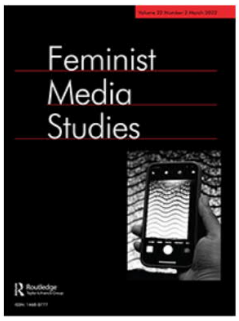

Feminist Media Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfms20

"I have always said that I am not a feminist, but…": moderate feminism in the narratives of Finnish women journalists who entered the field between 1960 and 1990

Heidi Kurvinen

To cite this article: Heidi Kurvinen (2022): "I have always said that I am not a feminist, but…": moderate feminism in the narratives of Finnish women journalists who entered the field between 1960 and 1990, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2022.2084438

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2084438

Published online: 07 Jun 2022.

FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2084438

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"I have always said that I am not a feminist, but. . .": moderate feminism in the narratives of Finnish women journalists who entered the field between 1960 and 1990

Heidi Kurvinen

Department of Cultural History / Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (TIAS), University of Turku, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

This article studies lived experiences of gender equality and feminism in Finnish newsrooms between 1960 and 1990. On one hand, the journalists I interviewed claimed they had reported on diverse social issues related to gender equality and feminism throughout their careers. On the other hand, they embraced the idea that the journalistic profession had achieved more gender equality in Finland than in other countries in the Global North and the Nordic region. Using narratives collected from 31 women journalists, I use this contradiction to problematise the relationship between experiences of gender equality and the desire to struggle for feminist demands in professional journalism. I do so by adopting the analytical approach of moderate feminism.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 May 2021
Revised 21 May 2022
Accepted 26 May 2022

KEYWORDS
moderate feminism; gender equality; women journalists; Finland; journalism history

Introduction

> Every fifth newspaper journalist in the country is a woman. This might give us cause to wonder about gender roles, but the time for that is over. (Antero Okkonen 1969, 10, my translation)

These words were written in 1969 by a well-known journalist and journalist educator in Finland. Interestingly, a decade previously, Okkonen had published a journalism textbook in which he wrote somewhat sceptically about women's abilities in professional journalism (Heidi Kurvinen 2013). Nevertheless, a few years later – in response to the heated debate about sex roles that was taking place in the Finnish public sphere – he used his authority to announce that the time to think about gender in journalism was over.

Since the 1960s, the relative number of women journalists has been higher in Finland than in other countries in the Global North and the Nordic region (e.g. Tarja Savolainen and Henrika Zilliacus-Tikkanen 2013), and because of this it has been easy to argue that gender equality in the profession is an accomplished fact. Okkonen based his comment on a comparison between the status of women journalists in Finland and in other countries. The lived experiences collected for this article highlighted the profession's supposed egalitarian nature by repeating the sentiment that "it may not have been

CONTACT Heidi Kurvinen heidi.kurvinen@utu.fi University of Turku, Turku, Finland

fully equal, but at least it was more equal than other professions". Such sentiments and comparisons portray a profession where the discussion of gender equality has supposedly been unnecessary. They also sum up a longitudinal context in which Finnish journalists have had difficulties embracing their feminist leanings. This was also noted by Marion Marzolf (1977, 267), who argued that women journalists in the early 1970s in Finland – similarly to those in the UK and Sweden – "were not anxious to participate in 'American-style feminist confrontations'" even though "they were firmly resolved to bring about change".

This article attempts to explain this contradiction by studying lived experiences of gender equality and feminism in Finnish newsrooms between 1960 and 1990. It does this by analysing narratives of Finnish women journalists who began their careers during this 30-year period. In addition, the article applies the analytical approach of moderate feminism, an umbrella term for various forms of feminism that share a focus on the individual woman who recognises "the persistence of gender inequalities but perceives the solution to inequality as dependent on individual action" (Patricia Lewis, et al. 2019, 1063). In this article, moderate feminism is understood as a response to the gendered realities of the period in question, which emphasised the postfeminist idea that gender equality had already been achieved (on postfeminist discourses in the 1970s, see Kaitlynn Mendes 2011). I use "postfeminism" to refer to a common understanding of women's relatively good status in Finnish society, which minimised the impact of women's radical feminist organising during the period from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The reasoning behind my chosen approach is twofold. Firstly, as an analytical concept moderate feminism is embedded in the sociopolitical context of the period in question (e.g. Charikleia Tzanakou and Ruth Pearce 2019). Secondly, moderate feminism implies practices that were considered reasonable in the context of the period but also had the potential for resistance or "tempered radicalism", to use Debra E. Meyerson and Maureen A. Scully's (1995) term. Finnish women journalists' moderate feminist practices were distanced from structural critique, but at the same time they intermediated between liberal feminist discussions of gender equality and the more radical claims that became visible in newsrooms' everyday activities.

Following Srila Roy's (2013) argument regarding moderation as a performative practice, this article adheres to an understanding of feminism as a spectrum that is actualised in a variety of ways between institutionalised forms and grassroots activism.[1] A similar approach is taken by Tanfer Emin Tunc and Annessa Ann Babic (2021, 6), who argue that Paula Green, a pioneering female advertiser in the post-war US, demonstrated her solidarity with women through "small everyday acts that when taken as a whole, were feminist". Consequently, my analysis views agency as an everyday activity that questions prevailing norms and values rather than offering a visible critique of gendered practices (Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton 2013). It is doubtful that the narratives under analysis reveal the "truth" of what took place in newsrooms. Nevertheless, they express the *meanings* my interviewees attached to feminism at the time of the interviews when discussing their professional careers. In addition, the narratives reveal the extent to which feminist agency was activated in newsrooms, according to their recollections.

