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Who Dares to Wear Trousers?

Adoption of a New Fashion by Finnish Women 1920–1980

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Trousers have traditionally been men's clothing that women have not been allowed to wear. In this article, I study the history of women's wearing of trousers in the twentieth-century Finnish context by analysing women's own memories and experiences of the trouser trend. My research material consists of written reminiscences, which I use, first, to reconstruct the social and cultural factors that framed women's choices. Second, I approach their personal preferences and choices by analysing their narrative identities in the context of dress. My analysis shows that the cultural norms, conventions and expectations about a proper dress were crucial for adopting a new fashion trend. The most important factor in the choice of apparel was, however, the sensual, embodied experiences of wearing clothes.



Introduction: Women as Consumers and Wearers of Fashion

Women's wearing of trousers has become an important symbol and milestone in both fashion history and gender history because it represents women's emancipation on many levels. Women first started wearing trousers when they gained access to sports, paid work and other male-dominated spheres in society (see e.g. Roberts 1994; Warner 2005; Wolter 1994). Trousers were advertised as a symbol of women's independence and new, active role in society (see e.g. Roberts 1994; Turunen 2011).

Trousers became a trend in women's fashion in the Western world for the first time in the 1920s and 1930s, and they were celebrated as representing women's emancipation in the era after the First World War. As trousers were traditionally men's wear, women's wearing of trousers was initially, however, considered very daring and only mildly acceptable (Bill 1993; Roberts 1994; Horwood 2011; Warner 2013: 56–61). "They were quite a shock back then, these trousers", wrote a woman, born in 1931, in her answer to the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, which gathered reminiscences on the history of wearing trousers among women in Finland. She had started to wear them in the mid-1940s, but her mother-in-law, for example, never put them on (SKS KRA Housut 298.2006, respondent born in 1931). In this article, I discuss how the trend towards wearing trousers was not always easy for women to adopt. I examine how women's trousers fashions were experienced in the Finnish context from the 1920s to the 1970s.

The history of women's trousers has been previously discussed mainly by focusing on the role of the fashion industry in initiating and popularising trousers for women. These studies highlight how fashion designers, clothing manufacturers and retailers, fashion magazines, Hollywood films and film stars and other fashion idols revolutionised women's dress. In doing so, they reconstructed and promoted new ideals of femininity, feminine beauty and women's emancipation in the early and mid-twentieth century (e.g. Wolter 1994; Warner 2005; Buckland 2005; Welters 2005; Rabine & Kaiser 2006; Comstock 2011; Warner 2013). Only a few studies discuss women's views on trousers, even though women's role as consumers and wearers of new fashions was crucial. Without acceptance by consumers, fashionable apparel would never be bought; it would lie unworn in factories and shops (Entwistle 2000: 1). Additionally, after an item of clothing has been bought, it will stay unworn in the closet if the person who purchased it does not like to wear it (Woodward 2007). Women's trousers are a good example of a fashion that was not easy to adopt, since although the trousers fashion was established as early as the 1920s, women did not fully embrace it, or were not given full access to it until the 1970s, and in some cases not even after that (e.g. Vincent 2009: 130–132).

The point of departure for my article is the current study of fashion as consumer fashion. Instead of seeing consumers as passive followers of fashion, adoption and wearing of fashion is understood as a process that is motivated by a range of factors, including both personal preferences and social factors such as class, age, occupation and income as well as cultural norms, conventions and expectations about what is proper dress in particular social settings (Appleford 2013; Entwistle 2000: 3–52; Woodward 2007: 19–21). Most previous studies on the social and cultural history of women wearing trousers focus on the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fischer 2001; Warner 2005; Buckland 2005; Welters 2005; Rabine & Kaiser 2006; Comstock 2011; Warner 2013) or during the Second World War (Buckland 2005; Hall, Orzada & Lopez-Gydosh 2015). In a European context, researchers have studied the use of trousers as part of the emergence of new fashion trends and the New Woman in the period between the two world wars in France (Roberts 1994) and Britain (Bill 1993; Horwoord 2011; Skillen 2012). Marianne Larsson (2012) and I have examined the history of trousers as women's sportswear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Nordic context (Turunen 2011). A more comprehensive analysis has been made by Gundula Wolter, who has analysed the history of women's trousers from the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century to the 1980s, with a special focus on Germany. Sports historians have emphasised that it was the increase in leisure time and women's participation in sports at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century that explain the need for a new item of clothing for women in the first place (Warner 2006; Skillen 2012). During the two world wars, the employment of women in factories also necessitated more practical clothing (Doan 1998: 676; Grayzel 1999; Hall, Orzada & Lopez-Gydosh 2015).

The aim of this article, however, is to contribute to the study of the history of women's trousers by focusing on an aspect that has been previously understudied: women's everyday experiences of trousers.¹ I draw on ethnological approaches and the methods of oral history to scrutinise women's personal preferences and the social and cultural factors related to women's dress. I analyse cultural change as transformations in mentalities, identities, semantic structures and practices of everyday life in local historical and social settings (Stark 2009: 4; Jönsson & Nilsson 2017). In today's world, trousers have mostly lost their significance as gender-specific clothing designed only for men, but in the past, contemporaries could not know if women's trousers were only a passing fad or if they would become a permanent part of women's wardrobes. The process of modernisation in Finland moved at different paces for persons of different classes, regions, occupations

¹ For an exception, see Bill (1993) and Turunen (2016).



