

# The Perceived Limitations of the Athena SWAN Gender Equality Charter in Improving the Lives of Early- and Mid-Career Women Academics: A Case Study of an Athena SWAN Gold-Awarded Department

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## Abstract

*To address the career challenges faced by women in Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET) within UK higher education institutions, the Athena Swan Charter was established in 2005 and later expanded to include a broader range of academic groups in 2015. Athena Swan literature presents a complex picture, while some studies suggest that participation in the Athena Swan Charter leads to measurable improvements in structural and cultural conditions, others question these claims, pointing to the persistent challenges women face in academia. This study adopts a grounded theory approach to explore the lived experiences of women academics in a science department that holds a Gold Athena Swan award. It used a case study design and employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool to collect data from women in early and mid-career positions. The findings reveal a performative dimension of Athena Swan, as participants described feeling “invisible,” “voiceless,” and “excluded” due to their socio-symbolic status — yet simultaneously “hyper visible” through their representation in websites and Athena Swan case studies. The study argues that the performativity embedded in the Athena Swan application process itself may lead women to question the legitimacy and effectiveness of such gender equality initiatives.*

## Keywords

gender equality • Athena Swan • Higher Education • Science • Engineering and Technology

## Introduction

Studies suggest gender inequality prevailing in the UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Westonby et al., 2021), with reports showing women represented only 27% at professorial roles and 38% of other senior academic roles (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). Athena Swan (AS) Equality Charter originated in the UK in the year 2005 as a voluntary benchmark charter and certification scheme to address gender inequality issues for women in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) in UK HEIs. In May 2015, the scope of the charter was broadened to include efforts within the arts, humanities, social sciences, business, and law, as well as to acknowledge contributions from professional and support staff, and to support trans staff and students. As an external accreditation and voluntary charter, the AS Charter outlines ten key principles of equality and inclusion and encourages its members to embed them in their organizational culture. Member institutions are further encouraged to work toward progressive awards (Bronze,

Silver, or Gold) to show their continued dedication to promoting gender equality (Advance HE, 2025) as outlined in Table 1.

In their recent report, Advance HE (2024) addresses AS as a “testament” to the continued efforts in the HEIs to address gender inequalities. However, recent studies question accreditation’s effectiveness in addressing gender issues, citing women’s continued underrepresentation in UK academia (Fagan & Teasdale, 2021). Furthermore, the literature on the AS charter gender equality initiatives shows a gap with limited studies exploring how AS initiatives are translated to the lived experiences of women in those institutions (Laver et.al., 2018). This article presents findings from a research project that employs a grounded theory approach and case study design to examine the everyday lives of women academics in STEM within an AS Gold-awarded department. This article will present the theme of performativity reproduced during the Athena Swan

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**Table 1.** Descriptions of Awards.

| Award        | Demonstration                                                                                                        |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bronze Award | The institution recognizes the issues associated with gender equality and provides an action plan to challenge them. |
| Silver award | The institution has successfully implemented the action plans previously submitted.                                  |
| Gold Award   | The institution shows sustained advancement towards gender equality initiatives.                                     |

*Note:* Derived from Advance HE (2025).

departmental implementation process. In doing so, the article first discusses relevant literature, followed by the research questions and methodology. It then presents the findings and discussion and concludes by considering the limitations of the study.

## Literature Review

### Gender Performativity in Academia

This research understands gender as performativity, a concept developed by Judith Butler in their influential text *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which they critique binary constructions of gender. Butler (1990) conceptualizes gender as a normative and compulsory reiteration of social norms, operating as a regulatory practice (Butler, 1988; 1990; 1993). Furthermore, gender is understood as a culturally enforced and politically regulated performance. This perspective emphasizes the “performative” nature of identity construction, whereby identity is constituted through the repeated enactment of social norms (Butler, 1993, p. 94). According to Butler (1988), individuals are compelled to perform gender norms, and those who resist or fail to conform may face social sanction, as gender is not an inherent truth, but something sustained through repeated acts.