Although my argument is limited to the Finnish cultural context, I will point out that a more diverse understanding of moderate forms of feminism in newsrooms is needed. Specifically, this article contributes to research on women in journalism by viewing the

interplay between feminism and journalism as a *process* that is connected to a specific historical and cultural setting. I do this by asking how women journalists experienced gendered newsroom practices. What understanding of feminism is produced in interviewees' narratives? How can we explain the contradictory narratives of an already gained, but only partial gender equality and feminist agency in newsrooms?

Feminism in the newsroom

There is an extensive body of literature on women journalists and their experiences of male-dominated newsrooms. Previous studies have shown that women have had difficulties advancing in the profession and combining family life with full-time work. Additionally, the masculine newsroom culture has forced women to use various coping strategies: whereas some have chosen to be "one of the boys", others have created a feminine niche, or left the profession altogether. As a result of the masculinist newsroom culture, these problems have persisted for decades, even though women's status has improved considerably since the 1960s, when the first major wave of women entered the profession in Nordic countries and other parts of the Global North (e.g. Carolyn M. Carolyn M Byerly 2013; Margareta Melin 2008; Louise C. North 2004, Louise C North 2009; Gertrude Robinson 2005; Eleanor Mills 2014; Monica Löfgren Nilsson 2010; Barbara M. Barbara M Freeman 2016; Kimberly Voss and Lance Speere 2014; Martina Topić and Carmen Bruegmann 2021).

As I have shown elsewhere (Kurvinen 2013), although Finnish newsrooms in the 1960s and 1970s had their share of sexist banter and gendered working practices, journalism nonetheless offered women an opportunity to explore their societal role more freely than was possible in other professions. This made women willing to tolerate the profession's masculinist practices, as other studies and autobiographical narratives have acknowledged (e.g. Freeman 2016; Lynn Povich 2012). At the same time, the number of women journalists rapidly increased in Finland, and the proportion of women in the profession was extraordinarily high, even in comparison with other Nordic countries. In 1970, 26% of the members of the Union of Newspapermen in Finland (from 1991 onwards, the Union of Journalists in Finland) were women, and by 1979 this share had risen to 41%. This was considerably higher than in Sweden, where 25% of journalists were women in 1975. It was also strikingly higher than in Norway and Denmark, where the proportion of women in journalism was approximately 15% in the mid-1970s. In the US, women comprised 22% of journalists in 1971, and 34% in 1982 (Kurvinen 2013, 72).

However, unlike in Sweden, Norway and the US during the 1970s, this critical mass of Finnish women journalists did not foster radical gender-specific groupings in newsrooms. This can be partly explained by the different trajectories of radical feminism in these countries. While the women's liberation movement emerged in the US and Scandinavian countries at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Mendes 2011; Kurvinen 2013, Heidi Kurvinen 2020), in Finland it did not generate broader interest among women until a decade later. Although Finland's first radical feminist groups were established in 1973, at first they primarily attracted the Swedish-speaking minority, which comprised roughly six per cent of the country's population. Consequently, the

public discussion of feminism and gender equality in the Finnish-language media[2] was at its most active during the 1980s, a period commonly referred to as a backlash in the history of feminism (Heidi Kurvinen 2021).

The masculinist newsroom culture is an important context for understanding women in journalism, but as my brief historical sketch of the Finnish situation has shown, other factors also need to be taken into account. The literature concerning the relationship between feminism and women journalists is of particular value here. Scholars, for instance, have paid attention to women journalists' role in reporting on feminism in the mainstream media and discussed the ways in which the feminist movement influenced their affirmative actions regarding gender equality issues within the profession (e.g. Ainara Larrondo Ureta 2020; Heidi Kurvinen 2019; Freeman 2016; Voss and Speere 2014). This scholarship remains surprisingly scarce, even though North advocated in 2004 that feminist media scholarship should "move away from [. . .] the idea of a misogynist media, and instead explore how feminism is a part of news content, in order to reveal the negotiation that takes place over textual product and how it is shaped by social relations in the newsroom" (54).

One early attempt to conceptualise feminism in newsrooms was made in 1989 by Liesbet van Zoonen, who approached the theme by asking journalism students what they meant when they defined feminist goals as central to their professional behaviour. Based on interviews conducted in the mid-1980s, she concluded that feminist journalism meant first and foremost individual attempts to change prevailing news values that excluded women's topics and female interviewees. Van Zoonen also noted that women who were able to stay within the field learned to fit in with the prevailing work culture by down-playing their feminist ideas. North found similar results almost two decades later. According to her study (North 2004, 61), "women who succeed in journalism [. . .] do not necessarily *have* to *disavow* predominant feminist values. But, the outcome [. . .] must still fit with an objective, rational journalistic discourse, which, historically in Western tradition, has been mostly male". Consequently, feminist journalists had not constructed their professional identities around feminism. They may have supported feminist causes in their spare time, but in newsrooms they tried to fit in and did not challenge the prevailing conventions of the workplace (North 2009).

More recent studies have complicated this conclusion. Monalisa Gangopadhyay (2010) and Nithila Kanagasabai (2016) found differences between journalists' identifications, based on their age and the gendered context in which they entered newsrooms. In Kanagasabai's sample, younger women journalists in India were careful about how they revealed their feminist sympathies, whereas women approaching middle age did not try to hide their feminist leanings. Other studies have shown that the historical context affects the ways in which journalists may or may not reveal their support for feminist causes (Freeman 2016; Voss and Speere 2014). Furthermore, the individualistic culture in modern journalism has been seen to undermine the relevance of radical feminist thinking, because the idea of journalism as a field where an individual can succeed or fail based on her own talents makes it irrational to use structural explanations for unequal treatment. Thus, the occupational culture itself increases postfeminist thinking and leads women journalists to see their profession as gender-equal (Anna Louise Williams 2010).

