

# Moderate feminism within or against the neoliberal university? The example of Athena SWAN

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This article argues that gender equality programmes in universities and colleges may operate as a form of 'moderate feminism', producing contradictions through simultaneously providing a site of resistance and complicity for feminists. Our argument draws on a critical and empirical analysis of the Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) charter mark, which originated in the UK. We argue that Athena SWAN is a product of neoliberalization within the UK's academic environments, reflecting the tendency towards accountability, metrics and the performative 'doing' of equality work within this context. We problematize the operationalization and implementation of Athena SWAN processes in departments and universities, describing contradictions and caveats. Athena SWAN can lead to benefits and (limited) achievements in terms of culture change and institutional initiatives. However, the burden of undertaking this work predominantly falls upon women and other marginalized groups, such as people of colour and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Equality programmes such as Athena SWAN are often poorly designed to address complex issues, such as intersectional identities and discrimination experienced by self-assessment team members. Nevertheless, we identify potential in utilizing Athena SWAN as a site of resistance and means to foster collective solidarity to work against neoliberal practices.

## KEYWORDS

Athena SWAN, gender, intersectionality, neoliberalism, universities

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, a growing number of gender equality programmes and policies have been instituted within both public and private organizations, on national and transnational levels. Within the European Union (EU), numerous policy reports have assessed the prevalence and approach of gender equality policies and legislation on an aggregate level. However, these reports tend to rely on quite broad forms of categorization that do not capture complexities and individual details of schemes and interventions (European Commission (EC), 2014).

At the organizational level, scholars have been concerned with challenges in addressing gender inequalities in transformative ways, focusing on the 'effectiveness' of gender interventions in organizations and organizational change (Benschop, Mills, Mills, & Tienari, 2012; De Vries & van den Brink, 2016; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Evans, 2014). In higher education organizations, interventions to address the gendered nature and persisting inequalities of academia have become more common in European institutions since the 1980s, in a context where the impact of neoliberalism or 'industrialization' – as it is often called by authors – is increasingly visible (Fogelberg, Hearn, Husu, & Mankkinen, 1999). Based on the First European Conference of Gender Equality in Higher Education (1998), a collection of such interventions is provided highlighting the resistance that such activities come across and the 'hard' work entailed in implementation. It is thus emphasized that 'analysing the shortcoming and difficulties those interventions often meet has provided new insights and new material to studies on the gendered nature of academia' (Fogelberg, Hearn, Husu, & Mankkinen, 1999, p. 14).

Gender equality interventions at policy and organizational level have been debated within various strands of feminism. For instance, it can be argued that gender equality goals benefit from being aligned with business and economic imperatives, with organizational actors being more likely to engage with liberal practices such as mentoring and training schemes for women (Grosser & Moon, 2005; Vinnicombe, 2004). However, critiques regarding the rationale, implementation and outcome of such interventions seem to be recurrent and pervasive. Numerous feminist scholars have criticized gender equality interventions for shying away from challenging assumptions and beliefs about the neutrality of organizational practices, and for emphasizing outcomes that focus more on 'fixing the women' than addressing structural barriers (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Liff & Cameron, 1997). Even when approaches such as gender mainstreaming aim to '[make] visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes and outcomes' (Walby, 2005, p. 454), the interpretation of their findings and implementation of their recommendations for change can still be perceived as too challenging by organizations, thus limiting their transformative potential (Rees, 2005). Less attention has been paid to the actual operationalization and implementation of gender equality interventions, although some recent literature has noted the complexity of these matters (Callerstig, 2014; Evans, 2014; Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009, on gender mainstreaming).

In this article, we provide a detailed example of how one such gender equality scheme works, and how it impacts upon those who work to implement it. In doing so, we address the previous dearth of attention on this topic in the context of research and educational institutions, through focusing on the UK gender equality framework Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network). We draw on a mixed-methods study to argue that Athena SWAN represents a form of 'moderate feminist' praxis within higher education institutions, examining its operationalization across multiple institutions. In examining the benefits and drawbacks of Athena SWAN, we use 'moderate feminism' as an analytic framework and show how the operationalization of Athena SWAN – and thus its *potential* – has been constrained by a neoliberal university model that centres business and market imperatives, rather than the equality case in and of itself. We engage constructively with the charter, provide a better understanding of its limitations and argue that it provides opportunities to 'question the game' and focus our future efforts in alternative ways to enhancing its potential to bring transformative change.

In doing so, we contribute to scholarly work about gender interventions in organizations and organizational change (Benschop et al., 2012; De Vries & van den Brink, 2016; Ely & Meyerson, 2000) and how they can be problematized to demonstrate both limitations and potential for transforming the power relationships in the academic sector, within the UK and beyond. To do this we also use the concept of 'moderate feminism' to raise the

tensions between different strands of feminisms in the context of gender interventions. We utilize the concept of 'ambivalence' to demonstrate our positional and methodological stance towards feminist debates on gender equality work (Ahmed, 2007a; Weick, 1979).

Our specific analysis of Athena SWAN is important for three reasons. Firstly, because it is an example of how moderate feminism may operate both as a site of complicity in neoliberalism *and* of resistance. Feminists may use 'moderate' practices to create a space to organize, engage and develop a collective solidarity, utilizing the higher education sector's recognition of these practices to exert pressure and ensure commitment from senior management for developing actions and programmes with transformative potential. Secondly, the UK can be understood as a testing ground of sorts for neoliberal innovations within the higher education sector, with new approaches to profit maximization and individualization frequently adopted elsewhere in Europe and beyond (Pereira, 2017). Athena SWAN has been heavily shaped by recent developments in the UK which are likely to have a growing resonance beyond this setting in coming years. Finally, we show how Athena SWAN is at present relatively unique within a European context, with some of the specific benefits and drawbacks of the scheme arising specifically from the particular nature of its design and implementation.

This article opens with an account of moderate feminisms and neoliberalism within higher education institutions, which provides a theoretical framework for the article. We then offer a brief introduction to the context, emergence and operationalization of the Athena SWAN charter. We also compare Athena SWAN to other European gender equality schemes for research institutions, noting the dearth of detailed accounts on this topic and showing how Athena SWAN is unique within this context. We explain our methodology and approach to the research project, before presenting our findings, which demonstrate the contradictory effects and limitations of Athena SWAN as a form of moderate feminist praxis.

## 2 | MODERATE FEMINISM IN THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

Notions of a 'moderate' feminism typically entail an appeal to reasonableness, as embedded in the commonsense norms of the socio-political context in which the appeal is made. In societies where people overwhelmingly present themselves as in favour of gender equality, a moderate approach to feminism would seem a normal, reasonable and 'easy' political position to take (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Edley & Wetherell, 2001). However, the *form* that a moderate feminism might take is mediated by pre-existing social discourses on feminism, as well as wider sociocultural and economic paradigms. In a review of the literature, Roy (2013) identifies various international examples of moderate feminisms, including feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in India, Islamic feminism in Pakistan and 'domesticated' liberal media feminisms in the UK.

