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Gendering violence in the school shootings in Finland

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Abstract
Within barely a year, two school shootings shook Finland. The school shootings shocked Finnish society, forcing media, academics and experts, police and politicians alike to search for reasons behind the violent incidents. Focusing their analysis on the two main Finnish newspapers, Helsingin Sanomat and Hufvudstadsbladet, authoritative sources of information for Finland’s two language communities, the authors maintain that the Finnish case contributes to research on school shootings by evidencing the intimate linkages between the state, gender and violence. The authors argue that violence is to be understood through different discourses about the Finnish state. In particular, they discern three discourses about the state that produce gendered discourses of violence: the welfare state, the realist state and the neoliberal state. The authors conclude that these discourses produce different notions of rational and irrational violence thereby providing different legitimizations for male-embodied/masculine violence.

Keywords
Finland, gender, masculinities, school shootings, state, violence

Within less than a year, two school shootings shook Finland. On 7 November 2007, 18-year-old Pekka-Eric Auvinen entered his school, Jokela High School, and killed eight people. Having then shot himself, police discovered him unconscious when they raided the school. He died from his injuries that afternoon in hospital. Less than a year later on 23 September 2008, 22-year-old culinary arts student Matti Juhani Saari killed 10 at his college, the Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences in Kauhajoki. Like Auvinen, he shot himself in the head, was found unconscious by police, and died a few hours later in...
hospital. The media and police considered the shooting similar to the one in Jokela, both of which in turn resembled previous shootings in North America and Europe. Perhaps surprisingly for a country that ranks relatively high in global gender equality surveys, the mainstream discussion did not address the gendered nature of the violence. Both perpetrators were men, and in the Kauhajoki shooting, eight out of 10 victims were women. Police representatives nonetheless dismissed suggestions that Saari targeted particularly women, referring instead to the large proportion of female students at the college as an explanation.

School shootings were not a completely new phenomenon in Finland. The first and only previous incident occurred nearly 20 years earlier in Rauma in 1989, when a 14-year-old male pupil opened fire during class at his secondary school, killing two boys. The two recent school shootings were considered unprecedented due to the scale of violence and the similarities between them and US school shootings. The media, academics and experts from different fields, police and politicians alike searched for explanations to the violent incidents.

Finland is often portrayed as a model of gender equality in line with its Nordic counterparts. This has resulted in a persistent belief that gender equality has already been achieved, making it difficult to talk about or identify gendered societal patterns (Holli, 2002). Gender violence in particular is a difficult issue to discuss as its high levels in Finland disrupt the discourse of a women-friendly welfare state (Kantola, 2006). The two school shootings are a prime example of such tendencies. At the outset they were clearly gendered: both perpetrators were men and in the second incident the majority of victims were women. Yet, gender was a silenced issue in the public debate, reflecting the difficulties of addressing remaining gender inequalities in society. This tendency shows the need for feminist scholarly interventions to further deconstruct the links between gender and violence.

In this article, we explore the gendered character of the public debate surrounding the school shootings. In the first part, we discuss the previous research into school shootings and gender, which is mainly US-based. In the second part, we explain the Finnish context and build a theoretical framework around the concepts of gender, violence and the state. The Finnish case contributes to research on school shootings by drawing attention to the intimate linkages between the state, gender and violence. In particular, we argue that discourses about the state are based on and reproduce different notions of gender and violence. In the third part, we undertake an empirical analysis of the Finnish public debate as evidenced in two key newspapers. Such analysis generates detailed and differentiated knowledge about how gender, violence and the state are activated and intertwined in such dramatic events as the school shootings.

**Bringing gender into school shootings**

Most previous research on school shootings is US-based, perhaps unsurprisingly considering most incidents occur in the US. Both popular and academic explanations to school shootings centre on lax gun laws and violence in popular culture such as heavy metal music, violence in films, video games and the Internet. Pathological explanations like psychological problems rooted in childhood histories have been at the forefront among
media and academics alike. The few studies that connect the acts of violence with issues of gender are exemplary of the potential of feminist interventions in school shootings discussions outside the US (see Consalvo, 2003; Garbarino, 1998; Kimmel and Mahler, 2003: 1440–2; Watson, 2007: 729–30). Drawing on this literature can help us better understand the particularities of the Finnish media discussion, the gendered tensions of which, we argue, are tied to the neutralizing tendency of Finnish gender equality discourse that suppresses questions about the relationship between gender and violence.

