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Immigrant Women, Societal Participation and
Compulsory Modes of Gender Equality in Finland

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1. Introduction

This paper looks into how immigration and integration policies in Finland utilise discourses of gender equality to exclude and discipline certain subject positions that immigrant women from other cultures are deemed as sometimes holding. The approach is Foucaultian in the sense that it employs Foucaultian conceptions of discourse, subjectification and discipline. "Subjectification functions through the discursive creation of subject positions that limit the identity of the individuals who are 'eligible' to speak a true discourse, and secondly, through the development of a theoretical framework that has the power to ascribe what constitutes true and 'normal' and to assert its normalising effect on the reality" through various disciplinary methods.¹ The overall argument in this paper is based on the notion that gender issues typically play a crucial role in nationalism and racism. Definitions of 'proper women' and of the woman's place in society are one of the key elements of national culture constructs.² How the Finnish society has negotiated the national role of women will be explained shortly, but first, to put the Finnish immigration discourse into context some words on the patterns of immigration in Finland are due.

Immigration to Finland really started only in the 1990s and the immigration policy has been very strict. Numerically speaking, the proportion of foreign born population is around 3,8% in a country of some 5 million inhabitants.³ Most of this immigration, some 2/3, has been from Western or European countries (largely Estonia and Russia) and only some 25.000 non-Western/European foreigners have obtained Finnish citizenship.⁴ Finland has often been characterised as a racially and culturally homogeneous society, although there have always been indigenous minorities in Finland.⁵ In general, the identification of the nation is blatantly racial although the words referring to biological race are not that common in the 2000s.⁶ But as the theories of new racism have suggested, there has been a cultural turn in the racist ideology that naturalises and essentialises cultural differences in the same way that biological differences were once held 'natural'.⁷

¹ Foucault 1997, 38-39 also 29; 2002; 1982/1984.

² E.g. Chatterjee 1990; Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992/1993; Phoenix 1995; Wobbe 1995; Yuval-Davis 1997a; and 1997b.

³ Jaakkola 2009.

⁴ The estimation is based on the online statistics of Tilastokeskus / Statistics Finland, www.tilastokeskus.fi.

⁵ E.g. Matinheikki-Kokko and Pitkänen 2002, 49.

⁶ E.g. Keskinen et al. 2009.

⁷ E.g. Balibar and Wallerstein 1991.

2. Immigrant Women and Gender Equality in Finland

2.1. Multiculturalism vs. Gender Equality

Paralleling the arguments of the theory of new racism, Akkerman and Hagelund have connected the general trend of stressing gender equality in Europe with the increasing electoral support for anti-immigration parties. This cultural racism has created an unlikely alliance between the far right and the feminists both of which base their arguments on a discursive order in which large-scale immigration is identified as threatening fundamental values of the host society.⁸ In general, this type of new assimilationism criticises multiculturalist policies of causing the failure of integrating 'ethnically' different immigrants. Women's rights have been one of the fronts at which the criticism of multiculturalism has become more acute. In Finland, the brand of multiculturalism propagated by the Finnish state is already thin, and integration is mainly framed in terms of 'behaving as the Finns do'.⁹ In terms of multiculturalism and gender equality the statements below evidence how gender relations are culturally defined and how the societal positions of immigrant women are explicitly disciplined:

The wellbeing and social cohesion of Finland requires that people are committed to shared values, i.e. to democracy, equality and respect for human rights. Immigrants have the same rights and duties as the indigenous population. Their ability to maintain their culture and their language needs to be supported, but not at the expense of basic rights, like women's and children's rights or the security and liberty of their person (Finnish Parliament 5.2.2003; comment by a Social Democratic MP during the Parliamentary discussion on integration legislation).

Informing immigrant women about their rights and about the law is important so that they can evaluate their own position in their family and in the society in relation to the Finnish legislation (Report on the implementation of integration legislation: Finnish Government 31.5.2002).

