



Equal Opportunities Survey 2018 Report

Workgroup members

Jakob Paul Morath, MPI for Infection Biology
Raisa Sherif, MPI for Tax Law and Public Finance
Sivarajan Karunanithi, MPI for Informatics
Sreyasi Nag Chowdhury, MPI for Informatics

Introduction

Motivation. The Equal Opportunity (EO) Workgroup was formed in 2014. In early 2018 we discussed the need to better understand the status quo and identify problem areas in the Max Planck Institutes with regards to Equal Opportunities for all Doctoral Researchers (DRs). This was only possible by a survey where DRs would share their experiences (both positive and negative) with regards to Equal Opportunities (or the lack thereof). The motivation for characterizing existing EO cases was to be able to use the insights for the betterment of EO in terms of defining new policies, regulations, and facilities at each institute.

Approach. A survey was designed to collect experiences of DRs in the realm of Equal Opportunities. We define “Equal Opportunities” and our aim in the preamble of the survey as follows:

“Equal Opportunities (EO) ensures favorable working conditions for all employees regardless of gender, nationality, religion, disability, age, cultural background or sexual identity. The Max Planck Society (MPG) promotes a strong focus on equal opportunities for its employees in order to ensure excellent research¹

We, the Equal Opportunities group of the Max Planck Phdnet², would like to have a deeper understanding of the existing state of affairs revolving around EO in all institutes of the MPG. Identifying various EO issues would allow us to start a dialog and realize solutions on a bureaucratic level.”

Methodology. The survey was designed to be anonymous to protect the identities of the DRs sharing their sensitive experiences. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Problems and Good Practices.

Section 1: Problems

We identified three key categories of EO problems: Discrimination, Harassment, Lack of Institutional Framework. Additionally we provided an “Other” field for cases which may not fall under the above categories.

Section 2: Good Practices

In this section we collected existing exemplary good practices, with an aim that some of them can be implemented across all the Max Planck Institutes. We identified a few EO good practices for which we requested *Yes/No/I don't know* responses from participants. Additionally, participants state many other good practices in an open-ended “Other” field.

Mode of survey. Anonymous Google forms was used for the survey. Utmost care was taken to preserve the anonymity of the respondents – no personal information or user sessions were saved. LimeSurvey (the platform of choice for surveys of the Phdnet) requires email-addresses of participants to generate unique access tokens, which would have revealed some (albeit limited) information about the participants. The topic of the survey being very sensitive, we wanted to avoid such a break in anonymity.

The survey was distributed to all DRs of the MPG through social media channels of the Phdnet and through the external PhD representatives (77 out of 84 institutes had external representatives at the time of distribution of the survey). It was open for a period of 3.5 months – September 7, 2018 to December 20 2018.

Analysis The main aim of the survey was to identify existing problem areas. In order not to narrow down the scope of responses, strict definitions of categories were not provided to participants. Instead we relied on the respondent's ability to be the best judge of their experience, and their basic notions about the common words “harassment”, “discrimination” etc. The responses to the survey were manually analysed and grouped into a common set of categories for all the questions. This allows for an unified analysis. The categories are as follows: Chronic Illness, Conflict Resolution, Gender, Health and Disability, Lack of Information, Legal Support, Mental Health, Nationality, Parenthood, Power Abuse, Racial, Religion, Salary/Contracts, Sexual, Sexual Orientation, Others. Some of the above categories are not relevant for some questions. These have been marked ‘NA’ (Not Applicable) in the respective bar-charts.

415 respondents participated in the survey. We discuss the important insights gathered in sections dedicated to each question. The responses were rephrased, when needed, to protect anonymity. All responses per category can be found in the list of responses submitted along with this report. The responses would be archived with Phdnet for reference. We hope that this survey brings forward important EO issues in the Max Planck Institutes and that suitable steps can be taken by the Phdnet to alleviate them.

¹https://www.mpg.de/equal_opportunities

²<https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/3309/EO>

Discrimination

Q1: Did you face any discrimination? If yes, how?

Discriminatory practices in several forms are widespread in research institutions. This open-ended question is an attempt to take a tab on the existing situation at the different MPIs. Here we present some issues that were raised in the surveys.

