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Gender equality policy in academia: The intersectional invisibility of gender and age.

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Introduction

Workplace gender inequality is a persistent problem (Heilman & Caleo, 2018; Ryan, 2023). Gender discrimination is seen as one of the causes for workplace gender inequality (Heilman & Caleo, 2018; Verniers & Vala, 2018), as gender discrimination negatively affects women in situations of hiring, bargaining (Coffman et al., 2021), career advancement (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015), and leadership positions (Ryan, 2023; Verniers & Vala, 2018). Gender discrimination can become institutionalized in the organizational structure through human resources policies and practices by reinforcing gender stereotypes, for example through job performance criteria that favor men (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015; Verniers & Vala, 2018).

Therefore, most organizations try to address gender inequality through several initiatives, such as unconscious bias training (Ryan, 2023), improving the representation of women (Heilman & Caleo, 2018), and gender equality policies (Verniers & Vala, 2018). However, Ryan (2023) argues that while the motivation behind these efforts is positive, most initiatives are not effective and can lead to negative unintended consequences. For example, unconscious bias training can lead to feelings of false progress as stereotypes are hard to change (Heilman & Caleo, 2018), and women are more likely to get appointed to leadership positions in situations of poor company performance. This is also known as the glass cliff, which reinforces the stereotype of women as incapable leaders (Ryan, 2023).

Most organizations with gender equality policies make the mistake of assuming women to be a homogeneous group (Ryan, 2023; Verloo, 2006). However, not all women have the same experiences, as individuals embody different social categories besides their gender. An “one size fits all” gender equality policy will only be based on the experiences of the dominant group, such as white, heterosexual women in the western context. This is problematic as subgroup inequalities will be ignored and marginalized groups become invisible (Holman & Walker, 2021; Ryan, 2023). Intersectional invisibility refers to “cases where only the prototypical ‘norm’ is visible” (Kelan, 2014, p. 793). Intersectionality enables to take this variability within a marginalized group into account by reflecting the multiple social categories that people simultaneously embody, such as ethnicity, class, and age (Holman & Walker, 2021).

Age is an example of a social category that is mostly invisible in diversity policies (Petery & Grosch, 2022). Organizational members are assumed to be age-neutral in policies, and age is not explicitly mentioned (Thomas et al., 2014). However, only the experiences of the dominant group will be represented in the policies. With age, this dominant group generally

consists of younger employees, as youth is often still taken as the norm for the ideal worker (Thomas et al., 2014). This is problematic as the interests of different age groups can be conflicting (Fragoso & Fonseca, 2022). This difference in interests is partly caused by ageism, which is defined as “the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or ourselves based on age” (World Health Organization, 2024). Ageism is experienced by employees of all age groups, but previous research is mostly focused on older workers (Bae & Choi, 2023). Older workers are defined as workers over the age of 50 (OECD, 2006).

According to ageist beliefs of organizations, workers are assumed to decrease in their productivity and thus contribution to the organizations as they are getting older. The depreciation model explains this economic perspective in which the value of workers declines as they age, whereas the employment costs keep increasing (Petery & Grosch, 2022). This is based on stereotypes of older workers as being less willing to accept change, less trainable, less adaptable, inflexible, and less productive than their younger colleagues (Jaakson & Dedova, 2023; Lagacé et al., 2019). However, age discrimination can also affect younger workers, as they are seen as “too young” to fit the image of the ideal worker or face the stereotype of being untrustworthy and less loyal to the organization (Bae & Choi, 2023; Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Kelan, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014). Younger workers are defined as employees under the age of 35 (Raymer et al., 2017).

Ageism is rarely gender-neutral, and an intersectional lens needs to be adopted to study how age and gender as aspects of an individual’s identity affect their experiences (Daldrop et al., 2023; Jaakson & Dedova, 2023). The intersection of gender and age is also called gendered ageism, defined as “the combined effects of discrimination based on age and gender in employment conditions and professional opportunities for women” (Íñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2023, p. 303). For example, women are more likely to be negatively affected by ageist stereotypes than men, as they are perceived as older earlier in life and thus less productive (Cleveland et al., 2017; Íñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2023). The invisibility of individuals created by intersecting social categories are especially problematic in academia, where the career advancement of academics is highly dependent on their visibility (Täuber, 2022). As gender inequality is a persistent problem in universities, intersectional invisibility of women of different ages in gender equality policies can contribute to policy-practice gaps (Täuber, 2022).

Therefore, it is important to analyze gender equality policies through an intersectional lens, to determine if the policy helps increase the equality for women of all ages. To fill this gap, the following research question has been formulated:

“How do women of different age groups experience gender equality at a Dutch university based on the gender equality policy?”

The answer to this question will show how gender equality is perceived by women of all ages at a Dutch university, by comparing the workplace experiences of women of different ages on gender equality and the gender equality policy to gain insights on the intersectionality of the gender equality policy.

Scientific and societal contribution

This research will contribute to the literature on intersectionality by increasing insight in the intersection of age and gender in academia, as this is an area that requires more scientific attention (Gans et al., 2023; Holman & Walker, 2021). Research has found evidence of persistent gender inequality in academia (Ryan, 2023), but the role of intersectionality and age are not clear. Täuber (2022) states that “the intersectional aspect is understudied but important to consider because it can both be a cause and a consequence of policy ineffectiveness” (p. 4). It is not yet known if women of certain age categories experience intersectional invisibility in gender equality policies, and how this influences the work experiences of women in academia.

