



Deservingness and backlash: How gendered advantage is built and defended in equity-accredited universities

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ABSTRACT

Despite sustained investment in gender-equity initiatives, hierarchies of authority, legitimacy and reward remain entrenched in higher education. This paper synthesises two staff surveys conducted in Athena Swan-accredited institutions in the United Kingdom and SAGE Athena Swan-accredited institutions in Australia. We develop a processual account of how gendered advantage is accumulated and defended within institutions recognised for equity progress. Across the studies, encouragement, sponsorship, workload protection and recognition operated as informal judgements of deservingness that shaped who entered formal evaluation with credibility and institutional momentum. Resistance became more visible when equity initiatives rendered these arrangements contestable, appearing through appeals to merit, reverse-discrimination claims and institutional withdrawal. We theorise these mechanisms as operating at different organisational speeds: deservingness is slow, cumulative and ordinarily obscured, whereas backlash is faster, reactive and more visible. Backlash is therefore treated as diagnostic evidence of the status, resources and authority being defended. This framework explains how accreditation can generate substantial activity while leaving informal distributions of legitimacy comparatively intact.

Introduction and background

Women now constitute a substantial proportion of the academic workforce, but representation continues to decline with seniority. In the United Kingdom, women comprised 32% of professors in 2024/25, despite their much stronger representation across academic employment generally (HESA, 2026). In Australia, women reached 50.2% of academic full-time-equivalent employment in 2025, yet remained less fully represented in senior academic classifications (Australian Government Department of Education, 2026). These contemporary patterns demonstrate that numerical participation does not necessarily translate into equivalent authority, status or institutional decision-making power. Feminist institutional scholarship explains this

persistence through the interaction of formal rules with informal cultures, networks and evaluative practices that shape promotion, recognition and access to authority (Gray et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2020).

Gendered inequality is also reproduced through employment insecurity, workload stratification and the unequal valuation of academic labour. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in insecure, teaching-intensive, service-heavy and pastoral roles that are institutionally necessary but often weakly rewarded within promotion and prestige systems (Crimmins, 2016; Heijstra et al., 2017).

Gendered inequalities are also intersectional. Racialised, disabled, migrant, gender-diverse and caring staff may encounter compounded forms of marginalisation through institutional norms and evaluative practices that privilege particular bodies, biographies and career

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trajectories (Solanke, 2017). Motherhood remains a particularly well-documented site of disadvantage, including through assumptions about competence and commitment (Correll et al., 2007).

Gender equality initiatives and charter-based reform

In response to persistent gender inequalities, universities internationally have adopted Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), charter-based accreditation frameworks, and institutional benchmarking schemes intended to drive organisational change. Among the most prominent is the Athena Swan Charter, established in the United Kingdom in 2005 and subsequently adapted across multiple national contexts, including Australia through SAGE Athena Swan (Ovseiko et al., 2020). Participation is typically linked to institutional reputation and, in some contexts, research funding eligibility, positioning the Charter as a significant lever for reform.

Evaluative research indicates that Athena Swan participation can strengthen institutional data literacy and prompt reforms to flexible work, parental leave, workload allocation and promotion (Ovseiko et al., 2020). Yet, critical research identifies the risk of gender-washing where institutions might display the policies, committees and metrics associated with equity while leaving underlying distributions of authority and informal evaluative norms substantially intact (Yarrow & Johnston, 2023; Crimmins et al., 2026). Accreditation can therefore operate simultaneously as an infrastructure for change and a reputational 'performance' of change.

Impacts also vary across disciplines and institutional contexts, with stronger Moreover, benefits may accrue unevenly, particularly where reforms prioritise representation metrics without addressing intersecting inequalities or entrenched definitions of merit (Crimmins et al., 2023). Taken together, this literature suggests that while Athena Swan and SAGE Athena Swan can catalyse institutional reflection, their transformative capacity depends on whether organisations confront the informal power relations and evaluative cultures through which advantage is produced and defended.