In what follows, I combine the idea of individualistic newsroom culture with the question of feminist identification to analyse how the generation of Finnish women journalists who began their careers during the decades when the women's liberation movement emerged in Finland narrate their professional pasts in terms of gender equality and feminism. I argue that compared with previous studies, moderate feminism offers a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms women journalists use to navigate masculinist newsroom cultures while receiving societal signals of the need to strive for a more gender-equal world.

Sources and methods

The article is based on 31 qualitative interviews collected between 2014 and 2016 from Finnish women journalists who began their careers in the 1960s (N = 5), 1970s (N = 13) or 1980s (N = 13). The interviewees were recruited through an open call which was posted on the website of the Union of Journalists in Finland and distributed via its local branches' email lists in March 2014.

The interviewees comprised 26 national, local or tabloid newspaper journalists, two magazine journalists, two television journalists and one radio journalist. Most interviewees had worked in the area around Helsinki, but 11 had spent their careers in other parts of Finland, and one had worked as a freelance correspondent abroad. All interviewees were white, middle-class women without strong political leanings.[3] At the time of the interviews, they were 50 to 75 years old; consequently, they were reminiscing about the period when they were aged between 20 and 40. All interviews were conducted face to face, either in the interviewee's home or in a public café, and they lasted from one to two and half hours. Pseudonyms are used in this article.

As indicated above, the narratives I analyse here were presented by journalists whose childhood, youth or young adulthood had coincided with a heightened discussion of women's status in Finland. As journalists, these women had also reported on diverse issues related to gender equality and feminism as part of their job. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that they were at least aware of the main premises of feminism. At the same time, the data suggests that the postfeminist narrative that "gender equality has been achieved" was a dominant discourse within Finnish journalism from the late 1960s onwards. Consequently, women working in the field developed a moderate feminist position on gender equality, as their lived experiences demonstrate.

I will show this by taking a historical discourse studies approach, which understands reminiscing as activating discursive practices through which narrators make sense of their past (Mariana Achugar 2017). In practice, the analysis will trace the ways in which the understanding of gender equality as already achieved an understanding born at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s was used, negotiated and contrasted when my interviewees narrated their professional pasts. Because I am interested in the connection between interviewees' feminist identifications and their narrations of feminist agency in newsrooms, I will also pay attention to the interpretative repertoires they used to make sense of their current and past experiences of feminism (Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell 2001; Mats Alvesson and Dan Karreman 2000). This involves paying attention to the ways in which interviewees used their narratives to distance themselves from feminism rather than relate to it.

"Many of those who shared feminist beliefs never said it out loud"

Organisations and working life are seen as central forums for the implementation of moderate feminist attitudes, and scholars have written extensively on this (e.g. Lewis et al. 2019; Tzanakou and Pearce 2019). For instance, Rosalind Gill, Elisabeth K. Kelan and Christina M. Scharff (2017) show that minimising gender inequality is a common interpretative repertoire within professional environments such as information and communications technology, and business. Either women do not acknowledge that they have been treated unequally due to their gender, or they downplay their negative experiences. Furthermore, age or other factors are more easily seen as reasons for unequal treatment than gender, and working women distance themselves from structural explanations.

On a micro level, this minimising repertoire is supported by four subsidiary repertoires: 1) presenting gender inequalities as a past phenomenon; 2) locating inequalities outside an organisation or in another cultural context; 3) highlighting the advantages of being a woman, and marginalising men; 4) accepting the status quo. The first two subsidiary repertoires – pasting (see also Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra 2007) and relocating – were repeatedly activated by my interviewees when they discussed feminism. Indeed, their strategies echoed Jonathan Dean (2010), who used the concept of domestication to interpret the British quality press and how it drew the line between different forms of feminism. According to Dean, the press framed the feminist movement of the early 2000s as moderate by contrasting it with the radical feminism of the 1970s.

During the interviews, I was especially interested in how women journalists had or still experienced the state of gender equality within their profession, and whether they had actively striven to improve the situation. Interview questions covered themes such as interviewees' own definitions of gender equality, experiences of working in newsrooms and women's status within the profession, developments in the state of gender equality within the profession over the decades, and women's active means to improve the situation. One question dealt with feminism directly: I asked whether it had been possible for journalists to declare themselves feminists in newsrooms.

Like Pamela Aronson (2003), I left the definition of feminism open and let my interviewees define it. This revealed a great ambiguity in the word "feminism". Some made a clear correlation between feminism and gender equality; others defined feminism as a radical identity position. Consequently, responses to my original question varied. Some interviewees (N = 12) were confident that it was and had been possible to be openly feminist; others thought the word had a clearly negative tone (N = 16). A few did not have a clear stance on the issue (N = 3). Saila, a self-identified feminist who began her career in the late 1960s, depicted the attitudes in her newsroom:

> H: At the beginning, you mentioned that you are a feminist. Has it been easy to declare this in newsrooms?
>
> S: No, if you wanted to protect yourself. It was more clev[er], many of those who shared feminist beliefs never said it out loud. It is unbelievable that the word irritates so many people although they do not even know what feminism means. [. . .] Due to this, I have been forced to explain. I have been forced to argue, explain and spoon-feed that it is not such a frightening and terrible thing [to be a feminist].

According to Saila, the 1980s and 1990s were the decades when feminist attitudes were heightened in newsrooms, "after which even the slowest ones understood why feminism was needed". However, this interpretation seemed overly optimistic given her description of how journalists with feminist beliefs remained cautious about stating their position in newsrooms. Furthermore, her colleagues' irritation might be interpreted as a sign of a postfeminist working environment based on the idea that gender equality had already been achieved within the profession.