As in Finland, the gendered nature of US school shootings was repeatedly silenced in the media and it has been the task of a handful of feminist scholars to make it visible (e.g. Danner and Carmody, 2001). They argue that most US shooters were under severe pressure to conform to a normative masculinity and that their violent reactions merely reinforced the power structures that they seemed to attack (Klein, 2006a: 54). The non-ideal type masculinities of boys, such as non-athletic physique, atypical clothing or being a ‘geek’ with good grades made several school shooters the targets of homophobic peer ridicule by the school’s athletic or wealthier students (Kimmel and Mahler, 2003: 1447–8). Here, gay-bashing does not refer necessarily to abusing a particular sexual identity, but rather to discursively persecuting a marginalized masculinity that ‘has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or any revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity’ (Pascoe, 2005: 330). Tellingly, the inability of some boys to dominate girls was a cause for derision. Many perpetrators who were either unable to get girls’ attention, or refused to harass them were called ‘gay’ or ‘fag’, exemplifying the social acceptance of both gay-bashing and sexual harassment. In other cases, boys were ‘protecting’ their girlfriends by shooting other boys who threatened their relationships (Klein, 2006a: 58; 2006b: 165).

Gendered analyses revealed that while male bullies constituted a portion of victims, girls often comprised a distinct majority in several shootings. For example, eight out of 12 victims in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Colorado were female. Similarly, outside the US in 1996 in Dunblane, Scotland, 12 out of 17 killed were women. In a massacre in 1989 in Montreal, a 25-year-old polytechnic student wanted to kill feminists for ruining his life (see Malette and Chalouh, 1991). All 14 victims and ten out of 14 injured were women. In aiming to resist the pressures to which they were subjected, the gunmen actually reproduced the same oppressive gender norms that troubled them in the first place. Having internalized ‘the hatred of their own feminine attributes . . . [low-status boys used] symbolic masculinity (violence and domination) to prove that they too can conform to social expectations’ (Klein, 2006a: 67).

**Theorizing gender and violence in Finland**

Theorizing gender and violence in the Finnish context is closely connected with understanding different discourses about ‘the state’. Finland is oftentimes described as a Nordic welfare state. For gender scholars and activists, the welfare state functioned as a guarantor of high levels of gender equality. In contrast to Anglo-American countries, ‘the state’ occupies such a central and positive place in people’s lives that the term is often conflated with that of ‘society’. Women’s and feminist movements also turned to the state and even were incorporated into its structures as ‘femocrats’ (Kantola, 2006, 2007).
A focus on violence, however, challenges the hegemonic understanding of a ‘woman-friendly’ welfare state where gender equality was achieved. A study evidencing the extent of domestic violence showed that 20 percent of Finnish women were victims of physical violence in their current partnerships, a figure reconfirmed in a follow-up study seven years later (Heiskanen and Piispa, 1998: 11; Piispa, 2008: 121). Other forms of violence are common too: sexual harassment and violence experienced by young girls has increased (Aaltonen, 2006; Tuominen, 2007) and Finnish school children bully and are victims of bullying more often than their Nordic counterparts (Oksanen, 2008: 232). Services for victims of domestic violence however are poor, the sparse and scattered network of shelters does not meet the European Union’s recommendations on the issue, and public debate tends to emphasize the violence committed by women rather than men.

In this article, we draw upon theories of gender and violence and their connections to different discourses about the state in the context of the two school shootings. We understand gender as being reproduced through discourses and practices of violence: ‘instances of violence are one of the sites at which gender identities are reproduced’ (Shepherd, 2008: 51). The focus is on the productive power of violence (Foucault, 1980) and gender as performative, where gender is not something that is possessed by but rather something that is done through repeated actions (Butler, 1999: 179). What becomes important is to expose and challenge the ways in which the links between masculinity and violence are preserved in discursive constructions (Shepherd, 2008: 53). Indeed, various researchers maintain that violence plays an important role as a marker of masculinity, which distinguishes, reproduces and ranks masculinities (see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 1998; Hutchings, 2008).

We argue that violence in Finland can be understood through three discourses about the Finnish state that produce gendered discourses of violence: the welfare state, the realist state and the neoliberal state. All produce different notions of rational and irrational violence thereby providing different legitimations for male-embodied/masculine violence.

