

# Where is equality? A dissertation on feminist academic activism in British universities

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## ABSTRACT

Until recent years, little attention has been paid to the discrimination that so-called minorised groups suffer within higher education in the UK. This dissertation acknowledges the power of feminist academic activism to tackle said discrimination. In order to explore this phenomenon, I firstly investigate how we acquire the stereotypes and prejudices that develop into discrimination, particularly within the academic environment. In the dissertation, I highlight the impact of teacher's and parent's roles and the influence of neoliberalism in academia, which raises barriers that hinder the careers of many scholars. I provide an overall picture of these barriers and their repercussion on the identities and well-being of many scholars, with specific interest on intersectional identities –such as racialised female academics. Finally, I delve into the relation between feminism, activism, and academia in order to prove that feminist academic activism is a valid countermeasure to the different forms of discrimination present in the academic environment of the UK. In fact, I conclude that feminist academic activism does not only contribute to the production of knowledge for social change, but it is also beneficial at a personal and individual level since it brings motivation, sense of comfort and contribution. In addition, I introduce three types of feminist academic activism as an illustration of the wide variety of courses of action that can assist with the enhancement of universities in the UK. A major limitation of this dissertation has been the lack of data regarding intersectional identities and gender identities aside from the traditional woman-man binary paradigm. I believe the topic of my dissertation is worth of further research, for which greater attention to diversity and inclusion of identities should be drawn.

**Key words:** Academic feminist activism, discrimination in academia, female and/or racialised academics, stereotypes and prejudices.

## GLOSSARY

- **Academia:** according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.), it is the “life, community, or world of teachers, schools, and education”. In this dissertation, I focus on two stages of the academic life: middle and high school, periods during which we acquire not only knowledge, but socializing skills and an overarching understanding of the world; and higher education, where we focus on students, teachers, researchers, and on the academics in senior positions.
- **Sex *versus* gender:** on the one hand, sex is a biological term that applies to anatomical, physiological, genetic, and hormonal variations that differentiate men, women, and intersex people<sup>1</sup> (Johnson & Repta, 2012). On the other hand, gender is socially constructed and focuses on the behaviours and attributes based on labels such as masculinity and femininity (Tolland & Evans, 2019). In addition, gender identity deals with an individual’s perception of themselves, and with the gender category they identify with from the gender spectrum<sup>2</sup> (ibid.).
- **Intersectionality:** intersectionality consists of the interaction of social and political categories –such as gender, ethnicity, age, disabilities, and sexual orientation to name a few— that may derive in advantage, or disadvantage and/or discrimination (Atewologun, 2018). In feminism, this notion is fundamental to conceptualising the relationship between systems of oppression that contribute to constructing our identities and our social positions (Carastathis, 2014).
- **Race *versus* ethnicity:** race relates to biological and/or physical traits such as skin colour, whereas ethnicity refers to cultural expression and identification, such as language (Blakemore, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Someone with both male and female physical characteristics (Britannica, 2020). Works as a continuum in the sex spectrum.

<sup>2</sup> Instead of a binary system, gender is considered to be a spectrum with man and woman on each end.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1901 and 2021 there have been 975 Nobel Prize laureates (Nobel Prize, n.d. a), among whom only 58 (5.9%) are women (NobelPrize.org, n.d. b). Furthermore, by 2019, 16 of the winners have been black, being women only four of them. In addition, none of them were awarded the prize for their contribution to the field of science (Migiro, 2019). This is not mere random data, but an objective reflection of the dominance of white supremacism and heteropatriarchy in the academic world. People who deviate from this pattern have been long neglected both in society at large and in academia in particular. These forms of discrimination have been present in academia since its birth, and although some advances have been made, the privileged position of white cis heterosexual males is still significant, the low number of female and non-white Nobel award-winners being only the tip of the iceberg.

In this dissertation I argue that feminist academic activism is a valid countermeasure to the multiple forms of discrimination present, in this particular case, in British academia. To this end, I will comment on the current situation of racism and sexism in academia as suffered by so-called minority social groups, paying special attention to women in the British context. Although the data regarding racialised female academics is scarce (Sobande, 2018), I seek to focus on gender and ethnicity intersections whenever possible. By way of theoretical framework, I will start explaining the notions of stereotypes and prejudices, on the assumption that they are both the foundation for and manifestation of the inequity underlying different forms of discrimination, such as psychological or physical abuse, as well as the rejection of the stereotyped individual or group. Secondly, I will explore how these preconceptions mould the minds of children, affecting their perception of themselves and others. In order to expose the influence of stereotypes during infancy and childhood, I will comment on the presence of sexism and racism in British schools. In the last part of the dissertation, I argue that these preconceived ideas are transferred to the academic environment, where they develop into further discrimination that affects the careers of many.

In order to display a picture of the academic barriers that many scholars have to face, I mention the influence of teachers and parents on children, and the neo-liberalisation of academia, which is responsible for the institutionalised academic discrimination that causes gendered and racialised pay gaps, misrepresentation, and low access to senior

positions for female and/or racialised academics. I also comment on the impact of such discrimination on the identities of many individuals within the academic environment. Finally, I address the power and necessity of feminism and feminist academic activism to tackle such situations.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice

Discrimination is by definition “the intended or accomplished differential treatment of persons or social groups for reasons of certain generalized traits.” (Heitmeyer & Salentin, 2021, para. 1).

#### 2.1.1. Types of discrimination

Among the different types of discrimination, I focus on the following, since, as we will see throughout the dissertation, these are the most notable ones present in academia.

- **Direct and indirect discrimination:** A direct form of discrimination takes place when someone differentiates intentionally (Brander *et al.* 2020). On the contrary, indirect discrimination occurs when a rule or criterion, which applies to everyone, puts a certain social group at a disadvantage (*ibid.*).
- **Structural or systemic discrimination:** A system –such as our society— which disadvantages groups of people through norms, routines, patterns of attitudes, and behaviour that raises obstacles to achieve equality (Brander *et al.* 2020). A common example of structural discrimination is institutional bias.
- **Occupational segregation:** it refers to the division of social groups into different types of employment. Occupational segregation may be broken down into vertical segregation, where more socially accepted identities are concentrated on higher and better paid positions, and horizontal segregation, which, by contrast, divides social groups into different disciplines (Scott, 2014).
- **Multiple discrimination:** This type of discrimination is closely connected to intersectionality. Someone may suffer from multiple grounds of discrimination because of their intersectional identities, or they may suffer from discrimination for different reasons and from different communities (Brander *et al.* 2020). For

instance, when a chicana<sup>3</sup> woman experiences racism from white people, and sexism from the Mexican community.