Tyler and Cohen (2010) extend the concept or notion of performativity to academic spaces, and their findings indicate that organizational spaces become performative for women, whereby social interactions and power relations negotiate how gender is constructed at work. Similarly, Fotaki (2013) extends the performative notion of academic work and argues that academia is inherently gendered, with dominating masculine norms and the absence of symbolic representation of women resulting in them feeling excluded and ‘Otherness’. Similarly, studies have agreed on the marginalized position of women in academia where they are “outsiders within” (O’Connor et al., 2018); “strangers” (Strauß & Boncori, 2020) and “silenced” through exclusion (Fotaki, 2013). In a more recent study on women academics from three world-leading universities, Aiston and Fo (2021) argue that the academic culture becomes performative for women, where they negotiate their everyday life by using “silence” as a strategy. Furthermore,

the study found that women are silenced through exclusion from decision-making committees or other roles. However, studies further suggest that women become more visible when it comes to undertaking service roles, or ‘academic housework’, including indirect tasks not directly linked to research or teaching but essential for institutional success, which often go unrewarded and unrecognized and slow down women’s career advancement (Heijstra et al., 2017; Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2023).

Studies relate these service roles to academic citizenship, which is generally defined as a “virtuous undertaking” associated with care and loyalty (Albia & Cheng, 2023; Davids, 2022). Macfarlane (2007) defines academic behaviour as “duties and responsibilities of academics; willingness to work with others and take on projects”. Macfarlane (2005) uses Marshall and Bottomore’s (1992, as cited in Macfarlane, 2005) three-dimensional model of academic citizenship to explain the significance of these service roles in being the “glue” that sustains academic communities and links universities to the broader world (p. 299). More recent research by Johnston (2025) in their qualitative study showed that academics could be ‘happy’ to perform some aspects of the service role, including student recruitment and open days, but also observed a decline in the service aspect of the academic citizenship role since it does not benefit them directly. However, studies show that this decline is not experienced uniformly but is shaped by gendered dynamics within academia. Albia and Cheng (2023), in their review of the literature on academic citizenship, highlight discussions of the gendered nature of academic citizenship, where both gender and employment contract status shape academics’ levels of recognition, belonging, and participation within the institution, resulting in unequal positioning within the academic hierarchy. They further note that service roles, often framed as a form of academic citizenship, are in tension with teaching and research responsibilities and are increasingly devalued within a performative academic culture that prioritizes research outputs over other forms of academic labour. Macfarlane and Burg (2019) further identify this as a “trap” that results in women who are invested in service roles advancing much later than their male counterparts.

### Impact of AS Accreditation

The discussion on the impact of the AS gender equality initiatives in the UK HEIs illustrates a complex picture where studies, debate the role of the AS in improving gender equality in academia. Several qualitative studies report the measurable improvement brought by the AS on structural and cultural issues faced by women in AS-accredited institutions (Barnard, 2017; Caffrey et al., 2016; Tsouroufli, 2019). For example, Ovseiko et al. (2017)

examined perceptions of women academics on the impact of AS accreditation in medical science departments at Oxford University and reported that AS accreditation has resulted in the departments' greater recognition of women's caring responsibilities in the domestic sphere, improved visibility towards women's challenges in the organizational setting, and better mentoring facilities. Moreover, they found that an effort to implement the AS principles in institutional practices itself resulted in an increased effort to challenge the gendered culture in those institutions. Similarly, Barnard (2017) used AS gold application documents to investigate the AS impact and claimed the AS to be an overriding success through the improvement of the member institutions' commitment towards gender equality initiatives, greater engagement with the early career researchers and prioritizing their requirements, providing a voice to the academics, improving their visibility, and being a platform to raise their concerns. However, the findings from these studies derived from perceptions of the participants or analysis of documents were criticized for not informing about the real-life experiences of the women working in these institutions.

