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## Female Professors in Sweden and Germany

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*Female Professors in Sweden  
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*TP 03/03*

**About the Project**

The normative concept of gender equity which exists in European societies is contrasted by a reality in which women in top-level positions are by no means a common occurrence.

Against this background, the European Research Training Network Women in European Universities, funded by the European Commission, is a joint research project of partners in seven European countries.

Its scientific programme aims at assessing the professional status of women in academia and at analysing the reasons for the under-representation in positions of authority in European Universities.

The network structure includes regular conferences and meetings to provide a forum to present outcomes, exchange knowledge and to discuss about research planning as well as findings and outcomes.

The **Training Paper Series** are essays authored by the doctoral students of the project in every research phase. They give an introduction to the research topic and an overview of the findings in the research country of the doctoral student.



### **Abstract**

The Research Training Network “Women in European Universities” focuses on career opportunities of women in higher education in seven European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). Within the frame of this network different aspects of career perspectives of women – and also men – are investigated. In a first working step a context analysis was conducted in order to give an understanding of the different systems of higher education, their changes and developments. A second working step provided a statistical overview of women’s participation in higher education systems investigated in this project. During the third work-phase an inquiry of female and male professors was conducted in all participating countries.

This working paper is the result of the fourth working step of our research. Quantitative investigations – as done at an earlier working stage – are necessary to understand career opportunities of female professors and processes of glass ceiling. Nevertheless, what can be gained out of a questionnaire is limited to options for answering and coding of answers. Qualitative interviews answer different questions than quantitative surveys. In our case they give the opportunity to understand academic careers in the terms of female professors

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## Introduction

In an earlier work phase we conducted a survey of female and male professors and focused on their perception regarding support and mentoring, networks in academia, the relation between work inside and outside academia and glass ceiling. The focus on these key-topics was based on literature review; theoretical considerations just as on earlier work of the Network “Women in European Universities”. Quantitative investigations like this are a necessary tool to understand career opportunities of female professors and processes of glass ceiling. Nevertheless, large-scale surveys are mainly based on the understandings and assumptions of the researchers. What can be gained out of a survey is limited due to options for answering and coding of answers. Qualitative interviews allow to explore how people understand the world they are living in and what issues they define as important. Open questions and answers make it possible to let the interviewee develop her or his own phrasing, definitions and understanding.

This paper is the result of the fourth work phase of the Network “Women in European Universities” and is concerned with qualitative interviews that were conducted with female professors in linguistics in Sweden and Germany. Purpose of the interviews was to understand how the interviewees perceived their academic career. What made them professors? What difficulties and what joyful aspects did this career path provide? The interviews were lively and some assumptions had to be reversed, since the issues that were raised in the interview were re-defined by the female professors. Due to the small number of interviewees this paper cannot be seen as a full study. This paper is a Training-Paper and does not pretend to be anything more advanced than that. Nevertheless, I think that the interviews indicated some issues worth to be considered in future studies.

## **I. Qualitative Interviewing**

Quantitative surveys enable the researcher to reach a large number of people, to capture a range of different opinions. By doing so the reliability of the data emerges from the statistical representativeness of the sample. For the researcher who is working with qualitative interviews a sample of several hundreds of people is hardly to manage – a number of 30 or 40 interviews is seen as sufficient in this context (Stroh 2000:201) – but this does not make qualitative interviewing less reliable. The relevance of the interviewed subjects is not grounded in the representativeness of the number, instead the representation as regards content is more important.

The advantage of qualitative interviews is the possibility “to access the ‘world’ in the terms of those people being researched.” (Stroh 2000:197) This means that the terms and concepts for the analysis of the data-material emerge from the material itself and are not pre-settings of the researcher – like it is the case in quantitative surveys. “Interviews will provide to the ‘why’ question rather than just the ‘how many’ or the ‘how often’ (...) Interviews aim to be a conversation which explores an issue with a participant, rather than to test knowledge or simply categorise. Thus, the two approaches can answer different questions.” (Stroh 2000:198)

### ***1. The Semi-structured Interview***

There is a range of research tools to “access the ‘world’” of those people researched. Focus group interviews “provide the opportunity to work with a group of people’s ideas” (Stroh 2000:1999) and “allows room for ‘surprising moments’”. (Wibeck 2001:4) One of the major advantages of focus groups is the explorative character of this technique. Especially in an unstructured focus group “the participants may introduce aspects of the topic that would never have been raised if the moderator had been more dominant.” (ibid:4) But in cases when the research interest is more focused on personal experiences, expert knowledge or sensitive questions one-to-one interviews might be more suitable.

