

Advancing Women's Careers in Academia:

From lived experience to action:
Stakeholder-informed roadmap report

September
2025



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Foreword

The Women in Academia (WinA) project has always been about more than research, it is about amplifying women’s voices and turning their lived experiences into meaningful, systemic change. Over the past year, we have undertaken a mixed-methods programme of work across three interconnected strands: a UK-wide survey of 401 participants from 62 institutions; 20 in-depth qualitative interviews; and a series of stakeholder engagement activities involving multiple rounds of discussion with women with lived experience and key decision-makers from across the sector. Together, these have provided both a broad view of sector-wide challenges and a nuanced understanding of the realities women in academia face today.

Our findings show that while progress has been made in many areas, systemic barriers remain. Job precarity, unequal workloads, limited recognition for certain types of academic labour, and restricted access to funding and leadership opportunities continue to shape women’s careers. These challenges often intersect and accumulate, making it harder for women to thrive, progress, and remain in academia. In reflecting on these findings, we were reminded of Mary Ann Sieghart’s The Authority Gap, which captures many of the issues explored in this project.

She writes:

These words underline why this work matters, not simply to document statistics or describe systems, but to recognise and respond to the lived experiences behind them. The women who contributed to this project did so with the hope that their stories and recommendations could help shape a better, fairer academic landscape for themselves, for future generations, and for the wellbeing of our research culture.

This report marks a transition from research to action. It presents the evidence, the voices, and the recommendations that have emerged from the WinA project, and it calls on higher education institutions, funding bodies, and sector leaders to act. As Sieghart also reminds us:

401
PARTICIPANTS

62
INSTITUTIONS

20
IN-DEPTH
INTERVIEWS

“Women’s voices are not just underrepresented, they are undervalued, interrupted, ignored or challenged in ways men’s voices are not.”

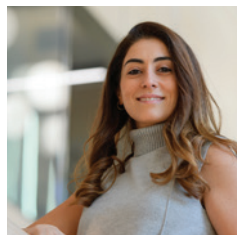
“We need to listen to women as closely, believe them as readily, and respect their authority as fully as we do men’s.”

“Change will only happen when those in positions of power recognise the gap and take action to close it. Awareness is the first step. But awareness without action is complicity.”

Our hope is that the insights and strategies outlined here will not remain on the page, but will form part of a wider, collective push for real and lasting change across the sector. We invite you to read, reflect, and most importantly, to act.

Introduction

The representation of women in academia has improved in recent years, but the progressive reduction of women's participation at successive career levels remains a critical issue. Indeed, despite representing 49% of all academic staff working in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI), in 2023/24, women only occupied 32% of professorship posts – barely up from 31% the previous year (HESA, 2023).



Dr. Talar Moukhtarian

Assistant Professor in Mental Health
University of Warwick



Dr. Amber Tout

Postdoctoral Researcher
University of Warwick

Research also shows that women take an average of 8.5 years longer than men to reach associate professorship status, and 15 years longer to obtain full professorships (Harris et al, 2024). In turn, the unequal distribution of female staff and lack of women in top paying bands contributes to the gender-pay gap (Frank, 2020), which currently stands at 13.7% in UK HEIs, with men comprising 64% of academic staff in the highest pay range (Advance HE, 2024).

These disparities not only expose institutional inequalities and unconscious biases in promotion systems but also reflect the high number of women who end up leaving academia in the face of additional challenges that present them with little other choice – a phenomenon known as the “leaky pipeline” (Blickenstaff, 2005). In a review exploring barriers to success for female academics in the UK, Westoby et al., (2021) concluded that an “over-arching narrative of continued biases, barriers, double-standards, and unsupportive work environments” remained prevalent even in the context of policies and initiatives intended to reduce them – e.g., the Equality Act (2010) and the Athena Swan Charter (Barnard, 2017). Common issues included everyday sexism (gendered assumptions that influence perceptions of competence), a lack of mentorship, and the double discrimination of female ethnic minorities who struggle to advance under definitions of merit constructed by White men (Westoby et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, the resulting workplace atmosphere can cause women to question their own abilities and preclude them from applying for promotion, thus perpetuating the problem (Westoby et al., 2021).

While progression based on academic merit – i.e., a strong and consistent track record of research publications and grants – may appear to level the playing field at first glance, these definitions have been produced by the majority group, and as a result reinforce existing gender imbalances (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014). ‘Career gaps’ arising from maternity leave, for instance, make it harder for women to progress in universities operating under meritocratic systems where uninterrupted research productivity is highly valued (Westoby et al., 2021). Although some universities have implemented policies to try and mitigate gendered employment and promotion practices, research suggests that women still need more publications and a fuller CV to obtain the same position as their male counterparts (Heilman et al., 2024; Savigny, 2014). Indeed, discrimination of female applicants continues to factor into hiring

decisions, with women often seen as a riskier choice due to the potential for maternity leave and/or childcaring responsibilities, irrespective of family circumstances or intentions (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016).

In addition to ‘career gaps’, women are also more likely to take on a greater number of administrative duties, additional teaching, and pastoral support roles, which often exist outside of the recognition of meritocratic systems and consequently hinder their own career progression while, ironically, facilitating that of others (Ashencaen et al., 2018; Kandiko Howson et al, 2018). Higher education statistics also indicate that women are more likely than men to work part-time, be employed on fixed-term contracts, and/or hold teaching-only positions (HSEA, 2023) – employment factors that make it harder to meet definitions of academic excellence established by male-dominated power structures (Coate and Howson, 2016; Westoby et al., 2021).

Although these challenges exist at all stages of a woman's academic career, they can be particularly critical during the early- to mid-career stage – a time where personal life transitions (e.g., the desire to establish geographical stability, start a family, buy a house etc.) often intersect with professional ambitions (e.g., the desire to progress academically and establish independence; Ahmad, 2017; Davies et al., 2022; Ledford, 2017; Llorens et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2007; Ysseldky et al., 2019). Research shows that women experience a concentrated period of gender biases during the early- to mid-career stage (Llorens et al., 2021), and are less likely to have secured permanent employment contracts, which further compounds the difficulties they face when attempting to maintain and/or progress in their



academic career (Ahmad, 2017; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Shepherd, 2017; Ysseldky et al., 2019). Indeed, a recent report commissioned by the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology identified the lack of job security afforded by short-term contracts to be a key factor contributing to the attrition of early career researchers and underrepresented groups from academia (DSIT; 2025).

Short-term contracts also make it difficult to establish geographical stability, qualify for a mortgage, access adequate parental leave provisions (which often require a long period of continuous service), and introduce uncertainty when returning-to-work (Ahmad, 2017; Davies et al., 2022). In a recent survey by the University and College Union (2019), 83% of staff felt that fixed-term contracts made it hard to make long-term family plans, while Davies et al., (2022) found the odds of returning to work after maternity leave were 59% lower for those on fixed-term contracts across the 24 Russell Group universities. Interestingly, research has shown that good university parental leave policies enable women to stay and progress in academia, with better policies and pay linked to a higher number of female professors – no such relationship exists with the number of male professors (Epifanio and Troeger, 2020). In light of this, it is worrying that nearly three-quarters of UK universities have no specific return-to-work policies for research active staff (Faulkner and Rogers, 2025), with the absence of institutional support again reflecting the way academia is shaped around masculinist cultures, with the ‘ideal’ academic expected to demonstrate total institutional commitment, free from familial responsibilities that might impact their ability to work (Bleijenbergh et al., 2012).

Unsurprisingly, experiencing such challenges at the early- to mid-career stage has been linked to increased identity conflict, future uncertainty, and compromised wellbeing, which contributes to female attrition and the subsequent underrepresentation of women at successive career levels (Ahmad, 2017; Ledford, 2017; Martinez et al., 2007; Ysseldky et al., 2019). In turn, the resulting lack of women in senior academic roles can make it even harder for women in the earlier career stages to break into pre-established networks and access suitable mentors, thus reducing access to career planning advice from those who may better empathise with their situation (Westoby et al., 2021).

While initiatives like Athena Swan and the Aurora Leadership Programme have been introduced to address such disparities in UK HEIs more recently (Barnard, 2017; 2024), unintended consequences of taking part in these initiatives have been reported, including increased administrative load and time away from research (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Training programmes aimed at women also run the risk of appearing tokenistic while doing little to change gendered institutional policies and tackle everyday sexism (Oveseiko et al., 2017; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). As Diel and Dzubinski (2016) note, such programmes may inadvertently seek to ‘fix’ women by training them in assertive leadership skills, thus encouraging them to assimilate into academic norms and adopt stereotypically masculine behaviours as opposed to addressing systemic issues. Some studies also suggest that Athena Swan awards can have little impact on closing the gender-pay and seniority gaps, further highlighting the need for deeper institutional change (Amery et al., 2019; Pflaeger Young et al., 2021).

In this context, the Women in Academia (WinA) project was developed to generate an up-to-date, UK-specific understanding of the challenges shaping the retention and progression of early- and mid-career women in UK HEIs. Unlike many previous studies, which have predominantly relied on qualitative data from STEM fields in the US (e.g., Ahmad, 2007; Ledford, 2017; Llorens et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2007; Ysseldky et al., 2019), WinA combines quantitative and qualitative methods to provide both breadth and depth of insight into women’s experiences across UK HEIs. Importantly, the project goes beyond documenting problems by working directly with women and key decision-makers to co-develop solutions aimed at delivering meaningful change.

The project set out to address three core aims:

1. Identify key challenges experienced by early- and mid-career women in academia
2. Understand the impact of these challenges on health, wellbeing, and career development
3. Co-develop solutions with women and decision-making stakeholders to address the most pressing issues

To achieve these aims, the project involved three interlinked work packages (WP):

- WP1:** A survey capturing the prevalence and correlates of key barriers to equity, career progression, and wellbeing in UK academia. This complements the more established qualitative literature by providing statistical evidence to support the lived experiences of women.
- WP2:** In-depth interviews with early- and mid-career academic women, exploring how challenges are experienced in real-world academic contexts, and how different identities, circumstances, and support systems shape outcomes.
- WP3:** Co-production workshops with women and sector stakeholders, focused on translating findings from WP1 and WP2 into realistic, context-sensitive recommendations for funders, universities, and policymakers.



Work Package 1: Survey

A cross-sectional online survey was conducted with early- to mid-career women in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), recruited via social media, university mailing lists, and professional networks. Eligible participants identified as women, were within 10 years post-PhD (excluding career gaps), based at a UK HEI, and employed on teaching and/or research contracts.

The survey, hosted on Qualtrics and pre-piloted with a small group (n = 5), included demographic questions, ratings of workplace challenges across eight domains (e.g., job precarity, leadership opportunities, bullying), and optional open-text responses about barriers to gender equality and improvement strategies. Standardised short-form mental health and wellbeing measures were included, alongside custom items on identity conflict, future uncertainty, and perceived control. Responses were collected using Likert-scale ratings.

Survey Measures

Demographic/ Occupational Factors

- Age
- Ethnicity
- Parental/Pregnancy Status
- Relationship Status
- Disability Status (long-term physical or mental health condition)
- Academic Job Role
- Contract Type
- Academic Discipline/Department

Academic Challenge Areas

- Job precarity and pay
- Work-life balance
- Wellbeing at work
- Perceptions of gender inequality
- Bullying and harassment
- Belonging and inclusion
- Career development and leadership opportunities
- Mentorship and access to role models

Mental Health and Wellbeing-related Variables

- Anxiety (GAD-2)
- Depression (PHQ-2)
- Stress (PSS-4)
- Quality of Life (single-item QoL scale)
- Imposter Syndrome (CIPS-6)
- Social Support (1-item adapted MSPSS)
- Future Uncertainty (1 original item)
- Perceived Control (2 original items)
- Identity Conflict (3 original items)

Participants were drawn from 62 UK HEIs, with the highest representation from the Universities of Edinburgh, Warwick, Imperial College London, Hertfordshire, and York. Most participants were based in natural science departments (50.62%).

Survey data was analysed in line with three research objectives:

Objective 1: Identifying Key Challenges

To identify the key challenges experienced by women in academia, we assessed the extent of agreement with a series of statements relating to eight literature-derived challenge areas, ranked 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Percentage agreement ratings and mean scores for each of the eight challenge areas were calculated.

Objective 2: Examining Intersectional Differences

To examine how women's experiences of academic challenges might vary across demographic (e.g. age) and occupational factors (e.g., academic job role), we conducted mean difference tests. We also examined differences in mental health and wellbeing outcomes across these factors.

Objective 3: Investigating Links Between Academic Challenges and Wellbeing

To investigate whether academic challenges predicted women's mental health and wellbeing, we conducted multiple regression analyses. We also explored whether wellbeing outcomes might, in turn, predict experiences of academic challenge.

Exploratory Analyses

In addition to our three objectives, we investigated potential mediating factors that could help explain the relationship between academic challenges and wellbeing outcomes. We also conducted a clustering analysis to identify groups who may be more vulnerable to experiencing these challenges and poor wellbeing, and therefore more likely to benefit from targeted support.

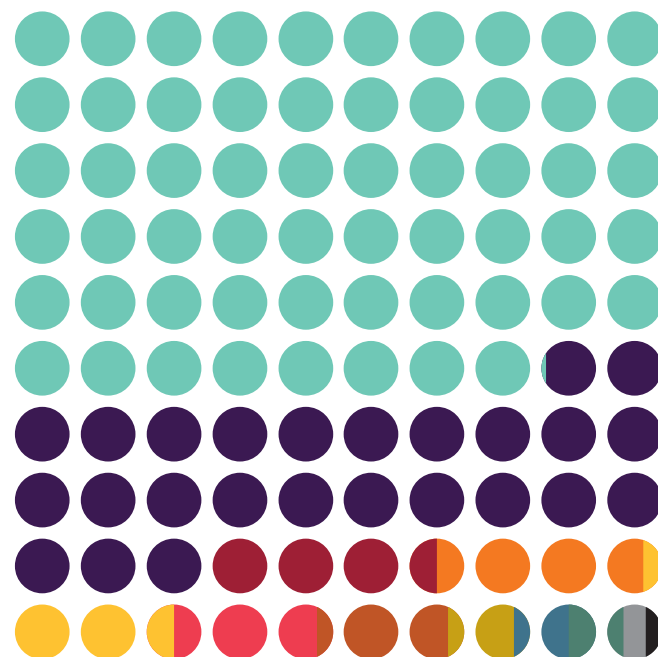
A total of 401 early- to mid-career women from across 62 UK HEIs took part in the survey.

The sample had a mean age of 37.88 years (SD = 7.92)

See subsequent figures for full demographic details

Demographic characteristics of the survey sample (N = 401).

