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Persistent Paradoxes, Pragmatic Postfeminism: How Young Women Negotiate the Contradictions of Gender Equality

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ABSTRACT

Due to social change and gender detraditionalisation, young women in the Global North have been positioned as agentic subjects who can benefit from increasing freedom in education and work. However, there remains a gap between gender equality as a powerful cultural norm and the persistent inequalities that continue to shape people's lives. Focusing on Finland, this article examines how this gap is negotiated by young women transitioning from post-compulsory education to work in two different fields: care and media. Building on the theories of postfeminism as a sensibility, the article analyses how field-specific conceptualisations of gender equality and patterns of gendered disadvantages in the two fields shape young women's understandings of their imagined futures in the Finnish labour market. The article develops the notion of "pragmatic postfeminism" to show that young women selectively deploy elements of postfeminist sensibility as a pragmatic resource to manage the persistent gender equality paradoxes of the Finnish labour market.

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Introduction

Feminist scholars from various disciplines have shown that in the Nordic countries, the idea that gender equality has already been achieved is widespread, even though gendered and intersecting inequalities still shape people's lives (e.g. Kantola et al., 2020; Keskinen et al., 2021). Similarly, feminist youth research has revealed that this paradox also shapes the lives of girls and young women, who have been socialised to the idea of gender equality as a powerful cultural norm despite the inequalities and injustices that they face in their everyday lives (Formark & Bränström Öhman, 2013; Melby et al., 2007; Oinas, 2017). This contradiction has also been examined in international research, which has confirmed that, regardless of stubbornly persistent inequalities, specifically young women in the Global North have been perceived as ideal individualised and agentic subjects who can overcome previous inequalities if they choose to do so. Education and the labour market have been identified as key arenas in which young women are encouraged to benefit from their increased freedom (e.g. Allen, 2016; McRobbie, 2009).

However, less attention has been paid to how young women negotiate this gulf between the norm of gender equality and the actual inequalities that shape their lives. The purpose of this article is to close this research gap. Drawing on 39 interviews with young women studying in the fields of care and media, I examine how the participants make sense of persistent gender equality paradoxes in the Finnish labour market. More specifically, I first ask how young women at the threshold between education and the labour market negotiate work-related, persistent gender equality paradoxes.

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Second, I ask how such paradoxes are navigated in relation to field-specific gender understandings and disadvantage patterns in the two fields.

In answering these questions, my research draws on and contributes to two ongoing discussions. First, by paying attention to how young women negotiate persistent inequalities in the relatively egalitarian context of Finland, I build on the findings of the Nordic gender equality scholarship. This body of work has critically studied persistent inequalities in the Nordic countries, showing that by approaching gender equality in terms of linear progress and displacing inequalities to the past or other geographical contexts, the “gender-friendly Nordic welfare state” contributes to the concealment of existing inequalities (e.g. Borchorst & Siim, 2008; Kantola, 2021). Second, I draw on discussions in feminist cultural studies in which similar questions have been analysed using the concept of postfeminism. Postfeminism describes the paradoxical situation in which the existence of gendered inequalities is, to a certain extent, acknowledged, while the role of gender as a structural power relation is simultaneously replaced with a distinctly individualised understanding of gendered disadvantages (e.g. Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill et al., 2017).

I contribute to these discussions by suggesting that young women negotiate the persistent paradoxes of the Nordic welfare state through a pragmatic postfeminist orientation. In other words, I show that young women engage with postfeminist understandings because the latter provide tools for managing the persistent paradoxes of gender equality in the Finnish welfare state. Furthermore, I argue that these engagements are selective and situational rather than all-encompassing. Consequently, I respond to recent calls to explore the social and cultural nuances and ambivalences of the postfeminist landscape (Keisu & Brodin, 2022, p. 13).

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, I situate my work in relation to previous discussions on postfeminism and gender equality in Finland. Then, I discuss my research data and methodology. The subsequent main part of the article, in which I analyse how young women navigate work-related, persistent paradoxes of gender equality, comprises two parts. The first part focuses on the narratives of care work students and the gender equality paradoxes that characterise the care sector, while the second part considers media students and the media industry. In the Conclusion, I bring together the findings from the two fields to consider their broader implications.