The discussion further focuses on another key improvement brought forth by the AS charter, increased awareness among academics towards gender equality issues (Caffrey et al., 2016; Ovseiko et al., 2017; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Barnard (2017) and Ovseiko et al. (2019), in their evaluation, insist that engagement with the AS implementation process itself in the institutions results in the AS committee members having a higher awareness of the gender issues, which itself has challenged the gendered culture. However, recent studies challenge the legitimacy of such claims, pointing towards the persisting inequality women face in academia (Armstrong & Sullivan, 2023; O'Connor, 2020). AS accreditation is criticized for reproducing gender inequality (Henderson & Bhopal, 2022), used by institutions for "institutional peacocking" (Yarrow & Johnston, 2022) and causing potential "gender fatigue" due to the administrative workload associated (Tzanakou et al., 2021). Tzanakou and Pearce's (2019) qualitative study of AS Self-Assessment Team (SAT) members concluded that the AS itself reproduced the gendered division of labour for women involved in the committee. Drawing from self-reflection as SAT members, focus group discussions and qualitative interviews with SAT members from four universities, they found that the implementation process of AS itself in institutions causes unequal workload for the committee members. The AS committee work, perceived to be women's work, resulted in women who were the minority being pressured into the committee, thus increasing their workload. The findings further reported that the "emotional burden" (p. 14) imposed on women in the SAT committee is not recognized or valued. Moreover, the committee members were penalized if the institution failed to receive an award, thus indicating the AS

process itself to be exploitative work reproducing a gendered division of labour.

Furthermore, O'Connor's (2019) review of gender equality initiatives using global scholarships argues that the AS implementation process itself is approached as a tick-box exercise or "rhetorical compliance" (p. 22) to secure the award without making meaningful efforts to tackle gender inequality issues in the organization. This supports the cross-national study by Ovseiko et al. (2017) on senior women scientist members of the SAT team who illustrated their concerns about approaching the implementation process itself as a tick-box exercise as an unintended consequence of connecting financial incentives to the AS awards. A more recent study by Yarrow and Johnston (2022) on universities across the UK and Ireland argued that despite AS accreditation bringing some positive changes to the participating institutions, they are seen as a "commodity" which serves for "institutional reputation gains" (p. 757). These studies thus caution against the wider institutional practices which continue to go unchallenged in AS-accredited universities that may have negative implications for women's career development (Caffrey et al., 2016). However, the literature produces limited evidence to reach any sufficient conclusion to understand the impact of the AS accreditation on the lived experiences of women academics and recommend further empirical evidence to contribute to the discussion (Caffrey et al., 2016; Ovseiko et al., 2019; Yarrow & Johnston, 2022). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by reporting the impact of AS accreditation on the everyday life of women academics in an AS gold-awarded department. The research question guiding this enquiry was: What is the impact of Athena Swan accreditation on the lived experiences of women academics?

## Research Methods

### Grounded Theory Research

This study adopted the Straussian Grounded Theory (GT) approach using a qualitative case study design to explore how AS accreditation is translated into the lived experiences of early and mid-career researchers in a department that holds a Gold AS award. GT is understood as a flexible methodology and a systematic approach for examining power asymmetries, including social and cultural issues within organizations (Charmaz, 2014). Developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, it uses an iterative research approach that evolves throughout the research process (Birks & Mills, 2022). Glaser and Strauss (1967) critiqued the prevailing focus on developing theories based on pre-existing assumptions and instead proposed a rigorous and systematic method for generating theory which is grounded in data. They emphasized that the development of theory from carefully collected and analysed data should

be considered as valuable as the process of verifying facts (p.1). Therefore, GT as a methodology is considered a comprehensive and structured approach that facilitates the development of theory by closely connecting it to data. Furthermore, being grounded in the data, it helps to bring out the “voices, experiences and actions of those studied” (Goulding, 2002, p. 104), thereby offering a fresh perspective on women academics’ experiences in this study.

### Case Study Design

Case study design provides a comprehensive understanding of the organization, offers the researcher an opportunity to learn from it, while enabling the research question to be examined in a real-life context (Schoch, 2020; Yin, 2018). A single case study design was used in this study for its vigorous approach to examine the organizational issues and to provide greater focus and in-depth analysis, thus better quality for the emerging theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). The case study department selected was AS-accredited and had a long-time association with the programme, thus giving in-depth information on the topic of investigation. It is a research-intensive department located within a large science department, thus providing a greater scope to collect a wide range of experiences from women academics at different stages of their careers and a wider perspective in data analysis. Also, the status of the department holding the AS gold award further represented the criteria of excellence, considered as an extreme case, and provided an area to explore, which was seldom investigated in the previous studies (Eisenhardt, 1989).