Merit, encouragement, and the production of deservingsness

A central limitation of many gender equity initiatives lies in their emphasis on formal policy change while under-attending to the informal evaluative cultures through which academic worth is produced and recognised. Feminist organisational scholars have long argued that universities operate as gendered regimes in which formal rules interact with informal networks, norms, and expectations to reproduce inequality (Thornton, 2013). Within these regimes, merit is not a neutral standard but a socially constructed value system that privileges particular bodies, behaviours, and trajectories, often aligned with masculinised norms of uninterrupted productivity, visibility, and self-promotion (Thornton, 2013).

Individualised explanations for women's slower career progression, such as claims about confidence or ambition, remain influential, but organisational research highlights how women are as likely to apply for promotion as men yet less likely to be considered 'deserving' of promotion, and so receive less encouragement, sponsorship, or informal endorsement by senior colleagues (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012), and far more likely to experience informal gatekeeping (Heffernan, 2021).

Deservingsness within this context refers here to the repeated conferment of a credible claim to recognition, opportunity or reward (Simpson et al., 2020; Simpson & Kumra, 2016). It is relational rather than an individual possession: senior actors and influential networks recognise some colleagues more readily as promotable, investable and institutionally valuable. These judgements produce legitimacy - the socially authorised standing to be heard, supported and advanced - which can accumulate into authority, or the organisational capacity to influence decisions and confer legitimacy on others. Deservingsness,

legitimacy and authority are therefore related but distinct moments in a recursive process: recognition produces legitimacy; accumulated legitimacy enables authority; and authority permits further judgements about who deserves institutional investment.

These insights position deservingsness as a cultural and organisational technology through which inequality is reproduced while preserving the appearance of fairness. Through repeated acts of endorsement, encouragement, and visibility, deservingsness accumulates into symbolic capital and authority, creating self-reinforcing loops of advantage that remain largely invisible within formal equity frameworks. We describe these exchanges as informal economies of legitimacy: relational circuits through which endorsements, visibility, opportunities and workload protection circulate unevenly and are converted into credibility and authority. Because these exchanges precede formal evaluation (e.g. for academic promotion), outcome-focused policy instruments rarely capture how candidates arrive at the point of assessment with unequal institutional momentum.

Feminist and critical organisational scholarship has long challenged the assumption that merit is neutrally or objectively assessed. The criteria through which merit is recognised are themselves gendered (Correll, 2004). Men's qualifications, trajectories and working practices are more likely to align with unmarked norms of academic excellence, rendering their achievements readily legible as meritorious.

Backlash, resistance, and institutional defence

While much scholarship has focused on how gendered advantage is produced, less attention has been paid to what occurs when equity initiatives begin to disrupt established arrangements. Feminist institutionalist work emphasises that institutions are active sites of contestation in which actors seek to defend valued norms, identities, and resource distributions (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). From this perspective, resistance and backlash are not aberrations but predictable responses to perceived threats to entrenched privilege.

Backlash is defined here not by any single attitude or incident but by its restorative organisational function. It comprises discursive, affective and institutional practices that re-legitimise threatened hierarchies by recoding structural correction as unfairness, declining merit, risk or administrative excess (Flood et al., 2021). Its registers might include denial, reverse-discrimination claims, appeals to neutrality, moralised resistance and the dilution or withdrawal of equity infrastructure. What unifies these different expressions is their effect as they seek to restore the legitimacy of arrangements made contestable by equity intervention.

The Australian higher education sector provides a particularly instructive context for examining these dynamics. Through SAGE Athena Swan, Australia has adopted a national charter-based framework modelled on the UK system. While SAGE Athena Swan has increased visibility and accountability around gender equity, the literature above suggests that it might also provoke resistance, particularly where reforms challenge entrenched definitions of merit, disciplinary identity, or institutional prestige. Despite its growing influence, empirical research examining how SAGE Athena Swan-driven reforms are experienced by staff and how resistance operates within accredited institutions remains limited.

Contribution of this study

This paper brings two related staff surveys into analytic rather than statistically representative comparison. We ask how deservingsness and backlash illuminate the reproduction of gendered authority within UK Athena Swan and Australian SAGE Athena Swan-accredited institutions. Rather than assigning one mechanism exclusively to each country, we examine their different organisational temporalities. Deservingsness operates slowly through repeated judgements of readiness, credibility and 'investability' whereas backlash becomes more visible when equity scrutiny or intervention makes accumulated advantage contestable.

