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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Reimagining equality in EU higher education and research policies: insights from Black feminism

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the European Union's (EU) higher education and research (HE&R) policies from a Black feminist perspective that seeks transformative change. It employs an adapted Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) to understand current EU HE&R gender and race equality frames. These frameworks are then contrasted with a Black feminist perspective, based on the works of Philomena Essed, Akwugo Emejulu, and Nilma Lino Gomes, which identifies four inequality dimensions: access and representation, curriculum and research agendas, everyday discrimination, and equality as a democratic imperative. The findings reveal that EU HE&R policies fall short in addressing intersectional, structural, and institutionalized discrimination and the epistemic exclusion of marginalized groups, particularly the racially minoritized. The article argues that these policies reflect a colonial and race-evasive discourse, treating inequality as a numerical problem rather than a systemic issue rooted in gender and race power imbalances. By integrating a Black feminist framework to 'reforest our imaginaries' and expand EU equality frameworks, the study contributes to a decolonial critique of European universities and simultaneously advances feminist epistemic justice.

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Introduction

This article analyses gender and race equality frameworks within the European Union's higher education & research (HE&R) policies through the lens of Black feminism, revealing their limitations in addressing the historical marginalization of racialized and gendered groups in European academia. Analysing HE&R is strategic because it can either challenge or perpetuate inequalities by shaping opportunities and driving knowledge production that informs policymaking and public opinion. It also mirrors broader societal inequalities, with implications beyond HE&R (Thomas & Arday, 2021; Waller et al., 2018).

The racialized and gendered nature of democratic institutions, including HE&R, comprises the historical marginalization of bodies and ideas. Following the call by Indigenous scholars Oliveira and Turner-Chuji (2025) to 'reforest our imaginaries', this article incorporates marginalized perspectives to expand democratic frameworks, thereby expanding

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monolithic equality. Black feminism, as a tradition of radical political imagination (Lourenço & Franco, 2021), critiques socially unjust structures that marginalize Black and other racially and intersectionally minoritized women while generating knowledge that inspires transformative action (Collins, 2000). Incorporating Black feminist perspectives, EU HE&R policies can be reimaged as tools for decolonization and intersectional equality.

While the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) primarily tasks the EU with supporting national higher education policies, the EU can influence them through mechanisms like the European Research Area (ERA), recommendations, and funding programs. The EU's role in research is more significant, allowing it to design and implement research programs. As for equality policies, the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC) prohibits discrimination at all education levels, and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997, in force since 1999) commits the EU to gender equality across all activities (Verloo et al., 2006), including in HE&R.

The discussion around equality in higher education gained momentum in the late 1990s, stimulated by the expansion of university access, immigration, and mobility programs (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Sadlak et al., 2009). Student advocacy in the early 2000s led to the inclusion of a social dimension in the Bologna Process, which now reflects the EU's emphasis on inclusion as a key objective for the European higher education system (Bohonnek et al., 2010; European Commission, 2022). In the field of research, the European Community introduced its first gender equality measures in 1990 (Hönig, 2016). Other aspects of inequality, such as race, have remained much less prominent and have only recently been addressed under broader concepts like 'diversity' and 'inclusion'. Unlike higher education, there has been little debate on democratizing access to research positions and funding.

Inclusion concerns in HE&R align with the gender and race mainstreaming strategy, a core approach to promoting equality (Bell, 2008; Verloo, 2005). Ursula von der Leyen's first term as President of the European Commission (2019–2024) represented a change in the opportunity structure for equality policies and the mainstreaming of an intersectional perspective (Maes & Debusscher, 2024).

Gender mainstreaming has produced diverse policy frames that reflect different interpretations of problems, goals, and strategies for addressing inequality. Studying this variation is crucial, as it influences its success and effectiveness (Verloo, 2005). In this article, I extend this analysis to the mainstreaming of racial equality, comparing equality frames in gender and racial policies to identify synergies, particularities, and gaps. This approach seeks to advance a more intersectional and comprehensive framework for equality, particularly relevant for HE&R.

Policy frames are heavily shaped by power relations, which determine whose voices are present and whose are absent (Verloo, 2005). Notably, intersectionally marginalized people, particularly Black women, have been largely excluded from EU policymaking processes (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019) and, correspondingly, so are the definitions of problems and solutions displayed in EU policies.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept of 'epistemic violence' describes how dominant knowledge systems erase, silence, and marginalize those marked as colonial 'Others', their perspectives, and contributions. Kristie Dotson (2012, p. 24) deepens this analysis with the notion of 'epistemic oppression', which occurs through 'epistemic exclusions', defined

as systematic infringements that reduce the capacity of certain communities to participate in knowledge production. These exclusions compromise 'epistemic agency', the ability to use shared epistemic resources to contribute to and revise collective knowledge, thereby weakening both individual knowers and the quality of social knowledge.