I did not ask whether interviewees identified as feminists, but some – such as Saila, Soile and Raisa – did so when answering my overall question about feminism (N = 7). A second group of interviewees did not identify themselves as feminists but showed their support for women's issues during the interviews (N = 16). A third group drew a clear distinction between feminism and their own ideas (N = 8). However, it was distinctive that my interviewees all distanced themselves from radical feminism, in different ways: 1) locating it in the US; 2) locating radical feminist journalists in other generations; 3) distancing themselves from feminist journalists in their own newsroom; 4) locating possible feminist journalists in the Helsinki area. In some narratives these strategies were simultaneous and intertwined, as will be shown next.

Taking a distance from radical feminism

The Finnish media discussion of women's feminist awakening began at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, when journalists reported on the women's liberation movement emerging in other countries in the Global North (Kurvinen 2021). The idea of the movement's foreign origins also appeared in my interviews, which located radical feminist behaviour in the US in particular. This strategy was most visible in Soile's narrative, where she described how she had identified as a feminist since studying at a women's college in the US. At the same time, she highlighted that this did not mean she had participated in bra-burning or anything similar. Saila too mentioned the earlier generation of bra-burning feminists, a generation she was not part of because of her age. Evidently, both Soile and Saila were familiar with the radical image of feminism, of which the myth of bra-burning is one example (e.g. Kurvinen 2020).

Others did not mention bra-burning per se but drew a distinction between moderate and radical feminist behaviour. For example, Siiri used stereotypical images of feminism when depicting her feminist colleagues:

> H: Have people who define themselves as feminists arrived in newsrooms only recently, or have they always been there?
>
> S: Yes, they were already there in the 1970s. They were not radical feminists but clear feminists anyway in the newsrooms [names two regional newspapers]. And they were not spinsters but married women, moth[ers].

In Siiri's experience, feminist journalists were not radical, a view that she emphasised by highlighting that they were "ordinary" women who were even married. The last sentence in particular can be interpreted as a way of distancing her colleagues from negative images of feminists, such as the stereotype of feminists as man haters (Kurvinen 2020).

For some interviewees, the intensity of the feminist movement was clearly a generational issue. Both Siiri and Victoria, who had begun their careers in the 1960s and late 1970s respectively, argued that the previous generation of women journalists had been forced to fight for their place in newsrooms and had therefore clearly been feminists, i.e. women's movement activists. On the other hand, Seela, who had worked as a journalist since the beginning of the 1970s, saw some journalists of the 2010s as too sensitive about gendered newsroom practices. Although she did not mention the word "feminist" per se, her labelling of young women as uptight in terms of sexual harassment can be interpreted as a division between "sensible" mature women and oversensitive younger women, implying that the latter were feminists. This distinction between the younger women of the 2010s and Seela's generation can also be seen as a reference to the popular understanding of different feminist "waves", even though Seela did not mention this explicitly (see e.g. Teri Finneman and Yong Volz 2020).

Later, Seela claimed that journalists could be whatever they wanted in newsrooms, and she therefore saw no reason why feminists would be unable to express themselves. If we read this comment against her earlier remark, it seems that the acceptable feminist was a moderate feminist who was not "too sensitive" to gendered practices. Brita, a self-identified feminist who had worked on a political newspaper from the beginning of the 1980s, saw the genealogy of feminist generations differently:

> Women of the previous generation still identified with gender equality but not feminism. We were the feminist generation [. . .]. After us came a generation that is [. . .], they think that gender does not matter. That we are all individuals, it is only one's abilities that count.

These contradictory narratives of feminist genealogy can be explained by interviewees' self-identifications. Seela was the one who most clearly distanced herself from feminism, whereas Siiri and Victoria identified as feminists to some extent. However, for them the earlier generation had paved the way for women in journalism, whereas they themselves had been entitled to enjoy their achievements. Consequently, it was Brita who produced the most active narrative of feminist agency in her interview. She was also one of the most outspoken feminists in the whole sample, and had participated in feminist activism outside the newsroom during the 1980s.

Women who did not have a clear feminist identification were the most eager to locate feminist journalism in earlier and/or later generations of women. Piia, who had begun her career on a local newspaper in the late 1960s, mentioned that even men could be feminists nowadays, referring to the mainstreaming of feminism, whereas the earlier generation of feminists had been extreme by nature. She distanced herself from both versions of feminism:

> I have always said that I am not a feminist, but . . . I saw the phase when there were these real feminists, they were like any sort of religious people who thought that other people were not as good as they were.

In Piia's narrative it was not clear who these "real" feminists were or how they acted. However, if we read her statement against her professional biography – which locates her experiences in northern Finland, where radical feminist activism was scarce and began only in the early 1980s – it is evident that she was referring to feminism in general, rather than to feminist practices in her home town or even in Finland. One explanation for Piia's connection between feminism and radical behaviour thus lies in her geographical location.

Narratives by other women also suggested that working outside the Helsinki area affected journalists' willingness to declare themselves feminists and their abilities to practise feminist agency. Heini, who began her career in the 1970s, pondered:

> I do not know a single journalist who would declare herself a feminist here [city in central Finland]. In the capital area, the group of journalists is much bigger and more varied, there may be some, but not here.

Others drew a distinction between women journalists in general and true believers in feminism. Maria was willing to reflect on diverse gendered practices in her interview, but she nevertheless distanced herself from "feminists":

> H: If a journalist is a feminist, is it possible to declare herself as such in the newsroom?
>
> M: Yes, but it may cause stigmatisation, those who believe in her take her seriously, in other words those who are like-minded and respect these values. But others, especially men, they think there she goes nagging again, and they do not bother to listen or get involved, it does not interest them.

