

Dissonance as Social Signal

Anti-Asian Racism and the Politics of Silence

Hyunjung Lee
hyunjung.lee@uni-leipzig.de

Universität Leipzig, Asian Voices Europe

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The recognition that societies need to address racism

- ★ In 1988 the youth-led movement “*Schools without racism, schools with courage*” was established in Belgium and quickly spread throughout Europe. German schools adopted this movement in 1995. Walking through Berlin neighbourhoods today, for instance, one can see plaques on schools:



Dissonance as a social signal

- ★ Against this background, it is only **seemingly paradoxical**, that the public acknowledgment of racism – an “*opening*” in the discourse – can also involve a “*closing*,” where the definition of racism is **narrowly confined**, allowing individuals to oppose racism superficially while sidestepping its full implications. (Kim and Steinhilper 2025)

The Roadmap

- 1 Overview
- 2 Anti-racist EU
- 3 Anti-Asian racism in EU
- 4 Persistence of AAR
- 5 Counterframes

EU's National Action Plan against Racism

- ★ The National Action Plan against Racism (NAPAR) 2020–2025 was adopted in response to structural racism as [the first](#) comprehensive action plan at [the EU level](#).



Structural racism persists in our societies. Discrimination on the basis of race or ethnic origin – as well as religion or belief – remains widespread, as shown in numerous reports. [...] [It is not enough to be against racism. We need to talk about racism. We have to be active against it.](#) ([European Commission 2020b: 1,16, 19](#))

Key Components of NAPAR

Based on the Guiding Principles by [European Commission \(2022\)](#), tackling racism should be approached through the following sectors:



EU legal framework



Extremism and hate speech



Fair policing and protection



Better data collection



Education and remembrance



Diversity in the EU



Economy, employment, housing, healthcare

Anti-Asian Racism in NAPAR

- ★ No specific unit, coordinator or dedicated strategy framework for anti-Asian racism (AAR) at the EU level so far.
- ★ AAR has had a long but largely undocumented history in Europe and was not even officially recognized as a distinct category of racism by the EU, either at the national or EU level until July 2022 (European Commission 2020a,b, Asian Voices Europe 2024).

Anti-Asian Racism in NAPAR

- ★ EU-level surveys or [data collection on AAR](#) (e.g., [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#), [European Values Study \(EVS\)](#), [European Social Survey \(ESS\)](#), [Eurobarometer](#)) are either [nonexistent](#) or [scarce](#).¹
- ★ Engagement with civil society organizations is not adequately facilitated.

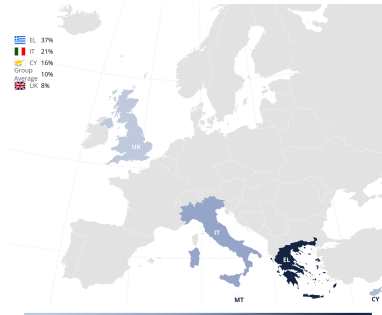


Figure 1: FRA's Survey on Minorities and Discrimination in EU - (South-)Asian Group

¹cf. See the FRA's report on anti-black racism [Being Black in the EU](#) report in Oct. 2023.

AVE Survey II - When Asian Voices Echo



(Asian Voices Europe
2024)

- ★ 855 out of 1,275 responses (consented and validated-all reside in Europe)
- ★ data collection: 14. June - 6. August 2021
- ★ via online survey in 10 different languages
- ★ the first Europe-wide survey of AAR
- ★ to identify perception of racism, lived experiences of racial discrimination and impact of the pandemic of Asian living in Europe
- ★ on-probability convenience sampling/snowballing/double coder strategy

AVE Survey II - When Asian Voices Echo

★ The demographic of the respondents:

Gender	Frequency	Percent%
Women	689	80.6%
Men	139	16.3%
NBGD [†]	25	3.1%

[†] Non binary Gender Diverse

Country of residence	Frequency	Percent%
The Netherlands	259	30.3%
Germany	194	22.7%
France	122	14.3%
United Kingdom	113	13.2%
Others [‡]	167	19.5%

