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Girls Claiming Discursive Space within the Dominant Discourse on Gender Performativity: A Case Study from a Compulsory School in Iceland

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how four teenage girls claim discursive space in a compulsory school in Iceland where the dominant discourse sustains traditional gender performances and (cis)heteronormativity. It also examines how the dominant discourse positions the girls and how they resist such positioning and position themselves. The analysis draws on an ethnographic study conducted in a compulsory school, consisting of observations in various spaces therein and interviews with 13–16-year-old students. The findings suggest that Iceland's reputation as a gender-equality utopia, with a progressive, cutting-edge curriculum, has not fundamentally changed students' or teachers' day-to-day realities or lived experiences. That discrepancy manifested in hegemonic ideas in the discourse on gender performativity, which is deeply rooted and reinforced through ((cis)hetero) normative gender performances. The few female students who tried to find cracks in the (cis)heteronormative discourse in order to claim discursive space for alternative gender performances were positioned as being difficult, wilful subjects—as feminist killjoys—for in addressing those cracks they dared to disturb the dominant discourse on legitimate femininity.

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Gender performativity; resignification; discursive-affective space; intelligibility; liveability

Introduction

As institutions, schools actively contribute to the construction of gender and its performativity, both as institutional agents of the construction processes involved and as the settings in which they occur. Research has shown that teenagers' views on gender roles reflect a binary understanding of gender grounded in stereotypical assumptions (Kuurme & Kasemaa, 2015). Despite heightened awareness of non-binary gender identities, young people seem to remain more comfortable with the gender binary (see Allen et al., 2022; Bragg et al., 2018). Entrenched, binary, stereotypical ideas of intelligible gender performativity can play a vital role in reproducing gender differences, thereby resulting in gender-segregated choices and gender positions within what Butler (1990) terms the "heterosexual matrix": a matrix within which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.

Gender stereotypes in a given society, informed by the sociopolitical landscape, time, and context, can relentlessly enforce the pressure that children and teenagers experience to conform to gender norms. Girls receive and internalize messages from peers, parents, educators, and society, including various types of media, that they should perform gender in particular ways (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2008; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Research also suggest that boys are under pressure

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regarding gender performativity, but in different ways, such as pressure to confirm to traditional and more restricted gender performativity than girls (see Halimi et al., 2021; Skipper & Fox, 2022). Girls navigate contradictory expectations regarding sexuality that sexualize girls in general while simultaneously requiring them to be modest, suppress negative feelings, and be obedient subjects (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2008). McRobbie (2008) has criticized such pressure on girls, especially in neoliberal Western societies, where girls must balance the pressure of being powerful and successful and running their own lives all while being objectified and hypersexualised. Those contradictory messages not only affect girls' construction of gender but can also limit their personal growth and thus call for resistance.

Research on girls' resistance to pressure to conform to gender norms, sexism, and traditional feminine ideologies has suggested that such resistance is often an individual endeavour, given the difficulty of resisting the hegemonic or normative gender script in social groups (Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009; McRobbie, 2008). Even so, examining the different approaches that students employ to challenge normative constructions of gender in school settings remains important. Research on resistance among trans and non-binary students 15–18 years old against (cis)heteronormativity in schools in South Africa suggests that individual resistance was performed by talking back, using banter when addressing opponents, using art to express their resistance, and educating cis-normative teachers about their positions and marginalization (see Francis & Kjaran, 2020). Research on students' resistance to oppressive gender structures, including the study undergirding this article, is vital to understanding the persistence of those structures and the various means that students use to challenge them.

To date, little research has examined how girls perform gender and resist gendered expectations in Iceland, especially at the compulsory school level, or the positions of individuals who claim discursive space within school settings. Thus, for this article we aim to give answers to the following research questions:

(1) How do girls in compulsory schools position themselves in the dominant discourse on gender performativity?
(2) How do they claim a discursive and a material space for alternative or non-conforming gender performances by "work[ing] the cracks" of the dominant gender discourse?

