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Complexities of Care in the Political Aspirations of Finnish Girls

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ABSTRACT

This article explores aspirations concerning future and political participation of Finnish adolescent girls. We analyse data produced in 2018 by 856 girls aged 13–20 in response to a questionnaire. We ask (1) what futures do the girls see as possible and desirable for themselves and (2) what kind of political agency is constructed in the girls' accounts? While our interest in political participation has steered our analysis, the thematic analysis led us to focus on the changing and sustaining possibilities available for the girls and especially the process by which these girls are becoming (political) agents within the plurality of discourses defining contemporary femininities. Drawing on feminist literature on girls' agency, girl power and care our analysis highlights the complexities of care entangled in the political agency, actions and (gendered) societal expectations visible in the girls' responses. We develop the concept of triple burden to describe the contradictory terrain where the emancipated strong and active girls are imagining their future.

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Intro

I don't understand the question, but I guess I would like to spread love to everyone who's not getting it but deserves to be loved. I want to grow trees everywhere and I would like to make people listen themselves and others more. Zupzuplooklookaglow-worm, 15

During the past few decades, research focusing on girls has witnessed a transition, with a growing number of studies on girls' lives, experiences, thoughts and aspirations in terms of agency and participation. Girls are no longer seen as passive or victims of societal and political circumstances with little or no power over their destiny, but rather as increasingly active political participants (Driver, 2024; Loveday et al., 2021; Taft, 2014, 2020). The rise of high-profile girl activists, such as Greta Thurnberg or Malala Yousafzai, has changed the way girls are seen as political actors and citizens. Taft (2020) states that girl activists have always existed, and girls have been active in many movements from

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strikes to civil rights. However, what has changed is the cultural, political and social landscape that has made girl activists more legible and interesting for media coverage (Taft, 2020, p. 2).

This change to active and emancipated girls, with power over their destiny and to solve the wicked problems around us, was the main inspiration for this study, as we started to analyse future aspirations and political participation of adolescent Finnish girls. In this article, we report on our analysis of data produced in 2018 by 856 girls aged 13–20 in response to a questionnaire. Here, we focus on how the participants write about their dreams concerning the future, their means for achieving these and their position in and relationship to society currently—whether they considered it possible to affect the wider context framing their lives. Our initial interest for this paper was related to political participation: views, interests and worries as well as resources.

While political participation steered our analysis, in the process of working with the data we became more interested in the process by which the girls are becoming (political) agents within the plurality of discourses defining contemporary femininities. Although we found strong and active girls matching the image of politically active (hero) girls in our data, we also collided with contradictions. Many of the girls not only stated their worries about societal and global developments but were ready to act on these, as in Zupzuplooklookaglow-worm's above-cited response to the question about what she would like to impact on society. After the first rounds of reading the data, we started to feel overwhelmed, even exhausted by the burden that the girls seemed eager and ready to bear.

These girls were aware of societal and global problems and said they were going to address these. At the same time, they were planning to take up traditional mothering roles and fulfil themselves by having a career, or “a dream job” as many of them called it, travelling, staying fit and happy. Yet, in the data, these aspirations are not represented as contradictory. They flow together, cross paths and separate again, sometimes in the same response.

To make sense of this intertwining, we draw on theoretical discussions about girls' agency, girl power and care. We ask (1) what futures the girls see as possible and desirable for themselves and (2) what kind of political agency they construct?

Theoretical Underpinnings: Girls, (Political) Agency, Girl Power and Care

Girlhood—what is meant by this and who is a girl—is currently a debated construct and concept in the field of girlhood studies. As, for example, Mitchell and Smith (2024) have pointed out, this debate reflects recent changes in how we understand gender (as non-binary) as well as different societal and cultural changes. In this article, our understanding on girlhood draws from Butler's (1990) ideas on gender. We see girlhood not as a characteristic determined by biology but as a social and performative formation that is constantly (re)produced through repeated enactments of behaviours, gestures and social norms. In terms of our analysis, we approach girlhood, and womanhood, as something that is formed in and by our data, asking what it means to be and become a girl/woman in the contemporary Finnish society.