The one-to-one interview situation enables a more appropriate respond to sensitive questions or allows for a more detailed exploration of the interviewees’ ideas. Mainly the researcher has two options regarding the interview technique in a one-to-one interview situation. The interview can be planned as a narrative or as a semi-structured interview. The former is to prefer when the single case and the context of experiences are of major interest. The latter is more suitable when more concrete information is needed. (Mayer 2002:36) Nevertheless, the semi-structured interview is not meant to be a dialog of questions and answers. “Interviews should try to be made into conversations. To achieve a conversation, it is important not to sit in the interview setting and ask a series of closed ended



questions.” (Stroh 2000:1999) In other words: even a semi-structured interview provides the opportunity for the interviewee to develop own thoughts and ideas, even here is space for the narrative moments.

The interviews done for the purpose of this paper were conducted as semi-structured interviews. This technique seemed to be most appropriate since it allows focusing on certain aspects of an academic career. At the same time it opens the possibility for the interviewee to elaborate own thoughts and experiences that could not be captured in a quantitative survey.

The earlier conducted survey focused upon rather institutional factors of an academic career like support and mentoring, networks in academia, the relation between work inside and outside academia. This was useful to elaborate the phenomenon of glass ceiling and to analyse the career paths and working conditions of female and male professors. The idea behind the qualitative interviews of female professors in Sweden and Germany was to focus upon the difficulties and hurdles that these women meet, but even more it was interesting to elaborate why these women remained in academia and finally became professors. In order to find out motivations and encouraging moments the interview-scheme focused upon the following topics:

1. Who or what motivated to start studying at a university and the choice of discipline?
2. The motivations for choosing an academic career.
3. Difficult and demanding periods in academic life.
4. Perception of the university as a male-dominated environment.
5. Networks and working experiences abroad.
6. What or who does confirm and encourage in the present working situation?<sup>1</sup>

All in all the interviews were held open to new topics, I was prepared to enter topics that were proposed by the interviewee. On the other hand topics that did not appear as important to the interviewee were not pursued in the interview. The purpose was to elaborate as much as possible what the female professors define as motivation or difficulties, if and how they perceive the university as male-dominated environment and of course what other issues they found worth talking about.

## ***2. The interviewed Professors***

As already mentioned above it is the representation as regards content that is important for the decision whom to interview. The interviews in this paper were conducted at two universities – one in Sweden, one in Germany. To focus on only two universities was rather a decision of organisational matters and

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<sup>1</sup> For the final version of the interview-scheme see the Appendix.

resources, since interviews at more universities also mean higher travel-expenditures and bigger amount of organisational work to co-ordinate interview appointments and travelling. Also more practical reasons had to be taken into account, since all doctoral students in the network conducted qualitative interviews with a comparative approach, we had to co-ordinate the choice of disciplines in order to avoid interviewing the same professors two or three times. We are well aware of that this decision also limits the possibilities to draw more general conclusions. Firstly, because the size or age of a university and regional preconditions might have an impact on career opportunities and how an academic career is organised. Secondly, to focus on two universities means also to limit the number of possible interview candidates.

I decided to interview female professors working in the national linguistics – meaning Swedish and German languages and literature. Linguistics belong to the disciplines with higher participation rates of women, which means the chances were quite high to find more than one two female professors at each of the selected universities. To focus on linguistics implied also another point: Studies in this field lead mainly to teaching professions, which means that opportunities in this field are strongly linked to options on the labour market. This might have an impact on a person's decision to stay in academia or to choose other professional options.

All in all I could conduct four interviews – two in each country. By accident all interviewees also were concerned with women's or gender studies within their field. The interviewed professors remain of course anonymous. Quoted statements from the interviews will be marked with an initials containing out of two capital letters – one indicating the country ("S" for Sweden and "G" for Germany), the other taken from the interviewees first name.

The interviews were conducted in November 2002 and April 2003 they were tape-recorded. After the interviews I made notes regarding statements or observations. Later I was listening to each interview and made more detailed notes. Finally the interviews were transcribed and analysed.

