

**Women in the Education System:
*Breaking Barriers and Championing Excellence***

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**Lifelong
Education
Institute**

LEI Thinks

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
1 INTRODUCTION	3
2 WOMEN IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM	4
3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17
ABOUT THE LIFELONG EDUCATION INSTITUTE	19
REFERENCES.....	20

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thinkpiece explores the profound impacts and contributions of women in the education system, examining their dynamic roles as teachers, educators, students, and learners. As educators, women shape the educational landscape by nurturing students' growth and fostering inclusive learning environments. Meanwhile, their contributions as students, learners and researchers drive innovation and enrich academic discourse across various disciplines. However, challenges such as gender disparities and barriers to reaching leadership positions continue to hinder progress. To navigate the future, we must prioritise supporting women in education through mentorship, outreach, and inclusive policies.

By empowering women to pursue and excel in their educational endeavours, we can create a more equitable and inclusive educational system. Collaboration and commitment from stakeholders are crucial to overcoming obstacles and ensuring that we have equal access to quality education for all. Embracing diversity, promoting inclusivity, and advancing gender equality in education are all essential for building a brighter future for generations to come.

Recommendations

1. Enhance women's visibility and their significant influence in academic and professional spheres through partnerships with schools, community organisations, and industry leaders.
2. Develop mentorship programmes pairing female students, including cis and transgender women, with mentors in their desired academic disciplines. These programmes should provide guidance, support, and networking opportunities to help women navigate academic and professional pathways successfully.
3. Invest in targeted outreach and recruitment campaigns to encourage more women to pursue education and careers in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as STEM subjects.
4. Implement gender-inclusive policies within educational institutions to create supportive environments for all students and faculty; including ensuring equitable access to resources, facilities, and opportunities.
5. Develop flexible learning options, such as online courses and part-time programmes, to accommodate women who may have caregiving responsibilities or other commitments. This flexibility can help women continue their education despite personal challenges.

6. Increase funding and support for research initiatives focused on the importance of gender equity and diversity in education, as well as those which promote gender-inclusive approaches to knowledge production and dissemination.
7. Provide comprehensive career counselling services via tailored advice and resources that help address the unique challenges women face in the workforce and give women much-needed support to achieve their career goals.
8. Ensure that educational institutions are safe spaces where girls and women can learn without fear of violence or harassment. Implement strict anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies and provide support services for those affected.
9. Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programmes aimed at enhancing women's education, making sure to collect and analyse data to identify areas for improvement and ensure that initiatives are meeting their goals.
10. Offer mandatory diversity and inclusion training for faculty, staff, and students to raise awareness of gender-related issues, unconscious biases, and systemic barriers so as to increase institutions' focus on promoting empathy, respect, and understanding to foster a culture of inclusivity and belonging.

1 INTRODUCTION

The significant impact of women in education resounds across all levels, from early years and primary education to further, higher and adult education, and extends into the realms of policymaking. In nursery, primary and secondary schools, women educators not only impart knowledge but also serve as pivotal figures, shaping early and young learners' personal and academic growth. The beneficial influence of female teachers on learners' achievements is especially notable, with girls deriving particular benefit from witnessing empowered women in leadership positions within their educational settings. Furthermore, the presence of women in these positions within schools is instrumental in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. Female headteachers and administrators bring diverse perspectives and leadership styles that often prioritise collaboration, empathy, and community engagement. Their leadership inspires both learners and staff, promoting a culture of equality and empowerment within educational institutions.

Women's impact in further, adult and higher education is equally profound. As students, professors, researchers, and administrators, women contribute significantly to the quality and diversity of academic discourse. The growing enrolment rates of female students challenge historical gender disparities in educational attainment, while women academics bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to both research and teaching. In higher education (HE), for example, the representation of women in leadership positions has increased, albeit gradually. Female deans, department chairs, and university presidents also play vital roles in shaping institutional policies, encouraging diversity, and advocating for gender equity within academia. Their leadership is essential in addressing systemic barriers and advancing opportunities for women in academic and administrative roles. In addition to their roles within educational institutions, women are also wielding considerable influence in education policymaking. Female policymakers are able to champion policies aimed at promoting equitable access to education, closing achievement gaps, and addressing the unique needs of marginalised student and learner populations. Their advocacy efforts can lead to the development of gender-sensitive policies and initiatives that can aim to create more inclusive and supportive educational systems.