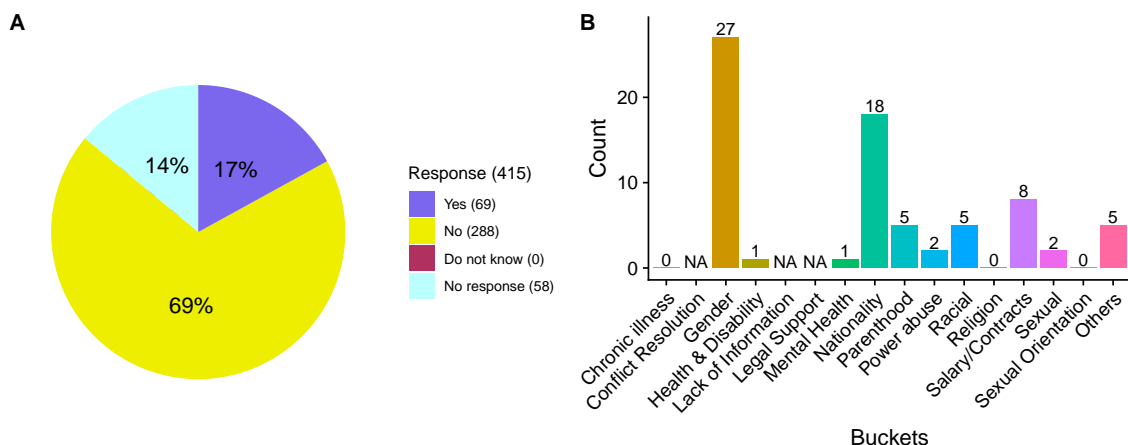


Figure 1: A) Yes/No/I don't know response statistics from Q1. B) Category statistics from Q1

Gender

One of the most frequently raised issue (27 times out of 415) was discrimination based on gender. Sexist comments and jokes at the workplace, frequent interruptions, and not being taken seriously (compared to male colleagues) get mentioned more than once. Multiple respondents report being considered as a secretary and being asked to take down minutes of meetings more than male colleagues. There were two comments on the absence of voting option for men in electing the EO officer and exclusion from career development courses because they were exclusively for women.

Some of the responses were as follows:

- *I see every day that women's scientific ideas are treated less seriously and less welcoming.*
- *It has happened multiple times that two colleagues (male and female) present a joint project, but questions from superiors are always addressed specifically to the man, not the woman, even though this is not related to any known specialty knowledge/training etc.*
- *Whenever there is a task such as taking minutes in a meeting, organizing something like a video conference or taking care of a birthday present graduation hat, I will get approached first. People will look at me or directly approach me and ask me for a favor. I had to make it clear that I am not comfortable doing secretarial work*

Nationality

Discriminatory practices based on nationality is the next largest group with 18 respondents reporting incidents. Majority of the other complaints fell on the practice of German PhD students receiving a contract with the MPS while foreign students given a stipend.

Some of the responses in this category are below:

- *my visa conditions do not allow me to have the same rights (e.g. Kindergeld) as my German colleagues*
- *Yes. Because of my nationality, I am paid a less salary. I complained about getting less salary and stipend instead of a work contract. In the lab Germans get the work time they want. We sometimes have to work*

at times that are not available for German Students. Nights and weekends...

- *In our lab, only Germans get working contract. All foreign PhD students are stipend holders.*

Language was also an issue for non-German speakers in their work and social life. 8 out of them mentioned German language used in group meetings, important documentation, and in social settings at the institutes limiting their participation. One respondent wrote - *I feel discrimination in concerns with language barriers. There are some aspects where there is no English translation, as a result international students feel excluded from many opportunities (i.e. workshops)*

Four respondents mentioned they faced racist comments at the institute. Parenthood was mentioned as another source of discrimination in the form of lack of supervision. One wrote of explicit signaling that she was not to give pregnancy as an excuse to need longer time. Another respondent complained of being treated as a second class scientist post delivery. Inflexible scheduling of meetings during the latter half of the day also interfered in the ability of new parents to join them as they had to pick their children from care centers and KiTas.

At least one person reported on absence of work space for individuals with disabilities and not getting support for psychological ailments. Instances of abusive language from supervisors and group leaders also came up in the survey. Multiple respondents mention intersectionality of discrimination in the form of gender discrimination being harsher on people of color and of different nationalities.



Harassment

Q2: Did you face any harassment (e.g. because of your gender/nationality/religion/sexual orientation/disability/mental health/chronic illness?) If yes, how?