Our reading of agency draws from the critical feminist tradition that has formed against overly individualized approaches to agency highlighting free will, rationality

and goal orientation, while staying critical of approaches where the subject is conceived as being totally conditioned (e.g. Oinas, 2001, see also Coffey & Faruggia, 2014). Following Ojala et al. (2009, pp. 14–15), we are interested in how historical, material, cultural and social conditions play in the formation of agency and see agency as situated and constantly emerging in social interaction. Thus, while we are interested of how our respondents understand their own positioning and possibilities in relation to future making (making decisions concerning and impacting personal, society's and the globe's future), we see their dreams concerning the future as embedded in culture. To articulate desirable and inevitable futures, the girls draw on historically and culturally specific discourses concerning female citizenship. In the analysed stories, these appear as different, even contradictory representations of future selves, responding to cultural expectations. In terms of agency, we are interested in the kind of citizenship that becomes possible/desirable for women within the discourses available to the girls, and in how the girls themselves are making sense of their agency—of what is possible for them and why.

To understand the historical social context in which the girls are dreaming their gendered futures, we connect our analysis to two key academic discussions examining girls and women, their social meanings and assigned roles, and agency. Our understanding of the girls' ambivalent positioning as both emancipated saviours of humanity and individualistic consumer citizens is indebted to scholarly discussions on girl power and can-do girls. Girl power has been in the centre of girlhood studies, and while it has been critically discussed in many ways, it has also had a significant part in the inauguration of the field (Gonick, 2024).

Tormulainen (2018) sees the birth of girl power movement connected to the overall post-feministic period in the early 2000s where female agency, femininity as a bodily capital, consumerism and emphasis on choice, individualism and empowerment were at the centre. Girl power crystallizes in a narrative on a successful young woman, who is creative, ambitious and self-assured (Tormulainen, 2018, p. 11). Or, as Gonick (2024) states, girl power recodes the performance of femininity as an empowering choice that girls then seemingly choose. Girl power has been criticized for promoting heterosexuality and reinstating whiteness as the norm (see, for example, McRobbie, 2009). However, as Butler (2013) points out, it is too simplifying to say that the ideal postfeministic subject is a white, Western, heterosexual woman. She argues that while postfeminism might primarily represent an affirmation of a white heterosexual subject, it still doesn't simply exclude the racial and sexual other and gives a vast amount of popular culture examples of this (Butler, 2013, p. 49). Understanding this transition from a discourse resisting normative gender roles to another emphasizing individual responsibilities and freedoms has helped us to make sense of how the apparent ambivalences and even contradictions in the girls' stories contribute to their own subjectivities—how they make sense of themselves.

In *Future Girl*

(2004) Anita Harris related the cultural representation of the can-do girl to girls' emerging subjectivities. Harris sees the can-do girl as a trope directed at girls through books, webpages, services and products, which works as a wider cultural narrative offering everyone clues on how to best cope with all the dramatic social, political and cultural changes at the turn of the millennium. In terms of agency,

Harris emphasizes, in many ways this trope encourages but also creates expectations of girls to fulfil their dreams, take charge of their lives and seize opportunities around them. Thus, while the girl power movement increased popular interest in girls' lives, thoughts and agency, creating many new possibilities for them, Harris notes

that this new interest in looking at and hearing from girls is not just celebratory, but is, in part, regulatory as well. There is a process of creation and control at work in the act of regarding young women as the winners in a new world. In holding them up as the exemplars of new possibility, we also actively construct them to perform this role. (Harris, 2004, p. 8)

If girl power research has provided us tools to make sense of contemporary girlhood and the discursive context in which girls understand themselves and what they can become, care literature is integral to understanding contemporary girlhood and girls' dreams in a longer historical continuum of female citizenship. Universally care in all its forms is seen as a female responsibility. Of course men do care work inside and outside the home, but women are seen as more *suitable* for care work through motherhood (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Näre, 2012). Women are seen as better in caring as they are expected to do it; it is a role they are expected to play (Tronto, 2016, p. 30).

