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Chapter Four

MYTHS AND REALITIES OF SAMI WOMEN

A Post-colonial Feminist Analysis for the Decolonization and Transformation of Sami Society

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In Sami society, there is a common and persistent image of strong Sami women (see, for example, Aikio 1998; Lukkari 1998). While this may be true in some cases both traditionally and presently, I argue in this chapter that there is a pressing need to revisit this myth as it may hinder the necessary processes of decolonization and healing of contemporary Sami women and Sami society at large.

The Sami are the Indigenous people of Northern Europe who, in the course of colonial history, have been divided by the nation-states of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.¹ Faced with similar colonial practices of assimilation, usurpation of territories and eradication of languages and cultures as other Indigenous peoples worldwide, the Sami have, since the late 1960s, been engaged in a process of reclaiming their self-determination and rights to land, language and cultural heritage.

Compared to many other Indigenous peoples, such as the Maori in Aotearoa and First Nations/Native Americans on Turtle Island, the Sami fall behind in critically examining the effects of colonial and assimilation policies on us and in embarking on the path to decolonizing and reshaping the various spheres of Sami society. Quite obviously, this analysis would necessarily include an in-depth assessment of women's conditions and realities beyond "the traditional roles of Sami women." As other Indigenous women scholars have pointed out, it is necessary to critically assess the numerous ways in which colonial and patriarchal policies and practices have affected and still affect Indigenous societies (Green and Voyageur 1999; Irwin 1988; LaRocque 1996; Mihesuah 2003; L. T. Smith 1999; Green 2001). Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that it is not only Indigenous women but the entire society that is negatively affected, for example, through psychological stress, mental disorders, identity crises, self-hatred, violence, increased alcoholism and other social problems. As a result, Indigenous communities experience breakup of families, communication gaps between generations and loss of connection with traditional livelihoods and the land, forcing many people to move away from their communities to cities (Mihesuah 2003).

MYTHS AND REALITIES OF SAMI WOMEN

When critically employed, particularly post-colonial feminist analyses of patriarchal hegemony can be useful in the process of decolonizing contemporary Sami society. "Post-colonial" here refers to the critical analysis and deconstruction of colonial discourses, practices and relations of power, and it does not suggest that colonialism belongs to the past. As patriarchy is an inseparable part of colonization, trying to dismantle one without the other may prove both ineffective and inadequate. I suggest that the confluence of Indigenous and feminist discourses (which are by no means singular or homogeneous) may help to move beyond stereotypical misunderstandings of feminism prevalent in Sami society and offer a more attentive understanding and critical perspective of the ways in which colonial practices always overlap with patriarchy and gender imbalances. In this chapter, I discuss three themes affecting Sami women and their participation in Sami society: challenges Sami women face in participating in political processes; discriminatory reindeer herding policies and practices; and sexual violence against women and girls. First, however, I consider the myth of strong Sami women more closely to establish a context for my discussion.

THE MYTH OF STRONG SAMI WOMEN

While there are Sami women who feel it is artificial to separate women from the rest of their communities, there are others who are forging a strong feminist agenda and contesting the myths of "strong Sami matriarchs," which are often employed to ignore demands by Sami women's organizations and groups. According to Sami feminist scholar Jorunn Eikjok, notions of powerful Sami women and traditional Sami society as matriarchal are myths created by the Sami ethnopolitical movement in the 1970s, which needed to distinguish the Sami people from the surrounding Nordic peoples and cultures.² Until the late 1980s, it was common in the Sami movement to stress that Sami women were not as oppressed as Nordic women and that in Sami society, women were equal with men.³ Besides as a marker of distinctiveness, the notion of strong Sami women also had to do with a desired ideal of Sami society rather than the everyday reality of Sami women. Today, this myth is often used against Sami women who advocate women's issues, particularly by Sami men who have either internalized the myth or who benefit from the patriarchal system that is the reality of contemporary Sami society (Eikjok 2000). A common way to disregard Sami women's concerns is to refer to the fact that Sami women are already "better off" than Sami men because they are stronger and because the loss of traditional livelihoods has not impacted them as radically as men.⁴

In daily life, Sami women are often torn between two sets of demands. On the one hand, they are required to uphold cultural values and customs connected with the traditional subsistence economy and on the other, they

are required to fulfill the expectations placed upon contemporary women. Eikjok suggests that this is due to the internalization of patriarchal social relations in Sami society while at the same time, there is very little social or societal support for Sami women's efforts. The adoption of the mainstream gender roles and devaluation of the private sphere has had the effect of diminishing the status of Sami women also in the public sphere (Eikjok 1988; 1990; see also Paltto 1989).

