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Persuasions, Resistance and other Discourse Virtuosities: The Ambivalent Position of the Equality Specialist

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Persuasions, Resistance and other Discourse Virtuositities: The Ambivalent Position of the Equality Specialist

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Abstract

This article concerns the discursive power relations that have led to equality work in Finland. In addition to marketisation, publicly-funded projects, especially those funded by the European Union, have permeated the public sector. Equality has been labelled women's work and something that women do and the continuity of equality work requires a complex form of competence. In this article, ways have been looked to analyse the current situation by conducting an analysis that will enable to see not only the discursive power relations that shape gender equality work but also how it has been possible that gender equality work has succeeded in remaining continuous. Persistence of problems concerning equality as well as co-operation between women and the 'discourse virtuosity' of equality work have opened up opportunities for continuity but not without problems.

Keywords: equality, equality work, projectisation, heteronormativity, agency, discourse virtuosity

Persuaciones, Resistencias y otros Discursos Virtuosos: la Posición Ambivalente de la Especialista en Igualdad.

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Resumen

Este artículo se centra en las relaciones de poder discursivas que lidian con el trabajo por la igualdad en Finlandia. Además del *marketisation*, proyectos financiados públicamente, especialmente aquellos financiados por la Unión Europea, han penetrado al sector público. La igualdad ha sido etiquetada como trabajo de mujeres y como algo que las mujeres hacen y la continuidad del trabajo por la igualdad requiere unas formas complejas de competencias. En este artículo, se han buscado las vías de análisis de la situación actual desarrollando un análisis que será capaz de ver no solo las relaciones discursivas de poder que configuran el trabajo por la igualdad de género pero también cómo ha sido posible que el trabajo por la igualdad de género mantenga un éxito continuo. La persistencia de los problemas en relación a la igualdad así como la cooperación entre mujeres y el "discurso virtuoso" de trabajo por la igualdad ha abierto oportunidades para continuarlo pero no exento de problemáticas.

Palabras claves: igualdad laboral, proyectización, heteronormatividad, agencia, discurso virtuoso

Finland is usually described as ‘world leader’ regarding gender equality which has even been presented as an export product. This article is about gender equality work in Finland, specifically, the activities involving promoting gender equality in Finland. The focus is on the period when the public sector has become more market-orientated not only in Finland, but also all over the Nordic countries (e.g. [Kautto et al., 1999](#); [Brunila & Edström forthcoming](#); [Antikainen 2006](#)). Moreover, business-orientated thinking has penetrated activities, which have not traditionally emphasised profit-making ([Ball 2007](#)). In addition to marketisation, publicly-funded projects, especially those by the European Union, have permeated the public sector.

In Finland, a country that is famous for its gender equality and strong position of women in working life, the promotion of gender equality has been closely linked to the welfare state (e.g. [Holli 2003](#); [Anttonen 2002](#); [Holli & Kantola 2007](#)). Finland has consistently presented itself with pride as a model of gender equality. Gender equality has even been billed as an export product. Nevertheless, despite thirty years of equality work, very little change has taken place.

Finnish Nordic welfare state has also been subject to restructuring (e.g. [Kautto et al., 1999](#); [Antikainen 2006](#)). This has happened along with the shift from government to (new) governance ([Dale & Robertson 2009](#); [Ball 2007](#)). New governance can be seen as a market-orientated attempt to introduce territorially unbounded public and private actors, functioning outside their formal jurisdiction in political institutions’ decision-making processes (see also [Bailey 2006](#)). Furthermore, Finland’s accession to the EU in 1995 brought significant changes to the nature of equality work. Structural Funds, Community Initiatives and special programmes increased the number of projects, influenced the forms of implementation and shifted the focus to an employment perspective on equality ([Brunila 2009](#)). Equality work became caught up in market-orientated, project-based activities. In this article the shift to projects is analysed by showing how the shift to project-based work has both contributed to the visibility of problems related to gender equality, while maintaining market orientation and a heteronormative gender order.