Their relationship is processual but not universally linear: the cross-sectional data identify patterned associations and narrated mechanisms rather than proving a single causal sequence. The paper's contribution is to show how slow legitimacy-building and faster defensive recalibration help explain why formal equity activity can coexist with durable inequalities in authority.

Research design and approach

This paper draws on two independently administered, cross-sectional online surveys of staff working in higher education institutions, academic units and research institutes formally recognised through Athena Swan or SAGE Athena Swan accreditation. The UK study was conducted from March to May 2019 and included 207 respondents from twelve Athena Swan award-holding institutions, units or schools. Athena Swan coordinators and/or human resources departments distributed an email invitation, participant information and an anonymous survey link to staff within participating organisations. Eligible participants were staff employed in the participating institutions or academic units across academic and professional roles, contract types and appointment levels. Ethical approval for the UK study was granted by the University of the Sunshine Coast (Ethics approval A191199), approved January 2019.

The Australian study was conducted from November 2024 to March 2025 and received 104 survey submissions. Respondents named ten identifiable universities or research institutes after institutional aliases were harmonised. SAGE Athena Swan coordinators, or staff undertaking equivalent institutional roles, distributed an email invitation, participant information and an anonymous survey link to staff within participating organisations. In both studies, participation was voluntary and self-selected. Ethical approval for the Australian study was granted by the University of the Sunshine Coast (Ethics approval A242162), approved November 2024.

Because the numbers of staff who received or viewed the survey invitations are unavailable, response rates cannot be calculated and neither sample is treated as representative of its national higher education workforce.

The Australian survey retained the UK survey's focus on employment, career progression and gender-equity initiatives but was expanded to capture disability, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, caring responsibilities and multiple gender identities. Occupational categorisation also differed between instruments. The datasets are therefore compared only where wording and response categories are sufficiently aligned; non-comparable items are identified in Table 1.

Quantitative analysis used valid-item denominators, descriptive frequencies and gender comparisons. Fisher's exact tests were used to examine associations between categorical variables, with a *p*-value below 0.05 used to indicate statistical significance. Cell counts and valid denominators are reported alongside statistically tested differences. Open-text responses were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis involving familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, cross-study comparison, refinement and attention to counter-examples. Deservingness and backlash operated as sensitising concepts, but coding also examined material that complicated or contradicted the proposed framework.

The research was informed by a reflexive feminist approach attentive to the research team's proximity to higher education and, in some cases, to gender equity governance. We approached participants' accounts as structurally situated rather than individually attributable, recognising that speaking critically about equity, promotion, and institutional culture may carry professional and reputational risks. Analytic decisions therefore prioritised anonymity and interpretive care, particularly in relation to accounts of resistance and backlash.

Two members of the research team are employed by SAGE and did not access raw data or participate in coding or analysis. Their involvement was limited to reviewing aggregated findings and contributing

Table 1

Characteristics of the UK Athena Swan and Australian SAGE Athena Swan survey samples.

Characteristic	UK Athena Swan survey	Australian SAGE Athena Swan survey
Study information		
Survey submissions	207	104
Organisations represented	12 participating institutions, units or schools	10 identifiable institutions or research institutes
Fieldwork period	March 2019–23 May 2019	November 2024–March 2025
Gender		
Women/Female	164/205 (80.0%)	67/104 selections (64.4%) ¹
Men	38/205 (18.5%)	15/104 selections (14.4%) ¹
Gender-diverse or self-described	2/205 (1.0%)	17/104 selections (16.3%) ¹
Prefer not to state gender	1/205 (0.5%)	5/104 selections (4.8%) ¹
Employment status		
Permanent or ongoing	141/196 (71.9%)	46/80 (57.5%)
Fixed term	49/196 (25.0%)	29/80 (36.3%)
Casual or short term	2/196 (1.0%)	2/80 (2.5%)
Working hours		
Full time	132/155 (85.2%)	59/79 (74.7%)
Part time	21/155 (13.5%)	17/79 (21.5%)
Casual hours	Not offered as a working-hours category	3/79 (3.8%)
Other working hours	2/155 (1.3%)	Not offered
No working-hours response	52/207 (25.1%)	25/104 (24.0%)
Staff classification and work focus		
Academic staff	93/155 (60.0%)	Not collected separately
Professional-services staff	56/155 (36.1%)	Not collected separately
Other staff classification	6/155 (3.9%)	Not collected separately
Teaching-intensive or teaching-focused work	17/129 (13.2%)	6/79 (7.6%)
40% teaching, 40% research, 20% service	38/129 (29.5%)	15/79 (19.0%)
Caring responsibilities and disability		
Has caring responsibilities	102/202 (50.5%)	34/80 (42.5%)
No caring responsibilities	100/202 (49.5%)	46/80 (57.5%)
No caring-responsibilities response	5/207 (2.4%)	24/104 (23.1%)
Disability, impairment or long-term condition	Not collected	32/82 (39.0%)
No disability, impairment or long-term condition	Not collected	48/82 (58.5%)
Prefer not to state disability	Not collected	2/82 (2.4%)
No disability response	Not collected	22/104 (21.2%)

