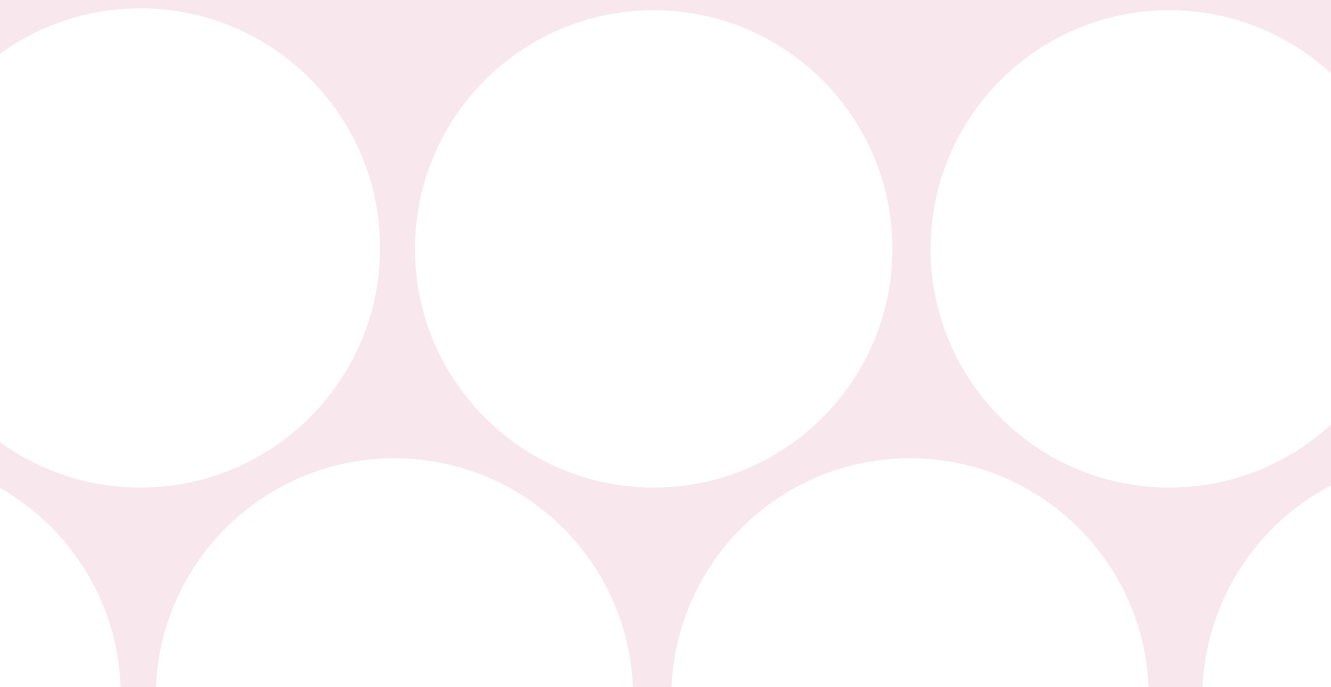




# **SKIN COLOUR'S SIGNIFICANCE**

**– in your workplace**



This report has been produced within the framework of the project Expand the Norm in Practice (Vidga Normen) and has been financed by the European Social Fund.

This publication can be found on the County Administrative Board's website [www.lansstyrelsen.se/stockholm](http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/stockholm)

For more information, contact:

Katarina de Verdier

Tel 010-223 12 85 / Switchboard 010-223 10 00

E-mail: [katarina.deverdier@lansstyrelsen.se](mailto:katarina.deverdier@lansstyrelsen.se)

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**Where does equality  
really stand in your  
workplace?**



# Introduction

The County Administrative Board of Stockholm runs the project “Expand the Norm in Practice” (in Swedish: Vidga Normen), which is financed by the European Social Fund. The project aims to open up the labour market to everyone regardless of skin colour\* (\*term explained in the section Explanation of terms, page 28). This publication provides guidance to employers, trade union representatives or employees in the work against skin colour-based discrimination in the workplace.

The publication was produced by the Stockholm County Administrative Board and the project Expand the Norm in Practice in collaboration with the social fund-financed project Universal Design of Workplaces and the project owner Akademikerförbundet SSR. It explains about the nature and scale of the problem in the labour market, you get support in how to conduct the conversation about skin colour-based discrimination in the workplace and you can read about what we all have to gain from increased equality in relation to skin colour. Each section of the text concludes with some thought-provoking questions with the aim of contributing to in-depth reflection. The knowledge is based on research and accumulated experience from previous work.

The text provides an introduction to the subject of highlighting common resistance that can be met along the way in the work against skin colour-based discrimination in the workplace. You will also get tips on how to take the conversation further and avoid getting caught up in the resistance. It is not a comprehensive guide, but our common hope is that it will support the work for equal rights and opportunities in your workplace!

# Background

There are reasons for us in Sweden to be proud of the work we have done to promote equality\* and combat discrimination\*. High political objectives have been set and, in international comparison, we appear to be a country that has come a long way in promoting gender equality, to name one example.

But sometimes there is no basis for this pride. Racism and skin colour-based discrimination are areas where we have not got as far as we might think or hope. We know what the gender pay gap is, but what do we really know about pay differences linked to skin colour? And how “colour blind”\* are our workplaces and how do we ensure compliance with discrimination legislation?