Theoretical Framework

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) emphasizes that gender is an enforced cultural performance, impelled by compulsory heterosexuality, and as such, it is performative. The performance of gender does not express a pregiven identity but rather produces an illusion of a core or an essence. Gender becomes something that a subject does, not something that the subject is, through socially and culturally informed acts in line with discursive norms and practices. Normative gender performances are legitimized and made intelligible in social relations and taken for granted, as they occur through conscious and unconscious patterns of stimulus and repetition of conventions. Gender performativity illustrates how subjects' stylized repetitions of acts are regulated in keeping with "a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990, p. 139). These repetitive acts are vital for subjects to be considered intelligible, as it ensures inclusion and recognizability within a particular society such as the school. Butler, therefore, argues that (mis) recognition is a site of power operating through gendered norms or what they refer to as "cultural intelligibility" (1990, p. 17). It defines and determines who can be recognized as a legitimate subject and who may be seen as illegible (Butler, 1990). Intelligible subjects perform gender in line with societal expectations of gender performativity, but those who fail to perform gender in intelligible ways, that is by undoing gender and disrupting gender norms, are at risk of exclusion, misrecognition, and subordination (Butler, 2005).

The pressure to conform to gender normativity has been reported in the ways that schools reproduce heterosexuality, cisnormativity, and (cis)heteronormative understandings of gender, reinforcing and sustaining gender categories (identities) that marginalize students who do not fit into the "heterosexual matrix" (see Kjaran, 2017; Paechter, 2010; Smith, 2007; Woolley, 2016). Schools are thus seen as regulative institutions in relation to the construction of gender and sexuality, often limiting subjects' available practices of performing gender and/or sexuality. Performing gender and/or sexuality outside of the intelligible norms puts subjects at risk for unintelligibility, which can then reduce their expectations of having a "liveable" life (Butler, 2009). In fact, as Butler has argued, intelligibility is connected to the concept of liveability, which is assigned to those who adopt dominant gender norms and pursue life within the frame of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990).

Furthermore, not aligning with gender norms may also result in linguistic injuries and violence. In other words, subjects have linguistic agency to injure and harm others. Language also interpellates subjects in ways in which they are defined, differentiated, and categorized. Naming, interpellation and active use of language brings forward its performative aspects and thus power dynamics in which "to name and to make" (Butler, 1993, p. 70) collide. This is particularly true when the interpellation of subjects is supported by authoritative bodies (Butler, 1997), such as state juridical institutions or as seen in this article, educational institutions. Within school spaces gender norms are sustained and reproduced through speech acts and discourse by which subjects are shaped and interpellated (Butler, 1997). However, as Butler has demonstrated, subjects have the capacity to reclaim identity labels and words. In that respect, Butler employs the term *resignification* to draw attention to the acts of linguistic (discursive) resistance with the aim of reclaiming hurtful and negative identity labels (Butler, 1993) through acquiring discursive agency (Butler, 1997). Thus, as will be argued further in this article in the context of schools and educational spaces, the Butlerian tool of discursive resistance through resignification can be understood as rupturing the norms. Collins (2012) has framed this as, "working the cracks" of the discourse, and it can be used both for claiming discursive spaces as well as repositioning the self.

Subjects are positioned through discourse and in interaction as using language to negotiate positions for themselves and others. This positioning applies to discursive processes through which people negotiate their own and others' subjectivities (Butler, 1990; Davies & Harré, 1990). There are two kinds of positioning: interactive positioning, in which people position each other, and reflexive positioning, in which people position themselves. A position occupied by a subject makes particular narratives and concepts available and sets the limits on what is considered socially and logically possible regarding gender performativity (Butler, 1990; Davies & Harré, 1990; Van Houtte & Vantieghem, 2020).

Ahmed (2010) sees the limits of boys' and girls' gender performativity as gendered scripts, which she names as "happiness scripts" (p. 59). These provide instructions for what subjects must do to be happy or which objects, termed by Ahmed as "happy objects" will bring happiness. Thus, subjects must follow the gender script and stay within the heterosexual matrix in order to become happy. Feminist subjects who refrain from aligning with the gender script and criticize its norms may risk their social position. They are referred to as Ahmed (2014) has argued, as feminist killjoys and wilful subjects. Thus, being feminist and, therefore, *wilful* reflects the uncertain ground for collective politics translating subject's emotions, dismay, or anger towards social injustices. As Ahmed has indicated, the position of the *wilful subject* is understood as a place of political tension as well as a place for political claims (Ahmed, 2010, 2014, 2017).

The Icelandic Context

In an effort to reduce gender-stereotypical attitudes and to promote gender equality, the Act on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men came into force in 1976. The Act has been amended a few times, but its emphasis on schools as active transformative agents remains strong.