In this article, I want to ask what has happened to gender equality

work among the above described shifts. I examine the consequences of this turn of events on equality work in Finland. Moreover, equality has been labelled women's work, something that women do. Continuity of the equality work has required a complex form of competence. In a situation, in which equality issues are firmly harnessed to the aims of economic efficiency and productivity, it is even more important to understand how people who actively seek change have succeeded in negotiating equality matters (see also Squires 2006). Therefore I look for ways to investigate the current situation by conducting an analysis that will show not only the power relations that shape gender equality work, but also how it has been possible for gender equality work to continue successfully.

Gender Equality Work in Finland

In Finland, gender equality is a political term that is actualised in demands for various kinds of social changes. This is evident when examining gender equality work. Gender equality work means activities such as teaching, training, guidance, development and research, which help to promote gender equality (e.g. Holli 2003; Raevaara 2005; Edström 2009; Guðbjörnsdóttir 2010; Brunila 2009). A great deal of equality work has been carried out in co-operation with preschools, schools, universities, vocational training institutions, children, pupils, teachers, students, researchers, educators, governments and employers (Lahelma 2011; Lahelma & Hynninen 2012; Sunnari 1997; Brunila, Heikkinen & Hynninen 2005). Political and governmental programmes have called for equality work, such as teaching, training, research and other kinds of political influence in order to promote the political interests of the welfare state. Alliance with the state has offered the opportunity to achieve professionalism and continuity. Although compared to other public sector professions equality work has not achieved similar legitimisation, it has fulfilled the interests of the welfare state despite current trends towards marketisation and project-based activities.

Of course, funding directs what you do; that's obvious in research and training; it really matters what gets funding: you do what you get funding for. (Hedvig, who has conducted several EU-funded equality projects and provided training in equality issues)

Hedvig describes the effects, which are characteristics of the period making its mark on the definition of equality, the EU policy period. After Finland joined the European Union in 1995, public sector activities have increasingly been forced to apply for outside support for project-based activities (see, for example, [Ikävalko & Brunila 2011](#); [Brunila 2009, 2010](#)). The EU policy period has rapidly shifted equality work to publicly-funded projects ([Brunila, 2009](#)). First of all, the shift has taught that the promotion of equality needs publicly funded projects. Secondly, such projects represent a significant transformation in the promotion of equality, which has been marked by the emergence of new forms of governance ([Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007](#)). Consequently, such projects as new forms of governance direct how equality work is done.

The rise of project-based work is part of a larger societal shift to market economics that has started to challenge the Nordic welfare state. Various researchers have shown that there is a stronger reliance on project-based activities, especially after Finland's accession to the EU in 1995 (e.g. [Rantala and Sulkunen 2006](#); [Sjöblom 2009](#)). In Finland projects have permeated the entire public sector and constitute a common, market-oriented method of implementing welfare policies, including equality work. Publicly-funded and budgetary equality work have evolved into business-orientated projects in situations in which the project itself has become a new governing mechanism for society (e.g. [Brunila 2009, 2011](#)).

In order to grasp the consequences of this turn of events on gender equality work, I have utilised the concept of projectisation ([Brunila 2009](#)). Projectisation, which is seen as the result of decentralisation and marketisation of the public sector (e.g. [Rantala et. al. 2006](#); [Sjöblom 2009](#); [Julkunen 2006](#)), represents a disciplinary and productive form of power related to project-based activities. The concept is theoretically derived from Michel Foucault (1977) and from Neo-Foucauldian researchers (e.g. [Miller and Rose 2008](#)). Projectisation combines the ideas of new governance and governmentality. As a form of new governance, it represents market-orientated, managerialist, self-organising networks. Projects as a form of new governance have created a 'project society' ([Rantala & Sulkunen, 2006](#)); that is, dependency between individuals, groups, organizations, enterprises, officials and the state in order to solve the problems of welfare politics by market-

oriented and project-based interventions. In addition to new governance, projects represent a form of governmentality (Dean, 1999) because they link the constitution of individuals more closely to the formation of the state and to shaping the action of subjects (Rantala & Sulkunen 2006). As organized practices through which individuals are governed (Rose, 1999), projects extend marketisation even further into public sector practices as a form of governmentality (Brunila, 2009, 2011).

