

Young adults' perceptions of citizenship outside and beyond labour market citizenship

Susanna Ågren and Jenni Kallio¹

Introduction

This chapter engages in a critical debate on youth citizenship, looking into young adults' perceptions of their future as citizens, especially in terms of participation in the labour market. Our approach is deconstructive. We ask what kind of opportunities to belong and participate in society the current labour market citizenship provides for young adults, and what kinds of participation it excludes. We agree with the arguments claiming that the dominant neoliberal model where people are expected to participate in society as “active”, “efficient”, “responsible” and “entrepreneurial” individuals largely ignores how young adults themselves understand their needs and well-being and the (diverse) forms their societal participation can take (Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021; Kelly 2006, 2017; Smith et al., 2005).

In the chapter, we make the argument that the challenges and complexities today's young adults encounter when trying to position themselves as citizens relate not only to the breakages and insecurities in the labour market but importantly also to the hardened and unsustainable demands of the neoliberal work society (Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017). We recognise that currently waged work holds a virtually unquestionable moral position in society as a determinant of people's identity and citizenship (Weeks 2011, 109), and young adults learn to interpret their value in society through their relationship with work (Farrugia 2021). However, as the labour market and adulthood have become more complex for today's youth in comparison to previous generations (Cuervo & Wyn 2016; Standing 2011), many scholars have highlighted how the demands of the labour market fail to meet the young adults' own values and perceptions of well-being and societal belonging, especially when these values and perceptions fall outside the prevailing norms of labour market citizenship (cf. Helne & Hirvilammi 2022; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 97).

In this chapter, we seek for a broader way to conceptualise young adults' attachment to society. We take part in this debate from the perspective of the theory of citizenship. Traditionally, citizenship has been seen as a status linked to the formal membership of society, where citizens achieve their rights as citizens by fulfilling their basic obligations to the nation-state. However, understanding citizenship more broadly as a lived, everyday membership in society opens the possibility

of seeing the more mundane aspects of citizenship, including the ways in which young adults negotiate their relationship with society in their daily lives (e.g., Lister 2007). In this chapter, we supplement and empirically demonstrate the idea of a lived, everyday citizenship as part of well-being and construction of sustainable society. In our thinking, citizenship, participation and well-being are intrinsically interlinked in young adults' everyday membership, agency and influencing in society (Isin 2008; Harris, Wyn & Younes 2010). In here, we are inspired by the theory of sustainable well-being and its relational understanding of well-being (see Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 2022).

The chapter is based on studies in which we have examined the demands and expectations that young adults struggle with when building their relationship to society (Kallio & Honkatukia 2022; Kallio 2022; Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021, 2023). By young adults, we refer to young people aged 17–25 going through a phase of life where they are negotiating their belonging to the labour market as a way of being included and respected as members of society. We, however, argue for a wider understanding of young adults' citizenship as a fundamentally social and intersubjective process taking place within different sites of belonging, connections and institutions, which structure their everyday life (Kallio, Wood & Häkli 2020; Moensted 2020, 247). Approaching citizenship in this sense opens up space for recognising different forms of citizenship outside and beyond working life (Smith et al., 2005). By “beyond”, we would like to convey the idea that the traditional understanding of being “inside” or “outside” the labour market poses a problematic dichotomy, predominantly created by the hegemonic narrative regarding the meaning of work in society (cf. Cuervo & Wyn 2014). Our argument is that also alternative (yet equally valuable) ways of societal participation that exist on the fringes and beyond the social norms of labour market citizenship should be acknowledged (cf. Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021). Therefore, we are interested in looking beyond the existing model of labour market citizenship by analysing the various forms in which young adults envision their participation and belonging in society.