Although we like to see ourselves as both equal and anti-racist, the difference is that gender equality has become a practice. This is something that is a part of our evaluation and is done using practical methods such as quick reference guides and checklists. Anti-racism, on the other hand, is something we expect to arise

as if by magic. Just because we think it’s something desirable.

From experience, we know that making changes is difficult. It is particularly difficult to work on change that is linked to discrimination based on skin colour. Perhaps it is due to a perception that we in Sweden do not “see colour”. It is the idea that we treat all people equally regardless of the colour of their skin because we do not pay attention to the colour of people’s skin. Scratching the colour-blind surface by, for example, shedding light on a problematic structure or racist statement can therefore challenge our self-image. The colour blindness we have grown up with in Sweden and learned to see as a reality needs to change, and we need to



learn about a different reality and embrace new facts. When we work on change to skin colour-based discrimination and on active measures, we sometimes encounter misunderstandings of concepts and perhaps also complete inaccuracies. One such misunderstanding is that minorities do not want us to categorise skin colour in order to investigate the incidence of discrimination. In this publication, we will try to unravel some such misunderstandings and myths so as to facilitate conversations about and work on skin colour-based discrimination.

Discrimination does not happen at random, but rather all discrimination occurs according to certain patterns, linked to norms and power relationships,

which make some groups more vulnerable than others. When it comes to skin colour-based discrimination, people who are racialised\* as non-white are more vulnerable and for them colour blindness as an image of reality is not as credible. White Swedes, on the other hand, often lack the habit of relating to their own skin colour. Whiteness is the norm in Sweden and when non-whites are discriminated against and disadvantaged, it means that white people benefit. This shakes many white people, and the work of teaching themselves and others to see this system is therefore not done overnight.

Racism, ethnicity and discrimination are often perceived as uncomfortable topics of conversation – whether round the

**Many Swedes have an image of Sweden as an anti-racist and equal country.**

dinner table or during coffee breaks at the workplace.

There may be individual reasons why the conversation is perceived as awkward and therefore avoided, but common points of contact can be found in the concern about expressing oneself in an offensive way, the concern about “destroying the mood” or the fear of being victimised themselves because of questioning or protesting when something racist is said. This concern often results in the problem not being raised and the important conversations being completely or partially missed. The consequence of this, in turn, is that the necessary changes, which most individuals and workplaces need to make to ensure that no one is discriminated against, are not made.

It is not uncommon for the work against racism and skin colour-based

discrimination in the workplace to be initiated by a group we can call catalysts – people, enthusiasts, who feel strongly about the issue. Their commitment is very important, but the legal responsibility for work against discrimination in the workplace does not rest on their shoulders. This responsibility lies with employers who need to work against skin colour-based discrimination on the basis of current legislation and in a socially sustainable way. In this work, trade unions play an important role by working together with their members to promote a workplace that is free from discrimination.

Always when working with inclusion and discrimination issues, it is important to have an intersectional perspective, that is to say not just looking at a power structure/ subgroups we divide people into (for example, men – women or white – non-white), without seeing how





different structures interact. For example, if we look at how men and women are treated, but do not also take into account the issue of skin colour, we may miss the fact that a black man may be more likely to be discriminated against than a white woman, even though, if we only look at gender, the black man benefits from being a man.

Before we dive into what the problems in the labour market look like and why we need to work for change in this respect, in this publication we intend to find out what we really mean by skin colour.

The term skin colour appears in the Discrimination Act in the provision on ethnicity, but the concept of skin colour

is not explained. For many people, the most commonly used categories for skin colour are black and white, even though nobody actually has skin this colour. Nor is it always because of the colour of their skin that, for example, East Asians or North Africans are discriminated against in Sweden; many of them may have skin that is lighter than people who are coded as white. Thus, when we talk about people in terms of skin colour, we refer more generally to people's appearance and their supposed origins.

More terms can be found in the section on Explanation of terms on page 28.

# Do we have a problem?

In some quarters, there may be doubts about the extent to which skin colour-based discrimination actually occurs in the Swedish labour market. This is a form of discrimination that has attracted far less attention than, for example, discrimination on grounds of gender. And although the area is hardly saturated with studies highlighting the problem, in recent years there have been research and a number of studies on skin colour-based discrimination in the labour market. Presented below is a small selection of these important results.

## **The report 'Anti-black racism and discrimination in the labour market'**

In 2018, Uppsala University, on behalf of the Stockholm County Administrative Board, produced a knowledge base on anti-black racism and discrimination in the Swedish labour market. The study was based on data taken from Statistics Sweden on all registered persons in Sweden between the ages of 20 and 64. To make a comparison, the population was divided into three categories:

1. Persons born in sub-Saharan Africa
2. Persons born in Sweden who have at least one parent born in sub-Saharan Africa
3. The rest of the population.