Projectisation represents discursive power, which we need to understand in order to grasp better what is going on in the context of equality work. As a form of discursive power, projectisation is important to analyse because it is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. It does not dominate; instead, it incorporates those who are subject to it and is productive in the sense that it shapes and retools its targets. With the analytical concept it was possible to analyze how equality specialists were made speaking subjects at the same time as they were subjected to the constitutive force of discourses. According to Foucault (1977; 1998), power and knowledge are always found embedded together in the discursive regimes of truth. Discourse is a way of representing knowledge about a particular domain at a particular historical moment.

It is also important to look actively for ways in which to analyse the current situation. Thus, I have undertaken to conduct a study that will demonstrate not only the power relations that shape gender equality work, but also how it has been possible for gender equality work to continue. An understanding is needed of how discursive power relations function as a strong framework within which subject and action are formed (cf. Butler 2008). In order to understand how gender equality work shapes and how it is shaped by those involved, I have used the concept of subjectification. Subjectification represents the processes through which people are subjected and the terms of subjection that they actively adopt (Davies et al. 2001; Davies 1998, 2006). In equality work subjectification involves those discourses used by that people involved in equality work as if such discourses were their own.

Heteronormativity can also be understood as a form of subjectification. Regarding gender equality work, what gender means to us affects the objectives that are set and the ways these objectives are pursued. A crucial obstacle to the advancement of equality seems to be

that the division into two results in assumptions about the fundamental dissimilarity of women and men. This way of thinking includes assumptions about the heterosexuality of the two parties. What makes this problematic in heteronormative order and in terms of equality is that characteristics labeled masculine are seen as more valuable than those labeled feminine ones. Also the assumption of differing characteristics necessarily leads to different treatment, which then produces differences that strengthen the assumptions of gender-bound characteristics. (e.g. Brunila, Heikkinen & Hynninen 2005, 26.) In gender equality work, through heteronormative discourses enforced by projectisation (Brunila 2009), equality specialists are made the speaking subjects, while at the same time as they are subjected to the constitutive force of those discourses.

Research Data and Analysis

This article is based on an analysis of gender equality work in Finland between 1970 and 2003. The data were produced in an equality project undertaken with fellow researchers Mervi Heikkinen and Pirkko Hynninen (Brunila et al., 2005). The data include documents from 99 publicly-funded equality projects. By project, I mean short-term ventures, publicly funded by the EU, the Finnish government, private foundations, associations, and so on, usually implemented outside the formal public sector system and having certain predetermined goals. In this article I have utilized interviews with 30 long-time specialists who have promoted equality through teaching, training, guidance and research. They have committed important parts of their lives to gender equality activities through several decades and have also worked in a number of public sector equality projects. Nearly all have academic degrees, and they have worked in public and private sector. The anonymity of the interviewees was guaranteed by using pseudonyms and changing contexts whenever necessary. Before beginning the interviews, the research aims and the practices for securing anonymity were discussed. An informed consent form was signed by the interviewees, in which the use of the data and the research practices regarding confidentiality and archiving were described.

I wanted to emphasise that it is important to analyse what is said rather than who is speaking. This is central point in the analysis of

discursive power. As an analytical tool, I have utilised discursive approach, especially the concept of discourse, not only as speech and writing, but also as a productive and regulative practice with material effects (Foucault 1977; Davies 1998, 2006). I use the concept of discourse as an analytical tool, not only to refer to speech and writing, but also to refer to productive and regulative practices (e.g. Davies 1998; Foucault 1977). The analysis acknowledges the relationship among knowledge, discourse and power as productive and regulative. This kind of analysis provides insight into how the forms of power are linked to gender equality work and the consequences for the agency of the people involved.

The ambivalent position of an equality specialist

I cannot see it as work from 8 to 4 o'clock: in general it is everywhere in my activities and in my life. It is also connected with my world view; maybe it is the ideological fire that I have in me. (Hedvig, who has promoted equality in the public and private sectors since the 1970s.)

There is no return from awareness. Once, you realize something, you are stuck with it. In a way it's very much like an internal road, inner development. (Fredrika, equality specialist since the 1980s.)

