

## “It will be difficult for you to move on from this...” An Autoethnographic Study of Hitting the Glass Ceiling in an Academic Recruitment Process

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### ABSTRACT

This narrative is an autoethnographic study of how discrimination and prejudice counteract the academic meritocratic system. In Sweden, which is one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, opposition to gender equality and prejudices against what is considered the Other can be hidden and thus reproduced in decision-making processes and structures. This narrative shows how a professorial recruitment process bypassed the meritocratic system i.e., the system in which qualifications and educational results in combination with the individual's achievements should play the greatest role in the promotion process. This is a story about how the supposed meritocracy is twisted and manipulated within university contexts and how the “temperament” of a foreign female researcher is utilised to exclude her from entering through the coveted doors of academic departments. Different experiences, characterised by demanding conditions, have been analysed with the help of gender theoretical perspectives, opposition to gender equality, intercultural perspectives and a number of social psychological perspectives linked to prejudice. The description is interwoven with previous experiences from younger years, which together contribute to an increased understanding of the individual narrative and its specific context.

**Key words:** gender, discrimination, academic recruitment, meritocracy, autoethnography

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This is an autoethnographic study about my own experiences of how recruitment to a professor position can play out at a university in Sweden. This is an experience of gender inequality in a country that is considered one of the world's most gender-equal, where equality is a constitutional norm and a political goal (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2021). However, individual cases can testify that this is not the case, certainly not within the academic world. These experiences and memories of previous events have been recorded in a diary and form the basis of this description and analysis. I will touch upon two types of experiences: the academic recruitment process of 2021 at a Swedish university and war memories from Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1990 and 1992. The incident surrounding the recruitment process is relatively close in time to the writing of this essay, while my more traumatic war memories are written from a longer time perspective. Due to their very nature, war memories are well preserved. The descriptions are mostly written chronologically but begin with a situation in the present in order to contextualise the entire course of events. One reason that the stories of the academic recruitment process are intertwined with war memories is that both were shaped as a reaction to perceived traumatic events. These stories (epiphanies or emotional stories in this study) can serve as protective mechanisms against the perceived fears of being considered inadequate, insecure or having feelings of loneliness and alienation (Collimore et al., 2010). Writing is a way of dealing with the emotional burden but at the same time leaving an imprint in the history of examples of institutional injustice and their individual management.

An event or phenomenon that was experienced by the researcher, but was analysed in this manner afterwards, is to be described as participatory observation (Ringdal, 2001). Similar autoethnographic narratives are relatively common in scientific publications (see, for example, Hagström, 2021; Lundberg and Huzell, 2010). The approach has also been referred to in ethnography as reflexive ethnography in which autobiographical experiences form an empirical basis (Davies, 1999). This type of participatory observation is therefore significantly more accepted than covert observation with unspoken intentions (Lundberg and Huzell, 2010).

However, methodological ethical and moral aspects need to be discussed in more detail. Autoethnographic studies are controversial and always a subject of debate. The method possesses strengths and weaknesses (Jones et al., 2016). Autoethnography allows the researcher to put themselves in focus in a specific context and function both as a study object and as an author. It is common for introspection and distancing to occur in the same study and for subjectivity rather than objectivity to dominate the observations. Epiphanies or emotional experiences that have left an impression on the researcher, that have been documented or sorted out through introspection, usually constitute empirical evidence in an autoethno-

graphic study (Jones et al., 2016), which is also the case here. Their validity is at least as debatable and it can be assumed that the story leads to some form of learning, which is a desirable outcome (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

In this study, I also discuss relational ethics mainly as three research ethics areas (Palmgren, 2020), such as (1) consent from the individuals who appear in the autoethnography, (2) the researcher's privileged position in the interpretation of the commonly experienced reality and (3) how the individuals described are represented in the final text.

One criterion is the credibility of the study, which can be assessed by allowing a number of individuals to read drafts, not least those mentioned in the study (Bryman, 2018). There are, of course, calls for autoethnographers to obtain the consent of others affected even before the material is collected, but there are a number of published autoethnographic studies where consent was not obtained nor was it requested (Palmgren, 2020). This is because autoethnographic studies have been criticised for being too self-absorbed (Lapadat, 2017). Nine people in my immediate vicinity have read various drafts to ensure that the material is nuanced and ethical. One of them is anonymous and the rest are mentioned in Acknowledgments. The managers mentioned in the study itself are anonymous and they have their own narrative. The organisational culture and different power structures may colour their perception of what happened and, for that reason, they have not been asked for consent to approve my experience.

When the time is right, there may be a reason to co-write an article describing our different experiences. Regardless of our role in an organisation, we are, after all, all men, women, managers and employees, subject to the hypermasculine norms that have reproduced themselves (Kimmel, Hearn and Connell, 2004). In light of the above, it can be added that I, as the writer, have the privilege of dominating this particular story for better or worse, but that I acknowledge that others may have completely different views. It is not my intention to harm anyone, this is a power-equalising act of resistance. "*Because where there is power, there is resistance,*" says Foucault (2002: 105). Power is relational and power relationships cross over each other, which means that those who are powerless in one context are in power in another (Foucault, 1982). This is a socially critical story that raises a norm-critical voice for female academics and calls for ethical action (Denzin, 2013).