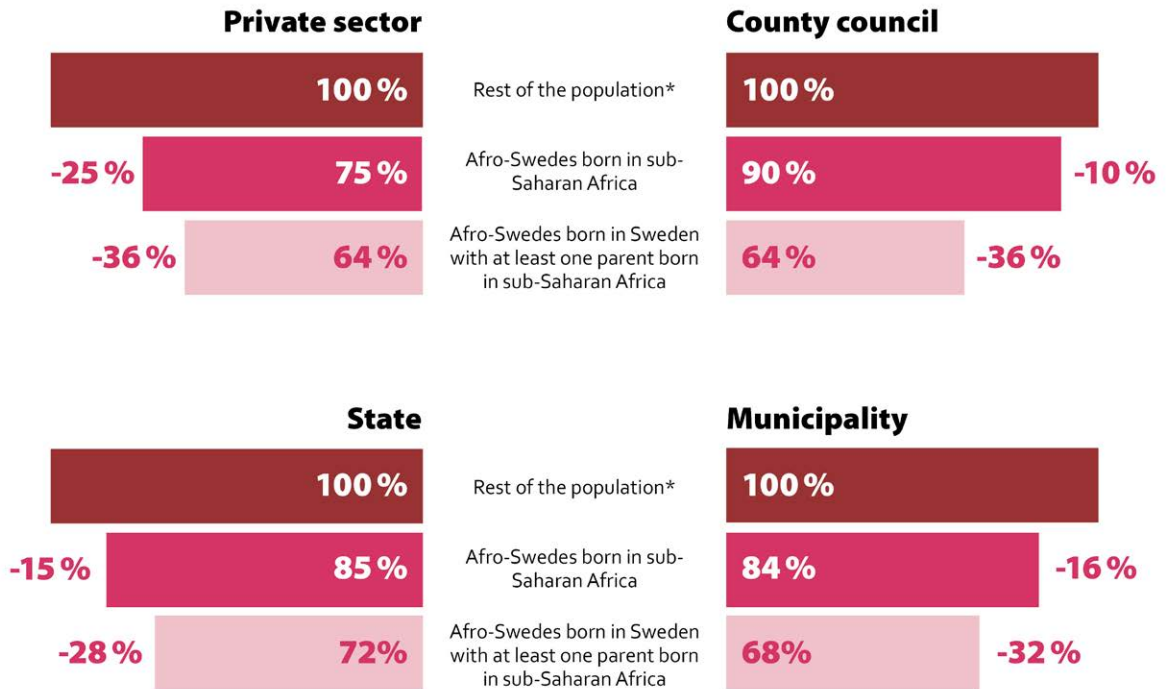
In the study, the term Afro-Swedish refers to people who are included in groups 1 and 2. The group 'rest of the population' is not only made up of white majority Swedes, but also includes people from, for example, the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America, that is to say people who have been shown in previous research to be discriminated

against in the labour market. Despite this, the study shows major differences between the three groups.

### **Pay differences**

In the private sector, the study found that people born in sub-Saharan Africa are paid 25 per cent less than the general population and that Afro-Swedes born in Sweden who have at least one parent born in sub-Saharan Africa are paid 36 per cent less than the general population. The study found similar patterns among public sector employees.

The study showed that there is a large pay gap between Afro-Swedes and the rest of the population and also remarkably that the gap between Afro-Swedes and the rest of the population is greater for Afro-Swedes born in Sweden than for Afro-Swedes born abroad. A partial explanation may be that Afro-Swedes born in Sweden are on average younger than the other two groups.



**Figure 1: Percentage lower pay than the general population.**

\*The group 'rest of the population' is not only made up of white majority Swedes, but also includes people from, for example, the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America, that is to say people who have been shown in previous research to be discriminated against in the labour market.

**Figure 2: Average salary among Afro-Swedes in a managerial position.**

\*The group 'rest of the population' is not only made up of white majority Swedes, but also includes people from, for example, the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America, that is to say people who have been shown in previous research to be discriminated against in the labour market.



## Managerial positions

The proportion of Afro-Swedes in a managerial position is significantly lower than that of the rest of the population who have a managerial position. It is five times as common for people from the rest of the population to achieve managerial positions than Afro-Swedes with the same educational background. The study shows that the average salary among Afro-Swedes in a managerial position is lower than the rest of the population. An Afro-Swede born in sub-Saharan Africa with a managerial position comes out with an average salary of just over 77 per cent of the average salary of a person in a managerial position from the rest of the population. Afro-Swedes born in Sweden have 76 per cent of the average salary of people in managerial positions in the rest of the population. In addition to having a lower salary, the study showed that Afro-Swedes were underrepresented among managers.

## Education and disposable income

The study also shows that Afro-Swedes need to have a postgraduate education in order to reach the same disposable income as a person in the rest of the population who has completed a three-year bachelor education. Afro-Swedes born in Sweden with a three-year bachelor education have a 49 per cent lower disposable income than the rest of the population with a corresponding level of education. Afro-Swedes born in sub-Saharan Africa have a 34 per cent lower disposable income than the rest of the population with a corresponding level of education.

The differences we see in this report are averages and are mainly due to the fact that Afro-Swedes, regardless of their country of birth, are more frequently unemployed or overqualified for the jobs they have than the rest of the population with the same educational background. They are also concentrated in industry sectors with lower pay in general and less often become managers.

## Recruitment

There have been several studies where the possibilities of being called for an interview as a job seeker by an employer have been examined. The Institute for Labour Market Policy Evaluation (IFAU), a research institute under the Ministry of Employment, has carried out a number of such studies. The results showed, among other things, that de-identified job applications resulted in women from outside the western world being able to come to an interview more often than if they could be identified through the application documents. One of IFAU's surveys, from 2007, showed that applications with a non-Nordic name led to almost 25 per cent fewer contacts than those with a Nordic name. If applicants who were over 40 years of age applied for a position that required high qualifications and in an industry dominated by Swedish applicants, ethnic discrimination increased.