Ethnicity



Demographic Characteristic	N
White (English, British, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller or Roma)	233
Other White Background	100
Other Mixed Background	14
Asian or Asian British	13
Mixed White and Asian	11
Chinese	9
Other Asian Background	8
Arab	4
Black or Black British	3
Mixed White and Black African	3
Prefer not to say	2
Not known	1

Parental Status



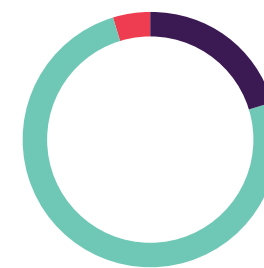
Demographic Characteristic	N
Not a Parent	213
Pregnant and/or expecting/adopting a child	11
Parent (including stepparent and/or adoptive parent)	76
Prefer not to say	1

Relationship Status



Demographic Characteristic	N
Co-habiting or living with a partner	110
Married or in a civil partnership	189
Separated, divorced, or civil partnership dissolved	20
Single (never married)	73
Widowed/Surviving partner from a civil partnership	1
Other	7
Prefer not to say	1

Long-term Physical or Mental Health Condition



Demographic Characteristic	N
Yes	82
No	301
Prefer not to say	18

Contract Function (Academic Job Role)



Demographic Characteristic	N
Research Assistant/Associate	48
Postdoctoral Researcher/Teaching Fellow	149
Clinical Fellow	9
Lecturer	69
Clinical Lecturer	8
Assistant Professor	36
Associate Professor/Reader	26
Clinical Associate Professor/Reader	1
Other	52
Prefer not to say	3

Contract Type



Demographic Characteristic	N
Full-time fixed term	190
Part-time fixed term	38
Full-time open-ended/permanent	131
Part-time open ended/permanent	31
Other	9
Prefer not to say	2

Academic Department/Discipline

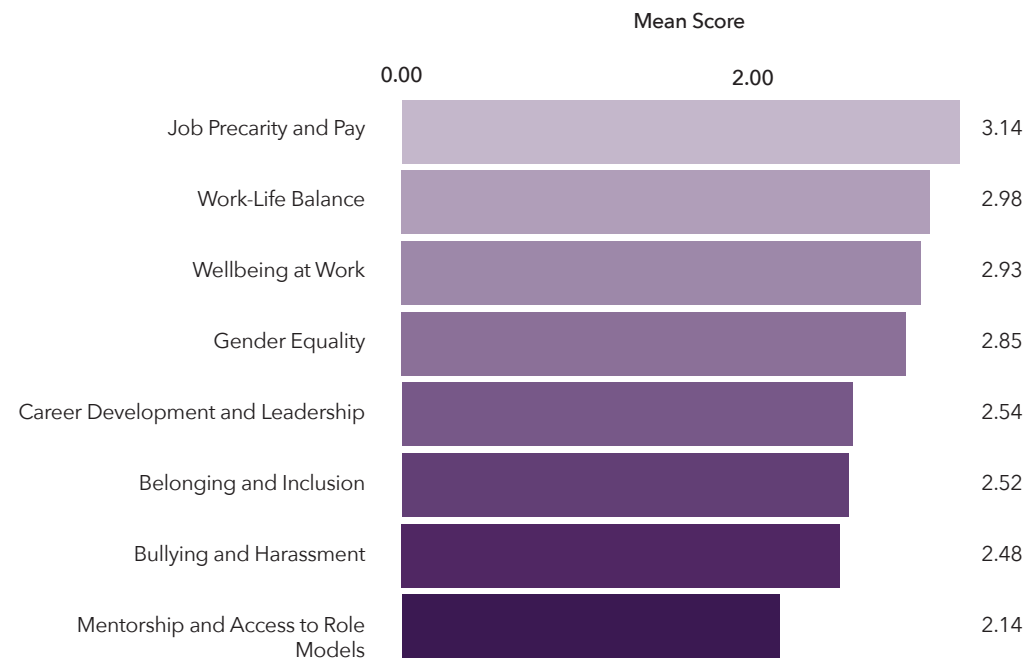


Demographic Characteristic	N
Art and Humanities	20
Formal Sciences	19
Natural Sciences	203
Social Sciences and Education	59
Other	5
Prefer not to say	95

Objective 1: Identifying Key Challenges

Figure 1 shows mean scores for the eight challenge areas, ranked below from most to least challenging.

Figure 1.
Challenges faced by women in academia (mean scores)



Top 3 Challenge Areas:

Job precarity and pay

50%

disagreed or strongly disagreed that their employment felt secure, while ~50% also disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they were satisfied with opportunities for pay regrading and promotion.

Work-life balance

60%

agreed or strongly agreed that they felt pressured to work beyond their normal hours to advance their careers.

Wellbeing at work

50%

disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would feel comfortable and supported taking time off for work-related stress or mental health issues.

Objective 2: Examining Intersectional Differences in Experience

To examine whether demographic (e.g., age) or occupational factors (e.g., job role) impacted women's experiences of the challenge areas, a series of mean difference tests were conducted. Significant group differences are reported below.

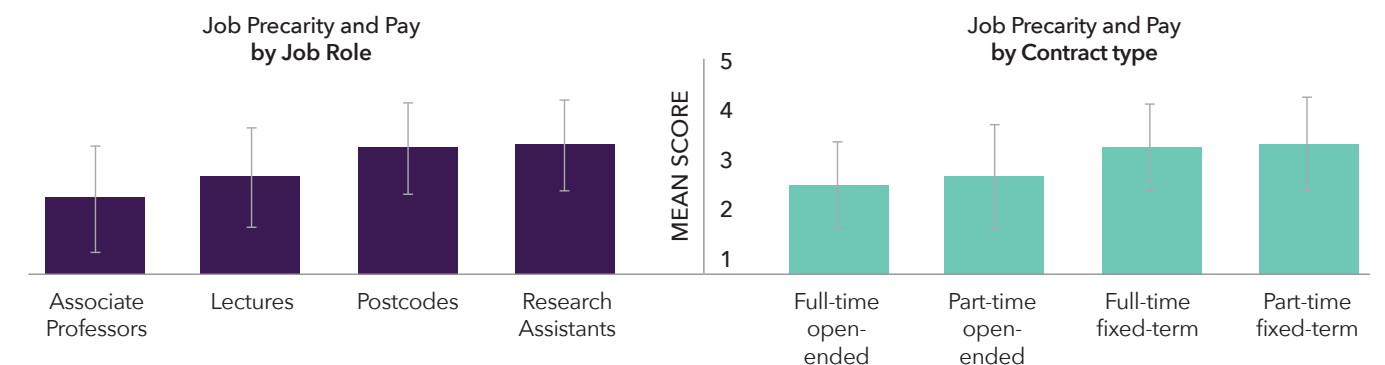
Job Precarity and Pay

Bar charts in Figure 2 illustrate significant differences in mean job precarity and pay-related challenge by academic job role and contract type (error bars show standard deviation).

Compared to associate professors ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.02$), research assistants ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .87$) reported more challenge with job precarity and pay (mean difference = 1.02, 95%CI[.41, 1.64]; $p < .001$). Postdocs ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .87$) also reported more challenge in this area compared to associate professors (mean difference = .96, 95%CI[.43, 1.50]; $p < .001$) and lecturers ($M = 2.86$; $SD = .95$; mean difference = .56, 95%CI[.20, .90]; $p < .001$).

In terms of contract type, compared to women employed on full-time open-ended contracts ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .83$), those employed on full-time fixed-term contracts ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .83$; mean difference = .72, 95%CI[.46, .98]; $p < .001$) or part-time fixed-term contracts ($M = 3.49$, $SD = .90$; mean difference = .79, 95%CI[.36, 1.22]; $p < .001$) reported significantly more challenge relating to job precarity and pay.

Figure 2.



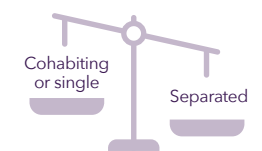
Future Uncertainty

After correcting for multiple comparisons, levels of future uncertainty were found to differ by age (Welch's $F(3, 100.78) = 13.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$), **relationship status** ($F(3, 344) = 10.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$), **academic job role** ($F(4, 301) = 22.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$), and **contract type** ($F(3, 339) = 32.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$).



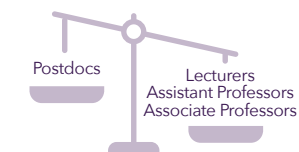
Age

Women aged 20-29 ($M = 4.30, SD = .91$) experienced higher levels of future uncertainty compared to women aged 40-49 ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.10$; mean difference = 1.00, 95%CI[.55, 1.45]; $p < .001$).



Relationship Status

Compared to women who were separated ($M = 2.68, SD = .89$), women who were unmarried but co-habiting/living with a partner ($M = 4.08, SD = 1.05$; mean difference = 1.40, 95%CI[.68, 2.12], $p < .001$) or single ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.12$; mean difference = 1.27, 95%CI[.52, 2.02], $p < .001$) reported higher levels of future uncertainty.

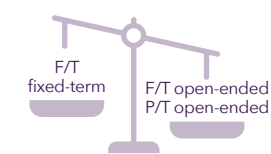


Academic Job Role

Postdocs ($M = 4.30, SD = .93$) reported significantly higher levels of future uncertainty compared to lecturers ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.02$; mean difference = 1.08, 95%CI[.66, 1.05], $p < .001$), assistant professors ($M = 2.84, SD = 1.07$; mean difference = 1.47, 95%CI[.91, 2.03], $p < .001$), and associate professors ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.11$; mean difference = .95, 95%CI[.33, 1.56], $p < .001$).



Research assistants ($M = 3.84, SD = 1.09$) also reported more future uncertainty compared to assistant professors (mean difference = 1.00, 95%CI[.33, 1.67], $p < .001$).



Contract Type

Those on full-time fixed-term contracts ($M = 4.21, SD = .98$) also experienced higher levels of future uncertainty compared to those on full-time open-ended contracts ($M = 3.17, SD = 1.04$; mean difference = 1.04, 95%CI[.72, 1.36]; $p < .001$) and those on part-time open-ended contracts ($M = 4.13, SD = .94$; mean difference = 1.29, 95%CI[.73, 1.85], $p < .001$).

Anxiety

There were intersectional differences in anxiety based on ethnicity and disability status. Participants who identified as Other White ($M = 1.35, SD = .92$) reported significantly higher levels of anxiety compared to those who identified as White ($M = .94, SD = .82$; mean difference = .42, 95%CI[.15, .67]; $p < .001$).

Women with a self-reported physical and/or mental health condition also reported more anxiety compared to those without one (with: $M = 1.48, SD = .98$; without: $M = .91, SD = .78$; Welch's $t(93.62) = 4.48, p < .001, d = .69$).

Depression, Stress and Quality of Life

Differences were also found for disability status when it came to depression, anxiety, and stress. Compared to those without any self-reported physical and/or mental health condition, women with a condition showed higher levels of depression (with, $M = 1.06, SD = .93$; without, $M = .62, SD = .72$; Welch's $t(91.55) = 3.68, p < .001, d = .58$), higher levels of stress (with, $M = 1.98, SD = .72$; without, $M = 1.53, SD = .75$; $t(333) = 4.42, p < .001, d = .59$), and poorer self-rated quality of life (with, $M = 6.17, SD = 1.65$; without, $M = 7.07, SD = 1.59$; $t(333) = -4.18, p < .001, d = -.56$).

Objective 3: Investigating Links Between Academic Challenges and Wellbeing

With the exception of imposter syndrome and future uncertainty, all eight challenge areas were significantly correlated with mental health and wellbeing outcomes ($p < .05$; see appendix). In every instance, higher challenge scores were linked to poorer wellbeing (e.g., increased anxiety, depression, and stress).

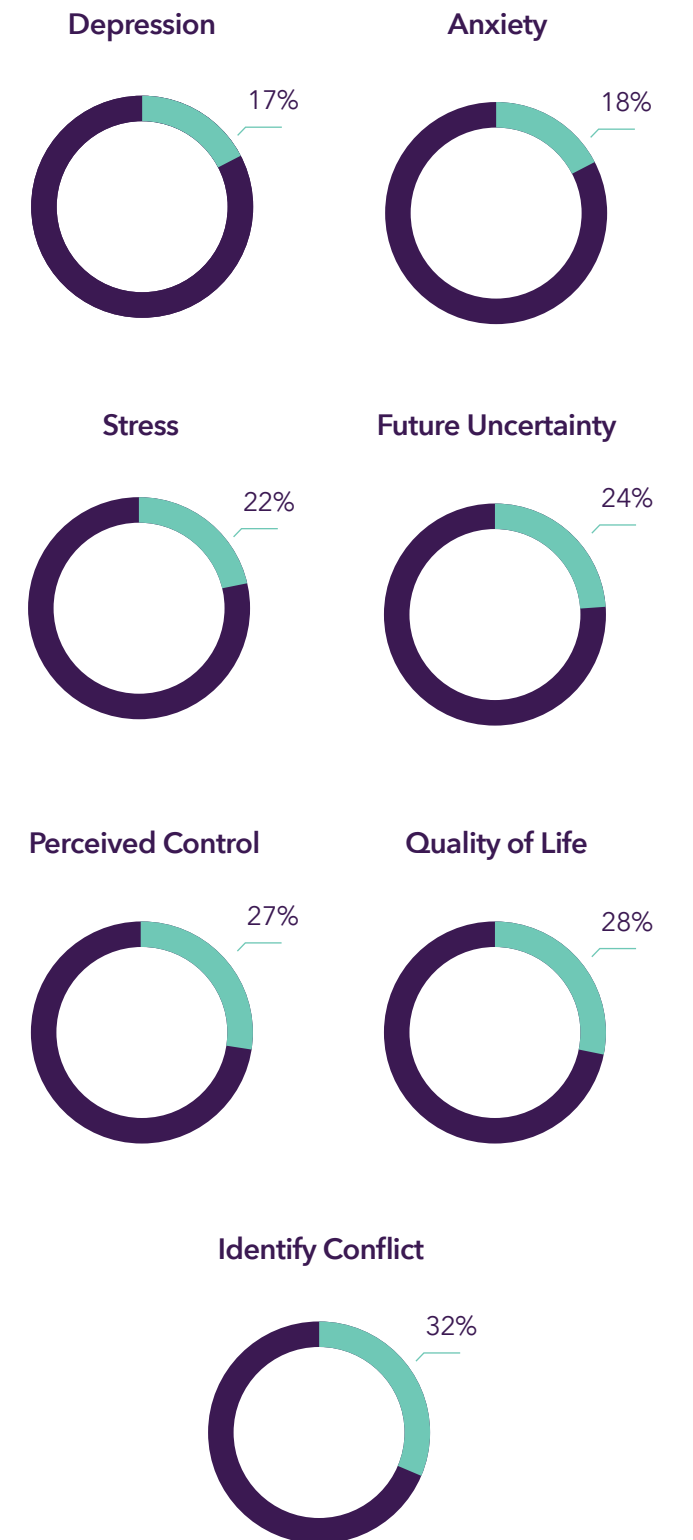
Predicting Wellbeing from Challenges

To explore whether the challenges faced by women in academia predicted mental health and wellbeing outcomes, multiple regression analysis was conducted. After applying Bonferroni corrections - except for imposter syndrome (which explained only 5% of variance) - the eight challenge areas collectively explained between 17% and 32% of the variance in mental health and wellbeing-related outcomes (all $p < .001$; see appendix).

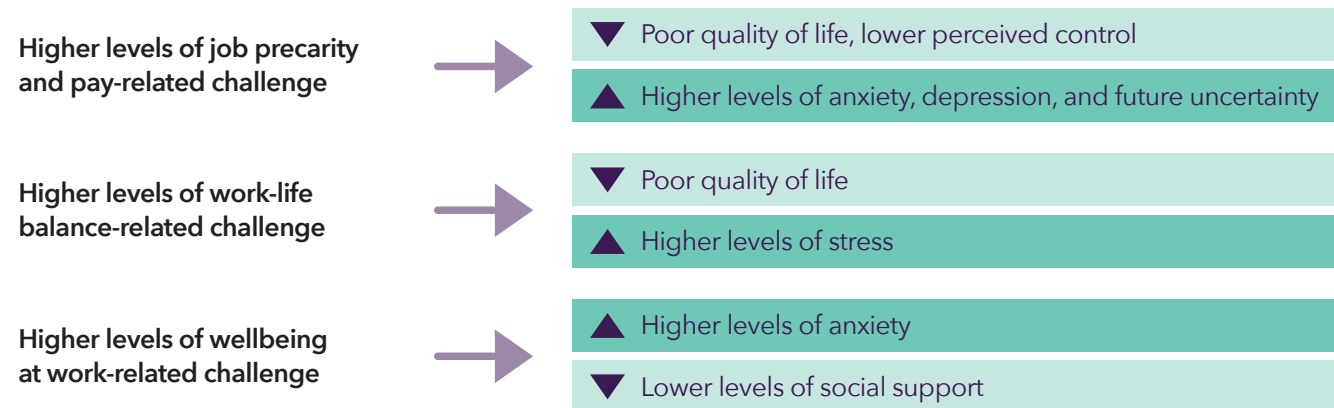


Figure 3.

Pie charts illustrating the percentage variance explained by the eight challenge areas for each of the mental health and wellbeing outcomes (all $p < .001$).



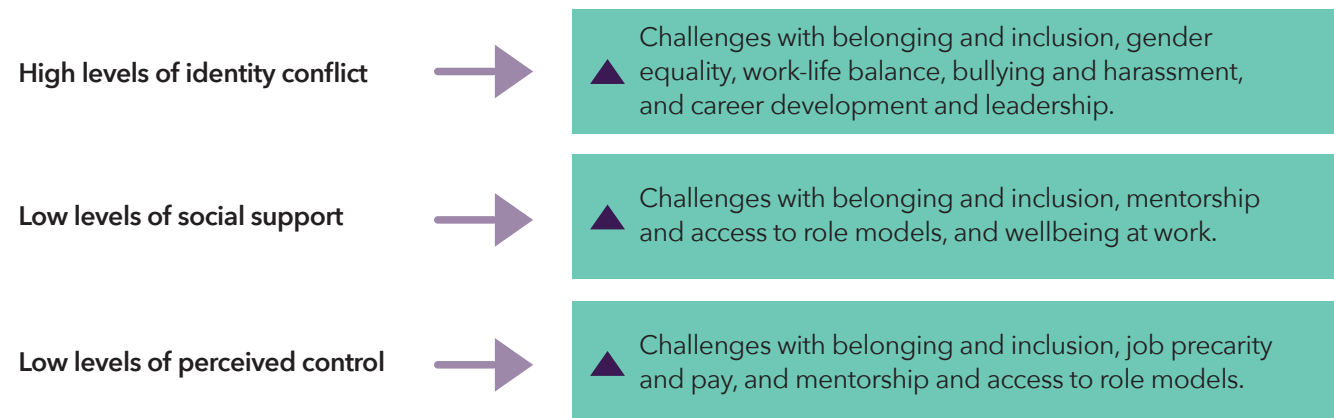
Overall, **job precarity and pay**, **work-life balance**, and **wellbeing at work** were the most robust linear predictors of mental health and wellbeing-related outcomes:



Predicting Wellbeing from Challenges

When exploring the opposite effect – that is, when exploring whether mental health and wellbeing outcomes collectively explained a significant proportion of variance across the challenge areas – they were found to account for 20–34% of the variance.

