GENDER POPULISM: THREE CASES OF FINNS PARTY ACTORS' TRADITIONALIST ANTI-FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Gender has been marginalized in the study on populism (Mulinari & Neergard 2012; Akkerman 2015; de Lange & Mügge 2015). Ruth Wodak (2015) states that gendered discourses in the rhetoric of right-wing populist parties have been neglected and remain under-researched. Although we seem to be witnessing an upsurge in the focus on gender issues in research on populism (see e.g. the thematic issue of *Patterns of Prejudice,* ed. by Spierings et al. 2015), with especially the amount of analyses of the so-called gender gap in voting patterns increasing lately, the analysis of performing gender and a certain gender order in the wider political discourse is still mostly missing.

In this chapter, I will look at the ways gender is performed in three cases that include active Finns Party members, namely an interview of the party secretary Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo, published in the main newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*; a 'gender campaign' by the Finns Party Youth organised mainly in the Internet, and the book *A Non-Neutral Book on Gender*, published by the think tank near to Finns Party.

My hypothesis is that in these cases, gender is performed in a conservative, even traditionalist way, manifesting the strict and insurmountable gender roles for men and women. For my analysis, I have developed the concept of 'gender populism' that refers to a simplifying understanding of gender as a 'natural', essential dichotomous order, based on positioning men and women in hierarchical locations in terms of power (Saresma 2014). By introducing this concept, I wish to bring gender into the research on populism, which as a phenomenon is often believed to be gender-blind, and to

broaden the understanding of populist logic (both populist rhetoric and populism as a mobilising force) also outside party politics.

Introduction

Gender has often been marginalised, when it has not been totally absent, in research on populism (Mulinari & Neergard 2012; Akkerman 2015; de Lange & Mügge 2015). Ruth Wodak (2015) states that gendered discourses in the rhetoric of right-wing populist parties have been neglected and remain under-researched. Although we seem to be witnessing an upsurge in the focus on gender issues in research on populism (see e.g. the thematic issue of *Patterns of Prejudice,* ed. by Spierings et al. 2015), with especially the amount of analyses of the so-called gender gap in voting patterns increasing lately, the analysis of performing gender and a certain gender order in the wider political discourse is still mostly missing.

Finns Party [Perussuomalaiset, formerly True Finns] is a populist party with a left-wing legacy: like its predecessor, Suomen Maaseudun Puolue SMP [Finnish Rural Party], it emphasises the rights of the farmers, small entrepreneurs, the unemployed, single mothers, and other groups of people with income smaller than the average. The popularity of the Finns Party among the voters has risen considerably during the last decade, however showing serious decrease in the opinion polls after the party entered the government in the Spring of 2015 (Palonen & Saresma 2017; Pekonen 2016). Side by side with the Finns Party Youth Organisation activists occupying many of the leading positions in the party, the emphasis has shifted to more right-wing populist values such as anti-immigration minded, xenophobic opinions and a certain conservatism, manifested in traditionalist views that are strongly against abortion, gender-neutral marriage, feminism, and LGBTI rights (Norocel et al., forthcoming).

In this chapter, I will look at the ways gender is performed in three cases that include active Finns Party members, namely an in-

terview of the party secretary Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo, published in the main newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*; a 'gender campaign' by the Finns Party Youth organised mainly in the Internet, and the book *A Non-Neutral Book on Gender*, published by the think tank near to Finns Party. In what follows, I will analyse the abovementioned cases, published during the last couple of years, all of which, in their own way, encapsulate something essential about the heated debate around gender.

My hypothesis is that in these cases, gender is performed in a conservative, even traditionalist way, manifesting the strict and insurmountable gender roles for men and women. This rigidness is in strong opposition to the academic understanding of gender as not a biological 'fact' based on an essentially binary order, dividing people into two separate homogeneous groups based on reproduction, but something more variable, like a continuum on which people may position themselves (see e.g. Koivunen & Liljeström 1996; Saresma et al. 2010). Thus, following Judith Butler (1990), gender is often understood in academic gender studies as a culturally constructed and repetitively performed trait, although essential for one's self-understanding. Even the 'roles' of various genders are not a biological given in this understanding, but something constantly negotiated (Rossi 2010).

