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Sexism and Gender-Washing in Academia and Beyond

How Gender Equity Schemes Might Inadvertently "Gender-Wash" Universities, Provoke Backlash, and Propagate Inequality

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the work experience and career trajectories of people working across 12 UK-based universities awarded an Athena Swan Charter, an international scheme that recognizes commitment to gender equality. Despite, or perhaps due to institutional reward leading to gender-washed "peacocking", everyday sexisms and gender regimes are sustained through acts of gendered microinsults that often go unnoticed and are individualized. Women in "awarded" institutions report being spoken over, disproportionately allocated academic housework, experience re/enforced gendered boundaries, and inadequate equality policy provision. They also identify microinvalidations through exclusion from meetings, mis/appropriation of their ideas, gender inequality denial, and overt or covert resistance to gender equity initiatives. An analysis of these microaggressions determines their interconnected, mutually constitutive, and reproductive nature; it suggests that institutional gender-washing propagates a misconception of current levels of gender inequality which kindles "equity-backlash". The findings reveal unintended outcomes of gender award schemes that might be mitigated through visibilising and addressing inequality regimes and their impacts.

1 | Introduction: Background and Context

In more than 45 years since the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and 50 years since the Equal Pay Act (1970) were introduced in the UK, Westoby et al. (2021) suggest it fair to assume gender equality would have been achieved in the workplace by now. There are, however, still no employment sectors where women are paid the same as men (Wisniewska et al. 2019), a gender pay gap of 11.9% remains, and more than 80% of women work for an employer which pays men more than them (Westoby et al. 2021). By age 64, the average gender wealth gap between men and women is 42% (Women's Budget Group 2023). Correspondingly, women in the UK undertake twice as much unpaid domestic work such as cooking, housework, and childcare, and six times as much laundry as men (HM Gov

et al. 2019). Globally, women take on 75% of unpaid domestic and care work, spending on average 4 hours and 25 min daily on this invisibilised and unpaid work (Action Aid 2023).

The gendered economic and domestic structures embedded in and constituted by "gender regimes" (Connell 1987, 2006), which reflect deeply entrenched cultural traditions, result in unequal access to senior decision-making roles in higher education (O'Connor 2020). Whilst most staff that work in UK based universities identify as "female",[1] only 20% are full professors (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2025). The distribution of senior roles is reflected in pay scales where the proportion of female academics receiving the highest pay rate is half that of male academics (10.4% women, 20.7% men) (Advance HE 2021). Gendered stratification is self-reinforcing as

perceptions of inequitable academic promotion processes, salaries, and allocation of fellowships negatively impact women academics' confidence and self-efficacy to apply for promotion within their workplace (Allen et al. 2021).

To address the cycle of gender inequality, many research and higher education institutions have introduced gender certifications, charters, and award schemes to demonstrate their commitment to gender equity. Across Europe, 113 equity, diversity, and inclusion certification and award schemes focus on gender equity, with most focusing exclusively on gender (Cacace et al. 2024). The Athena Swan Charter, originating in the UK, is considered the most prominent certification system to advance gender equality within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Tzanakou et al. 2021).

Established in 2005, Athena Swan aimed to combat gender inequities faced by women in STEM fields by encouraging commitment to their advancement, though in 2015, it expanded to include the arts, social sciences, humanities, business, and law. Members can submit Athena Swan awards at the institutional and departmental levels, including an aspirational action plan with clear responsibility lines for completion. As a nonprescriptive framework, Athena Swan seeks to "support and transform gender equality within higher education and research" through 10 principles. These focus on addressing the loss of women from the career pipeline, their underrepresentation in senior roles, the gender pay gap, and gendered barriers at key career stages. The updated principles also emphasize the necessity to consider intersectionality in advancing equality.

In the UK, institutions (universities and research institutes) that choose to become members of the Athena Swan Charter first apply for an Institutional Bronze Award which recognizes a commitment to advance gender equality through its policies, processes, and practices. Once the institution holds an award, its constituent Faculties/Schools/Colleges can themselves apply for "Departmental" Bronze Awards. Thereafter, Silver Award criteria recognize evidence of positive impact on gender equality, although Gold Award criteria relate to sector-leading practices. Successful applications result in an Award that is valid for 5 years.

Incentives to engage in Athena Swan, or similar award schemes, are provided by research funding bodies that use funding mechanisms to drive gender equity by embedding actions on gender inequality into application processes. For example, the European Commission mandates Gender Equality Plans for institutions applying to Horizon Europe (European Commission 2022), although the UK Research Institute, though not mandating it, expects universities and research institutes receiving Research Council funding to embed equality and diversity in research practice (UK Research and Innovation 2022).

Consequently, Advance Higher Education who administer the UK-based Charter, note that as of January 2025 there were 1007 active awards in total, with 121 held by institutions and 880 by departments (Advance HE, 2025). Additionally, the Athena Swan Charter has been adapted and adopted by Higher Education Institutions across Australia, Ireland, the US, and Canada, and is being piloted in India (Advance HE, 2024a, 2024b).