Overall, **identity conflict**, **social support**, and **perceived control** emerged as significant linear predictors of challenge areas:



Key Implications

These findings highlight the potential role of these factors as risk or protective influences in shaping how women experience the academic environment.

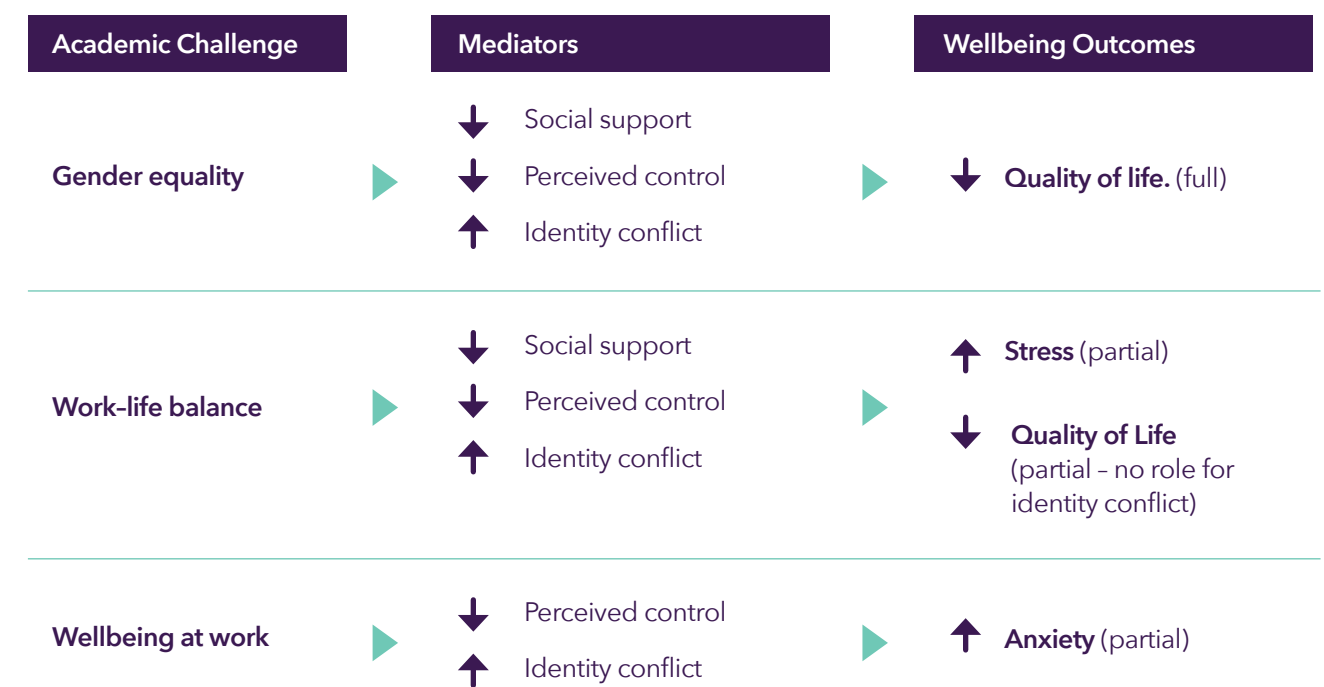
Interestingly, **anxiety, depression, and stress did not predict any of the challenge directly**, which might suggest that these mental health impacts are more often consequences of academic challenges, rather than causes. But futures longitudinal or repeated-measure studies are needed to infer causation.

Exploratory Analysis

Mediation Findings

In line with our exploratory aims, we examined **potential mediators** of the relationships between challenge areas and wellbeing outcomes. Here, we focused on challenge areas that had already emerged as significant predictors of wellbeing outcomes (job precarity and pay, gender equality, work-life balance, and wellbeing at work).

Given that depression, anxiety, stress, and quality of life were predicted by these challenge areas – but were not themselves robust linear predictors of the challenge areas – they were treated as wellbeing outcomes (provided they had been significantly predicted by the challenge area in question). The remaining variables were explored as mediators if they were correlated with both the challenge area and the wellbeing outcome in question ($p < .001$). Based on these criteria, seven parallel mediation models were explored:



What This Means

Across the identified challenge areas, social support, perceived control, and identity conflict emerged as powerful levers for change. Strengthening these could help buffer the impact of systemic and workplace challenges on mental health and quality of life.

Hierarchical Clustering Analysis

To explore how sociodemographic and occupational factors related to mental health and wellbeing outcomes, we conducted hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA). Here, we focused on exploring factors that were shown to exhibit significant intersectional differences (i.e., age, ethnicity, disability status, relationship status, job role and contract type) and the associated mental health and wellbeing outcomes (i.e., job precarity and pay, future uncertainty, depression, anxiety, stress, and quality of life).

The aim of this analysis was to identify naturally occurring subgroups of participants based on patterns across the six outcome variables and to examine which intersectional categories were overrepresented in each cluster, thus helping to identify those groups who may be most at risk or in need of targeted interventions.

The HCA identified **three distinct groups** with varying levels of psychological distress, job and pay-related challenge, and quality of life.

Chi-squared tests were conducted to determine whether there was significant association between cluster membership and each of the demographic and occupational factors. Significant differences emerged for **age, ethnicity, disability status, and contract type**.

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
(High-Risk / Distressed and Job-Related Insecurity)	(Resilient / Low-Distress Group)	(Moderate-Risk / High Uncertainty Group)
Profile: Highest psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress), high job precarity and pay concerns, high future uncertainty, lowest quality of life. Overrepresented groups: - Age: 20-29 17% or 50+ years 14% - Ethnicity: "Other White" 41% - Disability Status: Presence of a long-term health condition 38% - Contract Type: Full-time fixed-term 62%	Profile: Lowest psychological distress, highest quality of life; moderate job precarity and pay concerns, and future uncertainty. Overrepresented groups: - Age: 30-39 years 52% - Ethnicity: "White" (65%) - Disability Status: No long-term health condition 85% - Contract Type: Full-time open-ended/permanent 39%	Profile: Situated between Clusters 1 and 2 with moderate psychological distress, high future uncertainty, intermediate levels of quality of life. Overrepresented groups: - Age: 20-29 22% or 50+ years 14% - Disability Status: Presence of a long-term health condition 28% - Contract Type: Full-time fixed-term 58%

No significant differences in cluster membership emerged for job role or relationship status, although a higher proportion of postdocs were in the High-Risk and Moderate-Risk clusters compared to the Resilient cluster.

Implications

The cluster analysis shows that wellbeing and job-related insecurity among women in academia fall into three distinct patterns: High-Risk, Moderate-Risk, and Resilient, rather than being evenly distributed across the workforce. The first stage of this analysis highlights that a substantial subgroup of early- to mid-career stage women experience high levels of psychological distress, concerns with job precarity and pay, and low quality of life, while others are relatively buffered from these challenges.

Examining the demographic and occupational composition of each cluster, we identified that these subgroups are shaped by intersectional factors such as disability status, ethnicity, contract type, and age. Those on fixed-term contracts, with long-term health conditions, from minoritised Other White ethnic backgrounds, and at early or later career stages are disproportionately represented in the High-Risk and Moderate-Risk clusters. In contrast, those with open-ended contracts, no reported disability, and White ethnicity status are more likely to be in the Resilient group.

These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both the structural drivers of job insecurity and the unequal distribution of risk across the academic workforce. Efforts to improve wellbeing will be most effective when they are tailored to the specific challenges and contexts faced by the most vulnerable groups identified in this analysis.



Work Package 2: Interviews

At the end of the survey, participants could opt into a follow-up interview. Those who consented (N = 153) provided contact and demographic information. A stratified random sampling approach was used to select 20 participants, ensuring representation across ethnic groups, with oversampling of marginalised ethnicities.

Selected participants received a Participant Information Leaflet and scheduling link via email. Interviews were conducted one-to-one via Microsoft Teams (45 minutes), audio recorded using OBS Studio, and transcribed by an approved third-party vendor. Consent was obtained both in writing and verbally.

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide, pre-piloted with women meeting inclusion criteria. Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in NVivo, guided by Braun and Clarke’s six-phase process. Two female researchers with lived experience of academic careers (AT, TM) conducted the analysis. Emphasising reflexivity over inter-coder reliability, they independently coded a shared set of interviews, maintained reflexive memos, and engaged in collaborative theme development. This process combined inductive and deductive approaches to produce a theoretically grounded, data-driven narrative.

Twenty interviews were conducted in March 2025 with early- to mid-career women in academia, aiming to achieve thematic saturation and capture diverse lived experiences. **Participants had a mean age of 37.95 years** (SD = 6.81). Full demographic details are provided in Table 2.

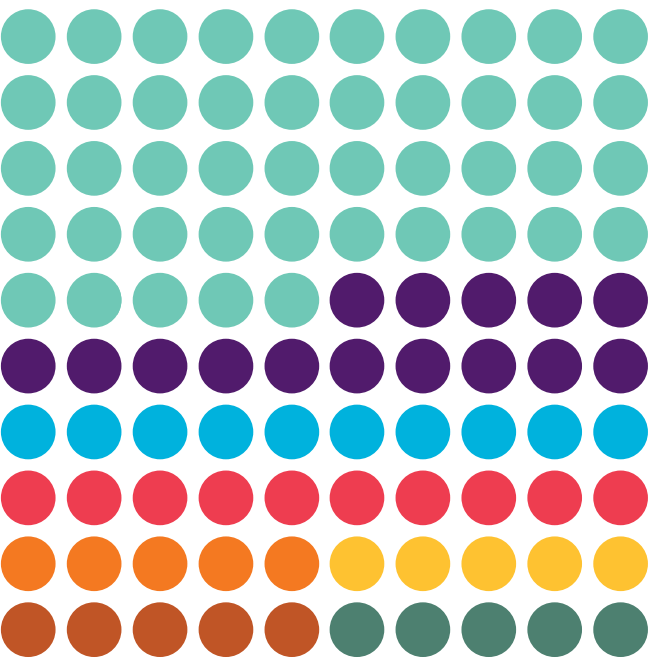


20
PARTICIPANTS

MEAN AGE
37.95
YEARS

Demographic characteristics of the interview sample (N = 20).

Ethnicity



Demographic Characteristic	N
White (English, British, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller or Roma)	9
Other White Background	3
Chinese	2
Mixed White and Black African	2
Arab	1
Mixed White and Asian	1
Other Asian Background	1
Other Mixed Background	1

Parental Status



Demographic Characteristic	N
Not a Parent	11
Parent (including stepparent and/or adoptive parent)	9

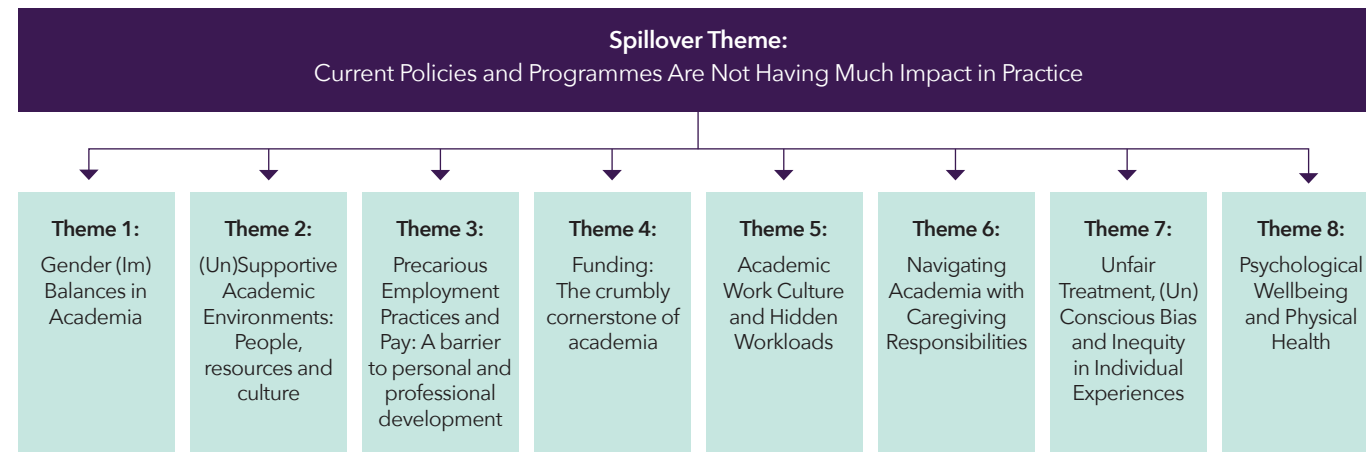
Academic Job Role



Demographic Characteristic	N
Postdoctoral Research/Teaching Fellow	9
Lecturer	4
Assistant Professor	3
Research Assistant/Associate	2
Associate Professor/Reader	1
Clinical Lecturer	1

Figure 4 Thematic map illustrating eight higher-level themes that represent current areas of challenge experienced by early- to mid-career stage women in academia, encompassed by an overarching 'spillover' theme: Current policies are programmes are not having much impact in practice.

Figure 4.



Eight themes representing current areas of challenge were derived from interviews. Across these themes, a clear overarching message was evident: Current policies and initiatives are not having much impact in practice. Figure 3 presents the thematic map, while Supplementary Table 1 provides an overview of themes and sub-themes. The following sections describe each theme in detail, illustrated with representative participant quotes.

Theme 1: Gender (Im)Balances in Academia

Interviews revealed the positive impact of gender-balanced working environments for women in academic settings, while imbalances within certain departments, seniority levels, and group meetings contributed to frustration and difficulty. Pay discrepancies between men and women with equivalent skillsets and roles were another common concern. Additionally, some interviewees commented on a generalised female reluctance to apply for certain positions and promotions, thus contributing to current imbalances and a lack of visibility at senior levels.

Female equilibrium at all levels leads to benefits for women and the wider research environment

Interviews revealed that gender balance has a positive impact, with interviewees working in gender-balanced teams expressing an increased sense of confidence and validation. As a result of the benefits she observed, one interviewee believed that actively working towards female equilibrium would foster a naturally supportive academic environment for women – and suggested the current lack of female representation might explain why current processes were not as supportive as they could be.

"I'm really happy where I am now, because the group that I'm in is actually gender balanced, which is so rare... And at all seniority levels as well, so now I kind of can compare to how I used to feel, and I notice the difference even more. So, from a personal life point of view, work-life balance and wellbeing, I see a huge difference because now I feel valued, I feel more confident... I'm validated... I sometimes try to imagine what would things be like if we were 50/50, men, women... like what would be different? And I feel like there are so many things that just wouldn't be a question, like maternity leave, you know, people would speak up about this when workloads are being discussed and it would naturally become a part of all these processes... The biggest problems are the fact that... we are not in an equilibrium – we have to actively put in some effort to try and address the balance. One day maybe when things are balanced, then it'll just sort of tick over smoothly." (Interview 15)

The presence of female leaders and mentors was also key to helping women feel supported. Many interviewees had positive experiences of female line managers, mentors, and senior academics, and felt better able to navigate their careers as a result of their support.

"Now I'm finally in a position where I'm led by a line manager who's female, who seems to have a very different approach... I found her really supportive, and this is the first time out of all the research jobs I've done that I found someone supportive." (Interview 2)

Gender imbalance is still present in certain departments, at higher seniority levels, and in pay packets

Being a female minority in certain departments and fields (e.g., STEM, sports) came with added difficulties. As well as not feeling understood by male colleagues, one interviewee felt she had to educate those who did not 'believe in' gender inequity and observed stark differences in departments where female support was more readily accessible.