This negotiation manifests itself in the discursive struggles over genders and in the way people are hierarchically positioned within the gender system (Julkunen 2010). Here, I prefer to use the concept of 'gender order' to refer to a more flexible way to socially organise the activities and experiences of various genders. Gender orders vary according to the socio-cultural context, some emphasising the diversity and flexibility of genders, others denying it and deafening the negotiations of multiple understandings of gender and the existence of a variety of gender orders.

The negotiations over the ruling gender order are loud in the contemporary society, where the traditionalist and more progressive opinions struggle. For many sociologists and historians, including Ulrich Beck, Manuel Castells, Göran Therborn, and Eric

Hobsbawm, the new arrangements in the relationship of the genders is one of the most ground-breaking social changes of our time (Julkunen 2010, 9). A lot of emotional capital is invested in the gender order, and defining it is fundamentally a question of power. It is therefore no wonder that gender and, more broadly, the gender order have become central sites of negotiation in the contemporary affective media landscape and in political discussions. (Saresma 2014a.) Several debates on gender and the negotiation of the gender order are ongoing in the contemporary political and societal discussion. The gender debates in the Finnish media deal with e.g. abortion rights, anti-feminism, day-care versus housewives, quotas for women in politics, and gender-neutral marriage. Loud disputes are often based on entrenched positions, straightforward argumentation, and affective allegations, and are thus based on populist rhetoric. (Saresma, forthcoming.)

I analyse this relatively new phenomenon that juxtaposes academic gender studies and feminist movement against the folksy, traditionalist understanding of gender through the lens of *gender populism* (Saresma 2014b). Populism, for me, is an ambivalent phenomenon that aims at popularity among the people by fuelling distrust and directing hostility towards the political elite (Wiberg 2011, 14). The populist rhetoric is based on simplification, polarisation, and stereotypes, thereby aiming at creating the (more or less imaginary) 'other' that is set against (simultaneously imaginary) 'us'. The creation of these opposing groups is based on the utilisation of black-and-white rhetoric and vague expressions (Wiberg 2011, 15–16). The tone of populist rhetoric is often affective (Lähdesmäki & Saresma 2014). Constructing and perceiving enemies and adversaries and creating scapegoats (Wodak 2015) are essential elements of populist othering.

With gender populism as my conceptual contrivance, I refer to the vernacular speech about gender that is oversimplified and consciously separates itself from analytical approaches to gender, such as those found in academic gender studies. In this discourse, gender is perceived to be a given and people are grouped as either women

or men on the basis of a simplistic, 'natural' bi-polar system. Women and men are understood as forming opposite groups that consist of individuals distinguishable by their biological traits, looks, and behaviour (Saresma 2014b, 46). It is characteristic of gender populist discourse to take 'man' as a monolithic, universal category, and to consider maleness, heterosexuality and middle-class status as normative for being human (Koivunen & Liljeström 1996). These properties simultaneously serve as unmarked categories of power (Choo & Marx Ferree 2010).

Thus, the concept of gender populism refers to a simplifying understanding of gender as a 'natural', essentially dichotomous order, based on positioning both women and men in hierarchical locations in terms of power (Saresma 2014b). By introducing this concept, I wish to bring gender into the research on populism, which as a phenomenon is often believed to be gender-blind, and to broaden the understanding of populist logic (both populist rhetoric and populism as a mobilising force) also outside party politics.

Gender conservatism on the rise

Ruth Wodak (2015) has noted that conservative family values, homophobia, and anti-abortion campaigns have become part and parcel of the ideologies of some of the right-wing populist movements in Central Europe, the former Eastern-Bloc countries and the US Tea Party. In the right-wing traditionalist imaginaries, as she continues, gender-relations are changing in a significant way, patriarchy is threatened, and the world as 'we' know it no longer exists.