Despite Athena Swan's growing role in gender equality policy and practice in HEIs internationally, studies analyzing gender equality initiatives in higher education are scarce, and often limited to single case studies (Tzanakou et al. 2021). These studies offer little insight into how findings correlate with institution-specific contexts and policy nuances. Resultingly, there is limited understanding of how Athena Swan principles are operationalized across a sector, their strengths, challenges, and impact (Tzanakou et al. 2021, 2). In response, we aimed to explore how institutional commitment to gender equality and public recognition affects the work experience and career trajectories of academics in institutions awarded Athena Swan between 2015 and 2020. The two research questions that guided this research are:

RQ1: How do academics in Athena Swan awarded institutions describe their work experience and career trajectories?

RQ2: What strategies do academics in Athena Swan awarded institutions consider effective for addressing gender inequity?

Although the Athena Swan framework has been credited with raising awareness of structural inequalities and fostering discussions on gender issues (Ovseiko et al. 2017), there is limited research on its influence at the individual level, and the research therefore sought to fill a critical gap by linking institutional gender equity policies with personal experiences, offering valuable insights for refining gender equality strategies in higher education.

Here we outline a rationale for undertaking an instrumental case study to learn how academics describe their work experience in HEIs awarded an Athena Swan Charter, provide an overview of the theoretical lenses through which we undertook the study, summarize the methods employed, present both the quantitative and qualitative data garnered, and discuss the key themes apparent in the findings.

As we undertook grounded theory, we did not have a priori assumptions guiding our analysis. However, we brought key theoretical frameworks to the research which informed our approach, helping us to interpret and make sense of the data. These frameworks provided a lens through which we could examine the complex interplay of gender and institutional structures, allowing us to situate our findings within broader socio-cultural and organizational contexts. Collectively, the frameworks allow researchers to consider the impact of and the interrelationship between the theoretical constructs of gender regimes (Connell 2006), gender schemas (Bem 1981), microaggressions (Pierce et al. 1977), post-feminisms (Gill et al. 2017; McRobbie 2008) and gender-washing (Lewis et al. 2017; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020).

Our discussion particularly considers how the work experience of academics is simultaneously mediated by and reconstitutes "gender regimes" (Connell 2006). Gender regimes are culturally embedded dimensions that both inhabit and expose the patterning of gender relations within specific institutions, including -and intersecting across-gendered divisions of labor, power relations, emotional relations, and symbolic relations within institutions (Connell 1987). These regimes are shaped by,

and in turn reinforce, gender schemas (Bem 1981), which are the cognitive frameworks through which individuals process and internalize cultural expectations of gender. Thus, gendered institutional norms are reproduced through both external systems and embedded internalized beliefs about competence, authority, and professional identity.

Microaggressions are a key mechanism through which these schemas and regimes are enacted and reinforced within academia. Originally conceptualized by Pierce et al. (1977) to describe subtle, derogatory behaviors toward African American people, the concept has since been expanded to include other marginalized groups, including women (Algner and Lorenz 2022; Sue 2010). Microaggressions are categorized into three types: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations, each differing in the perpetrator's level of intent (Sue et al. 2007). Microassaults involve explicit acts of discrimination, such as name-calling or exclusion, although microinsults and microinvalidations are more subtle. Microinsults might include comments or actions that negate the experiences of women and are often rooted in unconscious bias. Finally, microinvalidations occur when women's contributions and expertise are dismissed or ignored, reinforcing the idea that their voices and knowledge are less valuable than those of men. Connell (1987), (2006) gender regime provides a critical lens to understand how such microaggressions are embedded within broader institutional and cultural practices that privilege hegemonic masculinity. These behaviors serve to uphold patriarchal structures, marginalizing women and reinforcing the dominance of masculinity associated with power and authority.

We finally consider how the role of gender equity schemes in HEIs contribute to post-feminist misconceptions of the achievement of gender equality, masking gendered power relations and fueling resistance to gender equity provision. Post-feminism is characterized as a discursive shift that assumes gender equality has largely been achieved, thereby repositioning feminism as redundant or outdated (Gill et al. 2017). This disposition depoliticizes structural inequalities and reframes gender issues as individual rather than systemic concerns, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility and choice (McRobbie 2008). Within this context, "gender-washing" emerges as a corporate and institutional strategy that superficially signals commitment to gender equality while failing to enact substantive change (Lewis et al. 2017). By co-opting feminist rhetoric for brand or reputational gain, gender-washing both masks enduring inequalities within organizations and reinforces traditional power structures (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020).

2 | Methodology

The methodology employed to investigate the work experience of academics in Athena Swan awarded institutions was informed by Blackmore's (2013) encouragement to extend focus beyond numerical representation of women, and Lipton's (2015) recommendation to examine how and why (or why not) "power is shared between men and women" within universities (p. 66). An instrumental case study methodology was adopted because they help to uncover aspects of social life/social phenomena through engaging

"how" and "why" questions (Yin 1982) to offer "insight into an issue where the case is of secondary interest" (Stake 2000, 237). We thus employed an instrumental case study to learn how academics experience their work environment, and the contributing factors that inform that experience. We pay particular attention to "why" and "how" the "drip drip" (Savigny 2014, 794) of gender regimes are operationalized and/or challenged within Athena-Swan awarded institutions, and consider why and how gender equity strategy might be "done" or "undone" (Grzelec 2022).

