

Ethnic and cultural diversity in the field of acting in Finland



Näyttelijäliitto
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Alarming results from the Actors Union survey - discrimination, uncertainty and fear is common in the industry

The Actors Union's survey of ethnic and cultural diversity reveals that there is a lot of discrimination and ignorance in the acting field in Finland. Actors belonging to a minority report facing problems breaking in and working in the acting industry. The results of the survey show that fear and uncertainty makes it difficult for actors to stand up for themselves or for their colleagues. The precarious position of freelance actors and general lack of knowledge on their legal rights adds to the problem. Workplaces are not aware of the problems and many workplaces do not have a strategy to solve discrimination issues. Nearly half of the respondents feel that the field does not do enough to prevent discrimination.

Introduction to the survey

The first survey of the Finnish Actors Union's equality group was conducted in spring 2022. The survey was open for a bit less than two months and it was shared through different channels of the union. The survey was sent to all members of the Actors Union and to a wide range of organisations on the field of acting such as various networks for actors as well as shop stewards of theatres around Finland. The survey was also sent to organisations on the cultural field at large, such as GAP and Tinfo.

Altogether eighty-seven actors (members and non-members of the union) responded to the survey. In comparison to the total number of members in the union (1950 including 502 pensioners), eighty-seven answers cannot be considered representative of the actors' situation at large. However, the amount of participation was similar to previous surveys conducted by the Actors Union.

As we report the results of this survey, we are also reflecting upon who are the actors that the survey failed to reach and what are their thoughts on this sensitive issue of discrimination. It is clear this is only the first step towards better practices and deeper understanding of the issues.

We are grateful for the time and thoughts that the actors have dedicated to answering the survey. We are especially thankful to those who shared their painful experiences and took the time to reflect on them. As one of the respondents wrote: "It has not been easy for me to answer this questionnaire as it has made me re-live stressful, humiliating, sad situations, which make me feel rejected and which affect me emotionally."

We sincerely hope that answering the survey might have also to some degree offered release or functioned as a cathartic exercise to transform feelings of exclusion and rejection into something else.

When launching the survey, the main goal was to learn more about ethnic and cultural diversity within the professional acting field in Finland. The aim of the survey was to map out the current situation and to make suggestions for the future.

However, we are aware there are multiple reasons potentially causing discrimination in the workplace such as gender identity, sexual orientation, age, cultural and ethnic background, place of study and graduation or employment status. We are also aware of the intersectional nature of discrimination. The focus of this survey has been on discrimination based on cultural and ethnic diversity in the acting field in Finland as the Actors Union has priorly not addressed this type of discrimination by collecting information on it.

Mapping out discrimination in the acting field is not only important from a legal and human rights perspective, but it has a direct relation to the quality of artistic productions. Discrimination effects the interpersonal relationships within the working groups and in consequence might have a negative effect on the quality of the artistic productions.

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About the survey and the respondents

87 actors answered the survey. They identified mainly as white, women, Finnish and between the ages of 25–40. We also received answers from people belonging to different minorities according to their languages, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and gender identities. Most of the respondents were formally educated and have been working in the acting field for less than 5 years. Most of them were able to work in Finnish but many of them had another native language than Finnish. Majority of the respondents were members of the Actors Union. We decided not to share the exact numbers and percentages of answers to all the questions, as due to the size of the collected data this could endanger the anonymity of the respondents.

Cultural background seems to have an effect on how discrimination is perceived. For example, 83,33 % of people belonging to ethnic minorities stated that they have had less work opportunities because of their background. More than half of this group stated that they personally have been discriminated against during the last ten years.

83,33 % of the respondents belonging to ethnic minorities stated that directors and executives do not have norm critical training and/or knowledge. 66,67 % of ethnic minorities stated that they feel as if it is not clear to everyone in their working community what is condescending and discriminatory language. 75 % of this group said that they do not think diversity and norm criticism is considered when making programming decisions.

The questions addressed the following main themes: working opportunities; diversity & norm criticism; experiences of discrimination; structural, interpersonal, and personal mechanisms in facing discrimination. The different options for answering the questions were open answers, multiple answers and yes/no/I don't know answers.

Polarisation

The answers reveal that majority and minority actors experience and perceive discrimination in very different ways. This polarisation is present in individual work relationships as well as in the structures. Discrimination is understood differently, which is evident in the way that discrimination is dealt with or even recognized.

A large part of the white Finnish respondents (42,5 %) think that differences are valued in the acting industry, whereas only 25 % of the respondents belonging to an ethnic or cultural minority agreed to that statement. However, this does not always extend the practical level.