Debating youth citizenship in the labour market

Critical youth scholars have debated the citizenship of young adults for a long time. Recently, many researchers have been concerned about the growing demands and pressures placed on young adults by labour market citizenship, and how they are (or are not) able to respond to those pressures (e.g., Kelly 2017; France 2016). In brief, labour market citizenship refers to the normative model where people are expected to engage in society first and foremost through waged work (cf. Suikkanen & Viinamäki 1999). Respectively, “good citizens” are defined as autonomous, responsible individuals, and as healthy, resilient, entrepreneurial workers and social actors (e.g., Walsh 2017; Duffy 2017; Kelly 2006, 2017; Nikunen 2017; Rikala 2020). Such “self-making citizens” (Walsh & Black 2020) are expected to actively personalise the project of citizenship, and at the same time function effectively in the labour market, while adapting to its changes and developing their personal abilities

and skills accordingly (Lewis & Flink 2004; cf. Isopahkala-Bouret, Lappalainen & Lahelma 2014). Young labour market citizens are also seen responsible for filling the dependency gap left by older generations to sustain the economic growth and continuity of the welfare society (Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017, 71–73; Nikunen 2017; see also Chapter 3). The expectations to adopt labour market citizenship as a major moral responsibility in turn shape how young adults see themselves and their value in society (Farrugia 2021).

Critical scholars have detected several problems in this way of thinking about citizenship. First, problems arise when the expectations linked to this view collide with the ongoing changes in the labour market. According to some research, there is less full-time work available for young adults, while part-time work, zero-hour contracts and periods of no (paid) work are increasing (Standing 2011, 112–113). Other researchers have claimed that the amount of waged work in general is decreasing, which challenges how the wage-based society operates (Gorz 1999). From the intergenerational point of view, this means that young adults have poorer opportunities than previous generations for stable careers, economic independence, home ownership – and ultimately, achieving a safe and independent adulthood (Walsh & Black 2020; Cuervo & Wyn 2016). Second, researchers have been concerned about the effects of labour market citizenship on young adults' well-being, including whether it meets young adults' own values and expectations (Helne & Hirvilammi 2022, 166). Several studies have highlighted young people's frustration with the increasing pressures stemming from the current labour market, which they find difficult to respond to (e.g., Kelly 2017; Rikala 2020; Farrugia 2021; also, Ågren 2023). Hence, it can be argued that adopting individualised measures – emphasised in neoliberal policies – to promote young people's participation in the labour market, such as seeking to increase young people's resilience and adversity capital, is neither effective nor socially sustainable. Along with many other researchers, we are concerned about how the normative expectations of labour market citizenship affect the abilities of both contemporary young adults and future generations to function in society. We think that young adults' societal participation should be based on their values, well-being and future expectations (Walsh 2017). In our own discussion, we are interested in what kind of experiences and critical ideas young adults have about their societal participation and belonging in relation to (the ideals of) labour market citizenship, especially outside and beyond it.

In order to develop our argument, we will utilise the theory of sustainable well-being developed by Tuula Helne and Tuuli Hirvilammi (2017), in which they conceptualise well-being as something built upon the satisfaction of people's basic needs. To them, well-being is a thoroughly relational construct where alongside adequate living conditions (*having*), the individual also needs love and relationships (*loving*), acceptance and appreciation as persons in their own right (*being*) and opportunities to act on issues they deem important in society (*doing*) to be able to live good meaningful lives (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 44–47; see also Introduction and Chapter 3). We will use this conceptualisation when analysing young adults' experiences of working life and their ideas of societal participation.

Critical voices and visions – introducing the data

The discussion of the chapter is based on 68 interviews of young adults (including 22 follow-up interviews) and 12 group interviews (altogether, 104 different interviewees aged 17–25) conducted in Finland in three different contexts: among vocational education students and graduates, young adults who have sought support to their concerns related to becoming independent² and young customers of one-stop guidance centres.³ We regard it important to listen carefully the critical voices in these interviews which are often bypassed in research. In this chapter we make visible how these accounts can interestingly challenge many implicit and normative assumptions in how transitions to adulthood are viewed in society. All interviews included themes related to young adults' relationship and belonging to society, inquiring also about their expectations and experiences of participation in the labour market. We have previously published several independent papers on these data sets, where we especially focus on young adults' internalisation of the ideal labour market citizenship and the problems that have followed when or if their attempts to achieve this fail (Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021; Honkatukia et al., 2020). Interestingly, we have detected that not all young adults take the norms of labour market citizenship for granted; some also criticise those norms and aim to transform them to make them more in sync with their own values and aspirations (Kallio & Honkatukia 2022; Ågren 2023).