In this thinkpiece, Dr Maísa Edwards and Dame Ann Limb argue that women's contributions to the education system are both multifaceted and far-reaching. From classrooms to boardrooms, women educators, leaders, scholars, and policymakers are playing key roles in the UK by driving transformative change, breaking down barriers, and paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive educational system. Their leadership, expertise, and advocacy are essential in shaping the future of education and empowering us to continue our learning and reach our full potential.

2 WOMEN IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

This section explores the diverse and multifaceted roles that women take on within the realm of education. From their positions as students and learners, teachers, leaders, and educators, women contribute significantly to shaping the landscapes of learning. It outlines the significant impact of women in the education system and the barriers which are continuously being broken by their dedication, perseverance and championing of excellence.

2.1 Women's Education: Visibility and Opportunities

Education is a fundamental human right, yet millions of girls around the world are sadly deprived of this opportunity. According to UNICEF, 129 million girls are currently not attending school. This staggering number includes 32 million girls of primary school age, 30 million of lower-secondary school age, and 67 million of upper-secondary school age. This situation is even more difficult in conflict-affected countries and regions, where girls are over twice as likely to be out of school compared to their counterparts in more stable or peaceful areas. The barriers which are preventing girls from accessing and staying in education are complex and sadly deeply rooted, with violence, poverty, early marriage, and gender biases among the most acute challenges.

In the UK and around the world, meaningful steps have fortunately been made to improve women's access to primary, secondary, further and higher education as well as entry into traditionally male-dominated fields, such as jobs and study in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Important initiatives which support and secure education opportunities for girls both domestically and internationally are likewise playing vital roles. The Malala Fund, for example, which was founded by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, is present in a number of countries in the Global South and is doing vital work to secure education opportunities for girls in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Brazil and more. Increasing opportunities and visibility for women in education is therefore a key link in the chain, and must be more widely implemented in schools and across the lifelong learning journey. These must continue to include scholarships and financial aid directed towards women, as well as the development of mentorship programmes and policies aimed at creating more inclusive and supportive educational environments. By providing role models, mentorship, and targeted support, more girls and women can be inspired and empowered to continue their studies and pursue any career they set their minds to.

While efforts are being made to increase the number of women in education, as well as in teaching positions and leadership roles within educational institutions, more needs to be done. This involves providing young girls with role models and also helping to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of women are represented in the

development and implementation of educational policies and curricula. This shows the need to also address visibility and representation at senior leadership levels where women, and especially women of colour, are still underrepresented. This consequently has knock on effects on decision-making in businesses, in further education (FE) and higher education (HE) and beyond. According to HESA's Higher Education Staff Statistics (2021/22), for example, '10% of academic staff (23,515) were employed with the contract level of 'Professor'. 30% of professors were female, up from 28% in the previous years (...) Among professors who declared their ethnicity, 165 were black. At under 1% of the total this proportion is the same as previous years. 88% of professors were white and 8% were Asian'.

2.2 Women in Academia: Teachers and Educators

Women have made significant strides in the UK in reshaping educational landscapes as teachers and educators, helping to bring diverse perspectives and innovative approaches to teaching and learning. In 1878, following the University of London's decision to grant women access to its degrees, University College London emerged as the inaugural British university to enrol women on entirely equal terms as men. This inclusivity soon extended across all faculties, except in Medicine, which took a while to catch up. This has played a role in laying the groundwork for women's access to continued education and pathway to become school teachers. One of the primary early benefits of female representation in the education system has therefore long been from the varied perspectives they bring to the teaching profession. Women educators often employ more inclusive teaching methods that cater to the diverse needs of students, fostering a supportive and nurturing learning environment. Research also consistently demonstrates that female teachers excel in interpersonal skills, empathy, and communication, all of which are essential for cultivating positive student-teacher relationships and promoting student engagement.