To critique the stereotype of strong Sami women does not imply that it has not existed in traditional Sami society. Like many other Indigenous and/or traditional societies in the world, women in Sami society historically had a form of equality with men, characterized by a symmetrical complementarity of domains, roles and tasks. Sami scholar of religion and history Louise Bäckman notes: "In a society in which hunting is a prerequisite for survival itself, it is obvious that everyone, regardless of sex, shared the burden of work, and that the division of labour is made upon a practical basis" (1982: 148).

The symmetrical complementarity of domains, roles and tasks resulted in a situation where Sami women were independent and possessed power and control over certain domains. Often these spheres were domestic and private but in some cases also economic. Erik Solem (1970), a Norwegian sexton in the Sami community of Tana in the early twentieth century, observed the respected and independent status of Sami women both within the family and in society at large. Traditionally, particularly reindeer herding women were often in charge of their family economies (Solem 1970; Valkeapää 1988; Bäckman 1982; Sámi Instituhtta 1979).

Moreover, it was customary for women and men to have separate professions. Skolt Sami women, for example, traditionally owned everything that they prepared and made, including clothing for their husbands. Women and men also used to manage their own loans (Paulaharju 1921). According to Sami customary law, women and men inherited on equal footing. It was also common for a Sami widow to move back to her own family and community, taking her property with her (Balto 1997). Further, Solem (1970) proposes that Sami naming customs and terminology indicate a relatively strong matrilinearity and matrilocality. This does not mean, however, that patrilinearity did or does not exist in Sami society, nor can Solem's findings be considered a proof of the equal status of Sami women in contemporary society.

Sami educator Asta Balto's (1997) study on Sami gender roles and control partially supports the ethnographic information above. There have been and there are Sami women who have a higher status and more power than others. The status of a Sami woman might be dependent on her family and wealth. Today, matrilocality is no longer more common than patrilocality,

and traditions have been replaced by practical factors such as employment. Balto contends that both matrilinearity and patrilinearity are common and important in Sami society. She points out, however, that modernization of Sami society especially since the mid-1950s changed many of these practices and customs, an indication of the influence of patriarchal ideologies that followed the societal changes (Balto 1997).

It is these subtle and sometimes not so subtle influences that many Sami, including women, are reluctant to address or analyze, preferring to fall back on the argument of strength and power of Sami women. Personally, I have witnessed many occasions where Sami representatives (at conferences, symposia, meetings, etc.) are asked about the role and status of Sami women. It is interesting how Sami male representatives always very politely let their female counterparts reply, as if they have no knowledge or authority over these issues. When the question is asked directly of a Sami man, a standard response is to invoke the notion of strong Sami women, usually accompanied with a story either about the "matriarch" mother in the man's family or a personal encounter with a "strong Sami woman." I have never witnessed a Sami man telling about the less glamorous realities of Sami women, either past or present, such as institutional discrimination within traditional or contemporary livelihoods, or the negative influence of Christianity on general attitudes and perceptions of women in Sami society, not to mention domestic and sexual violence against Sami women — an issue that very much remains a taboo among the Sami.

In *No Beginning, No End: The Sami Speak Up* (Helander and Kailo 1998a), an anthology of front-line Sami artists and cultural workers discussing and analyzing current issues affecting the Sami people and culture, several contributors address the influence of Christianity on women. Sami writers Kirsti Paltto (1998) and Rauni Magga Lukkari (1998) and Sami musician Inga Juuso (1998) suggest that Christian ideology has introduced a hierarchical understanding between genders, prioritizing men and resulting in low self-esteem of many Sami women.⁵ Since the mid-1800s, Laestadianism, an evangelical, revivalist movement inside the Lutheran Church influential in the Northern parts of Scandinavia,⁶ 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.⁷

In other words, Christianity and Laestadianism in particular have affected Sami society for several generations. Contemporary perceptions of and attitudes toward women in Sami society are, therefore, an entangled combination of influences of various origins and from different periods of time, making it rather difficult trace back the traditional status and roles of Sami women (whatever is implied by the always problematic notion of "tra-

ditional"). While the Sami as a people have been colonized by surrounding nation-states, many Sami women have also been oppressed and susceptible to sexism and male violence within their own communities. Though not a new phenomenon, anecdotes and also official reports about such incidents are only now beginning to surface in Sami society.

SAMI WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Inspired by several other civil and human rights movements around the world, the Sami women's movement culminated in the establishment of the Sami women's organization *Sáráhkká* in 1978.⁸ Many of the women involved in the organization had been (and in many cases, remain) active in the Sami ethnopolitical movement and other forms of cultural revitalization that emerged in the early 1970s (Eidheim 1997). The history of the struggle for Sami rights, however, goes back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this struggle, Sami women have always had a central and significant role.