In the following discussion, we focus on these kinds of “transformative voices” in the data, highlighting how the interviewees negotiate their relationship with the norms of the working life and society in alternative and occasionally disruptive ways. We use the term transformative to describe the aspirations of the young adult respondents to reform the labour market and make it more socially sustainable (see Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). We pose two questions: (1) what kind of (critical) ideas about social participation emerge from the data, in relation to or apart from the prevailing ideals of labour market-centred citizenship? (2) How can young adults' thoughts and experiences of societal participation be interpreted by using the concepts of the theory of sustainable well-being?

In our analysis, we approach the interviews as stories, which express young adults' everyday experiences of participation and citizenship, and which are intertwined with other narratives about their lives. The stories enter in a dialogue with surrounding cultural and societal discourses – variably called “master narratives”, “plot lines”, “master plots”, “dominant discourses” or simply “cultural texts” (Bamberg 2004, 136) – which we understand as socially, historically and locally constructed beliefs and preconceptions about how individuals should operate in society (Atkinson & Delamont 2006). The objective is to analyse what kinds of everyday citizenship young adults are building with their stories, and how they construct themselves as citizens in relation to the hegemonic discourse of labour market citizenship (Bamberg 2004). Moreover, we understand these cultural and societal discourses as important ingredients of young adults' self-definitions (Cahill & Davdand 2018, 249). Our thought is that while the prevailing cultural discourses

in society affect and define young adults' citizenship, we should also see them as agents who actively negotiate their position in relation to such discourses (also Bamberg 2004, 153).

We use citations from the interviews to illustrate our analysis. However, we do not reveal the interviewees' working life status, their educational background, their needs of support or other related identifiers. The purpose of this strategy is to give greater weight to their messages and thoughts, rather than to categorise their opinions based on their background and current labour market position. We regard this as an ethical choice and as a key premise of our critical approach.

Recognising the diversity of belonging in society outside labour market citizenship

When we talk about the possibility of belonging to society outside of the labour market citizenship, we primarily refer to a phenomenon where that kind of a citizenship is unattainable to young adults no matter how hard they try. Yet, we agree with Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2017), who make the important point that young adults who are not engaged in the labour market are not simply victims; instead, they actively reflect on and negotiate their position in relation to the existing education and employment policies. Talking from such "outside position", some interviewees in our data expressed strong counter-speech against the hegemony of labour market citizenship, with a few even stressing their right to refuse any obligations associated with it. We consider such voices as evidence of how some young adults in society feel the need to critically evaluate the "risk talk" aimed at them by an adult-centred society and defend their right to be treated as valuable and respected members of society, even when they are unable to fulfil the norms of labour market citizenship (Kallio & Honkatukia 2022; Kallio 2022; Ågren 2023).

In Helne and Hirvilammi's (2022) theory of well-being, the dimension of "being" refers to human beings' right to be met and accepted as what they are. In the context of our analysis, this means acknowledging young adults' different experiences and ideas about belonging to society as well as the fact that there are structural inequalities defining their opportunities, or lack thereof, to fulfil the ideals of societal participation (cf. Honkatukia et. al., 2020; Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021). According to the interviews there are many reasons why some young adults in society find it difficult to meet the criteria of labour market citizenship. For example, the requirement to be socially active and engage in networking to enter and succeed in working life is simply too demanding for some. Others feel that they are forced to perform a role they do not feel comfortable with, such as when they are expected to impress employers in job interviews (also Nikunen 2021). Moreover, some feel that their current life situations or work histories are not adequately acknowledged in the institutional system, and that the society only values education and participation in the labour market as a legitimate means to achieve well-being (see Kallio 2022). Similarly to the interviewee below, instead of being forced to waged work, many young adults would appreciate the acknowledgement of their needs:

I think we should first focus on how people are doing, whether things are okay in their life, and only after that see how they can be employed. Instead, we focus on how people can be employed; and only if they won't, we start to wonder if they have other issues in their lives. In my opinion, this order is wrong. It's very hard to get excited about work training if you, for instance, come from a family with problems with alcohol and if you yourself have started to use [substances]. Still, the social service or KELA [The Social Insurance Institution of Finland] states that you must go to work trainings, or otherwise you won't get any money [social security]. It's not the kind of help the person needs; they are forced into the working life when what they really need is something different.⁴

Based on the data, it is evident that young adults wish to be treated humanely in the labour market. If they do not foresee that the labour market would guarantee them decent treatment and livelihood, they might lose motivation to commit to such a form of citizenship. The quote below expresses strong frustration by some interviewees for being forced to mould themselves into the requirements of labour market citizenship:

Well, I don't know. I somehow hate society. Or how could I say it ... It's like, despite being born here, you feel that you cannot cope by just living. You are supposed to do many kinds of things to manage [in life].

Moreover, many young adults have lost their faith in participating in working life as a provider for their interests and dreams. In contrast, they feel as if working life deprives them and reduces them to a mere taxpayer, as the following quote illustrates:

Currently, [work] means that I haven't found anything I would enjoy doing. If I'd find something I enjoy, it would be like a hobby or having fun, from which I'm also paid for. However, currently, [work] means only that the government wants to get taxes from me. I don't personally like being forced to do anything, but I understand that in society, it's your duty to work.

Some interviewees refuse to follow the expectations of labour market citizenship. The first excerpt below brings out an ironic tone with which some young adults in our data value free time more than work, while the second makes visible how some do not want to do stressful work if it does not pay enough to get by:

You waste the best time of your life working. You spend all your well-being for work and don't have time for anything else. [So], social bum, here I come! The society doesn't like it, but I don't care what others think about me.

[Seasonal work] takes all your zest in life. You won't get a proper salary from it and it's so repugnant that you lose your nerves. You just repeat the same process

just like in a factory. I could never work there [again]. You only lose your health. So why the hell would I work there! I wouldn't work there unless I was absolutely compelled, if I wouldn't otherwise survive [financially].

Some young adults in our study feel strongly that they are unfit for the labour market with its demands and norms, which makes them consider the possibility of withdrawing to the fringes of work-centred society or even outside of it. They are not willing to sacrifice their free time, social relationships and intimate life ("being", "loving"), which they value as part of their well-being and coping, for work. Labour market citizenship is therefore not a viable option for all young adults to build their relationship and belonging to society, at least in every phase of life. This kind of sentiment is keenly expressed by the following interviewee:

Well, I don't think it's every person's duty to work. [I say that] because some people don't want to work, and if some people are not capable [of working], then there's nothing to do about it. If someone is against working, they shouldn't be chained and forced to work. That's because I feel that a bad working life oppresses people. Some people prefer being unemployed and enjoying their life [to working in an eight-hour office job].

In a nutshell, the above stories demonstrate how for some young adults who are outside of the labour market can secure their well-being better than being inside of it. Some interviewees persuasively ask which is more expensive for society: to maintain expensive mental health services for young adults wounded by the demands of working life and society or to treat those with respect who cannot or do not want to integrate into the normative and burdensome labour market. The interviewees highlight that despite being unable to work, their need to be accepted and respected in society will not vanish. This important message from young adults should be adequately acknowledged in policymaking.

Beyond the normative labour market citizenship

The interviewed young adults describe their attempts to change the prevailing ideals of labour market citizenship, imagining what working life could exceed its current confines. Instead of positioning themselves as outsiders, they wish to reshape society into being more approving of diversity and adaptive to various needs and aspirations (see Ågren 2023). According to these views, young adults should be allowed to participate in working life more on their own terms, as expressed in an almost surrendering tone by one of the interviewees:

Mostly, I hope that I will find an employment possibility that works for me. [Trying to get employed] has meant for me [several] attempts and failures, and after that, new attempts and failures. I wish that I could find an option that wouldn't be the most important thing in my life but that goes on with its own

weight, and I can concentrate on other things. The fear is that it won't work. My fear is that there won't be jobs that suit me.