Figure 1: It became socially acceptable for women to wear trousers and dungarees in Finland as workwear during the Second World War. (Photo: Väinö Kannisto, Helsinki City Museum).

and generations (Stark 2009). The decisions and behaviours of people who lived through it were influenced by the immediate options available to them as well as their hopes and expectations regarding change. In order to understand their behaviours, we must seek to situate their choices in their contemporary contexts (Stark 2009: 5).

Firstly, I contextualise choices of women by analysing the connection between personal preferences and social and cultural factors, as women pondered whether or not to purchase and wear trousers. By social context, I mean the social factors (such

as age and class) affecting the women in question and their consumption of fashion and new clothes in general. By cultural context, I mean the dominant ideals, norms, expectations and conventions of dress that framed women's clothing choices in Finland from the 1920s to the 1970s. My analysis spans seven decades because my aim is to highlight that women's adoption of trousers was a long process. Secondly, I analyse why this process took as long as it did. Women's personal experiences and preferences and the process of negotiating between various and even conflicting cultural ideals will be studied by applying theoretical discussions of narrative identity, habitual clothing and dress as embodied experiences. The concept of narrative identity is used to analyse how respondents reminisce and explain their own choices, and the concepts of habitual clothing and embodied experiences highlight the role of clothing as a sensual item and as something that one must learn to wear.

Written Oral History Narratives as Research Material

The reminiscences that I use as research material were written in 2006 and 2007 as responses to an oral history project that collected memories on the history of women's trousers in Finland. I initiated the collection of the material, which was organised by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society. The aim of the collection was to collect in-depth knowledge representing women's personal experiences, memories, opinions and interpretations (Leavy 2011: 4–5, 9; Fingerroos & Haanpää 2012: 81–92; Hagström & Marander-Eklund 2005: 11–12). The respondents were given a list of questions, including: “When did you start to wear trousers?”; “When (at what time and for what purposes) have you worn trousers?”; and “How did it feel like to wear trousers for the first time?” Questions addressing the dress codes at school and at work as well as other people's attitudes towards women's wearing of trousers were also included in order to gather information about social norms and ideals of dress and appearance.²

The Finnish Literature Society's Folklore Archives have collected folklore and descriptions of people's lives since the end of the nineteenth century through fieldwork conducted by academic researchers and students. Members of the Archives' network of respondents have also been regularly asked to complete narrative questionnaires dealing with heritage in their locality. Today, this “ethnography by mail” in which amateur fieldworkers are respondents is actively used for gathering research material in the Baltic and Nordic countries (see Fingerroos & Haanpää 2012: 81–92; Heimo 2016; Hagström & Marander-Eklund 2005).

² The inquiry is available at <http://neba.finlit.fi/kra/keruut/naistenhousut.htm>. The questionnaire attracted a total of 108 responses, 10 from men and 98 from women.

As there was no comprehensive collection of oral history material available about women's wearing of trousers in Finland, I chose to collect my research material through a narrative questionnaire. Cooperation with the Folklore Archives was also a labour-saving way to gather information about the topic compared to interviewing dozens of people in different parts of the country. The members of the network of the Folklore Archives were used to writing their personal memories in response to narrative questionnaires, and they also knew what kind of information the Archives and academic researchers were looking for. They knew, for example, that laypersons' personal narratives and stories in a personal style were valued by researchers (Pöysä 2015: 5, 20).

The responses I received to my questions are several pages long and these narratives are more or less structured (Hytönen 2013: 90). In my research material, the length of the answers varies from a few sentences to 40 pages. The shortest answers usually consist of one or two incidents or stories, and the longer ones are life story narratives that are built around personal milestones in life (such as starting and graduating from school, getting married and entering working life), as well as changes in the historico-political environment. Some authors followed the order in which the questions were asked in the questionnaire, some recounted their memories and experiences about the topic freely and others focused only on particular questions. Temporally, the answers cover a time span from the turn of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In Finland, the respondents who provide this kind of written material collected through writing competitions and narrative questionnaires typically represent all social classes and all parts of the country (Helsti 2005). This was the case with this material as well: questionnaires were returned from all provinces and from a broad range of respondents such as former manual workers, farmers, farmers' wives, salespersons, housewives, nurses, teachers and university professors. In this article, I analyse the answers of those 95 female respondents who were born before the mid-1950s. The oldest respondent was born in 1913 and the youngest in 1952. I focus on their narratives because they have personal memories and experiences of the time when trousers were an exceptional and unusual form of clothing for women. I am particularly interested in the respondents' narrative identities in the context of dress. I analyse the responses as narrative accounts of how the respondents see themselves in relation to the trousers fashion, how they explain and negotiate their identities and choices of dress, and how they want to be seen as agents (for more on narrative identity, see Koskinen-Koivisto 2014: 2–27).