Whilst compiling the integration plan¹⁰ for the immigrant, officials will always need to make sure that the immigrant is representing his/her own will. In this regard, there have been problems for example due to the cultural differences related to the woman's position (Finnish Parliament - Social Affairs and Health Committee 2.10.2002).

The Committee draws attention to the need of stressing European views on human rights, democracy and gender equality in immigrant training in order to prevent problems (Finnish Parliament - Social Affairs and Health Committee 2.10.2002).

As the above statements show, in Finland 'unequal' treatment of women cannot be defended by cultural rights. Tellingly, the government has also published a booklet for immigrants on how to be equal in Finland.¹¹

⁸ Akkerman and Hagelund 2007, 212.

⁹ Lepola 2000.

¹⁰ The integration plan is an official, three-year plan that all qualified, unemployed immigrants have to do in cooperation with local authorities. The plan is aimed at increasing the immigrant's chances of getting employment and can include language training, basic, vocational or additional training and job placements. Any benefits are tied to the adherence to this three year plan. There has been talk about extending to those immigrants outside the labour market also.

¹¹ "Equal in Finland: Information for Immigrant Women and Men" Finnish Ministry of the Interior 2009. For additional information and analysis on this document, see Vuori 2009.

2.2. Liberalism and Gender Equality in Finland

As the examples above showed, gender equality is an important component of the self-subjectification of the Finnish nation. The Finnish gender equality is based on the notion of theoretical equality, on equality as a right, which in the Finnish context especially has become a mandatory desire for immigrant women.¹² These definitions of gender equality prevalent in Finland are liberal and constitute an attempt to realise gender equality as 'freedom' and 'equal opportunity'.¹³ Classical forms of liberalism are based on an historical exclusion of women, the property-less and people of colour; it is based on an arrangement in which any difference, that of gender, religion, culture and sexuality are banished into the private sphere and hence excluded from the 'civic' or 'cosmopolitan' culture. In this sense, classical liberalism presupposes and in fact requires sameness that is marked by this exclusion.¹⁴ Academic feminism has been critical of the ways in which womanhood has been excluded from the articulations of humanity.¹⁵ This exclusion is partly visible in the privileging of the 'intellectual' and 'spiritual' characteristics of human beings whereas the supposedly feminine dimension of 'emotions' are excluded from the public sphere. As Boswell effectively describes "[l]iberal universalism is premised on the moral equality of all human beings. More specifically, it is the individual's capacity for autonomy or rationality that generates a series of rights and entitlements".¹⁶ The prominence of 'rationalism' and the consequent binary opposition of ratio/emotion has led to the universalisation of a mode of thought: the thought of 'the white Western man'.¹⁷

Thus, liberalism has a paradoxical relationship with feminism: being at the same time a certain condition and a certain hindrance for realising equality for women.¹⁸ In many ways the Finnish history of gender equality highlights this paradox. The historical development of Finnish gender equality and the special characteristics of the Finnish gender contract¹⁹ have together established a certain mode of existence, an essentialist identity, for women that, especially in the Finnish context, has

¹² E.g. Vuori 2009.

¹³ E.g. Holli 1991; Raevaara 2005.

¹⁴ E.g. Gaus and Courtland 2007.

¹⁵ E.g. Phillips 1993; Mouffe 1995; Hirschmann 1999, 28; Schaeffer 2001.

¹⁶ Boswell 2005, 667.

¹⁷ Here it has to be noted that the subjectification of 'the white Western man' can equally be analysed as an oppressive subjectification for those who would rather adhere to different subject positions, as masculinity studies have done. In addition, in the Finnish context, the alteration of the role of the man is a key point in the governmentality of state feminism.

¹⁸ E.g. Martin 1982; Pateman 1988; Hirschmann 1999.