In the west, a 'neoliberal' socio-political economic paradigm is hegemonic. We understand neoliberalism to be a 'complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the "market" as a basis for the universalization of market-based social relations' (Shamir, cited in Ball, 2012, p. 18). This approach centres private enterprise, the profit motive and individual (rather than collective) responsibility; it 'rests upon a starkly utopian vision of market rule, rooted in an idealized conception of competitive individualism and a deep antipathy to forms of social and institutional solidarity' (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009, p. 51). The predominance of neoliberal ideas and assumptions in contemporary western societies has come to shape most aspects of our personal and working lives: 'neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others' (Ball, 2012, p. 18).

Consequently, most contemporary organizations committed to tackling gender inequalities in the west adopt a 'rational', 'reasonable', individualistic neoliberal approach to doing so; in this context, moderate feminism and neoliberalism can be understood as potentially mutually constitutive. These approaches have been labelled variably as transnational business feminism (Roberts, 2015); neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014); choice feminism (Kirkpatrick, 2010); and market feminism (Kantola & Squires, 2012), and are in congruence with the phenomenon

of moderate 'liberal' feminisms spreading across policy, media and scholarly discourses. The common parameter of these forms is the emphasis on the individual, the 'feminist subject' and (typically) a lack of engagement with the structural issues in which gender inequality is rooted.

Liberal and neoliberal feminisms often rely on a simplified, reductionist notion of 'the woman', which ignores intersectional experiences and power inequalities, and which views female liberation through the market. Intersectional theory recognizes that individuals face specific challenges as structural forms of marginalization intersect (Crenshaw, 1989); for example, BME (black and minority ethnic) women are likely to face greater obstacles in academia than white women (Bhopal, 2015; Gabriel & Tate, 2017), and these challenges are only compounded for trans academics of colour (Jourian, Simmons, & Devaney, 2015). Intersectional approaches arguably stand at odds with liberal equality policies that increasingly position gender as the central form of inequality and are justified in terms of a business case rather than any notion of social justice (Ahmed, 2007b; Squires, 2007). Gender equality policies are thus constrained by the neoliberal frameworks within which they operate (Annesley, Gains, & Rummery, 2010). As an example of gender equality work, we show that Athena SWAN similarly relies on a binary conceptualization of gender both in its inception and in the subsequent over-reliance of this concept at the centre of its operationalization.

The feminist scholars whose work is described above tend to adopt a highly critical view of 'moderate' approaches to feminism. However, Roy (2013) argues that such analyses tend to regard moderate feminism as a form rather than a process, thereby reinforcing a 'reform-revolutionary dichotomy'. Roy (2013) thus argues that the *practice* of moderation may serve an important pragmatic function, enabling a feminism to

characterize and performatively bring within its fold a number of political practices not viewed as sufficiently radical, transformative or even feminist, such as political interventions in and through the state, institutions and (neoliberal) development. (p. 114)

As we shall show, it is this logic of strategic moderation that underpins the Athena SWAN charter in the context of the neoliberal university.

Higher education institutions have undergone a significant process of neoliberalization over the last three decades. This is an international phenomenon, albeit with an uneven rate of development; in particular, neoliberal 'innovations' pioneered within US and UK institutions are often adopted within European universities and in the Global South a few years later (Pereira, 2017). Academic staff are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the efficiency and efficacy of their work, with their success (or failure) quantified through accountability exercises such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework and Teaching Excellence Framework, which ensure that academics can be rewarded or punished according to their productivity (Ball, 2012; Pereira, 2017). There is also a growing tendency towards casualization in academia. An increasing proportion of UK academics work under precarious and insecure conditions (Lopes & Dewan, 2014), with continuous pressure to perform having devastating effects on career advancement, wellbeing and mental health of early career academics (Pereira, 2017; Sifaki, 2016; Thwaites & Pressland, 2017). This only compounds the pressures felt by academics who experience marginalization or discrimination in the workplace due to factors such as gender and racial inequality (Bhopal, 2015; Knights & Richards, 2003; Lopes & Dewan, 2014).

Certain priorities, ideologies and mechanisms are now so deeply embedded in the structure of higher education institutions that resistance to sexism (as well as ableism, cisgenderism, heterosexism and racism) can be difficult to imagine – let alone undertake – outside of a neoliberal framework. The onus is often upon committed individuals who are themselves marginalized and/or discriminated against to work for progressive change (Parsons & Priola, 2013). In her account of the drafting and enactment of race equality policies at UK universities, Ahmed (2007a) observes that responsibility for writing these policies can be 'uneasily distributed along racial lines'; in this way, an 'uneven distribution of responsibility for racial equality can be considered a mechanism for reproducing that inequality' (p. 593). Similarly, it is often women who undertake most of the work on gender equality programmes such as Athena SWAN (Caffrey et al., 2016). Moreover, once the policy is written, 'good practice' can often amount to little

more than a marketable measure of consumer satisfaction. This is demonstrated by institutions through the existence and distribution of a policy or training provision rather than through any evidence of success in changing racist or sexist institutional structures (Ahmed, 2007b; Tate & Page, 2018).

Shore and Davidson (2014) therefore argue that action for progressive change must move beyond a collusion/resistance binary. They encourage campaigners to 'question the game itself, making visible its outlines, rules and referees – and the historical contingency and arbitrariness of its arrangements', by which means 'we might be able to create the conditions of possibility for an alternative space and produce a different way of practicing politics within the university' (p. 25). Similarly, in organizational studies, De Vries and van den Brink (2016) suggest a bi-focal strategy that enables individuals and organizations to move from traditional gender equality approaches towards more transformative ones. They suggest that this will take place through individuals acting 'as change agents that disrupt and change workplace practices', through small wins and 'tempered' radicalism (Meyerson, 2003; Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

We contribute to this body of work by exploring the benefits and contradictory effects of Athena SWAN – as an example of moderate feminism – through investigating the operationalization of the scheme in various institutional and departmental contexts and argue that through revealing its benefits and shortcomings, we can help to develop conditions for alternative and more transformative interventions.

### 3 | ATHENA SWAN AS A MODERATE GENDER EQUALITY INTERVENTION

The Athena Project started in 1999 providing grants to institutions for projects and networks aimed at advancing the representation of women in science, technology, engineering, medicine and mathematics (STEMM). It was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Royal Society. A Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) was one of the initiatives of the Athena Project. This was a 'top down' project founded by a group of women in senior academic and management positions which capitalized on contacts and professional networks with academically renowned scientists in senior posts, senior management and junior researchers (mainly women) and whose engagement with the project helped to sustain its momentum. The project's association with the Royal Society and HEFCE further provided a vital sense of respectability and status.