The Arrival of the Trousers Trend in Finland before the Second World War

Trousers made their breakthrough in Western women's fashion in the 1920s as part of the new style of the "modern emancipated woman" who led an active and sporty life.

New items of dress included beach pyjamas, shorts and other trousers for sports and leisure (Bill 1993: 47; Wolter 1994; Warner 2005; Skillen 2012; Larsson 2012: 130–136; Warner 2013). Existing studies show, however, that the number of women who actually wore them was small, and their use was limited to skiing and the seaside. By the 1930s, middle-class women could wear shorts for hiking and beach pyjamas – a loose and wide overall – on the beach and for other holiday and leisure pursuits (Bill 1993; Wolter 1994: 250–253; Horwood 2011; Skillen 2012). Some of the women interviewed by Katina Bill (1993: 47) for her study of British women in the 1930s could not recall women's trousers being worn until wartime.

In my research material, too, several respondents wrote that the trousers fashion arrived in Finland only during or after the Second World War, but many reminiscences indicate trousers were worn in many parts of the country, both in towns and in the countryside, already before the war. The oldest respondent, born in 1913, reminisced that:

It was in the 1920s when I saw women's trousers for the first time. My sister had a white sailor suit with white trousers, they had widening legs. I can't remember what kind of shirt she wore, but I remember the trousers because they looked so fine! (SKS KRA Housut 466.2003, respondent born in 1913)³

The sailor suit in question was presumably a beach pyjama.

In Finland, the modern, athletically-minded woman was seen to be one who practised cross-country skiing. Skiing was named the Finnish national sport in the 1920s and 1930s, and all Finnish citizens irrespective of age and gender were encouraged to take up cross-country skiing (Kokkonen 2008: 149–150). Finnish women's magazines, for example, portrayed skiing as women's civic duty as Finns. These magazines labelled skirts as outdated skiing wear and strongly recommended that women should wear trousers instead (Turunen 2011). My written narrative sources indicate that the women who had worn trousers-like items of clothing were almost exclusively young upper- and middle-class girls, which explains why only a few respondents had seen or worn them in the 1920s or 1930s:

At the end of the 1930s, as I was at school, some girls from the wealthier families who lived further away from the school started to wear skiing trousers in the wintertime. I was a little bit envious of them because it was much easier for these girls to ski. It didn't matter if they fell when they were skiing downhill, because the skin of their

³ Translations were made by the author.

legs didn't come into contact with snow, unlike mine. (SKS KRA Housut 119.2006, respondent born in 1928)

In all Western countries, access to trousers and other fashionable items of clothing depended on the availability of consumer goods and the income levels of female consumers. In the United States, the mass production of clothing had already gathered speed in the nineteenth century (see e.g. Welters & Cunningham 2005: 2). In both the United States and Western Europe, the period between the two world wars was a consumer culture boom, because consumer products became available for the first time to the lower-middle class and working-class masses (see e.g. Roberts 1994; Horwood 2011).

When compared to France and other Western European or even Nordic countries, the standard of living in Finland was low until the late 1920s, and the country suffered from the Great Depression in the early 1930s (Saaritsa 2019). In the period between the two world wars, the clothes of rural families – the majority of the Finnish population – were mostly made at home or by a local seamstress or village tailor. In the early 1920s, it was still typical to use homespun fabrics. The manufacture of ready-to-wear clothing was established gradually during the 1920s and 1930s, but it consisted mainly of socks, underwear, men's suits and overalls, and other work garments. Among rural inhabitants, ready-to-wear clothing was costly and thus rarely worn (Kaukonen 1985: 12–13, 266, 270; Oittinen 1999: 73–74; Kaipainen 2008: 82–83, 103–110).

My respondents' stories show that in the 1920s and 1930s, women's trousers represented a modern fashion that was adored by many girls and young women, while their parents had reservations regarding it. Respondents who grew up in working-class families or on a farm before the Second World War reminisced that their parents saw trousers as too expensive and an unnecessary purchase for girls, "especially as we got along quite well without them", as one respondent's mother had said (SKS KRA Housut 119.2006, respondent born in 1928). The mother's response shows how women who were used to wearing only skirts were not convinced that the new trend was necessary for women, particularly as they could not afford to purchase this new type of clothing.

The main reason why parents refused to buy their daughters a pair of trousers or restricted their use was that trousers were perceived as indecent. One of the respondents described how she had asked her mother whether "we women" should not also wear trousers: "The answer was clear, they don't belong to women, and why should we imitate men?" (SKS KRA Housut 88.2006, respondent born in 1929). Reactions to women's trousers were mostly negative; they were seen as indecent, immoral, disgusting and too mannish for women. Both in Bill's (1993: 50–51) and in my research materials, the strongest reactions towards women's trousers came from women's own parents because they were worried about "what the neighbours would think".

Social and gender historians have shown that the idea of the 1920s as a decade of women's liberation is an optimistic interpretation. The 1920s witnessed an enormous preoccupation with issues of female identity and women's proper role, which the new fashion was seen to express (Roberts 1994; Sølund 2000). Women's suffrage, their increased employment opportunities and independent consumer spending, as well as the increased legitimacy of female sexual desire created an impression of profound social change that worried social observers. Politicians, journalists, teachers, physicians, psychologists and social workers sought to control this change by defining new standards for women's behaviour, duties and responsibilities, female employment, mental fitness and health (Bill 1993: 53; Roberts 1994; Sølund 2000). In Germany, the National Socialistic propaganda of the 1930s in particular promoted conservative gender roles and was critical towards the new fashion of trousers (Wolter 1994: 254–255).