### Data Collection

As Yin (2018) observes, the case study design provides an opportunity to use multiple sources of data collection. The choice of data sources was determined by the research question, which in this study was to examine the impact of AS accreditation on the lived experiences of women. Towards this, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool along with field notes (direct observations of the participants’ workspaces), and memos (verbal and non-verbal cues during the interviews). Additionally, documentary evidence (the AS departmental application documents/departmental maps) was collected, which helped to confirm the departmental progress towards gender equality and also to confirm responses from interviews.

### Ethical Implications

This research was granted ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee (details removed for blind peer review). All necessary measures were implemented to address potential ethical concerns, including obtaining informed consent from participants before collecting any

data. A pseudonym (UA Department) was used to ensure the organisation could not be identified. An invitation to participate in the study was distributed by the department, detailing the purpose of the research. Individuals interested in participating could directly contact the researcher via the provided email address. Given that participants were reflecting on their own workplace, measures such as ensuring confidentiality and anonymity were implemented to minimize potential bias and encourage honest and open responses. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, in which case their data would be destroyed. Interviews took place either in a pre-booked room to ensure privacy or at the participants’ offices, based on their convenience. Participants and the case study department were pseudonymized to maintain anonymity.

### Sampling

As shown in Table 2, a total of 32 women academics from early to mid-career positions participated in this research. Women in their career trajectory from postdoc positions to Principal Investigator (PI) positions were identified as early to mid-career researchers. A pilot study (initial seven interviews) was conducted to help refine the research focus during the early stages of data collection. As Nunes et al. (2010) point out, conducting a pilot study in GT aids in developing a clearer understanding of the study’s context during the initial phases of data gathering. Additionally, the pilot study played a role in validating the research question and helped to confirm the existence of a research gap as the study progressed. The later interviews adopted a semi-structured format.

### Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are generally considered to support inductive theory building, illustrating findings, and exploring participants’ subjective experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). For the initial pilot interviews, a loosely structured interview framework was used to capture dense experiences of participants. Analysis of the data from these interviews highlighted key areas of enquiry, which informed the development of more focused semi-structured interview questions. Semi-structured interviews use key guiding

**Table 2.** Distribution of Interviews.

| Departmental position                        | Number |
|----------------------------------------------|--------|
| Senior lecturer (Principal Investigator, PI) | 1      |
| Lecturer (Principal Investigator, PI)        | 3      |
| Senior postdoc                               | 4      |
| Postdoc                                      | 22     |
| Research fellow                              | 2      |

questions to explore a phenomenon while allowing flexibility to follow relevant new topics in greater depth. This approach enables participants to express their views freely and provide rich, detailed data (Kallio et al., 2016), and was therefore particularly useful in the second phase of data collection despite being time-consuming.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis in GT is continuous and conducted alongside data collection (Birks & Mills, 2022). Each interview was transcribed and transferred to NVivo. Two memo files were maintained in NVivo: one documenting observations and reflections after interviews, and another capturing analytical insight during coding. These memos were regularly revisited to refine emerging codes and categories. Data segments were systematically coded and organized into NVivo nodes, enabling themes and patterns to emerge from participants' responses (Thornberg et al., 2014). Open coding involved breaking data into discrete codes, sometimes using participants' exact phrases as In Vivo nodes — for example, "AS as something on website." During axial coding, categories relating to feelings of 'Othering' and hypervisibility emerged. In the later selective coding phase, core categories were identified and subcategories integrated around them (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Constant comparative analysis was used to compare categories with one another, as well as against memos and case study documents, enhancing precision, consistency, and reducing researcher bias.

### Credibility and Validity

To maintain trustworthiness in this GT study, several strategies were employed as discussed by Corbin and Strauss (2014). The research process was guided by participants; the pilot interview questions were broad to capture the experiences of women in this study. Following the initial analysis of the

pilot interviews, these were further refined, ensuring that the research design was grounded in participants' experiences. These experiences were also cross-referred with the AS departmental application documents and departmental website. Furthermore, NVivo was used for data analysis, where some of the participants' own phrases were incorporated into the analysis, thus ensuring their voices are represented.