During the interview, Maria made it clear that she was not a feminist by discussing "feminists" in the third person. Other narratives also revealed some women's tendency to resist feminist identification. For example, Tanja had two women colleagues with whom she had tried to abolish gendered practices in her newsroom. However, as she recalled, only one of these colleagues had been a "feminist", i.e. a person who openly disrupted the status quo. Liisa, who also adopted a more moderate position, identified herself as a supporter of gender equality, and then pondered how a feminist journalist might be treated in the newsroom:

> It depends a lot on her closest circle, and how publicly. If [long pause] one is very openly [a feminist], I think, it may cause something, people react very reluctantly to feminists or hardcore feminists or even misunderstand them, sometimes severely.

Thus, the interviewees viewed gender equality positively as a principle, but they distanced themselves from a more structural critique of gendered practices (Lewis et al. 2019). At the same time, they made a clear distinction between moderate ways of gaining gender – equality mostly through the trade union – and feminism, which seemed to be something excessive from which they needed to distance themselves.

As this analysis has shown, all the interviewees used othering as a strategy to draw a distinction between moderate and radical feminism, although they differed in their identifications with or as feminists. This correlates with Dean's (2010) results on postfeminist cultural contexts where one chooses moderate forms of feminism in order to distance oneself from "excessive" forms. Similarly, Liesbet van Zoonen (1992) noted that even women journalists who were sympathetic to feminism distanced themselves from many feminist goals. Although they could recognise the need for equal pay and childcare, as young women who were used to working in male-dominated newsrooms, they simultaneously supported the idea that women should solve their problems themselves. The masculinist newsroom culture embraced this moderation. My interviews included recollections of male journalists who tended to label any woman a radical feminist if she dared to voice her opinion on women's issues. Nevertheless, Finnish women journalists occasionally applied moderate feminist actions to disrupt craft practices, as will be shown next.

Everyday feminism at work

It was a recurring theme that interviewees had not realised the impact of unequal gender relations until they encountered structural barriers during the later years of their career. It was first-hand experience that made them realise that being female might affect their opportunities to work as journalists. Even after such turning points, experiences of inequality were described as isolated events, and most women had difficulties connecting those experiences with wider gendered practices within the field. My interviewees seem to have accepted with little question the claim that gender equality had been achieved.

When I asked my interviewees whether they had actively tried to change the gendered practices of the profession or had been content with the discussion of gender equality, most chose the latter option. Piia, who had had a career as a local reporter and advanced to managerial positions, replied:

> I know that in principle it would be great if [equal treatment] was followed. However, in practice I do not have the energy to fight for all the things, although I see that they are not right.

It was only during the last years of her career that Piia realised she was not taken seriously, which she reflected on in her comment. Thus, it is possible to argue that during her most active years Piia was not aware of gendered practices in newsrooms, and consequently did not actively try to change the status quo. However, similar narratives were produced by women who described themselves as aware of gendered obstacles. When I asked whether they had felt the need to protest, narratives mostly recalled individual journalists who had confronted unequal pay, for example: the emphasis was on individual actions to challenge gendered practices, not on collective frustration (e.g. Banu Ozkazanc-Pan 2019). Furthermore, more than one interviewee pointed out that if one did not succeed within journalism, one only had oneself to blame – resonating with the culture of individuality in journalism to which Williams (2010) refers. As in various forms of moderate feminism, securing gender equality was thus seen as the responsibility of each individual, who could construct her own hero(ine) narrative (Lewis et al. 2019), as Raila's comment on the gender equality discussion in the newsrooms of the mid-2010s reveals:

> There is starting to be such strong expertise on all fronts that equal treatment is mostly about abilities. If [long pause], if one feels somehow overshadowed in the newsroom, one can only blame oneself and one's professional pride. [. . .] Most of the time, those who are the biggest whiners are also those who do not take any professional risks.

One's willingness to act was also affected by other factors, such as age. Heini described how she had blamed herself for unequal treatment, whereas a colleague who was ten years younger openly spoke out if she experienced gendered treatment. But even in such cases, the boldness of some women did not spark a broader movement for gender equality; their feminist agency stayed at the individual level.

Interestingly, the interviewees simultaneously rejected and embraced the need for feminism, depending on its target (Stéphanie Genz 2006). It was common to all the narratives that feminist agency was connected first and foremost to news content, i.e. the topics and interviewees that received special attention. For example, Raila explained that there had been several feminist-identified women in the newsroom of a big newspaper where she had worked since the 1960s. Although she described how women in

the 1980s started to realise that they were treated differently from their male colleagues, feminist consciousness meant above all that they tried to put women's issues on the news agenda. This correlates with Bernadette Barker-Plummer's (1995) argument that women journalists played an active role in making women's issues visible in the 1970s. Patricia Bradley (2003) has also emphasised the role of women journalists' media activism as a defining element of the feminist movement. In a recent study, Finneman and Volz (2020) similarly found entanglements between discussions of news content and of women journalists' status in the field among members of the Journalism and Women Symposium.

However, the Finnish context differs somewhat from the US, where these researchers' observations were made. In Finland, the first comments on women's status in the profession and in media content appeared as late as the early 1980s. Furthermore, the discussion was heavily influenced by the work of early feminist media scholars: the flow of influence often came via the academic world, not directly from grassroots feminist activism. Nevertheless, there was an active discussion of "woman journalism" (in Finnish, *naisjournalismi*) in the late 1980s, which explains the interconnectedness of feminist journalists and news content in my interviews (Kurvinen 2019). The interviewees' relationship with this kind of journalism was not straightforward, however. Women such as Saila, who had actively paid attention to women's issues and deliberately interviewed women for her stories, used essentialist notions about women's and men's different experiences of the world to explain women's responsibility to work towards more gender-equal news content. Others saw a contradiction between feminism and professional journalism, which took objectivity seriously. Even Saila highlighted that feminism might cause an inability to cooperate, thereby positioning male-defined professional practices as the core of journalism. Her narrative thus implied that craft practices were internalised even by journalists who described themselves as gender-sensitive. Heini described a situation where she was going to discuss gender equality on a live television show:

> Once we were going to have a whole programme on gender equality. My boss [mentions his name] said to me, not directly but evasively, it is not going to be a feministic hoo-ha, is it? [. . .] I hastened to allay his suspicions by saying, "I am a professional journalist, and the programme will not serve as a megaphone for one cause or one movement".

