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Sexism and Gender-Washing in Academia and Beyond

Theorizing Patriarchy Against a Backdrop of Workplace Sexism and Stress in UK Academia

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ABSTRACT

Our analysis investigates the distinct relationship between sexism and workplace stress as experienced by women academics in the UK higher education system. We argue that due to the insufficient literature on this issue there is a limited knowledge base of the harmful psychological effects of stress in the workplace upon women academics in the UK university sector. In applying the concept of "gender regime" through a feminist lens we explain how the patriarchal, neoliberal university is a site of sexist discrimination, producing psychosocial health hazards in the workplace resulting in stressful experiences unique to women academics. The methodology employed in the study was a combined feminist and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach using semi-structured interviews to generate qualitative data. The sample included detailed interviews with seven women academics. Three themes were identified; *exclusion*, *discrimination,* and *gendered divisions of labor* as categories to illustrate how the gender regime manifests itself to cause stress in the workplace. Our data also suggested that the presence of men in leadership roles was associated with a higher frequency of sexist incidents compared to women-led management teams. To challenge such discrimination and the consequential experiences of workplace stress for women academics, we argue for recommendations that go beyond the micro agentic level implementing transformative change at the meso institutional level. These proposals include positive action equality programs, equitable and transparent recruitment/promotion procedures, access to full participation in all forms of academic work, statutory equality training programs for senior leadership postholders, and effective support mechanisms for employees with caring responsibilities. Simultaneously, we contend that any analysis of organizational gender regimes within UK universities needs to be recognized as originating from the wider macro patriarchal structural context.

1 | Introduction

Despite recognition of the "institutional peacocking" (Yarrow and Johnston 2022, 758) of gender equality work within UK higher education institutions (HEIs), contractual and workload inequalities are still very much evidenced when employment and progression data are examined. The majority of part-time workers in UK HEIs are women and less likely than men to be on open ended or permanent contracts (HESA 2024). Women on fractional contracts are more likely to work longer hours (UCU 2016), less likely to be in senior positions (Richards et al. 2023; Fagan and Teasdale 2021), and less than one quarter of institutions in the United Kingdom have female Vice-Chancellors (Bachan and Bryson 2022). There also remains a significant variation in the gender pay gap statistics, up to a 41% median difference across all types of roles, with estimations that progress toward closing the gap is slowing down (HEPI 2024). These disparities are uncomfortably at odds with the success experienced by the very graduates the system produces, with a majority of female enrollments who go on to earn more first-class honors degrees compared to their male peers (HESA 2023).

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Literature acknowledges the disproportionate degree of exposure to workplace stressors experienced by women (Biloudeau et al. 2020; Mukherjee 2024) and that the root of this is often as a result of the double burden of domestic labor with paid employment which can increase the risk of psychological distress (Väänänen et al. 2005). Consequently, this institutional tension between the private and public sphere contributes to increased levels of psychological distress amongst women, with the conflict caused by work impacting upon family, and vice versa, occurring disproportionately for women compared to men.

This paper makes a significant contribution in bringing together discussions on the distinct relationship between workplace sexism and stress as endured by women academics in UK universities through a feminist lens. It evidences the existence of a sexist culture, illustrates the ways in which the gender regime in operation in HEIs is a stressor, and asserts that this regime is a cause of stress that is uniquely experienced disproportionately by women academics. The application of the term sexism in our analysis stems from the concept of cultural sexism that refers to social practices that both devalue and fail to recognize the contributions of women on an everyday basis, resulting in marginalization and discrimination (Savigny 2014, 2017). The paper also employs an innovative methodological approach with its combination of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and feminist theory in analysis of the data (Abdellatif and Haynes 2024; Clifford et al. 2018; A. Cohen et al. 2022). This synthesis enables a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between individual hermeneutic experiences of the women participants to the wider patriarchal neoliberal structures that are embedded within higher education organizations.

The rationale behind the purpose of this paper stemmed from a wider study on lecturer stress in higher education that demonstrated the relationship between a neoliberal organizational culture and high levels of stress in the workplace. In addition to this, further findings also revealed how sexism was identified as a stressor for virtually all the women participants yet not recognized by the men in the study as a cause of stress (Baron 2022). Consequently, the aim and focus of this paper is to reassess that data from the women participants utilizing Walby's concept of the gender regime (2009, 2011, 2015, 2020, 2023) to generate further knowledge on this underdeveloped issue of the distinct dynamic between sexism and stress within academia (Watts and Robertson 2011; Guthrie et al. 2017).

1.1 | Patriarchy and Gender Regimes in Academia: From Macro to Meso to Micro

Constructing a narrative that views institutional sexism as a significant causal factor of workplace stress for female academics within higher education inevitably necessitates the incorporation of the concept of patriarchy. Walby (1990, 20) concisely captures the nature of the gendered power dynamic within her definition of the term as, "... a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." This hierarchical domination is explicitly present within the current UK university sector as evidenced by Bachan and Bryson's (2022) study on the financial status of Vice Chancellors between the period of 2000–2019. Within their sample of 115 UK universities, 76% of this ultimate leadership position was occupied by men in 2019. Furthermore, other data confirmed this patriarchal presence in that 63 out of the 115 universities had never employed a female Vice Chancellor within the period of their study's focus. This type of evidence unequivocally indicates the gendered nature of power between men and women within the sector, and how patriarchy is reproduced in hierarchical formations. Thus, the very essence of this study is rooted in the recognition of the ontological reality of patriarchy in HEIs as a dominant and debilitating presence for gender equality in academia. To further contextualize our research, we precede our exploration of the literature on gender inequality in HEIs by establishing the theoretical conceptual framework that underpins the study: gender regime and its distinct relationship to stress for women academics.