According to the Act (Article 15), schools are given a vital role regarding these aims, as all schools are obligated to teach about gender equality, gender-based choice of education and occupation and issues concerning people with disabilities or those who identify as LGBTIQ+. The Compulsory School Act of 2008 includes clauses on gender-equality education and the current National Curriculum Guide, first released in 2011, assigns all schools this role as well. Vowing to apply gender and queer studies in education, the National Curriculum is progressive in its emphasis on gender-equality education at all school levels (Kjaran, 2017).

The international community cites Iceland as a progressive society in regard to gender equality (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2022), proclaiming the nation to be "the most feminist place in the world" (Johnson, 2011) in international media. However, this recognition does not mean that gender equality has been achieved in all realms of Icelandic society. The labour market in Iceland remains highly gender-divided, and the findings do not include the persistence of gender-based violence or the low number of women in managerial positions. The paradoxes that emerge in the discourse have been contested by Icelandic feminist academics, who have emphasized the need to consider perplexities, even referring to an "aura" and how good ranking feeds into the politics of reputation and nation-branding (Einarsdóttir, 2020; Pétursdóttir, 2009).

The ranking for Iceland noted above, which is conducted annually by the WEF, and the legal obligations to teach gender and queer studies provide an interesting setting for an inquiry about students' ideas of gender performativity and resistance. In the spring of 2015, the so-called #freethenipple revolution, which was a part of the Free the Nipple Campaign, took place in Iceland. Furthermore, women and teenaged girls were active participants. The first Slut Walk took place in Reykjavík, the capital, in the summer of 2011, and this was followed by annual Slut Walks in various municipalities in Iceland. These events and revolutions have had some success, especially in opening discursive spaces where stereotypical ideas on the female body and feminism can be expressed to interrupt and change the current discourse on what it means to be a woman/girl. Similar to other locations, these events raised awareness on gendered issues, such as harassment, sexual violence, and views of women's bodies as sexual objects.

At the same time, gender equality is presumed to be existent, and feminism is thus represented as a "spent force" or an individual endeavour instead of collective actions (Tyler, 2005). Prior to the research presented in this article, the discourses on gender and gender equality in Icelandic society echoed these occurrences, especially in the public digital media (Rúdólfsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). Some of the girls were, of course, constituted and cited for these latest discourses on feminism and femininity, as they narrated their claim for discursive space in a highly gender (cis) heteronormative school regime.

Methods

This article is based on an ethnographic study conducted in a public compulsory school located in one of Iceland's larger municipalities, herein referred to as Valley School. The compulsory schools in Iceland are run by the municipalities for students from the ages of 6 to 16 (1st–10th grade). The fieldwork was carried out over 14 weeks with students in the 8th, 9th and 10th grades and took the form of observations of the students and staff in a variety of school spaces, as well as during field trips (Nespor, 1994). To further understand the meanings of activities and discourses in the field, interviews were conducted.

Most interviews were conducted in groups, but four girls in 9th and 10th grade wished to be interviewed individually on different grounds, such as slut shaming, marginalization, or strong opinions on gender discourses. The interviews with these girls included semi-structured questions on sex and gender categories, school practices, popularity, interest in school subjects, hobbies, etc. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was transcribed by the first author. The data further comprised fieldnotes and a logbook. The field notes and logbook included reports about the daily interactions, discourses, and activities of students and staff.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I [first author] observed students in various spaces. During lessons, recess and lunch, students mostly sat or moved about in gender-segregated groups. The most visible sign of the gender divide was a wall, which was situated in the middle of one of the classrooms positioning the boys and girls apart. The wall had been moved into the classroom by their teacher to separate the students, as it was thought that they would learn better, and the girls have some peace from the noisy boys (Þrastardóttir et al., 2021). This visible gender-divide in various settings and informal discussion with students about gender reflected ideas of gender as binary. Conducting interviews provided an opportunity to hear students' ideas and experiences in connection to the observed gender regime.

Adhering to formal ethic procedures, I introduced and discussed the fieldwork and interviews with students and invited them to take part in the study while providing an opportunity for participants to opt out of the observations. Approval was received from the students and their parents to use their descriptions of their activities as data. The students were promised confidentiality and informed that pseudonyms would be used rather than their names.

In line with research ethics when interviewing children and teenagers, I tried my best to ensure that the teenagers were comfortable during the interviews, and that they would not be harmed or feel insecure in my company. These measures were taken to promote and safeguard the dignity and the well-being of the teenagers taking part in the research (Punch, 2002).