Harassment in general as well as in workplace situations is only starting to draw the attention it deserves. Following two widely discussed cases of harassment and bullying in two Max Planck Institutes (MPIs) during 2018, the Max Planck Society (MPS) has expressed its intention to stay alert regarding this issue. The PhDnet is by its nature of existence concerned with this topic and constantly working on improving the conditions for PhD candidates at the MPS. Hence, there is an ongoing need to assess the current situation among PhD students in order to identify problematic areas. This will, hopefully, serve as basis for raising awareness in general and improving individual situations specifically. With those down-the-line-goals in mind, we asked the participants to answer the openly formulated question Q2.

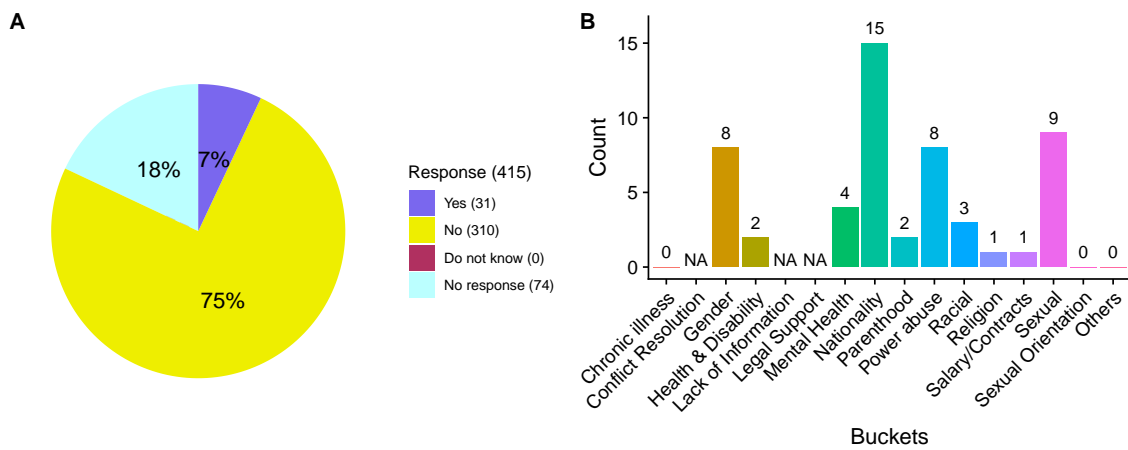


Figure 2: A) Yes/No/I don't know response statistics from Q2. B) Category statistics from Q2

Seven percent of the participants reported that they did face harassment.

The definition from Wikipedia that we used if the respondents just described a situation but did not give a clear yes/no answer themselves. “Harassment covers a wide range of behaviours of an offensive nature. It is commonly understood as behaviour that demeans, humiliates or embarrasses a person, and it is characteristically identified by its unlikelihood in terms of social and moral reasonableness. In the legal sense, these are behaviours that appear to be disturbing, upsetting or threatening. They evolve from discriminatory grounds, and have an effect of nullifying or impairing a person from benefiting their rights. When these behaviours become repetitive they are defined as bullying. Sexual harassment refers to persistent and unwanted sexual advances even after gently refusing, typically in the workplace, where the consequences are potentially very disadvantageous to the victim if there is a power imbalance between victim and perpetrator.” (wikipedia.org, February 2019)

Nationality

Participants mentioned harassment based on nationality 15 times, making it the most frequently raised topic. Many times language or dialect as characteristics of a certain nationality seemed to be the reason. Language barriers were not only reported to lead to hostile comments but also lead to problems on an institutional level. In addition, also associating a person to its home countries’ government or policies was reported as a cause of harassment.

Some of the responses were as follows. We paraphrased the responses where deemed necessary in order to protect anonymity:

- Some of my co-workers expressed harsh opinions regarding my mother language and advised me not to use it

- *The personnel that one can approach in case of mental health issues is almost never fluent enough in English to make the reporting/asking for help a satisfying experience*
- *“Ofentimes German is spoken during discussions although the program was advertised as an “English international” program.”*
- *People blamed me for political actions of my home country*

Sexual

Respondents pointed to sexual harassment nine times. Whereas most frequently loaded language and sexist jokes were reported, it did not always stop there. At least one person was affected by physical harassment.