Gender regime is a notion that originated within Acker's (2006) idea of "inequality regimes" and is a concept utilized by various theorists to analytically explain gendered inequalities (Bull and Shannon 2025; L. Cohen et al. 2023; Walby 2009). Walby's (2009, 301) conceptualization of gender regime as "a set of interconnected gender relations and gendered institutions that constitutes a system" shows the importance of understanding how micro relational elements are intrinsically linked to the wider macro milieu. Walby (2011, 2022) has stated frequently that the terms gender regime and patriarchy refer to the same underlying concept, a system of gender inequality. The reason she selected gender regime as a conceptual tool related to how other commentators inaccurately accused her of using the concept of patriarchy in an essentialist and ahistorical manner (Walby 2011). It is important to highlight that the idea of the gender regime possesses conceptual differentiation both in relation to understanding the societal sphere it is located in, and within the severity of its patriarchal relational manifestations within different societies. Gender regimes within domestic and public spheres manifest inequality in different forms, the former is of an exclusionary nature confining women to the context of the family and household. In the public gender regime, segregationary inequality exists in which women are present in public spaces but assigned an inferior status compared to men (Walby 1990, 2011). Our analysis argues how the public gender regime manifests itself in the UK neoliberal higher education sector revealing the stressful emotional effects from discrimination and exclusion upon women academics.

Walby (2011, 2020, 2023) contends that the severity of gender regimes varies according to the political context that it is situated within, hence the gender regime in a neoliberal capitalist society contains higher levels of inequality and shallower levels of democracy compared to the gender regime in a social democratic capitalist system. Therefore, neoliberal political environments intensify the harshness of the gender regime and "privilege hegemonic masculinity" producing deeper inequalities (Savigny 2017, 644). Walby (2020, 416) captures the importance of differentiating the nature of public gender regimes stating, "the public, modern form itself takes more than one form, with a distinction between neoliberal and social democratic being the most important. They have different levels of gender economic and political inequality, quality of intimacy and levels of violence." Walby (2015) suggests that the United

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States of America is an example of a neoliberal gender regime with Sweden as a socio-democratic version of the regime. The argument we assert here is that the entrenched presence of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom is intensely visible in its higher education system displayed in marketization processes of corporate managerialism, an increase in performativity audits, academic de-professionalization, an increase in work intensification, and student consumerism (Baron 2022), leading to a severe form of gender regime inequality in UK universities. Richards et al. (2023) also highlight this process arguing that the idea of aspirations to realize gender equality outcomes in a neoliberal higher education system are seriously undermined by marketization processes such as economic inequality, ruthless competitiveness, atomized individualism, and occupational precarity. Similarly, Prothero's (2023) autoethnographic account of her career revealed from a personal viewpoint the discriminations and detrimental emotional effects she encountered as a female academic in the masculinist neoliberal university.

In assessing this relationship in our study between the neoliberal gender regime and sexist practices that contribute to emotional distress for women academics in the higher education workplace, the concepts of macro, meso, and micro will be utilized. The macro level refers to the totality of the wider society constituted by the numerous interlinked patriarchal institutions, such as the State, work, and education. The meso/intermediate level comprises the individual institution (the education system) with the university sector forming one part of that institution. The micro is situated in the everyday practices experienced by individuals in that institution. The relations between these three dimensions are dynamic, containing the process of macro structures flowing downwards influencing the meso and micro, yet inversely micro instances aggregating to formulate the reproduction of meso and macro levels. Within this hierarchical structure the gender regime is present within each level. Walby (2015, 12) emphasizes the necessity of recognizing these inter-related three levels to show how overarching structures of patriarchal capitalist society shape both institutional and individual contexts, and that "...this understanding requires the concept of society as a social system. It demands sociological inquiry at a macro level, not only at the meso and micro levels." Hence, by adopting this type of analytic framework, we contend that stressful experiences that women academics face arising from sexism in academia needs to be assessed in relation to the organizational setting and wider societal formation.

The concept of *stress* is recognized in literature as multi-faceted, but defined in its most fundamental sense, neutrally, as "the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors" (American Psychological Association 2018). The authors' adoption of the term stress in this paper, however, aligns more closely with literature that recognizes stress in the workplace as a negative experience, such as Cooper et al. (2001) who refers to "strain," which emphasizes the "distress" aspect of an experience, that produces very damaging psychological and physical effects for the individual.

Thus, this paper views experiences of sexism as encountered by participants immersed in, subject to, and shaped by the neoliberal gender regime that perpetuate negative types of stress. The centrality of these concepts and the application of them is apparent throughout our analysis of the data and the conclusions presented at the end of the work.

1.2 | Default Labor in the Academe: Sexist Stressors

The experiences of academic women's disproportionate accumulation of stress via day-to-day structures and micro experiences are apparent. This ranges from accounts of overt sexual discrimination in the workplace to the "drip drip" (Savigny 2017, 648) or "slow grind" effect (Westoby et al. 2021), which further constructs and consolidates the gender regime as a cyclical and reproductive phenomenon. Savigny (2017, 643) also asserts that sexism is experienced by women in academia as a commonplace cultural norm, and an "ordinary feature" of their working environment, whereby gender is "*performed upon* women" (Savigny 2017, 646, our emphasis). The connotations here are that the continual and accumulated impact of pervasive sexism is erosive, and other studies have explored the day-to-day impact of this.

"Academic housework" is a recognized feature of the workloads and roles assigned to many women, that is, responsibilities or tasks which are often associated with more menial, less promotable, and lower status elements of academic work. For example, heavy administrative duties (such as program leadership) and higher loading of teaching or pastoral work (such as the personal tutor or academic advisor role) is more likely to be taken on or assigned to women (Barrett and Barrett 2011) at the expense of prestigious activities (Kandiko-Howson et al. 2018). This practice (of women taking care of the core business of student-facing academia), recognized by both UK and US centric writers, then enables and facilitates others' (men's) access to activities that form the basis of career-building assets, crucially the work of writing that leads to conference presentations and publications. This side-lining of opportunities for academic currency has led some to position women who prioritize academic writing as engaging in a political act of resistance (Mazak 2022), which could "play a role in disrupting and re-writing masculinist cultural norms" (Savigny 2017, 644).