Moreover, female educators serve as powerful role models for students, particularly young girls, who benefit from seeing empowered women in leadership positions within their educational settings. By breaking down existing gender stereotypes and challenging societal norms, women teachers inspire confidence and ambition in their students, encouraging them to pursue their academic and professional aspirations without limitations. In addition to their roles as classroom teachers, women play pivotal roles as educational leaders and administrators. Gaining the opportunity to serve as department chairs, deans, and academic directors, they can also contribute to shaping institutional policies, promoting diversity and equity, and fostering a culture of inclusivity within academic institutions. Their leadership is instrumental in advocating for gender-sensitive practices and implementing initiatives aimed at advancing the representation and success of women in both HE and FE.

The teaching workforce across the UK is consistently predominantly female: 74% in 2022/23, the same as in 2021/22. The greatest proportion of female teachers is at nursery level and the share decreases for each successive level of education: across the UK 85% of FTE at primary level are female and 64% at secondary level.'

**GOV, UK | Education and training statistics for
the UK (2023) - Reporting year 2023.**

The presence of women in wider academia also has a deep impact on the academic research landscape, leading to the exploration of previously overlooked topics and the development of interdisciplinary collaborations. Women scholars are also bringing unique perspectives and insights to their research, enriching academic discourse and contributing to the advancement of new knowledge across various fields. It is therefore key to highlight and increase visibility on the indispensable roles played by women. Success stories of women helping to shape the educational experiences of students, driving innovation in teaching and learning, and advancing knowledge through their research contributions should be made more widely available than the occasional mention. This is because the greater visibility that women, and especially queer women and women of colour, have in the education system, the more their dedication can be rewarded and seen as an enrichment of the academic community. This would allow their roles to also extend beyond the confines of traditional classrooms or organisations, and be present on a larger scale so as to directly influence academic discourse, shape curricula, and mentor future generations of scholars.

2.3 Students and Learners

In contemporary British society, women's representation as students and learners is surging across various fields, reshaping educational landscapes and challenging traditional gender norms. The UK stands as a prominent example of this trend, where women not only outnumber men in tertiary education but also excel across diverse academic disciplines. One notable area where women are particularly present in the UK is the field of healthcare. Nursing, midwifery, and other health professions have historically attracted a predominantly female cohort. Today, women continue to dominate these fields, and comprise a significant majority of students enrolled in nursing programmes and related disciplines at British institutions.

'In the UK, the sectors with the most women in employment are health and social work (accounting for 21% of all jobs held by women as of September 2023), the wholesale and retail trade (12%) and education (12%). In the health and social work sector, 77% of jobs are held by women, and in education it is 70%.'

House of Commons Library | Women and the UK Economy
Research Briefing by Brigid Francis-Devine and Georgina Hutton
(4th March 2024)

Furthermore, the social sciences and humanities are also witnessing a considerable influx of female students in the UK. Disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and English literature attract a diverse range of students, with women often comprising most of undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts. Interest and involvement in these fields also helps to emphasise intellectual curiosity and commitments to exploring complex societal issues and cultural narratives, such as steps towards decolonising the curriculum. In addition to healthcare and social sciences, women's representation in STEM fields has also grown in recent years. While traditionally male-dominated, STEM disciplines are slowly becoming more inclusive, with concerted efforts to encourage and support women's participation. Initiatives which promote STEM education for girls and women, coupled with increased advocacy for gender equality in STEM-related professions, is leading to greater diversity and representation across these fields in the UK.