## ACADEMIC MERITOCRACY CHALLENGED BY REPRESSIVE POWER AND SHADOW POLICY

It is Friday afternoon, a sunny day in February. I am in the schoolyard, about to pick up my son. The phone rings just as I step into the playground. Happy children can be heard everywhere. Many parents are waiting for their children because it is a pandemic year and you are not allowed to enter the school premises. The phone rings and I see on the display that one of my bosses is calling. With one finger in one ear and the phone pressed up against the other “Swedish Defence University, it is Aida speaking” – I answer formally. I am met with a deep sigh on the other end of the line. Something is not right – I say to myself. “How are you?” he asks formally, without really the slightest interest in the question, or in the answer, for that matter. I hear this in his voice. At the same time, I see my son approaching, his eyes are happy but his facial expression changes when he sees my eyes. He sees that my face has a grey tone of utter seriousness. *This is how it is* – says the boss on the phone – *you will not be offered a position of professor in either of the places you have applied for* (two professorships at two different university campuses in the same subject). *We have made the assessment that you lack management skills and for that reason, we cannot offer you a job* – he continues, sounding about as involved as if he was ordering pizza rather than what he is in fact doing, which is exercising repressive power (see also Foucault, 1982) over my career. I stiffen. My son asks: *Mum, has something happened?* I signal that I am still on the phone, but I am not saying anything. *Are you still there?* He asks and sighs in relief. OK! I answer mildly and hang up. I stand in the schoolyard for a few minutes, wondering what really happened. Could he not at least have waited until Monday? – I ask myself. Have they decided this way because I am a woman? Or because I am an immigrant? Or both? But I live in Sweden and we are supposed to be equal. I do not understand anything of what has just happened, it feels very surreal. The weekend is ruined and the glass ceiling that determines how far I, as a woman, can go, appears to be officially reached. How can this event be explained theoretically?

One of the most important tasks a manager has is to make decisions, comply with legal requirements and regulations, recruit staff and be responsible for the work environment (Alvinus, Hede and Helenius, 2022). This applies to all workplaces and, consequently, to the meritocratic academic world. But does academia live up to its meritocratic ideal? Zivony (2019) says that it does not and claims that, as early as at the doctoral student level, those who are privileged come higher up in the hierarchy. The minorities are instead affected by the regime of inequality, which is reproduced over time (Acker, 2006). In this way, academia loses the diversity of opinion, openness, different perspectives and knowledge. The decision

made in the above story was not based on the opinions of experts, students or board recommendations, it went against them all. It was, instead, a product derived from *Shadow Policy* (Ahmed, 2021) and communicated through repressive power (Foucault, 1977). The decision reveals a gap between the organisation's gender equality goals and actual action, i.e., an expression of resistance to diversity and gender equality. The Shadow Policy thus reveals that decisions can be made in secret and based on non-meritocratic premises (Zivony, 2019). Unwritten rules about how people should be, look, how they should communicate can influence decision-making processes and, consequently, reproduce inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). Meritocracy is therefore challenged by shadow policies and the glass ceiling then takes shape. Well-qualified people are prevented from climbing their career ladders. They reach the glass ceiling. My story is not unique, it is shared by many female researchers around the world. Here are more examples:

We are women scientists who have worked in university settings for most of our careers. National data suggesting persistent gender inequities are corroborated by our daily, lived experiences. Women are overrepresented in nontenure track roles, are underrepresented among full professors and senior leadership, and receive lower pay across all ranks compared to men counterparts. These data tell an even more dire story for women from racial and/or ethnic minority groups. (Beidas et al., 2022:1)

## HOW WAR EXPERIENCE LEADS TO THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

War raged in Bosnia in the 1990s, about 30 years ago. The heart of Europe was shattered by an evil force. In my teenage years, a sensitive period in itself, I ended up in the middle of the horrors of war with my mother and grandmother. We lived at the border between Bosnia and Croatia, in a small town called Bosanska Gradiška. The civilian population of the city was affected in the early 1990s when Serbs and Croats fought across the border that went through the city and followed the Sava River. After several months, the sound of shells, screams, curfew alarms and panic became the norm. The fear and the lump in the pit of my stomach were still there but, over time, I got used to it.

In the back of my mind the eternal question; will we survive another day and is there any hope of peace and freedom for us all? Air raid sirens sounded through the city and we were always ready to run to a bomb shelter. A bag containing the essentials was always ready to pick up. Some food, water, a blanket, an extra sweater and also my school books. I absolutely did not want to be without them,

my homework had to be done. Reacting quickly and getting under cover as soon as the firing started could make the difference between life and death.

