

# HOW TO TALK ABOUT SEXISM AT AAU

Based on “Sexism in Danish Higher Education and Research”.



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## INTRODUCTION

In early October 2020, 16 individuals from six different research institutions, began to cast light on the prevalent and ongoing problem of sexism in Danish Academia.

This led to 689 signatures and more than 800 testimonies which has provided insights into how sexism and sexual harassment in Academia take place.

It can happen to anyone – even though the majority of victims are women. It has obvious cultural and structural characteristics and flourishes in hierarchies of power and under competitive and precarious conditions where some are oblivious to their privileges and others are particularly exposed.

To protect the anonymity of the respondents, the testimonials have been re-written into 28 cases. In this document AAU present 4 of the cases.

The cases provide a tool and a method to encourage dialogue, reflexivity, and action on the issue of sexism.

Providing a safe space is essential. It often takes only one judgmental, self-righteous, or defensive person in a group to influence what other people might dare to say.

This is even more important when there might be differences in power among the persons in the group (e.g., professors versus post-docs or PhDs).

For this reason, conversations should aim at reflection, understanding, and respectful listening and insist that the pedagogics used for the discussion are as important as the content of the cases.

We must engage in conversations beyond shaming, naming, and blaming.

Find all the 28 cases in the book “Sexism in Danish Higher Education and Research”.

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# HOW TO USE THE CASES

1) Participants are asked to sit in groups of ideally four to six persons. Each group is led by a facilitator.

2) The facilitator's role is to chair, monitor the time, and ensure that the ethics of the activity are maintained and to mediate if there is a potential conflict.

3) Each group is assigned 1-2 cases, and participants receive a printed copy of these and the questions related to each case, where they can write their thoughts and observations.

**Describing:** The case is read out loud by the facilitator of the group.

**Reflecting:** The questions are presented, and participants are then asked to write down their initial thoughts related to the case and questions.

**Dialogue:** Participants should share only what they are comfortable with, and what they share should be based on their individual written answers and reflections.

Participants are asked not to disseminate the personal experiences and comments shared during the dialogue outside the group.

Most notably, the participants are asked to listen respectfully in silence without interrupting and to abstain from commenting on others' reflections.

Participants take turns speaking, one after another. This continues until the last one in the group has spoken.

The different contributions are allowed to stand on their own as a collage of reflections.

Read more about the method and theory in the book ["Sexism in Danish Higher Education and Research"](#).

Or listen to [episode 2](#) of the podcast "Do You Know Sexism" and learn how the cases can be used as a tool to counteract sexism.



# 01

## SEXUALIZED COMMENTS

*"YOU KNOW HOW THESE THINGS WORK"*

When Karin started her first day as a post-doc, which she had been looking forward to, she was met by a successful and powerful professor who smilingly said to her: "I have been looking forward to you starting."

Karin smiled back to him and said, "So have I!," and he replied, "You must not forget, I have the right to kiss all the pretty girls in this department."

Karin was stunned by his reply, and she felt rather awkward about it. However, she quickly brushed it off as she didn't want to make a fuss about anything on her first day.

A couple of months went by, and the summer party in the department came along. Karin was standing at the bar as that same professor approached her. He touched her back and moved his hands down to her lower back. She turned around.

The professor said: "My wife isn't home." Karin was speechless, and she wanted to act as if she hadn't heard him. The professor just stood there and looked at her, and Karin decided to ask, "Sorry, what did you say?" He smiled at her and said: "You heard me. Don't act foolish, you know how these things work."

*Do you want to learn more about what sexism is and why we exert sexist behavior? Listen to [episode 1](#) of the podcast "Do You Know Sexism."*

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# Dialogue questions #1

## Sexualized comments

Participants are encouraged to respond from their own perspectives or from the viewpoint of the fictional characters in the vignettes. This is to reflect personally, to allow empathy, and to identify feelings such as compassion, anger, surprise, sadness, etc.

Why do you think Karin feels she needs to “brush it off” on her first day? Have you ever had that feeling?

Do you think it matters that these comments come from a successful and powerful professor? Why/why not?

Have you experienced comments like this directed to yourself or others?

# Dialogue questions #2

## Sexualized comments

Participants are encouraged to imagine and reflect upon possible fields of action in regard to managerial responsibility and support.

How do you see Karin's possible fields of action here?

How can colleagues act on such issues?

What can management do to prevent such behavior?



# 02

## MEN'S COMPETENCES VS. FEMALE KINDNESS

*"YOU ARE THE BEST"*

Juliana is asked to arrange a conference by her research team. Actually, she does not feel she has the time to do it, so she asks whether someone else might do it or perhaps share the responsibility.

A colleague says, "But you are the best." Juliana feels acknowledged by that compliment. However, she also knows that doing this type of work means not having time to do research. She therefore feels unsure whether this is a genuine compliment.

Another colleague says, "Yes we need those good feminine qualities." Juliana now feels as though "feminine qualities" are being used as an excuse for her to arrange the conference.

As this is not the first time her feminine qualities are highlighted as important to an administrative task, she gets a sense that her gender is actually an obstacle from being able to fully dedicate herself to primary job responsibilities that will best position her for advancement in the academy.