[‡] scattered around Europe with lower response

rates

Age	Frequency	Percent%
Under 19	33	3.9%
20-29	441	51.6%
30-39	261	30.5%
40-49	81	9.5%
50-59	26	3.0%
Over 60	12	1.4%

Racial Identity	Frequency	Percent%
East Asian	599	70.06%
South-East Asian	168	19.65%
Interracial & others	37	3.91%
Southern Asian	28	3.27%
Western/Central Asian/Others	23	3.12%

Experience of Discrimination by Asian Diaspora

The results reveal high rates of experiences in racial discrimination among Asians in their residence countries in Europe

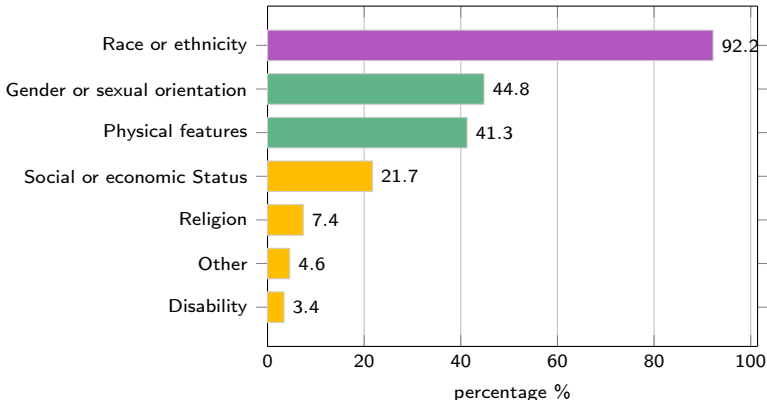
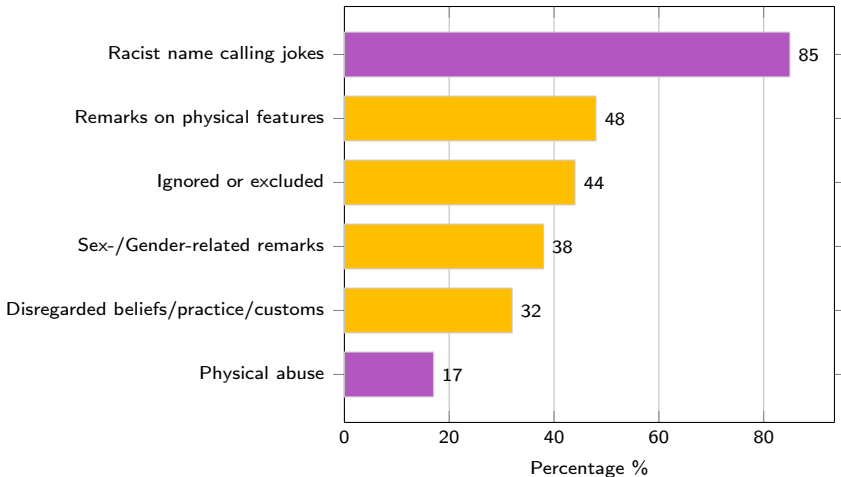


Figure 2: What type of discrimination have you ever been discriminated?

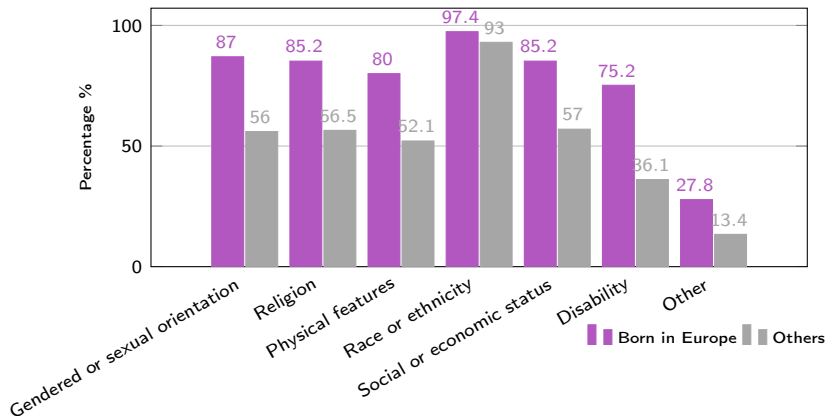
★ This figures (92.2%) surpasses figures from studies of Asian Americans, where 79.68% have