Persistent paradoxes, pragmatic postfeminism

As a Nordic country, Finland is internationally known for its relatively high levels of gender equality. More specifically, the idea of Finland as a “women-friendly welfare state” stems from the family, employment and social policies that have enabled women’s participation in the labour market. Gender equality has also been a widely shared political ambition, supported by both the state as well as women’s and feminist movements, although the concept of gender equality and the policies needed to promote it remain contested (Julkunen, 2010; Kantola et al., 2020). However, a long tradition of feminist scholarship has revealed persistent paradoxes in the Nordic gender equality model. In Finland, many contemporary inequalities lie in the area of work: gender segregation levels are high, the gender pay gap remains around 16%, pregnancy and family leave discrimination is common and women are more often employed in part-time jobs than men (Kantola, 2021). Furthermore, by employing women in the low-paid sectors of education, social services and health care, the Finnish state has also contributed to gender inequality by hiring women predominantly for undervalued, underpaid and feminised work (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). Moreover, these inequalities tend to be invisible, as many Finns believe that when it comes to employment and the workplace, gender equality has been achieved (Ylöstalo, 2012). For example, the gender pay gap is typically explained away by suggesting that equal pay could be achieved if women did not choose to work in female-dominated (public-sector) jobs, such as those in the care field (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018).

Whereas scholars of gender equality policy have approached these persistent paradoxes of gender equality by examining how policies that are strong on paper clash with implementation

problems (e.g. Saari et al., 2021), my article explores this gap between the realities and ideals of gender equality as it is negotiated by young women. In the process, I engage with debates on postfeminism, which have paid attention to how contradictory understandings of gender are mobilised to encourage young women to overcome gendered obstacles. Angela McRobbie (2009) argued that in this landscape of assumed social change, gendered power dynamics are characterised by “an illusion of positivity and progress while locking young women into ‘new-old’ dependences and anxieties” (p. 10). In feminist and youth studies, figures such as the “can do girl” (Harris, 2004) and “top girl” (McRobbie, 2009) have been used as heuristic devices to conceptualise the changing social landscape and its effects on young women’s lives (see also Threadgold, 2020). These figures show that young women have been represented as poster children of meritocratic advancement and equal opportunity, capable of producing social change through self-transformation and self-development (e.g. Gill & Scharff, 2013). Many studies have approached education and employment as key arenas of postfeminist regulation and achievement (e.g. Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Gill et al., 2017; Ringrose, 2013), and previous research has shown that young women’s possibilities of inhabiting the position of the “successful” or “top girl” subject depend on the broader social and cultural inequalities that constrain their choices (Allen, 2016).

In general, these studies have traced the contours of a seemingly feminist discourse that supports young women’s achievements while simultaneously “depoliticising”, individualising and hiding structural inequalities. Although many of the previous discussions have been located in Anglo-American contexts, recent Nordic research has analysed how “top girl” subjectivities are cultivated in the relatively egalitarian context of the Nordic countries (Ikonen, 2020; Vaadal & Ravn, 2021). This emerging body of research has indicated that class backgrounds inform young women’s possibilities of embodying the enterprising and economised femininity associated with postfeminism. In Finland, researchers have also identified similarities between postfeminist and state-feminist understandings of equality (Kolehmainen, 2022). My research contributes to this literature by examining how a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007, 2017) is mobilised in young women’s negotiations of education and work to navigate the persistent paradoxes of the “woman-friendly” welfare state (Hernes, 1987).

This article approaches postfeminism as a sensibility—a set of contradictory understandings of gender equality and feminism marked by an entanglement of feminist and antifeminist ideas (Gill, 2007, 2017). For example, women are encouraged to become “successful” and empowered, but feminism is presented as redundant because gender equality has already been achieved. The major elements of postfeminist sensibility are as follows: the values of individualism, freedom and choice; a reassertion of essential sexual differences between men and women; and an emphasis on continuous self-development and transformation, paired with extensive surveillance and monitoring of the self (Gill, 2007, 2017). Analysing how a postfeminist sensibility manifests itself in work contexts, Gill et al. (2017) has suggested that women repudiate sexism and signal gender fatigue through the following patterns of discursive moves: allocating gender inequalities to the past, other countries or different work contexts; perceiving women as the “advantaged” sex; and accepting workplace inequalities as part of the status quo.

