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# Consultation on the CSC's Gender Project 2022

Alumni Advisory Panel  
Report 2021-2023 Panel

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# Executive Summary

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The CSC's Alumni Advisory Panel provides a platform for Commonwealth Alumni to support the future of the programme and its Scholars by sharing personal insight and expertise to contribute to the development of CSC activities. Panel members are appointed for a two-year term and are expected to advise on at least one activity per year. The panel is comprised of 97 members.

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In December 2020, the Commission approved a plan that one of the priority projects in 2021/22 for the CSC's work on equity, access and inclusion would be related to gender. The project aims to look at how gender impacts scholar experience and outputs throughout the entire scholar journey, from recruitment and selection through to scholars' careers after their studies.

The first stage of the project comprised an audit of existing data to identify areas of concern. The audit uncovered information about every stage of the scholar journey and has informed ongoing work on recruitment and the scholar experience whilst in the UK. In relation to post-scholarship effects, the data audit identified significant evidence suggesting that gender plays a role in scholars' careers after their studies. It was therefore decided that the Alumni Advisory Panel would be consulted on their own experiences to elaborate on the evidence already collected and get more detailed insight into this issue.

# Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions. The questions were aimed at understanding if respondents felt their gender had impacted their career journey and, if so, in what areas and how, how the role of gender may have changed over time, and what strategies panel members had used to mitigate the impact of gender on their career and those around them.

**As part of the consultation, the following documents were shared with participating panel members:**

- CSC Gender Project Plan 21/22
- Gender Project Overview- a summary of work completed so far

The task was open to all panel members. 54 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 56%.

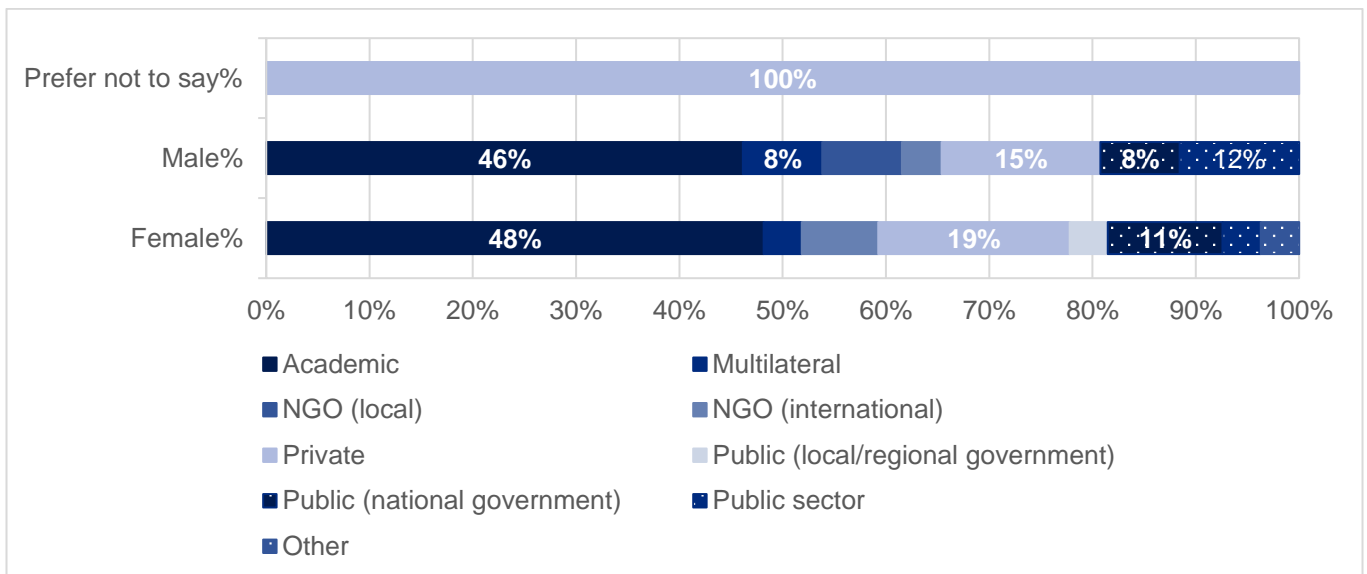
## Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised under the following headings: Demographics; Personal experience; Career focus/experience; Support and networks; Additional thoughts.