### 2.1.2. Forms of discrimination

There are countless identities, and therefore there are many forms of discrimination, such as discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, ableism, or classism. In this dissertation, I mainly focus on sexism and racism because gender and ethnicity are the most researched and tangible objects of discrimination in academia (see University and College Union, 2013; Pells, 2018; National Education Union and UK Feminista, 2017).

- Sexism: the form of discrimination that is based on the belief that men are superior to any other gender or sex and which contributes to the maintenance of patriarchy (Masequesmay, 2021). An example of this kind of discrimination is gender roles.
- Racism: the belief that we are separated by races and that some of these are superior (Smedley, n.d.). This is commonly justified by the assumed link between inherited physical traits and personality, intellect, morality, and many others (ibid.).

The abovementioned generalized traits that raise discrimination are really the subject of a mindset of negligence or underestimation, commonly known as stereotypes and prejudices, which are both cause and consequence of discrimination. Such generalized ideas are assumed to shape our perceptions from a young age and affect our private and professional lives later in life. As I will elaborate in the following sections, the object of stereotypes and prejudices varies widely, in turn due to the various types and forms of discrimination as indicated above. They may focus on gender, race, or sexual orientation, to name a few— which is the reason why many people are affected by them. I will especially focus on gender- and race-based discrimination within academia, but before engaging in this matter I will define what stereotypes and prejudices are, and how they develop and operate in society.

According to Blum (2004, p. 251) stereotypes are “false or misleading generalizations [...] immune to counterevidence”. Therefore, the stereotyper, who is in most cases not part of the stereotyped group, assimilates an inaccurate generalization to such degree that they deny or ignore any rebuttal that may undermine their discriminatory judgement. This

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<sup>3</sup> A woman born in the United States that comes from a Mexican immigrant family.

may happen consciously or unconsciously. The two main fields studying this occurrence are cultural and media studies on the one hand, and psychology on the other, each giving different but articulable definitions of stereotypes together with explanations of the processes of stereotyping. On the one hand, according to cultural and media studies, stereotypes are historically and socially constructed, and do not consist of an overgeneralization, but of a socially acknowledged association of a set of characteristics to a group. On the other hand, psychology focuses on the individual as the originator and user of purely personal stereotypes. These are maintained by different stereotyping processes such as ignoring or denying diversity within the group. For instance, let us imagine a stereotyped person who nevertheless does not fit in the stereotype mould -hence not carrying the expected label. How would the stereotyper behave? Classifying them as an exception to the rule of thumb that 'justifies' the 'labelling'. Blum (2004) justly considers these definitions to be cooperative by attributing a cultural argument to the stereotype itself and to its creation, and a psychological explanation to the process of stereotyping of each individual. Consequently, I would argue that it is thanks to a psychological process whereby an individual, upon realising how unfair and discriminatory such generalizations are, reacts against them that activism battling with a *status quo* of discrimination emerges.

Prejudice is a form of discrimination considered to be a consequence of stereotypes. This translates into the feelings and/or attitudes –positive or negative, the latter being more frequent– towards an individual from a social group (Marx & Ko, 2019). Another aspect that differentiates stereotypes from prejudice is that the former may be overtly expressed while the latter looms over silently. In other words, stereotypes are activated or overtly expressed under circumstances that depict a person or a group as minorised by those who believe in their inferiority or otherness to be a matter of negative judgement (ibid.). By contrast, the prejudice works as a filter through which we perceive reality (Brander *et al.* 2020). Stereotypes and prejudices are considered to be cognitive shortcuts, and together they create and maintain social inequality (Vescio & Weaver, 2013). In other words, these forms of social classification are mental processes that assist us in simplifying our world. However, while they allow us to devote cognitive resources to other tasks, they also lead to discrimination and inequality (ibid.).

Stereotypes and prejudices may be broken down into positive and negative. As we will see throughout the paper, positive stereotypes are usually related to white cisgender men,



locating them in a privileged position, while the negative ones are applied to what has historically been considered ‘the other’, i.e., women, racialized peoples, people with disabilities, people from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the countless possible intersections, among many other groups. It is to these groups that I would like to pay attention, portraying an overview of the discrimination they endure and calling for action against it.

## **2.2. Stereotypes and prejudices in British academia**

### **2.2.1. Discrimination among students.**

Stereotypes and prejudices surround us since childhood, which may conduce to an early internalization and endorsement of stereotypes. Experts and researchers’ opinions on the age that stereotypes are acquired vary from 6 months of age to 6 years old (see Katz *et al.*, 1997; Jaxon *et al.*, 2019; Master *et al.*, 2021). Although the difference is considerable, data shows that it is during infancy that we internalize stereotypes, changing in this way our perception of ours and others’ personality, abilities, and talents. In addition, this early acquisition of false categorizations could raise more extreme forms of discrimination during childhood and adulthood. These may go from physical and verbal aggressions to bigotry at an institutionalized level. In fact, discriminatory behaviour can be observed in many schools, particularly among students. Discrimination among students is part of everyday life in schools, and its normalisation may lead to further discrimination in academia, which I will describe in the following section.

According to a study on sexism in British schools by the National Education Union and UK Feminista (2017), sexual harassment<sup>4</sup> in schools is gendered, being in most cases<sup>5</sup> boys assaulting or targeting girls. Among the different forms of aggression, we may also find that sexist and homophobic language, as well as body shaming<sup>6</sup> are common in corridors and playgrounds. In the abovementioned research, 66% of the students that identify as female and 37% of the students that identify as male report to have experienced or witnessed discriminatory language at school (National Education Union and UK Feminista, 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> Any form of unwanted sexual approach, from physical touch to the generation of a hostile environment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> In the study we learn that 37% of the girls polled reported to have suffered sexual harassment, compared to 6% of boys (National Education Union and UK Feminista, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Unnecessary and harmful comments about someone’s physical appearance.

Racism is also very much present in British schools. The regularity of racist prejudices and aggressions in schools is accurately displayed in a study by Sarah Page (2020), where students from different ethnic backgrounds provide testimony of racism amongst pupils in UK secondary schools. In her study, Page echoes personal experiences not only to describe a reality but most importantly to give voice to minorised groups, as is expected in any feminist approach. Among the personal experiences, Page highlights one of the Muslim participant's record of a white male peer pulling her head scarf away, since such aggressions and harassment may result in identity issues that affect many children's school life. Racist aggressions, like the one just mentioned, result in identity issues that affect many children's school life. For example, another participant in Page's study stated that he had to move school because of the anxiety stemming from continuous racist physical aggressions. In many other cases, children who suffer from racist discrimination eventually drop out from school or university. In fact, 10.3% of black students resign from university, while the percentage of school dropout among the whole student population reaches 6.9% (Patrie & Keohne, 2017).