The methodology is informed broadly by a feminist lens, recognizing that "feminisms" are diverse, complex, multiple, porous, and dynamic (Crimmins and Casey 2023), and acknowledging that gender inequality intersects with other inequities, oppressions, and marginalisations related, for example, to abilities, race, ethnicities, sexuality, place, and age. They are concerned with inequities and power imbalances broadly, but predominantly focus on the condition of women within society and their relationship to power and are committed to changing the subordinate status of women in society by making manifest their marginalization (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). We recognize women as diverse and reject attempts to treat them as a uniform group with identical characteristics or experiences. Being a woman encompasses many different identities and lived realities. While our research primarily focuses on women's experiences, we also strive to include and support individuals who do not identify within the limited and false male/female gender binary. Feminist research recognizes that no researcher is truly neutral or separate from their work; rather, researchers bring their own lived experiences, values, and perspectives into their work (Haraway 1988). In the spirit of transparency, we therefore make explicit our positionalities as researcher-authors within this research.

This paper is written by four women academics. The first author is White, able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual and the mother of two children. She investigates the lived experience of women academics from the stance that the "plights of individual women are connected with each other, as instances of systemic subordination rather than as the results of individual, accidental, or coincidental misfortune" (Mann 2012, 9). The second author is a White, cis-gendered woman from a rural background, who lives with a condition that she does not disclose in workplaces. She identifies as a survivor, which informs her sense of justice. She works across gender, rurality, and digital communication studies. The third author is a White, able-bodied, cis-gendered, gay woman. Her research focuses on gender and the higher education workforce including gendered impacts of COVID-19. She also leads on the Athena Swan Charter agenda at her employing university. The fourth identifies as a feminist who researches and writes from the standpoint of the transnational, international and foreign, Southern European academic. She particularly focuses on how configurations of gender, race/ethnicity/racialization are shaped by socio-political and spatio-temporal particularities (Tsouroufli 2025).

3 | Research Methods

After obtaining Ethics Approval we invited the Athena Swan coordinators of twelve UK-based academic institutions to

participate in the research. These coordinators then invited academic staff to voluntarily self-select and complete the survey. We focused on UK based institutions because Athena Swan had been embedded into institutional frameworks and practice since 2005 and engaging HEIs across all four countries of the UK to capture geographically contextualized data.

3.1 | Data Collection and Analysis

The online survey administered contained both closed and open questions. We structured closed questions, designed to capture demographic and employment data, by providing categories from which participants could select. For example, we asked: What of the following best describes your employment status: 1. Employed on a casual/short term contract; 2. Employed on a fixed-term contract; 3. Employed on a permanent/ongoing appointment. Whereas to garner more individualized and nuanced responses, some questions contained a mix of closed questions, followed by questions that could be responded to using free text, such as "Have you received academic promotion whilst working in this institution: Yes. No" and "If you were encouraged to apply for academic promotion, who encouraged you to do so (the academic role of the person in relation to you, peer or line manager…) and what support you were offered?" Finally, open text boxes were provided for participants to communicate the perceived barriers and catalysts to their career advancement, where no prompts or examples were provided. This approach sought to encourage participants to personally reflect on and share their lived experience without prompts that might inadvertently ascribe perimeters to their reflection.

All quantitative data was aggregated and imported into SPSS, where basic descriptive analyses, including frequency distributions and percentages, were performed to summarize the data. Participant responses to key questions were then separated by gender, and differences in proportions were analyzed. The cross-sectional design and convenience sampling of the study limited our ability to perform logistic regression, as not all predictor variable combinations were present in the sample (Field 2016). So, whilst we had initially hoped to understand the impact of compounding equity status on participants' experience of academic work, the number of individuals in certain subgroups (e.g., Black women or disabled women) were too small for meaningful statistical analysis. This significantly undermined our opportunity to learn how intersecting identities impact the lived experience of working in an Athena Swan awarded institution.

Given these constraints, we adopted a grounded theory approach for our qualitative data analysis: a method that allowed us to explore the social contexts in which gendered subjectivities and power relations are constructed and maintained. By focusing on participants' narratives, we instead developed a theoretical framework grounded in their lived experiences, that provide deeper insights into the systemic nature of gender disparities within academic institutions.

For the open-ended responses, we initially employed manual thematic analysis, following the process outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), which involves becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and searching, reviewing, and naming themes. However, as we delved deeper into qualitative data, we recognized the need for a more robust analytical approach that could move beyond mere description to theory generation. Accordingly, we extended our analysis to grounded theory methodology which aims to generate a theoretical framework that explains the underlying processes influencing the observed phenomena (Glaser and Strauss 1967). By adopting grounded theory, we specifically sought to develop a deeper understanding of the social processes and structures that shape participants' experiences of higher education, allowing for the emergence of a theory grounded in the data itself.

4 | Findings

We communicate the main quantitative results in fairly short, visual forms below, limiting our commentary to two significant quantitative findings: the gender and ethnicity ratio of respondents. Yet to understand the factors underlying and guiding the quantitative data, we subsequently elaborate on the main qualitative findings and analysis.

210 academics participated in the survey, with most self-identifying as female ($n = 165$), 38 identified as male, and one identified as female-presenting nonbinary (Figure 1: A breakdown of participants separated by gender).

