

Gender Gap Extremes: Relational differences, rather than aspirational ones could be major factor in ‘leaky pipeline’

The dwindling number of women in senior positions in academia, often referred to as the ‘leaky pipeline’, is particularly apparent in Polish art schools. [Anna Gromada](#), [Dorka Budacz](#), [Juta Kawalerowicz](#) and [Anna Walewska](#) share findings from recent research shedding light into the more general mechanisms that generate the gender gap in academia and beyond. Crucial differences were identified in networking and mentor relationships between men and women. For example, male students were more likely to receive encouragement, help with securing assistantships, and invitations to attend extracurricular art activities.



With each consecutive step up in the career ladder a disproportionate share of women leave academia. A [study of 400 top higher education institutions](#) conducted in 2010 by Thomson Reuters in association with Times Higher Education revealed that while women constituted 50% of students, they made up just 34% of academic staff.

However, there are some academic systems from which women leak out much faster than from others. We decided to study a case that presented itself as extreme: Polish art schools where women have made the majority of students since the 1940s. At present, women constitute 77% of Polish art students but only 35% of art teachers and 22% of art professors. This is one of the biggest gender gaps in Poland between subsequent career stages among all academic disciplines short of theology where the over-representation of men reflects their privileged position in the Catholic Church. A major which is equally frequently studied by women as art is medicine (74% of students are female) but there women constitute 57% teachers – twice the representation compared to art. These gaps in art that go well beyond the “expected loss” of women encouraged us to look for additional factors that make this academic pipeline spectacularly leaky.

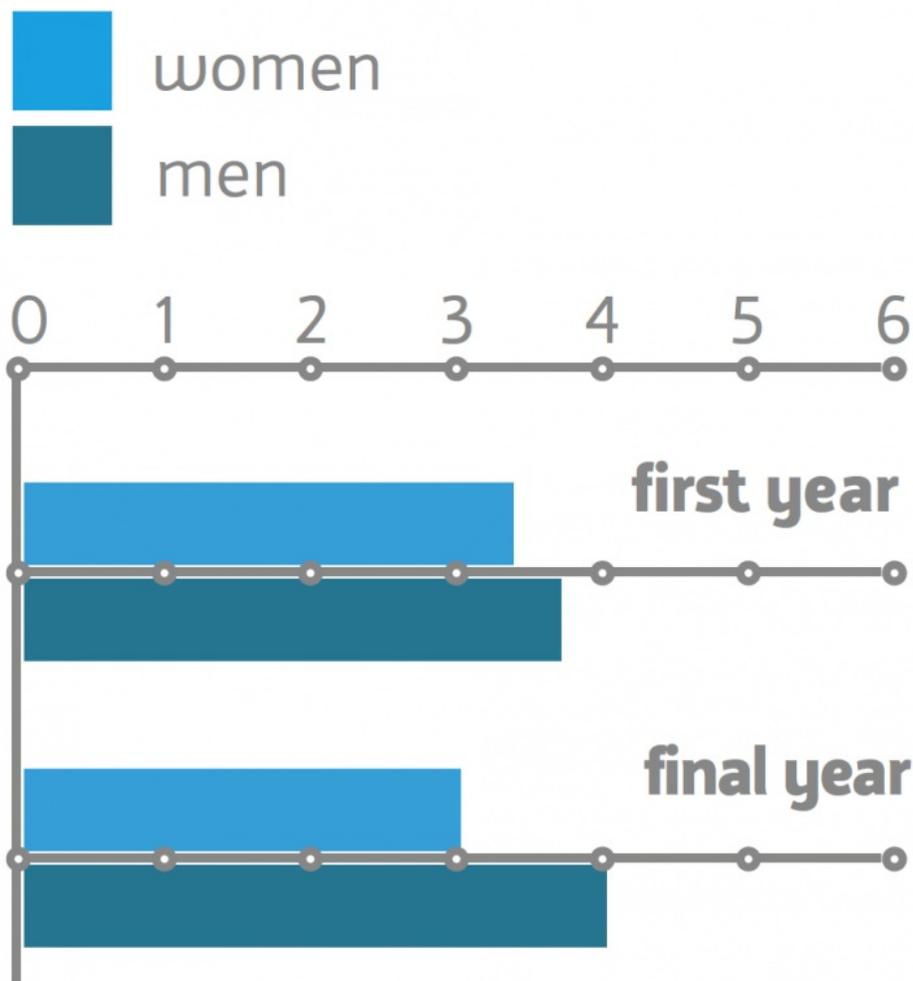
A classic explanation is that women simply want something else from life and work than men. This approach, however, found no empirical support in our survey. Both men and women wanted self-development, independence and money (See Table 1).