Racism is not exclusively internal in schools, participants in Page's survey describe how some schools, which are mostly attended by white children, make racist comments about schools that are ethnically diverse. Other common forms of segregation are the formation of gangs<sup>7</sup>. According to Page (2020), children's racist and violent conduct was parallel to what surrounded them in their community, which could be interpreted as mirroring the racist behaviour that adults around them would have, hence instilling racism into the youngster. I will delve into this issue further in the dissertation.

### 2.2.2. Stereotypes and prejudices in higher education

The early internalized preconceptions I have just described have a great impact later in life, on both personal and professional dimensions, with the academic realm being no exception. I would argue that there is a transfer of some of the generally accepted stereotypes and roles from childhood to adulthood, from student to professional, within the academic environment. The presence of prejudices in academia noticeably affects female and/or racialised scholars. For instance, there are degrees that are considered as 'for-women-degrees', on the assumption that they would suit them to foster skills or values that are perceived as inherent to a female identity, such as care-taking. This type

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<sup>7</sup> The gangs are described as "either white or black, not mixed" (Page, 2020, p.9), and are characteristic because of the racist violence that usually involves weapons such as sticks, knives, and knuckledusters.

of discrimination could be considered to be occupational, and as I argue in this section, the stereotypes and prejudices, on which such discrimination is based, can influence decision-making processes during childhood and mid-adolescence (Wood *et al.*, 2021), and it could also lead to marginalization and paucity of professional opportunities during adulthood.

In the academic environment, white cisgender males are once more considered to be more excellent, succeeding in their careers more easily. As a matter of fact, by 1840, 60% of women were illiterate while white men already had access to an education. In addition, it was not until 1878 that the access to university was granted to women –who were surely white– by the University of London (A History of Women’s Education in the UK). Until this date, higher education was exclusive to white cisgender men, and still, education remained biased until around 1920 (*ibid.*). The situation for racialised men was similar given that it was not until 1873 that the first black man was permitted to study at the university of Oxford (Liddell, 2017). By contrast, the first black woman entering Oxford University, named Kofoworola Ademola, did not register until 1932 (Della Sala, 2021). As we can appreciate, there is approximately a 5-year gap between the acceptance of the first white woman and black men, and a 60-year gap between the access to British universities of black men and black women. Thus, we should not ignore intersectionality when dealing with discrimination, considering that it makes a great difference, as the late admission to British universities of the first black woman demonstrates.

The presupposed intelligence and excellence of males facilitates their access to careers associated with great mental ability, like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Jaxon *et al.*, 2019). Research on the early acquisition of gender stereotypes about academic interests reveals that girls’ motivation and sense of belonging regarding computer science and engineering is much lower than boys’ interest (Master *et al.*, 2021). These researchers explain that gender-interest stereotypes have a great influence on decision-making (*ibid.*). In other words, women are usually instilled to look for professions such as teaching, nursing, or clean-up service, which fall into their designed label of caretaker, nurturer, feminine, and compliant. In academia this translates into humanities, education, and arts.

In a similar way, historically racialised people have fewer opportunities to enter the academic world, and when they become part of it, they may find they are judged,

stereotyped, and ignored. For example, in a research project on ethnic stereotypes about UK medical students, white students and teachers viewed Asian students as poor communicators and shy, which they justified with a lack of confidence due to linguistic barriers, or cultural differences regarding courtesy (Woolf *et al.*, 2008). Although white participants also perceived Asian students as hard-working and bright, most white medical students also thought that they were inflexible and less able to assimilate the white environment (*ibid.*). Another common stereotype regarding historically racialised people is that they are often assumed to specialise in their ethnic origins (Ahmed, 2017 as cited in Sobande, 2018). As I have indicated in the previous paragraph, such assumptions could impact on degree decision-making, or it may impede their access to other degrees that are not related to their ethnic origins.

There are further barriers for racialised female academics within academia, since they are not only expected to fit into the traditional gender roles, but they are also racialised due to their ethnicity. Furthermore, many academics feel the pressure to choose from either their gender or ethnic identity, and sometimes, ‘choosing’ is not even an option given that many racialised female academics feel ignored as women (Sang, 2016). This unfair treatment does not only discredit women that have fought for their position, but it also marginalises them. As I will comment in the two following sections, the sources and consequences of such overgeneralizations, which deny and/or question the abilities of many women, are diverse and frequent.

### 3. DISCRIMINATION IN BRITISH ACADEMIA

Having identified some of the most common academic stereotypes, in this section, I concentrate on some of the obstacles –such as the pay gap and misrepresentation— that female and/or racialised students, lecturers, and professors have to face in the academic environment. However, before describing the unfavourable situation for female and/or historically racialised academics, I will first outline how the discriminatory behaviours that I have mentioned to be present at earlier stages of life travel along. Having acquired such behaviour when young, many people will in the future continue to incite intolerance, lack of understanding –and therefore lack of respect and even violence—, if they do not become aware of such bigotry and decide to act and educate themselves against it.

### **3.1. Teachers' and parents' roles in the acquisition of academic stereotypes**

As I have already pointed out, I consider that the early acquisition of stereotypes and prejudices that lead to discrimination among students is not an innate phenomenon, but a reproduction of the social conduct we are exposed to in our surroundings. In other words, children are not born racist and/or sexist, they are raised –consciously or unconsciously— in one way or another, and probably acquire discriminatory conducts by copying what they perceive from the adults that surround them.

In the British context, the racist attitude of some teachers is mostly notable towards black Caribbean and Pakistani students, who are subject to teachers' low expectations. According to Demie (2022), teachers' low expectations about minorised groups are influenced by racism and may manifest in different ways. For instance, racialized students are usually punished more severely, frequently, and for misconduct that is not as bad as their white peers' (ibid.). It is also common to find that most black students are separated from their classmates and put in lower ability groups, whereas teachers' expectations of white students are much higher (ibid.). These low expectations together with patronising attitudes can give rise to demotivation and low performance in students (Richardson, 2005 as cited in Demie, 2022). Demie (2022) argues that it is the lack of teacher training and education to promote equality that cause racist incidents.

Likewise, there are differences on how teachers treat female and male students. As Riley (2014) states, teachers may convey sexist stereotypes and prejudices directly via behaviour or indirectly via classroom assessment. The author herself introduces this topic reporting her own experience with a teacher that congratulated her on “finally looking like a girl” (Riley, 2014, p. 2), which I think would be a fitting example of the more direct sexist behaviour of some teachers. As for the indirect biases, we may see that some teachers foster traditional gender roles by allowing boys a dominant and controlling attitude in discourse (Gunnarson, 1997). On the contrary, girls are usually taught and expected to be silent and to enact a function as helper that reinforces the traditional role of subordinate female (ibid.). Some teachers have the preconceived idea that motivation, focus, and organization are linked to the fact of being female, which results in teachers monitoring and surveying girls less (Rollock, 2007). This lack of monitoring together with teachers' low expectations of racialised students prompt the invisibility of black female students in schools (ibid.).