### Demographics

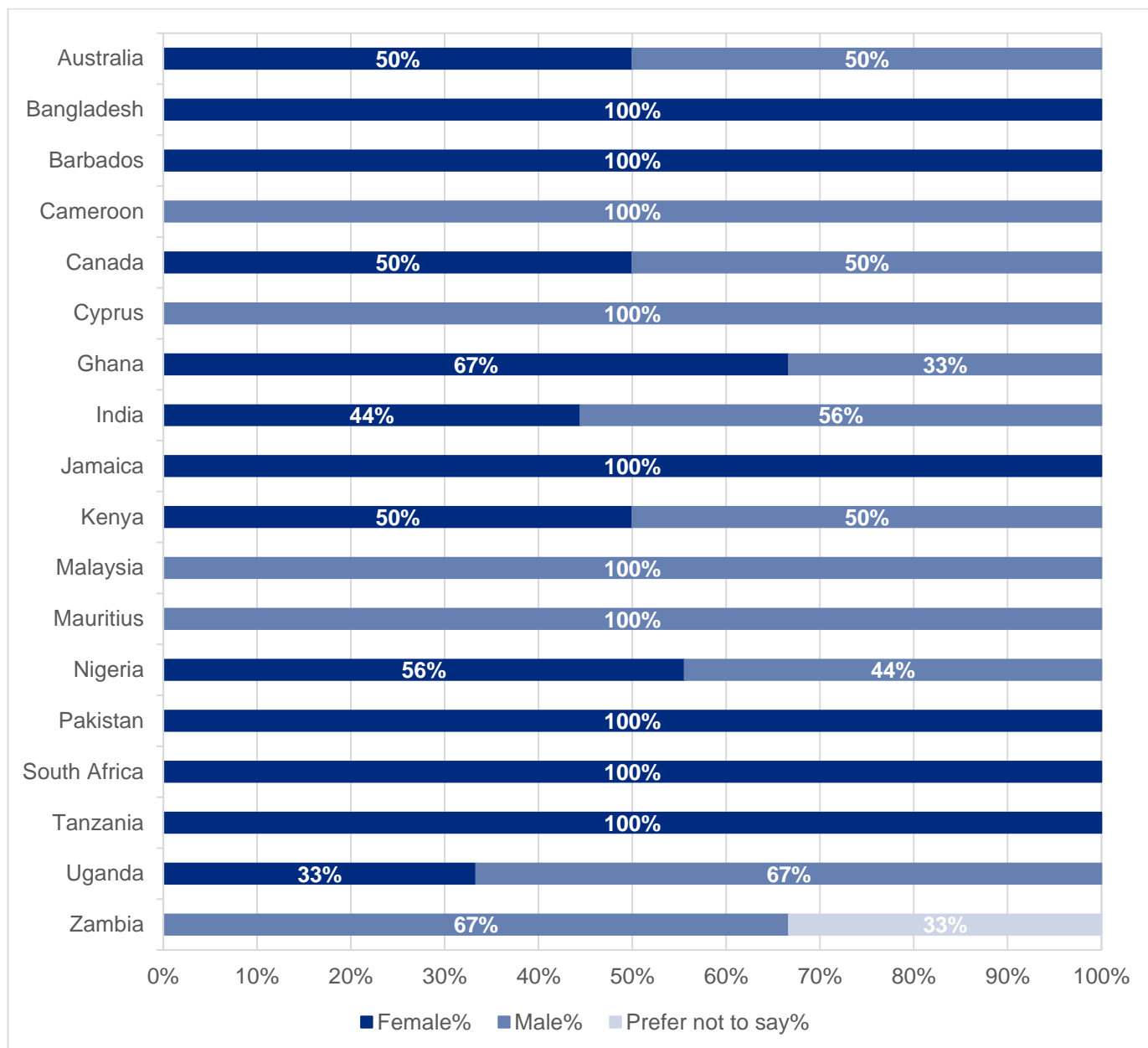
The split between male and female respondents was fairly even with 50% of respondents identifying as women, 48% identifying as men, and 2% preferring not to say. Below you can find a breakdown of respondents’ sector of employment and current country of residence.

Figure 1 – Breakdown of respondents by sector of employment



n=54

Figure 2 – Breakdown of respondents by current country of residence



n=54

As you can see in Figures 1 and 2, both male and female respondents predominantly work in academia, with NGOs and the public sector also well represented. 19% of reported working in the private sector. Respondents reside in a range of Commonwealth countries meaning responses reflect a broad selection of views and experiences. India and Nigeria are the most represented with nine respondents living in each.

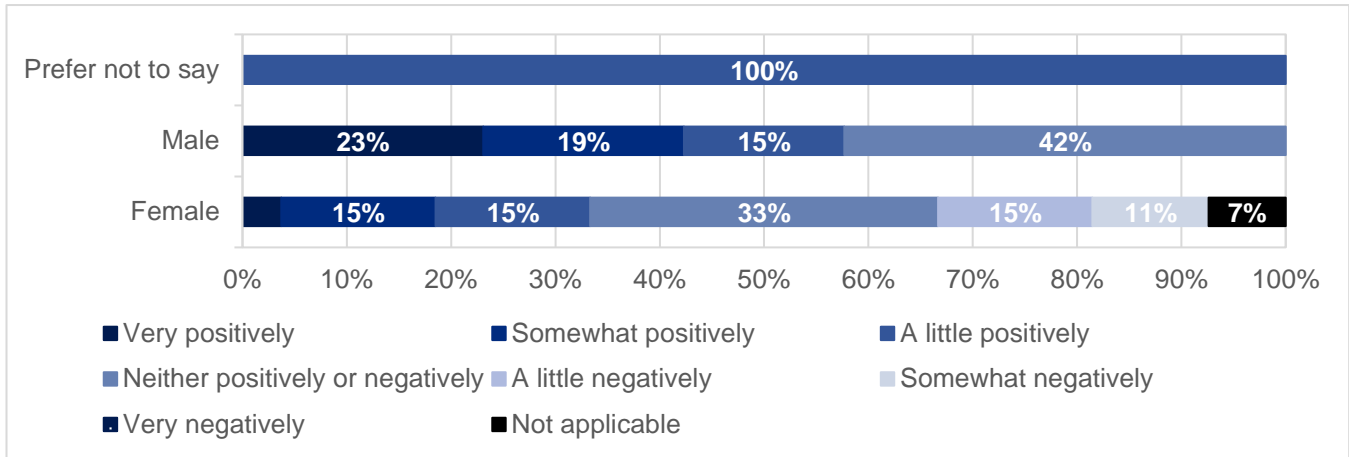
## Personal experiences

As part of the consultation, we wanted to understand the extent to which respondents felt gender had impacted different aspects of their work and life and whether this impact has been positive or negative. Specifically, we asked respondents to gauge the extent to which gender has impacted the following: Leadership activities; Research activities; Applying skills and

knowledge; Workplace support; Interpersonal networks; Development impact; and Personal responsibilities.