These currents and attempts to restore the nostalgic (yet imagined) traditional gender order can be seen in the texts of the internationally networked and mobilised Men's Rights Movement, which is mainly internet-based (Saresma 2012; 2014a; 2017; 2018). Here, however, I ask whether there is a tendency by the mainstream party politics to adopt these anti-feminist currents. The hypothesis is

that gender populism is strengthened by the more general populist atmosphere in the society and that it has to do with the general rise of gender conservatism, sometimes named backlash (Faludi 1994). Based on these assumptions, the main question of my chapter is, how gender is performed in the contemporary political sphere, especially in the discursive realm of the Finns Party. This question is explored in light of three recent cases that can be interpreted as gender populism and that caused media fuss, if not panic. I have selected the cases based on their topicality – all of them were published within the last couple of years – and their influence and authority in the constantly ongoing negotiations of the ruling gender order, and thus, their impact on the general opinion.

Case 1: Interview with Party Secretary Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo

I start with an interview, published in the Sunday supplement of the leading Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* in 2014, with the newly elected party secretary of the Finns Party, Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo. The Finns Party, like its predecessor, has a reputation of being a men's party: as many as 67 percent of its voters are men (Yle 2009), and of a total of 38 MPs elected in 2015, no less than 22 (58 %) were men (Suomen Uutiset 2015). This inequality has been noticed, and there has been an effort to agitate female candidates in the elections (Norocel et al., forthcoming). It is thus remarkable that the party secretary is a woman. In the interview, the subject of gender is touched upon, however in a tone that would be easy to be interpreted as misogynous.

The article by Hanna Mahlamäki (2014) published in the main Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat,* includes a provocative quote, where the newly elected Party secretary Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo asserts: 'In Finland women are so equal that they even look like men.' This quote emphasises the unnaturalness of 'equality gone mad', familiar from the masculinist discussion forums and

blogs (Saresma 2012; 2014a; 2014b). In the interview, the female party secretary of the Finns Party opens up about her understanding of gender roles and feminism. In her view, men and women are comprehended as two distinguishably different groups of people. Women and men can be separated by their biology and looks (at least they could be before!), and they have different roles in the family and the society. In Slunga-Poutsalo's view, they complement each other by forming a heterosexual couple, the basic unit of Finnish society.

This traditional view of separate gender roles that Slunga-Poutsalo so eagerly promotes is the basis of a patriarchal gender system. It is supported by many Finns, and especially those supporting the conservative Finns Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Centre Party. In Finland, feminism or the f-word is a dirty word, unlike in Sweden, where the Feminist Initiative received more than 3 percent of the votes in the 2014 general election and became the most popular party outside the parliament. In Finland, it is more common to say, 'I am rather a male chauvinist than a feminist', as Slunga-Poutsalo actually declared after she was elected the party secretary in 2013.

The interview does not explicitly focus on gender issues, but the interviewer gives a lot of room for Slunga-Poutsalo's traditionalist opinions on them. I quote the part on gender in its entirety:

> She is attracted to the Finns Party because of their value conservatism. Grown up in Lapland, Slunga-Poutsalo supports traditional gender roles.
>
> "I am a woman, and I have my strengths and weaknesses as a woman. Likewise my husband, he's a man, and he has these things between his legs, and he has his own strengths and weaknesses."
>
> She grimaces at the word feminism.
>
> "There is a strong negative tone to feminism. Today, it does not mean that you stand for equality. In everyday speech, there is the tone that you want more for women at the expense of men. – – They are proud to be women. They have tits, they have rolls of fat around their waist. They try to be equal with men, or even a bit more equal. This makes me want to poke my fingers into my ears."

The interview with Slunga-Poutsalo roused a critical discussion in print and social media. It is, according to my interpretation, an excellent representative of political gender populism. It also manifests well the tendency of anti-feminist ideology and sheer misogyny to transgress the bi-polar gender system: both men and women can subscribe to these ideologies. The gender of the speaker is far less important than the gendered discourse she or he is promoting.

Case 2: Gender Campaign #Girl_boy

Let me then turn to an even more blatant example of gender populism. Here, it is actually used to mobilise people in favour of the traditional gender order. The phenomenon in question is the internet campaign by the Finns Party Youth.

The slogan of the Finns Party Youth declares that it is 'the most nationalistic and democratic political youth and student organisation'. In the organisation's website, there is the picture of the national personification of Finland, the Maiden of Finland, with her blonde hair and traditional hair-do (see picture 1).

Picture 1.