Furthermore, we can appreciate other common instances of teacher's sexist classroom arrangement that may not be related to discourse or academic abilities, but with physical ones. For instance, when teachers ask boys exclusively to carry out physical tasks, such as moving chairs or desks, implying in this way that women are weaker than men. Indeed, many British female students report disagreement and call for the same opportunities as their male peers (National Education Union and UK Feminista, 2017). The explanation for this circumstance is, once again, misinformation and lack of teacher training on gender equality and unbiased teacher-to-student treatment. According to National Education Union and UK Feminista, only 22% of secondary school teachers have received formation to first recognize and then tackle sexism. Nevertheless, 62% of primary and secondary school teachers are willing to receive said training. Therefore, as we will see in the following section, the problem does not rely solely on the teachers as individuals, rather on a system that does not provide academic professionals with the necessary tools.

The role that parents take in these cases is also crucial. As mentioned above, the surroundings can have a great impact on children, in their forming ideals and personality. I would argue that when parents normalize biased beliefs, it is more probable that their children behave the same way, or they may adapt themselves to the mould that their parents see adequate. In other cases, it is just a matter of misinformation. Many parents do not know how to address matters of racism and sexism with their children, and others do not even bother. According to Sáinz, Martínez, and Meneses's research, students whose parents had university degrees or high educational attainments are more likely to confront sexist situations (2020). Presumably because they have had access to the necessary information to undertake these situations, and therefore, they have been able to instruct their children on how to address and handle sexist circumstances. In the case of racism, it is more common for non-white parents to educate their children about this matter (Ramachandran, 2021), arguably because these parents want to protect and give their children the tools to confront situations that they may have gone through. However, the endeavour of these parents alone may not be enough for progress to take place. As I see it, it is more urgent to educate those in assumingly privileged and unmarked positions, i.e., white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, and male people.

All in all, parents and teachers, as role models, should be aware of their position of influence and be careful with how they behave and talk to and around children and young people, since it could lead to discrimination, either conscious or unconscious.

In fact, the discrimination that children bare, not only among them, but also from teachers and other adults, could provoke low academic performance, identity issues, and an increase and standardization of unfair thinking and treatment.

### **3.2. Institutions and the neo-liberalization of academia**

In addition to the influence of parents on students' way of understanding the world and teachers' misinformation, the present neoliberal academic structure in the UK raises sexist and racist systematic barriers. These make many minorised people face disadvantageous situations during their careers as academics –such as economic gaps, misrepresentation, or low access to senior positions.

To understand this conception, we should start by learning what neoliberal academia is. By definition, Neo-liberalism is:

[The] ideology and policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition. [...] [It] is often characterized in terms of its belief in sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress, its confidence in free markets as the most-efficient allocation of resources, its emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital. (Smith, 2019, para.1)

So, we could say that Neo-liberalism is closely related to capitalism. Indeed, the only difference between one and the other is that Neo-liberalism is a philosophy, while capitalism is an economic system (Boettke & Heilbroner, 2022). How is this related to academia? Neo-liberalism has spread to many aspects of life, including the academic context. Some label the interference of this ideology in universities as 'academic capitalism'. This focuses on productivity and remodels universities into businesses that compete for capital (Münch, 2022). The fixation on productivity and on the creation of new capitalized knowledge incites capitalist exploitation, that is, British universities employ precarious contracts and increase the workload, which mainly affects women, queer people, racialised people, and the working class (Deschner *et al.*, 2020). This is so presumably because, in a system where individuality is the mainstream, historically marginalised people feel the obligation to work considerably more so as to achieve the same results that a person in a privileged position would. Therefore, we could say that this system erects barriers that ward of any support to the so-called 'other', and prevent many from equal pay, access to senior positions, or proper representation, among others.

The cultural and structural forms of discrimination described above manifest in different ways. In the following sections I will mainly focus on the pay gap among faculty personnel; on the misrepresentation and low access to senior positions of female and historically racialised people; and on the identity issues that these raise.

### 3.3. Pay gap

According to the Equality Act 2010, –which applies to England, Scotland, and Wales– it is illegal to pay individuals differently for the same job (New JNCHEs, 2018). The provisions in the act address explicitly the gender-related pay gap, but the Act also protects workers from other forms of discrimination, such as racism (ibid.). Nonetheless, before the Equality Act 2010 was passed, there were many disparities in salaries and lack of transparency across British universities. This is because, although a minimum pay point was established at a national level by the Equal Pay Act 1970, each university could still regulate, at a local level, how the pay rates were determined above said minimum (University and College Union, 2013). Notwithstanding the Act, the pay gap in universities is not an inequality from the past. In this section I will look at the pay gap percentages of 2010/11, and I compare them to recent years, in order to find if there has been any improvement.

By 2009/10, the average gender pay gap for full-time professors in universities from the UK was 6.3%, the largest gap in favour of men being 20.2% in the St George University, London (University College Union, 2013). These numbers were consistent throughout the 2000s decade and continued to be similar during the following years. By 2016/17, the overall mean gender pay gap from 198<sup>8</sup> English universities was 10% with differences across academic professions (University and College Union, n.d.). In terms of leadership and management, there was an annual difference of £3,189, which translates into a gender pay gap of 7%; female trainers, instructors, assessors, and verifiers earned 4% less than their male peers; and among lecturers the difference was of 3% (ibid.). In the report, the University and College Union (UCU) also details that although the number of female workers is significant, there were still differences in their salary (ibid.). In 2018 the situation was no better, there being a median average gap of 9.7% in higher education (Pells, 2018).

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<sup>8</sup> From 2010 on, the data is more precise and larger in number than before because the Equality Act 2010 requires British universities to submit annual report on the staff number, payment, etc.



In the case of racialised people it was more difficult to calculate the pay gap during 2010/11 because there is lack of data (University and College Union, 2013). Examining the data that I have had access to, it can be seen that there was a significant pay gap in favour of white people in England, with a difference between 9.7% and 3.6% in their salaries (ibid.). Overall, in the UK, the salary that black professors earned was 9.4% lower than their white colleagues', the Chinese professors' salary was 6.7% lower, and professors from other ethnicities earned 3.5% less (ibid.). According to the UCU's analysis of the 2017/18 staff record (2019), differences in payment among scholars of different ethnic origins got worse during these years. Historically racialised academics were paid 9% less than their white peers. Black academics are the ones that suffer the biggest economic gap, with a salary difference of 14% (ibid.). Actually, black academics earn the lowest salary irrespective of their position: the difference in income for professors, senior academics, and mid-career academics is 7%, 3%, and 2% respectively.