On a warm August day, I was in Grandma's apartment. We heard a loud explosion nearby and I ran out onto the balcony. A nearby hair salon that was open at the time had been bombed to pieces. A shell had hit that particular building, centrally located, near the post office. Panic spread as fast as the dust that rose after half the building had collapsed. Blood, shards of glass, stones and dust were interspersed with screams. The weeping is etched in my memory. I heard a girl below my balcony screaming for her mother. I had a cold sweat and shivers passed through my body from terror, fear and anxiety. I hoped the girl would find her mother. We went to the bomb shelter, calm claimed us. The neighbours were trying to identify who was at the salon. *Was there anyone we knew?* A witness who was nearby described how strips of meat hung in the tree branches. The audience was silent. We lived in a small town and everyone knew everyone, you cannot escape the news that someone you know died in the war. Death was ever-present. After the incident, we went home. The days passed. The townspeople tried to live as normally as possible in that completely abnormal situation. Sometimes we got tap water that we could store in bottles, sometimes we had electricity so we could prepare certain food but most of the time we tried to find different ways to get through the day. Neighbours helped each other, we slept in different places together to keep the fear in check. My mother and I were alone and she had constant worry on her face and was scared and overprotective. I only thought about my homework, this was my psychological security, I did not want to think about the war.

One evening the shooting was overwhelming and curfews were being announced from the late afternoon and throughout the night. I had been to school during the day and was on my way home when a noise of thunder came from different directions. My mother came to fetch me. She was afraid that I would go home alone with my friends. My regular school was used by soldiers as a temporary hospital and we had to walk together to another school several kilometres away. Everyone was allowed to go for a couple of hours a day, but at different times so that all the classes could take turns and everyone could receive an education.

The school was an important socialising institution where, as early as in the first grade, children had to swear that they would be good citizens, good friends, respect the elderly and be disciplined. We sometimes wore blue uniforms and had to address teachers with the respectful rather than the more informal personal pronoun. There was built-in respect for authority and obedience was essential. They gave us annual grades from the first year and physical punishment was common. Being slapped around the head by the teacher was not entirely unusual. However, the boys were more exposed to this type of behaviour. We had to swear in the

name of Josip Broz Tito (see more in Banac, 1992) that we would do everything to maintain brotherhood, community and social cohesion. This collectivism was vital.

On the way home one late afternoon in winter, when darkness falls quickly, we heard the sound of a shell passing at high speed. The sound made fear rise in my body and my legs ran as if they had a life of their own. The body lagged behind and we ran as fast as we could. We felt no tiredness, only a racing pulse. It would land and explode somewhere close. My mother, who had fetched me from school, and I made it to the nearest building. A shell landed on the house behind this building and a lightning bolt illuminated the darkness. We heard screams but we no longer reacted, our bodies were in the flight and survival mode. The sense of relief because the shell had not hit us was palpable. The adrenaline rushed, my heart was in my throat. We made it home, there had been no electricity for a couple of days and hardly any water. I did not feel thirsty, hungry or tired. The only thing I thought about was that I was home now and I had homework to do. We had been given the assignment to memorise the periodic table by Saturday because we had school then, too. By the light of a candle, I tried to memorise the names. I spoke them out loud but had to cover my ears in order to shut out all noise. I just wanted to hear my own voice: "... *if I memorise the periodic table, I will have it in my head and will not have to carry it with me written down if we are forced to run. If it is in my head, no one can take it away from me.*"

As it turned out, we had to leave our home. A certain person, due to his ethnicity which was then ruling in the city, merely came, threatened us and forced us to leave everything we owned. The circumstances caused us to separate even though we were neighbours a year earlier. Down the barrel of a gun and with threats that "*he would drink your daughter's (my) blood*", my mother only took our photographs with her and everything else was left behind. *Just as long as no one touches us... No one... Cannot risk that*, my mother whispers. My mother did everything in her power so that she and I could leave the country for good.

We came to Sweden as refugees in December 1992. I experienced Swedes as friendly and helpful. A little "cool" and very calm. Everyone would always agree all the time. You could agree that you did not agree. I learned the language and integrated into society relatively quickly. But the war trauma had left its mark and I often had nightmares. My mother was not doing well and I was 14 years old when I was allocated the responsibility of becoming a parent to my own parent. We could not both be sad, I had to fight. There was no teenage defiance or time for youth activities. As a disciplined student, brought up in the school system of the former Yugoslavia, I rolled up my sleeves and started studying Swedish and social studies seriously. After just over four months, I started to make myself understood and things were going well at school. I was a good girl all the way up to the university

and earned good grades. Good grades and good judgment were the only things I had in my personal “backpack”. I had no network, no social capital or acquaintances who could help me navigate in this new country. Knowledge, willingness to learn and resilience were, and still are, my only psychological and social capital in Sweden. With hard work, I thought, you can go far in life.

In crisis and war, some groups are particularly vulnerable, psychologically as well as physically. Women, children and the older population are the groups most often mentioned. Children are probably the group that is particularly sensitive to stressful conditions. Although vulnerability is a common denominator, a number of studies show that some children have an extraordinary ability to adapt to, recover from and cope with crises. Their resilience also depends on the social and psychological capital of the environment and the family, health, their guardians' level of education, resources and background (Fothergill and Peek, 2015). Despite facing very difficult conditions during their upbringing, some children can cope with everything due to their resilience. These are known as the *dandelion children* and have been given that name because they, like dandelions, seem to be able to grow in all possible environments, everywhere from gardens to concrete. Their life force is enormous. The article “Superkids: Competent Children of Psychotic Mothers” by Kauffman et al. (1979) became the starting point for research on resilient children. In order for dandelion children to become functioning adults, despite trauma, crises and other difficult stressors, the following factors are important (Borge Helmen, 2005): a good relationship and a strong bond with at least one adult, their own ability to actively avoid problems and school as a protection factor (Persson, Alvinus and Linehagen, 2022). All these strategies have been identified in my own story about stress management, attitude to problem-solving, a strong relationship with my mother and a sense of security in my Swedish school.