The consequences of lack of access to these opportunities and the playing out of male hierarchies contributes to reduced motivation (Eslen-Ziya and Murat Yildirim 2021), lesser promotion and lack of representation in the meso at senior levels (Long et al. 1993; L. Cohen et al. 2023; Aiston and Kent Fo 2021) achievement of tenure (Weisshaar 2017), lack of confidence (Westoby et al. 2021) and limitations in the ability to establish crucial career-building networks (Heffernan 2021; L. Cohen et al. 2023; Westoby et al. 2021).

More evidence of the gender regime at micro levels can be found in recognized acts of sexism, often referred to as microaggressions because they may appear as minute instances to an outsider, and difficult to evidence (Aiston and Kent Fo 2021; Blithe and Elliott 2020) but are still experienced as sexism. Fotaki's 2013 study identified four aspects of discriminatory behavior which were; demeaning representations and use of language, sexual harassment, negative connotations of pregnancy and motherhood, and the objectification of the unwanted female body in

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academic space. Sexual harassment is referred to as "systemic" in U.S. academia (Bishu and Kennedy 2020) and implied as verging on inevitable in a system where networking and types of patronage are essential by L. Cohen et al. (2023).

Several studies (Prothero 2023; Mountz 2016; Blithe and Elliott 2020) that distinctly identified the stressful impact of sexism within the workplace have highlighted how micro-aggressive behaviors from men toward women have caused harmful emotional and physical effects. Prothero (2023) in her autoethnographic account cites many instances within everyday work situations from both male colleagues and students that caused her immense distress. One example revealed how she was constantly undermined by a small group of male students in one of her classes from disruptive behavior, and complaints of having to be taught by a female lecturer, resulting in her being physically sick every week before the session. Mountz (2016) similarly exposed the destructive physical manifestations of stress from working in the neoliberal masculinist university. Particularly striking are the experiences of two women participants from her study who revealed the detrimental effect of stress upon fertility patterns. The first account showed that during the teaching semesters the participant's ovulation cycle completely stopped, only resuming to normality in the summer holiday period. The second participant highlighted that during her first year of university teaching the patterns in her menstruation cycle were seriously affected, again during semester time. Blithe and Elliott's (2020) qualitative study demonstrated how micro-aggressive behaviors manifested themselves in acts of explicit hostility and overt sexual harassment experienced by women academics from male colleagues causing immense levels of stress.

The impacts of the gender regime are also felt in obstacles to academic career success that originate in the private, home spheres because of motherhood and the increased likelihood of caring responsibilities. The component parts of this disproportionate burden were recognized around 30 years ago by Duncombe and Marsden (1993) with the "triple shift" burden experienced by women consisting of paid employment, domestic responsibilities, and emotional labor. The practical impact of this results in decreased academic output due to less time to write (Barrett and Barrett 2011) and consequently amass the academic currency required for academic success (Westoby et al. 2021). As at the macro level, this micro level expectation to be responsible for the majority of domestic tasks and child-rearing is prevalent (Savigny 2014; Westoby et al. 2021) and clearly impedes career progression (L. Cohen et al. 2023), often leading to fractional working, whereby women academics are "less privy to meetings, mentorship, and opportunities for development" (Westoby et al. 2021, 1046). This burden in the private sphere has a relationship with the public academic life because of the reduced emotional resources, energy, and resilience to cope with and tackle sexist practices in academia. In a reciprocal manner, stressors from home can reduce and negate capacity to cope at work (Baron 2022), and literature shows that women are exposed to greater levels of stress derived from the workplace than men due to equality issues and a work-life imbalance (Michailidis 2008; Hogan et al. 2014).

So, gendered stressors from the workplace follow women home (Mountz 2016), and gendered stressors from home are brought to the workplace. Being subject to this inescapable pursuit and transference of stress from one sphere to the other leads to unique psychosocial stressors experienced disproportionately by women academics. We assert that such conditions produce psychosocial health hazards in the workplace resulting in stressful experiences unique to women academics. Although some studies (Mountz 2016; Prothero 2023) distinctly reveal this negative emotional damage from the gender regime, we contend that there is limited data on this issue, and a neglect to closely inspect such psychological effects in the literature on gender inequality within higher education, hence the rationale for this paper (Baron 2022; Guthrie et al. 2017; Watts and Robertson 2011).

2 | Methodology

As previously stated, the primary data analyzed within this paper is sourced from a wider study that investigated lecturer stress in higher education (Baron 2022). One significant issue that surfaced from the data identified sexism as a stressor for virtually all the women participants, whilst none of the male interviewees experienced this form of discrimination. The focus of this paper is to reanalyze the data by integrating both IPA with feminist theory to generate a deeper evaluation of this distinct relationship between sexism and stress within UK academia. Deem (2002, 836) highlights that feminist research is "informed both by feminist theories and by a concern to explore the situated positions and experiences of women and men and the effects of gender processes on one or both sexes." Utilizing Walby's concept of the neoliberal gender regime in conjunction with an IPA approach to our data analysis, enables an explanation of the idiographic accounts of stress that women academics experience from organizational sexist cultures within universities.

2.1 | Methodological Approach

IPA is a methodological manifestation of phenomenology and is grounded in double hermeneutics which Smith et al. (2009, 186) define as allowing "the researcher to develop an analytic interpretation of participants accounts which should be prompted by, and clearly grounded in, but which may also go beyond, the participants' own sense making and conceptualizations." Hence, this type of (double) hermeneutic analysis simultaneously emphasizes the importance for the researcher to empathically enter the phenomenological subjective experience of the participant but also advocates permission for the researcher's interpretation of that reality. However, although IPA provides a detailed understanding and interpretation of individual experiences (double hermeneutic), it does not explain how the wider social structures influence this context that the person is located within (A. Cohen et al. 2022). Therefore, the methodological inclusion of feminist theory, using Walby's gender regime concept alongside IPA within our study, counters the limitations of IPA micro interpretive analyses. This enables our study to contextualize the detailed findings of the participants' experience of stress in relation to the neoliberal organizational gender regime within UK academia, providing a triple hermeneutic (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009).