This quote from one of the respondents sarcastically simplifies this paradox: "When everyone is white and there are no differences in the working environment, these situations don't occur." In line with this observation, another respondent wrote: "People are afraid of offending minorities so for the sake of their own comfort they keep the minorities outside."

Issues related to work opportunities were perceived very differently by the actors belonging to minorities in comparison to the white Finnish actors. They strongly see the difficulties in working in the acting field in connection to their diverse background. For example, one respondent writes: "There are less roles for me than for those who are 'Finnish looking', and the roles are small, stereotypical side characters." Actors who belong to minorities also report having more obstacles breaking into the acting industry.

The survey reveals that minorities also perceive the state of diversity in the acting field more pessimistically than the majority. Minorities reported their own experiences of discrimination more than the majority, but also expressed a deeper understanding and a more critical lens when it comes to identifying and recognising discrimination. In fact, 66,77 % of respondents belonging to a

minority mentioned that they have witnessed discrimination against someone else than themselves, versus the 22,67 % of the ethnic majority (white Finnish).

In comparison to answers given in Finnish or English, the respondents answering in Swedish reported having less obstacles in breaking into the acting industry and working in the acting field. The respondents who answered in Swedish had a more positive outlook towards the state of norm critical thinking on the field and towards differences being valued in the acting industry. 63 % answered that they have not experienced discrimination personally. But the majority of the respondents in this language group also reported that they had witnessed discriminatory situations that had not been intervened by anyone. Here again the sample size of the collected data was not large enough to make a generalisation.

Respondents gave open answers mentioning that working opportunities in the Finnish speaking acting field were not as easy to obtain, even if you spoke perfect Finnish. The issue of working language was one of the issues covered in the survey, and many actors from linguistic minorities (Swedish included) expressed the pressure to speak perfect Finnish.

Diversity, discrimination, and norm critical thinking in the workplace

Actors who answered the survey seem to trust each other more than their directors and executives. This would confirm that discrimination mainly occurs in hierarchical situations and more specifically when there is abuse of power. Concurrently, directors and executives are perceived as less informed in issues related to diversity and norm criticism as only 11,5 % of the respondents agreed that directors and executives have norm critical training and/or knowledge. This is reflected in their use of language, in the general communication within the working groups as well as in the programming choices.

Thus, cases in which discrimination occurred are mentioned more often in relation to employers, directors, or casting directors rather than actor colleagues. For example, one respondent wrote: "A producer has said to me that I am not as relatable to Finnish people because of the colour of my skin." Another one said: "Nothing changes, if the executives don't participate in anything and [don't] keep the open discussion alive." These comments express the amount of power that employers, directors and casting directors have from the perspective of actors.

However, experiences of discrimination among actor colleagues are also mentioned. For example, among the respondents 16 altogether said that they have experienced discrimination from other actors. Still, the respondents focused more on the relation with employers, directors, and casting directors, all of whom have more absolute power. Employers, directors, casting directors and

producers are all in the position of making decisions about the participation of actors in productions and choosing the actors for the productions.

To the question *By whom have you experienced this discrimination?*, the answers given in the survey mention casting directors, employers, directors and producers all together 53 times. Interestingly, the situations in which these discriminations occurred were reported to not only have been in the competitive environment of auditions or job interviews (12), but also during rehearsals (11), in the workplace in general (10) and in more relaxed situations such as parties (9) and networking events (8).

Some of the respondents mentioned that their whole working environment was to some degree discriminatory. A respondent wrote: "My workplace is not safe for all ethnicities, genders, or sexual minorities. I hear words that are insulting towards ethnic or gender minorities, the experiences of minorities are undervalued and there is sexism and unnecessary gendering."

Another respondent mentioned: "The n-word is being used in my workplace, also by the executive."

Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours are also experienced within different departments, as one respondent writes: "Nobody knows how to do my hair or plan a make-up for my skin colour." Some of the open answers given were so detailed that in order to ensure the respondents anonymity we cannot publish their experiences. Other answers were very vague and non-descriptive.

