

## WORK IN THE LIVES OF FINNISH WOMEN AS REFLECTED IN CONTEM- PORARY FINNISH SOCIAL RESEARCH AND WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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**ABSTRACT.** Work related values are to be found among the most cherished by Finns in any Finnish value survey ever conducted. Women constitute 49% of the whole of Finnish labour force. In contemporary Finnish novels however, pictures of females at work are much less frequent than those of working males. The author of this article discusses the actual meaning of work in the Finnish society and claims that the significance of work for both sexes is equally evident – only in the case of women it is manifested differently. Finnish women – as well as female characters in contemporary Finnish novels by women authors – express themselves acting rather than pondering just like their male counterparts.

In my doctoral dissertation<sup>1</sup> to be defended later this year, I focus on the phenomenon of Finnish work culture. The core of the sources analysed in it consists of contemporary Finnish novels of Finnish mother tongue writers published in the years 1990–2000. The work discourses to be found in those writings represent many different attitudes towards work and many aspects of work representative for contemporary Finland. The period in question is not randomly chosen either – the 1990's in Finland were a decade rich in political and economic fluctuations, which have influenced also the cultural identity of Finns.

It may come as a surprise that literary fiction is used for analysis, which is partly sociological. The reason for this is that Finns are a nation of readers and writers.<sup>2</sup> They express themselves on paper more willingly than orally and they

<sup>1</sup> K. Kasierska, *Homo Faber Fennicus. Work Discourses in Finnish Literary Culture 1990–2000*.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Statistical Yearbook UNESCO 1998* Finland is rated second after Iceland when the number of titles published per 1000 inhabitants is concerned. Compare: Stockmann, Bengtsson, Repo 2000: 29.

are passionate readers as well.<sup>3</sup> Thus also their opinions on present day issues can be found in literary texts, and certain cognitive and mental patterns typical for the Finnish mentality can be traced between the lines. It is possible not only because of the Finns' appreciation for the written word, but first and foremost for the fact that the Finnish culture is a low context culture. Almost all the novels published nowadays in Finland discuss situations and relations that might occur in real life and the characters found in them are for the readers easy to identify with. Especially in the case of the most popular literary fiction, the action of which takes place in contemporary Finland, the characters as well as the events may be approached as if they were facts. Most of the sources used for analysis in my dissertation are such novels.

In this article I present the most problematic of all the issues I focused on in my dissertation, i.e. the attitude women have towards work. Furthermore in this article I discuss the Finnish work ethos, which is the key to proper understanding of Finnish mentality and the rules governing the society. Briefly one can state that work has an overwhelming meaning in Finns' lives, but even though it is easily found in any kind of men's writings – from newspaper articles to poetry even – in women's writings it is not that evident. Nonetheless I claim that the lives of Finnish women are also work-centred. And so are the lives of the female characters found in contemporary Finnish literature.

The whole population of Finland exceeds a little the number of 5 million.<sup>4</sup> The Finnish labour force consists of less than a half of the whole population.<sup>5</sup> 51% of working Finns are men and 49% women.<sup>6</sup> Already these statistics tell of the importance of work in women's lives. Why is it not so clear in women's writings then? In order to understand that let us first have a look at contemporary Finnish female authors and their works.

#### WOMEN'S LITERATURE IN FINLAND

In general it can be stated that men's and women's literatures differ a lot among themselves. Male Finns read books by female authors rarely. Among the

<sup>3</sup> In Finland the rates of book and newspaper sales per capita as well as the popularity of libraries exceed those of any other country in the world. Compare: Stockmann, Bengtsson, Repo 2000: 29ff.

<sup>4</sup> By the end of the year 2000 the actual number of inhabitants was 5 181 115 among which 2 529 341 were male and 2 651 774 female. *Statistics Finland*: [www.stat.fi](http://www.stat.fi) -> Population by main type of activity and sex 31.12.2000.

<sup>5</sup> Exactly 2 554 657. *Statistics Finland*: [www.stat.fi](http://www.stat.fi) -> Population by main type of activity and sex 31.12.2000.