"I have found it difficult being in a very male department, where you don't have that culture around you, just like women supporting women, or even that understanding of why or how you might be impacted. I mean, someone literally said to me the other day that they don't really believe in the gender gap... That's people I work with, they don't even believe in it... I'm one-person fighting against 10 males, but I don't want to have to constantly try to like educate all the time, but I just don't have that understanding in the circle I work. So, I know that would maybe impact me more than... my best pal [who] works in psychology, so it's very kind of female dominated and has a really strong female presence in the team and it's very, very supportive and uplifting, and the stories we compare are just wildly different." (Interview 21)

Many interviewees observed that, while gender balance may have been achieved at the earlier career stages and/or within certain departments, an imbalance across seniority levels and a resulting lack of role models remained a problem and made their own career trajectories feel uncertain. Some women also noted that gendered seniority-gaps contributed to unequal dynamics in groups and meetings. One interviewee gave an explicit example of how a female colleague's efforts to introduce inclusive language had been undermined by senior male researchers focused on meritocratic gain, suggesting that masculine priorities and power remain a key factor in academic decision-making.

"I'd say my institution is very well gender balanced compared to other places partly because it's very focused on sort of public health and everything. But still like most of the professors I can list off are all male... And I think yeah, it sort of makes knowing and understanding the pathway and realising it's possible more difficult." (Interview 10)

"...my [female] colleague wanted to use slightly different terminology. She wanted to say 'minoritized racial groups' rather than 'ethnic minorities'... The older male researchers were like, 'Well, no...' And it's kind of like... why can't we challenge that? ...She had all the data... she'd done research, she'd consulted experts in the field about how to use terminology around race. And she brought it to the meeting, and it was just shut down... And it's like, their agenda is different from hers because she wants to change the way people see and think about the issue, whereas they want to get a paper published... And, obviously, you can predict what happened, we're now going with 'ethnic minority'... It's a power thing." (Interview 13)

In addition to disparities in representation, many interviewees were aware of pay disparities between male and female colleagues who were equivalent in skill and position, and believed more transparency was needed to address this persistent issue.

"...there's so many women I know that were being paid less than their male colleagues and I just, I don't know what would resolve this, but just like some, some like transparency or something" (Interview 17)

Unequal representation of women putting themselves forward for recruitment and promotion

The final sub-theme in this category related to the way women put – or did not put – themselves forward for academic positions and promotions. Many interviewees believed women were reluctant to go for roles unless they met every criterion and would apply for lower-level positions relative to their skill. This was seen as contrasting with men, who were perceived as having greater confidence and a more pointed focus on climbing the career ladder.

"...a few people have commented at the school that fewer women put themselves... forward for promotion compared to men because, you know, there is a bit of a difference... men tend to be kind of more ambitious and kind of driven... on their kind of

career ladder, whereas women are, you know, a lot of women are too, but some... are more aware of the need to be... balancing work life better" (Interview 3)

Theme 2: (Un)Supportive Academic Environments: People, Resources and Culture

The wider academic environment was a key determinant of women's overall experience. Supportive line managers, teams, and resources had positive impact. In contrast, unsupportive behaviour from male and female leaders, inadequate onboarding, and limited support services were linked to negative experiences, prompting some to seek external advice. Views on current policies and initiatives for equitable research environments were mixed, with many unsure of their practical impact – an overarching theme that will be returned to later. Some women described being treated differently due to their gender and/or race, with international staff describing the British academic context as particularly hard to navigate due to systemic racism, hierarchies, and 'stiff-upper lip' attitudes.

Supportive people and teams allow women to speak freely and grow

Individuals who could talk openly in their environment felt confident, supported, and welcome. Having access to supportive line managers and PIs was also emphasised more specifically, with women valuing those who took an active role when working towards team objectives and personal development goals. Women also expressed appreciation for male supervisors who were willing to recognise, discuss, and consider gender differences in academic experiences, highlighting the importance of support from conscious male allies and leaders.

"I received complete support from the team that I worked with... I feel like I can speak to my manager freely without being afraid of saying anything that she's going to criticise... So, it's just like feeling that you can speak in a welcoming... non-judgmental environment... And if I couldn't find the support from my manager, if she was busy, then I have... other research members who I can go to who are also welcoming..." (Interview 5)

"I'm in a very, very lucky situation... I could not feel more supported by what I've been having. My supervisor also like he addresses that there are differences in the way that men and women and people of all different variations of individual differences act and behave, and that needs vary and the politics of it all. So, the fact that he also talks about it is very nice." (Interview 14)

Making the effort to grow and retain staff was perceived to be another key aspect of a supportive environment. As well as contributing to career development, interviewees expressed their appreciation for teams and leaders who helped them to grow and made an active effort to retain them in the face of ending contracts.

"So, I think that my research team is a good place for me to grow as a researcher... I get a lot of opportunities. And my manager is really good at pushing me." (Interview 13)

"I'm staying in the same job and that was all because...they put pressure on the funding body to be like 'Look we need this person on our team' because they were aware that it would be good to keep me on board, and that sort of made me feel very valued which was very nice.... So, it's like, active engagement and investment in keeping me around and caring about me being able to live." (Interview 14)

Importance of inductions, support services, and access to wider resources

As well as support from colleagues, women discussed many additional elements that helped or hindered their ability to navigate their academic career. Many interviewees believed the transition from PhD to postdoc – or from one institution to another – was inadequately supported, suggesting better inductions are needed to facilitate transitions.

"Because at the beginning you need [to get] familiar with like the standard operation procedures... I feel like...you don't know how to do that... I think it's kind of lack of training and support... because like I mentioned, although I have a PhD degree, I don't feel like it means anything, because there are lots of things you need to explore, lots of things are new to you." (Interview 1)

In addition to better inductions, many interviewees said that academic mentors mattered but could be difficult to access and find. Women recognised the benefits of having someone to talk to but often struggled to access mentors due to a lack of female professors and mentorship schemes. Interviewees also described the importance of having access to administrative support (e.g., IT, finance), feeling that administrative burdens would otherwise default to them. Unfortunately, some women had to rely on third party support for help and advice in the absence of internal support from the institution itself. Examples included the UCU in instances of bullying and unfair treatment, external parental support groups for those without a relatable network, and independent consultancies to make up for the lack of career support.

"Even just the pipeline into Academia is such a mystery and I guess... finding someone who you're happy to talk about it has been an issue, like... seeing role models, there's very few female professors comparatively" (interview 10).

"I've been very, very lucky that both departments I've worked in we've had absolutely brilliant like actual administrators very, very qualified, very skilled administrators employed to do those tasks... I can imagine that if you're in a department or a team that doesn't have that... I can fully understand how those sort of jobs could end up falling on particularly maybe a more junior female member of the team" (Interview 20)

"An incident happened during my...previous role and I felt that I was bullied, I didn't know...what to do... So, I got in contact with [the UCU], and I got really, really good support... It was something... really urgent... Like, over the weekend, I received like a decision that was horrible to me and I felt like it was an unfair decision, and I needed to have like someone who can support me." (Interview 5)

Mixed feelings and awareness of policies, programmes and initiatives designed to support and aid equitable experiences

While many women were familiar with Athena Swan awards and EDI initiatives, there was wide variety in levels of awareness and perceptions of benefit. Women's reflections on current institutional efforts and the persistence of inequitable experiences are discussed as an overarching theme later, thus providing context for the challenges identified throughout this study.

"I see the Athena Swan stuff with university's going 'Oh we're an Athena Swan bronze or a silver', but off the top of my head I can't remember what it actually means other than we support women." (Interview 10)

Unsupportive people and toxic environments reduce confidence and intimidate

Throughout interviews, many women described experiences of unsupportive academic environments, often manifesting in the form of unsupportive line managers and PIs, who knocked their confidence and even caused them to consider leaving academia altogether. There were also examples of not feeling supported or understood by male colleagues, especially for women in male-dominated fields, where differences in experiences, values, styles of communication, and career advice were felt to diverge to the point of disconnect. Unfortunately, while many interviewees had positive things to say about female leaders, there were also instances of 'Queen Bee' syndrome, wherein junior women felt they had been poorly treated – and even bullied – by women who had achieved positions of power.

"Not receiving the support from your manager or from your leads is not helpful in terms of building yourself into becoming an independent researcher because if you have someone who will question you in everything that you do... when you have like...a toxic environment, let's say, you don't have someone to support you." (Interview 5)

"There are definitely gender differences... so if I go to a male colleague of a similar career stage... [there are] definitely differences in... the things that we do face, and sometimes...it's not where I would expect actually a lot of support, if that makes sense... I expect less support from male colleagues... I think that they are not bad people, they just don't understand." (Interview 4)

"I do remember coming back on my second day and I was asked, 'Oh what have you done under the past six months?' And it was a male senior person, and I just thought, hang on, I've just been on maternity leave... How can you ask me that? It's like... there's a complete disconnect." (Interview 9)

"I've been... line managed by... females in academia, and I have unfortunately felt that they feel very threatened by me... and I think that's an aspect to draw out here as well. As women, we sometimes impair the progress of other women without perhaps necessarily meaning to. But that's what's happened to me... the latest job was a professor, female

professor, Muslim background, who felt extremely threatened by me and was very difficult to manage. And then prior to that, it was a bigger project... and there was... the professor who was behind the whole project, again female, she made me feel like she didn't like me from day one." (Interview 2)

The final two sub-themes in this category relate to cultural differences. International staff and minoritised ethnic groups working within UK HEIs felt the British academic context could be especially problematic and difficult to break into due to wider cultural attitudes and norms. Experiences of racism and differential treatment were also given.

"British... people don't talk necessarily about their problems or... when they're finding things difficult... they would prefer to be like... 'Okay... I keep calm about it and just deal with it' and, you know, stiff upper lip kind of thing... And that is maybe not helpful." (Interview 4)

"You'd rarely see female ethnic minority included on papers... you would not see them...remotely mentioned. Unfortunately, I see that with Caucasians or White British... because everyone knew each other, they went out drinking together, they went out socialising together, et cetera. And that makes it very difficult with someone like myself, where I don't feel that I necessarily belong to those friendship groups." (Interview 2)

Theme 3: Precarious Employment Practices and Pay: A barrier to personal and professional development

One of the most consistent challenges reported throughout interviews related to precarious employment practices. Entwined with the reliance on external funding (Theme 4), women on short, fixed-term contracts described a wide-range of barriers relating to personal and professional development, including the ability to start a family, buy a house, and achieve their career goals. In contrast, interviewees on permanent contracts described positive experiences due to the breathing space and development opportunities they could access under conditions of stable employment. Many interviewees also felt academic salaries did not reflect the skill, effort, and overtime hours worked, contrasting academia with other industries where overtime is financially recognised.

Short, fixed-term contracts are a source of stress and uncertainty

Institutional overreliance on short, fixed-term contracts was a constant source of stress, precarity, and future uncertainty for women at the early- to mid-career stage, with negative impacts on personal and professional development.

"I think the whole projectification of research and the fixed-term contracts thing is ridiculous and unnecessary, and if you did look at different industries, they don't have quite the same setup, even though they don't have permanent funding, they have permanent employees... they will hire people and develop them on a career trajectory, and then, ideally, hopefully, they will get the work in for those people to work on. And I would like to see that happen, but I don't think it will because there are no incentives for that... It's a strange way of running things, and a strange way of then going, 'Oh well, it's funny that people keep leaving.'" (Interview 6)

"Short-term contracts mean, A, you're always living with that uncertainty of where's the next job, and you do have to work very hard and over and above to be secure in the next thing...so there's the life precarity and, you know, 'Can I afford to do things?' or 'Am I going to be employed?' and the stress that comes with that. But I think there's also...the detrimental effect of not being able to build your expertise or build like a trajectory of your...intellectual development... So, to go back to sort of your question about the biggest obstacle, I think, yeah, it's precarity, but in two senses because that affects your life outside of work, but it affects your intellectual trajectory." (Interview 16)

While interviewees acknowledged that precarious employment practices had impacts on personal life development regardless of gender, many women described the compounding challenges they felt when it came to pregnancy and starting a family. Additional forms of personal life stress included geographical instability and house ownership, with many women feeling that academia came with an unfair expectation of relocation for the purposes of accessing the next short-term position.

"...it is hard to find the time to be pregnant, I mean just like when you get pregnant... like considering you have a three-year contract, you feel like you can never find a good time... and then you have that kind of worry like 'What if my contract ends during

my maternity leave?'... I do feel like I'm...struggling. I think these things can't be solved unless you have a permanent contract." (Interview 1)

"And the whole like the stability side of it as well... I'm about to move 400 miles away for my next job... you don't get life stability... I've got friends where I'm living at the moment but I'm about to have to say bye to all of them and leave..." (Interview 10)

Interviewees also discussed impacts on professional life development, feeling academic careers were hindered by the short-term nature of employment, with many individuals having to settle for less (e.g., lower pay/ position) and having to constantly jump around and find funding to stay afloat.

"I do remember one of my ways in is... was through sort of a teaching intensive route.... it was a way in, which was good for me career wise, but it sort of narrowed the opportunities that I could have got to start with a teaching and research contract." (Interview 9)

"I then had about eight years where I was jumping from thing to thing and quite...random topics, you know, still loved the fundamentals of doing research. But then, it was only in about 2021 I was able to sort of find my way back into a topic area that was much more back on my home turf." (Interview 16)

The peace of permanency (or long, fixed-term contracts)

In contrast, women employed on permanent – or longer, fixed-term contracts – expressed positive experiences such as having had the freedom to start a family and the breathing space to develop professionally. Nevertheless, whenever 'long-term' employment was discussed, it was ultimately perceived as luck and dependent on who you know, demonstrating the way stable employment is perceived to be a rarity in academia rather than an expectation.

"I'm now in a position where I think we are going to be more permanently located. So, I am actually thinking about developing my own research... And I've been lucky in that the last couple of contracts have both been three years which gives you enough space to develop your own ideas and develop an application, so in that side of things I've felt supported." (Interview 6)

"Again, I've lucked out. The reason I'm moving is because I've got three-and-a-half-year contract which is incredible." (Interview 10)

Pay is too low compared to workload, overtime, and other industries

The final sub-theme in this category relates to women's dissatisfaction with pay in line with qualifications and workload. Many interviewees pointed out discrepancies between academia and industry when it came to working unpaid overtime and saw it as a concerning norm.

"Like in other industries where you get paid... if you do overtime, you either get more annual leave or you get some extra pay for it, but there's none of this [in academia]... Don't even get me started with pay..." (Interview 9)

"Even like the pay, it just doesn't seem worth it sometimes, like I think about some of my friends who are in different jobs and I think 'I've got a bloody doctorate, and you are earning like 10, 20, £30,000 more than me like, what is going on?'" (Interview 7)

Theme 4: Funding – the crumbling cornerstone of academia

As alluded to in Theme 3, reliance on external funding was often the only means for women on fixed-term contracts to maintain their own employment and support career progression. Accordingly, many interviewees discussed funding as a barrier to progression in academia, believing it was complicated, competitive, and convoluted. Bias in funding allocation and the current financial climate was also discussed as an additional challenge that left many women feeling uncertain about the future.

A Long – but necessary – Path Paved with Rejection

For some interviewees, applying for funding comprised a large part of their day-to-day activity. As well as being a time-consuming process, the chances of funding success were perceived to be low. Although dealing with rejection was difficult, there was the sense that the psychological impacts of failure had to be worked through quickly to focus on the next grant.

"Applying for grants is quite stressful... And up to a point you should be happy that you get through it. But after a certain time, because you failed [and had] this many rejections, you sort of temper your excitement... I have worked with like five other colleagues since I started now and, you know, watching how they deal with it is instructive, you know... in a weeks' time they're like 'Onto the next

one... The next deadline is in two months; we go for that one.' And that's the mindset you have to get into." (Interview 4)

Compounding Complications: Contract, Career Stage and Caregiving

Women recognised how academic contracts were inextricably linked to external funding and the projectification of research. Interviewees on fixed-term contracts described living from grant-to-grant, and the associated pressures of having to constantly apply for funds to maintain their own employment, while trying to keep up with the demands of ongoing projects. Some interviewees felt they had no choice but to overwork, given that the alternative was unemployment.

"I guess in academia you always have to bring in funding, so that's always an expectation, but at least if you know that you're secure, you kind of have that peace of mind that allows you to sort of, yeah, just not be stressed out all the time.... so, it's kind of just hit me that... I am... in a precarious situation... It has made me think, 'Oh my God, yeah, what do I do? ...And...you just have to do more work, don't you, because if you don't, you're kind of shooting yourself in the foot...'" (Interview 7)

As well as the added workload associated with the funding application process, one interviewee pointed out that being on a fixed-term contract often meant being ineligible to apply for funds – an ironic Catch 22 that perpetuates uncertainty and stifles career progression.