The predominance of female respondents aligns with findings that women are generally more likely than men to self-select to participate in surveys (Smith 2008) and to respond promptly to survey invitations (Becker 2022). The data may have also been influenced by the notion that men are less likely to perceive themselves as gendered beings and often consider gender-based research as less applicable to them because maleness is positioned as the normative state, rendering gender largely invisible to men. Consequently, men may view gender issues as primarily concerning women, leading to a lack of engagement with gender-related research.

Most respondents were aged between 35 and 54 (62.3%), 22.5% were aged between 25 and 34, 10.6% aged between 55 and 64, (2.5%) were under 25 and 2% over 65. Most respondents identified as heterosexual (84.5%). Of the remainder of the sample, 5.8% identified as bisexual, 4.8% as homosexual, and 1% as asexual. Five individuals preferred not to answer the question, and one declined to answer.

Most participants (93.0%) described their ethnicity as White. Six identified as Asian/Asian British, three as mixed/multiple ethnicity (including White and Black Caribbean/White and Black African/White and Asian), two as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, and two as ethnicities not mentioned in the given categories.

That 93% of participants identified as White and individuals identifying as mixed race, Black, or Asian were more likely to have been employed for under 5 years compared to their White counterparts, suggesting a higher turnover rate among these groups. This trend may be attributed to the prevailing Eurocentric

Gender

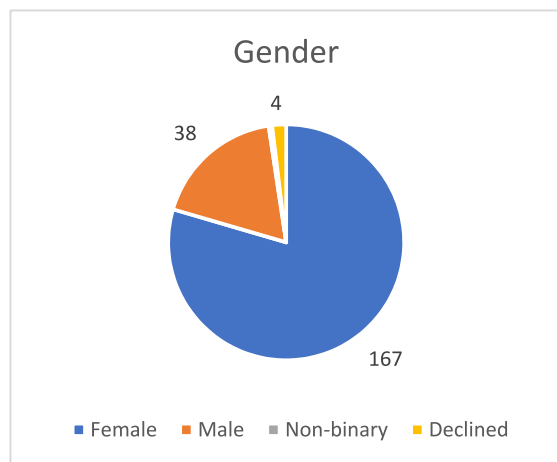| Gender	
Female	167
Male	38
Non-binary	1
Declined	4
Total	**210**

FIGURE 1 | A breakdown of participants separated by gender.

environment within academia, where employees are drawn to organizations reflecting their own attributes or values and where contributions by people with other ethnicities are undervalued (Buttner and Lowe 2017).

Figure 2 (A comparison of participant employment status) demonstrates that there were gendered differences presented in employment status, where more males to females were employed permanently, and more women than males were employed on fixed-term appointments, reflecting an international phenomenon (Crimmins 2016):

In terms of respondents' career trajectories, data demonstrated marginally more female academics had applied for promotion (68.6%) than male counterparts (60.5%), yet in relation to academic positions, a greater proportion of males (52.2%) had successfully received promotion than females (40.6%).

Across the whole sample, a comparison of participant pre-promotion academic roles (see Figure 3: Comparison of participant pre-promotion academic roles) demonstrates a significantly greater proportions of males were promoted to full professors (30.8%) compared to females (2.6%), while significantly more females (47.4%) were promoted to senior lecturer positions compared to males (15.4%).

There were also gendered differences in identified levels of encouragement to apply for promotion (see Figure 4: Comparison

of participant level of encouragement received), where males were more likely than females to receive encouragement:

4.1 | Qualitative Findings

Recurrent themes emerged in relation to work experience and career trajectories presented within qualitative responses, including silencing women and "invisibilising" their contribution; disproportionate allocation of academic housework along gendered lines; and the inadequacy, and inconsistency of equality policy implementation. Other key findings include women academics' re/enforcing gendered boundaries; the denial of gender inequality; and c/overt hostility towards Gender Equality Plans. We briefly consider below how these reoccurring themes reflect systemic inequities, whilst being experienced as individual microaggressions:

In Figure 5 (Summary of Qualitative Findings), systemic inequities refer to institutionally structural issues, persistent and embedded within organizational systems. Individual microaggressions reflect personal, everyday actions that reflect broader cultural attitudes. Yet, our analysis avoids making a strict division between these categories because the expression and experience of microaggressions make manifest and reinforce gender regimes generally embedded within systemic inequities.

4.2 | Qualitative Findings and Discussion

The findings illustrate entrenched gender disparities continuing to shape institutional cultures, professional interactions, and career trajectories. Drawing on Connell (1987), (2006) concept of gender regimes, the analysis highlights how the divisions of labor, power, and symbolic relations within universities contribute to the persistence of gendered inequalities.

Collectively the key themes illustrate how universities continue to privilege men's career trajectories by placing additional burdens on women, limiting their opportunities for advancement, and reinforcing gendered hierarchical power structures. Whilst we provide some participant demographic data in the text below, we do not share data related to ethnicity, disability, or sexuality as this may inadvertently identify participants.

