

# What It Really Feels Like: Female Academics' Perspectives of Gendered Expectations and Stereotypes in Malaysian Research Universities

## ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research is an investigation of the role of gender stereotypes in determining the work performance and professional experiences of female academic employees at Malaysian public research universities. The present study is a qualitative research design which takes the exploratory approach, which centers on the in-depth interviews with four female academics working in Malaysian research universities, with a view of generating preliminary information concerning the influence of gendered expectations on academic work experiences. The study, through semi-structured interviews with four female lecturers, reveals that gender bias is manifested in four primary ways: unequal expectations of emotional labour, gendered patterns regarding task distribution, differences in perceived authority, and pressure on women to constantly demonstrate their competence. Based on Role Congruity Theory (RCT), the discussion can indicate that these stereotype-related expectations may serve as impediments to career advancement and appears to reduce job satisfaction due to poor rewarding the contributions of women when acting according to feminine norms and punishing them when they demonstrate agentic behaviours. The findings suggest the need for institutional-level changes that could help to decrease gender inequities and create more equitable academic settings.

**Keywords:** Gender Stereotypes, Work Performance, Female Academics, Role Congruity Theory, Qualitative Research, Malaysian Higher Education, Emotional Labour, Invisible Labour, Glass Ceiling

## 1. Introduction

Research shows that although women are represented better than before within higher education, they are still vastly underrepresented in upper levels of academia (European Commission, 2021; Galvin et al., 2024). Perhaps some of this disconnect can be explained by the persistence of gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are particularly visible in the academia, where people think of leaders, people in charge, and top researchers only in terms of males. The opposite applies to women, where people think that women are only suited for roles that are supportive, nurturing, and encouraging (Meza-Mejía et al., 2023; Heilman, Caleo, & Manzi, 2024). These stereotypes are not just “theoretical”; they have actual and real impacts to the quality of work and the quality of people’s careers. Administrative and teaching roles that are not valued are attributed to women. In this way, women’s productivity and research visibility are attacked systematically (El-Alayli et al., 2018; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021).

In a multiethnic and collectivist country, especially Malaysia, where the expectations surrounding traditional gender roles and stereotypes in work environments are context-sensitive (Hamisan et al., 2023). Malaysia's higher education system is not an exception to the institutional barriers along the lines of the gender. Although women are the majority of personnel in an academic setting, they are still less frequent than men in regard to assuming leadership roles (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022; Eaton et al., 2020; Misra et al., 2021). Because of the context in dealing with gender inequalities in the Malaysian academic system, it is imperative that the role of gender stereotypes and how they are an impediment to the effective performance of the employees is examined. Although a number of studies have looked at gender inequities in Malaysian academia (Moorthy et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2023; Devi et al., 2024), few have focused on the women academics and how the stereotypes influence their work performance, professional mobility, and their overall satisfaction with the job. From a practical perspective, the current gap is the lack of sufficient evidence to support the formulation of targeted interventions.

Consequently, university administrators and policymakers lack in deep understanding of these specific stereotypes (i.e. stereotypes related to emotional work, authority and task allocation). But these stereotypes need to be identified to formulate effective and evidence-based diversity and inclusion policies (Lean In. & McKinsey & Company, 2022). Furthermore, from a methodological perspective, previous studies have been using broad surveys or secondary data analysis. This has led to a lack of in-depth qualitative studies that can provide rich and deep descriptions of these female scholars’ narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) which is important in identifying the reasons for these quantitative disparities.

To bridge these gaps, this study uses a qualitative approach. This study aims to identify the gender stereotypes that are commonly faced by female academic staff in Malaysian public research universities and critically examine its impact on their job performance. Accordingly, the study is designed as an exploratory qualitative inquiry that offers preliminary, context-specific insights rather than generalizable conclusions, contributing to theory, practice and methodology towards gender equality in Malaysian higher education. Accordingly, this study was designed to address the following two research questions:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** How do female academic staff in Malaysian public research universities experience gender stereotypes in their work environment?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** How do these gender stereotypes influence their work performance?

This exploratory, theory-generating study, which is based on four in-depth interviews, aims to surface mechanisms and lived narratives rather than produce representative estimates.

Table 1. The Study’s Operational Constructs

Emotional Labour	Gendered expectations that female academics are naturally suited to emotional support, communication, and student care
Gendered Task Distribution	Perceived unequal allocation of teaching, administrative, and service-related tasks based on gender
Authority/Credibility Gap	Explores the phenomenon where female academics perceive their professional authority, expertise, or judgment to be undervalued compared to male colleagues, particularly in meetings and decision-making contexts.
Work Performance	Analyzes performance in domains such as research, teaching, and service, covering key responsibilities and performance metrics across roles.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Work Performance in Universities

In universities, work performance is not just about research output. Although output can and should be measured – publications, amounts of research funding, citations, and so on (Huang et al., 2020) – a more holistic picture must also encompass teaching, administration, and general academic citizenship (Smith et al., 2024). Academics have warned that measuring performance primarily through research output overlooks the many aspects of academic work, such as the hidden role of mentor and servant that maintains university life but is infrequently acknowledged (O’Meara et al., 2020). These many facets of performance are not assessed in a wholly objective way. Institutional biases and cultural influences – male biases in particular – distort assessments of performance, so it is important to examine how organizational culture and implicit assumptions affect them (Heilman et al., 2024).

#### 2.1.1. The Gendered Dimensions of Academic Performance

First, academic work comprises multiple dimensions (research, teaching, service/administration, mentoring, external involvement/influence, etc.), which are not given equal importance in organizational practice (Norander & Zenk, 2023). Recent research emphasizes that institutionalized performance evaluations often prioritize quantifiable research outputs (such as the number of papers, funding, and citations), while significantly underestimating the importance of teaching quality, service, community engagement, and emotional labor (Reid, 2021). This leads to the so-called "invisible labour" problem—that is, a large amount of work crucial to the operation of universities but not fully recognized by the promotion and evaluation system (such as student mentoring, committee work, and unpaid mentoring roles) is often undertaken by women, and this unequal distribution erodes women's research time and promotion opportunities.

Secondly, the study found that teaching and service work are more time-consuming for female scholars. Women are more often expected or requested to undertake pastoral care, student counselling, and departmental/faculty administrative tasks. While these tasks are crucial to student experience and institutional operation, they are typically not included in research-oriented KPIs, thus putting them at a disadvantage in promotion assessments (Sümer, 2023). This creates a structural path from gendered task allocation to limited research output, and then to lower evaluation scores in a system where publications are valued above all else.

Furthermore, student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have been repeatedly shown to be gender-biased in global studies: student ratings of female teachers are often influenced by the teacher's gender, expected role, and classroom behavior (e.g., additional expectations of "warmth/support"). These ratings are frequently incorporated into promotion and teaching performance evaluations, further amplifying institutional disadvantages against women (Khokhlova, Lamba, & Kishore, 2023; Aragón

et al., 2023). Therefore, the teaching dimension is not value-neutral; it is gendered through culture and evaluation mechanisms.

Finally, interdisciplinary and collaborative research, as well as service-oriented research (such as work aimed at educational improvement and community engagement), are often underestimated or fail to translate into traditional academic reputation and quantifiable outcomes. This is more common among female scholars because their research and teaching workloads are more dispersed, further disadvantaging them structurally in terms of quantifiable research metrics (Reid, 2021). Overall, viewing "performance" as gender-neutral masks the profound influence of institutional and cultural factors on job allocation and evaluation.

## **2.2. Work Performance of Women in Universities in Malaysia**

These are also evident in the larger education in Malaysia and may even be more striking due to cultural considerations. As it has been found out, in Malaysia, female lecturers tend to pay more attention regarding the involvement in teaching and service-related tasks than male colleagues in Malaysia (Munusamy, Ramasamy, and Sukir, 2024). It was also discovered that stereotypes according to which men inherently have authority and can better occupy leadership roles exist among the academic staff (Islam et al., 2023). These attitudes may weaken the position of women and reduce valuation of their professional input (Othman et al., 2023). Though these disparities are well established, not much research has dwelled to investigate how these expectations are experienced in day to day academic or how the disparities frustrate the performance and satisfaction of the work they do.