*Do you want to learn more about sexism seen from an organizational perspective? Listen to [episode 5](#) of the podcast "Do You Know Sexism."*

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# Dialogue questions #1

## Men's competences vs. female kindness

Participants are encouraged to respond from their own perspectives or from the viewpoint of the fictional characters in the vignettes. This is to reflect personally, to allow empathy, and to identify feelings such as compassion, anger, surprise, sadness, etc.

Have you experienced gendered language such as the above?  
How did it make you feel?

Do you recall hearing or saying "feminine" or "masculine" linked to competence/qualities? If so, when? And how did it matter to the situation?

# Dialogue questions #2

## Men's competences vs. female kindness

Participants are encouraged to imagine and reflect upon possible fields of action in regard to managerial responsibility and support.

How can we as colleagues discuss the relevant distribution of such invisible work tasks that do not count for promotion but are part of “academic citizenship?”

What can management do to distribute such work more equally and deal with the risk of gendering such tasks?

# 03

## DEGRADATION OF INTELLECT

*"NOW I KNOW WHAT I HAVE YOU FOR"*

Louise a PhD student is having lunch with Martin, another PhD student, and a professor, who is their supervisor. They talk and laugh together.

Louise is really pleased to work with both of them, and she is happy that they share such a "loose and free tone" together.

At one point the professor looks at his sock and sees a hole in it. He looks at Louise and says: "Now I know what I have you for" and points toward the hole in the sock. Louise now feels a bit awkward.

The three of them have always laughed a lot, but there is something about this joke that does not feel right. Why would the professor point to her? Why not Martin? She wonders.

Louise now starts feeling a bit self-conscious. She looks to Martin, who nervously laughs at the joke.

*Do you want to learn more about bias and everyday sexism? Listen to [episode 4](#) of the podcast "Do You Know Sexism."*



# Dialogue questions #1

## Degradation of intellect

Participants are encouraged to respond from their own perspectives or from the viewpoint of the fictional characters in the vignettes. This is to reflect personally, to allow empathy, and to identify feelings such as compassion, anger, surprise, sadness, etc.

How would you feel if someone made a joke like this to you?

Why do you think Louise feels self-conscious? Have you ever had that feeling?

How can we nurture a casual collegial environment and a culture that allows for humor while still rejecting gender-based and condescending jokes?

# Dialogue questions #2

## Degradation of intellect

Participants are encouraged to imagine and reflect upon possible fields of action in regard to managerial responsibility and support.

What are the actors' fields of action when comments and jokes cross the line? How can we address such lines without being called "prudish" or "boring"?

How can colleagues discuss the tone and address the local language style form with respect for different boundaries?

What can management do to support this ongoing effort of cultivating a friendly and respectful tone?



# 04

## EXPERIENCES WITH REPORTING

*"YOU HAVE TO LIVE WITH YOUR ENEMIES"*

Sophie experienced sexual assault during a Christmas party, and therefore she called in sick from work the following days. She called her doctor, and got a reference to a psychologist.

It was now time for her to tell the department. She knew that the person who did this was liked by many, and therefore she feared no one would believe her.

When she told her department head, he actually did believe her, and for a moment she felt relieved. She could almost hear herself take a big deep breath out loud.

The department head looked at her and said: "I am sorry that this happened to you, but there is nothing we can do about it. You have to live with your enemies" as he smiled nervously and apologetically to her.

As if experiencing a sense of unreality, she thought to herself this can't be happening. Sophie was unable to respond in the moment. She left the office and took the rest of the day off.

*Do you want to know more about the victims voices? Listen to [episode 6](#) of the podcast "Do You Know Sexism."*

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# Dialogue questions #1

## Experiences with reporting

Participants are encouraged to respond from their own perspectives or from the viewpoint of the fictional characters in the vignettes. This is to reflect personally, to allow empathy, and to identify feelings such as compassion, anger, surprise, sadness, etc.

Why do you think Sophie is unsure whether anyone would believe her? Have you ever had that feeling?

What are Sophie's fields of actions here? How would you react if you found yourself in a similar situation?

# Dialogue questions #2

## Experiences with reporting

Participants are encouraged to imagine and reflect upon possible fields of action in regard to managerial responsibility and support.

Which formal and informal channels do you know about that are relevant in this situation at your university?

How can management deal with this, and what should the department head have done in this case do you think?

# FIND MORE INFORMATION

## 1. PUBLICATIONS

- EINERSEN, A.F., KRØJER, J., MACLEOD, S., MUHR, S.L., MUNAR, A.M., MYERS, E.S., PLOTNIKOF, M. & SKEWES, L. (2022): **SEXISM IN DANISH HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH: UNDERSTANDING, EXPLORING, ACTING.** [WWW.SEXISMEDU.DK](http://WWW.SEXISMEDU.DK).
- KRØJER, J., MUHR, S.L., PLOTNIKOF, M., MYERS, E.S., EINERSEN, A.F., MACLEOD, S., MUNAR, A.M. & SKEWES, L. (2024): **SEXISME PÅ ARBEJDE: GENKEND, FOREBYG OG HÅNDTÉR.** DJØF FORLAG

## 2. WEBSITE

- [WWW.SEXISMEDU.DK](http://WWW.SEXISMEDU.DK)

## 3. PODCAST

- [DO YOU KNOW SEXISM?](#)

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