Likewise, some of the interviewees emphasise that they wish to be encountered in society as who and what they are, with their values and needs and sometimes limited resources. In such accounts, young adults appear as critical citizens who – by engaging in “doing” – claim justice, rights and responsibilities (Isin 2008, 18) and contest the hegemony of labour market citizenship which rejects diversity and heterogeneity of societal participation. Some young adults in our data describe their struggles in trying to follow the normative transitioning paths to adulthood, and in their efforts to build a career to their own liking (cf. Farrugia 2020). Some interviewees picture themselves as creative or artistic, stating they would enjoy passionate things as part of their work, and this would also support their well-being (cf. Farrugia 2021). They express disappointment at how little support they have received from adult society for such wishes. On the other hand, some admit being supported by their peers, as the following extract shows:

When I'm aiming for [professional] fields that may sound tricky, and others fear whether anything will ever come of it, I hear a lot of not-so-supporting comments and tense feedback from adults. For example, they frighten me that I would never get a job in that field, and that I would fail. But that does scare me. [...] [However] people of my own age see my aims and goals as possible, so their comments are very different.

The transformative voices in the data claim that society should better understand and support the link between work and well-being. Some interviewees point out that their participation in working life depends on whether it will become more humane and equal as compared to what it currently is. Echoing the following interviewee, some of them contemplate whether more alternative ways to integrate in the working life will exist in the future:

I don't know if it is possible that everyone could do something they regard important, but at least there could be more possibilities for flexible working hours. [...] Because currently, all people are forced to the same “box of work”. In my opinion, there should be more alternatives. Much more alternatives.

Young adults try to avoid the narrow model of an active labour market citizenship by lowering their own expectations of success in working life and letting themselves to settle for less in life in terms of work. This desire, however, collapses with the normative ideals of labour market citizenship, directing young adults to proceed along the path sanctioned by society (Ågren 2021; Honkatukia et al., 2020; cf. Cuervo & Chesters 2019). Settling for less is a personalised struggle for many young adults, as they must accept their failures regarding the required norms and career paths, as the next quote highlights (cf. Farrugia 2021, 868):

Finally, I realised that I just don't have that kind of drive. Some people know what they would like to be when they grow up, and for some people, it is not that big of a deal at any level. For me, it's hard to accept it because I had my goals. But now I'm starting to accept the idea that maybe I will never have any vocation, and that I just do the kind of work I can and happen to get. And it is also okay. Because when I was younger, I never thought that would be okay.

Moreover, many young adults who choose a non-normative path position themselves as citizens who act in ways that are meaningful for them in other areas of life than work. The interviews bring out numerous examples of how young adults attempt to realise their citizenship through various ways of "doing", "being" and "loving". They have, for example, been active members in their communities, sought to make a difference in their social relationships, experienced success in their hobbies or in volunteering, and some have sought to influence societal issues through their own lifestyle. In these sites of "being" and "doing", young adults acquire and develop communication skills, critical thinking and knowledge of society's institutions – all important citizenship capabilities (Kallio 2022). One interviewee describes an activity meaningful to themselves in the following way:

I'm there [Youth Shelter run by Finnish Red Cross] as a volunteer, now from time to time due to COVID and my work. But I've been there in the emergency housing and in the evenings, and I cook for the young people there and help the staff. I'm there overnight, and then I leave the next day. And then, a year ago, they started this solidarity project, and I've been a volunteer there.

By engaging in what can be called everyday activism, these young adults act as citizens in ways that override the normative nature of labour market citizenship (cf. Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). However, rather few of them position themselves as citizens who reflexively and actively turn their critical insights into political actions (cf. Rinne 2011, 11). Our understanding is that this may be due to the normative understanding of societal participation mainly as inclusion to the labour market to which all the other activities are subordinate (cf. Smith et al., 2005; Walsh & Black 2020).