Regarding the issue of higher education in Asian countries, quantitative and qualitative studies indicate similar structural issues: female lecturers are more often given or volunteer to teach more often, and support students and do administrative work in their departments. Although such actions might enhance the quality of teaching and student satisfaction in the short run, they undermine time spent on research and writing work in women during the long run, thereby influencing the production of research and the rate of promotion (Nursyamsi, 2024; Nurumal et al., 2023). In addition, local research indicates that the cultural norms of South Asia and the Southeast Asian people (with the promotion of humility, respect, and hierarchy) increase the demands on women; therefore, becoming micro-excluded or less visible during interactions in classrooms, departmental meetings, and research partnerships (Islam et al., 2023). Such cultural-institutional interaction intensifies the international problem of gendered performance in the situation in Malaysia.

As in most university performance evaluation systems around the world, the Malaysian academic institutions are extremely skewed in their approach toward measurable research results (including publications and granting funding) (Sarjidan & Kasim, 2023). Nevertheless, the academic load is unevenly distributed among female researchers, with a greater proportion having to contribute to housework at school like teaching, serving students, and administrative work (Islam et al., 2023). The withdrawal of women or non-participation in the labor market by Malaysian women is concretely demonstrated in a report by the World Bank (2021): it points out that most women withdrawal or do not enter the workforce because of the so-called domestic work, which involves childcare and elder care. This causes a single-peak trend of Malaysian female labor participation from the working force, which has a large proportion of women dropping out at the age of about 30, the reproduction age, and never coming back.

At the same time, women also encounter barriers to accessing international partnerships and large-scale funding applications due to the influence of informal networks (i.e. mentorship relations and the academic circles) where the resource distribution depends, and women are not involved at all or are poorly represented in these informal contacts (Bellotti, 2022; Callander, Johnson & Grandis, 2025). Thus, the performance of women at work is not taken seriously or is misunderstood in institutionalized ways of evaluation. Lastly, it can be mentioned that since Malaysian society is multi-ethnic (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), female academicians experience varying family expectations and community

standards, and therefore, the so-called work-family balance implies more challenges and coping strategies of the ethnic groups.

### **2.3. Role Congruity Theory (RCT)**

Role Congruity Theory (RCT) (Eagly & Karau, 2002) offers a compelling theoretical framework for explaining the persistence of gender bias in academia. According to RCT, people have shared beliefs or gender stereotypes about the typical characteristics associated with women (e.g., communal traits such as warmth, nurturance), and men (e.g., agentic traits such as assertiveness, dominance). Prejudice occurs when there is perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and the requirements of a social role.

In the present study, being a senior academic and a leader is often assumed to be agentic. When women, who are stereotypically communal, hold these positions, they encounter a double standard and a penalty for deviation from expected norms. This perceived incongruity between the female gender role and the leader role results in two types of prejudice (Heilman, Caleo & Manzi, 2024): First, women violate expected norms and are judged as less fit for the role; that is, women are evaluated as less capable of holding high-stakes research leadership roles and more authoritative positions because of the perceived incongruity between the female gender role and the leader role. Second, when women do exhibit agentic behaviour to compensate for this negative evaluation, they are evaluated negatively for that behaviour, evaluated more harshly than men for doing the same assertive or decisive things, and labelled as "aggressive" or "difficult".

Hence, RCT explains not just why women face initial barriers to entry into leadership positions in academia, but also why, once there, they continue to face challenges in being taken seriously and in having their performance evaluated fairly. This study uses RCT as a theoretical framework to interpret and analyse the reported experiences of academic women in Malaysia, focusing on how the perceived incongruity between the female gender role and the academic role leads to evaluative disadvantages, and how this affects their work performance.

Building upon the theoretical foundation of RCT, this study constructs a qualitatively oriented conceptual research framework to organize thematic focus during interviews and subsequent coding frames. This framework combines the RCT perspective of "role incongruity" with organizational-level "gendered organizational practices" and individual-level "experience/coping strategies," forming a multi-layered analytical perspective.

#### **2.3.1. From Theory to Analytical Mechanisms: What the Interviews Will Probe**

The biases detailed by the authors mentioned above and the outcomes predicted by Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) intertwine and present challenges particular to the field of academic work. This study will guide coding and interview development through the biases identified by the authors. Firstly, according to RCT, which proposes two forms of prejudice toward female leaders, these can be further understood as descriptive biases and prescriptive biases. Descriptive biases hold that women are viewed as lacking the so-called 'agentic' qualities that are required of leaders, while prescriptive biases reflect that women are penalized for being assertive. This tension will be the focus of research to be conducted through these interviews. This helps to understand whether respondents believe that women within Malaysian academia suffer from more descriptive exclusion (the perception that women are less suitable for holding a leadership role) or whether they believe that women suffer from more prescriptive penalties (the perception that women are punished for being assertive and taking on leadership roles).

A more recent mechanism that the literature identifies is the invisible allocation of work which, in this instance, refer to the more pronounced allocation of teaching and service work to women (Meza-Mejía, Villarreal-García & Ortega- Barba, 2023; Sümer, 2023), which reduces women's research time and

visibility. This, along with literature on RCT, suggests that this allocation may in fact be a by-product of communal role expectations and biases. These interviews will determine whether respondents believe that the allocation of work is done in a voluntary manner (i.e. through some self-fulfilling prophetic role expectation) or in a manner that is prescribed by the structure within which they operate.

Women are often faced with balancing individual strategies to cope, such as working harder and promoting oneself, and imposing structural change, for example through equitable distribution of work policies. While RCT suggests that individual coping may be self-destructive because of prescriptive penalties, it is often the case that the explanation for backlash is work that is not traditionally done, which in this case is the case for women. These interviews will examine the strategies that women undertake, and determine whether women perceive, or more accurately will themselves suffer from backlash as a result of their strategies. The aforementioned mechanisms served as a basis for the construction of the interview questions (i.e. the allocation of work, the perception of fairness in the evaluation of work done, and the experience of backlash), as well as the coding framework.

## **2.4. The influence of Gender Inequality Structures on Women's Academic Work**

### **2.4.1. Hidden Labor and Invisible Contributions**

A recent empirical study of universities in several different countries demonstrates that male and female faculty members submit the same average amount of weekly hours, yet female faculty members spend more time teaching and serving the university, and men spend more time at the research. Even when this gender difference is controlled by the family and workload, it is still significant (Allen et al., 2023). This conclusion confirms the invisible labor according to which, women do much teaching/service work which cannot be estimated, and they are seldom promoted or evaluated. However, more easily incorporated in the notion of performance, by quantifiable measures, like research output (publication), female scholars are structurally disadvantaged as part of institutional production (like in terms of promotion and research performance evaluation). Moreover, considering external factors like parental leave, maternity leave, and family issues this difference in genders (and, more specifically, the difference in research productivity) becomes much narrower. It implies that one of the gaps is greater non-professional expectations of women (including childbirth and caregiving) and the associated time out of work (Aksnes, Nygaard and Reiling, 2025).

### **2.4.2. Glass Ceiling**

Glass ceiling is an institutionalized and hidden barrier to women getting to the highest or top position in an organization, or getting to a position of power cognized in the literature of management that has over thirty years been discussed (Taparia and Lenka, 2022). Despite the overall increase in the number of women on the general academic faculty, the percentage of women who take up senior positions (associate professor, full professor, senior leadership) is still very meagre. In Europe, an example given is a recent report on the academic systems of the OECD countries: it shows that many of them yet cannot balance gender in the senior level. Women tend to be disadvantaged when it comes to promotions, a chance to receive a research grant, an opportunity to work internationally, the distribution of resources, or involvement in an editorial review or editing panel (OECD, 2024).

To take one case as an illustration, a longitudinal study conducted in Italian universities (2025) demonstrated that despite considering individual productivity and differences in fields, women continued to be greatly disadvantaged during the post-doc to assistant professor transition which also pointed to institutional/structural factors being central in the gender gap (Gaiaschi, 2025).

### **2.4.3. Work Stress, Mental Health and Job Satisfaction**

As institutional and cultural imbalance is historically cumulative, female teachers/scholars have more chances to be held in greater danger of stress, burnout, and dressing. According to a 2025 study, mid-level academic professions show that women experience less job satisfaction and increased stress and burnout rates more often than men because certain structural factors impact the employees, namely overtime, unpaid service, and hidden labor (Röbken et al., 2025).

Accordingly, the studies on the circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdown indicate that female academicians feel contradictions between the demands of work on the family, house cleaning, and providing emotional support to students and their career growth (research, writing) which has a disastrous effect on their research work and employment opportunities (Bam, Walters & Jansen, 2024).