With Joan Tronto (1993), we understand care as a backbone of society and thus, political. The political question is not just how care is arranged in society, but also how it is valued (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Care literature has given us a framework to analyse girls' desires related to motherhood and a theoretical concept to make sense of less apparent connections between different aspects in the girls' dreams. By understanding "caring as a species activity" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), an ethical orientation towards the world and others, we see care as organizing girls' extending citizenship. The future citizenship of girls is formed relationally, through commitments not only to close family members, but also to fellow citizens, and to making world a better place for all species.

Two commitments are foundational to our approach to analysing girls' political agency. First, we define the political inductively. This means that we returned to ask what the girls politicize—what they want to influence and have an impact on—at different points of analysis. We consider the question of how girls become citizens as political. This, and the ambivalent relationship of girlhood and politics/activism raised by earlier researchers, has pushed us to look for the political beyond our participants' definitions. As Craddock (2019) claims, the "ideal activist" is male and the ideal type of activism—direct action—fits poorly with the agency represented by the girl power movement. Thus, while girl activists are increasingly celebrated in the media, politics and activism are still not easily accessible to girls and women, and their relationship to politics remains ambivalent (Taft, 2020).

Secondly, as mothers with careers and commitments to the make world a better place we are painfully aware of the work and resources required to achieve the things our research participants are dreaming to do in their lives. This difference in perspectives has been apparent in the comments we received when presenting this data in seminars and conferences. It would be tempting to discard the girls' representations of agency as unrealistic. But realism did not frame the questionnaire—we asked the girls to dream. As the girls are writing about their future selves, they have not yet faced all

the material conditions that would set limits to their narration of self (see Ojala et al., 2009). Rather than assess the girls' dreams as realistic or unrealistic, we seek to understand what makes these dreams possible and certain forms of female citizenship desirable, making girls aspire to achieve specific positions and contribute to society and the world in specific ways.

Data, Methods and Coding

The data we analyse in this article came from a questionnaire titled “Young people’s passions and values.” The questionnaire had five open-ended questions on young people’s (1) hopes and dreams (2) fears (3) means of societal and political participation (4) how the world will look in 20 years and (5) thoughts on sustainability. The respondents were aged 13–20 and 94.8% identified as female, 0.8% as male, 0.8% other and 3.8% didn’t want to define their gender. A vast majority, 83%, of the respondents were 13–16 years of age. Even though the age distribution is quite big, the responses did not differ so much by age. For example, while some under-aged respondents discussed how they cannot yet vote and thus be “fully” politically active in the society, this, or formal politics and means of participation in general, came up only in few of the responses.

The questionnaire was paid for by (ALL-YOUTH) project in collaboration with *Demi*. The questions for the questionnaire were formulated collaboratively by the project’s researchers and therefore were a combination of various themes. The editorial staff of *Demi* conducted the questionnaire online on *Demi*’s webpage. In terms of research ethics, the project followed national standard (TENK, 2019) according to which institutional ethics approval process is implemented only when the research is unable to comply with the general guidelines concerning research participants’ dignity and autonomy and without causing significant risk, damage or harm to research participants. In the case of our study, review was found unnecessary. Written consent was acquired from the participants in connection to the questionnaire and all participants under 15 were asked to ask a permission from their parents to take part.

The questionnaire was open for answers for 2 weeks in the autumn of 2018. After removing the blank entries from the data, the number of responses was 865. The aliases we use in this article are ones used by the girls themselves and for them to better understood we have translated them into English.

Age and gender were the only background variables asked. This brings certain limitations to the analysis of the data based on background of the respondents. Considering the profile of the *Demi* magazine, the respondents were unsurprisingly predominantly female. While we lack information concerning other aspects of the respondents’ social backgrounds, according to Tormulainen (2010), who has studied representations of girlhood and sexuality in the magazine, the readers of *Demi* were middle-class girls from big or middle-sized urban areas. Moreover, the responses in many ways reflect middle-class, white and heterosexual values.

We focused on two (of the five) open-ended questions in the questionnaire: (1) What do you dream of, and can your dreams be achieved? and (2) What kind of things would you like to have an impact on in the society or around you? How are you going to influence things in the society? The entries to these questions also focus on ways and means of (political) participation which was our main interest. Responses to the open-

ended questions varied from short, single issue, one or two sentence entries to very long entries discussing multiple topics ranging from personal mundane life to bigger issues such as equality or climate change.