Further, Bem's (1981) gender schema theory helps explain the mechanisms through which these gendered patterns are internalized and reproduced. Gender schemas act as cognitive frameworks that influence how individuals perceive competence, leadership, and professional worth, and shape workplace interactions in ways that sustain patriarchal advantages. In academic institutions, these schemas reinforce the expectation that men are natural leaders and researchers, while women are assumed to be better suited to administrative or pastoral roles. The operationalization of gender schemas reinforces the ongoing reproduction of systemic inequities in hiring, promotion, and policy application, and re-entrench epistemic injustice which propels the vicious cycle of inequity.
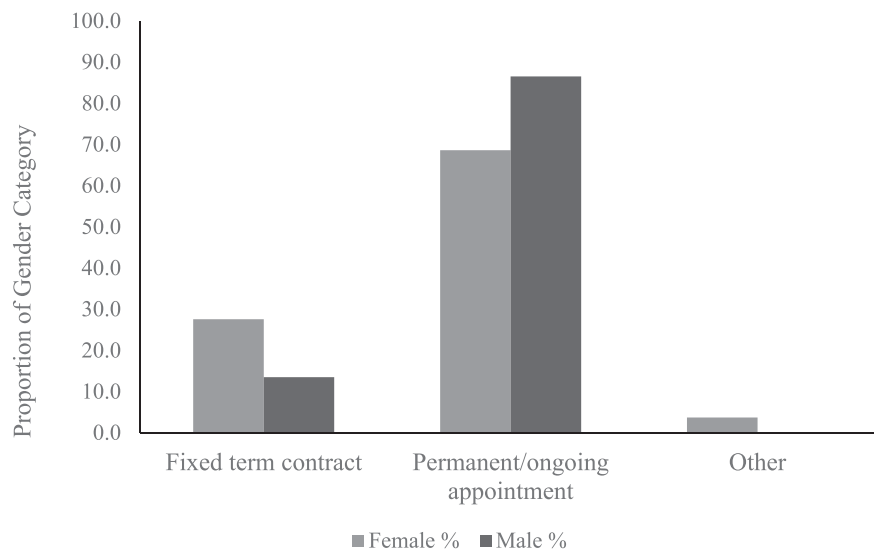
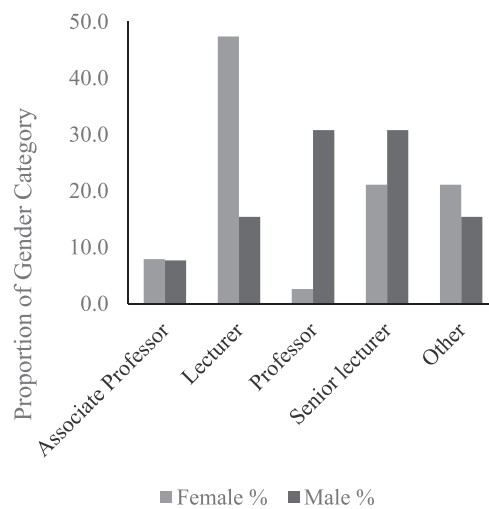**FIGURE 2** | A comparison of participant employment status.

FIGURE 3 | Comparison of participant pre-promotion academic roles.
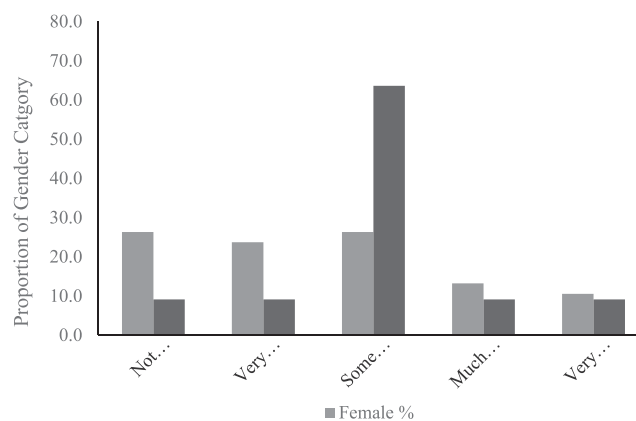

FIGURE 4 | Comparison of participant level of encouragement received.

4.3 | Silencing and Invisibilising Women's Contributions

In this study, 14 women academics identified being ignored, spoken over, having ideas and work appropriated by others, and being excluded from meetings and opportunities, based on their gender. This reflects professional invalidation of women (as a form of microaggression) through being ignored, spoken over, excluded from decision-making processes, or having their ideas appropriated by male colleagues. Sue (2010) recognizes these microaggressions