Moreover, in the societies that uphold gender role beliefs (like the Asian societies), women are expected to have a larger portion of the duties in the family (childcare, eldercare), and the household chores. This is superimposed on professional work (teaching, mentoring, administration), which increases work-family conflict and influences mental health and career retention. Such combination of institutional, cultural and personal forces simplifies the situation whereby most of young female academically promising scholars end up quitting academia.

#### **2.4.4. Inequality in Social Capital, Academic Resources, And Visibility**

Beyond time and institutional constraints, female scholars are also at a disadvantage in accessing research collaborations, international partnerships, editing/reviewing opportunities, and academic networks. Recent large-scale studies in communication have found that even with a growing number of publications by women scholars, their rates of citations, sole-authored publication, and publication in top-ranked journals remain lower than men's even when they control team composition and research field. These disparities are primarily reflected in research visibility and academic recognition (Oliveira & Huang, 2025).

Meanwhile, research has found that female scholars are also more conservative in self-promotion on social media/public communication; they are less likely to actively promote their research findings (e.g., through Twitter), and even with the same or greater effort, they may receive less reward due to gender bias (e.g., negative evaluations of assertiveness) (Peng et al., 2025). These factors mean that relying solely on publication count or grants as performance/reputation/promotion criteria systematically underestimates the contributions of female scholars especially those whose research is more collaborative, interdisciplinary, or service- or community-oriented.

#### **2.4.5 Inequality in Gender Role Perceptions, Institutional Policies and Structures**

A recent review points out that inequality in women's leadership in higher education is not merely a matter of individual ability differences or choice, but rather the result of the combined effects of institutional, sociocultural, and structural factors (Meza-Mejia, Villarreal-García & Ortega-Barba, 2023). These structures include: a promotion system that prioritizes outcomes and lacks recognition of the value of teaching, service and administrative work; implicit preferences in the review, funding and promotion process for social capital, networks, collaboration, and leadership potential; insufficient institutional support for childcare or parenting responsibilities; and culturally stereotypical expectations of gender roles. Therefore, from the perspective of cultural-institutional-structural interactions, even if women and men are formally equal in terms of titles, positions, and qualifications, their "available resources (such as time, energy, and social capital), visibility, and career trajectory" may be systematically eroded in the long term.

#### **2.4.6 Research Rationale and Gap Statement**

Based on the latest research, we can see that even though the proportion of women entering university faculty, postdoctoral, and assistant professor positions has increased in recent years, they remain systematically disadvantaged in multiple dimensions, including resource allocation, implicit labor, academic visibility, psychological burden and risk of attrition, and promotion and leadership opportunities.

However, most current research on these issues is based on quantitative methods (such as surveys, bibliometric data, and time allocation statistics) and is concentrated in Western countries (Europe and North America) or a few countries with publicly available data—research on the institutional and cultural interactions in Asia, especially in multi-ethnic and multi-racial societies (such as Malaysia), is still relatively limited. As the structural review points out, gender inequality manifests in different forms in different countries, cultural, or institutional contexts, and the impact of institutional reforms (such as institutional support, childcare policies, work flexibility, and promotion mechanisms) on mitigating inequality has not been fully explored.

Furthermore, even when research focuses on work-family conflict, childcare responsibilities, attrition rates, and burnout, it primarily focuses on basic education or teaching-oriented universities and may not be applicable to research-intensive universities. For example, research on burnout among female teachers is mostly conducted in teaching-oriented universities or the basic education system (Wei, Subramaniam & Wang, 2025). Therefore, exploring the implicit labor, time allocation, and resource access of female academic staff in Malaysian public research universities through qualitative interviews and a multi-layered framework (i.e., institutional, cultural, and personal experience) fills a gap in the current literature.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

To answer the research questions, exploratory qualitative research method was adopted to get insights on the common gender stereotypes and their impacts on female academic staff in Malaysian public universities. The research design involved collecting and analyzing data on female academic staff in public universities with semi-structured interview and document.

Interviews can yield full and rich accounts of how people see the world, what sense they make of it, and what concerns they bring to their lives (Demirci, 2024). Different from a highly-structured interview that rigidly adhering to predetermined questions, which may not allow the researchers to access participants' perspectives and understandings of the topic, semi-structured interview, which is guided by a list of questions (Ruslin et al., 2022), was used to understand the range of perceptions of gender stereotypes by female academic staff in Malaysian public universities. Therefore, the present study utilized semi-structured interview as its primary data collection method.

A pilot interview was conducted online with a female university lecturer to ensure that questions are worded appropriately and are understood and interpreted as intended (Lim, 2025). As proposed by Morgan (2022), data from document can elicit meaning, gain understanding and advance new categories. Stability is another advantage of using documentary material. Unlike interviewing and observation, the presence of the investigator does not alter what is being studied. Documentary data are “objective” sources of data compared to other forms. In this study, documents were used to documentary contextualisation of the data gleaned from the interviews. The whole research flow is illustrated in Figure 1.

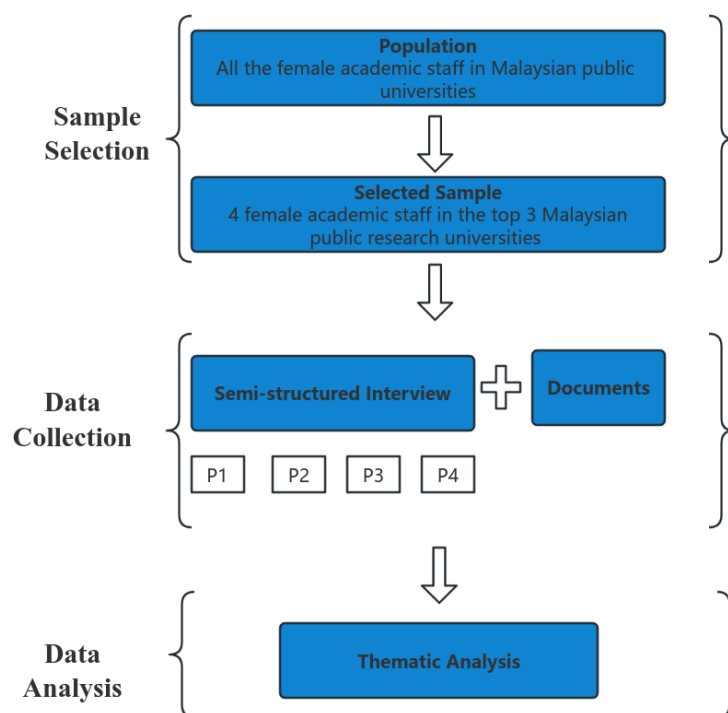


Figure 1. Data Collection and Data Analysis Flow

### 3.2. Participant Information

This study was conducted in three of the top public research universities in Malaysia through purposive sampling. The sampling frame comprised public, research-intensive institutions representing diverse disciplinary profiles. Potential participants were identified based on predefined inclusion criteria, including gender (female), current academic appointment, and a minimum of two years of academic experience.

Recruitment invitations were sent directly by the researchers to eligible participants identified through publicly available institutional websites and professional networks. The invitations outlined the study purpose, voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality assurances. To collect the data, the period was August 2025 to October 2025. Although they could invite eligible academics again and again during the time (23 direct invitations were sent to qualified academics), the number of eligible academics that were willing and available to participate was rather low.