### *3. Analysing the Interviews*

A comparative analysis of qualitative interviews looks for the common aspects in all interviews that go beyond individual statements. In the literature a range of different techniques is proposed in order to analyse qualitative data. The procedure proposed by Mühlfeld et al. concentrates on the uncovered content of communication. It is more important to identify issues that can be assigned to questions in the interview-scheme. (Compare Mayer 2002:47ff.) This procedure can be useful when the interviews are meant to explore theories or concepts that were developed based on other data sources. If the interest is more "in exploring interpretations and attitudes and are not in any way 'testing' preconceived

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theories, then a more grounded approach is required.” (Stroh 2000:210) In these cases the research themes should emerge from the interview-material itself – as it is proposed in Strauss (1987). Meuser and Nagel suggest to paraphrase the interviews and later to assign them to themes or topics. These topics emerge from the interviews and are not pre-defined by the researcher. (Compare Mayer 2002:49)

For the analysis of the interviews I decided to use the procedure proposed by Matt Stroh, which “allows the researcher to get from the specific concerns of the participant through to the more general concerns present in all texts, and to explore inconsistency and difference at various levels”. (Stroh 2000:211) Additionally it is a procedure suitable to the small number of interviews that were conducted.

Stroh proposed the following procedure: First, to read/listen to each interview in full in order to get an overall understanding of its content and the interviewees concerns. Second, to circle words or phrases that recur in the text. By doing so issues and questions important to the interviewee are clearly marked and will be used in the third step. Now the circled phrases and words will be linked together. During the coding-process words and phrases are categorised just as the more abstract argumentative structure is analysed. Finally, the codes are linked together and the general themes emerging from the text are ascertained. (Stroh 2000:211)

## II. Female Professors' Experiences

In the following the issues and thoughts raised by the interviewed female professors are presented. Even though the interview-scheme posed a range of questions, the interviews developed their own dynamic. It was difficult for the professors to relate to certain topics – like the question regarding the point of time when the interviewees decided to become a professor – or they posed topics that were not included in the scheme – like the issue of reconciliation of family and working life. Four main topics dominated the interviews: Firstly, the issue of motivation and encouragement. Secondly, the university as a male-dominated environment. Thirdly, the difficulties and challenges in the academic life. Fourthly, the joyful and positive aspects of becoming and being a professor.

### *1. Motivations and Encouragement*

As already mentioned I was interested in the factors that make a young female academic succeed. The difficulties that women in academia meet are investigated in a range of studies, (ETAN 2000, Fogelberg et al. 2000, Morley / Walsh 1996, Wennerås / Wold 1997, Geenen 1994), that is why I focused more on the motivating and encouraging aspects. The interviews started with questions regarding the interviewee's motivations to study her discipline. I received a range of different answers. What was common for all interviewed professors was interest in their field and curiosity in that sense that they also tested other disciplines or studied more than one discipline at a time. Nevertheless, to become a professor was something they did not consider during their studies.

“I never thought about that I could become a professor. Not at all. I wanted to become a teacher and thought somehow a longer time abroad... But university-professor was for me in the beginning... well the first few years of studies... strange as something.” (GS)

This is nearly the only quotation when a teaching-profession is mentioned as a clear and specific goal. Most of the time the considered professions – teacher, librarian, translator or journalist – are rather phrased as options. Beside all professional orientations, the teaching profession was the one mentioned most often during the interviews. For the Swedish interviewees the options seemed to remain relevant during a longer time than for the German side. The German offensive to educate and employ more teachers of the 1960's did ebb away ten years later (compare Turner 2001:41ff.) which implied the end for the teaching-option. This becomes clear in the example of GS:

“I had finished my studies, then it was absolutely clear – I had state examination and Master of Arts – it was absolutely clear, my generation will not enter school teaching.” (GS)

For GS it became important to find other professional options. Her earlier interest in languages made her working abroad some years. Her work and the experiences she made during that time period made a professor encourage her to write a PhD-thesis. Something she considered, but still considering other working places than academia.