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The combined use of IPA and feminist theory as a methodological approach within research has only recently emerged with several pioneering studies establishing this new synthesis (Clifford et al. 2018; A. Cohen et al. 2022; Abdellatif and Haynes 2024). One salient feature identified in our research and recognized within these studies is how both IPA and feminism methodologically contain strengths and weaknesses that complement each other. IPA offers a very pragmatic and systematic method to process the detailed minutiae of research data into meaningful thematic concepts, whereas feminist methodology lacks this practical level of detail on data analysis. However, in the theoretical analysis of micro data in relation to wider sociocultural and political contexts, feminist methodology is proficient in this task, whereas IPA is insufficient alone, as it avoids a macro level of analysis. Clifford et al. (2018, 2) captures this necessity and benefit to incorporating both approaches, stating, "combining a feminist approach with IPA helps recognize difference and power imbalances and acknowledges the impact of wider structural factors on the research process as well as on the women's lived experiences." Hence, our study is grounded with this comprehensive orientation to integrate IPA and feminist theory, specifically using Walby's concept of gender regime, in the study of stress amongst women academics in higher education.

2.2 | Method and Sampling

The sample for this paper included seven women academics of white ethnic identity. Apart from one individual the other participants had considerable experience of working in higher education, having been in post for a minimum of 10 years. Five of the academics held the position of Senior Lecturer whilst the other two individuals were employed in the post of Lecturer. One of the limitations of conducting interviews using an IPA methodology is the confined sample size to capture the experiences of different demographic intersections (Smith et al. 2009). Our sample to a certain extent reflects this limitation. Various studies have noted how certain social groups amongst academics in higher education such as women, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities experience worse mental health outcomes compared to other groups, revealing the importance to appreciate intersectionality in any analysis (Guthrie et al. 2017; Kinman and Wray 2013). Hence, within our study we acknowledge a restricted account of the experiences of women academics, particularly in relation to ethnicity.

The interviews were conducted between October 2017 and January 2020 in a "face-to-face" context by one of the authors of this paper. The time duration of the interviews was at a mean average of 54 min and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Explicit reassurance was given prior to the interview in the initial communication with participants to confirm confidentiality and anonymity that all interviewee disclosures would be securely maintained, and the study was approved by a university ethics panel. Pseudonyms were used to protect our participant's anonymity.

The sampling method employed in this paper was a non-probability purposive type as the research topic focussed on a selective specialized group—that of women academics. Access to many of the participants was facilitated by a gatekeeper working within the institution in which the interviews occurred, who had a close working relationship with these individuals. The content of the questions in our (semi-structured) interviews centered around demographic information that included job title, contract status, and the number of years working in higher education. The main substantive section consisted of questions regarding personal work experiences of stress, identifying factors on its causation, explaining the effects derived from it, and strategies to both prevent and deal with stress.

Smith et al. (2009) highlight that an IPA analysis of qualitative interview data follows a flexible but rigorous interpretative process. This begins with intensely listening to the recorded audio material of each individual participant followed by transcribing verbatim. The next part of the process involves coding the data using both a descriptive and interpretive commentary by the researcher. The next step identifies emergent themes from this coding process, assessing how these themes relate to each other to formulate an overarching category. Once this procedure has been completed on all participants' transcripts, the final analysis compares similarities and differences between cases to generate new overarching grand themes.

Intrinsic to this interpretative analysis of the data was our application of feminist theory to provide an explanatory account of the gendered nature of stress for women academics taking into account the dynamic between the micro, meso and macro. To illustrate this, one of the codes generated from our data was "boy's club," a phrase used explicitly by two of the participants to convey how male academics exhibited excluding behaviors that were identified as a cause of stress. From this code we formulated the theme of discrimination to capture this one dimension of a sexist organizational culture that women academics encounter. Overall, we constructed three overarching themes to illustrate the harmful emotional effects of this disempowering culture in higher education. The final element of this interpretative and analytic process provided an overarching theme, that of applying Walby's concept of the neoliberal gender regime to conceptually interlink our three themes into an interconnected whole.

3 | Findings

Each of the participant's accounts of their experience of sexism and stress in the neoliberal university are presented and explored here. In our analysis of the data using IPA and feminist theory we identified three inter-related themes, *exclusion, discrimination*, and *gendered divisions of labor*, and argue that these different elements significantly contribute to the formation of a gender regime that disadvantages women academics professionally and poses a psychosocial health hazard.

3.1 | Exclusion

Exclusion as a stressor centered around how the participants received less recognition and involvement within the institution compared to their male peers, with invisibility as a form of exclusion strongly experienced by this particular individual.

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Interviewer: "What other situations at work are stressors?"

Michelle: "I had a meeting with my Divisional lead, whom I've known for 10 years, and he could not remember my name, I felt insignificant, male members would get a response [she was referring to email replies back from management], in this institution, it is male dominated, patriarchal like..."

Interviewer: "Gender favouritism?"

Michelle: "The Divisional lead always talks to men, laughs with them, pats them on the back, but he could not remember my name, it stung a bit."

Interviewer: "You felt devalued?"

Michelle: "Devalued, dehumanised, I work hard here, I recently organised a conference and it was not acknowledged by my Head of School, whereas when a male colleague organised a new degree, he got an email that was praising his efforts. I don't resent my colleague, but I never got an email for organising my conference."

This participant was angry when disclosing these experiences describing how she felt devalued due to the excluding responses from two male colleagues in leadership roles within her department. Her reaction to the general question of what issues are stressors at work explicitly cited how her institution was patriarchal in nature explaining how this meso level of organizational culture generated gendered forms of exclusion in the micro context. This level of awareness echoes the reasoning behind Walby's concept of the gender regime. Further in the interview Michelle referred to how she internalized the hurt feelings from these two episodes that triggered activation of her underlying health condition of depression. Savigny's (2014) qualitative study cited various accounts from women academics such as Michelle, that highlighted how an insidious cultural sexism process causes experiences of exclusion and discrimination negating female occupational equality. Although Savigny's research eloquently exposes this type of inequity the acknowledgment of the harmful emotional effects is underdeveloped in her analysis. The need to recognize this is essential to fully demonstrate the debilitating psychosocial health effects from exclusionary processes as our account with Michelle revealed.