This research will therefore contribute to society as the new insights help to improve gender equality policies to be more inclusive for all women. Most gender equality policies do not include other forms of discrimination (Powell, 2018). Intersectional language is required in diversity policies as the experiences of members of a social category are not homogeneous (Ryan, 2023). A policy that only focuses on women as one group ignores the needs of women with intersecting social categories, such as age. This can lead to policy gaps when age-related issues are not addressed in the policy, which contributes to inequality through intersectional invisibility (Cole & Duncan, 2023).

This thesis has been structured as follows. In the next section, the theoretical framework of the research will be explained. In chapter three, the methodology will be explained, including the research paradigm, the research design, the data collection, the data analysis, and the ethical considerations. The fourth chapter will consist of a presentation of the findings. Lastly, in the

discussion, the findings will be linked to the theoretical framework and the limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusion of the research will be stated.

Theoretical framework

Gender equality in academia

While female students already outnumber male students in universities across the EU for more than a decade (Timmers et al., 2010), this does not hold true for women as academics (Cois et al., 2023; David, 2015; Roos et al., 2020). Evidence has been found that it is more difficult for women to enter, remain and succeed in academia due to their gender, because of structural gender inequality in academia (Clavero & Galligan, 2021). The phenomenon of the difficult advancement of women into full professorship and leadership positions is known under names as the leaky pipeline, glass ceiling, and glass door (Cois et al., 2023).

An explanation for the gender inequality in academia is the culture and structure of universities. Universities are bureaucracies, and while there is the assumption these structures are gender-neutral, they are deeply masculine in culture (O'Connor, 2020; Powell, 2018; Powell et al., 2018; Snickare & Wahl, 2024). For example, academic meritocracy is seen as a gender-neutral system, as it provides “everyone—regardless of gender, race and class—with equal opportunity to advance and obtain rewards on the basis of individual merits and efforts” (Nielsen, 2016, p. 387). However, as it is implemented in a gendered organization, women are seen as less suitable for academia through the evaluation with masculine norms (Mihăilă, 2018; Powell et al., 2018). The stereotype of the ‘ideal’ academic thus resembles a man (Mihăilă, 2018; Roos et al., 2020), as job performance criteria are in favor of men and family demands are mentioned as the barriers to career advancement for academic women (Miller & Riley, 2022). Women are expected to become mothers and take care of their families, which does not fit the picture of the ideal academic. The stereotype of the ideal academic and the expectations for women are incompatible (Mihăilă, 2018), which maintains gender inequality in academia. In academia visibility is extremely important for career progression. Therefore, in the context of this study it is expected that women with care responsibilities, especially mothers with young children, experience more gender inequality in the progression of their careers. This as women who become mothers have to take pregnancy leave and have a higher likelihood for work-life balance issues, which creates lower physical attendance in the place of work.

Initiatives by universities to increase the gender equality have to challenge the masculine culture underlying the meritocracy and “equality of opportunity” to make an impact, as actual

equality of opportunity does not exist when excellence is defined in masculine norms. However, current initiatives are mostly focused on the individual and ‘fixing women’ (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; O’Connor, 2020), for example mentoring or leadership trainings. These initiatives are judgement-free and pose less of a threat to the current culture and structure (Utoft, 2021), as they put the blame on women instead of addressing the underlying structures (O’Connor, 2020; Snickare & Wahl, 2024). This moderate form of feminism can therefore be seen as more acceptable. This can be explained from the postfeminist gender regime which assumes gender equality is generally achieved, as most organizations have meritocratic principles and women have freedom of choice (Utoft, 2021). According to postfeminism, the “natural” differences between men and women in their characteristics and preferences explain the lack of representation of women in the higher ranks of academia. Young women are more likely to have postfeminist ideas and deem gender equality to be achieved (Kelan, 2014; Worth, 2016). Therefore, young women perceive affirmative interventions as a risk to their professional credibility (Utoft, 2021).

To encourage structural and cultural change to increase gender equality, the EU requires universities to implement gender equality policies to be eligible for grants (Tardos & Paksi, 2024). Gender equality policy is defined as “a set of actions aimed at identifying gender inequalities and bias, designing and implementing measures to correct these, and setting targets and monitoring progress via indicators” (Clavero & Galligan, 2021, p. 1116). Initiatives from gender equality policies can be categorized according to the two-dimensional model of gender equality initiatives (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Benschop & Verloo, 2011). The model distinguishes on two dimensions: the target and the scope of the initiatives. The first dimension addresses the focus of the initiative on the individual or the structure. The second dimension refers to the scope for change: inclusion, re-evaluation, or transformation. As mentioned before, initiatives focused on individuals do not address structural gender inequality and create minimal change (Benschop & Verloo, 2011). It is thus expected that interventions and activities from the policy aimed at individuals are not experienced positively by women for improving the gender equality at the university.

Intersectionality

An intersectional lens is required to understand the complexity of inequalities, as this complexity can’t be addressed from an unidimensional perspective (Rodrigo, 2022). Individuals can experience oppression through membership of multiple social categories simultaneously, which creates unique experiences of inequality (Täuber, 2022). However, the intersectional

perspective should not only be used with an additive approach, which states the inequality an individual experiences is the sum of the multiple forms of discrimination. Inequality can't be compared and measured on a scale, but the interactive nature of the multiple inequalities makes it context-specific (Goñalons Pons & Ferree, 2014).

The intersection of social categories can create a new kind of inequality (Bernstein, 2020). These new kinds of inequality make members of multiple marginalized groups particularly vulnerable, as they can become invisible (Cole & Duncan, 2023). Without the intersectional lens, marginalized groups are seen as homogeneous (Dennissen et al., 2020). However, through the paradox of the sameness/difference rationale, individuals of intersecting social categories are not similar enough to represent the marginalized groups, but at the same time not different enough to represent themselves (Cho et al., 2013). This intersectional invisibility is problematic for the effectiveness of equality policies, as individuals that don't fit the prototypical norm are ignored (Kelan, 2014; Täuber, 2022). Therefore it is important that gender equality policies include interventions that focus on specific issues of women of different age groups.