The first national Sami conference, in 1917, was organized particularly due to the efforts and vision of Elsa Laula Renberg (1877–1930), the chair of the first Sami women's organization. She also established the first (though short-lived) national Sami organization in 1904 and several local associations in both the Swedish and Norwegian sides of Samiland. A well-known figure of the time, Renberg actively promoted Sami land rights and livelihoods and advocated the education of women. Despite her deep commitment to her people — she even wrote a pamphlet entitled "Life or Death," in which she encouraged Sami to claim their rights to land — Renberg's role in the early Sami rights movement has usually been minimized or left out in historical accounts (including those written by Sami men), which focus on her male contemporaries and their activities (Lundmark 1978; Stien 1976; Hirvonen 2000).

Sami women also played a central role in the Alta River conflict in the late 1970s and early 1980s, although their actions have generally received much less attention than those of the male activists. The Alta River conflict, considered a watershed in Sami-Nordic relations, involved a plan by the Norwegian government to build a hydroelectric dam in Northern Norway (see, for example, Brantenberg 1985; Paine 1982; Parmann 1980; Sanders 1980). In its original form, the dam would have submerged the Sami village of Måze (Masi) and a considerable portion of important reindeer grazing and calving areas in the heart of the reindeer herding region. The government plans were met with unexpected resistance by the Sami as well as by environmentalists and fishers who wanted to protect the salmon river. The conflict culminated in a massive demonstration at the construction site by the river and a hunger strike in the front of the Norwegian Parliament building

in Oslo in 1979. The office of the Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland was occupied by fourteen Sami women in 1981. The prime minister met with the Sami women but did not consider their concerns worthy of her time and left the meeting after half an hour.⁹ The women refused to leave the office and the next morning were forcibly removed by the police. In spite of my close connection to the conflict — my parents attended the demonstration by the river — I only recently learned from a Sami newspaper about these fourteen women and their action. Ignored in most accounts of the Sami political movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the fourteen women and their actions were finally recognized in 2005 by the Norwegian Sami Association in a special ceremony (Min Áigi 2005).

The forms of Sami women's activism have had and continue to have several objectives and concerns not limited to issues stereotypically associated with women's organizations. They include revitalizing and maintaining the Sami language and cultural heritage, promoting the participation of Sami women in leadership (see Nystad 1995; Stordahl 1990) and increasing Sami women's economic opportunities as well as fighting for the recognition of previously held economic rights within traditional livelihoods, particularly reindeer herding (Joks 2001; Sára 2002).

Although there are several Sami women in prominent political positions, a large number of contemporary Sami women do not consider running for office at local or regional levels such as in municipal or Sami Parliament elections. The three Sami parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland — elected bodies representing the Sami especially at the national level to their respective state governments — have been male-dominated, and in the case of Sweden and Finland, continue to be so (the percentage of women is 35 and 21 respectively). The Norwegian Sami Parliament has had special campaigns to recruit more women as candidates and to encourage women to vote in its elections. At its last election in the fall 2005, women formed, for the first time, the majority (51 percent) of the Norwegian Sami Parliament's thirty-nine elected representatives. (Before the 2005 elections, the percentage of women representatives was as low as 12). Also, for the first time in the history of all three Sami parliaments, the newly elected president of the Sami Parliament in Norway is a woman.¹⁰

There is, however, a need to look beyond numbers and percentages. Although significant, the female majority in the Norwegian Sami Parliament does not automatically guarantee political practices or procedures that revoke or even challenge the patriarchal structures, priorities and political processes. Moreover, there are other powerful Sami organizations, such as the Norwegian Sami Reindeer Herders' Association, that continue to be strongly male-dominated. With an executive board consisting of only 22 percent women, the organization also breaks the Norwegian law that requires

minimum 40 percent of women representatives on organizations' boards (J.I. Utsi 2005c). In a similar fashion, women play a minor role in the municipal politics in Ohcejohka/Utsjoki, the northernmost and only municipality in Finland where the Sami are in majority. In the most recent municipal elections, in 2004, only one woman (Finnish) was elected as a councillor despite the fact that all the parties had female candidates.¹¹ A female candidate on the Sami List notes that the results suggest that the voters in Ohcejohka/Utsjoki do not seem to trust women as politicians (Johnskareng 2004).

In spite of the prominent roles some Sami women play in local politics, practices of trivialization of and discrimination against women continue in contemporary Sami and other local organizations and political processes. Generally, these practices are subtle and difficult to expose as discrimination (such as jokes and insinuations), but as feminist scholars have pointed out, they function as powerful mechanisms of control (e.g., Enloe 2004: 5; Plumwood 1993). Sami female politicians' perspectives and attempts to participate in political debate are particularly trivialized when the topic is considered traditionally belonging to the "male sphere," such as all-terrain vehicle permits — a hot topic in the Norwegian side of Samiland before the 2005 Sami Parliament elections. Ali Keskitalo, the new president, challenged the practice of trivializing women's perspectives on the issue. As an example, she mentions a male candidate who had called the female vice-president of the Sami Parliament a "coffee maker" when she expressed her views on the all-terrain vehicle debate (J.I. Utsi 2005d).

