# Report on the discrimination experienced by people of african descent

### DISCRIMINATION AFFECTS THE LIVES OF PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT WIDELY

This is a summary of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's report on the discrimination experienced by people of African descent. The full survey in Finnish and otherrelated materials can be accessed online at www.syrjinta.fi

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In Finland, afrophobic¹ racist discrimination is a widespread social phenomenon that affects the lives and well-being of people of African descent at all levels and sectors of society. The term afrophobia describes the specificities of racism that targets people of African descent. In the contacts to the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's office which concern ethnic origin, African descent is not highlighted. Consequently, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's primary objective for the report was to study underreporting and its underlying causes on a deeper level. In addition, racist discrimination and its diverse impacts on the lives of persons of African descent in Finland were studied.

The report pays particular attention to the reasons behind underreporting, development needs in tackling discrimination as well as racism and structural discrimination encountered in education and in employment. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman considers it important to collect information on everyday experiences of discrimination and the underlying causes of underreporting in order to advance equality for people of African descent.

- Majority of the respondents face discrimination on a monthly, weekly or even daily basis.
- First experiences of racism happen before school age in early childhood education or on the first grades of basic education.
- Racist discrimination and harassment are primarily encountered in public urban spaces, in education and in employment or when applying for a job. They also take place in public services, such as social and health care services.

I don't feel like I have the same... opportunities as others here. I have to explain myself and my existence all the time. It's exhausting.

Afrophobia is a special form of racism motivated specifically by the victims' African background, and it is targeted at people, groups and communities of African descent. The ultimate purpose of Afrophobia is dehumanisation, and it is linked to the historical injustices experienced by black people, such as colonialism and the negative stereotypes associated with black people through the process of racialisation. Afrophobia can take various forms ranging from violence to discrimination, including racist hate speech. It may manifest as racist discrimination between individuals and groups, which in turn emerges as prejudices, illustrations, beliefs and fears as well as structural afrophobic racism and discrimination.

Discrimination affects the lives of people of African descent in all areas of society in a comprehensive manner. Everyday discrimination occurs in interaction between individuals and groups and in the structures of society. Racist discrimination and harassment are primarily encountered in public urban spaces, in education and at work or when applying for a job. They also take place in public services, such as social and health care services. A little over half of the respondents who reported having experienced discrimination, reported having experienced ethnic profiling by the police, security guards or other security personnel.

The experiences of harassment range widely from seemingly harmless comments and acts, i.e. microaggressions<sup>1</sup>, to violence. Exclusion from the group and isolation from others are more visible, even though non-verbal, forms of harassment that take place in schools, workplaces and hobbies. Many respondents also reported having experienced racist verbal insults and even violence.

It is particularly worrisome that the respondents' first experiences of discrimination have taken place at a young age, that is, under school age in early childhood education or on the first grades of basic education. The majority of the respondents face discrimination on monthly, weekly or even daily basis.

A clear majority of respondents have experienced multiple discrimination<sup>2</sup>. As much as 65% of respondents reported having been discriminated against on the basis of another personal characteristic as well. The most common other grounds for discrimination are foreignness, language, religion or belief and nationality.

## MAIN REASON BEHIND UNDERREPORTING IS A LACK OF TRUST IN THE USEFULNESS OF REPORTING

- About half of respondents do not report discrimination experiences to any authorities.
- The most common reason for not reporting experiences of discrimination is that reporting is not believed to lead to any changes.
- Only one third of respondents know their rights when encountering discrimination.

According to the report, underreporting experiences of discrimination is a significant problem. When authorities are not made aware of the full extent of discrimination, the individual's rights are not exercised, leading to a situation where discrimination cannot be addressed by targeted measures. At worst, discrimination continues. When persons subjected to discrimination do not report their experiences to authorities, neither statistical nor qualitative information on discrimination as a phenomenon can be collected. Thus, its societal development may remain unknown. As a result, measures taken by authorities are reactive instead of preventive.

About half of the respondents do not report their experiences of discrimination to any authorities. Based on the responses, there are several reasons for not reporting discrimination, and the reasons are interlinked. The most common reason for not reporting experiences of discrimination is that reporting is not believed to lead to any changes. Reporting requires awareness of rights, i.e. knowledge about discrimination and the ability to identify it, knowledge about victim's rights and about who provides assistance in implementing said rights. Furthermore, reporting requires a willingness and belief that reporting discrimination is worthwhile. This, in turn, requires trust in the reporting processes, the system, the authorities and the implementation of legal protection.