Contemporaries viewed modern fashions of the 1920s as indecent and immoral because the use of cosmetics and lipstick in particular was considered vulgar. Short hemlines and sleeves, low necklines and trousers refuted old codes of modesty since they revealed significant parts of women's bodies that the old fashions had hidden (Bill 1993: 51; Wolter 1994: 237–244; Roberts 1994: 66–67; Sølund 2000: 25–31, 84–87; Horwood 2011: 66–69). The bobbed hair and boyish look of the 1920s were regarded as a rejection of the traditional feminine role in favour of a more masculine one. The fashionable boyish look of the 1920s represented a much-feared blurring of gender distinctions and was interpreted, on the basis of the new scientific discussion on homosexuality, as sexual perversity. This fashionable style was seen to transform women into lesbians or “sexless eunuchs” (Roberts 1994: 69–73; Wolter 1994: 244–247; Sølund 2000: 30–40; Turunen 2011: 326–331).

In my written narrative sources, only one respondent mentioned that she did not want to be seen in trousers in public because she had heard “whispers of masculine girls who were fond of long trousers, and of women lovers”, which was a vernacular term for lesbians (SKS KRA Housut 148.2006, respondent born in 1926). My research confirms the observation made in previous studies that the agrarian common folk in Finland were not familiar with the modern concept of homosexuality until the 1940s and 1950s. Masculine women who wore trousers and engaged in men's duties on farms were not perceived as homosexuals because people did not have a category for naming gendered behaviour linked to same sex desire. They were “merely” seen as odd (Löfström 1994; Juvonen 2002).

In the 1920s and 1930s within the agrarian context, women's trouser-wearing was therefore not criticised as a sign of deviant sexual proclivities: it was interpreted instead in the context of religious literature and teachings. My respondents mentioned that

they were reminded by elderly people that women's trouser-wearing was prohibited in the Bible,⁴ according to which women's wearing of trousers was a sin. It was seen to represent a transgression of the traditional gender roles, which were perceived to be created by God (see also Mikkola 2009). Another reason for disapproval of women's trousers was that they were thought to be a sign of the end of the world. "Women's wearing of trousers prophesies the Second Coming", wrote one respondent, citing a proverb she had heard in her childhood (SKS KRA Housut 89.2006, respondent born in 1929). By choosing to wear trousers, a woman or a girl was therefore perceived as a sign of the impending apocalypse.

Another reason why parents had negative attitudes towards their daughters' wearing of trousers was that it was seen to be a sign of the wearer's willingness to make a spectacle of herself:

My sister got the idea for the shorts when our acquaintance from Helsinki visited us. She had shorts. My sister didn't dare to make them for herself but decided to make me a pair in order to see how people would react. [...] I was afraid that my parents wouldn't let me wear them, but they did. I was permitted to wear them, but only on one condition: I should not wear them in the village road. My mother didn't want her daughter to be a coquette showing off with fashionable clothing. (SKS KRA Housut 345–346.2006, respondent born in 1927)

As social historians have shown, in the Finnish early twentieth-century agrarian context, new fashions in clothing were resisted as vanity and extravagance, and therefore as sinful (Mikkola 2009). Fashionable clothing was also associated with frivolity and loose morals. The dress code of the time was based on social status, and imitating the gentry was strongly disapproved of in rural villages since it violated the boundaries between the social classes (Mikkola 2009). One of the respondents wrote that in her village in the 1930s, people found it natural that a young female elementary school teacher wore trousers as skiing wear "because she was an educated modern woman", but they thought that it was unnecessary for "ordinary" women, meaning rural women, to wear them (SKS KRA Housut 121.2006, respondent born in 1928).

From a Shortage of Goods to Consumer Culture

Attitudes towards women's dress changed during the Second World War as women stepped into jobs and service positions vacated when men left for the war front. In

⁴ The Book of Deuteronomy 22:5 says: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this."

Finland, as well as in other countries that participated in the war, it was pointed out that women needed practical clothing as workwear (Hall, Orzada & Lopez-Gydosh 2015: 237–239; Turunen 2015). For the first time, trousers were considered suitable for women in ordinary daily life, not only for sports: “we even slept in them, in case there was an air-raid alarm in the night” (SKS KRA Housut 85.2006, respondent born in 1926).

However, not everybody changed their attitude towards women’s wearing of trousers. Respondents reported that especially in the countryside many fellow villagers, usually older people, still disapproved of women’s trousers. “There was a girl who put on her brother’s trousers [during the war], it aroused so much disapproval that she sewed a skirt out of them”, reminisced one respondent (SKS KRA Housut 293.2006, respondent born in 1933).