Like other Indigenous societies worldwide, contemporary Sami society is shaped by processes of colonial and patriarchal history. Sami political and representative bodies, such as the Sami parliaments and the Sami Council, are, in many ways, copies of their Nordic counterparts, thus often reflecting similar ideologies and biases as institutions in mainstream societies. Although the Sami political bodies have limited decision-making power even with regard to issues affecting the Sami, they exert power internally by dealing only with issues considered important within the patriarchal political system.¹² Issues such as health, social services, education and other concerns internal to Sami society are often neglected. While topics such as the European Union, globalization, government-relations and funding feature in seminars by the Sami parliaments, the Sami Council and other main Sami organizations year after year, rarely are concerns pertaining to the well-being of Sami society topics of long-term policy-making. Initiatives on issues pertaining to Sami women are often ignored or limited to the realm of Sami women's organizations.

SAMI WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL LIVELIHOODS

Policies and laws imposed by the nation-states regulating and controlling reindeer herding and the way of life associated with it are an excellent example of the interconnectedness of colonial and patriarchal discrimination and domination. These government policies have made women invisible in the livelihood in which they have always played a central role. In many cases, they have erased the traditionally held right of ownership of woman's own reindeer and in official records placed reindeer-owning Sami women under their husbands — an act that has had ramifications ranging from allocation of subsidies and grants to the status and recognition of women within the livelihood, often considered one of the central markers of Saminess and Sami identity (Sára 1990–91; Sámi Instituhtta 1979; Sára 2003).

These sexist policies make it very difficult for reindeer-herding Sami women to continue their traditional livelihoods if, for example, there is a divorce or the husband dies. In 2005 in Kárášjohka, Norwegian Samiland, a young Sami woman who separated from her husband lost her share of the reindeer-herding subsidies. She and her husband had a joint reindeer household but she had always had her own reindeer and reindeer mark. Since the divorce, however, the full amount of subsidies have been paid to her ex-husband, although she has the custody of their three small children. The *Reindeer Herding Act* in Norway does not indicate how the subsidies ought to be distributed in cases of divorce, and the director of the Reindeer Herding Administration does not want to get involved, stating that it is the responsibility of the household to find a way to share the subsidies (J.I. Utsi 2005b).

Some Sami female politicians, however, are concerned about the situation and note that issues such as divorce have never been taken account of within the *Reindeer Herding Act*. The Act, which came into force in 1978, did not protect both the husband's and wife's rights, only the rights of the owner of the reindeer household, who were and still are mostly men.¹³ The Act was amended in 1996 and the rights were extended to the spouse of the owner, but nothing was said about the rights upon divorce, still a taboo topic in reindeer herding, where, traditionally, separation has been rare. Usually it is the women who lose their economic and livelihood rights, although there is at least one case where, upon a divorce, a woman kept the reindeer household while the man kept the reindeer but lost his rights to the pasture and the household (J.I. Utsi 2005a).

Another recent case involves an older Sami woman who lost the right to the family summer pasture after the death of her husband. Their summer pasture area — where the 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, presently, reindeer herding is commonly regarded both inside and outside Sami society as synonymous with men's activity, while in reality, women continue to "stand for much of the production and ... for a versatile management of the resources" (Eikjok 1992: 7). Many women are also more prone to keep up the traditional Sami *verdde* system, the practice of establishing and sustaining economic relations and social bonds with individuals and families of different livelihoods (Eikjok 1992). What is more, Sami scholar Solveig Joks (2001) contends that if reindeer herding is viewed only as a meat industry, an emphasis of state policies and regulations since the 1950s, rather than as a traditional way of life, women's input and role are made invisible. This focus on meat production has also been adopted by Sami reindeer herding associations and their politics, which generally do not recognize the special tasks of Sami women as part of the livelihood (Eikjok 1988; Joks 2001). This has resulted in an increased number of women giving up reindeer herding as a viable source of living and moving to other livelihoods and occupations (Landbruksdepartementet 1991–92).

There is, however, an increasing number of reindeer herding Sami women who are critically assessing reindeer-herding practices and traditions such as traditional child-rearing and the practice of marking more reindeer to male children in the family (Somy Sara 2005). For example, the chair of the Guovdageaidnu Reindeer Herding Women's Network demands the establishment of a educational centre for reindeer herding and for other Sami livelihoods and activities to promote equality among genders, among other things (E.M. Utsi 2005b).

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Besides the image of strong women, another prevalent myth about the Sami is that of a peaceful people who 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 (see especially Nickul 1970). While the idea of the Sami as a peaceful people who never fought any wars is not quite true, those who created the myth and those who continue to uphold it have been also blind to incidences of violence *within* Sami society.