When asked "*What kind of ethnic or cultural discrimination have you experienced?*" respondents listed:

- being ignored, left alone and without collegial help
- bullying, humiliation, name calling
- being talked about behind my back
- lack of trust towards my expertise
- looked down upon / my culture looked down upon and viewed as inferior
- prejudice and hostile attitude
- racist comments and jokes
- the silent approval and/or avoidance of conflict
- in regard to being casted: fewer and smaller roles, no suitable roles
- stereotyping
- cultural appropriation
- tokenism
- commodification
- being considered "exotic"

Diversity plans and safer space guidelines

The survey reveals a general uncertainty as the respondents often chose not to answer a question or they picked the options “I’m not sure” or “I don’t know”. For example, more than 40 % of the questions related to how diversity and equality are considered in programming choices and decisions on casting and marketing were answered with “I don’t know”.

There also seems to be a common lack of knowledge regarding safer space guidelines. Other apt tools to tackle discrimination in the workplace such as ensuring the existence of diversity and equality plans, seem also to be unknown. Most of the respondents do not seem to know whom to contact in case discrimination occurs in the workplace. In some cases, they reported being aware of the existence of a common strategy plan or a code of conduct, but it still remained unclear to them whom to address in the event of discrimination.

This uncertainty and lack of knowledge leads to a general feeling of confusion which then reflects as loneliness and frustration. This is further addressed later on in this report. For example, one respondent writes: “In the case of a bigger incident the production company did not have a strategy to handle the situation in a safe way.” While other respondents state:

“Currently there are no sanctions on indirect discrimination so it is easier to operate in the old ways. If there would be pressure to change, the situation could change. Some of my PoC colleagues have moved abroad because of this.”

“My colleagues remained silent through the discrimination because the director had illegally threatened to fire us.”

Freelance actors in particular are not always fully aware of the official guidelines and rules in the workplace. As one respondent writes: “As an outsider I am not being informed of the policies. I go there, do my job and leave.”

“I have not heard about a diversity plan or safer space guideline in any of my workplaces.”

“There are plans/guidelines, but the practical understanding and the skills to act according to the guidelines are weak. Even if there is not a member of ethnic or cultural minority in the working group, it does not mean that there is no discrimination or discriminatory speech.”

The collected data does however not represent the whole picture of the acting industry in Finland. It is still meaningful to truly reflect on the information collected in this survey and on the answers of the respondents, especially regarding the type of discrimination actors have experienced and/or witnessed in the field.

From the survey results emerges a general feeling of confusion among the actors about what are the rights, the duties, and the legal aspects of working environments. This is especially visible in the case of freelancers. About 900 of the union's members are freelancers. Freelance actors are often younger in age and working many jobs at the same time.

The precarious situation these freelance actors are facing gets even more severe when they also need to deal with the consequences of having a diverse cultural background. There is a fine line between what is considered the norm (what happens in the routine of the work life) and what is legal. Sometimes certain behaviour can be socially accepted, even though it is illegal, as we saw also during the #MeToo -campaign.

Moreover, answering questions concerning the working environment or questions about diversity plans in a binary way (yes/no answer) seemed difficult to some respondents. In some cases, a more suitable option for the answer would have been "sometimes".

None of the respondents pointed out the fact that discrimination is in fact illegal or mentioned that they would be aware of the existing legislation concerning discrimination. The non-discrimination act was not mentioned in any of the answers.

Consequences and actions

From the open answers the respondents gave emerges a general sense of loneliness and powerlessness regarding the issue of discrimination. This seems to be especially the case with the respondents who belong to a visible minority and/or non-Finnish background. Another element rising from the open answers is fear of losing work opportunities within an already fragile and vulnerable working environment.

Almost half (~49 %) of all respondent's state that not enough is being done by the Finnish acting industry to prevent discrimination and ~23 % do not know whether sufficient actions are being taken to prevent discrimination. The respondents seem to feel overwhelmed with the issues of discrimination and perceive them as too big to face or handle on their own. A need comes across in their answers for an outside authority to intervene or to carry the responsibility on issues of discrimination in the workplace. One of the respondents stated: "I would have liked to hear a strong and firm voice to stop those who acted in a discriminatory way towards me. Or to have received training and support to exercise my rights and denounce discriminatory actions."

The answers given in the survey confirm that respondents are interested in receiving more knowledge on discrimination and anti-racism practices from the Actors Union. They are also willing to participate in education on the topic

and wish that this education and training would especially reach those who hold the most power.

The survey's answers also express issues related to representation for example on stage, in tv scripts and in plays. They point out a general lack of understanding of diversity and the problem of how little attention and care is posed on choosing words, characters, and actors in a respectful and intercultural way. In the open answers the respondents mention experiencing and witnessing problematic stereotypes related to cultural, regional and/or religious backgrounds.

