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Feminists in High Heels: The Role of Femininity in Second-Wave Feminists' Dress in Finland, 1973-1990

Arja Turunen

Abstract

Recent studies have shown that the politics of self-presentation was a contentious issue among feminists. This article, which is based primarily on oral histories, addresses how Finnish second-wave feminists viewed the meanings of dress and appearance for their identity. The focus is on those who believed that feminist ideology liberated them to embrace their femininity and argues that Finnish feminist views about dress liberated women from the orthodox Marxist, pro-Russian Soviet political ideology of the Taistoist movement that was popular among young people in the 1970s, yet also from traditional, conservative female education at home and in school.

Introduction

The “new women’s movement,” also known as the second-wave feminist movement, emerged in the United States in the 1960s to fight against the oppression of women, with an agenda that included the targeting of traditional fashion and the use of cosmetics. Feminists saw both fashion and cosmetics as trivialities that functioned ideologically to foster a false femininity of controlling women, and to keep them

trapped in subservience to men.¹ But since the 1990s, third-wave feminists have argued for a more inclusive and expansive vision of beauty and feminist style and pointed out that the rejection of fashion by second-wave feminists produced a strict feminist dress code that tended towards uniformity. Instead of liberating women from feminine norms and the tyranny of fashion, they created their own dress dictates of “blue jeans, sensible shoes, and an unmasked face.”²

In recent years, more detailed studies of the history of the feminist movement have reconstructed both a second-wave feminism and its relationship to a third wave. These show that the politics of self-presentation was a contentious issue among second-wave feminists, as there were divergent ideas about the roots of women’s oppression and the way feminist ideas should be practised. The political role of fashion, dress, and standards of feminine beauty had been highlighted by the radical feminist movement from early on, with a mass demonstration in Atlantic City, New Jersey, United States in 1968 to protest against the Miss America Beauty Pageant. Radical feminists threw such garments of female “oppression” and “torture” as high heels, bras, and girdles, into a “freedom trash can.”³

However, the liberal American feminists who formed the National Organization for Women (NOW) favoured a feminine style and appearance for tactical reasons, arguing that an alignment with that era’s cultural norms was a way to fit into institutions to foster change from within. From this point of view that era’s “unisex style” in which both genders dressed similarly, sent the wrong message and was thus counterproductive. This conflict was complicated by additional disagreements within

¹ See Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton, *Women & Fashion: A New Look*, Quartet, London, England, 1989, p. 1; Astrid Henry, “Fashioning a Feminist Style, Or, How I Learned to Dress from Reading Feminist Theory,” in Shira Tarrant and Marjorie Jolles, eds., *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style*, State University of New York Press, Ithica, United States, 2012, p. 17; Jo Reger, “DIY fashion and Going Bust: Wearing Feminist Politics in the Twenty-First Century,” in Tarrant and Jolles, op cit., p. 211; Betty Hillman Luther, *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s*, The University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, United States, 2015, pp. 61–89.

² Henry, op cit., p. 21; Reger, op cit., p. 212; Marjorie Jolles, “Stylish Contraction. Mix-and-Match as the Fashion of Feminist Ambivalence,” in Tarrant and Jolles, op cit., pp. 229–230.

³ Reger, op cit., p. 211; Evans and Thornton, op cit., pp. 3–5. The image of early feminists as bra-burners is based on this event. But bras were only one item thrown into the rubbish bin, which was not—contrary to the consistent myth—set on fire. See Linda M. Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, United States, 2015, p. 290; Deborah Siegel, *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to Girls Gone Wild*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, United States, 2007, p. 49.

the second-wave feminist movement over issues of age, class, and race,⁴ yet despite the divisions, all feminists were stereotyped as radicals who disavowed fashion.

This article addresses Finnish second-wave feminists' views on dress and appearance⁵ and is based on 24 oral interviews about style, its relationship to feminine beauty standards, and the ideological significance and meaning of dress, fashion, and appearance. The interviews show that there was no uniform style among Finnish second-wave feminists and that some dressed in stereotypical casual or unisex styles. This article focuses on those who felt that feminist ideology liberated them to embrace their femininity. Thus, how did feminist views on dress encourage this and why did they find femininity liberating? The aim is to first reconstruct the stereotypical image of Finnish second-wave feminists, and then to examine the cultural discourses and settings that formed the context in which Finnish feminists discussed and practised the politics of appearance in the 1970s and 1980s.