Previous research into postfeminist sensibility has provided profound explanations of how and why postfeminist understandings of gender become common sense in the workplace and beyond. Scholars have revealed its connections with neoliberal modes of thinking, showing how a postfeminist sensibility discursively works to mask gender inequities (e.g. Gill et al., 2017). Moreover, research has shown that postfeminism as a gendered version of neoliberalism leads to an injurious subjectivity for young women, who are at risk of becoming entangled in dynamics of self-blame, anxiety and exhaustion (Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2018). However, less attention has been paid to the issues of why postfeminist storylines “make sense” to people and what use they have for different social groups. However, recent research contains important exceptions: a study has shown that postfeminism can be mobilised as a coping strategy that helps people navigate difficult work environments (Keisu & Brodin, 2022), while Gill et al. (2017, p. 237)

have mentioned that denying the existence of discrimination may be a way of coping in an unequal workplace. In this article, I have chosen to follow these cues by focusing on the uses of postfeminist sensibility. Thus, as I will explain below, my analysis addresses how and why postfeminist ideas “work” for young women as a resource and what they help them accomplish and resolve (see Illouz, 2008, pp. 20–21).

The study

The article is based on my research project that studied how young women become workers in the 21st-century Finnish work society. It draws on qualitative interviews I conducted in 2017–2018 with 39 young women. My research was centred on the interconnections of work and subjectivity as they are negotiated by young women at the threshold between education and the labour market. During my research, I examined the expectations and uncertainties that young women in two different fields associated with realising their aspirations. The interview participants were undergoing either (1) vocational upper-secondary education in the field of social services and health care to achieve the practical nurse qualification or (2) bachelor-level education in universities of applied sciences in the field of media. The interviewed care work students specialised in nursing and care tasks as well as the care and education of children and youth. The interviewed media students were studying to work in the fields of journalism, graphic design and digital media.

I recruited the interviewees via the educational institutions. The participants were aged 18–32 years. In both groups, the participants generally came from working-class and lower-middle-class families. All media students were white and Finnish born. Five practical nursing students were of migrant origin; of the five, four had migrated to Finland as teenagers or young adults, and three had formal citizenship. In the two groups, the students often had relevant work experience in their respective fields, thus discussing both work and education experiences. The practical nursing students had acquired work experience through clinical learning periods, a crucial part of their education, and many had worked as temporary employees and had had summer jobs. The media students had gained work experience through internships, and though some held temporary or freelance positions alongside their studies, it was rarer for them to have relevant side jobs.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours, covering themes such as education trajectories and experiences, the students’ understandings of gender in education and work and their imagined futures in the Finnish work society. I carefully explained the research aims along with the ethical principles, such as the voluntariness of participation and the right to withdraw consent, to all participants before their interviews and then asked them to sign consent forms. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, and some details have been slightly altered or withheld to ensure anonymity. Before conducting the interviews, I also performed periodical fieldwork at the participants’ educational institutions to familiarise myself with their study programmes and to contextualise the interviews.

During the analysis, I thematically coded the field notes and transcribed the interviews; in this process, I used the NVivo software to process the data. Regarding my method, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to identify and analyse recurring patterns in the interview materials; however, rather than “discovering” existing themes, the researcher plays an active role in constructing them (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I analysed the data in two stages. First, I read the material several times, focusing on the parts related to gender and gender equality as well as searching for patterns and themes. After realizing that the participants’ discussions of gender involved contradictions, I chose to pay closer attention to these contradictions. In the second stage of the analysis, I worked to arrive at a theoretically informed reading of the interviews. I chose to use “postfeminist sensibility” as an analytic concept to systematically analyse the interviews because it contained explanatory power in relation to the contradictions I had identified in the data. In my pragmatic reading of postfeminist sensibility, I followed cultural sociologist Eva Illouz (2008), who developed a pragmatic approach that “invites us to enquire about why some ideas are viewed as true and how

they are used in everyday life” (p. 21). As I will argue, young women do not engage with postfeminist narratives because they are “individualized and duped” (see Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Rather, using my notion of pragmatic postfeminism, I emphasize that postfeminist understandings make sense to them because such understandings help young women navigate the insecurities and challenges that they associate with work and employment.