Some of the responses in this category are below:

- *My supervisor and co-workers made inappropriate sexually-loaded comments and jokes*
- *My boss repeatedly “accidentally” touched me inappropriately.*

Gender-based harassment and abuse of power

Gender-based harassment and harassment based on power abuse are equally frequent topics for the survey participants who mentioned each topic eight times. Based on the examples, gender-based harassment frequently roots in gender-specific stereotypes by perpetrators, which lead to inappropriate comments or jokes. Harassment based on abuse of power is a somewhat cross sectional topic, coming in many flavours. Based on the responses of this study it seems to be mostly associated with sexually offensive behaviour and behaviour affecting student’s mental health situation.

Some of the responses in this category are below:

- *Inappropriate compliments, statements and sounds made because of my gender*
- *Degoratory comment towards me for cleaning as a male person.*
- *Inappropriate male supervisor behaviour towards female employees (mostly nicknames, comments about clothing and emotions)*
- *Approaching my supervisor in a professionally and mentally challenging situation led to even higher pressure put on me. Also I was accused of not meeting deadlines because of being a mother.*
- *Certain people think it’s funny to confront you with cliches. It’s very few people only, but they happen to be in senior/leading position.*

Lack of Institutional Framework

Q3: Do you think there is lack of Institutional Framework (lack of legal support/guidelines on certain matters)? If yes, in which areas?

This question was intended to identify problem areas which are not properly addressed in the current MPG’s institutional framework. While 38% of the respondents thought there was no lack of institutional framework, 29% registered a lack thereof, while 9% respondents were uncertain (Figure 3A). 23% of the participants chose not to respond to this question.

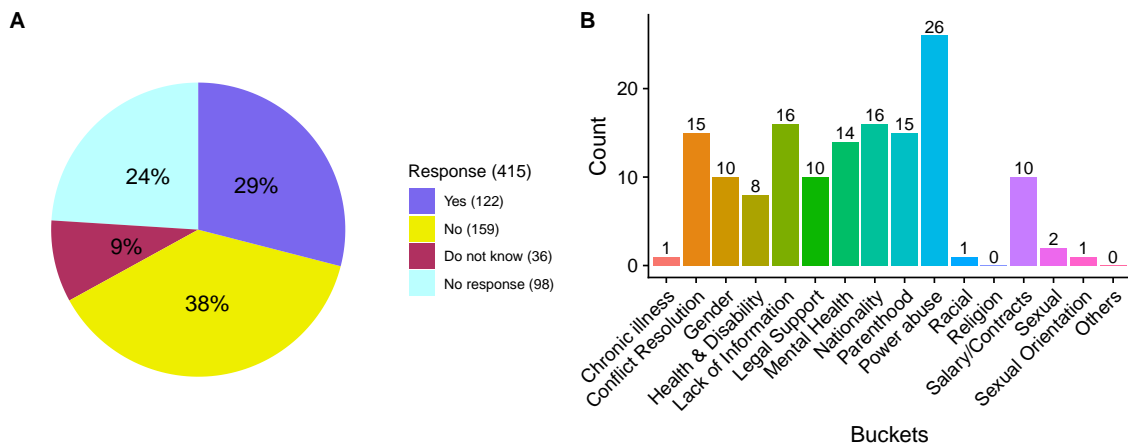


Figure 3: A) Yes/No/I don't know response statistics from Q3. B) Category statistics from Q3

Out of the 29% “yes” responses, there were elaborate explanations of problems DRs faced which could not be resolved due to the lack of certain frameworks. As seen in Figure 3B, Power Abuse constitutes the majority of these complaints, followed by issues faced by foreigners (Nationality), Lack of Information on important regulations, Conflict Resolution, support for new parents (Parenthood) and Mental Health. The major issues reported for the top 3 categories (with respect to number of responses) are as follows:

Power Abuse

The general tone of the responses in this category was to the effect that power vested in group leaders and supervisors are often misused, and there seem to be no strict official guidelines to deal with cases of power misuse. Often, no affirmative actions are taken by the administration against the abusers, putting the DRs in a very vulnerable state. Here are a few important responses from this category:

- *Project leaders and especially directors think they are above all. And quite honestly they are not being punished even if the things they do come out.*
- *There are enough guidelines. There is no enforcement of them. Group leaders can claim publicly that they have no responsibility (including supervision) towards doctoral researchers other than providing a salary and lab space. Neither actions nor statements had any repercussions on the group leader(s) in question that I know of.*

Suggestions to counter power abuse appeared multiple times in the responses – to organize mandatory people management courses for people with responsibility like the PIs and supervisors, regular surveys to check fairness in research groups and official incentives for the PIs/supervisors for maintaining the same.