The first draft of the Athena SWAN charter emerged from a SWAN meeting; the charter was launched in 2005 with ten member institutions. Within a decade, the number of Athena SWAN member institutions increased to 128. While membership was moderate in the first few years, it grew significantly (especially in medical and dental schools) after an announcement in 2011 from Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England, that eligibility for funding from the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) would be dependent on achieving an Athena SWAN silver award (Donald, Harvey, & McLean, 2011). This momentum was further bolstered by a 2013 statement from Research Councils UK (RCUK), which outlined an expectation that funding recipients 'provide evidence of ways in which equality and diversity issues are managed at both an institutional and department level'.<sup>1</sup> Participation in Athena SWAN could be used as part of this evidence. The explicit (NIHR) and implicit (RCUK) link between Athena SWAN and funding eligibility has been an important feature of the scheme, in a similar manner to other gender equality initiatives in the EU such as in Norway and Germany (Lipinsky, 2014).

The purpose of Athena SWAN has always been to bring about structural and cultural change, with its original stated aim being to 'encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) employment in higher education and research'. In this sense it can be understood as a moderate feminist project, focused on changing structures sufficiently to increase the success of individual women within the context of existing institutions. In 2014–2015, the scheme further expanded in terms of disciplinary and geographical boundaries, as well as scope. The charter now aims to address intersectional inequalities, and Athena SWAN charter members are now expected to examine their support for transgender staff and students and their commitment to staff in professional and support roles.<sup>2</sup> The growing level of interest in Athena

SWAN from institutions and STEM departments, along with an acknowledgement that women are still underrepresented in senior posts across the higher education sector, has also led to departments in the social sciences, arts and humanities now being included in the scheme. Last but not least, Athena SWAN has been extended to Ireland and piloted in Australia in a slightly modified form (as the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) initiative). The Athena Swan charter is currently owned and managed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), a registered charity (for more on the establishment of ECU, see Finch, 2003).<sup>3</sup>

Athena SWAN member institutions and their constituent academic departments are invited to assess gender equality among their own staff and students, submit a document that identifies challenges and propose an Action Plan to address those challenges. This document is evaluated through a peer review process managed by ECU. If sufficient progress is demonstrated, a charter mark is awarded as evidence of the department or institution's work towards promoting gender equality. In the UK, equality charter marks serve to imbue prestige upon an organization by signalling that they are committed to promoting diversity and inclusion. There are three different Athena SWAN award types, which show different levels of progress: Bronze (requiring the identification of challenges and plan of activities), Silver (requiring evidence of ongoing activity and impact) and Gold (requiring a significant record of activity and impact). Departments or institutions must hold a Bronze award before they can apply for a Silver, and a Silver award before they can apply for a Gold. Departments and institutions must regularly apply to renew their charter mark, and risk losing it if they cannot demonstrate sufficient progress towards achieving the goals set out in their Action Plan.

Athena SWAN submissions at both departmental and institutional level require a self-assessment team (SAT), which is responsible for collecting and analysing data broken down by gender, identifying problems and designing actions. There is great emphasis on providing quantitative data in particular to provide an overview of the population at different levels (staff, students within various categories) and evidence of the impact that actions have had on the representation, structural and cultural change. The SAT is expected to be representative of the department or institution's population, and inclusive of both senior and junior academics as well as support staff from a range of roles. The SAT has a chair, whose role is to lead the process and coordinate the submission. For departmental submissions, significant 'buy-in' is required from the Head of Department, who ideally will be involved in the SAT, but at the very least is expected to write and sign a letter of endorsement for their department's submission and associated Action Plan.

A European report on gender equality work in research institutions such as universities (EC, 2014) showed a growing number of gender equality schemes undertaken at the EU level and beyond. This report categorizes gender equality programmes as follows: (i) specific laws/acts regulating gender in public research; (ii) acts/incentives stimulating or obliging research performing organizations (RPOs) to explicitly set up a Gender Equality Plan; and (iii) strategies (i.e., guidelines, charters/codes, awards, etc.) at the national/ministerial or regional level for gender equality in RPOs. Athena SWAN is specifically reported as an example in the report, listed both as an 'act/incentive' (category 2) and a 'strategy' (category 3). This approach to categorization reflects our own feeling that Athena SWAN can be understood as a hybrid form of intervention. It was created by academics as a 'bottom-up' scheme and does not have legal standing. However, it is now managed by an external organization (ECU), and the motivation for participation can be about prestige associated with achieving an Athena SWAN award, as well as links to research funding.

There are other examples of European gender equality schemes that have associated gender equality performance with research funding and/or provide some level of prestige or financial award for participation, sometimes with the explicit backing of government organizations, as in Austria, Finland, Luxembourg and Germany (Lipinsky, 2014). For instance, the German Research Foundation evaluates research institutions' performance in order to grade and categorize Research Performing Organizations in four categories in a similar manner to Athena SWAN's Bronze, Silver and Gold awards. Similarly, during 2007–2014 the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research offered an annual Gender Equality Award of 2 million Norwegian kroner (approximately €224,300) to reward research communities' gender equality efforts. Importantly, Athena SWAN differs from these schemes in incorporating a form of monitoring process, by requiring higher education institutions and departments to demonstrate that they have made

sufficient progress in meeting the goals set out in their Action Plans. This is particularly significant for the sustainability of the scheme, which is often a challenging issue for gender equality interventions (De Vries & van den Brink, 2016; see also Colclough, 2004, for an examination of the Swedish model).

Athena SWAN can therefore be positioned within a wider context of gender equality schemes both within and beyond higher education institutions in the EU. However, it is relatively unique in terms of operating as a 'hybrid' scheme that provides both a strategy and an incentive for undertaking action to tackle inequality, with this incentive being sustained in the long term through continual re-assessment and monitoring as well as links to research funding. We will show that it is these unique elements of Athena SWAN that especially enable it to be used as a 'moderate feminist' tool for encouraging structural change.

Athena SWAN arguably seeks to tread the pragmatically moderate path described by Roy (2013), while undertaking a structural analysis from the 'inside' as championed by Shore and Davidson (2014) and De Vries and van den Brink (2016). As of 2017, the ECU website describes how its Equality Charters 'aim to drive forward the cultural and systemic changes needed if institutions are to remain competitive and attractive to talented staff and potential students in a global market'. There is thus an implied competitive element to the Athena SWAN scheme. Through addressing inequalities and achieving a charter mark, departments and institutions might aim to make themselves more attractive to hard-working neoliberal subjects, such as ambitious women academics and discerning students. A 'business case' can therefore be made for utilizing the untapped potential of a population that is demonstrably underrepresented in the workforce of the institution. Diversity has been linked to better science and knowledge outcomes (Nielsen et al., 2017), meaning that a case for inclusion can connect diversity with better innovation and economic competitiveness (in alignment with the competitive nature of the self-assessment process). Aside from the economic value, there is a diversity value similar to corporate social responsibility promoted in the neoliberal university. The appearance of being diverse and performing diversity, for instance, through writing a diversity policy document, is constructed as evidence of the 'actual' presence of diversity without necessarily changing the institution (Ahmed, 2012).