At the same time, the clothing worn by women on the home front was shaped by wartime conditions. The US and the British governments instituted measures to ensure the supply of materials to the armed forces, and restrictions were imposed on fibre, yardage and design details in domestic textile industries (Buckland 2005; Hall, Orzada & Lopez-Gydosh 2015: 239–241). In Finland after the summer of 1941, the textile industry manufactured textiles and clothing only for military purposes, and the shortage of these products for civilians continued until the end of the 1940s (Pihkala 1982: 317–318, 324). The shortage of fabric and clothing was mentioned as an explanation in my sources for why women did not own trousers during the war, unless they wore those belonging to their brother or another male relative, left in closets when he went to the front:

I got my first pair of skiing trousers when I was 18 [in 1950]. At that time, almost every woman had them. There was hardly any fabric for sale in shops. My trousers were made of men’s old trousers. (SKS KRA Housut 257.2006, respondent born in 1932)

The rationing of fabric and clothing did not end until 1955. At the beginning of the 1950s, luxury items such as nylons were still hard to obtain, and the ready-to-wear industry was only starting to develop (Mansner 1988: 58–59).

In the decade after the war, trousers became women’s sportswear and leisurewear in all social classes: “When the war and the shortage of consumer goods had ended and I was earning my living, I was able to buy my first trousers. They were black skiing trousers”, reported a respondent whose parents had refused to buy her a pair of trousers in the 1930s. She was not the only one who pointed out that women started to wear trousers in the 1950s because that was when fashion began to influence people’s dress, and some families had more money to spend on clothing:

I belong to the generation [of women] who did not wear trousers in their childhood, and not even after that for a long time. [...] I live in the countryside, we did not follow any fashion when I was a child. [...] They started to appear [in shops] in the early 1950s, that's when I bought myself my first "jeans" for farm and garden work. After that, they became more common wear, for myself as well, and the selection of both fabrics and styles became wider. (SKS KRA Housut 123.2006, respondent born in 1927)

Even girls from poorer families found ways to obtain and wear trousers in the 1950s, as one respondent born in 1941 described:

In the 1950s, the standard of living was low: we couldn't buy trousers just like that. In poor families, you could have a pair of them only if your relatives in town could send them to you. When I was 14 years old, I made myself brown corduroys. I liked them a lot. I remember that I unstitched them, turned them inside out and sewed them again so that I could wear them longer. (SKS KRA Housut 477.2006, respondent born in 1941)

Respondents' stories point to the fact that Finns became consumers of mass-produced, ready-made goods in the 1960s and 1970s, much later than the United States and other Western countries. The ready-to-wear industry started to grow after the war, and in the 1960s when Finland was beginning to reach the standard of living of Western Europe, a wide selection of consumer goods replaced the previous shortages (Lappalainen & Almay 1996: 224–225; Autio 2019: 205–211; Frisk 2019).



Figure 2: Skiing fashion in the late 1950s. (Photo: Juha Jernvall, Helsinki City Museum).

Finnish baby boomers who were born right after the war (from 1945 to the beginning of the 1950s) turned jeans into a norm for their generation as teenagers and have worn them ever since (Iltanen 2005: 180–181):

I was lucky to live at the time when jeans landed in Finland in the 1950s. We called them *dongarit* [dungarees] before they were called *jamekset* [James jeans].⁵ Nobody could resist them, and there was no reason even to try, because there are no better everyday trousers than jeans. They also promoted equality among girls and boys, as both wore the same clothes. (SKS KRA Housut 328–329.2006, respondent born in 1938)