Navigation in a new country can also be understood at a societal level because the adaptation of immigrants can be studied through, for example, their employment rate in the Swedish labour market. According to an economic study by professor Ekberg (2016), many Bosnians in Sweden ended up in regions with a weak labour market. After an initially poor economic situation and a sluggish start, their employment situation improved sharply during the 2000s. The refugee group from the disintegrating Yugoslavia can be said to be successful where their adaptation and employment rate are closest to that of native Swedes (Ekberg, 2016).



## EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRIVILEGING OF THE MARGIN

It is 2013 and I am defending my PhD thesis. I am 34 years old. The 5 April is the date of my thesis defence and I am also 8 months pregnant with my son but there is about a month left until the estimated delivery date. The defence takes place at the university where I am enrolled and the party has been planned in advance. The night before, my water breaks. Typical! My son seems to want to get out a little sooner than we expected. Several weeks early to be exact. Since we already had a daughter, I know that childbirth can be a very drawn-out event. I will defend my thesis even if my son comes out halfway through, I decide. It is important to complete the process so that I can be on parental leave in peace and quiet. On the day of the thesis defence I tell everyone present that my water has broken but we are moving on through. A quick visit to the hospital together with the child's father makes me feel more secure in completing the event, the contractions are not that frequent. But that would, of course, change. With a wheelchair, morphine and an adult nappy, I head to the university. I will do this. I have longed so much for the day when I can defend my thesis. Once there, slight panic arises, the person examining my thesis is stressed, I have been given morphine and I am surprisingly very calm and determined to proceed. It feels a little cool to be the only woman in Sweden at the moment who is giving birth whilst defending her thesis. The questions take place according to plan, the guests then move to a party room, and so do I. In the evening, however, it is no longer possible to manage and we go to the hospital. The contractions are more frequent, I am tired, exhausted but grateful that everything seems to be over. My son is born, healthy, happy and alert with fantastic blue eyes. The midwife shakes her head and tells her colleagues about the mother who got both a baby and a doctorate on the same day. The news also ends up in the local media.

The identification as a researcher is deeply-rooted in those of us who have chosen this as a profession. It is our identity, it is our duty. Creativity and freedom are at the heart of the profession. For those of us who have a different ethnic background and are pursuing an academic career, this means that we have to make a little more effort. In any case, for me, it means maintaining a little dignity and I do this by equating pride, dignity and hard work.

As a woman with a foreign background, I still experience a kind of stigma, some kind of guilt that I have to bear because I am different. It becomes visible whatever I do, either you do everything right as a good *immigrant*, a role model for others, or you make a mistake which is also made extra visible. No matter what you do, you deviate. However, this is not unusual when women make careers in contexts where they are a minority (Alvinus, Krekula and Larsson, 2018). A previous study

on women who make careers in a military organisation showed that they were raised up and made visible precisely because they were women. At the same time, the same woman is made visible due to a mistake that would probably not be that significant if a man had committed it. Tolerance for mistakes appears to be lower when it comes to women seeking managerial positions (Alvinus, Krekula and Larsson 2018).

Those of us who do research are part of our organisations, our universities. We are social hybrids. We are *organisational centaurs* (Alvinus, 2013; Ahrne, 1993). An organisational centaur is *half human, half organisational*. What you do, the loyalty you feel, is characterised and influenced by organisational affiliation and the identity that you have cemented as a researcher. It is an interplay. This explains why we, as researchers, are so dedicated to our work. Because we *ARE* our work. The definition according to Ahrne's (1993) term, *organisational centaurs – half human, half organisation* reads as follows:

When organizations do something, it is always the individuals who act. However, they do not primarily act on the basis of their own impulse but on behalf of the organization. Their actions are not their own but those of the organization. However, since people are still acting with their own experiences and thoughts there is always tension between the actions of the organization and the human actor. Organizational action is a social hybrid. The actor is a human individual but the action is organizational. One can talk of organizational centaurs: partly human – partly organization (Ahrne, 1993:63).

Devoted researchers, dedicated to their work, regard research as a calling. Somewhere, we brand the research with our unique personalities, but in a meritocratic system, the organisational centaur is extra easy to see. The research act is performed by a human being, but it characterises the organisation they belong to and gives it a "reputation". Our organisation is the sum of our collective deeds, behaviours and characteristics.

But what happens when organisations separate the organisational part from the organisational centaur and pinpoint the human in us? The uniqueness of each of us and what makes us complete individuals? If you as a person in power in an organisation begin to deal with the centaur and begin to blame the centaur's identity and gender and everything that cannot be changed? This is what happened during the recruitment process I describe in the next section.

