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Making choices but few changes: the discourse of choice and mothers working in research and innovation

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ABSTRACT

Based on the identification of the discourse of choice in debates on neoliberalism, meritocracy and post-feminism, this article analyses how highly educated mothers position themselves within the discourse of choice and use *choice* as their discursive resource when reflecting on how their demanding careers combine with motherhood. The data come from 26 interviews with mothers employed in research and innovation in Finland. The analysis reveals five ways in which the mothers positioned themselves within the discourse of choice. It appears these ways are all based on, and produce, the moral primacy of individual self-governance. We treat this as a demonstration of how neoliberalism is internalized and lived. Furthermore, the results show that an egalitarian welfare society whose policies support work–childcare reconciliation does not remove the need to use the individualistic discourse of choice. We suggest that this could be changed by voicing the challenges it poses to many women.

Introduction

The successful reconciliation of women's work careers and motherhood is a globally troubling issue for the women themselves, for the employers and for the society at large (Gerson 2002; Orgad 2019). The issue is not only practical and institutional but also overwhelmingly imbued by the tensions that mothers face between emotional and morally laden commitments to themselves and others in any given culture or society (Gerson 2002). Finland, a northern welfare society, provides the cultural and social context for this study. There, a strong gender equality assumption prevails and childcare arrangements are institutionally provided, but the neoliberal discourse effectively dominates on the background of the political and economic agenda (Elomäki 2019; Kantola and Kananen 2013).

This article takes its starting point from how the neoliberal research milieu, in alignment with meritocratic and post-feminist ideas on equal opportunity for all to excel at anything, produces an overwhelming discourse of choice, a 'language' according to

which individuals can craft their life path as free and unbound subjects (for a similar type of approach, see Baker 2008; Beddoes and Pawley 2014; Budgeon 2015; Canetto et al. 2017; Jacques and Radtke 2012; Sørensen 2017). Through this theoretical lens, the following research question is posed: how do mothers working in research and innovation (R&I) position themselves within the discourse of choice when they reflect on how their careers intertwine with motherhood? In particular, our analysis focuses on the discursive resources they draw on in this positing. We contribute to the research on lived neoliberalism and bring forth internalized neoliberalism, which refers to neoliberalism with a tight hold at all levels of society and that formulates subjectivities (Brown 2015). Relative to this, the article suggests possible views on questioning and changing the choice discourse.

Many studies have shown neoliberal trends, and the meritocratic and post-feminist ideas that occupy them (e.g. Gill 2009; Nikunen 2012), pose particular challenges for reconciling research work with motherhood (e.g. Amsler and Motta 2019; Huppatz, Sang, and Napier 2019; Ivancheva, Lynch, and Keating 2019). The masculine ideal worker norm (Acker 1990) still runs strong in science, technology and their allied fields (Makarem and Wang 2020; O'Connor, O'Hagan, and Gray 2018; Seddighi and Corneliussen 2021), which refers to a culture in which care duties are not supposed to affect work performance (Haas, Koeszegi, and Zedlacher 2016; Hardey 2020). However, it is still expected for women to bear more responsibility than men for reproductive issues – not just childbearing but also years of childcare, nurturing and upbringing – while maintaining their careers (Currie, Harris, and Thiele 2000; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2016). For example, in heterosexual relationships, men more often have 'domestic capital', meaning arrangements and resources provided by their wives to support their smooth career progression, than women, whereas women with a husband and children have domestic and care work waiting for them at home (Duberley and Cohen 2009). This gendered organization of care participates in maintaining gendered practices in organizations (Acker 2006). Simultaneously, neoliberal discourse produces a way of speaking that emphasizes free choices through which everything is possible and depends on individual efforts. Because universities and other research organizations have long been used to having a greedy and powerful hold over the individuals who voluntarily devote themselves to them (Coser 1974), the researchers' predisposition to 'work hard' and 'do well' has meshed perfectly with the neoliberal ideal of an autonomous, self-motivating and self-responsible subject (Gill 2009; also McRobbie 2015).

