

Marginal from the Start: Navigating Gendered Barriers and Incentives in Postgraduate Research at LSE

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Introduction

Despite diversity in undergraduate studies, access to postgraduate research in UK universities remains unequal. Women, non-binary, disabled, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic students are significantly underrepresented in PGR programmes (Sotiropoulou, 2022), revealing structural barriers in who gets to become an academic researcher. In Herzig's (2004) study on women doctoral students in the mathematics department, women described experiencing a feeling of awkwardness in the professional field of mathematics and not "fitting in" within male-dominated academic spaces.

I had one female professor in my time here and it was so much easier to get interested because I could imagine myself being her...The math department seemed so much like an old white guys' club, and I didn't really see that I had a place in the old white guys' club (Herzig, 2004, p.385).

This account highlights how women battle the psychological consequences of underrepresentation and few role models while pursuing postgraduate research (PGR) in male-dominated disciplines.

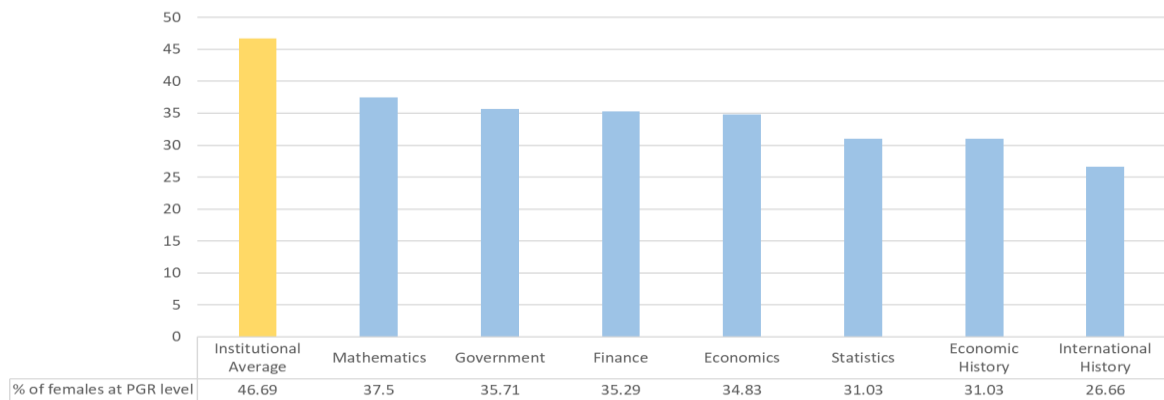
Furthermore, Westoby and colleagues (2021) talk about the barriers to participation faced by women in the form of exclusion from networks and mentorship. (Westoby et al., 2021, p.6) highlights that "pre-established networks primarily consisting of men, or 'old boys' at the top level, prove difficult to enter", creating a structural disadvantage for women. In male-dominated disciplines, female PGR students may face similar exclusion, as they build contacts alone in environments where collaboration and mentorship are critical for success.

Additionally, "meritocratic illusions" (p.15) and how academia favours masculine norms of productivity can disadvantage women whose contributions may be collaborative or interdisciplinary. Additionally, subtle biases can erode women's confidence and sense of belonging. The paper describes "cumulative experiences of being underestimated, devalued, belittled, sexualized, and invisible" (p 11), which can deter women from pursuing leadership roles. For PGR students, everyday sexism might include being "judged [by] clothing choice" (p. 17) or not being able to get space to speak in seminars.

At LSE, this gap is especially visible in departments like Economic History, Economics, Finance, Government, International History, Mathematics, and Statistics, as shown in internal data from 2022/23 to 2024/25 (refer Figure 1). The Athena SWAN Action Plan has prioritised

investigating this underrepresentation at the PGR level. Thus, as part of the action plan and the LSE Change makers program, this project explores how women in male-dominated disciplines at LSE experience gendered barriers and what support they believe could enhance their participation.

Figure 1
LSE Departments with female representation significantly below the institutional average at the Postgraduate Research Level (2024/25)



Methodology and Study Design

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore gendered challenges in the PGR journey, focusing on the application process, departmental culture, and institutional support. Ten women from seven selected LSE departments—current or recent PhD/PGR students—were recruited via direct email and departmental communication channels. Participants received monetary compensation through LSE Change Makers. Due to the topic’s sensitivity, full transparency was ensured, including the right to withdraw, and all data were anonymised to protect privacy.

| Department | Number of Participants |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| International History | 5 |
| Government | 2 |
| Statistics | 1 |
| Economic History | 1 |
| Finance | 1 |

Table 1 - Departmental Representation of Interview Participants

Findings

The interviews were thematically coded, after which the following five themes were identified:

All-Boys Club Culture

Many participants spoke about systematic exclusion from informal academic networks, which they characterized as an 'all-boys club' culture. Female students reported systematic gatekeeping of information regarding teaching opportunities, research positions, and professional development prospects. This exclusion extends beyond formal academic interactions to social spaces where significant academic networking occurs, with male academics engaging in relationship-building activities in environments that are inaccessible to many women, such as private clubs or alcohol-centred social events.