The idea of second-wave feminists as being masculine, short-haired women who preferred a casual look is pervasive in Finland. Finnish third-wave feminist Anna Kontula, for example, has criticised the second-wave feminism of her mother's generation in her book *Tästä äiti varoitti* [*This Is What Your Mother Warned You About*], for its negative attitude towards traditional feminine beauty ideals.⁶ She mentions lipstick as an example and the cover features an image of a lipstick that feminist mothers had warned their daughters about. When I asked one interviewee about the role of dress and appearance in her feminist identity, she mentioned this book and especially its cover, "I was irritated by this book, *Tästä äiti varoitti*, by a younger-generation feminist...because its claims don't apply to my feminist group at all...I didn't stop wearing lipstick when I became a feminist."⁷

The interviewees' relationship to dress and feminine beauty are interpreted in the context of anthropological and sociological dress studies, which examine many clothing and adornment practices and meanings. Individual decisions on clothing and appearance are framed by a wide range of social factors, among which fashion is

⁴ Reger, op cit., p. 212; Luther, op cit., pp. 83-88.

⁵ This article derives from my postdoctoral research, titled, *How the Political Became Personal: Feminism in Practice in Finland*, funded by The Academy of Finland (Decision #288470).

⁶ Anna Kontula, *Tästä äiti varoitti*, [*This Is What Your Mother Warned You About*], Into, Helsinki, Finland, 2009, pp. 53-59.

⁷ Kati, [Finnish: "Ärsyynnyin kun tuli tässä ... tuota niin yhden nuoremman polven feministin kirja, *Tästä äiti varoitti* ... Esimerkiksi mä en tunnista sitä siitä meidän ryhmästä ollenkaan ... En lakannut käyttämästä huulipunaa, kun minusta tuli feministi."]

important but not exclusive. Others include class, gender, ethnicity, age, and occupation, to name a few. Such works also point out that different situations impose varied ways of dressing according to particular dress codes and rules, or simply through cultural conventions that most people usually follow.⁸ The interviews show that concepts of cultural conventions and norms for dress unrelated to the fashion industry were crucial for the interviewees' descriptions and explanations of the meaning of feminism in light of their personal choices.

Oral History Interviews as Research Material

The interviewees were born between the late 1930s and the mid 1950s and joined local feminist groups in the 1970s or early 1980s.⁹ In Finnish research, the corresponding term for oral history is *muistitieto*, or "remembered information," which refers to information which is not based on written documents but solely on the memory of the informant. The focus concerns concepts of "memory" and "information" which go beyond the concept of "oral history," since oral history material may also include the informant's answering questions by writing.¹⁰ One informant preferred to answer questions in writing because she thought that it was a better option for sorting out her thoughts, and I also sent additional questions to her and the other informants by email.

As there is little research material available on feminist practices and ideals of dress in Finland, I have used an oral history approach and asked feminists themselves to provide information about the matter. In this article, I analyse the material as narratives that reveal information both about collectively shared ideas and conventions of dress and their subjective views, memories, and interpretations of dress and appearance in light of their feminist identity.¹¹ In order to make these interviews

⁸ Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, "Definition and Classification of Dress: Implications for Analysis of Gender Roles," in Ruth Barnes, Joanne B. Eicher, eds., *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning*, Berg, Oxford, England, 1992, pp. 8-28; Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory*, Polity Press, Cambridge, England, 2000, pp. 3-52.

⁹ While American feminist groups were usually concerned about raising consciousness, in Finland feminist groups were also known as radical therapy groups, especially during the 1980s.

¹⁰ Outi Fingerroos and Riina Haanpää, "Fundamental Issues in Finland Oral History Studies," *Oral History*, Volume 40, Issue 2, 2012, pp. 81-92; Kirsi-Maria Hytönen, "Hardworking Women: Nostalgia and Women's Memories of Paid Work in Finland in the 1940s," *Oral History*, Issue 87, Autumn, 2013, pp. 87-99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; Alexandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?" in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London, England, 2002, pp. 67-70.

anonymous, I have given the interviewees pseudonyms and removed all references to actual places and names.

