



Is Life in Academia Attractive to Women in the Geosciences?

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Abstract. Despite decades of equity initiatives and increasing participation by women in STEM education, women remain significantly underrepresented in geoscience careers. This study moves beyond the conventional ‘leaky pipeline’ narrative to examine how female academics perceive the attractiveness of careers in the field. Drawing on qualitative data, we conceptualise attractiveness as a socially and institutionally produced orientation shaped by perceptions of career viability, work-life integration, and the kinds of academic lives regarded as possible and desirable. The findings show that academic careers in the geosciences are widely perceived as unattractive because dominant models of success are premised on mobility, precarious employment, and an ideal worker norm that remains at odds with caregiving responsibilities. Participants also described a lack of relatable role models, persistent gender bias, and everyday sexism that further erode the appeal of the discipline. Institutional policies intended to support work-life balance were frequently experienced as inadequate or symbolic, failing to address the structural inequalities embedded in academic work. The findings highlight the need for systemic transformation to create academic careers that are both viable and attractive to women in the geosciences.

1 Introduction

The underrepresentation of women is well documented in the geosciences (Arnaboldi et al., 2025). The most common explanation for this is the ‘leaky pipeline’ (Koevoets-Beach and Balabanoff, 2024), where lack of female representation is explained by attrition in recruitment and retention. This attrition reduces the number of female role models, negatively impacting the likelihood of female students being exposed to examples of career viability in geosciences. Following this logic, institutional commitment to female recruitment should be bearing fruit. However, a recent study of more than 1000 universities in 80 mostly European countries shows that while the female share of bachelor students is 54% and PhD students is 52%, the women's share of professorial positions drops to as low as 29% (Federkeil and Friedhoff, 2022). In the United States, between 2010 and 2017, the percentage of women working as geoscientists declined from 17% to 11% (Gonzales, 2018). Quantitative research has highlighted that female faculty in STEM face a multitude of barriers, including gender and racial discrimination, negative workplace climate, and unequal divisions of labour (Xu, 2008). Qualitative research has focused on the experiences of STEM academics (Ysseldyk et al., 2019) and women in academic leadership roles (Ayyildiz and Banoglu, 2024). This study extends the qualitative research, adopting the concept of attractiveness as its central analytic lens. Attractiveness is understood



not as an individual disposition or subjective evaluation, but as a socially produced and institutionally structured assessment of the viability and desirability of geoscience careers. It is shaped through the intersection of neoliberal labour regimes, gendered expectations of academic work, and institutionalised inequalities that structure how certain academic lives become perceived as possible, sustainable, or desirable. The Irish and German institutional settings included in this study reflect wider
35 European trends toward the casualisation of academic labour, the internationalisation of academic careers, and the intensification of performance-based metrics. While national contexts differ, these structural conditions are increasingly shared across European universities, particularly in research-intensive disciplines such as geosciences.

2 Literature Review

As noted by Rosa (2022) and Oberhauser et al. (2025), there is a rich literature about how university workers combine
40 academic, professional and personal responsibilities—often discussed in the context of work-life balance. Oberhauser et al. (2025) specifically notes the contributions of feminist and critical scholars who challenge the binary and hegemonic framing of gendered labour embedded in the mechanisms of work-life balance. Toffoletti and Starr (2016) examined how the unstructured nature of work routines in academic careers blur the separation of home and work. Bosanquet (2016) illustrates that the sometimes competing demands of work and life are not separate but rather overlap in both time and space.

45 This became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, with female academics disproportionately assuming most of the care labour required during lockdowns (Martucci, 2023; Pecis and Touboullic, 2024). Ultimately, both the professional
50 and personal identities of academics are embedded in the social relations of the neoliberal university that reflect unequal power dynamics (Kinkaid et al., 2022) and an increasingly precarious work environment ruled by metrics of academic
55 excellence (Rosa and Clavero, 2020). These benchmarks are presented as gender neutral. However, they are underpinned by hegemonic masculinist work norms that become perpetuated and reproduced as unconditional commitment to the university (Rosa, 2022). Further, the relentless pressure to ‘succeed’ (Huppatz, 2019) undermines cooperation and leads to the devaluation of care, both within and beyond the university (Ivancheva et al., 2019).

55 The neoliberalization of academia has also led to decreased job security, with academics increasingly employed in temporary positions that are dependent on competitive grant acquisition (Løvbak and Holter, 2012) or revenue from international tuition fees (O’Brady et al., 2025). Indeed, contemporary academia is mostly sustained by academic labourers working on temporary research and teaching contracts, sometimes over extended periods and multiple sites (Hearn, 2020). This insecurity leads to unclear career prospects, ill-defined workloads and a speeding up of the tempo and output expectations (Bozzon et al., 2017).
60 Kvande (2007) argues that universities are increasingly becoming ‘greedy institutions,’ with academics expected to be perpetually available (Bone et al., 2018), unencumbered by non-work demands (Manfredi, 2017). Engaging with such a limitless time culture is not gender neutral—academic mothers spend significantly more time on childcare and less time on



work activities than academic fathers do (Di Leo et al., 2026; Hong et al., 2025). Moreover, women consider leaving academia more often than men due to their responsibility for household caring and labour (Drew and Marshall, 2020).