Scholars have pointed out the colonial dimensions of EU policies that perpetuate or contribute to epistemic oppression, particularly from feminist perspectives.¹ Within EU HE&R policies, this manifests when racially minoritized women's knowledge, experiences, and proposed solutions remain absent from policy debates, resulting in narrow equality frameworks. Black feminist politics and the equality frames they advance 'are too often erased from or misrecognised in the European imagination' (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019, p. 3). As a countermeasure, I employ Black feminism as a praxis that centres Black women as knowing agents, challenging epistemic oppression and inspiring a reimagining of EU equality frameworks.

The article begins by introducing a Black feminist framework, which identifies key dimensions of inequality in European HE&R. The methodology section then presents the adaptation of the Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) to examine EU policy documents through an intersectional perspective and describes the documents analysed. The next section identifies the gender and racial equality frames currently employed in EU HE&R policies. This is followed by an engagement with the Black feminist framework developed earlier, using its four dimensions of inequality – access and representation, curriculum and research agendas, everyday discrimination, and equality in HE&R as a democratic imperative – to critically assess these policies. The article concludes by discussing how insights from Black feminist thought can help to reforest our imaginaries and inform a more inclusive and transformative framework for addressing gender and race equality in European HE&R policy.

A Black feminist approach to gender and race equality in HE&R

Black feminism provides both a critique of and a response to interlocking systems of oppression (such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism) shaped by historical processes such as the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and modernity (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). Rooted in resistance to these processes, it combines transformative knowledge production with praxis, defining Black women's oppression as the systemic and enduring denial of resources and rights through unjust political and social structures (Collins, 2000). Black feminism is a political, ethical, and theoretical project that affirms Black women as agents, knowers, and central actors in the pursuit of justice, while also orienting transformative practices to resist, survive, and dismantle these injustices (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

This section synthesizes the work of Philomena Essed, Akwugo Emejulu, and Nilma Lino Gomes into a cohesive, albeit provisional, Black feminist framework for HE&R policy. Their scholarship helps uncover mechanisms of marginalization in European HE&R and informs the construction of a transformative framework for inclusion.

Essed, a social justice scholar, has made pioneering contributions to everyday racism and gendered racism, illuminating the systemic barriers Black women face in various spheres, including academia across Europe, North America, and South America. Emejulu, a political sociologist, studies racial, gender, and class inequalities and activism in Europe and the United States. Gomes, a Brazilian pedagogue, has been influential in advocating

for policies that integrate Black and Indigenous histories into the curriculum while supporting equal access to higher education in Brazil. Although Gomes's work does not directly address the European HE&R system, her perspective highlights common challenges within the African diaspora and provides valuable insights from the Global South.

Following Patricia Hill Collins, I situate these scholars' work within Black feminist thought. Their contributions critique socially unjust ideas and practices that marginalize Black (and other racially minoritized) women and advance knowledge that inspires transformative action (Collins, 2016). Black feminist thought affirms Black women as agents and knowledge producers, centring their lived experiences on justice-oriented projects (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). However, Black women's intellectual contributions often face 'epistemic exclusion' (Dotson, 2012), a devaluation that silences Black women's voices and erases their contributions by damaging their ability to speak and be heard (Dotson, 2011). Despite these challenges, Black women's experiences of oppression encourage their sustained effort to theorize injustice and catalyse social transformation (Collins, 2000). This provides a foundation for assessing EU HE&R policies' gender and racial equality frameworks.

In this article, the work of Essed, Emejulu, and Gomes contributes to a Black feminist project of transformation by unveiling mechanisms of marginalization in European HE&R and building a transformative framework for inclusion. It identifies four dimensions of inequality in HE&R: access and representation; curriculum and research agenda; everyday discrimination; and equality in HE&R as a democratic imperative. The first three categories describe different aspects of inequality, while the fourth provides a rationale sustaining the claim for equality.

Access and representation

Access and representation concern the (unequal) opportunities for minoritized groups to enter HE&R as students or staff, progress into decision-making and senior roles (vertical segregation), and achieve equal distribution across disciplines (horizontal segregation). Inequality is regarded as related to epistemic exclusion (Dotson, 2012) as it relates to colonial conceptions of 'who is allowed to be a knowing and knowledgeable agent' (Emejulu, 2019, p. 204).

The existence of biases in access is made evident from the significant discrepancies in access to HE&R for racially minoritized groups, who, even when achieving similar secondary educational outcomes as their White peers, have lower enrolment rates in universities, particularly in prestigious institutions (Emejulu, 2017b; Essed, 1999). Barriers to access include awareness of racial discrimination in the labour market, previous experiences of bias in education, restrictive immigration laws disqualifying long-term racially minoritized and refugee residents as national applicants, and the favouring of White applicants. Rather than addressing such hurdles, analyses often employ a 'deficiency framework' (Essed, 1999) that focuses on perceived deficiencies within minoritized groups – such as 'unstructured families', 'learning problems', or 'lack of competence'–, which obscure underlying structural discrimination and institutional biases (Essed, 1999; Gomes, 2021).