Nationality

The major grievance lodged under this category was the lack of English translations of official documents. Participants also expressed dissatisfaction on the lack of information when it comes to fundamentals of German social laws, especially job security and unemployment rights of non-Europeans. Example responses:

- *At my institute, not all forms and documents have been translated into English. It is harder for employees without considerable German language skills to understand the legal framework.*
- *I think there is a lack of information on the job security and unemployment right for the non-Europeans.*

We also found a suggestion among the responses which we think is very important for cultural integration in an international institution like the Max Planck Society – *...I also think that there should be some kind of courses to help researchers (German and non-German) to understand “the other”; Who is s/he? How does s/he think and the culture s/he came from. I think it will lead to a much better work environment.*

Lack of Information

There seems to be considerable discontent among respondents regarding the availability of information on formal procedures to be followed in case of issues, especially confusion regarding who the responsible officer is with respect to a certain issue. In our opinion, clear documentation of the roles and authorities of the administrative staff or people in positions of responsibilities should be put up on internal websites of the MPIs. In addition, yearly seminars on important administrative matters could be organized locally in every MPI. Some responses under this category are as follows:

- *I think there is a lack of information on the conditions of the contracts, payment, extensions, tracking of working hours, etc. before starting and during the PhD. I think this lack of information can affect specially non-German speakers.*
- *There isn't any guidance for anything. When I appealed to the Ombudsman, he said normally we would go to the head director of the institute, but that would not have protected my anonymity. And that was the end of it.*
- *There are no guidelines on how these issues (discrimination, harassment) are to be resolved. There are no guidelines on recourse. I didn't even know whether or how the persons who have made discriminatory remarks would be dealt with if I did complain. There is also no legally binding part (e.g., in our contracts) that define the action that will be taken against somebody who behaves inappropriately or perpetuates a discriminatory workplace environment.*
- *...the access to information and visibility of the the topic on the institute's internal website could be improved...with legal support/guidelines and contacts to the independent law office...*

Parenthood

Better support possibilities for (would-be) new parents were discussed in this section. These could be in the form of longer opening hours in KiTas, pregnancy planning for DRs such that they don't lose time or competitiveness in research, clear guidelines for contract extension after maternity leave, organization of babysitters at conferences (including costs), etc.

Conflict Resolution

Respondents pointed out a possible flaw in the system when it comes to conflict resolution. All official persons responsible for conflict resolution, for example, the EO officer, the Ombudsman, thesis committee members, are all part of the system which prevents them from looking at cases in an unbiased way. This flaw also leads to unwanted implications on DRs' careers since there remains a possibility of broken anonymity in case of conflicts. The need for an external independent organization responsible for handling conflicts within the MPIs seems to be apparent.

Two other issues which were reiterated throughout the responses were the need for attention to mental health of the DRs, and change in frameworks such that the EO Officer can be elected irrespective of gender. For the former, recruitment of (English-speaking) in-house psychologists, or information on access to external psychologists were suggested. The latter comes with the criticism that the EO Office only considers women's issues, thus contradicting the grounds on which the office was appointed.

Other Problematic Areas

Q4: Other (Is there something else that you think the Equal Opportunities group should know?)

The purpose of the survey was to identify potential problem areas. Hence we included this open-ended question to address issues that does not fall under Discrimination (Q1), Harassment (Q2) or Lack of Institutional Framework (Q3). The responses have been categorized under the same set of buckets as the others.