Neoliberal discourse is fruitful ground for meritocratically explaining that potential, hard work and excellence (Ferree and Zippel 2015; Herschberg, Benschop, and Van Den Brink 2019; Wijaya Mulya and Sakhiyya 2021) are behind career advancement. Although meritocracy has been shown to maintain inequalities because self-acclaimed meritocratic organizations actually favour male employees (Castilla and Benard 2010; Cech and Blair-Loy 2010; Van Den Brink and Benschop 2012), it is hard to resist the idea of meritocracy because it seems to guarantee equal opportunities for all who deserve success, women and mothers included (Huppatz, Sang, and Napier 2019; Ollilainen 2019). In meritocratic cultures, gender inequalities appear irrelevant; at most, they should be lived with confidence and without complaining about marginalization, oppression or other structural issues (Acker and Armenti 2004; Gill and Orgad 2016; Lewis, Benschop, and Simpson 2017). Inequalities undeniably exist in working life, but they should be combated individually (Rottenberg 2014). Accordingly, subjects are responsible

for their own choices, and the consequences of these, and they are only themselves to blame for the choices that turn out to be unsuccessful (Beddoes and Pawley 2014; Raddon 2002). In such contexts, when 'choice' is signified as a positive concept and something available for everyone, women do not want to be labelled as 'whiners' who cannot do well in their field (Harris and Guiffre 2015; Kivijärvi 2021).

Neoliberalism and meritocracy are tightly linked with post-feminism (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020; Gill 2009; Gill and Orgad 2016; McRobbie 2015). Organizational cultures in R&I-related fields are particularly sympathetic to post-feminism, which encourages women to make confident choices and smother any complaints they may wish to voice (Gill and Orgad 2018; Petrucci 2020). 'Having it all', including a career and children, is constructed as a matter of choice (Rottenberg 2014). To that end, complaints about possible challenges as a mother and an academic must neither be made nor voiced in women's own minds. Thus, following Sørensen (2017), the concept of choice is where neoliberalism and post-feminism entangle.

These three concepts contribute to the 'choice discourse', all from a slightly different angle: while neoliberalism stresses individualism generally, meritocracy emphasizes individualistic pursuit of success, which will be rewarded as academic positions. Postfeminist sensibility complements the picture with equalitarian women who can – by hard work and strong will –achieve the same as men and additionally perform the family responsibilities. Thus, the discursive circumstances are formed in which making appropriate choices is all what is needed for a successful career and family life. None of the three utilized concepts recognizes the social context of the individuals. In different but interlinked ways, they contribute to explain how and why women represent themselves as autonomous choice-making subjects, although norms and social practices of the society and institutions affect their decisions as professionals and mothers.

Contours of the choice discourse and motherhood

In addition to intensified work, changes to parenting cultures add new requirements for parents, more so for mothers (Hays 1996; Lee et al. 2014; Orgad 2019). Neoliberalism constructs 'proper parenthood' as a pursuit that emphasizes parental responsibility, control, risk and competition to ensure children's future success (Wall 2010). It is doubly challenging that although good parenting, for which mothers are largely responsible, is demanding, mothers also want and are supposed to use their skills and potential in the labour market (Gerson 2002). Importantly, the choice discourse provides a persuasive discursive resource in which very different end-results are understood as a matter of choice, thereby directing attention away from the conditions of those choices and the corresponding pressures experienced. Yet by positioning themselves as autonomous agents making free choices, mothers present themselves as personally responsible for their and their children's lives; accordingly, women become isolated from one another (Jacques and Radtke 2012).