All the people who were interviewed had promoted gender equality in various ways for decades. In the interviews with long-term equality specialists, gender equality work was also talked about as a lifelong commitment. Like many others, Hedvig and Fredrika said that once you started the rocky road of equality work, there is no turning back. Gender equality work means all kinds of discomforts:

The first work day

And then we walked along the hallway, and while we were walking some men started to clap their hands, saying: equality, equality. I still remember it. I still remember what I was wearing; I remember everything. (Miina, equality specialist since the 1980s.)

Miina's recollection of her first day at work demonstrates how equality work from the beginning involves all kinds of rules and regulations, which constantly shape the position and the leeway of the

beginning involves all kinds of rules and regulations, which constantly shape the position and the leeway of the gender equality specialist. Sometimes regulations are harder to recognise, but sometimes they almost crawl under your skin.

If someone asks what you do, that topic, even if you are on your free time or visiting someone, you cannot get rid of the topic. You have to start discussing what you think about this and that. And sometimes, you don't want to have opinions on anything. And then very easily, it feels like I have to answer to, be the underdog and know all the equality questions in the world, what do you think about this as a woman of equality and are you feminist or not. (Fanny, equality specialist who has worked especially in the private sector, since the 1980s.)

Especially at first, it was very frustrating when my colleagues came to ask me. One man asked whether I had personal problems because you have to promote equality; don't you have a nice husband? Another man came to me and asked why I always have to shout and jabber about equality. You've got a good education, you've got a good job, you have a man. You don't have anything to complain about. (Tyyne, equality specialist, especially in the public sector since the 1990s.)

Discomfort in gender equality work is constantly present as Miina, Fanny and Tyyne's extracts describe. As these extracts show, the position of the equality specialist is constantly challenged and marginalised. During the interviews and from the perspective of subjectification, there was a noticeable ambivalence. Although all the equality specialists who were interviewed were committed to the promotion of equality, the people involved in the work were also tired and generally rather cynical (see also Brunila & Lahelma, in review). Despite co-operation and support from other colleagues, being an equality specialist was described as a rather lonely position:

I think we all are quite lonely creatures; for example here I work quite alone. It is all up to me. When I leave here or go somewhere else, there will be no one who will keep it up. (Tyyne)

Several of the equality specialists, such as Tyyne described themselves as deserted and alone. In this way, equality work reminds me of the work of a lonely torchbearer who tries to keep the flame burning despite of constant obstacles. According to the interviews with specialists, equality work in Finland has indeed been the responsibility of individual specialists who have also carried the responsibility by keeping the work alive for decades. This shows that gender equality in Finland, despite the country's reputation for being a model of equality, has neither become a fully legitimate aim in society nor the right and duty of every citizen.

The focus on labour market interests, marketisation and projectisation has given rise to professional equality work in the form of training, coaching and teaching, which is intended to ease the segregation of the labour market and respond to an anticipated labour shortage. However, in the heteronormative order, desegregation has taken place only in one direction: for women. Most of all this equality work has been conducted in publicly-funded projects targeting girls' and women's educational choices towards male-dominated professions, such as the science and technology sectors (Vehviläinen & Brunila 2007, Edström 2005; Hedlin 2009). In other words, in accordance with heteronormative gender order, girls' and women's choices have been considered more problematic than boys' and men's. Technology is where cultural ideas about the meanings of gender are particularly emphasised (Brunila, Heikkinen & Hynninen 2005). In Finland the triumphs of technology have been described as heroic tales in which the heroes are white, middle-class and heterosexual males (Vehviläinen 1997). Those who have defined technology have mainly been men. The equality specialists interviewed were rather critical of this kind of heteronormative approach in the field of technology. For example, Sandra explained the tensions in a gender equality project related to this:

They [the evaluators] had written that the objective of the project is to bring more women into the technology field. I then said that bringing women into the technology field never existed in the project plan. To my mind it has not been the aim of the project. The evaluator, however, continued arguing that it was the goal (Sandra, equality specialist in the ICT field since the 1980s.)

These kinds of examples in the interviews indicate the constant tensions related not only to heteronormativity, but also to marketisation. In Sandra's case, as in many other cases, the evaluator, funder or project partners do not necessarily agree with the more feminist aims that equality specialists might have in mind. Great efforts have had to be made from the project planning stage to its end in order to secure project continuity.