"Do Some Countries Discriminate More than Others?," an article published in June 2019, presents the results of the authors' investigation of the incidence of discrimination in who is called for an

interview. The report covers over 200,000 fictitious job applications in nine countries in Europe and North America.

Identical applications were used but with different names that signalled whether the applicant was white or non-white. The results showed that France, immediately followed by Sweden, had the highest incidence of skin colour-based discrimination because white people there had the highest probability of progressing in the application process: 83 per cent and 65 per cent, respectively.

Sima Wolgast showed in her dissertation "How does the job applicants' ethnicity affect the selection process?" that professional recruiters treat people with "Swedish-sounding" and "Arabic-sounding" names differently in the recruitment process. With job seekers of "Arabic" origin, recruiters of "Swedish" origin focused more on whether the job seeker has integrated into the cultural norms and values of the group and how well they fit into a working group. However, when job seekers were from their own group, recruiters focused more on matters that examined the applicant's job-specific abilities and skills. Since the recruiters themselves stated that they value interviews that focus on job-specific abilities, the conclusion is that those who have had to devote their interview time to talking culture are disadvantaged.

### **Work environment**

Several studies show that racism is a significant work environment problem. Out of 2,266 doctors who responded to a survey from the television channel

SVT news and the Swedish Medical Association, 505 agreed with the statement: "I have been subjected to abusive treatment because of my ethnic or religious background by patients or their relatives". That is more than a fifth of the respondents. In autumn 2018, SVT news also reported that racism against employees in pharmacies was a growing problem, which is growing further as more people who are racialised work in this sector. The interviewees in the studies describe it as employers being very badly prepared to deal with incidents and almost non-existent preventive work.

**Question:** *How do you work to ensure that the inequalities presented above are not present in your workplace?*

**Question:** *What do you think is the reason why this discrimination can continue despite the fact that we have legislation and supervisory authorities to prevent this?*

**Question:** *Why do you think Sweden stood out among other European countries when it came to the incidence of skin colour-based discrimination in the study that compared how recruiters react to names that signal the applicant's skin colour?*

# Why it is important for employers to work against skin colour-based discrimination

There are many reasons why employers should work on issues related to skin colour-based discrimination. For example, there is legislation that requires employers to work on these issues. But there are also other arguments as to why this is important. Perhaps the most obvious is to wish to promote equality and justice, that no one should be discriminated against in the workplace. Moreover, the organisation itself can benefit from active measures against skin colour-based discrimination.

Below are some important reasons to work on this.

## Legislation

The employer has a responsibility to ensure that the work environment is free from harassment and abusive treatment, as expressed in the Discrimination Act and in the Swedish Work Environment Authority's regulations and general advice on the organisational and social work environment. Skin colour-based discrimination falls under the concept of ethnicity in the Discrimination Act and since 1 January 2017 employers have been obliged to work on active measures in this regard.

This is how employers can work systematically in four steps:

1. Examine risks and obstacles.
2. Analyse causes.
3. Implement measures.
4. Follow up and evaluate.



Employers with at least 25 employees must also document all parts of the ongoing work. By working on active measures, the employer ensures that they comply with the law and avoid negative legal consequences such as fines or that individuals pursue the issue in court.

## **Competence**

Work against skin colour-based discrimination is also important for ensuring that the organisation recruits the best competence. Who does not want to believe that we are objective and unaffected by factors such as gender, skin colour and sexual orientation when making our decisions? Unfortunately, the truth is that we are sometimes influenced by unconscious prejudice. The effect is that organisations risk not employing the objectively best competence, which in the long run can of course damage efficiency and

production, for example. Organisations can also lose competence to other employers who are more attractive and who are seen as more progressive. If there is work against skin colour-based discrimination, the organisation increases its chance of recruiting those with the best competence – regardless of skin colour.

### **The employee's work environment**

Organisations that do not prioritise work environment issues and that have employees who are exposed to minority stress\* linked to skin colour, risk losing their competent employees to competitors. Another negative consequence of not working against skin colour-based discrimination is that poor working conditions and employees who do not thrive in the workplace can lead to increased sick leave, which is of course very costly for the organisation.

### **Sweden in change**

Sweden – like the rest of the world – is constantly changing. Technological advances have meant that many workplaces are different today compared to just a few decades ago, but the way we work has also changed. Just as technology has changed our lives, so have the demographics of Sweden changed. Employers need to relate to this when providing products and services.

In recent years, we have seen several good examples of this (now, for example, there are plasters to suit different skin colours).

One positive consequence of the work on skin colour-based discrimination and active measures is that an organisation's ability to deliver products and services is improved because its diversity reflects society.

### **Social responsibility**

In recent years, employers and organisations have become aware that it is important for consumers that companies and organisations take social responsibility both globally and in the local area. This could, for example, be to work more climate-smart, ensure that suppliers have good conditions for their employees or that employees can combine work with parenting. One way to show that you take responsibility and thereby improve the organisation's relationships with users, customers, members and the world around you is to work on skin colour-based discrimination and active measures. Otherwise, there is a risk that they will turn to others who do. Many employees also value the fact that their own organisation takes social responsibility, both near and far.

