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Indigenous Women in Traditional Economies: The Case of Sámi Reindeer Herding

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The Sámi are the indigenous people of Sápmi (Sámi land), a territory that today spans central Norway and Sweden through northern Finland to the Kola Peninsula of Russia, with an estimated population of between 75,000 and 100,000 people. Historically, Sámi society was organized locally by the extended family system called the *siida*. Each *siida* had its own tribunal to look after such matters as hunting and fishing disputes and disputes over territory between two *siidas*. The *siida* system was the early model for Sámi self-determination, a freedom that was, however, ignored and gradually erased by the colonizing states. From the 1800s onward, harsh assimilatory policies toward the Sámi were imple-

mented in the Nordic countries, mainly in the name of education and social welfare. According to the Nordic governments, the need for education and social welfare could be fulfilled only through learning the majority language of the governing country. In Norway, for instance, teachers were paid a bonus if they succeeded in teaching Norwegian to Sámi students. In 1902 a law was passed mandating that land could be owned only by a citizen who both knew and used Norwegian.

This article gives an overview of the ways in which gender issues arise in state regulation of reindeer herding, one of the main traditional livelihoods of the Sámi, and, consequently, in state regulation of the Sámi. It shows how government practices have failed to take into account women's roles in reindeer herding and have enacted policies that selectively disadvantage and disenfranchise women, leading them to leave reindeer herding as an occupation.

Sámi women

Like women in many other indigenous or traditional societies in the world, women in Sámi society historically were regarded as equal to men, a dynamic characterized by a symmetrical complementarity of domains, roles, and tasks (Bäckman 1982). As a result, Sámi women were independent and possessed power and control over certain domains. Often these spheres were domestic and private, but in some cases they were also economic. Traditionally, reindeer-herding women in particular were often in charge of their family economies (Solem [1933] 1970; Sámi Instituhtta 1979; Bäckman 1982).

Moreover, it was customary practice for women and men to own separate properties. Skolt Sámi women, for example, traditionally owned everything that they prepared and made, including clothing for their husbands. Women and men also managed their own loans (Paulaharju 1921). According to Sámi customary law, women and men inherited on an equal basis; it was also common for a Sámi widow to move back to her own family and community, taking her property with her (Balto 1997). Further, Erik Solem ([1933] 1970) proposes that Sámi naming customs and terminology indicate a relatively strong matrilineal and matrilocal tradition. This does not mean, however, that patrilineal practices did or do not exist in Sámi society, nor can Solem's findings be considered proof of the equal status of Sámi women in contemporary society.

Sámi women's participation in traditional economies

Patriarchal ways of thinking and laws have changed traditional gender roles in indigenous societies in many ways. This can be seen, for example, in current structural inequality within traditional economies, particularly reindeer herding (Joks 2001; Sára 2003a, 2003b). Sámi women have been pushed to the margins of reindeer herding for several decades. Particularly since 1945, government policies have made Sámi women invisible in the livelihood in which they had always played a prominent role. In many cases, these policies have erased women's traditionally held right of reindeer ownership. In official records, reindeer-owning Sámi women have been registered, since 1978, under their husbands' names, thereby losing their membership in the organizational unit for reindeer herding. This act has had ramifications ranging from who receives subsidies and grants to the status and recognition of women within a livelihood that is often considered one of the central markers of Sáminess and Sámi identity (Sámi Instituhtta 1979; Sára 1990–91, 2003b; Joks 2001).

These continuing patriarchal and sexist policies can also make it very difficult for reindeer-herding Sámi women to continue their traditional livelihoods if, for example, there is a divorce or if the husband dies, as recent examples illustrate. In 2005 in Kárásjohka, Norwegian Sámiland, a young Sámi woman who separated from her husband lost her share of reindeer-herding subsidies. She and her husband had shared a reindeer-owning household, but she had always had her own reindeer and reindeer mark, a mark in the reindeer's ear that indicates ownership and is cut by the owner. Upon divorce, however, the full amount of subsidies was paid to her ex-husband, although she had the custody of their three small children. In cases of divorce, the Reindeer Herding Act in Norway does not indicate how subsidies ought to be distributed, nor does the director of the Reindeer Herding Administration want to get involved, arguing that it is the responsibility of the household to find a way to share the subsidies (Utsi 2005b).