Care work students: Claims to individuality and autonomy

In this section, I use a pragmatic lens to show how care work students mobilized elements of postfeminist sensibility when making sense of the persistent paradoxes of care work. The care sector epitomizes Finland’s stark gender segregation whereby jobs associated with femininity continue to have low pay and low status (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). The practical nurse profession is a case in point, as the majority of those working or studying to become practical nurses are women. Furthermore, an increasing share of practical nurses are racialized or of migrant origin. In the professional hierarchies of care labour in Finland, practical nurses are below registered nurses, who have tertiary education and can work as ward nurses. Practical nurses’ tasks are also different from those of registered nurses and often consist of “dirty” and embodied aspects of care work contrary to the more specialized care tasks performed by registered nurses (Olakivi, 2018).

Professions such as practical nursing have not typically been analysed in studies of postfeminism and work, which have focused predominantly on industries like culture, technology and business (e.g. Adamson & Kelan, 2019; Ronen, 2018; Scharff, 2018). However, as I will show, elements of postfeminist sensibility, such as notions of freedom and choice, structured the care work students’ understandings of education and work. Particularly the students belonging to the white Finnish majority often said that individual preferences rather than gendered or intersecting power dynamics determine who becomes a practical nurse these days. Kaisa was among the students who suggested that individual preferences rather than gender norms inform who becomes a practical nurse:

I just happen to be a woman who happens to be interested in this field, but we are all equal now. (...) If I were a man and interested in this field, I would pursue this [field of work] anyway, so in this sense, I don’t think that gender matters.

Kaisa’s statement follows both the Finnish understanding of gender equality as something that has already been achieved and the postfeminist tendency to relegate inequalities to the past (Gill et al., 2017; Kantola et al., 2020). What also follows from this “relegation” of gendered inequalities to the past is that the gender segregation and gender pay gap associated with it are naturalized as a consequence of individuals’ choices. This type of thinking is evident in the following statement by Mia:

I have never met a person who’d say they don’t value care workers. (...) But, of course, the pay is quite small, not very competitive if you think about it. But then again, these are matters of choice, so if you want, you can go and work in the ship construction and make money there if that’s what you feel like doing. (...) It’s 2017, I don’t know if [the pay difference between industries] is a question of a field being female-dominated or male-dominated anymore. I’d like to think that it doesn’t play a role, but I don’t know.

By framing financial remuneration as a question of choice, Mia mobilized postfeminist sensibility, normalizing the lower pay levels associated with feminine work as part of the status quo (see Gill et al., 2017). This understanding is characteristic of how Finns understand gender segregation in the labour market: it is not perceived as a problem because the segregation and the associated pay gap are seen as deriving from people’s individual choices (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018).

Mia’s and Kaisa’s emphasis on individual choice obfuscates the role of gender socialization and norms in guiding young women to the care field. Simultaneously, this emphasis works to depoliticize gendered pay differences by obscuring the historical processes that have resulted in the female-dominated care field being perceived as secondary to and less productive than the male-

dominated export industries in Finland (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). However, from a pragmatic perspective, the appeal of such an individualistic grammar is easy to understand, as investments in the ideas of freedom and choice unconstrained by unequal structures helped Mia and Kaisa lay claim to the culturally celebrated mode of the postfeminist, autonomous, agentic subjectivity. This mode of value-accruing subjectivity has historically been constructed as masculine and made in the image of the middle class, with racialized and working-class women being excluded (Skeggs, 2004). Therefore, the emphasis on individual choice provided a way for care work students to claim legitimacy as “subjects of value” (Skeggs, 2004), helping them position themselves against the idea that their choices to pursue care work could be reduced to their gender. In addition, the students’ statements also raise the question of whether only gender-atypical choices should be understood as genuinely “individual” ones as well as signify their commitment to the ideal that all people should be able to choose their lives without being constrained by gendered expectations.