Underrepresentation persists across senior faculty ranks and disciplines, especially in sciences, with racially minoritized groups and women concentrated in temporary, part-time, and lower-ranking roles (Emejulu, 2019; Essed, 1999; Gomes, 2019).

Systemic inequalities are not unidimensional: they are compounded by capitalism, racism, and sexism. For instance, budget cuts, increased fees, the focus on metrics, and the adoption of a managerial style disproportionately impact economically disadvantaged groups, in which racially minoritized groups are overrepresented (Emejulu, 2019; Essed, 1999). Other examples are the combination of institutionalized racism, sexism, and exploitative labour practices working as barriers that undermine the career prospects of early-career researchers women of colour (Emejulu, 2019), or (White) male colleagues often obstructing the career progression of women of colour (Essed, 2013).

Curriculum and research agenda

This dimension emphasizes how the uneven distribution of power across intersecting systems of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 2002) shapes pedagogic practices and knowledge production, and how they contribute to reinforcing social hierarchies.

Universities uphold a Eurocentric perspective that marginalizes non-Western epistemologies, reinforcing colonial legacies through education (Gomes, 2021). HE&R institutions regulate what is considered legitimate knowledge under the guise of 'meritocracy' and 'free exchange of ideas' Emejulu (2017b). The ethnocentric curriculum often reproduces racial and cultural stereotypes (Essed, 1999, 2000), with the history of colonialism, slavery, and migration being erased, and alternative systems of knowledge and political organization being overlooked (Emejulu, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Essed, 1999; Gomes, 2019, 2021). Epistemic exclusion results in contributions by Black women and other minoritized groups being marginalized, and so are courses on gender or race (Emejulu, 2019; Gomes, 2021). Accordingly, the curriculum is dominated by White male authors from the Global North while lacking a critical reading of the gender, race, and capitalist politics promoted in their work.

In research, this inequality manifests in biases that influence department research agendas, a lack of grant funding, and scant access to prestigious journals, restricting work on racism and sexism (Emejulu, 2019; Essed, 2000).

Decolonization efforts, therefore, entail transforming the very structures of knowledge production to reconfigure 'what knowledge is' (Emejulu, 2019, p. 204).

Everyday discrimination

This dimension describes the pervasive forms of gender and race discrimination in higher education and research (HE&R). Such practices send a clear message to marginalized groups that they do not truly belong in academia. Consequently, this contributes to their epistemic exclusion and devalues their intellectual contributions.

Racially minoritized women frequently experience isolation and the lack of mentorship and support networks, often being the only person of colour in their departments (Emejulu, 2019; Essed, 2000). Because universities fail to adopt effective anti-racist policies, they are also disproportionately tasked with care work and emotional labour, as they are expected to support minoritized students facing discrimination (Essed, 2000). Because these demands are not regarded as academic work, they divert time and energy from the activities that are valued for career progression.

Discrimination also appears in hostility from peers, as racially minoritized women may face censorship when addressing antiracism and are often treated as ‘diversity hires’, devaluing their qualifications (Essed, 2000). Racially minoritized students often encounter harmful stereotypes about their communities and cultures and face the marginalization of topics that hold significance for their communities (Essed, 2013). Teachers frequently hold low expectations for them, and biased grading practices are not uncommon.² Everyday racism also manifests as harassment and takes the form of racial jokes, casual hostile remarks, and negative generalizations (Essed, 1999).

Equality in HE&R as a democratic imperative

This dimension has two components: it regards equal participation in HE&R as a right and defines HE&R as strategic for decolonization and fostering genuinely democratic societies.

Part of a broader anti-racist and feminist mobilization, the struggle for equality in HE&R seeks to validate racially minoritized and other marginalized groups as legitimate contributors to knowledge production, thus decolonizing it (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). Achieving this goal requires structural changes in both HE&R and society (Gomes, 2020). In politicizing inequality in HE&R, the role of HE&R institutions in colonial and imperial enterprises is exposed and followed by the demand for changes to address the multidimensional intersectional inequality they helped create and continue to perpetuate (Emejulu, 2017a). Transforming universities from an ‘elite institutional project’ into inclusive spaces is essential to breaking cycles of exclusion rooted in power imbalances (Emejulu, 2017b).

Understanding equal participation in HE&R as a right rather than a privilege of the elite links education with citizenship and solidarity (Emejulu, 2017b). It also connects to projects of socioeconomic transformation, as equal access provides minoritized groups, who disproportionately experience socioeconomic marginalization, with routes for social mobility (Essed, 1999; Gomes, 2020).