We can draw on examples of analyses that have demonstrated the gendering effects of the choice discourse. A US study of young science graduates (Canetto et al. 2017) showed that the academic profession was seen by interviewees as the best route for pursuing their scientific interests and forging a career. Most of them viewed academic science careers as incompatible with having a family, an idea that gained strength when they

tracked their professors' work pace and patterns. Canetto et al. (2017) pointed out that women tend to explain their wishes and needs as different from those of men; women are happy to have different career alternatives to choose from – choices, however, that embrace moralized gender ideologies that see childcare as a mother's responsibility. Speaking about choice obscures how women and men have very different options to choose from (Canetto et al. 2017) and that women self-select away from faculty careers due to the barriers they expect to face (De Welde and Laursen 2011; Van Anders 2004).

Another example of explaining gender disparities as a choice comes from a US study of STEM faculty members who discussed the work–family balance by engaging with a discourse on choice to frame the challenges they faced (Beddoes and Pawley 2014). The participants believed that female faculty members faced, more than in an industry or governmental career, conflicts between having children and keeping up with a demanding, not-family-friendly work culture that would require much time investment. It was evident to them that a mother would have more family-related responsibilities, making a scientific career incompatible with motherhood. Several participants recognized there was a need for a change to the larger system, but they expressed a belief that the system was too difficult to change.

Context

Importantly, the effects of the discourse of choice are influenced by the sociopolitical system. Finland, which is seen globally as an affluent and egalitarian Northern European country, provides the social context for this study. Since Finland operates a social-democratic welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990), state interventions in private life are greater than in other capitalist welfare regimes; for instance, the parental leave system is rather generous, high-quality public day-care services are affordable, a dual-breadwinner/dual-career model is the norm for couples and the system supports the individual rather than the family. All these contribute to women's equal labour market participation (Thévenon 2011), albeit in highly gender-segregated labour markets (THL 2021). No wonder Finland is considered as gender-equal; according to EIGE's (2021) Gender Equality Index, it scores fifth, clearly above the EU average. However, neoliberal governance transformations have contributed to pushing gender equality off the political agenda, meaning that it requires continuous work to maintain and justify gender equality (Elomäki 2019).

In addition, childcare in Finland is still much more of a mother's issue. Finnish fathers take considerably less family leave than mothers or their Nordic counterparts (e.g. Swedes or Norwegians) (Koslowski et al. 2020; Miettinen et al. 2019), and only three percent have taken any parental leave days independently, without the other parent simultaneously being on leave, although a great majority have used at least some days of the part of the leave that is ear-marked for them (Miettinen et al. 2019, 257). This is partly because the Finnish family leave system, before reform in autumn 2022 to encourage parents to shoulder care responsibilities more equally, allocated more leave days to mothers than the other parent and allowed less flexibility than in other Nordic countries, which has contributed to maintaining a culture of mothers having the main responsibility (Eerola et al. 2019). What is more, the existing, if not dominant, political discourse in Finland emphasizes the positive outcomes of children's home care (rather than attending nursery), which also advocates that mothers use their 'freedom to choose' to choose home care and thus support their children through it (Nyby et al. 2017).

Indeed, it has been suggested, through a comparison of the gender ideologies of 26 European countries, that Finland belongs to the *choice egalitarian class* of those countries (Begall, Grunow, and Buchler 2023). This is characterized by not only egalitarian attitudes towards mother's employment and men's childcare and domestic tasks but also endorsing the housewife's role and having low support for prescribed dual-earning. The authors interpreted this as reflecting the discourse of 'choice feminism' because it emphasizes individual choice.

In sum, Finland, as a well-known equalitarian society with plenty of opportunities for women, and thus no visible structural obstacles, accompanied by choice egalitarian gender ideology, forms a particularly strong basis for people, including the mothers working in R&I who we sampled in this study, to rely on the post-feminist, meritocratic discourse of free choice.

