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Career ambitions of women academics. Are women willing *and* able to rise to the top in higher education institutions?

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ABSTRACT

The disproportion of women to men at the top tier in the academic hierarchy, concerns politicians, academic leaders, students, and other stakeholders. A popular explanation for the gender imbalance in elite positions is that potential female candidates lack ambition and therefore do not have sufficient drive to make it to the top. In this study, we explore the issue of professional ambition among a group of women academics working as tenured associate professors in Norway. With the backdrop of VIE (Valence-instrumentality-expectancy) theory, we focus on two key subjective, but nonetheless contextual judgments that are assumed to underlie the decision to aim for a promotional opportunity; (i) Do I want it and (ii) Can I make it? Three sources of qualitative data provide interesting insights into these considerations, and our findings point to focusing more specifically on the perceived costs that are assumed to derive from making this career choice. The women are ambitious in the sense that they desire the professional clout and impact that comes with this top role (so, yes, they want it). However, a number of conditions are perceived to be central to the actual realization of their ambitions, such as more time, resources and transparency when it comes to the qualification process. The findings may serve as important to designing more suitable career conditions for this target group in practice. Finally, we propose the application of a context-specific gender perspective to better understand women's career ambitions in higher education institutions (HEI).

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1. Introduction

While Scandinavian countries are deemed the most equal in the world, vertical sex segregation remains in Scandinavian academia, and on a par with most institutions internationally.¹ The phenomenon of the decreasing proportion of women at higher levels of an organizational hierarchy, is known as 'the leaking pipeline' (Camp 1997; Kulis, Sicotte, and Collins 2002) and is widely discussed in literature on gendered career development, gender equality in career progression and gender composition among academics in HEI (Meschitti and Marini 2023; Rehbock, Knipfer, and Peus 2021). Both in the EU and the US, there has been an increased interest in achieving a more gender balanced representation among full professors in academia, and consequently the causes of the leaking pipeline in higher education institutions have come under scrutiny (Pell 1996;

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Osborn et al. 2000). Focusing on the ‘leaks’ at the various academic employment stages has proven useful, such as what happens during selection, promotion and retention processes (Filandri and Pasqua 2021; Teelken, Taminiau, and Rosenmöller 2021; Freeman, Douglas, and Goodenough 2020; Liu, Brown, and Sabat 2019). In this study, the focus is put on the process of advancing from tenured associate professor to full professor, which is deemed both the most difficult barrier in the scientific career trajectory (Teelken, Taminiau, and Rosenmöller 2021) as well as the most elusive (Walker 2016). Being the most exclusive role in the academic career system, a relatively small proportion of academic staff holds the position of full professor. Specifically, a study covering seven European countries report variations from 7 per cent full professors among faculty in Austria to 21 per cent in Norway, where this study is situated (Frølich et al. 2018). Research has shown that it takes women 3.5 years longer to advance from associate to full professor level (Freeman, Douglas, and Goodenough 2020). The criteria by which candidates are evaluated are typically highly regulated, nevertheless are specified on a very general level and are therefore often considered unclear and situational. For example, for the position of full professor, Norwegian regulation proposes the following criteria: *Scientific or artistic level in accordance with international or national standards, and documenting relevant practical-pedagogical competence* (Frølich et al. 2018, 30). Consequently, more specific operationalizations are done at the level of discipline, institution and evaluation committee. Lack of transparency when it comes to evaluation criteria may make it difficult for potential candidates to judge whether they have what it takes to make it as a full professor, how far they are on the way to get there, and whether it will be worthwhile to embark on the qualification process. This is a problem in as much as the main route to achieve this qualification comes from the initiative of each potential candidate to nominate themselves for evaluation by a committee (Mäntysaari 2022). Since the process by and large is depending on the agency and decision of each potential candidate, exploring how such judgments are made and what influences them, will provide important insights into what may incentivize more women to embark on this journey (sooner rather than later). However, there are few empirical studies that have researched the issue of women’s ambitions to become full professors, with some notable exceptions (Spermon 2019; Terosky, O’Meara, and Campbell 2014) and we therefore know very little about what kinds of judgements and thought processes potential professorial candidates employ when deciding either to embark on a qualification process or not, and what influences those judgments (Figure 1).