Experience of Discrimination by Asian Diaspora



Experience of Discrimination by Asian Diaspora

This suggests that those who have lived in Europe for a longer period of time are more likely to be exposed to situations of racism and discrimination.



Experience of Discrimination by Asian Diaspora

Physical Abuse

- (2) I experienced an incident where two Caucasian men assaulted me in France. [...] they ridiculed me [...] and yelled **insulting words** like, “**go back to your own country!**”. This assault happened inside [a] store with more than a dozen customers around, including the clerk, but **nobody [came to] help** me even though I was **bleeding** from my face. I asked the clerk to report the incident to the police, but he (clerk) dismissed it and said, “**Nothing is happening here, so I am not going to report it.** Just go home quickly.” [...] The pain and swelling worsened, and I had to go to the emergency hospital for treatment. My nose bone was deformed, and I had to bear the medical expenses myself. I also tried to file a report with the police again, but unfortunately, there was **no major investigation [undertaken]**, and all I heard was, “You had no luck.” [...] Whenever I try to share this experience with people, they simply brush it off, saying “**That is not a big deal**”. This leaves me with no one that I can [trust]. -30s, man, *in France* (Asian Voices Europe 2024)

Gendered Discriminatory Experiences

The AAR trends have **intersectional** faces: **Women & Non-binary and gender diverse (NBGD)** groups more often, severely experience racism and discrimination.

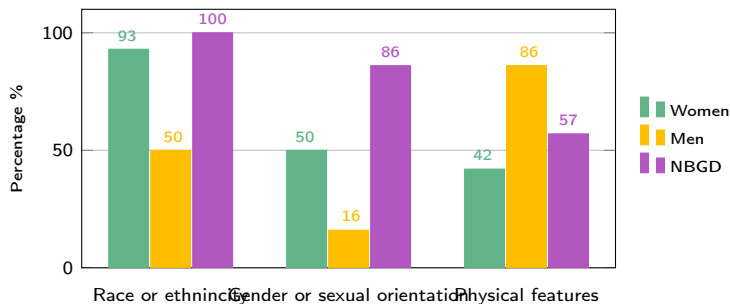


Figure 5: How do individuals across gender groups experience the top 3 forms of discrimination?

Gendered Discriminatory Experiences

There were clear **gendered patterns of AAR**, in particular with regard to incidents of sexual and physical remarks.

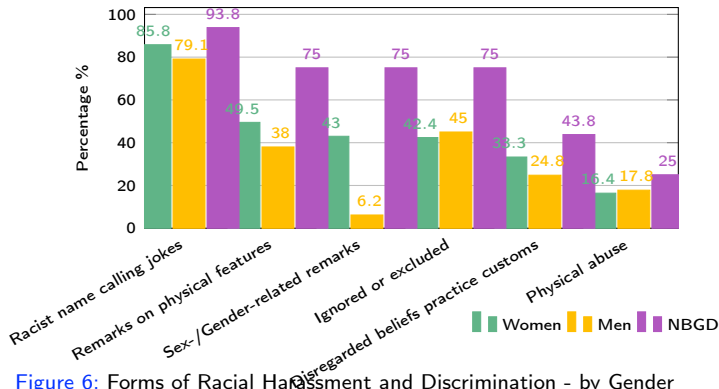


Figure 6: Forms of Racial Harassment and Discrimination - by Gender

Gendered Discriminatory Experiences

Sexual and gender-based violence experienced by Asians also exhibits gendered patterns in four European countries.