The gender pay gap is present in both white and non-white groups, but the difference among white and racialised males is usually larger than among white and racialised women (Advance HE, 2018). Therefore, we could say that, taking intersectionality into account, ethnicity becomes a major factor among men, but among women it is arguably gender. In addition, having compared the gender and ethnicity pay gaps, during the last ten years the changes have been either minimum or non-existent.

*Table 1. Average gender pay gap*

<b>2009/10</b>	<b>2016/17</b>	<b>2018</b>
6.3%	10%	9.7%

*Table 2. Average ethnicity pay gap*

<b>2010/11</b>	<b>2017/18</b>
3.6% - 9.7%	9%
<b>Black: 9.4%</b>	<b>Black: 14%</b>
<b>Chinese: 6.7%</b>	
<b>Other ethnicities:</b>	
3.5%	

### 3.4. Misrepresentation and low access to senior positions

In addition to the pay gap present among academics in the UK, the representation of minorised groups in British universities is scarce. This is particularly common in senior positions, given that the presence of historically minorised academics decreases at higher and higher hierarchical levels. This form of discrimination is defined as vertical segregation. Some slow improvements have been made since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the gendered and racialised difference among senior academics is still vast and evident. The lack of representation and diversity in British universities can contribute to the normalization of whiteness, and thus to the prevalence of white supremacy in universities, along with marginalization of various identities.

In 2000/01, the percentage of historically racialised professorial staff was 3.9%, which raised to 7.3% in 2010 (University and College Union, 2013). This slow progression was certainly not enough, given that British universities were employing mostly white academics, especially among higher positions. By 2010, the number of non-professional staff from racialised groups (13.3%) was nearly twice as high as that of professorial positions (7.3%) (ibid.). Among the historically racialised professoriate, only 0.4% were black academics, this ethnic group being, once more, among the most disfavoured ones (ibid.). This vertical segregation has positively changed during the last ten years, but inequity still prevails. According to Higher Education Staff Statistics (HESA, 2022), in 2020/21, 17% of the academic staff in the UK were black and minority ethnic (BME), among whom half were Asian. In recruitment and promotion processes, the access to professoriate positions is more demanding for racialised people, especially female, than it is for their white counterparts, since the lack of transparency regarding promotion decision-making processes causes delays by several years for female and racialised scholars to attain professorship (Rollock, 2019).

In the case of female academics, representation has increased but vertical segregation holds sway. In 2000/01, 12.6% of the academics at a professorial level identified as women, which increased to 19.8% in 2010/11 (University and College Union, 2013). Although there was some progression, if we compare the numbers of professorial (19.8%) and non-professorial (46.8%) female academics, we can see that, during 2010, gendered vertical segregation in universities was still severe. Fortunately, some aspects have improved during the last years. HESA states that by 2020, 42% of the academic staff and 63% of non-academic staff was female. In addition, according to Jarboe's report (2018),

half of all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had gender-balanced boards in 2018, and university board memberships for women increased from 32% in 2013 to 40% in 2018. Nevertheless, there are many aspects in which equality is long way from being achieved. In 2018, the majority of chairs and vice-chancellors were still men, women only representing 27% and 29% of them respectively (ibid.). Furthermore, I would suggest that these percentages are not representative of all women in every field. Most reports do not reflect the horizontal segregation that is more apparent in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Moreover, the approach of most reports is not intersectional, that is, the reports do not display the combination of multiple identities, such as ethnicity and gender. If they did, we would see that the number of non-white female academics is scarce.

As Begum and Saini (2019) state, the lack of diversity in academia is precarious given that a white middle-class heterosexual cisgender man cannot relate to the experiences of minorised groups such as female and/or racialised academics and students. The researchers consider that mentorship and support from academics in lecturer or senior positions contribute to the sense of belonging and career trajectory of many early academics (ibid.). I deal with some aspects such as the sense of belonging in the following section, since one of the main consequences of discrimination in academia is its impact on the identity of many scholars.

### **3.5. Impact on identity**

Social roles, stereotypes, prejudices, and the discrimination that these bring about, contribute to the development of our identities. In academia, whiteness has been established as the norm, and white males as the neutral occupants of this space, embodying the universal individual in racialised and gendered terms (Wright *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, although the qualifications and skills of female and/or historically racialised academics prove them “insiders” (Wright *et al.*, 2007, p.151) in the academic world, they—especially racialised women—cannot help feeling as invaders since they do not fit into the traditional label of white male academic (ibid.). For this reason, many scholars try to assimilate into the imposed whiteness (Rollock, 2019). This attitude, both regarding behaviour and appearance (ibid.), has become part of being an academic for many. For instance, as one participant in Rollock’s study states, some black female academics avoid wearing their hair in a natural style. Another suitable example is the fact that many racialised people find more interviews when they substitute their surnames for ones that

sound more English (Page, 2020). Therefore, the normative culture of the academy pushes people to disguise their own cultures, preferences, or identities, and it erects barriers for the ones that choose to get rid of the masks (Wright *et al.*, 2007).

Many academics feel constantly questioned and ignored, which may lead them to doubt of their own abilities and willingness to continue with their careers. For instance, many racialised female professors are commonly mistaken for students, and therefore disregarded as authority figures (Wright, 2007). This passive form of discrimination can be taken as a consequence of the lack of representation and normalization of female and/or racialised scholars in academia, and it contributes to the aforementioned sense of isolation (*ibid.*).

In short, the previously explained deficit in promotion, the passive discrimination, and patronising behaviour from co-workers and students, and the barriers that institutions impose—such as the gendered and racialised pay gap—, endanger the sense of belonging and reproduce marginalisation, which results in loss of confidence and/or assimilation. Not to mention that loss of confidence and marginalisation are some of the main reasons for women’s self-silencing and may even lead to identity threat<sup>9</sup> (Purdie-Vaughns *et al.* 2008 as cited in London *et al.* 2012). Self-silencing and identity threat can contribute to the low production of research and literature by women. Nevertheless, the low publication rates are mostly the consequence of the prioritisation of men in academia. Indeed, Lillis and Curry (2018) comment that even in research fields dominated by women in number, men publish the top papers. The women who publish are usually segregated into different fields considered to be more ‘feminine’, such as empirical work, whereas men are more inclined to theory (*ibid.*). Therefore, we should add self-silencing and low production and/or publication to the marginalisation, loss of confidence, and assimilation of minorised groups.