Research rigour was further enhanced through theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis, whereby emerging categories were continuously compared across interviews, field notes, and case study documents. This helped in bringing an audit trail to the data analysis and also ensured that the findings closely reflected participants' lived experiences. Additionally, transparency was maintained by clearly justifying methodological choices, including case selection, sampling strategy, and the use of semi-structured interviews. Reflexivity was also a key component in ensuring trustworthiness. A reflexive diary was maintained throughout the research process to document the researcher's assumptions, experiences, and potential biases during both data collection and analysis. This contributed to greater transparency and credibility. Overall, these practices enhanced the credibility, validity, and rigour of the study by ensuring that the emerging theoretical construction remained firmly grounded in participants' interpretations of the phenomenon.

## Findings and Discussion

As shown in Table 3, this study revealed women's feelings of Othering where women felt excluded, invisible, and voiceless both within the department and in AS-related activities. At the same time, they were highly visible on the department's website and in Athena Swan applications, where their experiences were used as evidence of institutional excellence

**Table 3.** Themes Generated.

| Concepts        | Examples                                                                       | Discussion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Othering        | Exclusion, silencing, and limited spaces of representation and decision-making | Performance-based academic culture based on competitiveness and associated success (Misra et al., 2017; Thébaud & Charles, 2018) rewards those who succumb to those norms while punishing those who do not by exclusion through informal processes (Aiston & Fo, 2021).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Hypervisibility | Website, writing case study for AS                                             | Embodied status renders women hyper visible when it comes to writing case studies for AS and on the website. While the 'academic citizenship' literature asserts that individuals can challenge and renegotiate these duties (Albia & Cheng, 2023), the findings of this study indicate that such renegotiation may not always be feasible for women, particularly given their historical minority status in organizations. As Davids (2022) suggests, the performativity dimensions of academic citizenship emphasize "Academic citizenship is not only about performative compliance, but also unavoidably about what it means to be and become in an agonistic space" (p.3). The power relations in the current study imply that women might not be able to deny participation in the AS process out of fear that it might suggest a lack of loyalty and refute the academic citizenship behaviour expected of women. |

in promoting equality. This illustrates how the implementation of Athena Swan itself becomes performative in relation to women's experiences.

### **Othering: Exclusion and Silencing**

As shown in Table 3, women in this study described feeling invisible and voiceless during the AS implementation process itself.

#### ***Feeling like 'outsiders': Excluded***

Participants, explained how they experienced invisibility by being excluded from departmental AS celebrations and activities. The feelings of being 'outsiders' were significant for postdoctoral researchers in this study who believed that their 'exclusion' and 'invisibility' reflected their lower status, shaped by their postdoctoral contracts, and revealed how the Athena SWAN space itself reinforced existing hierarchies, as shown in the interview extracts below:

Participant 4 explained how the postdocs got excluded from the AS drinks celebration event:

When they got the Athena SWAN thing (award), there was like a drinks reception for all the people who was involved. And I know, he (PI) went. And I know, he felt a bit awkward about going because like, his lab is basically all female. None of us were invited. And he was and he was like, sorry, guys! So, I guess it might have like, filtered through a little bit like almost subconsciously in a way ... (Participant 4, postdoc).

Furthermore, postdocs expressed feeling excluded from the 'club' or 'group' despite having worked in the department for many years. They described a sense of being "left out of the club" and "not counted as staff," which contributes to negative feelings among women and discourages their participation in departmental activities: "So, I feel that I do a lot more than maybe 50% of the academics in the department, but I'm not, I'm not in the club ... I think I do feel like perhaps I'm an embarrassment to them. Because I'm a postdoc, and I'm perhaps still here" (Participant 32, postdoc). "I think Athena Swan is more generally for staff ... I think the other problem is that postdocs are sometimes not really counted as staff" (Participant 5, senior postdoc).

The above quotes reflect the general experience of the early and mid-career researchers in this study who explained feeling not being part of the departmental community and like 'outcasts' due to their postdoc status. The AS departmental application documents highlighted the department celebrating the success of the AS journey, thus supporting women to feel more included within the wider departmental community. Furthermore, it identified the postdoctoral stage as a key career transition point where women seem to be leaving

the institution and explains how they provide supportive initiatives, including networking opportunities for postdoctoral researchers. However, as the above interview quotes show, women who are mostly segregated at junior levels of the career ladder felt excluded from such celebrations, and the PIs of the department, who are predominantly men, being invited resulted in participants questioning the legitimacy of the department's commitment to gender equality. This resulted in women's understanding of AS decision-making/celebration spaces to be a status symbol, excluding women and minorities who are segregated in the lower steps of the career ladder.