## RESISTANCE TO GENDER EQUALITY IN ACADEMIA

I was employed at the university on 16 August 2004 as a research assistant. Pretty soon I ended up in a "good girl" phase where it was important to do my very best. As a foreigner in Sweden, I had the chance to be educated, developed and contribute to society. I was interested in continuing a research career and already knew, as a research assistant, that I wanted to do a doctorate, and become a lecturer and a professor. Ending up in an educational environment with officers and civilian academics was a challenge at first but with the desire to see a *hybrid learning environment* (Alvinus, Johansson and Ohlstedt, 2016) rather than just challenges, problems and prestige, I found my way to this university. A hybrid learning environment mixes different professions and organisational cultures and, as an advantage of the resultant synergy effect, creates more knowledge. However, mutual respect for different professions is required. I took this knowledge to the teaching of military personnel with great success. I have many people in my environment to thank for my research success. Long-standing collaboration and a lot of publications have been the results.

I try to work based on the requirements set in academia. Write more articles that are published internationally, do more training sessions, help with the academic housework that is not always meritorious. But it is work for the collective best (Bird, Litt and Wang, 2004; Kalm, 2019). It is about gaining acceptance and recognition in this profession despite a heavy workload. After seventeen years in academia, you know your craft well. After I received my doctorate in 2013, it was not long before I became a senior university lecturer and associate professor. Until then there was no glass ceiling identified. When it came to pedagogical and scientific skills, I felt completely secure, so I decided to apply for two professorships advertised at my workplace.

After the application period ended, three external experts were appointed to assess all the applicants, which were national and international. After a couple of months, the experts submitted their assessments and I was placed on the shortlist along with two other, well-qualified male applicants. I was assessed as the best candidate by one expert and as the second-best by two others. Since there were two positions, I felt that I had a great chance of getting one if merit was to be considered and expert recommendations followed. And since the university is in a development phase, there was also room for all three to be employed as professors. Below is a summary of the assessment of one of the experts:

Aida Alvinus meets all the criteria by a wide margin. Her research on organization, higher management and gender are topics that are relevant and can be considered extremely important in a military leadership context. She is a

talented and productive researcher who, in a short period of time, has published in high-ranking journals such as *Gender, Work and Organization*, with a higher impact factor than the scientific journals that other applicants have published in. She can be regarded as possessing extensive knowledge of the military context as well as various pedagogical contexts and situations, something that is reflected in her well-developed pedagogical philosophy. With regard to administrative and management skills, Aida Alvinus shows commitment and willingness to participate in committees and working committees that are important to operations and takes on various management assignments, including the design and implementation of future higher education. Based on my evaluation and assessment of the applicants for Professor of Leadership under Stressful Conditions /... / at the Swedish Defence University, I find that Aida Alvinus is the best suited for the position.

In the end, the experts' recommendation became completely irrelevant to the final decision-making. In short, the decision made meant that both male applicants were employed at one of the university campuses. The recruitment process for the other campus, in the town where I live, had been completed and the position would be re-advertised. A very, very strange decision, said several of my colleagues. The decision, despite the experts' assessments, was made to my detriment, invoking only my personal qualities such as temperament, without any direct explanation in context. What is this? Since when is a professor not allowed to have temperament? I cannot stop drawing parallels with my background in the former Yugoslavia, where temperament is a collective feature (Smajlovic, 2009). However, a cultural analysis is presented later in this essay.

Sweden is one of the most gender-equal countries (EIGE, 2021) in several respects. Women and men must have equal power to shape their lives, equal pay for equal work, equal distribution of work in the home, equal health and education and men's violence against women must cease (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2021). However, the higher education world is gender-segregated horizontally. The majority of students are girls. However, when it comes to the academic career path, men dominate at the top. According to the statistics of the Swedish Higher Education Authority, 29% of professors are female (UKÄ, 2019). At the Swedish Defence University, the statistics are the following: of a total of 22 professors, 18 are men and only 4 are women, one of whom is Professor Emerita. The statistics show that 22.22% are female professors, but in reality, it is 16.67%. The following was stated in government instructions concerning the recruitment goals for professors issued for 2021: *During 2021–2023, the university has a target for gender structure of*

*newly-recruited professors of 53 percent women* (Governmental Regulation letter for Swedish Defence University, 2021).

In an earlier decision at the same university, measures were presented to facilitate the promotion and recruitment of female professors. There is a recognition of the failure to recruit women and clear measures for what should be addressed were put in print. It is a beautiful document in a shop window, which means that the intentions are positive, but the organisation's inner life does not correspond to the set goals that well (Alvesson, 2013). In Sara Ahmed's words (2021), these goals can be regarded as solid walls where all attempts to implement gender equality are merely scratching the surface.

The decision regarding my application for the professorship cannot be interpreted as anything other than hidden opposition to gender equality in general (Benschop and Van den Brink, 2014) and is in direct opposition to the guidelines the university introduced in its work towards improved gender equality. Gender equality concerns important issues such as the distribution of power, resources and responsibilities which, by definition, means that someone gets more and others get less. Resistance can take the form of vociferous protest or it can be there in silence, it can be manifested through lack of interest or it can provide active opposition structurally, behind decisions (Cockburn, 1991; Amundsdotter et al., 2015).

