



Excellent and gender equal? Academic motherhood and 'gender blindness' in Norwegian academia

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This article explores Norwegian female academics' experiences with academic motherhood in an organizational perspective. A main finding is that academia as an organization is greedy, uncertain, and has 'blind spots' that reveal gender bias related to gender and parental status, especially mothers. By analysing the link between gendered organization of work and the legitimizing of gender inequality, the article reveals 'gender blindness' in the academic organization concerning gender and parental status. The article concludes that changes in academia – in line with academic capitalism – may indicate that the Norwegian model of work–life balance is under pressure. This article suggests that the organizational conditions for academic motherhood are important factors in order to understand the persistence of gender inequality.

KEYWORDS

academic motherhood, excellence, gender inequality, Norwegian academia, work–life balance

1 | INTRODUCTION

In November 2017, a conference called 'Creating a Competitive Edge through Diversity – Leadership for Nordic Research Excellence towards 2030' was held in Oslo, the Norwegian capital. The aim was to discuss the Nordic paradox – the fact that 'equal access to employment and politics coexists with inequality for women in academia', and the overall question was: 'How can equality and diversity become part of leading for excellence towards 2030?'¹

Norway and the other Nordic countries are considered to be world leaders when it comes to overall gender equality in society (World Economic Forum, 2018).² The Norwegian welfare state model has enabled both men and women to have a work–life balance (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006). In the field of academia, Norway has promoted

gender equality since the 1980s, however, the goal of gender balance is still not accomplished (Bergman, 2013; Husu, 2015). Norway is slightly above the average in a European comparison when it comes to the number of female professors. Norway had 25 per cent female professors in 2013 and the European average (EU-28) is almost 21 per cent (European Commission, 2015, p. 129).

In 2013, The Norwegian Research Council launched *The Initiative on Gender Balance in Senior Positions and Research Management* (BALANSE). The aim is to promote gender balance at the senior level in Norwegian research. This increased focus on gender balance and gender equality is happening simultaneously with a strengthened emphasis on scientific excellence (Meld. St. 7, 2014). However, Norwegian academics with childcare responsibilities experience a dilemma between the Norwegian gender equality ideals and the expectations to be a 'star researcher' (Orning, 2016, p. 99).

In this article, academic motherhood provides a lens to explore gendered organization of academic work (Acker, 2006), as well as to discuss an overall question: How can we understand the persistence of inequality for women in Norwegian academia? In order to operationalize this question, the article asks two analytic questions: (i) What are gendered 'blind spots' in the organization of academic work? (ii) How is gender inequality legitimized in the discourse of excellence and gender equality in the organizational culture? Gendered 'blind spots' are gender bias in the academic organizational structure and culture. More specifically, I analyse two components of inequality regimes; firstly, the *organizing processes* that produce gender inequality, and secondly, the *legitimacy* of gender inequality (Acker, 2006).

This article contributes with new empirical data to the field of gender and organization by providing insight into how gendered structures within academia have an impact on individual women's careers. Norway is an interesting case for studying 'inclusive excellence' – both competing globally for talent and advancing gender equality (Zippel, Ferree, & Zimmermann, 2016) because the combination of an academic career and childcare has been more common in Norway than in other countries (Vabø, Padilla-Gonzales, & Waagene, 2014). The experiences of women balancing motherhood and an academic career can shed light on the ways in which academic work is organized and explore gendered blind spots in the university organization. In addition, the article contributes to the development of feminist organization theory by further developing theorization concerning 'inclusive excellence' (Zippel et al., 2016) and inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). Hence, it analyses how academic work is organized, as well as discusses the link between organizing processes and the legitimizing of gender inequalities in academia. The gendered blind spots in the university organization and the ambivalence concerning gender equality measures can be interpreted in the larger discussions about gender equality and excellence, and contribute to theorization of gender inequality in academic organizations. The article analyses different meanings of gender equality (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003) and argues that a utility argument is compatible with the (ostensibly) gender-neutral discourse of excellence in academia (e.g., Nielsen, 2016; van den Brink & Benschop, 2011; Wennerås & Wold, 1997).

2 | UNIVERSITY AS A GENDERED ORGANIZATION

The theoretical framework is informed by social constructionist feminist approaches within organizational theories focusing on the ways in which gendered understandings are reproduced and challenged through organizational processes (Calás, Smircich, & Holvino, 2014). I am inspired by a doing gender in organizations perspective which sees social practice and social relations as fruitful starting points (Kvande, 2007). This perspective draws on Dorothy Smith's (1987) approach to study everyday experiences starting where women are actually situated, and Joan Acker's (1997) concept of gendered practices.

The starting point is to investigate practices and experiences in everyday life as an academic mother and to analyse the gendered organization of academic work (Acker, 2006, p. 448). According to Acker (2006), gender is so embedded in the structure of organizations that we often fail to appreciate just how much it shapes our lives, experiences and opportunities. Acker (2006) argues that all organizations have inequality regimes, defined as 'loosely

interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations' (p. 443). Systematic differences in power are not static and they can change, but that can be challenging because 'inequality regimes are linked to inequality in the surrounding society, its politics, history, and culture' (p. 443).