The lack of trust indicated by respondents in the usefulness of reporting and in authorities must be taken seriously. According to the survey, lack of trust is influenced by a number of factors related to the practices of reporting discrimination and the redress sys-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Microaggression: A deliberate or unintentional comment or act that reinforces and maintains racist or otherwise discriminatory stereotypes and, at the same time, supports othering. For example, by praising the Finnish skills of a person categorised as non-white, the person praising the other person also implies that a black or brown person cannot speak Finnish as their mother tongue. Questions or comments that may appear as harmless can be offensive and cumulative for the recipient.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> **Multiple discrimination**: a person is discriminated against on the basis of two or more personal characteristics. Belonging to a minority, especially a visible minority, exposes people to multiple discrimination.

I suppose I have simply accepted it. I have never reported any of the discrimination I have experienced.

tem for discrimination in general. Addressing the situation requires action from authorities that supervise discrimination, such as the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman and the Regional State Administrative Agencies.

### RACISM OCCURS AT ALL LEVELS OF EDUCATION, STARTING FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

- A clear majority of respondents have experienced discrimination in education.
- Racism occurs and is encountered at all levels of education, and it is expressed by both the teaching staff and other students.
- Experiences of discrimination include verbal harassment and violations of physical integrity. In addition, non-verbal acts such as exclusion from a group are also common.
- At school, racialisation and stereotyping based on students' skin colour, ethnicity and/or religion affect guidance counselling and assessment, for example.

As much as two-thirds of respondents that have gone through the Finnish education system reported having experienced discrimination or harassment based on skin colour in education. Racism occurs and is encountered in all areas of education covered by the report. According to respondents, it is not only expressed by other students and teaching staff, but also by other staff members, like social workers and school nurses. It is particularly worrisome that almost one third of the respondents have experienced discrimination already before school age in early childhood education and care. The greatest amount

of discrimination has been experienced in interactions with other students when teachers have not been present, for example during recess.

According to the respondents, racism manifests in various ways in schools, for example as degrading and disrespectful language, belittling and bullying, and it is expressed by both teachers and other students. It is alarming that nearly one third (31%) have also experienced physical violence at school. In addition to verbal harassment and violence, non-verbal acts, such as exclusion from the group, were mentioned.

According to the report, racialised guidance takes place in at least two educational structures: guidance counselling and in the Finnish as a Second Language and Literature (S2) syllabus.

Racialisation: a sociological process where people are divided into groups based on their superficial or assumed characteristics. A historical process in which groups are associated with defining characteristics, assumptions and social hierarchies related to, for example, customs, language, history, religion, abilities, morality, personality and intelligence. The definition is largely based on prejudices, beliefs, jokes, fears and stereotypes. The process of racialisation leads to racist and discriminatory activities: members of certain groups are treated unequally either consciously or unconsciously based on imaginary social hierarchies which are also used to justify discriminatory action. Definitions and meanings associated with racialised groups are seen as inherent and unchangeable. In addition to Afro-Finns, racialised groups in Finland include, among others, the Roma, the Sami and Russians.

Teachers never intervened in the racism that continued throughout basic education. Instead, they always belittled my experiences. In lower secondary school, I was diagnosed with severe depression which was partially caused by racism and the fact that it was never intervened in.

In guidance counselling, particularly women are directed to apply to education programmes in the healthcare sector. The respondents reported that in guidance counselling, they were instructed to apply to secondary education, for example in the healthcare sector, instead of upper secondary and higher education despite the fact that their mother tongue was Finnish, they performed well in school and they had other interests.

At education levels preceding higher education, respondents who speak Finnish as their mother tongue and/or had good language skills in Finnish have been directed to take the Finnish as a Second Language and Literature (S2) syllabus, even though it is not necessary. This prevented them from developing optimally in academic language. As a result of deviating from normative whiteness, it has been assumed that the person's mother tongue is not Finnish.

Higher education institutions have tightened their language proficiency demonstration practices so that students who have studied the S2 syllabus are placed in an unequal position. The discriminatory consequences of S2 studies are a typical example of a structural, seemingly neutral practice that aims for equality, but actually leads to a wide range of shortcomings.