More than intellectuals and professionals, HE&R institutions should focus on shaping citizens. Therefore, they must embrace an emancipatory, decolonial, and anti-discrimination approach, equipping students and staff with the ability to recognize and combat discrimination in their professional and daily lives, thereby contributing to advancing social justice (Gomes, 2021). HE&R is a key tool for fostering social dialogue, cultivating intercultural competence, and promoting an appreciation of diversity (Essed, 1999), and can thus improve the quality of democracy.

Viewing equality in HE&R as a democratic imperative underscores the need for the decolonization of HE&R institutions, particularly public ones, and to promote changes that allow them to serve all of society, not only majority groups.

Methodology

CFA assumes that gender equality policies adopt diverse policy frames, diverging in ideologies, definitions of problems, strategies, and objectives (Verloo, 2005). The same logic can be extended to racial equality policies (Bell, 2008). Originally, CFA investigates four dimensions – diagnosis; prognosis; roles, and voices–, but this study focuses on problems and solutions. Inspired by Collins and Bilge (2016) and Debusscher and Maes

Table 1. Questions and criteria guiding the document analysis.

Policy dimension	Guiding questions	Criteria	Intersectionality
(1) Diagnosis (problems)	How are gender and race inequality described? Who or what generates the problem? Who is affected?	Visibility of inequality and discrimination Structural understanding of inequality Power imbalance and discriminatory processes leading to inequality are addressed Visibility and representation of groups discriminated against	References to intersectionality Articulation of intersectionality Visibility of problems affecting groups experiencing intersectional discrimination Systems of discrimination as mutually constitutive Visibility and representation of groups experiencing intersectional discrimination
(2) Prognosis (Solutions)	What should/will be done? Who is the policy seeking to protect?	Inequality and discrimination are addressed Power/Structural understanding of inequality Social justice and transformative approach Visibility and representation of groups discriminated against	References to intersectionality Articulation of intersectionality Problems affecting groups experiencing intersectional discrimination addressed Discriminatory processes generating intersectional inequality addressed Visibility and representation of groups experiencing intersectional discrimination

(2024), I adapt the CFA to incorporate an intersectional perspective, in recognition that gender and race inequality in HE&R is shaped by intersecting systems of power and privilege. The questions guiding the analysis of the documents are presented in Table 1. The documents analysed, enacted between 2017 and 2022, cover the most recent EU HE&R policymaking cycle while allowing time for policy implementation. The selection includes key framework documents for higher education and research, and regulations establishing major HE&R programmes. To focus on equality mainstreaming, dedicated equality initiatives were excluded. Priority was given to documents with strategic or regulatory weight and in force. Although not exhaustive, this corpus provides a coherent overview of the main instruments shaping EU HE&R policy during the period studied. The following documents were included in the analysis:

- (1) *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education - COM/2017/0247 final, May 2017 (from now, A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education)*
- (2) *Strategic Plan 2020–2024, of the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, Oct 2020*
- (3) *Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing Horizon Europe (hereafter, Horizon Europe)*
- (4) *Regulation (EU) 2021/819 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (recast) (hereinafter, EIT)*
- (5) *Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+ (hereafter, Erasmus+)*
- (6) *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on*

a European Strategy for Universities - COM/2022/16 final, Jan 2022 (from now, A European Strategy for Universities)

The documents were systematically coded based on the analytical dimensions outlined in [Table 1](#). This coding process facilitated the development of responses to the corresponding questions in the analysis.

The results are next contrasted with the four dimensions of inequality derived from Black feminist scholarship – access and representation, curriculum and research agendas, everyday discrimination, and equality in HE&R as a democratic imperative.

An important study limitation relates to its focus on epistemic oppression: understanding how EU HE&R equality frameworks align with a Black feminist reading of inequality. Future in-depth analyses of the political and institutional processes leading to the exclusion of Black feminist perspectives in EU policies would complement our comprehension of the construction of marginalization.

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Gender and race in HE&R policies

This section outlines the main gender and racial equality frames identified in EU HE&R policies, examining how they define problems, propose solutions, and integrate intersectionality. The goal is to reveal how these policies conceptualize inequality and the remedies they advance.

Identifying problems

In EU HE&R policy documents, problems related to gender are mostly defined as inequalities between women and men negatively impacting women. In contrast to this narrow definition of the subject of the gender mainstreaming strategy, the subject of the racial equality mainstreaming strategy is not clearly outlined, and is only visible in HE policy documents, but not in research policy documents. The language used to identify beneficiaries is inconsistent with the Racial Equality Directive and varies across and within documents, often combining explicit terms for racially minoritized groups with more ambiguous phrases.