The rise of women in STEM is particularly evident in fields such as biology, environmental sciences, and psychology, where female students are increasingly making their mark through advanced research and innovation. However, challenges still persist in certain STEM disciplines, such as engineering and computer science, where women remain underrepresented. Efforts to address gender disparities in these areas are including more targeted recruitment strategies, mentorship programmes, and initiatives to help develop a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for female students. Additionally, the establishment of partnerships with schools and community organisations can play a key role in helping to create more supportive networks. This can be done through offering mentorship programmes where women professionals guide and inspire girls in schools, in the community via drop in sessions and/or via career guidance. Creating scholarships and financial incentives can also further motivate girls and women to enter and remain in STEM fields. By actively promoting the importance of STEM careers, these outreach efforts are significant. We should all have heard of Ada Lovelace, Rosalind Franklin and Marie Curie, right?

Figure 1: Five examples of education programmes and groups designed to increase women’s representation in STEM fields in the UK:

UK based education programmes and groups	
STEMettes	STEMettes is a social enterprise that aims to inspire and support young women in STEM through various programmes, including panel events, hackathons, and mentoring schemes. Their initiatives are designed to make STEM subjects more accessible and appealing to girls from an early age.
Women’s Engineering Society (WES)	Founded in 1919, WES supports women in engineering and promotes gender diversity in the engineering sector. They offer career development programmes, networking opportunities, and outreach activities to encourage young women to consider engineering careers.
Women into Science and Engineering (WISE)	WISE works to increase the participation, contribution, and success of women in STEM by providing resources and support for women and employers. Their educational outreach includes workshops, events, and resources aimed at schools and universities to promote STEM careers to young women.
Code First Girls	This organisation offers free coding courses to women, helping them develop the skills necessary to pursue careers in technology. They partner with companies to provide mentorship and job placement support, aiming to reduce the gender gap in the tech industry.
Ada, National College for Digital Skills	Named after Ada Lovelace, this organisation offers high-quality education and training in digital skills, with a focus on increasing the representation of women in tech. They provide various programmes, including apprenticeships and courses, to help young women gain the skills needed for careers in digital and tech industries.

Beyond specific academic disciplines, women's representation as students and learners in the UK extends to non-traditional and vocational fields as well. Technical and vocational education and training programmes are also attracting a diverse range of students, with women now more actively contemplating pursuing careers in fields such as construction, engineering, and information technology. These programmes are amongst those that offer women opportunities to acquire valuable skills and

credentials, empowering them to enter these traditionally male-dominated industries and achieve greater economic independence.

2.4 Women in Leadership

Women in leadership positions, whether as headteachers, deans, heads of department, or in other senior administrative roles, play a crucial role in shaping organisational culture, driving innovation, and fostering more inclusive environments. Their leadership is instrumental in promoting diversity, equity, and excellence within educational institutions. Research has shown that diverse leadership teams are more innovative, better at problem-solving, and more effective in addressing the needs of its stakeholders. The presence of women in leadership roles also serves as a powerful symbol of progress and empowerment, thus inspiring other women to pursue leadership roles themselves and challenge existing gender norms and stereotypes. By shattering glass ceilings, women leaders are paving the way for future generations of women to achieve their full potential in the fields of education and society as a whole.

However, despite their important contributions, it is important to note that women in leadership position often face unique challenges and barriers that can risk hindering their professional advancement and success. Three of the most pervasive challenges are gender bias, harassment and discrimination, which can manifest themselves in various forms, such as unequal opportunities for career advancement, lower salaries compared to male counterparts, and lack of support and recognition from colleagues and superiors. Additionally, women in leadership may still face systemic or organisational barriers such as limited access to leadership development programmes, senior mentorship opportunities, and networking resources. These difficulties can hinder their ability to further develop their skills, confidence, and professional networks – all of which are indispensable in seeking to achieve success in leadership roles.