Table 1: Per cent of respondents listing a given employment characteristic as one of their top three priorities, by gender

Employment characteristic	Women	Men
professional development opportunities	53%	48%
independence	41%	52%
good salary	38%	34%
employment matching qualifications	35%	32%
employment security	33%	31%
time for the family	28%	23%
lack of stress	24%	29%
success and recognition	19%	25%
networks of informal contacts	14%	9%
usefulness for others	9%	12%

Both expressed utmost dedication to art: 58% of female respondents and 52% of male respondents declared that they would not be willing to give up their artistic aspirations even for the sake of the family. Nevertheless, we noticed that male students rank a prospect of employment at art academies higher than female students but this gap in assessments seems to emerge over time: men and women are similar in their assessment of working at art academy in their first year of study but by the end of the degree women are much less optimistic about this prospect than men (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Perceived attractiveness of teaching at art academy, by gender

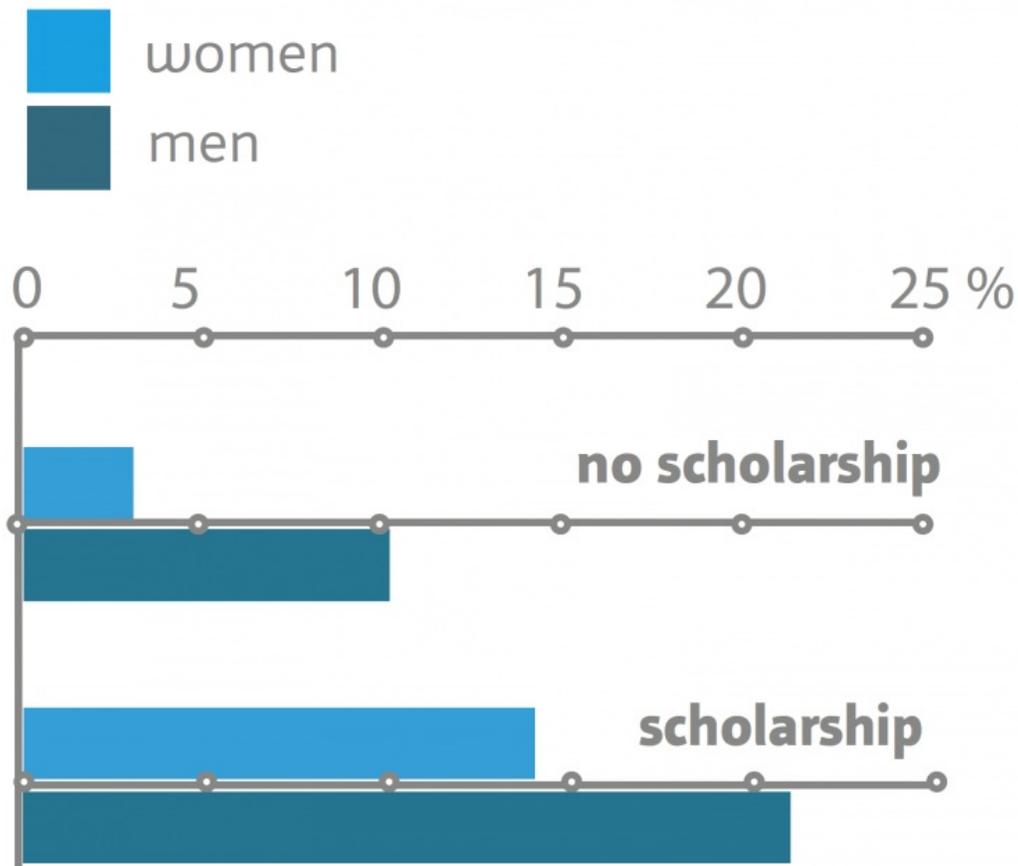


Assessment on a scale from
 0 - completely unattractive
 6 - very attractive.

It is not the aspirational but the relational sphere where crucial differences emerge. Female students are more likely to hear unwanted comments from their teachers: for instance 20% of female students reported hearing comments about their body, compared to 11% of male students. Furthermore, male students are more likely to receive encouragements from teachers: for instance 65% of male students reported receiving an invitation for extracurricular art activities, compared to 51% of female students. As the in-depth interviews testified, these situations are vital for friendship formation, networking, skill acquisition or even job offers.

Most importantly, 12% of men and only 5% of women received help from academic teachers in securing assistantship, which in the art world serves as a bridge between college and the difficult labour market. One explanation for this – which is also sometimes employed as an explanation of the current situation – is that maybe these men were more gifted or, in a less extreme form, that there are more outliers in male population. Although it is difficult to come up with a measure of art talent, a good way to start was by asking students whether they have received merit scholarship or not. We found that scholarship status did not explain the discrepancy in assistantship offers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Assistantship offers and scholarship status, by gender



Even though the study was carried out at arts academies in Poland, the findings shed light into the more general mechanisms that generate the gender gap in academia and beyond. We believe that all dimensions of inequality, not just gender, might be sharpened in environments that have arbitrary criteria of evaluation, are embedded in a difficult labour market and are made up of dense networks of close relationships epitomized by master-apprentice formula.

The findings are based on a large, weighted sample of art students (783 surveys, almost 10% of the total population) and 32 in-depth interviews with men and women at different stages of the academic career: students, junior and senior academics. For more information and to download the study report [click here](#).

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