Note. Percentages use the valid denominator for each item unless otherwise stated. Percentages may not total 100.0 because of rounding.

¹ The Australian gender item permitted multiple selections. The survey summary reports 104 selections: woman 67, man 15, non-binary 7, transgender 5, self-described 5 and prefer not to state 5. Gender-diverse or self-described combines non-binary, transgender and self-described selections. These figures describe selections, not necessarily 104 different respondents.

sector knowledge to refinement of the analytical framework. This separation was designed to strengthen analytical rigour while maintaining ethical distance between governance roles and empirical analysis.

While individual-level identifiers (such as faculty, discipline, or appointment level) were not reported in order to preserve anonymity within relatively small institutional cohorts, responses were analysed for patterned clustering across employment status, contract type, gender identity, caring status, and disability status. Where quotes are presented, they reflect recurrent patterns across multiple respondents unless

otherwise indicated.

Results: Athena Swan study

Employment position and valued work

Clear gendered differences were evident in employment security. Women were substantially more likely than men to be employed on fixed-term contracts (27.6% compared to 13.5%), while men were significantly more likely to hold ongoing or permanent appointments (86.5% compared to 68.6%). Among respondents without permanent contracts ($n = 53$), nearly two-thirds (64.2%) expressed a desire for ongoing employment in academia, indicating that precarity reflected structural conditions rather than personal preference.

Qualitative responses highlight how insecurity was experienced as prolonged and normalised rather than transitional. Several women described extended periods of uncertainty and stalled progression:

“Long process” (woman respondent, UK).

Other accounts connected stalled progression to inadequate institutional support following gendered career interruption:

“After maternity leave I received no support with my return to work and this was very challenging” (woman respondent, UK).

These accounts indicate that career insecurity was shaped not only by contract status but by whether institutions recognised and supported gendered interruptions to academic work.

Men were more likely than women to be employed in academic roles (75.0% of men compared with 56.6% of women), while women were over-represented in professional positions (38.5% of women compared with 25.0% of men). Within academic roles, respondents most commonly described their contracts as evenly split between teaching, research, and service (38.7%) or as predominantly research-focused (36.6%). Among academic staff who answered the work-focus item, a significantly greater proportion of women reported holding research-intensive or research-focused contracts: 30/69 women (43.5%) compared with 4/23 men (17.4%; $p = .026$, Fisher's exact test).

Despite women's strong representation in research-focused roles, all respondents who identified managerial or senior leadership responsibilities within their contract focus were men. Among professional staff, over half of respondents were employed in managerial roles (51.1%), with men disproportionately concentrated in these positions (83.3% of men compared with 47.5% of women). Administrative roles accounted for 25.5% of professional staff positions, and teaching support roles for 10.6%.

Qualitative responses located the problem in the scarcity of senior actors able to provide authoritative advocacy, rather than in an assumption that women could be supported only by other women:

“There are very few women at a promoted level... so there is very little support or mentoring available from other women” (woman respondent, UK).

Women frequently described occupying roles essential to institutional functioning but peripheral to power:

“Female academics tend to be morally supportive, but they tend not be in high enough positions to actively support a promotion application” (woman respondent, UK).