The report indicates that many respondents experience that the teaching staff do not address racist discrimination at schools with adequate seriousness. However, it is the responsibility of educational institutions and education providers to make sure

that schools are safe learning environments. Deviating from normative whiteness¹ affects how a person is regarded and treated at school by both the teaching staff and other students. At school, racialisation and stereotyping based on students' skin colour, ethnicity and/or religion affect guidance counselling and assessment, for example.

## EMPLOYERS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE OBLIGATIONS STATED IN THE NON-DISCRIMINATION ACT MUST BE INCREASED

- Respondents reported having been discriminated against at work and when seeking employment by employers, other employees and customers.
- Discrimination occurs both in recruitment and in the terms and conditions of employment. In addition, prejudice and racism have a negative impact on the supervision of work and the working environment.
- Discrimination by supervisors manifests, in particular, as questioning the employee's competence and as passive attitudes towards harassment at the workplace or even as participation in harassment. Supervisors' attitudes have a significant impact on the working environment.

<sup>1</sup> Normative whiteness: the term does not refer to skin colour per se, but to invisible social hierarchies and power relationships in which western and European culture are seen as the norms that define social structures. Normativeness only appears when it is deviated from.



Over the course of my career, I have been denied certain benefits, such as permanent paid employment, even though I have worked for the same company for more than 3 years. The worst part is the silence of good colleagues who do not react to the injustice they witness.

The respondents reported having been discriminated against at work and when seeking employment by employers, other employees and customers. 60% of the respondents who have worked or applied for a job have experienced discrimination. The respondents have experienced discrimination by employers, colleagues and customers in both the private and public sectors. The respondents have experienced discrimination, especially in recruitment and at the workplace. They also feel that, regardless of their educational background and work performance, career advancement may be slower and more dif-

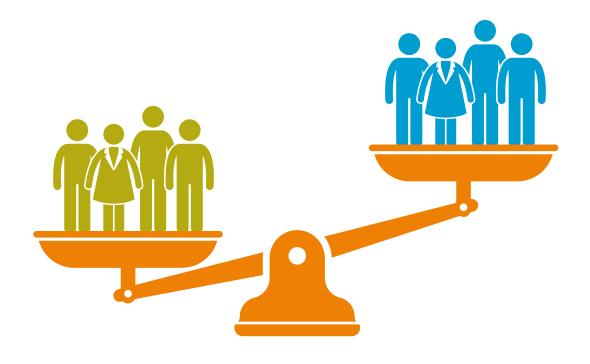
ficult. Discrimination is also visible in salaries and other benefits pertaining to employment.

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Discrimination by colleagues and customers, such as patients, may manifest as crude racist harassment. Colleagues' participation in discrimination was distinctly highlighted. Examples of colleagues' behaviour were questioning one's competence and disappointment in the lack of support which emerged as colleagues' tacit acceptance of racist insults or different treatment.

Employers' actions to eliminate harassment are inadequate, and many respondents felt that they are left without support, especially when faced with customers' insults.

Harassment against women often involves sexualised racism.



#### **AFTERWORD**

Afrophobic racism and discrimination are serious social issues in Finland, and they must be identified and recognised more widely than they are at present. In addition to this report, the commonness of racism is also demonstrated by several studies, contacts received by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, and hate crime statistics of the police.

The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman aims to utilise the useful information obtained through the report to intervene more efficiently in discrimination experienced by people of African descent in Finland. The information helps to plan and target measures to promote equality for people of African descent in a more successful manner than before.

Providing authorities with up-to-date information on discrimination is a precondition for a more equal society and for realising the fundamental and human rights of the most vulnerable persons. Up-to-date information on discrimination enables targeting actions and resources so that they have the most effective impact possible. Thus, underreporting experiences of discrimination poses problems also to the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's operation.

We hope that the report will be utilised by other authorities, education providers and employers as well. In particular, authorities and other parties who have the responsibility of promoting equality in education and at work should familiarise themselves with the problems highlighted in the report. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman will discuss the topic with the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the occupational safety and health authorities of the Regional State Administrative Agencies.

Work against racism requires taking responsibility, commitment and support. A complete resignation from racist hate speech would be an important step. As long as hate speech and the use of racist language in political debate are considered next to acceptable, it will contribute to the spread of racism and undermine all work against racism and discrimination. In order to change discriminatory attitudes and structures, authorities must take information on racism and discrimination seriously and implement their duty to promote equality much more effectively than what is being done today.

