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Summary

This essay considers violence against women and self-determination in contemporary Sami society. It argues that in order for Sami self-determination become meaningful and viable, it must address women's concerns and needs, including security and freedom from violence. First, the essay examines recent incidents of sexual violence and responses to them in the Sami media. These incidents have eroded the traditional notion of Sami society as peaceful and free of violence. The essay considers also conceptions of "tradition", including traditional Sami notions of women that are often based on Christianity and in particular, Laestadianism. The essay then proceeds to discuss Sami women's views on self-determination and how they often are linked to the notion of individual autonomy and integrity. This discussion draws on interviews with fifteen Sami women conducted in Summer 2008. Like many other indigenous women, Sami women regard self-determination as a relational concept in which individual and collective dimensions are intertwined and interdependent. Moreover, according to these women, collective self-determination is most effectively practiced in the local level.

Violence Against Women, Indigenous Self-Determination and Autonomy in Sami Society

In the past decade, there has been an exponential growth of research on various aspects of indigenous peoples and self-determination. However, very few studies examine indigenous self-determination from a gendered perspective or apply a gender-based analysis. There is also a striking lack of research that consider whether and how the question of violence against women is related to self-determination and autonomy. Yet self-determination (both individual and collective) and gendered violence are among the most important and pressing issues for indigenous women worldwide. The reality is that existing indigenous self-governance arrangements have often failed to protect women from social and economic dispossession and from multilayered violence they experience in their own communities and in society at large. It has also become evident that current justice systems or existing structures do not adequately address violence against indigenous women (Koshan 1998; Russell 2008; Cameron 2008; Crnkovich 1995; Larsen and Petersen 2001).

Globally, gender violence is increasingly considered a serious human rights violation (Merry 2001; MacKinnon 2006). According to Amnesty International, violence against women is the biggest human rights violation of our time (Amnesty International 2007). Violence against women must be understood as belonging to the public sphere of human rights, not as a private concern as has often been the case with national policies. Private-public division has long prevented addressing violence as a societal, public concern. Although the liberal rights thinking has succeeded, at least to some extent, raising the issue of personal violence as a human rights violation, it has not been as successful in making structural violence in society visible (Peterson 1990; Youngs 2003).

While direct physical and sexual violence are the most severe manifestations of the oppression of women, they cannot be fully

understood if not analyzed as part of the larger framework and ideologies of domination. Catharine MacKinnon's definition of violence against women incorporates these two dimensions effectively:

By violence against women, I mean aggression against and exploitation of women because we are women, systemically and systematically. Systemic, meaning socially patterned, including sexual harassment, rape, battering of women by intimates, sexual abuse of children, and woman-killing in the context of poverty, imperialism, colonialism, and racism. Systematic, meaning intentionally organized, including prostitution, pornography, sex tours, ritual torture, and official custodial torture in which women are exploited and violated for sex, politics, and profit in a context of, and in intricate collaboration with, poverty, imperialism, colonialism, and racism. (MacKinnon 2006: 29)

This article considers violence against women and self-determination in contemporary Sami society. First, I examine some recent incidents of sexual violence and responses to them in the media. I then proceed to discuss Sami women's views on self-determination and how they often are linked to the notion of individual autonomy and integrity. The article argues that in order for Sami self-determination be meaningful and viable, it must address women's concerns and needs, including security and freedom from violence.

Physical and sexual violence against Sami women largely remains an unaddressed issue in Sami society. There is an oft-repeated myth according to which the Sami are a peaceful people exemplified by the fact that they never fought any wars. This myth was created in the 1960s particularly by well-meaning anthropologists who wanted to portray the Sami as the victims of outside settlement and development projects and as a people who "deserved" to be protected (Nickul 1970; Lehtola 1994; 2000). Whether Sami never fought any wars might be questionable, more significant in today's context is that those who created the myth and those who continue to uphold it remain blind to incidences of violence in Sami society.

