Enhancing Gender Equity in Postgraduate Studies at the LSE: Barriers, Incentives, and Pathways to Progression

Anika Amin and Isabella Brankovic
If this project has informed your practice, please let us know at
lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

This report investigates the barriers limiting women's participation and progression in postgraduate study at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), with a particular focus on persistent underrepresentation at the Masters and PhD level in departments such as Economic History, Economics, Finance, Government, International History, Mathematics, and Statistics. Drawing on LSE's institutional data, which provides a quantitative overview of gender disparities among PhD students, and our own survey capturing the experiences of female Master's students, this study aims to identify the systemic challenges women face, such as some of the barriers to access, progression, and career development, and to explore how LSE can enhance female representation and support for career progression across its taught and research postgraduate programmes. The ultimate goal is to deliver evidence-based recommendations to foster greater gender equity within LSE, in line with its Athena Swan commitments.

Literature Review

Academic research consistently identifies systemic barriers to gender equity in higher education. This report aligns with Eagly and Carli's (2007) "labyrinth" model, which describes gender inequality not as a single "glass ceiling" but as a complex web of subtle, interconnected obstacles that hinder women's progression, particularly in doctoral study and leadership roles in fields such as STEM and government. Women in academia face significant **financial constraints**, consistent with global trends of gendered economic disadvantage. These challenges, including pay gaps, caregiving responsibilities, and limited private funding, can delay or derail postgraduate study and force women to work externally, compromising academic focus. Furthermore **persistent gender disparities in leadership** mirror the "glass ceiling" and "leaky pipeline" metaphors, with women well-represented at entry levels but underrepresented at senior levels due to attrition throughout their academic careers. For example, although 61% of LSE's Postgraduate Taught cohort in 2022/23 was female, barriers to leadership and equitable outcomes remain significant. There are also inequities present in **research participation**; studies show women in STEM PhDs often work more research hours yet receive less authorship credit, reflecting pervasive biases that limit recognition and advancement opportunities. Lastly, **ambivalent career outcomes** have been shown to play a role in underrepresentation; even with PhDs, women often face less employment security and professional reward than men, with barriers extending beyond academia into government and other sectors, reflecting broader issues such as pay gaps and domestic burdens. These barriers are interconnected: financial constraints limit networking, underrepresentation dampens aspirations, and biases reinforce one another. **The "labyrinth" model underscores the need for holistic, systemic solutions addressing multiple, mutually reinforcing obstacles to achieve genuine gender equity in academia.**

Methodology

We utilised two kinds of data. The first was **LSE's Internal Institutional Data (Secondary Data),** which encompassed applications, offers, funding, and overall diversity specifically at the Postgraduate Research (PGR) level for the last three academic years (2022/23, 2023/24, 2024/25). This dataset offered a broad statistical overview of gender distribution across LSE's PhD programs, providing a general context of the issues across departments. The second form of data was **specialised primary survey data** which we created in order to gain specialised quantitative insights into the lived experiences of female postgraduate students at LSE. This survey was distributed via the Alumni Centre's women's network, targeting individuals who had pursued postgraduate studies at the institution.

Data Analysis Approach

The two data sources (LSE internal data and our primary survey data) were analysed in conjunction to identify relationships and inform the development of recommendations. LSE's internal data provided the overarching statistical context of gender representation at the PhD level, highlighting where imbalances exist (e.g., specific PGR departments) and where representation is stronger (e.g., overall PGT). Our primary survey data, on the other hand, offered a unique and specialized lens by capturing the subjective experiences and perceptions of women, predominantly at the Master's level (92.1% of respondents), which was deemed valuable for identifying factors potentially unique to LSE and relevant to the progression from Master's to PhD. The experiences of women already enrolled in postgraduate programs at the LSE were considered useful in identifying factors that may contribute to underrepresentation in affected departments. A key limitation was the small, skewed sample of 45 respondents, mostly master's alumni and largely from outside the initially targeted departments with low PGR representation. This necessitated a shift in focus from departmental PhD underrepresentation to broader insights on the female postgraduate experience at LSE. While offering valuable long-term perspectives, the alumni-heavy sample also raises concerns about recall bias and limits the study's ability to address the original research question, highlighting the need for more targeted, real-time data in future research.

Findings from internal data

This section first presents the findings from LSE's internal data, which directly addresses the underrepresentation of women at the PhD level, followed by insights from our primary survey data, which provides a complementary perspective on the broader postgraduate female experience.

Underrepresentation of Women at the PhD Level

LSE's internal data, which applies specifically to PhD students, reveals a persistent pattern of underrepresentation of women in several key departments, particularly when examining the progression from applications to actual student numbers and funding. While the overall PGR cohort is slightly male dominated (49% female in 2022/23), a deeper dive into specific departments highlights more pronounced disparities. Across departments such as Economics, Finance, Government, and various quantitative fields, female applications and admissions to postgraduate study at LSE remain consistently lower than those of male counterparts. In Economics, for example, female applications in 2024/25 were 128 compared to 335 male, while new female entrants ranged from 6–8 annually versus 11–16 for men. Similarly, Finance saw fewer female applicants (37 vs. 92 in 2024/25), and minimal female new entrants (1–3 per year). In Government, female applications declined slightly from 81 in 2022/23 to 68 in 2024/25, while male applications rose to 133. Notably, the proportion of women receiving funding remains low

across all departments and years, for instance, in Economic History, only one woman per year received funding compared to 2–4 men, and in Mathematics and Statistics, female funding numbers were consistently 0–2. Although some departments, like International History, show moments of relative parity (e.g. 5 funded women vs. 7 men in 2023/24), overall patterns reveal persistent gender gaps in application rates, enrolment, and financial support, especially acute in STEM and economics-adjacent disciplines.