<sup>6</sup> Male labour force 1 314 056 and female labour force 1 240 601. (The quota of 318 104 – the total of unemployed the percentage male/female remaining 51/49% has to be subtracted from the total number of labour force to receive the actual sum of the employed, but for the purpose of this article I consider this data irrelevant). *Statistics Finland* [www.stat.fi](http://www.stat.fi) -> Population by main type of activity and sex 31.12.2000. See also: Lehto 1999: 105ff. for more statistic data on women's position on the labour market – e.g. the unemployment rates in the 1990's, female immediate superiors in work environments, women's attitude towards work, etc.

most popular female writers one can find such names as: Laila Hietamies, Anja Snellman,<sup>7</sup> Leena Lehtolainen, Kaari Utrio. Among those most awarded and praised by Finnish literary critics – i.e. those who either received or were among the candidates to the prestigious *Finlandia Literary Prize* in the years 1990–2000 one finds such names as: Leena Krohn, Eeva Joenpelto, Irja Rane, Pirkko Saisio, Pirjo Hassinen, Sisko Istanmäki, Johanna Sinisalo.<sup>8</sup>

Works of almost all the above mentioned writers could be called feminist – in the broadest meaning of this word – as they all deal with femininity in its various shapes and forms, and approach it from many different angles. In most cases women are the main characters of their books or, if a man plays the main part, women anyhow shape the reality of the fictitious world, just as strong Finnish women would do in the real world.

Finnish women writers only rarely present literature that cannot be rated woman-centred or feminist. The works of the above mentioned authors can be then divided into two kinds – historical and contemporary fiction. Regardless of this division, in all of them female characters approach the world that surrounds them from the feminine perspective, expressing their strong feminine identity.

The historical novel is represented especially by Laila Hietamies (1938–) who has been the most widely read female author in Finland for the past 25 years. Since her first novel in 1972 she has so far published close to 40 novels – among these most in long historical series. The characters of her books are strong Carelian and Finnish women in difficult historic moments. Her books are issued in editions of about 3 million copies.<sup>9</sup>

Another important woman writer of historical novels is Kaari Utrio (1942–).<sup>10</sup> Kaari is a historian by profession and apart from literary fiction she has also published several remarkable works on the history of women.<sup>11</sup> She is particularly interested in the Middle Ages and thus also the action of her novels is set in those times. Unexpectedly though, also these novels present women who fight for their rights, who influence rulers and first and foremost, who think for themselves – quite on the contrary of what is commonly thought to be true for the patriarchal medieval period.

<sup>7</sup> Anja Kauranen until the year 1997. In 1993 her novel *Ihon aika* (Time of the skin) was also among the *Finlandia prize* candidates.

<sup>8</sup> In the period in question women writers were awarded five times and men writers six times – the lists of winner and candidate books can be viewed at [http://www.skyry.net/sky/finlandia\\_k.htm](http://www.skyry.net/sky/finlandia_k.htm).

<sup>9</sup> More information about Laila Hietamies can be found e.g. at her publisher's homepage: [www.otava.fi](http://www.otava.fi) and <http://www.lappeenranta.fi/kirjasto/carelica/kirj/hietam.html>.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on Kaari Utrio see her homepage: <http://www.amanita.fi/kaari/kaari.html>. The complete list of her published works (including the titles of their English translations) can be found at <http://www.amanita.fi/kaari/engl/works.html>. Kaari Utrio is known also to the Polish reader. Six out of her more than forty published works have been translated into Polish. For details see: <http://aurinko.krap.pl/kultura/przeklady.html>.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. *Eevan tyttäret*, Helsinki: Tammi, 1984 translated into Polish by Mariola Gąsiorowska under the title *Córki Ewy – Historia kobiety europejskiej*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo 69, 1998.