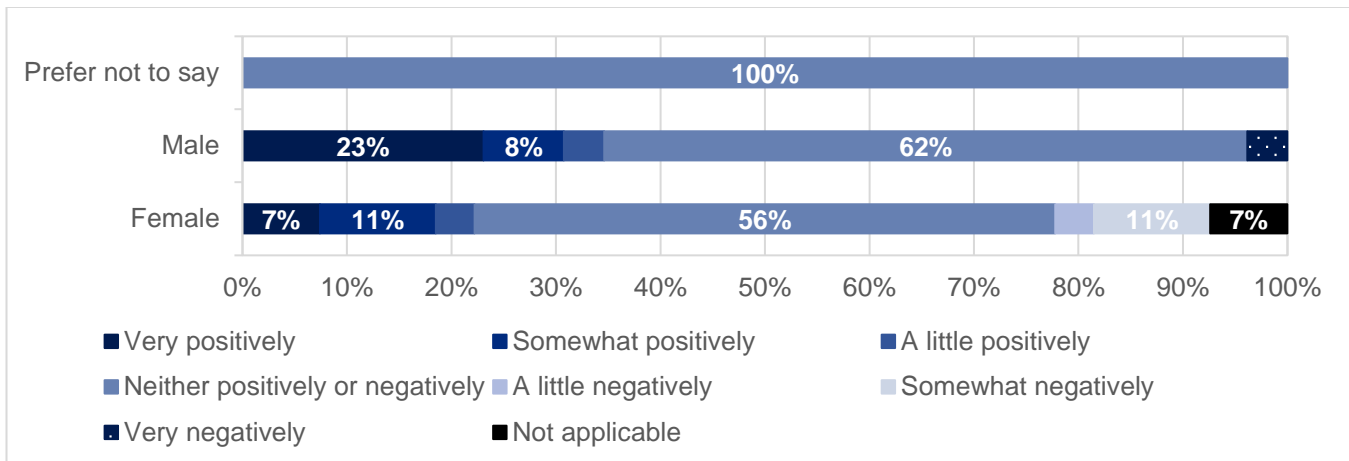
As you can see in Figures 3 – 9, across all categories the ‘neither positively or negatively’ response was most popular, receiving an average of 51% of responses from men and 39% of responses from women. This can be seen as a positive outcome, suggesting that for many respondents the impact of their gender has been minimal in most of these areas. However, for every question the range of female responses was greater, with women consistently reporting a full range of experiences (from very negative to very positive) compared to the largely neutral or positive experiences reported by men.

Figure 3 – Leadership activities



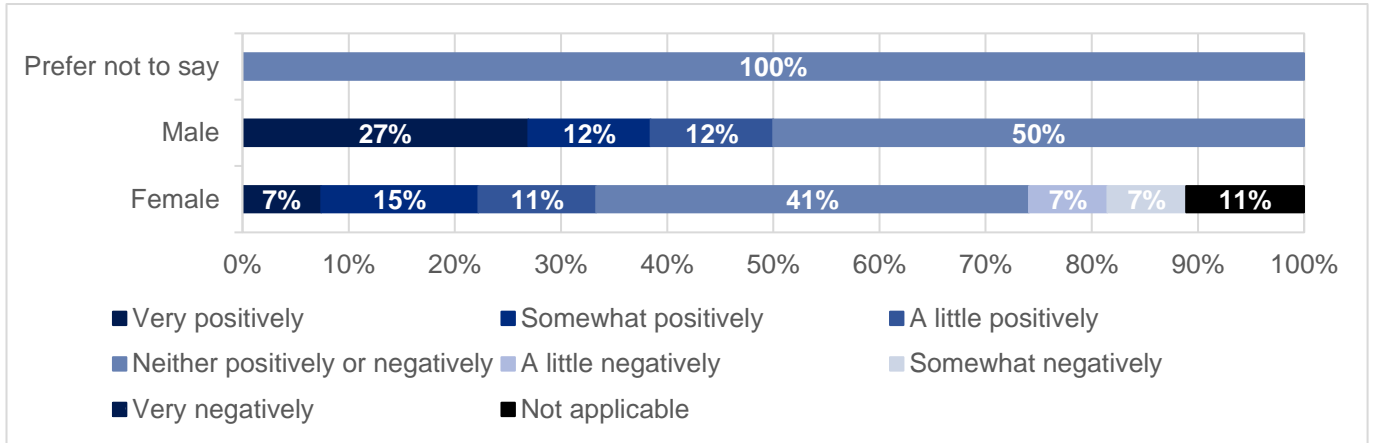
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Figure 4 – Research activities