Feminist ethics of care were also employed, as the girls who preferred to be and were interviewed alone found that they were not respected and even marginalized due to their views, thus putting them in a vulnerable position. Utilization of feminist ethics of care (see Gilligan, 1995) is vital when researching relations of power and ensuring the care of participants in marginalized position (Roffee & Waling, 2017). The interview context could, therefore, be seen as an opportunity to create a discursive-affective space to express the girls' feelings on difficult issues affecting their lives. By providing an affective-discursive space within the interview settings it was acknowledged that participants´ positions and how they were constructed by the dominant power regimes might evoke affective responses, which can both constrain and enable their opportunities to act (Åhäll, 2018). In addition, drawing on Ahmed's (2021) method of "becoming a feminist ear", I actively listened to the girls' complaints/narratives and co-constructed with them a discursive-affective space in which they could freely express themselves. Thus, as Ahmed (2021) emphasized, by becoming a feminist ear, I not only received their complaints, but tried to "make use of the stories" (p. 313) they shared. This was accomplished, for example, by drawing attention to and focusing on the institutional barriers that stop complaints from being heard, thereby sustaining and reproducing harassment, exclusion, and violence.

Furthermore, as a feminist researcher, I found myself in a position of care and encouragement. I was aware that the girls' narratives put them in a vulnerable position during the interviews; in addition, I remained cognizant of the power imbalance between them and me. However, by agreeing to participate in the interviews, the girls were claiming discursive space, a site to express their concerns and views on gender performativity at school as well as how they were viewed by their fellow students and the institutional regime. I was aware of my role as a researcher, and as a middle-class white woman, it would be likely that it would take time to gain the trust of my informants. In the days following the girls' request to talk to me individually, I tried to remain visible and open to discussions in order to gain their trust. However, being aware of these power relations does not necessary remove them.

During the interviews, I was also aware of my position as a feminist who could relate to the girls' narratives, which reflected othering and marginalization, even though they did not utilize such concepts. As the girls' narratives touched on feminist issues, without uttering feminist concepts per se, I was careful to listen rather than apply these feminist concepts to their stories. This created a discursive-affective space within the interview in which they freely relayed how they experienced their school context.

The interview transcripts were read several times. Notations were written, and texts were coded using an inductive approach. The first coding was open and focussed on getting to know the participants' ideas and experiences. The codes were assembled to identify repeated patterns of meaning across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013), but also students' negotiations of meaning and contradictory views were noted on the attributes necessary to fit in or go against the preferred gender script. As observation took place in one school and there were only four individual interviews with girls in 9th and 10th grade, the girls' narratives were continually compared to informal conversations with students written in the logbooks and the fieldnotes to attain conformation of their accounts and reduce possible limitations of the study in line with social construction of validity (Kvale, 1994).

Findings

Our analysis revealed three themes that emerged in interviews with Laufey, Eyrún, Lísa, and Elsa. All four participants preferred to be interviewed individually due to their needs to discuss the individual gender-related challenges faced in the school. Our analysis focused on their experiences at school, their attempts to make their voices heard, and how their environment responded to those attempts.

Performing Gender Flawlessly

The dominant discourse on gender in Valley School included binary terms describing girls' and boys' different attributes and behaviour. Girls were often characterized as being emotionally difficult and with less self-esteem than boys (Thrastardóttir et al., 2021). Students' notions of femininity referred to good looks and girls' body parts, including large breasts and buttocks. Girls who played sports and received the most "likes" for their good looks and bodies on social media were identified as the most feminine and desirable. Conforming to dominant ideas about how to master desirable feminine looks reflected expectations outside the school environment, where young women have reported extreme pressure to look a certain way and accentuate sexy bodily features regarded to be desirable and feminine (Rúdólfsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). Such pressure to conform relates to Western consumption and egalitarian culture as well as to postfeminist ideology (McRobbie, 2004, 2008), which characterizes girls as being powerful creators of their own futures while simultaneously facing pressure to align with current standards of flawless beauty (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2008; Ringrose, 2006). Not meeting such expectations and thus not performing girl properly or resisting pressure to perform femininity in legitimate ways affect subjects' positionality in the gender system, including in school (Brinkman et al., 2022; Youdell, 2006).