One other rather interesting challenge that equality specialists have had to confront has been the will to position oneself as a feminist. In professional and project-based equality work, calling oneself a feminist has not been easy. This is why in the interviews, the work is described as a constant confrontation and perpetual challenge. To be able to call oneself a feminist was described as a long and difficult process:

I am now able to say that I am a feminist. I don't think I only talk about equality in general; I think I can say this because I have gone through a long process. I feel that it is so meaningful so that I can say it aloud now. If one says here that she/he is a feminist, it demands a lot. But once you have said it aloud, it won't hurt so much the next time. (Hedvig)

I later realized that I have become a woman of equality and a feminist. I have had to question what I am and how much I trust myself and also whether I am as valuable as men are. It has been how I would say it, ongoing growth to become a feminist. (Fanny)

Feminism was a topic that was introduced in the interviews without my asking. I have interpreted this as a will to talk about the subject. In some cases feminism was considered a natural part of equality work, but in many cases it was described as a difficult and burdensome process. In any event, to analyse the position of the equality specialist tells something about the stigma of feminism and therefore how hard it is to be a feminist in Finland.

Discourse virtuosity as insurance for continuity

At a time when equality discourse is harnessed to the aims of economic efficiency and productivity, it is essential to understand how people who actively seek continuity and possibilities negotiate equality matters.

Alli: You have to know how to read the organisation, you have to know how to act, and you have to know the border that you cannot cross, influence the organisations only positively.

Kristiina: What do you mean by the border?

Alli: If you go to a very patriarchal, masculine and goal-orientated organisation, those borders are much narrower. If you start to cry during a meeting, you are out. Or if you become emotional and say this is so wrong if I don't get this and that, and child care is not working, if you talk about handicraft or something feminine, you are out.

When I started interviewing equality specialists, I soon realised the biggest problem or paradox in equality work: the aim had become the biggest threat to the work's continuity. In order to keep the work going the aim should remain hidden or be talked about in a different way in many cases. Many of the people I interviewed described ways of hiding or camouflaging gender equality work so that they could gain access to different people and places (see also Brunila 2012). Alli, for example, explained how she learned to avoid certain topics she thought were considered feminine and therefore were abandoned or ignored. Her interview described the invisible border that several people I interviewed were telling about, the important border that must be recognized in equality work.

Alli's example helps to understand heteronormativity as a form of subjectification in equality work. The border Alli refers to means acknowledging the heteronormative discourse and mastering it in order to be heard. In this sense equality work consists of sequences of repeated acts that solidify into the appearance of something that has been present all along. In other words, someone involved in equality work does not stand apart from the prevailing norms and conflicting power relations. But as Alli's example also shows, neither heteronormativity nor any form of power relation has to be deterministic. In order to promote equality, one needs to learn the "right" way to talk so that in becoming objects of the disciplinary forms of power, people also become active subjects.

I sell it as a cream cake, that's what I do.
(Mimmi, equality specialist since the 1990s.)

When I first talked to Mimmi, she was reluctant to be interviewed because of the cream cake she feels she has to provide in order to get into different kinds of organisations to train gender equality matters. What she meant by the cream cake was to highlight the positive effects that gender equality could have. In market-orientated and heteronormative order, these effects would be the efficiency, competitiveness and productivity that gender equality would offer. Based on the interviews with equality specialists, the equality work was about constant negotiations, precisely the thing that Mimmi demonstrates in her extract, as follows:

It demands constant negotiations and constant recognizing of other people's opinions. I have had to twist the words and turn the words and... (Mimmi).

According to the interviews, equality work has meant working in complex power relations where to be heard and keep the activity going, one has to learn to utilise different and contrasting discourses.