Acker (2006) has identified several components of inequality regimes (the bases of inequality, the shape and degree of inequality, the organizing processes that produce inequality, the legitimacy of inequality, the visibility of inequality, and control and compliance). This article focuses on two of the components of inequality regimes; firstly, the *organizing processes* that produce gender inequality, and secondly, the *legitimacy* of gender inequality. According to Acker (2006, p. 448), work is generally 'organized on the image of the white man who is totally dedicated to the work and who has no responsibilities for children or family demands other than earning a living'. Acker argues that women usually have more family obligations and thus, 'gendered organization of work is important in maintaining gender inequality in organizations [...]' (p. 448). The analysis also draws on Sullivan's work on contemporary academic organizations. Sullivan (2014) expands on Lewis Coser's concept of 'greedy institutions' which are

organizations [that] overstep their bounds and begin to make absolute, unlimited claims on their members, taking up more and more of their life space, until no room is left in the workers' lives for anything else. (p. 3)

Kvande (2007) has written about knowledge work and boundless flexible time cultures in the Norwegian context, and she claims that 'knowledge work organizations are more and more becoming greedy work organizations demanding that employees put in more and more time' (p. 69). The tension between a 'greedy' academic career and motherhood is found in studies of academic mothers (e.g., Acker & Armenti, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006).

The legitimacy of gender inequality is the second component in the analysis (Acker, 2006, pp. 452–454). Gender equality is taken for granted in Norwegian society and gender discrimination is not legitimate (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003, p. 194). However, gender inequality is 'often legitimated through arguments that naturalize the inequality' (Glenn, 2002, in Acker, 2006, p. 453). This article will discuss tensions between the gender equality discourse that is prevalent in Norway (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003) and a meritocratic discourse that emphasizes excellence (Acker, 2006, p. 452) in the academic culture. Gender-based assumptions and gender stereotypes are often taken-for-granted understandings in organizations. They are re-created in daily interactions, but often subtle and difficult to document (Acker, 2006, p. 451). This article will use Skjeie and Teigen's (2003) typology of gender equality in order to discuss the legitimation of academia as an inequality regime, and the way in which discourses of excellence and gender equality risk to reproduce gender blindness in the academic organization. Skjeie and Teigen are inspired by Hernes' typology of gender equality arguments for political participation: (i) right-based justifications (women have the right to participate); (ii) utility arguments (society miss out on women's experiences/talent); and (iii) interests argument (women and men have different and often opposite interests, and women's interests are usually not represented) (Hernes, 1982, 1987, in Skjeie & Teigen, 2003, p. 194).

In academia, meritocracy is the ideal, and according to this idea, 'the most talented and hard-working people get ahead; those who are poor must try harder, and when they do, the inequality gap will be closed', and thus, meritocracy is a way 'to explain and legitimate inequality' (Scully, 2002, p. 399). The norm of meritocracy is prevalent in the global academic system 'by emphasizing the objectivity and measurement of excellence' (van den Brink & Benschop, 2011, p. 508). Thus, gender equality measures may be seen as unjust because individual merit should be evaluated independently of gender, age, race, religion, family situation, sexual orientation, etc. (Nielsen, 2004, p. 322). However, a gender-neutral meritocratic norm can result in gender inequality, and several studies challenge the gender-neutral discourse of excellence in academia (e.g., Lund, 2012; Nielsen, 2016; van den Brink & Benschop, 2011; Wennerås & Wold, 1997).

3 | THE NORWEGIAN WELFARE SYSTEM AND AN ACADEMIC NEOLIBERAL SYSTEM

Compared to many other countries, Norway seems like a haven for academic mothers and fathers. Since the 1970s, the care of young children has been central to the promotion of gender equality in order to improve opportunities for working motherhood and caring fatherhood (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006). The Norwegian welfare state offers parents long periods of parental leave and the dual-earner/dual-carer family model has set new standards for gender relations in families with young children (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006, p. 7). Since the early 1990s, policy innovations – like the ‘father quota’ – have been introduced, parental leave has been prolonged³ and childcare services are approaching universal coverage (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006). Thus, the combining of career and family is the norm for Norwegian women (Seierstad & Kirton, 2015, p. 400). However, gendered expectations in relation to family life exist, and mothers still tend to take the majority of parental leave that can be distributed between the parents (Seierstad, 2011, p. 297).

Recent studies demonstrate that Norwegian academics with children experience a dilemma between gender equality ideals and ideals about excellence. They meet expectations about being a ‘star researcher’ which means that you are part of prestigious projects and publish in the best international journals within your field. Moreover, it entails international mobility and a ‘career is everything’ logic (Orning, 2016, pp. 97–99). Women in Scandinavian academia experience a ‘double bind’ of the welfare system because the benefits related to parental leave and childcare clashes with the gendered academic work culture (Seierstad & Healy, 2012, pp. 303–304). Seierstad and Healy’s (2012, p. 307) critique is not directed at the welfare system, but rather at the inequality regimes in universities in neoliberal economies.