Qualitative Findings	Systemic Inequities	Individual Microaggressions	Key Points
Silencing women and 'invisibilising' their contribution	Gendered patterns of exclusion and undervaluing women's work in institutions; lack of support for women's ideas and contributions in decision-making processes.	Women experiencing personal exclusion, being spoken over, or having their ideas attributed to male colleagues.	Represents both a systemic culture of undervaluing women and individual, everyday instances of exclusion.
Disproportionate allocation of academic housework	Gendered assumptions in role allocation; women expected to do more administrative or pastoral tasks.	Women personally tasked with roles labelled as 'caring' or 'nurturing' based on gendered stereotypes.	Demonstrates systemic gendered expectations, though individual experiences also reveal how these expectations are enacted.
Inadequate gender equality policy and procedure	Gendered gaps in institutional policy application (e.g., promotion procedures, maternity leave, flexible working).	Women individually feeling the negative effects of policies that don't address their needs (e.g. missing out on opportunities due to unrealistic deadlines or lack of childcare support).	Both systemic in terms of policy failure and individual in the lived experiences of women within these systems.
Women academics reinforcing gendered boundaries	Women contributing to systemic issues by reinforcing gender norms, potentially due to internalised biases/gender scripts.	Personal interactions between women which reinforce gendered roles or barriers.	While this may look like an individual action, it reflects broader cultural and institutional dynamics.
Hostility towards Gender Equality Plans	Institutional policies (such as Athena Swan initiatives) failing to achieve substantial change, or backlash against these policies.	Individual hostility, especially from men, towards gender equality initiatives, perceiving them as unfair.	While the hostility is expressed on an individual level, it is embedded in the broader institutional context that resists change.
Lack of perceived institutional change	Institutional inertia and lack of meaningful change despite gender equality initiatives like Athena Swan.	Individuals feeling the impact of superficial changes that do not address deeper systemic issues/'backlash' against equity practice.	Reflects a systemic failure that is felt personally by the individuals within the institution, and operationalisation of post-feminist sensibility.

FIGURE 5 | Summary of qualitative findings.

as subtle, often unconscious, behaviors that serve to undermine women's professional legitimacy and authority.

One participant described how her contributions were routinely dismissed, stating, "There have been situations when a male co-worker has acted unprofessionally, for example, ignoring my opinions during meetings or talking over me" (Female, White, Aged 25–34, fixed-term contract). Another noted the appropriation of her ideas, explaining, "I have at several times made suggestions, been ignored, only for a male colleague to make the same suggestion and it be hailed as a great idea" (Female, White, Aged 35–44, permanent appointment).

Moreover, the findings reflect epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), where women's knowledge (and ways of knowing) is systematically devalued within professional settings and reinforce gendered hierarchies. Relatedly, Bem's (1981) gender schema theory provides insight into why these patterns persist, as cognitive schemas condition individuals to expect men to possess leadership and authoritative expertise while conceptualizing women's contributions as secondary, less stable, and less valuable. This (predominantly) unconscious bias perpetuates male dominance in academic spaces, where women's intellectual labor is more easily dismissed, under-utilized, or co-opted.

4.4 | Disproportionate Allocation of Academic Housework

Women academics ($n = 12$) reported that gender influenced the allocation of internal service roles and responsibilities associated with caring and nurturing. The gendered distribution of administrative and pastoral tasks emerged as a significant structural barrier to women's career progression. Participants described being disproportionately allocated service roles that diverted time and energy from research and leadership opportunities, which were considered of less value and "promotable." The persistence of this phenomenon, which reinforces traditional gender norms, illuminates Acker's (2006) observation that academic organizational structures simultaneously reflect and reconstitute gender regimes that privilege men's career trajectories while placing additional burdens on women. Moreover, the service roles women academics often adopt actively support men academics' advancement.

One participant reflected, "I am given more administrative and pastoral tasks because I am female … when choosing a new first-year tutor for our department, my Head of School said I should do it because I was "more mumsy" than everyone else" (Female, White, Aged 45–54, permanent appointment). Another pointed to the structural assumptions about women's professional aspirations, stating, "Women are assumed to want part-time work and to prefer pastoral roles—and potentially not need promotion or research roles" (Female, White, Aged 35–44, fixed-term contract).

4.5 | Inadequate and Inconsistent Gender Equality Policies

Despite the formal presence of gender equity policies, many participants reported that they were inconsistently applied or were insufficient for addressing deeply entrenched structural inequalities. The data suggest that while institutions publicly endorse gender equity, their policies often fail to challenge engrained biases in hiring, promotion, and research funding decisions. Despite that all participating HEIs included formal internal policies relating to family or carers' leave, flexible working conditions, and "relative to opportunity" clauses written into internal grant and promotion application procedures, 10 women identified gender equality gaps or inequitable adherence to gender equality policy.

Participants highlighted specific instances where gender-neutral policies failed to accommodate women's needs, including that

"Insufficient and unclear allowance made for maternity leave in promotions procedure." (Female, White, Aged 35–44, permanent appointment), and "[There is] no support for childcare at conferences or when having to work outside of normal working days/hours." (Female, White, Aged 35–44, permanent appointment); even though there is "Explicit emphasis in promotion criteria on international collaborations/conferences, when these are harder for carers to attend." (Female, White, Aged 45–54, permanent appointment). The gendered impacts of "Short deadlines for example, for internal funding opportunities" (Female, White, Aged 35–44, permanent appointment) were also emphasized. These accounts underscore the need for institutions to critically assess and revise ostensibly gender-neutral policies to ensure they do not inadvertently disadvantage women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities.

Policies that appear to be gender-neutral can thus perpetuate inequalities when applied without consideration of their unintended outcomes on women's academic careers. The over-representation of men in leadership roles facilitates a maintenance of the status quo and further entrenches gender inequalities. Finally, men's voices and contributions are more valued, creating a feedback loop in which men are more likely to hold policymaking roles and less likely to address the systemic barriers that women face (noting that these advantages are not uniformly distributed among all men; rather, they vary based on factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Connell 1987)).

