

Self-determination and Indigenous Women – “Whose Voice Is It We Hear in the Sámi Parliament?”

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Abstract

The Sámi self-determination discourse has always been state-centric in its tendency to invoke the central role of the Nordic states in shaping national policies and legislation on Sámi rights. This article examines the meaning of Sámi self-determination from the perspective of Sámi women: how do Sámi women understand the concept, how do they evaluate the current efforts to implement self-determination by Sámi political institutions and what kind of forms their socio-political participation takes in contemporary Sámi society? It argues that Sámi self-determination is often understood in relational terms as discussed by Iris Marion Young.

Keywords

Sámi; self-determination; socio-political participation; indigenous women; women's rights

1. Introduction

Sámi self-determination is not a new idea – the idea of establishing an institution that could speak on behalf of the Sámi people existed already back in Elsa Laula Renberg's time.

Parliamentarianism is the only way of expanding democracy – is there another way among indigenous peoples?¹

Although the idea of Sámi self-determination is not new, there is still very little understanding of its implementation or actual contents – in other words, how Sámi self-determination would look like in practice. The Sámi Parliaments have existed in a form or another since the mid-1970s, but in their current form, whether in Norway, Finland or Sweden, they cannot be considered self-determining or self-governing institutions.² A recent conference held in northern Norway focused

¹ Senior female Sámi politician with positions held at the highest levels of Sámi political institutions, in an interview on 29 May 2008.

² See R. Kuokkanen, 'Achievements of Indigenous Self-Determination. The Case of the Sami Parliaments in Finland and Norway', in J. M. Beier (ed.), *Indigenous Diplomacies* (Palgrave, New York, 2009) pp. 97–114.

on questions of scope and implementation of Sámi self-determination, but very little was achieved in terms of clarifying how Sámi self-determination might look like on the ground.³ The emphasis of the conference was on legal interpretations of the concept of self-determination and on international human rights instruments as they pertain to indigenous peoples.

The Sámi self-determination discourse has always been state-centric in its tendency to invoke the central role of the Nordic states in shaping national policies and legislation on Sámi rights. Another distinct characteristic of Sámi self-determination discourse is its source: the legitimacy of Sámi self-determination is rooted in and derived from the international legal framework and human rights norm whereas the fundamental authority or historical foundations of Sámi self-determination – the inherent right to self-determination – are rarely discussed, if at all.

In his opening speech of the mentioned conference, the president of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament noted: “The specific content of the right to self-determination must be defined and rendered concrete through national legislation in our various states.”⁴ According to him, the Sámi still have a long way to go but in terms of implementing Sámi self-governance, the key steps will be the process of following up the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and implementing the Sámi Convention.⁵ The position of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament is not much different from that of the State Secretary of the Sámi Affairs (a Sámi himself) who, also speaking at the conference, stressed that “[i]t is important to the Norwegian government that the concept of self-determination is interpreted in a way that is valid and useable internationally. The key is: What kind of *precedent* is set?”⁶ In his view, Sámi self-determination takes primarily the form of consultation and co-decision powers with the government with regard to relevant legislation. Further, “[t]he Norwegian government and the Norwegian Parliament has made it clear, repeatedly, that self-determination for the Sámi will

³ International Conference on Sámi Self-Determination: Scope and Implementation, 4–6 February 2008, Alta, Norway. The conference was organized by Gáldu the International Indigenous Resource Centre and the Sámi University College, both based in Kautokeino, Norway.

⁴ E. Olli, ‘Opening Address by Egil Olli, President of the Sami Parliamentary Council and the Sami Parliament in Norway, Alta, 4–6 February 2008’, *International Conference on Sami Self-Determination: Scope and Implementation*, Alta, Norway, 4–6 February 2008.

⁵ The Draft Nordic Sámi Convention is an agreement between the Sámi people and the governments of Norway, Sweden and Finland intending to harmonize legislation and other regulation of significance for Sámi activities across nation-state borders. The working group submitted a draft in 2005 to the Nordic ministers in charge of Sámi affairs and the presidents of the three Sámi Parliaments for their approval but the negotiations have been stalled particularly by the governments of Sweden and Finland.

⁶ R. Valle, ‘Self-Determination and the Sami. Remarks for Opening Statement at Conference on Sami Self-Determination: Scope and Implementation’, *International Conference on Sami Self-Determination: Scope and Implementation*, Alta, Norway, 4–6 February 2008.

have to be exercised within the framework of an existing, democratic state”.⁷ Interestingly, at the conference, both the president of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament and the State Secretary of the Sámi Affairs (both members of the Norwegian Labour Party) felt the need to emphasize that Sámi self-determination has never implied nor have the Sámi ever sought secession.