The third of the most prolific women writers in contemporary Finland is Eeva Joenpelto (1921–2004), who published over twenty novels.<sup>12</sup> Various as they may be, all the female characters of her books are strong and all the male ones are weak. The world pictured in Joenpelto's novels would not have survived if it had not been for her strong women characters.<sup>13</sup>

The three above-mentioned authors are important for us now only in order to understand there has been a long tradition of literary production about women and for women in Finland. The following writers interest us from the point of view of this article – their novels are sources for my analysis of contemporary Finnish women's attitudes towards work.

Although Leena Lehtolainen (1964–) is not a typical feminist writer – she is the most popular Finnish woman writer of crime novels<sup>14</sup> – she nonetheless considers herself one. As an author of detective stories, she is also one of the few female writers who are popular among male readers as well. Lehtolainen has written among others a series of eight crime novels. The main character of them is a feminist policewoman/lawyer with the name Maria Kallio, who apart from solving crimes has to constantly shape her identity of a hardworking woman at a high post, a partner in a relationship and a mother.<sup>15</sup>

The remaining writers whose literary production I would like to describe represent rather typical feminist literature. The first one is Anja Snellman (1954–).<sup>16</sup> She is a quite popular author whose novels have also been recognised by critics. She writes about women and for women primarily. Her main characters are women in search of their own feminine identity. They suffer from childhood traumas (they have had bad relations with their parents, their mothers especially), which they wish to overcome in order to accept their own femininity.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Eeva Joenpelto died in January this year a very popular writer and that is why I write about her in present form. The complete list of Eeva Joenpelto's works is to be found e.g. at the following site: <http://www.karjalohja.fi/kirjailijat/joenp.htm#Tuotanto>. One of her novels (*Johannes vain*, Porvoo: WSOY, 1952) has been translated into Polish by Cecylia Lewandowska, *Po prostu Johannes*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1978.

<sup>13</sup> In her *Finlandia Prize* awarded novel *Tuomari Müller, hieno mies* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1994) an elderly woman – the main character and the wife of the late Judge Müller – makes the city council's plans of extension impossible by refusing to sell a few acres of land.

<sup>14</sup> And the only woman to have ever received the Finnish detective story *Vuoden johtolanka* (the Clue of the Year) prize in its almost 20 years' history. The list of all the winners can be found at this page: [http://www.dekkarisaura.fi/johto\\_k.html](http://www.dekkarisaura.fi/johto_k.html). Lehtolainen received this prize for the only one of her novels (*Luminainen*, Helsinki: Tammi, 1996) so far translated into Polish (by Sebastian Musielak) and published as: *Kobieta ze sniegu*, Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Homepage of Leena Lehtolainen: <http://www.kolumbus.fi/leena.lehtolainen/index.htm>. Other Lehtonen's novels I analyse in my research are: *Harmin paikka* (1994), *Kuparisydän* (1995) and *Ennen lähtöä* (2000) – all of which were published by Tammi Publishing House in Helsinki.

<sup>16</sup> Detailed information about Anja Snellman and her works: <http://www.lappeenranta.fi/kirjasto/carelica/kirj/snellman.html>.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. her two famous novels published yet under her maiden name: Anja Kauranen, *Ihoni aika*, Porvoo–Helsinki–Juva: WSOY, 1993; Anja Kauranen, *Pelon maantiede*, Porvoo–Helsinki–Juva: WSOY, 1995.

The questions of various identities a woman must assume are crucial issues in Pirkko Saisio's literary fiction.<sup>18</sup> Pirkko Saisio (1949–) has expressed herself in many artistic fields, as she is not only a writer, but also an actress and a director. Among other artistic works, she has published several plays and fourteen novels. Several of her novels are autobiographical.<sup>19</sup> In all of them the central topic is personal identity of the main character – writer's alter ego. What does it mean to be a woman in various roles: those of a daughter in relation to her mother and father, a sister, a homosexual lover, a female artist, a worker, a friend?<sup>20</sup>

Pirjo Hassinen's (1957–)<sup>21</sup> literary fiction can be called carnally naturalistic and feminist. Hassinen's female characters are aware of their own and others bodily boundaries and they observe the world through them. They are spiritually, mentally and physically tough.<sup>22</sup>

Anna-Leena Härkönen (1965–)<sup>23</sup> has been well known in Finland since 1984 when she published her first novel.<sup>24</sup> Apart from being a writer she is also a popular actress. Since her literary debut she has published among others five novels (one of them autobiographical<sup>25</sup>). The central topic of all of them is women's rights to their own body and various aspects of feminine identity. The author concentrates on women's identity questions rising from relations with their male partners, their mothers and children, and their own carnality.