Furthermore, women in leadership positions in education can also often struggle to balance their professional responsibilities with family obligations and caregiving responsibilities. This can lead to a lack of a healthy work-life balance and, if support systems are not in place, can contribute to feelings of burnout, stress, and exhaustion, making it even more challenging for women to thrive in leadership positions. Despite these challenges, many women in leadership roles in the education system have overcome obstacles to achieve remarkable success. Their resilience, determination, and commitment to excellence serve as powerful examples to us all of the transformative potential of women's leadership in education.

Figure 2: Four case studies kindly provided by women in senior leadership positions from among the Lifelong Education Institute’s membership organisations.

Case Studies	
<p>Prof Annabel Kiernan <i>Pro Vice-Chancellor Academic at Staffordshire University</i></p>	<p>I started teaching in 1994, in my early twenties. My first full time lectureship was as Jean Monnet Chair of European Integration at the University of Paisley (now UWS) which was consciously a university of social inclusion. UWS had a core of older learners; in social sciences, this was also mostly women in their 40s and 50s returning to education to create new social and economic opportunities, having raised families. My experience at UWS challenged me and my approach to teaching: to value what lived experience brings to higher learning and to democratise the classroom environment.</p> <p>At Sheffield Hallam University, the development of a new Politics degree allowed me to put into practice my commitment to applied politics. I taught a course in political and social activism with the intention of reconnecting post-marketisation students with everyday politics. BBC reporting described it as teaching students to protest, but it was really about developing skills to be transformative citizens.</p> <p>These two formative experiences have shaped my career. I have challenged myself to deliver education innovations informed by my own connection to ‘education as the practice of freedom’ (hooks 1994), enabling students’ lived experience to be valued in the classroom and by empowering students to be agents of change.</p>
<p>Liz Bromley <i>Chief Executive Officer of the NCG</i></p>	<p>Married with 4 young children, in 1997 the Open University offered me a great ‘job’ - family friendly and close to home. There I met Dean Linda Jones, an exemplary female leader who inspired me to have a ‘career’. Through her motivation, relevant CPD and the opportunity to learn across a number of roles, I became the OU’s first non-academic Associate Dean managing staff in 13 regional offices. I then moved into traditional</p>

	<p>university roles including Director of Student Life, COO, Deputy VC and acting VC.</p> <p>At my last university I was met by a toxic culture - misogynistic leadership poisoned relationships, and damaged the organisation. Divisiveness at the top must be exposed and stamped out. This requires bravery and the support of trusted colleagues. But the experience taught me how marginalisation and bullying feels. I have used this learning to check my own leadership behaviours.</p> <p>Further education (FE) was a homecoming. Focussing on improving lives and making a difference too feels so like those early days at the OU. Education is life changing and it matters. It offers a variety of rewarding career pathways. My life has been enriched by my own education and by working in the sector. I have met inspirational leaders and been mentored by some astonishingly accomplished women. I hope that I will look back and see the talented young women I have worked with reach senior roles and have the same sense of joy that I have experienced over many years of work.</p>
<p>Prof Kate Asante <i>Professor of Skills & Innovation Director of Lifelong Learning & Employment at the University of Hertfordshire</i></p>	<p>I grew up shy and quiet, yet inquisitive, enjoying learning. As I aged my perspective changed, education became an opportunity to progress in my career, as opposed to something I pursued for joy – a shift that occurred upon failing my Sixth Form qualifications and receiving university rejections. This experience abruptly changed my self-perception and direction of travel into full-time employment.</p> <p>Throughout my life, I have combined work and learning which has shaped my career trajectory, professional practice, and leadership. I had part-time jobs from a young age working on weekends whilst at school, a pattern that continued when I re-applied to university. My postgraduate degree at the Institute of Education (UCL) restored my love of learning as I found a discipline that inspired me. I studied Inclusive Education, focusing my research on higher education (HE). This was a turning point in my career, made possible by a supportive</p>