What has gone mostly unnoticed, both in the past and the present, is sexual violence such as incest, rape, sexual abuse and child molestation and other forms of sexual and physical violence. Mainly due to Laestadianism, women's sexuality especially has been a major taboo in Sami society. Moreover, because of the shame surrounding sexual violence and the ten-

dency to blame the victim (usually women), incidences of rape and sexual harassment have remained largely unreported until very recently.

There has been a particularly sharp escalation in sexual abuse cases within a short period of time in Guovdageaidnu, one of the Sami communities where the language and traditional livelihoods, especially reindeer herding, remain very strong.¹⁴ Some of the recent reports of rape involve victims who were fourteen-year-old girls (Pulk 2005d). The Sami head of the local police is quoted as saying that the recent cases indicate that the situation in Sami society is not as good as people have previously thought (Pulk 2005c).

Thus far, sexual violence in Sami communities has not been addressed in any serious or systematic manner. However, there are signs that some individuals and groups have started to take the issue of sexual violence seriously. A few months after recurrent reports of rape in Guovdageaidnu a group of local Sami men initiated and organized a public meeting against rape and sexual harassment (Pulk 2005b).¹⁵ One topic discussed at the meeting was the commonplace sexual harassment of girls at the local secondary school. A teacher reported how he had seen boys grabbing girls' genitals while walking by in the hall. When he stopped and questioned the boys, they did not understand what was wrong with their behaviour. Others also reported an increase in disconcerting attitudes among boys toward girls (Pulk 2005e).

In the view of Sami psychiatrist Marit Triumf, one explanation 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 girls' and women's responsibility if the man did not control himself and proceeded to have intercourse (Pulk 2005a). This kind of double standard in behaviour, blaming the victim (woman) is, of course, very common in all societies. However, in Sami society, Laestadianism has played a central role in forming views and methods of upbringing with a strong focus on the dualistic patriarchal paradigm of female chastity on the one hand and the fallen woman who is to be blamed, on the other.

Christianity is part of the colonial legacy that continues to affect Indigenous communities worldwide. Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith argues that sexual violence in Indigenous societies is inseparably connected to colonization (2005b). In other words, the subjugation of Indigenous communities depended on the subjugation of women. Because Indigenous societies were largely egalitarian and characterized by complementary gender roles, colonial administrators facilitated colonization by first establishing and naturalizing hierarchy through the introduction of patriarchy (Allen 1986; A. Smith 2005a: 23). For Smith, the link between state violence and interpersonal violence is most obvious in the legacy of abuse from boarding schools. 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 (126–27).

The Sami also have a history of boarding schools but the physical, sexual and psychological abuse that took place in those institutions has been a taboo subject until very recently and is even less debated than in the North American context. As long as we cling to the myths that do a huge disservice to those Sami women who are most vulnerable, rather than give them necessary support, Sami society cannot start healing, essential in the process of restoring a healthy and strong self-determination. As Métis scholar Emma LaRocque (1997) asserts, healing cannot take place without justice. As long as we insist on believing that Sami women do not face any oppression, we remain blind to contemporary realities that are crying for attention and that may, in the worst cases, result in such tragedies as a recent incest case involving a well-known Sami writer who had sexually abused two girls related to him. When the case became public and he was sentenced to prison and a literary award was withheld from him, he committed suicide (Anti 2005). Selective blindness can be particularly damaging especially when we as women continue the legacy of silence, for example, in the name of false and misguided ideas about family reputation. In reality, we are protecting the perpetrators of violence at the cost of the health and sometimes lives of women in our communities.

In struggling for self-governance, I believe that we Sami must ask ourselves some critical questions. What do we do with self-governance if a considerable part of our people is unable to either contribute to and participate in it or receive any benefits? What do we do with self-governance if it is built on myths and illusions rather than on realities of Sami society? Or as Andrea Smith notes, “Before Native peoples fight for the future of their nations, they must ask themselves, who is included in the nation?” (2005b: 121). In short, it is imperative that we re-evaluate our institutions and political structures and aspire to create a self-determination that reflects our own values, principles and models of governance.

As Eikjok notes, “in discussing self-government schemes for Indigenous peoples, we must carefully evaluate *which* of our traditions are worth basing our community upon” (2000: 41). We have to be careful when talking about “traditions” and remain critical of Christian, patriarchal, liberal or New Age reinventions of our traditions (see LaRocque 1997). Remodeling Indigenous traditions along colonial and patriarchal paradigms can be employed against Indigenous women to silence, subordinate and remove them from their previously held positions of authority (see Martin-Hill 2003).