Seeking to reduce that research gap, our contribution to the research field is to explore how a group of women reflect on the attractiveness and value of becoming a full professor on the one hand, and what perceptions and notions they have regarding the costs and disadvantages that might incur on the other. By asking: *‘Are Women Willing and Able to Rise to the Top in Higher Education Institutions?’* we are particularly interested in what insights can be gained as to the bases on which the professorship is judged as attractive and attainable, or not, and exploring the gendered nature of these perceptions.

We report from a study which was conducted among tenured academic women in the tier beneath the top academic position of full professor, as associate professors at a Norwegian University College.² They participated in the study as part of an action research (AR) initiative (Greenwood 2007) with the aim of increasing the number of women in top academic positions.

2. Theoretical positioning

Ambition is typically seen as a personality trait (El Baroudi et al. 2017), type of behavior (Sools, Van Engen, and Baerveldt 2007), or desire (Pettigrove 2007) which in turn leads to a generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller 2012, 759). Irrespective



Figure 1. Isaac, Zerbe, and Pitt (2001) valence-instrumentality-expectancy model.

of what definition one chooses to apply, it involves a type of directed energy or drive towards a certain aim, objective or situation. In motivational terms, ambition is about the *will to will*. From a behavioral viewpoint, ambition literally means to act out a strong desire to achieve something. In this respect, it shares common traits with achievement motivation (Anderman 2020), but ambition has the added connotation of moving ahead toward a distant and high goal. Ambition can also be seen as both a type of reward expectancy (in our case, the expectation of actually succeeding in qualifying as a full professor) and as a commitment towards a course of action (Desrochers and Dahir 2000, 566).

Aiming to qualify as a full professor may be viewed as a difficult task for anyone who sets out to do so (Lagesen et al. 2021) and thus, presupposes ambition. However, we propose that this should not solely be seen as an individualistic endeavor but must be viewed in light of the environment within which such motivation or mindset is embedded. Consequently, we think it is necessary to explore the notion of female ambition in respect of professorship as it plays out in a specific, social context.

2.1 Judgements underlying career choices

Career choices can be viewed in light of cognitive perceptions of current and future abilities also labeled self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), and expected outcomes based on perceived value and costs of future outcomes. Sealy (2010) writes about the 'prize' versus the 'price' of a career choice, where the prize refers to the perceived positive consequences and the price is the negative costs that are expected. A 2014 study from the US, of 'soon-to-be-professionals' showed that, even though college women reported higher levels of occupational aspirations than college men, they were anticipating more barriers to their career advancement than their male peers (Watts et al. 2015). Similar tendencies have been found in other studies where women anticipate more negative outcomes in terms of professional advancement than do men (Gino, Wilmoth, and Brooks 2015). According to VIE (valence, instrumentality, expectancy) theory, there are two main judgements that must be made in order for an individual to have the motivation to aim for a job opportunity or promotion (Wanous, Keon, and Latack 1983). The job must be considered attractive (perceived benefits must outweigh the perceived costs), *and* one must positively expect that the job opportunity/qualification is within reach, meaning that it is likely that one might succeed in achieving the job/promotion. In short, from a subjective viewpoint, two questions must be answered in a positive manner; (1) Do I want it? and (2) Can I make it? in order for it to make sense to expend effort towards achieving a job opportunity. Applied to the professorial qualification process, one can assume that if the answer to either of these questions is negative, it does not make sense to explicitly embark on this advancement process which will require extraordinary efforts on the part of those who do (Lagesen et al. 2021).

The theoretical framework of VIE-theory has been applied to explore and explain gender differences in job preferences and job decision-making, going back to early contributions that were aimed at exploring why there were fewer girls and women in specific educational fields, elite professions and work roles (Van Sell, Brief, and Aldag 1979; Eccles et al. 1983; Wheeler 1983). Adding a situational dimension to these ideas, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) argued that the social world is central in its influence on the judgements people make regarding their ability to achieve certain outcomes as well as the attractiveness of such outcomes. These social perceptions will in turn influence the degree of effort or non-effort expended to achieve those outcomes or ends (*ibid.*). Accordingly, career choice must be understood within its particular cultural domain (Lewis and Simpson 2015).