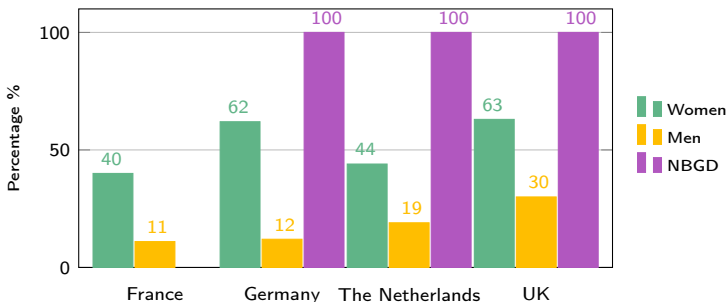


Figure 7: SGBV experienced by gender in four European countries

Gendered Discriminatory Experiences

Country	EU Survey (2017) [†]	AVE Survey II (2021)
The Netherlands	44.9%	44%
France	44%	40%
United Kingdom	43.9%	62%
Germany	35.1%	63%
EU average	33%	50%

[†] Violence; Gender Equality Index, [European Institute for Gender Equality, \(2017\)](#)

Figure 8: Comparison of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Index

Gendered Racism

Fetishized (Yellow-fever), Sexual Harassment, and Stereotypes of Submissiveness

- (4)a. [In] 2012, I took a train from Berlin to Potsdam. [...] [There] was a man riding the same train with me. When I got off at the station, **he grabbed my butt**, basically. [...] It (The disgraceful feeling) still stays. - *30s, Woman, in Germany* (Shim 2021)
- b. I often feel like being fetishised, [when someone] says to me, “**I like Asian women**”, simply because of my heritage. - *30s, Woman, in France* (Asian Voices Europe 2024)
- c. [As a] Japanese woman, it's disheartening to [encounter] many men who believe in wrong gender stereotypes, such as assuming that we (Japanese women) are **unrestrained in matters of sex**. - *30s, Woman, in France* (Asian Voices Europe 2024)

A Long But Undocumented History of AAR in Europe

- ★ While AAR has become more visible to Whites* since the Covid-19 pandemic, colonial biases and stereotypical portraits of Asian diasporas living in Europe have predated a long ago - Appendix A.
- (Yeh 2020, Roberto et al. 2020, Chen and Wu 2021, Köhler and Suda 2023, Mai 2020, Suda et al. 2020)

(Yeh 2020, Roberto et al. 2020, Chen and Wu 2021, Köhler and Suda 2023, Mai 2020, Suda et al. 2020)

* See Painter (2020, 2011) for the capitalized use of White.

A Long But Undocumented History of AAR in Europe

- ★ Asians in Europe face a form of racism that manifests in seemingly paradoxical ways.
- ★ The term ‘**Yellow Peril**’, since the 1890s, depicted Asians as villains or as undesirable members of society, who may pose existential threats (Keevak 2011).



„Völker Europas, waret eure heiligsten Güter!“

“Peoples of Europe, preserve your most sacred goods!”

A Long But Undocumented History of AAR in Europe

- ★ Asians continue to be assigned to the '[model minority myth](#)', which is used to stereotype Asians, who are considered to be financially successful, hard working and socially well-assimilated in White culture.

(Toupin and Son 1991, Daniels and Kitano 1988, Hsia 1988, Takagi 1992, Wei 2010, Hartlep and Bui 2020).



The children of immigrants from Vietnam stand out with their brilliant school grades. Their success refutes clichés in the integration debate ([Spiewak 2009](#)).

A Long But Undocumented History of AAR in Europe

- ★ This dual portrayal, encompassing both the 'Yellow Peril' and 'model minority' myths, draws from **orientalist narratives deeply rooted in Europe's** (post-)colonial history
(Cho 2021, Hasunuma 2020, Kawai 2005, Shim 1998, Li and Nicholson Jr 2021).
- ★ These narratives, acting as instruments of **hegemony**, reinforce simplistic stereotypes and overlook varied experiences of Asians in Europe (De Cook and Yoon 2021, Yeh 2014, De Leon 2020).