The last writer I wish to mention here is Katja Kallio (1968–).<sup>26</sup> Her first novel<sup>27</sup> was published in 2000 and since then she has written other two. Especially her debut novel was very popular among young readers in Finland. Kallio may not be a remarkable writer, but her three so far published novels show typical value systems of today's young Finnish adults, which make it possible for the readers to identify with the characters and their problems. Her main characters are women in search of love and the meaning of life.

After the short introduction to the literary production of a few of the most prominent contemporary Finnish women writers one must proceed to discuss the

<sup>18</sup> Pirkko Saisio's biography and bibliography in English: <http://authors.libraries.fi/?c=5&pid=272&lang=EN>.

<sup>19</sup> Among these one has to rate also her latests books *Punainen erokirja*, Porvoo–Helsinki–Juva: WSOY, 2003 which for which she was awarded last year's *Finlandia Literary Prize*.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. P. Saisio, *Pienin yhteinen jaettava*, Porvoo–Helsinki–Juva: WSOY, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Some biographical information about P. Hassinen and a short fragment of one of her novels (*Mansikoita marraskuussa*, Helsinki: Otava, 2000) are to be found at <http://dbgw.finlit.fi/fili/eng/kirjailijat/phnayte.html> and <http://authors.libraries.fi/?c=5&pid=275&lang=EN>.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. P. Hassinen, *Mansikoita marraskuussa*, Helsinki: Otava, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> More about Anna-Leena Härkönen at her publisher's homepage: [http://www.otava.fi/default.cfm?cd=1014&depth=2&dept0=1003&dept1=1014&template=author\\_details&authorid=125](http://www.otava.fi/default.cfm?cd=1014&depth=2&dept0=1003&dept1=1014&template=author_details&authorid=125).

<sup>24</sup> A.-L. Härkönen, *Häräntappoase*, Helsinki: Otava, 1984.

<sup>25</sup> A.-L. Härkönen, *Heikoisti positiivinen*, Helsinki: Otava, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> For details on her writing and translating career at: [http://www.otava.fi/default.cfm?cd=1014&depth=2&dept0=1003&dept1=1014&template=author\\_details&authorid=134](http://www.otava.fi/default.cfm?cd=1014&depth=2&dept0=1003&dept1=1014&template=author_details&authorid=134).

<sup>27</sup> K. Kallio, *Kuutamolla*, Helsinki: Otava, 2000.

meaning of work in Finns' lives. According to Matti Kortteinen<sup>28</sup> the meaning of work in the Finnish society cannot be properly understood without the notion of *the Survival Ethos* – a term coined by Kortteinen himself in his 1992 research, but there are several other background facts and possible explanations which are worth taking into consideration as well.

#### FINNISH WORK ETHOS AND PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC

Work ethos in a protestant country is inevitably associated with the term of protestant work ethic and with Max Weber who elaborated on it in his famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.<sup>29</sup> Though not all that this term implies can be directly applied to the Finnish society.

Weber explained capitalist ideas with Calvinist theology. For Calvin labour was the only available means for assuring one's redemption. No sacraments could do that, nor remaining in the church community, but a kind of worldly asceticism – i.e. continuous hard work of each single person on their own throughout the whole life and neglecting any worldly pleasures.<sup>30</sup>

Lutheranism however differs significantly from Calvinism and the Finnish national mentality as well as identity has been shaped by the first, not the latter, set of beliefs for the past 500 years. One has to keep in mind though, that any kind of ethic would not have brought such fruit if the soil were not proper for the seeds to grow. The protestant work ethic only underlined and explained the logic under which this society had functioned also before the arrival of the Lutheranism, i.e. in the Catholic ages. Finland was the most further north situated agrarian society in the world – and this is the natural explanation for the people's attitude towards work and their appreciation for it.