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While gender inequality remains an issue within academia generally, the inequalities are particularly stark within the geosciences. In the US, Wilson (2019) estimates that only 24% of the geoscience workforce are women, with 20% holding faculty positions. In the UK, Burek and Higgs (2007) reported that a mere 7% of professors in Marine and Environmental Science were women. These inequities raise significant concerns for the future of the geosciences, as the lack of diversity hinders innovation and the dispersal of new ideas (Hofstra et al., 2020). Ranganathan et al. (2021) highlight that the bias is the result of institutional and structural factors that cause women to leave academic institutions at a rate higher than men. Further, Vila-Concejo et al. (2018) argue that gender inequality in geosciences is not a “self-correcting phenomenon.” This research acknowledges this reality and asks a deceptively simple question: is the lifestyle of academics in the geosciences attractive to young women?

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75 **3 Research Design**

Drawing on feminist scholarship about gendered organizations and academic labour (Rosa, 2022; Oberhauser et al., 2025), we treat attractiveness as an emergent and relational concept shaped by the intersection of perceived career viability, gendered experiences of work-life balance, and the institutional structures that determine what kinds of academic careers are seen as desirable. This analytical perspective moves beyond identifying individual preferences to examine how participants assess the desirability and attainability of geoscience careers in relation to gendered expectations surrounding work, care, mobility, and success.

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Data collection was iterative. First, a small exploratory survey ($n = 58$) was circulated to attendees at an Annual Summit Meeting of the Irish Centre of Research in Applied Geosciences, where participants were asked to identify successful members of the geoscience community and explain their choices. Insights from this survey informed a workshop at a subsequent iGeo Early Career Symposium, with eight females, one male, and one non-binary participant. These exploratory stages shaped our engagement with subsequent focus groups, which were conducted with female academics from three universities in Ireland (Dublin, Cork, and Galway) and one research institute in Germany. Participants were recruited through institutional contacts to capture a range of career stages, contract types, and family circumstances.

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The authors were very conscious that the female participants were working in a field characterised by persistent gender inequality, precarious employment, and relatively small professional networks. In this context, discussing sexism, discrimination, or dissatisfaction with working conditions could have professional implications. To counter this risk, the research design prioritised participant anonymity and confidentiality in to minimise the possibility of identification. Details



95 such as age, departmental affiliation, number of children, and specific position titles were excluded from reporting. Institutions
were anonymised, and participants were identified only through broad employment categories and national context.
Acknowledging that sharing experiences of discrimination and/or precarity has the potential to amplify vulnerability,
participants were reassured that they could decline to answer any questions and withdraw from discussions at any stage without
consequence. The focus groups were conducted respectfully and supportively, with the researchers remaining attentive to the
emotional labour involved in sharing potentially upsetting experiences. The researchers prioritised careful listening and
minimising harm rather than scrutinising personal disclosures. The final sample included nineteen participants. Three
participants, based in Ireland, held permanent positions, one participant in Germany occupied a tenure-track role pending
review, and the remaining fifteen were employed on temporary contracts. Participants were almost evenly divided between
those with children (nine) and those without (ten), with a higher proportion of academic mothers in Germany (six) than in
Ireland (three). Table 1 provides an overview

Table 1. Summary of Focus Group Participants

Participant	Position	Location	Contract Type	Children
1	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Ireland	Temporary	No
2	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Ireland	Temporary	No
3	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Ireland	Temporary	No
4	Lecturer	Ireland	Permanent	No
5	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Ireland	Temporary	No
6	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Ireland	Temporary	Yes
7	Technician	Ireland	Permanent	Yes
8	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Ireland	Temporary	No
9	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Ireland	Temporary	No
10	Lecturer	Ireland	Permanent	Yes
11	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Germany	Temporary	Yes
12	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Germany	Temporary	Yes
13	Data Curator	Germany	Temporary	Yes
14	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Germany	Temporary	No
15	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Germany	Temporary	Yes
16	Junior Professor	Germany	Tenure Track	No
17	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Germany	Temporary	No
18	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Germany	Temporary	Yes
19	Post-Doctoral Researcher	Germany	Temporary	Yes



Analysis of the focus group transcripts followed Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with repeated reading of the transcripts to facilitate data immersion. This allowed for the development of inductive codes grounded in participants' accounts of career progression, work conditions, and work-life balance. These codes were then iteratively grouped into sub-themes and refined. Final theme development prioritised recurring patterns rather than isolated experiences and was guided by the study's central analytical concern with the perceived attractiveness of academic careers in geosciences. A summary of the sub-themes and final themes is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Sub-themes and themes from focus group transcripts

Sub-themes	Themes
Key indicators/metrics Alternative definitions	Success
Absence of women Perpetual availability Work-life balance Gendered division of domestic labour Family	Role models/lifestyle/work culture
Temporary contracts Mobility (linked to excellence) Pregnancy and maternity leave	Precarity
Support Impact on work Part time status Gendered division of domestic labour Family	Motherhood
Boys network Fieldwork Gendered assumptions and expectations	Gender bias/sexism

The analysis focuses on how participants construct the conditions under which an academic career in geosciences becomes an attainable and appealing pathway, particularly in relation to gendered expectations surrounding work, care, and mobility. Particular attention was paid to how institutional structures, gender norms, and career trajectories shaped participants' understandings of career viability and desirability. The findings are presented under four thematic headings focusing on success, precarity, motherhood and gender bias.