Procedure

This research is part of the Nordic Centre of Excellence on Women in Technology Driven Careers (NORDWIT). The data used in this article consist of interviews with 26 mothers with PhDs (or in one case, a PhD candidate) working under the multidisciplinary umbrella of R&I, particularly in health technology. The interviewees included researchers, senior researchers, group leaders and professors at universities and research centres, although some had left academia shortly after completing their PhDs and worked in research-based development, management or leadership positions in public or third-sector organizations, while a few were company partners. All were white and, except for two, Finnish-born. Some described having rural or working-class backgrounds, but at the time of the interviews, they were all urban, middle-class (or sometimes upper-class) citizens with a high level of education and intellectually demanding, recognized and research-intensive jobs. Most had salaries above the Finnish average.

The interviewees were born in the 1950s–1990s, mostly in the 1960s–1980s, and had one to four (most often two) children. For a few, issues of caring for children of different ages were no longer part of their everyday lives. All the reported relationships were heterosexual. At the time of the interviews, most (22) lived with the father of their children; only a few were divorced, which is rarer than the general trend in Finland (Salmi and Närvi 2017) and the US, where women in academic careers are more likely to be single or divorced than their male counterparts (Winslow and Davis 2016). A larger proportion of the women we interviewed had children than Finnish women on average.[1]

As is typical in Finland, public day-care was the most common childcare solution. Regular nannies were used rarely, mainly while the mother was working abroad. Most of the interviewees had returned to full-time work when their child started day-care, namely when the child was aged between one year and 18 months. Relatives, mainly grandparents, generally had roles in providing extra help with childcare (Ikonen, Salminen-Karlsson, and Seddighi 2022). Some fathers had taken childcare leave for several months when the children were babies, which was more often than is generally the case for fathers in Finland (see Miettinen et al. 2019). A few interviewees said that the father barely participated in childcare. Many said that their partners provided career-related support; this sometimes seemed to be mainly emotional/professional, but it also involved the sharing of everyday care duties. Mothers had the main responsibility

for these duties, and there was therefore not always a big difference in care duties between those who did not have a partner and those whose partners had little participation. This may be partly a question of personal cultural presentation; that is, the culturally shared conception adopted even by the interviewers was that professional mothers also hold the main caring roles, and accordingly, their partners' roles were not widely asked. Thus, it depended on the interviewed women themselves how much they discussed organizing their relational commitments.

The interviewees, who provided informed consent, were found with the help of key actor interviews, via the webpages of R&I institutions and through the snowballing method. The interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2020 in Finnish by two members of the research group, lasted about 1–2 h and were transcribed verbatim by a service that signed a confidentiality agreement. The interview themes included the participants' R&I career histories, current work situations and future plans, the role of gender in R&I work and the relationship between work and personal and home lives.

The research team read the interview transcripts several times to answer different research questions (Ikonen, Salminen-Karlsson, and Seddighi 2022; Korvajärvi 2021; Vehviläinen, Ikonen, and Korvajärvi 2022). For this article, the first author wrote a summary of each interview, covering their situation and thoughts concerning mothering, childcare and R&I work/career prospects. In addition, the parts of the interviews in which childcare and mothering issues were mentioned were analysed further. These accounts were read in relation to the literature on neoliberal research work, particularly in the R&I sector, and the related discourses of choice and meritocracy. In this way, and following researchers who regarded individual, self-responsible choice as a governance technique 'where individuals are persuaded to make meaning of their life as if it were the outcome of individual choices' (Baker 2008, 54), it was possible to develop an understanding of how these mothers positioned themselves as choice-making subjects in the R&I context and how they used the choice discourse as a readily available discursive resource to justify their choices.

In defining discursive resource, we followed Kuhn et al. (2008, 163), who stated that it is 'a concept, phrase, expression, trope, or other linguistic device [–] that guide[s] interpretations of experience and shape[s] the construction of preferred conceptions of persons and groups'. Since positioning is a discursive process whereby the self is located in conversations (Davies and Harré 1990), we saw that positing takes place by using culturally available, even conflicting, discursive resources, of which many wrap around choice. The discourse of choice was a predefined lens that the first author, based on the literature, identified when reading the interview narratives. This does not mean that everything the participants said could be interpreted through the choice discourse, but it was a frequently used resource that they drew on in their reflections on work and motherhood issues.