"I was on fixed-term contracts for a while, and the main issue - apart from the general, 'Will I have a job next year?' concern - was that you just couldn't progress your academic career while you were on them because you couldn't get funding, because the university rules or the funder rules... would say that, 'Well, you don't have enough time left on your contract in order to apply to this for the funding'... So, there were times when, you know, I had a project, I had it all costed and ready, and then at the last minute they go, 'Oh no, hang on a minute, you're on the wrong type of contract, you can't do that'. I've wasted months and months of time, and wasn't able to then get the funding that I needed to progress. So, that's a big barrier... and I know that there are a lot...of people in postdoc positions where they're struggling to get their own research off the ground because they can't get funding." (Interview 17)

Further to contract complications, some interviewees felt that their career stage put a limit on opportunities and access to funds, with time-sensitive eligibility requirements (e.g., years post-PhD) making it hard for those who had taken a 'non-linear' career pathway.

"When it comes to fellowships, it's often difficult to find where you fit, particularly if you haven't followed a conventional career path. So, for instance, not so much now, I know that previously there used to be age limits that meant that anyone that didn't start their PhD by a certain point in their life was never going to get an early career fellowship, those have changed, thankfully. But it can still be difficult to work out where you fit in that kind of fellowship structure, if you haven't kind of gone straight from PhD postdoc. (Interview 19)

Another concern was not being able to defer funding for caregiving (e.g., maternity leave). Indeed, despite knowing funding would benefit their career progression, women were less inclined to apply for funds if they were planning to start a family soon, which they felt had consequences for career advancement.

"I remember thinking that at my stage in the career I really needed to get some of my own funding, and unfortunately, either knowing I was pregnant or not knowing when I was going to return back to work, if you go for some of the smaller funding pots, you can't defer the funding. So, I didn't even try for any funding for about five years because I knew that even if I was successful in getting the funding, I had to spend it within a year, they couldn't be deferred for parental leave. So, yeah, that stopped me applying for any funding which clearly then has had a knock-on effect on my CV." (Interview 6)

Biased Allocation

Funding allocation was also deemed to be biased by some women, who had the perception that big names take it all. This sentiment was even backed up by one interviewee who said funding was 'just a formality' for her research team and had no job insecurity concerns as a result.

"...there's so much data that just shows... there is bias in grants, so that just needs to stop... it hasn't been done that's such an easy fix to me and it seems like an obvious one and I still don't understand.... People open grants and go 'Oh, this is from so and so'. Like I hear it all the time 'Oh, they sent a grant through, it'll be lovely, in it goes'". (Interview 11)

Theme 5: Academic Work Culture and Hidden Workloads

Interviews painted a clear picture of normalised overwork, blurred work-life boundaries, and gendered assignment of 'hidden' administrative roles. As well as being less valued by traditional employment and promotion criteria, some interviewees felt the time allocated to certain tasks was insufficient and reduced their ability to work on meritocratic outputs needed for progression. Accordingly, some women worked overtime to keep up; others considered leaving academia altogether.

Normalised expectation of overwork and lack of work-life boundaries

For most, a healthy work-life balance felt unattainable. Many interviewees described working worrying levels of overtime to keep up with workload demands and felt pressured to answer emails out-of-hours. Beyond meeting expectations of others, overtime was also driven by the pressure to progress and generate outputs in a competitive, precarious system. As one participant noted, avoiding overtime would be an act of self-sabotage.

"So if I don't work beyond my 9:00 to 5:00 to fit all my day job in, plus apply for those grants, plus write those papers, I'm just sabotaging myself." (Interview 7)

"it's almost normal and expected that you'll work outside usual working hours, that if there's a grant deadline, everything else gets pushed aside and you will work 24 hours a day to get it done... I've also had... somebody say that I should make an effort to pay more attention to my emails when I'm on leave... So, there's this expectation to be always on and always available which I found really difficult." (Interview 19)

Conscientiousness, passion, or self-exploitative acceptance of an unfair game?

While academic work culture was perceived to be fundamentally flawed, many interviewees admitted their working habits were partly the result of their own conscientiousness and passion.

"So personally, I can't blame this all on the system, but I do a lot more than what I'm expected or need to do. I actually only work part-time but I'm fully available all the time. And although that's not asked for, it is in a way rewarded because I get so much

"Our group was quite well known for the particular area that we work in, it was generally just a formality that we had to apply for this research funding. I was never particularly concerned about being out of a job..." (Interview 21)

When discussing potential solutions to improve equitable funding, some interviewees expressed concerns that women-only funds could be viewed as positive discrimination vs. skill and would have a negative impact on how their achievements were viewed by colleagues – and even themselves.

"...it's hard, because I felt like I have had opportunities that became available to me, where between two candidates, because I am early career and/or because I'm a woman or because I'm all those things, it meant I got them over some other colleagues. It's hard to feel that you're not there to, you know, fill the quota... It's always very difficult because I definitely feel that... other people think less of you, but also you think less of yourself and that doesn't help you to feel very secure." (Interview 4)

Wider Financial Instability

Interviewees recognised that universities and funders were dependent on the wider financial climate, with some women noting that their ability to obtain funds was influenced by changing governments with changing priorities. Indeed, many interviewees felt that the financial crisis in UK HE was making everything worse, and believed institutional efforts to save money (e.g., voluntary severance schemes, shorter contracts, pauses on promotion) would disproportionately impact women.

"...a lot of the grants I apply for are ODA funded by UK aid. And so obviously the Prime Minister's announcement to cut again ODA funding...is not welcome. And so, there's this sort of added layer of precarity in the sense of where do I get my funding from now? ...I just feel like that is just another thing that is adding anxiety and stress to an already stressful position... It's not a good time to be a woman or in academia at the moment doing global health research." (Interview 7)

"Obviously, the universities across the UK are now experiencing financial difficulties, and I think the consequences of that are again going to fall disproportionately on women who have, again, the caring responsibilities and who are less likely to put themselves forward for promotion..." (Interview 22)

done, partially because of my efficiency, but also because I do just over work, and I know a lot of women do that" (Interview 22)

"...My husband would say I self-exploit in terms of hours worked... but... I think it is the nature of the game and I think a lot of our personalities that go into this kind of job, you do it for the joy of it... So, it's tricky to point the finger at the institution completely." (Interview 16)

Hidden workloads and their gendered assignment

Interviewees felt that certain roles were given to women by default (e.g., admin, teaching, pastoral support), often due to the stereotypical perception that they were better at them and/or more likely to say yes when asked. Participants suggested that the gendered assignment of non-research roles was even more of an issue for women in male-dominated departments, with the same women being asked to attend public-facing events and take on admin roles.

"Something that I've seen is that there are... public facing things for open days and interview panels where you do want a woman on the panel, it creates more work for the women in the department because they're underrepresented." (Interview 15)

"I get shafted with admin roles all the time because I'm [the only] female in like 11 people... I get asked all the time to do admin things or take on little roles like personal tutoring. I'll probably take over someone else's load because I actually do send out emails when we're meant to send out emails, I actually do meet with students if they request it, I take on other people's students when they can't get in contact with their personal tutors, I'll take on more. So you do start kind of building up this list of roles..." (Interview 21)

Many interviewees felt that women were more inclined to see such tasks as part of their wider academic role, contrasting this with men who don't see it as their job. Some also pointed out there were no consequences for not doing admin well, which enabled certain individuals to get away with doing less and burdened those known to make more effort.

"...what I hear from a lot of male colleagues: 'But that's not my job, they should... have a dedicated other person to tell them about finance.' I was like 'They're approaching you to do a PhD. Where does that responsibility lie?' And I feel this is where there's definitely a very clear difference in how we take responsibility for people." (Interview 4)

"So, some people will have committee roles and be rubbish at them, and... there doesn't appear to be any kind of any consequences for that, they're allowed to just kind of set out their time and everyone just accepts that they're rubbish at it and then is relieved when somebody else takes over." (Interview 19)

Interviewees also perceived differences in the way research vs. non-research roles were weighted, with many interviewees feeling that non-research roles went unrecognised AND hindered the ability to work on traditionally recognised outputs (e.g., publications and grants). Another reason attributed to the gendered assignment of certain roles, was the pressure to say 'yes'. Indeed, several interviewees believed women were asked to take on additional roles as result of being more agreeable or worried about the consequences of saying no.

"...it [admin] deserves recognition but then doesn't get it, and if the natural work that women on average tend to end up doing, if that was valued as how it should be, then women wouldn't need to change to fit in..." (Interview 15)

"I think it's also maybe often we are more saying yes and accommodating. So, we are much more cooperative and therefore, we are more likely to agree... So, I think our agreeableness and way of working together to, within a team is much maybe higher, whereas maybe, and that's a limitation from us, we should step back and actually say 'No' because then we cannot achieve some of the other things that we want to do." (Interview 9)

Theme 6: Navigating Academia with Caregiving and Parental Responsibilities

Many women highlighted the challenges of trying to balance academic careers alongside caregiving responsibilities. Interviewees described how gendered expectations, structural inflexibilities, and a lack of institutional support shaped their experiences of caregiving. Indeed, many women felt as though they were expected to meet traditional caregiving roles while also sustaining high levels of academic productivity – a clash resulting in career stagnation, reduced output, and personal sacrifice. Planning a family was also stressful due to job precarity, vague parental leave policies, and unclear return-to-work policies. Amid these pressures, women described personal support systems and flexible working policies as being crucial enablers.

The maternity leave pipeline: Preparing, covering, returning

Challenges spanned the full maternity leave arc, including unrealistic expectations and struggles when it came to preparing to leave, securing cover, and returning to work. Structural and contractual barriers made it difficult to access maternity leave, with vague institutional guidance making it hard for women to understand their entitlements, while some had to fight for their basic rights.

"...someone had a fellowship that... was supposed to be moveable. They had it in one place and they were going to move it to another place. And because they were going to do this move just after the end of their maternity leave, the first institution they were at was like, 'Oh no, we're not going to pay your maternity leave because to get maternity leave you have to continue, you have to come back to work and you're not coming back here.' And they're like, 'But yeah, the whole point of this fellowship is to take it somewhere else like this is ridiculous. Also, the university wouldn't have had to pay the maternity leave, it was the fellowship anyway', or yeah, it was a bit like that... and so in the end it got worked out, but that person had to... she had to fight to get this and take it to like, the upper levels of this fellowship kind of thing." (Interview 15)

Participants also described disrupted career progression and difficulty returning to work after maternity leave, often clashing with the demands of being a new parent, resulting in feelings of inadequacy, exhaustion, and thoughts of leaving academia.

"And then of course when you're returning from maternity leave especially when it's your first kid... Your life is a bit more different... you cannot work all evening, you cannot work the weekends to really be on the top of this balance that academia has, which is research, admin, teaching... And it is multitasking, it is tricky, and it takes some time and support and proper adjustments to account for all of this because the nonstop work it's not quite accounted for, especially when you have a family to look after and spend some time with." (Interview 9)

Returning from maternity leave was also perceived to come with an unspoken penalty. Women described being passed over for promotions due to perceived gaps in productivity or taking on roles below their previous grade and pay level out of necessity, resulting in long-term career consequences.

"...with maternity leave and everything, coming back in terms of promotion, as a result of... not achieving the output as well as being on maternity leave, I went once for promotion and I've been basically told, 'oh because of your maternity leave, you just didn't have even the time, so no wonder... you weren't successful and he didn't move you forward.' And I was like, 'Oh okay', I was just surprised to hear because I was on maternity leave, no wonder." (Interview 9)

Gendered Expectations and Societal Pressures

Many interviewees reflected on the impact of gendered norms surrounding caregiving responsibilities, with many feeling pressured to uphold traditional roles alongside uncompromising work demands. Conflicting pressures and expectations from within and outside the institution were often internalised, fuelling guilt, invisibility, and constraint. In some cases, judgments came from peers, line managers, and older generations, suggesting wider structural assumptions are deeply embedded within academic culture.

"It's all gendered, isn't it, like women are supposed to do all of these tasks at home and now we're supposed to work and also have babies. Like, it's just so ridiculous, but the systems yet just aren't built for women to thrive still." (Interview 7)

Several interviewees noted the societal expectation that women are the primary caregiver and point of call for children and school, regardless of family or employment context. Even when parenting was shared, responsibility for practical caregiving often fell to women.

"Speaking to other women in academia that have children... and it quite often falls to the female to pick up a lot of that slack in like terms of parenting... even if it's obviously quite co-parented... which you hear happens over and over again for females, that they are more likely to take that burden of maybe family or caring responsibilities or parenting responsibilities as opposed to their male counterparts. And it does just always knock you back a few pegs." (Interview 21)

Some interviewees felt the prioritisation of a male partner's career and/or assumption that women would relocate, scale back, or make career sacrifices "for the family" was also entrenched, particularly among older academic networks. Participants also noted how men's ability to overwork is often framed as personal passion or dedication, despite being facilitated by unequal caregiving arrangements.

"There were a lot of women who obviously had a really strong connection together because they were really used to the idea that they just got up and moved wherever their husband was going... And so, their response to us was just well 'you just have to get on with it.' And I was like okay, but what happens if I want to be the scientist?" (Interview 11)

"And there was an instance fairly recently... a discussion about culture... And the dean of the school said... 'I do sometimes work on the weekends, but that's because I really love my job.' And all the women in the audience kind of went, 'It's not because you love your job, it's because...your wife's looking after the kids.'" (Interview 19)

Women also described being on the end of judgments from female non-academics and older generations about caregiving choices when choosing to prioritise work activities, while others received judgments from those who held the contrary perception that partners and children hinder academic careers.

"I've had so many, you know, parents say to me, 'Well, you know, it would just be better, you know, I think your child would really benefit if you were there', and I was just like, 'Okay'. You know, the guilt that you get is... from other women is bad, is bad from the older generation. That's fine, like their experience is very different. But from other women, it's so judgmental, so bad. It's not, it's not helpful at all." (Interview 11)

"it's hard for... my line manager to accept that I have children or duties and responsibilities... there was a week that my children were off, it was Easter holidays, and she said to me at one point, 'I think you should consider child care.'" (Interview 2)

Practical Caregiving Strain

Many women described having dual caregiving responsibilities for children and aging parents, creating a "sandwich generation" pressure that compounded the strain.

"I'm in my mid-40s now my kids are approaching teenage-ness and my parents are now elderly. And I'm just like, I'm now at the point where I'm supporting elderly parents, so you know, mum fell down broke her hip, I'm now driving backwards and forwards to check... on them at the weekends make sure they're okay..." (Interview 11)

Others highlighted financial strain and stress due to childcare costs, with some unable to afford full-time

childcare, despite their senior academic position:

"Yeah, once you've got kids you either have to pay for the... pay for them to be looked after by someone or you have to like, you have to as a pair work out your times, or one of you has to cut back on hours. And ultimately, it ends up being the woman that does that I think..." (Interview 10)

"If I have two kids and I put them through to fulltime day care, I would go below minimum wage... And people are like, 'Oh, but you're a professor'. I was like, 'Yeah, no, I cannot afford, you know, two kids, like fulltime childcare on my salary alone'" (Interview 4)

Many participants also described sacrificing personal and family time and working additional hours to meet work demands and caregiving responsibilities. For many women, the only way to manage both was to stretch the working day into nights and weekends. This relentless juggling was not only exhausting but, in some cases, career-ending.

"it would be nice if I could do my own thing, and that own thing could be something nice that I like doing, but actually I'm just like, well, the reality is, it's term time that is work time. So, I work from about three o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday until 11 o'clock at night on Sunday. So, that gets a big chunk of work done, because in the week, I make sure of being there for swimming lessons, being there for dance lessons, being there for whatever it is, and that eats out of time during the week. So, I kind of feel that I have, I still have that, that work doesn't go away, so it has to be done somewhere." (Interview 11)

"I have at least one friend who dropped out of science because of that, because you know, in the scientific world it's kind of, it's not a 9 to 5 job and the pressures of kind of trying to stay in the research, you know, it means you're kind of compromising you're, you know, it means you're compromising like the time you're spending with your kind of family potentially because, you know, you always feel the pressure to be working outside of work time." (Interview 3)

Many women noted the structural incompatibility between academic careers and parenting, describing academia as unforgiving to periods of leave or reduced availability. Indeed, competing work-life demands were felt to be one of the key reasons for slower progression, with the juggle between personal responsibilities and work ultimately impacting some women's decisions to stay or leave academia.