According to Mimi Schippers (2007), women who position themselves as being critical and who reject, or challenge hegemonic norms of femininity are performing pariah femininity. Women who perform pariah femininity necessarily contaminate the relationship between femininity and masculinity and thus disrupt the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). As a consequence, they may experience exclusion as they could damage the legitimate femininity of other women. In Paechter's (2010) study on how girls and boys learn, adopt, and construct masculine and feminine identities, the pressure to embody either feminine or masculine identities seemed to align with the expectations of their social groups in school. That pressure, manifesting in gender stereotypes that emphasize heterosexuality, becomes increasingly visible when children transition into puberty. The pressure to conform to gender norms has even been reported in kindergarteners who, reflecting Paechter's theorization, make use of the cultural material assigned to their gender (Þórðardóttir, 2012).

Laufey, a 10th grader, in describing the pressure to conform to gender norms, emphasized that the pressure to conform to "ideal" and "flawless" femininity was keenly felt among girls in her grade and that ones who failed to conform risked being ostracized:

> Suddenly, I was cut off by the other girls once I told them about my depression. You have to be flawless, you know, and it is important to be with the "right" group of girls. You must look a certain way . . . have the newest iPhone and Nike Free and Adidas shoes. Everything has to be perfect. You cannot be a victim of sexual violence in the company of those girls. in fact, you must be that exact type.

Laufey added that girls have to perform girlhood flawlessly to be accepted by girls who had mastered feminine performativity. Before telling those girls about her depression and anxiety, she had identified as one of the popular girls. However, once Laufey revealed her depression, they turned their backs on her. She was not "flawless" anymore, and the girls positioned her as "sick" and as an unhappy subject. She began censoring herself and could not express herself in their company as freely as she desired. Her discursive—affective space was thus limited by exposing herself as not being flawless and as experiencing emotional and mental difficulties. She was viewed as not performing girl properly—that is, being in control emotionally and physically regarding beauty and fashion. For Laufey, negotiating the postfeminist pressure of being in control, enforced by neoliberal capitalism as reflected in the material necessities for performing legitimate femininity, and her vulnerability as a girl with mental health conditions was difficult. Those findings align with past results suggesting that girls who do not perform legitimate femininity as expected are likely at risk of mental health problems (see Landstedt et al., 2009; Odenbring, 2019).

Laufey also recalled a time when she stood up for students who had experienced violence and exclusion at school. When students were asked to prioritize what should be included in the school curricula, she emphasized the need for education about sexual violence, equality, and mental health and the seriousness of those issues. Disagreeing with other students, she explained to the class that prejudice could be eliminated with education about issues such as sexual violence and mental health. "That did not result in the desired education", she explained, "but I was able to advance my opinion, and it felt good, and I did not care if they [former girlfriends] judged me". On this occasion, Laufey claimed discursive space by highlighting what needs to change for students who are marginalized.

Eyrún, another 10th grade student, also spoke about the emphasis on beauty in performing legitimate femininity. Describing herself as "fed up with the beauty standards set by the boys", she was prepared to confront them but only because she would be graduating soon:

> Everything is about the same group of boys and their taste in women, which they get from porn. . . . I lost my voice some time ago; [I] was not one of the popular girls, but now, as I will leave the school soon, I am not afraid to use my voice and tell them [the boys] what I think about their standards about women.

Given her approaching graduation, Eyrún was willing to openly express herself about the policing of girls' bodies and ideal femininity and thus confront the gender regime in her school. By the acknowledged perception of legitimate feminine bodies, she performed what has been termed *pariah femininity*. Her emphasis on the temporal aspect of her resistance, as a soon-to-be graduate, indicates the difficulty of casting doubt on norms and confronting the dominant discourse on femininity, sexual norms, and desirable bodies (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). During an observation in Eyrún's class, the so-called sports guys openly and repeatedly discussed their preferences for girls and their ideas about legitimate femininity. Their discussion identified girls with athletic figures as having the most desirable female bodies, along with girls with curves in the right places according to them. Because their persistent discussion about their preferences was not interrogated or otherwise contested, their preferences were the only preferences uttered and upheld.

The Feminist Killjoy

Iceland's compulsory schools have not been recognized as spaces where girls advocate for feminism. At the international level, Lamb and Randazzo (2016) have stated that feminist inputs about sexuality and desire have been excluded from school settings such as lessons on sex and relationships. According to their findings, feminism is rarely taught or nurtured as a critical lens. Likewise, the concept of feminism was not found in the sociology textbooks read by students during observations in Valley School and was rarely mentioned in the classroom.