Intersection of gender and age

As the number of women in employment has grown continuously over the past decades (Cleveland et al., 2017), women are now present in all age categories in the workforce. Therefore, an intersectional lens needs is required to study the influence of the interaction between age and gender on the experiences of individuals (Daldrop et al., 2023; Jaakson & Dedova, 2023), as both gender and age can be sources of inequality. Women experience more ageist attitudes than men at all ages (Pritchard & Whiting, 2015). An example is how women are perceived as older earlier in life than men, because the value of women is linked to their sexual attractiveness (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). This leads to negative consequences for older women, such as less opportunities for training and promotion (Íñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2023). The link between women's bodies and discrimination is also visible with the maternity penalty, as women without children are still perceived as potential mothers and thus less suitable for promotions (Kelan, 2014). Additionally, based on the female-caretaker stereotype, young women are expected to care for their children, whereas older women have to look after their parents (Jaakson & Dedova, 2023). Women in their thirties even experience discrimination on grounds of being too old and too young at the same time (Kelan, 2014). This is caused by being too old for promotion as it is assumed they will get children and leave the workplace soon, but at the same time too young for leadership positions because of a lack of experience.

Young women often do not get taken seriously due to by low status beliefs that are associated with characteristics as gender and young age (Daldrop et al., 2023), which leads to lower pay, benefits and opportunities for promotion (Walker & Zelin, 2021). However, women themselves often don't attribute this inequality to their gender, but to their age or lack of work experience. This can be explained by postfeminist ideas, that assumes gender equality to be achieved (Kelan, 2014; Worth, 2016). Younger women see gender inequality as consequence of old-fashioned practices that does not limit women anymore. Older women on the other hand perceive gender inequality as normal (Kelan, 2014).

In the context of this paper, intersectionality helps with understanding how experiences of women in the workplace can differ due to their ages. The intersection of gender and age may lead to new kinds of discrimination. When these issues for women of specific ages are not taken into account in the gender equality policies, these women become invisible in the policies. It is expected that women of certain age groups who experience intersectional invisibility are more negative about the gender equality at the university. Younger and older women are assumed to experience this invisibility rather than middle-aged women, as they have a higher likelihood of being the target of ageism.

Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological choices for this research are explained, including the research paradigm, research design, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Research paradigm

The research paradigm is a set of basic beliefs that guide the researcher through methodological, ontological, and epistemological choices (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This research will use the critical theory paradigm. The critical theory paradigm has an ontological position of historical realism. According to historical realism the reality is shaped by social, economic, cultural, political, ethnic, and gender factors, which created structures that are taken as real, fixed, and natural (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The epistemological position of the critical theory paradigm is transactional and subjectivist: the researcher and the research objects are interactively linked, which causes the values of the researcher to influence the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The ontological and epistemological position lead to a methodology with a dialogic and dialectical nature, in which dialogue between the researcher and the research objects is necessary to transform ignorance about the structures into informed consciousness (Guba &

Lincoln, 1994). The aim of the critical theory paradigm is to critique and transform the structures that are assumed to be natural and fixed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which in this research consists of the structure of gender inequality in academia.

Research design

This research was conducted through abductive qualitative research to analyze the workplace experiences of women of different age groups with gender equality based on the gender equality policy to investigate the intersectionality of the policy. Qualitative research is considered most fitting as it is concerned with “developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans’ lives and social worlds” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717). With the individual workplace experiences of women regarding gender equality central to the research, a qualitative approach is appropriate. Furthermore, qualitative methods are more suitable to the aim and theoretical language of intersectionality, because of the open stance of researcher towards emergent phenomena (Shields, 2008).

Data collection

Data for this research was collected through documents and semi-structured interviews at a Dutch university. The gender equality policy that was selected for analysis is the Gender Equality Plan [name Dutch university] (2023). This policy document includes “the existing and planned interventions for gender equality at [name Dutch university] for 2022-2025” (Radboud University, 2023, p. 3). The document consists of 22 pages and is the second version of the Gender Equality Plan published in January 2022. The second version is the most recent and has updated and complemented sections in response to feedback from stakeholders (Radboud University, 2023).

To collect data on the workplace experiences, semi-structured interviews were held with ten women in academic positions working at the Dutch university. This relatively small amount of interviews is caused by the scope and time span of this research, and the availability of participants. The interviews were conducted in April and May, which is a busy time for academics. The participants were asked about their experiences with gender equality and the interventions and activities of the gender equality policy. Examples of interview questions are: “What are your experiences with the interventions and activities in the gender equality policy regarding organizational culture and work-life balance?” and “Do you have recommendations for the gender equality policy to improve gender equality further for women of your age?” (*see appendix 1*). The semi-structured nature of the questions gives participants the opportunity to

talk freely and in-depth about their own experiences (Bleijenbergh, 2015). To minimize the risk of socially acceptable answers, participants were told in advance that the interview data would be pseudonymized and handled confidentially. After asking permission beforehand, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and stored safely.

Participants for this study were reached through the personal network, by contacting a random selection of women academic staff working at different faculties and snowball sampling through earlier participants. The participants had to meet certain criteria to be selected for this research. First, the participants had to identify as women, for the interventions from the gender equality policy to be focused on them. Second, the participants had to work at the university for over two years, as the Gender Equality Plan was published in January of 2022. Third, participants had to belong to different age groups: younger employees (aged under 35), middle-aged employees (aged between 35 and 50) and older employees (aged above 50). Fourth, participants had to work as academic staff in the positions of PhD candidate, associate professor, assistant professor or full professor. This as most interventions and activities from the Gender Equality Plan are focused on the academic staff.