First, in the welfare state discourse Finland is arguably a women-friendly Nordic welfare state, thus different from a number of other western democracies. There is a strong notion of ‘state responsibility’ with a focus on the care policies of the country (extensive public child daycare arrangements, maternity, paternity and parental leaves); labour market policies (women’s employment, addressing the pay gap); or gender policies (gender mainstreaming, women’s policy agencies). The discourse presumes that gender equality is a *fait accompli*, gender neutrality being highly valued and gender conflict downplayed (Holli, 2003). In this context, domestic violence (framed as ‘family violence’) becomes a gender neutral phenomenon as opposed to its framing as ‘violence against women’ in the Anglo-American countries (Kantola, 2006: 101–5). Violence is individualized and more structural approaches proved difficult to adopt in the public debate (Nyqvist, 2008; Ronkainen and Näre, 2008: 9). In the welfare state discourse, there is a strong notion of ‘state responsibility’ which results in a belief that in cases of domestic violence the state provides support for both the victim and the perpetrator (Kantola, 2006: 108). Those criticizing the welfare state construct it as feminine, as captured by the pejorative notion of the ‘Nanny state’: too intrusive, creating dependence on the state thus undermining the independence and autonomy of citizens.
Second, the ‘realist state’ discourse relates closely to the Weberian idea of the state as a legitimate user of violence in society (police and defence forces). Finland could be characterized as a militarized country (Cockburn, 2010; Enloe, 2000). The Finnish defence forces occupy a key position in the national discourse and are frequently portrayed positively in the media. Military service is universally compulsory for men over 18 years old, and is discharged by the majority of young men (80 percent). Military service has been open to women since 1995 on a voluntary basis but they constitute only 1–2 percent of the 25,000 conscripts trained every year (Tallberg, 2009: 77). These figures highlight the army’s central role in the construction of Finnish masculinities and in disciplining them (Jokinen, 2000: 198). Through the institutionalized practices of the military service, violence becomes a legitimate part of ‘men’s capabilities’ and conscription is an important initiation into manhood (Tallberg, 2009: 78). The realist state discourse is based on a distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘good’ violence as opposed to ‘irrational’ and ‘bad’ violence. In this respect, Kimberly Hutchings (2008: 33) observes that ‘good’ violence is associated to the controlled and civilized violence under the state’s auspices. This leads to positive valorizations of such things as bravery, rationality and discipline as traits of masculinity, formed in a dichotomous relation, othering and often depreciating things like emotionality and caring as ‘feminine’ (Carver, 2008: 79; see also Hutchings, 2008: 23). In contrast, ‘bad’ violence, associated to an inferior, racialized ‘other’, is attributed to a devalued masculinity despite its feminizing irrationality does not depart from the masculinity continuum (Hutchings, 2008: 33).

Third, these two traditional discourses about the state were recently complemented with another one, that of the neoliberal state. Trends, such as globalization, and governance tools, such as New Public Management (NPM) and neoliberalism, have challenged extensive welfare state policies in Finland like elsewhere (Kantola, 2002; Larner, 2000; Newman, 2001). In gender policy too, ‘the state’ has been replaced with ‘the market’ as the most appropriate provider of services and policies. For instance, permanent staff and long-term policies were in many instances replaced with competitive short-term project funding in the name of efficiency leading to ‘projectization’ of gender equality work (Brunila, 2009). The discourse of the neoliberal state produces subjects idealizing ‘competitive individualism, reason, and self control or self-denial’ (Hooper, 2001: 98). Our analysis discusses these discourses in the context of Finland’s school shootings.

Methodology and research material

Our methodological approach draws on Foucauldian discourse theory, which falls in line with our theoretical framework developed above. This requires an analytical strategy that can uncover how ‘the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected organized and redistributed’ (Foucault, 1972: 216). Because we are interested in the public discussion and circulation of discourse on gender and violence, focusing on the discussions in major Finnish newspapers is an obvious choice.

The articles that we analyse however are not to be understood as mere text, for a discourse of violence is not language, but rather a set of practices and performances underpinned by power relations that are constitutive of objects and subjects through processes of subjectivation and objectivation (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1972: 169; 1981: 94–5).
Thus, the statements in the newspapers are not just reflections of reality, but producers of reality itself (Foucault, 1980: 131). This means going further than a content-based examination of gendered features in media texts. Gender and violence are practices governed by power relations particular to the field in which they emerge, in this case, Finland and its status as a gender equal country (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 136; Foucault, 1972: 91, 169; Hopf, 2004). As such, discursive silences and contradictions are also evidence that shatter the illusion of unity produced by discourse (Foucault, 1972: 150–1). With this approach, the silencing of gender and its relation to violence serves as a major piece of evidence that enables us to challenge the perception of the shootings as gender neutral by problematizing this disconnection.