Often, opposition to gender equality can also intertwine with other interests that may include, for example, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation, which provides an intersectional perspective. I draw this conclusion about resistance if I carry out an analysis using intersectionality (Acker, 2006, 2009) as an analytical tool in order to be able to understand the decision that was made to my detriment. The more characteristics of a minority a person has, the greater the risk of discrimination. Being a woman born in Sweden is enough to be discriminated against. It is even worse if you have a foreign background. The intersectional perspective, in combination with resistance to gender equality, is what is most relevant in this context as the distribution of power and resources is a vertical homosocial phenomenon (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014). *Birds of a feather stick together.*

Allocation of positions of power from the theory of homosociality is about prioritising a certain gender, in principle only men, so that this overrepresented gender may dominate in this social context, such as in the recruitment of professors, rather than meritocracy and individual merits. Acker (2006) calls these Inequality Regimes, which will be described later in the essay.

## INTERSECTION OF VARIOUS BASES OF DISCRIMINATION

Sometime after the decision had been made that I would not get the job despite recommendations, I was offered a development interview in a meeting with managers and representatives of the union. Due to the pandemic, the meeting was held digitally via Zoom. The idea was to discuss my development opportunities, which was my own proposal. One of the managers I had never really met began the conversation in a more positive spirit:

You have received a sad message that we did not approve of your management skills. So, both NN and I think that it is reasonable to offer an opportunity like this so you could ask questions and hear our thoughts about why it happened this way and what is behind this. But the most interesting is your way forward. What future opportunities can we see?

He lobbed the floor to the other boss who delivered the decision on the previous Friday and who initially refrained from commenting. The first boss continued: *Shall we give the floor to you, Aida, so you can tell me what you are thinking? What do you need at the moment?*

I answered that I was grateful that they were basing the discussion on my needs, but that I understood that the decision had been made to my detriment. However, in order to make the discussion as constructive as possible, I suggested we talked about what the future held and the development opportunities there were in the workplace. After all, I had been declared a competent professor. The first boss began to explain that they made decisions based on my personal qualities, which would then mainly be about my temperament. I felt uncomfortable. At that point my thoughts began to revolve around what this was really about. I believed somewhere that academia was based on a meritocratic system and that merits should be respected. Before the meeting, I had read the descriptions of all three candidates and noted an important difference that I addressed at that moment.

Me: But can you help me then understand, I answer. My personal characteristics are the same as those of one of the male candidates, but the narrative around him is more positive. I am presented in a negative narrative.

This is a crucial question – the boss expands the tone of his voice a little – so either you take this to heart and believe that there is substance in this or you think it is an incorrect and erroneous assessment and there is nothing WE CAN do to change you!

Me: I do not know, you and I have never met and talked. So, in the name of honesty, you have formed an opinion based on what others have said.

Him: Yes

Me: Then I think we need to focus on the future instead. I do not think we can have a discussion based on what others have said. I had checked with my references about what had been said and this was not the narrative they wanted to convey. You have never even heard the other side. So, we need to talk about the future instead.

Him: This IS talking about the future because the future will be determined by how YOU look at it! And you can choose to see this as feedback. And if you feel that it is not true and not correct then it will be difficult for you to move on from this...

*It will be difficult for me to move on...* said a man I had never met, never had a dialogue with and with these words he gave the glass ceiling a clear definition and design. It would be difficult – for me... In my heart I just wanted to shout: What have I done to you? Why am I accused? What am I even accused of? I remained silent instead, I was neither impulsive nor temperamental at that moment. In my ears, the bombings returned. I had not done anything; I am a mother of two children and have a husband and a good relationship of almost 20 years. *I am a functional individual* – I heard myself say in some kind of self-defence. There was no intention of helping me understand either. I personified Franz Kafka's *The Trial*.

At that moment, the interpretive precedence around me as a person, my life story, my feelings and my future ended up with two men, one of whom I had never met and the other I had talked to twice. The men in this conversation decided that they had the interpretive precedence concerning which emotional states and which qualities were the right ones. If they decided that a woman had temperament and they considered that to be wrong or a "*risk to others*", they also believed that their own reaction to reality was the correct one. They believed that the narrative around me as an individual should be designed so that it sounded negative. A woman's emotions seem to be some form of reaction that is, to say the least, irrational, appearing out of thin air and not a reaction to reality or perceived injustice. That we act and react appears to violate some kind of norm and logic of obedience that is imposed on us women. I asked them to exemplify what exactly I am accused of. But they gave no examples. However, deep down I knew that I had challenged

power, pointed out the unreasonable workload of myself and my colleagues, and taken up injustices but was silenced, blanked, ignored and blamed (see, for example, Ahmed, 2021). My complaints were always about working conditions and I asked the question *Why is it done this way?* Without an actual answer and a lot of delays, my questions were transformed into my personal qualities. Individuals who complain of injustice and challenge power are not listened to (Ahmed, 2021).