Women working in a male dominated academic department can easily encounter exclusion from everyday mundane events (Barrett and Barrett 2011; Savigny 2014, 2017). Lauren highlighted this in relation to topics of conversation that she experienced from her male colleagues.

> Lauren: "... things they often talk about. Our male colleagues talk about technology, they often talk about the latest forms of technology ... they get really obsessed ... so you are kind of excluded in conversations ... a colleague, the badly organised one calls us ladies. I feel like slapping him."

This participant revealed how both herself and a female colleague based in a male dominated department were exposed to men talking excessively about technology resulting in the feeling of their exclusion. Furthermore, she highlighted the use of chauvinistic language expressed by one male colleague that elicited a very angry response expressed in the interview, but repressed in her work environment (Prothero 2023). At an earlier stage, in response to a general question about the causes of stress in the workplace, Lauren was very explicit and definitive in pinpointing male colleagues as a factor regarding their levels of disorganization and lack of professionalism. Aiston and Kent Fo's (2021) study also discussed the use of devaluing sexist language, arguing that such terms used by men results in an "internal silencing" process within women. They highlighted this as a dynamic of micro-politics, in which apparently harmless trivial incidents in the everyday workplace accumulate to reproduce patriarchal power relations. Like Savigny (2014), their study provided detailed qualitative insights in how female academics encountered such discriminations, yet their analysis was limited in the recognition of the detrimental emotional impact from such an experience.

3.2 | Discrimination

The oppressive emotional effects of sexist discrimination upon female progression within their academic careers in the patriarchal neoliberal university is an issue numerous researchers have identified (Mountz 2016; Prothero 2023; Richards et al. 2023). Our research findings also confirmed this, and how such discrimination was experienced as stressful.

One participant, Georgia, elaborated on this relationship between stress and sexism and other forms of discrimination.

Interviewer: "Do you think sexism is an issue within this university and if it is, has it contributed to feelings of stress?"

Georgia: "It can do, I mean, it has done over the years. Definitely, there is a sense of it's a bit of a boy's club, but it's not just that, it's not just about gender."

Interviewer: "Your subject area or across the university?"

Georgia: "I'd say across the university, my subject area, yes, where I have been moved recently, it's very much a boy's club, there are more male staff, and the manager and management are mainly men."

Interviewer: "Men in positions of management whether in your department or across the university, still illustrates that we still live in this gender unequal environment."

Georgia: "Yes, they sort of make jokes about football and act in a very stereotypical male bonding way when there are women around, it's irritating, there is a bit of that goes on. Also, you tend to get discrimination against you if you're

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part-time and have a disability. I've been in rooms where senior managers have made jokes about disabilities quite openly in front of several people ..."

This participant starkly highlighted how she experienced sexist behavior from colleagues both in the past and recent times throughout the institution, highlighting its discriminatory effects causing both stress and irritation within her. Georgia speculated on the context of this behavior as related to the overrepresentation of men within the department producing a very masculine culture operating in everyday work practices (Fotaki 2013; Savigny 2017). Additionally, she noted the intersections of discrimination also existed toward part-time members of staff and individuals with a disability, citing how senior managers had engaged in extremely unprofessional behavior regarding their attitude toward disability. L. Cohen et al. (2023) study similarly identified the advantageous benefits to men and the discriminatory effects upon women from exclusive masculine informal social networks both within and external to the workplace. Within Georgia's account she recognized male privilege not only in her immediate micro work context but also within the wider meso institutional university setting, a phenomenon that illustrates the concept of the gender regime in operation (Walby 2009).

The terminology of the "boys' club" highlighted by Georgia as a source of males gaining advantage was also cited by another participant (Lucy). In the interview dialog the participant seemed to be hesitant and tentative in the expression of her words, this may have been due to the dynamic of a male researcher interviewing a female on the issue of male privilege.

Interviewer: "What about transparency in the faculty? Do others get a good deal?"

Lucy: "Whether they do or not, I don't know, there is a lot of feeling around, that see, that some people get an easy deal, and others have a hard deal."

Interviewer: "Any characteristics?"

Lucy: "There is a feeling that there is a favourite subject, it [mentions subject] is seen to get more support, and they have a better staff-student ratio."

Interviewer: "What's the reason for that?"

Lucy: [There is a silent pause] ... "I don't know, because it's not the only traditional academic subject, but it's seen that [mentions subject] are treated more favourably, I've heard stories of the 'Boy's club' of [mentions subject] ... who knows?"

This excerpt directly reveals how gender inequity manifests itself in Lucy's department in her account of how one subject area with male colleagues received advantageous treatment compared to other teams with women members of staff (Savigny 2014, 2017). In other sections of the interview Lucy discussed how her subject area had particularly suffered from staff absences due to workplace stress and other health issues, but her male line manager responded inadequately to address this. Consequently, this resulted in excessive workloads with the participant describing the burdensome effect upon her, and how it limited the time spent on research activity excluding her from REF (Research Excellence Framework[1]) submissions. Lucy's account delineates how discrimination produces stress as the individual (s) facing this inequity are not allocated resources fairly and supported appropriately to meet the demands of a challenging (sexist) environment (Allison et al. 2021). These aspects of the gender regime illustrate how female academics must engage in excessive work activity to counteract the impediment of male privilege, with the potential to heightened vulnerability to harmful levels of stress.

3.3 | Gendered Divisions of Labor

Gendered divisions of labor is the final theme identified to conceptualize how particular gendered activities and power relations within the workplace and the domestic sphere interconnect, to form part of the gender regime resulting in stressful experiences for women (Prothero 2023; Walby 2009, 2020). This type of division is socially constructed from a dominant masculinist ideology reproduced from gendered practices enacted by women and men within both the public and private spheres (Savigny 2017; Walby 1990). Barrett and Barrett (2011) highlighted how certain "academic housework" tasks such as pastoral support to students is more likely to be undertaken by women academics. This form of work heavily features emotional labor, a phenomenon that has increased due to the establishment of the neoliberal consumerist culture within universities (Ogbonna and Harris 2004). One participant, Leah, revealed how the pressures and strains emerged from engaging in such emotional work.