The award exists to demonstrate that the department or institution is committed to create a welcoming and equitable environment where individuals can fulfil their potential irrespective of gender. The most attractive environments are, of course, those that have achieved a Silver or Gold award. In this way, success in the Athena SWAN process becomes another means by which universities and their departments might be hierarchically ranked, distinguishing winners from losers in the UK's neoliberal marketplace of higher education (Ball, 2012).

Athena SWAN has begun to attract some academic attention, particularly from feminist and gender studies scholars. However, very few studies have been published on the subject to date, with research focusing largely on the impact of the scheme and its limitations within individual universities (Ovseiko, Chapple, Edmunds, & Ziebland, 2017) and medical schools (Caffrey et al., 2016; Gregory-Smith, 2015). Reported advantages of Athena SWAN include creating a space in which issues of gender (in)equality can be discussed, highlighting the existence of structural inequalities, and increased support for women's careers (Caffrey et al., 2016; Munir et al., 2014; Ovseiko et al., 2017). Some improvement in levels of female employment has been observed in medical schools that are Athena SWAN members since the introduction of the charter in 2005; however, there is little evidence that this is directly attributable to Athena SWAN itself, particularly as more women have also been employed overall by non-member institutions (Gregory-Smith, 2015). Previous research findings also show that the scheme has been undermined by wider institutional practices and social norms, such as gendered distributions of labour (Caffrey et al., 2016; Ovseiko et al., 2017). In particular, white women are overrepresented amongst departmental and institutional champions (Munir et al., 2014).

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data from two mixed-methods projects undertaken by the authors from 2016 to 2017, supplemented by material from focus groups conducted in 2013 (as part of an ESRC project on academic careers). The authors shared an interest in the impact of Athena SWAN and jointly conducted further research and analysis: the first author undertook research on Athena SWAN as part of a Horizon 2020 Consortium Project PLOTINA



('Promoting gender balance and inclusion in research, innovation and training') and the second author co-organized a workshop for academics and administrative staff working on (or sharing an interest in) Athena SWAN (Pearce, 2017). This event was attended by approximately 50 individuals from UK universities. We have both participated in SATs for Athena SWAN departmental and institutional submissions.

We sought to examine the benefits and consequences of departmental and institutional participation in the charter mark, as experienced by the academics and students it is designed to support. We drew upon material from nine semi-structured interviews originally conducted by the first author during 2016–2017, and three focus groups conducted with female academics from STEM departments in 2013 (all of which examined academics' perspectives on the underrepresentation of women in academia, and gender equality initiatives). The second author undertook a further four semi-structured interviews with individuals who had participated in the aforementioned workshop, and conducted a focus group with trans staff and students on the subject of gender equality initiatives.

Overall, the authors undertook 13 semi-structured qualitative interviews and four focus groups with participants from four UK universities, most of whom had been involved in SATs. Interview and focus group participants were sampled to ensure a diversity of genders, career grades and academic disciplines were represented.<sup>4</sup> This was complemented by an interview with a founding member of the Athena SWAN scheme. Interview participants were invited to discuss their experiences on departmental and/or institutional SATs, as well as their views on the possible advantages and disadvantages of the Athena SWAN process. Focus group participants were asked about their career experiences in academia and obstacles to gender equality, with some individuals specifically raising Athena SWAN as a topic for discussion. Audio recordings of these interviews and focus groups were transcribed for coding. The authors further conducted textual analyses of a range of documents associated with Athena SWAN (including the charter's website, NGO commentaries, guidance documents, submission forms and internal institutional submissions), and reflected critically upon the themes and topics that emerged during the workshop.

Together, these data sources enabled the authors to examine how Athena SWAN is portrayed, explained, operationalized and experienced across a range of academic departments and institutions in the UK. This was an inductive, interpretative research process, in which we recognized ourselves as deeply embedded in a research setting and drew analytically upon this, while also remaining open to the emergence of unexpected ideas and information. The participation of both authors in departmental and university SATs influenced our positioning and stance towards Athena SWAN, as well as our access to potential research participants. As feminist academics with a critical attitude towards neoliberalism within the academy we initially felt somewhat sceptical about Athena SWAN. However, through the process of participating in self-assessment, we came to recognize the potential benefits of the scheme. Through the research, we discovered that other scholars involved in self-assessment shared our ambivalence. Moreover, the process of analysis enabled us to deepen our understanding of this ambivalence, through identifying contradictions and caveats in the supposed benefits and drawbacks of Athena SWAN.

A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key themes across the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors utilized a collaborative approach to this process. First, we individually coded our respective transcripts and texts, each focusing on the perceived benefits, limitations and outcomes of Athena SWAN self-assessment procedures and resulting gender equality initiatives. We then shared our initial findings, reflecting on similar themes that had been separately identified within our respective transcripts (raising awareness, engagement and support, sustainability, business case and hard data, box ticking, intersectionality, workload, personal cost). We then returned to the transcripts and texts for a second round of analysis informed by this joint discussion, which in turn informed the writing of this article. During this final round of analysis, the first author quantified some of the material from the documents by counting the number of women and men involved in various aspects of Athena SWAN, in order to test some of the anecdotal observations that consistently emerged from the interviews, focus groups and workshop (i.e., regarding the predominance of women within the composition and chairing of the SATs, see Table 1).

Based on the analysis of these themes we identified *contradictions and caveats* in which operationalization of the scheme could work both to support and undermine moves towards gender equality. We distinguished three interrelated arenas within which these contradictions and caveats could be observed: (i) attempts to incorporate



intersectionality and trans inclusion; (ii) the workload and personal cost of Athena SWAN; (iii) the perception of Athena SWAN as a 'box-ticking' exercise. These findings were triangulated through an analysis of available data on SAT participation from ECU.

Through this analysis and our engagement with existing literatures, we ourselves developed an ambivalent stance towards moderate feminist practices. We are critical of how moderate feminism can position gender equality as common sense within higher education institutions through encouraging organizations to adopt neoliberal approaches in addressing gender equality.

However, we came to believe that problematizing the operationalization of moderate feminist practices such as Athena SWAN can also help us to address such limitations and explore the benefits and opportunities that equality schemes might provide. These include opportunities to raise further awareness of inequalities and obtaining access to institutional resources with the aim of addressing structural issues. Through institutional legitimacy and recognition, moderate feminist initiatives such as Athena SWAN can function as opportunities to organize collectively and develop actions that undermine structures of inequality.

This ambivalence has inevitably affected the conduct and writing of our research, but we ultimately believe that this process has been advantageous to efforts to address academia's gender inequalities from the 'inside'. As Meyerson and Scully (1995) note, with ambivalence

individuals can remain ambivalent and quite clear about their attachments and identities. In contrast to compromise, ambivalence involves pure expression of both sides of a dualism; compromise seeks a middle ground which may lose the flavor of both sides. (p. 588)

## 5 | THE BENEFITS OF ATHENA SWAN

Many participants described Athena SWAN as a genuine opportunity to address structural issues and bring about positive change in the culture of their department and/or institution. The charter was seen as providing an important opportunity to raise awareness of gender equality issues, and increase engagement, support and commitment from staff in developing sustainable strategies for structural and cultural change, thereby reflecting the findings of Caffrey et al. (2016), Munir et al. (2014) and Ovseiko et al. (2017).