In this job [promoting equality in a certain organisation] it is better that I am not too visible because it could hinder my work here. You can become stigmatised as an uptight feminist so easily. Of course I am a feminist, but I don't mean that in the negative sense. I want to be constructive and go forward with small steps. I am known as a constructive and co-operative person; I am not aggressive. In this work you have to avoid aggressive behaviour. (Helle)

What Helle is saying is that an angry equality specialist loses her chances of keeping the negotiations going. The stigma that Helle describes is not just about controlling her behaviour, but also is an important skill in equality work. Controlling one's behaviour, one's emotions, which in a heteronormative order is considered feminine, can easily lead to avoiding all kinds of feelings:

You have to learn to neutralise it; you cannot have too many feeling there when you give your presentation; if you are able to present it very neutrally, and argue it, it goes through more easily. (Fanny)

The type of emotional control that Helle and Fanny are talking about forms an important part of the competence of equality work. Helle's and Fanny's excerpts are examples of project-based equality work in heteronormative order of how discursive constructions take hold of the body, take hold of desire, and how certain discursive constructions are appropriated, while others are discarded and relegated as irrelevant or even threatening (see also Petersen 2008).

The equality specialist as a competent discourse virtuoso

We were the ones who had been doing this project, but we were not allowed into the decision-making process at all. I got this feeling last year that we have been isolated, that people want to isolate us [equality specialists in the organisation]. That we are not visible. But then I thought that, as a matter of fact, we need to have a strategic change in this situation. We need to start influencing this situation, we have to attract more people to become involved in what we are doing so that in this way we are more influential. (Hedvig)

In Finland, we have learned to utilise what comes from up there [policy level]. (Alva)

It depends on which hat I am wearing when I go to give a presentation. (Lucina)

Although equality work has been consistently been called part of the state's welfare politics, equality work in Finland has never been able to rely solely on institutional structures or professions. Instead, the central support has been the ability to talk, to present oneself in a way that secures continuity and emphasises credibility. Indeed, the equality specialists I interviewed were used to speaking in public, and they described in various ways how the negotiation skills they had developed over the years were central in order to secure continuity. Therefore, one can never think that the situation has failed completely, even if the settings sometimes seem hopeless. Regardless of the shift to projects and the demand for certain market-orientated competences, equality specialists have found ways to utilise various kinds of power relations linked to equality work. More than anything, promoting equality means constantly learning to act in various kinds of power relations, as well as

learning to utilise them.

The interviews provided many examples of this skill of taking advantage of the current situation and power relations. Equality specialists told how they learned to provide various kinds of utility factors of equality work, lobbying gatekeepers to agree with their aims by highlighting the image factor or the economic resources that projects are sometimes able to provide. A frequently-used means was to invite decision-makers to participate in public panels or to comment on publications that equality work had produced. Equality specialists also invited public figures to seminars in order to attract reporters to participate in their events. In order to get funding for equality work, discourses of labour shortage in male-dominated fields, boys' underachievement, the ability to use immigrants' skills more effectively and ways to combine work and family were all utilised.

In equality work, negotiations seem to be more useful than opposition, especially negotiations that unsettle power relations from within. The negotiations that Marjorie, Iris and other interviewees so vividly describe consisted of skills and (tacit) knowledge, which I refer to as 'discourse virtuosity' (Brunila 2009, 2012). Discourse virtuosity is a consequence of parallel but contradictory aims and discourses in equality work, a complex form of competence performed in order to be heard.

This kind of discourse virtuosity is especially needed when seeking funds for employment, for the next project and for the work's continuity. In order to receive funding for equality work, one needs to demonstrate the impact of the work in market-orientated terms, such as productivity and competitiveness. Sometimes one needs to highlight public discussions such as concern over boys' underachievement at school or strict segregation and gender division in education and working life. When different discourses were utilised, equality work became possible in places and situations that might otherwise have been inaccessible such as private companies. I consider discourse virtuosity a historically formed competence in equality work, a form of knowledge about how to think and act so that you will be heard (see also, Brunila 2009, 2012). Discourse virtuosity could be compared to tacit knowledge that implies unwritten, but well-proven ways of being and doing. Equality work demands flexibility, patience and small steps that Iida and Sandra talk

about:

What I think is the most rewarding thing what I have experienced is that with small steps, with small steps politics, and sometimes a little bit bigger steps. (Iida)

I have never become cynical. I think proceeding with small steps it's always better than nothing. (Sandra)

