

# Nordic Girlhood Studies: Connections, Contrasts and Future Cooperation

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## INTRO

*I would like to commence my presentation with expressing my deepest gratitude to the Gorbachev Foundation for the invitation to attend this fabulous event. I wish to particularly thank the Executive Director of the Gorbachev Foundation and Vice President of Raisa Gorbacheva Club - Dr. Olga Zdravomyslova for smoothly and patiently guiding me through all the practical arrangements for this trip. But first and foremost I would like to thank and acknowledge Dr. Zdravomyslova for the very inspiring conversations we had during a research gathering in Finland in 2013. A dialogue which has continued through the work-process with the now published post-socialist issue of **Girlhood Studies**. This emerging dialogue between Nordic Girlhood Studies and girlhood scholars working in other geographical, cultural, social and/or political contexts is a theme that I will reflect upon in my presentation today. However, before I do that I will briefly describe and situate the development of Nordic Girlhood Studies that has taken place in primarily Finland and Sweden during the last decade.*

## 1.

*FlickForsk! Nordic Network for Girlhood Studies* started in 2007. The word “FlickForsk” is an abbreviated fusion of the Swedish words for “girl” (flicka) and “research” (forskning). We are a network for researchers within primarily the humanities and social sciences who are doing work on girls, girls’ culture, girliness and girlhood. Our aim is to develop Girlhood Studies as a research field in Sweden and to facilitate exchange between researchers both nationally and internationally. Around the same time, in 2006, The Finnish Girlhood Studies Network *Tyttötutkimusverkosto* was established. Since the start we have, both independently but often in close collaboration with the Finnish network, arranged a number of academic events, such as seminars, workshops and conferences at which researchers have been able to meet. Parallel with these events we have also initiated and completed a number of publication projects. To this date the two Nordic networks have published 3 books and 3 theme journal issues. One being; the theme issue “Nordic Girls’ Studies: Current Themes and Theoretical Approaches” of *Girlhood Studies*.

So how can this analytical preoccupation with girls and girlhood among a younger generation of Nordic scholars be understood? Are we not from countries/places that are often perceived as being very progressive and dubbed the “best/worst in the world” when it comes to gender equality and encouraging children to act beyond traditional gender roles? Well, in spite of this or perhaps precisely because of this image the founding members of both networks experienced a need to find ways to

interact with other researchers working with section of human population which are categorized and/or represented as “girls”.

As an historian I have a firm belief that the formation of our network can and must be contextualized in relation to a series of normative, yet ambivalent and complex, effects of the societal ambition to achieve gender equality. Since the 1960s’ Nordic girlhood has within the state sanctioned gender equality framework rested on discourses that stress individual emancipation, gender likeness and gender integration of girls and boys (but where sex differences can still be essentialized). Most parts of children’s public life, with the exception of sports, are today gender-integrated, such as child-care, co-educational schools and leisure-time activities. However, parallel with such reforms there has been a considerable structural continuity regarding the gendered value hierarchies, the distribution of power, influence, economic resources and investments. Girliness being perhaps the most unwanted and least valued attribute and characteristic. So, on the one hand Nordic girls have been targeted as key-players in the realization of gender equality, but on the other hand the structures within which this change was going to be realized have remained fairly uncontested and stable. When we started *FlickForsk!* it was precisely this paradox which we had identified. In short, the societal ambition to reform gender roles has thus created a set of very specific circumstances, challenges, and opportunities for generations of Nordic girls that had not adequately addressed by the academic community. Within for example Gender Studies, a research field established very much parallel with gender equality politics, there seemed to have been a largely unconscious focus and bias on either women or adult spheres such as work and political life.