What has gone most unnoticed is sexual violence such as incest, rape, sexual abuse, child molesting and other forms of sexual and physical violence both in past and present. Because of the shame surrounding sexual violence and the tendency to blame the women, incidences of rape and sexual harassment have largely remained unreported until very recently. There has been a particularly sharp escalation in sexual

abuse cases within a short period of time in Guovdageaidnu (Norway), one of the few Sami communities where the language and traditional livelihoods, especially reindeer herding, remain very strong.¹ The Sami head of the local police is quoted saying that the recent cases indicate that the situation in Sami society is not as good as people have previously thought (Pulk 2005b).

The Sami media took great interest in reporting various incidents of sexual abuse and also attempted some analysis. According to Sami psychiatrist Marit Triumf, one explanation for sexual violence can be found in the traditional upbringing of girls in Guovdageaidnu. Girls and women were expected to be chaste and say “no” even if they agreed to a man’s advances. It was the responsibility (or fault) of girls and women if the man could not contain himself and proceeded to have sex (Pulk 2005a). This was also the view of some elderly Sami women in Guovdageaidnu. According to them, the teenage girls who had been sexually harassed or abused have only themselves to blame because they do not cover their bodies properly (Utsi 2006).

There was, however, a whole array of important questions that were not raised in the Sami media that often focused on the shock value of the stories. From where and how do such “traditions” emerge? And are we really talking about Sami traditions? How do we know what is Sami tradition? Is it a Sami tradition if some elders say so? As a great variety of scholars have pointed out, “traditional” is a highly loaded and problematic concept. Cynthia Enloe argues that “tradition” is one of those concepts that allows us to take things for granted and to save our mental energies: “If something is accepted as being ‘traditional’... then it too can be swathed in a protective blanket, making it almost immune to bothersome questions” (Enloe 2004: 2). Moreover, uncritically invoking and reinscribing tradition often further marginalizes already disenfranchised groups in the community, such as indigenous women (Smith 2005b; Martin-Hill 2003; LaRocque 1997; Green 2004; Denetdale 2006; Eikjok 2000). Others have cautioned against “cultural deficit” explanations of violence against women. Analyzing two widely read books written by Norwegian scholars on the issue of forced marriages in Muslim communities in Norway, Sherene Razack criticizes their positions which “culturalize” violence against women by arguing that violence originates entirely in culture. By “culturalizing” violence, these analyses obscure “the multiple factors that give rise to and sustain violence” (Razack 2004).

What also remained unexamined was why these elderly Sami women were so ready to defend grown-up men rather than girls who are the victims of sexual abuse? Blaming women is common in contemporary societies, including Sami society. One can find examples of it in popular culture (e.g., movies), literature and even in everyday language use. It is so prevalent (though usually indirect) that many women and girls internalize these views themselves. In a similar fashion, views according to which the sexual abuse of teenage Sami girls is rooted in high unemployment rates can be seen a way of exculpating the male perpetrators. If unemployment is a cause for sexual abuse, why don't unemployed Sami women abuse children to the same extent? If sexual abuse is caused by unemployment, what does it tell about the male values and masculinity? Such explanations suggest that sexual abuse of those in society who have the least possibilities to defend themselves is a pastime for adult men when they do not have anything else to do. One sometimes hears also that men in contemporary indigenous societies rely on violence because they have lost so much (their identities, livelihoods, roles in their communities) in the wake of colonization. Such explanations, however, have been challenged by research on indigenous communities in North America. These studies show that the traditional roles and activities of indigenous women have changed at least as much as those of men. The only thing that has not changed for indigenous women is giving birth and child rearing. As one scholar argues, office work is as far from women's traditional activities as is building roads from that of men's traditional livelihoods (Ackerman 2002).

In order to find some answers to the questions above can be found in the past and the history of Sami colonization. Since the mid-1800s, Laestadianism, an evangelical, revivalist movement inside the Lutheran Church influential in the Northern parts of Scandinavia,² has had a particularly strong effect in Sami society. It has introduced certain concepts of female piety and humility in addition to common Christian dualistic notions of women as either good or evil.³ Christianity and Laestadianism in particular, have affected Sami society for several generations. Therefore, contemporary perceptions of and attitudes toward women – including those of elderly Sami women – in Sami society are a multilayered blend of influences of various origins and from different periods of time, making it relatively difficult to trace back the “traditions” around Sami upbringing or “traditional” views of women and girls.

Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith argues that sexual violence in indigenous societies is inseparably connected to colonization (Smith 2005b). In other words, the subjugation of indigenous communities relied on the subjugation of women. Because indigenous societies were largely egalitarian characterized by complementary gender roles, to successfully colonize them was to first establish and naturalize hierarchy through the introduction of patriarchy (Smith 2005a: 23).⁴ For Smith, the link between state violence and interpersonal violence is most obvious in the history and abusive legacy of boarding schools. She notes: “Before colonization, Native societies were, for the most part, not male dominated. ... Violence against women and children was infrequent or unheard of in many tribes. Native peoples did not use corporal punishment against their children. ... In boarding schools, by contrast, sexual/physical/emotional violence proliferated” (Smith 2005b: 126).

The Sami also have a history of boarding schools (see Tjelle 2000; Blind 2004; Aikio-Launiemi 1995; Magga 1997; Minde 2005; Rasmus 2006; Valkonen 1998; Valle 1998). Thus far, however, abuse or other traumatic experiences that took place in boarding schools have not been addressed in any serious or systematic manner in Sami society although there clearly is a need and desire to start individual and collective healing (Pieski 2011; Rasmus 2006). As in North America, the history and abusive legacy of boarding schools have largely remained unacknowledged also by the dominant society.⁵ As Smith argues, this has resulted in individualizing the trauma and increased personal shame and self-blame but also continuing the cycle of abuse by inflicting violence on self and others. In order to start the process of healing, the sexual, physical and psychological abuse experienced in boarding schools needs to be recognized as a human rights violation (Smith 2005b). Individual and collective healing from historic trauma is also considered a prerequisite for capacity-building and self-determination in indigenous communities (Lavoie, O’Neil et al. 2008; Warry 1998; Calliou 2008; Monture-Angus 1998).

Many indigenous women, however, have been critical of the standard interpretations of the concept of self-determination. Some have suggested that indigenous conceptions of sovereignty and autonomy should not be confused with foreign concepts such as self-determination or European notions of sovereignty which consider it in terms of power, authority and domination. For many indigenous women, sovereignty is practiced through everyday practices as well as through ceremonies. It recognizes human interdependence with the surrounding ecosystems and the

importance of reciprocity. Sovereignty and autonomy are embedded and encoded in individual and collective responsibilities sometimes called the laws that lay the foundation of indigenous societies.⁶

In fact, sovereignty is often understood and articulated as responsibilities. Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture-Angus, who points out the discrepancy of perceptions of the concept of sovereignty between the Canadian legal and political system and Aboriginal peoples, defines sovereignty as the right to be responsible. Defined this way, sovereignty is “a question of identity (both individual and collective) more than it is a question of an individualized property right” (Monture-Angus 1998: 36). Monture-Angus offers a Mohawk word *tewatatha:wi* (‘we carry ourselves’) to better reflect the understanding of sovereignty as collective and individual responsibility. This responsibility starts at an individual level with an understanding of who one is and how to carry oneself accordingly, and expands to the collective level (nations, clans and families) (Monture-Angus 1998). Further, as Menominee human rights activist Ingrid Washinawatok notes, “These responsibilities are manifest through our ceremonies” (Washinawatok 1999: 23). She explains that in indigenous worldviews, “[s]acred is not separate from responsibility and daily existence. From the mundane to the momentous, sovereignty is an integral part of the foundation that anchors our culture, society and organizational structures” (Washinawatok 1999: 23). Therefore, she maintains, sovereignty extends beyond the political context and should not be fragmented or redefined into artificial categories.