### **Everyone's equal value**

Last but not least – working on skin colour-based discrimination and active measures is about working for everyone's equal value and that is a starting point for human rights.



**Question:** *Do you think that stronger arguments are needed to get a response to the need to work against skin-based discrimination than are necessary to work against discrimination on the basis of gender? If yes, why? If no, why not?*

**Question:** *In spite of the benefits of working against skin colour-based discrimination, not many workplaces actually do such work. What reasons do you think are at the other end of the scale that are tipping the balance?*



# Why it is important for unions to work against skin colour-based discrimination

Being affiliated to a trade union has several advantages. As a member, you receive legal advice, help to negotiate salaries and income insurance in the event of unemployment. But most importantly, the members together become a strong voice when negotiating with the employer side and can influence the entire Swedish labour market. In exchange, a membership fee must be paid. In order for the trade unions to provide maximum benefit, the unions must be relevant to members. Trade unions must represent their members. It is therefore important that the unions see, understand and can deal with the skin colour-based discrimination that exists in the labour market in Sweden.

Below are some important reasons for trade unions to work on this.

## **Members are exposed**

Trade unions play an extremely important role for those members who are exposed to skin colour-based discrimination in their workplaces. Members may need support in conversations with employers, advice on what legal measures should be taken and what requirements can actually be imposed on the employer, but also in actually being represented by trade union ombudsmen and lawyers in disputes with employers. For trade unions, it is therefore important to acquire the necessary knowledge of applicable laws and regulations and to work actively against skin colour-based discrimination in order to be able to assist vulnerable

members with the help that is needed. The trade unions have the preferential right to pursue discrimination cases for their members. Only if a trade union chooses not to pursue a case can the individual turn to the office of the Discrimination Ombudsman, which then makes an assessment of whether the agency should pursue the case.

## **Losing members**

Precisely as has been mentioned above, the demographics in Sweden have changed and it is important for both employers and trade unions to keep up! Trade unions that fail to educate themselves in skin colour-based



discrimination, to pursue the issue and in practice to represent all their members run the risk of members terminating their membership when they do not feel they are getting value for the union fee. If any other trade union works more effectively against skin colour-based discrimination, there is also a risk that members will switch to that union.

### **Everyone's equal value**

Last but not least – working on skin colour-based discrimination and active measures is about working for everyone's equal value and that is a starting point for human rights.

**Question:** *What are competence and representation like in your trade union? What consequences do you think this will have for the issue of skin colour-based discrimination in your trade union?*

**Question:** *Many trade unions have extensive experience of working against discrimination on the basis of gender. What do you think is the reason why unions have not pursued the issue of skin-based discrimination as actively?*

# Common misconceptions and myths

When we work on change to skin colour-based discrimination and on active measures, we sometimes encounter misunderstandings of terms and concepts and perhaps also complete inaccuracies. Doubtless many of us are keen to express ourselves correctly in the work against skin colour-based discrimination, and most employers and employees probably do not want to express themselves in a way that could be perceived as offensive.

It is also important that misconceptions and persistent myths do not persist and make it more difficult to work on skin colour-based discrimination and active measures. In this section, we will try to unravel some such misunderstandings and myths so as to facilitate conversations about and work on skin colour-based discrimination.

## **Misconception 1** **It is illegal to ask questions about people's skin colour and to document such information!**

In order to comply with discrimination legislation's requirements for active measures, employers must, among other things, investigate the existence of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity in their own organisations. These investigations can be done in different ways. For example, through quantitative methods, such as surveys.

Collecting quantitative data is a good way to make patterns visible, make comparisons and measure change. But are we really allowed to record personal data that reveals race, ethnicity or skin colour?

Is this not prohibited by the EU Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)?

As a general rule, the GDPR prohibits the processing of sensitive personal data unless there is an applicable exemption. In order for processing to be permitted, it is necessary, among other things, that the basic principles are fulfilled (for example, the principle of data minimisation) and that the processing is supported by legal grounds. Examples of exemptions to the prohibition of processing sensitive personal data are if the processing is necessary for the employer or employee to fulfil their obligations or exercise their specific rights in labour law. Thus, there are restrictions on the types of personal data and to what extent employers may process their employees' personal data.



It is also possible to conduct surveys through qualitative methods without it being contrary to the GDPR. Such surveys can be carried out by means of interviews, for example.

### **Misconception 2** **Swedes do not want to answer questions about skin colour!**

In Sweden, we are used to answering questions about which gender we want to identify with. It is even the case that Swedish citizens represent one of the world's most registered people on the basis of gender. Although there is resistance to providing information on ethnicity and skin colour, there is a study that shows otherwise.

DO has examined the role of statistics in the work against discrimination and reports that in 2006 the EU implemented an attitude

survey of the then 25 member states and the then candidate countries Romania and Bulgaria. Among other things, it asked whether people were prepared to provide ethnicity data on an anonymous basis if this would benefit the work against discrimination. The survey showed that a high proportion of Swedes were prepared to provide such information about their own ethnic origin – as many as 83 per cent were in favour and 13 per cent against. Swedes also stood out as generally more positive than the average of other countries' citizens, where 75 per

cent would be willing to provide data on ethnicity in order to promote anti-discrimination efforts.