“ *The same applies to men in academia. Um, that they speak to each other. Um... And again, like, I mean. Maybe it would be different if I didn't know that one of the people in my cohort went to, like. A private club with their supervisor, and then now that's in my head, and I'm just like, well, how do I compete with this? Like, how do I... Um.* ”

Participants noted pervasive gendered norms and microaggressions throughout the academic environment, with dismissive attitudes toward their research interests, particularly when focusing on race, gender or grassroots development. The absence of female representation among faculty emerged as a critical barrier, with participants expressing strong criticism of LSE's recruitment practices and the lack of women of colour in positions of authority.

“ *We had one set of assigned readings that were sort of optional, but we're very male focused, very, I would say quite male focused and also quite white focused.* ”

For some participants, physical safety concerns significantly impacted their ability to engage fully in academic life. Women's mobility around London is constrained by safety considerations that limit their participation in networking events in the evening. Most participants expressed serious disappointment with LSE's current procedures for tackling sexual harassment cases, especially when faculty members are involved. Participants expressed that they feel the efforts appear tokenistic, especially when the perpetrators of sexual violence continue to remain in positions of power.

Double Subjugation

Participants talked about facing double subjugation, where they experienced compounded disadvantages based on intersecting identities. Women of colour, particularly those from Muslim backgrounds, reported facing what one participant described as losing points from their academic journey. They explained that they lose points for being female first, and then additional penalties for their nationality, previous institutional affiliation, and other identity markers.

Institutional and Structural Barriers

The lack of gender diversity in shared academic spaces, like PhD offices, underscores the need for structural and institutional changes to create more inclusive, gender-balanced environments that foster belonging and safety.

“ Naturally, as a woman, I don't know if, uh, other people who identify as women feel this way. But when I went into the PhD office, and it's completely sort of jam-packed with men. And because of the lack of women in the PhD cohort, naturally there won't be a lot of women, um, or if you live far, you know, you have those days when that happens, I will not be comfortable, you know, spending my whole day in that office. ”

Students brought up situations where male colleagues failed to recognise safety concerns or practical limitations affecting women's research activities, such as fieldwork constraints in international contexts, with words like 'obliviousness' and 'lack of awareness' being used to describe these interactions.

“ I think that the department should provide students with more information about if you go away on field work. We do is kind of just good luck. See you later. A workshop what doing field work is going to look like and. What the point of contact is if something goes wrong because I think. ”

Participants also suggested that the current attempts at female representation feel tokenistic and often fail to address structural inequalities and may inadvertently present misleading narratives about the challenges faced by women in academia.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Individual departments

- **Annual Gender Equity Audit:** Departments must be encouraged to conduct an annual gender equity audit and publish their metrics. This includes transparent tracking and publishing of hiring, progression, and promotion data, which must be used to decide affirmative actions including to structural inequalities in the individual departments regarding recruitment in researchers, teaching positions and other positions of power.
- **Develop tailored fieldwork preparation and support mechanisms** for postgraduate researchers of POC academics to address gendered, racialized, and geopolitical vulnerabilities encountered during fieldwork. Financial support can also be administered through emergency micro-grants for researchers who face gender-based safety risks during fieldwork.

Recommendations for LSE

- **Safe Spaces for Women:** 1) Co-design a dedicated physical community space with the female students, on campus, to support the creation of a **PGR Women's Collective which will have a** drop-in lounge to decompress from daily microaggressions and academic pressures and weekly peer-led support sessions. 2) Gender research network meetings should be held in environments that are safe, inclusive, and non-alcohol-centric, ensuring comfort for all participants.
- **Structural Changes:** Departments should implement structural changes to ensure equal representation of genders in three key areas: among faculty members, within course readings, and across PhD offices.