In Summer 2008, I interviewed 15 Sami women ranging from 30s to 70s of age from two neighbouring Sami communities: Kárášjohka (Karasjok) in Norway and Ohcejohka (Utsjoki) in Finland as part of a larger research project on indigenous women and self-determination. Based on their involvement in Sami political life, the participants can be divided into three groups: eight women were not and had not been involved in Sami political institutions⁷ (although several were or had been active in Sami society in other ways such as through other Sami organizations), three had been previously involved and four were currently members of the Sami Parliament either in Norway or Finland.⁸

Nearly all participants defined “self-determination” as an ability, freedom or right to make decisions over one’s own affairs both at individual and collective levels. Several women, especially those involved in Sami politics focused on the collective dimension of self-determination.

One woman defined self-determination as a right to live as Sami and for two women it implied equal rights and decision-making powers between men and women. Three women discussed the lack of women's self-determination traditionally in Sami society. One woman who grew up in a reindeer-herding family noted how she was excluded from reindeer herding activities once she got herself an education: "In the minute I went to school I was shut out." In paper, she still had the right to reindeer herding but at the time she returned home, reindeer herding was not considered to be for women. Girls were, in her words, "educated away."⁹

Also one of the representatives of the Sami Parliament¹⁰ underlined the paramount significance of individual self-determination. In her view, self-determination starts with the individual's right to decide over one's body, life and livelihood in society. For her, it was important to emphasize individual self-determination especially with regard to women, their sexuality and reproductive rights. "If individual self-determination is not in place, we will encounter difficulties at other levels – the Sami cannot have collective self-determination if it does not exist at the individual level, particularly if women don't have it. It must be realized and exist at all levels," she maintained.

Several anthropological studies show that traditionally in many indigenous societies, individual autonomy has been highly valued (e.g., Brody 1988; Ridington 1990; Balto 1997). If we define individual autonomy as personal agency, a capacity and ability to make informed choices and a possibility to participate in social life, it is not difficult to see how individual self-determination is necessary for a meaningful collective autonomy of indigenous peoples (cf. Napoleon 2005). Social or cultural practices that infringe the individual autonomy of some groups in society (such as women) also undermine the collective autonomy. For example, a brochure titled "Sovereign Women Strengthen Sovereign Nations" by Sacred Circle, the U.S.-based National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women explains the relationship between the sovereignty of Native women and the sovereignty of Native nations. It also maintains that, "Framing the issue of violence against Native women as an issue of sovereignty has proven to be an effective strategy for educating tribal elected and traditional leadership about the inherent rights of Native women" (Sacred Circle n.d.: n.p.).

When I was living in Guovdageaidnu, I was told a few times about an elderly Sami reindeer herding woman who took the floor at a conference

on equality held in town. She is recorded of stating that, “we don’t need equality – what is going to happen when men start making decisions!” This example clearly indicates that at least some women and within some livelihoods (especially in reindeer herding) Sami women have held and may still hold a relatively strong position and personal autonomy. Other examples, however, demonstrate otherwise – that personal agency and the capacity and ability to make informed choices and the possibility to participate in social life might not be as great as we may think. In some cases, Sami women may have possibilities to participate on the political and societal level, but at the same time lack control over their own bodies. Autonomy, therefore, is a much broader concept than political self-determination of a people, and we need to conceptualize and perceive it both on individual and collective levels. When we talk about equality in a society, it is necessary to consider both aspects and their complexities within. One aspect is gender equality on an individual level, or women’s personal autonomy, which cannot be erased or sacrificed in the name of collective autonomy, as has often happened in indigenous societies (e.g., Gutiérrez and Palomo 2000; Napoleon 2005; Smith 2005b).¹¹

On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind that equality may mean different things in different societies. For example Kate Shanley argues that the American Indian movement seeks to advance equality in two ways that do not concern women in mainstream societies: “(1) on the individual level, the Indian woman struggles to promote the survival of a social structure whose organizational principles represent notions of family different from those of the mainstream; and (2) on the societal level, the people seek sovereignty as a people in order to maintain a vital legal and spiritual connection to the land, in order to *survive* as a people” (Shanley 1988).¹²