According to Acker (2006), the inequalities between levels become more profound in hierarchical organisations such as academia. The recruitment and selection processes form a clear example of how inequality regimes are reproduced. The ideas concerning which bodies (gender, race, ethnic background) are best suited for the job benefit men to a greater extent than women, who are instead disqualified due to personality traits or gender (Acker, 2006). The basic problem with inequality regimes is the underlying system in which male norms are valued higher. Attempts to change the structures do not attack the root of the problem, only its manifestations. Consequently, according to Acker (2006), gender mainstreaming is difficult to achieve. The visibility of this inequality depends entirely on the viewer. Those who belong to a privileged group do not see their own privilege. In the conversation with managers, I felt that they were legitimising their decision to deviate from meritocracy and maintain the inequality regime. Because that is what they did when they completely ignored the recommendations of external experts and university governance internal bodies and decisions. The only way to solve the problem is to diversify recruitment and ensure that there is diversity in positions of power (Acker, 2006) and that meritocracy is established and formal rules are followed.

The conversation or monologue continued for about an hour. I was pressured to admit that I am temperamental. It was an asymmetry of power in the conversation that meant I no longer had the ability to stand up for myself, to try to save the little dignity I had left as a human being, as a woman. Never had I felt so much like an immigrant (i.e., a deviant), a woman and so wrong at the same time. The image of me as a human being, as a teacher, mother, friend, daughter, researcher, citizen and much more was shattered and redefined by two strangers based on their yardstick of how to be (in my opinion, de-humanised and without expressed emotions). The organisational centaur, the social hybrid, was torn apart. The organisational part was snatched away from me and buried. Remaining, and obliterated, was the human part or rather a caricature of my personal qualities that I share with so many people. This was a culture clash. I tried to gather myself and take on my research role and observe what is happening in this meeting.

After further work looking into whether there is research on former Yugoslav culture showing that is heterogeneous but with certain common features, I found



a master's thesis based on a number of interviews where temperament is emphasised as a cultural feature. Verbal and non-verbal communication characterise a certain behaviour and contribute to being perceived as temperamental and evaluated on that basis. Being perceived as exotic, "like a breath of fresh air" and committed is as common as being perceived as aggressive. The essay refers to an interview with a guy who describes how he himself is perceived in his Swedish workplace:

You hear sometimes, that you are hot-tempered and your temperament is like that, kind of... calm down now for goodness' sake... but it's mostly... mostly out of love, I think (Smajlovic, 2009:34).

To be able to recognise why my Swedish managers could start talking about my personal qualities, I placed myself in my bosses' shoes to understand their ability to draw conclusions so I chose to do further research and found a study by Phillips-Martinsson (1995) about how Swedes are experienced in an international business context. Through interviews with 171 foreign businessmen, the author was able to identify a number of stereotypical notions about Swedes. Communication problems based on the fear of conflict were obvious. In the above conversation with managers, a clash crystallised between the fear of conflict (manager) and being unafraid of conflicts (me). Based on his study, Phillips-Martinsson believes that Swedes are perceived as slower than others in making decisions, that they are driven by a consensus culture and are not flexible enough (1995). The same conclusion is drawn by Larsson et al. (2016) in a study in which foreign military officers were asked to comment on their Swedish counterparts. The pursuit of consensus was far too obvious, the study concluded. The clash between cultures, between "careful" and "impulsive", "consensus" and "conflict" was evident in this meeting.

In the interview study of individuals from the former Yugoslavia who live in Sweden, a question was asked concerning their views on the differences between the Swedish and the Bosnian culture (Smajlovic, 2009). The major difference is that the Bosnian culture is perceived as "hotter". It appears to be a cultural feature. The interviewee in the study described himself as impulsive and spontaneous. He interpreted his work colleagues' way of working as slower, more thoughtful and more detailed. It is the combination of these different working methods that can drive forward development in an organisation, the author concludes (Smajlovic, 2009). The same interviewee also generalises everyone with a foreign background who lives in Sweden and believes that immigrants are forced to be more creative and think outside the box due to the imminent risk of being perceived as deviant. Greater challenges are in place in social life, in encounters with the Swedish culture and then problem-solving ability comes to the fore (Smajlovic, 2009).

In the same study, another interviewee says that immigrants from the Balkans generally use body language more than Swedes. The same respondent said that if he raises his voice, for example, others think he is angry, which he is not as this is part of his personality and cultural expression. There is something about verbal and non-verbal communication, according to the author, that everyone must relate to. Insights into how others perceive hot behaviour are as important as knowledge of how your own temperamental behaviour can affect other, more emotionally restrained, individuals. An acceptance of each other's differences is the way to go.