There has been a shift in governance of higher education which includes a new performance-based funding system and more competition between higher education institutions. Norway is affected by a global script about ‘world-class’ universities and influenced by reforms in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) area (Christensen, Gornitzka, & Maassen, 2014, p. 33). Following the Bologna process, the Norwegian government implemented a comprehensive ‘Quality Reform’ in 2004. This resulted in stronger state control of higher education, increased focus on benchmarking processes, goal-oriented steering and reporting (Maassen, Moen, & Stenaker, 2011).

The reforms in Norwegian higher education, which emphasize the number of publications and selected elite research environments, have privileged researchers with more time to produce articles and researchers in ‘masculine’ areas of research, and these researchers are often men. Thus, gender and life phase seem to have an impact on the possibilities to succeed in the increased competition for permanent positions, and a new career dynamic appears to have different outcomes for men and women (Brandser & Sümer, 2017). The ‘new’ researcher role includes long-term temporary positions, job insecurity, and increased competition for funding and positions (Løvbak & Holter, 2012; Vabø & Ramberg, 2009). Studies show that men to a higher degree than women can work long hours (Halrynjo & Lyng, 2010), and that long hours are necessary in order to publish in academic journals (Egeland & Bergene, 2012).

According to Ferree and Zippel (2015), the shift towards ‘academic capitalism’⁴ runs the risk of co-opting feminism and gender equality measures in a neoliberal agenda. They address the ongoing struggles over governance of higher education – with focus on accountability and excellence – and the challenges for gender equality. Feminists have seen ‘universities as crucial sites for creating gender equality’ (Ferree & Zippel, 2015, p. 561). However, they claim that both the ‘old’ liberal system and the ‘new’ neoliberal system are flawed when it comes to the reproduction of gendered, racialized and other inequalities. The classic liberal-humanistic university with elitist professional authority relations and ‘old boy’ networks was not gender equal, even as feminists struggled to expand educational opportunities for women, and for including gendered experiences and alternative standpoints (Ferree & Zippel, 2015). A study of Norwegian academia from 1988, supports this claim, and describes sex discrimination of women in hiring. Men were called original, pioneers and geniuses, whereas women were described with words like diligence, thoroughness and accuracy. Thus, these evaluations led to discrimination of women in academic positions (Fürst,

1988). Ferree and Zippel (2015) argue that the new system, like the old, still reflects the interests of a privileged population. However, their meritocratic principles differ. In the liberal system, professors had more authority to define merit, and evaluations were more local and contextualized, whereas the new neoliberal system with institutionalized auditing emphasizes performance according to quantified standards of productivity.

Zippel et al. (2016, p. 867) have also explored programmes for gender equality in German academia. They claim that neoliberal reforms have opened a possibility for women to be redefined as essential talent in the transnational 'battle for the best brains' (p. 868). The new academic standard 'inclusive excellence' – both competing globally for talent and advancing gender equality – includes family-friendly policies. However, Zippel et al. (2016, p. 869) warn that 'family friendliness' may increase women's disadvantages when it is equated with mother friendliness, and thus 'tied to expecting women to be mothers'. Thus, it is interesting to explore 'inclusive excellence' in Norwegian academia because it exists in a welfare state that promotes double career families.

4 | EMPIRICAL MATERIAL AND METHODS

The data material consists of 24 qualitative interviews with female researchers at seven different departments,⁵ at The Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences (MN) at the University of Oslo. The University of Oslo is Norway's oldest and second largest university, founded in 1811, and is situated in the capital. The interviewees were selected through the FRONT project (Female Researchers ON Track) at the MN Faculty which focused on gender equality among employees.⁶ The MN Faculty has approximately 40 per cent female students, but less than 20 per cent of the professors are women. There are differences between the departments at the MN Faculty, however, it is a commonality that women disappear in the transition between temporary positions (39 per cent women) and permanent positions (21 per cent women).⁷ Mathematics and the natural sciences are disciplines that are in the forefront of internationalization in Norwegian academia (Vabø & Wiers-Jenssen, 2014), as well as research areas with less than 20 per cent female professors (Vabø, Gunnes, Tømte, Bergene, & Egeland, 2012).

The sample was selected from a list of possible participants for various programmes in the project, and leaders in the different departments provided lists with names of female employees. The interviewees were approached by email with information about the research project, and those who responded positively were contacted again. The participants represent different occupational levels at the university; six Professors, ten Associate Professors and eight Postdoctoral researchers (ages 31–59). Eighteen have children and six do not have children (three have three children, eight have two children, seven have one child and one was pregnant at the time of the interview). Most of the Postdoctoral researchers are in their 30s, and some of them are planning to have children in the future. Among the female scientists, there are both Norwegian and foreign researchers – women academics of non-Norwegian origin – included in the sample, in all positions (16 Norwegian and eight foreign). Fourteen of the Norwegian scientists have children and four of the foreign scientists have children. The foreign researchers are situated in different research areas and they are from different countries of origin, thus comprising a heterogeneous group of researchers.