As central dimension of their critiques of dominant self-determination discourses and practices, indigenous women have been calling for different and alternative forms of autonomy that are not based on domination, violence or coercion but instead, on indigenous worldviews, knowledge and values such as interdependence and mutual reciprocity as well as on the agency, rights and needs of indigenous women. Alternative forms can take several forms: the revitalization of traditional forms of governance and political roles of women as hereditary chiefs, clan mothers or members of women’s councils (Parisi and Corntassel 2007; Anderson 2009), the interrogation and transformation of the project of sovereignty and nation-building (Smith and Kauanui 2008) and the

creation of “new diplomatic spaces at the global, regional, state, and local levels to pursue simultaneous negotiations for both their individual rights as women and collective rights as members of Indigenous nations” (Parisi and Corntassel 2007: 82; also Belausteguigoitia 2005; Marcos 2005; Gutiérrez and Palomo 2000). Some indigenous feminist scholars have, however, cautioned of uncritical employment of “traditions” or reinstatement of traditional forms of governance, pointing out that traditions (including those respecting women) do not necessarily protect women’s individual rights or advance women’s leadership. In some cases, domination and patriarchal structures have been re-inscribed in the name of “indigenous traditions” (LaRocque 1997; Nahanee 1993; Green 2001; Martin-Hill 2003; Denetdale 2006).

For most interviewed Sami women, self-determination is a relational concept rooted in principles shared by many other indigenous people. In her analysis of two conceptions of self-determination, Iris Marion Young (2007) argues that a relational interpretation of self-determination reflects better both reality and indigenous peoples’ claims for the right to self-determination. In her view, the dominant understanding of self-determination as non-interference, separation and independence is misleading and also a dangerous fiction. Drawing on feminist political theory, she argues that the precept of non-interference “does not properly take account of social relationships and possibilities for domination” (Young 2007: 46). It also creates an illusion of independence which in fact is constituted by institutional relations and a system of domination. A relational conception of self-determination, on the other hand, recognizes the power dynamics and interdependence while simultaneously respects the autonomy of individuals as agents (rather than atomized individuals). For Young, non-interference is largely neither desirable nor possible in today’s interconnected and interdependent world.¹³

Several interviewed Sami women emphasized the relational nature of self-determination. They pointed out the individual and collective responsibility of taking others into consideration in decision-making in ways that also recognize the rights and claims of others who might be affected. They also considered individual autonomy – the ability for being in control over one’s body and decisions – important. At the same time, they all recognized the significance of Sami governance institutions and the precept of collective self-determination – what Young calls the indigenous peoples’ “quest for an institutional context of nondomination” (Young 2007: 50). Importantly, all of these principles were fully congruous – not

oppositional – with one another and to Sami women’s understanding of the concept of self-determination in general and Sami self-determination specifically. In other words, collective and individual dimensions of self-determination are not incompatible and should not be constructed as such as is often done.

Sami women’s perceptions of self-determination also reflect principles of traditional indigenous governance understood in terms of decentralized power, localized decision-making (often through processes of consensus) and voluntary compliance with authority (cf. Alfred 1999: 92). Three of the interviewed women explicitly stated that collective self-determination must primarily take place on the local level rather than through centralized institutions and several others discussed the paralyzing effect of the establishment of the Sami Parliaments. In short, many interviewed women wanted more effective ways to participate in decision-making with regard to issues such as land use and management and traditional Sami livelihoods. They saw the current efforts of Sami self-determination abstract and irrelevant only insofar as it was constituted through centralized institutions of the Sami Parliaments. Further, at the local level women might be also more eager and prepared to take power, make public statements and apply their knowledge, skills and understanding in advancing Sami governance – points made by some interviewees as critiques for women’s lack of participation in Sami political institutions.

This article has discussed some issues related to violence against women, indigenous self-determination and autonomy in Sami society. I have considered these questions here only in fairly general terms because there is hardly any previous research that examines Sami self-determination from a gendered perspective. In my current research project, I hope to shed more light to these issues that many women consider crucial for their personal and collective well-being.¹⁴ As is the case in many other indigenous communities, Sami women see individual and collective autonomy and political agency as inseparable. In other words, one cannot be reclaimed without attending to the other. Moreover, indigenous women have increasingly challenged the premise that indigenous struggles for their collective rights is paralyzed and disrupted by women-specific demands or calls for equality rights. They have called for a critical examination of commonplace notions of indigenous autonomy and sovereignty and forcefully argued that a viable collective indigenous autonomy and the survival of indigenous societies at large depend on women’s individual and collective agency and autonomy.