News about the Finns Party youth organisation's Gender campaign, titled #Girl_boy [#Tyttö_poika], were released on 25 February 2016. The text of the press release asserts that a gender revolution is needed to fight the feminist aim to question the existence of only two genders. I quote:

> Instead of denying oneself, one should be proud of what s/he is. The idea of a gender neutral society is based on the lie that there are no differences between genders and that girls and boys should be interested in the same things. – – The gender differences in orientation are demolished in working life and politics by setting quotas for women. We are in favour of binning all the quotas. – – The gender differences are visible in education as well. If we openly admit the existence of the differences, we could create a diverse learning environment that would better acknowledge also the needs of boys. (Press release 25 Feb 2017.)

The press release ends with a remark on the baffling effects of questioning the existence of (two) genders and the suggestion that educators and parents abstain from using their kids as guinea pigs of these 'trendy currents'.

The campaign thus explicitly condemns feminism and the idea of gender-neutral education and makes a clear stand on defending the traditional gender roles. The campaign is paradoxical in its need to deny the gender quotas that favour women, yet simultaneously demanding acknowledging the specificity of boys at schools.

In the campaign photograph, there are young people wearing caps that pronounce each one's gender: Boy, Boy, Girl, Girl, Girl (see picture 2). The essential message of this campaign – the need for boys to be boys and girls to be girls – was spread and disseminated mainly through social media, especially via Twitter, where the hashtag #girl_boy was launched. It did not however gain much positive attention in the social media. Instead, it was ridiculed in the social media, and it was criticised ardently both in Twitter and Facebook for being very simplifying.

In the traditional media, the campaign gained some media coverage. In an interview after the campaign was launched, the chair of the youth organisation of the party, Sebastian Tynkkynen, explicitly stated that it was directed against feminism and more broadly

Picture 2.

‘against the propaganda of Women’s Studies that is quite strongly fed to us’ (Lehto 2016). The campaign is directed ‘against a gender-neutral society’, as Tynkkynen claims. ‘We are afraid that the societal discussion is narrowing down too fast. It is a bit like just a while ago when it was forbidden to discuss immigration with a negative tone, and you were labelled if you tried to discuss. Now we have this other issue.’ (Ibid.)

The issue of anti-feminism and defending biological understanding of two sexes as well as traditional gender roles were not always taken seriously by the media. In the interview referred to above, the journalist poses a question to Tynkkynen, asking why five of the young people in the campaign photo wear a cap stating clearly ‘girl’ or ‘boy’, but we cannot read that in the sixth person’s cap. Tynkkynen’s huffy answer is: ‘It must be his position, nothing else. You can surely see that it says “boy”.’

The campaign seems to be put up in a hurry. It is an example of how the traditional values and ideas about the dichotomous gender

order and inciting adversarial opinions are used to attract publicity, so vital for political organisations.

Case 3: Non-neutral Book on Gender

The third example of mainstreaming gender populism in the political domain continues the promoting of conservative ideology and the simplifying of the understanding of genders, while aiming at restoring the pre-feminist gender order with (supposedly) clear-cut gender roles. It is a book called Non-Neutral Book on Gender – Notes on Gender Issues [as translated from the Finnish title *Epäneutraali sukupuolikirja – Puheenvuoroja sukupuolikysymyksistä*]. The title refers to the torrid debate surrounding the legislation of the gender-neutral marriage bill and the demands for gender-neutral education from early childhood to grammar school. It is published by The Foundation of Finland [Suomen Perusta], a think tank affiliated with the Finns Party, and edited by Simo Grönroos, the executive manager of the think tank and a Finns Party member, active in municipal politics as a councillor. He is also a member of the nationalist far-right organisation, The Grit of Finland [Suomen Sisu], which is openly against multiculturalism and immigration.

The executive committee of Suomen Perusta comprises Finns Party politicians: the Speaker of the Finnish Parliament Maria Lohela, the Minister of Social Affairs and Health Pirkko Mattila, MP Simon Elo, MP Juho Eerola, MP Laura Huhtasaari, and MP Ville Vähämäki, many of whom are renowned members of Suomen Sisu. The chair of the committee is the historian Arto Luukkanen, whose research specialises in Russia. In the 2015 parliamentary election, Luukkanen ran as a member of the Finns Party.