### **Misconception 3**

#### **Minorities don't want us to categorise this or talk about it!**

Since minorities are not a homogeneous group, it is difficult – if not impossible – to claim proof of such a claim. Of course, there are those who do not want employers to investigate and analyse the extent of discrimination for all seven grounds of discrimination (gender, trans-gender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other beliefs, disability, sexual orientation and age) while there are also those who want to see such surveys. Regardless of the opinion of individuals or the different groups on the issue, employers are obliged to comply with the legislation. And the legislation is clear that employers must investigate, analyse, take action on and evaluate the occurrence of all forms of discrimination defined in the law.

There are a number of NGOs working for minority rights that advocate the identification of the incidence of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. Among others, the Network of Swedish Muslims in Collaboration, the Sami Parliament and the National Organisation of Afro-Swedes.

### **Misconception 4**

#### **The non-whites in the organisation are going to have to educate us on this skin colour-based discrimination thing!**

It is important to listen to non-whites' experiences of skin colour-based discrimination. Non-whites have often spent a lot of time and energy talking about racism and discrimination and protesting when something racist is said. In a workplace that is largely homogeneous in terms of skin colour, it can be perceived as obvious to ask an employee who is not white for input in the work against skin colour-based discrimination. But the responsibility to educate cannot be placed on the victim. It is the employer who is responsible for ensuring that there is sufficient competence in the organisation to pursue the efforts against discrimination.

### **Misconception 5**

#### **It's more important to talk about everyone's equal value than just skin colour!**

Perhaps it can be perceived as creating divisions between people when we talk about whites and non-whites, or about majority and minority, instead of just focusing on "everyone's equal value". But if we don't separate these from each other and examine them separately, how are we going to know how things really are in our workplaces? If we did not do salary surveys in which we divide employees into men and women, we would not detect the pay gap that exists linked to gender. In terms of skin colour too, we must know

what problems we have in our workplaces, how big they are and where to apply our strength and effort.

So it is not a question of separating people and polarisation, but of investigating more precisely, so as to create a labour market in which everyone's rights and equal value are respected.

### **Misconception 6** **Diversity and equality are the same thing!**

Sometimes the terms diversity and equality become confused. Perhaps your organisation has a diversity policy, but is this really the same as working for equality? By diversity, perhaps we really mean representation, that an employer may want, for example, to strive for people of different skin colours to be recruited to the workplace. When we talk about equality, we are focused instead on rights, that everyone in the workplace should have their rights met, that no one should be subjected to harassment\* etc., regardless of skin colour. So there is a difference and it is important not to confuse these words. A simple rule to follow is "diversity does not always lead to equality, while equality always leads to diversity". The Discrimination Act and work on active measures address equality and not diversity. Diversity is, so to speak, a by-product of successful work on equality.

### **Misconception 7** **It's only a joke!**

We have probably all been in a room where someone has objected to a joke or a "funny" comment made at the someone

else's expense. We have felt the change in the room and that the previously good atmosphere has been blown away. "Wasn't that protest over the top?" "Does he have to be such a killjoy?" "Can't you even joke anymore?". In these moments, it is important to ask whose joy it is that is being killed. The minority, or the victim of the crude joke, is probably happy that someone is standing up and speaking out.

When we start changing norms, the atmosphere can become uncomfortable and bad. Then it is important to remember that norm breakers are part of the work of inclusion, part of the change. Changing norms is about pointing out what is being done wrong and could lead to exclusion. A person who points out what is wrong is actually the one who eventually creates inclusion. People who are commonly referred to as killjoys are thus engaged in moving norms and positions and are important in the work against discrimination.

**Question:** *What misconceptions and myths do you think there are in your workplace? How can you help get rid of these?*

**Question:** *What misconceptions and myths have you had yourself? Do you think you still have any?*

# Meeting resistance and leading conversations about the importance of skin colour

Although the vast majority of people today would agree that everyone is of equal worth and that discrimination and racism are wrong, those who lead the work of change against discrimination can find that they encounter resistance, and that it is difficult to have conversations about skin colour-based discrimination. For example, there may be colleagues who stop listening when the issue is to be discussed, or those who think that racism will never go away anyway and that the work is therefore futile. Others are guided by their colour blindness and believe that the very discussion about the importance of skin colour in working life creates problems with racism instead of solving them.

In this publication, we start from the Discrimination Act when we say that an employer must carry out systematic and goal-oriented work to promote equal rights and opportunities and combat discrimination. This means that you need to talk openly about the importance of skin colour in the organisation, investigate whether inequality linked to skin colour occurs and set goals that are then followed up. Such an approach to tackling skin colour-based discrimination runs contrary to the Swedish norm on how best to combat racism, as we described above. Resistance is expressed in different ways and can at first glance be difficult to

detect. It can also be complicated by the fact that resistance does not always have to be intentional, but is rather a cultural resistance to challenging colour blindness in people who are not used to talking about and relating to the importance of skin colour for our lives in the workplace.

Robin DiAngelo, a professor, author and lecturer who has researched issues related to racism, believes that some patterns linked to resistance to work for change against racism are recurring. Below we describe some examples of how resistance can be expressed and we give some ideas on how the conversation can be handled and led.