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Notes

¹ In the municipality of Guovdageaidnu with the population of 3,000, there were 16 reported cases of rape in 2005, three times more than the previous year (Utsi 2005).

² The movement was named after its founder, Lars Levi Laestadius (1800-1861) who was of South Sami ancestry and who travelled across Samiland preaching and delivering his healing sermons, which partly drew upon Sami culture and oral traditions. A central characteristic of the Laestadian faith is the confession of sins followed by absolution "in the name and blood of Jesus." Laestadianism requires an abstinence from alcohol and disapproval of contraception.

³ Such perceptions of women are evident, for example, in some of the works of Sami writers, including Eino Guttorm, a male writer who has been criticized of his dualistic, simplistic descriptions of Sami women (see Guttorm 1998). In her collection of short stories *Guovtteoaiivat nisu* ("Two-Headed Woman"), Kirsti Paltto analyzes common images and representations of Sami women in a society strongly influenced by Christianity (see Poikajärvi 1996). For perspectives on the legacies of Laestadianism, see Paltto (1998), Lukkari (1998) and Juuso (1998).

⁴ For egalitarian and complementary gender roles in Sami society, see Bäckman (1982).

⁵ Minna Rasmus notes that as of 2008, no in-depth research has been conducted on Sami boarding schools in the Nordic countries. She points out that due to lack of funding, at least two research projects on the topic were not able to proceed because the funding agencies did not consider them worthwhile (Rasmus 2006).

⁶ The term "customary law" has been critiqued by many scholars (e.g., Schouls 2003; Cunneen and Schwartz 2005; Woodman n.d.; Napoleon 2006). Val Napoleon argues that, "From the perspective of positivist theory, custom is simple law for simple societies. In contrast, centralized legal systems comprise a highly evolved, multi-tiered complexity – and are therefore superior." Instead of examining the various practices of indigenous customary law, she calls for an investigation of "the intellectual or reasoning processes that are necessary for the collaborative analysis and practice of law, management of conflict, and governance generally" (Napoleon 2006: 7).

⁷ For the purposes of this article, the term 'Sámi political institutions' refers to the main formal political bodies which include the three elected Sámi Parliaments and the Sámi Council (NGO representing the Sámi in all four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia).

⁸ A more extensive discussion and analysis based on these interviews can be found in Kuokkanen (2011). See also Kuokkanen (2012).

⁹ This continues to be the case today. The Sámi newspaper *Ávvir* recently reported of a 21-year old Sámi woman who grew up in a reindeer herding family but is not able to make it her livelihood because the "normal" practice is that the family herd goes to the sons (see Guttorm Johansen 2010).

¹⁰ In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, the article will not specify between the Sámi Parliaments in Finland and Norway unless required for clarity.

¹¹ This debate has been going on for quite some time among other indigenous peoples, especially in Canada. Since 1982, the major question has been whether Canada's Human Rights Charter applies Aboriginal communities. Some Aboriginal leaders have argued that gender equality is not an issue and that it does not apply to sovereign nations. These arguments have been opposed by many Aboriginal women (e.g., Green 2001; 2005; Moss 1990; Monture 2004; Nahanee 1997; Medicine 1993). For example, lawyer Teresa Nahanee maintains that collective self-determination is dependent on the individual rights and possibilities to self-determination (see Green 2000: 338).

¹² Others have pointed out that indigenous peoples' demands to their rights are not merely about equality but they are founded on historical existence (Green 2001).

¹³ She makes an exception with regard to a people's "prima facie right to set its own governance procedures and make its own decisions about its activities, without interference from others" (Young 2007: 51)

¹⁴ My research project titled "Gendering Self-Determination: Comparing Indigenous Women in Canada, Greenland and the Nordic Countries" is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (2011-2014).