	<p>director – her encouragement, openness, and ability to secure funding for my tuition fees made it possible.</p> <p>It was during my postgraduate study, that I learnt I had a specific learning disability and the effect this had on my early education and results. I finally understood how I processed, recalled, and articulated information, and combined this understanding with effective strategies so I could harness my strengths, which led to promotion in the workplace and later a PhD.</p> <p>In my current role, I provide strategic direction in all areas of lifelong learning, apprenticeships, career development and employability. My approach to academia is holistic, straddling education, research, and knowledge exchange. I lead a team of 95 staff, which includes professional, academic and student staff, mentor colleagues and supervise doctoral research. Despite those initial rejections, HE is for me.</p>
<p>Prof Eunice Simmons</p> <p><i>Vice Chancellor & Professor of Sustainable Environments at the University of Chester</i></p>	<p>I have been fortunate in carving out a career in higher education which has encompassed my two driving forces; education and the environment. An early role as a University of London research assistant funded by the Forestry Commission immersed me in a macho world of heavy machinery, green uniforms and wildlife as pest! I made a conscious effort to counter this culture in my subsequent lecturing in conservation and landscape ecology and developed the confidence to move 350 miles to become the first female leader of the National School of Forestry in Cumbria. Establishing my leadership credentials, settling our young family into a new area and navigating a range of mountains between campuses certainly honed all my strategic skills.</p> <p>As an educator it was satisfying to develop vocational, academic and research programmes in one institution and eye-opening to find there was very little interchange between these areas. This made me realise that a student’s educational background can limit them for life – and led me to focus on widening participation to higher education. This has crystallised in supporting the creation and development of TASO: a national charity</p>

	<p>researching how to transform access and student outcomes.¹</p> <p>It is important to remain in touch with the subject you loved as a student and as I have progressed in management roles I have always tried to keep my environmental roots alive. This has meant developing skills as a collaborator beyond my institution and I am proud to now chair the Mersey Forest Partnership,² one of the most impactful community forests in the country.</p> <p>In my current role as Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive my priority is to ensure our university delivers social value and economic uplift in Chester and in its University Centres in Warrington, Birkenhead and Reaseheath. The tension between financial sustainability and improving our wider sustainability credentials is the subject of daily conversation; my twin passions are as relevant now as when I started forty years ago!</p>
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As we can see, women in leadership positions in education play a vital role in shaping organisational culture, driving innovation, and creating more inclusive environments. Enhancing women's visibility and their significant influence in academic and professional spheres, the establishment of strategic partnerships with schools, community organisations, and industry leaders is also essential. By fostering collaborations with educational institutions, we can also introduce programmes that highlight women's achievements and create mentorship opportunities that can inspire young girls to pursue diverse career paths.

Furthermore, the taking of active steps to create partnerships with industry leaders would help ensure that women's contributions are recognised and valued, thereby also promoting equitable practices and inclusive policies. Such partnerships can lead to internships, scholarships, and leadership training programmes which are specifically designed for women, helping to bridge the gap between education and professional advancement. By integrating efforts such as these across the HE and FE sectors, we

¹ <https://taso.org.uk>

² <https://www.merseyforest.org.uk>

will be better placed to create a robust support system that not empowers women, but amplifies their voices, and acknowledges their important impact and contributions as teachers and educators. We must not forget that taking this more holistic approach not only benefits women but also enriches our entire society, leading to a more improved culture of inclusivity and equality.

2.5 Facing the Present and the Future

As we confront the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow, we must explore strategies to navigate the future. It is essential that British society further embraces diversity and creates environments where everyone feels valued and empowered. Greater inclusivity for women is key to ensure that there are more equal opportunities and representation across diverse socio-economic backgrounds, gender identities, and racial backgrounds. Socio-economic factors also significantly impact women's access to education, employment opportunities, and resources. Women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds often face additional barriers such as financial constraints, lack of access to quality education, and limited professional networks, which can hinder their ability to thrive and succeed in various sectors and professions.