The requirements for departmental and institutional assessments have helped individual staff members (mainly those involved in the assessment process) to become more aware of policies, practices and numbers in relation to gender in the workplace. They have also enabled conversations about sensitive and previously undiscussed topics

**TABLE 1** Chairs and composition of self-assessment teams (SATs) by gender in higher education institutions with Athena SWAN institutional Silver awards

SAT chair	Proportion of men's participation in SAT (%)	Proportion of women's participation in SAT (%)
Woman	38.9	61.1
Woman	43.8	56.3
Woman	23.1	76.9
Man	30.0	70.0
Woman	38.5	61.5
Woman	55.6	44.4
Woman	40.0	60.0
Woman	30.8	69.2
Man	42.9	57.1
Man	31.0	69.0
Woman	30.0	70.0

such as work–life balance, family–care responsibilities, culture and collegiality. Several participants reported that their involvement made them observe and reflect on behavioural patterns, which led to them altering their own behaviour.

I think [Athena SWAN is] a good thing, I think it's good more generally as well because they ought to be things that improve the culture for everyone rather than specific female groups. [...] and it's more self-reflection, which is a good thing to do. (*STEMM, woman, mid-career academic*)

Staff awareness of embedded gender inequalities has been catalysed through the process of data collection and analysis, which provides an overview of the institutional situation and how it compares to other universities or departments. A strong presentation of student and staff data can also be crucial to build up a business case for increased support and commitment from colleagues (including in instances where the moral case was not enough). So, while it was often driven by a data-driven business case, this institutionally recognized 'moderate' feminist approach encouraged a critical reflective process of the identified issues. Interviewees specifically highlighted the power of these data:

We found when we showed academics in particular the statistics they were quite shocked by them. (*Senior administrator, woman*)

I think there is value in you know galvanising both individuals and departments and forcing people to look and think about data. Because you know, actually if you just have casual conversation and ask the average academic about the gender balance they have no idea. So you've actually go (to) look at some numbers and start to think about issues and ask questions I think Athena process does that I think it brings people together it provokes discussions and so you know there's lots and lots that's really positive. (*Social Sciences, woman, senior academic*)

The availability of 'hard' (quantitative) data was often considered crucial. Data often clearly highlighted an underrepresentation of women in the department (especially in senior positions), creating a convincing 'case' for doing something about it, especially within STEMM departments. Furthermore, the charter requires access to data that may not have been readily available or publicized in the past, creating a need for more consistent and robust data systems that can provide meaningful statistics on gendered (in)equalities.

Participants identified a range of positive actions that arose from Athena SWAN processes within their departments and institutions. Examples included financial schemes to support new parents in attending conferences or focusing on research following maternity or adoption leave, and an increased representation of women at senior levels (see also Pearce, 2017). In parallel to enhancing the numbers of women progressing in their academic careers, there were also efforts to change behaviours and attitudes. Research participants tended to portray changes that resulted from these initiatives as small but incremental over time.

So I think we've had positive changes in terms of staffing and just kind of increasing, at a certain point we kind of had real disparities. I see some positive change in terms of number of getting women, of women getting promoted at least through the cycle [...]. So I think that that's improved, and I think that there are things that we've countered just because we wanted [...] 'Actually it's not cool to bully people, it's not cool to be kind of sexist or', so I think that that's, I think changed slightly. (*Social Sciences, woman, early career academic*)

The academic quoted in the above example participated in the SAT for a department that recently *failed* to obtain a bronze award. The critical reflection and actions emanated from the submission process itself; thus, the scheme has the potential to improve gender equality, regardless of the application outcome. In this sense, a 'moderate' feminist approach might offer a site of resistance to institutionalized sexism and result in structural change despite a lack of 'success' as measured through the receipt of badges and awards.

Participants therefore saw Athena SWAN as a positive opportunity to raise awareness of gender inequalities, build a case for action to support women's careers, and push for a change in structural problems and entrenched

sexist behaviours. However, when it came to the operationalization of the Athena SWAN, numerous contradictions and caveats were highlighted, as examined in the following three sections.

## 6 | INTERSECTIONALITY AND TRANS INCLUSION

As previously discussed, the Athena SWAN charter originally focused on the limited representation of women in STEMM, with self-assessment relying on the production of 'hard' data relating specifically to gender inequalities. This approach was criticized for ignoring experiences of intersecting equalities. ECU attempted to address this through the 2014–2015 expansion of the scheme, which was intended to encompass an intersectional approach and include trans staff and students.

People's identities are shaped by several factors at the same time, creating unique experiences and perspectives. These factors include among others age, disability, gender identity, race, religion and belief, and sexuality. Institutions should be mindful of this intersectionality when exploring issues and developing solutions. (*Equality Challenge Unit, 2015, p. 35*)

These changes have broadly been welcomed by gender specialists within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Nevertheless, there is little guidance provided by ECU on how best to *do* intersectional data collection and analysis. Moreover, research participants with expertise in gender argued that there is further scope for improvement, as in practice the scheme continues to utilize a very narrow conceptualization of 'gender inequality'.

It's the first critique that anyone offers, right, in the self-assessment teams [...] and it's the first thing our students pointed out is look gender's fine, you guys do great on gender, but class is terrible, and also this university is really white, I mean that was kind of the ... so what can Athena SWAN do about that, so I think, I mean I think there've been useful shifts, like they seem to have responded to things that actually need incorporation. (*Arts, woman, mid-career academic*)

A binary, simplistic approach to gender remains at the core of the Athena SWAN process. This can be seen in the scheme's requirements for the presentation and analysis of binary data on 'women and men' by participating departments and institutions. Two examples from institutional submission form guidelines follow below.

Comment and reflect on the proportions/percentages of women and men compared with the national picture for the discipline(s). Where benchmarking data does not provide meaningful comparison, a clear explanation must be provided.

Comment and reflect on any differences in data for men and women across the institution and any differences between AHSSBL and STEMM within the institution. (*Equality Challenge Unit, 2015, p. 40*)

In practice, when SAT teams attempted to integrate an intersectional approach to Athena SWAN, they found it challenging to do so while simultaneously conforming to the ECU guidelines:

We realised that we were missing the stats on other protected characteristics because that's one of the flaws of Athena SWAN, the [language of] 'gender balance' pushes us in directions that we don't necessarily want to go, or at least, further down a road that we're not entirely happy about. Because of course, being in the arts and humanities, we're like, 'Why isn't this more intersectional?' [...] how to make it that within a scheme that's focused on gender, how to bring the other things in. So we've been pushing the limits from the very beginning, so I said, 'I don't want this to just be about gender, I want this to be about everybody.' Because otherwise it doesn't make any kind of sense. So we're kind of shoving it in the direction of that. It's not easy. [laughs] (*Humanities, woman, senior academic*)

Furthermore, the focus on 'men and women' tended to exclude many of the trans staff and students who are now supposed to be included the Athena SWAN process.