Documents combine language that explicitly designates racially minoritized groups with terms that may or may not include them. An example can be found in *A European Strategy for Universities*, which mentions ‘people from disadvantaged backgrounds’, ‘first-generation students and students with a migrant or minority background’, ‘refugees and individuals seeking asylum’, and ‘ethnic minorities’. *Erasmus+* (p. 15) further adds to the lack of clarity by mentioning Article 21 of the *Charter*:

(...) ‘people with fewer opportunities’ (defined as ‘people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, due to their migrant background), (...) including a reason that could give rise to discrimination under Article 21³ of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the Programme.

The lack of a clear definition for beneficiaries makes it difficult to determine who is affected by inequality and who should receive support. Broad terminology like ‘people from disadvantaged backgrounds’ conflates different systems of discrimination with different levels of coverage in EU legislation without making any of them, or their combination, visible. It can also be interpreted as referring primarily to socioeconomic inequality, thereby ignoring discrimination faced by racially minoritized individuals across all social classes.

Another problematic aspect is the framing of race mainstreaming subjects with a focus on immigration. This remarkably disagrees with the EU legislation since the Racial Equality Directive purposefully focuses on discrimination on the grounds of racial and ethnic origins while narrowing the coverage of the rights of immigrants due to the EU’s restrictive migration policy (Howard, 2010). The mention of asylum seekers and refugees, for instance, in *A European Strategy for Universities*, presents the advantage of shedding light on administrative barriers hindering access to HE. However, the lack of references to racial discrimination in HE contributes to avoiding addressing additional expressions of racism within European institutions.

As for the problems identified, three main frames relates to gender inequality in HE&R. From the most to the least visible, they are gender segregation by field of study, with a focus on the low proportion of female students and graduates in STEM; the under-representation of women in decision-making and senior positions; and, to a lesser extent, gender-based violence and gender discrimination. The first and the second frame gender inequality as a descriptive and quantitative problem; however, the second can be additionally interpreted as a factor causing the problem. The third frame refers to social dynamics identified as causing gender inequality and is only briefly mentioned but often not described.

As in gender equality, a descriptive and quantitative frame prevails in the description of problems related to racial inequality. The problem is defined as a matter of access, with people with ‘migrant backgrounds’ being less likely to enter and complete HE; as under-representation or low representation of those with a ‘disadvantaged background’ among academics, administrative staff, and researchers; and as a matter of segregation, with underrepresentation of ‘minorities and other under-represented groups’ in the field of scientific and technology.

An additional qualitative interpretation is also provided, and refers to a perceived lack of basic skills, as exemplified in *A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education*: ‘The social groups least represented in higher education are more likely to *lack basic skills* (literacy, numeracy and digital competence), experience of learning independently and a clear idea of what higher education entails’ (p. 6, my emphasis). Disconnected from a structural reading of inequalities, this framing results in the stigmatization of the group discriminated against.

Racial inequality as a problem is significantly less frequently addressed in HE policy documents than gender inequality and is practically absent from research policy documents. The single research policy document mentioning race is the *Strategic Plan 2020–2024* as it identifies ‘interlocking systems of power between gender and other social categories and identities such as ethnicity and race (including migrants and refugees)’, as well as other ‘social categories and identities’ (p. 32), as (interacting) factors that result in inequality in EU research. Problems generated by racial discrimination are not described.

Identifying solutions

Gender and race in HE and in research policies

The measures proposed to address gender and racial inequality in HE do not align with the problems they describe, often grouping gender and racial equality together or remaining unspecific. In this sense, *A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education* states that the Commission will '(...) direct Erasmus+ support to help HEIs in developing and implementing integrated institutional strategies for inclusion, gender equality and study success from admission to graduation, including through cooperation with schools and VET providers' (p. 7, my emphasis). Similarly, *A European Strategy for Universities* declares that 'The Commission will develop a European framework for diversity and inclusion, including on gender gaps, identifying challenges and solutions for universities' (p. 14, my emphasis). 'Diversity and inclusion' serves as a generic term that hinders the identification of the systems of discrimination addressed. The promised framework on diversity and inclusion had not been published at the time of writing this article.

Concerning gender, the proposed measures only explicitly refer to the 'segregation problem'. For instance, *A European Strategy for Universities* establishes that the Commission will 'address the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields through a roadmap' without providing further details and that the same EU institution will 'call Member States to encourage universities to implement measures for diversity and inclusion, including voluntary, quantified targets for inclusion and inclusive gender equality plans' (p.14).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership and senior positions is not explicitly tackled, and measures addressing discrimination and gender-based violence generating inequality are also remarkably absent. The focus on numbers greatly empties the initial transformative aims of the gender mainstreaming strategy (Verloo, 2005), as it fails to address and redress the gendered nature of the EU HE system (Verloo, 2006).