References

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- Westoby, C., Dyson, J., Cowdell, F., & Buescher, T. (2021). What are the barriers and facilitators to success for female academics in UK HEIs? A narrative review. *Gender and Education*, 33(8), 1033–1056. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1884198>
- Herzig, A. H. (2004). "Slaughtering this beautiful math": graduate women choosing and leaving mathematics. *Gender and Education*, 16(3), 379–395.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250042000251506>

Appendix

Participant Quotes

Below is a compilation of some notable quotes from the participants that emerged during the conversations:

1. "Quite a lot of female professors don't end up being professors is, obviously, given the construct of academia, you have to publish X amount, and you know, be able to go through promotion processes to end up being a professor. If you don't have the time, if you're a mother, if you're doing all of the informal academic duties within the department, if you're organizing all the events, if you're dealing with all the EDI issues within a department. How do you have the time to write anything? How then would you become a professor?"
2. "I'm speaking specifically from the context of the fact that I'm a woman, I'm South Asian, I'm... Muslim, and, you know, I am the first generation, um, to be born and raised here, so... Yeah, that specific set of factors really does set you up to fail when it comes to academia, but you have to just combat all of that."
3. "I think it's, like, first it's female. You know, when you're a female, you already, like, lose, like, 10 points. And then you come from this country, lose ten marks, and then you come from this Uni, you lose another 10 points, you know."
4. "...sometimes I feel a bit difficult to actually join their, like, coffee chat or something like that. You know, sometimes a casual chat also, like, um, inspires your research, but you feel that there's a boundary, like, a wall. They don't be willing to, like, speak with female students."
5. "Some information is, like, you don't have... the way to actually know this kind of information. Yes. It's like, like... like, the teacher experience, or any, like, um... teaching opportunity or marketing opportunity, or anything else. It's like they always gatekeeping in their groups"
6. "A lot of academia is about intermingling and being present in these social spaces. Um, it's not limited to my identity, but even somebody who has a personality of being quite introverted. These, uh, social events that are set up to, you know really highlight the strengths of a social person, um, but also, sort of you know, sift away a lot of the introverted or... people, or the people just not comfortable being in those spaces, you naturally create this disparity of you know, um... you know, a professor knowing your name, or a professor just...you know, wanting to collaborate with you on a project, or, you know, just being able to get some insight, or, you know, 5 minutes of uninterrupted time with a professor that you want to ask his or her opinion...you... you... you're prevented from entering those conversations and those spaces, simply because of the values or the personality, or the type of upbringing you've had. Um, I think that's not often talked about. I mean, the corporate world is slowly starting to enter this sort of revolution of, you know, alcohol not being the center of social event. Surprisingly, academia hasn't entered that sort of change. Um... despite, uh, you know, universities being the forefront of, you know, revolution in thought."

7. "I think it's sort of the men talk first. In a lot of group discussions, and almost as though you know a question is posed to the room, and they just sort of assumed they're the ones answering it, and I think it's not that the female students don't have anything to say. It's just that maybe. Subconsciously or social conditioning wise, we're sort of more aware of the room and kind of waiting to see is there like waiting for a moment to speak rather than just assuming the floor is ours."
8. "As a woman, I don't like to be in London as soon as it gets dark. I like to be home, um, before it gets too dark. And London isn't a safe space, and that's something that women have to navigate on a daily basis when they have to go to and from university, um, in the day or in the night, and so if we're thinking about networking, I'm prevented from doing so. Not only because I choose not to, because I'm too introverted for that, but also, if I was an extrovert, these are the things that would be on the forefront of my mind. I need to get into the station, get on the tube. Walk home and enter my home very safely. So many, you know, throughout this whole journey, there are... there's so much scope for danger. For a woman in particular, and again, a lot of that just isn't spoken about or just considered, I think, yeah, there's just new risks that are introduced to something as simple as attending."
9. "Naturally, as a woman, I don't know if, uh, other people who identify as women feel this way. But when I went into the PhD office, and it's completely sort of jam-packed with men. And because of the lack of women in the PhD cohort, naturally there won't be a lot of women, um, or if you live far, you know, you have those days when that happens, I will not be comfortable, you know, spending my whole day in that office. Being the only woman, that's a natural feeling that I think a lot of women feel when you enter a bus and it's all men on the bus, or when you enter a train carriage and it's just... near a couple of men, you naturally feel a sense of discomfort. I think because of the gender ratio of the X Department, that naturally ends up being that way. Um... Yeah, so there's a lot of different reasons, not only the context of the department, but also, you know, the lack of freeness to have certain conversations and also physical space, I think those three reasons sort of boil down into hindering that sense of belonging."
10. "I think that the department should provide students with more information about if you go away on field work. We do is kind of just good luck, see you later. A workshop: what doing field work is going to look like and what the point of contact is if something goes wrong."