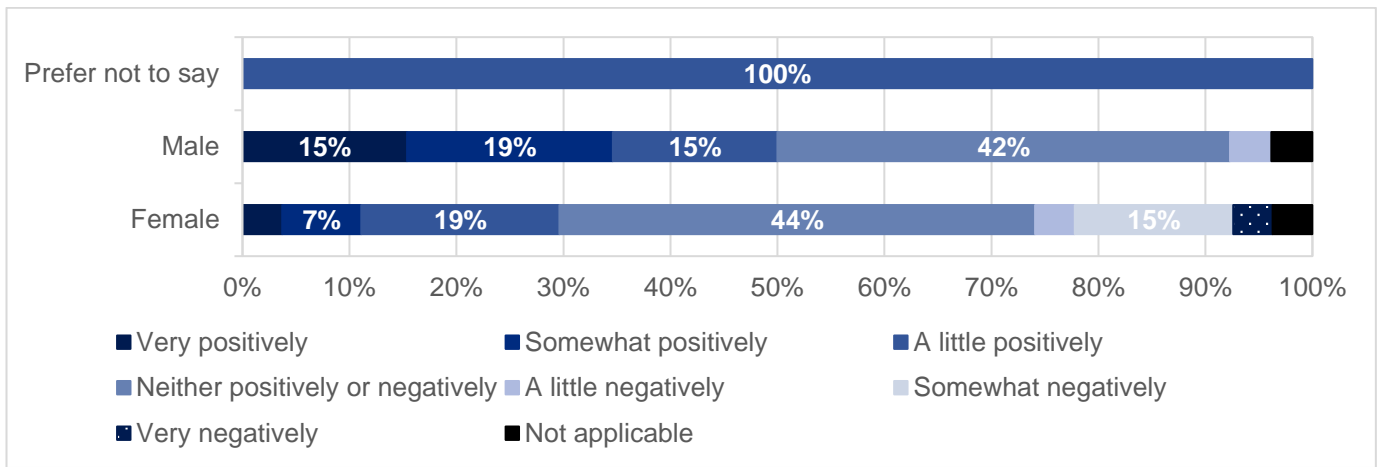
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Figure 5 – Applying skills and knowledge



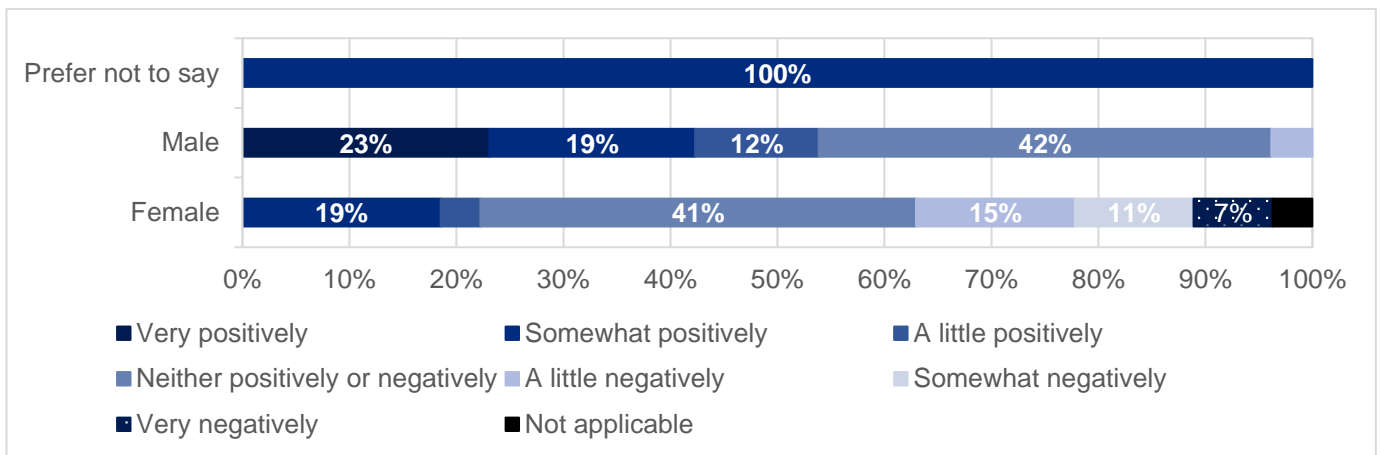
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Figure 6 – Workplace support



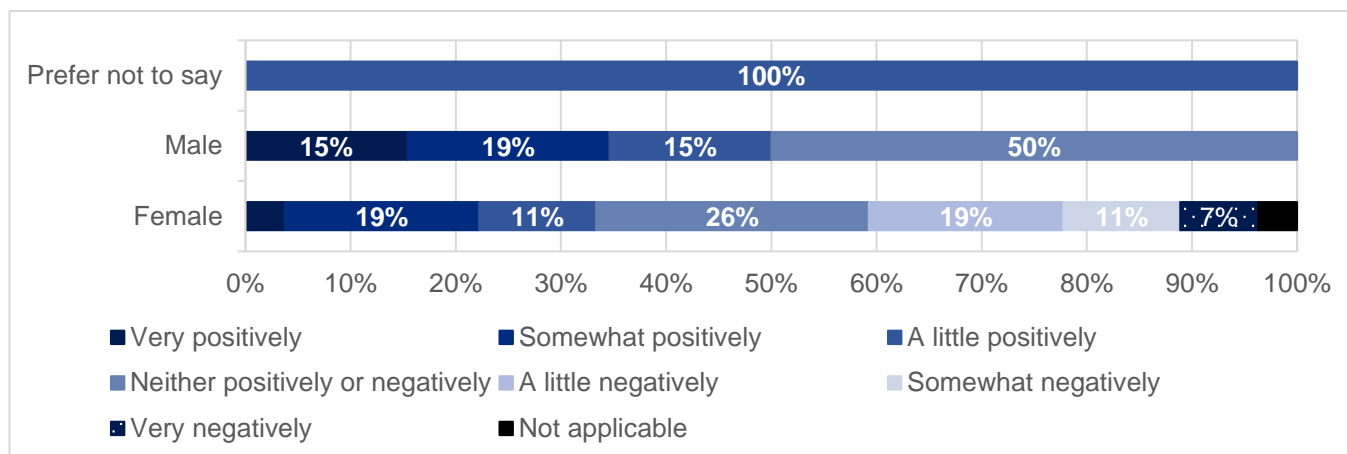
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Figure 7 – Interpersonal networks