## 2.

However, our wish to assuage the region specific problems we had identified through the establishment of Nordic Girlhood Studies was of course also inspired by our awareness and knowledge of the existence of such a research field in other places. As often is the case in the Nordic countries we are often Western-bound, or rather just restricted to English, in our intellectual inspirations. Thanks to our insufficient language skills we were aware of Girlhood Studies as both a budding and established research tradition in for example Canada, USA, United Kingdom and Australia. At that point in time it also seemed as the field, on a global level, was going through a period of vitalisation and consolidation; evident through for example the establishment of the GHS-journal and the International Girls Studies Association in 2011. We were of course very excited about these developments and fairly quickly became part of the Anglo-American contexts/networks of Girlhood Studies. However, in this exchange and in our reading of the discussions and the prevalent themes within the field we also felt puzzled. Puzzled both by the seemingly unquestioned belief about gender equality along the already tested and failed Nordic lines of gender likeness and gender integration. Puzzled, as always, by being met with such unfounded enthusiasm regarding Sweden as a social paradise. And this is indeed perhaps what Sweden has succeeded best with – the international marketing of the myth that all social problems have been resolved. Puzzled by seeing a simultaneous global and political centering of the girl, such as the United Nations establishment of the International Day of the Girl Child in 2011, that seemed to mirror the Nordic rhetoric of the girl as a key-agent for social change.

In this respect the Nordic experience can be viewed as a unique historical experience. When this experience becomes problematized and analysed it can offer and contribute with equally unique reflections, knowledges and questions in an international dialogue. As Nordic scholars we indeed have to be careful not to downplay the implications of the privileged position we are speaking from and

about. While at the same time not re-constructing a reductive, comparative, and linear, framework that places some places some countries ahead of others. Development is, perhaps unfortunately, indeed never linear. And we are always situated and always more local than global. And this is what I view, as both the main challenge and benefit of Girlhood Studies as a global research field; there are both connections and contrasts, both similarities and differences. For the field there therefore needs to be a constant comparative caution and reflexivity enough so that we are able to engage in a global intellectual dialogue that can untangle these diverse specificities without creating hierarchies or linear roads of progress and/or destinations.

### 3.

It is precisely this kind of intellectual exchange of mutual curiosity that has started to grow between *FlickForsk!* and the Gorbachev Foundation during the last couple of years. My reading of the themed issue, which we are celebrating today, has no doubt increased this feeling of curiosity. What an achievement on the part of the guest editors and contributors. And what a luxury to finally get access to such nuanced and informed analyses about girlhood in Russia and Eastern Europe both past and present, both in real life and in works of fiction. These are indeed exciting times within Girlhood Studies! But I should also use some of my time here to be honest. Reading the articles in the theme issue also left me with a feeling of a kind of frustrated bewilderment regarding my own ignorance. How is it possible to be an historian and know so little about contemporary Russia? How is it possible to be Swedish and be so unaware of books, movies, TV-shows, fashion trends that have shaped, and continues to shape, the lives of millions of girls in places not at all so far away from home?

However, I believe that the only way to address this frustration in a constructive way is to, with even more enthusiasm, engage in that elusive quest for increased knowledge and sharper thinking beyond restricting, and fundamentally anti-intellectual, preconceptions and stereotypes. All these wonderful things that indeed made us pursue the academic life in the first place. And for many of the researchers active in *FlickForsk!* this is precisely what it is all about; to provide spaces for curious and collaborative forms of dialogue about the diversities of girlhood and how girlhood interacts with temporal and spatial location, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, age and generation. We are not there yet, we still have much to learn, but we are learning. The exchange with the Gorbachev foundation is thus very much part of a humble ambition to understand, create better and more relevant and far-reaching knowledges than we possibly could if we isolated ourselves to what we are already aware of, too close to home or contexts which can be conveniently grasped and grabbed. When this ambition is put in relation to Girlhood Studies, as a global research field, such an approach is part of working for what could be called an intersectional turn in Girlhood Studies. An approach that is also highlighted by the guest editors in the introduction of the theme issue that brings us all here today. So this much I have gathered - we might be working in different contexts which requires a specific set of strategies, within different disciplinary backgrounds and with different content matter, but we are at least, at times, on the same page. I look forward to drafting, re-drafting, thinking and re-thinking on joint and collaborative pages in the future.