POST-COLONIAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS AND SAMI WOMEN

As both colonialism and patriarchy employ analogous forms of domination, there are certain similarities in experiences of Indigenous peoples (and other colonized groups) on the one hand and women on the other. With Indigenous women, these two forms of oppression often result in multiple marginalization. Sami scholar Vuokko Hirvonen, for example, proposes that it is possible to compare the situation of Sami women to that of Third World women. If the Sami in general are characterized as the Other, Sami women have been in the multiple margins because most research on Sami society has been conducted in the light of male activities. What has been recorded as Sami culture or tradition is, therefore, mainly tradition produced and sustained by Sami men. In such a context, Hirvonen argues, feminist criticism is valuable in casting light on the biased premises and perspectives on knowledge production. Moreover, employing feminist analyses in Sami research can produce new information about Sami women’s lives and the hierarchies between the genders (Hirvonen 1999).

Similarities can also be found in ways in which post-colonial and feminist critiques oppose forms of oppression. Post-colonial and feminist discourses both aim at asserting a denied or alienated subjectivity and agency, whether of women or colonized peoples. In other words, post-colonial feminist analysis seeks to deconstruct and demonstrate the “interrelationship of oppressions of race, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality in both a national and a transnational frame” (Clough 1994: 118).

As a critique of hegemonic relations implicated in patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism, post-colonial feminist approaches have introduced a more nuanced consideration of the multiple ways in which gender is constructed and employed in colonial and imperial processes. Early post-colonial feminist critics such as Chandra Mohanty (1984), Gayatri Spivak (1985) and Sara Suleri (1992) also demonstrated that, while imposed upon everybody, colonialism affected men and women in different ways. Spivak (1985) in particular examined and criticized the gender bias and blindness of anti-colonial nationalist movements, which often reproduce patriarchal, hierarchical models as the ideals for sovereignty.

It could be argued that there are Sami who have internalized and benefited from the colonial and patriarchal structures that have, in many ways, also permeated Sami society. There are quite a few Sami who deny the impact of colonization on Sami people and culture (even when the signs, such as loss of language, identity and possibilities to practise Sami culture and livelihoods, are anywhere), but there are even more people who refuse to recognize the influence of the mainstream patriarchal structures. As in many other Indigenous communities, one often hears the argument that sexism is only a problem in dominant societies. But as Maori scholar Kathy

Irwin notes,

Colonisation brought with it capitalism and a new set of patriarchal relations. We cannot deny the impact of colonisation upon our culture.... It would be unrealistic to suggest that the relations between Maori men and women have been able to withstand the impact of colonisation and capitalism, in a way that race and economic relations have not. The truth is that sexism: that is, the economic exploitation and social domination of members of one sex by the other, specifically of women by men, is alive and well in Maori culture *today*. (1988: 35; see also A. Smith 2005b)

The same applies, no doubt, to Sami society. It would be misleading and naive to seriously believe that in some miraculous way, Sami gender relations have remained entirely unaffected through the centuries-long colonizing process that changed every other aspect of the lives and cultural practices of our people. One only has to look around to see that as a result of the colonial process, contemporary Sami life hardly differs from that of mainstream Nordic societies. In such a situation, how could we expect that we would have not internalized the patriarchal, hierarchical power relations and mechanisms of control? In such circumstances, it is peculiar indeed that thus far there has not been a systematic analysis of colonial processes — many of which continue today — including assimilation policies, racism, marginalization and erasure of our epistemic foundations and value system.

Feminist critique may assist us to expose not only the patriarchal, hierarchical structures of our governing bodies and models but also the (perhaps unconscious) internalization of hegemony,¹⁶ which prevents us from achieving a meaningful self-determination. It needs to be emphasized here that the question is not merely how many women there are in Sami politics but more fundamentally, what are the ways and structures, discourses and processes in which Sami politics is practised. As French feminist Luce Irigaray pointed out,

women merely “equal” to men would be “like them,” therefore not women.... So it is essential for women themselves to invent new modes of organization, new forms of struggle, new challenges.... If women allow themselves to be caught in the trap of power, in the game of authority, if they allow themselves to be contaminated by the “paranoid” operations of masculine politics, they have nothing more to say or do *as women*. (1985: 166)

Irigaray's words could be paraphrased to also apply to the Sami (or other Indigenous peoples) in general and Sami women specifically — that if we as

the Sami people allow ourselves to be caught in the trap of power, if we allow ourselves to be contaminated by colonial, patriarchal politics, we will have nothing to say as Sami. Moreover, if we as Sami women are caught in the trap of masculine, colonial power, we will have nothing to say as Sami women. Colonial and patriarchal policies and practices have affected Sami men and women differently. Feminist analysis can help us expose these differences and thus reinforce and facilitate our decolonizing strategies. Certain post-colonial feminist criticisms may also effectively illuminate the forms of involvement and roles of Sami women that have been overlooked and excluded from official historiographies, including those written by Sami men.¹⁷

Even if some Sami women may be able to claim that sexism is not their problem, our society is heavily influenced and permeated by colonial and patriarchal practices affecting all of us (but even more so Sami women). Post-colonial feminist critique can assist us in recognizing and understanding these practices in a way that can help up on the road to decolonization and transformation. I strongly believe that our survival as a people is dependent on embarking on the path of transforming and decolonizing the colonial, patriarchal discourses reflected in every aspect of our society, hindering and distracting us from restoring and re-envisioning our communities and the future of our people. It is a process of challenging the very foundation of the social and cultural order that is prescribed by the colonial and patriarchal systems, that is, addressing interlocking oppressions and mechanisms of power on institutional and structural levels.