Despite feminist activism on social media during the #FreetheNipple revolution and the slut walks, only two girls mentioned its effect on their ideas. Such knowledge was not provided in school, and the binary (cis)heteronormative gender discourse was hardly interrupted by taking a feminist stance. According to Ahmed (2010), by disrupting or questioning social norms about gender, sexuality, or race, subjects are often seen as feminist killjoys.

During the interview with Lísa, a 10th grade student, it became evident that most students did not express their opinions about issues concerning gender equality because it was less trouble to simply avoid the risk of being in the crossfire. Both Eyrún and Lísa explained that pervasive negative ideas about feminism and queer issues reflected in school were extremely difficult to alter. Both girls reported being, as Eyrún put it, "fed up with negative or traditional gender stereotypical attitudes". They discussed how the #FreetheNipple revolution had affected their own thinking about gender inequality. Lísa described herself as feminist but added that some boys in the school had strongly negative opinions about feminism. She explained that even mentioning gender-related issues in class would spark loud arguments:

> It is impossible to talk about gender issues in class. The same boys and usually one girl always start shouting at each other. . . . I was the only feminist, and I really tried to stand up for girls.

In the fieldnotes, there are several instances where conversations among 8th and 9th grade students also revealed negative views on feminism. The boys who uttered the most negative remarks often positioned femininity as being inferior to masculinity and thereby seemed to view them as competing categories. That stance positioned the few girls who spoke up for girls' and women's rights as argumentative, radical, and extreme. Moreover, because the girls typically faced such negative attitudes alone in front of others, they were in the minority. Lísa explained:

> It is so difficult to shut them down or make them listen. They're a team, and they know best. They see me as an opponent and try everything to convince me that feminism is bad. They always refer to X [a specific Icelandic feminist] as an "extreme feminist" . . . and they ask me if I want to be like her. I tried to explain what it means to be a feminist—that it is about equality for all—and asked if they disagreed with that and whether it was extreme. Some hesitated, but others were so agitated that they just did not listen.

During her interview, Lísa stated that she was interactively positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990) as being difficult—as being wilful—due to disagreeing with boys who position themselves against feminism. They labelled her as a feminist and asked her whether she wanted to be seen as being extreme and toxic. By this naming, she was positioned as being aggressive and even extreme; nevertheless, she used that interpellation as a means to enter the citational chain of discourse and claim discursive space by embracing the negative feminist labels given to her by the boys. In that way, by adopting the position of the extreme feminist, Lísa confronted them in a way intended to imbue that position with a new, more positive meaning as being common sense instead of extreme (Butler, 1993). In being subjectified, she acquired the "discursive agency" (Butler, 1997, p. 127) needed to resignify the names that others had applied to her (Butler, 1993). Meanwhile, the boys echoed a persistent discourse against feminism that has remained especially vigorous among some men. They referred to a certain Icelandic feminist as being extreme and as a "bad feminist"—that is, someone criticized for their writings about gender injustice, especially in relation to gender-based violence. Lísa's position on the topic caused discomfort and sparked argument because she did not align with the dominant gender discourse. In response, the boys constituted her as being wilful and as opposing the discourse and negative interpellation that she encountered. Interrupting that process, she interrogated her subjectivation by boys who were comfortable and content with their gender scripts and, in so doing, acted as a feminist killjoy who contaminated their citational chain of discourse and happiness (Ahmed, 2010; Butler, 1997; Schippers, 2007).

Slut Shaming and Sexuality

The performance of femininity in relation to sexuality can be quite precarious within postfeminist media culture. Girls' social status and visibility are measured by their sexiness, which should not be too sexually "forward" (Gill 2007, p. 24), and in response to the hyper-sexualization of girls' bodies, the revaluation of girls' sexual innocence has been proposed. Girls who have experienced sexual violence have often been labelled as sluts (Ringrose & Renold, 2012), which according to Ahmed (2010) is a label that sticks a negative sign on girls' bodies. Per Ahmed, "Bodies can get stuck depending on what feelings they are associated with" (p. 39). Naming girls "sluts" is an act of inducing shame that can negatively affect girls' subjectivity, for they are left with the understanding that they do not perform legitimate femininity. The slut label is thus a strong regulatory feature that becomes a part of their subjectivity (Gill, 2007). The aim of the annual slut walk has therefore been to oppose the slut-shaming discourse in an attempt to resignify, or rework, the meaning of the injurious concept of slut, by celebrating it as a source of political unity, casting the shame back on the perpetrators, and questioning its normalization (Butler, 1993).