This study also discusses *Lentävä feministi ja muita muistoja 70-luvulta [The Flying Feminist and Other Memories from the 1970s]* by feminist journalist Pia Ingström,¹² as well as Finnish second-wave feminist Eeva Peltonen's articles that reminisce about her feminist past.¹³ Ingström, born in 1958, called herself a "sworn feminist"¹⁴ in the 1970s and wrote her book to document the history of the Finnish feminist movement in that era, including practices of dress. She interviewed members of the feminist groups that were established in Helsinki and on the west coast by Swedish-speaking women in the early and mid 1970s. But the present interviewees are mainly Finnish speakers who became active feminists at the end of the 1970s or early 1980s.

Feminist Style as Protest and Uniform

The feminist movement is typically divided into the first, second, and third wave. The first was established in the second half of the nineteenth century and focused on suffrage, gaining the right to own and inherit property, and access to higher education and employment. The second was established in the United States in the 1960s and broadened the feminist discourse to include sexuality, reproductive rights, family, and the problem of sexism in society and culture.¹⁵ The movement had spread to western Europe by the beginning of the 1970s, and radical feminism was established in Finland during the period 1973–1977. The movement became visible as a social phenomenon by the late 1970s, as feminists turned increasingly outwards by arranging

¹² Pia Ingström, *Lentävä feministi ja muita muistoja 70-luvulta [The Flying Feminist and Other Memories from the 1970s]*, Schildts, Helsinki, Finland, 2007. This was also published in Swedish, titled, *Den flygande feministen och andra minnen från 70-talet*.

¹³ Eeva Peltonen, "Nais- ja miesmuistoja 1970-luvulta. Sukupuoli entisten taistolaisopiskelijoiden elämäkertahaastatteluissa," [Female and Male Memories from the 1970s: Gender in the Life Story Interviews of Former Taistoist Students], in Matti Hyvärinen, Eeva Peltonen, Anni Vilkkö, eds., *Liikkuvat erot, [Differences on the Move]*, Vastapaino, Tampere, Finland, 1998, pp. 187–237; Eeva Peltonen, "Ihan pienesti liikkeessä. Tätimäistä posttaistolaisuutta," [Just a Small Part of the Movement: Auntie's Post-Taistoism] in Tommi Hoikkala, Sofia Laine, and Jyrki Laine, eds., *Mitä on tehtävä? Nuorison kapinan teoriaa ja käytäntöä, [What Must Be Done? Theories and Practices in Youth Revolt]*, Loki-kirjat, Helsinki, Finland, 2005, pp. 103–134.

¹⁴ Ingström, op cit., p. 9.

¹⁵ See Marlene LeGates, *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society*, Routledge, New York, United States, 2012, pp. 197–364.

seminars and festivals, and publishing periodicals.¹⁶ The third wave was established in the early 1990s and redefined feminism by embracing individualism and sexual and gender diversity. Third-wave feminism implicitly critiques the second wave, which was viewed as only addressing the problems encountered by white, heterosexual middle-class women.¹⁷

In early second-wave radical feminist thinking, masculine dress symbolised male privilege and feminists claimed that all established feminine clothing and the ways in which the feminine look was generated stood in the way of women's liberation.¹⁸ Radical feminists criticised fashion and the beauty culture for producing a false conception of women that emphasised their being naturally different from men, and rejected traditional feminine beauty standards to create their own definitions for women's appearances.¹⁹ The ideal, radical feminist appearance was based on the notion of presenting an unadorned self without any artificial aids such as makeup, or corsets and push-up bras that distort the "natural" body. The feminist "anti-fashion" instead consisted of a simple, natural look with loose shirts and dungarees or jeans, and was intended as an attack on the dominating power of fashion to instead forge a more authentic self.²⁰ A visible sign of women's emancipation was that they were "allowed" to enter restaurants and pubs without a male escort (Figure 1).

The third wave of the feminist movement criticised the second wave by pointing out that with the inclusion of male clothing and the unisex dress styles that this so-called "natural look" was, in fact, simply based on a masculine model of appearance. This model, therefore, did not represent a truly androgynous or unisex style. It also symbolised a rejection of femininity on two levels: it was both masculine and thus the opposite of femininity, as was its "gender free" alternative look.²¹ Betty Hillman Luther has pointed out that for some feminists, the masculine and unisex styles were only adopted during a brief phase of their lives.²² By the early 1970s many feminists began to adopt retro chic, based on feminine styles in old Hollywood films, and thus allowed women the pleasure of dressing in fine clothes yet also distancing themselves from the current establishment fashions.²³

¹⁶ Solveig Bergman, *The Politics of Feminism: Autonomous Feminist Movements in Finland and West Germany from the 1960s to the 1980s*, Åbo Akademis Förlag, Åbo, Finland, 2002, pp. 134–165.