Leah: "I also had students coming to me with their problems ... a few students seem to come to me and my office [female] colleague before they would go elsewhere in the department. We'd get the burden of their problems, all kinds of things, unwanted pregnancy, people being date raped, all kinds of things. It does start wearing you down, I'm not a counsellor, all you can do is direct them to someone, but it still plays on your mind what they have told you."

Interviewer: "That's a stressor, you have been identified as someone who will listen, you're a kind of magnet for students coming to you and coming with serious problems."

Leah: "I had one the other night sending me screen shots of something in her daughter's diary that she had found that she was suicidal, and she was asking me what to do. I'm thinking, oh my god, and this was at nine pm on a Saturday night that she was sending me this, and I couldn't ignore it, if anything had happened? All I could do was recommend that she took her to the doctors and tell the school, things like that, we are not counsellors."

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This incident and the issues that Leah was confronted with are explicit examples of intense forms of emotional labor due to her students presenting serious life problems in everyday settings within the workplace. The excerpt highlights how women may be more vulnerable to experiencing emotional exhaustion, compared to their male peers (Watts and Robertson 2011). Leah revealed a sense of personal inadequacy in offering professional support to these students as the psychological demands were inappropriate and excessive for her academic role. This illustrates one aspect of Abouserie's (1996) definition of stress in how the individual perceives that they do not possess the emotional resources to meet the demands. Divisions of labor within educational organizations that structure women into emotional labor activities disproportionately compared to male colleagues is a potential psychosocial health hazard (Michailidis 2008).

Savigny (2014, 2017) application of the concept of cultural sexism demonstrates the hegemonic power of the gendered divisions of labor in everyday work settings that formulate stereotypes about gender roles and divisions for both women and men. This narrative both devalues and hinders career progression for women. Working in the gender regime consequently constructs an environment that disadvantages and stifles females, defined as the "chilly climate" by Hall and Sandler (1982), in which regular, ordinary workplace practices fail to recognize women's contributions resulting in low self-esteem and marginalization (Savigny 2014). These two studies conducted by Savigny (2014, 2017) on the impact on career development for women academics due to cultural sexism elicit insightful qualitative accounts revealing powerfully how discrimination stifles women's progress in the workplace. However, although there is some recognition of the negative psychological effects arising from this in her analysis, the need to explicitly outline this relationship of sexism as a stressor could be articulated further.

In our study, a particular mundane incident was recorded that highlighted the stereotypical division of labor in male expectations about the gendered nature of roles in everyday academic housework. The participant was discussing how certain dynamics manifest themselves within a male dominated environment, describing this process in a very despairing manner:

Lauren: "It's a female dynamic and male dynamic. I don't know how to explain it?"

Interviewer: "It's quite interesting the male dynamic and female dynamic. What would you say the female dynamic is?"

Lauren: "Let me give you an example. So, when we have team meetings and take minutes, it's always assumed, well not me, that my female colleague will do it, because they say [male colleagues] you two are more organised ... it's always an assumption that the women will take minutes, and we usually do."

Although Lauren personally resisted male hegemonic expectations of documenting an administrative team meeting record, she observed her female colleague fulfilling this task. These types of dynamics were examples Lauren cited to explain how she found male colleague behavior to be a source of workplace stress. Such interactions reinforce gender stereotypes regarding task allocation, in how women are expected to perform specific menial and lower status tasks within academic work (Barrett and Barrett 2011; Aiston and Kent Fo 2021). Understanding the origin of the gendered dynamics to such a micro mundane event needs to be contextualized in relation to the meso and macro dynamics of the gender regime (Walby 2015, 2020).

Gendered divisions of labor manifest themselves within masculinist hierarchal power structures in contemporary neoliberal university institutions (Mountz 2016; Bachan and Bryson 2022; Prothero 2023). The perception of this type of organizational order by women can have a powerful disabling effect upon their levels of motivation to challenge the barriers that are embedded in such contexts. Eslen-Ziya and Murat Yildirim's (2021) international study that consisted of two hundred female academics discovered that those who perceived a strong male hierarchy in their workplace believed that being a woman disadvantages their job opportunities in comparison to men. In addition, they felt pessimistic and skeptical that such an inequity in the future could be challenged and eliminated.

Several participants within our study referred to the gendered dimensions of authority in their organization in how the culture of management varied depending on whether leadership roles were occupied by either women or men resulting in different levels of stress. This was visibly identified by Chloe in comparing her previous place of employment to the current one.

Chloe: "I love my department here it has been a revelation compared to the department at my previous university, it was very male dominated, I kept getting one year-year contracts."

Interviewer: "When you moved here, and it was a more female environment compared to your previous place of employment, did you notice and feel the difference?"

Chloe: "I don't know whether it's because of more females here, or because it is a different university although with a different culture. Here feels more feminised, if I had to put it into stereotypical words. My previous place felt very different; I loved studying there but working there I couldn't seem to get in at all."

The participant highlighted how her previous experience of working in a male dominated environment was both restricting and precarious, in contrast, her present employment situation was described in a highly affirmative way due to the feminized culture she perceived within the department. However, earlier in the interview it was revealed that even though the department in her previous university was monopolized by males, her immediate line manager in that institution was female who engaged in bullying behaviors toward her that had resulted in physical sickness before work virtually every day. Bagihole (1994, cited in Aiston and Kent Fo 2021) calls this the "Queen Bee" syndrome in how certain women in senior leadership roles undermine other women (and men) by emulating masculinist, authoritarian models of management. This illustrates the powerful colonization

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effects of the hegemonic gender regime. Chloe's account from her early career place of employment demonstrates the emotional toxicity of a masculinist, neoliberal culture within higher education (Prothero 2023).

Chloe's colleague, Leah, also mirrored her appreciation of working in a "feminized" setting, identifying this factor as a potential cause for the absence of sexism as a stressor, due to the strong presence of women in management positions within their department.

Interviewer: "What do you think of sexism in the workplace, does it exist and if so, does it impact on you in terms of stress?"

Leah: "Not really, not in our department, it might be in other places, and that stresses me out, 'cos it exists'."