Figure 3: Five strategies to support women in the education system

Supporting women in the education system	
Mentorship Programmes	Establish mentorship programmes that pair female students, including cis and transgender women, with mentors in their desired academic disciplines. These programmes should focus on providing guidance, support, and networking opportunities to help women navigate academic and professional pathways successfully.
Outreach and Recruitment Initiatives	Encourage targeted outreach and recruitment initiatives to encourage more women to pursue education and careers in traditionally male-dominated fields. This could involve partnering with schools, community organisations, and industry leaders to showcase diverse role models and highlight the opportunities available in various academic disciplines.
Gender-Inclusive Policies and Practices	Implement gender-inclusive policies and practices within educational institutions to create supportive and inclusive environments for all students and faculty. This includes ensuring equitable access to resources, facilities, and



	opportunities, as well as addressing discrimination and harassment based on gender identity or expression.
Diversity and Inclusion Training	Provide mandatory diversity and inclusion training for faculty, staff, and students to raise awareness of gender-related issues, unconscious biases, and systemic barriers within academia. Training should focus on promoting empathy, respect, and understanding among all members of the academic community and fostering a culture of inclusivity and belonging.
Research Funding and Support	Increase funding and support for research initiatives focused on gender equity and diversity in education and academic disciplines. This could involve establishing grants, scholarships, and fellowships specifically aimed at supporting women, cis and trans, in their research endeavours and promoting gender-inclusive approaches to knowledge production and dissemination. Additionally, providing resources and mentorship for women researchers can help address systemic barriers and facilitate their success in academia.

Inclusivity must also extend to transgender women, who risk facing added discrimination and marginalisation in society. Trans women experience unique challenges which are related to gender identity and expression, various barriers to accessing healthcare, as well as employment discrimination and violence. In educational settings, transgender women may also encounter hostility, lack of support, and institutional policies that fail to recognise and affirm their gender identity, leading to feelings of exclusion and alienation. The introduction of training to aid in supporting trans and non-binary students should focus on nurturing understanding, empathy, and cultural competence among educators and administrators.

Additionally, race intersects with gender to compound experiences of marginalisation and discrimination for women of colour. Women from racial minority backgrounds still face racism, stereotyping, and biases that impact their educational and professional opportunities. They also continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership positions and face barriers to advancement and recognition due to institutionalised discrimination and structural inequalities. There is therefore a need to provide better guidance on creating inclusive learning environments, addressing unconscious biases, and recognising the unique challenges which are faced by more marginalised groups. This type of training and guidance in educational settings and the workplace can help ensure that all people feel safe, valued, and supported in their educational and professional journeys. It is also fundamental to remember that embracing diversity and promoting inclusivity benefits not only individuals but also enriches the

educational and professional experience for us all, promoting a more equitable and thriving learning community.

To address these challenges and promote greater inclusivity for women, educational institutions and organisations must adopt intersectional approaches that recognise and address the intersecting identities and experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. This includes implementing policies and practices that prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as giving more investment and support to affirmative action programmes, new mentorship initiatives, and diversity training for staff and faculty. Moreover, creating supportive and inclusive environments for women requires ongoing efforts to challenge societal norms and stereotypes, dismantle systemic barriers, and amplify the voices and experiences of marginalised women. This includes advocating for policy reforms, promoting diversity in leadership positions, and fostering ally-ship and solidarity among women from different backgrounds.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thinkpiece has explored the diverse and significant roles of women in the education, recognising their meaningful impacts and influence. Women's representation as students, learners, teachers and educators in the UK reflects a dynamic and evolving educational landscape. From areas such as healthcare and the social sciences, to STEM fields and vocational training, women are breaking barriers, challenging stereotypes, and forging pathways to success in every facet of education and learning. As they continue to assert their presence and voice across academic disciplines and professional domains, women's contributions to the UK's educational and socio-economic fabric will undoubtedly continue to shape the future of our society for generations to come.