The few measures proposed to promote racial equality in HE align with the previously reported lack of a clear definition of the subject and the conflation of racial discrimination with socioeconomic disadvantages and deficiencies attributed to students with a migrant background. Some of them seek to promote institutional change to support the 'disadvantaged'. Illustratively, *A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education* declares the following initiatives: promote more flexible pathways and study options, and advance more widespread recognition of prior learning, which could indeed benefit students with a migrant background. The same document establishes 'teaching training on dealing with diversity' as a possibility. Financial support is proposed in *Erasmus+* as a way to ensure access for 'people with fewer opportunities'. Other measures in the document, such as mentoring and academic and non-academic support (also present in *Erasmus+*), privilege the individual-focused measures over structural, institutional, and cultural changes to promote an anti-racist HE system.

The measures addressing gender in research policies maintain a focus on promoting balanced participation while incorporating the dimensions of the research agenda and anti-discrimination (structural/institutional) measures that were absent in HE policies.

Balanced participation measures are found in all three research policy documents analysed. In the *Strategic Plan 2020–2024*, they consist of the indicators on women's participation in Research & Innovation EU programs, particularly Horizon projects. In

addition to quantitative indicators, *Horizon Europe* establishes balanced participation in evaluation panels and expert and selection boards. *EIT* emphasizes the importance of observing the criteria of balance in the appointment of the members of the EIT's governing board and establishes that it should encourage participating higher education institutions 'to pay special attention to gender balance (...), in particular in areas where women continue to be underrepresented, such as information and communications technology, science, technology, engineering and mathematics' (p. 74).

Research content, barely visible as an issue in the diagnosis, becomes quite prominent in the measures proposed. For example, as part of the initiatives to promote a gender approach in research, *Horizon Europe* declares that gender mainstreaming should be implemented, and R&I content should integrate a gender dimension at all stages of the research cycle. Specifically, the document defines that the EIT should ensure the implementation of gender mainstreaming in innovation. Nonetheless, *EIT* proposes a more limited set of measures related to gender content: although it is not among the criteria to select and approve agreements with Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs), the document states that gender-sensitive 'measures and activities' (p. 72) will be considered in the decision on the extension of partnership agreements. Furthermore, the document establishes that the EIT should encourage participating HE institutions 'to pay special attention to (...) gender-sensitive approaches, in particular in areas where women continue to be underrepresented, such as information and communications technology, science, technology, engineering and mathematics' (p. 74).

Remarkably, measures related to racial equality are not found in research policies.

From framework to specific policies

As mentioned above, *A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education* states that the Erasmus+ program will address gender equality. Nonetheless, the topic does not appear as particularly relevant in *Erasmus+*. This could be due to the prevailing descriptive and quantitative perspective adopted, since women are the majority of the participants of the program. An alternative focus on gender segregation in the STEM fields and gender-based violence could have produced a different understanding and, accordingly, a different design of the policy.

Regarding racial equality, *A European Strategy for Universities* and *Erasmus+* both express the intent to formulate a European framework for diversity and inclusion. While the first is not to be found, the framework adopted by *Erasmus+* is presented in the document *Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/1877 of 22 October 2021 on the Framework of Inclusion Measures of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes 2021–2027*. Nonetheless, this document does not mention race, ethnicity, or people with a migrant background.

Remarkably, while the *EU Anti-racist Plan 2025* mentions the *Horizon Europe* and the *Erasmus+* programs, the policy documents analysed, launched after the Plan, merely add a reference to the right to non-discrimination, but do not include efforts to promote racial equality. This further illustrates the failure in implementing the race mainstreaming strategy.

These inconsistencies exemplify how mainstreaming efforts can fail in the transposing of equality initiatives from equality policies and framework policies to specific policies.

(Absent) Intersectionality

The Strategic Plan 2020–2024 contains the only explicit reference to intersectionality among the HE&R policies analysed, and there are no further mentions of intersectional discrimination as a problem or groups experiencing it. Likewise, none of the measures proposed in the documents display an intersectional perspective, and intersectionality is not integrated into solutions. In the *Strategic Plan 2020–2024*, intersectionality is poorly articulated and appears as a mere listing of categories rather than as structurally arranged or related to power. Like other EU policies, the *Strategic Plan 2020–2024*'s approach to intersectionality both prioritizes gender as the main system of discrimination and hinders the visibility of the intersection of race with systems of discrimination other than gender (Christoffersen, 2021; Eigenmann et al., 2024).

Overall, EU HE&R policies seem unable to promote the equal inclusion and participation of racially minoritized women and other intersectionally discriminated groups, even though several of the policies were enacted after the launch of the *EU Anti-racist Plan 2020–2025*, which acknowledges the need for an intersectional approach to be adopted in EU policies.