#### 4. FEMINISM AND ACTIVISM IN ACADEMIA

In the face of the discriminatory situations and processes I have commented, many feminist activists have raised in order to fight for their positions and their rights. In this section, I attempt to provide a picture of the presence of feminism in academia and the

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<sup>9</sup> The underperformance in evaluative situations due to the interiorization of a given stereotype. For example, women are believed to be bad at maths, and therefore many women underperform in said field (Purdie-Vaughns *et al.* 2008 as cited in London *et al.* 2012).

power and necessity of feminist activism. For this purpose, I explain how the feminist movement is connected to academia. Secondly, I will comment on the importance of activism within both the feminist and academic environments. Finally, I provide three types of activism, together with an example of each, which aim to call attention to the institutionalised discrimination and the stereotypes and prejudices that many academics uphold.

The trajectory of feminism is usually divided into four so-called waves. The first wave started around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the second during the 1960s, the third is considered to begin in the mid-1990's, and the fourth emerged around 2012. We refer to the people that focused their attention on gender issues before the 19<sup>th</sup> century as proto-feminists, who were individuals, usually from elite positions in society that had been thus (well) educated. A well-known author that is considered to be a proto-feminist is Italian philosopher Cristine de Pisan, who is to be credited with being the first to demand education for women as early as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This debate did not reach England until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with authors like Jane Anger or Mary Astell speaking out for women's right to education (Burkett & Brunell, 2021). During the Enlightenment –17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries—, feminism started to take form into a more coherent, but still unnamed, movement (ibid.). Among the most eminent proto-feminist voices from this period, we can find Mary Wollstonecraft, whose piece *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*<sup>10</sup> has helped to advocate for equality among women and men in the economic and educative dimensions.

These early ideas of equality together with the notions of freedom brought by events like the French Revolution (1789) or the rise of abolitionism culminated in the organization of women commonly known as the Suffrage Movement (Burkett & Brunell, 2021), arguably the starting point of the first feminist wave. This organisation vindicated equality and the vote for women, and it was constituted by and focused on white women from middle and upper classes (ibid.). In 1918, the right to vote was granted to British women, which fractured the movement into the ones that thought the vote was 'enough' and the ones that did not think so (ibid.). It was not until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's that women organised themselves once more. This wave focused on issues such as sexual liberation and domestic violence, which involved an important break from

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<sup>10</sup> Wollstonecraft, M., Brody, M., Brody, M., & Wollstonecraft, M. (2004). *A vindication of the rights of woman* (Rev., Ser. Penguin classics). Penguin Books.

the previous stage. Nevertheless, the movement continued involving and addressing solely white cisgender women from privileged classes (ibid.). Most of these women presumably had access to education, which along with the rise of social sciences during the 1970s, enabled feminism to enter academia (David, 2015). Thus, feminist materials and resources, such as the distinction between sex and gender, began to proliferate (ibid.). During the 1990's, those born during the second wave started conforming the third wave. They differed from their predecessors in that they recognised the importance of intersectionality and opted for deconstructing and then reconstructing issues such as gender and the gender spectrum, sexuality, or femininity (Burkett & Brunell, 2021). Finally, the fourth wave started around 2012, when the popularisation of social media brought an increase of reports of discriminatory and dehumanizing situations such as sexual harassment, rape, and racism, among others (ibid.). Some still debate the existence of the contemporary wave, however, the expanded access to the Internet, which not only allows to denounce said circumstances but also grants access to information, has become a key component that separates the fourth wave from the preceding one (ibid.). The proto-feminists and feminists I have just mentioned together with other feminist academics such as Angela Davis, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Judith Butler, among many others, have fought, and still fight, to open the public, economic, politic, and academic spheres to women.

Although there have been breaks and divisions among these women throughout the years (Burkett & Brunell, 2021), the one thing they have in common is that they have all spoken up, and they have thus become activists. By definition, activism is “[the] practice that emphasizes direct<sup>11</sup> vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Hence, I would argue that activism is an inherent element of feminism, since it fights patriarchy and focuses on reforming politics, traditions, and society. In fact, most of the definitions given for ‘feminism’ make reference to the organization and advocacy that is characteristic of this movement (see Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Most importantly, the activist character inherent in feminism has contributed greatly to academia. As I have previously displayed, academic issues have been present in the feminist agenda since its beginning,

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<sup>11</sup> I do not completely agree with such definitions, since “measuring the success of activism solely in relation to its visibility and the immediacy of its effects, can uphold neoliberal notions of productivity and speed over sustainability” (Sobande, 2018, p.85)

which has not only enabled women enter the academic environment, but it has also made feminist activism within academia possible.

The sometimes subjective character of activism leads some to claim that it is not compatible with the objectivity of academia (Baldwin, 2021). Nevertheless, I would argue that academia has been a tool for activism, which has accordingly created a relationship between these two dimensions. In fact, Flood, Martin, and Dreher endorse that academia and activism can be cooperative in different ways (Flood *et al.* 2013): to produce knowledge to inform social change; to conduct research that seeks social change, when applying progressive teaching and learning strategies; and to reconstruct and challenge the power relations within the academic realm. In addition, academic activism can bring individuals comfort, sense of contribution to a greater good, and motivation regarding research and public engagement (*ibid.*). Therefore, as I see it, academic activism, especially feminist academic activism, is a form to fight inequity through knowledge which may not only contribute to social change, but it can also bring benefits at a personal and professional level, contributing to the individual's inner growth.

There are many different forms of feminist activism within academia, such as the research on the disadvantages that minorised groups face (see Wright *et al.*, 2007), or social media activism (see Bates, 2012), to name a few. For the last part of the dissertation, I address three types of feminist academic activism: self-organisation, literary and artistic activism, and accidental activism. For the sake of a better understanding, I make use of one example of each form of activism. The main reason for me to focus on these models is that they report on the fighting against different forms of discrimination within academia, as empirically observed in the British context. The first example tackles the aforementioned institutionalised discrimination and the neo-liberalisation of academia, while the second and third lay emphasis on the stereotypes and prejudices about academic abilities and talents that some individuals in the academic environment hold. As already pointed out, reporting on personal experiences is a common tool in feminist academic activism, since it helps give voice to those who have been marginalised. Accordingly, the review I make of the three projects chosen to illustrate feminist academic activism describe true stories.