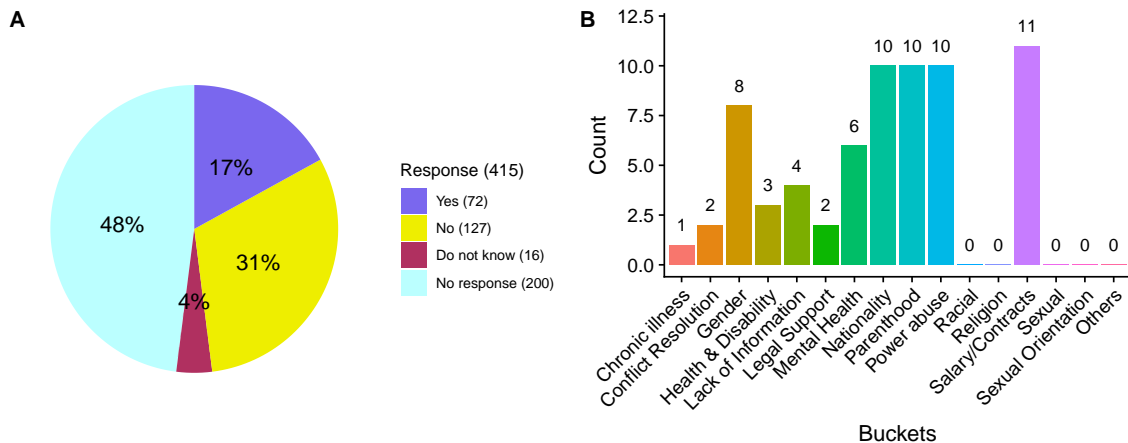


Figure 4: A) Q4: Yes/No/I don't know response statistics. B) Category statistics from Q4

As seen in Figure 4B, issues with salary or contracts, support for foreigners, support for parents, power abuse, and gender-equality constitute the highest number of responses. These have been elaborated below.

Salary/Contracts

Participants reported that DRs in the same department, working on similar projects are often paid differently. Some reported being officially employed by a different institution, and as a result having different contracts (less salary) than their direct PhD colleagues. Yet others have reported Nationality-based difference in type of contract and salary – non-Germans getting paid by stipends and hence stripped of social (retirement and unemployment) and financial (yearly bonus) benefits. One response mentioned that DRs in the same institute, but in different departments get paid differently. Contracts and salaries across the different MPIs also seem to be unregulated. Here are two comments in this direction:

- *different institutes have different fractions of TVöD, therefore different salaries*
- *The discrimination of PhD students via the amount of pay is out of control. We are expected to travel extensively, pay for things like hotels and food out of pocket and wait MONTHS to be paid back. This is impossible and most of us have maxed out our credit cards in this process (with accrued interest while waiting for repayments). This leaves us completely broke and in a financial hole when leaving the PhD. Other PhD students in MPI science institutes make almost double of our current salaries.*

Contract extensions being solely at the discretion of the supervisor/director present possibilities of unfairness based on differential preferences of directors and their personal relations with their employees. One response on similar lines was particularly striking:

Contracts are designed willfully in a form (terminability of one year or less with the “possibility” of prolongation of one year) that legal prevention of discrimination becomes irrelevant. The directors just will not prolong the contract. As there exists no representative for handicapped people at the institute, there will no one be present at job interviews or involved in the process of selection of candidates. They write in every job announcement that candidatures of handicapped are welcome, but in reality they eliminate them consequently in the evaluation process or kick them out after their first contract period.

This response also falls under the category “Health and Disability”.

Nationality

Participants expressed a need for more support for international DRs. The following responses are representative:

- *As an international (phd student and/or postdoc) with limited knowledge of the German language, setting up a life in Germany can be a challenging matter (especially when it comes to housing and the discrimination towards internationals/non-German speakers). It would be important for MPI to support these employees as much as they can. An equivalent of an "International Office" available at universities need to be included in the MPI structure as well, supporting international employees in various aspects of their lives in Germany.*
- *Extreme lack of national/cultural/social diversity among PhD candidates and researchers*

Unwillingness on part of the administration to speak in English or provide English translations of German documents (despite institute-sponsored English classes, as pointed out by one respondent) have also been reported. *This creates unfair and dangerous situations for non-German speakers as they remain unaware of liabilities (Haftpflicht, Auslandsreisekrankenversicherung, additional income when long-term sick, etc.).*

Parenthood

New parents, or people who would like to start a family expressed the need for more support from the institute or colleagues, not necessarily through official framework, but through increased awareness and better mindset. For example, schedule meetings only within core daycare hours (9:00-15:00), not made to feel guilty of betraying colleagues if planning pregnancy (and hence leave), institutes being made child-friendly (for e.g. through existence of nurseries, nursing/changing rooms, solo child-friendly offices), not being questioned regarding decision to take parental leave, or expectations to work while on parental leave.