One must keep in mind that what is usually associated with the term protestant work ethic does not apply to the Finnish society to all its extent. Being Lutheran, Finns have accepted Luther's ideas about the meaning of work, but not all of the ones formed by Calvin who was the one to base the whole religion on the idea that labour is people's means to gain redemption. Another Calvin's idea, the one probably most often associated with the term of protestant work ethic is the superiority of profit over profession. For Luther it was labour itself – not the profit brought by it – that played the essential role.

Luther's idea was that people could serve God through their work and that all professions were useful and thus equal. It was his reply to the conviction of

<sup>28</sup> Kortteinen is a researcher at the Department of Sociology of the University of Helsinki, as well as a researcher of the *National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES)* and the author of two important works on Finnish worklife (*Kunnian kenttä. Suomalainen palkkatyö kulttuurisena muotona*, 1992, and together with H. Tuomikoski, *Työtön. Tutkimus pitkäaikaistyöttömien selviytymisestä*, 1998) which I relate to continuously in my research.

<sup>29</sup> Weber (1904–05) 1958.

<sup>30</sup> Morrison 1995: 248ff.

the superiority of the contemplative monastery life over earthly professions. According to Luther no profession was better than others and people's duty was to work diligently in their own occupation, which he saw as vocation.

These two tenets – the equal importance of professions and the diligence in performing work are crucial to proper understanding of the Finnish society.<sup>31</sup> I claim in my thesis that Finns are a society of hard workers. Being hardworking is a virtue; it gives one's life a meaning. It is an important characteristic of the Finnish *common consciousness*<sup>32</sup> – their hard work is their reason to live, the source of their personal identity and self-esteem. People in Finland work not as much to gain financial profit or to build a career – but for the satisfaction well-performed work itself gives them. It is not dishonour in Finland to be underpaid or have a lower degree of education, but to be less than very good at what you do, or even worse – unemployed. Casual conversations among friends inevitably concentrate on work issues. New acquaintances are eager to learn about each other's professions and work experience much sooner than about their interests or any personal e.g. family related issues.

The importance of work in people's lives is most evident in various researches of the life of the unemployed. Being unemployed in Finland, especially in the case of men, is a real personal tragedy as work is probably the most important factor of men's personal identity. Finland is a country marked by work-centredness and when left without a job, men quite often suffer from mental conditions such as depression and in several cases even decide to end their lives – their total dedication towards work prevents them from seeing other reasons to live. This fact was evident especially at the beginning of the period of economic crisis, which Finland underwent in the 1990's. The rate of unemployment grew from under 4% in 1990 up to almost 20% in 1994 and it remained that high until the 1996 when it started to diminish slowly to reach the level of about 10% which is preserved more or less until now.<sup>33</sup> In the first years the numbers of the unemployed increased fast and researchers expected its influence to be evident in mortality statistics as well, especially in the case of suicides and other violent death causes.<sup>34</sup> Then a certain change in the mentality occurred – an-

<sup>31</sup> As a matter of fact Luther disapproved of commerce and saw it as a sinful profession – thus his ethic seems to be miles away from Calvin's conviction of Christian vocation to gaining profit to everyone's prosperity in order to make the world a place that would resemble the heavenly kingdom.

<sup>32</sup> "The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the *collective* or *common conscience*". Durkheim 1893 (1933): 79f.

<sup>33</sup> Compare the recent data on the unemployment rates at [www.labour.fi](http://www.labour.fi). See also: Kortteinen & Tuomikoski 1998: 11, 38ff. for various unemployment statistics of the economic crisis period – especially statistics concerning the chronic unemployed and the influence of unemployment on their health.