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process was bottom-up and inductive. The analysis began with Suni getting familiar with the data. Next, Suni systematically coded relevant data segments generating initial codes. After this, the initial codes were gathered up into potential themes. Throughout the process, Suni checked whether the themes worked with the data extracts gathered under them.

The first question on dreams was coded under seven themes drawn inductively from the data: (1) career; (2) mundane and everyday things (such as hobbies, spending time with friends and family); (3) having an impact on something; (4) travelling; (5) studying; (6) happiness and good life; and (7) love, marriage and kids. The first five themes were constructed during the first round of inductive coding of the data. After this, during the second round of coding that focused specifically on recognizing overlaps between the codes and on gaps left by the existing codes, the last two themes were added. The data was then rearranged thematically into sub-sets for closer analysis. Some themes, such as career and family, were mentioned often in connection to other themes, and therefore, some entries were cross-coded under two or more themes.

With the second question about impacting on society, we took somewhat different approach to coding. During initial round of reading the responses to this question three themes, (1) climate change, (2) caring for others and (3) equality were recognized from the data. After this, the data was coded mainly through word searches under related codes (climate change, caring for others, equality). After this phase, responses that did not fall under these themes were coded line by line, and another four codes were drawn out of the data: (4) inequality and racism, (5) mental health, (6) bullying and (7) politics. Again, the data was coded using word searches. The word searches was done by using the root form of the Finnish word, without suffixes that change the meaning.

After coding and organizing the data thematically, we went through the data together and agreed on a thematic structure. Together we looked for bigger and binding themes in the data to identify overlaps and build connections. In this article, we focus on three of these themes: individualism, care and global ecological crisis, which we will discuss in more detail in the next three sections. Although care is more prevalent in some responses than others, we argue that it unfolds into all the three themes.

Individualistic Career Girls

One of the biggest themes in the girl's dreams for their future was work and career goals. Career and work were mentioned in almost a third of the entries. Work is, of course, a huge part of people's lives and, furthermore, "good citizens" are expected to participate in society foremost through paid work (Ågren, 2024). Farrugia (2020) has studied how young people construct the language of career and how projects of self-actualization are articulated on line with the requirements for a workforce. Farrugia (2020) discusses how young people discuss their "career" aspirations and how work takes an extensive role in the formation of self, thus "collapsing personal development, the cultivation of personal uniqueness, and the capacity to live a meaningful and satisfying life into the experience of work" (Farrugia, 2020, p. 857).

This resonates with how the girls discuss work and career in our data. For them, it is not only about finding a suitable and fulfilling career, but about a “dream job,” as many of them call it:

My dream is to have a nice and well-paid job and I think this definitely is possible to attain this, unless the world has already ended by then. *ampskuh*, 15

The most popular career paths for the girls were traditional and esteemed occupations, such as lawyer, doctor, journalist, police officer or teacher. Work in more creative industries such as musician, actor, model or writer was mentioned many times, as well as a career as a professional athlete. Care professions, such as nurse, physiotherapist, paramedic and geriatric nurse, were mentioned as well, but these were not very prominent in the data. A somewhat surprising theme that was brought up in different contexts was becoming a writer and especially writing a book either as an occupation or as a way to have an impact on something, as *Siirizzkas*’s quote shows:

I dream about writing a book and becoming a best-selling author, and also travelling around the world. I would like to be an outspoken influencer. I believe many things are possible if you really want it and keep on trying. *Siirizzka*, 15

It would be tempting to analyse this as a sign of belonging to a certain social class as indeed the dreams do reflect a very middle-class norms of society. *Harris (2004)* points out, young girls tend to dream about the same bright futures full of possibilities and lucrative career opportunities irrespective of their class. It is only later on that the differences in resources and capital become apparent as life raises more obstacles for some, while for others, university education and well-paid white-collar jobs are not only accessible, but the norm (*Harris, 2004*, pp. 42–44.). Our point is not to say that all girls have the same possibilities in life, as they clearly do not. Rather, we argue that Finnish girls grow up to believe that they can have it all and do it all, which is not true even for the middle-class, white, non-disabled girl, even if it might be somewhat easier for them (see *Tormulainen, 2012, 2018*). A striking recurring theme in the entries was emphasis on the individual and what the girls call “hard work.” This also applies to other themes outside work and career. In this way of thinking, societal problems become individual problems that can be tackled through hard work. Indeed, for these girls, the way to succeed in life and find the “dream job” is through “working really hard,” “giving your best” or “believing in yourself”:

I want a supple and well-trained body. Also, I want a positive mind during the week and I want to be everyone’s friend and have a good reputation. I would like to know how to cook and be as artistic and goal-oriented as possible. My Instagram feed would be perfect and I would like to meet new people. I would like to be good at something, preferably dancing or playing the piano. I believe I can achieve these through work. *Adaiswonderful*, 13

I dream about life in Los Angeles as a professional dancer. I want to achieve the same level as Maddie Ziegler and Julianne Hough, who are big names in the dance world. I think my dream is achievable, but I have to work really hard, like 168%. *balloon*, 13.

What becomes visible in *Adaiswonderful*’s and *balloon*’s quotes above is how the dream job and career are just part of the bigger, all-consuming project of the self. *Nikunen (2021)* suggests that investing in one’s mental and bodily capacities have become more

pronounced as the competition for good employment has become fiercer. “Employability” is the affective and bodily work of the individual of gathering all kinds of credentials and skills, and taking part in never-ending self-improvement (Nikunen, 2021, p. 207).

The girls are an epitome of Harris’s can-do girls and self-made subjectivity. These girls are not only created but are creating themselves to be the flexible, resilient and self-sufficient citizens ready to serve late modern Western capitalism who can make it on their own. Well-educated girls with glamorous consumer lifestyles and successful and lucrative career paths ahead of them are seen as embodying success in life, and all girls are expected to be able to accomplish this (Harris, 2004, pp. 8, 47). In this sphere of career, the girls in our data see the world as full of choice and freedom. Only when we discuss the social relations within which these career goals are to be achieved, does it become apparent that these dreams are sprinkled with the old gender norms; besides becoming well-educated career women, the girls seemingly choose to be mothers and wives, while taking care of their bodies and appearances.

Traditional Femininities vs. Girl Agency

The theme where care is most prevalent is family and motherhood. This is the theme where traditional gender roles, as well as gendered caring roles, become most visible. Yet sometimes very traditional roles, as mothers, wives and homemakers, are constantly narrated with agency.

Finding love, having a boyfriend or a husband, getting married and having children was a recurring theme in the data and mentioned in one-fourth of the entries. Getting married and having children was often seen as “the basics of life,” a concrete example of a good life. Motherhood and marriage were seen as prerequisites of “normal” life and not so much as requiring “hard work” and “trying your best.” Finding a significant other and obtaining a family were taken for granted. In most of these entries focusing on family and marriage, the goal is to have a good, balanced, healthy and happy life.

I dream about a bright future, where I would live in a house on the shore of a lake with a man, maybe with a child, and a dog. We would go to work, exercise and everything would be good in life. We would be healthy and so on. I think all this is achievable. Fun, 15

According to Mustosmäki and Sihto (2019, p. 158) during the last decade intensive motherhood, where mothers are seen as the primary caregivers of children and the choices mothers make are seen as core determinators of children’s development and well-being has become a powerful and visible ideal. It is therefore interesting how the girls in the data discuss motherhood and marriage in such a nonchalant way—as easy to achieve and manage. However, as Mustosmäki and Sihto (2019, p. 159) note, the cultural narrative of good motherhood is so strong that mothers find it hard to talk about their negative feelings, tiredness or hardships or to live up to the ideals of good motherhood. Thus, cultural representations of motherhood might be less likely to touch negative aspects of mothering, and more likely to represent it as happening naturally.