### **Distancing**

In conversations about racism, we can hear people talking about how badly other people behave, or what society should do, or what the management team in their own workplace has or has not done. The problem of discrimination is thus addressed, but is kept at a distance from the person concerned.

One tip to break such a pattern may be to shift the focus to what role this person him or herself has in the fight against racism and discrimination. For example, ask “can you see racism in your own behaviour/thoughts/opinions in your workplace?”

### **“Checking out”**

Many of us have probably sat in a meeting and felt our thoughts wander away from what has been talked about, the phone has suddenly taken our focus and we have “checked out” from what is going on in the room where we are sitting. Sometimes things like that happen and there may be understandable reasons for it, but sometimes it is part of something else. A pattern where more people than usual are taken up by their laptop or smartphone just when we are going to talk about discrimination. If non-white people attend the meeting, such

behaviour sends a problematic message of disinterest in their vulnerability.

To avoid this, meetings can start with everyone being asked to put down their computers and telephones to minimise the risk of anyone “checking out”. If anyone is expecting an important call/e-mail, that person may leave the room when that call/e-mail arrives.

### **Dominates the conversation**

Some of us are happier to talk and more comfortable taking our place than others. We are all different and an absolute balance in the conversational space is not really desirable. However, when someone or some people completely dominate the conversation and others sit completely silent, an unhealthy imbalance in the conversation is created. What voices won't be heard? What are the important thoughts that we others can learn from? What perspectives do we lack? Conversations about skin colour-based discrimination may also include new discoveries for those taking part that may not have been considered before. Perhaps someone has only just understood that their own behaviour has been problematic? There can be a lot to process and not everyone is as quick-thinking or processes information at the same speed as others.

One tip may therefore be to leave a little extra time after each question/topic before the next one is taken up. It may also be

an idea to go once around the table and let everyone speak instead of letting the conversation go freely. Or perhaps set up a rule that people who have made two contributions to the discussion then have to wait until everyone has said something before they are allowed to make their third point. In conversations that can be perceived as uncomfortable or unfamiliar, uncertainty is created when someone around the table sits in silence. It is therefore important to encourage everyone to make their voice heard as part of taking responsibility for the conversation.

### **Already know it all**

It is tempting to claim that we already know about discrimination and that we already treat everyone equally. Unfortunately, however, few people are fully-educated or perfect in that regard; we all have something to learn. Perhaps we hear colleagues say things like “many years ago I already realised that” or “I am married to a black man/have black children”. Such input is often followed by a distancing from the problem, rather than realising and acknowledging that their claims do not exempt them from being able to say and do racist things, and that they too must continue to learn about racist structures and discrimination.

It is very difficult to work for change when people do not consider themselves in need of change or to absorb information. When

colleagues and co-workers consider that they already know more or less all there is to know, it can be valuable to ask “how can we know how good we are at working against skin colour-based discrimination?” or “can you describe three occasions in the last month that show your anti-racism in action?”.

### **Hopelessness**

When we are facing big problems, it can of course feel hopelessly difficult to solve them; the mountain looks impossible to climb. You hear your colleagues say “I can’t do anything about this”, “we’ve been working against discrimination for many years now and nothing changes” or “racism will never go away”.

It is easy to be put down by such statements and feel that the headwinds are too strong, but here it is a matter of poking holes in the bubble of hopelessness. We can do this, for example, by asking “what effect does our discouragement have on the work against skin colour-based discrimination?” and “what have you done so far to try to stop skin colour-based discrimination?”. Often, an existing system is kept in place precisely because there is a perception that the system cannot be changed.

**Question:** *What other possible resistance can you face in your work on skin colour-based discrimination and active measures? How can you handle these?*

**Question:** *What resistance do you have yourself, what do you need to work on in yourself?*

# Explanation of terms

In order for work on skin colour-based discrimination to be given the best possible conditions, everyone working on the issue needs to have a good understanding of what terms are used and also what they mean.

**Anti-racism.** By anti-racism, we mean working through active measures to identify and eliminate racism in all its forms. So there is a difference between not being a racist and being an anti-racist. Anti-racism requires action. So claiming to be “colour blind” and treating people in the same way regardless of skin colour because you “don’t see colour” is not the same as being an anti-racist. As a white person in Sweden, you benefit from your skin colour. To be an anti-racist, action is required, not just inaction, because passivity only contributes to maintaining one’s own privileged position.

**Discrimination.** A simplified description of the law’s definition of discrimination is that someone is disadvantaged or violated. The disadvantage or violation must also be related to one of the seven grounds for discrimination – gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other beliefs, disability, sexual orientation and age. Intent is not relevant for discrimination to have taken place, but it is the act itself that decides.

**Gaslighting.** Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation that leads

to doubts in individuals or members of a group in that they question their own memory, perception and state of mind. The phenomenon of gaslighting recurs in stories from people who are racialised as non-white when they try to address issues related to skin colour in the workplace that affect their sense of recognition, belonging and security. An example of this can be when a colleague is confronted with the fact that something they have said or done is perceived as racist. Then it is common to be met with responses such as “I did not mean it like that”, “I am not a racist” and “am actually saddened by such baseless accusations”. The focus then shifts from being about the problem of what the colleague has actually said to the fact that the victim has interpreted the situation “wrongly”.