The group of participants consisted of three younger women in the positions of PhD candidate and assistant professor, five middle-aged women working as assistant professor or associate professor, and two older women in the position of full professor. The women have been working at the Dutch university between two and thirty years.

Data analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in an abductive manner, by alternating between the empirical material and theory (Van Maanen et al., 2007). Analysis of the data was done with the use of qualitative content analysis and the Gioia methodology for coding. The Gender Equality Policy and transcribed interviews were coded through the coding-software Atlas.ti for a clear overview of the codes. The Gender Equality Plan was analyzed with qualitative content analysis as this method maintains the advantages of quantitative content analysis, such as high reliability and validity, for interpretation of qualitative texts (Mayring, 2000). The policy document was coded with categories that are as close to the text as possible. With the research question and theories of the theoretical framework in mind, the text was scanned for mentioning of age, and the different kinds of implemented and planned interventions to reduce gender inequality.

Analysis of the interviews was done according to the Gioia methodology, as this systematic method gives a clear and transparent overview of the coding process through the

hierarchical data structure (Gioia et al., 2013; Langley & Abdallah, 2011). The data structure consists of three levels of codes. The first level of codes is developed through open-coding using the participants own words, after which the in-vivo codes were compared and grouped together into first-order concepts. Examples of first-order concepts are “masculine promotion criteria”, “care responsibilities” and “perception of ageism”. Multiple rounds of coding are done to ensure all relevant quotes are selected and given a fitting code. The first-order concepts were further compared on similarities and differences to be grouped together in second-order dimensions, such as “career progression” and “issues connected to age”, to uncover a deeper structure. Through constant comparison between the second-order dimensions of the data and the theory, the final overarching categories, called aggregate dimensions, were developed. The final four aggregate dimensions are “experience with gender equality”, “experience with the policy and interventions”, “influence of age” and “gaps in the policy”. The data structure is a visual representation of the links between the first-order concepts, second-order dimensions, and aggregate dimensions, which can be seen in appendix 2.

Thereafter, the findings of the Gender Equality Plan and the interviews were compared, to find similarities and differences between the interventions and activities of the gender equality policy and the experiences of women of different ages.

Ethical considerations

As gender equality and workplace experiences of individuals are sensitive topics, the ethical considerations of this research are taken into account. Before the start of the interviews participants were asked to read the information document. The document informed the participants on the content of the research and the interview, the participants’ rights, the data storage process, and ethical complaints. The participants’ rights consists of voluntary participation which can be withdrawn at any moment without explanation, the ability to not answer questions, and deletion of the research and personal data up until two weeks after the interview. Furthermore, participants are informed of the confidentiality of the interview, as the research data is pseudonymized and stored safely in a secure environment. The audio-recordings are deleted after the pseudonymized transcripts are finished and only the researcher and supervisor of the thesis have access to the research data. The participants are notified of the complaints regulation. After reading the information document, the participants are asked to sign the consent form to state they are sufficiently informed and give consent to the making of the audio-recordings.

Findings

In the following sub-sections, the experiences of women of different age groups regarding the gender equality at the Dutch university are compared on the aggregate dimensions as seen in the codebook in appendix 2. The findings are supported with quotes to give examples of the experiences of the participants in their own words. The experiences will be compared with the interventions and activities from the Gender Equality Plan.

Experience with gender equality

In general, gender equality at the Dutch university is perceived as relatively good. The first association of gender equality that is made is with the gender balance and number of women in higher positions in the own department or faculty. The representation and visibility of women is thus very important for the perception of gender equality. In the Gender Equality Plan the representation of women is also one of the first interventions mentioned to increase the gender equality, with specifically the target of 36% women full professors in 2025. The opinions towards the quota are varying. Most women are positive about the quota and see it as a necessary means to increase the number of women in higher positions:

“And having ... a goal to promote women to these kinds of positions is good, because you have to go against the systemic tendency, ... if you leave it up to, to chance, then it is probably going to be more men” (P5, associate professor, 45).

However, some participants are critical on this intervention, as the quota on its own does not change the structures within the university that cause the inequality. Additionally, a young woman feels a target for the career advancement of women makes the achievements of women less valuable and undermines their credibility as a scientist:

“Look it's very nice to set a quota, of, “We want 36% women”. But you're a woman yourself, and that's going to work against you. Because it is not that you then get a degree because you have earned it, but because you are a woman.” (P2, assistant professor, 34).

Besides the representation of women in the own environment, the women experience equal treatment and opportunities compared to their male colleagues and see a growing awareness from the university towards diversity and gender equality. The younger participants are more neutral in their experience with gender equality:

“My experience is honestly that I never noticed that much of it, in both positive and negative ways” (P8, PhD candidate, 28).

Another young woman also does not experience any immediate issues with inequality herself, and thus describes the situation as “normal”. She mentioned she has not *“yet experienced not being treated equally. ... So then it’s not such an issue either”* (P2, assistant professor, 34). As the young woman does not have experience with change in her perception of gender equality at the university, a lack of comparison creates a neutral stance towards gender equality. This is in contrast to the middle-aged and older women, who can compare their current situation to earlier experiences at the university or other institutions. The women in the older age category are the most positive about the gender equality in their own department, but they are aware of issues in other parts of the university and recognize that their experiences may not be generalizable to all women working at the university:

“Yes, I got to where I wanted to be. ... Of course, that's by no means true for everyone, and it may well be that there are women of my generation who are assistant professor, for example, who say like: "Well, it's really ridiculous what that [last name Participant 7] is calling out there! Which equal opportunities, I'm running into walls and ceilings!"” (P7, professor, 51).