<sup>34</sup> Martikainen & Valkonen 1996: 909ff. – this research shows the results of rapidly growing unemployment in the first period of the crisis. Strangely enough the average suicide rates appeared to have been higher towards the end of the 1980's than at the period in question. Nonetheless the suicide rates among the unemployed were clearly higher than those of the employed. Compare also: Martikainen & Valkonen 1995.

other approach of the whole society towards unemployment. Traditionally not having a job meant certain disabilities and thus the unemployed saw themselves as worthless and were treated alike by other members of society. In the period of depression though this problem touched equally not only blue-collar workers who possibly lacked skills, but also people with high level of education who had worked at high posts. Unemployment thus stopped being seen as the individual's own fault, but as some kind of fate, which may touch whoever. In this way the whole society suffered from the unemployment of some of its members. This tragedy ceased to be personal only, at least to some extent.<sup>35</sup>

It has already been mentioned that referring to the protestant work ethic as an explanation of the phenomenon of work-centeredness functions only to some extent. The roots of this model of society lay in Finland's agrarian past. Finland has undergone rapider social changes than probably any other European society. For a long time it remained agrarian, poor, illiterate and in a politically subordinate position, but when the things finally began to change, everything changed very rapidly. What it means in practice is that the social and mental norms, which governed the agrarian society, have preserved to a large extent to the present day or their influence on the Finns' contemporary value systems can be easily traced.<sup>36</sup> Finland was agrarian despite its northern geographical position, extremely short vegetation period and infertile soil. Such circumstances created people who can survive anything and who know that one has to work hard whenever there is an opportunity for that. If the time given – the short period when days were long and warm and one could work outside – had not been used properly, the poor people would not have survived. Even though nowadays, thanks to the invention of electricity, people can work the whole year round and their life does not depend on their hard physical work, the mentality of the agrarian period still governs people's minds and guards the norms of their value systems.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> SKS (Finnish Literature Society) organised in 1993 (when the unemployment rate had reached 20%) a literary competition under the title *Työttömän tarina* (The story of an unemployed). Even though generally Finns take part in such writing competitions willingly, this time only about 1200 stories were sent. The best 33 of them were then published under the same title (Laaksonen & Piela 1993). This book was, according to many people, the most important Finnish publication of that year (Siimes 1994). People were still very ashamed of their unemployment (that was why so few of them decided to send their stories for others to read). The autobiographical stories published in that book resemble a lot the story told by Aki Kaurismäki in his 1996 film *Kauas pilvet karkaavat* (Drifting Clouds). The main characters of it – a man and his wife – both become unemployed all of a sudden. The man is the first one to lose his job, but he is so ashamed of the fact that he pretends to be still going to work everyday for several weeks, before he dares to tell his wife what had happened.

<sup>36</sup> More about the agrarian values present in contemporary Finnish mentality e.g. in: Apo 1996, Kasierska 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Anna-Leena Siikala and Satu Apo – two professors of the Folkloristics Department of the University of Helsinki – have repeatedly stated in their works (following the statements of the mentality historians of the Annales school, etc) that Finnish mentality of today is strongly influenced by the society's past, even as distant as the prehistoric times, and definitely by its agrarian period – the values and mental patterns of those times are still valid in today's society. Compare e.g.: Apo 1996, 1999, 2001; Siikala 1992, 2002.

Matti Kortteinen, in his famous research of the meaning of work in contemporary Finland published under the title *Kunnian kenttä* (the Field of Glory) describes the phenomenon of Finnish work centeredness with the term *selviytymisen eetos* (the Survival Ethos).<sup>38</sup> Briefly it can be summed up as seeking glory and self-esteem in surviving (often deliberately chosen) tough situations – setting oneself high goals to reach and then fighting the circumstances and one's own weaknesses in order to reach them. It is also about evolving to be better than others – but in all the cases the toughness of the circumstances is the key to proper understanding of this phenomenon. Kortteinen and several other researchers<sup>39</sup> explain the origin of many of the features called by Kortteinen with this term with the war and post-war traumas of most of the Finnish families.<sup>40</sup>