Suomen Perusta has published several pamphlets and reports. These publications criticise the bilingualism of Finland and the 'coercion' to study Swedish; the EU and euro; multiculturalism, immigration and the 'migration crisis'; and the mainstream media journalists living inside the 'red-and-green bubble', espousing a (too)

tolerant worldview. A recurring theme is Russia as a threat to the Finnish nation. The Non-neutral gender book continues the traditionalist themes of the publication series in the sense that it promotes conservative values and is explicitly against liberal ideas about multiculturalism, gender-neutral marriage, and women's rights.

The aim of the book is made clear from the beginning: 'Gender neutrality and feminism are, together with multiculturalism, buzzwords of our time', as the editor Grönroos puts it. He claims that the 'problems of the equality of men' (a concept the men's rights activist Henry Laasanen has promoted and endlessly discussed in his blog, see Saresma 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2017) have been forgotten because of feminism while the meaning of traditional gender roles has been overshadowed by the over-emphasis on gender-neutrality. The book aims to raise consciousness about men's problems. The writers of the Non-Neutral Gender Book are renown anti-feminists, such as the aforementioned Henry Laasanen and the essayist and the chief editor of a right-wing traditionalist web publication, Timo Hännikäinen, whose misogynous essays I have analysed earlier (Saresma 2016). In his two chapters in the Non-neutral Book, Laasanen discusses the inequality white men have to deal with in the contemporary feminist-governed Finland and the faults of Gender Studies. Hännikäinen continues promoting traditional marriage and tackles the questions of heterosexual love and gender roles.

The other writers include the Finns Party member Juho Eerola, who writes about men's position in custody disputes; the MP candidate and Finns Party Youth member Tiina Ahva, who 'is critical about feminism', discusses the need for gender quotas; and the conservative journalist and author Marko Hamilo, known for his articles on the science pages of *Helsingin Sanomat* and in *Perussuomalainen*, the official organ of the Finns Party. In this publication, he argues that it is dangerous to deny biology in discussing gender, and that the conservative view on gender roles is based on biology and evolution psychology and is thus factual. The pseudonym Black Orchid [Musta Orkidea], herself a trans woman, defines herself as

'critical towards rainbow people'. In her pamphlet about the 'dangerous gender ideology', she refers to the LGBT movement and the supporters of trans-rights as being wrong to start with, since there are only two genders. In the final chapter, Jukka-Pekka Rahkonen, a Pentecostal Church activist and the organiser of the True Marriage campaign (against gender-neutral marriage), juxtaposes traditional marriage and gender-neutral marriage legislation, showing support for the former (see also Bellè & Poggio in this volume).

All the writers thus stand for traditional(ist) views on gender. They oppose feminism, gender studies, gay rights, gender-neutral education and other progressive ideas related to gender. Without going into more detail, it can be claimed that the argumentation, following the populist logic of reasoning, is weak throughout: it is based on black-and-white claims without grounds; references 'many media analyses' instead of academic research; and relies on simplifications and gut feeling instead of valid argumentation (Keisalo 2016). The chapters do not fill the requirements of a scientific publication, which the book of course does not even claim to be. Instead, it is targeted at an audience outside the academy, at the lay people already sympathetic to the traditionalist ideologies promoted by the populist think tank Suomen Perusta. However, certain strategies of persuasion and a striving for ostensible academic credibility are used, such as bibliographies and references to research and legislation.

Having said that, the credibility of the writers and the pseudo-scientific argumentation as well as the plausibility of the arguments, when published in a book instead of as separate claims, should not be belittled. Since the members of the publishing organ and many of the writers are near to the Finns Party and the nationalist organisation Suomen Sisu, and one of the members of the publishing organ, Laura Huhtasaari, runs as a candidate for presidency of Finland in the 2018 elections, the book has even more weight as the 'official' opinion of the party than the previously mentioned interview of the Party Secretary Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo or the Finns Party Youth gender campaign. The third case study shows even more explicitly

the intertwining of traditionalist understanding of gender with reactionary gender politics. The traditionalist view on gender and the understanding of man as the head of the family and nation is connected with the nationalistic opinions and 'keeping Finland to ourselves', that is, white heterosexuals (see also Saresma 2017).