However, there are still points of improvement. The younger participants mostly mentioned the barriers for women to achieve full professorship and specifically the influence of becoming a mother in climbing the career ladder. In the Gender Equality Plan, no concrete interventions and activities are stated with the aim of increasing the number of women academics, apart from the quota for women full professors. Besides, social safety is an issue for these younger women who are in the early stages of their careers, which makes them vulnerable for harassment by senior staff members:

“It usually comes from more, like senior male staff. Those [uncomfortable] feelings that you then get” (P3, PhD candidate, 28).

The group of middle-aged participants experience problems on the topic of work-life balance, as all participants in this group have care responsibilities for the children at home. Children are still mostly the responsibility of the mothers through traditional gender roles. As a result, women with children have less time to invest in their career:

“There are in our department ... three women who have children, or a child, and have been quite devoted, and now they all work part-time ... So we are the ones who step back, and not the men” (P10, assistant professor, 49).

Experience with gender equality policy and interventions

The Gender Equality Plan is not yet well known under the academic staff. Almost all women knew of the existence of the policy, but nobody was well informed of the content. Despite the lack of knowledge about the policy itself, women of all age categories have participated in at least one intervention or activity from the policy. The interventions and activities are not always deemed useful in improving the gender equality at the university, due to a lack of quality and substance:

“I feel like the intentions are there, but sometimes there's so little expertise behind it. And then I think, yes, a lot of time and money is spent on it, ... for example, adding DEI as a theme to one of those leadership courses, but that interpretation, what on earth is that going to accomplish?” (P4, assistant professor, 40).

This creates a feeling of distrust in the intentions of the university. Interventions and activities from the policy are called *“greenwashing, but for gender equality”* (P2, assistant professor, 34) or *“a band aid to a ... large bleeding wound”* (P1, associate professor, 46). The younger women are mostly skeptical about the effectiveness of the policy and they have to see the evidence of the change first before they are convinced:

“So I am maybe a bit pessimistic about these things. But I often find out in the end that commitment on the paper is different to the commitment in real life” (P3, PhD candidate, 28).

Next to the lack of substance and trust, time constraints are a big barrier for women of all ages to participate in the interventions. A job in academia is very demanding as the working time has to be divided between teaching, administrative duties and research. Participating in trainings, employee networks, or other activities has to be done in the own free time. As academics are evaluated on their research output and teaching for promotions, younger women tend to prefer to invest their time in work instead of participating in the interventions and activities from the gender equality policy:

“And if I'm also going to take time away from that to participate in programs and so on... How is that really going to advance me in my career?” (P2, assistant professor, 34).

The time constraints thus create a lack of priority to participate in interventions and activities. A middle aged participant mentioned that she had a lack of priority to participate in diversity trainings and workshops because she did not experience any problems:

“Would I have taken part if I had known? Maybe because I haven’t felt that the gender equality issue, at least in terms of the arrangements in our chair group again, made it urgent to do that. But I hadn’t necessarily thought: ‘Well, yes’.” (P6, associate professor, 42).

This is linked to an issue mentioned by multiple women of different ages. Most interventions and activities from the gender equality policy are focused on the individual and are offered on a voluntary basis, which creates a situation in which only the women who experience problems will take part in the activities. This shifts the responsibility to improve the gender equality to women instead of all organizational members:

“If you only provide trainings for women, then it’s the time spend in these trainings is taken of the clock for research for women and it’s, it makes the issue still an issue for women only” (P5, associate professor, 45).

This problem is even greater for women with children, as care responsibilities are described as *“another job, next to your job”* (P10, assistant professor, 49). Interventions or activities planned after working hours in the evenings or weekends are very difficult for women with children to attend.

Women in all age categories experience the feeling that the policy is not implemented in the same way throughout the university. There seems to be a lack of guidelines for the implementation of the policy, which creates a variation of treatments dependent on the choices of the supervisor. Participants have heard differences in the experiences from colleagues in other departments or faculties:

“So I hear then from colleagues ... in other departments then the section and how their supervisor is, is deciding or communicating or supporting them, or not supporting them. And then I compare it to my own supervisor and I am like: ‘Okay, woah, that is not alright!’” (P1, associate professor, 46).

The implementation of the Gender Equality Plan is thus highly dependent on the supervisor. This problem is amplified for younger women, as they are more dependent on their supervisors than older women who are in further career stages:

“And I think that we as PhD students are in a kind of very strange position, because we are in a position of dependency on everyone above us, especially our... our supervisors” (P8, PhD candidate, 28).

Influence of age and gaps in the policy

The barriers for gender equality at the Dutch university and issues with the effectiveness of the Gender Equality Plan were also mentioned by the participants when asked for recommendations to improve the policy. These recommendations include the involvement of men in the interventions and activities, evaluation of the policy, and more recognition and support for women with children. The involvement of men is linked to the issue of gender inequality being a problem that is only caused and solved by individuals. This shifts the responsibility to the women, whereas gender inequality is a collective problem that needs a collective effort to make a difference. One of the participants experiences that men are not aware of the problem with gender inequality within academia and the role they play in the solution:

“But again, I think people who are interested in [gender equality] anyway, those are the ones who follow that. Case in point, that I would follow that, but my male colleagues wouldn't, for example” (P8, PhD candidate, 28).

Another recommendation is to evaluate the policy on the effectiveness of improving the gender equality at the university, with the policy on remuneration to diminish the gendered wage gap as an example:

“Look at what programs are there now, evaluate them, see if they are achieving the desired effect. ... It's useful every now and then to see if that's working as a whole” (P8, PhD candidate, 28).