¹⁹ As opposed to Carole Pateman's famous concept of 'sexual contract' (e.g. in *Sexual Contract*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1988) Scandinavian feminist theory uses the concept of gender contract. This is related to an analysis that focuses more on the complexity of and dependency between the institutional and societal practices of gender roles in society (Rantalaiho 1994, 13-16).

consequences for the inclusion of immigrant women. A short introduction to the particularities of the Finnish context are in order.²⁰

Historically, Finnish women were (among) the first in the world to be granted and to exercise both the unconditional and universal right to vote without property or other restrictions and the right to stand for election in 1906 and Finland had the first female MPs in the world.²¹ The Finnish women's movement was intimately connected to the nationalist movement focusing on the education of the largely peasant population and the mission of the bourgeoisie to civilise the lower classes. It has been argued that because of this engagement Finnish women developed a particular access and ownership of certain sections of the public sphere. This access relied on a conceptualisation of 'societal motherhood' and designated women as the experts and owners of 'caring' and civilising activities in the Finnish society.²² In light of this it is understandable why Finland has had a model of state feminism, i.e. why the interests of women and gender equality have been incorporated into the institutions of state and civil society from the beginning.²³

The Finnish development of gender equality is also unique due to the lack of a pre-war period of mass industrialisation. The gender contract is marked both by the agrarian centuries during which women had been an essential part of the labour force in the small family farms and by what has been conceptualised as a weak model of male breadwinning, which was at the time conceptualised as being due to 'alcoholic and lazy men' who were not capable of providing for their families. In consequence, women became subjectified as 'hard working and reliable' providers for the families. Thus, the women's move straight from the farming sector to the urban industrial and service sector during and after the Second World War was smooth.²⁴ In this framework, the improvement of women's position in the society had become an issue of modernisation of the society in general, and not a specifically feminist issue as such.

Additionally, it has been suggested, that this conceptualisation of women's emancipation as part of modernisation is why Finland never developed a culture of stay-at-home mothers (despite some attempts during the 1950s after the war). Instead, caring has been conceptualised as a paid profession and there exists a "strong resistance towards the housewife or maid culture".²⁵ The gender contract in

²⁰ E.g. Martikainen and Gola 2007, 89.

²¹ Partial political rights had been granted in many other countries before this, but the voting rights could be restricted to local elections only or to women with property, for example. Alternatively, women were in some countries given the right to stand for election but no right to vote or vice versa. In 1907 19 out of the 200 representatives elected to the Finnish Parliament were women.

²² E.g. Anttonen et al. 1994, especially Ollila 1994, 57.

²³ E.g. Ollila 1994, 60; Anttonen 1994.

²⁴ E.g. Anttonen et al. 1994.

²⁵ in Kantola 2006, 60, original reference to Anttonen 1997, 'Feminismi ja sosiaalipolitiikka', pp. 131 and 138.

Finland has framed the issue of stay-at-home mothers as an issue of modernisation: the modern woman is subjectified as 'equal, employed and financially independent': The modern woman has to be an active, educated and working member of the society by definition.²⁶ Hence, for example, the system of public childcare is modelled so that it cheaply enables women's employment, and in this sense the primacy of motherhood as a defining character of women is less pronounced in Finland. Indeed, municipal childcare is preferred over care at home. This preference is based on the conceptualisation of care as a profession and on the formulation of public childcare as a guarantee of equality for children. It is argued that only the (university-)educated, professional carers can provide adequate and correct stimulation for children during their crucial years of development, because the differences between the educational capacity of different mothers was seen to be producing inequalities that hampered children's developmental chances.²⁷

These subjectifications of women and mothers, however, bear on the immigrant woman today. When the immigrant woman enters this societal arrangement, her motherhood becomes subjectified as problematic by the government and is measured against the Finnish discourses of motherhood and the woman's place:

The Committee emphasises the need to improve immigrant women's possibilities for integration and education. Many mothers are completely left outside integration measures when they take care of their children at home. Because of this these women lack language skills and can't help their children with school nor many other things in their children's lives. In bringing up their children immigrant parents are reduced to dependency from their children, who function as messengers between the kindergarten or the school and the home. Many parents are helpless and afraid when bringing up their children in the Finnish context. Immigrant women, especially stay-at-home mothers, need help in bringing up their children and they need activities that help them to integrate to the Finnish society. It is pivotal to offer them language training. Especially getting those without writing or reading skills into training is indispensable, so they will not be completely marginalised. By educating mothers we can also prevent the marginalisation of children and youth. (Finnish Parliament - Social Affairs and Health Committee 2.10.2002).

