Women in Fund Management

Science, long assumed to be a realm of dispassionate logic and objective discovery, has too often been a platform for the systematic exclusion of women. From academia to capital markets, women have had to overcome institutional barriers, structural biases, and often outright theft of their intellectual contributions.

Britain's Royal Society of scientists (BRS) barred women for nearly 300 years on the grounds that women were not "legal persons." It wasn't until 1945 that the first women were admitted. Marie Curie, perhaps the most well-known female scientist in history, was never granted membership in the French Academy of Sciences, despite being the first woman to win a Nobel Prize—and the only person ever to win Nobel Prizes in two different sciences: physics (1903) and chemistry (1911). Even Harvard University declined to award her an honorary degree.

This systemic oversight wasn't unique to Curie. Lise Meitner, an Austrian-Swedish physicist, was another brilliant woman who changed the world—and was overlooked. Meitner was a key figure in the discovery of nuclear fission. Alongside her long-time collaborator Otto Hahn, Meitner interpreted experimental results to explain how uranium nuclei split—a discovery that laid the foundation for nuclear energy and, controversially, nuclear weapons. But when the Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded in 1944, only Hahn received credit. Meitner, who fled Nazi Germany and continued her work in exile, was excluded—despite her undeniable role in one of the most important discoveries of the 20th century.

Like Rosalind Franklin—whose pioneering work in X-ray crystallography revealed the double helix structure of DNA but was exploited and claimed by her male colleagues—Meitner was erased from a scientific legacy she helped create. Franklin died never knowing the full extent of the recognition that had been denied to her.

These cases are not anomalies; they are symptoms of a broader pattern across industries and centuries. Even in today's post-genomic era, women continue to be under-credited and underrepresented. The story of Rosalind Franklin inspired Jennifer Doudna to become a scientist, and in 2020, Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier were awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for developing the CRISPR/Cas9 gene-editing technology. This breakthrough has revolutionised medicine, agriculture, and virology—playing a vital role in the development of Covid-19 vaccines.

Such recognition is overdue, and it remains the exception rather than the rule.

In finance, particularly in the asset management industry, the imbalance persists. While gender diversity is on the agenda for many firms, meaningful representation at senior levels remains elusive. According to Bestinvest, only 7% of retail investment funds in the UK are managed or co-managed by women. Morningstar data shows that as of 2015, women made up just 9.4% of U.S. open-ended fund managers and 11.8% of ETF managers. Only 2% of all funds were managed exclusively by women.

These numbers should concern us—not just from a social equity perspective, but from a performance one too. Studies consistently show that female fund managers are as competent as their male counterparts—and often more so.

- Goldman Sachs found that 48% of female-managed funds outperformed from the market bottom in March 2020 through August, compared to 37% of all-male funds.
- Hedge Fund Research reported that female-managed hedge funds outperformed their male peers during the trailing 12 months and held up better during the Covid-19 crash.
- Between January 2000 and May 2009—including the dot-com bust and the global financial crisis—female-run hedge funds delivered nearly double the performance of male-run funds. In 2008, they fell 9.6%, compared with a 19% decline for male-managed funds.

These are not just anecdotal wins. Women bring strengths particularly suited to complex decision-making environments like fund management: analytical rigour, collaborative thinking, and a long-term orientation. They are more likely to listen, weigh diverse inputs, and manage risk prudently—skills that translate directly into consistent investment outcomes.

As a co-owner of a boutique fund management company where I am the minority male, I've had the privilege of witnessing the talent and temperament women bring to the table. My female colleagues don't just meet expectations—they redefine them.

We should not be asking whether women belong in portfolio management; the data answers that resoundingly. The real question is: how much potential has been lost by not giving women equal footing?

Lise Meitner, Rosalind Franklin, Jennifer Doudna—these women are not exceptions to the rule. They are the rule that has too long gone unacknowledged.

In investing, as in science, the next star is just as likely to be a woman as a man. I have no doubt that within the next decade, we'll be talking about a woman as the next Warren Buffett or Charlie Munger—someone whose track record earns her the admiration and recognition she deserves.

It's time the industry not only acknowledged this potential, but acted on it. Because when women rise, so does performance.

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