

# Should I Stay or Should I Go?

## Gender and Career Choices to Exit or Remain in Academia

Women PhD holders advance their academic careers at a slower pace than men with PhDs, and men still dominate top academic professions. This has sometimes been explained with reference to women's share of family responsibilities, suggesting strategic or necessary prioritization. Interviews with 32 PhD holders in Sweden portray a more nuanced image of the situation and the choice between an academic career and exiting academia.

### Interviewee selection

The group of interviewees had an even number of men and women who had stayed or left academia after completing their PhDs. 17 participants held PhDs in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), while 15 held PhDs within the social sciences and humanities (SSH).

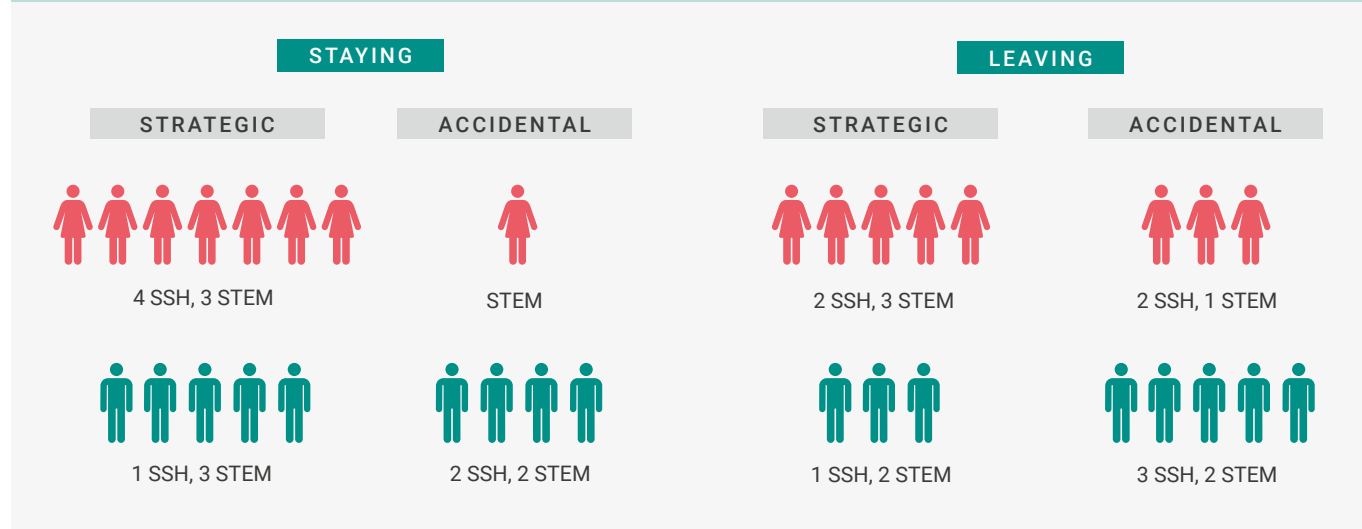


## Strategic and Accidental Stayers and Leavers

The decision whether to stay or to exit academia is made with varying degrees of intentionality. PhD holders can be divided into two rough categories that describe the degree of intent behind their career paths: strategic and accidental. Strategic stayers and

leavers describe having strong intent behind their decision, whether it is to make a career in academia or to exit. Accidental stayers and leavers have less clear intent in their pursuit of a career, whether that is within or outside academia.

The 32 Swedish PhD holders were divided in their decisions to stay or exit, as well as in aspirations and career strategies.



## Some Reasons Why PhD Holders Exit Academia

### Attractive career opportunities for PhD holders outside academia.

Becoming aware of interesting opportunities for PhD educated colleagues in her field inspired Frida (strategic leaver) to enter a PhD program with the goal of using her education outside of academia.



“They got more responsibility and more interesting [assignments] so I thought okay, let’s go for it. That’s when I applied for the PhD education.”

### Unappealing working conditions within academia, including precarious employment, short-term contracts, issues with flexibility, and heavy workload.

Hanna (strategic leaver) described being strategic in her decision to exit academia, after observing other researchers’ careers.



“They lived and became their research careers, and work and leisure time became blurred. That was not for me.”

Fredrik (accidental leaver) thought the precarious employment situation within academia was incompatible with having children, for both men and women.

“It’s simplified and old-fashioned to say that women find academic careers too insecure because they want children. I, too, wanted children and I wanted a secure employment situation that allowed me to take parental leave”.



## Some Reasons for Staying in Academia

### Wanting to make an imprint

Josefin (strategic stayer) felt she had “some kind of a mission” to change her discipline through her approach. She also believes her critical thinking would have suffered if she had left academia.

“I would have become more boxed in. I could have made a good career elsewhere, but I would have lost an important dimension of who I am today, and not have had access to this voice with which I can inspire others.”

### Flexible work hours and autonomy

For Karin (strategic stayer), the flexible work hours in academia was a reason for staying, especially when having small children.

“I can work on a Sunday and be away from work on a Thursday and nobody asks where I am. It’s the work I do that is important. When you have small children that is obviously much more smooth.”



# Gendered Patterns in “Stay-or-Go” Decisions of PhD Holders

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Clear gendered patterns did appear in the decision-making of PhD holders about staying or exiting academia.

- For men and women who left academia, family considerations and economic security played a crucial role in the decision to leave.
- Women were more strategic in their decision-making, while men more often described their career path as accidental.
- Childcare responsibilities did not appear as a central strategic issue for men who stayed in academia.
- Female stayers in academia negotiated a strategic family contract in which their partner took on the primary responsibility for childcare.

The idea that women leave academia due to family responsibilities and that they are less career ambitious than their male counterparts – in this context – is not present.

## About this research

This presentation is based on the article: [“Having it all, or avoiding black holes? Career–family strategies and the choice between leaving or staying in academia among Swedish PhDs”](#) by Anne Grönlund. The study interviewed 32 male and female PhD holders in Sweden during 2018. Some participants held no faculty position, while some held a position of associate professor or full professor.

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Further information about the project can be found on the [project webpage](#) (QR code).