The post-war decades were a time of huge social changes which seem to have influenced also the Finnish mentality – namely the sense of responsibility for others (for the family, for the fatherland) and the willingness to sacrifice one's life for them, which were characteristic especially for the wartime stories, have been replaced by highly individual goals. The most significant change is said to have occurred in the lives of the baby boomer generation who grew up in the post-war times listening to the stories of survival told by their parents – who themselves though experienced none of the life threats the previous generations had to cope with. The mental structures which governed the lives of the previous generations have been inherited by them nonetheless – they too fight for survival – no longer for the common good though but only for themselves. Along with the vast migration from rural areas to the cities and the development of the welfare state system, people's aspirations gradually changed and became highly individualised.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand the economic crisis Finland underwent in the 1990's forced those who experienced unemployment, especially for a period of time longer than a year, to turn to the norms and values of the previous generations. As the research results of Kiianmaa, Kortteinen and Tuomikoski<sup>42</sup> show those whose attachment and devotion towards work was stronger than any other social attachment suffered from the loss of work the most. The source of personal identity of those people lay only in their occupation and they were part of no other social network. Those among the unemployed who had families and could

<sup>38</sup> Kortteinen 1992.

<sup>39</sup> Especially those who have studied Finnish biographical stories of the wartime, postwar and baby boomer generations (among others: Roos 1987; Tuominen 1991).

<sup>40</sup> The informants repeatedly state how proud they are and how successful they feel because they made it no matter how hard it was. Their life stories were certainly not all roses. Still they were happy and proud of what they had achieved. The father of the family might have died leaving his wife with several young children, so that everyone in the family had to work really hard for the common good; there might have been no educational opportunities, but despite that one learned how to read and eventually graduated from university, etc. (Kortteinen 1992:52ff.; Roos 1987).

<sup>41</sup> Compare: Kortteinen 1992: 60ff. and passim.

<sup>42</sup> Kiianmaa 1996; Kortteinen & Tuomikoski 1998.

count on their support in resisting the hard times, fighting the feelings of humiliation and shame resulting from the unemployment<sup>43</sup> etc., survived the ordeal better than others. The sense of the common sacrifice for the common good on the part of all the family members resembles the wartime generation's recollections of surviving the hard times.<sup>44</sup> Still also these research results support the idea that the post-war generations – and especially young women – find it hard to set their goals elsewhere than in individual success and they were those who experienced sacrificing their personal aspirations as unjust and unwillingly assumed the traditional housewife role.<sup>45</sup>

Thus one feature remains characteristic for the Finnish society – just as it played a vital role in the agrarian past and in the course of the hard war and post-war reconstruction times – the sense of equal responsibility for the family's survival on the part of both the man and the wife in a family, everyone alike. Also in the period of economic crisis the family's survival was guaranteed by everyone's hard work for the common good. In the light of this fact the Finnish gender equality phenomenon is but a logical consequence of it.

#### GENDER EQUALITY IN FINLAND

Equality between sexes means something else in every culture – as the historical background of the society is different, thus also the social roles applied to women and men vary and their aspirations and views of what the ideal gender equality should look like vary as well. It has already been mentioned that the numbers of male and female employees are comparable. And actually the work-centeredness of Finnish women is the most characteristic trait of the Finnish model of gender equality.

In the agrarian society women had to work hard for the common good of the community they were part of – namely the kin. Their position was not always the same – it depended on their age, marital status and wealth of the family, but hard work for the common good was known to them all.<sup>46</sup> Children were usually taken care of by other relatives rather than by the mothers only – a natural consequence of which is the fact that in most cases it is the state that takes care of the youngest nowadays.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Kortteinen & Tuomikoski 1998: 23ff.

<sup>44</sup> Compare: Kortteinen 1992: 52ff.

<sup>45</sup> Kortteinen & Tuomikoski 1998: 63ff.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. the housewife's position was strongest when the master of the house was gone (dead or away from home) or weak (ill or an alcoholic). The poorer the family the more evident the equality between sexes – wives were often responsible for money keeping, etc. See: Apo 1999: 9ff.; Pylkkänen 1999.