Young women's participation in the #FreetheNipple revolution in Iceland in 2015 was also an endeavour of political activism. The young women posted photos of themselves bare-breasted with the hashtag #FreetheNipple to oppose the shaming of a bare-breasted girl on Twitter. That symbolic protest opened a discursive space for girls and young women who wanted to reclaim power over and define their own bodies and body parts (Rúdólfsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2018).

In another interview, Elsa, in 9th grade, emphasized her difficulty with airing opinions other than those legitimated by boys:

> They know that I am often right about things, but I am not respected. I just do not agree that girls are only their bodies. The boys say I am a slut because I have an older boyfriend. . . . I am different from the other girls; they are reluctant to say what they think, but I just say what I think.

Elsa sounded frustrated with being named a slut due to her relationship with an older boy attending another school. Such slut shaming had projected a negative sign on her (Ahmed, 2010), and repeat mentions from boys and even friends had only reinforced it. Hanging out with or dating older boys was considered to indicate that Elsa was sexually active. Given that sexual objectification, she was perceived as a slut and as being too sexually forward (Gill, 2007) instead of a pure subject (Ringrose & Renold, 2016) failing to perform legitimate femininity. Her description of the slut label revealed that she considered it to be negative, undeserved, and damaging, as well as limiting of her character. The experience reflected how difficult and painful peer-group policing can be and how girls' reputations are framed according to sexual (in)activity (Lamb & Randazzo, 2016).

In observations, Elsa was a vibrant girl who seemed confident in the various spaces of the school. She participated in lessons and frequently asked questions about the material being studied. She did not confront her fellow students about the slut label, and when asked about that, she stated:

> It is so difficult to do that in front of the class, it is humiliating, but I have talked about how girls' bodies are always what they talk about when they talk about girls; it is all about their body parts. Once when there was a guest teacher who taught us about gender equality, I mentioned the #FreetheNipple revolution and how girls want to change the emphasis on sexiness. . . . I did not talk about them calling me a slut but said that I knew about girls who were called sluts for no reason.

Elsa saw herself as having to negotiate competing discourses on womanhood, being a high-achieving student, and being attractive to boys but not being allowed to be too attractive (Gill, 2007; Ringrose, 2006).

Although Elsa was not willing to be exposed in front of the whole class as having been labelled a slut, she did claim discursive space when the topic of gender equality was discussed by the guest teacher. In doing so, she acquired what Butler (1997) has termed "discursive agency" insofar as she aimed to explain the label and thus influence her fellow students and the discursive terrain by working the cracks of the gender discourse (Collins, 2012). Moreover, she resisted the slut label used to shame and silence her. The opportunity presented itself as a teaching moment about gender equality, albeit one provided by a guest teacher, not the school staff. Her participation in the class discussion could be interpreted as her way of resurrecting her subjectivation by the boys in question.

Discussion

Claiming Discursive—Affective Space

In this article, we have examined how four girls—Laufey, Elsa, Eyrún, and Lísa—negotiate competing discourses on legitimate femininity in school—that is, how they position themselves and claim discursive—affective–material space for alternative, non-conforming gender performances by "work[ing] the cracks" (Collins, 2012) of the dominant gender discourse.

The data collected during interviews with the four girls suggest that they have generally experienced a lack of opportunities to address injustice and their emotions as subjects in classroom settings. Given that opposition to their criticality and their willingness to challenge normative ways of performing girl, Ahmed's (2010) concepts of the feminist killjoy and being wilful became analytical tools, as did Butler's conceptualization on how to perform gender in normative, acceptable ways. The four girls who openly as well as privately resisted the dominant gender discourse were indeed perceived as being wilful subjects and were constituted as embodying toxic or pariah femininity (Schippers, 2007) due to questioning normative gender performances, which determine who can be recognized as a legitimate gendered subject (Butler, 1990). For the girls, claiming discursive—affective space in school was difficult, for they knew that they would be identified as being difficult or different and thus risk misrecognition or exclusion by not aligning with the school's cultural intelligibility of femininity (Butler, 1997). Eyrún associated her claim for discursive—affective space with the fact that she would soon graduate and leave the school, which reflects her fearful prediction that her school environment would be constraining, if not unliveable, had she expressed her views earlier. Those findings align with past results characterizing high school as a hyper-regulatory space that enforces certain attributes and tastes and how leaving that space can free students from such regulations (Cann, 2018). The risk of social exclusion due to speaking openly or critically about legitimate gender performances was real, for the girls had indeed experienced a lack of support from staff and fellow students. Eyrún and Elsa reported a lack of support in opposing the hegemonic emphasis on girls' beauty and sexualized bodies in society and on social media, which reflects the neoliberal commercial culture that aims to sell the idea of girls as sexual objects, either represented as spoilt or pure. Although girls are also supposed to create their own identities (Cann, 2018; Ringrose & Renold, 2016), when the girls in our study opposed those standards, they experienced critical tension and marginalization among their peers, which indicates the persistence of postfeminist gender discourse and how girls have adopted it.

