

The Gender Gap in Philosophy

“Here we have a woman, and she talks about women’s issues. And here we have a person of color, and they talk about issues affecting people of color. Beyond that, we only read old white men, and they are allowed to talk about everything.” This is how a master’s student in philosophy reflects on her first year in the program. According to her, this experience is not unique but part of a broader pattern: “There is a gender problem at the university. It’s not tangible, but it is constantly present. That is what makes it so paradoxical,” she concludes.

Investigating the Gender Gap

In most bachelor’s programs, women make up roughly half of the first-year student population. However, women seem to leave the field disproportionately when climbing the academic ladder. Research by SWIP-UK from 2021 across 41 philosophy departments shows that women account for 48% of bachelor students. At the master’s level, this drops to 37%, and among PhD students to 32%, while only 25% of professors are women.

This gap is not only concerning but also a missed opportunity. Previous studies show that a balanced representation of women* strengthens the field of philosophy, both for female researchers and for the discipline as a whole (Friedman, 2013). An increase in the number of women* could not only attract more female students and create a more welcoming working environment for everyone, but also enhances the quality of philosophy by better representing the concerns and interests of diverse ordinary lives.

Driven by this urgency, SWIP-NL undertook this study. We interviewed students from research master’s programs in philosophy at various universities in the Netherlands and Flanders about their experiences as non-male philosophy students, and about the doubts, obstacles, and motivations that influence their decision to continue in academia. The interviews were conducted in 2024, and the results are briefly summarized below.

“A PhD is the best possible job”

All participants are enrolled in a two-year research master’s in philosophy, identify as women or non-binary, and speak with visible enthusiasm about the field. Their motivation to pursue a PhD often seems to stem from a deep passion for philosophy and the prospect of engaging daily with their interests. One student summarizes: “Philosophy is the only thing I really want to do. There aren’t many things I’d want outside of this; it seems incredibly fun to spend another four years doing what I find most interesting.” Another adds: “If I am interested in a topic, I have a lot of passion and motivation for it. That’s why a PhD seems like one of the most enjoyable jobs I can imagine.”

Although doing a PhD is initially described as a dream job, doubts soon arise, painting a less idealized picture of this career path. These doubts generally fall into three themes, which reinforce each other: the atmosphere within the program, uncertainty about one’s own abilities, and the persistent image of academic life as extremely demanding.

“The Research Master made me doubt myself”

“Within two minutes, there are always two blonde Dutch guys with a stupid opinion, which they voice very loudly,” a student reports. According to several students, the standard seminar format often encourages louder participants to dominate in-class discussions. “You

have to raise your hand to speak, which can be very exclusive for women who have been socialized to be quieter and take up less space.”

Many participants therefore experience seminars as a stage to appear smart rather than as open conversations. The gender difference is noticeable: “Many women feel something has to be perfect before they dare to share it, while guys raise their hands and just say whatever comes to mind,” explains one student. Others confirm this feeling: “I find it quite difficult to take up space. I’m afraid of saying something that sounds stupid or is wrong.”

Several students indicate that feelings of self-doubt increase as they progress in the program. One student recalls: “I was quite uncertain during my first year of the master’s about whether I even belonged here; it felt strange because I never experienced that during my bachelor’s.” Another adds: “It’s about whether I feel comfortable enough to say what I want, without feeling my comments aren’t smart enough. I didn’t feel that during my bachelor’s; only in the research master did I really start doubting myself.” In some cases, this feeling is reinforced by the notion that merely liking philosophy is not enough reason to pursue it: “A teacher literally told me once that because I only liked philosophy, the research master wasn’t the place for me,” a student concludes.

“Am I smart enough?”

Feeling inadequate is apparent not only in seminars but also influences whether students choose to continue in academic philosophy. “The only reason not to do a PhD is the fear that I am not capable of doing so, because I’m actually not smart enough,” emphasizes one student. The so-called imposter syndrome is frequently mentioned, either explicitly or implicitly: “I feel like a moment will come when I’m exposed. That someone will say, ‘Oh, you’re doing this master, but actually you don’t meet the requirements.’”

Students acknowledge that these feelings are often unfounded: “I consistently get high grades, and I’m often told I belong here. But somehow, there’s just something that makes me feel like I don’t really fit in.” Confirmation from supervisors or instructors only helps temporarily: “When my supervisor or teacher reassures me, the feeling disappears only briefly.”