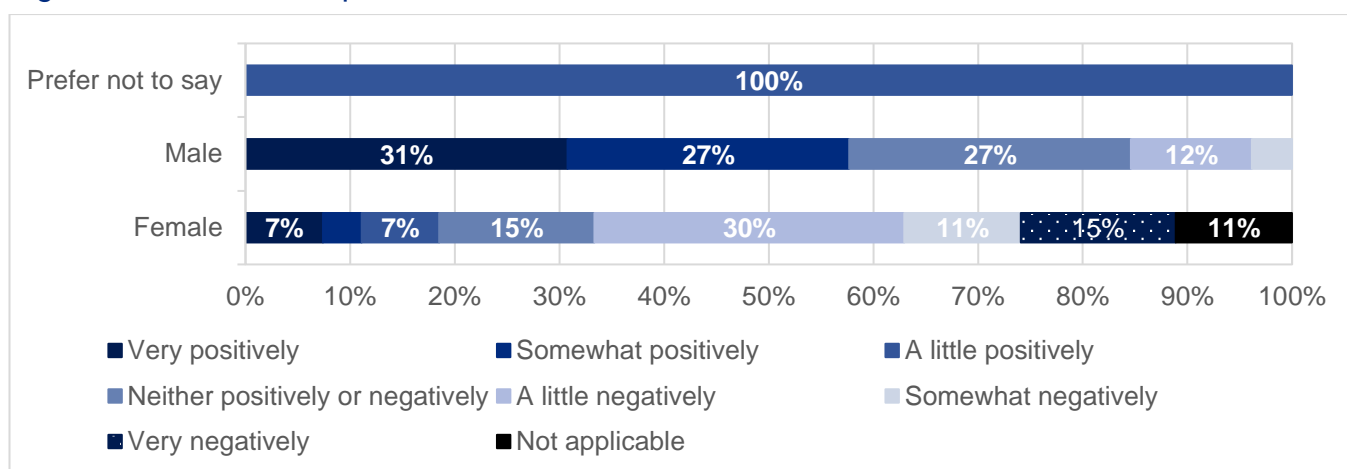
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Figure 8 – Development impact



N=54

Figure 9 – Personal responsibilities



n=54

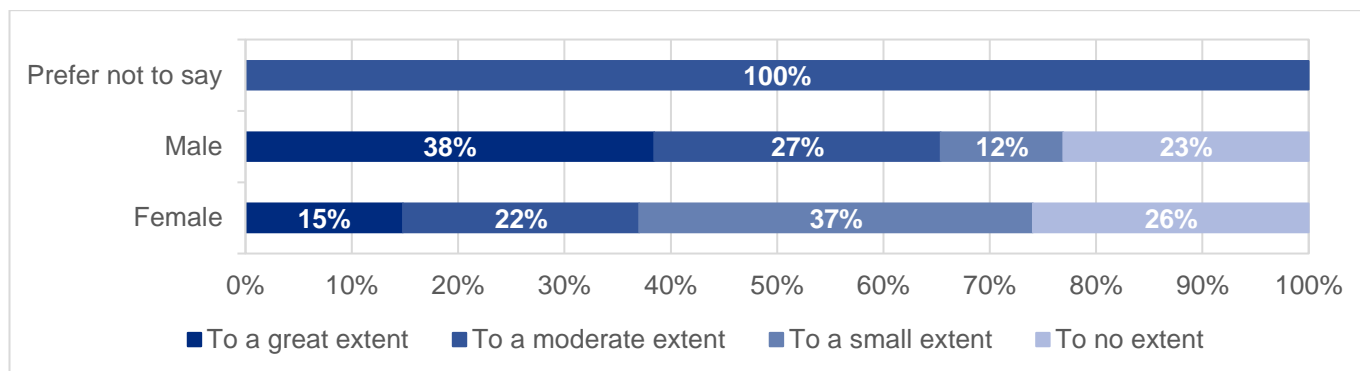
## Career experience in relation to gender

The trend of female respondents expressing more negative experiences is further reflected in questions on the extent to which respondents felt gender had impacted their career journey. As you can see in Figures 10 and 11, there are stark differences in responses from men and women showing they have had different experiences of gender throughout their careers.

In Figure 10, 65% of men felt their gender had positively impacted their career to a ‘great’ or ‘moderate’ extent compared with 37% of women. Conversely, 48% of women felt their gender had negatively impacted their career to a ‘great’ or ‘moderate’ extent compared to just 4% of men (all who described a moderate impact).