¹⁷ See Henry, op cit.; Siegel, op cit.

¹⁸ Evans and Thornton, op cit., p. 12; Henry, op cit., pp. 18–19.

¹⁹ Luther, op cit., pp. 67–71.

²⁰ Evans and Thornton, op cit., p. 7; Henry, op cit., p. 20.

²¹ Evans and Thornton, op cit., p. 12; Henry, op cit., pp. 18–19.

²² Luther, op cit., pp. 74–83.

²³ Evans and Thornton, op cit., p. 8.



Figure 1:

Women's Unisex Dress Style, circa 1970s, Photographed by Raimo Myllyoja, Helsinki City Museum Photograph Archives, Helsinki, Finland.

By the mid 1970s, feminist leaders came to advocate the concept of “choice feminism,” which included the option to re-embrace traditional feminine clothing. Luther has suggested that this transformed the way feminism was practised. Instead of mandating a certain lifestyle and appearance, it was argued that “choice” was the movement’s basic goal. In this view, “liberation” thus did not come from specific clothes that a woman was supposed to wear, but from the knowledge that the choice was hers to make. The language of choice thus offered feminists the option to incorporate more diverse styles into the politics of self-presentation.²⁴

²⁴ Luther, *op cit.*, pp. 81–83.

In *Lentävä feministi [The Flying Feminist]*, Ingström describes the dress style of her feminist friends in the 1970s as being varied and flexible, including jeans, duffel coats, and Palestinian scarves (associated with protest) as well as colourful fabrics, long dresses, and the South Asian styles that were popular in feminine “hippie style” dress, with comfortable “Earth” shoes and high heels. Vintage clothing was also favoured and there was a “do it yourself” style inspired by traditional folk dress. These modes differentiated the wearer from the dominant fashion, and the masculine dungarees or unisex style consisting of jeans and a T-shirt were just one version of these feminist styles.²⁵ By the end of the 1970s and into early 1980, feminist style also came to be expressed by the long hippie style skirts and the colour, lilac, which had become fashionable in the 1970s.²⁶

Yet, several interviewees mentioned that when they had consciously expressed feminism in their dress, that it was to contradict the stereotype of a feminist as a masculine woman, “People didn’t expect feminists to dress like that, and to wear makeup. And *especially* to wear high-heel shoes. I did it on purpose.”²⁷ The interviewees also used the discourse of choice to describe their dress and many of both my and Ingström’s interviewees who preferred traditional feminine styles, emphasised that they were liberated to do so by feminism. Ingström describes feminist style as playful and experimental, as women asserted themselves by questioning the old clichés.²⁸ My interviewees had two-fold explanations for why the new perspective of choice was so important: they found them as liberating from the rigid ideology of the left-wing political movement of Taistoism, yet also from the traditional conservatism of female education at home and at school. The Taistoist movement, also called the Marxist-Leninist movement, which was established at the end of the 1960s consisted of Marxist groups in the Communist Party and in the Finnish People’s Democratic League. The movement adopted official Soviet ideology in detail.²⁹

²⁵ Ingström, op cit., pp. 151–152.

²⁶ See Valerie, Steele, *Fifty Years of Fashion: New Look to Now*, Yale University Press, New Haven, United States, pp. 79–90.

²⁷ Leena, [Finnish: “Odotettiin että feministit nyt ei sillee pukeutuis. Eikä meikkaa tai jotain. Eikä pitäis korkokenkiä nyt varsinkaan (korostaen). Mä ihan tahallani.”]

²⁸ Ingström, op cit., pp. 114–115, 153.

²⁹ Jukka Relander, “From Flowers to Steel: Development of the Leninist Mind in Finland 1968–1972,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 33: 4, 2008, pp. 464–467.