Most students approach intelligence as an innate talent rather than a skill that can be developed through practice and education. Research (Leslie et al., 2005) shows that this belief is dominant in philosophy: the discipline places a high emphasis on innate talent for success and simultaneously has one of the lowest percentages of female* PhD students. Disciplines emphasizing brilliance often reinforce the stereotype that women are less suited for advanced academic work, which increases dropout rates among women*. In other words, the stronger the emphasis on “being brilliant,” the less welcoming the discipline is perceived to be by women*, and the larger the representation gap at the PhD level.

A negative view of academic life

Almost all participants have a clear image of academic life - a life in which they often do not see themselves. “I don’t know if I can meet the demands of the academic world. As a woman, I have a different idea of a good life: it’s more about quality than quantity,” says one student. “I don’t know to what extent success in academia requires emotionally shutting down and doing nothing else besides work.”

One of the most cited aspects is the extreme competitiveness. “I often think my personality wouldn’t thrive in a competitive environment. It would bring up a lot of insecurity, and I don’t

know if I want that,” says one student. Another adds: “I feel like it can be a harsh world, where I’d feel like a softy.”

For many women*, this competitive structure raises questions about lifestyle and family planning. “As an academic, you have to lead a nomadic life and move every few years for a new job,” a student explains. The combination with a desire to have children seems nearly impossible: “As a woman, you could become pregnant at any moment and might have to care for a child. This makes us more sensitive to where we live, how we live, and how much stress we have.” The difficulty of balancing womanhood, family, and a successful academic career is further reinforced by situations students encounter within the university: “I can’t imagine combining children with an academic career. At an event, everyone who stayed for a drink afterwards either didn’t have kids or was a man, because the men had someone at home to take care of the children.”

Notably, universities often do not counteract this negative image. “I’ve received warnings about the difficulties of combining children with an academic career. I wonder how many male students hear similar stories.” Teachers sometimes reinforce this view: “The negative image of a PhD is not reduced by teachers, but rather strengthened. For example, teachers who say they cried every day during their PhD.”

Addressing the problem

Across all three stages of the academic trajectory, a certain atmosphere emerges that especially triggers insecurity among women* and makes them feel less at home in philosophy. “I wouldn’t say the atmosphere is negative, but there is an unspoken pressure that makes me very insecure,” summarizes one student. “Participating in philosophy seems to require certain traits that women aren’t always accustomed to. I have no desire to join a ridiculous, competitive struggle.”

At the same time, students express a strong desire to challenge stereotypes about academic philosophy: “If I don’t feel comfortable in philosophy, maybe that’s exactly why I should enter academia, otherwise nothing will change.” They aim to create a new status quo at the university: “A kind of softening of the work environment, making it more sensitive and allowing more space for doubt and not knowing at times.” This includes the idea that perfection need not be a requirement: “The option to not be a jerk and still enjoy your job as a philosopher should be a possible scenario.”

Students provide concrete examples of positive steps: “What really helped was when some teachers asked people to submit something beforehand and discussed this during class - like that more voices were heard”, one student explains. “Or giving introverted students more space by discussing the topics in small groups first.” Explicitly acknowledging inequality in class also makes a difference: “Recognizing that, for example, only men ask questions and women need more encouragement can already help.”

Above all, the strongest wish that emerges is the need for open conversation. Students want space to discuss the realities of academic life and its expectations—for example: “Do I really have to give up four years of my life to pursue a PhD?” or “Will I lose years of work if I become pregnant, while men won’t face the same consequences?” They also emphasize the importance of creating an environment in which vulnerability is possible—both among students and in dialogue with lecturers. As one student concludes: “I think making these issues discussable might prevent men from automatically taking more space or assuming they are entitled to more.”

Limitations of the study

Although this study provides insight into the doubts, obstacles, and motivations of students pursuing academic philosophy, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research focused exclusively on students in research master's programs, meaning participants already had a certain interest and engagement in philosophical research. It would be valuable to also include bachelor students or students in teacher training programs in philosophy to see if similar doubts and obstacles occur. Additionally, no male students were interviewed, making it impossible to determine whether certain struggles are more common among female students, whether they also occur among men, or whether other factors affect gender differences. Comparative research between male and female students could provide important additional insights.

Thirdly, this study did not examine the representation of women* across different subfields of philosophy. There is a perception that female faculty are primarily active in ethics, political philosophy, and cultural philosophy, and it would be interesting to explore whether this is related to students' experiences and choices.

Finally, SWIP-NL acknowledges diversity extends beyond gender. Students of color, students with a migration background, or students from different socio-economic classes may face unique challenges within academic philosophy. Moreover, it is important to examine how these factors intersect with gender: female students of color or with a migration background may encounter specific experiences that are not fully understood when only a single dimension of diversity is considered. Intersectional research would therefore provide a more complete picture of the various doubts, obstacles, and motivations experienced by different groups of students.