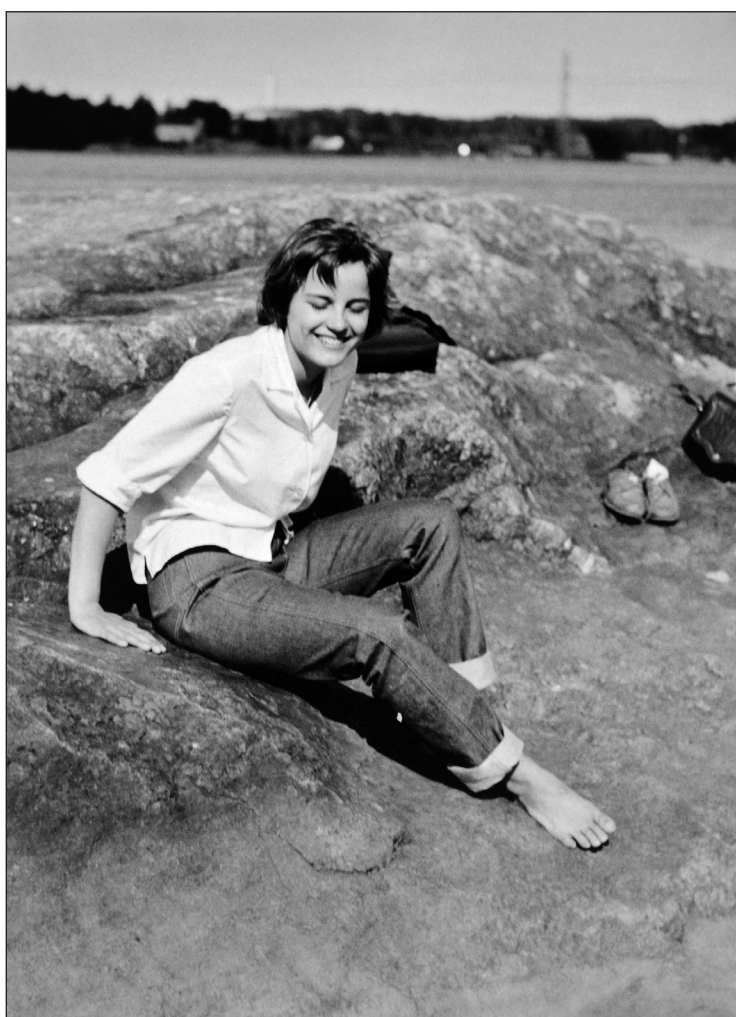


Figure 3: The youth fashions of the 1950s also popularised jeans for girls. (Photo: Helsinki City Museum, photographer unknown, the late 1950s).

⁵ Mattisen Teollisuus Oy named their famous jeans after the American actor James Dean (Poutasuo 2006).

By the mid-1950s, nearly all children were completing their elementary school, and unlike their parents, many baby boomers also had post-elementary school education, some even a university degree (Rinne & Kivirauma 2006: 72–75; Hoikkala, Purhonen & Roos 2002: 146, 150–151). Several younger respondents who were born in the 1940s or 1950s mentioned that by the time they had graduated from secondary school or university and went to work at the end of the 1960s or in the 1970s, girls were allowed to wear trousers at school, university, and white-collar workplaces. In the 1970s, trousers had totally replaced skirts and dresses in their wardrobes:

In the 1970s, trousers were so common that we did not even purchase other clothing. There were three of us [women] living together as roommates, we all had the same clothes size, and only one of us owned a skirt. We all wore it whenever one of us needed to wear a skirt. (SKS KRA Housut 80, respondent born in 1943)

Women's Sensory Experiences of Wearing Trousers

The social and cultural factors that frame the consumption of clothes are relatively easy to identify. Women's personal preferences, by contrast, represent a micro-level of fashion and dress that can only be studied by looking at the intimate processes of selecting and rejecting outfits that take place within the sphere of the home and in shops. Many respondents explained that they liked to wear trousers because trousers were so practical and comfortable to wear:

I noticed how carefree [trousers] were only during the last summer of the Continuation War⁶ as I did my labour service in the fields and in the garden on weekdays from 7 am to 5 pm. I had somehow managed to get dungarees, and I discovered that they were very comfortable and carefree in all weather. Probably my liking of trousers is based on this experience. (SKS KRA Housut 464.2006, respondent born in 1927)

After this pleasant experience, the respondent wrote that she continued to wear trousers because “I particularly prefer clothes that are comfortable to wear”. Her favourite pair of trousers is one that “feels like it was made for me” (SKS KRA Housut 464.2006, respondent born in 1927). Many respondents had similar explanations for their liking of trousers:

⁶ In Finland, the Second World War included the Winter War (1939–1940), the Continuation War (1941–1944) and the Lapland War (1944–1945).

Over the years, now that I'm retired, trousers have become my favourite clothing for travelling, hiking and different kinds of occasions. I feel relaxed and free [in trousers]. (SKS KRA Housut 339.2006, respondent born in 1940)

After wearing trousers, it feels like I'm freezing in a skirt. And it also feels awkward to wear a skirt. It sticks to me here, there and everywhere. (SKS KRA Housut 133.2006, respondent born in 1924)

The respondents' narratives demonstrate that the physical wearing of apparel is fundamental to our experiences of cloth and clothing (Woodward 2007; Entwistle 2001). Joanne Entwistle (2001) criticises those analyses of dress that focus on its communicative aspects by pointing out that they neglect the "fleshy" body and experiential dimensions of dress. She argues that the production and consumption of fashion are two very different realms of fashion. The fashion system, dress codes and other discourses surrounding dress are idealisations. They provide "raw material" for our choices and are implemented and adapted by individuals only if they choose to select and follow them. Significant to this process are our experiences of body, and therefore wearing clothing is an embodied practice: the dressed body is not a passive object, but actively produced through particular, usually routine and mundane practices directed towards the body (Entwistle 2001; see also Skjold 2018). Senses such as touch and vision also play an important role when people decide what clothes to purchase and wear, and which clothes are "right" for them (Skjold 2018).

Respondents who had experienced the era when girls and women were not allowed to wear trousers or there were no trousers available for women narrated how impractical and even inhuman it was to wear a skirt in the winter:

When I started first grade in elementary school in 1953, I wore a dress and an apron, just like all the other women and girls in my village at the time. The winter cold brought nothing but pain to the womenfolk. Even though the legs of the undergarment reached almost to the knees, a narrow area of thigh between the bottom of the undergarment and the top of the woollen socks remained uncovered, stinging and becoming flaming red in the cold weather. [...] I can still remember how relieved I was when my mother bought red and blue fabric and took it to Hilma, who was our seamstress. She made a ski suit with trousers out of the fabric, which I liked a lot. (SKS KRA Housut 157.2006, respondent born in 1946)