Some Sámi female politicians, however, are concerned with this situation and note how issues such as divorce have never been discussed properly within the Reindeer Herding Act. This act, which came into force in 1978, did not protect the rights of both husbands and wives but only those of the heads of reindeer-owning households, who were and still are mostly men.¹ Although the act was amended in 1996 and own-

¹ In Norway, where only Sámi can own reindeer, only 17 percent of women are heads of reindeer households, although 45 percent of reindeer owners are women. These women

ership rights were extended to the spouse of the owner, nothing was said about the rights upon a divorce—still a taboo topic in reindeer-herding communities, in which, traditionally, separation has been rare. Usually it is the women who lose their economic and livelihood rights, although there has been at least one case in which a woman, upon her divorce, kept the reindeer household while her ex-husband kept the reindeer but lost his rights to the pasture and the household (Utsi 2005a).² Another recent case involved an older Sámi woman who lost the right to the family summer pasture after the death of her husband. Their summer pasture area—where reindeer herders are mandated to migrate annually according to the Reindeer Herding Act—was seized by other reindeer herders of the area, making it impossible for the widow and her son to conduct the annual summer migration. As a result, the Reindeer Herding Administration threatened the family with a forced slaughter of their herd (Utsi 2006).

Jorunn Eikjok suggests that, currently, reindeer herding is commonly regarded both inside and outside Sámi society as synonymous with men's activities, while in reality, women continue to “stand for much of the production and . . . for a versatile management of the resources” (Eikjok 1992, 7). Women are also more likely to keep up the traditional Sámi *verdde* system, the practice of establishing and sustaining economic relations and social bonds with individuals and families of different livelihoods (Eikjok 1992). Moreover, Sámi scholar Solveig Joks (2001) contends that if reindeer herding is viewed only as a meat industry, which has been the approach of state policies and regulations since the 1950s, rather than as a traditional way of life, women's input and their role are made invisible. This view has also been adopted by Sámi reindeer-herding associations and represented in their politics, which generally do not recognize the special tasks of Sámi women as part of the community livelihood (Eikjok 1988; Joks 2001). This has resulted in an increased number of women leaving reindeer herding and moving to other livelihoods and occupations (Landbruksdepartementet 1991–92).

own approximately one-third of all the reindeer (Utsi 2005). The Norwegian Sámi Reindeer Herders' Association also continues to be strongly male dominated. With an executive board that is only 22 percent female, the organization breaks the Norwegian law that requires a minimum 40 percent of women representatives on organizations' boards (Utsi 2005c).

² “Reindeer household” is an administrative term that refers to the family members within one unit. Even if a woman owns her own reindeer mark and herd, she is regarded as belonging to the household, in which the man is usually the head.

Conclusion

Policies and laws imposed by the nation-states regulating and controlling reindeer herding and the way of life associated with it are an excellent resource for investigating the interconnectedness of colonial and patriarchal discrimination and domination. Government policies have made women invisible in the livelihood in which they have always played a central role. In many cases, they have erased women's traditionally held right of ownership over their own reindeer and, in official records, have placed reindeer-owning Sámi women under their husbands.

Restructuring indigenous societies from subsistence production into market economies dependent on trading goods has brought about far-reaching political and cultural transformations in indigenous societies in general. Global capitalist discourses have inherited legacies of colonial law that sought to exterminate indigenous peoples by outlawing their practices and livelihoods that do not conform to the logic and values of Western societies. Today the same results—making the conditions for indigenous cultures and livelihoods impossible—are achieved through the naturalized discourses of profit and development. Reindeer herding has gradually been made next to impossible by various gestures of colonial encroachment starting from the establishment of the nation-state borders in the eighteenth century to more recent processes such as hydroelectric development, logging, mining, and tourism. The process of incorporating indigenous societies into the capitalist economy has also been highly gendered and has had many gender-specific consequences. In the case of Sámi women, it has resulted in the loss of both their status and visibility in their livelihood and in policies regulating it. This has led to changes in reindeer-herding activities, which in turn has radically reshaped communal work practices and introduced a new, gendered division of labor.

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