With these systemic perspectives as an added backdrop to VIE-theory, the focus in this study is on the beliefs and judgements that are made at an individual level with respect to the outcome of qualifying as a full professor, and how these judgements are influenced by and played out in a specific situational context.

Based on this model (see [Figure 1](#)), perceived attractiveness of, and/or aversion to, an expected career outcome will depend on judgments made at two different stages: (i) *The Performance-Outcome linkage* and (ii) *The Effort-Performance linkage*. We shall address each separately with reference to women's judgements regarding the professorial career track in an academic context.

Performance – Outcome: Assuming that I might perform in accordance with professorial criteria, how attractive does it seem to me to become a professor? The question here is based on the assumption that achieving a certain standard or performance is only meaningful if it is believed to lead to some outcome that is attractive and desirable at the individual level. The motivating effect of a promotion is therefore dependent on the value that is considered to come as a result of it (Tien 2000). Applied to our problem, we might assume that women candidates will find it meaningful to strive for professorship if they see the role of full professor and the situations that it may produce for them, as sufficiently attractive and desirable.

Effort – Performance: Assuming that I find it attractive to work as a full professor, will I be able to put in the effort that is required to qualify for professorship? The question here assumes that people will expend effort on a task or assignment when they believe that a certain level of performance is attainable (ibid.). Applied to our problem, we would assume that female academics in the tier beneath the top role in the academic hierarchy will put in the effort to qualify for professor, if they think they can perform in accordance with perceived professorial standards/criteria such as producing a specific number of publications, attending, and presenting at international conferences, advising master's and Ph. D. students, establishing, and collaborating in international networks, teaching upper level courses, etc. On the other hand, if they see that some of the perceived criteria are beyond reach and cannot be attained, it does not make sense to them to take on this specific ambition and career goal.

3. Research method

The study from which our data has been derived, is an action research project based on a nationally initiated program by the Norwegian Research Council with the overall goal of improving the gender balance at the senior level in Norwegian research and academic institutions. The project was situated at one of Norway's largest University colleges with the aim of enabling more women to qualify for top positions in the academic trajectory, namely full professorship. In Norway, there are two separate career tracks in the academic hierarchy, a research-oriented and a teaching-oriented track (Frølich et al. 2018). There are different titles and qualification criteria for the different levels in the two tracks, however, since the top roles are deemed equal in status and both qualify for the title 'full professor' in English, we use the terms 'full professor' and 'professorial candidates' for all candidates irrelevant of which specific track they belonged to. *Actions* were implemented at both an organizational and an individual level, including the provision of supportive structures to a group of potential professorial candidates who had signed up for the project.

One distinguishing feature of action research is the active and deliberate self-involvement of the researcher in the context of his/her investigation. Unlike the methods of objective science where the researcher is argued to be an impartial spectator on the research context (Chalmers 1982), the action researcher is viewed as a key participant in the research process, working collaboratively with other concerned and/or affected actors to gather knowledge that may inform actions for desired change (Abalkhail 2021; Checkland and Holwell 1998). The authors of this article were a part of the action research team recruited for the project, both were associate professors when the project started, with extensive experience within academia. We were involved in planning the actions that were implemented over the two years (2015–2017) that the project lasted, as well as collecting data via various sources such as focus groups, log-writing, conducting a survey, and participant observations during network meetings. There are advantages to action research as a form of 'insider research' (Merton 1972), in which researchers can build on their contextual experience and knowledge while collecting empirical material and conducting data analyses for research purposes (Brannick

and Coghlan 2007). At the same time, it is important to ensure that one follows the procedures deemed necessary for valid research (Anderson and Herr 1999). Procedures for collecting and analyzing data are described next.