Feminist Ideas of Dress as a Liberation from the Taistoist Movement

The process of becoming a feminist is often represented as a transformative experience that changes a woman's identity,³⁰ which is stereotypically made visible through dress and appearances. In the early second-wave radical feminist thinking, this transformation entailed women adopting trousers instead of skirts and wearing other masculine clothing. But the interviewee Sinikka did the opposite; for her, becoming a feminist meant deciding to choose a skirt over trousers:

It was at the end of the 1970s when I put on a skirt for the first time. It was actually a friend of mine who lured me into it. I respected her a lot, and she was also part of the same political circle. But she had started to break with them, too. And so she encouraged me to do so. I do remember what it was like to wear a dress, I mean a skirt, for the first time for a long time.³¹

For her, the process of becoming a feminist also meant leaving left-wing Taistoism behind, and her change of dress was an important way of both displaying and experiencing this. In the United States, the radical feminist movement grew out of the civil rights and student movements of the 1960s and formed as a reaction by women against the New Left for marginalising and downplaying all questions of gender. The New Left was then a sexist organisation; political activism was an exclusively male privilege with women being relegated to clerical work and serving coffee. Some also later claimed that some men in the New Left treated women as sexual objects and that women were expected to look pretty and act in a feminine way.³²

In Finland, the most popular New Left movement in the 1970s was the Marxist Taistoist movement, which was established at the end of the 1960s. Despite being small in numbers, the movement was very powerful among young people, but especially university students (Figure 2). The relationship between feminism and

³⁰ Jane Mansbridge, "What Is the Feminist Movement?" in Ferree, Myra, Marx Ferree, Martin, and Yancey, Patricia, eds., *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the new Women's Movement*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, United States, 1995, p. 29; Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, New York, United States, 2003, p. 21.

³¹ Sinikka, [Finnish: "70-luvun lopussa niin mä ensimmäisen kerran pistin hameen päälleni. Joo, että mun yksi tuttavani oikeastaan houkutteli mut siihen. Semmoinen ihminen, jota m kovasti arvostin ja joka oli kanssa näissä poliittisissa kuvioissa mukana. Mutta joka oli kans ruvennut ottaa irti. Niin hänen niin kuin rohkaisemana sitten. Kyllä mä muistan minkälaista se oli laittaa ensimmäisen kerran mekko päälle pitkästä aikaa. Tai siis hame."]

³² See Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, Ballantine Books, New York, United States, 2002, pp. 85–87; Luther, op cit., p. 66.

Taistoism is an important part of the history of second-wave feminism in Finland. It has been claimed that in the late 1970s feminism was established in Finland due in part to the strong role of the Taistoist movement in that decade. Taistoism attracted many politically active young women, but its Communist orthodoxy marginalised the question of gender. Later, Taistoist women, who were dissatisfied with its negative attitudes toward their attempts to raise “the women’s question” left the Taistoist movement to join the feminist movement.³³



Figure 2:
The Unisex Dress Style of the Student Movement, circa 1970s,
Photographer Unknown, The People’s Archives, Helsinki, Finland.

³³ See Peltonen, op cit., 1998; Matti Hyvärinen, *Viimeiset taistot*, [*The Last Struggles*], Vastapaino, Tampere, Finland, 1994, pp. 144-145; Kimmo Rentola, “Kevään 1968 isänmaan toivot,” [“The Hopes of the Fatherland in Spring 1968”], in Sakari Saaritsa, Kari Teräs, eds., *Työväen verkostot*, [*Networks of Working-Class People*], Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura [The Association of the Study of Working-Class People’s History and Tradition], Helsinki, Finland, 2003, p. 103.

Taistoism was also criticised for sexism from its being mostly led by men. Former female members, such as Peltonen, have recalled that traditional feminine beauty was criticised and women were supposed to behave and dress in a way that would not emphasise their gender.³⁴ Former Taistoist Maarit described the then dress style of Taistoist women as attempts to be “children of nature:”

In the 1970s, we didn't think about appearance or clothing and tried our best to be these children of nature... [we wore] nothing feminine or fancy, that was the principle at the time. High-heel shoes, for example, were a horror to us, and skirts were also too much.³⁵

This “natural” unisex or masculine style was supposed to show that enlightened women did not pay attention to their appearance, which was stereotypically associated with feminism. Ingström has pointed out that it was socialism that dressed young people in uniforms in order to enable them to become a part of the collective and to be disciplined. In the 1970s, in order to visibly identify the political affiliation of their members, the Youth Leagues of the Finnish Communist Party purchased uniform-like shirts for their members; members of the Taistoist movement had blue shirts; the rest had similar red shirts. The only thing that was actually beautiful, as Ingström points out, was the colourful scarf that originated from a Russian folk costume.³⁶