Although the participants employed the vocabulary of freedom, autonomy and choice when considering their decisions to pursue education and work in the care sector, they also discussed several injustices that they associated with work in this sector. For example, Mia’s previous statement epitomized a central paradox of care work, whereby care work, though socially essential and symbolically acknowledged, often remains poorly paid, under-resourced and devalued (Dowling, 2016), which is also true in Finland (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019). Indeed, practical nurses’ working conditions and poor pay were frequently addressed by the participants. Some students, such as Frida, questioned the persistent idea that care work is unproductive:

The pay is really bad, if you think about the importance of our work. After all, the work that we do is absolutely essential, it has to do with the [people’s] basic needs. (. . .) If you think about, for example, nurses who take care of children and work with those who are the ones who in the future will earn money and [will become the] labour force of the society, then it’s really weird that they’re paid so little.

Frida emphasized the societal importance of childcare, and although she did not adopt an explicitly feminist perspective or mention gender, her statement resonated with feminist criticisms suggesting that the economy relies on reproductive labour while failing to admit the latter’s crucial economic function (e.g. Fraser, 2016). At the same time, the participants felt that their chances of renegotiating care workers’ pay or work conditions were limited. For example, Minna mentioned that, unlike in an office job in which one can simply turn off the computer when the shift is over, in care work, vulnerable people suffer if the care worker leaves before the work is done. Moreover, she added that care workers’ personal sense of responsibility weakens their power to negotiate their work conditions: “The work just has to be done. We can’t go on strike or anything if we feel like we are not treated fairly as workers or we are not paid enough.” Minna’s statement illustrates that although the practical nursing students were highly critical of the work conditions in the care sector, they saw that there was little they could do to influence these conditions. Minna’s and Frida’s thoughts also resonate with the fact that in Finland, the male-dominated export industries are typically valued for their status as the engine of the economy. Concomitantly, male-dominated labour market organizations have controlled wage negotiations, whereas care workers in female-dominated, low-paid public-sector jobs have found it difficult to achieve higher wages (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the need to streamline the female-dominated public care sector has been framed in policy discourse as crucial to Finland’s competitiveness. In the context of the ongoing care crisis in Finland, this has resulted in a deepening contradiction between the logic and rationality of care, which requires situational responses to care recipients’ changing needs, and the current emphasis on streamlining care work according to the principles of cost efficiency (e.g., Hoppania et al., 2016; Jokinen, 2017). Consequently, when negotiating their futures, the care work students worried about becoming overworked when working as practical nurses. These fears stemmed from the lack of time and resources dedicated to care work that they had witnessed when temping and performing their

clinical learning periods. For example, Riina described her experiences in a privatized elder care facility as follows:

It feels like “ready, next [patient], ready, next,” and you’re so busy all the time when you have to take care of so many residents at once, and you’d like to have time to chat and to stay for a bit longer in the room and, for example, to stay while the client eats, but you never have the time.

These experiences made Riina question whether she wanted to remain a practical nurse. She said that when there is a constant shortage of staff, the work is highly tiring and one is busy all the time. Therefore, she started to think about continuing her education after graduating as a practical nurse. The participants’ experiences of practical nurses’ work, especially in elder care facilities, often echoed previous research findings showing that the marketization of and diminishing resources in auxiliary nursing have led to labour shortages, leaving workers overworked and weakening their sense of autonomy and agency (Hoppania et al., 2016; Wrede, 2008). As I have shown elsewhere (Lamberg, 2020), practical nursing students fear becoming stuck in jobs that they associated with assembly-line care work and instead strive to find jobs in which they can employ the wide variety of skills obtained during care education.

However, the participants considered it to be care workers’ own responsibility to move forward if they found themselves overworked in assembly-line care work, as illustrated by Elisa’s statement:

Changing diapers is not all that practical nurses do. It depends on where you work. But what happens for many is that they become stuck with the elderly, while if you really tried to look [for other work], there would be many different things that you could do.

I suggest that by constructing the notion of moving forward from precarious work as a personal responsibility, the practical nursing students adopted postfeminist sensibility’s emphasis on self-responsibility (Gill & Orgad, 2017): instead of criticizing work conditions, blame was placed on the (female) care workers who “become stuck” instead of moving forward. Therefore, the care work students’ individual solutions were aligned with postfeminist logic, which encourages cultivating aspiration as a way to survive in the contemporary work economy (Gill, 2017, p. 610). However, I suggest that the care work students’ hopes for autonomous work should not be interpreted as a way of disavowing the structural inequalities in which they found themselves; rather, such hopes functioned as a pragmatic response to the precarious working conditions in the care field.