Power Abuse

The cases of power abuse which do not explicitly fall under discrimination, harassment, or lack of institutional framework, have mostly to deal with inherent biases. Such cases include mocking comments about the need to discuss EO issues, lack of awareness on the position of minorities in the group and hence the need to strive for a more inclusive research environment, not giving credit to all members working in a team irrespective of their position, etc. These concerns spell out a dearth in people management skills in those in positions of power. Leadership/human interaction training for supervisors, postdocs, and senior researchers was the reiterating suggestion to address this problem.

Gender

There seems to be low female representation in some research groups, especially belonging to the STEM subjects, which is nothing but a projection of societal biases. More pressing concerns were – gender bias in work division (females being asked to do administrative or organizational tasks which do not appear in their job description), and use of non-gender inclusive language (“ask your professor if he (!) has time” instead of “ask your professor if they have time”). These issues can be tackled with greater awareness regarding (non-binary) gender equality. Regular awareness workshops organized from the institution can help in mitigating these social biases in the workplace.

EO Good Practices

Good practices at an institutional level can be multitude. With this in mind, we categorized this section of our survey in to two. The respondents

- were requested *Yes/No/I don't know* responses to the list of identified good practices,
- and respond with any other good practices that they are aware of.

Identified Good Practices

The following are the list of identified good practices, and their response summary can be seen in Figure 5

- Child care facilities, for example a play room?
- Provision for emergency sanitary napkins for women?
- Prayer/Meditation/Multi-faith room?
- Sick room where employees (with chronic illness) can temporarily rest?
- Good accessibility for the physically challenged?

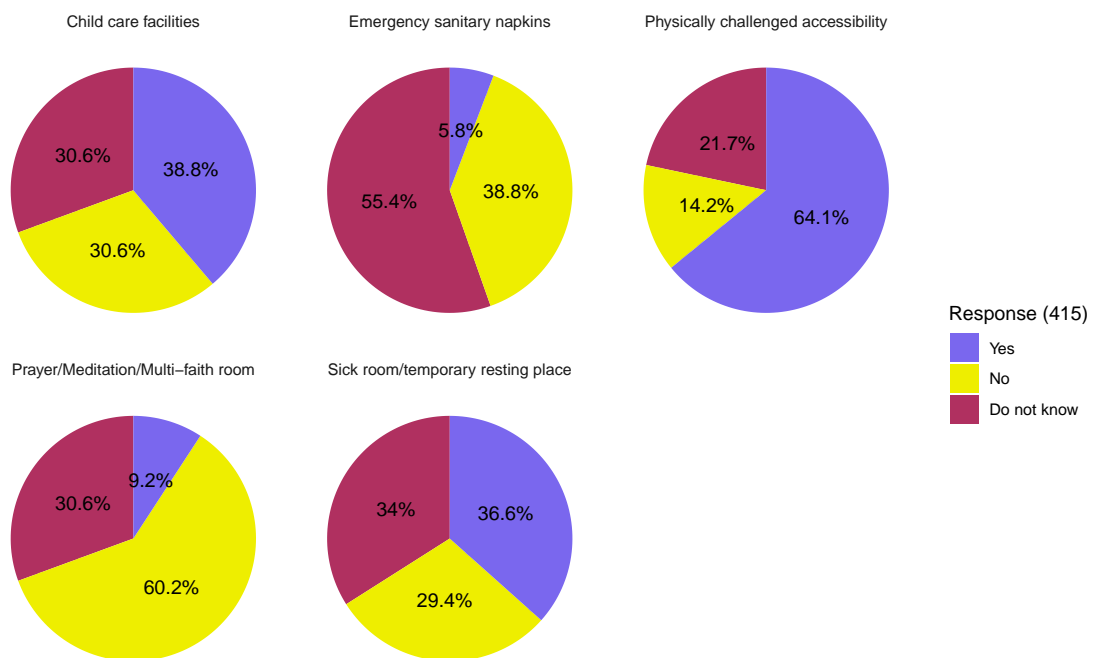


Figure 5: Response for identified good practices

Any other exemplary EO good practices?

Respondents used this section to voice out a lot of exemplary good practices followed at their respective institutes. The responses were broadly categorized as shown in Figure 6. We observed highest number of responses in the categories of conflict resolution, and Parenthood. They are briefed below.