#### ***Denied Voice: Silencing***

Three PIs participated in this study, and one of them expressed how she was excluded from the AS Self-Assessment Team itself despite her interest in being involved in it. According to Participant 2:

I have volunteered to assist [on the AS committee], and I've been contacted by the heads of Athena Swan at other universities asking about how we do this, and I have volunteered that it's something that I would be interested in, but I have not been moved on to any Athena Swan committee ... And it's because maybe because [hesitant] I don't know, I don't want to hazard a guess, but I have made it clear that I want to do ... (Participant, PI).

Participant 2 explained her interest in engaging with the university's departmental inclusive and diversity initiatives, which was the reason for her application to the AS committee membership. Furthermore, she identified such service roles to be significant for career development opportunities. The departmental promotion criteria document also demonstrated the importance of being involved in such committees to improve chances of success. UA Departmental AS Gold Award application documents state that the committee comprises over 20 members, invited from among academics, administrative staff, and students to reflect diversity and various career stages. This structure offers them the chance to participate in shaping policies and practices that promote an inclusive departmental culture.

However, Participant 2 believed that she was denied participation due to her 'reputation' and argued that the selection process is biased, potentially functioning as a form of 'reward' or punishment for members:

They [the departmental leaders] can assign all of the roles for committees and all of the leadership roles and often do assign them to people who they feel that they agree with; they don't have to give any reasoning for it, they just say "Oh, well I think that person would be good

in that role” and they use it as a reward or as a penalty for people (Participant 2, PI).

The findings show women feeling ‘Otherness’ in the department through exclusion and silencing from departmental celebrations and committees. It supports existing literature on women’s experiences of ‘Otherness’ within academic organizations (Fotaki, 2013; Strauß & Boncori, 2020; Tyler & Cohen, 2010). As Tyler and Cohen (2010, p. 186) suggest, “gender performativity is played out in terms of who is visible or invisible or a legitimate occupant of space — who is allocated space and who is not, and the symbolic implications of these arrangements — but also in boundary management”. Studies have also identified a performance-based academic culture that privileges a masculine ideal of the competitive, assertive, and independent worker (Misra et al., 2017; Thébaud & Charles, 2018). In this context, dominant organizational norms and power structures shape recognition and exclusion. This implies that gender performativity is reinforced through spaces that symbolize women’s structurally lower position within the academic hierarchy. In this sense, women, due to their lower status in the academic spaces, are excluded from meaningful participation in departmental life. The feelings of ‘outsider status’ identified in this study are consistent with previous research, including O’Meara et.al., (2018) and, more recently, Blalock and Stefanese-Yates (2024), which show how gender, intersecting with contractual status, intensifies the challenges women face in HEIs.

Participants’ belief that committee memberships being used as a reward or penalty suggests a performative dimension of gender. Jenkins and Finneman (2018) argue that dominant organizational norms influence how members behave and interact. As Butler (1990) suggests, nonconformity to gender norms can lead to punishment. In an organizational context, this may suggest that those who do not conform to those organizational norms may face consequences, including restriction to meaningful participation in the organizational life (Mathew, 2025). These findings further suggest that such norms marginalize women who do not conform, positioning them as ‘Other’ and subjecting them to exclusion through informal processes (Fotaki, 2013). This aligns with Aiston and Fo’s (2021) concept of external silencing, which highlights how micro-inequalities, including exclusion from seemingly minor events, including decision making committees and panels, contribute to women’s invisibility. This study agrees with and builds on their work by demonstrating how women are denied participation in departmental celebrations and representation, even in gender equality initiatives like AS, which itself claims to improve inclusivity and a supportive culture for women, thus reinforcing their marginalization and limiting their visibility within institutional space.

### **Hypervisibility**

The performative aspect of the AS process in this study was reinforced by the accounts of three women who had some involvement in the AS process. Their experiences showed that women may remain mere observers of the SAT process, or their presence becomes visible only through websites or when they are required to contribute case studies that showcase departmental success in addressing gender inequality.