3.1 Data collection

Fifty-eight female associate professors signed up for the project via an invitation from their superior. They were between 38 and 64 years old and represented different disciplines including educational research, health care, mathematics, economy, human rights studies, marketing, management, history, and biology. The women met for network meetings twice a year, with the purpose of sharing information, experiences and knowledge, as well as having discussions and group sessions on relevant topics like the new professor role, academic writing, writing applications, research management, self-leadership, mentoring, etc. The data material was primarily collected in these seminars. This article is based on three data sources: personal logs written by the participants, notes from a group-work session and a survey. The following table summarizes our data:

Thus, in this study we are triangulating the data sources. Triangulation may guard against viewing events in a simplistic or self-serving way (Anderson and Herr 1999). Furthermore, we avoided conducting interviews and instead relied on personal log writing as a key data collection method. One of the problems of interviewing one's colleagues may be that of being too close to the data. As Brannick and Coghlan (2007) note, when insider researchers are interviewing, they may assume too much and therefore not probe sufficiently compared to outsiders or someone with little prior context specific knowledge. By choosing log writing instead of interviews, we as researchers have had no influence on this part of the data generation except for formulating the log questions, which in turn are research-based and related to the research problem.

Personal Logs. The participants wrote personal logs reflecting on specific themes at the end of each workshop/network gathering. The number of women in the various workshops varied, consequently the number of logs differs. The purpose of the log-writing was twofold, (i) to get the participants to reflect for themselves, and (ii) to collect data for research. Logs as a data source, have some limitations, particularly as it prevents follow-up questions. But seen together, the four different logs (see Table 1) provide important information and input that shed light on our research questions.

Group Discussions. Our second data source consists of notes and resumés from a group-work session. At one of the seminars the theme was: *What is needed to realize my plans to gain a professorship during the period the project lasts?* The group work was presented in a plenary session, and the group's notes from the presentations serve as our second data source.

Survey Data. Two years into the project period, a survey was conducted among the participants in the network. Even though most of the questions were crafted to measure the participants' work-in-progress and achievements related to relevant qualification criteria, there were also several open-ended questions related to the perceived output from the project and various forms of support (from leaders/networks) which provide insights to our research questions.

Table 1. Data sources.

Data 1	Log 1a	What is it that makes you want to become a professor?	35 logs
	Log 1b	Imagine a professor that fills the role in a way you have a flair for – what do you cherish? What ways of working do you admire and want to take with you?	35 logs
	Log 1c	What tasks and what kind of role do you see that a professor has in the future of academia?	35 logs
	Log 5a	What motivates your work towards becoming a professor?	27 logs
Data 2	Group work	What is needed to realize your plans to gain professorship during the period you have planned?	7 sets of group notes
Data 3	Survey		42 respondents

3.2 Data analysis

The data sources were analyzed separately before they were synthesized. Our purpose in data triangulation was not to compare the different data sets, but to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This complementary analysis was nevertheless done to ensure that we uncovered any possible differences between the data sources, and thus were able to assess and comment on the weighting of each of the sources (Carter et al. 2014). The first step in the data analysis process was to read the logs and notes repeatedly to identify statements related to ambitions. Secondly, we organized the relevant statements according to the claims based on VIE-theory outlined in the introduction, concerning: (1) the desirability of the outcome (do I want it?) and (2) achievement probability (can I make it?). On the background of these general considerations, we examined and interpreted each group of textual data in search of patterns and themes, common lines of reasoning, and illustrative statements. Next, we present the findings and discuss some of the implications both theoretically and practically.

4. Findings and discussion

It is evident that career motivation does not spring from one single thing. Career goals are decided upon for complex reasons, although it seems among the participants in our study, as though the more individual-oriented personal arguments, like autonomy, are crucial for the ambition to choose to qualify for the professorship. When it comes to the costs, it is the high workload which may affect life outside work that makes it less attractive to strive for this position. Also structural factors such as unclear guidelines for qualification and more gender-related factors, such as lack of support and inclusion, make it less attractive, to such an extent that about half of the participants in our study are uncertain that the effort is worth the cost.