“...and when I then talked with the earlier professors, especially one of them did always say: Write a doctoral thesis about this! And I thought: Well, it will probably help me in the field German as foreign language... and so the doctoral thesis emerged out of the interest in the topic and because I thought: Well, professionally it is not bad to have a doctoral thesis.” (GS)

One of the Swedish professors explained her reasons to start doctoral studies as follows:

”Probably it was a combination out of that it went so well during undergraduate education and that teachers encouraged me (...) one said like that: I hope that the young lady continues with the subject. (...) Yes, one can probably say that success and encouragement were the reasons why I decided that it would become this...” (SE)

All of the interviewed professors mentioned at least one professor who encouraged to start doctoral studies and who often helped to get a position at the university. In that sense the reason to start post-graduate education was a combination of interests and competence in certain questions and the encouragement of a professor. But when did these women decide that they want to continue within the academic system? When did they decide to aim at a professorship? I asked for the critical point to opt for an academic career or to choose a different career path.

Interestingly none of the interviewees was willing or able to mention such a point of time. The interviewed professors did not describe their academic vita as a planned career path. Instead they talked about “emergency exits”, meaning that other professional options remained as an alternative for the academic life. Nevertheless, at a certain point for some the “emergency exits” did not remain available anymore:

“Why take this insecurity? ...and the older one gets – and it is really so – the other options drop out more and more, you are too old for this, you are too old for that, at the end there remains only the university.” (GS)

Even the interviewee who referred to “many different decisions” (SC) one makes did not express her academic way as planned and though did not point out a certain time or moment when it became clear for her that she wanted to become a professor. So does this mean that these women became professors just by taking what was offered without having a goal or course? This does not fit to the image of intellectual, successful women and – even more important – it does not fit the perception of an academic career that these women have either.

”You don’t choose it by your self. How can I explain? As humanist you cannot choose now I will become a professor. That is not possible, because there are so many good people in this field. So you cannot say ‘Now I want to become this’ and then you become it. It is not that simple. Instead you are chosen so to say in a very... large extent in that profession... This interplays with that one is really diligent and tries to be competent and so on, but the latter does not imply any guaranteed position so to say...” (SE)

SE points out that it is not possible to choose a professorship, according to her statement it is not possible to plan an academic career or to develop a strategy how to become a professor, instead one is chosen. This can be understood as seeing the professorship as a call, but then the question remains ‘Called or chosen by whom or what?’ Taking a closer look at SE’s statement it becomes clear that she is hardly referring to an undefined but exclusive call for the professorship. Instead it is referring very much to the fact, that excellence and competence are no guaranty for an academic career.

”Probably it is important that both factors are there right, a good achievement and then someone, some people that support one...” (SE)

The other interviewees also expressed similar views. In other words, in the perception of the interviewed women a successful academic career is not the result of strategic behaviour, decisions or career planning. It is more the interplay between good achievement, in some cases the impact of experiences of “outside options” and the existence of at least one encouraging person (professor) that is motivating and is even helping one to establish at the university. To become a professor was more perceived as interplay of different factors rather than a result of exclusively personal competence and strategy.

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## ***2. Male-dominated Environment & Reconciliation of Family and Work***

The interview-scheme contained also questions regarding the university as a male dominated working place. It seemed interesting to know to what extent female – feminist – professors took this fact into consideration during their career planning. It turned out that an academic career was not perceived as a result of planning but mainly understood as interplay of achievement and supporting senior colleagues. That is why the question turned out to be obsolete. All of the interviewees perceived the university as a male-dominated environment, but this perception did not influence their choices. This might not be surprising since the interviewees often mentioned encouraging male-professors that were important for them.

“I have always been encouraged by male professors and even by the few female professors who were there in the humanities and they were very important, they were a kind of a model. ...they simply were central for me.” (GS)

In fact this statement is the only one that mentioned female professors as central figures for the academic development, but even here the male professors are mentioned first and it turned out from the interview that it was the encouragement of a male-professor that motivated her to write her PhD. In the academic vita of all interviewed women there was at least one male-professor that had a positive and motivating impact. Taking this into account it is not surprising that they did not consider male-dominance as a factor when thinking about future professional options – even though it was an issue in their research and political life.