3.1 Author Positionality

This study was informed by a feminist and critical understanding of academic labour. The authors approached the research with the understanding that academic institutions are not neutral spaces, but are shaped by gendered norms, unequal power



relations, and historically masculinised constructions of scientific work and success. This perspective was informed both by existing scholarship and by the authors' own embodied experiences as working mothers. These experiences shaped the framing of the research question and informed the interpretation. While the authors occupy different positions within academia—one as a social geographer and the other as a paleoceanographer—the study emerged from their shared concern regarding the persistent underrepresentation of women in geosciences. This concern shaped the study's analytical focus, moving the research beyond “pipeline” explanations to examine how institutional structures, norms, and practices shape the attractiveness of geoscience careers. Rather than imposing predefined categories, themes emerged inductively through careful engagement and iterative reflection which illustrated how participants experienced precarity, gender bias, and academic success within the geosciences. The authors recognise that the interpretations are shaped by their own social locations, disciplinary training, and experiences. Participants' accounts are therefore understood as situated narratives produced within specific institutional and cultural contexts.

4 Results and Discussion

As noted above, this analysis is guided by the concept of academic “attractiveness” as a socially produced and institutionally mediated evaluation of career desirability. Attractiveness thus emerges from participants' accounts of what kinds of academic lives are perceived as viable, sustainable, and worthwhile, with the analysis tracing how participants construct the conditions under which geoscience academia becomes either an appealing or untenable career pathway. In this framing, themes such as precarity, mobility, success metrics, and care responsibilities are not treated as separate issues, but as interrelated dimensions through which attractiveness is negotiated and experienced.

Before discussing the main focus group findings, it is useful to briefly consider the results from the survey and workshop, as these findings shaped our subsequent engagement. Of the 58 participants, 29 percent were students, 31 percent were employed on temporary contracts, and 24 percent were employed as permanent lecturers. 67 percent were forty or younger, 62 percent were male, and 21 percent had children. There was an even split in male and female participants with children, with the majority asserting that caregiving responsibilities were shared. The figures below illustrate their frequency responses using word clouds, where word size is determined by the frequency of a word's usage. Minimum word frequency (MWF) was set at 8 mentions, unless otherwise indicated.

In Figure 1, the explanations of all participants are included, and research emerges as central to success. Figure 2 illustrates some important differences based on student status and contract type, with industry being more central to student definitions of success than those of temporary or permanent academic staff. Notably, work-life is only apparent in the definitions of success provided by participants with permanent contracts. Figure 3 presents the word clouds of male and female participants separately and highlights the centrality of research, with industry also being an important dimension of success amongst female



participants. In Figure 4, the responses of those with and without children are contrasted. Research is central to definitions of success amongst those with children, while those without children regard industry as more important in defining success.

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Figure 1: Most common words used to describe successful members of the Geoscience community by participants at iCrag Annual Summit Meeting.

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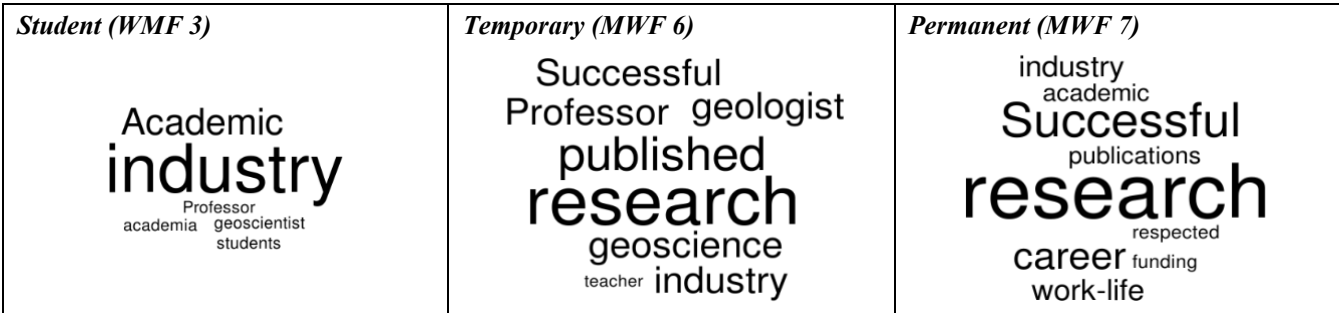


Figure 2: Most common words used to describe successful members of the Geoscience community by participant student status or contract type at iCrag Annual Summit Meeting.