The first judgement that must be positive to aim for the full professorship, according to VIE-theory, is that the outcome of the decision is perceived as desirable and attractive, or in the words of Sealy (2010), the prize must be sufficiently attractive and the price not too high. When reflecting on what would make the professor role attractive and desirable; it is autonomy and freedom that seems most valuable to our subjects. One subject wrote in her log: *'First and foremost, the autonomy is important to me. It will be easier to choose interesting problems and projects to work on when you are a full professor'* (L1D2). Another subject states firmly: *'I want academic authority'* (L5D27), while a third writes: *'It provides autonomy and freedom'* (L1D8). Freedom can be used to prioritize work tasks based on one's own preferences, as this subject remarks: *'I hope we get the freedom to take civic engagement seriously, to seek knowledge and understanding'* (L5D11). In addition status, recognition, authority, and professional clout are reasons our subjects provide for the ambition to advance; *'Professional authority, power, more wages, more research time'* (L5D2). Professional impact and the influence that comes with this top role are also important; *'With increased competence and academic clout, I will be able to develop and influence my discipline'* (L1D1). Likewise, one subject wants *'academic clout so that I can make my mark on my discipline in the future'* (L1D11). Another one writes about the ability to affect change; *'Power, not as in over/under-positioning, but the kind of power that H. Arendt talks about – a force that can move mountains (...)'* (L1D21). Some see it more matter-of-factly as a natural step in their career journey; *'I see it primarily as a natural step forward in my career'* (L1D5), while another subject remarks that it will *'finalize an ongoing process'* (L1D3), and a third states that *'it is a natural development, simply, a kind of maturation'* (L1D19).

Seen together, the reasons for making it worthwhile to work towards professional advancement are often related to what Eccles (2005) calls attainment value, which is linked to identity or self-assessment. The responses by our subjects as to why becoming a full professor is meaningful to them, indicate that there is a longing to be recognized for the effort they have put in over many years, as well as being acknowledged for the value of their work.

However, perceived costs also enter into the equation. One of the subjects ends her log about the professor role by saying that her vision is to work as a full professor while also living a full life outside of work. If she cannot, 'it is undesirable', she states with an exclamation mark (L1D20). Thus, even if the 'prize' of becoming a full professor seems bountiful in a variety of ways, if the 'price' involves the sacrifice of part of her private life, she is not prepared to pay it. Others are less absolute, but there are certainly indications that the perceived conditions that must be met in order to qualify for a full professorship are considered too high by some. The amount of effort needed, the stress, and the sacrifice of other goals, are the factors Eccles (2005) calls costs. A high workload which affects life outside work is the cost that is most frequently expressed by the respondents. This reflection can be considered gendered and systemic, not least in relation to masculine assumptions of the 'ideal academic' who has unlimited time to dedicate to work (Thun 2020).

4.1 Achievement probability: what will it take to make it as full professor?

The second judgement that must be positive if candidates are to aim for the professorship, according to VIE-theory, relates to having sufficient abilities or resources to make it through the qualification process – judging oneself capable. The empirical basis for addressing this question is derived from a group session where the subjects were asked to reflect on how they could realize their vision and fulfil their needs in order to become a full professor in the next few years as participants in the AR project. This resulted in a preponderance of both individual oriented conditions, as well relational and structural concerns.

On the individual level, the notes reflect awareness of personal qualities like being assertive, self-confident and conscientious, as well as pointing to more concrete actions and conditions like building a network and having a mentor. Here is a list of individual-level statements provided from the group sessions (G1-7); *'SAY NO'*, *'prioritize'*, *'acquire information'*, *'be visible'*, *'stop stretching too far'*, *'demonstrate muscle'*, *'lean in'*, *'be self-confident'*, *'be aware'*, *'build a network'*, *'get a mentor'*, *'travel to international conferences'*, and more. In the literature addressing women's roles in male dominated environments, there has been a move away from focusing on individually oriented causes and solutions 'fix the women', to structural and systemic ones ('fix the organizations' (Burkinshaw and White 2017) and 'fix the knowledge' (Schiebinger (2021)). The data above might be considered more of a 'fix ourselves' (i.e. the women) perspective. On the other hand, it also demonstrates a kind of agency and strategic mindset related to the way forward to full professorship for these women (Terosky, O'Meara, and Campbell 2014). Other parts of the data demonstrate an awareness of structural and systemic issues. For example, more transparency regarding qualification criteria is an important factor on the structural level that is mentioned by most groups; *'Be specific about the choices we must make (CV, etc)'*, writes one group (G1). Another group remarks that *'promotion criteria must be made explicit in order to clarify expectations and make the process more realistic'* (G5). Many respondents in our study disclose an uncertainty over what the requirements for becoming a full professor really are, and whether the criteria will be changed while they are striving to meet them. One respondent has experienced the rejection of an application for promotion already, on a basis she does not understand. Others, like the quote below shows, write about unclear criteria and criteria changing along the way: *'My experience is that the rules of the game change while playing and that it is not possible to start again.'* (L2D11). From the open answers in the survey, one respondent notes that she has become better informed about what a professor application should contain, however, she also seems demotivated by the notion that; *'... they seem to be pulling up the ladder these days. The number of published articles that is required seems to be rising, among other things. This is interesting when you think about all those who got promoted to professor without even having a PhD to show for'* (SQ44).