Tenets of gender populism

There are some shared tenets of gender populism in the three cases introduced above. First, they all subscribe to the assumption that there are fundamental differences between women and men, femininity and masculinity. It is asserted repeatedly that the two genders are opposite and as such complementary, and insisted that the 'natural differences' between the two genders must be preserved with whatever cost. This leads to the belief that evening up gender differences is wrong, and to the conviction that gender neutrality is dangerous.

These tenets are all laden with heteronormativity in the form of a belief that the categories of two complementary genders are intertwined with the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality; often this belief is linked to homophobia and heterosexism (Lovaas & Jenkins 2008) that are more or less explicitly demonstrated in the cases analysed above. Another shared ideology in gender populism is strong anti-intellectualism, which is very much intertwined with the general anti-elite argumentation often found in populist argumentation. Here, it is inextricably linked with anti-feminism.

The understanding of genders as complementary and the emphasis of the fundamental differences between the two genders is bolstered up by repetition. A good example of a recurring theme is the idea of characteristics that are claimed to be typical for either women or men. Another is the commenting on the behaviour and looks of 'opposite genders'. These ideologies are preached by their advocates using populist rhetoric, defending 'us, the people' against the badness of the others, be they homosexuals, members of

the academic feminist elite, or foreigners that do not share the western values or do not belong to the nationalistic Finland.

The above-mentioned three cases prove on their part my earlier finding that although gender populism deals explicitly with the power relations of women and men, it is intersectional in the way it merges various reactionary and subordinating ideologies such as homophobia, xenophobia, and anti-feminism. It is also alarmingly linked to racial discrimination and the persecution of sexual and religious minorities.

It is possible to conclude, on the basis of these three examples, that gender populism relies on a specific understanding of gender as an essential category and on layman knowledge on gender, based on the personal experiences of individuals. It denies the complexity of gender(s) and the historicity of the prevalent gender order; rejects the (feminist) theoretical analysis of complex relations of gender and power; and ridicules academic gender studies as ideological humbug funded by the 'feminist elite'.

Gender populism also aims at hindering the internal diversity of the categories of women and men by invoking the alleged inner homogeneity of the groups and constructing them as binary and opposing. However, unlike this black-and-white rhetoric suggests, gender is always intertwined with other categories of difference and hierarchies of power and subordination: ethnicity; economic and class status; and age and religion. This means that individual women and individual men are positioned differently in the webs of power, not only according to their gender but also because of their ethnic background, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, education, bodily capabilities, geographical location, and so on. Acknowledging the intersecting differences (Crenshaw 1991; Karkulehto et al. 2012) enables problematising the dichotomous nature of gender found in the gender populist rhetoric, which opposes men as a group to women as a group and talks about 'the opposite sexes'. Intersectional approach also challenges heteronormativity by looking at sexuality beyond the normative assumption that heterosexuality is the prevalent mode of sexuality while homosex-

uality, if acknowledged at all, is always considered as subordinate to heterosexuality.

What gender populism?

Above, I have presented examples of a specific phenomenon in the broader field of populist rhetoric, namely gender populism. I suggest that using this concept as a sub category of the more general populist rhetoric, it is possible to analyse in more subtle ways how gender is performed and how the gender order is negotiated in the contemporary political climate that bursts with populist expressions. Gender populism helps to focus on one of the axes of power, namely gender, more specifically masculinity and femininity, or, in this discourse, masculinity or femininity as opposing, yet complementary categories.

Gender populism as a phenomenon, I suggest, is gaining ground in the contemporary media discussions, because it hits the target that is simultaneously perceived as a very personal experience – 'it is my gender, I know what is right, I am the specialist of gender issues', as the argument goes (Saresma 2010) – and a very powerful category that permeates the society from the (allegedly) basic unit of nuclear family to education, legislation, and religion.

I propose that gender populism as an analytic concept helps to discern the nuances of discussion by focusing on e.g. (1) whether gender is defined or not; (2) how gender is understood (e.g. as a dichotomous phenomenon based on two poles, or as a negotiation between femininity and masculinity, or something else); (3) what are the roles and restrictions reserved for the genders (e.g. should women stay at home taking care of kids? can men cook? who are the assumed political actors and legislators?); and (4) what is the gender order that is aimed at (e.g. traditionalist/liberal/utopian/queer)?