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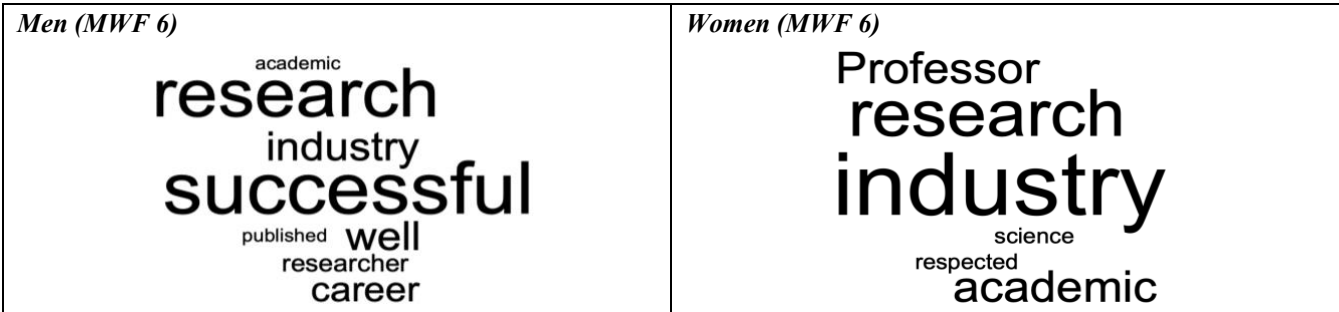


Figure 3: Most common words used to describe successful members of the Geoscience community by male and female participants at iCrag Annual Summit Meeting.

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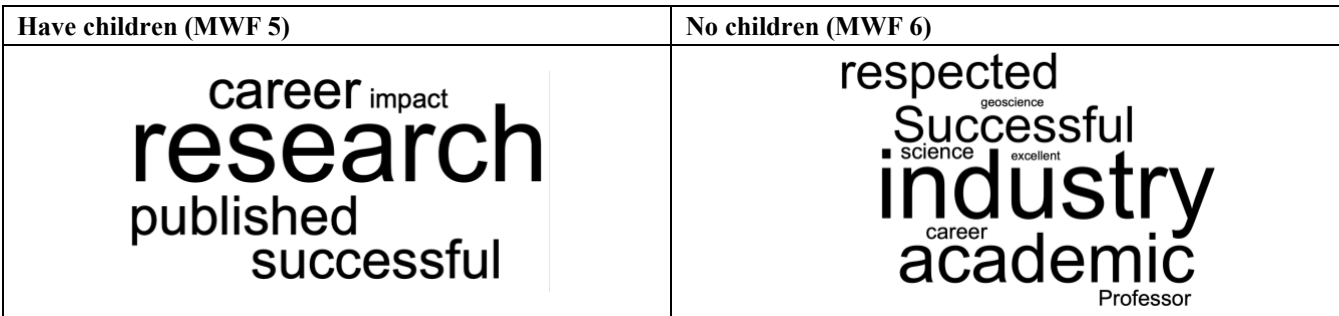


Figure 4: Most common words used to describe successful members of the Geoscience community by participants with children at iCrag Annual Summit Meeting.

180 There is a paucity of words relating to work-life balance in the word clouds. In contrast, the iGeo workshop participants identified both happiness and work-life balance as important dimensions of success, alluding to the influence of lifestyle in terms of the attractiveness of a geoscience career. These exploratory findings warranted further analytical engagement with the attractiveness of geoscience as a career.

4.1 Contours of Success: Metrics, Role Models and Academic Attractiveness

185 Participants’ accounts of success reveal that attractiveness in the geosciences is structured around a narrow and highly gendered model of achievement. Success was overwhelmingly defined in terms of conventional academic metrics, research income, international collaboration, and professional reputation. These indicators were not described simply as markers of accomplishment; rather, they were understood as prerequisites for securing the permanence and stability that many participants viewed as the ultimate sign of success. As one participant explained:

190 “for postdocs [in geosciences], you’re not going to get that first permanent job unless you’ve got the high impact publications and a couple of grants under your belt.”

For those employed on temporary contracts, obtaining a permanent position was itself a central marker of achievement:

“people who I went to school with just consider having a permanent position or being offered a permanent position, the marker of success.”

195 Achieving professorial status was similarly described as “very classical success in academia.” These accounts suggest that attractiveness is closely tied to institutional definitions of success. Participants understood academic careers as desirable insofar as they culminated in permanence, but the route to permanence was perceived as requiring sustained conformity to a demanding and highly competitive model of productivity. Younger participants and those on temporary contracts were particularly conscious of this pressure, with one noting that “there’s constantly this feeling of competition.” Consistent with the ‘greedy’ university, success was constructed as an individualised accomplishment dependent on perpetual productivity, rather than as
200 a collective or sustainable academic practice.



Only two participants articulated alternative definitions of success. One explained that her definition of success extends beyond research and permanence to also include “*satisfaction with the position.*” Although limited, such responses are analytically significant because they suggest an emerging redefinition of success in which subjective well-being and work-life integration become part of how academic careers are evaluated. This indicates that attractiveness is not reducible to formal career advancement alone but also depends on whether the everyday realities of academic work align with participants’ broader aspirations and values (Stratford et al., 2024).