### **Something on the Website**

As shown in Table 3, women who feel like ‘outsiders’ in the department questioned the credibility of the department’s AS awards, viewing them as something that exists only on the website:

I think it’s [Athena Swan departmental initiative] been pretty poor in raising awareness. Because I don’t know too much about it. Like, I don’t think many people do. I don’t think it impacts me at all. Like I’ve seen it like, they have it like on their website, they’re Athena SWAN accredited. And like, honestly, sometimes, I wonder, but I don’t know how they got their credit. But I don’t know of the steps that they had to go through like (Participant 4, postdoc).

‘Sometimes it’s a feeling that they maybe have it [Athena Swan] on the outside, and then you see it. [When I apply for the job.] But then afterwards when I came here, I didn’t hear much about it (Participant 7, postdoc).

‘Well, I’ve seen them advertise it on the website. And it’s always saying, “it’s a good thing. We have this, and it’s gold” [laughs]’ (Participant 25, postdoc).

As the interview quotes above indicate, participants viewed AS primarily as ‘something’ displayed on the department’s website to showcase their gender equality efforts, rather than it having any real improvements in women’s everyday experiences. Furthermore, women appeared sceptical of such a display without making any meaningful impact on their lives. Thus, the accreditation was often seen as a performative effort aimed at enhancing the department’s image rather than creating real change. Furthermore, the departmental SAT (20 to 28 members) shows only a single postdoctoral research assistant and a research staff member included, despite postdocs making up the majority of the academic staff. This might hinder the SAT from capturing the diverse challenges of postdocs in the department.

### **Writing a Case Study for Athena Swan**

It was interesting to note that a postdoctoral researcher involved in the AS award application shared that being part

of a department with a Gold AS award had no meaningful or positive impact on her personal experience.

According to her, "I don't think Athena Swan has had any [stress] impact at all" (Participant 3, postdoc).

Participant 3 shared that she became visible to a senior academic, involved in the AS application, only after approaching them for support. When asked why she wrote the testimonial case study, she explained that she had approached management for guidance on a mock interview. During that meeting, she was asked to write a case study for AS, which she did solely because she was requested to, rather than as a reflection of any positive impact the department's practices had on her experience:

So, then ... then they became aware of my existence in the department [emphasis] because before then I was just there with my colleague [details removed]. So, when XX was aware, XX said, XX could use my case study for the Athena Swan application. So, yaa, I was used in the Athena Swan application as a case study ... I did it just because she asked me [smile] (Participant 3, postdoc).

This relates to the concept of 'hypervisibility,' where women are expected to take on 'good citizenship' roles — such as writing case studies for the AS application to demonstrate the department's commitment to gender equality. Recent studies argue that academics are required to perform 'good academic citizenship' as a part of their loyalty and commitment to the university (Albia & Cheng, 2023). This is reflected in the account of the woman who contributed to the case study document, highlighting the performative aspect of the Athena Swan application process, in which women are expected to engage in 'academic good citizenship' — such as writing case studies that contribute to departmental achievement, including securing AS awards. While the citizenship literature argues that citizens can challenge and renegotiate these duties (Albia & Cheng, 2023), the current study suggests that this may not always be possible for women who are historically a minority within the organization. As Davids (2022) suggests, the performativity dimension of academic citizenship emphasizes that academic citizenship is not only about performative compliance, but also unavoidably about what it means to be and become in an agonistic space (p. 3). In this sense, academic citizenship is not limited to performative compliance with institutional expectations but also involves processes of being and becoming within a context of tension and power relations.

The power dynamics in the current study suggest that some women may feel unable to refuse participation in the AS process, as declining could be perceived as disloyalty and a refusal of academic citizenship behaviours typically expected of them. The findings further contribute to the literature on

the gendered nature of academic citizenship. It is similar to Russo and Ionescu's (2024) findings in the context of a Dutch university, which shows that gender norms may be a reason for women to engage more in academic citizenship service roles. The current study extends this by arguing that such performative dimensions of gender may also result in women being unable to refuse participation.