Finally, four respondents accepted and undertook to fill the in-depth interviews. Because of the depth-oriented and exploration of the study, the final sample was regarded as a rich set of information and not a representative set. Such a recruitment result is well aligned with qualitative pilot studies which are concerned with the depth of analysis rather than the sample size. Table 1 represents the criterion of the sampling, and Figure 2, Table 2 illustrates the entire procedure of the recruitment process and participant flow, respectively:

Table 2. Criterion for Sampling

Criteria	Specifics
Gender Requirement	Must be female academic staff
Employment Status	Must be currently employed as academic staff Should hold a formal academic position

<b>Institution Type</b>	Must be employed at a Malaysian public research university Not private universities or other higher education institutions
<b>Employment Duration</b>	Should have worked in the academic field for 2 years at least
<b>Academic Disciplines</b>	From various academic disciplines
<b>Career Levels</b>	From different academic positions

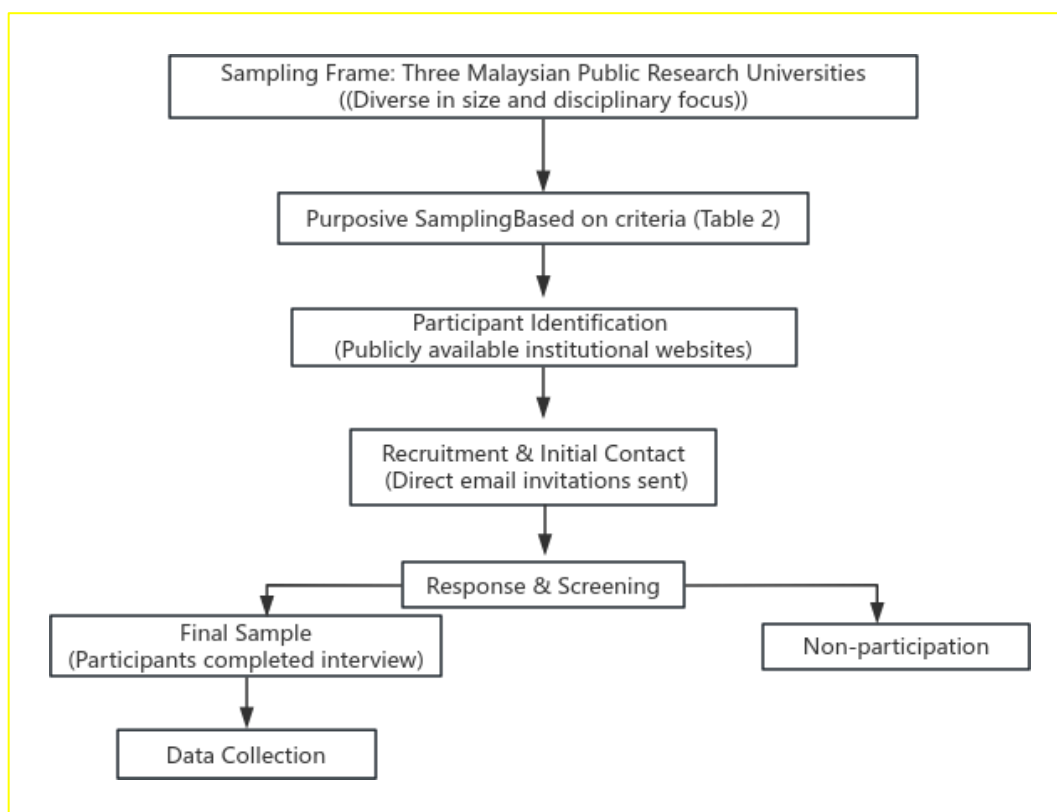


Figure 2. Recruitment and Participant Flow

Table 3: Demographic and Data Collection

Serial Number	Position	Cultural Background	Experience	Discipline	Method	Camera	Duration
P1	Senior lecturer	Malaysian	6 years	STEM	Zoom	On	46 mins
P2	Senior lecturer	Indian	20+years	Non-STEM	Zoom	On	66 mins
P3	Senior lecturer	Malaysian	16 years	Non-STEM	Zoom	Off	52 mins
P4	Lecturer	Malaysian	5 years	Non-STEM	Google meet	On	55 mins

### 3.3. Data Collection

The online interviews were done individually through Zoom or Google meet. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed word-to-word to analyze them. Table 2 demonstrated the time and the number of words spent on every interview. All the participants were provided with written consent forms. The gathering of documents was done following the technique suggested by Guest, Namey and Mitchell

(2013). To begin with, we set inclusion criteria: we determined what was included in the scope, what type of documents, and what was included within this period of time. Second, we gathered materials in the form of documents in the open or organizational sources.

Similarly, to the exploratory character of the research in question, data collection did not target exhaustive thematic saturation but preliminary, in-depth coverage of the phenomenon of gender stereotypes experienced by female academics working in Malaysian public research universities. The sampled population was purposely chosen and belonged to a rather homogenous group and presented intensive, reflective information concerning their careers. In the course of analysis, common trends associated with gendered expectations, emotional labour, perceptions of authority and distribution of tasks were discovered to be recurrent in interviews. However, it was by the fourth interview that no significantly new themes were identified in the context of the research question that the data was seen to be adequate in the exploratory and theory-making purpose of this study.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

As the main approach to the analysis of the collected data, thematic analysis was used, it is the process of identifying a pattern, which triggered the emergence of the themes and placed them into categories to be analysed further. This included attentive and dedicated reading and re-reading of data, systematic coding and category building (Braun and Clarke, 2021a & Braun and Clarke, 2021b). Besides interview data were a qualitative document analysis (QDA) that was performed to aid documentary contextualisation. The qualitative document analysis was constrained by three factors used to choose the documents to be included in the analysis. To begin with, they had to be authoritative and publicly accessible sources that were created by established governmental or international organisations. Secondly, the documents were required to contain empirical or policy-related information of gender, academic work or labour participation that would have been contextually relevant to the study focus on academic females. Third, only the currently existing or still ongoing documents (2020-2025) were included, and the information should have matched what the participants were reporting about. On these criteria, 4 documents were selected (see Appendix C). These documents were coded using the deductive approach to coding proposed by Guest et al. (2013) and Morgan (2022) to investigate the perceived themes in the data of the interviews. This research allowed to make a direct comparison between formal institutional expectation and self-reported lived experiences of the participants.

To test the analysis, intercoder reliability guidelines were used as a sense of verification. The initial coding procedures were formed via online meetings by the researchers to create a complete codebook. We then analysed transcripts and documents separately discussing any gaps in coding to bring to a consensus. This incorporation of document insights in the meaning making of the findings increased the depth and credibility of the study in general. Member-checking was done to guarantee the worthiness of the results. Following the preliminary analysis, the subjects were given reports about the preliminary themes and essential results through email. The thematic descriptions in the category "gendered task distribution and inequalities in workload" are slightly altered as a result of the feedback provided by two respondents to portray the subtlety of administrative burden.

The research team agrees that we are all bound to have influenced the process of interpretation through our backgrounds. As female researchers (First author), and female scholars (Second and third author) operating in the Malaysian higher education field, we enjoyed an insider view, with the advantage of rapport and trust with the respondents. Nonetheless, this common experience also gave rise to a danger of a pre-existing bias, as individual dissatisfaction with workload might conceal the data. To overcome this, we kept a reflexive journal during the coding procedure and had peer debriefing sessions on a regular basis. These debates compelled us to question our original expectations and made the findings firmly based on the voice of the participants instead of our identity.

#### **3.4.1. Saturation Assessment and Stopping Rationale**

Given the exploratory and theory-generating aim of the study, coupled with the small sample size ( $n = 4$ ), it is important to explain how saturation was measured and why this sample is regarded as sufficient. Saturation was measured according to the code frequency counts method described by Hennink and Kaiser (2022).

After each interview, the research team independently analyzed the transcript and then convened to discuss their codes. The first interview produced 12 codes. The second interview produced 4 new codes. The third interview produced only 1 new code. The fourth interview produced no new codes apart from those already described in the first three interviews. This pattern no new codes in the last interview—was our stopping rule (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The code accumulation matrix (Appendix E) illustrates the progress of this process.

Code saturation can be achieved through a lesser number of interviews when the study population is homogeneous, and the research aim is specific (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). While our sample of four participants is small, it was purposively drawn from a homogeneous population: female academics in public research universities in Malaysia, with a minimum of two years of professional experience. The participants had similar institutional settings, career levels (three senior lecturers and one lecturer), and professional challenges. This homogeneity, in conjunction with the depth-oriented nature of the interviews (each lasting 45 - 66 minutes), enabled us to collect a broad and comprehensive range of data with a smaller number of interviews.

The focus of this study is neither to make statistical generalisability claims nor to attempt to verify existing theories. This study looks to create a hypotheses and describe the workings of gender stereotypes in this context. A focused, small sample qualitative study is methodologically fitting for this purpose. While larger scale studies are required to confirm and broaden these findings, for the theory generating aims of this exploratory study, the sample size is rational.

### **3.4.2. Coding Process and Consensus**

The coding process used thematic analysis as explained by Braun & Clarke (2021b), which involves cycles of coding and theme creation. The first step for the researchers was to familiarize themselves with the data and establish preliminary codes in the interview transcripts. These initial codes went through cycles of review and refinement which led to the creation of larger category codes that eventually formed the final themes.

