

I could take pregnancy leave, but for a post-doc it's all about how many publications you have, it doesn't matter if you were out for half a year due to pregnancy or parental leave.

For that reason, one woman (R23) decided to look for a tenure position abroad that pays more attention to her needs as a future mother. This university has a tenure-clock extension policy, meaning not to include the time women are away as part of their tenure term.

INT: And how do you feel about being a mother and work at the university? In the sense of work-life balance?

RESP: That's what I'm planning to do. It's possible, but I need .. support of my partner, I have that .. Support from the university. So with my tenure track, if I get pregnant, my tenure is prolonged. So I get a year for each child which is great.

The lack of standardized policy on pregnancy and parental leave creates a climate of shame and guilt. Shame derived from the expectation of continuing work while on leave (R11):

Is she not going to work during her pregnancy leave? What is she going to be doing then? Putting aside a PhD for three months, that's impossible. And I am thinking like, she's on pregnancy leave, she has a baby and stuff, you know?!

NPM in HEI have created dynamics of 'academic capitalism' (Münch, 2016). Academics are no longer only knowledge producers but are forced to combine their research with a maximization of profit. Within this entrepreneurial setting, success on an individual and institutional level is measured in terms of capital accumulation. On a national level, universities are considered profitable businesses that receive governmental funds based on their scientific output. The pressure on universities to satisfy the ceaseless demand of profit maximization trickles down to academics. Academics' achievements are evaluated on the scientific output they produce and how they turn them into profitable commodities. This output is imperative for their career development. As a result, this pressures academics to work around the clock and leaves no room for taking time off for personal and family reasons.

Feelings of shame and guilt were strengthened from absent substituting-arrangements. Women are either expected to work during their leave or individually find a solution. The most common solution was to find co-workers who would volunteer to take up the work as resources for substitution were often not provided. R11 experienced a situation in which her soon-to-be-mother

colleague was not granted any resources for temporary replacement. Her work would accumulate while away:

I started the discussion that we should do something .. come on giving people feelings of guilt because they can't work during their pregnancy leave! I asked is there any replacement; they said no. So no one is going to help her? She shouldn't be coming back to a pile of work.

Within the entrepreneurial university, academics rely on unstable contracts with few fringe benefits. As this respondent indicates, they are left to their own devices. Therefore, they need to look for colleagues who would take over their work for no pay or are expected to work while on leave.

Another issue was the inadequate infrastructure for mothers when returning to work, such as breastfeeding or pumping rooms. The government provides women employees the right to take a break of minimum half an hour and maximum an hour per day for breastfeeding or pumping (Fedweb, 2015). Yet, there is no infrastructure to take their breaks. Many women discuss this combined with a lack of privacy and comfort (R7):

I was breastfeeding and I always had to pump at work. And there was no designated space for it. There was no lock on the door, so everyone just walked in and out while I am sitting there half-naked. So, if you are talking about female-friendly work floors than they should really invest in breastfeeding rooms.

Also, R10, a mother of one, who previously worked abroad compares her past workplace with her current university:

In [foreign country] the university had one office in every building to pump or breastfeed. There was a couch and it was pretty. They called it the 'parent-child' office so if your child was ill but not too ill, and you have meetings, you used the office and it had toys, was carpeted .. There was also a desk to work. It's such easy things that could solve it.

These women are not only asking for mother-friendly policies, but a family-friendly one in which fathers are considered (R10):

It's not only women, male colleagues also have families. I sometimes say that it's not a gender issue, but a family issue. I see those who succeed are single colleagues or colleagues with partners who take everything upon them. I have a colleague who has a stay-at-home wife and two children. He went abroad for a year. But I also have a colleague whose partner also works and they have the same problem.

As R10 refers to the difference between the traditional male-breadwinner model and the dual earners model, it indicates how the capitalist system still relies on the ideal type of women as fulltime caretakers while men are able to focus on their work and career (Pfau-Effinger, 2004). However, in Belgian society dual earners are the most common household which leaves both men and women academics with difficulties to balance their work and family life.

These results indicate the urgency of a family-friendly perspective to foster equality among men and women academics in two ways. First, the respondents fell under an amalgam of different family regulations showing the need of a formal institution-wide policy both for women and men. Second, in line with previous research, the lack of formal policies creates a culture of fear, shame and guilt. Women feared for career penalties should they decide to take leave. According to Drago et al. (2006), women internalize 'bias avoidance' to go against key constituents' perceptions of unproductivity. As academia is a 'greedy institution' (Coser, 1974) that requires and expects full attention, women will minimize their leave even when they allow it. Therefore, a universal policy must be accompanied with a cultural transformation in which parents are included.

Conclusion and discussion

In the past decades, HEI have gone through major transformations to accommodate and adapt to new societal challenges. The increasing diversification of the student population and governmental pressures have developed policies and practices aiming at providing equal opportunities to students and staff. With the introduction of NPM and the consequent corporatization of HE, diversity policies were redefined into measurable outcomes rather than a goal to be achieved. Based on 50 in-depth interviews with women respondents from different ethnic backgrounds, we identified their experiences with diversity policies.

The results firstly demonstrate that, aside from the general lack of knowledge surrounding the existence and aims of diversity policies, many women described the lack of commitment towards actual change. In line with the raising criticism on the influence of NPM on diversity policies, women experienced these policies as a new marketing tool that no longer serves the aim of equality.