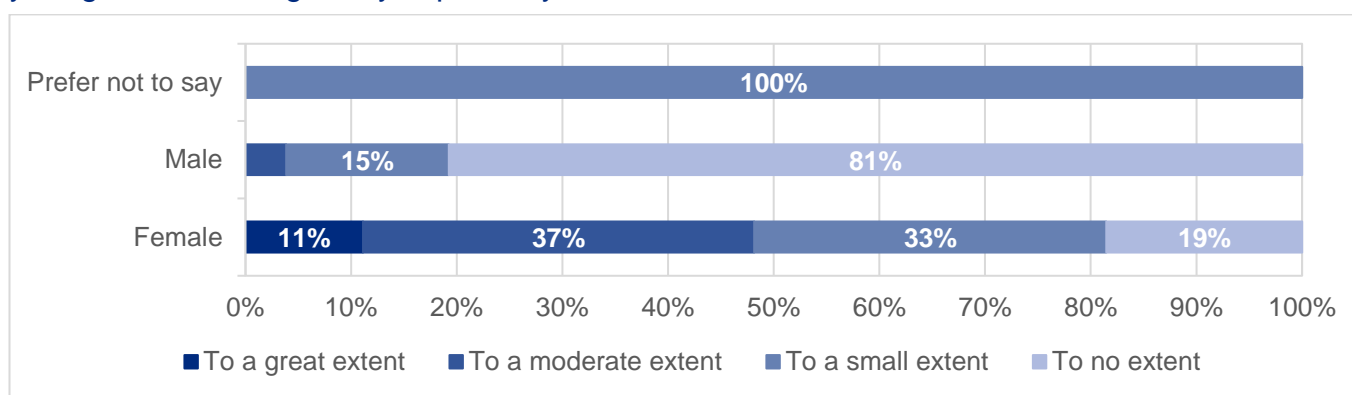
Based on these responses, it can be argued that gender has a significant impact on the career journeys of Commonwealth Alumni and as expected, our sample suggests this impact skews more negatively for women compared to their male counterparts.

Figure 10 – Thinking back on your own personal career journey, to what extent to you think your gender has positively impacted your career?



n=54

Figure 11 – Thinking back on your own personal career journey, to what extent do you think your gender has negatively impacted your career?



n=54

For both questions we asked respondents to elaborate on their answers and provide examples where relevant. Responses were varied reflecting the different experiences men and women have in the range of contexts in which they are living and working. Despite this, several themes emerged from the data and were consistently referenced. These are explored below.

On the positive side, many women described feeling they have benefited from gender balanced recruitment targets and quotas.



‘There are quotas for women in education and job, which helps me to some extent. To keep a balance in man and woman ratio, an organization tries to hire women in significant numbers nowadays.’

‘My gender had a positive impact whenever I went to the government bodies or private organisations to seek funding for my research projects. I somehow felt that committee members took more interest in what a woman in the team, or individually, presenting had to say.’





Many men described feeling less societal pressure than women to be at home with children and felt being male had meant it was easier for them to take certain career opportunities. Several participants also felt being male meant they were seen as more suitable for leadership positions.



'As a family man, my wife is responsible for the daily care of the kids, as I am responsible for the financial care of the family. This has given me the freedom to work and progress in my career as I provide for the family.'

'In my organisation and community, Males have higher chances of being in leadership positions and this has to some extent impacted my career. I have been able to become a Project Manager.'



Negative responses were more varied, with many disadvantages being raised by women. Examples include increased family responsibilities, being overlooked for promotions, and the most senior positions being deemed 'male centred' jobs. Male culture within certain sectors was also cited, with one respondent describing 'aggressive debate' as the norm. The struggle to be taken seriously was also a common response.



'In Bangladesh, gender role is very designated. A woman seems like the only caregiver, cook, and manager in the family. If a woman gets a job, it is very difficult for her to juggle between work and personal life. A man has the liberty to take decisions that may be better for his career, but a woman's parents, husband, brother, or in-laws are taking decisions.'

'Facing the "brick wall" and "iron gates" for to be promoted at Mid-level to top-level management positions in the higher education sector. These roles are male-centred. Therefore, I settle for less than I would have desired.'



'I have occasionally had senior colleagues not take me seriously because I am female. Early on in my career, I had patients question my ability to carry out surgery because I am female.'

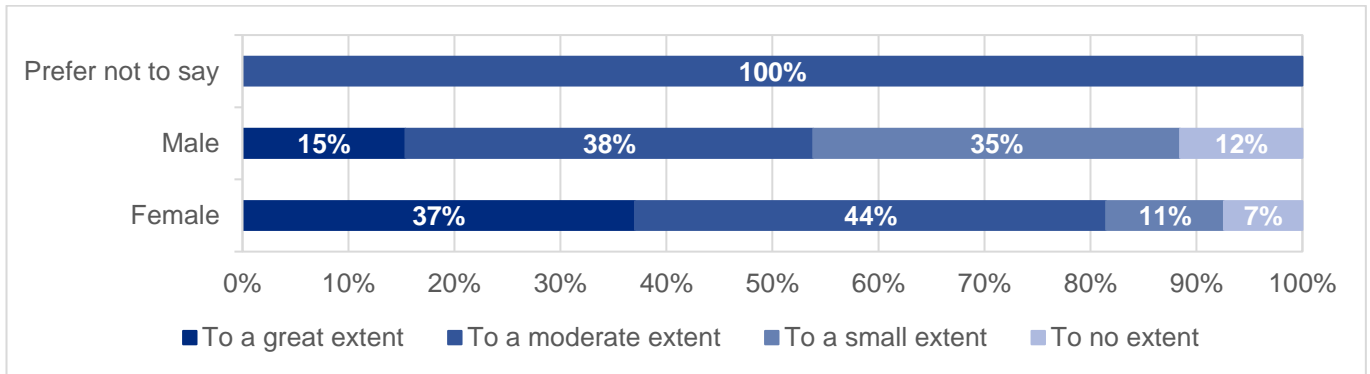
In contrast, men shared far fewer negative experiences, though several respondents described losing out on jobs due to gender quotas and gender balanced recruitment policies. One respondent also felt women were treated 'more softly' than men in the workplace.