I claim that it is important to analyse the increasing and polarising gender speech in the media, as gender populism is emerging and strengthening in a political climate where populism in general

is gaining prominence. As I have shown elsewhere, it is an example of how populism functions in all fields of life and can mobilise people also outside party politics (Saresma 2017; Saresma, forthcoming). Gender populism is also an increasingly visible trait of the populist Finns Party, as the examples analysed above demonstrate.

Why Gender Populism?

What is it that various stakeholders aim at by harnessing gender in the populist power play? Above, I have shown that the traditionalist gender populism questions the previous shared understanding on the importance of gender equality in Finland (see also Lähdesmäki & Saresma 2014; Saresma 2014a; Saresma 2017). This is related to the wider backlash against the rights of women and especially against feminism that is taking place on all levels of the Finnish society, from top to bottom (van Wormer 2008). This can be seen in the demand for women to stay at home and take care of children, with the statistics showing a decrease in the employment rate of young mothers (Tilastokeskus 2013); in the gap between the wages of men and women that is actually increasing instead of decreasing (Saari 2016); and in the overrepresentation of men still in politics (Holli et al. 2007).

Western societies have traditionally leaned on male emperors on the state, church, community, and family levels. The contemporary power system with the white middle-class western man on top of the hierarchy is fracturing. Advances in modernisation and globalisation have provided education as well as economic independence and societal and political agency for formerly minoritized groups, such as women, the working class, and ethnic minorities as racialized others. This, naturally, has diminished the traditional privileges of white middle class men. (Saresma & Harjunen 2012.)

As always, societal turbulence, such as the ongoing economic recession, the rise of political populism and the growing amounts of immigrants arriving in Europe, invokes petitions to protect the

'natural' or 'genuine' gender order. This insistence on returning to the traditional gender order used to be performed on the internet, as has been argued elsewhere (Saresma 2014a; 2014b; Saresma 2017). However, the conservative claims for restoring the traditional roles of the (two) genders have become louder in the mainstream media as well, as I have shown above.

The increasing amount of gender populist discourse and the permeability of this discourse from the semi-public online discussion forums to mainstream media is, as I suggest, an attempt to restore the traditional gender order and to return the position of power or hegemony of white western middle-class heterosexual men in a situation where neoliberal economy, climate change, and other currents have brought about global mobility. It is a means for heterosexual white men to strengthen their own masculine identity by despising marginalised others, be they women, non-heterosexuals, or people of a different ethnic background. It is about the sense of entitlement, the feeling of deserving to be privileged, and the feelings of resentment and anger when the privileges are constricted, if not altogether taken away (Husu 2013; Saresma 2017).

Conclusions

Utilising the concept gender populism here emphasises how gender is used as a tool for politics: gender is utilised for influencing and for intervention. Implementing gender populism aims at certain goals that include the wish to change the current ('too modern', 'too equal') gender order. Gender populist rhetoric aims at convincing people that they are mistreated by the liberal, feminist 'elite'; it aims at mobilising people against this elite.

Using the concept of gender populism highlights the populist rhetoric utilised in discussing gender in contemporary culture: these include black-and-white arguments, dividing people into 'us' and 'others', dichotomisation of people based on (assumed) essential, biological and psychological gender difference, and construct-

ing threats in describing how gender equality has 'gone too far' or how the advocates of gender neutrality are trying to take over. The aim is to control and to restore the traditional gender order, in which the white heterosexual men rule and the others – women, non-heterosexual, those advocating more liberal organising of genders and the right to live out their gender without the limits and restrictions of the rigid binary system – as subordinate or even silenced.

In her important book, *The Politics of Fear*, Ruth Wodak (2015) has talked about the *pseudo-emancipatory gender policies* that are extremely contradictory, such as the linking of feminist values to traditional family values. She maintains that in these policies, gender becomes instrumentalized and linked to a rhetoric of exclusion (e.g. the exclusion of the migrants). In my examples, the main aim is to turn back the clock and to restore the traditional gender order. What is noteworthy is that the negotiation of genders and their position in the society is never done in isolation. It is always intertwined with other power struggles and with the desire to dominate the others. Gender is politics.

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