It's terrible. I mean [...] it focuses on women, like, presumably trans women more so, but then ignores non-binary people, ignores like genderqueer, agender, gender non-conforming people, ignores trans men. (*Social Sciences, non-binary student*)

Historically, the scheme was designed to increase the representation of women in STEMM departments and then across the disciplinary spectrum, an approach that relied upon a simplistic, binary model of 'gender inequality' between women and men. While Athena SWAN is now framed in more intersectional manner, this seems to be more of an add-on since it is operationally devoid of tools and guidance to support departments, institutions and their SATs in accounting for non-binary genders and addressing how gender inequalities can be (for example) racialized and classed. Arts, Humanities and Social Science departments with gender expertise are perhaps better equipped than STEMM departments to navigate this problem, but are still restricted by the limiting guidelines. The focus on the numerical representation of women as a homogenized group, the simplification of gender equality and the positivist methodology used reflect features of a moderate feminist practice. In this context, the simplistic understandings (and subsequent simplistic solutions/actions) associated with a moderate feminism that uncritically positions 'gender' alone as the central form of inequality are limited. They offer little insight into intersectional power dynamics and are not well-equipped to challenge entrenched power relationships and lead to the envisaged transformative change.

## 7 | THE WORKLOAD OF ATHENA SWAN: UNFAIR BURDENS, PERSONAL COSTS AND INDIVIDUALISTIC ETHOS

In this section, we highlight how producing and analysing evidence for an Athena SWAN submission creates a large amount of work and can entail personal costs, particularly for women and other marginalized groups. This stands in contradiction to Athena SWAN's aims to secure wide engagement and commitment and reduce intersectional gender inequalities.

The Athena SWAN submission form is a large document that requires a significant amount of work from SAT members to prepare. The departmental submission form alone comprises 8 main sections (and 32 subsections) in which SAT members are asked to: describe the department and the self-assessment process; analyse a range of statistics on staff and student numbers by gender; describe how the department is supporting and advancing women's careers; assess career development procedures, policies and staff experiences of flexible working and career breaks; describe the organizational culture of the department/institution; and outline an Action Plan that presents and prioritizes proposed actions to address issues identified within the submission document. A strict word limit is enforced for submission documents depending on the level of submission. In preparing submissions, SATs must therefore carefully tailor their responses to provide as much information as possible within a fairly rigid framework, with only a few hundred words available for each subsection.

Caffrey et al. (2016) showed that the overall workload of SAT participants increased dramatically, resulting in a significant increase in overtime and weekend work. Many of our interview participants similarly described undertaking extensive work in evenings and on weekends.

It's the overburdening that's the big thing I get a lot of complaints about [...] there was one Sunday that I was in working on Athena SWAN and answered an email somebody had sent me and it turned out that woman was in as well, and then there were three of us all in, all working on Athena SWAN, all doing it on a Sunday. (*Institutional lead, woman*)

ECU guidance documents refer to the importance of 'shared responsibility' for the heavy workload of an Athena SWAN submission (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015, p. 25). In a recent ECU guide produced for research institutes, charter members are explicitly encouraged to formally recognize the contribution of SAT members:

A final submission should be the result of group work and collaboration across the self-assessment team and the institute. [...] Completing an application requires considerable time and effort, and this should be: factored into any workload allocation model, recognised in appraisal, considered as evidence of leadership and/or contributing to the running of the institute in promotion. (*Equality Challenge Unit, 2016, p. 17*)

However, very different practices are followed in different higher education institutions. During a meeting on Athena SWAN hosted by the Royal Geographical Society (2016), representatives from geography departments in 13 higher education institutions reported the 'wide variation in how workload was allocated and reflected' (p. 4). Similarly, our findings showed that practices of recognition and time allocation differ greatly between (and within) institutions. These differences do not necessarily reflect the financial resources of any given institution, suggesting managers' commitment to Athena SWAN and willingness to invest in SATs play a more important role. For example, while one departmental SAT lead explained that she was on a 20 per cent buyout, with approximately a fifth of her time (in theory) dedicated to working on the Athena SWAN submission, another participant described a difficult battle with managers to increase her 6 per cent buyout to 12 per cent, which still wouldn't actually account for the amount of time she spent on Athena SWAN.

Recent studies have found that the heavy workload of Athena SWAN has disproportionately burdened women, both as SAT members (Caffrey et al., 2016; Ovseiko et al., 2017) and as institutional and departmental champions (Munir et al., 2014). This can also be seen in the gendered composition of successful SATs. We looked at the gender composition of the SATs in the 11 universities that held an Athena SWAN Silver institutional award at the time of writing. As Table 1 shows, only three of these 11 SAT were chaired by a man, and only one team comprised more men than women (none reported non-binary or genderqueer team members).

Furthermore, a disproportionate amount of SAT work is often placed on women in STEMM departments – where they are typically underrepresented – due to the perceived importance of having gender balanced SATs. By contrast, a greater proportion of academics in many non-STEMM departments tend to be women, which would suggest that there is a lesser burden of representation placed upon individual women in these settings. However, research participants based in Arts, Humanities and Social Science departments indicated that women colleagues generally were more likely to volunteer for the SAT than men, meaning that women are more likely to do the work of Athena SWAN even within 'feminized' disciplines. This is not to say that men were universally uninterested in Athena SWAN; rather, that women were more likely to volunteer to participate in a scheme based around gender equality.

We only got one male staff member volunteering himself, we had to identify [...] other male staff members, now they have been completely fine about being on-board, have turned up and have contributed, once they were asked, and have been very very helpful actually, but yeah, there wasn't a lot of motivation from men to be on the committee. [...] So yeah, like it was largely the self-assessment team was definitely largely made up of women at lecturer and senior lecturer like level. (*Arts, woman, early career*)

Another participant indicated that men with their own personal investment in Athena SWAN (such as young parents) and those with a political interest in gender equality were more likely to volunteer for the SAT. Nevertheless, the work of her SAT was still undertaken by 'a majority of women'.