Sinikka had changed her dress style when she became a feminist. She told me that while in the Taistoist movement she had consciously avoided feminine dress, “I was in my twenties when I realised that I wouldn't be taken seriously if I didn't dress as neutrally as possible.”³⁷ She also believed that makeup was a form of oppression. Peltonen has discussed the sexist thinking in Taistoism by noting that within the movement, women were divided into two groups: the typically feminine and the non-feminine. The latter aimed to show by appearance and behaviour that “gender does not matter” and their non-feminine dress and appearance, which essentially displayed a uniform-like masculine style, was necessary to be accepted. The goal was for those

³⁴ Peltonen, op cit., 1998, pp. 223–231; Peltonen, op cit., 2005, pp. 117–123.

³⁵ Maarit, [Finnish: “Mehän oltiin 70-luvulla semmosia, että sillon ei ajateltu ulkoasua eikä pukeutumista vaan oltiin niinku mahollisimman tämmösiä luonnonlapsia ja... ei mitään naisellista eikä hienoa, sillonkin oli jo tää periaate. Että ne oli ihan kammotus jotkut korkokengät ja hamekin oli jo liikaa.”]

³⁶ Ingström, op cit., p. 143.

³⁷ Sinikka, [Finnish: “semmoisena niin kuin kaksikymppisenä, että mä tajusin sen, että mua ei oteta nyt vakavasti, jos mä en niin kuin mahdollisimman neutraalisti.”]

who had previously embraced a traditional feminine appearance and behaviour to be able to avoid sexist treatment by men.³⁸

Both Sinikka and Peltonen realised only after they joined the feminist movement that choosing a non-feminine appearance and behaviour, which was supposed to represent a protest against traditional standards, actually reinforced the established gender hierarchy instead of subverting it. According to Peltonen, the former Taistoist women encouraged each other to experiment with various colours, accessories, makeup, hairstyles, lace and “whatever each one of them had previously overlooked/or underrated.”³⁹ Sinikka noted that the change was not easy; it took years to learn to appreciate traditional femininity and the idea that a woman can be feminine—yet also a feminist and a professional in her field.

Feminism as a Sartorial Liberation from Conservative Femininity

Other feminist interviewees, who felt that feminism encouraged them to embrace this ideology, explained that it also represented a liberation from the traditional conservative standards and ideals of feminine beauty taught at home and in school. Hannele, for example, reported that as a young girl she believed it was very important that girls be beautiful. When she had to decide about where to study after high school, she chose the same university as the previous class’ most beautiful and fashionable female graduates. Feminine beauty was also important to her because her father had forbidden her to dress beautifully:

I was very dissatisfied with my looks because my father didn’t let me have curls. He didn’t want us [daughters] to become proud. He was very serious about it and was openly hostile towards our wanting... [to be beautiful]. We could have been so...but my hair was cut in such an ugly way.⁴⁰

When discussing dress, the interviewees also often referred to their schools’ dress codes that emphasised a non-sexual femininity for girls. School uniforms were not adopted in Finnish schools but the dress norms were strict, and in the 1950s girls were

³⁸ Peltonen, op cit., 1998, pp. 229–232; Peltonen, op cit., 2005, pp. 118–123.

³⁹ Ibid., 1998, pp. 231–232.

⁴⁰ Hannele, [Finnish: “mä olin tytymätön ulkonäkööni, koska isä ei antanut laittaa kiharoita. Isä ei halunnut, että meistä tulee ylpeitä. Hän oli oikein tosissaan siitä, että hän osoitti vihamielisyytensä sitä kohtaan, että me halutaan...Me oltais voitu olla ihan kauniit tytöt, mutta mun tukkani leikattiin niin rumasti.”]

expected to wear an apron over their dress and have their hair bobbed or plaited (Figure 3).⁴¹ One even remembered that to discourage the girls from paying attention to their looks, the bottom halves of the school windows were painted white, “...As in a police station...so that you could not use them as mirrors.”⁴²



Figure 3:
Elementary School Children's Dress Style, circa 1946-1954,
Photographed by Kuvaus Oy, Kerava City Museum, Kerava, Finland.