Promotion and formal evaluation

Gendered disparities were evident in promotion outcomes. A greater proportion of men (52.2%) than women (40.6%) reported having been promoted. Among promoted academics, 42.9% had worked at their pre-promotion level for between one and three years, with men more likely to be promoted within this timeframe (50.0% of men compared with 40.5% of women). A further 40.8% had remained at pre-promotion level

for between four and seven years. All respondents who reported remaining at pre-promotion levels for more than ten years ($n = 4$) were women.

The distribution of pre-promotion academic levels differed by gender ($p = .027$, Fisher's exact test). Men were more likely to report promotion from professorial positions, with 4/13 men (30.8%) compared with 1/38 women (2.6%). Women were more likely to report promotion from lecturer positions, with 18/38 women (47.4%) compared with 2/13 men (15.4%). These patterns indicate that men's promotions more often consolidated already elevated status. Women's qualitative accounts described repeated applications, shifting expectations, and comparative disadvantage relative to male colleagues:

“Actively encouraged to apply in words, but had to apply four times and felt that male colleagues who were less experienced received promotions more quickly” (woman respondent, UK).

Several respondents explicitly compared their records with those of promoted men:

“Told by my Head of Department that my research was not good enough for promotion. I pointed out that a man in my department had been promoted to a higher grade with only three more papers than I had... Eventually they let me submit my application and I was successful” (woman respondent, UK).

These accounts indicate that promotion outcomes were significantly shaped by informal judgements of credibility and readiness.

Encouragement, support, and deservingness

Encouragement to apply for promotion was unevenly distributed. Among the 48 respondents who had received academic promotion and answered the encouragement item, 17 (35.4%) reported receiving some encouragement, while a further 11 (22.9%) reported receiving much or very much encouragement. By contrast, 20/48 (41.7%) reported receiving very little or no encouragement. Men were more likely than women to report receiving some encouragement to apply: 7/11 men (63.6%) compared with 10/37 women (27.0%).

Qualitative responses illustrated how encouragement operated as a signal of legitimacy:

“I basically received virtually no support from a department that was overwhelmingly male” (woman respondent, UK).

Some male respondents described consistent support from senior colleagues:

“I was supported by both male and female colleagues who were at a higher level than me” (man respondent, UK).

Women, by contrast, emphasised the absence of senior advocates with institutional authority:

“Few senior women are in a position to be supportive” (woman respondent, UK), “Males have been much more influential” (woman respondent, UK).

Across the dataset, encouragement, mentorship, and sponsorship emerged as mechanisms through which legitimacy and opportunity were unevenly distributed.

UK respondents also described resistance to equity intervention, although these accounts were less extensively captured than in the later Australian instrument. Some distinguished visible accreditation activity from structural change:

“The university's aim is to achieve Athena Swan awards, not to have any meaningful changes” (woman respondent, UK).

Another argued that initiatives “only work if these are desired to be implemented” (woman respondent, UK).

These accounts indicate that backlash was not absent from the UK study; rather, the survey's stronger focus on career experience meant

that resistance appeared principally through accounts of symbolic implementation and institutional non-enactment.

Results: SAGE Athena Swan study

The Australian survey received 104 submissions from staff across SAGE Athena Swan-accredited universities and research institutes. The sample included diverse gender, disability, caring and employment-status experiences (Table 1).

Employment position and valued work

Across the dataset, gender emerged as a central factor shaping everyday work allocation. Just over half of respondents indicated that their gender had directly influenced their workload and role expectations. Women repeatedly described being assigned teaching-intensive, coordination-heavy, and relational roles, often in contrast to male colleagues who were perceived to have greater access to research-focused work.

Participants described repeated teaching churn and heavy coordination loads with limited opportunity to stabilise their teaching portfolios. One respondent explained:

“As the only woman in my department I was often given the larger cohorts and units that needed fixing... I also ended up organising social events and sessions for students, which took time away from my research” (woman respondent, Australia).

Others highlighted how forms of care and relational labour were unevenly distributed, particularly in comparison to male colleagues, and several respondents noted the cumulative time costs of these patterns, describing how sustained teaching and service responsibilities constrained their capacity to build research momentum:

“Women tend to bear the brunt of coordination duties” (woman respondent, Australia).