The respondents write for example:

"Just a couple years ago there was a blackface done on the stage."

"In summer theatres there is often a white actor who speaks bad Finnish portraying a character from a different ethnic background."

"Racist jokes are being defended by saying that the text needs to be respected. Apparently, people don't need to be respected."

The general norm on the field seems to be to avoid conflict or open confrontation about the issues of discrimination. There are several reasons to this, like for example the fear of losing a job, the fear of having ruined one's career, the fear of being considered a "trouble-maker", the fear of being in a conflict or the fear of making the working atmosphere worse. Some respondents answered to not even know why they had not intervened when facing discrimination, whilst others stated that people in general do not see the problems, and that is why they do not intervene.

"I would have liked to feel supported by colleagues. Any action on my behalf [to support me] no matter how small, would have been very helpful."

Not tackling cases of discrimination, may in the long-term create increased frustration and internalised anger and pain. This may have effects on mental health such as depression, alienation, and other mental health issues. One respondent said: "Bullying caused stress, insomnia and uncertainty." Some ways to prevent these issues would be for example to provide help in the form of support groups and by encouraging a more open dialogue in between colleagues as well as with union workers and/or specialists. We will further address suggestions for the future in the last chapter of this report.

Education

When it comes to education, respondents mentioned that the system of recognising any formal education other than the Finnish one is extremely rigid.

For instance, a master's degree from the Helsinki Theatre Academy or from Näty at Tampere University is seen as the only correct basis for professional actors while foreign schools are being perceived as inferior.

It is worth mentioning that in Finland a master's degree is considered the norm, while in other countries a BA is considered enough, and only people who have interests in becoming doctoral students (PhD) or pursuing an academic career would continue their studies further than a BA degree. As one respondent said:

“Education from abroad is underestimated. The BA degree I had from abroad is a year longer than the ones in Finland, but it is still very much doubted. My degree was considered the best in the country, but it doesn't matter in Finland.”

The rigidity of the Finnish system is reflected also in the way other professionals are treating actors who have studied abroad, even when they have studied in well-known or well-ranked acting schools.

“People don't even want to network with someone who comes from outside [of the bubble]. There is no openness or curiosity to get to know new people.”

The results of the survey raise the question, how big of a significance does it have on employment that certain education gives you better networks on the Finnish acting field and therefore provides more working opportunities. Professional actors without formal higher education can apply for a union membership on the basis of their work experience only, but as one respondent said: “Food for thought. When accepting a new member, does the Actors Union take into account the difficulty that foreign actors have in finding work in Finland?”

Change and resistance towards it

From the survey emerges a subtle resistance towards change. Few of the respondents expressed agitated feelings towards this subject: they mentioned that they do not want to be told what to do, especially by an outsider: “art that is directed from above is totalitarian”, “there are some things/limitations that people just have to live with”, referring to the fact that the requirements of the industry are reasonable and understandable. One respondent said that in their working group they can deal with inappropriate incidents and conflicts themselves and that they do not want an expert from outside to interfere.

Some of the answers provide good examples on how theatres have made inclusive choices in terms of representation, programming and casting, and taken an active approach to hiring actors from diverse backgrounds. Thus, a good direction might be to follow the example of theatres that are already active in promoting diversity and inclusion in their working environments. One of the respondents noted:

“Recently the situation has felt more equal. There has been a strong message from theatres and production companies that they want to hire racialized actors and not only for the roles that have been written to be performed by a racialized actor. The situation feels more balanced. But only for those who have a higher education and speak fluent Finnish.”

Final reflections and suggestions

The survey is meant to be the first step of a series of actions addressed to fight discrimination, racism, and other diversity issues.

The respondents listed the following things as something that would help:

- Providing education and knowledge on what is inappropriate and racist: also to the managers
- A clear set of rules in the workplace that everyone knows and commits to
- Processes for dealing with discrimination, clear information on who to contact in discriminatory situations
- Community and networks
- Better working conditions

Based on the results of the survey, the union will start a long-term plan to work towards equality in the acting field. The Union’s Equality Group has made an action plan together with the Union’s Board.

The action plan consists of the following steps:

- Organizing equality and anti-racist training for the union’s board and other operative bodies
- Gathering and spreading information, publishing guidelines on inclusive practices in the field together with other organisations.
- Spreading awareness about these issues on the union’s website, social media, and the union’s own magazine as well as other channels.
- Organising events and inclusive training, career development and networking opportunities.

- Collaborating with Ilmaisuverstas to provide training also in English
- Putting together a peer support network

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