The relationship between success and attractiveness became clearer when participants discussed role models. Rather than describing inspirational figures, participants assessed role models as embodiments of the kinds of academic lives they might realistically pursue. In this sense, role models functioned as practical illustrations of whether academic success appeared attainable or desirable. Yet many participants struggled to identify women in such roles. One participant stated:

“*I know loads of people that I would consider highly successful both here at [] and where I did my PhD in [] but every one of them are male.*”

Another observed:

“*I’ve never had a female boss; I’ve never worked in a department that had a working mother.*”

The scarcity of female role models diminished academic attractiveness because it reinforced the perception that success in the geosciences remains organised around masculine life patterns. Even when women were identified as successful, their success was often interpreted as contingent on their conformity to masculinised worker norms. One participant described a prominent female researcher as “*a male at the same time as she’s female*” because she had no children. This striking observation illustrates the extent to which participants viewed academic success as predicated on the absence of substantial caregiving responsibilities. Male role models were frequently described as benefiting from partners who “*stayed at home*” and raised children “*effectively as lone parents,*” making visible the gendered division of labour that underpins apparently individual achievements. Participants repeatedly concluded that careers in the geosciences and family life were “*mutually exclusive,*” with one participant remarking that “*it’s often a decision of having a career or having kids.*”

Taken together, these responses indicate that the geosciences continue to assume that successful academics possess unlimited time and minimal non-work commitments (Ollilainen, 2020). The “time-thirsty” character of research (Fuller et al. 2026) was repeatedly identified as undermining the appeal of academic careers. One participant recalled that observing her female supervisor working weekends rather than spending time with her family “*completely put [her] off*” pursuing a long-term academic career. Another explained that “*everything that [she] had to do to be successful was not something [she] wanted to do.*” For some, the issue was not whether combining work and family was technically possible, but whether the personal costs were acceptable. As one participant with children observed, it was possible to “*manage the work and the kids*” while working “*10 hours a day to be successful,*” but the likely consequence was “*losing your partner and yourself.*”



These narratives demonstrate that attractiveness is shaped not only by the availability of opportunities but also by the kinds of sacrifices participants believe success requires. When success is defined through permanence, hyper-productivity, and total availability for work, and when role models appear to achieve this only by forgoing family life or relying on traditional divisions of domestic labour, careers in the geosciences become difficult to imagine as either attainable or desirable. In this sense, the issue is not simply that women face barriers to progression, but that the dominant model of academic success itself reduces the attractiveness of the profession.

4.2 Precarity and the Conditional Attractiveness of Academic Careers

While permanent employment was viewed as a key marker of success, the pathway toward permanence was widely experienced as prolonged, uncertain, and dependent on a willingness to accept precarious working conditions. In this sense, geoscience careers were perceived as attractive only under certain conditions—if the insecurity associated with successive temporary contracts could eventually be converted into a permanent position. However, the scarcity of permanent posts (Cairns, 2025; O'Connor et al., 2024; Jones, 2023) was described by participants as *“the basic problem of academia.”* Temporary employment was experienced as a *“waiting game,”* requiring researchers to endure years of uncertainty while pursuing what one participant called the *“unicorn of a permanent job.”* This uncertainty was intensified by the expectation that ambitious researchers would embrace a *“nomadic lifestyle,”* moving repeatedly between institutions and countries to demonstrate commitment and build a competitive CV. Participants’ experiences closely reflect the excellence-mobility nexus identified by Rosa (2022) and Courtois and O’Keefe (2024), in which geographical mobility becomes both a marker of excellence and a tacit prerequisite for career progression.

The requirement for mobility was especially off-putting for participants with children or those contemplating family life. One participant observed that institutions rarely consider that academics *“may not want to move the family around.”* Another explained that relocation was difficult because she had *“a little person that’s reliant on me for security.”* Others described declining opportunities because they prioritised stability for their children. One participant recounted withdrawing an application for a job because she *“knew my kids didn’t want to move,”* a decision that left her *“limited in my career options.”* These accounts highlight the ways in which mobility and immobility are not merely individual preferences but are relational and embodied, shaping how women assess the attractiveness of geosciences in relation to the competing demands of family life (Tzanakou, 2017). One participant captured this succinctly:

“it’s the insecurity and the not knowing exactly where you’re going to be from one year to the next that just means it’s impractical.”

Her use of the word “impractical” is significant, indicating that the issue is not simply professional uncertainty but the broader difficulty of organising one’s life around unstable employment. Another participant decided against pursuing an academic career because she wanted to *“stay where I am,”* while another noted that exclusion from academia may occur when individuals *“dare to deviate from the main route for whatever kind of reason.”* Thus, attractiveness depends not only on the existence of



opportunities but also on whether the institutional conditions required to access them are compatible with participants' desired
 270 ways of living.

Participants also described a temporal dimension to precarity, expressing concern that extended periods on temporary contracts
 reduced their chances of securing permanent employment. One participant reflected:

275 *"I can find maybe another postdoc ... then I have a limited time, maybe for another two, three years. And then I don't
 think I can become a professor any longer."*

This sense of *"running out of time"* reveals how precarity intersects with age and gender, producing anxiety about whether
 success remains attainable. As research on gendered ageing suggests (Baloch, 2025), academic careers are not experienced as
 open-ended but as bounded by institutional and social expectations regarding age, productivity, and life stage. For women in
 particular, these temporal pressures are compounded by decisions about partnership and parenthood, making the pursuit of
 280 permanence feel increasingly risky, uncertain and unattractive.