We engage with the two main newspapers in Finnish printed media, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) and *Hufvudstadsbladet* (Hbl), which are regarded as authoritative sources of information for Finland’s two language communities. HS paid special attention to the school shootings in Jokela and Kauhajoki, publishing a series of articles, editorials and in-depth materials. Hbl also covered the two episodes extensively. The majority of Finns (about 92 percent) are Finnish-speaking, so we have focused our analysis on HS as the largest Finnish-language daily in Finland, using the Swedish-language Hbl as supplementary material, simultaneously paying attention to possible differences between their respective narratives. HS is the most widely circulated newspaper in Finland and its opinion column is a significant discussion forum that publishes often long-running debates written by both experts and laypersons. We analyse articles published two months after each shooting, dealing with the shootings and their aftermath, and the subsequent debates over stricter gun laws, the army and the need for a tighter-knit community. By these guidelines we found 190 articles from HS and 43 from Hbl. Because we are interested in the substantive micropolitics of power that constitute discourse, we narrowed this selection further to 54 articles that we considered captured most compellingly and succinctly the major conflicts in the reproduction of gender and violence (see Flyvbjerg, 2001: 103).

In the following sections we examine, first, how gender and violence were disconnected from one another in the media, effectively silencing debates about gender in the school shootings. We then argue that in trying to make sense of the violence, different gendered notions of violence were produced that were conflicting with each other, were displaced and reconstructed. By problematizing this assumed gender neutrality it is possible to examine how the discussion of violence was reproductive of gender itself by enquiring into the gendered terms on which the violence of the shooters was explained and condemned, and likewise who was disempowered in the process and how.

**Silencing the discussion on gender and violence**

We begin with the problematization of the silence on gender in the school shootings by conveying how gender was disconnected from violence through the use of gender neutral language. This silence reflected the dominance of the welfare state discourse and obscured the fact that the media reports produced various gendered subject positions to make sense of the killings. Violent incidents perpetrated by men are nearly always conveyed in a passive form in headlines such as, ‘A woman was stabbed to death’. The same
norm of gender neutrality led to the silencing about the gender of the perpetrators, a trend that was particularly strong in relation to the first school shooting. ‘What made a young candidate for the matriculation examination to act in such an insane manner?’, one story asked (HS, 8 November 2007), while another stated that ‘Nyman reminds that he does not want to do a diagnosis of Auvinen, the Jokela shooter, because it is not possible to hear the young person any longer’ (HS, 9 November 2007). The perpetrator was vaguely called a ‘young person’ or a ‘young man’ (Hbl, 8 November 2007). Whenever referred to as a young man, it served to differentiate him not so much from an opposite sex (women), but rather from other, older and wiser men. This implied that Auvinen was not an adult, rational man and this made perhaps his deeds more comprehensible.

A focus on the individuals, their habits, relationships, hobbies and personal and psychological problems dominated the search for explanations to the shootings, diverting attention from possible gendered explanations to non-societal individual problems (HS, 8 November 2007, 28 September 2008; Hbl, 8 November 2007). The newspaper reporting also contained lots of stories about the medication they took, and whether they suffered from depression (HS, 9 November 2007, 13 November 2007, 24 September 2008; Hbl, 8 November 2007, 6 November 2008). All of these are symptomatic of the prominence of the individual level of explanation at the expense of examining broader social structures. Indeed, Suvi Ronkainen and Sari Näre (2008: 15) write that perpetrators in Finland are either pathologized or made into something unique and special, or their actions are bypassed and neutralized. As the latter was not possible due to the seriousness of the incidents, media and public debate resorted to the former: Finnish society itself functioned well enough, whereby only the perpetrators could be to blame.

There were however four commentators who published full-length articles or opinion pieces on gender. There, one man observed the violence present in ‘men’s culture’ and the little ‘space given to them to express their emotions’ (HS, 26 September 2008). He questioned the ‘acceptance of men’s violence as a part of men’s lives’ and speculated that ‘if a woman had behaved like Saari by glorifying violence and shooting, a more serious intervention might have been made’ (HS, 26 September 2008). In contrast to this comment, somewhat feminist as it sought to question the constructedness of violence and masculinity, another man lamented men’s roles but reverted to reaffirming the necessity of certain forms of violence in men’s lives. The piece accused women of dominating men’s lives through their predominance in daycare, education and healthcare professions, concluding that maturing boys need challenges from other boys: ‘Pain is a part of life. Sometimes it’s good to get beaten up, physically even’ (HS, 26 September 2008).