**Skin colour.** The term skin colour appears in the Discrimination Act in the provision on ethnicity (chapter 1, section 5, point 3), but the term is not explained. For many people, the most commonly used categories for skin colour are probably black and white, even though nobody actually has skin this colour. Nor is it

always because of the colour of their skin that, for example, East Asians or North Africans are discriminated against in Sweden; many of them may have skin that is lighter than people who are coded as white. Thus, when we talk about people in terms of skin colour, we refer more generally to people's appearance and their supposed origins. We can therefore interpret the concept of skin colour literally, but then it becomes uninteresting from a discrimination point of view, or we can give it a social constructivist meaning that is more in line with what English speakers refer to when they talk about "race" (see racialisation).

**Equality.** According to the National Encyclopedia, equality should be understood as the equal value of all human beings. From an anti-discrimination point of view, this can be concretised by comparing it with the National Encyclopedia's definition of gender equality: "that women and men have the same rights, obligations and opportunities in all significant areas of life". Equality is then understood as a collective name for an equivalent state with regard to the other six grounds for discrimination.

**Microaggressions.** Microaggressions are degrading and subtle questions or actions that are frustrating and stressful for the recipient. It can be something as common as the question "where are you from?". The question, which can be asked out of curiosity and with all good intent, is often directed at non-whites who have probably heard it many, many times before. When a person has lived in Sweden all their life

and has had to answer that question time and time again, it is not difficult to imagine that the repeated question creates irritation, frustration and a feeling of not fitting in.

**Minority stress.** Microaggressions, gaslighting and tokenism\* lead to increased stress and ill health. Many minorities feel concern about being exposed to racism, but also a concern for their own group in society. That concern creates increased stress that is called minority stress. In the USA, for example, research has been carried out on minority stress among African-Americans and LGBTQI people, but in Sweden research into minority stress is limited.

**Racialisation.** Skin colour as a social category can perhaps be best understood as race; something we humans create in social interaction with each other. Therefore, the process itself, the creation of skin colour, can be called racialisation. Thus, racialisation means the processes and practices that cause people to be seen in terms of race. That is to say, purely because of their appearance, people are attributed certain characteristics that are derived from society's ideas of race based on history and the contemporary context. People who are coded as white are thus also racialised, but since the norm is to be white, white people pass as "neutral", that is to say as just people, while those who fall outside the whiteness norm are perceived as people of a specific skin colour. When we talk about racialised people in everyday speech, we therefore mean people who, by their appearance,

are racialised as non-white. People who are racialised are often attributed characteristics that cause them to be discriminated against, in employment processes for example.

**Racism.** In Sweden, the term racism is most often used to describe startling acts carried out with intent by ideologically motivated perpetrators. These may, for example, be hate crimes with obvious ideological motives aimed at visible minorities. Deliberate discriminatory acts such as refusing racialised people entry to a restaurant can also qualify as racism in this view of the concept of racism. But this narrow definition makes it difficult to see how racism works in everyday life and how we are all involved in creating and maintaining racist structures. In this publication, we use a broader definition of racism based on a scientific definition. Racism should be understood as a structured network of social relations at a cultural, political, ideological and economic level that affects the life opportunities of different groups in a given society. These racial structures reward those who are construed as white while punishing those who thereby become non-white (Bonilla-Silva).

**Tokenism.** Tokenism means making almost a symbolic effort to give the appearance of including people belonging to minority groups in different contexts in order to appear equal. For example, it could be recruiting someone, a token,

from an under-represented group so as to appear as an inclusive and equal employer and to escape accusations of discrimination. A common example of tokenism is also to use the few non-white employees in many pictures for advertising campaigns, brochures and recruitment advertisements for workplaces. It may also involve purchasing images of non-whites in order for the organisation to appear to have a higher degree of diversity than is actually the case.

**Harassment.** Harassment is an act that violates someone's dignity and is related to one or more of the seven grounds for discrimination. It can take the form of comments, derogatory jokes, gestures or ostracism. Harassment is behaviour that is undesirable for the victim. It is the victim of harassment who decides what is unwanted or offensive. According to the law, the person performing the harassment must understand how the action is perceived in order for it to be harassment. In the case of non-obvious harassment, therefore, the person who feels victimised is required to speak up.




# Conclusion

Skin colour-based discrimination is today one of the biggest obstacles to achieving equality in the Swedish labour market. In discussions that arise, you may at some point feel bewildered. Hopefully, you can then find support in this publication.

The aim has been to give employers, unions and employees an introduction to work on skin colour-based discrimination and active measures. A door opener to the important work that this is.

As we have tried to convey in the text, we are faced with a tough job and you, like everyone else who engages in this, will face resistance. Our hope is that you feel that we have given you valuable tips that make it easier for you in your work. You have also received brief facts about research in this area and references to further reading (see below) that we hope you have been inspired to take a look at. Putting our energy into these issues and thereby bringing about change is something we all benefit from.



**It is important to  
listen to non- whites'  
experiences of  
skin colour-based  
discrimination.**



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The County Administrative Board shall work to ensure that national targets have an impact in the county while taking into account regional conditions and circumstances. The County Administrative Board of Stockholm County runs the social fund-financed project Expand the Norm.



Expand the Norm in practice (Vidga Normen) opens up the labour market to everyone regardless of skin colour.