A further contradiction between the aims and implementation of Athena SWAN can be found in the importance of intersectional diversity and representation within the SAT teams. Early career women, women of colour and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) women can be under pressure to participate in the SAT in order to represent groups of which they are a part. Often there is no acknowledgement of the emotional burden of this work, or of time spent on Athena SWAN that might otherwise be invested on pursuing personal career goals. This was illustrated by an early career researcher and SAT member on a precarious contract:

I mean other than the fact that um it's very time consuming [laughs] and often within ... within ethnic minorities people who are on precarious contracts are invited to take part in it because they want to hear the experience of these people, but then ... in the bigger part of it takes hours of their time [...] when they're already pushed for time. (*Social Sciences, woman, early career*)

SAT membership can therefore be understood as a form of 'women's work' reinforcing the 'rational' moderate approach to gender equality where accepted gender roles are reproduced. Athena SWAN submissions constitute a feminized form of labour in which women are typically overrepresented (even in STEMM, where male academics usually outnumber women), and in which the most marginalized women are disproportionately tasked with the job of securing their own equality (albeit often within junior roles, as Munir et al. (2014) report that a disproportionate majority of Athena SWAN Champions are white). Reflective of the individualistic ethos of moderate feminism within a neoliberal context, individual female subjects are assigned to undertake individual actions and find solutions to equality. Inevitably, if women want to use Athena SWAN as a means to resist gender inequalities, then they have to be complicit in an exploitative system.

At the same time and in alignment with Ahmed's (2007b, 2012) work on 'doing diversity', we find that the disciplining of Athena SWAN within institutions can come at a considerable personal cost for individuals. The feminization of SATs can thus extend beyond a simple overrepresentation of women doing this work. Several participants described meeting considerable opposition to their attempts at data collection, to certain proposed action points and/or to the Athena SWAN agenda more generally. Typically, this was attributed to male departmental heads and senior managers who were concerned that the submission might portray their department or institution in a poor light by highlighting structural inequalities and instances of sexism. Negotiating such opposition required further time and considerable emotional labour from women working on the SATs, which could take its toll.

I got signed off sick for three weeks. And it mostly was because of our Athena, and the difficulties of getting this process when you're facing opposition. If you got support, it's not an issue. I mean there's obviously work to do if you're pulling in the same direction. But if you're doing it in the face of opposition, then I think it can be extremely challenging to people, and physically and mentally gruelling. Because of the people having repeated conversations about why you shouldn't be doing it, why haven't you already done anything, what are you doing it for and all of that etc. About having to force your way onto groups and so on. But you know, all of those things are just mental hard work. (*Humanities, woman, senior academic*)

Individuals involved in Athena SWAN submissions also reported being penalized by departments or institutions if a charter mark was not awarded. Participants described examples of women who were told that they will only receive a promotion or have their contract renewed if the submission 'succeeds'. Other women described being turned down for more senior roles because an Athena SWAN submission had 'failed' or been delayed, as illustrated in the following account from an interview participant.

Recently I applied for a more senior position. They said, 'We see you've been working on the Athena SWAN application, and it appears to have fallen behind. Can you explain why that is?'

Interviewer: So they were holding the delayed Athena SWAN submission against you?

Yes, it's not the only reason I didn't get the job, but it's one of the reasons I didn't get the job.

(*Humanities, woman, senior academic*)

This approach holds individuals personally responsible for collective failings in the part of departments or institutions that may simply fail to meet the Athena SWAN criteria, regardless of how hard the SAT or team leader works. While it is ironic that a gender equality scheme might be used to undermine women's careers (Pearce, 2017), this phenomenon only reflects the wider outsourcing of risk from employers to employees within the neoliberal university (Lopes & Dewan, 2014). It further shows the limitations of an individualistic approach to moderate feminist praxis.

The lack of a consistent approach towards the allocation and recognition of workload demonstrates a failure on the part of the institution to recognize, compensate and reward the workload of Athena SWAN, which is also in contradiction with rhetoric around how important this activity is. As we have noted with regards to (for example) varying workload allocations, this is an activity that can potentially be accounted for by managers. If SAT membership were to be properly accounted for within workload models, and equality work recognized and valued the purposes of promotions and job appointments, then Athena SWAN would likely not be regarded as an unfair burden in the same way.

## 8 | 'TICK THAT BOX': THE LIMITATIONS AND UNEXPECTED BENEFITS OF CONTINUAL ASSESSMENT

We have previously noted that a unique quality of Athena SWAN within the context of European higher education gender equality schemes is that it is designed to be systematic and sustainable, in that awards are not acquired through a one-off process. Instead, institutions and departments need to periodically reflect on their successes and failures in order to renew the award. Nevertheless, participants sometimes considered the process to be a 'box-ticking' exercise, which ultimately takes place sporadically and does not necessarily lead to structural change.

Participants who critiqued Athena SWAN's alleged tendency towards box ticking argued that this approach is used primarily to increase the prestige of the university and improve its competitive advantage against other institutions. It was thus seen as a benchmarking exercise which reproduces logics of quantification and rankings within organizations, making gender equality another marketable product. In this way, SATs might be understood as complicit in contributing to the development of new metrics and rankings of 'success' and 'failure' in a manner that does not necessarily entail a real commitment to equality:

My impression from the meetings is that it was like looking for where we can find things that we can easily score higher and how we can do the changes ... how we can, basically, without changing much, how we can phrase it how we can change the little things to make it sound and look better [...] it's more in the ... kind of words than actions. (*STEMM, woman, early career academic*)

It's quite easy for institutes to try to hijack it. And what they want is the logo they can put on the bottom of their emails, you know. For goodness' sake. Nobody cares what that logo refers to in real life, they want the logo. It's like, being on a league table. (*Humanities, woman, senior academic*)

A male scientist and SAT member insisted that the process does not necessarily require critical reflection:

You know how these things work. You take a successful application from somebody else and you essentially write the same stuff, more or less, trying to make it personal, make it so that this is not xxx, this is [name of institution]. That's the way it works. (*STEMM, man, early career*)

Departments may also take actions attributable to Athena SWAN that visibly benefit individual women, but do not actually work to address wider gendered structures of inequality. For example, an early career researcher in a STEMM department with a Silver award described how she received departmental support for her career because she was considered to be a good candidate for progressing to senior levels. Despite acknowledging that she had been recognized for her abilities, she felt that the department was not genuinely engaged with the award and that they singled her out for her gender to create positive publicity.

Athena SWAN is, however, variably operationalized and implemented across different departments and institutions. Interestingly, even in cases where the box-ticking approach is encouraged, it can still potentially be employed pragmatically as a 'moderate' feminist strategy. Athena SWAN does provide legitimacy for staff engaging with gender equality issues and can help to develop accountability for senior managers and administrators to ensure that resources are allocated towards these activities. In the below example, a SAT member for a departmental submission argued that her managers' desire to 'tick that box' actively empowered her team to tackle issues that they knew were



present in their institution, but had previously been unable to address without facing either resistance or indifference. In this context, Athena SWAN offered an opportunity for activism amongst staff simply by *requiring* a team to collect data on inequalities and propose actions for change.

And by asking for the numbers, you know. It's data-driven, just really really. And it's about amassing the evidence, to say, 'Look, you can't deny that we have a problem here. Now what are we going to do about it?' And then saying, 'You know what, if we don't do this we can't tick that box you're so keen to tick. Yeah? You've got to do this to take that box that you want. I'm not interested in the box-ticking, but you are.' [laughs]

Interviewer: So, 'we'll make you do this before you can tick the box'.