Only two self-identified feminist commentators, amid the same number of non-feminist pieces on gender, succeeded in interrogating publicly Finnish masculinity and appropriate role models for men. They were never interviewed, but rather submitted their own opinion pieces to the newspapers in their attempt to highlight the gendered nature of the school shootings. They did not interact with each other or the mainstream discussion, but they showed that gender was a concern in some quarters of Finnish society unlike the silence otherwise dominating the discussion.

Despite the discourse of gender neutrality that characterized the debate, writers persistently recognized the perpetrators as solitary men and drew parallels between their lives and appearances: ‘Both have blond hair that is combed backwards and a black
leather jacket and a white collar shirt’ (HS, 24 September 2008). The emphasis on their ‘lack [of] a feeling of belonging’ set them apart from girls their age (HS, 27 September 2008; see also HS, 26 September 2008, 29 September 2008, 6 October 2008), thus further reproducing gender difference. It was about ‘men’ and ‘women’ as they naturally appear and (inter)act, not recognizing problematic social structures or the constructedness of gender. The next section takes a closer look at how gender differences were produced, not only in terms of subjectivity, but in relation to the institutions and state mechanisms involved in the incidents and their aftermath.

**Violence as gendering: Displacements and reconstructions of gender and violence**

A more dynamic picture of the gendering power of the public media debate can be achieved by focusing on a series of gendered shifts in the ways that various subjects and institutions were conceived through the construction of subjectivities, spaces and issues. We found that groups of individuals like students, teachers, politicians and military dropouts, and institutions such as the school system, the welfare state and the legal system underwent a process of feminization. This took various forms in portrayals of victimhood, powerlessness, instability, emasculation through lack of action, control and rationality. Meanwhile, a disciplinary masculinity embedded in the rational violence of the state was reaffirmed in articles addressing police involvement, military service and gun legislation. Gendered connotations also altered from the first to the second school shooting.

We begin by examining the school sites where the incidents occurred, showing how gender was produced throughout, starting from the descriptions of the events. The school and its subjects were predominantly objects of feminization. Articles describing the first shooting scene portrayed students and their parents as terrified, shocked and helpless. When the first armoured police patrols arrived, the school area was ‘reigned by chaos’ (HS, 8 November 2007; Hbl, 8 November 2007). Students and teachers were evacuated in ambulances and Red Cross buses to the local church, thus transporting victims in designated transportation to a space of protection. Their powerlessness was mirrored in descriptions of their bodily defencelessness as they were brought into the church ‘without shoes and outdoor clothes’, and were ‘given blankets and something to eat’ (HS, 8 November 2007). Women especially featured in emotionally and corporeally vulnerable terms at both scenes: ‘young people were crying, particularly girls’ (HS, 8 November 2007) and ‘women hugged each other in front of the church’ (HS, 24 September 2008), respectively. Such descriptions were repeated in the second shooting the following year in students’ stories of fear, chaos and tears (HS, 24 September 2008).

Outside the school, women interviewed by newspapers featured as marginal or passive actors, as mothers or bystanders (HS, 8 November 2007, 11 November 2007, 23 September 2008; Hbl, 8 November 2007). This is in line with Sari Näre’s observation that women are most often positioned as victims or witnesses of violence, rarely as its perpetrator (Näre, 2008: 212). At Jokela, motherhood, through its assumed traits of care and affectionate protection, became a strong signifier of femininity. One article was
titled: ‘Mum, is the world a safe place?’ (*HS*, 9 November 2007). The connection in vulnerability between daughter and mother is apparent in titles reading ‘Katariina: What if I die mommy?’ (*Hbl*, 8 November 2007). A longer and more deliberative article in the Sunday edition of *HS* recounted a 14-year-old boy’s account of the day of the Jokela shooting. The narrative portrayed his girl classmates as hysterical: ‘the teacher tried to calm down the girls who were crying, panicking’ (*HS*, 11 November 2007).