Overall, it is clear that the precarity of short-term contracts diminishes academic attractiveness by making career progression
 dependent on sustained uncertainty, repeated relocation, and the postponement of stability. Although permanent positions
 retain symbolic appeal, the conditions required to reach them are often experienced as incompatible with participants'
 285 commitments to place, relationships, and family. Academic careers in the geosciences are therefore perceived as attractive
 only to those willing and able to tolerate prolonged insecurity, with the willingness itself a reflection of gendered norms,
 expectations and institutional practices. For many women, these conditions render geosciences not simply difficult, but
 fundamentally misaligned with their lived reality.

4.3 The Maternal Wall and the Mirage of Academic Attractiveness

290 The concept of the maternal wall (Crosby et al., 2004) captures both the anticipation and the lived reality that motherhood
 constrains women's academic opportunities. For participants, this was not simply a concern about balancing work and family,
 but a recognition that pregnancy and caregiving could fundamentally alter their career prospects. One participant worried that:

"pregnancy could be a huge financial issue as well or prevent us from getting the next contract."

Another explained that she was fearful about the impact of pregnancy on her potential to secure a job, noting:

295 *"I would be really scared about being discriminated [against] if I was coming to an interview pregnant"*

The participant was equally concerned about *"falling pregnant the first year."* These anxieties were grounded in lived
 experience rather than hypothetical fears. One participant reported that her contract was *"cancelled because of the pregnancy,"*
 while another recalled being advised not to take maternity leave because it would *"ruin [her] career."* A third participant felt
 that once a woman becomes pregnant, *"your dedication and motivation to science is in question."* Collectively, these accounts
 300 show that motherhood is perceived not as a normal life event but as a potential signal of reduced professional commitment.



The maternal wall also fostered a climate in which working mothers felt scrutinised and undervalued. One participant remarked that hostility toward mothers had “*reduce[d] her desire to stay*” in academia. Another described the persistent sense of guilt that accompanied leaving work to meet family responsibilities:

305 *“even though you might be working since 7 in the morning ... there’s still this guilt that I’m walking out and I’m leaving and I’m not participating fully.”*

This sense of not “participating fully” reveals the continuing power of the ideal worker norm, under which full commitment is understood as visible and uninterrupted presence. For participants, motherhood required a deviation from this norm and was therefore viewed as a challenge to their legitimacy as academics. Participants in Germany described an additional layer of constraint associated with the expectation that mothers should reduce their working hours. One participant noted the absence

310 of a:

“pathway for women who have children and are working part time to become a professor or to get a permanent post.”

This highlights not only a maternal wall but also the “caring ceiling” (Lynch et al. 2020), whereby the structural organisation of geoscience careers limits advancement for those with caregiving responsibilities. Thus, family-friendly policies may inadvertently disadvantage women when they are premised on the assumption that women should prioritise caregiving over

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320 career progression (Zippel et al., 2016).

The maternal wall was further reinforced by deeply internalised ‘good mother’ norms (Raddon 2002). One participant attributed her own achievements to having had a stay-at-home mother, stating that:

320 *“any success I have is absolutely based on the fact that my mother was at home when I was a child.”*

Another reduced her hours when her son began school because she believed that:

“someone needed to be there to collect him, to do the homework, to go through ... what life brings for a child.”

Many participants expressed anxiety that sustained professional ambition would make them “*a bad mom.*” As a result, motherhood often prompted a reassessment of priorities. One participant observed that work was “*not my number one priority anymore,*” while another explained that by choosing part-time work she would “*have to kind of pay the price*” and might “*have to leave academia at some point because the train has left.*” These accounts suggest that the perceived price of motherhood in the geosciences is diminished access to the conventional markers of academic success.

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Some participants framed their decisions in terms of personal choice; however, the data suggest that these choices were made within institutional contexts that systematically constrained their options. Other participants were acutely aware of this tension, where universities individualise responsibility for balancing work and care rather than addressing the structural conditions that render motherhood and academic success difficult to reconcile (Tamtik and Guenter, 2019). One participant described institutional measures as “*a bit fake*”:

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335 *“They can offer you a part time job, but the expectations are the same as the full-time job, except you have less money
and less time.”*

This observation suggests a mirage of academic attractiveness, where institutions offer flexibility and support while the underlying expectations of productivity and availability remain unchanged. Consequently, the formal existence of family friendly policies does little to alter the structural conditions that make geoscience careers unattractive to many women.

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These findings show that motherhood reshapes academic attractiveness by exposing the incompatibility between dominant models of academic success and the realities of caregiving. While institutions may offer the language of flexibility and choice, participants experienced these provisions as largely symbolic, leaving women to absorb the personal and professional costs of combining academic work and family life. The result is that careers in the geosciences are frequently perceived not simply as
345 difficult for mothers, but as structurally organised in ways that make motherhood and academic success appear fundamentally at odds.