Yeah. So, in a sense it's about what we're supposed to do, just think about what the other guy wants. What is it that they want out of this? They want a box ticked. So how do you set it up in ways that you get what you want in order for them to happen to tick the box. (*Humanities, woman, senior academic*)

This participant expanded on her point by highlighting how a separate intersectional feminist intervention at her institution – an attempt to reform the curriculum to ensure a greater diversity of authors on reading lists – was founder-ing precisely because it didn't have the 'teeth' of an Athena SWAN action.

[W]ithout the teeth of the Athena SWAN, it's difficult to see – it's great, yes, we have inclusive curriculum work going on but nothing's actually happening. It has been raised at the proper meetings, nothing has happened. There's no box you have to tick even though they put out a statement, that's why – without any kind of documentation, without that nothing will change. (*Humanities, woman, senior academic*)

Athena SWAN was thus portrayed as a possible tool for a 'moderate' feminist resistance, bolstering existing attempts to fight systemic inequalities from within the institutional bureaucracy. It can therefore provide the space and the conditions to think strategically and collectively about developing interventions with less moderate and more transformative potential.

## 9 | CONCLUSIONS

In this article we used the Athena SWAN scheme as an example of moderate feminism in the context of neoliberal higher education, to explore the benefits and contradictory effects that gender equality programmes might have as a form of institutionalized feminist praxis.

Athena SWAN can raise awareness of gender inequalities, help to build a case for the development of actions to support women's careers, and encourage changed behaviours and attitudes. Many research participants argued that the charter therefore has the potential to nurture incremental structural change. Nevertheless, the internal operationalization and logics underpinning gender equality schemes such as Athena SWAN in neoliberal environments can hide powerful contradictions and caveats, which may limit the potential for change.

As a moderate feminist undertaking, Athena SWAN relies on the notion that women represent a largely untapped resource in the scientific labour market, a perspective grounded in the neoliberal rationale of economic competitiveness and growth (Ball, 2012; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Nielsen et al., 2017). The achievement of an Athena SWAN award enables departments and institutions to promote themselves as successful environments that investors, ambitious academics and fee-paying students might desire to buy into. As a benchmarking procedure, the self-assessment and submission process reproduces logics of quantification and ranking, with 'gender equality' reduced to just another product feature in the markets of research and education.

We have therefore also shown that Athena SWAN can become a site of complicity for feminists, in which the emphasis on 'moderate' (safe and reasonable) 'business case' arguments to promote gender equality can lead to the development of new competitiveness metrics for higher education institutions. This entails a reductionist and often essentialist portrayal of gender equality as an issue that might be addressed through fulfilling numerical targets, with limited consideration on intersectional dynamics, non-binary understandings and the reproduction of gender roles in relation to the unpaid, emotional labour undertaken by women.

Athena SWAN is variably operationalized and implemented across different departments and institutions. What seems to be common is that the responsibility for achieving gender equality is vested primarily in the individual 'feminist subject', with women carrying out the heavy lifting for initiatives that aim to disrupt gendered structures and practices, sometimes at the expense of their careers and/or their mental health. Therefore, some participants perceived it as a box-ticking exercise that is undertaken (too) sporadically, without critical reflection and with limited potential for structural change. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic, box-ticking character of the scheme can be creatively employed as a feminist strategy to ensure commitment from senior management for data collection and action development.

If we are to follow Roy (2013) in understanding moderate feminism as a pragmatic practice, rather than as a commitment to neoliberal ideology, Athena SWAN might be understood in this context as a 'moderate' tool that can nonetheless be used to pursue 'radical' ends. Therefore, in alignment with organizational studies scholars such as De Vries and van den Brink (2016), we argue that moderate feminist practices – which may benefit from not being characterized as 'radical', thereby lessening institutional resistance (Benschop & Verloo, 2011, p. 285) – have the potential to become transformative interventions in organizations. While they might hold small and moderate objectives – in the beginning at least – we could slowly build upon them, to organize ourselves, keep the momentum going and collectively develop plans that are greater in scope. For instance, rather than focusing on 'fixing the woman', Athena SWAN Action Plans might be used strategically by SATs to prioritize issues such as liberated curricula, institutional support for parental leave and action against sexual misconduct (Pearce, 2017).

In this way, self-assessment can become a site of resistance and a way to work against neoliberalism, and 'moderate' feminism a strategy rather than a neoliberal appropriation. Feminists may use 'moderate' practices to create a space to organize, engage and develop a collective solidarity, utilizing the higher education sector's recognition of these practices to exert pressure and ensure commitment from senior management for developing actions and programmes with transformative potential. However, it is important to note that Athena SWAN's operationalization as a hybrid scheme (EC, 2014), its link to funding and its unique reliance on continual assessment are vital in providing it with 'teeth', meaning that institutions can be held to account by feminist SAT members.

Bearing in mind that institutionalized feminist practices in various settings since the 1990s share similar characteristics with Athena SWAN, and that UK neoliberal practices are often eventually adopted elsewhere in the world, we feel that the examination of such practices through the analytic lens of moderate feminism is informative, especially in relation to its contradictions within the operationalization of past, current and future actions. Such analyses contribute not only to better understanding the unforeseen effects of these actions and enabling us to design and carry out feminist transformative strategies, but also provide a space for moderate feminism to be examined in relation to intersectional theory and approaches that prioritize social justice over business opportunities. To what extent moderate *praxis* can bring radical *telos* remains to be seen.

The overarching paradox of Athena SWAN is that it is designed to try and bring about structural change (with many SATs actively working towards this goal) even as its operationalization can reproduce gender inequalities through an embrace of market logic. This is not a coincidence: it is after all difficult to pursue anything *other* than market logics within the environs of a neoliberal institution (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2016). If moderate feminism is to be a vehicle for change within neoliberal institutions, it is vital for campaigners and diversity workers to think strategically about how best the potential of equality schemes can be realized while working to minimize their impact upon the very people they are meant to support. This must be a feminism that works within *and* against neoliberalism.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/skills/equalitystatement-pdf/>
- <sup>2</sup> We did not find an explicit rationale for Athena SWAN's inclusion of trans staff and students in any of the ECU documentation and web pages we analysed. However, this move arguably reflects the inclusion of 'gender reassignment' as a statutory equality strand in the UK's Equality Act 2010, as well as growing empirical evidence of the unique and often severe challenges faced by trans people within higher education (Jourian et al., 2015; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Following the 2017 Bell Review of higher education sector agencies, ECU is presently in the process of merging into a single body with the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) called Advance HE. For the purposes of this article, we will use ECU.
- <sup>4</sup> The authors obtained informed consent from interview and focus group participants for the recording and analysis of their conversations and the dissemination of research findings arising from these. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, some participants feared censure within their institutions if identifiable; therefore, participant names, institutional details and job roles have been anonymized and most demographic information omitted to ensure anonymity.

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