Secondly, as in previous research, compulsory measures for enhancing equality were a common point of discussion. Remarkably, women were divided on utilizing quota in higher executive commissions and boards. Women from life and exact sciences are less keen to its implementation as they fear tokenism and wrongful perceptions and undervaluation of their abilities. Women from social sciences and humanities were more demanding for compulsory

measures. They believe it is necessary to enhance the gender composition structurally in higher echelons. Differences along the lines of disciplines may be partially explained through the perceptual lenses on inequality (Park and Denson, 2009). We can suggest that women from life and exact sciences, compared to women from social sciences and the humanities, employ meritocratic ideologies instead of structural explanations for women's positions (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010). Meritocratic discourses may disregard structural factors of exclusion and discrimination and therefore be an impediment to putting gender equality on the agenda.

Thirdly, if we look at the existing diversity policies, attention is mainly diverted to gender equality. In Flanders, every HEI has a gender equality plan to enhance women's recruitment, retainment and promotion to full time professors. Therefore, the concept of diversity is mainly filled in by gender. Respondents from ethnic minoritised groups felt excluded as gender equality only concerned ethnic majoritised women's issues. Ethnic minoritised women disappear on the gender equality agenda. No attention is given to their unique and different experiences (Jones, 2006; Turner, 2002). Although intersectionality has found its way into HE, it is still not employed to the best of its abilities to widen the view of gender and power.

Finally, in line with previous research in the US and Europe (Drago *et al.*, 2006), many women struggle with balancing an academic career and family responsibilities. This is one of the reasons that women decide to leave academia as it is not sustainable long-term. Fathers who are also willing to make more time for family-responsibilities realize the absence of institutional policies for their needs. This is not only an organisational problem but is intertwined with governmental regulations. As mentioned, Belgium allows 15 weeks pregnancy leave of which only 1 week is mandatory. Because only 1 week is mandatory, this offers a window to shame women who decide to take longer maternity leave. Paternity leave is even more restricted with 10 non-compulsory days (Vlaanderen, 2020). It sustains a system that forces women to take up family-responsibilities after birth disadvantaging them compared to men counterparts who stay productive in NPM-terms building their career. Research indicates that universities designing family-friendly policies induce a climate of trust and loyalty among staff (Hollenshead *et al.*, 2005). It helps eradicate bias against caregiving and normalizes a healthier work-life balance. While the corporate sector has put family policies in place and demonstrates the positive effects for employees, improving their morale, and the business, in terms of cost effectiveness, Belgian HEI have yet to adopt a family-perspective in their diversity policies.

Diversity and equality should not only be about the outcome but should be mainstreamed in all spheres of the institution. If we want diversity policies to succeed, we need all levels of the

institution to be committed and engaged with the proposed goals. With this paper we wanted to show the perspectives of those targeted by these policies. Although women are the target, room for participation is required. Allowing them a say will lead to policies that align more closely to their issues and needs. This research showed several aspects that seem to be a gap for diversity officers and/or the university's executive management. The overarching issue was the lack of intersectionality. Based on the respondents' perspectives, this shortage appears in terms of ethnicity as well as family status. We can imagine that this might also be true for other identity-related aspects such as class, disability or sexual orientation. The replacement of equal opportunity to 'diversity' has not been as beneficial as predicted. While the main aim was to go beyond anti-discrimination and to include disadvantaged groups beyond gender, this has not been achieved as yet. Policy makers should raise more attention to an intersectional perspective that views identity as multidimensional. This multidimensionality of identity is the intersection of multiple axes such as gender, ethnicity and family status leading to a variety of experiences and hurdles that need to be addressed individually. Taking the previous in mind, we would like to offer some practical recommendations. The most imperative recommendation we would like to mention is the need for diversity in terms of personnel, thoughts and work within the HR department. UK Research shows how HR diversity work is mostly an ethnic majoritised women profession. Only 7% of HR diversity positions are held by ethnic minorities (CIPD, 2020). This already gives insight into the inequality existing within the profession that is responsible for making the institution equal. Secondly, bias against the quota system needs to be eliminated through clear communication of how this system works. Thirdly, universities need to create a family-friendly environment by, amongst others, introducing university-wide regulations on parental leave to avoid an amalgam of different regulations for different contracts. Besides that, infrastructural changes such as the availability of breastfeeding rooms can have a beneficial impact on employees' attitudes concerning work-life balance. Although these recommendations follow a quick-wins model, it is through small changes that resistance to institutional change is avoided on the one hand, and simultaneously change in perceptions, attitudes and beliefs among employees may lead to a change in the workplace climate to a more inclusive, equal and family-friendly one, on the other hand.

In addition, research shows that the reasons for which diversity officers believe that diversity policies turn into empty promises is the disinterest of the university's management (Ahmed, 2012). Therefore, future research should pay attention to the perceptions of university's management regarding diversity policies. In the US most research on the perceptions of university's management predominantly focusses on affirmative action, while less attention is paid to diversity policies in general. A UK-based study shows that management still struggles in

prioritizing diversity as they feel it does not align with the dominant principles of merit and excellence (Deem, 2009). While the perceptions of management were investigated to a certain extent in the US, there still remains a research gap in European HEI.

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¹ Belgium is divided into three language communities: the Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking part who have their separate educational systems.