At the same time, the practical nursing students were divided in their possibilities of employing postfeminism as a pragmatic sensibility. This was most evident in the migrant students’ interviews: The participants of migrant origins stated that their reasons for pursuing vocational care education were informed by their limited opportunities in the Finnish labour market. For example, Mary felt that in Finland, migrants were required to obtain an “easy occupation”, by which she meant that higher education was not an option due to the language barrier. “The reality is we are foreigners, and it’s hard to go to school here”, she said. This emphasis on one’s limited possibilities differed starkly from the white Finnish practical nursing students’ emphasis on personal interest and choice. Furthermore, the teachers in the vocational education programme I observed also sometimes suggested that migrant students’ “cultural background” made them good practical nurses, thus characterizing their choices as “traditional” rather than individual. More specifically, persons with migrant backgrounds were subjectified as ideal elder care workers, and the migrant participants were sometimes represented as docile care workers (Krivonos, 2019), particularly in the accelerated care settings that the other students sought to avoid.

Media students: ‘inequality talk’ meets postfeminist coping strategies

If care work is a paradigmatic example of feminized “women’s work”, media work represents employment in the creative, media and cultural industries. The understanding of this field as egalitarian produces a false sense of gender equality as already achieved (Gill, 2014; McRobbie,

2016; Scharff, 2018). As I will now discuss, although the media students generally expressed an awareness of the gendered and intersecting inequalities of Finnish society, they also pragmatically engaged with postfeminist sensibility as they sought to navigate the contradictions of gender equality in a competitive labour market.

The media students often emphasized their commitment to equality understood as something broader than binary gender equality—for example, LGBT rights and antiracist commitments were discussed. Concomitantly, the students often used social justice vocabularies to describe their professional ambitions, hoping that they could help promote change by working in the media. Karoliina, a white Finnish student, felt that working in the media industry was a good way to promote social justice: “Having studied in this field, I’ve come to realize more clearly that there are real possibilities to make things better, these things that I find important.” Rebekka discussed her aspirations in a similar manner: “I do see quite a lot of those unequal structures in our society so that, well, you pay a lot of attention to them. And obviously, I would like to promote undoing these structures myself, too, if I could somehow, with my own skills and in my profession, do that.” Often, the participants explicitly drew on feminist vocabularies when discussing gender, and many, Karoliina and Rebekka included, described themselves as “intersectional feminists”. These self-identifications indicate the growing popularity of intersectionality as an everyday framework that young feminists employ to understand social injustices (see Kanai, 2020).

Somewhat paradoxically, however, the white female media students also adopted postfeminist sensibility: *because of* their awareness of societal inequalities, they often attributed inequalities to other industrial contexts than their own (Gill et al., 2017). Karoliina, who studied journalism, described the media sector as a “modern and diverse field” in which people are generally highly knowledgeable regarding societal inequalities. She described her field by saying that “the atmosphere here is that racism and other forms of discrimination are just not tolerated”. Sofia, who studied graphic design, also suggested that in the media field, people are generally committed to equality, which influenced her choice to study in this field:

Here [in the education programme], for example, people can belong to a minority in a very visible way, whether it is a cultural or ethnic or sexual minority. (...) So, in a way, it has influenced, or may have influenced, my choice of industry. At least it has created a very safe environment in that sense, whereas if I had, at some point, I had decided to study (...) a more technical field, that might have not been as safe an environment, and I wouldn’t have had as many female study mates.

The field was perceived as safe for women and minorities precisely because there was a shared language for describing persistent inequalities. Nonetheless, it sometimes seemed that this “speakability” of the inequalities of the surrounding society rendered the inequalities in the media education programmes more difficult to grasp. For example, in the previous quotation, Sofia referred to ethnic diversity as a norm, yet the education programmes that I observed were overwhelmingly white. Moreover, although condemnations of racism were common, reflections on the whiteness of the industry were few. As one exception to this pattern, Karoliina mentioned that her fellow students were mostly “white folks”, like the bulk of the Finnish population. However, contrary to previous research on postfeminist sensibility in the creative, media and cultural industries, the emphasis on the media field as committed to equality did not entail a repudiation and “unspeakability” of existing inequalities (Gill, 2014). Rather, the participants’ statements resonated with recent findings that in cultural work, there has been a shift from “unspeakability” to inequality talk, which, however, often fails to acknowledge privileges of certain speakers (Scharff, 2021).