Assessing equality in EU HE&R policies from a Black feminist perspective

This section employs a Black feminist framework to contrast the equality frames and dimensions identified in EU HE&R policies with four dimensions of inequality drawn from Black feminist scholarship – access and representation, curriculum and research agendas, everyday discrimination, and equality in HE&R as a democratic imperative. This approach aims to contribute to ‘reforest our imaginaries’ by offering alternative equality frames that can inspire more inclusive and transformative EU policies.

Three equality dimensions of inequality arise in EU HE&R policy documents.

The first, *participation*, concerns access and presence at all levels of the academic career and fields. It is most frequently linked to gender equality and the field of study, and mostly refers to HE, as the following excerpt from *A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education* suggests: ‘The profile of the population of students entering and completing higher education should reflect wider society’ (p.6). While this represents a step towards democratization, the identification of inequality’s causes and the proposed solutions remain insufficient and lack an intersectional approach, thus limiting meaningful change to the inclusion of White women.

The Black feminist approach outlined above reveals significant shortcomings in this frame. Its prevailing quantitative focus on participation overlooks systemic gender, racial, and intersectional discrimination – central drivers of epistemic oppression–, which are practically absent from problem definition and solutions. This results in inequality being represented predominantly as a numeric issue to be fixed. Transformative measures should instead tackle the structural roots of exclusion and unequal power relations, as exemplified, in the case of gender, by initiatives like the *Zero-tolerance code of conduct: Counteracting gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, in the EU research and innovation system* (European Commission, 2024).

EU HE&R policies recognize that career choices are influenced by social contexts and educational institutions. For instance, *A Renewed Agenda for EU Higher Education* states that

What people choose to study in higher education depends on personal motivation, good guidance and the availability of attractive learning and career options. Career opportunities ultimately depend on employers and the wider economy, but education and training have a key role to play. Schools can motivate pupils to take an interest in all subjects, including maths and sciences, and in guiding their choices. (p. 4)

Nonetheless, this passage illustrates the dominant individualistic approach and the invisibility of discrimination that prevails in EU HE&R policies, which fail to address problems discouraging minoritized groups from accessing HE and pursuing (certain) academic careers, such as previous discrimination in earlier steps of education and discrimination in the labour market. When racial inequality is at all incorporated, the only causality concretely attributed to underrepresentation and segregation is the supposed 'lack of basic skills' of racially minoritized groups. This 'deficiency framework', a key mechanism of epistemic exclusion, stigmatizes groups discriminated against and aligns with colonial views as it ignores processes of discrimination and frames the subjects of policy as a 'burden' (Essed, 1999), portraying them as inherently unsuitable for academic careers. Here, 'fixing the numbers' means fixing the subjects, instead of changing institutions.

Remarkably, unequal representation in senior positions and, in the case of race, also in research careers, remains unaddressed by the solutions proposed. Thus, the colonial distribution of academic positions in which Whites and men are overrepresented in advanced academic and leadership positions and racially minoritized groups are delegitimized as knowledge producers is not questioned. Overall, EU HE&R policies seem far from aligning with the Black feminist and decolonial intent of subverting dominant ideas of 'who is allowed to be a knowing and knowledgeable agent' (Emejulu, 2019, p. 204), and even further from dismantling the intersecting institutionalized racism, sexism, and exploitative labour practices that continue to marginalize racially minoritized groups, including women, in HE&R.

The second equality dimension in EU HE&R policies is *content* and can be compared to the curriculum and research agenda dimension of the Black feminist approach outlined earlier. However, in EU HE&R policies, this dimension is very limited in scope, as it appears only in initiatives to mainstream gender in research. This limitation is partially justified by the EU's mandate, as curriculum content remains a prerogative of Member States. Proposed transformations in the research agenda, where the EU holds greater decision-making power, are not accompanied by efforts to include voices that have remained marginalized, or the history of colonialism, slavery, or migration. There are no visible efforts to reintegrate erased histories or voices beyond those of White women, and Eurocentrism is reinforced as it stays untouched. The policies additionally fail to address inequality in access to funding or publication, the priorities of department agendas, or the marginalization of courses on gender or race.

In this sense, the EU equality frame in HE&R only seems able to moderately address epistemic oppression affecting White women, but remains far from posing the question

‘what knowledge is?’ (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019) from the perspective of other marginalized groups.

The third equality dimension displayed in EU HE&R policies refers to *institutional discrimination* and shows up in measures to promote teacher training for dealing with diversity and diversity strategies or gender equality plans. Most initiatives, though, focus on participation and fail to address content and institutional discrimination. While the problem generating gender inequality is depicted as structural discrimination affecting women, but is rarely discussed, racial discrimination is not acknowledged. As a result, discrimination is predominantly treated as a technical issue.