Utilizing the choice discourse

Next, we provide details of the conversations on choices in our interviews, identifying five ways to utilize the choice discourse. These refer to difficult choices, healthy choices, natural choices, regretting choices and facing the consequences of the choices made. The interviewees seemed not to have hesitated on whether they had sufficient personal resources, such as family/friendship networks and financial capacity – in addition to the taken-for-granted sociopolitical system with longish family leave, affordable day-care

and free education systems – to support a child's future. Their choices related to children were thus (contrary to some less-family-friendly countries), less about whether they could have children but more on a discursive level about how mothers working in R&I must struggle to strike a balance that enables them to meet cultural pressures to succeed as both good mothers and ideal workers.

Difficult choices

Sometimes, the choices a mother who is also an R&I professional must make about her career are, although happy, recognied as difficult.

> So, this definitely hasn't been at all bad, my career path, and I'm really proud of myself and where I've gotten, despite the fact that I have these four wonderful kids. But. For example, one colleague of mine went to Europe, and you're not going to do that kind of thing with a family. So, if you want to be at the very top of research, it does demand an awful lot. And, well, I don't think it's impossible that I would have wound up making that kind of choice, but then, of course, I found my wonderful husband, and we had these wonderful children. So, my choices ended up different, and I'm absolutely not saying I'm bitter about it, but I totally understand people who choose differently. (Mother of four, 40+ years, partner in a technology company)

In this example, one of many, work can be read as a great passion of the mother. At the same time, she described how her responsibility for her children inevitably diminished the time and effort she could put into that work. There were hints that investing less in work was not completely voluntary (*you're not going to do* that kind of thing with a family), which is why the choices were difficult. However, the governing discourse was that of choice because the account finished by saying that it was a choice, and that is how things had gone. It seems that women perform considerable emotional management to avoid dwelling on why they must make these difficult choices. A post-feminist, neoliberal 'keep calm and carry on' type of self-help representation was present in this excerpt (Delany and Sullivan 2021; Gill and Orgad 2018). There seems to be no space for ideas of carving out a leading career in university research for a mother with a big family or giving a mother the scope to immerse herself in her work for any length of time, but these gendered social norms and practices are not recognized here. Instead, there is a belief that these are women's choices and are rewarded accordingly.

Healthy choices

In knowledge work, such as in R&I both within and outside academia, workers seemingly have considerable autonomy over their working time. Yet the downside of this autonomy is that an employee is personally responsible for getting the work done without burning out. When the culture glorifies constant hard work, while such work is often under-resourced, there is soon little room left in life for anything other than work. In the masculine work milieu (e.g. O'Connor, O'Hagan, and Gray 2018), women may experience pressure to prevent family responsibilities from influencing their work, especially when a neoliberal post-feminist culture voices that women can excel at anything (Delany and Sullivan 2021; Gill and Orgad 2018; Rottenberg 2014). Through this lens, the following

two excerpts stand as accounts of active choices for a healthier life. They describe lessons learnt about life that, at one point, had become too work-centred.

> I was home for only three months [after giving birth]. (…) It was a time when we had quite a lot of people on maternity leave. And then our boss at the time had a bit of a problem, so I got an insane workload, and I actually kind of ran myself into the ground. (…) So it was total burnout. (…) Therefore, after that, I realised that managing such a workload wasn't everything, but you do also have a home life. So, you just have to reduce the workload. (Mother of one, 40+ years, university-based group leader)

> I have a feeling now that I'm not going to … that work is just work. I'm not going to give my whole life to it. I saw that there was this trap in which one wouldn't do anything but work, and I didn't see it as very reasonable. With that, my thoughts changed. I often say that my kids saved me from being a workaholic. (Mother of two, 40+ years, moving into the private sector)

Both accounts expressed a common rhetoric; that is, when the governing discourse is that one has countless opportunities to choose between, to have a child who lifts some of the burden of making choices only in relation to work can actually be a blessing. In this way, having children and making choices in their best interest is an alternative discursive resource a mother can rely on; with good reason, they can understand the choices made in this spirit as healthy and thus responsible. Getting into such a mindset may bolster their resistance to the culture of constant work.