Many Sami women are, however, hesitant to engage with feminist analysis. They may consider feminist analysis irrelevant or fear being stigmatized or ridiculed by others, particularly Sami men (see Eikjok 2000), and they may hold misconceptions and stereotypical views about feminism. Like their Indigenous sisters elsewhere, many Sami women argue that as long as the Sami people's right to self-determination has not yet been adequately addressed and recognized, the priority needs to be given to colonization over sexism.

According to Sami scholar Eilima Helander, the Sami women's movement scared some women off as the idea of women as victims was alienating for them. Moreover, as the women's movement was labelled as “radical” and a threat to Sami family and other central social structures, it was misunderstood and rejected even by Sami women themselves (Helander and Kailo 1998b). As elsewhere, many Sami women have internalized the common but false impression of feminism as male-bashing or as an attempt to merely reverse the power dynamics and, in turn, have control over and oppress men. Clearly, these views serve certain interests and are thus reinforced and perpetuated through media and other public discourses. Yet, the roots of colonialism can be found in patriarchy (see, for example, Mies 1998; A. Smith 2005a).

Eikjok notes: “Feminism is perceived as very negative in the Indigenous world; it has been reduced to being *anti men*, as opposed to being *pro women*” (2000: 40). It is, however, also crucial to recognize that feminism is not limited to being pro-women, but that it extends to the analysis of the interlocking systems of oppression inherent in patriarchy, sexism, racism and colonialism. As Black feminist scholar bell hooks argues, feminism is “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” that eventually benefits the entire society (2000: viii).

If we want to adequately understand and dismantle complex colonial processes — many of which have become internal — it is necessary to recognize that colonial and patriarchal practices usually form interlocking and inseparable discourses and practices of oppression in which each informs and reinforces the other. It is necessary, as Sami and Indigenous women, to have the courage and vision to call attention to the realities and circumstances in which many of us live, even if it is not always our own lives. We must stop interpreting colonial and patriarchal practices as two separate forms of oppression, only one of which affects Indigenous peoples, and start examining the historical roots of colonialism in patriarchy. As Andrea Smith reminds us: “It is precisely through sexism and gender violence that colonialism and white supremacy have been successful” (2005b: 127).

We also have to stop falling prey to superficial, stereotypical misconstructions of feminism and its objectives as “anti-men.” Instead of statements about irrelevancy of feminism to Sami or Indigenous women in general, we can reclaim it as one of our strategies for restoring our communities and strengthening our people. Instead of retreating behind the barricades of assumed incommensurable differences, it would be more fruitful to recognize the similarities in the various struggles against colonial and patriarchal subjugation and engage in the “politics of affinity” — i.e., collaboration with other women and marginalized groups (Kailo 1994).

I have no doubt that there are traces of the traditionally strong Sami women left everywhere in Sami society. However, to use the notion as a means to dismiss issues and concerns critical and important to Sami women, to bash or trivialize women and their initiatives, either for one’s own reinforced sense of power or in the fear of losing the unified front (which is yet another common myth) in the struggle for self-determination is shortsighted, selfish and deleterious to Sami society. We are losing people through increased physical and sexual violence — suicides, mental illnesses, substance and alcohol abuse — but also through structural violence manifested in the lack of participation, further assimilation and integration into mainstream societies and, ultimately, the loss of what makes us Sami.

Instead of repeating the myth of Sami women as an excuse to remain passive and as a means of accepting current circumstances, we can start

employing it for a proactive strategy of healing and transforming of not only women but all of Sami society. We could start advocating and implementing our powerful female legacies found, for example, in the Sami worldview and cosmic order that may well have been centred around the female deity Máttaráhkká (“Ancestral Mother”) and her three daughters Sáráhká, Juksáhká and Uksáhká, to advance and rebuild our communities. We could use our strength to call for accountability of our current leadership to enhance the well-being of all our people, not just a handful of individuals. Such a strategy would not only empower us and foster the Sami self-determination process in the present, but it also would constitute an invaluable gift for future Sami generations.