4.6 | Women Academics Re/Enforce Gendered Boundaries

While the qualitative data predominantly indicated male colleagues were the main perpetrators of gendered microaggressions within academic institutions, some participants also reported instances involving female colleagues. For example, one participant noted, "In my case the female Dean was the biggest obstacle" (Female, White, Aged 45–54, permanent appointment). Another observed, "I have found given that promotion is now monitored by gender, women now see other women as a greater threat" (Female, White, Aged 45–54, permanent appointment). Additionally, a participant recounted, "Under a female head of department, I was told I had to take annual leave to look after [a] sick child…" (Female, White, Aged 35–44, permanent appointment).

These instances can be understood through the lens of Bem's (1981) gender schema theory, which posits that individuals internalize cultural definitions of gender roles, leading them to process and enact behaviors that align with societal expectations. Consequently, both men and women may unconsciously perpetuate traditional gender norms and biases. In these cases, female colleagues, having internalized the same gender schemas, may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal structures by upholding policies or behaviors that disadvantage other women. This absorption and enactment of gender norms illustrate how deeply ingrained schemas can influence behavior, perpetuating systemic inequalities even among those who are themselves disadvantaged by such systems.

4.7 | Denial of Gender Inequality and Resistance to Gender Equality Plans and Gender-Washing

A significant finding was the ambivalence or outright hostility demonstrated towards Athena Swan initiatives, particularly among male participants who perceived gender equity policies as unnecessary and unfairly privileged women. This perspective upholds dualistic gender positions and aligns with a post-feminist sensibility, which, according to Gill et al. (2017), frames women's subjugation as a past issue, rendering further gender equity efforts unnecessary and potentially unfair.

For instance, one male participant stated, "I believe my workplace is geared towards the promotion of female staff over male … Female staff are provided so much … have free membership to the Women in Business network, have a Women's Network to promote advancement of women in the university, access to development programs such as Aurora, are invited onto grant applications because it will strengthen the bid from an equality perspective etc." (Male, White, Aged 35–44, Academic: permanent appointment). Another expressed, "… there seems to be a large imbalance in favor of females, more females employed and most of the management/senior grade roles are occupied by females." (Male, White, Aged 45–54, permanent appointment). A third noted succinctly, "As a male, I feel disadvantaged." (Male, White, Aged 35–44, fixed-term contract).

We consider if such a dualistic post-feminist disposition might be informed by the gender-washing capabilities of gender equity awards such as Athena Swan. Gender-washing refers to the application of rhetorical strategies to persuade audiences that organizations have achieved gender equality, even when entrenched inequalities persist (Fox-Kirk et al. 2020). Johnston and Yarrow (2023) argue that Athena Swan is used to support 'institutional reputation gains and (extended) virtue signaling, conceptualized as… "institutional peacocking" [offering] primarily institutional benefit" (p. 757).

Thus, gender-washing statements and certifications of gender equality might be both co-opted by individuals to justify microinvalidations of denying the presence/prevalence of sexism and opposing gender equity strategy, whilst simultaneously masking the cultural sexism and gendered regime operationalized within celebrated institutions. There is a danger that gender equity award schemes might thus catalyze, deny, and invisibilise sexisms and further entrench hegemonic masculinity. Meaningful transformation will require more than symbolic commitments to gender equity; universities must address the underlying cognitive schemas that contribute to the imposition of structural barriers, reinforce gender hierarchies, and ensure that gender equity efforts result in tangible cultural and institutional change rather than perpetuating progressive illusions.

Whilst gender-washing issues extend beyond academia and closely parallels corporate diversity initiatives, there is currently a dearth of research exploring how gender equity schemes specifically contribute to gender washing. Indeed, it is established that academic institutions use symbolic commitments to gender equity as a means of reputation-building rather than effecting substantive change (Ahmed 2012; Gill et al. 2017) by

profiling diversity without addressing structural inequalities (Wilkins and Kaiser 2014). Similarly, corporations engage in highly visible diversity branding by appointing token women leaders while maintaining gendered hierarchies (Kirton and Greene 2016). Scholars have also critiqued various industries, including the defense sector, for engaging in "gender washing" by using corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications to present an image of empowering women and girls, while their core operations contribute to conflict and instability that adversely affect the very groups they purport to support. Relatedly, Jester and Walters' (2024) posit that arms manufacturers employ social media campaigns during International Women's Day to position themselves as progressive, inclusive and caring, despite the inherent violence associated with their products. Byrne (2007) found that the U.S. arms industry failed to meet CSR requirements regarding the environment, social equity, profitability, and the use of political power and exposed a discrepancy between their CSR communications and actual practices. Whilst this critique highlights a tension between public relations efforts of organizations and the ethical implications of their products and operations, they do not consider how equity messaging potentially catalyzes post-feminist sentiment that ironically assists in propagating gender inequities. This appears to be an area for future research and consideration.

4.8 | Practical Implications

The findings presented above highlight critical implications for addressing gender inequality in HEIs and contribute to theoretical and practical understandings of systemic inequities. Theoretically, the findings demonstrate the inextricable and self-reinforcing relationship between gender schemas and gender regimes enacted through microaggressions. It seems necessary, therefore, to seek to address both the ideological foundation (gender schemas) and daily enactment of gender regimes simultaneously by shifting attention from improving/fixing women to exposing inequality regimes in higher education leading to a more nuanced approach to gender equality schemes and the complexity of certification (Tzanakou et al. 2021). To sensitize people working within academia to the underlying gender schemas in operation, we recommend that HEIs prioritize gender competency training that includes publishing recent gender-related data, both internally and externally. This might assist in exposing inequities and counter post-feminist narratives that position sexism as a past phenomenon. More specifically, competency training might include reporting disaggregated data on promotion and grant success rates which can reveal hidden biases, in a bid to foster accountability and informed dialog.