'Natural' choices

It was described as a natural choice that when a woman becomes a mother, she makes choices in favour of her children. This can be inferred from some accounts, such as those about healthy choices, and it is directly identified in a few interviewees' accounts:

> It can simply be an evolutionary thing, that you're more attached to it [the baby], and so you somehow sacrifice more, thinking that, of course, this is your responsibility, that it's somehow natural. (Mother of two, 50+ years, university-based group leader)

> I would sacrifice all the research for the kids. I just think it's unfortunately a kind of biological thing that a mother will do absolutely anything for her kids. (Mother of three, 50+ years, professor)

Although Finnish women can choose between work and family, or a combination of both (cf. Canetto et al. 2017), making a choice in favour of children is ultimately presented as self-evident. The choice is justified by biology, hormones and 'naturalness', but it is still a direction taken through choice. As in the case of healthy choices, this too could be read as a form of resistance to the all-for-work culture; in essence, in an extreme situation, a mother cannot be required to choose work but always has the right to choose her child, and this is because of the female body. Yet, if this is presented as such a natural choice that it is not even really a choice, then the social and gendered nature of the choice can be ignored (Edgley 2021).

Regretting choices

Choice was used as a discursive resource even when there was talk of regretting the choices one had made or potentially regretting them in the future. In the excerpt

below, a mother received a tempting work offer when her child was very young. She described having conflicting values that stirred up strong feelings. Following the idea presented by Sara Ahmed (2004) that affects intensify and gather value when they are circulated in our cultural imagination, we can see from the following excerpt that the feelings generated by conflicting values represent another discursive resource available to mothers in the current parenting culture, namely that of a mother who is always present and available (e.g. Lee et al. 2014).

> Last winter, I often wondered whether what I was doing was actually against my values; if instead, I would actually like to be at home. All the time, I was longing for home, and I felt every time I saw the baby [laughs] when picking him up from the kindergarten that he had changed so much in one day and I was missing him growing up! But then, I couldn't say no to it [the work offer], and I guess I still wouldn't dare to make a different decision now, based on the knowledge I have now. But … I'm afraid I will regret it at some point in the future. (Mother of two, 35+ years, recently moved to the private sector)

The mother here positioned herself both as a career-oriented woman who would seize opportunities as well as a loving mother who enjoyed watching her child grow up. Both positions, and the affective dimensions of them, draw on the discursive resources available to working mothers, and both are culturally justified positions. Combining these is something the post-feminist superwoman manages (Rottenberg 2014). However, several accounts proved that this was not easily achieved, and there was great difficulty associated with keeping the two in balance. In our analogy, the cultural superwoman figure supports the conception that having it all is a matter of choice. Consequently, if one is struggling with the choice, then the finger of blame is pointed at the individual who cannot find a balance and again, societal norms, practices and structures concerning the (re)productive responsibilities are ignored. In the excerpt above, there are expressions of worrying now and worrying about future regret, but no question is raised about the origin of the mother's choice horizon, as such.

Facing the consequences of choices

The interviews revealed a shared understanding that mothers must face the consequences of their choices. The interviewees described that whatever choices they made concerning working and motherhood, they were their own decisions and the best options available to them. This made complaining pointless because it could be construed as a sign of weakness and/or a crack in a mother's capacity to be self-directed. Positioning oneself as a self-responsible subject is a common way of dealing with the situation mothers face in R&I, even when that leaves them at a disadvantage.