As the vast majority of the girls in the data are likely not mothers, their dreams draw on cultural representations of motherhood, rather than its practice. Hence, they might

not yet understand the idea that motherhood is hard to obtain, perform or combine with other aspects of life. In the data, none of the girls mention that having a career would mean not having children. On the contrary, many saw it possible to combine quite challenging career paths with having children as Emerald's and Nica's quotes show:

I dream about my own big family, many children and a big house somewhere around Stockholm. I dream about becoming a doctor at Stockholm's Karolinska Institute [a prestigious medical school] and my dream is to become one of the best Les Mills BodyJam instructors. I dream about owning a kennel, where I would raise Eurasiers and other dogs. I also dream about having a cottage in Lapland. I also dream about having a house on the archipelago, for example the Åland Oslands. I dream about a successful career and a profession where I can see the outcome of my work and my work has a meaning. I dream about having a job that is meaningful and important. I think most of these dreams can be achieved. Emerald, 16

"I dream about successful career in music, literature, or cinema. With time and through hard work it can be possible but not certain. I dream about a happy family life; a house and pets, especially cats, a wonderful husband, and a few children. I believe this dream is quite easy to achieve. My unrealistic dream is to achieve magic powers and find a magic community. I would love my child to attend Hogwarts." Nica, 17

Finland has a reputation for high gender equality, which most likely affects the way the girls see the possibilities of combining motherhood with everything else. Yet, in 2022 88% of parents taking parental leave were women and one-fifth of fathers did not use any of their paternity or parental leave (Keskinen et al., 2022, p. 8; Miettinen, 2023). It has been stated that parental stress is higher and combining work and family life is more difficult in countries like Finland that have high level of gender equality in the workplace than in those where gender roles are more traditional (Hagqvist et al., 2017). This could be because mothers who work full time in countries that support this in many ways assume that men will take part in household and childcare duties. In reality, mothers still do most child and home-related labour and face the same, highly ideal, expectations as mothers in more traditional countries (Hagqvist et al., 2017, p. 794).

The Global Ecological Crisis and Care

In previous sections, we have gone from individual to family dreams. We have discussed the expectations and burdens on girls and women to be successful and hard-working, wives and mothers, and to care for others. This is often called the double burden on women, especially in a country like Finland where most women work outside the home. In this section, we move to dreams of impacting on society and how this intertwines with care.

Multiple feminist studies on girlhood and activism suggest that recognizing girls as capable and ambitious societal and political actors makes individual girls become the solution to collective problems, such as poverty, education or climate change (for example, Driver, 2024; Loveday et al., 2021, p. 4). This places a great deal of responsibility and pressure on them to address issues that they cannot tackle alone (Taft, 2020). In our data, this aspect of caring constructs a third burden on top of the burdens of motherhood and career, creating a triple burden. Shushing's quote is a prime example of this and encapsulates the remains of the girl power movement at the turn of the millennium,

a narrative of emancipated, ambitious and confident young women ready to take the world:

I would like to have an impact on almost everything that I think is wrong, like inequality, poor human rights, mistreatment of animals, misuse of nature, pollution and so on. I try to do my part by recycling, using less plastic, electricity, water and other things, condemning racist, sexist, and other offensive things, thinking what I eat and when I get a bit older I would like to move around and help people, to develop solutions to climate issues and talk to people about these things! Shushing, 14

In one third of the entries, the girls mentioned wanted to impact on ecological issues such as climate change and global warming, pollution or extinction. This resonates with other studies that show how women are more concerned about environmental issues than men (Autio & Wilska, 2003; Fransberg et al., 2022; Tindall et al., 2003). However, MacGregor (2006, p. 5) argues that the whole idea that is in women's nature as mothers to care about the world where their children will live is problematic and can enforce sexist and essentialist notions about women's place and roles in society. Nevertheless, the environmental theme was bigger than any of the other issues the girls wanted to have an impact on, although many of the girls mentioned various complicated issues. The following quote from Lonelycat summarizes the complexity and the vastness of these issues the girls see around them and want to solve:

With my own small deeds I would like to have an effect on animal and nature conservation, climate change, equality, and feminism. Lonelycat, 16

The girls want to impact on climate issues by changing their own behaviours, such as becoming vegetarian or vegan, consuming less or more thoughtfully or picking up trash. The girls tend to favour mundane actions. This way of participating in society is very typical for young people, as other studies show on youth political participation in general (Rytioja & Kallio, 2018) and on climate issues in particular (Piispa & Myllyniemi, 2019, Saari & Lötjönen 2021).