In order to increase the consistency and trustworthiness of the coding, two researchers coded the same transcripts independently and then reconciled their coding. The research team held three consensus meetings that lasted around 60 to 100 minutes. During these meetings, the two coding team members shared the results of their independent coding, and where there were discrepancies (for example, where one coder assigned a code and the other coder did not), they discussed the case and resolved it by consensus. When there was a stalemate, a third researcher was brought in to resolve the issue (there were two instances of coding where this happened). The coding consensus meetings also provided the basis for the iterative development of the codebook and the refinement of the codes in the manual, which was done in subsequent meetings. Appendix B includes a sample of the codebook that was used.

### **3.5. Variation and Moderators**

When going beyond description and examining possible reasons for variability between participants, the four female academics were allocated to the primary analytical dimensions from the literature. This can be found in Table 4.

Several of the tentative patterns from the cross-case comparison are as follows. Regarding the discipline, the only STEM representative (P1) did not cite greater time pressure to produce research outputs compared to her non-STEM colleagues. Rather, she benchmarked herself against her male colleagues,

stating she felt more pressure than they did. This suggests that a gender comparison within the same discipline may be a more relevant perspective to consider than the discipline as a whole to understand stereotype impacts.

In addition, the position in the career ladder seemed important. The early-career participant (P4, lecturer) said she found it much harder to refuse teaching and service tasks than her more senior colleagues. This suggests that those with less institutional seniority feel the effects of invisible labour more. Unlike her, it appears that senior lecturers (P1, P2, P3) have less of such concerns, which could be a result of the greater autonomy or bargaining power they have gained over time.

P2 and P4 referred to caregiving responsibilities, but the female academics primarily structured their explanation as a comparison between the genders. They pointed out that women, in contrast to their male colleagues, have additional unpaid caregiving responsibilities at home. Neither participant provided many details on work-family conflict. This signifies that the claimed injustice is more prominent in the gendered allocation of unpaid domestic work than in the conflict between work and family roles.

Lastly, concerning P2's ethnicity, the only Indian participant, she stated that she did not encounter any incidents of marginalisation or exclusion attributable to her ethnicity. It could be the case that ethnicity did not constitute a significant aspect of her experience or that the professional milieu of the university is sufficiently inclusive. Given the limited sampling, no definitive conclusions can be made.

These considerations are very preliminary given the sample size and the fact that not all of the participants addressed every single dimension. Instead of generalising, this cross-case mapping is intended to formulate hypotheses and indicate areas for future research on a larger scale.

Table 4. Participant Mapping on Key Dimensions

Serial Number	Career Stage	Ethnicity	Discipline	Caregiving Status
P1	Senior lecturer	Malaysian	STEM	Not mentioned
P2	Senior lecturer	Indian	Non-STEM	Yes
P3	Senior lecturer	Malaysian	Non-STEM	Not mentioned
P4	Lecturer	Malaysian	Non-STEM	Yes

### 3.6. Validity and Reliability of Data

To ensure methodological rigour, several strategies to enhance validation of the study were adopted (Bryant & Ballantyne, 2017) as summarised in Table 3. Data were subjected to documentary contextualisation by obtaining evidence from the semi-structured interviews with the participants, to see if this evidence was supported by the documentary sources. Descriptive details of the research setting and research process were provided to enhance external validity. Reliability was maintained by investigator using secondary data for contextual grounding. The multiple researchers conducted an independent coding and analysis of the documentary sources and interviews.

Furthermore, researchers' subjectivity was weakened via reflexive actions as we attempted to monitor our own assumptions and biases during the research process. Finally, all the above steps led to the scientific validity and credibility of our study.

Reflexive vignette 1: We were all female academics in Malaysian public universities, which increased the risk of over-identification with participants. We purposely looked out for disconfirming evidence in transcripts and sometimes questioned whether each code was reflecting participants’ voices or our expectations.

Reflexive vignette 2: One of the researchers coded more emotional labour codes than the other did during the coding process. To minimise this bias, we returned two preliminary theme summaries to participants for member-checking, and these participants affirmed our interpretations. We also had a peer debriefing with a colleague outside the team who criticised us to make us justify every code with evidence in the transcripts.

Table 5. Trustworthiness Framework

Criterion	Strategy employed
Construct Validity	-Documentary Contextualisation -Member check
External Validity	Thick description
Reliability	Using Secondary Data for Contextual Grounding
Objectivity	Practice reflectivity

### 3.7. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia (Jawatankuasa Etika Universiti Penyelidikan Melibatkan Manusia, JKEUPM). The study was approved under reference number JKEUPM-2025-015, with approval validity from 27 August 2025 to 26 August 2026. Prior to participation, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study’s purpose, procedures, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, all interview data were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms, and any identifying information was removed during transcription. Audio files and transcripts are stored in a password-protected shared cloud folder with access restricted to the research team. They will be retained for five years following the completion of the study and will be permanently deleted thereafter. Anonymised data are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to institutional ethical approval.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

As an exploratory study, the findings should be interpreted as theory-generating rather than theory-confirming. With a thorough thematic analysis of collected interview data, four different but interrelated themes were identified as summarized in Table 4, providing an in-depth understanding of prevalent gender stereotypes, how gender stereotypes impact their professional experience, career advancement and job satisfaction in educational setting. This section presents a detailed discussion of the research findings, supported by relevant quotes from the interviews.

Table 6. Summary of Findings

Theme	Key Manifestations	Perceived Impact
Emotional Labor Expectations	-Assumption that women naturally excel in communication and emotional support (P1).	-Increased workload and work pressure. -Emotional burnout and mental strain.

<p><b>and The Invisible Burden</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Routine assignment to student counseling and pastoral care duties (P3).</li> <li>-Male colleagues are assigned more technical roles (P3).</li> <li>-Students expect more empathy from female teachers (P4).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reduced job satisfaction and overall well-being.</li> <li>-An invisible, unappreciated burden is placed on female educators.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Gendered Task Distribution and Inequalities in Workload</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Women are expected to take on administrative duties (P3).</li> <li>-Men are channeled towards senior leadership roles (P3).</li> <li>-STEM fields are perceived as male domains (P4).</li> <li>-Women are assigned event planning, paperwork, and committee work. (P3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Limits women's capability to engage in academic and research activities.</li> <li>-Creates unequal workload and opportunity.</li> <li>-Perpetuates gender disparities in leadership and STEM fields.</li> <li>-Results in gender-based bias in promotions .</li> </ul>
<p><b>Authority Perception Disparities and The Credibility Gap</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Male colleagues' ideas are prioritized in meetings (P2).</li> <li>-Students expect male teachers to be more assertive and disciplined (P3).</li> <li>-Female authority is frequently questioned (P2).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Undermines confidence and effectiveness in leadership positions.</li> <li>-Negatively affects female educators' confidence.</li> <li>-Creates a challenge in winning the same respect as male colleagues.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Constant Need to Prove Competence and Career Advancement Barriers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Capabilities are frequently questioned, leading to a need to overprove oneself (P1).</li> <li>-Contributions are undervalued or overshadowed by male counterparts (P2).</li> <li>-Being overlooked for projects in favor of male colleagues (P4).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Slower career advancement due to double standards and lack of recognition.</li> <li>-Diminished job satisfaction and weakened sense of fulfillment .</li> <li>-Creates extra pressure and exhaustion.</li> <li>-Contributes to the underrepresentation of women in senior roles.</li> </ul>

**4.1. RQ1: What are the gender stereotypes experienced by female academic staff in Malaysian public research universities?**

This section presents the gender stereotypes experienced by female academic staff at a research-intensive public university in Malaysia. Through interview analysis, three main themes emerge, revealing how organizations, students, and colleagues influence women's daily work and role positioning through gendered expectations.

**4.1.1. Emotional Labor Expectations and The Invisible Burden**

Emotional labour emerged as the most prominent theme in our findings. Three of four participants (P1, P3 &P4) mentioned that they were often expected to control their emotions and provide interpersonal support in workplaces.

*"You know, female teachers often face assumptions that they should naturally excel in communication skills and emotional support, while males are viewed as better at discipline and leadership." (Participant 1)*

Two of respondents (P3 & P4) mentioned that women educators were usually expected to play an emotionally demanding role such as counselling students or pastoral care. In addition, these extra works usually increased their workload but had no extra rewards.