This quantitative and technical approach to inequalities in EU HE&R neglects discrimination and erases everyday challenges mentioned in the Black feminist approach, such as low teacher expectations about minoritized groups and biases in grading, hostility from peers, and (sexist and racist) harassment or demands of care work and emotional labour falling on female academics, particularly racially minoritized women. By not addressing this, EU policies contribute to maintaining current inequality at all levels of HE&R.

A fourth dimension in the Black feminist framework is *equality in HE&R as a democratic imperative*. EU HE&R policies incorporate a social dimension and an engagement with democratic pursuits that is linked to inclusion in HE. For instance, *A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education* contends that:

Higher education must play its part in facing up to Europe’s social and democratic challenges. This means ensuring that higher education is *inclusive, open to talent from all backgrounds*, and that higher education institutions are not ivory towers, but civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities. (p. 6, my emphasis)

Moreover, one of the general objectives of the *Strategic Plan 2020–2024* seeks to strengthen democracy and aims ‘(...) to contribute to the development of policies and innovations that expand political participation and civil society engagement, enhance accountability and legitimacy, protect rights, promote equalities and inclusion, and help to strengthen trust in democratic institutions’ (p. 29).

Considering the Black feminist approach, the link between democracy and HE&R in EU policies seems quite fragile. First, it is restricted to participation in HE, does not reach research, and refers to inclusion but not equality. Second, as illustrated by the second passage, the proposal is that academia reaches out to society to help promote equality and inclusion, but not that knowledge production be transformed by the incorporation of multiple viewpoints that have been thus far marginalized. Furthermore, beyond this somewhat interventionist proposal, HE&R are not regarded as tools in forming citizens and, as previously observed, multidimensional and intersectional inequality is not addressed. Therefore, the suggested university model still frames universities as an elite institutional project, though slightly more connected to society, as it does not propose any kind of structural transformation leading to changes in power imbalance.

The comparison between how gender and race equality appear in EU HE policies additionally shows that gender receives more attention than race, despite the area of education being covered by the Racial Equality Directive and gender not being protected by EU Directives in the field of education. The result of this study resonates with previous observations that the EU antidiscrimination and racial equality policies often lack institutional commitment to implementation (Bell 2009).

From a Black feminist and decolonial perspective, the resistance to addressing racial equality can be linked to the dominant European racial discourse on race, which has race-evasiveness as one of its main characteristics. By refusing to address race, this discourse harms the visibility of racism and the conditions enabling it. In this sense, the reference to ‘migration background’ instead of race contributes to portraying ‘the race problem’ in Europe as a new phenomenon associated with the recent arrival of waves of immigrants, instead of a modern construct supporting European domination over other regions and populations – as revealed by the colonial enterprise or the long-term problematic relationship with populations such as Roma and the Sinti. On the other hand, by replacing race with migration, this framing relies on the construction of the racially minoritized, even those who are born in Europe, as always arriving in the region and thus never an organic part of it (El-Tayeb, 2011).

Concluding remarks

This article sustains that incorporating a Black feminist approach, alongside other traditionally marginalized viewpoints, can inspire a broader, more inclusive, and transformative equality framework for EU HE&R policies. Policy frames are not neutral: they mostly reflect the priorities of the most powerful and often maintain the status quo. Listening to the historically silenced in EU institutional and political spaces is thus essential to design transformative policies and overcome exclusionary equality frameworks.

The Black feminist framework employed calls for EU HE&R policies to acknowledge that inequality is constructed by intersecting systems of discrimination and privilege across structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels. Moreover, it points to the need to recognize racial discrimination as pervasive in European HE&R, and adopt concrete and effective measures to tackle it, instead of relying on stereotypical deficit-based assumptions about minoritized groups. Policies should move beyond numerical targets to address structural drivers of inequality, integrate intersectionality as a guiding principle, include marginalized voices in shaping curricula and research agendas, and confront everyday discrimination such as harassment, biased evaluation, and unequal care burdens.

The Black feminist perspective explored here shows that re-imagining EU HE&R supposes not only promoting the presence of historically marginalized bodies in academic spaces, which would be in itself an important achievement. Rather, it requires dreaming big and bold and conceiving of academia that promotes solidarity and collaboration, that engages in dismantling prevailing systems of discrimination and privilege, and that dares to work for a radically democratic society as we have not experienced yet.

Notes

1. See, for example, other contributions in this Special Issue (Küçük & Türkeş-Kılıç, 2025; Soyaltin-Colella & Gönenç, 2024; Zihnioğlu, 2025) and the volume *Feminist Framing of Europeanisation* (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm & Cin, 2021).
2. For recent evidence, see, for instance, Triventi (2019) and Neuenschwander and Garrote (2025).
3. Article 21 reads as follows: ‘1. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited’.

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