"There's no kind of benefit to women having children in academia like, it just like, it just doesn't work. And so, like I said, I don't know how that process fits into people's careers. Do you just prolong it and become a kind of later mother? Do you do it earlier and then kind of get it out the way? I don't know. And I don't feel like the support is there either for it to be an option, obviously women do it all the time because we have academics who are also mothers, but a lot of them work part-time, so actually you are kind of cutting down your hours and your capacity and your income as a result." (Interview 7)

"I think the main areas...where women tend to drop out of academia is often what I've found when it becomes a balance of personal responsibilities - so whether that's children or other family members, if there's other caring responsibilities - and work. And when the balance becomes too far in one direction, you know, the caring responsibilities becoming too much, the only option sometimes will end up being to leave that job." (Interview 20)

Insecurity and Career Timing in the Context of Parenting

Planning a family was difficult due to career instability, contract timelines, and institutional expectations. Some women described timing pregnancy and parental leave with fixed-term contracts, while others delayed parenthood until they had a more secure footing.

"... the best-case scenario, my contract ends... the end of August next year 2026. In the most incredible situation, I get a five-year fellowship that I think provides me with some security in terms of you can pause your fellowship and to have maternity leave and stuff and then restart it and you've got an RA so you can kind of get them to do the work and stuff. So, for me... part of me wants a fellowship so that I can have a family." (Interview 7)

"...you're advised obviously to take any of your annual leave or leave not during periods of teaching. So, that would be I think a huge challenge for people that do get pregnant, or have a child, or want to take shared paternity, that 'Would I be then criticised for taking paternity?' And it's happened, our male technician actually is on shared paternity quite soon, and he has had to try to delay that so that it's after the teaching like semester. So you have to try to work that around your job, I mean that's... if the university is offering shared paternity, they should give it based on when you've had a baby not your teaching responsibilities." (Interview 21)

Interviewees frequently expressed concerns about having no job to return to after leave, which were further compounded by unclear policies and the absence of consistent institutional processes for handover and reintegration. Several women also described working during mat leave to remain visible or retain employment, secure future funding, or simply protect their position. This pressure, internalised but also reinforced by colleagues, blurred the boundaries between leave and employment, often compromising wellbeing.

"I constantly struggle with the thought of what happens. I know that the grants...will cover maternity, but then it leaves you when you come back, you probably have a year... it's extremely stressful. It is limiting." (Interview 18)

"And then I went on maternity leave. But my job was at risk during that point, and I was in a redundancy consultation while I was pregnant... And they said, you know, we appreciate the circumstances so what we'll do is kind of put the clock on hold while you're off... But then when I came back to work after a year, I was on redundancy notice from that point." (Interview 16)

"I remember working a lot during my second maternity leave. And... I knew that my job was very shaky then. And I wasn't sure if when I got back, I didn't know if there was funding for me. And so, I was working and writing grants from maternity leave, and I do regret that now...I wasn't in a great place psychologically during that maternity leave." (Interview 16)

Flexibility and Remote Working as Enablers

Flexible working arrangements (e.g., remote working, hybrid models, and flexible hours) facilitated employment, caregiving and geographic stability. Women who had access to such arrangements reported feeling supported and able to manage both professional and personal responsibilities more sustainably.

"I think the academic, well the research job had a lot of flexibility in that I've always been able to do school runs and doctor's appointments with the kids and don't have to, although it's really a high-pressure job and a lot of workload, that for me, the balance, the positive trade-off is that you do have a lot of flexibility... And so, I can manage my own, the work-life balance in that sense is good, you can accommodate stuff." (Interview 16)

Accordingly, many participants were concerned that the cessation of flexible working may disproportionately impact women with caregiving responsibilities and compromise gains in work-life balance. The return to rigid, on-site work structures was seen as a step backwards, disproportionately impacting those juggling caring roles alongside academic careers.

"I think if we wanted to speak about women in general, obviously women are disproportionately representative of carers - either parental carers or non-parental carers - and so when it comes to career performance, or even just presence as there's now some pressure to be visible in the workplace so you know a cessation of hybrid working for example, the consequences of that fall disproportionately on women." (Interview 22)

Support systems and safety nets

Receiving emotional, financial, and practical support from family and partners was vital to staying in academia. Support ranged from motivational conversations during moments of doubt, to tangible day-to-day help with childcare, household responsibilities, and financial security from partners, which enabled women to cope with academic life and even take on short-term contacts.

"I can go to a three-day conference and know that they'll be fine. I can take whatever teaching hours and know that somebody else can sort out the childcare. And I know if I was a single parent or if I had a partner whose job wasn't as flexible, it would really limit the things you can take up." (Interview 16)

The presence or absence of this support also gave women the ability to make decisions in line with personal and professional values.

"I don't know if because my partner has got a very stable occupation, it's not been an issue for me... to just have short-term jobs because I know that we could manage it if I wasn't working for a year' or something... And I think you plan your life very differently if you don't have that security." (Interview 6)

"I guess anybody who doesn't have that, that level of support system, whether it's you know a partner with a stable career, or a partner that's able to contribute to their caring responsibilities, or other family members or, you know, the need to always be moving from one thing to the next, because you can't have any gaps and that could potentially force

you into maybe taking a role that isn't the perfect one for you because you've got no choice other than to do that, whereas if you did have the luxury of being able to take a few months out and then something better came up in that time but you wouldn't have been able to do that." (Interview 20)

Some participants described positive shifts toward more equitable parenting roles, with shared parental leave and equal caregiving which eases pressure.

"The other thing... I think helped has been men taking shared parental leave... that, I think, has been a real big help, because they see it from the other side and those are the guys who I reckon we get the biggest advocates from." (Interview 11)

Theme 7: Unfair Treatment, (Un) Conscious Bias and Inequity in Individual Experiences

Interviews revealed women experience differential treatment from male colleagues and senior leaders, shaped by (un)conscious biases and gendered perceptions of competence. In addition to examples of status-based immunity for poor behaviour, people in positions of power were reported to act in ways that brought about personal gain, showed resistance to change, and a failure to implement policies designed to improve equitable experiences. Several also described individual differences that added intersectional complexity to these challenges.

Everyday bias, gendered microaggressions, and discriminatory behaviour

Interviewees shared a sense of anticipation and awareness of discrimination in UK HEIs and were concerned that racism, harassment, and discrimination were still occurring. Several women gave examples of (un)conscious bias from (un)conscious men, with one interviewee describing an instance where this bias was a conscious choice.

"I do think that the biggest challenge that we face is sometimes attitude rather than anything else. My PhD boss freely admitted that he liked to employ women because they worked... really hard and their data was always more reliable than men, but he would never employ them in an academic position" (Interview 14)

"I'm the only female in my department... I'm one of... it's now 11, so a lot of the kind of assumption if I missed a meeting... it'll be like, 'Oh she'll be picking up her niece'... rather than anything to do with work or anything professional, it has to be something to do with being a female, it's really bizarre. Whereas I see the guys that don't come to meetings... 'Oh they must just be late from a meeting'... Like why is that different? Why could I not have a professional reason? (Interview 21)

Women also described gendered microaggressions and perceptions of competence, with differences in language being used to characterise their skills, activities, and behaviours. One interviewee described an instance of gaslighting, and went on to describe the difficulty that comes with reporting more subtle microaggressions.

"One example is that I have in the past proposed an idea to... a male colleague... I invited them to be a part of something and they said yes, and a couple of weeks later they proposed the same idea back to me as if I'd never suggested it... and I was like, 'Oh yeah, cool, this is the thing I was saying the other week, like, should we work on it together?' And they just refused to accept it, it was like talking to a brick wall, they refused to accept that I had proposed the idea first... So I feel like there is a bit more in place to deal with the really bad cases... [but] with some of the intermediate cases where it's a bit more awkward... the ways of dealing with it aren't really there, which can almost make it even worse." (Interview 15)

Some women also described examples of race-based bullying and discrimination, and felt their race was a contributing factor to mistreatment by academic colleagues.

"...I didn't receive the support that I was supposed to receive, you know, as per the university's guidelines, I didn't receive any of that. And I was somehow blamed... for someone else's lack of efficiency in doing their job... I feel there was... some bits of racism as well, to be honest, related I think to ethnicity... for not being a, you know, purely British person. So, I think that was an element there." (Interview 5)

Policy-practice gap and accountability failures

While interviewees described positive feelings towards policies designed to improve equitable experiences (e.g., flexible working), there were many instances of policies not being well-applied in practice.

"...there were certainly frustrations in the past where the idea of flexible wasn't really flexible... So, you know, for example, I'd have to take an entire day's leave if I wanted to go to a parent's evening." (Interview 6)

"My colleague [is]... on a committee for a charity that gives out grants... and when she became the chair, she said, 'Can we look at the dates of these meetings? Because this October meeting always falls bang in the middle of the school holidays and I have to get childcare', and they said, 'Oh yes, yes, we've got EDI policies, let's change that.' And it hasn't changed despite her saying that... the institution has completely failed to shift because nobody else on the committee sees any problem with having to do it in the school holidays because it doesn't affect them." (Interview 14)

Indeed, despite the presence of certain policies, some women felt that staff who benefited from the current academic system showed resistance to change and failure to update beliefs in line with the times. There were also examples of people in power abusing their positions for personal gain and/or not putting policy into practice. The most worrying - and ironic - example of which occurred during an Athena Swan committee meeting. Other issues included PIs coveting first authorship despite their lack of contribution.

"I think there's such a lot of resistance to change in research, which feels like such a contradiction. But... they like how it is, and there is a lot of that old... 'if it's not broken don't fix it'. But actually, you know, I think when young researchers come in and they can see where things can be improved, that perspective is often not listened to..." (Interview 13)

"So, I was sitting in an Athena Swan committee... And then, the head of school at the time was male... and I waited my turn and I put my hand up and I thought I'd been invited to speak and I started to answer and the head of school shushed me and like went 'Just shush we don't we don't need to hear that now that's not helpful!'... And I just remember thinking... I'm trying to tell you my lived experience and you have shushed me, which therefore means that actually... a lot of the actions and things designed to promote women are entirely there as box-filling exercises..." (Interview 11)

"One of the reasons why I left academia in the first place was because I didn't feel valued. I felt like it was a very transactional relationship and that I was taken advantage of when it was convenient for other people. So, for example, I led and conducted

a research project, and when it was time to publish it, my supervisor... despite it being my work, took the first author position and then put his wife on the paper as last author even though she had had nothing to do with the project.” (Interview 22)

Some interviewees believed that status-based immunity was given by the university itself, noting how those who brought in money were the recipient of certain privileges that meant their behaviour was left unchecked.

“...the professor I went to [about a male supervisor’s behaviour], said to me that this was recorded and noted, and we know already that we have trouble with him. And I just looked at him and I thought what have you done about it? But he was... almost like... managing a difficult child... you know that child, you don’t want to really admit that, you know, it’s causing trouble but still have that little bit of love for him, that’s how this other male White professor was treating him, as in, ‘Yeah...we all know he’s a bit like that.’” (Interview 2)

“So if you don’t care about equality, if you’re one of the ones who is the recipient of privilege and you’re not interested in reflecting on that, then it’s really, really easy to just ignore all of that. You know nobody gets fired for not doing their mandatory training if they’re bringing in funding.” (Interview 22)

Intersecting identities and individual differences

Many women felt the interaction of age, gender, and physical appearance could create an added level of challenge for women, while differences in neurodiversity and personality were also discussed as having an impact on academic progression.

“...One thing I’d say is, I’m 25, so I am quite young, but I think I look younger, and I think some of the older male clinicians or researchers in our team maybe treat me a bit like an intern... I think it’s all part of that power dynamic thing...” (Interview 13)

“...an older man is seen as being...experienced and wise, a woman is seen as being just old and like not as useful. And then of course, there’s also the practical implications of going through menopause for example, when you know you’ve got physiological impacts on your health your memory things like this that women can be vilified for and that men are able to circumvent fully.” (Interview 22)

“Progression is difficult, because that requires a form. I’m neurodivergent, I don’t do forms, which... adds to the hell. So, it’s annoying, because it makes going for promotion and stuff like that extra burdensome... It makes grant writing extra hard, because that’s a form, and there is a fundamental issue with form-filling and neurodivergent people.” (Interview 11)

Interviews also revealed additional challenges related to social and structural identity, with being an international staff member on a VISA and being from a marginalised group described as intersecting identities with added levels of stress.

“I belong to an ethnic minority, I am a woman of colour, I do visibly wear the Islamic hijab... and... I identify as a woman as well. So, I think when I’m being discriminated against, it is not very easy for me to sort of go, ‘That’s because I’m a woman’ or ‘That’s because of this’ or ‘That’s because I speak a certain way’. It’s very, very hard for me to define.” (Interview 2)

“I was before on a Visa. I needed to have like certain salary [and] a certificate of sponsorship...in order to show that I can stay here in the UK... But that element added even more stress and more pressure, so I think that... other researchers who are still in that position are going to feel even more pressured, especially lately with the changes in the government regarding residence in the UK and the increase in... the minimum salary that needs to be provided...” (Interview 5)

Some interviewees also discussed the added difficulty that socioeconomic status, non-academic family background, and ‘class’ could have in academia, with the British context thought to be especially hard to understand for first generation scholars and those who grew up in different socioeconomic contexts.

“In terms of things that are more challenging, I definitely think socioeconomic status is one... If you’re a woman that comes from a background where maybe you’re the first academic in your family or if you come from a lower socioeconomic status, especially in the UK which I find to be really classist, you know you might not speak the same way or look the same way or just have this understanding of these little you know cultural ways of behaving that are foreign to you but come naturally to somebody that was you know raised in a different class, went to boarding school... like that, good old boy sort of mentality and that has the family connections and experience.” (Interview 22)

Theme 8: Psychological Wellbeing and Physical Health

Considering the above themes, it is unsurprising that women described the significant emotional and physical toll of academic life. Indeed, many interviewees reported experiences of imposter syndrome and burnout and often sacrificed their own wellbeing to stay afloat professionally. Despite recognising the importance of rest, recovery, and exercise, health behaviours were frequently deprioritised due to inflexible schedules and associated feelings of guilt.

Academic Challenges Can Have a Negative Impact on Psychological Wellbeing

Many women reported feelings of imposter syndrome and self-doubt, anxiety, stress, depression and burnout due to the psychological weight of academia often internalising systemic challenges as personal failings. These challenges were often intensified by precarious contracts, hyper-competitive work environments, and the constant pressure to prove themselves.

“I’ve fully had like imposter syndrome during my PhD and resulted in quite bad anxiety which does not help in academia because everything is anxiety inducing. You’re constantly having to kind of prove yourself to people and present work to people externally, internally, whoever it is that kind of critique it, you know, right from the kind of viva and beyond. And so, I don’t think that kind of mindset helps at all and might put people kind of in a more difficult situation, like, I’ve definitely had to have therapy to kind of overcome that anxiety.” (Interview 7)

“I have had problems with depression, some of which is likely biological and to do with the thfact that there’s just not enough daylight in this place. But I’m sure that that pressure has something to do with it.” (Interview 19)

“...because you’re...experiencing all these challenges, you’re experiencing them, like it’s confirming that self-blame that belief even though it’s not true it’s like a systemic structural problem, but it’s really hard to feel like it’s not personal.” (Interview 11)

Participants described a constant trade-off between wellbeing and career advancement, with many women feeling pressured to overwork, sacrifice personal/family time, or accept unsustainable workloads to prove their

commitment or secure future opportunities. This conflict was especially pronounced for caregivers and those in precarious roles, who often questioned whether the pursuit of academic success was worth it.

“Then of course there are days where, you know, you see your children and they’re growing up and I’m spending, not maybe not spending that much time with them, that typical dilemma, and then I go ‘Who can be bothered to put in a fellowship grant?’ And then it’s not just that, that stage, you then have to maintain the whole research for another few years of your life. You know, so one part of me constantly is looking at me going, ‘Oh, do you really want this?’” (Interview 2)

Academic Challenges Can Impact Physical Health and Make it Difficult to Engage in Health-related Behaviours

Women reported physical health impacts from chronic stress and overwork, including struggles with weight, exercise, and sleep. Indeed, despite knowing their importance, many found it difficult to prioritise healthy behaviours due to workload pressures, inflexible schedules, and guilt. Even when time was carved out for physical activity or recovery, these efforts were frequently undermined by academic demands, causing many women to neglect their health.

“I do find that I struggle with my weight because of stress, and that’s difficult to manage, but I do make a point of like, sidelining time for exercise, and that’s very important and I never work at home, except on a Sunday... Darwin was a big fan of his science walks he always used to go for a science walk in the afternoon... I’d love to go for a science walk in the afternoon... However, let me just look at where I can possibly fit that, no wait, if I turn my diary upside down, no that’s not going to happen, no.” (Interview 11)

Overarching Theme: Current Policies and Programmes Are Not Having a Big Enough Impact in Practice

In the context of the previous themes and the pervasive challenges that women in academia still face, it is unsurprising to learn that interviewees expressed an overall sense of dissatisfaction when asked about current efforts to address gender inequity. Ultimately, many women felt that institutional actions had only scratched the surface of a much deeper problem and did very little to fix the underlying issues due to a lack of time, money, and sufficient investment.