## PREJUDICES AGAINST WOMEN'S EMOTIONAL STATE

When I wanted to become a researcher at the Swedish Defence University, I wanted to understand the mechanisms behind the war. The war in the former Yugoslavia is part of my life story. I really wanted to understand why we humans engage in wars. After 18 years at the university, I could not really grasp what the root cause of war was beyond economic and political causes. How come close friends, neighbours and acquaintances turn into bitter enemies overnight? After the meeting with my bosses, I realised that not much is needed to trigger prejudice and, finally, hatred. Allport (1954 [1979]) presented a scale of prejudice which, in brief, reads as follows: 1) antilocution is about reputation-blackening of other, deviant individuals, 2) avoidance, 3) discrimination, 4) acts of violence and 5) extinction. Allport tried to explain how exactly war arises from a political psychological perspective on a macro level. The mechanisms of bullying have some similarities with the prejudice scale and can be studied from a micro perspective. Bullying satisfies the need for dominance, power and status. This occurs through direct or more indirect action, such as spreading rumours, exclusion or other methods of relational manipulation (Eriksson, 2001; Blomberg, 2016). Another, however, similar way of looking at the function of bullying behaviour is that it provides control of resources and a willingness to eliminate competition (Eriksson, 2001; Blomberg, 2016). Somewhere, all of these mechanisms are involved in this process, which makes it easier for men to gain interpretive precedence over women's ways of being.

Prejudices against women's (emotional) states, prejudices against cultural expressions, use of hierarchism and social psychological factors that explain the structures of bullying mean that the glass ceiling can be preserved, protected, maintained and reproduced. Acker's (2009) metaphor of *inequality regimes* is telling, identifying processes, actions and patterns that create and systematise inequalities based on gender, ethnic background or social class. In addition to barriers to the careers of women, access to influence and resources are also affected. And to a greater extent if you have a different ethnic background. So, I am no exception.

To summarise this experience, as a woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina I am just too clumsy to be around fragile masculinity.

## SUPPORT FROM COLLEAGUES, FAMILY AND FRIENDS ALONG THIS DIFFICULT PATH

After these events, I received a lot of support from basically everyone, my friends, colleagues and family. Many were puzzled by that unexpected decision. A professor must be able to be a social hybrid, half human and half organisation "in full figure". Several of my friends and acquaintances thought that I should demand redress and justice after everything that happened. But I could not bear to fight any more for my dignity. I was exhausted. *Do it for other women in academia – they said. Do it for your daughter, for our daughters, for justice and the future!*

But the social and emotional cost was already great, I could not sacrifice any more. My energy must be focused on my family, my friends, students and lots of good colleagues who wish me well and whom I appreciate. Writing this essay has been a coping strategy and will leave a message to posterity that we have not come far enough in gender equality, not even in a country that is still well placed in the gender equality ranking. I regard the entire situation as a life lesson and realise that I am neither the first nor the last (sadly enough) who has been or will be part of a process which makes it difficult to move on in my career.

It is May 2021 and spring does not really want to offer any summer heat to Sweden. I am walking through empty corridors at the university, waiting for one of my military students to supervise. I look up to see if the sun will show up. It has been dark and cold for far too long. I notice that there is a glass roof above my head in the main building itself and yes, the sun's rays stubbornly fight through the rain clouds and reach me out of the corner of my eye. It felt provocative but still symbolic to see the glass ceiling above my head, a metaphor for my own experience. I still believe in justice and its victory, which might not happen today, but it will eventually. I see my student approaching, smiling and expectant. I wave and smile back. *Thanks to you, my essay was fun to write, thank you for being so committed,* he says. I am glad, this is exactly what I needed to hear. Now it is important to focus on helping other individuals to reach their goals and develop their thirst for scientific knowledge. Optimism and solidarity can still not be taken away from me and with this in mind, today I am embarking on my difficult academic path against all odds, not willing to change my personal qualities.

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## DATA ACCESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Data and analyses are presented within the article.

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## “Bit će ti teško napredovati...” Autoetnografska studija suočavanja sa “staklenim stropom” u procesu akademskog zapošljavanja

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### SAŽETAK

U ovoj autoetnografskoj studiji razmatra se način na koji diskriminacija i predrasude stoje u opreci prema akademskom meritokratskom sustavu. U Švedskoj, koja je jedna od najravnopravnijih zemalja na svijetu, protivljenje ravnopravnosti spolova i predrasude prema strancima skrivene su iza organizacijskih procesa i procesa donošenja odluka. U početnom dijelu rada opisuje se kako je proces zapošljavanja profesora zaobišao meritokratski sustav u kojem bi akademske kvalifikacije i obrazovni rezultati trebali imati najveću ulogu u procesu napredovanja akademskog osoblja. U centralnom dijelu rada analizira se kako se tobožnja meritokracija izokreće i manipulira unutar sveučilišnih konteksta i kako se osobne karakteristike poput “temperamenta” autorice iskorištavaju kako bi joj onemogućili ulazak na željena vrata akademskih odjela. Traumatska iskustva zapošljavanja na švedskom sveučilištu, povezana s prijašnjim iskustvima rata u Bosni i Hercegovini, pridonose boljem razumijevanju individualnog narativa i društvenog konteksta Švedske. Rad je doprinos promišljanju i teorijskoj analizi osobnog iskustva kroz povezivanje rodnoteorijske, interkulturene te socijalno-psihološke perspektive.

Ključne riječi: rod, diskriminacija, akademsko zapošljavanje, meritokracija, autoetnografija