Impacts of racial discrimination

The cumulative effect of such seemingly minor, insidious acts can lead to significant psychological and emotional distress for those targeted.

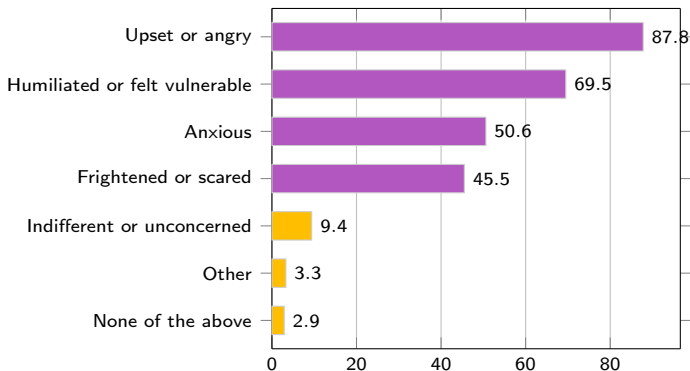


Figure 9: In general, how did you feel when you were harassed? Select all that apply.

Existential Impact of Racial Prejudice

Confronted with constant marginalization, individuals may **internalize these biases, leading to self-blame**. In an effort to assimilate into predominantly White societies, they may suppress their identities and conform to Western cultural norms, perpetuating feelings of invisibility and exclusion.

- (7) Reflecting on my background as the child of Vietnamese guest workers, [...] I wasn't even conscious of it, or of how I had **internalized racism** to the extent that I now understand. [...] I always **avoided (asian) community events** and any contact with Asian-looking people to **deny my origins and blend in with White people**. I even longed for a German name and resented my parents for not being German. [It was a result of] what I learned from my surroundings and society - this **persistent desire to fit in the White society**. [...] When I realized early that I looked different from my peers, I was frustrated [...] You had to prove your worth], so to speak. [...] The confirmation that my value is solely tied to my productivity has always forced me to **justify my existence**, especially under such princely guilt. - 30s, NBGD, Germany (Gang 2023)

Racism Denial Statements

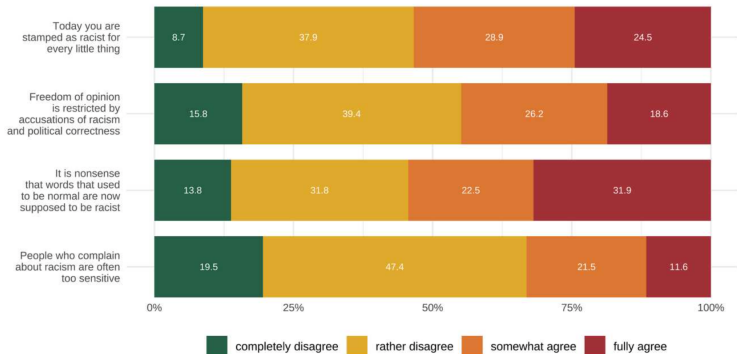


Figure 10: (Dis-)agreement with racism denial statements in Germany (N = 4.906–4.968).

- ★ Kim and Steinhilper's (2025) racism denial index revealed that 67% of respondents expressed agreement, which underlines that the majority of the population continues to harbour **defensive or dismissive attitudes** towards the existence of racism.

Normalization of embodied racism

- ★ The **persistence** of racial discrimination **reinforces** new form of racism and social dominance.
- ★ The **trivialization** of these experiences by the majority culture reinforces the notion that Asian individuals are **perpetual others**, furthering their exclusion from meaningful participation in social life.
- ★ The **systematic denial of AAR disrupts inclusive societal structures** by positioning Asian individuals as outsiders to the discourse on racism. They are not recognized as equal participants in this social dialogue, and their voices are often **dismissed or minimized**.
- ★ Scholars of racism have highlighted the ambivalences of antiracism, arguing that it can sometimes serve as a strategy to immunize racism from criticism, thereby contributing to its perpetuation (**Kim and Steinhilper 2025**).