<sup>47</sup> As soon as the urbanisation of Finland began, and especially in the period of war, children were treated as common property of the nation. Soon state and municipality kindergartens were established and women were given all kind of support to enable them to divide their lives between the home and the workplace. Compare: Apo 1999: 19; Pylkkänen 1999: 32ff.

Finland is at the top position in most gender equality statistics. Finnish women were the first in Europe to gain the suffrage in the 1906 and as soon as a year later a few Finnish female candidates were elected Members of Parliament.<sup>48</sup> Since then women in Finland have played an important role in the country's politics.<sup>49</sup> The employment rates of men and women in Finland are almost equal. Women actually surpass men in the field of education.<sup>50</sup> Still some polarisation in the society persists. The wages of Finnish women remain at the level of about 80% of the men's wages. Female employees are the ones most prone to lose their jobs in the case of economic fluctuations, and they perform most of the housework.

To women coming from another culture the Finnish women's aspirations for fairer gender equality may sound strange in the light of what has been said at the beginning of this paragraph – still it has always been the working opportunity on equal grounds with men that counted most for them throughout the social changes of the twentieth century. Thus even though they are given more or less equal work opportunities as men (as the state helps them raising children, etc.) they find it unfair that apart from their jobs they are still obliged to perform certain duties which most men perceive as suitable for women only – namely the housework – and on the top of all that they remain underpaid.<sup>51</sup>

The work-centeredness of Finnish women shows in various statistics. 91% of them find their jobs instructive or generally having positive influence on their personal development, and only 17% find their work monotonous and 46% perceive it as extremely important and meaningful.<sup>52</sup>

How is it possible then that despite the evident work-centeredness of Finnish women's lives it is not as common as one might expect to find work descriptions in women's contemporary literature?

#### WORK-CENTEREDNESS VERSUS PERSONAL IDENTITY

In his 1992 analysis of *the Survival Ethos* in Finnish work culture Matti Korteinen paid special attention to *the Sense of Antagonism and the Ambivalent Pondering* most women in Finland experience. They question and no longer accept the idea of sacrificing oneself for the common good of the family,<sup>53</sup> which gave meaning to *the Survival Ethos* of women in the previous generations. Along

<sup>48</sup> In the 1991 parliament elections 39% and 1999 elections 37% of the seats were taken by women. Kuusipalo 1999; Julkunen 1999: 79.

<sup>49</sup> Let us not forget the President of the Republic Tarja Halonen (elected in 2000), who is also a former Foreign Affairs Minister (1995-2000) and an Member of Parliament. Read more about Tarja Halonen at [www.tpk.fi](http://www.tpk.fi) – the official site of the President. See also: Nikula 1999 for more information on the history of gender equality politics in Finland.

<sup>50</sup> Lehto 1999: 115f.

<sup>51</sup> Julkunen 1999, Lehto 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Lehto 1999: 113ff.

<sup>53</sup> Or another community – the work environment, the nation, etc.

with the growing level of education, as well as the variety of career opportunities, they tend to place their personal development as their first aim – attaching less importance to the traditional female obligations of wife and mother. What they nowadays strive for is the sense of freedom and their right to determine their own destiny, which seems to be far easier at work than in private life. In work environment one can more or less deliberately choose whether to accept a certain task and perform it or not, which gives one the sense of controlling one's own destiny. Thus achieving personal success at work depends on oneself to a much greater extent than ever in the home environment. Women prefer succeeding at work – where their achievements can be easily seen in comparison with other employees – but on the other hand such a choice is in contradiction with the traditional, agrarian model of femininity, which is still embedded in their *common consciousness* and in their value system.<sup>54</sup>

This explains why most of Finnish contemporary novels by women writers concentrate on the questions of feminine identity. Nonetheless whether the women characters in them suffer from the sense of antagonism or not, all of them strive to learn what is best for them on their own – by acting, not just thinking and observing the world passively. They determine their own destinies and shape their personal identities, which is the reason why I decided to call my dissertation on the phenomenon of the Finnish work culture with the title *Homo Faber Fennicus*.

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<sup>54</sup> Kortteinen 1992: 109ff. and passim.

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