Participants consistently described these patterns as persistent, even within institutions formally accredited for gender equity.

Promotion and formal evaluation

Of the 78 respondents who answered the academic-promotion question, 16 (20.5%) reported having received promotion within their current institution and 62 (79.5%) did not. Among the 16 promoted respondents, seven (43.8%) reported being encouraged to apply, while nine (56.3%) did not. Open-text responses nevertheless identified promotion as an important site at which formal criteria interacted with informal judgements of readiness, contribution and institutional fit.

Among respondents providing open-text accounts, women described opaque decision-making, shifting expectations and the devaluation of teaching, service and career interruption.

Several respondents emphasised how promotion was framed as exceptional or unlikely, particularly at later career stages:

“Promotion to Level C [Senior Lecturer in the Australian classification system] is an exceptional situation” (woman respondent, Australia).

Others described being discouraged from recognising career interruptions or forms of contribution beyond research outputs:

“I was told not to include maternity leave on my promotion form” (woman respondent, Australia).

Across these accounts, promotion was experienced less as a transparent assessment of contribution and more as a process shaped by informal judgements and comparative positioning.

Encouragement, mentoring and sponsorship

Encouragement to apply for promotion was uneven and frequently absent. Many respondents described limited access to senior support, particularly where women were under-represented in senior roles.

Women repeatedly noted that while collegial support existed, it was often not accompanied by positional power:

“Most senior colleagues and mentors have been male” (woman respondent, Australia).

Others described how equivalent positions did not necessarily confer equivalent authority on women and men:

“I was in a coordination role for two years; after that a male colleague had the job. I have noticed him being treated differently ... than I was when I was in the position of power” (woman respondent, Australia).

This account indicates that organisational authority depended not only on occupying a formal role but on whose authority was recognised as legitimate within that role.

Responses to equity intervention

Most respondents were familiar with gender equity initiatives and recognised increased visibility of gender disparities. However, enthusiasm was frequently tempered by scepticism about the depth and durability of change.

Some participants described equity initiatives as procedural rather than transformative:

“There is a lot of reporting, but it doesn't always translate into change”

(woman respondent, Australia)

Others expressed concern that formal commitments were not sustained institutionally:

“An equity advisor role was removed despite clear evidence of its impact”

(woman respondent, Australia)

A minority of respondents, predominantly men, framed equity initiatives as undermining merit:

“Quotas overshadow pure merit”

(man respondent, Australia)

These views, while contested by other participants, formed part of the broader organisational climate described.

Men's perceptions of reverse discrimination emerged as a distinct and patterned theme in the dataset, frequently articulated through claims that gender equity initiatives compromised merit, quality, or fairness. Several respondents framed equity strategies as disadvantaging men, particularly white men, and described themselves as marginalised within institutions they perceived as increasingly female-dominated:

“As a white male we are treated like we have it all at our fingertips. I certainly don't have it all” (man respondent, UK); “I work in a very female dominated workplace and any gender equity strategy in place only further disadvantages my position. There are no positive impacts” (man respondent, Australia).

These narratives were often accompanied by assertions that diversity targets or recruitment strategies prioritised gender over capability. Some respondents expressed concern that equity initiatives undermined meritocratic principles:

“From my perspective, there seems to be an emphasis on achieving gender parity in academic positions... I feel the merit of candidates might not be the sole criterion for hiring” (man respondent, Australia); “There appears to be a push to meet diversity quotas which, in my view, can sometimes overshadow the assessment of pure academic merit” (man respondent, Australia).

Backlash was not confined to abstract critique but extended to interpretations of concrete organisational decisions. One respondent described institutional pressure to increase the proportion of men in a feminised discipline, framing this as a form of reverse discrimination that disadvantaged women:

“The university executive has forced the head of school to have more men as academics... expecting the school to have 50% as academics is ridiculous... We have recently recruited many more men than women... This has meant many excellent women are passed over” (woman respondent, Australia).