Hannele was critical of her parents' Lutheran teachings and worldview, “It is part of the Lutheran religion, probably part of all other religions, that a woman can't be herself. Especially not feminine. She mustn't be beautiful. She must be nothing.”⁴³ She emphasised that women must have the right to dress well and be elegant if they wanted to, “...Because I had to fight for it.” Betty Hillman Luther and Linda M. Scott's

⁴¹ See also Arja Turunen, “It Wasn't Common for Women to Wear Trousers: Memories of Women's Dress in the 1950s,” *Journal of Finnish Studies*, 19:2, 2016, pp. 22-46.

⁴² Maija, [Finnish: “Ikkunat oli maalattu niinkun poliisilaitoksella, puoleen väliin valkoseks, ettei voi peilata ikkunasta.”]

⁴³ Hannele, [Finnish: “luterilaisuuteen kuuluu, ehkä kaikkiin uskontoihin kuuluu, että nainen ei saa olla oma itsensä. Ei varsinkaan naisellinen. Hän ei saa olla kaunis. Hän ei saa olla yhtään mitään.”]

research on American second-wave feminist attitudes towards fashion conclude that radical feminists' feelings about dress style and cosmetics primarily reflected their own life experiences. Those from college-educated, upper-class backgrounds were more likely to value feminist critique of fashion and cosmetics since a fashionable appearance was especially highly valued by the well-to-do. For working-class and Black women, wearing fashionable dress and makeup was a question of respectability since societal norms based upon class and race made them feel inferior.⁴⁴ On the other hand, conservative rural Christian women were sometimes raised to condemn fashion and cosmetics. For uneducated, rural poor women who wore handmade clothing and no makeup, the urge to stay away from mass-produced fashion and beauty products was neither new nor liberating.⁴⁵

Finnish ethnologist, Pia Olsson, has studied girls' upbringing in rural Finland and notes that in this traditional ideal, the biggest symbolic threat to a woman was to dishonour her purity and good reputation. Moral behaviour was therefore still an important part of the upbringing of girls in the 1950s.⁴⁶ This was based on the Lutheran teachings which used the threat of sexual shame to enforce its notions of proper behaviour and restricted their lives in many ways. If a girl's conduct was considered inappropriate, she might easily be labelled as sexually immoral, which was one of the most effective ways to stop her from doing something undesirable.⁴⁷ Wearing new fashionable clothing and makeup were then typically linked to frivolity and loose morals,⁴⁸ which was mentioned in the interviews.

Some Finnish women believed that feminism gave them the long-needed permission to use makeup and other beauty products and to wear the beautiful feminine clothing that they had always wanted. Those raised in working-class families between the 1940s and 1960s also pointed out that in their childhood and youth, fashionable clothing and beauty products were unavailable to them due to cost:

⁴⁴ Luther, op cit., pp. 77-78.

⁴⁵ Scott, op cit., pp. 296-297, 304-305.

⁴⁶ Pia Olsson, *Women in Distress: Self-Understanding among 20th-century Finnish Rural Women*, LIT Verlag, Berlin, Germany, 2011, pp. 180-181, 201.

⁴⁷ Olsson, op cit., p. 201.

⁴⁸ Kati Mikkola, "New Clothing Fashions as Expressions of Modernization and Targets of Resistance," *Ethnologia Fennica*, Volume 36, 2009, pp. 42-43.

When we were children, my mother sewed all our clothes because there was no ready-to-wear clothing available. And later my big sister sewed them, too...and as soon as I could, I also started to make my own clothes.⁴⁹

The second-wave feminist critique of fashion stemmed from the larger socialist critique of consumerism and the Capitalist system: fashion was seen as a source of women's oppression because it disempowered them by sapping their energy, time, and money to expend on mere trivialities.⁵⁰ But the interviews are a reminder that in Finnish culture and society, womanhood is not inextricably tied to the consumer culture as it is in America. The ready-to-wear industry was established relatively late in Finland—at the beginning of the twentieth century and did not boom until the 1970s.⁵¹ The mass production of clothing was already strong in the United States by the late nineteenth century.