In the contemporary world, jeans are the most common wear for Western women (Woodward 2007: 148–149; Miller & Woodward 2012), and are "habitual clothing" for many of them. "Habitual clothing" means that clothes are worn on a regular basis

because they fit the identity of the wearer and are easy and comfortable to wear on many occasions (Woodward 2007: 135). In my research material, several respondents wore trousers as their habitual wear: “In the 1980s, I noticed that I no longer knew how to wear a skirt” (SKS KRA Housut 158.2006, respondent born in 1946). Some respondents explained that they were “trouser persons” or “dedicated trouser-wearers”:

I went to middle school in 1961, and I remember that I was a bit of a weirdo because I wore trousers almost all the time. I was forced to buy a skirt, but I wore it only once or twice a year. [...] But at the school’s Christmas pageant and at the end-of-term celebration in the spring I had to wear a skirt. I did so during middle school but in the late 1960s, during upper secondary school, I didn’t go to them at all because it [the dress code] irritated me so much. [...] As my graduation was getting closer in 1970, it was announced that girls would be allowed to wear trousers at the graduation ceremony, which meant that I could participate in it. I can still remember how distressing it was to wear a skirt. You couldn’t dress the way you liked. [...] I’m happy we don’t have that anymore. (SKS KRA Housut 2006.104, respondent born in 1948)

For these women, trousers were an important part of their identity. As Entwistle has noted, dress is intimately connected to our sense of self: “dress is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies and feel at home in them” (Entwistle 2000: 48).

How Women Learned to Wear Trousers

One respondent wrote that her first trousers, which were sports trousers that she bought in the mid-1960s, “felt strange on me, and as soon as I got home from skiing, I quickly took them off” (SKS KRA Housut 196.2006, respondent born in 1928). Another explained that when she wore trousers for the first time [in 1949], she “felt a bit embarrassed as well as slightly ashamed” (SKS KRA Housut 27.2006, respondent born in 1932). As mentioned earlier, in the 1920s and 1930s girls and young women regarded trousers as fashionable as well as practical but often felt that wearing them was daring. Older respondents in particular pointed out that they had been socialised to think of women’s trousers as an indecent item of clothing. Several older respondents wrote that therefore they only “gradually began to dare to wear them” (SKS KRA Housut 128.2006, respondent born in 1924). Some women never did: “For my whole life, I have shunned trouser-wearing. The reason for this is my upbringing, I think. For example, I have never worn jeans and young people’s tattered or worn-out trousers make me sick” (SKS KRA Housut 185.2006, respondent born in 1932).

When individuals select what to wear, they must negotiate a balance between comfort, fitting in, dressing appropriately and feeling that the clothing suits their

self-image (Entwistle 2001; Woodward 2007). The act of getting dressed is an act of appearance or identity management during which women negotiate their bodies, respectability, style, status and self-perception. In addition to the clothes that women wear, the ones that they reject are equally important because getting dressed is a matter of identity construction by individuals themselves, as women ponder whether certain clothes match their personal aesthetic and sense of who they are or want to be (Woodward 2007: 2, 11–13; Entwistle 2001: 48–54).

The respondents in my source narratives indicated that their personal aesthetic was formed throughout their lifetimes through socialisation and the continuous development of personal preferences (Woodward 2007: 12; see also Skjold 2018). In the 1950s, a respectable woman never left home without being formally dressed, as my respondents pointed out. This meant wearing a jacket and a skirt as well as a hat, gloves, a handbag, a scarf and shoes, all of which had to match. Jeans and women's trousers were associated with working-class people and rebellious youths, and they were not part of a mature woman's appropriate assemblage of clothing. In this context, trousers were "too ascetic and unfeminine" for women to wear, as one respondent described (SKS KRA Housut 464.2006, respondent born in 1927). Some older respondents narrated that they wore trousers only as workwear or sportswear: "I want to be a woman and feminine. In my opinion, trousers are essentially men's wear. If I'm going to a birthday party, for example, I absolutely could not wear trousers" (SKS KRA Housut 115.2006, respondent born in 1931).



Figure 4: A Finnish mother with her children in formal dress in 1940; trousers were only worn by her son. (Photo: Väinö Kannisto, Helsinki City Museum).

While trousers represented women's emancipation and freedom of movement for many respondents, others had the opposite experience. One woman who had received her first trousers from a Swedish charity after the war said that she did not like them because they were too tight in the thighs and were made of too coarse a fabric: "I've worn them only a couple of times, I didn't even want to show off with them because I felt so terrible in them" (SKS KRA Housut 110.2006, respondent born in 1928). The unpleasant sensual experience of trousers had prevented her from wearing them even in the post-war years when there was a shortage of clothing. Another respondent, whose first trousers were made by her aunt, likewise found trouser-wearing an unpleasant experience because they did not fit well:

My first trousers were made [at the end of the 1940s] by my aunt, who made the sewing pattern herself. She put newspapers on the floor and unfolded her husband's trousers on them in order to draw the outlines for my trousers. Well, she did end up having an outline of a sort. [...] The trousers she made didn't fit well on me, but "the main thing is that they are large enough for you and that there's room for you to grow". By that time, a few girls in my class had got trousers. You could not help noticing that. Their trousers were mostly more beautiful and well fitting. Mine were the most hideous. (SKS KRA Housut 114, respondent born in 1931)