This account complicates a unidirectional model in which backlash is voiced only by men defending male advantage. In a feminised discipline, women framed the institutional preference for recruiting men as a form of reverse discrimination or internalised misogyny. The finding suggests that deservingness does not attach mechanically to men across every context as it's produced through the interaction of gender with disciplinary status, scarcity, and institutional prestige. Men might be constructed as particularly desirable in feminised fields because their recruitment is imagined to diversify, elevate, or re-professionalise the discipline. Backlash might therefore also be voiced by women where equity language is perceived to authorise the preferential recruitment of men. This does not negate structural male advantage; it simply demonstrates how local scarcity narratives can reproduce it in context-specific forms (Kelan, 2018).

Some respondents described a pervasive sense that achievements associated with equity initiatives were considered with suspicion:

“There is a sense that achievements are questioned when they are associated with gender initiatives” (woman respondent, Australia).

Backlash also operated at an institutional level. Participants described senior leaders dismissing lived experience as anecdotal, reframing structural inequities as individual concerns, or withdrawing support from equity roles and initiatives. These accounts suggest that backlash operates through multiple registers, including personal grievance, appeals to meritocracy, moral panic around gender and inclusion, and institutional practices that dilute or withdraw equity commitments. Resistance was most visible where gender equity initiatives intersected with questions of status, authority, and control, indicating that backlash functions as a defence of established hierarchies rather than a neutral response to reform.

Across the SAGE Athena Swan dataset, participants described persistent gendered patterns in workload allocation, promotion experiences, access to encouragement, and organisational responses to equity initiatives. Everyday practices often continued to privilege particular forms of work, contribution and authority, while resistance and ambivalence were most evident where equity initiatives intersected with questions of merit, status and control.

Discussion

Across the two studies, unequal career outcomes co-occurred with unequal access to encouragement, advocacy, valued work and recognition. Although the data cannot establish that encouragement caused promotion, participants repeatedly described sponsorship, nomination, workload protection and being identified as ‘ready’ before formal evaluation. We therefore conceptualise deservingness as a pre-evaluative filter within an informal economy of legitimacy where positional authority is converted into opportunity and some trajectories become readily legible as meritorious, while teaching, care and institutional service remain weakly convertible into ‘promotion capital’ (Heijstra et al., 2017).

Backlash functions as a diagnostic signal of impact: resistance intensifies precisely where equity initiatives begin to unsettle the informal arrangements through which privilege is conferred, normalised, and protected. The Australian SAGE Athena Swan study reveals what

happens when these quiet accumulations of advantage are rendered visible and subject to intervention. Backlash emerges not as episodic obstruction or individual grievance, but as patterned institutional defence. Participants described claims of reverse discrimination, invocations of declining “quality,” and the de-legitimisation of equity work and expertise, discursive moves that reassert the moral authority of merit while reframing reform as unfair advantage. Backlash is therefore neither external to institutional power nor reducible to individual hostility; it is, rather, a repertoire through which threatened arrangements are re-legitimised.

Taken together, the two studies offer a more complete institutional account where masculinised networks confer deservingness; deservingness accumulates into authority and legitimacy; equity initiatives attempt interruption; backlash emerges to protect accumulated advantage; and institutions respond through recalibration, dilution, or retreat. Framed this way, backlash is not merely obstruction but diagnostic evidence of where privilege is being defended.

A further implication is that deservingness and backlash operate at different organisational speeds. Deservingness is slow and cumulative, assembled through ordinary acts of encouragement, nomination, workload shielding, sponsorship and being spoken about as ‘ready’ (Heffernan, 2021). These practices are rarely documented, yet they shape who approaches formal evaluation with credibility and institutional momentum. Whereas, backlash is typically faster and more visible, surfacing as explicit critique, withdrawal of resources or the reframing of equity as political, bureaucratic or unfair. The mechanisms, though, need not constitute an invariant sequence as deservingness may continue during reform, while resistance may precede, accompany, or follow intervention. Their different temporalities nevertheless explain how institutions can expand the visible architecture of equity while informal credibility economies continue to reproduce unequal authority. Accreditation can therefore be accommodated as an organisational overlay when the underlying prototype of merit remains aligned with masculinised career trajectories (Yarrow & Johnston, 2023; Crimmins et al., 2026).