Our primary data from the survey of predominantly master's students highlights key barriers affecting women's postgraduate decisions, including PhD progression revealed three core barriers. 69.2% of respondents faced **financial constraints**, with low awareness of gender-specific funding, revealing both inequities and communication gaps. While general **academic support** rated moderately, career guidance and gender-focused initiatives scored poorly, suggesting **women's professional needs,** like salary negotiation and caregiving balance, are not adequately addressed. Over half perceived gender disparities in leadership and research, citing a **lack of female role models and unequal environments**, despite near parity in PGR enrolment. Finally, gender pay gaps, and domestic burdens persist beyond graduation. Moderate confidence in career outcomes and low ratings for LSE's gender equality efforts **point to a need for more visible, targeted institutional support.**

Key Findings

Across the underrepresented departments, the LSE internal data consistently shows that while women do apply and receive offers for PhD programs, their representation in terms of new entrants and funded students is often lower than their male counterparts, or disproportionately low compared to the overall female PGT population. This quantitative evidence directly points to a "leaky pipeline" at the PhD level within these specific departments, indicating **that barriers exist beyond initial application.** The primary data findings from LSE's postgraduate women strongly corroborate the "labyrinth" model, demonstrating that barriers to gender equity are multi-faceted and interconnected rather than isolated. Financial constraints, inadequate support, leadership gaps, and persistent career hurdles collectively form a complex system that impedes women's progression.

Building upon the findings and insights from both LSE internal data and the postgraduate women's survey, the following recommendations are proposed. These recommendations are structured around the four core themes identified in the findings, ensuring direct alignment between empirical evidence and actionable solution. Financial support must be enhanced and made more visible. LSE should audit and expand women-targeted funding opportunities, and develop a centralized and accessible funding portal, particularly beneficial for international students. Career support must be strengthened, and LSE should provide tailored career counselling, expand mentorship networks featuring female role models, and incorporate gender dynamics into curricula, especially in male-dominated fields. Third, promoting gender equity in leadership and research is essential. LSE should review appointment practices, set representation targets, introduce leadership training for women, create equitable research environments, and mandate bias training for faculty and supervisors. Fourth, a more inclusive institutional culture must be fostered. LSE should improve the visibility and impact of gender initiatives, strengthen safe and confidential reporting mechanisms, promote flexible work and caregiving policies, and use disaggregated data alongside qualitative research to guide policy. Celebrating female achievements can also help shift the broader institutional culture. Ultimately, these interlinked recommendations reflect the "labyrinth" of challenges women face. **Addressing them in isolation risks limited impact; only holistic, integrated action can deliver meaningful and sustainable change.**

References

Eagly, A.H. and Carli, L.L. (2007) *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about how Women Become Leaders*. Harvard Business School Press.

Additional reading

LSE Public Sector Equality Duty Equality Information and Data Report, accessed on Jan 4th , 2025,(https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/Assets/Documents/Equality-data/PSED-report-2022-23.pdf

Correa A., Glas M.G., Opara J. (2025) Females in higher education and leadership: insights from a multi-method approach, *Frontiers in Education* 9 https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1485395

Brass L.F., Akabas M.H. (2024) More women than ever are entering MD-PhD programs. What lies ahead for them? *JCI Insight*. 22;9(22) doi: 10.1172/jci.insight.184715

Diep, W. (2025) Despite Progress, Women in Higher Ed Still Face Barriers, *National College Attainment Network*, accessed on Jan 19th 2025 https://www.ncan.org/news/696085/Despite-Progress-Women-in-Higher-Ed-Still-Face-Barriers.htm

Koleva, P. (2025) Women in Academia and the Overlooked Struggles They Face, *Al-Fanar Media*, accessed on Jan 17th , 2025, https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2025/03/women-in-academia-and-the-overlooked-struggles-they-face/

Houser, K. (2019) What are the key challenges facing women in academia? *Sage Research Methods Community*, accessed on March 5th 2025 https://researchmethodscommunity.sagepub.com/blog/what-are-the-key-challenges-facing-women-in-academia

Mbonyiryivuze, A. & Dorimana, A. & Pascasie, N. & Nsabayezu, E. (2023). Challenges Affecting Women PhD Candidates for Completion of Doctoral Educations: A Synthesis of the Literature. 19. 123-134. DOI:10.4314/ajesms.v19i1.9

Lapan, J. (2018) Equal Opportunity, Unequal Outcomes: Exploring Gender Inequality in Post-College Career Outcomes, *NACE Journal*, accessed on Feb 6th 2025 https://www.naceweb.org/job-market/compensation/equal-opportunity-unequal-outcomes-exploring-gender-inequality-in-post-college-career-outcomes/

Edwards, J. (2021) Creative Strategies to Address Gender Disparities in Academic Achievements, *Women in Medicine*, accessed on Jan 17th , 2025 https://www.wimedicine.org/blog/creative-strategies-address-gender-disparities