Equity awards such as Athena Swan, while valuable, must be restructured to ensure they drive cultural change rather than reinforce gender-washing which can be facilitated by requiring institutions to augment quantitative data with qualitative reporting on staff experiences to expose and address gaps in policy areas such as grant timelines and promotion criteria, The disproportionate allocation of "organisational housework" (as a reflection of gender schemas and a contribution to gender regimes) also requires attention, including formal recognition and

reward for these roles within performance and promotion systems (Blackmore and Sachs 2007). We also recommend targeted training programs to disrupt the internalization of gendered norms, address epistemic injustice, and foster inclusive decision-making. These programs should focus on exposing mechanisms through which hegemonic masculinity is embedded in HEIs, and facilitate the co-design of strategies for disruption. Interventions such as these can both highlight and help dismantle microaggressions and promote equitable workplace practices. Finally, to drive lasting institutional change, HEIs should invest in research exploring how exposure of gender data and redesigning equity awards can catalyze cultural transformation, creating practical pathways to address entrenched inequalities in academia.

By highlighting the discrepancy of organizations presenting an image of gender equity that is not reflected in the lived experiences of their members, the research underscores the need for institutions to move beyond symbolic gestures and implement substantive cultural changes. Moreover, a novel contribution of this study is the proposition that gender-washing not only masks existing gender inequities but may also contribute to a post-feminist belief that gender equality has been achieved. This perception can lead to the notion that further equity measures are unnecessary or even disadvantageous to men, thereby inadvertently perpetuating gender disparities and contributing to what McRobbie (2008) determined to be the depoliticization of feminist struggles and obscuring of ongoing inequalities of post-feminist sensibilities.

The implications of this finding extend beyond academia. In various industries, organizations may engage in gender-washing by adopting superficial gender equality measures to enhance their image without enacting meaningful reforms. Further research is thus warranted to explore how gender-washing contributes to post-feminist perceptions and perpetuates gender inequities across different sectors. By examining this dynamic, scholars and practitioners can develop strategies to identify and counteract gender-washing, ensuring that gender equality initiatives lead to substantive and lasting change.

5 | Conclusion

The recurrent themes from a study of academics′ career trajectories in Athena Swan-awarded institutions (2015–2020) include the silencing of women, disproportionate allocation of academic housework, and inconsistent equality policy implementation. Microaggressions, often subtle and unconscious, were found to undermine women′s career progression and are intertwined, mutually constitutive, and reproductive. Patriarchal beliefs perpetuate these behaviors, with all genders capable of being aggressors (Mergaert and Lombardo 2014), yet rather than attributing blame for the internalization of gender bias, we encourage exposing its causes and manifestations and opportunities for reflection and change. Inequities in higher education ensure men disproportionately occupy senior roles responsible for developing policies on issues they are less likely to experience, contributing to the inadequacy of policies on work allocation, promotion, and grant applications (Anicha et al. 2020).

Disrupting the gender balance of policy teams and investing in gender competency training are recommended to address this self-reinforcing cycle. Gender inequality denial, intertwined with post-feminist sensibilities and gender-washed rhetoric, can be weaponised to resist implementing gender equality policies. Ironically, celebratory narratives of gender equality might catalyze, deny, and invisibilise everyday sexism, functioning as "counteractions within the organization or unintended consequences of gender equality practices" (Grzelec 2022, 750). Mitigating this requires institutions to make public the gendered context of their organizations, providing counter-narratives to post-feminist rhetoric.

The Athena Swan award process requires institutions to evaluate and address barriers to gender equality, but the lack of transparency in sharing data and plans means myths of post-feminism remain unchallenged. While privacy may enable institutional peacocking (Johnston and Yarrow 2023), it limits gendered consciousness and cultural change. Sharing stories of inequities and providing bystander training to empower people to address microaggressions they see perpetrated, as Śliwa et al. (2024) recommend, could sensitize individuals to cultural sexism and equip them to challenge microaggressions that sustain the gender regime.

Although limited by a small, predominantly female and white sample ($n = 210$) and the constraints of an online survey, this study provides critical insights into microaggressions in academia and their role in resisting gender equality. This aligns with Mergaert and Lombardo (2014) call to uncover mechanisms of gender equality resistance, informing interventions to counteract or mitigate it. Finally, the study highlights how post-feminist sensibilities and gender-washing undermine equity efforts and calls for greater transparency in sharing data and narratives from gender equity schemes such as Athena Swan to counter hegemonic co-optation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] Please note, that although much of the literature and the research survey deployed the term "female", we acknowledge that this descriptor is limited as not all women are "female", and that complexity exists around women as all women are women (cis and trans*). Throughout the paper we use "female" due to accuracy of citation or reporting from the survey data wording, but "women" more generally due to its greater inclusivity.

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