Woodward (2007) notes that the comfort of habitual clothes arises out of the texture of the fabric and the style of the clothing, as well as the fact that wearing them requires no thought or planning. By contrast, the wearing of a new kind of clothing often requires repetition until the person knows how to wear it. Woodward argues that dressing is part of broader bodily self-management and requires competence and skill. Activities become naturalised only through repetition, and this applies to dress as well. Habitual clothing means clothing that no longer feels awkward (Woodward 2007: 136–137). Entwistle (2000), too, has pointed out that dressing is an ongoing practice that requires knowledge, techniques and skills, from knowing how to tie our shoelaces to understanding colours, textures and fabrics as well as dress codes (Entwistle 2000: 34). Several respondents in my sources reported the problems that they had experienced as they began wearing trousers. One woman said that her legs were frostbitten when she wore sports trousers for the first time when skiing. These ski trousers were made of Terylene, a polyester fabric, and as they had no lining, they did not protect her legs from the cold weather like old-fashioned woollen tights and long socks had done (SKS KRA Housut 2006.148, respondent born in 1926).

The stories I analysed reveal that wearing apparel is a technique of the body, which affects not only our appearance but also our experience of our bodies, the ways in which

the body can be used and moved (Mauss 1973; Sweetman 2001: 66; Woodward 2007: 17). We do not normally experience our clothes because they are like our second skin (Entwistle 2000). We only become aware of them when we are dressed uncomfortably as it makes us aware of the “edges”, the limits and the boundaries of our body (Entwistle 2001: 45). My respondents’ personal narratives show that only those women for whom trousers “felt right”, who felt at ease in their bodies when wearing trousers, adopted them as part of their wardrobe; others wore them only occasionally, if at all.



Figure 5: The female staff of the statistics office of the City of Helsinki followed the contemporary formal dress code by wearing a skirt as workwear in 1961. (Photo: Constantin Grünberg, Helsinki City Museum).

Conclusions: Daring to Wear Trousers and Getting Used to Them

In Finland, trousers were traditionally exclusively men’s wear, and became women’s wear only during the twentieth century. The Finnish fashion industry has promoted women’s trousers since the 1920s, but it was not until the 1970s that it became socially acceptable for women to wear them as an everyday apparel.

My analysis of individual Finnish women’s written stories, opinions and experiences shows that choices of dress were based in part on personal preferences: women started to wear trousers if they “felt right” and corresponded to their sense of self. For many of the women who shared their stories in writing, wearing trousers was a question of personal identity and style. This supports the claims made in previous studies that people prefer clothing that corresponds to their self-image and that for many, trousers and particularly jeans are habitual clothing, meaning clothing that can be worn on many occasions. This also applies to those women who did not like to wear trousers at

all or wore them only occasionally: they did not feel “at home” in them. In my source material, an important factor emphasised by many women was the embodied experience of wearing clothes. Women wore clothing in which they felt at ease in their bodies. For many women, this meant trousers, while others preferred a skirt for the same reason.

Women’s widespread adoption of trousers took five decades. That it took so long was because, firstly, the adoption of a new item of clothing or dress style required that the wearer “learned” to wear it. As women were used to wearing skirts all the time, trousers felt strange to some women at first, particularly if the trousers were too tight or made of uncomfortable fabric. Older respondents had also been taught by their parents and grandparents to see women’s trousers as immoral and indecent garments that a respectable woman would not wear. In order to learn to wear trousers, women had to reconcile their personal preferences with these cultural models and ideals. For the younger respondents, this was typically easier to do as they grew up in the 1950s and 1960s when youth culture was revolutionising dress styles. The Second World War had an important impact on cultural ideals of apparel. The need for practical workwear for women was acknowledged when women’s participation in paid work, farm work and other tasks that were previously seen as men’s work increased. Women were also encouraged to wear trousers instead of a skirt as daily wear, particularly in the winter. During the war, however, the rationing and shortages of fabric and new clothing meant that only few women had the chance to purchase trousers. The change in attitudes towards wearing trousers was only temporary: after the war the dress code mentioned by my informants was reported to accept trousers for women only as sportswear.

Secondly, women’s opportunities to wear trousers were limited by economic factors. Women’s participation in sports promoted women’s wearing of trousers, but women’s access to sports trousers depended on their own socio-economic status and the overall economic situation in the country. In wealthy families, girls and women had been purchasing sports trousers since the 1930s. For lower-income families, trousers became common wear only after the Second World War. In some cases, women’s sports trousers were still a novelty into the late 1950s, and respondents could not afford to purchase them even though they would have liked to.

One important factor contributing to how fashions spread is the overall cultural attitude to fashion itself. In the Finnish context, especially in the countryside, fashion was condemned as a passing fad and therefore as a waste of money. In the countryside before the Second World War women’s trousers were seen as an indecent extravagance suitable only for the upper-classes. Sports trousers became more widespread only after the war as Finland gradually became a consumer society and a larger selection of fashionable ready-to-wear products were available to ordinary Finns.

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