4.4 Gender Bias and Sexism: Eroding Geosciences Attractiveness

Participants consistently described gender bias and sexism as factors that further erode the attractiveness of careers in the geosciences, with everyday experiences of exclusion, devaluation and unequal expectations diminishing their sense of
350 belonging in the field. In this sense, gender bias and sexism undermine academic attractiveness not only by limiting opportunities, but also by weakening women’s confidence that success in geoscience is attainable on equal terms. Participants across all focus groups reported that *“academia is still quite sexist.”* One participant recalled hearing senior male professors at a gender equality event dismiss structural explanations for women’s underrepresentation, noting that his attitude was:

“there were no women before 30 years so we just have to wait 30 years and then it will be equality.”

355 Such attitudes deflect responsibility for institutional change and allow both conscious and unconscious forms of gender bias to persist. This was clearly apparent in participants’ accounts of exclusion from informal networks and collaboration opportunities. One participant described how her supervisor spent more time with male postdoctoral researchers, noting that while they were not actively trying to *“discriminate against me,”* the bias was *“happening naturally, kind of.”* Another participant explained that although she had been mentoring a male PhD student, their shared supervisor increasingly
360 *“include[d] him more than me”* by forgetting to *“put me in CC of emails”* and sharing collaboration opportunities directly with the male student. These experiences reflect what De Welde and Laursen (2011) describe as male ‘buddy status’ and what Yarrow (2021) characterises as ‘the hustle,’ whereby informal gendered networks shape access to resources and recognition. In doing so, they diminish the perceived attainability of academic success and make academic careers appear less attractive to women.

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Participants also described more explicit forms of sexism that directly undermined their professional legitimacy. One suggested that some male colleagues believed they were superior, noting that:



“because they're men, and believe that the woman cannot do the job as well as they do.”

Another recalled being told that her “*chances are good*” to secure a position “*because you're a female*.” Comments of this
370 kind reduced participants’ achievements to their gender rather than their scholarly ability, leaving them feeling devalued as
researchers. Such experiences reinforced the perception that women are judged differently from their male peers and that their
success is frequently viewed as less deserved. As a result, academic careers in the geosciences were experienced not as
attractive, meritocratic pathways, but as environments in which recognition and advancement remained contingent upon
navigating persistent gendered assumptions.

375 Participants also identified the physical environment of geoscience departments and fieldwork as a tangible reminder that
women are viewed as ‘matter out of place’ (Cresswell, 1996). One participant described the absence of a dedicated
breastfeeding room, forcing her to “*pump elsewhere*” whenever a shared room was unavailable. Another noted that there was
only one women’s bathroom “*in the whole department*,” and that concerns about this were dismissed with the question, “*why*
380 *are you blowing that up?*” These omissions communicate a symbolic message about belonging: spaces designed primarily
around male bodies signal that women are peripheral rather than full members of the geoscience community. These exclusions
were particularly pronounced in discussions of fieldwork, a core element of geoscience research and training. Participants
described resistance to basic accommodations such as additional bathroom breaks during menstruation, with one recalling that
a male professor responded, “*that’s not something we should have to worry about*.” Others highlighted assumptions about
385 women’s physical strength, including being assigned tasks deemed more suitable for women and denied opportunities to learn
how to operate field equipment. Fieldwork was repeatedly characterised as “*macho*,” echoing research that identifies it as a
domain historically associated with white, able-bodied masculinity (Heimann and Johansson, 2024). Such experiences
undermine both women’s immediate comfort and their longer-term ability to participate fully (Heimann, 2025). Given that
fieldwork is an integral component of education, research, and employment in the geosciences, the enduring barriers for women
390 to conduct fieldwork comfortably and without bias are troubling.

Many participants responded to these exclusions by becoming involved in mentoring, outreach and institutional gender equality
initiatives such as Athena SWAN. Several described this work as an attempt to make geosciences more attractive to the next
generation of women. Yet participants were also acutely aware that this labour was largely invisible within the prevailing
395 metrics of academic success. Mentoring and advocacy did not “*help directly to improve my CV*” and were described as
“*completely invisible*.” There was broad agreement that “*a lot of male researchers don’t care*” about this work, leaving women
to shoulder a disproportionate burden of advocacy labour. As one participant observed, such commitments became:

“another barrier for you because you could be doing other things like applying for a grant or a job.”

This reflects wider evidence that women undertake more work that carries limited institutional reward (Hanasono et al., 2019;
400 Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2025). In this way, efforts to improve the attractiveness of geoscience for women may simultaneously
reduce their own capacity to meet the performance metrics on which their academic success depends.



These findings demonstrate that gender bias and sexism erode academic attractiveness by undermining women's sense of legitimacy, belonging and future possibility. Whether manifested through informal exclusion, demeaning comments, invisible service burdens or male-oriented infrastructures, these experiences signal that women are not fully recognised as the normative subjects of geoscientific work. The cumulative effect is to make academic careers in the geosciences appear less equitable, less attainable and ultimately less attractive to women considering whether they can build a sustainable future in the field.