> I would say that women commit more on average to running day-to-day family life. Of course, families are different, but it's probably like that for many. If I compare myself to other professor colleagues who are men, and who don't necessarily have a family either, they definitely dedicate … are able to dedicate a lot more time to research, and their career development probably also reflects that. But it's about choices; I've chosen to have both a career and a family, so my career will advance at the pace that I'm able to muster at that point. (Mother of three, 35+ years, full professor)

> I remember when I was walking alone in [the town where she was a visiting scholar] and thought: 'Well, I'm here now, but what am I really doing here when my dearest ones are

elsewhere?' This was because, and it was my choice, my kids are really important to me. They are part of my life in such a way that I do not want to live away from them. So I do not put my career first by choosing to go away. No, I want to be present in their lives. (Mother of two, 40+ years, university researcher in a precarious position)

In the first case, the interviewee was not in a poor career position but had earned a full professorship. Thus, she was a perfect example of a woman who had got it all. Interestingly, she still described herself as different from her male colleagues, particularly childless professors, and somehow as not perfect enough. There was an identification of a disembodied, or male, ideal (Acker 1990); this might be related to something Angela McRobbie (2007) called self-perfectibility; that is, a constant entrepreneurial mode of self-work that women fall into under the neoliberal, post-feminist, meritocratic discourse. Since she had chosen to have children, she showed no anger at the scenario she faced, where men rarely face such a slowdown of their career development. Meanwhile, the mother in the second excerpt prioritized her motherhood and accepted that this choice had sidelined her academic career (see Canetto et al. 2017; Ollilainen 2019). She expressed some anger at what she had been expected to do to advance her academic career, but her rebellion was turned inwards: she had chosen otherwise. Indeed, she underlined how this had been her choice, although it had left her in a precarious scenario, and now she had to face the consequences of this choice – on her own. Yet, her choice was justified by the affective and normatively accepted position of good motherhood.

Discussion

In this article, we explored the discourse of choice as portraying the current neoliberal, meritocratic and post-feminist discourses in the R&I field. After identifying a discourse of choice from the existing analyses of neoliberal research work and working motherhood (Amsler and Motta 2019; Beddoes and Pawley 2014; Canetto et al. 2017; Huppatz, Sang, and Napier 2019; Nikunen 2012), we adopted this lens and examined how choice serves as a discursive resource for mothers to position themselves in R&I, where there is a culture of hard work, ideally without interruptions (Haas, Koeszegi, and Zedlacher 2016; Hardey 2020). While we do not argue that focusing on the use of the choice discourse will cover all work–childcare tensions in R&I work, we have identified five ways that the mothers employed the choice discourse to position themselves as autonomous and capable decision-making subjects. First, they positioned themselves as having made *difficult* choices in fitting together their two loves, namely their work and their children. Second, the discourse of choice was used as a resource to describe their choices as *healthy.* In this way, balancing work with children had made them learn what was most important for a mother and how they could actually increase their endurance by balancing work with something else. Accordingly, they could position themselves as self-directed, resilient subjects. Third, we recognized a way of speaking in which some choices were framed as *natural,* and thus pretty unavoidable for researchers with female biology, such as putting children before a career if it came to the pinch. Fourth, we found there was also discussion about the choices they *regretted* or would possibly regret in the future. We read these as difficulties of positioning oneself in the discourse of choice; that is, while it is in line with the neoliberal

ideology to tell oneself you are a subject making choices, the position is not always straightforward and easy to internalize. Fifth, based on the norm of self-responsibility, the mothers told themselves they were ready to *take responsibility* for their choices, such as by opting to leave highly competitive working environments, and thus accept the possibility that their career would suffer and that they would only hope to maintain a precarious position in the field.