The interviews were conducted in the time period April 2016–January 2017, and took place at the university, usually at the participants' office or in a meeting room. They lasted for 1–2 hours. The interviews were semi-structured and followed a thematically organized interview guide. Topics included: background questions about family situation, education, employment; current working situation and work–life balance; academic motivation and ambitions; the academic discipline; views about the department, the faculty, the university and an academic career in general; views and experiences concerning gender, gender balance and gender equality in academia; barriers and limitations, including gender discrimination in academia; and possibilities and improvements for women in academia. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

The analysis started 'from below', in the data material, thus applying an inductive approach, in which the initial coding of the interviews was closely connected to the interviewees' own descriptions, understandings and concepts.

Firstly, the transcripts were read a number of times, secondly, each transcript was summarized and then the data material was coded manually. In the coding process, I chose categories based on findings in the data material; academic career and being a parent; temporary positions; international mobility; publications; gender stereotypes; ambivalence about gender equality measures in academia; minority position as a woman; and gendered research areas. I made matrices on the computer based on these main categories. The next step of the analysis involved interpretations in light of relevant theory, as described above. According to Ragin (1994), the inductive part consists of the construction of images of the meaning of the data, which provide the basis for patterns in the data. The deductive approach involves the creation of analytical frames based on established theory, which enables an understanding of the patterns found in the data material.

A challenge has been to protect the anonymity of the interviewees without losing relevant information. The study was approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Official for research and educational institutions. Nevertheless, there are relatively few female researchers at the faculty, and in some departments the women are few and far between. I do not use real names and have left out information about specific fields of research, as well as career stories that would have made the interviewees recognizable. Also, some of the facts in the quotes are changed, for instance, the children's gender. In addition, I have left out the names of the countries where the foreign researchers are from.

5 | FINDINGS

The following section will explore two gendered blind spots in academia as an inequality regime (Acker, 2006). The first blind spot is found in the organization of academic work, and the second is related to the legitimization of gender inequality in the organizational culture.

5.1 | Blind spot 1: The organization of academic work

5.1.1 | Academic motherhood in a 'double bind'

The combination of an academic career and motherhood is a self-evident premise for the academic mothers in this study. Thus, they live in accordance with the two-income family that is the Norwegian norm (Statistics Norway, 2018). Some take advantage of the university day care centres on campus and others have their children in day care centres that are geographically closer to where they live. Especially the foreign researchers are explicit in their appreciation of the possibility of combining an academic career and family life.

When I was a postdoc in [another country] I had already decided that if I really wanted to do it my way, I would like to be in Norway, not there. That's the reason my husband left everything there and came here, because that's what I wanted. I preferred the Norwegian system to that system any day. [...] Yeah, so over all I think it's great and it works very nice, especially when you do have a system that allows you to take care of both the family and the career. (*Emma, Associate Professor, mother of one*)

In Emma's opinion, parental leave and day care in Norway are huge benefits. Her child is enrolled in one of the university day care centres on campus, not far from her department. She knows female colleagues in other countries who barely have a week of parental leave and who have chosen to leave academia after they have children. Emma also emphasizes the general culture of gender equality in Norway, which makes it commonplace for the parents to share childcare approximately 50/50.

Claudia, one of the other foreign researchers, also stresses the opportunity to combine an academic career and having children. However, she still finds it difficult to have small children at a critical phase in her career:

It's not ideal to have a child and pursue an academic career at the same time. In Norway it's easier to come back after a maternity leave. It's not like that everywhere. But it takes a lot of effort to return. (Claudia, Professor, mother of one)

An academic career demands long working days, much concentration and much publishing, and in Claudia's view, family life and children also require a lot of organizing. The relatively long maternity leave in Norway is a positive thing, but it is also difficult to take almost a year of absence from academia. You lose valuable time and it is challenging to keep up with new research and return to the research field. Claudia was able to share the parental leave equally with her husband and she is also content with the university day care. However, Claudia's husband travels a lot for work and they do not have grandparents nearby, so she has to pick up the child every day from day care, and it prevents her from having long workdays.

The findings suggest that the Norwegian welfare system makes the combination of an academic career and motherhood possible. As pointed out by the foreign researchers, women in Norwegian academia actually can 'have it all' – a career, a partner and children (Seierstad & Kirton, 2015). Claudia's story shows that the welfare benefits are positive for women's ability to combine motherhood and an academic career, but it also illustrates the 'double bind' that women in academia can experience (Seierstad & Healy, 2012, p. 303). Seierstad and Healy (2012, p. 303) write that the double bind of the welfare system happens when 'the enabling macro context clashes with the organizational level organizing processes [...]'. In Claudia's case, this clash happens when taking a long maternity leave is not compatible with the expectations of the university organization.