Cultural and contextual factors that are mentioned in the group notes relate to *'raising awareness'* about this issue in general, setting a goal of becoming a full professor more specifically, *'supporting each other'* on the way, and changing attitudes and getting rid of a culture that requires a

'substantial private effort'. There is definitely a concern about how to gain access to sufficient time and resources to perform the tasks deemed important in the qualification process; '*Resources! Time, money*' writes one group (G1). Money is important, in as much as it may be used to hire substitute teachers to take over some or all of the teaching load that is a part of the job of associate professors, but not giving the same merit as research and international collaborations.

One group points to the work plan and how one's leader is central in managing it; '*Freeing up time to write, creating space and room for writing, and being supported by one's leader (who has put it into the workplan)*' (G2). How one's leader can be instrumental in helping (or hindering) candidates' abilities to make it through the qualification process is addressed in various ways in our data. From the open questions in the survey study, one respondent noted: '*I wish that my manager would channel/hand me tasks and projects that can give me necessary merit. I don't advice PhD or Master students and I am not an obligatory lecturer on a master's or Ph.D.-program*' (SQ42). How managers distribute work loads and tasks in work plans and what resources are made available for qualifying activities such as (real) research time, financial funds to pay for international travel or substitute teachers, research technologies and other resources, may have a substantial impact on an individual's career considerations and progress. In our survey, 24% of the respondents answered that they were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the support provided by their leaders in qualifying for full professorship. This may be due to the fact that leaders are involved in allocating various resources, including the design and content of individual work plans. From a gender perspective, previous research has shown that women academics experience more work-work imbalance than do men (Misra et al. 2021), including a higher workload and service burden. A broader spectrum of tasks is being handled by women associate professors (more teaching, mentoring and service work) compared with their male colleagues at the same rank (Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012). Moreover, research shows that there are gender differences in the promotability of the kinds of tasks that are received and accepted by women and men (Babcock et al. 2017). In general, men are more protective of their research time and have more of it than women (Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012). Research among Norwegian academics has also demonstrated that more men had been encouraged to apply for research time by their leaders, compared with women in similar positions (Tømte et al. 2016). Other research has shown that, in terms of service work, men prioritize time in service of the profession, which is typically more prestigious, while women spend more time on service to the university (Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012). Additionally, women academics engage more in so-called 'emotional service work' (Hochschild 1979) like advising, counselling and emotionally supporting students (Bellas 1999). However, this is work that is typically not given much merit when it comes to academic advancement. In other words, the working conditions, the amount of and content of work that is being conducted by academics is skewed in favor of men when it comes to progressing to full professorship.

Perhaps this may explain why half of our respondents (48.7%) were unsure whether going through the qualification process was worth the effort. 5.1% said that they didn't think it was worth it, and 46,2% said they did (SQ43). This indicates that a substantial part of the 'talent pool' may perceive the process too costly. According to VIE-theory, it does not make sense to embark on a promotion process unless one believes that 'one can make it'. As noted from our data, there are many factors that may cause our subjects to doubt whether they will actually make it to full professorship. Numerous conditions make it difficult to answer the question, such as a lack of precise criteria, lack of clear communication and transparency about the process, lack of time, resources and managerial support and lack of individual-level factors such as ability to say no and prioritize merit-based tasks and activities. In sum, the women in our study seem to resemble the academic women Seierstad and Healy (2012, 307) studied; they are ambitious and can see many advantages of achieving the top role, nevertheless, they anticipate numerous negative constraints in the process and are uncertain about whether the extra effort will lead to the desired outcome.