The tension between feminism and objectivity is not confined to my interviewees. In a self-reflexive article, Jane Rhodes (2001) describes how she was never trusted as a professional journalist in an American newsroom in the early 1980s because she belonged to several outsider identities. As a self-identified feminist and woman of colour, she was seen as unable to fulfil the requirements of an objective journalist. North (2004), North (2009) self-reflexively describes how she became invisible as a journalist in situations where she was associated with the overall group of feminists. My data does not include similar experiences of marginalisation, because my interviewees mostly distanced themselves from radical feminism, and Finnish journalists during the period in question were predominantly white and middle class. But by trying to balance gender representation in news content, some Finnish journalists nevertheless practised an everyday agency rooted in the liberal feminist idea that women journalists could choose to produce more gender-balanced content.

Was there feminist agency?

There seems to be a tension in the narratives of journalists who actively tried to change news content but were less willing to strive for equal treatment in newsrooms. One possible explanation for this lies in feminist identification, an area that has been studied extensively. For my purposes here, Rachel Williams and Michele Andrisin Wittig's (1997) model, which sees feminism as part of a social identity, seems relevant: private and public feminist self-labels reflect differences in beliefs about the negative connotations of the term, as well as different levels of commitment to collective action. In other words, a belief in collective action correlates with public self-labelling as a feminist. However, women may support feminist goals without identifying themselves as feminists.

The division between public and private self-labelling also appears in my data. Raila, a newspaper journalist who had successfully advanced in her career, responded to my question about whether she had ever considered joining the Association of Women Journalists in Finland:

> I probably haven't ever thought about it. Within my own family I have stood for gender equality and opposed traditional women's roles. However, [. . .] I have always been a little bit afraid of fundamentalism in these kinds of communities. Perhaps it is due to this that I have tried to stay away from it.

Furthermore, the manifestations of interviewees' feminist leanings were influenced by the strong professional identification that is common to most journalists, even today. Brita, a publicly self-identified feminist, replied as follows when I asked whether she considered herself a woman journalist or just a journalist:

> A journalist, a journalist. Then again, this is a little bit difficult, a journalist but also a woman who is a journalist. It is a little bit similar to a dentist who is a woman or a man but primarily a dentist. [. . .] It means that one takes care of one's duties despite one's gender.

Arguably, due to their gender-neutral professional identity, women journalists were happy with their status in newsrooms until they hit the glass ceiling or became otherwise aware of their own gender. Saila, who became a feminist after an international women's conference in the mid-1980s, described her awakening and her subsequent attempts to practise feminism in newsrooms:

> H: Apparently you had this kind of "one of the boys" role for a long time?
>
> S: Yes I did, for a long time, until this feminist awakening took place. Then I realised that I do not have to take part in it. [. . .] As a manager, I tried instead to favour women and women's communities, and defend them.

This narrative is in line with previous research, where exposure to feminism is seen as a key factor in identification as a feminist (e.g. Williams and Wittig 1997). Scholars have also shown that feminist identification is a process of becoming (Susan B. Marine and Ruth Patricia Lewis 2014; Ruth Lister 2005). One is not born a feminist but becomes one.

Saila's story is also an excellent example of shifting emphases on gender-neutral professional identity and feminist identification, which can be further explained through Liesbet van Zoonen's (1998) concept of organisational identity. According to van Zoonen, organisational identity may change when a journalist moves from one newsroom to another, or when something happens in her personal life, causing changes in her personal

subjectivity and affecting how she values news topics. In Saila's case, a feminist awakening strengthened her individual preferences regarding her organisational identity, leading her to challenge the organisational structure by promoting women and feminist news stories. However, this did not mean that she rejected craft practices altogether. Hereby, such narratives' moderate feminist tones reveal a complex relationship between feminism and journalism in Finland (on the complexity of moderate feminisms and change, see Lewis et al. 2019): on the one hand, women actively strove for more gender-balanced news content and occasionally disrupted the status quo with individual attempts; on the other hand, the professional culture's gendered practices remained largely intact.

Conclusion

The analysed data – collected between 2014 and 2016 – gives a snapshot of the shared understanding of Finnish journalism's gendered past prior to the #MeToo movement. Arguably, data collection during or after #MeToo would have influenced the narrations, but as previous research has shown, Finnish women journalists generally adjusted to the masculinist newsroom culture and sexual banter until the late 1980s (Kurvinen 2013). Previous studies have also indicated that the impact of #MeToo on reminiscences has not been straightforward. For example, in Hannah Yoken's (2019) study, the ongoing #MeToo discussion did not foster personal testimonies of sexual harassment experienced by Finnish feminists during the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, her interviewees used #MeToo as a present-day example of the movement's historical significance. The ongoing societal discussion did not affect their narrations of the past, and this confirms the relevance of analysing the lived experiences of the journalists I interviewed.

In previous studies, male-defined craft practices have been used as an explanation for the conflicted relationship between feminist activism and professional journalism (e.g. Freeman 2016). In addition, the manner in which the profession opened wider horizons for women to operate in the public sphere has been noted (Kurvinen 2013; Povich 2012). Both aspects to some extent explain the ways in which my interviewees recollected their professional past. However, I have argued that by using moderate feminism as an analytical approach, it is possible to attain a more nuanced picture of the complex relationship between feminism and professional journalism.