Furthermore, we have examined women's presence in leadership positions and how they are also essential for the promotion of diversity, equity, and excellence within educational institutions. Highlighting the stories of women in senior leadership positions from among the LEI's membership, we have argued that women's leadership is key to addressing systemic barriers and advancing opportunities for women in academic and administrative roles. However, women in the education system, do still often face significant challenges and barriers that can impact their professional advancement and success. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from within educational institutions, and by policymakers, and stakeholders to promote gender equity, eliminate gender bias and discrimination, and ultimately create supportive environments that empower women to thrive.

As we move forward, let us continue to support women, in all stages of their career development. From mentorship opportunities, research support and funding, prioritising engagement with community and local organisations to Government-led incentives that support women's professional growth and development, we need more platforms for networking, skill-building, and advocacy.

Recommendations

1. Enhance women's visibility and their significant influence in academic and professional spheres through partnerships with schools, community organisations, and industry leaders.
2. Develop mentorship programmes pairing female students, including cis and transgender women, with mentors in their desired academic disciplines. These programmes should provide guidance, support, and networking opportunities to help women navigate academic and professional pathways successfully.

3. Invest in targeted outreach and recruitment campaigns to encourage more women to pursue education and careers in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as STEM subjects.
4. Implement gender-inclusive policies within educational institutions to create supportive environments for all students and faculty; including ensuring equitable access to resources, facilities, and opportunities.
5. Develop flexible learning options, such as online courses and part-time programmes, to accommodate women who may have caregiving responsibilities or other commitments. This flexibility can help women continue their education despite personal challenges.
6. Increase funding and support for research initiatives focused on the importance of gender equity and diversity in education, as well as those which promote gender-inclusive approaches to knowledge production and dissemination.
7. Provide comprehensive career counselling services via tailored advice and resources that help address the unique challenges women face in the workforce and give women much-needed support to achieve their career goals.
8. Ensure that educational institutions are safe spaces where girls and women can learn without fear of violence or harassment. Implement strict anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies and provide support services for those affected.
9. Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programmes aimed at enhancing women's education, making sure to collect and analyse data to identify areas for improvement and ensure that initiatives are meeting their goals.
10. Offer mandatory diversity and inclusion training for faculty, staff, and students to raise awareness of gender-related issues, unconscious biases, and systemic barriers so as to increase institutions' focus on promoting empathy, respect, and understanding to foster a culture of inclusivity and belonging.

ABOUT THE LIFELONG EDUCATION INSTITUTE

The **Lifelong Education Institute** (LEI) exists to promote learning and skills training for people at all ages and stages of their lives and careers. We believe that education should be available and accessible to everyone whenever and wherever they need it. Whether they are school leavers or university graduates, new recruits or long-serving employees, recent arrivals or long-term residents, working people or those who have entered retirement.

Our approach is based on four principles:

- Putting the lifelong learner first
- Building an integrated tertiary education system
- Bringing stakeholders together
- Looking to the four nations of the UK and beyond

Together, these principles underpin every part of our work, from research to advocacy, from convening to commentary. They are the bedrock on which we must build the 21st-century education system that the UK's learners urgently deserve.

The Lifelong Education Institute's Secretariat is hosted by the thinktank ResPublica. The Institute gets its strategic direction from its Advisory Board, which comprises prominent and forward-thinking figures in education and skills space. In addition, the Institute has asked political figures to form a Board of Patrons, who will advise on the current political environment, and help by progressing the Institute's positions in Whitehall.

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Women in Education: Breaking Barriers and Championing Excellence

This thinkpiece explores the diverse and significant roles of women in the education system, recognising their meaningful impacts and influence. Women's representation as students, learners, teachers, and educators in the UK reflects a dynamic and evolving educational landscape. From healthcare and the social sciences to STEM fields and vocational training, women are breaking barriers, challenging stereotypes, and forging pathways to success in every facet of education and learning. As they continue to assert their presence and voice across academic disciplines and professional domains, women's contributions to the UK's educational and socio-economic fabric will undoubtedly continue to shape the future of our society for generations to come.



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