Additionally, the data suggests a change in organizational culture is needed for the facilitation of mothers. The problems women with children face are mentioned by participants of all age groups, as this is seen as one of the biggest barriers for women in career advancement. The more practical facilitation, such as nursing rooms and child care, is mentioned in the Gender Equality Policy. However, support and recognition for mothers is seen as very important by women, and is not included in the policy. This support can be framed in a more forgiving work-life balance policy, especially in the months after giving birth. Furthermore, organizational culture is important in shaping the opinion towards families and children within academia:

“But having a support system and voicing this and creating an atmosphere in which ... it is possible and it's okay to do this, and even appreciated, that's I think the most powerful tool you can have, to make women equal in academia” (P5, associate professor, 45).

Most participants experience negative consequences for the progression of their careers when they become a mother: *“And now it's just, ‘yes, you're pregnant, that's going to affect your career’. And that's unfortunate.”* (P2, assistant professor, 34). Having a family is difficult to

combine with a job in academia and the criteria for promotion do not take these care responsibilities into account. Having children in the early stages of the career is even perceived as a sacrifice:

“And so age plays a role in terms of... how far are you in your career and at what point are you able to, kind of, make that decision to have a family without sacrificing your career” (P5, associate professor, 45).

When asked for specific problems or recommendations linked to their own age, the younger participants mostly mentioned the social safety issues. Because younger women are more likely to be in the earlier stage of their career, the combination of age and the hierarchical nature of academia leads to situations with unequal power relations in which harassment can take place. The Gender Equality Plan has multiple interventions and activities on the topic of social safety, including new policies, workshops, and improvement of the complaints process and confidential advisors. The policy briefly mentions gender power imbalance, but does not focus on unequal power relations between junior and senior staff. The unequal power relations also make reporting difficult, especially when issues in the relationship with supervisors occur, because there is a dependency for the advancement of the career:

“And then I think, “Okay, I’m not in a position to [hold others accountable], because I don’t have an equal relationship with my colleagues who are, for example, assistant professor or associate professor and who are, in addition, my former lecturers”” (P8, PhD candidate, 28).

The harassment is also not always seen as serious enough to report, as it can consist of subtle harassment in the hallways that lead to unsafe or uncomfortable feelings for women:

“Because these small things happen to all of us and if every time it happens you go [to report it]... You cannot go every time” (P3, PhD candidate, 28).

Another problem faced by young women is the feeling that they have to prove themselves more than male colleagues of the same age as it is assumed they don’t embody certain characteristics that are necessary for serious scientists. Examples that are mentioned by the PhD candidates are being talked over in meetings or not being involved in conversations over lunch:

“So it’s really these subtle things that make you feel like: “Do you feel like I belong here? Like do you think I deserve this?”” (P3, PhD candidate, 28).

Through this lack of recognition by older colleagues the confidence of younger women can take a hit and create stress. Whereas younger women perceive these subtle forms of ageism, older

women don't seem to face ageist remarks or actions. This can be linked to the career stage of full professorship that they have achieved, which creates a certain reputation that protects them from age discrimination:

"You're also so experienced that people can't just ignore you. That is useful, yes" (P7, professor, 51).

Furthermore, the physical nuisances that are connected to the life stages of women were brought up in the interviews. Participants mentioned the desire to be able to take days off to deal with menstruation, post-partum hormones, and menopause. However, one participant states the need for the organizational culture to change, as she wouldn't take the leave herself to prevent being seen as *"a wimp"* by colleagues:

"Yes, but you know, if that option is there you have to be strong minded to do that too, right? ... Because ... then they say like: "Oh, she [takes the leave]. Oh, yes, you see. That one was always weak, sick and nauseous", yeah." (P8, professor, 51).

Gender Equality Plan

In the Gender Equality Plan intersectionality is mentioned in the explanation of the concept of gender. One of the mentioned social categories that can intersect with gender is age. Additionally, it is stated that *"to this end, [name university] intends to incorporate a gender analysis and approach that recognizes intersectionality"* (Radboud University, 2023, p. 4). There are interventions and activities with an intersectional approach, for example for women from the LGBTQI+ community or disabled women. However, age is not mentioned in the policy and there are no interventions and activities specifically focused on younger, middle-aged or older women.

Despite the lack of mentioning of age, there are three separate instances in which interventions are concentrated on *"junior scholars"* (Radboud University, 2023, p. 9) or *"junior academic researchers"* (Radboud University, 2023, p. 10; p. 17). There is no further specification if the classification of 'junior' is based on age or the career stage. The interventions focused on the junior researchers are raising awareness through a PhD course on diversity and inclusion, and additional support for *"combining work and care through funds for fellowships/promotion"* (Radboud University, 2023, p. 10).

Discussion

The aim of this research was to compare the experiences of women of different age groups regarding gender equality with the gender equality policy of a Dutch university, to determine the intersectionality of the policy on gender and age. Therefore the following research question was formulated: *“How do women of different age groups experience gender equality at a Dutch university based on the gender equality policy?”*. The findings indicate there are both similarities and differences in the experiences of women of different age groups regarding gender equality, but the Gender Equality Plan does not account for these differences.

The older women are most positive about their experience with gender equality because they have achieved full professorship. They have years of experience and can compare the current situation with earlier experiences with gender equality at the Dutch university. The older women recognize their perception of gender equality can be biased through their career stage. As the older women have reached professorship, they have had less problems with issues such as the glass ceiling. Middle-aged women are also relatively positive about their experience with gender equality within the university, through comparison with earlier work experiences at other institutions. However, work-life balance is a big issue for middle-aged women who have care responsibilities for children. On this topic the Gender Equality Plan is not sufficient, as having children is still perceived as a barrier to career progression, due to the masculine criteria for promotion. The work-life balance issues create time constraints and a lack of priority to participate in interventions and activities to improve gender equality, which undermines the effectiveness of the Gender Equality Policy. Older women have less issues with the work-life balance, as their children are older and not in need of constant care.