5.1.2 | Flexibility in a 'greedy' organization

Flexible work hours are crucial for the academic mothers, especially the advantage of being able to leave early from the university in order to pick up children at day care, and instead work a couple of hours in the evenings after the children are in bed.

The amount of work is huge, I'd rather change that. But I do appreciate the flexibility and the advantage of flexible working hours. (Andrea, Professor, mother of three)

However, being a mom and a researcher, especially when the children are small, is described as demanding:

Last semester was very busy. I worked almost every night and every weekend. I worked during every vacation. The days when the day care centre was closed, I couldn't work full days, but I worked when my kid took a nap, before she got up in the morning and after she went to bed. [...] I can't do another semester like that. No, it was too much. (Olivia, Associate Professor, mother of one)

The interviewees describe hectic periods with a lot of teaching and deadlines for journal articles and research applications.

I'm afraid that every week is a 'state of emergency'. I have written many research applications and at times it is a lot. But I manage to work quite a lot, and I can work 36 hours straight. There have been times when I've been here at the office during the day, gone home and put the children to bed, and then returned to the office. I've worked all night and then gone home and made breakfast for the children. I've done that sometimes, but of course it's not ideal. (Celia, Associate Professor, mother of three)

Flexibility is crucial, but also described by the interviewees as a double-edged process (Kvande, 2007, p. 121). The stories reveal flexibility combined with a limitless time culture. The time you lose when you leave early to pick up children from day care has to be made up – often during the night-time. The female academics experience their work as interesting and rewarding, and thus they are willing to work a lot. Hence, the university is described as both greedy

and seductive at the same time (Kvande, 2007, p. 130). These findings are in line with other studies of academic motherhood that describe academic work as 'lacking boundaries' (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 16), and autonomy as 'a double-edged sword' for academic women, involving flexibility, but also 'never-ending workloads' (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016, p. 16). In Acker's (2006) words, academic work is organized on the 'image of the unencumbered worker' (p. 448).

Some of the female researchers are single mothers, which makes it even more challenging:

According to my superiors: 'People here work 50–60 hours a week', but at times it's hard for me to even work 40 hours a week. So that makes me think: 'Do I even belong here?' (*Sandra, Associate Professor, mother of two*)

For single mothers it is difficult to work past the day care centre's opening hours and to attend meetings in the evenings. Sandra tells about comments from colleagues: 'If only you were more present.' According to Kvande (2007, p. 134), a limitless work culture 'requires a support system with a partner or others who can take care of the reproductive tasks, or else one must be childless'. The dual-earner/dual-carer family model (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006) works best when there are two parents who can share the childcare tasks. Some of the single mothers rely heavily on grandparents as an additional support system, however, these mothers usually have to stay home with the children if they are sick. In addition, planning for conferences abroad is a logistic puzzle, not to mention long-term research stays abroad, which is difficult to do if one is sharing custody with the other parent.

Even if some of the foreign researchers describe a picture of comparatively modest work pressure and less competition than they are used to, their stories about intense work weeks and constant 'state of emergency', indicate that the university is a greedy organization in the sense that it seeks 'ever greater commitments of time' (Sullivan, 2014, p. 3). The interviewees describe the tension between pursuing an academic career and motherhood as having 'a constant feeling of a guilty conscience concerning both work and family'. Both academia and motherhood are 'greedy' – and require limitless time and needs.

5.1.3 | International mobility and temporary positions

Several of the researchers have been abroad for shorter or longer research stays. Some have done their PhD or a postdoc project at universities in other countries. However, younger researchers with temporary positions talk about the increased demand for international mobility and the difficulty of being mobile with a family.

To be a researcher with small children has worked out fine for me. But when I think about my future career, I know that I, at some point, have to move, and that's not that easy. (*Julia, Postdoctoral researcher, mother of three*)

It doesn't tempt me, and it entails a lot of uncertainty. But I feel that I have to go abroad. The Norwegian Research Council wants you to, and in order to get funding you have to. But it's not easy for me now that I have a family. Earlier I thought 'Yes, it won't be a problem to take my family with me.' But now I see that my child is not comfortable with new people all the time. She recently started attending day care, and I don't want to uproot her very often. It's less tempting now and it's much harder now that I have a child. (*Isabella, Postdoctoral researcher, mother of one*)

These postdoctoral researchers like their work and would like to continue to do research. However, international mobility is a demand that makes it difficult for them to see a future career in academia. Also, temporary positions do not combine well with establishment of a family. The relative lack of permanent positions at the University in Oslo, and the increasing demand for international mobility – both as a prerequisite for getting research funding and to be able to, eventually, compete for permanent positions – make them doubt that they have a chance of an academic career. Some of them have partners that are not mobile, or they have a network in Oslo that can help with

childcare. Others, like Isabella, do not want to uproot their children. Studies of academic mothers in a life-course perspective have also found that women live 'linked lives' when it comes to work and family, and this was 'particularly evident in career decisions that would require moving' (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016, p. 19).