Interviewer: "But in everyday work practices you don't come across it, so it doesn't make you feel aggrieved or stressed out?"

Leah: "... I don't think people could get away with it with me and my colleague, 'cos I share an office with her and I'm always going on about equality acts'."

Interviewer: "Do you see it with other colleagues in your faculty?"

Leah: "I don't think I do, 'cos we have a woman boss and woman line manager'."

Interviewer: "So the structures are good in terms of gender representation?"

This participant indicated that due to an alliance and strong working relationship with a close colleague, alongside the presence of women in line management positions in the department, sexist practices were not evident, even though Leah was highly aware that gender discrimination against women existed in other work contexts. Leah's account probably helps explain Chloe's experience of their department which enabled women to feel more included in everyday work practices.

Lauren, who was based in a department with a male dominated management team, reflected and highlighted how the differences in communication skills between men and women in leadership roles in dealing with constant organizational change impacts upon staff (Westoby et al. 2021; L. Cohen et al. 2023).

Interviewer: "Can you think of any other things in the workplace, not necessarily about you, but you've seen other staff get stressed about?"

Lauren: "I think a lot of constant changes. Over the last 6 years there has not been a year goes by where we have been settled with a particular course. We are constantly being told to change, or we had a Course leader who wanted to make all these changes that we disagreed with, but he went ahead and made them anyway ... it's a source of stress for me and my [female] colleague ... all these constant changes that we don't get to know about. I think within the whole area this lack of communication; things we don't know about make you feel powerless. I get angry because I feel powerless ... you have a lack of voice regardless of what you say. I do think there is a lack of women in the area, and this does affect that."

Interviewer: "Do you think if there were more females there would be more listening, consultation and understanding?"

Lauren: "Possibly? I think there would be more discussion, I think women tend to, unless they are completely despotic, they tend to hold consultations and discussions ..."

Lauren contends that the relationship between male leadership and the inability to communicate effectively and empathically was a source of stress, powerlessness, anger and frustration for both her and a female colleague. In addition, she suggested in contrast, that women in leadership roles would possibly be more attentive to consultative processes in working with staff.

Another major gendered division of labor is structured around the relations between the private sphere and the workplace (Walby 1990, 2011). Feminist analysis has demonstrated how the demands women engage within from the domestic sphere in relation to housework labor and familial emotion work impede their experiences at work (Duncombe and Marsden 1993). Several participants from our study highlighted how stressful family caring responsibilities impacted upon their performance in the workplace (Savigny 2014; Westoby et al. 2021; L. Cohen et al. 2023).

Chloe describes in detail how illness and a decline in her father's health made work a stressful encounter.

> Chloe: "... when my dad was ill, he had a couple of strokes, I was working here, [at a time she had just started in the position] then he seemed to lapse into Alzheimer's, we were close and then we weren't, he was saying weird things that were not true, it was awful, that was hard to cope with."

Combining a new employment position with a major family caring responsibility was an overwhelming experience for Chloe, in the interview she further elaborated how these stressful pressures incapacitated her in performing everyday teaching tasks (Baron 2022).

In the next excerpt, Hannah outlines how the problem of workload and its exhausting effects was exacerbated from a career break due to family caring responsibilities, another illustration of the gendered division of labor experienced by women.

> Hannah: "The Workload Hour allocation does not tally with what you do ... it's meaningless, in my

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> appraisal I talked about workload and said it was gruelling, but he wrote it down as 'hard' … if it was recognised as gruelling, maybe things would be managed differently, and to recognise that I'm coming back from a long career break, mainly due to family commitments and issues, which really is a sex discrimination issue."

In this account Hannah felt the lack of recognition by her male line manager regarding both the excessive volume of her workload and the gendered nature of her career break contributed to personal exhaustion in her daily work practices. In other parts of the interview, she highlighted the lack of consideration of the challenges in returning to the workplace and how intense work tasks were allocated to her, explaining it as an example of sex discrimination (Mountz 2016). This excerpt illuminates the debilitating emotional effects in the neoliberal work context for women with family caring demands (Walby 2020).

Similarly, for Georgia, she too had to navigate the challenge of integrating the responsibilities of childcare with developing a professional career. This often impacts on employment status progression whether through restricted promotion opportunities or engagement in part-time work (L. Cohen et al. 2023).

> Georgia: "I initially came on part-time hours, then I applied for a job that was advertised as full-time, but because I had a family, I asked if I could job-share, so I had half a job for a few years."

Allison et al. (2021) study explicitly demonstrates how the impact of parenthood upon male and female academics is significantly different. From their survey data they discovered that 10 years after the birth of their first child, mothers produced on average 17 fewer research papers than fathers. The authors highlighted how it would take approximately 5 years for the "mother" academics to close the gap with their "father" academic peers. Besides the career progression disadvantage for women there is the potential increased risk of stress from work intensification in any attempt to achieve career equity.

In this analysis of our participant's accounts employing IPA with a feminist approach, primarily using Walby's theory of the neoliberal gender regime, we have analyzed the distinct relationship between sexism and workplace stress as experienced by women academics in the UK higher education. This cause of workplace stress was a very salient issue for our participants, hence the need to reassess that relevant data from Baron's (2022) study to explore the ramifications in a more systematic manner. The excerpts presented by our participants clearly reveal how issues of sexism and gender inequality contributed to stressful emotional experiences.

In the re-evaluation of the data, we identified three related themes, *exclusion, discrimination* and *the gendered divisions of labor* to explain how these inter-connected elements produce the phenomenon of the gender regime as a stressor.

4 | Conclusion

The aim of this study was to distinctly demonstrate how a pervasive meso-level gender regime in the neoliberal university, that is situated in a wider macro patriarchal social structure, produces practices of a stressful nature that are uniquely and disproportionately experienced by women academics. After analysis of findings, we contend that the paper is able to present a number of insightful contributions to existing knowledge in this area.