"I feel like a lot of stuff is too surface level and it's a lot about how things look rather than being practical and solving problems that actually exist. And I often see - and not that this is bad in itself - but I feel like a lot of efforts can be like, 'Oh let's have a poster session celebrating women in research' and that's lovely and everything, but it doesn't fix the underlying problems... and fixing the underlying problems isn't something that you can just do in one year... it needs a person whose job it is to find what the problems are and then try and fix them at an institutional-level, or even maybe wider than that, like funding body level, like nationally, so... it takes money, it takes time... it needs to be a proper investment" (Interview 15)

Many interviewees described feeling 'stuck' and helpless in the face of the persistent challenges and barriers they continued to experience across multiple areas. Perhaps the most striking example came from one interviewee who had her contributions to an Athena Swan committee meeting 'shushed' by a male head of school (mentioned in Theme 7). This event - plus the lack of change and action - left her feeling so deeply frustrated and upset that she gave-up her position. When eventually rejoining the committee fifteen years later, the same conversations were still being had, highlighting the worrying lack of progress echoed throughout this study.

"...I've now tried to sit on various committees to support women and I've given up, because I don't feel like anything that I have done has either been heard, actioned or changed in 25 years, and that's deeply frustrating... And I couldn't get, I was stuck there. I was so upset, like I couldn't bring myself to even take... that physical step forward as well as that kind of metaphorical step forward... When I finally rejoined the Athena Swan committee I thought 'Okay, it's 15 years have moved on, let's do it'... you know, things have changed, you've changed, you've got more to add now, I've had two children by this point, it's like maybe I was naive, it was before I had kids, maybe I need to know more, maybe I hadn't educated myself, maybe I didn't understand the depths of academia, I should, you know, I made it about me, it was my fault, I didn't know. And I walked back in and I was like 'No we're still having exactly the same conversations as 15 years on'." (Interview 11)

Badges and shiny surface-levels: Tokenistic tick-boxes and temporary fixes

Interviewees felt institutions often engaged in temporary 'tick box' exercises to obtain 'badges' of honour that meant very little in practice. Indeed, most women had a level of awareness for initiatives such as Athena Swan but a lack of clear communication about what was being done combined with the absence of tangible impact on their lived experience left many women feeling disillusioned. One interviewee described the provision of wellbeing resources as a "sticking a plaster on a gunshot wound" in the face of wider systemic barriers and challenges.

"I know that having the Athena badge means 'Thumbs up you're doing a good job with women', but like I don't actually know what it means they do." (Interview 10)

"Even if they offer like a tick box, 'Yeah, we offer a shared paternity', how that actually works in practice is either quite poor or they're not informing us properly of how that works." (Interview 21)

"[access to wellbeing resources] feels a little bit like putting a sticking plaster on a gunshot wound... So, being told that they have wellbeing resources is not particularly helpful for people who are worried about whether they have a job in six months' time..." (Interview 19)

Women don't need fixing

Interviewees also believed that workshops and training programmes designed to shape women to fit the traditional academic mould could be 'patronising' and 'misguided' - often treating women's struggles like self-induced symptoms as opposed to consequences of a system in need of updating. Women also felt that efforts to tackle gender inequity were often left to them, which only added to their burden and left them feeling isolated in a system that seemed to implicitly blame them for their struggles.

"Change academia to allow women to thrive rather than trying to change the women, the way that women have to behave to thrive in academia." (Interview 15)

"I applied for the Aurora for whatever reason, I didn't get it, and then I never bothered because I thought in hindsight, maybe it's a bit patronising, actually... it's like... yes, I know I'm female, you know, leadership role, we need extra support. But actually, why is it that I need this extra support? What is going on? This is wrong, you know, I'm competent as it is, why am I viewed as I need this extra support, so what's going on in the first place, you know?" (Interview 9)

"I think training programs are misguided because it implies the fault is ours, and if we only had a bit more training then we'd fix the issues. I don't think that's the solution." (Interview 6)

"I think that there is a lot of, I guess, general good will. But at the end of the day I feel that all of these things to make things better can't just be also fixing the women, or the women doing the work. It has to be seen as everyone who is interested" (Interview 4)

A little less policy a little more action please

There was a shared sense of exhaustion and overwhelm when it came to navigating university policies and toolkits, which seemed to be numerous, yet vague, ineffective, and poorly implemented in practice as described previously.

"I just think the last thing we need is another policy, and another charter... I must say, it's a very UK British thing to do... Policy this and policy that, toolkit this and toolkit that constantly. But again, what do they mean? What do they practically mean, you know?" (Interview 2)

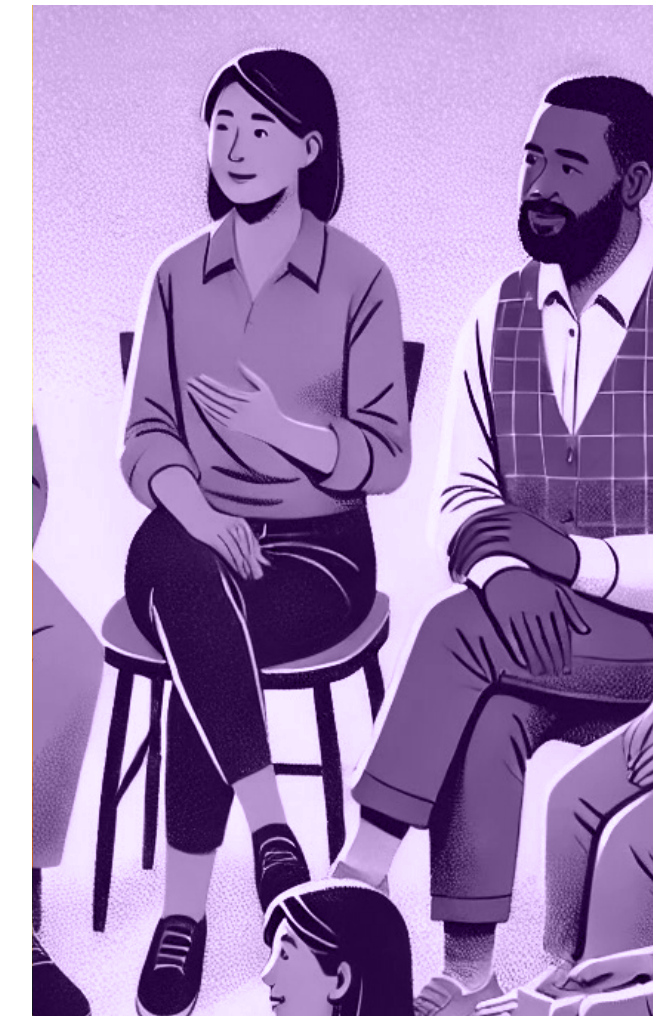
"There are a lot of words and there are a lot of policies and kind of guidelines and stuff, but it's just in practice, I'm not sure... It's the difference between kind of stuff that's written down on paper and stuff that actually happens" (Interview 3)

At the end of the day, it doesn't change anything, it's still just metrics

Overall, interviewees felt that the persistent focus on money and meritocratic output remained the default in academia, which, when combined with the lack of recognition for value-based activities (i.e., teaching excellence and improving research culture) and unequal caregiving burdens, made it harder for women to compete. Accordingly, it seems that current initiatives may be struggling to achieve anything in the context of embedded systemic norms that have remained fairly impervious to change.

"...they say in the promotion [criteria]...you can state any kind of...career breaks you've had or any kind of barriers you've experienced... and that will be considered in your promotion application. But I think in reality... it's not really factored in because... at the end of the day, they're comparing people's output in terms of, you know, number of PhDs supervised, how much grant income you've brought in. And you know, at the end of the day they have that box... But I think... that's not realistically kind of actually factored into the decision of about whether you're promoted or not, as far as I can tell" (Interview 3)

"You can do all these kind of courses...the unconscious bias training... it's great. Nevertheless, it doesn't really change anything... It doesn't change anything if how you're measured and how you get promoted is completely different and you're consistently behind, and never can reach it, so what's the point?" (Interview 9)



Work Package 3: Co-Production Workshops with lived experience groups and decision-making stakeholders

As part of the co-production phase, we conducted an online focus group with eight early- to mid-career stage women in academia. The session was hosted via Microsoft Teams, and supported by a live scribe from Nifty Fox, who visually illustrated emerging thoughts and ideas in real-time (see Figure 5). To recruit participants for the online focus group, we approached 20 women who had previously consented to taking part in an interview, but had not yet done so. This sample was purposively selected to ensure representation and variety in ethnicity, parental status, and academic job role. The focus group was divided into two parts, with each part focusing on 4 of the 8 key themes. Discussions focused on developing actionable solutions for each theme, with the aim of improving career stability, progression, recognition and reward opportunities for women in academia

Figure 5. Visual Scribes of the eight themes emerging from WP2



Lastly, we held an in-person strategy development workshop at the University of Warwick. This session brought together key decision-makers, EDI experts, and academic leaders to critically engage with project findings (quantitative, qualitative and focus group insights) and co-develop practical strategies for change. The workshop focused on identifying priority areas for action, mapping stakeholder responsibilities, planning next steps, and agreeing on success measures to support women's career progression in academia. Attendees included the University of Warwick's EDI Leads, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research, Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research (Research Culture), and the Head of the National Centre for Research Culture, alongside representatives from institutional research culture and people strategies, EDI leads from other UK universities, funder representatives from MRC, NIHR and Wellcome Trust EDI groups.

Together, the insights from our qualitative interviews, lived experience focus group, and strategy development workshop formed the foundation for a consolidated set of co-produced recommendations. These span structural, cultural, and systemic levels, and are organised thematically around the same eight key areas identified through our analysis. While not every proposal meets strict SMART criteria, the full set reflects an evidence-informed and experience-led blueprint for meaningful, actionable change. The next section presents these final recommendations.

Figure 6. Co-produced recommendation areas mapped to the eight themes emerging from WP2



Theme 1: Strategy and Systems for Gender Equity in Recruitment, Promotion, and Recognition

1. Transparent and inclusive recruitment and promotion practices

- Establish transparent recruitment and promotion criteria that value a range of academic contributions, including teaching, research culture, collegiality, and EDI/service work (e.g. Athena Swan leadership, mentoring), and promote recognition through narrative applications and awards (e.g., student-nominated teaching awards).
- Pilot blind recruitment and promotion processes, anonymising name, gender, and institutional affiliation at shortlisting stages for internal and external candidates.
- Ensure gender-balanced representation on all interview panels, promotion boards, and funding committees.
- Establish transparent and inclusive recruitment and promotion criteria, embedding gender bias safeguards (e.g., structured interviews, anonymised shortlisting).
- Introduce mandatory bias and equity training for all members of hiring and promotion panels.
- Normalise the inclusion of individual circumstances forms in recruitment and promotion processes, allowing candidates to reflect on career breaks and relevant non-academic experience.

2. Target Setting, data monitoring, and accountability

- Introduce proactive and targeted recruitment strategies to increase the proportion of women applicants for senior academic roles, especially in underrepresented fields (e.g., STEM).
- Set and review departmental and institutional gender equity targets for recruitment, promotion, and pay.
- Require universities to audit and annually publish disaggregated data on pay, promotion, research funding success, and employment by gender and academic rank, and to implement equity reviews with concrete action plans (e.g., through tools similar to the University of Warwick Diversity Dashboard or similar centralised data platforms).
- Link senior leadership performance reviews to progress on gender equity outcomes, including recruitment, pay equity, and promotion data.

- Monitor career progression pathways to identify gendered attrition points and introduce early, data-informed interventions to address drop-off.

3. Incentives and structural levers

- Mandate that funders link institutional funding to gender equity progress, including gender pay equality goals and transparent reporting, making them a condition for institutional-level awards (e.g., European Commission's Gender Equality in Research and Innovation strategy, which, while European-driven, demonstrates the potential of addressing systemic inequities within research funding systems).
- Pilot 360-degree review mechanisms where junior staff (e.g., RAs and postdocs) can provide structured feedback on the leadership, EDI engagement, and collegiality of line managers or PIs applying for internal promotions or leadership roles.
- Leverage AI-enabled or linked online systems to help researchers track and log skills, experiences, and outputs over time, with options to export for CV, job and promotion applications.

4. Changing culture and reframing academic success

- Run internal co-design workshops to address gendered barriers to self-promotion and broaden cultural definitions of academic success (e.g., 'Articulating achievements authentically', 'Navigating imposter feelings and internalised bias', Warwick's Inclusive Talent Programmes).
- Showcase the achievements of women in academia using authentic, strengths-based formats such as podcasts, videos, or case studies, as alternatives to metrics-heavy profiles (e.g., Warwick Women, Warwick STEM RandD People and Culture Hub).

Theme 2: Supportive Research Environments: Leadership, Mentoring and Career Development Opportunities

1. Implement structured onboarding programmes for all new academic and research staff, with tailored components for early-career researchers (ECRs) and staff at all levels.

This could include:

- A 30-90 day onboarding plan with key milestones and check-ins

- A digital or physical "Researcher welcome pack" (e.g., videos, guides to institutional systems such as Success Factors or Worktribe in the case of University of Warwick for example)
- A checklist covering IT/admin access, introductions to key personnel and support services (e.g. RIS), EDI policies, wellbeing resources
- Opt-in opportunities for mentorship schemes communicated during onboarding
- Assigned peer support (e.g., induction buddy system) for all new staff for their first 3-6 months (or longer), to support day-to-day and cultural transition
- Provide access to institutional resources (e.g., grant-writing support, teaching development), even for fixed-term and part-time staff.

2. Establish a dedicated online hub for women in academia within the institutional career development or EDI platform.

The hub should consolidate resources on:

- Promotion and progression pathways
- Mentoring and leadership schemes
- Parental leave policies and return-to-work support
- Information on gender equity initiatives and funding opportunities
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Women's networks, opportunities, and events

3. Introduce structured, intersectional mentorship schemes as a standard feature of academic career development.

This could include:

- Faculty/departmental mentoring schemes that consider age, gender, race, and caregiving contexts
- A central directory of mentorship schemes, updated biannually
- Annual mentor/PI/line manager training, including inclusive leadership and supporting (junior) staff development

4. Institutionalise 'skip a level' meetings, giving staff biannual opportunities to engage with their manager's manager for alternative mentoring, feedback, and leadership insight.

5. Recognise mentorship as a formal academic contribution by:

- Including mentorship roles in workload allocation models
- Introducing annual mentorship awards (peer- or mentee-nominated)
- Embedding mentorship contributions into promotion and recruitment criteria with clear guidance for evidence submission

6. Monitor and report annually on mentorship provision, including capacity, uptake, and unmet demand. Increase awareness through quarterly communications, updated webpages, and promotion of recognition schemes.

7. Foster peer support, community, skill sharing and inclusive culture-building among women academics by:

- Creating regular peer support groups or drop-in sessions across career stages (e.g. academic promotion workshops).
- Showcasing case studies of inclusive, high-performing research teams
- Embedding these case studies in PI development and leadership training programmes

8. Create a dedicated careers hub for non-academic career pathways, featuring:

- Career development workshops (e.g., two per year) with external speakers and alumni from industry, policy, and third sector roles
- Alumni partnerships and placement opportunities
- Supervisor training to support diverse career aspirations and avoid framing non-academic pathways as failure

Theme 3: Addressing Job Precarity and Improving Career Security

1. Implement transparent institutional policies to support secure academic career progression for fixed-term and early-career staff.

This should include:

- A guaranteed formal review for conversion to permanent employment after a maximum of four years of continuous fixed-term service (in line with UCU guidelines).
- A tenure-track pathway for postdoctoral researchers, enabling structured progression to Assistant and Associate Professor roles within

7-8 years, with clear milestones, mentoring, and annual development reviews.

- Clear documentation of these pathways in staff handbooks and onboarding materials, and annual HR review of contracts to identify those eligible for conversion.
- Build on innovative models of career development (e.g. Prosper: Unlocking Postdoc Career Potential, which provides a new approach to postdoc career development, opening up multiple career pathways and aiming to benefit postdocs, PIs, employers, and the wider UK economy).

2. Create and fund core permanent 'Researcher' or 'Research Scientist' roles that are not tied to individual grant funding.