The school as a space, population and institution became one of the main sites of feminization also in discussions seeking explanations and preventative solutions. The school system and the welfare state were feminized and seen as in need of stricter reform. Over the last decade the Finnish welfare state underwent neoliberal and NPM type of reform. The welfare state became increasingly a pejorative ‘Nanny state’, cut down and replaced with a masculinized competition state (Kantola, 2007: 277). A discursive battle about the consequences of this for young people unfolded in relation to the two school shootings (*HS*, 11 November 2007). On the one hand, the shift was a negative one:

Society has changed into a cold competitive society. . . . [The] necessity to succeed creates an atmosphere of aggression and emotional coldness in the society. . . . Flexibility, calculation, ability to change and aggressiveness are more useful from the point of view of the powers of the market than moral goodness. (*HS*, 17 November 2007)

One commentator argued that the public sector was streamlined at the expense of community spirit and that this was mirrored in the decrease of face-to-face interaction, stability and routines (*HS*, 19 November 2007). Auvinen and Saari were ‘the products’ of this school system for those who defended the pre-reform welfare state school system. Others, largely *HS* staff writers, favoured the reform, and shied away from linking the shootings directly to the neoliberal state. The old high school where all students had to follow the same classes at the same pace became a hindrance to autonomy and success, a sign of dependency, feminizing the old system and masculinizing the new ‘classless’ high school that creates independent, autonomous students who choose their individual paths (*HS*, 27 November 2007). In their argument, the welfare state rather than the neoliberal state was to blame for the shootings. One opinion piece after Kauhajoki claimed that the welfare state perpetuated an ‘Orwellian Big Brother world’ that ‘destroyed the autonomy of the family’ along with the parental authority and right to discipline their children (*HS*, 1 October 2008).

Finally, the realist security state also became engaged with the discursive battle over the school after Jokela. As a space, the school was feminized as naive, too open and trustworthy. It was suggested that while ‘metal detectors and security guards previously have sounded exaggerated’ in Finnish schools, their introduction might now be in order (*HS*, 8 November 2007). Teachers were out of touch with reality and its dangers, and psychiatrists urged them to learn to recognize disturbed and possibly threatening students and threatening situations (*Hbl*, 10 November 2007). There was a need to masculinize the school, securitize it, by cultivating a rational system of recognition and response to violence and danger. In one article a male student recalled how his teacher mistook the first gunshots as dummies in a play rehearsal. The student who ‘[knew] about weapons’
because his father hunts, immediately recognized the shots as real. The ignorant teacher outside the masculinized ‘real’ world was feminized as opposed to the masculinized hunter-father who used rational violence and taught his sons ‘real’ facts of life. ‘We should interfere even when the signals are weak’, proposed Matti Lahtinen, a teachers’ trade union representative, adding that teachers ‘must be trained to confront violent and threatening situations’ and that school should introduce ‘special risk surveys’ to pre-empt them (HS, 8 November 2007).

Politicians, the police and Finnish law were other institutions that became feminized. This is somewhat surprising considering their tendency to be masculinized as being associated with ‘high politics’. Two members of the opposition called on the Minister of the Interior, Anne Holmlund, to resign for insufficient measures in gun control since the first shooting (HS, 27 September 2008). At the time of the shootings, Finland had and continues to have one of the most lax gun laws in Europe and a high guns-per-person ratio. One journalist accused the cabinet of ‘inefficiency’ (HS, 27 September 2008). She called them ‘sanctimonious if not hypocritical’, and sarcastically described them with ‘their hands up’ for encouraging citizens ‘to take better care of each other and interfere in each other’s strange behaviour’ instead of taking immediate action on gun law reform. This discourse of failed masculinity also reached the police force. The failure of the police to revoke Saari’s gun licence, even though they were aware of his gun-sporting videos on YouTube before the incident, drew comments on the administrative precision and judgement of the police force (HS, 24 September 2008). Later, the blame directed towards the police shifted to the Finnish legal system, to the legal restrictions placed on information sharing by authorities (HS, 26 September 2008) and to the loopholes in gun control legislation (HS, 28 September 2008; Hbl, 25 September 2008). None of these state institutions seemed capable to assume control of the problem with sufficient tenacity or authority.

What the gun law reform did show, however, by allowing police to pry into gun licence applicants’ mental health records, was the dominance of a psychological discourse of the two perpetrators. What were seen earlier as the ideal neoliberal subjects, competitive and creative students, now became dangerous, uncontrollable and irrational subjects. This stemmed from the production of a strong connection between violence, reason and mental health in the failure to successfully embody the gendered creative neoliberal subject (see Blum and Stracuzzi, 2004). Saari and Auvinen pathologically misperformed the violence expected of them. A psychiatric prison doctor Hannu Lauerma said in an interview after the Jokela shooting that ‘It is hard to distinguish when psychotic behaviour becomes a superhuman or godlike mode of thought. On the other hand, it is normal for men to fantasize about violence’ (HS, 9 November 2007). Lauerma naturalized masculine violence; it was merely a question of psychological development whether it would materialize in the appropriate way.