As judged by our data, citizenship can mean for young adults "loving" in the sphere of intimate relationships. Citizenship in this sense relates to mutual sharing and feelings of belonging and safety. Moreover, young adults often choose to relate with their peers rather than authorities or professionals, which means that everyday life social relations provide them with important information and support (Bennett, Wells & Freelon 2011). They also highlight the crucial meaning of social relations for one's success in work. Friends and family support in "pinning" the difficulties in the labour market and help if working life becomes too burdensome; one interviewee, for example, was taken to the hospital by their friend because of a burnout. Furthermore, social relationships allow young adults to care for others and

be responsible for them, which allows them to feel valuable and important despite having difficulties in meeting the demands of labour market citizenship.

Indeed, for many young adults, “loving” is an important dimension of societal participation (cf. Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 132). It manifests a responsible citizenship, which (outside of intimate relations) relates to issues such as environmental citizenship, solidarity and caring for the future of humanity (for a similar argument, see Chapter 3). As Smith and others (2005, 437–438) state, this kind of socially constructive citizenship refers to people caring for their community and contributing to it by helping others in vulnerable positions. In our data, some young adults seek to realise such ideals through their own way of life, and some demand more extensive actions from the state in social and ecological issues. Through making sense of their own and other young adults’ difficulties in the labour market, they have come up with ideas on how to reduce mental health problems, which they believe have root causes in society. Moreover, they argue for more sensitivity to young adults’ needs from society’ institutions (also Kallio & Honkatukia 2022). For them, being a respected citizen should not be about “having” in terms of material resources, or about acquiring the standards of living enabled by having a certain status in the labour market. The idea that everyone should have an equal right to realise themselves and receive support as needed to be able to do so is well expressed in the following quote:

There should be many more hobbies that don’t cost that much. Because those people who don’t work ... they don’t necessarily have the money to have a hobby. But they should also have a community to attend to and do things, but which wouldn’t cost that much. In a way, even though you don’t work, because you haven’t got any job, you would have the money to do free-time activities. That would prevent your mental health from breaking down. Because if it’s not possible to have a hobby, it’s very easy to get depressed and have your mental health to collapse. And then, at least, you can’t get a job when you’re depressed.

To summarise our argument, while many young adults have internalised the model of labour market citizenship and want to stay “inside” of it, there are also many who criticise its narrow normativity and express transformative ideas. They wish to reformulate the existing expectations related to work to better suit their abilities, values and needs (cf. Ågren 2023; Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). In addition, they try to carve space for realising citizenship in more diverse ways. It is notable that while not occupying a normative place in the working life, they still develop citizenship capabilities that are important for sensible societal participation (Kallio 2022). As is reflected in the current master narrative of labour market citizenship and the ideology of economic growth, the ideas and aspirations of young adults for alternative forms of citizenship are at risk of being bypassed. This should be avoided. A genuinely sustainable society takes seriously the critical views presented by young adults about their position and participation in society, whether they’re expressed from inside, outside or beyond the labour market.

Conclusion – towards citizenship as lived well-being

In this chapter, we have examined young adults' considerations about their position and participation in society in relation to the hegemonic discourse of labour market citizenship. We have focused on what we have called “transformative voices” in our interview data, analysing young adults' critical views and alternative ways of understanding and living citizenship. Theoretically, we have looked at young adults' societal participation as a dimension of sustainable well-being and identified problematic assumptions in labour market citizenship. According to our observations, it can be claimed that for some young adults, labour market citizenship appears as too narrow, unjust and burdensome model of societal participation which devours other valuable aspects in young adults' lives and citizenship (Ågren 2023; Honkatukia et al., 2020).

The transformative voices outlined above call for rethinking the relationship between work and citizenship. They remind us how important it is to support young adults' societal participation regardless of their position in the labour market and in ways that holistically recognise the importance of societal belonging for their well-being. In our discussion, we take distance from the neoliberal view which places the responsibility of participation and well-being on young adults individually and ties it to their role in the labour market (e.g., Rikala 2020; Duffy 2017; Walsh 2017; France 2016). We also problematise the traditional understanding of welfare citizenship based on the state-financed social services and labour market citizenship as the (tax-paying) guarantor of the system (e.g., Newman & Tonkens 2011). Moreover, we have emphasised young adults' right for well-being and the need to belong and participate in society (Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 72, 92). Altogether, we wish to emphasise that young adults' citizenship and well-being cannot be resolved individually, but it requires collective decisions and critical discussions at the societal level.

