

Dear Guests,

Many years ago, a ship was launched – quite unnoticed.... There was something very special about this ship. It only carried women on board.

Year after year, the ship welcomed more women on board. And slowly, people on the coast began to take notice of the ship....

“What is their destination?” people asked. “Women’s independence,” they replied.

On the coast, this answer made many people smile. But the ship is still sailing, and it lies still deeper in the water, because more women continue to climb onboard....

This is the tale of a speech given by the author Gyrithe Lemche more than 100 years ago – in fact in 1908. The ship she was talking about was the Danish Women’s Society, Dansk Kvindesamfund.

Her speech is a reminder to us that others - before us - have fought and won important battles. Today, women can vote, get an education, work, be financial independent and so on. And equality is not only of interest to one gender.

You can argue that under those battles – and in those days - people knew the rules. And the objectives were achieved through reforms, laws and political agreements. Nobody was left in doubt.

But this is not the case when we talk about sexism. Because what is it? A culture? An act that goes unnoticed? An act that is noticed, but not reacted upon? Is it what is said? Or what is left unsaid?

Nonetheless, sexism is a problem we must address and a problem we must fight. That is also why we are gathered here today. During the last few years, many people have chosen to talk openly about their own experience of sexism in their workplace. And not without problems!

There have been numerous examples. And unfortunately also from the university sector. So, naturally, as a leader in higher education through many years, I have also asked myself how it could have happened?

I’m sad to say that part of the answer lies in the fact that universities are environments that provide prime conditions for sexism. Because of the many power relations at play. And because academic staff has a lot at stake.

At universities, there is a rather unique collegial tradition, where younger researchers complete a kind of apprenticeship with a researcher in a higher position. Ph.D.-students, postdocs and scientific assistants are often dependent on being on good terms with their immediate superior in order to qualify for the next step up the hierarchical ladder.

Tenured researchers can also be dependent on certain colleagues; to get introduced to a scientific community, get funding, publications, etc. Which is why it is preferable to become a co-applicant alongside another colleague who is already in good standing with a given foundation or whose network is important for your own entry into the academic and outside world. This is not a problem in itself. And I have come across numerous men and women in senior positions who have taken upon them to help, support and guide junior faculty in a meaningful and productive way. And who treat others with respect, regardless of gender, age, nationality or power relations.

But when other people get to decide your fate, there is also a danger that it may result in distorted ideas about what is allowed.

So the more we know about the cause of sexism, types of sexism and how to fight any type of sexism, the better we can react to unjust behaviour. And today – thanks to a dedicated group of researchers who wanted to get to the bottom of this - we have been given a tool to do so. A handbook that can help us navigate.

We will use it here at CBS, where we are currently working on several initiatives on how to combat sexism in connection with our Gender Equality Plan. Handling sexism must be a mandatory management tool to all our leaders.

That is why future management courses will include knowledge on sexism. And the handbook can be of great use. It provides us with the tools to identify critical situations. And the tools to deal with such situations.

Our goal is not a culture devoid of misunderstandings. Nor one without jokes that are sometimes amiss. As that is not realistic.

Our goal is mutual respect. A shared understanding. Knowledge. And a common language to talk about boundaries, consent, and power. And so, a huge thank you to all behind this new handbook who have provided us with exactly that. We need it. Thank you very much 😊