Analysis of the data has illustrated that the intersecting point of the three analyses (exclusion, discrimination and gendered divisions of labor) results in evidence of unique stressors specific to gender which are exacerbated by the "remasculinization" of academia where "academic capitalism is perpetuated, incidental gender effects achieved and gender orders maintained" (O'Hagan et al. 2019, 218). Hence, we assert that there be greater recognition of sexism as a significant stress variable that contributes to a hazardous psychosocial environment in the higher education workplace for women. Although some existing studies (Blithe and Elliott 2020; Bull and Shannon 2025; Mountz 2016) have highlighted the role of sexism as a stressor there is limited evidence revealing the distinctive link between stress and sexism, both within HEIs and outside of academia (Guthrie et al. 2017). Furthermore, we argue that studies that have researched the issue of gender inequality in neoliberal higher education, whilst insightful about the causes of discrimination, have underdeveloped the harmful emotional consequences of this upon women academics (Savigny 2014; L. Cohen et al. 2023). Also, some of our data indicated a relationship between the gendered nature of leadership, the levels of sexism related to this, and the consequential levels of stress that manifested in the workplace.

Therefore, we advocate that the contents of this paper act as a catalyst to stimulate further research in addressing this issue of sexism as a stressor for women academics. Consequently, we hope this will provoke interventions within the sector by educational stakeholders to initiate transformative structural change both at the institutional meso and wider societal macro levels (Walby 2015).

One very significant matter that did not appear in our data is that of harassment. Numerous studies have demonstrated how sexual harassment is an experience that many women academics have encountered in the workplace as having a profoundly harmful effect (Blithe and Elliott 2020; Bull and Shannon 2025; L. Cohen et al. 2023; Prothero 2023). As the interviews in our study were conducted by a male this may have influenced female respondents' willingness to disclose such an experience.

5 | Recommendations

Recommendations in existing literature tend to sit along a spectrum whereby micro-level agentic actions and macro-level structural aspirations for change are significant distances apart. HEIs abound with initiatives and programmes badged as

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empowering professional development, whereby women must learn to become more assertive, disregard their imposter syndrome, and find ways that *they* can change in order to fit into patriarchal systems more successfully: the narrative is all about "fixing ourselves" (Watson 2024, 72). Such initiatives (commonly mentoring, networking, confidence-building programmes) may well have some value on an individual level and are commonly recognized as good practice (Mountz 2016), but their unseen impact could actually result in the accumulation of further stress as women invest substantial energy into personally oriented activism and self-improvement, and potentially blame themselves when their efforts do not pay off against the monolith patriarchal structures which they are up against. This onus upon individual deficit is captured perfectly by Prothero (2023, 7): "I do not need to attend another training course on navigating a patriarchal and toxic culture. I need help in changing the system so that it is not patriarchal and toxic." Thus, somewhat unusually, our paper does not make recommendations that place further demands and expectations upon those it intends to benefit.

Assertions to look upwards toward the meso and macro, to radically change the system and question current power structures (Savigny 2014) are apparent in the minority of literature. Westoby et al. (2021) believes a key vehicle required for change is via policies, and indeed there is significant scope for commitment to policy change to impact directly upon the disproportionate causes of stress. Walby (2015) advocates that structural change at the macro level is essential for progressive equality outcomes to be achieved within institutions and everyday social practices. She argues that regulation of the market economy is necessary to challenge structural gendered inequalities, contesting that radical equality orientated legislation is imperative to ascertain a public social democratic gender regime, as seen in more egalitarian nations such as Sweden, Finland and Norway (Nokkala et al. 2020; Walby 2015).

To tackle the three core causes identified in this research—exclusion, discrimination, gendered divisions of labor—and the reduced resources of many women to cope with these due to home burdens, the authors of this paper assert that institutional efforts should be focused upon the following areas below, as derived from some of the sources of stressors identified by participants in this study.

There is a need for better support around periods of leave, better management of return to work from caring responsibilities (Prothero 2023) and the ongoing disproportionate burden of caring. This might look like coaching before and after these periods, commitments to unchanged workloads upon return, longer periods of phased return, research leave following maternity, or support for childcare to attend conferences. Several institutions offer schemes to support returning carers, but this is not widespread.

Transparency around promotion policies to counter evidence of the "boys' club" phenomena, and publication of data around applications and successes (for all intersectional characteristics) (Prothero 2023) would help to demonstrate institutional commitment to role progression for women. There could be value in mentoring under-represented applicants wishing to apply for promotion, and analysis of potentially gendered language in published promotion criteria.

There is scope for greater positive action to minimize exclusion in the HE workplace. This could range from efforts to maximize participation in activities that contribute to academic currency (e.g., at a micro level, not always scheduling research seminars in the early evening), right up to high profile meso commitment to greater representation of women at senior levels to counter the presence of a female Vice Chancellor as being exceptional. It is worthy of note that the HEI from which these participants were drawn has never had a female Vice Chancellor, as is the case for many of UK HEIs.

A case can be made for gendered analysis of workloads with particular regard to roles and responsibilities which provide high value academic currency such as attendance at conferences and sabbatical time, versus those that do not, namely the academic housework (Barrett and Barrett 2011; Prothero 2023).

Finally, an investment in face-to-face training for those in positions of power that is specific to the employee demographic of that organization and the lived experiences of those within it could be implemented. For example, this study has highlighted participants' experiences of bias and differential treatment aligned to gendered stereotypes and notions. A good deal of HEI training around diversity and inclusion is now supplied online, without opportunities for meaningful interactions and opportunities to learn directly from staff within that institution with particular protected characteristics. This could limit the resonance, experience, and applicability of messages intended to be received.

A myriad of other recommendations are needed, as "death by a million cuts experiences require a million solutions" (Prothero 2023, 4), but shifting the responsibility from micro-level individual action up the chain to these recommended meso-level actions above (and beyond) would represent a progression that requires managers and leaders to *understand the reasons* they are being requested to approve and implement such policy changes, and to realize that living and working in a post-patriarchal academic world remains far from reality. As Walby (2022, 128) outlines, "there is the possibility of a non-patriarchal gender regime, but I don't know of any."

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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

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Endnotes

[1] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system of assessing the excellence of research produced by HEIs in the UK, and the results are used to inform funding.

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