By the 1960s, American feminists were rejecting the trap of consumerism.⁵² But since most clothing was still made at home in 1960s Finland (Figure 4), there was no similar feeling of such urgency. Leena, who grew up in a poor, working-class family, recalled how important it was for her in childhood to have one new, beautiful dress each year:

Our mother dressed us [daughters] like princesses. She took us to the local dressmaker because there was no ready-to-wear clothing, or it would have been expensive. But anyway, she wanted to make us look nice. And so we had white knee socks and new hair ribbons and patent leather shoes.⁵³

⁴⁹ Inkeri, [Finnish: “äiti ompeli meidän kaikki vaatteet silloin kun oltiin pieniä, kun kaupasta ei saanut siihen aikaan valmisvaatteita. Sitten mun isosisko ompeli. Että aina kaikki ompeli ympärillä ja sitä ommeltiin itekin nukun vaatteita ja omat vaatteet heti kun kyettiin tekemään ja tällee.”]

⁵⁰ Henry, op cit., p. 20; Reger, op cit., p. 211.

⁵¹ See Piippa Lappalainen and Mirja Almay, *Kansakunnan vaatettajat*, [*The Clothiers of the Nation*], WSOY, Helsinki, Finland, 1996.

⁵² See Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham, “The Americanization of Fashion,” in Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham, eds., *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, Berg, Oxford, England, 2005, pp. 1-8.

⁵³ Leena, [Finnish: “äiti puki meidät semmoisiksi prinsessoiksi. Että ompelijalla saatiin käydä. Kun ei silloin ollut valmisvaatteita ja ne olis ollut kalliita. Mut kuiteskin, että se halus laittaa meidät nätisti. Ja oli valkoiset polvisukat ja uudet lettinauhat, ja kiiltonahkakengät.”]

Later, Leena learned to make her own clothing, “I just had to start refashioning old clothes into something new...because otherwise I couldn’t afford new clothes.”⁵⁴



Figure 4:
A Mother Sewing at Home, circa 1962, Photographed by Pekka Kyytinen,
The Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki, Finland.

⁵⁴ Leena, [Finnish: “Ja mä oon ite ommellu paljon. Mä aloitin joskus 14-vuotiaana, koska johtui myös köyhyydestä. Piti ruveta vaan vanhoista vaatteista jotain tuunaamaan. Löysin jotain ja rupesin vaan tekemään itelle, kun ei ollu varaa muuten saada vaatteita.”]

For working-class women, constructing a feminine appearance was expensive and often a luxury.⁵⁵ My interviewees made the same point as Angela McRobbie, who argues that when radical feminists speak to the female consumer, they forget that she is not always middle class. In reality, for most women, purchasing new clothing did not mean buying it. They bought fabrics, “[s]o the act of consumption was merely the precursor for further domestic labour.”⁵⁶ Leena, among other interviewees, emphasised that her feminism does not include restrictions and especially means the chance to live as she likes and enjoy fashion and be feminine.

Conclusion

Second-wave feminists are typically seen as women who favoured a masculine or unisex style in their dress and appearance. But their politics of dress has been criticised by third-wave feminists, who have pointed out that instead of liberating women from feminine norms, these principles only restricted them to a masculine appearance. This article contributes to the recent studies of second-wave feminists that show that many actually adopted a feminine style as constituting a feminist choice.

This research shows that in the Finnish context, the critique of unisex dress style that is typically seen as presented by the third wave was actually already present in the second wave. As the international radical second-wave feminist movement was established in Finland, feminists favoured the choice discourse when talking about the politics of dress and appearance. In the interviewees’ narratives, feminism was represented as a way to free oneself from the standards of dress and appearance of the Marxist Taistoist movement, which was the most powerful movement of the New Left in Finland. For these women, the second-wave feminist movement meant a liberation from the masculine or unisex uniform favoured in the Taistoist movement. For some, feminism was seen as helping to oppose the conservative standards of girls’ behaviour at school and in home, which emphasised a controlled, representation of femininity.

This research also shows that the fashion industry is only one factor that frames the ideals and norms of women’s appearance, because other systems, cultural conventions and meanings of dress also play important roles in this process. The interviewees’ narratives confirm that both oppression and liberation are results of the local culture and society that produce the gender order. Therefore, the ways that feminist ideas are understood—and how they are practiced in everyday life—must be studied in the local context.

⁵⁵ See also Luther, *op cit.*, p. 75.

⁵⁶ Angela McRobbie, “Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion, and Consumption,” *Feminist Review*, 55, Spring 1997, *Consuming Cultures*, p. 74.

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