Intersectionality is also necessary for understanding how institutional legitimacy is differentially available. Gender does not operate as an autonomous axis of power but is constituted through racialisation, disability, sexuality, age, caring, migration and other institutionalised relations (Crenshaw, 1989). The Australian instrument captured more of this diversity than the UK instrument, and qualitative accounts indicated that proximity to dominant institutional norms shaped whose needs, bodies and trajectories were recognised as legitimate. However, small subgroup cells and anonymity requirements prevented reliable estimates of how deservingness or backlash differed across intersecting positions. These accounts therefore identify possible mechanisms rather than subgroup prevalence. This limitation itself has implications for equity accreditation as frameworks that privilege aggregate gender measures might render intersectionally differentiated exclusions methodologically and institutionally less visible.

The findings therefore suggest that anticipating resistance must become a core component of equity reform, recognising that backlash is not peripheral but structurally predictable when informal hierarchies are disrupted. Institutions seeking to prevent dilution or symbolic compliance must move beyond visible policy overlays and instead redesign workload allocation systems, promotion criteria, and definitions of merit so that upstream processes of encouragement, sponsorship, and recognition are addressed. Structural safeguards might include transparent promotion feedback mechanisms, formalised sponsorship pathways, workload auditing tied to promotion metrics, and accountability structures that protect equity roles from institutional retrenchment. Without such safeguards in place, informal hierarchies readily reassert themselves and accreditation risks becoming reputational rather than transformational.

Conclusion

This paper explains the persistence of gendered hierarchy in equity-accredited universities through the relationship between deservingness and backlash. Across both studies, respondents described unequal access to encouragement, advocacy, valued work and recognition before formal evaluation. Deservingness captures these slow processes through which credibility and 'investability' are unevenly conferred; backlash captures the faster defensive responses that become visible when equity scrutiny renders accumulated advantage contestable.

Their relationship is processual rather than mechanically linear. Deservingness may continue during reform, backlash may precede or accompany intervention, and disciplinary contexts can complicate who is constructed as deserving. Yet, the framework helps explain how extensive accreditation activity can coexist with durable informal economies of legitimacy.

Equity accreditation must therefore address not only policy and representation but the upstream processes through which merit, credibility and authority are produced and circulated.

This framework also helps explain why accreditation schemes can generate substantial activity, such as data collection, action plans, committees, reporting, without producing commensurate shifts in leadership demographics or distributions of authority. The visible architecture of equity can expand while the slower, informal infrastructure of legitimacy remains intact. This implementation gap is not primarily procedural but cultural and epistemic, reinforcing the need for equity strategies that engage with *how* merit is defined, *how* credibility circulates, and *how* feminised and relational labour or institutional service is valued.

Both studies were cross-sectional and relied on voluntary, self-selected survey samples; neither can establish causality, temporal ordering or national representativeness. The samples differed in size, composition and instrument design, and staff with particularly strong positive or negative experiences may have been more likely to participate. Some analyses combined staff categories with different employment and promotion structures, while small cells limited gender-diverse and intersectional comparisons. Percentages are therefore interpreted descriptively, with greater analytic weight placed on recurrent qualitative accounts and the mechanisms they illuminate. Longitudinal, ethnographic and institutionally matched research is needed to trace how legitimacy accumulates, how equity interventions make it contestable and when resistance becomes organisational recalibration.

Despite the limitations, the analysis offers globally relevant insights for gender equity policy and practice. It suggests that while Athena Swan, SAGE Athena Swan, and related frameworks can open important institutional spaces for visibility, accountability, and targeted support, substantive transformation depends on whether organisations engage with the informal economies of legitimacy that structure academic careers. Treating backlash as data rather than disruption enables institutions to identify where privilege is most tightly defended and where reform must be directed. Ultimately, advancing gender equity in higher education requires not only procedural compliance but a deliberate reframing of merit, and institutional strategies that anticipate and engage resistance as an expected, and revealing, feature of organisational change.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Gail Crimmins: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sarah Casey:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Gemma J.M. Read:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Elvessa Marshall:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Maria Tsouroufli:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis,

Data curation. **Sarah Barnard:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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