The younger women are more neutral in their opinion about gender equality at the university. They perceive their treatment and opportunities as equal compared to their male colleagues and state to have no positive or negative experiences with gender equality. This is caused by postfeminist ideas, which are more prevalent with younger women who see gender equality as achieved (Utoft, 2021). This creates skepticism about the effectiveness of the Gender Equality Plan, because the interventions and activities are seen as useless or even working against women. Primarily affirmative action interventions, such as the quota for women professors, are seen as devaluating the credibility of the achievements of women scientists (Utoft, 2021).

However, whereas middle-aged and older women do not express experiences with ageism, young women do experience ageist comments and actions. The young women mention a lack of recognition by senior staff members and a feeling that they have to prove themselves more than their male colleagues to be taken seriously. This can be linked to the low status beliefs that are attributed to young women, which are not compatible to the image of a serious scientist (Daldrop et al., 2023). Additionally, young women experience unequal power relations with people higher up in the academic hierarchy, which makes them more vulnerable to harassment and other social safety issues. These problems are caused by the career stage and strongly correlated to age, as most young women are situated in the lower levels of the hierarchy. Therefore, younger women are dependent on their supervisor for the progression of the career, which amplifies the problem.

In line with the literature, the women in the gender equality policy are seen as a homogeneous group that is age-neutral (Petery & Grosch, 2022; Thomas et al., 2014). However, contrary to the assumption that youth is the norm in HR policies (Thomas et al., 2014), middle-aged and especially older women are the norm in the Gender Equality Plan of the Dutch university. This is due to the hierarchical nature of academia, in which reaching the higher levels takes time and thus middle-aged and older women are more likely to achieve full professorship. This connection between age and experience within the university creates protection against both gender and age discrimination, as women higher up in the hierarchy have more reputation and authority to stand up against these problems. Younger women do not have this experience and reputation and are thus more vulnerable to gender equality issues. As the Gender Equality Plan does not take age into account, the issues with gender inequality for young women will continue to exist. Gender inequality can not be improved for all women working at the university when the experiences of young women are not explicitly studied and their specific issues get the necessary attention. Without the intersectional approach that incorporates age the issues of young women are ignored, which leads to policy gaps and the invisibility of young women in the policy.

Moreover, the Gender Equality Plan needs to incorporate more interventions and activities focused on improving the work-life balance for women with families. From the moment onwards that a women academic takes her pregnancy leave, she encounters issues with the progression of the career (Kelan, 2014). These issues get amplified for women in the early stages of the career, when the physical attendance of academics is very important (Täuber,

2022). Taking time off for the pregnancy leave, working part-time or working more from home decreases the visibility of these women and thus the likelihood of promotion. This is linked to the masculine promotion criteria, in which the ideal academic has no care responsibilities and can dedicate all hours towards academia (Mihăilă, 2018). The organizational culture regarding families needs to change to give women a healthy work-life balance, in which having children does not create issues for their careers.

Furthermore, women experience several physical nuisances linked to life stages, such as menstruation, post-partum hormones and menopause. These are barriers for women who cannot deliver the same work as a man who does not have to deal with these issues (Mihăilă, 2018). The Gender Equality Plan should take this into account by facilitating women with days off to recover from the health issues, as well as initiating change in the organizational culture for the masculine criteria for scientists.

The results of this research build on the existing evidence of intersectional invisibility in gender equality policies (Petery & Grosch, 2022; Täuber, 2022). Young women experience gendered ageism due to the attribution of low status beliefs and unequal power relations which increase social safety issues. With the intersection of age and gender not recognized in the gender equality policy, gender inequality will not be solved for younger women who experience age-related issues. This makes younger women less positive about the gender equality within the university than middle-aged and older women who, due to their career stage, have experience and reputation as protection against both gender and age discrimination. The Gender Equality Plan should therefore include interventions and activities that resolve issues for women of specific age groups. Additionally, interventions should not be focused on the individual women, but on all employees within the university to create structural change for gender equality. Moreover, support for mothers should be incorporated into the policy, as care responsibilities for children are seen as the biggest barrier for women within academia, which influence the career progression of younger and middle-aged women.

This research has several limitations. Due to the time given for this research, the amount of interviews that was conducted is minimal. This makes the insights of the research less robust, as the experiences of the participants may not be representative for all women academics working at the Dutch university. Additionally, as the experiences of women were compared on age, the small amount of women per age group makes the insights less grounded. While the participants were approached randomly, the sample can be subject to a sampling bias.

Participants who agreed to the interview are more likely to have an affiliation or interest in gender. This can affect the results, as participants might have prior knowledge that influence their experiences with gender equality. Moreover, the participants had backgrounds from several faculties and departments. Because the implementation of the gender equality policy differs depending on the faculty, variations in experiences can be caused by the different faculties. Furthermore, the research was conducted within one Dutch university, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other universities as the gender equality policies and contextual factors, such as the organizational culture, can vary significantly. Lastly, complete objectivity of the findings can not be ensured. While the researcher tried to be as objective as possible and not let the own experiences influence the result of the research, by being a young female researcher the interpretation of the findings can potentially be biased.