NOTES

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1. Previously called Lapps or Laplanders, the Sami have claimed their collective term deriving from their own languages (*sápmelas* in Northern Sami). The terms “Lapp” or “Laplander” are considered derogative. Moreover, some Finns living in Northern Finland (also known as Lapland) have started to refer to themselves as Lapps to further confuse the already complex and conflicting issue of Sami land rights.
2. In a similar fashion, scholar of religion (and the first Sami woman to receive a Ph.D. in 1975) Louise Bäckman (1982) contends that the notion of Sami patriarchy is at best speculative.
3. There are still some Sami women who maintain that view. Sami poet Rauni Magga Lukkari, for instance, comments that, “I do not feel downtrodden like my sisters in the western world” (1998: 109). In her view, Sami women are not oppressed because one of the ways for women to exercise power is through making traditional Sami clothing.
4. As Lillian Ackerman notes, this is not necessarily so although it is a common explanation with regard to Indigenous societies. Discussing the context of the Colville Reservation in Washington State, she points out that there is as little continuity in women’s traditional roles as there is in men’s. Childbearing and rearing are roles that continue to be female-dominated, but everything else has changed: “Office employment is as different from gathering and preserving wild foods as lumbering is from hunting.” Ackerman suggests that women’s ability to better adjust “may result from their being accustomed to sustained rather than strenuous intermittent work” (2002: 30; see also Allen 1986).
5. This is the case of many other Indigenous societies as well. Dawn Martin-Hill observes that the adoption of Christian practices into Indigenous traditions is

- common in the North American Indigenous communities. According to her, it has resulted in "the exclusion of women from ceremonies and to exalting female servitude as 'traditional'" (2003: 109).
6. 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.
 7. 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 for his dualistic, simplistic descriptions of Sami women (see Guttorm 1998). In her collection of short stories *Guovttuoazat nisa* ("Two-Headed Woman"), Kirsti Paltto (1989) analyzes common images and representations of Sami women in a society strongly influenced by Christianity (see also Poikajärvi 1996).
 8. The name of the organization refers to one of the female deities of Sami cosmology. A daughter of Máttaráhkká ("the ancestral mother"), Sáráhká governs particularly the realm of childbirth.
 9. Ironically, only a few years later, Gro Harlem Brundtland chaired the World Commission on Environment and Development convened by the United Nations. The Commission produced the much-cited report, *Our Common Future* (1987), introducing the concept of sustainable development into mainstream parlance. The report is one of the first United Nations documents to recognize the sustainable ways of life of Indigenous and tribal communities and the role of Indigenous and tribal institutions and ideas in envisioning more sustainable futures for everybody in the planet. Significantly, the report also proposes that human activities should "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland 43). This suggestion echoes the traditional teachings of many Indigenous peoples in North America, according to which we need to consider our actions in the light of well-being of seven future generations.
 10. There is an interesting tendency in Sami politics to elect young women with limited experience to some of the most high-ranking positions of Sami organizations and political power. Most of the new female Sami Parliament representatives in Norway are relatively young, including the new president and the minister of fisheries in the government of Norway, while the more experienced and senior female Sami politicians are cast aside. One could ask whether this represents the beginning of a new and different dynamics in Sami politics or whether it is a old boys' network strategy to fend off charges of inequality while maintaining control over the political agenda and decision-making through "training" and "advising" the junior female leadership.
 11. Finland also has a law mandating a minimum of 40 percent of women on government representative bodies. In order to comply with the law, two other female candidates were nominated as municipal councillors.
 12. The Norwegian Sami Parliament today has the most decision-making power, especially since the *Finnmark Act* came into force in the beginning of 2006. The Act forms a co-management board for the northernmost county and its resources

- in Norway. However, as the president of the Sami Parliament Alii Keskitalo notes, the executive committee of the board lacks equality, having only two women representatives. She suggests that the board elect a woman as the chair to amend the situation (Johnskareng 2005b). The male Sami candidate for the chair disputes this and maintains that party politics are more important than equality (Johnskareng 2005a).
13. In Norway, where only Sami can own reindeer, only 17 percent of women are heads of reindeer households, although 45 percent of reindeer owners are women. These women own approximately one third of all the reindeer (E.M. Utsi 2005b).
 14. In the municipality of Guovdageaidnu, with a population of 3,000, there were sixteen reported cases of rape in 2005, three times more than the previous year (E.M. Utsi 2005a).
 15. These men have recently established an association to improve male attitudes toward women in the community. They intend to publish a book on sexual harassment and abuse based on experiences of local women as well as visit schools to raise awareness (E.M. Utsi 2005a).
 16. Hegemony, defined by Antonio Gramsci, is a form of ideological and cultural domination whereby the consciousness of subordinate groups is constructed by the discourse of those in power (Hoare and Smith 1971). It is a concept that appears to explain quite well the processes of Sami society discussed above.
 17. See, for example, Lehtola (1998), who discusses the early days of Sami politics in Finland only in light of activities of Sami men.

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