#### **4.1. Self-organisation**

Community building projects and self-organisation have been prevalent forms of feminist activism. A well-known instance would be the consciousness raising groups that proliferated during the 1960s and 1970s, where women raised awareness about gender

roles by opening up to each other (Randolph & Ross-Valliere, 1979). To illustrate that such forms of organisation have also reached academia, I will draw on Deschner, Dorion, and Salvatori's (2020) multi-vocal autoethnography. The authors state that:

Feminists within academia have started organising amongst themselves, to survive academia and provide collective support to each other, and to change the way academia works and pushes its members to adopt individualistic practices (Deschner, Dorion, & Salvatori, 2020, p.326).

On account of the lack of active collaborative learning space to meet within universities, Deschner *et al.* (2020) did precisely fill that gap by organising a workshop with the intention to create a space enabling them to join the resistance to the neo-liberalisation of academia. This form of organisation gives place to mutualism, solidarity, and empowerment in a realm dominated by individuality and competition (Deschner, Dorion, & Salvatori, 2020). In addition, the authors opted for prefiguration, an approach that aims to recreate the experience of what is wanted to be politically achieved, in this particular case, the authors aimed for inclusiveness and empowerment (*ibid.*). The autoethnographic character of the research paper may contribute to the prefigurative perspective, considering that it gave the authors the opportunity to tell theirs and others' experiences and to identify patterns that could lead them to reflect on their own privileges.

Before engaging with the explanation of the process of their organisation, the authors set a framework by denouncing neoliberal feminism<sup>12</sup>, post feminism<sup>13</sup>, and the managerial<sup>14</sup> character of the neo-liberal academia they are members of. In this way, they provide the context of their project while they also harness the space granted by the publication of their research to explicitly expose the unfair neoliberal system that raises barriers for many minorised groups in academia. Once they set the framework, they explain the nature of their project, which consisted of meetings among feminist scholars, artists, and activists outside the university building that integrated discussions, PowerPoint presentations, and art exercises about their experiences on feminist organising –such as community building or social media activism. The authors point out that one of the main

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<sup>12</sup> Neoliberal feminism focuses on white cisgender straight women and claims empowerment by means of economic and career success (Deschner, Dorion, & Salvatori, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Post feminism supports the idea that gender equality has been achieved (Just et al., 2018 *as cited in* Deschner, Dorion, & Salvatori, 2020) and that therefore feminism is no longer necessary.

<sup>14</sup> Managerialism is defined as the inclusion of private sector management approaches in public organisations. (Acker & Wagner, 2019 *as cited in* Deschner, Dorion, & Salvatori, 2020)

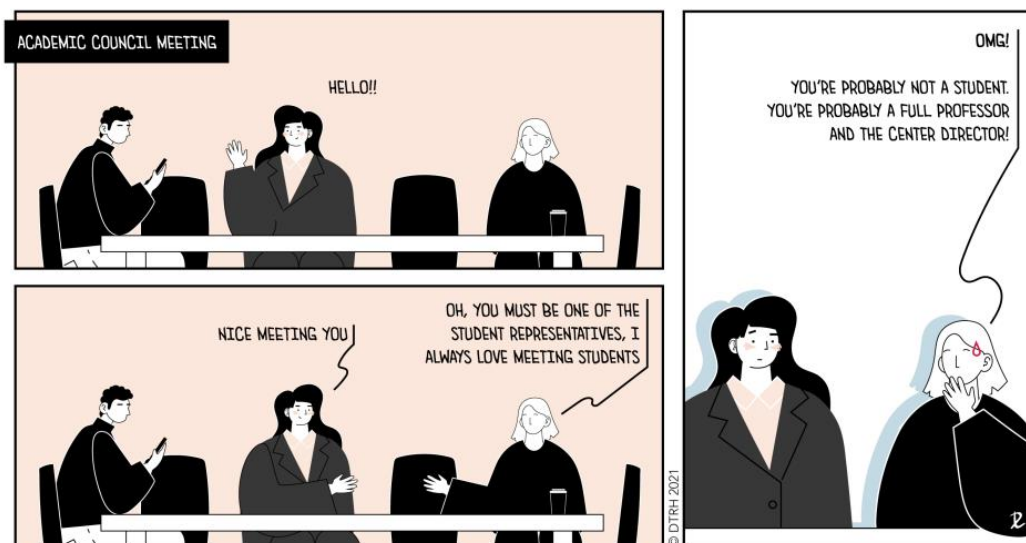


limitations for them was to manage the tensions generated because of the internalised hierarchical habits of neoliberal and patriarchal institutions, giving this way visibility to the consequences of such hierarchizations. Although they encountered limitations, the project helped to create community, and by publishing their stories they sought to contribute to collective empowerment.

#### **4.2. Literary and artistic activism**

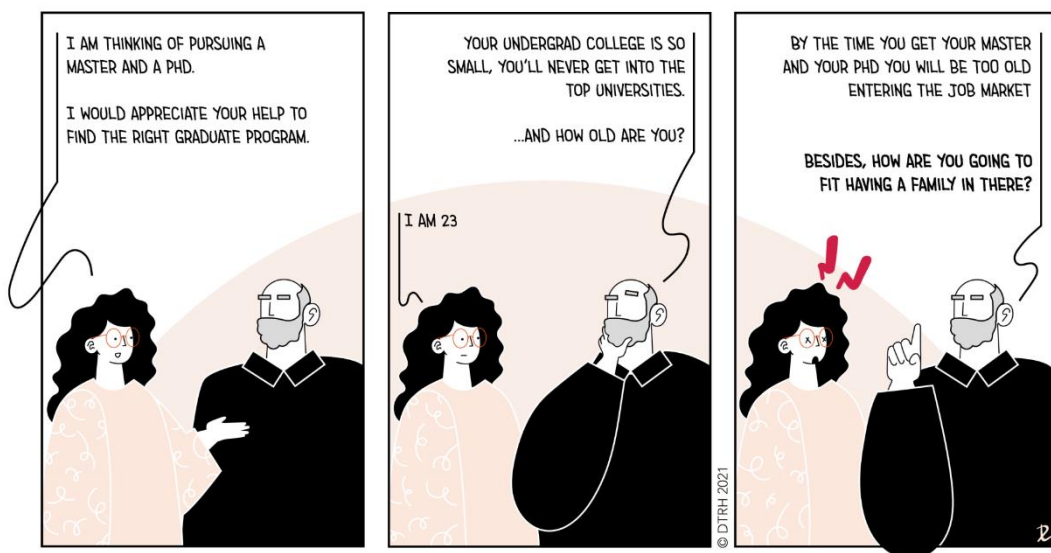
Works of art have always been considered great representatives of many cultures, and since the 1990s, they have also been used as an instrument to increase attention towards social movements and organisations (Goris & Hollander, 2017). In fact, art is considered to be one of the most frequently used tools for civic engagement, given that it helps forming movements' identity, it functions as a vehicle to transmit messages, it attracts recruits, and it generates attention debate, commitment, and recognisability (ibid.). Furthermore, the eye-catching character of artistic pieces helps activists reach many audiences and spaces in a society where the ever-increasing amount of information can be overwhelming (ibid.). For all these assets, many feminist academics have decided to rely on art and make use of images and artistic illustrations when they want to denounce injustice or inequity. By way of example, I have selected the project “Did this really happen?” (Bocher *et al.* 2020), with which a female team of researchers denounce many forms of discrimination by gathering and publishing anonymously day-to-day sexism and its intersections in the form of comic strips. The researchers denounce and bring awareness of (un)conscious biases present in the male dominated STEM fields. This project does not focus on institutionalised discrimination, but rather on prejudices and stereotypes held by many individuals within the academic community as it can be seen in figures 1, 2, and 3.