Instead of merely labour market citizenship, we propose that the inclusion of young adults in society should be understood through the idea of citizenship as lived well-being. With this concept, we want to highlight the relationship between societal participation and well-being as a fundamental basic need (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 2022); being an active citizen requires the opportunity for a person to live and act in ways that they find significant for their relationship to society. This would support their experience of dignity, thereby allowing them to have a meaningful agency not only individually, but also from the perspective of a sustainable society (Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021, 154; Ågren 2023).

Our conceptualisation of citizenship as lived well-being problematises the mainstream youth policies, which direct young adults towards labour market in ways that end up pushing some of them to the fringes of the work-centred society (Ågren 2023). Taking our cue from Weeks (2011, 106–107), we propose focusing on young adults' well-being instead of on their effective integration into working life. This could address many problems caused by the hegemony of labour market citizenship, which portrays young adults in the margins as passive, problematic or risky

(also Kallio & Honkatukia 2022). Instead of emphasising young adults' individual coping skills, it is imperative to consider how society and working life can be made more sustainable and inclusive (Madsen 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi 2022).

The conceptualisation of citizenship as lived well-being helps to acknowledge young adults as actors who have a right to participate in society as who they are and whose diverse ways of societal participation must be recognised and supported. At the same time, our findings may have more general significance in that the transformative voices we identified may indicate broader trends and shifts in societies, needed from the perspective of sustainable transformation of society. For example, our findings call for the realisation that many forms of agency can contribute to society's sustainability. Therefore, participation outside and beyond the labour market citizenship (such as voluntary or advocacy work, hobbies, arts and other forms of self-initiated participation) should not be turned into another institutionalised path to paid employment, which would lead to the creation of a new system based on control and guidance around work. As some researchers have suggested, such alternative activities should also be supported financially, for example, through basic income (cf. Weeks 2011; Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2017, 182; Gorz 1999, 83). In this, the basic income experiment in Finland in 2017–2018 is an encouraging example. The monthly basic income (560 euros) was found to increase the experienced well-being of the recipients, although it did not directly increase their employment (see Kangas et al., 2020, 188–189).

In a society that relies on waged employment, young adults' critique of the labour market citizenship can be easily refuted as idealistic and utopian (Weeks 2011, 255). However, according to the recent Finnish youth barometer, 86% of the respondents aged 15–29 regarded human rights, democracy, biodiversity and animal rights as more important than economic growth (Kiilakoski 2022). In the light of such results, critique towards the economic growth-based labour market citizenship can be seen as a major transformative voice coming from the younger generation (Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). There is a need for new conceptualisations and discourses to re-evaluate the meaning and value of waged work in society and other aspects of life, as stated by Weeks (2011, 35–36):

The problem with work is not just that it monopolizes so much time and energy, but that it also dominates the social and political imaginaries. What might we name the variety of times and spaces outside waged work, and what might we wish to do with and in them? How might we conceive the content and parameters of our obligations to one another outside the currency of work?

From this contention follows a crucial challenge for educational, social and employment institutions: are they ready to acknowledge the value of societal participation outside and beyond labour market citizenship? Are they willing to seriously consider the critical, transformative voices of young adults as to the meaning of waged work in society?

Notes

- 1 Names are in alphabetical order. Both are first/corresponding authors.
- 2 These young adults were reached from the Youth Shelters run by the Finnish Red Cross, where they had sought support for issues related to independence, such as independent housing, economic livelihood or their family relationships.
- 3 One-stop guidance centres (“Ohjaamo”) are multi-agency service points situated across Finland, offering guidance for employment and education matters for people under 30. The original data from the centres were collected by a research project led by Mirja Määttä (2018, 2019).
- 4 All citations have been translated from Finnish by the authors.

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