Amid that lack of support, the four girls chose to participate in a private interview. In that discursive—affective space in which they could freely express themselves, they found support in claiming a distinct discursive space in their school and the support and resources needed to do so in the future. For example, Laufey, who repeatedly reported having "lost her voice" in her class and circle of friends, expressed gratitude for the opportunity to discuss her feelings and views during the interview. Her sentiment was confirmed by the other girls, who found themselves able to speak openly to a researcher with a "feminist ear" about their resistance and experiences (Åhäll, 2018; Ahmed, 2021).

Resignification: The Feminist Label and the Slut Label

Although Lísa indeed identified as a feminist, some of her classmates had sought to label her negatively as an extreme feminist when she expressed her views and sought to critically engage with her fellow students. She embodied the feminist label and tried to explain to other students what it means to be a feminist—that is, wanting a just society and equality for all. Embracing the feminist label deemed so negatively in her school, she proudly stating that she was indeed a feminist. She therefore partly used resignification to shift the discourse and gain discursive agency over her identity and views (Butler, 1993). Such acts involved, for example, questioning the dominant understanding of feminism and the label of "feminist", even if as a form of damage control for her identity, made some other students hesitant to call her an extreme feminist. Elsa, who was interpellated a "slut", also tried to resist the assignation by resignifying the label stuck to her but only in the context of a discussion about gender equality with a guest teacher. The opportunity opened up a discursive space for her to express her views about gender stereotypes, including the annual slut walks and slut shaming. She described the slut walks, how the slut label had been reclaimed from the oppressor and resignified, and how she felt inspired as a result. In that sense, Elsa sought to interrupt the hegemonic gender script in her school by drawing attention to how women and girls are often slut-shamed in order to oppress them within a patriarchal society.

Feminist Killjoy

The gender regime in Valley School was reflected in a binary understanding of gender and sexuality deeply rooted and made available through normative gender subject positions and both individually and institutionally sustained and produced. The few girls who questioned that gender discourse were interactively and reflexively positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990; Van Houtte & Vantieghem, 2020) as feminist killjoys (Ahmed, 2014, 2017)—that is, as being difficult and different. By trying to address and question gender norms and traditions, the girls in our study were viewed as disturbing the school's gender regime and ways of performing girl. Their struggle for discursive space suggests that the legitimate feminine performativity in school entailed being sexy, nice, and friendly and not disturbing the status quo. Those results align with the findings of McRobbie (2008) and Walkerdine et al. (2001), which reflect the same available gender positions for girls despite neoliberal discourses of powerful, successful girls, thereby leaving girls who try to change norms with few explanations for their lack of success other than their own personal shortcomings.

Implications

Our findings suggest that students' opportunities to critically examine gender performativity are not as progressive as the notion of Iceland's being a feminist paradise suggests. Despite many feminist campaigns and movements on social media and the international stage, a gender gap remains. The myth of Iceland as a feminist paradise, set in competition with other countries, is exaggerated and often based on external surveys conducted by neoliberal institutions such as the World Economic Forum. The danger of that myth is that Icelanders infer that gender equality has indeed been established despite obvious inequalities in schools and other institutions. Eyrún, Laufey, Elsa, and Lísa have brought to light what it means to be excluded, labelled, and silenced due to their gender and critical feminist thinking. Even though the girls are only four, their stories suggest a skeleton in the closet in Iceland's gender paradise. Moreover, despite extensive use of social media among youth in Iceland, the feminist revolutions and campaigns are not reflected in the dominant gender discourse in Valley School on legitimate gender performativity and feminism. Bringing those issues into classrooms, as is required of schools, would provide discursive—affective spaces for students to express themselves freely and critically on feminism, gender, and queer issues for a just, safe environment for all.

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