It is particularly intolerable that women who work at home caring for their families get very little language training. If we, the mainstream population, are not ready to give sufficient language training to mothers of immigrant children, we do not have the right then to lament about the ganging up of immigration youth and their problems of adaptation. It is completely short-sighted and irresponsible to create a language gap inside a family between the mother and the children or between the generations (Finnish Parliament 5.6.2002; comments made by a MP from the Green Party).

The position of immigrant women in Scandinavia became very clear with the faith of the Swedish Fadime²⁸. Women's integration to the Finnish society is important not only for the women themselves but also for the wellbeing of the whole family. There is a saying that 'when you educate a woman, you educate the village', and if the woman is left outside the family that is otherwise

²⁶ E.g. Julkunen 1994, 190-192.

²⁷ E.g. Julkunen 1994, 195-198.

²⁸ Fadime was a daughter of an immigrant family who was murdered by her family. The murder was interpreted as an honour killing.

educated and proficient in the national language, it certainly causes the marginalisation of these women and their enclosing inside their family community (Finnish Parliament 5.6.2002; comments made by a MP from the Green Party).

These statements highlight how the immigrant woman's motherhood is marked for disciplinary rationality to correct: the mother's function is to guarantee societal equality for her children and this duty can only succeed through her own education and integration. By remaining enclosed in her family community the mother fails to promote the wellbeing of her family. Because of the discursive definition of motherhood, the government has recommended that all immigrant children be integrated into the society through municipal childcare at least after the age of three.²⁹

This Finnish logic of gender equality extends to the definitions of immigrants as members of the society. In today's Finnish society, women's citizenship is defined through employment: Employment for women is the norm, and in this sense, the model of female equality is based on the traditionally 'masculine' conceptualisation of citizenship, as equality that is based on the woman's capacity to be a citizen and a worker in the same way as a man. In this sense, in Finland women's equality has been striven for without questioning the exclusion of 'feminine' values from the public sphere, from the definitions of 'the citizens' and 'the worker', and the rejection of values and 'emotions' associated with 'traditional femininity' has been conceptualised as equality and not as (partial) oppression.³⁰ Although, it could be argued that the influence of the welfare state model, social democracy and the Scandinavian state feminism incorporate more 'feminine' values than is the case in many other Western countries, these rights, nevertheless, are attached to the worker and are gender-blind. In comparison to, for example the United Kingdom, the Nordic welfare state has been modelled according to the assumption of women as workers. Hence, in general integration of immigrants is measured as employment and their unemployment is often attributed to lacking skills and lower levels of education. But the government also expresses a special concern for women outside the employment markets, as the below statements evidence:

There are such women among the immigrants for whom integration has gone well and who are part of the working life, but there are also such women who need special support and encouragement in integration and in finding employment. These women may have been left without education in their home countries, their families have multiple children and it has not been part of their value systems that women educate themselves or have jobs. Despite whether these women work or not, it is important that they participate in the Finnish society (Finnish Government 31.5.2002).

Particular attention should be paid to the position of immigrant women. A majority of immigrant women have particular problems. A large proportion has gaps in their writing and reading skills, in their language skills and in their basic civic skills. On the other hand, their strength and their know-how is left hidden inside the walls of the home. They need to resort to the security of women's refuge homes with their children more often than the rest of the population. The Finnish society that respects gender equality emphasises the equal educational, employment and societal political

²⁹ E.g. Finnish Government 31.5.2002.

³⁰ Anttonen 1994, 223.

participation opportunities of both women and men. Securing these rights to immigrant women necessitates open discussions together with men and women and many measures speeding up integration. (Finnish Parliament 5.2.2003 comments made by a MP from the Social Democratic Party).