But equality work is more than small steps. From what I learned in the interviews, it is also about courage, strong will and the capability to refuse to compromise, as Aleksandra and Iida below demonstrate in their extracts:

I was not a novice in equality work. I had got used to the fact that things needed to ease up. If I want to create something, I never take the answer as last. I always leave the door open, and I close sessions so that we are able to agree at the next meeting. I always find a way to leave the door open. (Aleksandra)

And despite this, there will be the occasional setback, and they're always pretty depressing. But then you have to think again what to do, and what you can learn from this, so that the same thing won't happen again the next time. (Iida)

Many of the equality specialists presented themselves as strong, independent, brave and goal-orientated actors in the field of equality. Through utilising these kinds of discourses, equality specialists were able to introduce equality work, gain credibility and fill a position of an expert, as Minna shows:

I guess I have always found ways. I have pushed so long that I have found them (Minna, equality specialist since the 1980s, especially in the private sector.)

More important, based on the interviews this stance also enabled negotiating leeway for more feminist aims that avoided marketisation and heteronormativity. It appears that professional and projectised equality work demands a certain kind of competence and discourse virtuosity as Minna above pointed out. The situation seems to be

especially demanding for people who have just started to promote equality, and discourse virtuosity is not yet performed the right way. Nevertheless, the biggest problem here lies in the fact that discourses have the ability to look like they are driven from within. What seems to be innocent flirting with market-orientated discourse can lead to a situation that after many repetitions one no longer recognise.

Conclusion

Promoting gender equality is one of the tasks of the Nordic welfare state. In Finland, the government programmes and the government action plans for gender equality have incorporated ambitious objectives for the promotion of gender equality in preschool, compulsory school higher education, teacher education and in the field of science as well as in working life (Brunila 2010). The importance of mainstreaming the gender perspective into all education, working life and into the relevant policy areas has been underlined in the government programmes and actions plans for gender equality.

Nevertheless, the focus on labour market interests has given rise to equality work in the form of market-orientated training and teaching that has aimed to ease the segregation of the labour market and has responded to the anticipated shortage of labour. However, the desegregation has foremost taken place in one direction: for women. It's a good question to ask how these recent shifts relate to what has been traditionally understood as 'Nordic' such as equality, democracy and social justice.

In Finland, the responsibility to acknowledge gender equality in welfare state's politics has been the responsibility of individual gender equality specialists who have learned to act in various kinds of power relations. It is clear that public policy related to gender equality has not been fixed; rather, it is constantly modified by the different ways of doing equality work. Gender equality work is still done in many ways.

Based on my interviews, equality work is about recognising inequalities and being constantly willing to do something about them. Equality work is also a personal process of change for those involved. The process may not necessarily always be easy. Uncertainty and one's own incompleteness are a permanent state of affairs. This may pose a

challenge to one's expertise and know-how.

Although, there is a great deal of commitment connected with equality work, it is also full of all kinds of discomfort. To become the gender equality specialist means stepping into something from which there is no turning back. Equality specialists described how they have had to accept the fact that there is no praise or encouragement nor is there societal appreciation for what they are doing. Instead, equality work is described as a constant and lonely struggle for which no rewards are expected. The discomfort described in every interview was increased by the aim of bringing up inequalities which at the same time challenged the continuity of the work. This is the paradox: the work's aim is the biggest threat to its continuity.

Based on the interviews with 30 long-term equality specialists, equality work seems paradoxical. One needs to position oneself as a brave and determined expert who is not afraid of conflict, but then again one also needs to be neutral, flexible, willing to negotiate, in other words, be visible and invisible at the same time. During the interviews, time after time equality specialists told how crucial it is to recognise first these power relations and then learn to utilise them to open up channels that allow some distance from existing identities and identifications with preset meanings and categories. More than anything else, promoting equality meant learning to act in various kinds of power relations, as well as learning how to use them.

Based on my research, instead of being repressive, equality work means ongoing negotiations. But this does not necessarily come without problems. A multitude of interests meet in working towards change, and the upper is not necessarily the desire to promote justice and equality. There is always the chance that after sufficient repetition of market-orientated and heteronormative discourses in project-based activities, one no longer recognises the difference.

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