Concurrently, the participants felt that the education programme’s inclusive and diverse atmosphere might contrast with the reality that students would encounter in work life after graduation (see Crofts & Coffey, 2017), a view that was based on their experiences of temping and internships in the field. Ella, who had worked in digital media production, noted that in the education programmes in which she had studied, most students were female, but in the workplaces, “the

situation has sadly been the opposite”. The teachers whom I talked to during my fieldwork also said that although women were the majority in the education programmes, female graduates had a harder time finding employment. Therefore, the media field also epitomizes a central gender equality paradox in Finland, whereby, despite women’s educational gains in higher education, women do not have the same opportunities in the labour market as men with similar education (see Julkunen, 2010).

Furthermore, when the participants discussed gender inequalities in the media field, differences in pay and career advancement possibilities between men and women were frequently mentioned. For example, Inka, who hoped to work in digital content production, described herself as an advocate for gender equality. However, in her interview, she highlighted the importance of women’s actions to reduce inequities:

Well, it is a fact that it is not as rosy for women in the work life, in many fields of work, as it is for men. But I haven’t felt like it would be a big obstacle. After all, you can also influence it so much yourself, whether you let those kinds of things happen, for example, that you get paid less than your male colleague.

Similarly, Johanna, a graphic design student, said that it was a moment of revelation when a male colleague told her that “chicks have this problem that they always ask for too little pay”. The male colleague then suggested a monthly salary that Johanna should ask for when negotiating her wage, a sum that was a lot bigger than what Johanna herself had considered asking for. These statements contain elements of postfeminist sensibility because they imply that it is individual women’s duty to overcome gendered obstacles and to not let inequality “happen” to them (Gill et al., 2017). What these excerpts imply, I suggest, is that although the structural patterns of gender inequality are acknowledged, from a pragmatic perspective, it still makes sense for young women to invest in postfeminist strategies as they look to find their way in a competitive, unequal labour market.

The media students’ pragmatic investments in postfeminist modes of subjectivity were most clearly apparent in their efforts to cultivate a confident, resilient disposition. Postfeminism’s regulatory power has been linked to its ability to subjectify women to a constant project of personal development (Gill & Orgad, 2015). Such imperatives of self-improvement were also felt by the media students, who felt that “making it” in the media field required cultivating the dispositions of confidence and resilience (see also Lamberg, 2021). Henna, who worked in a male-dominated industry, felt that women in her field of work were seen predominantly as bearers of their gender rather than as skilled employees, meaning that they had to perform extra work to become recognized. Henna said that because she “happens to be born a woman”, her male colleagues often assumed that she did not understand technology. She said that she had acquired the habit of proving wrong those who suspected that she could not excel in the technology field due to her gender. In this process, she found different confidence strategies to be useful:

It works like this: You take up a role, but that role’s good for you as you start believing in the role. You haven’t been feeling all that confident, but then, when you play the part, you’re going to be confident even though you don’t feel like you should be. And when you do that to yourself enough, one time you’re like, ‘Wow, I feel confident!’

Writing about therapeutic culture, Eva Illouz (2008) suggested that therapeutic discourses are “popular” precisely because they help people overcome the challenges that they face in their everyday lives. For Henna, too, confidence-building techniques “worked” because they provided her with a way to cope with a male-dominated work environment that questioned her talents. For example, Johanna and Nora, both graphic design students, emphasized the need to have high self-esteem and confidence: when one becomes invested in creative work, criticism of one’s work can feel very personal. Therefore, although confidence-building strategies can be criticized for offering individualized solutions to structural problems, from a pragmatic perspective, the wish to feel confident makes sense. Furthermore, the need to display confidence can be perceived as a way for

young women to defend themselves against accusations of being too emotional—after all, there is a long history of women’s emotionality being perceived as a sign of weakness.