The cultural background of applicants will be taken into account in student selection and the provision of training. Improvements will be made particularly to ensure the participation of immigrant girls and women in training (Finnish Government 19.10.2006).

The Committee stresses that particular attention must be paid to the immigrant women under the threat of being marginalised, especially the stay-at-home mothers, and their ability to participate in language training (Finnish Parliament - Education and Culture Committee 21.11.2002).

Thus, these statements cultures in which women have multiple children, stay home taking care of them and in which values do not emphasise the education and working of women are presented as problematic and counter-productive. Thus in this sense, the conceptualisations and subjectifications of immigrant women clearly send a normative message to immigrant women to occupy the similar subject positions that are prescribed by the model of Finnish gender equality: The diversity of modes of life is disciplined. It is presented as obvious or at the least highly recommendable that women would want to educate themselves and to work: Not working is a 'sacrifice' that is not welcome in the Finnish society. Instead of questioning the subservient role of 'feminine' values in liberal countries, the Finnish model of state feminism disciplines alternative modes of arranging family life that do not accord to the values of a capitalist model of two-breadwinner family prevalent in Finland.

3. Conclusion

Despite the assumed pluralism of liberalism in practice liberalism erases and silences difference: "only some interests, views, and life plans are seen as worthy by the state and hence protected by rights".³¹ This is obviously also the situation for immigrants and their life choices. "If agents do not make the 'correct' choices (which always happen to be defined in coherence with the interests of economically privileged white men), irrationality is presumed".³² The current feminist theory has already discovered and accepted the diversity in women and their life choices.³³ In the Finnish model of state feminism never questions the supremacy of the liberal feminist mode of existence vis-à-vis other modes of existence or the implicit domination of the masculine citizenship model. In this respect the treatment of immigrant women in Finland is clearly impacted by the universalist assumptions embedded in the Finnish forms of state feminism.³⁴ The problems of the immigrant marginalisation are not located in the universalist and culturally racist criteria for success, but in the maladjustment of the immigrant. Recognising and

³¹ Hirschmann 1999, 28.

³² Ibid.

³³ E.g. Oksala 1997 and her discussion about the impact of Judith Butler on the feminist subjectifications of women.

³⁴ E.g. Saarinen 2007.

rethinking the paradoxical relationship between feminism and liberalism and the humanity politics based on it could open the door to rethinking that relationship, and redefining what is at stake in it.³⁵ This rethinking could have positive consequences for the distance that an immigrant woman is required to cross before acceptance into the Finnish society becomes possible.³⁶

The central argument in this paper has been that by constructing a vision of Finland as an epitome of female equality the immigration discourse sets conditions to the way that immigrant women are required to live their lives in order to integrate; it sets conditions on the mode of societal participation and dictates the acceptable desires, ambitions and life choices for immigrant women.³⁷ In this framework the immigrant woman's integration is 'calculated' in terms of her level of equality vis-à-vis the husband, her independence, career and education. Other types of life choices are problematised. The underlying lack of any substantial multiculturalism in this approach, which is evidenced in the strict definition of what constitutes societal participation in Finland, designates a constellation of power that contradictory to policy aims can contribute towards further exclusion, feelings of non-belonging and inadequacy among immigrant women instead of allowing immigrant women to form their own modes of societal participation. Although, my argument certainly is not anti-feminist or against gender equality, it is nevertheless aimed against the kind of cultural imperialism underlining some assumptions regarding immigrant women that, in a way, sometimes, similarly to patriarchalism, rob the immigrant women of the agency to define their own interests and life choices.³⁸

³⁵ Hirschmann 1999, 30-33.

³⁶ E.g. Martikainen and Gola 2007; Kantola 2006, 11.

³⁷ Also Keskinen et al. 2009.

³⁸ E.g. Keskinen et al. 2009; Martikainen and Gola 2007.

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