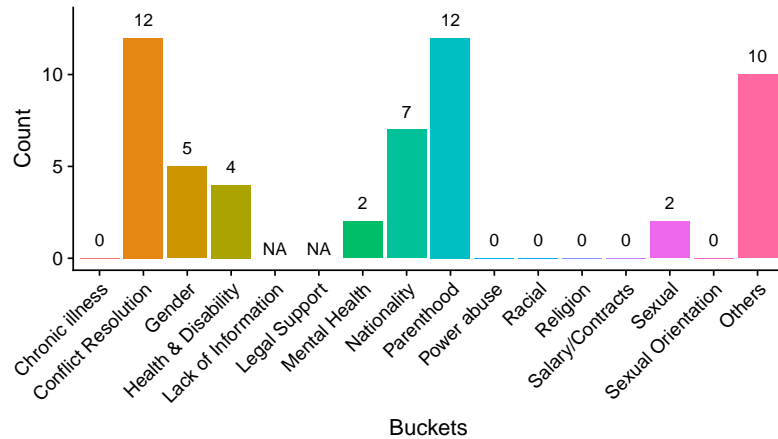


Figure 6: Other EO good practices categories

Conflict resolution

Six of these 10 responses were to appreciate the role of EO officers, in general. One respondent wrote “*very approachable EO officers, the former one and the newly elected one*”. Another respondent wrote, “*A gender equality office, that even offer courses and workshops to support female scientists.*”.

We believe such appreciations should be made aware to the EO officers, in order to have their continued support. These can also motivate the EO officers to provide more workshops, discussions, courses, etc.

Another respondent mentioned “Apparently the EO at the MPIs have to be women elected by women. Because this is by definition not representing all employees of our institutes, our directors decided to let us also elect a “mediator”, elected by and available for everyone, regardless of gender, race, religion, etc.”.

Parenthood

We have learned about the need for stronger parental support from the other sections of this report. Nevertheless, many respondents again appreciated the existing practices. One wrote, “*For my female supervisor a diaper changing table was exclusively installed on our floor. She is the only female with a baby on our floor. I appreciate the effort.*”, and another said, “*There is a nursing room (often used by participants) and I think, nappy changing facilities are in mens and womens restrooms.*”. Having gender-neutral diaper facilities, organization of child care for bridge days, supporting women/men planning their parenthood with seminars and personal counselling, are few other best practices mentioned in this category.

In the others category of Figure 6, we found comments vouching for flexible working hours (to support personal circadian rhythm), a coffee machine, sofa (to socialize, lay down on occasional overhangs), etc. Some respondents had criticized about the lack of information on the existing facilities.

Our suggestions

We used this diverse array of responses to broaden our scope of identified good practices. The below list may be considered in future surveys, and perhaps even as an advisory to the list of things to improve at every MPI where such facilities are not available.

- Facilities -
 - Gender neutral toilets
 - Gender neutral diaper changing facilities
 - Sofa

- Coffee machine
 - Social & Health -
 - Social activities
 - Sport/Fitness programs
 - Availability of in-house Psychologist
 - Organization
 - Child care support on bridge day between holidays
 - International office to support non-German speakers
 - Recommending inclusive/neutral language
 - Regular seminars for new comers, advertise the available facilities
-

Conclusion

There were several insights from the survey responses. However we asked ourselves what would the take away from this be? First is the information content. The survey highlights some patterns on discrimination and harassment, mostly based on nationality and gender, and power abuse. Availability of documents in English and transparency regarding salaries and contracts also come up frequently. On the positive side, the respondents identify several existing good practices across institutes - for example, accessibility for the disabled, child care support etc. We also have an interesting list of new suggestions of additional support that the MPG can provide.

While we have taken every measure to adequately represent the opinions of the Doctoral Researchers (DRs) through this survey, we highlight some of the concerns that could still arise. Firstly, the survey has the obvious limitation of it being voluntary. The request link was sent to all the DRs and there is a self-selection of people into taking the survey. DRs who care about and are more aware of EO issues are more likely to participate, so are people who are confident and unafraid of raising issues and giving anecdotes. This means that we might not have heard from many many others. We in no way claim that this is a comprehensive report on the status of discriminatory practices or harassment at the institutes, or a collection of good practices. However, given our constraints this report documents our best effort. Secondly, since we did not track who replied to the questions technically one person can enter several responses. However, we went through the responses in detail to look for extremely similar responses.

Our objective while designing this survey was to take a stock of the state of affairs at the institutes on the equal opportunities metric. We hope to initiate a conversation on this across the institutes and at the policy making level, and hope that this survey gives a starting point.