As such, the violence of perpetrators as lacking proper maturity and rationality was produced as not properly masculine. Auvinen’s peers and teachers depicted him as a ‘well-read young man’, ‘pleasant to talk to’, although ‘inward-looking’ and ‘idealist’ (Hbl, 9 November 2007). Articles described how a ‘bright and sociable child’ (HS, 9 November 2007) ‘flipped out’ into a self-isolating and ‘hate-driven’ killer and ‘extremist’ (HS, 8 November 2007) who despised the basic values of western society, like equality,
tolerance, human rights and political correctness (HS, 9 November 2007; Hbl, 8 November 2007). He was ‘self-destructive’, ‘a victim of his arrogance’ and ‘helpless and immature when it came to morals, norms and sociability’ (HS, 18 November 2007). Descriptions of victimhood, helplessness and irrationality are usually traits associated with femininity, constituting an alarmingly indecipherable masculinity out of control that required normalizing discipline.

The perpetrator of the second shooting, Matti Saari, was not as easily pathologized. At 22, Saari was an adult and his personal history remained vague and contradictory. Classmates said he was ‘quiet, but not lonely’ and ‘was bullied a little, but he also had friends’ and ‘was not unsociable’. Another peer claimed that in high school Saari ‘started to move in darker circles’, while according to a teacher ‘he was a pretty sympathetic guy’ (HS, 24 September 2008), while others portrayed him as a mediocre yet quiet student (Hbl, 25 September 2008). This ambiguity was reflected in descriptions of Saari as ‘a young man confused about his identity’ (Hbl, 25 September 2008). That ‘Saari did everything like Auvinen’ from his physical appearance, buying the weapon from the same gun-shop in Jokela, and the posting of videos on YouTube, to the progression of the shooting added to the perception of Saari as an incomplete if not vacant person (HS, 24 September 2008; Hbl, 25 September 2008). Yet, his copy-cat shooting nevertheless resembled the irrationalized violence of his predecessor(s).

The perpetrators found their antithetic and idealized masculine counterparts in the gendering of the police forces, the military and the notion of rational violence in the gun law debate that ensued. The armoured police as a group brought order to the ‘chaos’ of the shootings (HS, 8 November 2007; Hbl, 8 November 2007). The perpetrators were also posthumously outwitted by the police inspectors, who successfully mapped out their movements in the school after three days of intensive fieldwork (Hbl, 10 November 2007). The violence of armoured police and the rationality of investigative police disciplined and overcame the irrational and uncontrolled shooters. Ultimately, the state was in all instances sanctioned as the ultimate arbiter for permissible, rational violence. Backers of gun control, for example, suggested that all handguns be entrusted to the police for safekeeping (Hbl, 25 September 2008). The police were the most suitable organ to decide on licence renewal, with the right to revoke licences if someone ‘for instance plays with their gun’ or ‘behaves in a threatening manner’ (Hbl, 7 November 2008). It produced the notion of a legitimate masculinized violence in the realm of a rational security state, distinguishable from the violence of Auvinen and Saari. Those considered psychologically unstable like Auvinen were undesirable candidates for gun ownership (HS, 9 November 2007). The assumption was that rational people use violence in rational ways, reducing the causes of violence to individual irrationality and irresponsibility. The government’s reluctance to enforce a gun ban after Jokela supported this interpretation.

Curing teenagers of their psychological instabilities and irrationalities was therefore of prime importance (HS, 9 November 2007, 11 November 2007; Hbl, 10 November 2007), in other words, purging them of their feminized emotional disorders and replacing these with a masculinized, i.e. rational, controlled and responsible relationship to violence. Rational violence and military service became intertwined after the second shooting in this context of deficient and immature masculinity. When journalists learned of Saari’s suspension from military service, they factored it into the causes of the shooting.
Saari’s case made military drop-outs a risk group. The army figured as a standard against which a man’s behavioural maturity could be measured in terms of ability to enact violence in rational ways. Failure in the army was therefore a possible threat of violence in and against society. Some suggested that gun licences should be granted only to those that have done their military service, since the army was a ‘magnificent “exam” for the disciplined use of guns and for men’s behaviour in general’ (HS, 10 October 2008). Another writer distinguished between the violence of soldiers and the school shooters: ‘Men who fought in the war did not shoot their innocent fellow students in schools and universities. Schools are for learning and life, and these men knew this’ (HS, 10 October 2008). In other words, there was a logical and purposeful place for violence (committed for and by the state) and properly brought up and militarily disciplined men understood this distinction.