Whereas some scholars argue that individual agency translates into societal change only if it leads to collectivist feminism (Ozkazanc-Pan 2019, 1217), this article suggests that individual agency can be used to draw together the stories of intraprofessional adjustment and woman-centred news values. Although not all women journalists who worked towards more diverse news values identified themselves as feminists, they nevertheless practised gender-sensitive agency on an individual level. They may not have done it all the time, but they had a wish to change things, and at times they acted accordingly. In other words, they practised an activity that emerged from the everyday context of the newsrooms where they were embedded, to follow Deborah G. Martin, Susan Hanson and Danielle Fontaine's (2007) conceptualisation of activism. Although this activism never led to a formal network or larger-scale social movement, it was meaningful in the contexts of their own newsrooms and professional lives. It was a first step in a potential chain to create change towards more gender-sensitive news work. Thus, the broad story of moderate forms of feminism in

Finnish newsrooms, which reproduced the grand narrative that gender equality had already been gained, also hints at everyday activism that simultaneously questioned that same narrative.

Notes

1. In Finland, "state feminism" fully developed during the years I study here, while grassroots activism remained a marginal movement.
2. The majority of people speak Finnish. Swedish-speaking Finns constitute a cultural minority that has its own media outlets.
3. During the period in question, journalists – like Finns in general – were an ethnically homogenous group of predominantly white people. Most journalists during this period belonged to the middle class.

Acknowledgments

I offer my warm thanks to the peer reviewers for their insightful comments. Additionally, I thank Professor Kaitlynn Mendes, Professor Ulrika Maude and Associate Professor Arja Turunen, who all helped me to develop my argument by commenting on earlier versions of the text.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland (Kulttuurin ja Yhteiskunnan Tutkimuksen Toimikunta [316287]);

Notes on contributor

Heidi Kurvinen, PhD, is a media historian who specialises in the gendered history of 20th-century Finland and Sweden. She defended her doctoral thesis at the University of Oulu (2013) and currently works as a Collegium Researcher (2022–2024) at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies. She was previously a Visiting Scholar at the University of Stockholm (2015–2018) and a Postdoctoral Scholar in Cultural History at the University of Turku (2017–2021). Email: heidi.kurvinen@utu.fi

References

Achugar, Mariana. 2017. "Critical Discourse Analysis and History." In *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, edited by John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, 298–311. London: Routledge.

Alvesson, Mats, and Dan Karreman. 2000. "Varieties of Discourse: On the Study of Organizations through Discourse Analysis." *Human Relations* 53 (9): 1125–1149. doi:10.1177/0018726700539002.

Aronson, Pamela. 2003. "Feminists or 'Postfeminists'?: Young Women's Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations." *Gender and Society* 17 (6): 903–922.

Barker-Plummer, Bernadette. 1995. "News as a Political Resource: Media Strategies and Political Identity in the U. S. Women's Movement, 1966–1975." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (3): 306–324.

Bradley, Patricia. 2003. *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963–1975*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
Byerly, Carolyn M. 2013. "Introduction." In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism*, edited by Carolyn M. Byerly, 1–10. Bristol: Palgrave Macmillan.
Dean, Jonathan. 2010. "Feminism in the Papers." *Feminist Media Studies* 10 (4): 391–407.
Edley, Nigel, and Margaret Wetherell. 2001. "Jekyll and Hyde: Men's Constructions of Feminism and Feminists." *Feminism & Psychology* 11 (4): 439–457.
Finneman, Teri, and Yong Volz. 2020. "Leading the Second Wave into the Third Wave: U.S. Women Journalists and Discursive Continuity of Feminism." *Feminist Media Studies* 20 (6): 863–878. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1644658.
Freeman, Barbara M. 2016. "'You Will Have a Good Career Here, but Not a Great Career': Male Mentoring and the Women Journalists of the Canadian Press News Cooperative, 1965–2000." *Labour/Le Travail* 78: 237–264.
Gangopadhyay, Monalisa. 2010. "Hindutva Meets globalisation: The Impact on Hindu Urban Media Women." PhD Thesis. Florida: FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations.
Genz, Stéphanie. 2006. "Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism." *Feminist Theory* 7 (3): 333–353. doi:10.1177/1464700106069040.
Kanagasabai, Nithila. 2016. "In the Silences of a Newsroom: Age, Generation, and Sexism in the Indian Television Newsroom." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (4): 663–677.
Kurvinen, Heidi. 2013. *"En mä oo mies enkä nainen. Mä oon toimittaja": Sukupuoli ja suomalainen toimittajakunta 1960- ja 1970-luvulla*. Oulu: University of Oulu.
Kurvinen, Heidi. 2019. "'Minusta tuntuu, ettei suomalaisille naisille sovi iskulauseiden sorvaaminen': Toimittajat ja tasa-arvokeskustelu 1980- ja 1990-luvulla." *Media & Viestintä* 42 (3): 141–164. doi:10.23983/mv.85779.
Kurvinen, Heidi. 2020. "Feminism in the News." In *The International Encyklopedia of Gender, Media and Communication*, edited by Karen Ross, et al. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley. doi:10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc202.
Kurvinen, Heidi. 2021. "Yhteiskunnallinen muutos ja toimittajien ärtymys: Kuinka feminismistä tuli Suomessa vaikea sana 1970-luvun lopulla." In *Vihapuhe, vihalliskuvat ja disinformaatio*, edited by Marja Vuorinen, 233–258. Turku: Turun historiallinen seura.
Larrondo Ureta, Ainara. 2020. "(In)visibility of Feminism in the Media: The Depiction of the second-wave Women's Movement in Spain." *Feminist Media Studies* 20 (1): 70–85. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1574856.
Lewis, Patricia. 2014. "Postfeminism, Femininities and Organization Studies: Exploring a New Agenda." *Organization Studies* 35 (12): 1845–1866.
Lewis, Patricia, Maria Adamson, Ingrid Biese, and Elisabeth Kelan. 2019. "Introduction to Special Issue: Exploring the Emergence of Moderate Feminism(s) in Contemporary Organizations." *Gender, Work and Organization* 26 (8): 1063–1072.
Lister, Ruth. 2005. "Being Feminist: Politics of Identity Series." *Government and Opposition* 40 (3): 442–463.
Löfgren Nilsson, Monica. 2010. "'Thinkings' and 'Doings' of Gender." *Journalism Practice* 4 (1): 1–16. doi:10.1080/17512780903119693.
Marine, Susan B, and Ruth Lewis. 2014. "'I'm in This for Real': Revisiting Young Women's Feminist Becoming." *Women's Studies International Forum* 47: 11–22.
Martin, Deborah G, Susan Hanson, and Danielle Fontaine. 2007. "What Counts as Activism? the Role of Individuals in Creating Change." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35 (3/4): 78–94.
Marzolf, Marion. 1977. *Up from the Footnote: A History of Women Journalists*. New York: Hastings House.
Melin, Margareta. 2008. *Gendered Journalism Cultures: Strategies and Tactics in the Fields of Journalism in Britain and Sweden*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg.
Mendes, Kaitlynn. 2011. "'The Lady Is a Closet Feminist!' Discourses of Backlash and Postfeminism in British and American Newspapers." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14 (6): 549–565.
Meyerson, Debra E, and Maureen A. Scully. 1995. "Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change." *Organization Science* 6 (5): 585–600.