I have recently started to think the small everyday decisions I make. I take a shopping bag with me, so I won't have to buy one at the store. I rather take my own fork and knife with me, and I don't buy the disposable ones you can get from the salad buffet at the grocery store. You can make an enormous difference with your own choices. I still live with my parents which makes it harder for me to make my own decisions. It'll be a different story when I move out on my own. Then the choice will be completely mine. With my friends I strictly condemn narrow-mindedness and I try to talk to people about what their reasoning is behind their opinions. broken princess, 17

As the above quote shows, many girls are in subordinate position due to their age. Many of the girls still live with their parents and thus not all of them can control dietary and consumption decisions in their household. Furthermore, age influences participation in society, for instance minors do not have the right to vote and are not eligible to stand for election, but they do have the obligation to attend school (Fransberg et al., 2022).

Interestingly, on top of this mundane grassroot-level action, a very strong way of influencing that the girls mention in their responses is raising awareness by challenging their friends' and relatives' narrow-minded views and by talking to people. Many of the girls listed this as way to have an impact on societal issues from equality to racism to

climate change. This takes their action to a wider level from personal choices and behaviour, first to the level of their peers and family, and for some girls even to a wider societal level.

I would like to have an impact on climate change and pollution of the seas and air. I would like people to be more thoughtful and to think of the injustices in society and to make decisions together to make society and the world better. Cutegirl, 13

For these girls, care is not invisible but it is everywhere. According to Tronto (1993, 2013), care is not just something that we do for each other in our everyday lives, but the backbone of society and politics. Furthermore, care is at the very centre of being a citizen in a democracy as it entails caring about other citizens and care about democracy itself: care is an expression of support and a burden to help maintain the community and political institutions (Tronto, 2013, p. 11). Caring could be viewed as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40): in this view, the world means an entanglement of our bodies, ourselves and the environment that together interweave “a complex, life-sustaining web.”

Although in the data the girls express fears and anxiety on climate issues and they are uncertain whether they will have a future worth living, they still express a lot of care, for their own future and well-being, for others and for the environment. We see this caring as political participation and action for change entangled in care. As Sherilyn Macgregor (2006, pp. 7, 8) argues, in a society dominated by men that constructs and enforces women’s capacity to care, this capacity to care should not be romanticized, but politicized. She calls for an “ecofeminist approach to citizenship” that would question the feminization and privatization of care in Western societies, to demand more just and fair distribution of care within and between societies, which would enable gender equality and sustainability (Macgregor 2006, pp. 219, 220). In this process, all the wicked problems that the girls want to change—from inequality to racism to climate change—are threads in the same web.

Discussion

Spiderman’s uncle Ben famously told him with great power comes great responsibility” But that’s what uncles say to superheroes in the movies. In real life, with great power comes privileged irresponsibility. (Tronto, 2016, p. 29)

Rooted in a neoliberal language of choice, girl power offers girls and women a sense that they can choose when to be girly and when to be powerful, when to be mother and when to be professional, when to be sexy for male pleasure and when to be sexy for their own pleasure. (Zaslow, 2009, p. 3)

We began this article by referring to girl power and the influential young activist women that are changing the cultural representation of girls’ political agency. We return to this emancipatory transition as we discuss our key findings.

As our analysis showed, the representation of girlhood (and future womanhood) constructed by our data strongly resonates with the image of emancipated girls discussed in girl power literature and by Zaslow as quoted above. The overall tone of our data is

can-do: the girls are feeling hopeful and powerful. Especially the career-related dreams are in line with early girl power literature highlighting consumerism and individualism as the girl power phenomenon grew global and was somewhat reduced to market economics. As Tormulainen (2018, p. 11) points out, girl power did give girls space and power in the representations in popular culture, and they became a new consumer group that was taken seriously. Hence, the girls were growing up midst the illusion that they could have it all, and if not, maybe buy it all. Harris (2004) pointed out that although girl power offered a type of agency and success for girls and young women that was not possible for them before, it was not really an authentic way to achieve agency, as its ultimate aim is not social change. Our analysis indicates, the can-do attitude of the girls is not limited to advancing individualistic goals but extends to societal change. The girls were committed to consuming fewer animal products, reducing their consumption and awareness-raising by talking or writing about societal issues. These ambitions can be interpreted as resonating with what Taft (2020, p. 4) has called the second coming of girl power where girls were not only self-made, innovative and confident to break down barriers but also possessed the power to solve local and global problems.