Most of the limitations can be addressed by future research. To minimize the impact of different policy implementation between faculties on the experiences with gender equality, a recommendation is to conduct interviews with women from the same faculty. Additionally, participants from the different age groups should occupy a variety of positions, to study the influence of position in the hierarchy and age on the experiences with gender equality. This could further increase the understanding of the influence of reputation and experience in the perception of ageism and gender inequality. Another recommendation is to conduct a mixed methods research to study the effectiveness of gender equality policies on women of different ages and compare this with the experiences on gender equality. In this way the actual and perceived policy gaps can be compared to gain more insights on intersectional invisibility. Furthermore, intersectional invisibility of age in the gender equality policy should be studied in other universities in the western context to improve the generalizability of the findings. Conducting this study in academic institutions in non-western countries would be interesting to show the influence of culture on the prototypical norm within diversity policies. Lastly, to increase the knowledge on intersectional invisibility within gender equality policies, other social categories that intersect with gender, such as sexuality and ability, should be studied for a more holistic view on the experiences of women academics with different backgrounds regarding gender equality.

Conclusion

For this research the Gender Equality Plan and interviews on gender equality with ten women academics of different age groups working at a Dutch university were analyzed to gain insight

on the intersectionality of the gender equality policy. The analysis showed that while the Gender Equality Plan states to recognize intersectionality, the intersection of gender and age is not included in the interventions and activities. Younger women experience age-related issues with gender equality which are not acknowledged in the policy, which leads to intersectional invisibility for women in this age group. Middle-aged and older women perceive less problems on the intersection of gender and age, as their experience and reputation within the university protects them from discrimination. Age is thus correlated with career stage in the influence of the experience with gender equality within the university due to the hierarchical nature of academia. Because younger women experience intersectional invisibility in the gender equality policy, their age-specific issues are not resolved and their perception of gender equality within the university is less positive than the perception of middle-aged and older women.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Thank you for participating in my study. My name is Marja Bos and I am a student of the master Strategic Human Resources Leadership. I am currently writing my Master's Thesis on the intersection of gender and age in gender equality policies at Radboud University. Therefore I want to interview you on your workplace experiences related to gender equality.

Before I start the interview I have an information and consent form for you. Read it carefully and please sign the consent form. If you are ready, I will start the recording.

- Can you describe your current role at [name university]?
- How long have you been working at [name university], and in which functions have you worked?
- How is your experience with gender equality within the [name university]?
- Has your experience with gender equality changed over the last years working at [name university], and in what ways?
- Are you aware of the Gender Equality Policy of the [name university]? If so, how did you get to know about the policy?

I will now ask questions on the content of the Gender Equality Plan. I will give examples of interventions and activities that are linked to the topics.

- How do you experience the interventions and activities on the topic of organizational culture and work-life balance?
 - o For example: work-life balance covering (flexible work, caregiver's leave, pregnancy leave, childcare and nursing rooms on campus), employee networks (Women professors and Halkes Women+), workshops and training on gender equality and DEI
- How do you experience the interventions and activities on the topic of social safety?
 - o For example: complaints regulation, confidential advisors, new code of conduct, workshops on DEI
- How do you experience the interventions and activities on the topic of leadership and management?

- For example: target 36% full women professors in 2025, anti-bias training for leadership, mentoring program on learning process DEI, translate results of remuneration studies into policies and interventions
- How do you experience the interventions and activities on the topic of recruitment, selection and career progression?
 - For example: career program for academic leadership, mentoring program, career coaching, digital learning environment gROW to support careers, Christine Morhmann fund, Women professors network award
- Do you have recommendations for policy interventions and activities that can improve gender equality at [name university]?
- Do you have recommendations to improve the gender equality or to meet the needs specifically for women of your age?
- As age is an important factor in my research, I would like to ask you about your age. You are not obliged to share this information if you do not feel comfortable.
- Is there anything else you would like to add that was not mentioned in the interview?

Appendix 2: Codebook interviews

Experience with gender equality	Career progression	Barriers for career progression
		Masculine promotion criteria
		Physical attendance
		Promotion criteria
		Tasks outside job description
	Hierarchical issues	Leadership
		Relationship with supervisor
		Social safety issues
		Unequal power relations
	Gender equality within university	Awareness from university
		Equal treatment
		Lack of awareness from the university
		Perception of gender equality
		Women representation
		Women representation in higher positions
	Responsibilities outside academia	Care responsibilities
		Caregiver
		Children
		Good work-life balance
		Work-life balance issues
Structural gender inequality	Masculine criteria	
	Meritocracy	
	Organizational culture	
	Societal influence on gender inequality	
Experience with the policy and interventions	Effectiveness of policy	Dependence on supervisor
		Lack of awareness of policy and interventions
		Lack of priority
		Lack of substance
		Policy implementation
		Responsibility on the individual
		Time constraint
		Trust in the university
Influence of age	Age	Middle-aged
		Older age
		Younger age
	Personal characteristics	Career stage
		Experience and reputation
		Life phase
Gaps in the policy	Issues connected to age	Confidence issues
		Issues with hormones
		Menopause issues
		Menstruation issues
		Perception of ageism
		Recognition as scientist
	Recommendations for policy	Evaluation of the policy
		Facilitating mothers
		Involvement of men
		Recognition
	Support	

Appendix 3: Codebook Gender Equality Plan

Social safety	Code of conduct
	Complaints and feedback process
	Confidential advisors
	Harassment
	Ombudsperson
	Social safety
	Wellbeing
Data	Data collection
	Data monitoring
	Research
Awareness	Developing arrangements
	Diversity training
	Gaining knowledge
	Promoting visibility
	Raising awareness
	Sharing and promoting best practices
	Supporting initiatives
Support	Employee networks
	Grants, funds and prizes
	Mentoring program
	Role modelling
	Work-life balance
	Working conditions
Age	Junior academics
Career progression	Improve representation
	Inclusive leadership
	Leadership positions
	Revised criteria
	Transparent recruitment process
Structural equality	Accessibility
	Combatting gender stereotypes
	Guidelines
	Inclusion
	Inclusive language
	Intersectionality
	Organizational culture
	Policy documents
	Remuneration