Mills, Eleanor. 2014. "Why Do the Best Jobs Go to Men?" *British Journalism Review* 25 (3): 17–23. doi:10.1177/0956474814550595.
Montenach, Anne, and Deborah Simonton. 2013. "Introduction." In *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640–1830*, edited by Deborah Simonton and Anne Montenach, 1–14. New York: Routledge.
North, Louise C. 2004. "Naked Women, Feminism and Newsroom Culture." *Australian Journal of Communication* 31 (2): 53–67.
North, Louise C. 2009. "Rejecting the 'F-word': How 'Feminism' and 'Feminists' are Understood in the Newsroom." *Journalism* 10 (6): 739–757.
Okkonen, Antero. 1969. "Nainen USA:n sanomalehdistössä." *Suomen Lehdistö* 1: 8–10.
Ozkazanc-Pan, Banu. 2019. "On Agency and Empowerment in a #metoo World." *Gender, Work, and Organization* 26 (8): 1212–1220.
Povich, Lynn. 2012. *The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of Newsweek Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace*. New York: PublicAffairs.
Rhodes, Jane. 2001. "Journalism in the New Millennium: What's a Feminist to Do?" *Feminist Media Studies* 1 (1): 49–53.
Robinson, Gertrude. 2005. *Gender, Journalism and Equity: Canadian, U.S., and European Perspectives*. Cresskill: Hampton Press .
Rosalind, Gill, Elisabeth K. Kelan, and Christina M. Scharff. 2017. "A Postfeminist Sensibility at Work." *Gender, Work and Organization* 24 (3): 226–244.
Roy, Srila. 2013. "Feminist 'Radicality' and 'Moderation' in Times of Crises and Change." *The Sociological Review* 61 (S2): 100–118.
Savolainen, Tarja, and Henrika Zilliacus-Tikkanen. 2013. "Finland: Women Journalists, The Unequal Majority." In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism*, edited by Carolyn M. Byerly, 51–65. Bristol: Palgrave Macmillan.
Tasker, Yvonne, and Diane Negra. 2007. "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture." In *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 1–25. Durham: Duke University Press.
Topić M, and Bruegmann C. "Blokishness in the Newsroom Culture in the British Press?" *Journalism Studies* 22(1):77–95.doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2020.1854620.
Topić, Martina, and Carmen Bruegmann. 2021. "'the Girls at the Desk': Timeless."*Journalism Studies*. 22(1):77–95.
Tunc, Tanfer Emin, and Annessa Ann Babic. 2021. "Paula Green's Feminist Activism: Changing America through Advertising." *Feminist Media Studies*. doi:10.1080/14680777.2021.1979071.
Tzanakou, Charikleia, and Ruth Pearce. 2019. "Moderate Feminism within or against the Neoliberal University? the Example of Athena SWAN." *Gender, Work, and Organization* 26 (8): 1191–1211.
van Zoonen, Liesbet. 1989. "Professional Socialization of Feminist Journalists in the Netherlands." *Women's Studies in Communication* 12 (2): 1–21.
van Zoonen, Liesbet. 1992. "The Women's Movement and the Media: Constructing a Public Identity." *European Journal of Communication* 7 (4): 453–476.
van Zoonen, Liesbet. 1998. "A Professional, Unreliable, Heroic Marionette: M/F Structure, Agency and Subjectivity in Contemporary Journalisms." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 1 (1): 123–143.
Voss, Kimberly, and Lance Speere. 2014. "Taking Chances and Making Changes: The Career Paths and Pitfalls of Pioneering Women in Newspaper Management." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91 (2): 272–288.
Williams, Rachel, and Michele Andrisin Wittig. 1997. "'I'm Not a Feminist, but . . . ': Factors Contributing to the Discrepancy between Pro-Feminist Orientation and Feminist Social Identity." *Sex Roles* 37 (11/12): 885–904.
Williams, Anna Louise. 2010. "Post-feminism at work? The experiences of female journalists in the UK." Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Nottingham.
Yoken, Hannah. 2019. "Feminist Pasts & Present Memories: #metoo from an Oral History Perspective." *Sukupuolentutkimus – Genusforskning* 31 (3): 73–78.