The conversation about male-dominance in academia turned soon into an issue of reconciliation of family and working life. How this reconciliation was perceived was very much depending on the child-care-facilities offered. The German system did – and does – not offer child-care in the same amount than the Swedish system. Short opening hours for the kindergarten and short schooldays created organisational problems. The Swedish system in contrast offered better facilities and enabled young academic parents to combine research and family life. Though the time as a junior academic with children was described differently, the following two statements – the first from a German professor, the second from her Swedish colleague – shall illustrate this.

“...and then it was at the end of the 30s, with 38 I had a child. I wanted a child at that time and I knew I had to have it then and I had

not finished my habilitation and wanted a child. ...and this was the most difficult time for me, it was incredibly difficult.” (GS)

”However I thought it worked out very well to do my doctoral studies and to have small children. Because I felt that when I had my children at the kindergarten, then I was very effective. While others could sit and talk, I had not the time right and talk for hours instead I knew that I had six hours or something like that and then home to the children and I thought it was terrifically funny this commutation between the intellectual and peace and quietness and to sit and do research and to enter deeply and then home to the children and have... (...) But there is no doubt if I had not had children I would have produced the double and I would have been more bored.” (SC)

Later in the interview when asked for difficulties and challenges during the academic career, one professor returned to the issue of reconciliation of family and work, now more focused on the recent situation than on her life as a junior academic:

“...and then what I found much more difficult or even now very difficult to bring this job of a female professor in this male domain university in harmony with a family-life. Which is nearly impossible until today and I understand most of my female friends and fellow students who now are also professors, have no children or they are single.” (GS)

When the same women was asked about her experiences abroad, again the issue of reconciliation of family and work appeared – but now it is stronger related to an academic system that is organised according to male norms and male life-styles.

“...and here<sup>2</sup>, often we have meetings from six to eight a clock, from eight to ten, this is simply made for men who have wives at home, who take care of the children or for singles. But it is not made for people who have a family of some kind (...) Of cause I say something, but I feel strange when I am the only person who says something. But of cause the men don’t recognise this, then they are very obliging and say: Yes that is true. And the women often... the few women often don’t have any children...” (GS)

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<sup>2</sup> „Here“ refers to Germany.



Even though the issue of the university as a male-dominated environment was rejected quite fast – or phrased as a question of reconciliation of family and work – the issue appeared in one of the Swedish interviews. Regarding the difficulties and challenges in the academic system SC said the following:

”Probably we can say it like this: The academic, thus the university-system (...) is so focused on competition, so that you are forced to compete with your friends within a small university-environment. (...) But here it is so concentrated on merits; one has somehow to show oneself competent all the time, instead of co-operating. (...) In the beginning I told myself that I don’t want to be deformed by this system somehow and... just try to emphasise myself and so on and become people’s enemy, but it is somehow built into the system, this that you have to compete and that one has to emphasise oneself and so... and this is hard for women because we are not raised like this, we are not used to this. We are used to butter a person up and encourage others and so on.” (SC)

The small academic environment in Sweden seems to cause another problem: Former study-colleagues or friend can later appear as competitors when it comes to research funding or positions. A situation that was clearly expressed by SC. The competitive situation described by SC is also relevant for male academics but SC is explicitly referring to the way that women and men are raised and gives this as a reason why women feel less comfortable with this system.<sup>3</sup>

### ***3. Difficulties and Challenges***

The participation rate of women in top rank positions – and the professorship is no exception – is generally low. There are different approaches trying to explain the reasons for that, but no matter if they are talking about “glass ceiling” (Sonnert / Holton 1995:25), “thresholds” (ibid:26) or the “stone floor” (Heward 1996: 16) they all assume that there are certain barriers working against women. Having this in mind the interviewed professors were asked if they experienced difficult or challenging time periods during their academic career and how they would describe them.

The difficulties to combine a family life and the work on the habilitation were already mentioned earlier, but even when the familiar situation is not taken into account this time period remains as challenging. The habilitation is a

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<sup>3</sup> Another aspect – even though not clearly expressed by SC – might be the fact that a small university system implies an even smaller numbers of researchers concerned with women’s- or gender studies. The competitive culture in academia might course stronger preassure to these academics (mostly women), since it can be really difficult even impossible to co-operate with someone who at the same time has to be considered as ones competitor.

necessary qualification on a way to the professorship. At the same time to have this qualification is no guarantee for an academic position and means to be over-qualified for other sectors of the labour market. The awareness of this situation and the feeling of insecurity related to it were expressed as a difficult part in the academic vita:

“I found the most difficult this insecurity at the mid-thirties not to know how it all is going to end. To see the colleagues who have a habilitation not getting anything.” (GS)

As already mentioned the interviewed professors began their studies aiming at other professions than the professorship, for most of them the teaching profession was the major aspiration. It is plausible to assume that a person aspiring a teaching profession is doing so because she or he likes teaching and will continue to like it even during an academic career. This was also expressed by the interviewees. One of them was even referring to that she – at least when she was a student – believed that a professor’s work mainly contained out of teaching. A believe that later – when she actually became a professor herself – was destroyed:

“I like to teach and for me the lessons are really an essential part of my position, but I recognise how devalued teaching is. That was not clear for me, but in the course of my socialisation becomes more and more clear...” (GS)

Also in Sweden the devaluation of teaching in higher education seems to appear as a problem. SC pronounced during the interview that she likes teaching and described it later as one of the joyful aspects in her work. Nevertheless, she has the impression that her institution does not show any interest in motivating people who do teaching:

”...and in this respect I think that the university is very bad, very bad as a working place. We are so many at this institution who teach and arrange new courses and... we never receive any response, the response we get comes from the students, (...) So the feedback one gets comes from the students and from the colleagues one is working with, but the leadership of the university and of the institute I think it... I never experienced somehow that one receives the response one needs.” (SC)

Even though the Swedish academic system does not demand a second thesis comparable to the German habilitation, a young academic still has to prove her

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competence by doing research and publishing results. This system might seem more secure than the German one, but the Swedish systems shows other traps. Usually Swedish professors have hardly any teaching load. Under-graduate education is mainly done by lecturers or senior lecturers, both have to qualify and collect merits by doing research – research that often lacks continuity due to the financial situation.

”Just this about our system that one is teaching and then one is applying for research money and then one is receiving research money during three years and then one is back and teaching and has not the time to finish, this is actually quite hard. So we should have time for research that is more continuously scheduled for senior lecturers and professors – well professors have it but I have been a senior lecturer for so many years.” (SC)

Beside rather different systems for getting the professorship, this time period of collecting merits after the PhD provided challenges for both the German and the Swedish female professors that we interviewed. On the one side a situation of insecurity was described, on the other side discontinuities in research did appear as a problem.

#### *4. Positive and Joyful Aspects*

The thresholds and barriers for female academics is matter for investigation in a range of studies. Beside all this it remains the question “What keeps these women inside the system?” After descriptions of periods of insecurity, of devaluated teaching, problems in combining family and academic life, what is it that these women get back in reward that is worth all this? All interviewees were asked for their positive or joyful moments. During the interviews – even before this question was raised – all interviewees expressed a strong interest in their work. In some cases it was quite easy to guess that their research is a joyful aspect in their life: The interviewed women showed their books and the women explained how this book came along. Even though this paper is concerned with what the women said, but it is difficult to ignore the enthusiasm and joy they expressed in a non-verbal way.

The lack of co-operation was expressed as difficult situation, on the other hand the existence of co-operation and teamwork was pronounced as positive and encouraging aspect – the environment where the research is done seemed to be at least as important as the research question one is concerned with. GS describes the positive experiences during the time before her first professorship:

“Yes, the close co-operation, collaboration in K with – K is a small university, very interdisciplinary oriented – and the interdisciplinary co-operation with sociologists, anthropologists, with linguists, with literature specialists and a very strong support within this group, I found this fantastic. It was really a kind of unity, of support and to research on something together. During the years this was incredibly nice. ...and otherwise my child. But this is of course private.” (GS)

GS also mentioned her child as a positive part in her life, so did SC in an earlier statement. In the literature the existence of children is often interpreted as an obstacle for women, the interviews show at least a different perception of the female professors. The women who actually had children perceived their motherhood not as an obstacle – in contrast SC even gave a hint that the commutation between work and family made her working time more structured and her work effective. The familiar situation can also have a supportive impact, since it can imply a balance to the academic world – under the precondition that one has a partner “who goes along with that” (GS).