### **Evaluating the Impact of Athena Swan on Women's Academic Experiences**

Finally, this study answers the research question of what impact AS accreditation has on the lived experiences of women academics. This study identified that the AS accreditation has limited real-world relevance to women's actual everyday experiences and challenges previous studies that claim AS accreditation of organizations to be improving women's experiences in those organizations (for example, Barnard, 2017; Caffrey et al., 2016, etc.). In light of the limited positive experience of women as members of an AS gold-awarded department, this study found AS a 'failure' as an instrument of change. Furthermore, the findings highlight that the claims made in the AS gold-awarded departmental application document in integrating supporting initiatives for women, especially for post-doctoral positions, have not translated to everyday lives of women. Therefore, it agrees with studies like Tayar (2017) that criticize external gender equality benchmarks for not necessarily meaning real commitment and adds that the impacts of AS accreditations can be superficial and do not have real-world relevance to early- and mid-career researchers.

Furthermore, the findings show that the Athena Swan implementation process itself could create feelings of 'invisibility', 'outsider status' and 'exclusion' for women, resulting in the AS process itself reproducing gender performativity for women. Tzanaku and Pearce (2019) argue that there is an "implied competitive element" associated with AS awards, with it being connected to some funding requirements as well as to attracting talented staff. This results in overburdened work for women, especially in science, where they are a minority (Caffrey et al., 2016; Ovseiko et al., 2017), and not gaining the award can result in SAT members being penalized (Tzanaku & Pearce, 2019). The findings from the current study agree with this and add that the AS process itself might be performative for women who might not be able to deny participation in the AS process out of fear of penalty. Women's belief that AS is something 'advertised on the website' without making a real difference in their everyday lives agrees with recent findings of Yarrow and Johnston's (2022) study that conceptualized the gender equality work carried out by AS champions as mere 'peacocking' activities. In their study, conducted among AS institutional champions in the UK and Ireland, they argue that AS is "institutional

peacocking” as actions institutions commit to display their equality initiatives for institutional gains rather than making any structural changes. The findings from the current study agree with Yarrow and Johnston’s (2022) argument that AS awards can be a ‘showcase’ for enhancing reputation rather than making meaningful change in women’s lives in the participating institutions. Moreover, this may lead women to be sceptical of gender equality initiatives, seeing them as superficial — merely ‘something they see on the website.’ These findings align with recent reports indicating that women have lost confidence in the AS accreditation itself (Mckie, 2020).

### Implications for HRD Practice

The findings of this study have implications for Human Resource Development (HRD) practitioners. It highlights the need to critically assess the implementation of gender equality initiatives like AS, ensuring that such programmes move beyond performative displays toward fostering genuine inclusion. HRD practitioners should be attentive to the power dynamics and spatial inequalities that shape women’s experiences, particularly for early- and mid-career academics. This means creating mechanisms that value women’s contributions without reinforcing their hypervisibility in symbolic roles, while also addressing their invisibility in decision-making and celebratory aspects of institutional life. By recognizing and addressing these nuanced experiences, HRD practitioners can play a central role in promoting meaningful cultural change and advancing equitable academic environments.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is based on empirical data from a single case study within an AS Gold-awarded department, and as such, its findings cannot be generalized to the broader academic context. While it offers rare insight into lived experiences within such a setting, further research across multiple AS-accredited departments is necessary to draw broader conclusions. The study primarily reflects the perspectives of postdoctoral researchers at early- and mid-career stages, and therefore does not capture the full range of voices within the department. Additionally, time constraints limited the ability to include interviews with AS leaders, which could have offered valuable insight into the institutional side of the participants’ negative experiences. An ethnographic approach could provide a deeper understanding of the everyday dynamics among organizational members. To address these limitations, future research should replicate this study across various

AS Gold departments and consider comparative analyses to explore how early- and mid-career researchers’ experiences may differ across contexts.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study answers the research question by showing that the AS gold award departmental initiatives had no impact on improving the lived experiences of women in this study. It adds to the AS literature by providing empirical evidence on how the AS implementation process could exclude and make them feel ‘invisible’. The findings also add to research on the gendered nature of academic citizenship, suggesting that women may feel less able to refuse participation in service roles associated with gender equality work. Theoretically, it extends performativity theory to organizational spaces, showing the performative nature of AS, where women feel hyper visible on the website — used to showcase the department’s equality credentials — while remaining excluded and unheard within both the department and the AS process. These findings challenge claims from recent studies that AS fosters an inclusive and supportive culture, instead revealing that the process can generate feelings of exclusion for women, particularly early- and mid-career academics.

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