5 Conclusion

This study began with a deceptively simple question: are academic careers in the geosciences attractive to women? The findings suggest that the answer is shaped by a complex interplay of personal aspirations, institutional norms, and structural constraints that collectively configure careers in geoscience as only partially attractive. Across the data, the “ideal academic” consistently emerged as a figure aligned with the ideal worker norm: fully available, continuously productive, geographically mobile, and largely unencumbered by care responsibilities. Participants frequently identified successful role models as embodying this configuration, often supported by invisible systems of care and domestic labour that enabled sustained availability for work. Consequently, academic attractiveness was widely perceived as difficult to reconcile with family life, generating ambivalence about long-term commitment to careers in geoscience.

A central finding of this research is the tension between the increasing neo-liberalisation of academia and the simultaneous expansion of equality and diversity agendas. While universities and research institutions formally promote inclusion and work–life balance, the conditions for academic success are increasingly structured around short-term contracts, mobility, precarity, and uninterrupted productivity. This contradiction produces what can be understood as conditional attractiveness: women are encouraged to enter and remain within geosciences, while the organisational logic of academic labour simultaneously makes sustained participation increasingly difficult. In this context, mobility functions not simply as a feature of academic life, but as a gatekeeping mechanism that shapes who can remain in the field and under what conditions. These structural dynamics are further intensified by the maternal wall. Pregnancy, childbirth, and caregiving responsibilities were repeatedly described as moments at which academic careers became particularly fragile and less attractive. Participants noted the negative impact of maternity on contracts, career progression, and perceptions of suitability for academic employment. The persistent tension between the “ideal worker” and “good mother” norms rendered motherhood incompatible with dominant expectations of success. As a result, many women perceived geoscience careers as structured around assumptions that excluded women's lived realities rather than accommodating them.

Beyond institutional pressures, participants also highlighted the broader cultural environment of geosciences as a significant factor shaping academic attractiveness. Persistent gender bias, everyday sexism, and the slow pace of change contributed to experiences of exclusion and devaluation. Frustration was particularly directed toward the limited engagement of male



colleagues in advocating for change and challenging entrenched inequalities. Importantly, even policies designed to support women were sometimes experienced as paradoxical. Equality initiatives and interventions intended to improve inclusivity were occasionally reinterpreted by colleagues as evidence that women's employment or advancement was linked to gender rather than expertise. Such microaggressions undermined participants' sense of belonging and reinforced perceptions of academia as an unwelcoming environment for women.

This analysis extends existing understandings of the "leaky pipeline" in geosciences by demonstrating how careers are made more or less desirable through gendered organisational structures, norms of success, and everyday workplace practices. In doing so, it aligns with feminist scholarship that calls for a move beyond technical equality interventions toward a more fundamental rethinking of academic work and power relations (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). If institutions wish to increase gender diversity among academic staff—an objective linked to enhanced creativity, problem solving, and critical analysis within research environments (Pfeiffer et al., 2025; Hundschell et al., 2022)—they must embrace more diverse forms of academic life and challenge the narrow expectations that continue to define academic success. This requires moving beyond managerial approaches to the "pipeline" and instead confronting the structural inequalities embedded within academic labour. Equality initiatives such as Athena SWAN must be reframed as interventions aimed at redistributing power and addressing the epistemic exclusion experienced by women instead of a technical fix to improve female representation. Such transformative change will require a root-and-branch reconfiguration of everyday work practices. This includes addressing the persistence of ideal worker norms, reducing dependence on precarious contracts and mobility, recognising and valuing care responsibilities, and redesigning practices ranging from workload allocation to fieldwork expectations. Such interventions are necessary to resolve the contradiction between institutional commitments to equality and the neo-liberal practices that continue to reproduce inequality in practice. Ultimately, the question is not simply how to "fix" the leaky pipeline, but how to transform the practical, structural, and normative conditions that continue to make geosciences unattractive to many women. Only through such a reorientation can geosciences move toward a genuinely equitable academic culture in which careers are not merely formally open to women, but genuinely attractive as sustainable and inclusive forms of work.

Data availability

The qualitative data generated and analysed during this study are not publicly available due to the potentially identifiable nature of participant responses and the need to protect participant confidentiality. Anonymised data may be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.



Author contributions

465 Valerie Ledwith co-designed the survey, workshops, and focus groups, conducted the data analysis, and drafted the initial manuscript. Audrey Morley conceived the study, co-designed the survey, workshops, and focus groups, facilitated participant recruitment through her professional network, supported survey distribution, coordinated the workshops and focus groups and contributed to the writing of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

470 Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical statement

This study involved qualitative data from anonymous surveys, workshops and focus groups with adult participants discussing their professional experiences in academia. Formal institutional ethical approval was not sought because the research was
475 considered low risk, involving voluntary participation and no collection of special category personal data beyond participants' reflections on their professional experiences. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were informed of the aims of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw, and the intended use of anonymised quotations in publication. To protect confidentiality, identifying information was removed during transcription and analysis. The study was conducted in accordance with relevant data protection regulations, including the General Data
480 Protection Regulation (GDPR), and ethical principles for social science research involving human participants.

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