*"Well, I have witnessed my female colleagues often being asked to handle student counseling, while male colleagues are assigned more technical roles." (Participant 3)*

*“Students may expect female teachers to be more empathetic and understanding, while perceiving male teachers as figures for discipline and structure. For instance, girls might seek emotional support from female teachers, which can be stressful as it adds pressure.”*

*(Participant 4)*

This theme will align well with a certain literature that suggests that emotional labour is an invisible weight on women in academia which is within the context of this study. The narratives by the participants indicate that, female scholars were always supposed to assume pastoral roles, and mentor the pupils and handle interpersonal problems among other students. This type of communal behaviour though aligned with gendered expectations is not promoted in promotion structures that still place emphasis on research productivity. This is a reflection of the more recent studies which have indicated that emotional labour is overly perceived as female, and it is not sufficiently rewarded or acknowledged (Reid, 2021). The resulting trend of these demands may overwhelm female scholars, which may be associated with to exhaustion (Kariou et al., 2021) and could limits their performance in research.

#### **4.1.2. Gendered Task Distribution and Inequalities in Workload**

Gender differences in the allocation of work were evident among the interviewed group. Participants (P3 & P4) repeatedly mentioned that the organization would follow the traditional gender division of labour.

*“Emmm, gender stereotypes manifest in my working environment through expectations that female colleagues take on administrative duties, while male colleagues are expected to pursue senior leadership roles.” (Participant 3)*

As mentioned by participants (P1 & P4), girls usually got less encouragement or support from the institution to apply for leadership or STEM positions, which may have connection with the phenomenon of gender imbalance.

*“Yes, certain subjects are often seen as more suitable for one gender. For instance, STEM fields are typically associated with males, while arts and humanities are considered more suitable for females. (Pausing) This bias likely stems from societal expectations and traditional roles that shape perceptions of competence.” (Participant 4)*

In the educational context, as reported by most participants (P1, P2 & P3), some female lecturers were more likely to be assigned to organization events, academic documents, student affairs and committee works while male educators were more likely to handle strategic planning, technical responsibilities and resource-related decisions. For the women in this cohort, this pattern indicates how gender-based role expectations further limit women’s participation in research and scholarly development.

*“Yes, I believe there is a gender-based bias in promotions and leadership opportunities. (Pausing) Women are often overlooked for these roles due to prevailing stereotypes about their capabilities and commitments, which unfairly skews opportunities in favor of their male counterparts.” (Participant 3)*

Such a tendency in the distribution of tasks according to gender supports the constant unequal results in performance. As our interviews indicate, women were much more often than men assigned to administrative, service, and event-related duties, as men were more likely to be encouraged or oriented towards administrative/leader or research-intensive jobs. These categories seem to indicative of the persistent stereotypes of women and men as being respectively supportive and agentic, respectively. These trends continue to contribute to leadership inequalities in academia, as they have been emphasized in recent scholarships (Misra et al., 2021). As a result, women do not have as many chances

to increase their research visibility and become more prominent in their research and make an academic difference, as well as, slack the career growth based on merit.

### 4.1.3. Authority Perception Disparities and The Credibility Gap

Among the participants interviewed, gender-based perceptions of authority in the educational environment differ significantly. Participants (P2 & P3) reported being overlooked for leadership positions because they are believed to be less authoritative and less decision-making role models.

*"Well, male colleagues are perceived as more authoritative. Once, during a departmental meeting, a male colleague's ideas were prioritized over mine despite similar merit." (Participant 2)*

According to the accounts of four participants, gender stereotypes about authority tend to undermine the authority of women teachers in areas that require assertiveness.

*"Yes (nodding), you know, students often expect male teachers to be more assertive, while they anticipate female teachers to be more patient. For example, boys may allow themselves to be less disciplined in female-led classes." (Participant 3)*

In these specific instances, women struggle to win the same respect and recognition as their male colleagues which in turn affects their confidence in their leadership role. Being overlooked or interrupted in the workplace setting tends to have a negative impact on the female educator's confidence.

*"(sigh) Colleagues sometimes questioned my authority in discussions, making me more frustrated and also determined to assert myself despite these challenges." (Participant 2)*

The impact of role incongruity can also be demonstrated by inequality of power and credibility. In their interactions with students and peers, college leaders were more likely to assign more subject-matter knowledge and intellectual authority to male scholars and undermine the achievements and leadership of female scholars. This goes in line with the fact that evidence still points to leadership qualities still being culturally coded in a masculine way (Manzi, Caleo, and Heilman, 2024). Consequently, female scholars are confronted with discriminatory classroom experiences and lessen of perceived competence which overtime might erode confidence in their career and leadership positions.

## 4.2. RQ2: How do these gender stereotypes influence their work performance?

This section examines how stereotypes affect the work performance, career paths, and job satisfaction of female academics. Analysis suggests that these effects are multi-layered and cumulative, and are reflected in areas such as promotion opportunities, leadership development, and psychological experience.

### 4.2.1. Constant Need to Prove Competence and Career Advancement Barriers

Another finding from the interviews was that all four participants often felt they had to constantly prove themselves to gain recognition. Participants (P1, P2, P3 & P4) mentioned that they felt distressed about the emotional and cognitive burden of having to prove themselves to counter gendered assumptions.

*"Gender stereotypes have often led to assumptions about my capabilities, impacting my confidence and pushing me to overprove myself in professional spaces (silence). I mean, their presence has influenced my career trajectory, compelling me to navigate obstacles that male counterparts may not face." (Participant 1)*

This statement describes the need for women to constantly prove themselves and to shake off doubts about their abilities.

*"My contributions were either undervalued or overshadowed by male counterparts. Indeed, these experiences have persisted, occasionally affecting my confidence and professional relationships." (Participant 2)*

In addition, P4 also mentioned that their achievements were required to be stricter or different standards.

*"I've faced instances where my capabilities were questioned due to my gender, often being overlooked for projects in favor of male colleagues. This has affected my visibility and recognition in my field." (Participant 4)*

Because of such double standards, female academics often experience slower career progression which is associated with slower promotion and job satisfaction for female academics. The need to constantly prove themselves also can lower their sense of achievement.

*"Gender stereotypes negatively impact my job satisfaction by creating an environment where I have to continuously prove my worth. I mean, this additional pressure undermines the joy of achieving my goals." (Participant 1)*

The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE, 2022) states that in the public universities of Malaysia, over half of the workforce is made of women but only approximately 35% of professors. This current gap indicates the systemic limitations to female progress as well as suggests the very fact that the gender stereotypes remain a restricting factor to equity and diversity in higher education.

Female academics in this study described a recurring prove-it-again dynamic in which demonstrating competence required greater and more sustained effort than that expected of male colleagues for equivalent institutional recognition. They were not given due credit or their actions were not considered when performance was in same calibres. Recent research points out that this two-tier academic assessment and rewarding still persists (Llorens et al., 2021), thus resulting in slow career advancement and an underrepresentation in high positions.

*"Many women experience bias not only because of their gender, but also because of their race, sexual orientation, a disability, or other aspects of their identity—and the compounded discrimination can be much greater than the sum of its parts. As a result, these groups of women often experience more microaggressions and face more barriers to advancement." (Lean In., & McKinsey & Company, 2022, p. 20)*

While participants in this study did not report compounded discrimination based on ethnicity, the Women in the Workplace 2022 report (Lean In, 2022, p. 20) documents that such dynamics exist elsewhere. The Indian participant in this study (P2) did not report marginalisation based on her ethnicity, which may reflect the small sample size. This highlights the need for future research with larger, more diverse samples to explore whether ethnicity amplifies career advancement barriers in the Malaysian context.

These four themes together provide an indication of how the issue of gender stereotypes may be entrenched in the practices of the studied Malaysian public research universities. According to Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) this type of incongruity creates both descriptive and prescriptive forms of bias (how women are viewed and how women are expected to act respectively). The evidence from this exploratory sample suggests that the solution to these structural inequities could involve institutional reforms including the sufficient proper valuation of emotional and service work, the fair distribution of tasks, and glimpsing promotion. Unless these changes take place on a systemic level, the rise in female representation will probably be superficial, and it is likely that the performance and career progression obstacles identified in this study may continue to exist.

### 4.3. Disconfirming Vignettes

While the four participants' narratives were largely convergent, one minimally conforming vignette emerged that merits attention.

The sole Indian participant (P2) described an episode where she resisted having her ideas dismissed by her male supervisor:

*"I remember this one time... I had a disagreement with my supervisor... he's male, by the way... and, you know, usually in situations like that, if you just follow the normal process, my ideas probably wouldn't have been accepted. But I just... I kept insisting. I really believed in what I was proposing, so I didn't back down, even though it was quite uncomfortable. Honestly... the whole process wasn't very pleasant... there was tension, and it felt quite difficult at times... But in the end... I did manage to get the outcome I was aiming for... so I guess it was worth it."*  
(P2)

This vignette is minimally conforming because, compared with the passive acceptance of authority, which was not passively accepted by other participants, P2 actively resisted and had a positive outcome. However, it also acknowledged the emotional toll ("unpleasant", "tension", "quite difficult"). This suggests that not all women passively internalise stereotypes and that agency does not come for free when facing gendered barriers.

