

Gender Equality and Values in Finland

Merja Paajanen (2001)
AV3F English Public Speaking
Department of Translation Studies, University of Tampere

Dear students, Mr Hopkins,

I have decided to talk to you today about a subject that for a long time now has aroused vivid discussion and brought about diverse opinions. It is a subject that some people believe not to be worth discussing anymore, at least not in Finland. This subject is equality. I am going to focus on equality between men and women, by which I do not want to say that equality between persons representing different nationalities, for instance, would not deserve attention in today's Finnish society.

It is often said that Finland is a kind of model country when it comes to equality. And then again, this view has also been criticised on numerous occasions. Of course it must be admitted that the situation is rather good when Finland is compared to many other countries. One example of a drastically different situation is Afghanistan, but differences can also be found in countries whose culture is rather similar to ours.

In the recent municipal elections of France, for instance, the percentage of women elected rose significantly in comparison with previous elections. Prior to this, the number of female representatives was unbelievably small. In Finland, the percentage of female representation has been rather high for some time now. However, it is a generally known fact that the higher we go in the hierarchy of companies, political parties or any other organisations, the fewer women we find. The election of Tarja Halonen as our first female president does not change the big picture, even though it is naturally of great symbolic importance.

But let us now put aside the question of representation, and concentrate on another issue, which I believe to be important when equality is discussed. I am thinking of the values of today's society.

Economic matters and fields that contribute vigorously to economic growth have become increasingly important, overshadowing other areas of life. Fundamental sectors of society, such as taking care of elderly people, have somehow been forgotten. Or, to be more specific, they have not exactly been forgotten, since there is discussion about these matters, but they are not really valued.

I quote here the words of Juha Suoranta, who is Professor of Education in Lapland University. He was interviewed on today's values by *Aktivist*, a magazine in free distribution. Juha Suoranta says that education, care, nursing and housework are examples of sectors that in neoliberalist discourse are only seen to cause expenditures, while the truth is that they form the basis of our society and also maintain this society.

While there are many sides to this problem, one of them is inequality, as in the sectors I am talking about the majority of employees are women. And we all know that wages in these sectors are lower than in the technical sectors where the majority of employees are men. In my opinion, the sectors dominated by women deserve more respect, and one of the signs of respect is the wage level.

It seems to me that getting girls to choose mathematics and physics at school, and, later on, getting these girls to head for a technical career, is nowadays thought to be one of the most significant contributors to equality between men and women. It is true that there have also been efforts to raise the number of men in sectors dominated by women, for example in education. But more attention has certainly been paid to getting girls interested in technical matters.

I do not want to deny the importance of this, nor do I want to deny the fact that women are as capable as men to succeed in technical subjects. Instead, I want to ask why choosing a profession traditionally dominated by women results in a lower salary than choosing a profession dominated by men, even though the education level is the same.

It is certainly true that our culture and the traditional roles of men and women shape our minds and guide us to follow the traditional expectations of society. One of the consequences is that girls choose traditional professions, even though they might be highly talented in an area traditionally dominated by boys. For this reason, it is valuable to try to change the common patterns of behaviour.

But I think we should also accept the fact that men and women are different, and that they are interested in different things. Each of us is, of course, an individual, but generally speaking, it seems that boys are more interested in technical matters than girls. Once again, I want to stress that it is important that girls are encouraged to learn mathematics and physics, for example, but from this point of view, should boys not be encouraged to learn more languages or become nurses?

Not so long ago I read in a paper, once again, that the efforts to encourage girls to educate themselves for a traditional men's profession had not been very successful. While reporting on the current situation, doesn't this kind of writing also evoke the idea that those girls who sort of go with the flow and choose a traditional profession are somehow to be blamed for not choosing differently?

Equality is a complex issue, but I believe one of the fundamental questions to be the following: is equality about the sameness of men and women or is it about treating the two different sexes in an equal way, and about appreciating the work of both of them? This question is by no means a new one, but I think it deserves to be raised again and again.

Thank you.

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