After a PhD, one often has to have several temporary positions before one is qualified for a permanent position. In addition, there is a stronger emphasis on scientific publications, expectations about research stays abroad, as well as leadership experiences (Vabø, Tømte, & Gunnes, 2016). The postdoctoral researchers are especially interesting in that respect because they have temporary positions and they are planning to either start a family or have already established a family. They would like to continue to do research. However, the combination of temporary positions and international mobility result in insecurity that does not combine well with having children (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). According to Sullivan (2014), greedy organizations become greedier in situations with high unemployment and highly competitive job markets. In addition to becoming an even greedier organization, an academic career is also experienced as being increasingly uncertain. Thus, academia is described as being seductive, greedy – and risky.

5.2 | Blind spot 2: Legitimation of gender inequality in the organizational culture

5.2.1 | Fatherhood vs. motherhood

The academic mothers experience gendered expectations after returning to the university after maternity leave.

A male PhD student had a child at approximately the same time, and when we got back from parental leave, I really felt the gender difference. Our colleagues would praise him for picking up his child at day care twice a week. They would commend him even if his wife did most of the childcare at home, and he usually went back to work in the evenings. I felt very strongly how the society and the academia have different expectations towards mothers and fathers. They expected his wife to take care of the kids so that he could complete his PhD. (*Sandra, Associate Professor, mother of two*)

The female researchers also report that male colleagues more often than them have partners who do a lot of the care work at home.

Within my field of research, the older generation is typically men, the younger generation students and PhD students are typically women, and the generation in the middle is more gender mixed. Many of my male colleagues in the middle generation are men with wives. By that I mean that the men perhaps don't contribute as much at home as my female colleagues do. (*Inga, Professor, mother of two*)

In the 'middle generation', which is gender balanced, many have small children. However, more men than women have 'wives' who do most of the care work at home. Most of the interviewees have partners who they share care work with, but their partners also have career jobs. Thus, daily life is very concerned with logistics regarding the children and day care, school and leisure activities.

These quotes illustrate a double standard regarding motherhood and fatherhood. The norm is still that mothers have the main childcare responsibility. These findings resonate with Seierstad's (2011) study of Norwegian politicians, academics and directors of corporate boards. She particularly emphasizes gendered expectations in relation to family life and motherhood. Seierstad (2011, p. 297) found that the total uptake of parental leave by fathers is relatively low, and that mothers tend to take the majority of parental leave that can be distributed between the parents. This may be changing in the younger generation (Orning, 2016). However, this study suggests that gendered expectations and a double standard concerning motherhood and fatherhood still are present in the organization.

5.2.2 | Gender stereotypes and ambivalence about gender equality measures

Gender stereotypes in the academic culture are evident in a double standard regarding motherhood and fatherhood, but the interviewees also tell stories about more general gender stereotypes. Both academic women with and without children tell stories about being underestimated by colleagues and students, and they explain how they deal with gender stereotypes.

I have started to dress differently. Maybe I will be taken more seriously, I don't know. I'm conscious about how I talk, how I behave. (*Hilde, Associate Professor, no children*)

I used to get comments from male students like: 'you really study hard'. They suggested that when I got better grades it wasn't because I was smarter. Oh no. (*Maria, Associate Professor, one child*)

These quotes illustrate experiences about having to repeatedly prove that these academic women are smart and competent enough. Findings in this study indicate that there are gender stereotypes within the academic culture in which gender as a category overshadows individual competence.

They were having a seminar and discovered quite late that there were only men present. So they asked me to have a presentation. But the way they asked indicated that they didn't ask because of my expertise, but because I'm a woman. (*Anna, Postdoctoral researcher, no children*)

Anna and several of the other interviewees have experienced to be a 'token female' (Kanter, 1977, p. 207). They tell stories about being the only women in a panel and the feeling of representing all female scientists. Sometimes it feels like a burden to be the only women academic present. However, the interviewees think it is important to be present in order to show that there are female scientists within their field of research, and they see the value in being role models for younger women in academia. Thus, 'token female' is a paradoxical category because it indicates a greater consciousness about gender balance – which is a positive thing – but at the same time it 'labels' these women as their gender, rather than focusing on their competence (Thun, 2018).

The interviewees experience a dilemma: on the one hand, they do not want their gender to be the focus of attention (token female) because they want recognition as scientists. They view quality and excellence as gender-neutral concepts, and some are against gender equality measures because they claim that individual competence matters and measures that favour women are unjust. On the other hand, they recognize gendered stereotypes and academia as a 'greedy' organization. Thus, some of the interviewees have changed their view of gender equality measures because they have experienced that women face structural hindrances due to their gender, and that the academic competition is not just. Nevertheless, they are ambivalent because they are afraid that their colleagues will question their competence if they are 'helped' to advance in an ostensibly meritocratic academic system, and they have experienced resistance from male colleagues.