No one reported experiencing supportive leadership or resisting gendered role allocation without any emotional cost. This may reflect the power of gender stereotypes in the studied context.

## 5. Discussions and Conclusion

The results of this research indicate that gender stereotypes may be very strong, even within the academic culture of the investigated Malaysian publicly gathered research universities, and thus reflect the working reality of the female scholars used in the study on continuing and consequential terms. The four themes identified, which were repeatedly reported in the interviews indicate that gendered norms can be replicated in the daily interactions of organisations and institutional practices. They are not individual problems of individual bias; the statistics write tendencies in the frameworks that could hold women at the positions that are both necessary and underestimated, and make the working environment where work based on the feminine role is accepted and a work based on leadership role is audited.

A serious implication of the patterns, as voiced by the participants (P1, P2, P3 & P4) is that it had a direct effect on women thereby making them unable to fully engage in academic work, which is the fuel of career growth. When female scholars in this generation are overburdened with administrative tasks, student service, and other types of invisible labour, they complain that they lose time, attention and visibility in institutions that allow them to be fruitful in their research and relevant in the leadership front. Simultaneously, respondents pointed at a persistent prove-it-again load, according to which they are interrogated about their competence and authoritarianism, and in order to become as legitimized as their male peers, they must exert extra effort, both emotional and cognitive. All these experiences, based on the stories gathered, seem to destroy job satisfaction, narrow leadership paths, and destroy psychological health.

Despite the fact that the involved universities tend to represent themselves as a meritocratic environment, the results depict how informal rules might influence academic life in gendered means. This evidence based on this study indicates that opinions regarding the allocation of workload, the authority of women could be considered credible to a significant extent by those involved in the case which might have been caused by the deep-seated stereotypes. Such difference between what is written in the policy and what is experienced by the participants suggests a major institutional disconnect within these situations. Failure to challenge these unspoken rules means that universities may unknowingly

reproduce a culture where women are only visible by falling into the role of feminine expectations and a made suspect when they take charge and challenge existing hierarchies.

Notably, these results provide a positive contribution to the cause which argues that gender equity cannot be attained solely at an individual level. Teaching women to be more aggressive, tough or strategic do somehow help alter structural conditions that reproduce inequality. The examples given by the participants are pointing to the fact that the problem is not only a personal experience, but also the institutional mechanisms which seem to legitimize unequal allocation of labour. Should organisational culture reward masculine-coded behaviours and undermine relational or administrative inputs, the results suggest that female academics might still encounter systemic and not personal barriers.

To sum up, on the basis of the findings of this exploratory research, this study finds that in light of the intensity of this research, universities should ideally cease to have only symbolic commitments to gender equality, but introduce reforms to their structures. Findings reveal that the solution to inequality issues seems to cover opening workload allocation systems, incentives of emotional and service labour, fair promotional schemes as well as proactive measures to defy stereotype-driven assumptions on power and ability. Unless institutional measures are taken, in terms of deliberate and sustained action, the numbers of women in the academic might be hard to destabilise the structures that marginalise them. To make female academics flourish in real sense, universities can take a critical look into and challenge the norms, practices and power dynamics which were found in the course of this study.

### **5.1. Expand the Research Agenda and Next Steps**

These exploratory findings enable concrete next steps, which are three in number. First, replicate the study in a larger qualitative sample (20–30 participants) across more faculties to generate broader disciplinary variation. Second, apply a supplementary survey derived from the four themes to establish their prevalence in a broader population (200–300 respondents). Third, use a longitudinal cohort study design to follow women academics for 3–5 years and investigate whether gendered stereotypes can help predict attrition and other career outcomes.

On the implementation side, institution-specific actions include transparent workload tracking, unconscious bias training and targeted mentorship programmes — all of which can be implemented in 0-2 years. System-level policy reforms (e.g., reforming promotion criteria, requiring annual gender equity audits, decoupling leadership from masculine-coded traits) require broader coordination and will likely take 3–5 years or longer.

## **6. Implications and Recommendations**

These recommendations in this following section are presented as hypothesis-generating directions for future research and policy consideration rather than evidence-based prescriptions. The results indicate that to curtail well established gender stereotypes, universities can be able to go beyond the symbolic investment in tangible structural and procedural changes. The policies may need to reward and acknowledge emotional labour and service work, even distribution of teaching and administrative work and impose a clear and criteria-based promotion and recognition measures. Devoid of such systemic modifications, merely filling the academia with more women is, in and of itself, unlikely to demolish the very system that keeps on reinforcing the disadvantage.

Universities can consider to invest on special mentorship and leadership development programmes for female academics which might have chance to give them access to guidance, networks and knowledge institutional basis that can lead them towards research-based and leadership positions. Unconscious bias and gender equity Professional development activities, scheduled regularly, including both academic and administrative personnel, can increase awareness and break the inequitable pattern of hiring, promotion, and workload distribution.

The limitations on transferability are the exploratory design and small, purposively chosen sample but they do give a basis to carry out further studies of bigger magnitude of qualitative study or a mixed-method study. Future research should examine whether a broader sample that includes academics from various disciplines, ranks, and institutional types. A combination of the qualitative and quantitative methods could provide more comprehensive information on the workings of gender stereotypes in diverse situations, as well as on the most effective mechanisms of empowering female scholars and promoting gender equity within institutions.

Finally, these findings suggest university leadership may be able to devote themselves to ensure that gender equity policies are systematically monitored and reviewed not only through the tracking of representation but also through the survey of tendencies in work load assignment, promotion results and recognition of contribution. Universities may consider offer the opportunities needed to achieve desired results through concerted and prolonged institutional action, in which female academics may be able to strive and succeed without facing disproportionate disadvantages. In order to give a strategic roadmap of the institution leadership, table 5 will prioritize the recommendations of the study into short, medium, and long term activities and what the primary owners and key performance indicators (KPIs) of various initiatives will be.

Table 7. Prioritized Policy Table

Priority	Strategic Recommendation	Primary Owner(s)	key performance indicators (KPIs)
Immediate (0–1 Year)	Transparent Workload Tracking: Implement systems to formally record and recognize "invisible" service and emotional labor	University HR; Faculty Deans	Introduction of a digital workload dashboard; 100% logging of pastoral care hours.
Immediate (0–1 Year)	Unconscious Bias Training: Conduct professional development sessions for hiring and promotion committees.	Center for Academic Excellence (CAD); HR	Certification of 90%+ of committee members; pre- and post-training equity awareness scores.
Medium (1–3 Years)	Mentorship & Leadership Programs: Launch targeted development programs providing access to networks for female academics.	Office of Research & Innovation; VC's Office	20% increase in female-led research grant applications; increased female representation in senior roles.
Medium (1–3 Years)	Criteria Reform: Explicitly integrate "service" and "interpersonal support" into formal promotion and reward rubrics.	University Senate; Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)	Updated official Promotion Handbook reflecting broadened merit criteria.
Long-term (3+ Years)	Systemic Monitoring & Audit: Establish annual gender equity audits tracking workload distribution and promotion outcomes.	Vice-Chancellor (VC); Institutional Quality Assurance	Publication of annual Gender Equity Progress Reports; narrowed gap in gendered workload distribution.
Long-term (3+ Years)	Structural Culture Transformation: Decouple leadership expectations from masculine-coded traits through institutional policy shifts.	Top-level University Leadership	Longitudinal staff surveys showing significant improvement in perceived organizational equity.

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## **Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

This semi-structured interview guide provided a flexible framework for the in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, allowing the sequence and depth of questions to be adapted to participants' responses. Probing questions were used selectively to elicit clarification or elaboration. Core questions are mapped to the relevant research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). Minor revisions were made following a pilot interview to enhance conceptual clarity and contextual relevance.

### **A.1 Interview Opening and Informed Consent**

Introduction of the researcher and overview of the study purpose;

Explanation of interview procedures, including audio recording, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time:

Obtaining written informed consent;

Opportunity for participants to raise preliminary questions.

### **A.2 Professional and Academic Background**

#### **Primary Question:**

Could you briefly describe your professional background as an academic in a Malaysian public university?