Figure 1. You must be a student. (Adenis, 2021a)



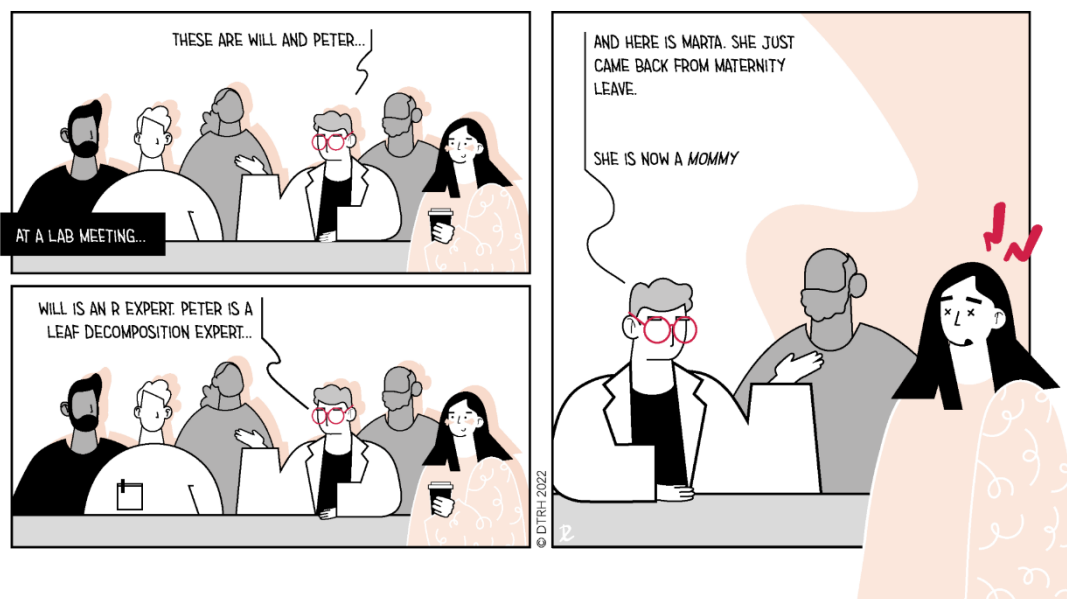
This comic strip addresses a scene in which a woman is mistaken for a student. As we have already commented, this kind of underestimation can cause discomfort and it may also derive in loss of confidence, marginalisation, and self-silencing.

Figure 2. Fit a family in there (Adenis, 2021b)



In this second comic strip we can observe that a woman is being underestimated because of her age. In addition, she is expected to give up on her aspirations in order to fit into the traditional role of mother and caretaker.

Figure 3. *She is a mommy* (Ademis, 2022).



In this last example, we are shown how women are perceived in comparison to men within the academic environment. While Will and Peter are presented together with their professions, detailing their field of expertise, Marta is not. Instead, the speaker refers to her as a mother. This way, the speaker belittles Marta’s achievements and gives more importance to what has been historically acceptable for women.

The visual dimension together with the narrative element of self-experiences present in the comic strips are, as I see it, ideal mediums to raise awareness, since it is an attractive and easy way to understand and fight (un)conscious biases and preconceived ideas.

### 4.3. Accidental academic activism

I came across the concept of accidental academic activism when I read the autoethnographic piece by lecturer, researcher, and writer Francesca Sobande, where she reflects on the concept of activism and on her own experiences as a black, and mixed-race, female academic.

During her PhD on marketing, Sobande states to have experienced situations in which she was cautioned against being the one who does “the race work” (Sobande, 2018, p.89), or she was labelled as too political and radical because of focusing on black women. Such commentaries led the researcher to the conclusion that even if someone from a marginalised group does not identify themselves as an activist, they may still find that people expect them to be so just due to their existence in a space that under-represents

them (Sobande, 2018). It is for this reason of (mis)identification that the concept of accidental academic activism plays an important part, because, as Sobande explains “[this concept] sheds light on exertions of agency, as well as structural forces which impact the development of the identities of individuals in higher education.” (2018, p. 91)

## 5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation highlights the necessity of feminist academic activism to tackle the heteropatriarchy and white supremacy present in universities in the UK. These systems of oppression are based on stereotypes and prejudices, which are the cause and consequence of discrimination against minorised groups, such as female and/or racialised academics. The maintenance of discriminatory situations in many British universities is in part due to the early acquisition of stereotypes and prejudices, which alters our perception of ours and others’ abilities. This can develop into further segregation and injustice later in life, in this case in the academic life. In the dissertation, I argue that some of the main transmitters of academic stereotypes and every-day discrimination are teachers and parents, whose role-model positions can have a great impact on children and young people. This, in addition to the institutionalised discrimination brought by the neo-liberalization of academia, has raised barriers such as pay gaps among scholars, or the misrepresentation and low access to senior positions of female and/or racialised academics. In fact, the differences in payment and misrepresentation are not the only obstacles for minorised groups, since marginalisation and identity issues also prompt self-silencing and low publication rates. In order to fight the neo-liberalisation of academia, many scholars have decided to apply feminist academic activism into their work, since academic activism is a powerful tool for social change. Finally, I displayed three types of feminist academic activism –self-organisation, literary and artistic activism, and accidental activism—that contribute to and fight in the battle for equality in academia.

While doing the research for this dissertation I have discovered and learned many aspects regarding universities in the UK that I ignored. However, the data and research available has sometimes been insufficient in that, although there is an increasing interest in discrimination in higher education, there is a lack of research on intersecting identities. Moreover, many reports only show binary gender systems that exclude other identities from the gender spectrum (see HESA, 2022; University and College Union, 2013; University and College Union, n.d.). Therefore, I would like to call not only for more



feminist academic activism that can help with the improvement of universities in the UK, but also for more inclusive and diverse research on the present discriminatory situation.

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