6 | DISCUSSION

I initially referred to the Nordic paradox – the coexistence of equal access to employment and politics with inequality for women in academia. This article has focused on academic motherhood in order to explore gendered blind spots in the organization of academic work and the legitimation of gender inequality. Based on these findings, I will discuss how we can understand the persistence of gender inequality in Norwegian academia.

6.1 | Gender blindness in Norwegian academia

A key finding is that the seemingly gender-neutral university has some blind spots that reveal gender bias. This article has focused on gender and parental status, but it also includes gender bias in general.

The first blind spot is related to how academic work is organized. The interviewees describe an academic 'career recipe' which includes long working days, research as a life style, temporary research positions, much publishing of articles in internationally recognized journals and international mobility. The faculty also puts much emphasis on getting European Research Council grants and other prestigious grants. This study suggests that the unencumbered male worker is the model for the organization and the model of the excellent academic (Acker, 2006, p. 459). The findings support recent research on PhD students with childcare responsibilities who experience a dilemma between the Norwegian gender equality ideals and the expectations to be a 'star researcher' who works 24/7 and who is internationally mobile (Orning, 2016). This study also supports Vabø et al.'s (2016) claim that research political developments have negative unintended consequences, especially for women's research careers. The recent emphasis on excellent young researchers with high levels of publication, international research experience and temporary positions does not fit well with parenthood. Thus, the increase in temporary positions and the emphasis on excellence in Norwegian academia may disadvantage women (Vabø et al., 2016). As observed by Lund (2012), the criteria of excellence are not objective, neutral and universal, and they are more difficult to achieve for some academics than for others – usually women – with much teaching and small children, and thus limited time for producing high impact articles.

The second blind spot is related to the legitimization of gender inequality in academia. Acker (2006, p. 451) writes about informal interactions while 'doing the work', and she refers to practices in which gender inequalities are created and reproduced. Gender-based assumptions are part of the organizational culture and they guide behaviour. Stories about colleagues who praise fathers when they pick up their children from day care, but who question mothers' work commitment when they do the same, illustrate a double standard regarding academic mothers and fathers. Moreover, there are gendered stereotypes within the academic culture in which gender as a category overshadows individual competence (Thun, 2018, p. 121).

The female scientists in this study are ambivalent concerning gender equality measures for women. On the one hand, they talk about excellence as gender-neutral and they do not question the fairness of academic competition. On the other hand, they tell stories about structural hindrances in the academic organization and they struggle with the academic criteria concerning excellence because these criteria are modelled on the unencumbered (male) academic (Acker, 2006; Lund, 2012). Initiatives to promote gender balance at the senior level in Norwegian research are well intended, and gender discrimination is not legitimate in Norwegian academia. The ambivalence regarding measures to promote women in academia can be interpreted as a tension that they experience between meritocracy and gender equality (Nielsen, 2004), which I will discuss below.

6.2 | Tensions between gender equality and excellence?

The conference 'Creating a Competitive Edge through Diversity – Leadership for Nordic Research Excellence towards 2030' addressed inequality and constructed gender equality as 'a competitive edge' towards research excellence. Within this understanding, gender equality – usually in terms of gender balance – will lead to better quality and more excellent researchers because universities can choose between the best people – regardless of gender – in the population. This understanding of gender equality is in line with a utility argument for gender equality (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003, p. 194). The utility argument for gender equality comes in two versions: one that emphasizes difference between men and women (men and women have different experiences and can complement each other), and another that underlines sameness, and claims that recruitment of both men and women will take advantage of the total 'talent pool' in the population (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003, p. 195). The focus on gender balance fits the latter argument. Thus, the aim for gender balance is constructed within a discourse of excellence in academia. If academia fails to achieve gender balance, we lose possible talents from half of the population. Measures to ensure that more women continue to pursue an academic career within this understanding of gender equality, usually focus on how

to change the women – to encourage them to be more egoistic, to learn how to manage their time better and to 'build' a successful career with research stays abroad.

The findings in this article, however, suggest that there is gender blindness in the university organization. A utility argument that emphasizes sameness (women as equally talented as men), is not in itself negative for gender equality, however, it can lead to gender blindness when structural inequalities in the organization are silenced. Moreover, academia as a gender inequality regime is made invisible and difficult to challenge when gender inequality is legitimated in a discourse that combines ideals of excellence and gender equality. Hence, the Nordic paradox – the fact that 'equal access to employment and politics coexists with inequality for women in academia' – can persist because structural hindrances in the organization are not addressed.

Acker (2006, pp. 458–459) argues that organizing processes that create inequalities may become more subtle and difficult to challenge when free market is the dominant ideology. A focus on profitability also fits well with a utility argument for gender equality (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003). Ferree and Zippel (2015) argue that universities today are influenced by neoliberalism, and they claim that the increased focus on accountability and excellence has consequences for gender equality. They address various consequences of this development – both potentially positive and negative. In the context of this study, it is especially interesting what they write about work–life balance. Among the negative effects, they mention 'escalating of demands for productivity' and 'disadvantages accrue to academics with familial responsibilities or physical limitations on their time' (Ferree & Zippel, 2015, p. 574). This resonates well with the findings in this study, and the university as a greedy organization with a flexible, yet limitless time culture (Kvande, 2007; Sullivan, 2014).