'Sometimes in the workplace due to affirmative action, I miss leadership opportunities because the company is looking for a lady to occupy the position to meet the 1/3 gender rule in Kenya. I feel this is discriminatory as qualified men miss appointments.'



## How gender has impacted others

Figure 12 – To what extent have you seen gender have an impact on other people in your workplace or wider work during your career?



n=54

In addition to discussing their own experiences of gender in the workplace, respondents were asked to what extent they felt gender had impacted other people in their workplace through their career. As you can see from figure 12, both male and female respondents reported across the full extent of impact.

In general, female respondents reported a greater impact, with 81% of women citing that gender had impacted their colleagues' careers to a great or moderate extent compared to 53% of men reporting the same observation. This may suggest men and women perceive gender related issues in the workplace differently and could be an interesting area to research further.

When asked to describe in what ways they had seen gender impact other people, many responses were similar to those described above. One exception was the issue of schooling and how girls were forced to drop out of school following pregnancy, something which several respondents described having witnessed through their own education.



'Right from my secondary school level, some of my female classmates dropped-out because they got pregnant (but the males who impregnated them, continued their study).'

## Changing attitudes over time

One of the strengths of the Alumni Advisory Panel is its diversity, including the wide range of ages that are represented. As some respondents graduated from their Commonwealth Scholarship or Fellowship many years ago, we were interested to see how they felt attitudes towards gender had changed over time.

Responses were incredibly varied and no clear trends could be identified. Many respondents identified positive changes around recruitment but were less forthcoming about whether this had changed attitudes significantly. Encouragingly, several respondents directly referenced their scholarship as a turning point for change in their own lives.

‘It would be fair to say that female gender was less commonly employed in surgical disciplines in the past but that now it is much more even.’



‘Still, my male colleagues think I have got the scholarship as I am a woman. But for me, the scholarship has changed my view of the world. Living in the UK showed me there is nothing that a woman can't do. And that boots up my energy and confidence.’

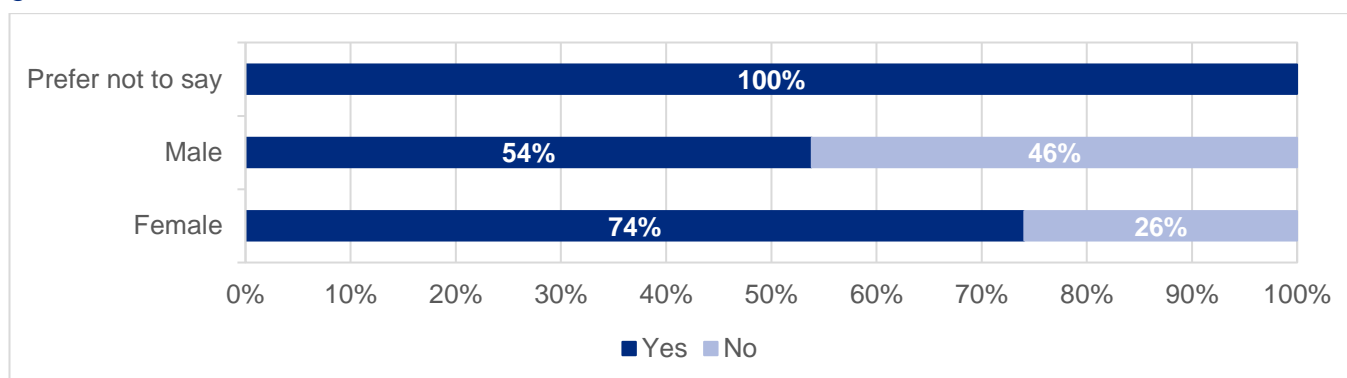
‘The scholarship brought a greater awareness of these issues and helped me see them in a different light than the traditional one I was inclined to.’



‘I have neither been nor seen a female discriminated against as a result of gender, in all work the places I have been. Therefore, no change since my Commonwealth Fellowship. In other words, this is not applicable to me.’

## Career focus/experience

Figure 13 – Have any of your professional and/or volunteer activities had any kind of focus on gender?