Yet, while we are ready to celebrate the agency present in the girls' accounts, we are critical towards all the things they seem to willingly choose. While these agentic girls present themselves as individuals with (unlimited) choice, as described by Zaslow (2009, p. 3), when they are choosing "when to be girly and when to be powerful, when to be mother and when to be professional" they are actually choosing to be everything at once. Reading these dreams as embedded in culture, as drawing on cultural discourses concerning female citizenship that these girls are subjected to, a different perspective on choice and agency opens up. These can-do girls are surrounded by multiple, sometimes even contradictory expectations related to their agency: they are expected to succeed in life, participate, care for others and to be happy, healthy and fit.

We describe this pressure as threefold, creating a triple burden. Firstly, it is the individual girl's responsibility to get a good life, have a successful career and be healthy and fit. Secondly, there is societal and cultural pressure on women to be wives and mothers. Thirdly, society puts pressure on girls to be active citizens and even to save the world from the impending doom of an ecocatastrophe. As we have highlighted in the three analysis sections, all these things produce contradictions where the individual collides with societal norms, structures and expectations, and of course, as we state in the beginning, the illusion of equality of the Finnish society brings its certain layers to this. The idea of equal society offering equal opportunities to everyone makes young people responsible for their own success, and thus, the differences in the possibilities to take part will not become visible.

The question that remains is whether the liberation that these girls experience brings them more responsibilities. It feels like the girls have taken the well-being of the entire world on their shoulders. Overall, the change in the role and place of girls in society has been enormous. They have evolved from the "can-do girls" (Harris, 2004) who believe themselves and are always ready to break the glass ceilings and any obstacle in front of them constantly improving and controlling themselves to able to do it all to the heroic power girls who carry everything on their shoulders. These girls, who are growing up in the second wave of girl power, are not only responsible for solving personal and local problems but are also expected to tackle the societal, political and environmental

problems (Taft, 2014, 2020). Yet, as Taft (2020, p. 13) puts it “We can appreciate that she is going to save the world for us, but also feel comforted by the fact that she is just a girl.”

This is where we return to Tronto’s words about Spiderman’s uncle Ben. While their can-do attitude could be read as representing individualism, the girls are storying their futures in interdependent relations where their well-being and success is connected to the well-being of others—of loved ones, society, other living beings and the world. Thus, can-do girls take the responsibility that comes with (girl) power. Alternatively, futures without such responsibilities—futures of “privileged irresponsibility” following Tronto’s phrasing—are difficult if not impossible to dream, even for the current generation of emancipated girls. Of course, the way the girls dream about their future strongly anchored to others, society, nature and so on is important, life-sustaining action. The problem lies not in these dreams, but in how care is valued and distributed in society.

As Segal (1987) pointed out decades ago, while the problem for women’s liberation and feminism was once how to make the personal political, the problem has now reversed to how to prevent political issues from being reduced to the personal. Segal continues “as I have argued, and as the German feminist Barbara Sichtermann has suggested, today ‘conflicts of global and apocalyptic proportions are tackled as matters of the heart.’ And this is not the analysis women need if we are to win our battles” (Segal, 1987, p. 243; Sichtermann, 1986). In the same vein, Macgregor (2006, pp. 7, 8) has argued that as long as we live in a male-dominated society that constructs and enforces women’s capacity to care, care itself and the capacity to care should not be romanticized but politicized. This is what the girls do in their responses. Through care, the girls are contributing to society, holding it together, but also working towards changing society for the better. Without care, society and well-being would look different, and caring for others is a fundamental aspect of fair and just society. As Tronto (2016, p. 8) argues, care and caring should not be seen as the invisible women’s work; it is something that each one of us gives and receives.

Care should be in the centre of politics—where it all begins. The problem is not that the girls care about everything so much and deeply. Rather, we argue that care, and caring, should change fundamentally: it should be more evenly distributed and seen, not as “women’s” work, but as the source of political action that can change the world.

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