This article contributes to the current literature on 'inclusive excellence' (Zippel et al., 2016) by exploring the academic organization from the perspective of women, and by analysing gender bias in the academic organizational structures and culture. According to Zippel et al. (2016), neoliberal reforms also have opened up a possibility for women in academia in the transnational 'battle for the best brains'. However, this study explores the tension between gender equality and excellence, and indicates that a strategy of advancing gender equality as a means to achieve excellence (utility argument) might cover gender bias, as well as make it more difficult to address gender discrimination (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003, p. 208).

This study suggests that the excellent university creates an inequality regime (Acker, 2006) that advantages particular groups of academics: the 'ideal academics' with unlimited time who work long hours and are internationally mobile. Academic mothers, on the other hand, are disadvantaged because they have family responsibilities and live 'linked lives' (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016, p. 19). However, the discourse of excellence and gender equality in the Norwegian context obscures these disadvantages, and results in gender blindness. Hence, organizational structures are more difficult to address and failure to success is individualized.

7 | CONCLUSION

Academic motherhood provides a lens to examine academia as an inequality regime (Acker, 2006). This study shows that the combination of an academic career and motherhood is the norm in a Norwegian context. This is in line with the welfare state model in Norway that has enabled both men and women to have a work–life balance (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006). The foreign researchers emphasize that the work–life balance in Norwegian academia is comparatively better than what they have experienced in other countries. However, the goal of gender balance in Norwegian academia is not accomplished. This article suggests that the organizational conditions for academic motherhood are important factors in order to understand the persistence of gender inequality. A main finding is that academia as an organization is greedy, uncertain, and has 'blind spots' that reveal gender bias related to gender and parental status, especially mothers. The unencumbered excellent academic is the model for the organization (Acker, 2006, p. 459). By analysing the link between gendered organization of work and the legitimatizing of gender inequality, this article reveals 'gender blindness' in the academic organization.

Norwegian academia is part of an international sector and is influenced by international trends. The discourse of academic excellence and the demands of the academic organization are international as well as national. In the Norwegian context, the discourse of excellence is constructed as compatible with the ideal of gender equality, emphasizing a utility argument for gender equality. Hence, this study supports Ferree and Zippel's (2015) claim that 'academic capitalism' runs the risk of co-opting feminism and gender equality measures in a neoliberal agenda. Changes in Norwegian academia in line with academic capitalism may indicate that the Norwegian academia is becoming more like the academia in some other countries, and that the Norwegian model of work–life balance is under pressure. The discourse about excellence and gender equality as compatible celebrates diversity and gender balance – and emphasizes diversity and gender balance as positive for research quality – 'a competitive edge'. However, it does not address the university as a gendered organization. This study suggests that subsidized parental leave and day care centres are necessary, but not sufficient in order to combine an academic career and parenthood. This article claims that 'inclusive excellence' (Zippel et al., 2016) – both competing globally for talent and advancing gender equality – must include family-friendly policies. However, that is not enough. The university as an organization must also evaluate the organizational processes that produce gendered inequalities. This research adds to other studies that claim that 'the more equal society that characterizes Scandinavian countries is obstructed by inequality regimes in universities' (Seierstad & Healy, 2012, p. 307). Moreover, it supports previous research that asks for more discussion about quality and excellence in research in the Nordic countries (Bergman, 2013).

An underlying premise in the discourse about excellence in the Norwegian case is that Norwegian academia has to become more like academia in other countries in order to compete in an international research community. An interesting finding in this study, however, is that some of the foreign researchers have applied for jobs in Norway precisely because they want the opportunity to combine a career in science and childcare. Thus, the Norwegian work–life balance model may be an advantage in the competition for the 'best and brightest'.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest with respect to authorship and/or publication of this article.

ENDNOTES

¹The conference was hosted by The Norwegian Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (<http://kifinfo.no/nb/nordic-solutions>).

²Norway is ranked No. 2.

³The total parental benefit period is 49 weeks at 100 per cent coverage (59 weeks at 80 per cent coverage). <https://www.nav.no/en/Home/Benefits+and+services/Family+related+benefits> (accessed 1 March 2019).

⁴'Academic capitalism' refers to 'managerial and cultural aspects of this shift for universities without framing neoliberalism as a totalizing ideology' (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999, in Ferree & Zippel, 2015, p. 565).

⁵Department of Biosciences, School of Pharmacy, Department of Physics, Department of Geosciences, Department of Informatics, Department of Chemistry and Department of Mathematics.

⁶<https://www.mn.uio.no/english/about/gender-equality/>

⁷<https://www.mn.uio.no/om/likestilling/likestilling-for-ansatte/front-prosjbeskrivelse-2015-03.pdf> (accessed 19 February 2019).

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