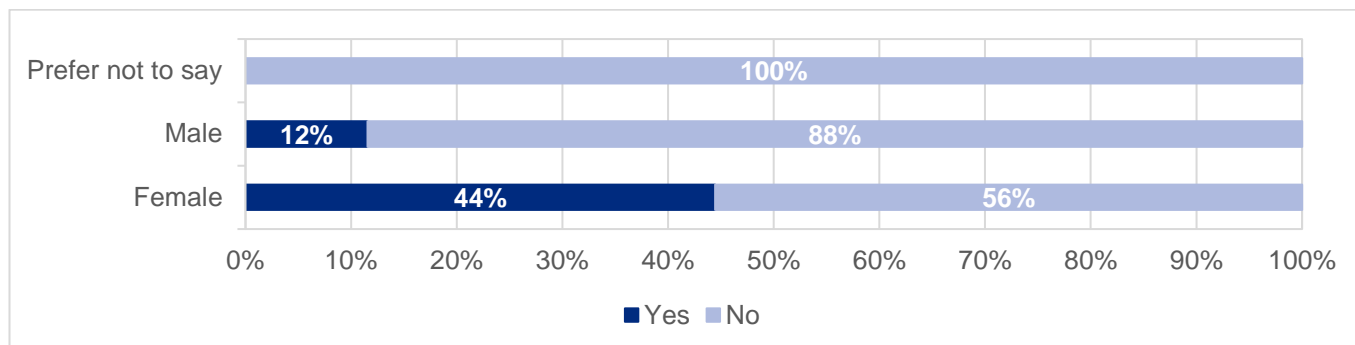
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As you can see from figure 13, many respondents have been involved in professional and/or volunteer activities related to gender. These activities have included formal and informal mentoring schemes, influencing local, national and international policy issues related to gender, volunteering for professional networks to support female colleagues, and contributing to research on impacts of gender.

Many respondents work professionally on issues related to gender and those that work in unrelated fields often volunteer to improve gender balance within their given sector. This demonstrates the importance of this issue for respondents across a range of countries, ages, and personal and professional experiences and that many respondents are committed to tackle gender related inequalities. It also highlights the wealth of experience potentially available through the CSC Alumni Network which the CSC hopes to draw on as this work continues.

## Support and networks

Figure 14 – Are you a member of any gender-based networks to support your personal or professional development?



n=54

As well as wanting to understand issues around gender in more detail, we also wanted to explore ways these issues can be mitigated. We were therefore interested to know whether alumni had sought out gender-based networks and other support mechanisms during their career and the extent to which they had found them useful.

As you can see from Figure 14, both male and female respondents reported being members of gender-based networks, with female respondents more likely to be. Respondents described a range of different gender-based networks including career specific organisations, such as the National Association of Female Teachers (NAFET) or gender focused committees at their workplace, and international networks such as the Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD). One respondent also referenced a network on social media.

Both male and female respondents found these networks to be valuable, with 100% of men and 92% of women reporting them to have been 'somewhat' or 'very useful'. When asked to describe in what ways they found these networks useful, answers generally fell within two categories: emotional and practical support. Many respondents described it being helpful to be able to talk about issues specific to their sector, share difficult experiences, and gain confidence by learning from others. In addition, many networks were cited as offering practical training to help with skills development.

'The organisation organises seminars and training which had really been helpful to navigate my professional development.'



'I have found many women and transwomen found solace in this group. There are vivid issues women can talk to in that platform with a sense of privacy and transparency.'

'Shared experiences give victims courage and many hope.'





'The programmes provide the awareness and training in what it takes to succeed. Mentoring provides the support network that gives one the confidence to take on challenging work environments.'

## Additional thoughts

In the final section of the survey respondents were asked to provide any final thoughts they had on the subject that were not addressed through the previous survey questions. A selection of responses are below:

'There is still a lot that needs to be done in this area with a focus on ensuring we bring everyone along to these discussions so that they can equally see challenges faced and help propose solutions.'



'[G]ender is only one aspect of diversity and attention should also be paid to religion, colour, disability, focusing on gender alone is anachronistic.'

'I have encountered numerous brilliant ladies who are hesitant going to another country for postgraduate studies as their marriages and social standing would unravel. The introduction of Distance CSC Masters and Split-site PhD Scholarships is commendable and appreciated. Hopefully, in decades to come we can develop local institutions so well that CSC scholarships will be tenable at select local Universities, in conjunction with British ones. This will enable many brilliant ladies to not have to choose between their families and a good education.'



'I think the gender issue is a complex one to navigate. On one hand, affirmative action appears to promote the gender lagging behind, and ultimately, in the process making the gender ahead to begin lagging behind. A calculated, focused and balanced action may need to be adopted to ensure no gender lags behind.'

## Summary

Overall, it is clear that men and women respondents have had significantly different experiences in relation to their gender throughout their career. Whilst both men and women reported difficulties in relation to their gender, women appear to have a more negative experience than their male counterparts in almost every area. These challenges are varied and personal to each individual but demonstrate the impact societal expectations and gender norms can have on career outcomes.

Positively, many respondents have found ways to mitigate negative impacts related to gender and many have engaged in trying to improve the situation for the future through their own work and voluntary activities, advice that we hope to be able to pass on to future scholars. Most respondents also felt that the situation had already improved through the course their career.

Whilst many respondents felt the changes that had occurred were positive, several expressed concern particularly about recruitment targets and quotas. This highlights the need for ongoing conversation as the CSC Secretariat continues to tackle this issue both as an organisation and

as wider society. Finally, a limitation of this study was the lack of reported non-binary voices. We hope in future to be able to understand more about the experiences of non-binary Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni and learn more about the ways in which we can support them.

## Next steps

In addition to the work with the Alumni Advisory Panel, the Policy team is working on two other main areas of work: the completion and submission rates of PhD students and recruitment by gender across different countries. To further these work streams, we plan to survey PhD alumni to understand more about their experiences whilst studying and interview nominating agencies to learn more about their advertising and selection processes, and challenges they encounter in recruiting and nominating with a balance between genders.

Alongside all other data collected as part of the Gender Project, the outcome of this report will be presented to our Commission in 2023. The report aims to identify a baseline understanding of how gender impacts Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni alongside key areas for further research. The CSC recognises the scale of the work that still needs to be done to ensure gender equality and is committed to continuing this in the long term.