5. Conclusion

On the face of it, this study is not dominated by statements that would be considered ambitious, if we define ambitious in a traditional way. Almost half of the women academics replied in the survey that they were uncertain whether obtaining the title of full professor would be worth the effort. A traditional explanation for this finding could be lack of ambition to reach the top of the academic career ladder. The perception that women have lower ambitions than men is an abiding one (Sealy and Harman 2017). The gender imbalance in leading positions, including in academia, is often explained by the fact that women do not desire top positions. However, the data demonstrates many reasons why achieving the status of full professor is attractive to the women in our study. Their professional ambitions take many directions, such as making a difference and impacting one's field or discipline, adding value, and innovating the professor role, which are all high and demanding goals in and of themselves. At the same time, they want to live a full life and not have to sacrifice their private time in order to reach their professional goals. While this contrasts with the notion of doing ambition in a masculine manner (Elchardus and Smits 2008; Sools, Van Engen, and Baerveldt 2007), it signals a more holistic and sustainable take on the route to rise to the top of the academic ladder. Our data mirrors a complex set of assessments that are made by these female associate professors, emphasizing not only judgments about the job in itself, but also the context within which the job is embedded and the costs that are perceived to incur along the way to get there.

From an institutional perspective, it is worth exploring further the gender-based perceptions and considerations that may make potential professorial candidates uncertain whether the qualification process will be worth their time and effort. Might it be the case that women academics have insufficient (real) time to engage in merit-based work tasks, for example? Would it be possible to change the qualification criteria to include more of the work that female academics engage in, such as mentoring, supporting students and teaching? Attracting women and men to full professorship, based not on their willingness to sacrifice their life for their career, but on their drive to impact their respective fields, seems like a win-win, not only for HEI institutions and their stakeholders, but for the individuals themselves.

Ambition has received only limited study from a woman's or gendered perspective although it is often used as a key explanation as to why there are fewer women in elite positions than men. Work and career ambition is typically considered a personality trait, which means you either have it or you don't. However, we propose that ambition must be seen from a holistic and gendered perspective, where individuals make career decisions by weighing the perceived advantages against perceived disadvantages. If the perception is that the price that must be paid is too costly, it does not make sense to push forward to qualify for full professorship despite the many advantages related to holding this role and in spite of the notion that one might consider oneself sufficiently capable to be an incumbent of such a role. The premise of the VIE-theory is that one must be *both* willing *and* able, in order to have sufficient motivation to put in the necessary effort towards a promotional opportunity. Therefore, if universities and their stakeholders are truly interested in creating a better gender balance at the top tier of the professional rank in the academic hierarchy, they must look further into the costs and disadvantages that women candidates ascribe to the qualification process, as well as to the enactment of the professor role in their real-life contexts. Assessing whether negative perceptions are based on objectively accurate reality, and if so, considering what can be done to carve out a more accessible and worthwhile qualification process, may be an important means towards achieving more equal representation by women and men among full professors in academia.

5.1 Limitations

This study has some limitations, particularly related to possible biases in the sample. The women included in the material have both actively signed up for the qualification program for promotion

to full professor and received approval from their manager to participate. This means that some groups of women are not included in our data material: Firstly, the women who qualify without such institutional support, secondly, the women who did not receive approval from their supervisor to participate, and thirdly, the women who have opted out of working towards promotion to full professorship.

Notes

1. The proportion of female graduates exceeds that of male students, but women represent only 23,7% of grade A (professorial) academic staff (European Commission 2018).
2. We wish to acknowledge the work of Jorun Ulvestad and Brit Ballangrud as part of the action research group that designed the study and were involved in collecting the data that is applied in this paper.

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