- Revise workforce planning strategies to allocate a fixed proportion (e.g., 20%) of research staff posts as permanent or long-term core-funded positions, with clear progression and parity of esteem with academic roles
- Draw on successful examples (e.g., CAMaCS at Warwick; InRA roles; Technical Specialist Promotional Pathway project) to inform model design and pilot implementation
- Mapping exercise to see where these models can work
- Establish progression frameworks for professional and support staff critical to research, including technicians and research impact officers

3. Improve awareness and implementation of redeployment practices.

- Ensure line managers actively support career planning by discussing aspirations with staff and signposting to mentorship or development support
- Monitor uptake and outcomes of redeployment schemes to ensure equitable access and effective use
- Offer bridge funding or transition support schemes between grants or roles, especially for caregivers

4. Revise eligibility and assessment criteria for ECR fellowships and career development funding to remove mandatory institutional mobility requirements.

- Allow applicants to remain at their current institution where justified (e.g., supportive

environment, strong mentorship, research alignment)

- Recognise institutional retention of talent as a valid strategic pathway particularly where proposals demonstrate innovation and alignment with host strengths
- Adjust scoring criteria to avoid penalising non-mobility
- Encourage internal support (e.g., bridging funding, pathways to permanency) for in-house fellowship holders

5. Introduce a minimum 2-year contract policy for postdoctoral and ECR roles costed on external grants, to enhance career stability and skills development.

- Funders and universities should jointly implement this policy
- Universities should integrate the requirement into internal grant approval systems, with clear costing templates and guidance for PIs and departments

6. Implement flexible tenure and promotion policies to accommodate diverse career trajectories.

- Offer automatic eligibility for tenure/promotion clock extensions for staff affected by:
 - Parental leave or caregiving responsibilities
 - Visa-related delays
 - Health issues or part-time/flexible working
 - Career interruptions or multiple fixed-term contracts across institutions
- Include narrative sections in application forms to explain career timelines and "extraordinary circumstances" without penalty (e.g. lack of support you've had elsewhere, number of postdocs/fixed term contracts you've been on).
- Create a clear and consistent institutional process for requesting and approving extensions via HR and line managers

Theme 4: Fairer Funding Accessibility and Structures

1. Streamline grant application processes to reduce administrative burden and improve efficiency.

- Develop a unified application portal across major UK funders to allow applicants to manage submissions, feedback, and status in one place
- Introduce pre-populated fields that automatically

carry forward institutional and CV data across applications, reducing duplication and form-filling fatigue

2. Enable early-career researchers (ECRs) to apply as principal investigators (PIs) for internal funding schemes and use the funds to support their own salary.

- Remove contract-length restrictions that require applicants to have a contract extending beyond the grant period (e.g., REC HURDLES by University of Nottingham).
- Explicitly state in eligibility criteria that ECRs on fixed-term contracts may apply as PIs
- Create ringfenced funding streams (e.g., 20-30%) within internal grant schemes for ECR-led proposals enabling career continuity and progression
- Encourage departments and line managers to support flexible contract extensions when ECR-led bids are successful

3. Introduce or advocate for dedicated grant schemes for women researchers, particularly those returning from career breaks.

- Develop institutional-level schemes targeted at supporting research continuity for women returning from parental leave, caregiving, or other career disruptions
- Where internal schemes are not feasible, lobby funders to support or expand national schemes (e.g., Daphne Jackson Fellowships, Women in Innovation awards)
- Ensure these schemes are visible on funding portals and promoted during staff induction, mentoring, and return-to-work support processes

4. Implement partial or full blinding of funding applications (internal ones too) at early review stages to reduce bias and increase fairness.

- Remove identifying information (e.g., names, institutions) during initial assessment (e.g., Lottery system trialled previously by the Wellcome Trust).
- Require funding agencies to publish annual data on award outcomes disaggregated by career stage, institution type, gender, and ethnicity.

5. Introduce flexible eligibility criteria for grant applications to accommodate diverse career pathways.

- Replace rigid "X years post-PhD" cut-offs with adjusted eligibility windows that account for career breaks, parental leave, part-time work, caregiving, health issues, and visa-related delays (e.g. Contextual factors section on grant applications as per NIHR example).
- Allow applicants to formally request eligibility extensions, with clear guidance (e.g., one year extension per child or per formal leave period).
- Ensure that family leave or caregiving-related deferrals are available without penalty or loss of funding.

6. Establish project continuation or "bridge" funds to support the completion and scaling of high-impact research after primary funding ends.

- Create institutional schemes offering short-term (e.g., 3-6 month) funding to retain staff and finalise key outputs such as publications, impact activities, or follow-on bids
- Ringfence a proportion of strategic or discretionary research funds (e.g., 10-15%) for this purpose annually
- Require PIs to submit short "Phase 2" cases outlining the remaining value of the project and how continuation aligns with funder and institutional strategic priorities

7. Develop or expand internal research funding support teams to improve access and equity.

- Establish dedicated roles or teams (e.g., within Research and Impact Services) to identify and match researchers with relevant funding opportunities
- Prioritise outreach and tailored support for underrepresented groups and disciplines
- Integrate funding matchmaking into broader research development pipelines
- Track and publish annual data on engagement, support provided, and success rates of matched and supported applications

8. Incentivise collaborative grant models that embed mentorship and career development opportunities.

- Encourage funding schemes to require or reward inclusion of mentorship roles (e.g., senior researchers mentoring ECRs, cross-institutional partnerships).
- Promote team-based grants that integrate development pathways for junior staff, women,

and underrepresented researchers (e.g., The UKRI Mission pilot funding opportunity, run by AHRC and the THRIVE project, trialled team-based applications that explicitly acknowledged the broader roles of research teams, moving away from a single-PI model).

Theme 5: Redesigning and Valuing all Roles

- 1. Challenge the “always-on” culture and shift success metrics towards quality, wellbeing, and team-based impact.**
 - Deliver campaigns that promote quality and collective team achievement over individual metrics such as hours worked or number of outputs
 - Encourage academics to set digital boundaries and protected time policies (e.g., no email outside contracted hours/email curfews, no-meeting zones), with PIs and managers modelling this behaviour to enforce healthy work-life boundaries
- 2. Adopt and equitably apply flexible and hybrid working policies across HEIs.**
 - Provide clear, centralised guidance on eligibility, core expectations, and processes (e.g., remote work, compressed hours)
 - Ensure consistent application across disciplines and roles, supported by neutral advocates or designated contacts who can facilitate access and ensure transparency
- 3. Reform job models and workload allocation to support equity, diverse contributions, and personal circumstances.**
 - Revise workload models to reflect a full range of academic labour, recognising caregiving, neurodiversity, part-time work, and significant service or mentoring contributions, not just teaching and research
 - Introduce specialist academic and professional roles with distinct promotion and progression routes, including:
 - Mentorship- or pastoral-focused roles (e.g., 80% pastoral, 20% teaching)
 - Research support academic roles (e.g., grant strategist)
 - Teaching-only or teaching-focused roles with flexibility for EDI, outreach, or leadership portfolios

- Publish transparent role expectations and promotion criteria for all roles, and embed them in HR, recruitment, and performance review systems
- Formally recognise and reward invisible labour, such as administrative roles, pastoral care and diversity work, through awards, promotion points, and workload credits

4. Professionalise and diversify pastoral care responsibilities to improve consistency of support to students and sustainability.

- Learn from effective institutional pilots (e.g., Coventry’s “student success coaches”, Heriot-Watt’s “super personal tutors”, Loughborough’s personal tutoring modules)
- Ensure pastoral roles are opt-in, clearly defined, workload-credited, and supported by appropriate training, without relying on stereotypical assumptions (e.g., women being more empathetic or responsible for wellbeing/pastoral tasks).
- Consider alternative models that separate day-to-day pastoral care from academic supervision (e.g., THRIVE) to promote psychological safety and balanced staff-student relationships
- Recognise that not all academics—especially those with neurodivergent profiles—feel comfortable or equipped to provide mental health support, and ensure responsibilities are not defaulted to specific groups without consent or training

5. Introduce administrative relief programmes to support under-recognised but high-impact work.

- Offer time-limited workload reductions (e.g., 10-30% for 6-12 months) to staff with significant service, leadership, or EDI responsibilities
- Establish transparent eligibility and nomination processes, modelled on research “buyout” principles, to avoid overloading key contributors

6. Embed workload equity and accountability mechanisms to prevent the unequal distribution of service work.

- Establish a “right to decline” principle for excessive or unbalanced duties, especially for women and ECRs
- Conduct regular workload allocation reviews to ensure senior staff contribute equitably
- Require those who consistently avoid certain duties (because they are “not good at it” to engage in relevant training (e.g., inclusive teaching, supervision, pastoral care) rather than reallocating tasks to women or junior staff

- Make workload contributions and avoidance patterns visible and meaningful in annual reviews and promotion decisions

7. Reform workload practices to reflect realistic time expectations and support a culture of transparency and psychological safety.

- Conduct regular (e.g., termly) workload check-ins that allow staff to report actual time spent vs modelled time, with aggregate data shared at department or faculty level
- Create safe channels for staff, particularly women and those from minoritised groups, to report overwork, misaligned expectations, and invisible labour
- Hold annual workload calibration reviews to adjust time allocations based on staff experience (e.g., marking, thesis supervision) and input
- Foster an environment where overwork and challenges can be discussed without penalty, underpinned by psychological safety principles
- Co-create workload models via working groups and pilots involving diverse staff across disciplines, roles, and equity groups
- Start tracking overtime and asking staff what adjustments are needed, recognising that current expectations may be structurally unrealistic

Theme 6: Caregiving, Parental Leave and Family-Friendly Policies

1. Promote transparent caregiving policies and strengthen return-to-work support for staff returning from parental leave.

- Implement phased return-to-work programmes (e.g., 50% workload in Month 1, 75% in Month 2, full return in Month 3).
- Provide guidance and flexible working options in advance of return (e.g. use of “Carer’s Passport” to support staff with caring responsibilities. The passport is a formal tool to help clarify and communicate the adjustments, flexibility, and support that carers may need. This is transparent, structured, and ensures staff returning from parental leave or with other caregiving duties have agreed support and expectations in place).
- Include return-to-work information in all parental leave planning conversations and HR onboarding materials.

- Use inclusive language in all policies and communications to reflect diverse caregiving roles (e.g., non-binary parents, elder care responsibilities).

2. Appoint dedicated maternity and parental leave officers within each department or faculty HR departments

- These officers should provide confidential, informed, and proactive support to staff planning or taking leave
- Promote their availability via departmental communications, staff induction, and parental leave planning resources

3. Normalise and increase uptake of shared parental leave (SPL), particularly among male staff, to reduce caregiving inequities.

- Raise awareness through staff induction, HR briefings, and communications campaigns that clarify eligibility, process, and benefits
- Simplify access with clear written guidance, online tools, and HR support
- Promote positive case studies and video testimonials from men who have taken SPL or reduced FTE to support caregiving

4. Strengthen parental rights and job security for fixed-term contract holders.

- Provide clear, accessible information on parental leave rights and protections as part of onboarding and leave planning
- Require completion of a formal Parental Leave Protection Agreement before leave begins, outlining role continuity, reintegration support, and flexible working options (e.g. phased return, workload relief)
- Establish a central bridging fund to extend contracts that would otherwise end during parental leave
- Embed automatic parental leave contract extensions into HR and grant systems, so they are not dependent on individual requests

5. Offer structured research reintegration/continuity support following leave.

- Implement a Research Continuity Scheme offering short-term RA support (e.g., 0.5-1.0 FTE for 6 months) for returning carers (e.g. grant writing, manuscript preparation, data analysis, project administration).

- Promote schemes as part of parental leave planning, with automated opt-in prompts that do not rely on line manager approval (e.g. The Warwick Academy Returners Fellowship, that provides a period of additional 'study leave' for academics who are returning to work from long term caring leave; Oxford's Returning Carer's Fund).

6. Expand access to childcare and family-friendly resources.

- Provide on-site or university-affiliated childcare where feasible, or partner with local nurseries to offer discounted, priority places
- Offer low-cost or free family-friendly activities (e.g., school holiday clubs, family days, weekend events)
- Introduce on-campus emergency caregiving support services
- Create a standardised carers' fund to support conference attendance or out of the norm fieldwork for staff with caregiving responsibilities

7. Promote and protect flexible parental leave and work schedules.

- Introduce an annual bank of flexible parental leave days that can be used as needed while children are young
- Ensure family-friendly policies are not perceived as tokenistic or discouraged in practice
- Require departments to schedule core meetings during family-accessible hours (e.g., 10am-3pm)

Theme 7: Equity, Inclusion and Bias

1. Strengthen reporting mechanisms and protections against bullying, harassment, and microaggressions.

- Implement confidential, independent reporting mechanisms (e.g., hotline, online portal) with non-retaliation policies and transparent resolution procedures.
- Develop a whistleblowing policy for reporting misconduct by senior staff or PIs, with protective follow-up support and independent investigation routes.
- Monitor and publicly report anonymised data on grievance outcomes and exit interview themes; use this to identify "hotspots" of poor culture or repeat patterns of concern. HR departments should track areas with high turnover or repeated informal complaints and intervene early.

- Recognise and respond to both targeted bullying and more diffuse cultures of incivility, including generalised rudeness, exclusion, and professional misconduct.
- Embed intersectional bias awareness training for all staff and allyship initiatives, including modules on accent bias, native speaker bias, and regional discrimination. Use institution-wide offerings such as 'Leading a Diverse Team', Active Bystander training, tackling bias toolkits, 'Inclusive meeting etiquette guides', and leadership training to build active support from senior and male colleagues (e.g. HeforShe campaign, Warwick's WMG Challenging Inappropriate Behaviours' training)

2. Actively challenge internalised gender bias and 'Queen Bee' dynamics.

- Launch cross-generational or cross-disciplinary women's mentorship programmes that promote solidarity, allyship, and mutual support.
- Include awareness-building activities in leadership development and EDI training to help women recognise and challenge internalised bias.

3. Provide institutional support for international staff navigating visa and immigration challenges.

- Offer access to free, confidential consultations with immigration advisors or legal partners on visa applications, renewals, and settlement routes.
- Introduce interest-free loans or salary-sacrifice schemes for visa and settlement costs, and partial/full reimbursement for early-career staff.
- Ensure visibility of this support at recruitment, onboarding, and contract renewal stages.

4. Avoid tokenistic diversity targets; build inclusive recruitment and recognition cultures.

- Ensure diverse candidates are selected and supported based on merit and contribution.
- Communicate clearly that representation initiatives and actions are grounded in fairness and structural inclusion, not symbolic gestures.
- Equip leadership teams with guidance on fostering inclusive environments post-recruitment.

5. Ensure context-sensitive workload allocation and identity-based support.

- Allow flexible task distribution tailored to individual circumstances (e.g., neurodivergent, disabled, or caregiving staff) and strengths (e.g. project management, pastoral roles).

- Create targeted support networks for minoritised groups (e.g., racially minoritised, caregivers, staff with long-term conditions).

6. Embed inclusive leadership expectations and dismantle status-based immunity.

- Define leadership contributions to research culture, collegiality, and wellbeing as promotion and reward criteria.
- Make senior staff accountable for behaviour and culture, regardless of research income or status.

Theme 8: Psychological and Physical Wellbeing

1. Promote mental health awareness.

- Deliver mandatory mental health training for PIs, line managers, and team leads to recognise burnout, distress, and isolation.
- Ensure training time is embedded in workload models, not an extra burden.
- Establish staff wellbeing frameworks including access to mental health support and stress management programmes.

2. Normalise open conversations.

- Host peer-led storytelling sessions where senior academics share experiences about imposter syndrome, academic failures and self-doubt.
- Normalise menstrual health and peri-menopause discussions and ensure workplace support for affected staff (e.g., flexible working, rest spaces, temperature control, and leave where needed).

- Include these narratives in onboarding, wellbeing initiatives, and leadership development content.

3. Establish work-life balance interventions endorsed by senior leadership.

- Introduce institutional campaigns promoting boundaries and discouraging overwork normalisation (e.g., 'Wellbeing Wednesdays' with 1-2 protected hours for rest or social connection).
- Allow staff to block out weekly time in their calendars for wellbeing (e.g., lunch away from desk, walking meetings, informal social time).
- Build this into induction and encourage visible uptake by department heads and senior staff to reduce stigma and lead cultural change.
- Formally endorse and support grassroots wellbeing groups (e.g., Warwick CTU's Well Beans, which runs social and wellbeing activities) to enhance impact and sustainability.

4. Set institutional standards for compassionate and inclusive language in internal communications, policies, and feedback processes.

- Audit and revise institutional forms, emails, and automated responses (e.g., grant or ethics rejections) to eliminate harsh or clinical phrasing and adopt more human, supportive language.
- Use sector-leading examples such as Wellcome's 'tone of voice' guidance to shape email templates, website copy, and policy documents.
- Provide guidance and light-touch training on emotionally intelligent communication and ensure leaders model this in their correspondence.