#### **Indicative Probes:**

How long have you been working within the Malaysian public university system?

What is your primary academic discipline or area of teaching and research?

What is your current academic position or rank?

#### **Purpose:**

To establish contextual background and rapport.

### **A.3 Experiences of Gender Stereotypes in Academia (Mapped to RQ1)**

#### **Primary Exploratory Question:**

Based on your experience, how would you describe the gender stereotypes or gender-related expectations that exist within the academic profession?

*(Pilot revision: The original wording referred specifically to the “teaching profession.” This was revised to “academic profession” to better reflect the broader scope of university roles, including research, service, and leadership.)*

**Indicative Probes:**

In what ways do these stereotypes manifest in your daily academic work or institutional environment?

How do such stereotypes shape expectations regard academic roles or responsibilities for women and men?

Are certain academic tasks, subjects, teaching styles, or service roles perceived as more suitable for one gender?

Can you share specific examples of gender-based expectations you have encountered, either personally or through colleagues?

**A.4 Perceived Impact on Work Performance and Career Development (Mapped to RQ2)**

**Primary Exploratory Question:**

Reflecting on your own career, how do you think gender stereotypes have influenced your professional experiences and career development?

**Indicative Probes:**

Have gender stereotypes affected your access to opportunities such as leadership roles, research projects, promotion, or professional networks?

How, if at all, have these experiences influenced your job satisfaction, motivation, or sense of professional fulfilment?

Have you experienced challenges in career progression that you believe are related to gendered expectations?

How would you describe the broader gender dynamics in your department or institution, and their influence on professional development?

**A.5 Perspectives on Gender Equality and Institutional Change**

**Primary Question:**

From your perspective, how would you describe the current state of gender equality within Malaysian public universities?

**Indicative Probes:**

Have you observed any progress or initiatives aimed at addressing gender stereotypes or inequality?

What institutional, cultural, or policy changes would you most like to see to improve gender equity?

How could the university system better support gender equality and the professional development of academics?

### **A.6 Interview Closure**

Invitation for participants to share any additional thoughts or experiences not previously discussed;

Expression of appreciation for participation and contributions;

Brief explanation of subsequent steps (e.g., transcription and data handling procedures).

## **Appendix B: Coding Procedures and Codebook Excerpt**

This appendix provides transparency regarding the qualitative data analysis process. It outlines the coding procedures employed in the study and presents an excerpt of the final codebook, illustrating the four core themes reported in the findings.

### **B.1 Coding Procedures**

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach. Analysis involved repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarisation, followed by inductive generation of initial codes grounded in participants' accounts. Codes were iteratively refined through constant comparison across interviews, with emerging patterns progressively organised into candidate themes. Analytic memos were maintained throughout the process to document coding decisions, reflexive insights, and theme development. Ongoing discussion among the research team supported clarification of interpretations and consolidation of the analytic framework.

Two coders as main coders of our team were involved in the analysis: the first author and a trained research assistant with prior experience in qualitative coding.

As this study adopted a reflexive thematic analysis approach, formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated. Instead, analytic rigor was supported through investigator documentary contextualisation, independent coding by multiple researchers, reflexive discussion to resolve discrepancies, and the development of a shared codebook.

### **B2. Codebook Excerpt:**

Code Label	Operational Definitions	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotes	Participant ID	Analytic Memo
Emotional labour expectation	Expectations that female academics should provide emotional support, counselling, and pastoral care to students	Mentions of being expected to handle student emotions, counselling, or pastoral care without formal recognition	Mentions of formal teaching duties or research responsibilities	"I don't know... it just feels like, somehow, there's this unspoken expectation that... female academics are the ones who should provide emotional support to students, you know?"	P3	This code captured repeated references to uncompensated student care. When grouped with similar codes (e.g., empathy expectations), it pointed to the invisible burden theme.
Overproving Competence	The need to work harder than male colleagues to gain the same level of recognition or credibility	Descriptions of having to constantly prove oneself, overprepare, or exceed expectations to be taken seriously	General mentions of hard work not linked to gender comparison	"Honestly... I've had to keep proving myself again and again... like, working harder than some of my male colleagues just to get the same recognition... it's kind of exhausting."	P1	Participant described having to work harder than male colleagues to gain recognition. This code revealed a higher-order theme of constant need to prove competence as a gendered career barrier.
Authority Questioned	Experiences where professional authority or expertise is doubted or challenged due to gender	Mentions of being interrupted, ignored, or having ideas dismissed in meetings; students questioning authority	General leadership challenges not attributed to gender	"I remember during a departmental meeting... I mean, we had very similar ideas, right? But somehow... his was taken more seriously than mine... I was just sitting there thinking, 'okay... why?'"	P2	This code captured how gender undermines professional credibility. When grouped with "Student Perception Bias," it revealed a broader theme of authority perception disparities, showing that gendered authority gaps operate in both colleague interactions and

						classroom settings.
Promotion Bias	Perceived gender-based barriers to career advancement and leadership positions	Mentions of being overlooked for promotion, leadership roles, or research opportunities due to gender	General career dissatisfaction not linked to gender	"Well... I feel like women are somehow overlooked when it comes to leadership roles... I mean some people just assume we're not as capable as others(male colleagues)..."	P3	This code linked individual experiences of bias to tangible career outcomes. Together with "Authority Questioned" and "Gendered Task Allocation," it contributed to the higher-order theme of constant need to prove competence and career advancement barriers.
Student Perception Bias	Gendered expectations from students regarding teaching style, authority, and approachability	Mentions of students expecting female teachers to be more patient/nurturing and male teachers more assertive/disciplinary	General teaching style preferences not linked to gender	"You know, some students may have these expectations... like, they expect ... it's like we're supposed to be patient all the time. I totally understand them but why always us (female)?"	P3	This code extended the authority theme beyond peer interactions into the classroom. It showed that credibility gaps are not only imposed by colleagues but also reinforced by students' gendered expectations, strengthening the theme of authority perception disparities as a multi-layered phenomenon.
Gendered Task Allocation	Unequal distribution of administrative, teaching, and service tasks based on gender	Mentions of women being assigned more administrative/teaching/service work; men assigned	General workload complaints not linked to gender	"Sometimes I feel like... a lot of the administrative work and committee stuff just automatically comes to us... while my male colleagues can focus more on their research..."	P2	This code showed how gendered expectations translate into concrete workload inequalities, directly feeding into "Promotion Bias" (less time for research) and "Emotional

		more research/ leadership tasks		it's a bit unfair, honestly."		Labor" (invisible service work). It contributed to the theme of gendered task distribution and inequalities in workload.
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### Appendix C: Documentary Sources Used for Analysis

Document title	Source	Year	Analytic role
Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education report: Academic staff demographics in 2021–2022.	The Web of Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (Open Source)	2022	Provided national-level contextual data on gender distribution across academic ranks and senior positions in Malaysian public universities.
She figures 2021: Gender in research and innovation.	The Web of Publications Office of the European Union (Open Source)	2021	Used to contextualise gender disparities in academic careers and research participation, informing interpretation of participants' accounts of inequality
Women in the workplace 2022.	The Web of Lean In (Open Source)	2022	Provided a comparative organisational context on gendered workload

			expectations, career barriers, and gender inequality trends, serving as a broader reference point for interpreting participants' reported experiences.
Malaysia Country Gender Note 2021.	The Web of World Bank (Open Source)	2021	Used to contextualise broader structural and institutional gender inequalities in Malaysia, providing national-level background relevant to understanding gendered experiences within higher education.

**Appendix D: Excerpts of Code-emergence Matrix (From Initial Codes to Core Themes)**

Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Core Themes
Emotional support, counselling students, pastoral care, empathy expectations	Emotional labour expectations	Emotional Labor Expectations and the Invisible Burden
Administrative work, committee coordination, event organisation, service roles	Gendered task allocation	Gendered Task Distribution and Inequalities in Workload

Being interrupted, ideas ignored, classroom discipline issues, leadership credibility	Authority perception bias	Authority Perception Disparities and the Credibility Gap
Working harder, higher evaluation standards, delayed promotion, self-doubt	Prove-it-again pressure	Constant Need to Prove Competence and Career Advancement Barriers

**Appendix E: Code-Accumulation Matrix.**

Interview	New Codes Identified	Cumulative Total
Interview 1 (P1)	12	12
Interview 1 (P2)	4	16
Interview 1 (P3)	1	17
Interview 1 (P4)	0	17