The intellectual challenging work of research just as the publication of findings is another satisfying aspect in academic work. In the wording of SE it sound a bit like an exploration:

”To do research is fun, it is exciting to find answers to questions that one finds important and exciting and the pleasure of an explorer is another thing (...) to find an answer to a question, to make visible, a happy expression – these are joyful things and extremely stimulating.” (SE)

It might be possible to read this as a self-satisfying reason, to do research in order to proof oneself special. But the intention of the interviewed women probably goes beyond this:

”Well, to be able to work at the university, to have the opportunity to do research and to enter deeply into scientific problems in which one is interested and then the whole question about women, female writers, women’s access to higher education, well (...) and to see how this has spread, because nevertheless we have equality and equality of opportunities in Sweden and even in working life. Even though it is not fully carried out yet, this will take lots of years... But this has been a huge motivation and joy and to work with this feels important I think...” (SC)

SC speaks about her joy in seeing positive changes regarding women’s representation in the academic education and in society. In other words, she is

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telling about research that is rooted in societal reality, not a utilitarian approach but scientific work that seeks to give impulses - something that, according to my interpretation, also is included SE's expression "to make visible".

## Summary

The purpose of this paper was to elaborate what made female professors succeed in academia by using qualitative interviewing. As already mentioned the material presented here is limited and the conclusion cannot be finally. Nevertheless, I will summarise what can be seen as common issues and perceptions. The interview-scheme posed a range of issues and open questions to the female professors. Since the interviews were kept open so that the interviewees could and even should pose and define their own issues, the topics that dominated the interviews were not exactly the same like the ones posed in the interview-scheme.

The major change done by the interviewed professor was probably to reject the idea that one could decide or plan to become a professor. The way to the professorship is definitely accompanied by a range of decisions, but the interviewees could not point out when they decided to become a professor. Even more it even was rejected that this could be possible. What was mentioned, as important preconditions were good achievements and people – mostly professors – who encourage or even help to get a position at the university. To become a professor was perceived as interplay of different factors rather than a result of personal competence and strategy. Certain factors are in a persons hand – like the own competence and scientific achievements – but other factors – like an encouraging professor or the existence of a motivating research group – cannot be influenced by the young academic and remain beyond ones control.

An issue that was re-defined by the interviewed professors was the topic of male-dominance within academia. My assumption was that a person that plans to pursue an academic career – and that is interested in women's or gender studies – takes the existence of male-dominance into consideration when thinking about career options. As already mentioned the idea of a career planning young academic was rejected by the interviewees, so this assumption turned out obsolete. Nevertheless, the issue of a male-dominated environment appeared in the interviews. In one case more as a recent problem of reconciliation of family and work, in another case as a critic on the academic system and its focus on competition.

Regarding the questions about difficulties and challenges during the academic vita, the formal rules of the academic system created different situations for the interviewees. The German system that demands a second thesis – a habilitation – puts people in an insecure situation. On the one side the habilitation is demanded for further advancement, on the other side there is no guarantee for a future position in academia and a habilitation means at the same time to be overqualified for other sectors of the labour market. Even though the Swedish system does not have a formal requirement like the habilitation, still it

is expected that a person is doing research and publishing. In this context a lack of continuity of periods of research was mentioned as a hurdle.

Asked for the positive and joyful aspects in their academic life, teaching and research appeared as the most important aspects. But also the response from students regarding the classes, seeing changes in curriculum and society and the joy of making things visible in research were mentioned as joyful and important. For the professors who had children, their children remained as an important source of joy and motivation. The interviewed female professors expressed an awareness of disadvantages and problematic aspects in their university systems. Nevertheless, despite all discussed difficulties and hurdles and rather different structural preconditions for the academic career the interviewed female professors expressed that they like the work they are doing – probably the most important precondition to survive and succeed in academia.

“All after all it is fun to me, this job is fun and I think I would not like to change.” (GS)

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## Appendix

### Scheme for Interviewing:

- What or who motivated to choose field of study?
- Choice of an academic career
  - what or who motivated
  - where there alternative career plans
  - people who encouraged
  - intellectual environment at home
- Difficult and demanding periods in academic life
- Perception of the university as a male-dominated environment
  - thought of that when decided to start academic career
  - Did the male-dominated environment influence working-perspectives
- Working abroad / networks
  - what experiences (professional working life)
  - networks and contacts (do they “survive” while abroad)
  - profits and losses of working periods abroad
- What or who does confirm and encourage
  - “Bubbles of enjoyment”

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