Reaction to AAR

The discrepancy between the high rate of experiences of racism and the low rate of access to the police may contribute to individuals' hesitance in seeking intervention from official authorities, such as law enforcement, due to limited confidence in the effectiveness of these measures.

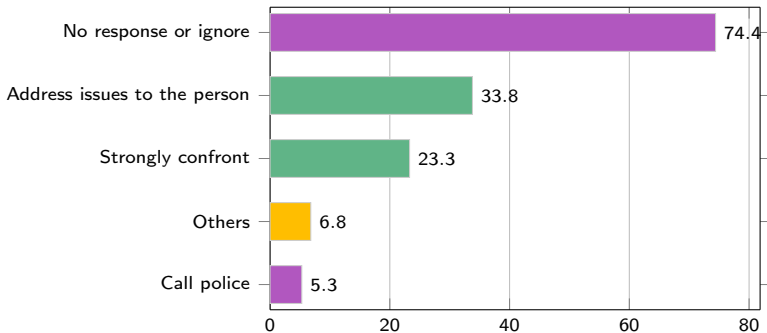


Figure 11: In general, how do you respond to racial harassment?

Challenges in Germany's National Action Plan

- ★ Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes (ADS; The Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency) (2024) calls for more comprehensive data collection and structural analysis regarding racism, highlighting a lack of inclusion in broader research frameworks.
- ★ Pointed limited new actions towards policies (or measures)



Figure 12: ADS (2024)
Discrimination in Germany:
Findings and Recommendations

[...] One of the aims of the report is to identify gaps in protection against discrimination and to show how they can be effectively addressed. For this reason, it also addresses experiences of discrimination that fall outside the scope of the General Equal Treatment Act (AGG).

Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes (2024: 10)

Social Movements: Counterframes



Figure 13: Korientation Demo 28.03.2021, Foto Victoria Kure-Wu

- ★ AVE successfully lobbied the EC to take its first steps in officially recognizing AAR as a standalone category of racial discrimination to be documented and addressed

Anti-Racist Initiatives

- ★ One of the adverse consequences of anti-racist mainstreaming is that policies are decontextualized from the lived experience of racialized peoples and promotes a 'universalized vision of equality' (Lentin 2004: 439).
- ★ Crenshaw emphasizes that if anti-racist initiatives only articulate racism along particular dimensions, anti-racist efforts employ 'strategic silence' (Crenshaw 1991: 1253), alerting that such interventions frequently perpetuate these silences.
- ★ *[W]ithout a detailed analysis of the role of anti-racism in contemporary societies [...] we shall not be able to understand the changing dynamics of racial ideologies and political mobilizations or the possibilities for defeating racist movements. (Back and Solomos 1996: 103)*

Key Takeaway

- ★ Effective antiracism must confront not only overt acts of racism but also the cultural, policy, and institutional norms that perpetuate exclusionary practices ([Goldberg 2008](#)).
- ★ The anti-racist works should [collaborate directly on civil society organizations](#) from racialized and sexualized perspectives.
- ★ The superficial antiracist actions can unintentionally reinforce racism when they [coexist with denial](#). In other words, saying '*I'm not racist*' without acknowledging structural racism helps immunize racism against critique. That's a dissonance we see often: *antiracist opinions without antiracist accountability*.
- ★ Dissonance is not the problem. it's the [social signal](#). It reveals where recognition is missing, and where change becomes possible.

Thank you!

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all of the respondents for sharing their opinions and experiences with us.

asianvoiceseurope@gmail.com

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Appendix A: Impact of Pandemic

Our findings suggest that while the pandemic may have acted as a trigger and exacerbated AAR, it is not the sole or ultimate cause of racism against Asians in Europe.