We suggest that there are only a few discursive resources available other than those related to choice. This is because relying on the choice discourse is constantly supported in the post-feminist, meritocratic, neoliberal culture where the idea that individuals can equally commit to free choices is hardly questioned, where the individuals are responsible for their choices and where they will be rewarded accordingly. Choices are further reinforced by the gender ideology in Finland, which can be seen as choice egalitarian, meaning that there are egalitarian attitudes and also support for choosing the housewife role (Begall, Grunow, and Buchler 2023). The result is that although mothers are choice-making subjects, and their choices can sometimes include rebellious elements such as choosing to work less for their wellbeing, they have limited scope to create waves as change-making subjects. The responsibility to take care for others or decision to take care for themselves did not shake the core idea that it is all about choices. The mothers in R&I in Finland had surprisingly little doubt over why their relational commitments mattered so much.

Indeed, collective efforts to advance the opportunities of people with different relational commitments and of different minority groups, even ones besides those an individual personally faces, as part of working towards equal opportunities, find little foothold in work cultures in which neoliberalism prevails. Notably, the choice discourse contributes to obscuring ongoing inequalities (Baker 2008; Beddoes and Pawley 2014; Budgeon 2015; Lewis, Benschop, and Simpson 2017), and their intensified research work left little time for these women to stop and think about the situation on a wider scale than how to find or maintain their own value in the system. Particularly since Finnish women have great opportunities to pursue university education irrespective of their childhood household income, and given that motherhood is supported by societal provisions, there are few similarly attractive discursive recourses besides 'living up to' the choice discourse. As such, women are implicitly governed by the idea that they are privileged with countless opportunities, which they are supposed to use wisely.

Our analysis provides a couple of suggestions concerning the entanglements of moving forward gender equality and creating collective resistance and change in research work and research organizations. Our interviewees did not often elevate the role of their children's fathers. It seems that inequalities related to gendered childcare responsibilities in the family and their impacts on careers stay hidden, and the discourse of choice does not help to reveal this. As recommended steps for change and gender equality, we suggest that the responsibility of fathers should be increased, both in families and society. The changes to Finnish family leave in August 2022 were an important step in this direction. To complement this, and to rectify the situation whereby a woman is responsible for carving out her career after becoming a mother, careers should be redesigned to be more inclusive. Achieving this will depend on the combined efforts of many actors, such as politicians advancing gender equality (in Finland, particularly with greater flexibility and incentives for fathers to use their share of family leave) and key stakeholders

advancing organizational practices and cultures to accept that parental responsibility causes some changes in mothers' and fathers' ways of working. Parenthood should no longer be something that demarks typical female-dominated workplaces while remaining hidden in male-dominated work cultures.

However, there are challenges in producing a change in the everyday sphere of people's lives. In the neoliberal feminist culture, equality barriers are seen to mainly hinder *individual* competition (Petrucci 2020). We call for management and social partners to foster inclusiveness. Even well-intended encouragement for individuals to continuously work on themselves in the spirit of meritocratic career advancement can represent an exhausting yet largely unseen task. Beyond this, directing attention to the burden the meritocratic choice discourse causes, even if it generates seemingly successive ones, would provide a form of collective support for people in different situations and diminish their feelings of being the 'wrong kind'. We could then possibly facilitate the collective confrontation of neoliberal subjectivities and make space for various ways of being researchers, academics and R&I workers, with different minority groups included in this future vision. Yet we warn against solely focusing on how to support women in climbing to the top of the career ladder, which would have the negative effect of enhancing the image of a top girl as the ideal and unquestionable norm. Instead, we encourage all efforts to widen the concept of the 'top' and the winning characteristics of a person who can be at the top so that the work culture no longer only rewards those who self-manage themselves to the pregiven form of 'being on top'.

Note

1. In Finland, 80.1% of women aged 45–48 years have children (Statistics Finland 2018); in our data, 26 out of 30 interviewees (87%) had children.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Hanna-Mari Ikonen, upon reasonable request. In the future, after careful anonymization, the data will be available in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive which assigns all archived data persistent URN identifiers or PIDs.

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