The participants also suggested that in the media field, women’s competence is still frequently questioned. Karoliina said that the journalists who are invited as lecturers in the education programmes always claim that female journalists receive more negative feedback:

Everyone has said, well emphasised, that female journalists get it [negative feedback] even more and as a female journalist you should have a thicker skin because in addition to all [the criticism] that men get, you also get criticised for being a woman.

The journalism students suggested that working as a woman in the media field requires developing a tolerance for threats and criticism and that identifying as a feminist may be particularly risky because of increasing anti-gender sentiments, particularly in the online environment. Alma described the risk that journalists take when writing about feminism as follows:

They flood you with threats, like “I know where you live,” threaten you with rape, violence, these sick things. (...) If one writes about women’s rights, even if you are a male journalist, if you write about women’s rights or in a feminist way, there will be threats.

Therefore, the participants felt that women in particular had to arm themselves against criticism. In a way, their narratives resonate with previous analyses suggesting that in a postfeminist context, resilience has become an individualized imperative through which women are invited to become flexible and adaptable as well as to adopt a positive attitude towards negative experiences (Gill & Orgad, 2018). However, cultivating the “postfeminist” dispositions of confidence and resilience can be seen as a pragmatic “coping strategy” (Keisu & Brodin, 2022). The postfeminist imperatives of self-improvement, then, provided ways for young women to manage the insecurities of the unequal media field, in which women are still more prone to having their competences questioned than men.

Conclusion

Focusing on two different fields, care and media, this article complements previous theorizing on postfeminism by showing how field-specific gendered disadvantages and understandings inform young women’s engagements with postfeminism. More specifically, the article has identified shared elements in the care work and media students’ narratives, suggesting that both groups employed postfeminism as a pragmatic sensibility to manage the persistent paradoxes of gender and inter-sectional equality in the Finnish labour market and welfare state.

First, I showed that young women studying to become practical nurses deployed a pragmatic postfeminist sensibility because the emphasis on individual choice and freedom from gendered constraints provided them with a means to lay claim to a culturally valued, autonomous and agentic mode of subjectivity. Furthermore, the care work students’ narratives also echoed the postfeminist emphasis on self-responsibility when they discussed their hopes of avoiding work in certain care work settings. However, from a pragmatic perspective, these aspirations can be interpreted as stemming from the unresolved contradiction between the rationality of care (Waerness, 1984) and the precarious conditions of auxiliary care (and elder care more particularly) in the context of the Finnish welfare state restructuring (Hoppania et al., 2016). Second, I showed that although the female media students frequently addressed inequalities in their interviews, their “inequality talk” (Scharff, 2021) was paired with individualized, postfeminist strategies of career achievement. These pragmatic “coping strategies” (Keisu & Brodin, 2022) helped the participants to protect themselves from criticism and hurt and to thus navigate the uncertainties of a competitive industry.

Elaborating on these findings, I suggest that the notion of “pragmatic postfeminism” describes a strategy that young women employ to manage the unresolved contradictions between persistent gender inequalities and their aspirations to overcome such inequalities in a “woman-friendly”

welfare state. In other words, living out the cultural norm of gender equality came at a cost as the participants tended to adopt individualized measures when they saw that they had limited power to change the unequal structures in which they were embedded. Furthermore, my analysis has demonstrated that in the postfeminist context, the masculinist and autonomous ideal of subjectivity becomes an ideal for young women across different sectors, but their possibilities of laying claim to such subjectivity remain dependent on their different positions in the intersecting hierarchies of the Finnish labour market. In particular, the article has shown that similarly to long-standing discourses of gender equality as a marker of Finnishness (Honkasalo, 2013), the postfeminist versions of equality (Kolehmainen, 2022) also work to exclude young women from migrant backgrounds, who find themselves subjectified as docile and “migranticised” (elder) care workers instead of aspirational “top girls”. To conclude, I suggest two avenues for future research. First, I call for more analyses of how postfeminism is imbued not only with country- (see Dosekun, 2015; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015) but also industry-specific inconsistencies. Second, I suggest that future research should examine in more detail the intersecting hierarchies of contemporary societies that inform women’s possibilities of engaging with postfeminism as a pragmatic sensibility.

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