The reporting on the school shootings therefore silenced gender as a topic of debate, yet reproduced gendered subjects, spaces and institutions to explain the violence. The school, its victims, students and teachers as well as politicians, in other words, those under the wing of the ‘Nanny state’ were feminized and thus constituted as weak, dependent and defenceless. The military and the police embodied a glorified rational and controlled violent masculinity, while the perpetrators were produced as irrational and uncontrollable subjects, whose manhood explained their aggression, but whose masculinity had failed or degenerated on account of their irrational violence. The debate produced a highly gendered understanding of the use of violence and its place in Finnish society, underpinned by the displacement and reconstruction of gendered subjects along the tensions between the neoliberal state, the welfare state and the realist state.

**Gender, (ir)rational violence and the state**

In this article we have showed that despite the initial silence on gender in the debate over the violence following the school shootings in Finland, it was reproductive of gender at several levels. The silence on gender upheld a norm of gender neutrality in Finland, whereas in fact the discussions adhered to conventional gender norms. Although it was known that both perpetrators were men, it did not lead to questions about masculinity and Finnish society, despite the potential for it, as the previous research in the US presented at the beginning of this article demonstrates. The discourse of Finland as a gender equal country firmly upheld the silence on gender as a problem.

Furthermore, we argued that although gender itself was not an articulated discourse, the discussions were reproductive of gender through dislocations and reconstructions of certain gender norms (see Shepherd, 2008: 50–1). This happened through processes of feminization and masculinization that extended from individuals and groups of people, to spaces and institutions. They were produced as the convergence of tensions between the welfare state, the realist state and the neoliberal state in relation to violence following the shootings. The masculinized, competitive and creative subjects of the neoliberal state (the perpetrators) were pathologized as irrational and potentially dangerous subjects. By contrast, the subjects of the welfare state (the school, students, teachers and politicians) were feminized as dependent and powerless in the face of new threats and challenges.
Finally, the masculinity of the realist state, embodied by the police and the military, put on a pedestal a masculinity that was disciplinary and regulatory of these gender identities, bringing order to the chaos at the shooting scenes, investigating them and most importantly, providing a proper model for ‘responsible’ and ‘rational’ violence.

The distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ violence and its link to masculinity was one of the paramount results of our study. While the irrationalized violence of Auvinen was pathologized, the commotion caused by Saari’s unsuccessful military service rendered apparent the strong linkage between masculinity and the realist security state. This tied the notion of rational violence to a state-bound militarized masculinity in Finland (Jokinen, 2000). That the Finnish defence forces were the only ones to escape any criticism whatsoever not only confirmed the state as the main arbiter of legitimate violence, but also was demonstrative of the reluctance to question conventional norms of masculinity in Finnish society. This upheld the notion of certain types of violence as rational, acceptable and even necessary, which in turn silences any challenges to these gendered norms, and produces gendered subjects in ways that maintain this order.

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Notes

1. Comparable statistics on gender violence are extremely difficult to obtain. Because of under-reporting and under-recording, police and court statistics are largely useless for comparative analysis (Hagemann-White, 2000: 176). Furthermore, definitions of violence tend to differ and some include physical and mental violence, others merely physical violence. Some statistics exist however and give some indication of the scale of the problem of gender violence across countries. In Finland, 22 percent of all co-habiting or married women have at some point been victims of physical or sexual violence or threats of violence by their present partner (Heiskanen and Piispa, 1998). In Sweden, the comparable figure was 11 percent (Lundgren et al., 2001). A Danish study maintained that approximately one in seven women was a victim of violence (Balvig and Kyvsgaard, 2006).

2. In 2008, HS had a circulation of 412,421 and Hbl 51,162 (Finnish Audit Bureau of Circulation Statistics).

3. Figure according to Statistics Finland; at: www.stat.fi/tup/vaesto/index_en.html.

4. The gun law reform was implemented in 2009, which enabled police to examine the applicant’s mental health and attitude towards firearms. It also made it easier for police to revoke licences. The legal age for eligibility was raised from 16 to 18 years, in compliance with the EU directive passed in November 2007.

5. There are 1.6 million privately owned guns among Finland’s population of 5.3 million. A majority of these guns (about five out of six) are hunting rifles. As such appeals for a total gun ban referred only to handguns, hunting rifles and shotguns were easily defended as a part of traditional Finnish culture.
References