By and large, the framework for the scope and implementation Sámi self-determination is set by the Nordic states and focused on national and international rights discourses rather than community realities and interests. If there is a limited understanding of the scope and contents of Sámi self-determination at the level of Sámi political and academic elite, it is not surprising that it is a topic rarely discussed at the community level – many people find it too abstract and even irrelevant to their lives. This article examines the meaning of Sámi self-determination from the perspective of Sámi women: how do Sámi women understand the concept, how do they evaluate the current efforts to implement self-determination by Sámi political institutions and what kind of forms their socio-political participation takes in contemporary Sámi society? It argues that based on the interviews, Sámi self-determination is often understood in relational terms as discussed by Iris Marion Young and feminist political theorists. The article also contends that Sámi women’s interpretation of self-determination is closer to notions of indigenous governance than notions of (liberal Western) democracy and parliamentarianism which the Sámi Parliaments seek to emulate. In other words, the article raises a fundamental question of the Sámi Parliaments as legitimate expressions of the Sámi right to self-determination.

The first part of the article briefly considers the history of Sámi women’s role in the struggle for Sámi rights and their more recent engagement in Sámi politics. The second part examines Sámi women’s perceptions on self-determination based on the in-depth interviews of 15 Sámi women conducted in northern Norway and Finland in May–June 2008. This article is part of a larger comparative research project that examines the participation and roles of indigenous women in self-determination; their engagement and input in self-determination processes such as negotiating self-government, drafting principles or shaping models for future self-governance and participating in existing self-government structures. In conclusion, the article analyzes Sámi women’s views of self-determination and their socio-political participation by drawing comparisons to other indigenous women and their relationships to self-determination efforts in their communities. This kind of comparison sheds light to the similarities and differences between the self-determination discourses and the engagement of indigenous women in different contexts and regions.

⁷ *Ibid.*

2. Sámi Women's Political Participation

The history of the struggle for Sámi rights goes back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this struggle, Sámi women have always a central and significant role. The first national Sámi conference in 1917 was organized particularly due to the efforts and vision of Elsa Laula Renberg (1877–1930), the chair of the first Sámi women's organization. She also established the first (though short-lived) national Sámi organization in 1904 and several local associations in both the Swedish and Norwegian sides of Sámiland. A well-known figure of the time, Renberg actively promoted Sámi land rights and livelihoods and advocated the education of women. Despite her deep commitment to her people – she even wrote a pamphlet “Life or Death” (1904) in which she encouraged Sámi to claim their rights to land – Renberg's role in the early Sámi rights movement has usually been neglected or left out in historical accounts (including those written by Sámi men) which focus on her male contemporaries and their activities.⁸

Sámi women 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 some of the Sámi male activists. The Alta River conflict is considered a watershed in Sámi-Nordic relations and it involved a plan by the Norwegian government to build a hydroelectric dam in Northern Norway.⁹ In its original form, the dam would have submerged the Sámi village of Máze (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 Sámi as well as by environmentalists and fishers who wanted to protect the salmon river. The conflict reached the most decisive point 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 14 Sámi women in 1981. The prime minister agreed to meet with the Sámi women but did not consider their concerns worthy of her time and left the meeting after

⁸ B. Lundmark, ‘Hon Var En Förgrundsgestalt I Samernas Moderna Historia’, 6 *Samefolket* (1978) pp. 10–25.

⁹ See T. Brantenberg, ‘The Alta-Kautokeino Conflict: Saami Reindeer Herding and Ethnopolitics’, in J. Brosted *et al.* (eds.), *Native Power: The Quest for Autonomy and Nationhood of Indigenous Peoples* (Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1985) pp. 23–48; H. Minde, ‘The Challenge of Indigenism: The Struggle for Sami Land Rights and Self-Government in Norway in 1960–1990’, in S. Jentoft *et al.* (eds.), *Indigenous Peoples: Resource Management and Global Rights* (Eburon, Delft, 2003) pp. 21–44; R. Paine, *Dam a River, Damn a People?* (International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen, 1982); G. Parmann, *Kampen Om Alta – En Trusel Mot Vårt Demokrati?* (Dreyer, Oslo, 1980); E. Sanders, ‘Urbefolkningens Rettigheter Og Alta-Kautokeino-Utbyggingen’, in T. Thuen (ed.), *Samene - Urbefolkning Og Minoritet* (Universitetsforlaget, Tromsø, 1980) pp. 175–186; M. Speddrøningen, *Beretningen Om Alta – Et Nulpunkt I Sameland* (Tiderne Skifter, København, 1981).

half an hour. The women refused to leave the prime minister's office, and the next morning the police forcibly removed the Sámi women. Ignored in most accounts of the Sámi political movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the 14 women and their actions were finally recognized in 2005 by the Norwegian Sámi Association in a special ceremony.¹⁰

Today, Sámi women are increasingly involved in Sámi politics through various organizations and institutions at local, national and international levels. Sámi women's increased political participation, however, is a fairly recent phenomenon,¹¹ and, in some cases, a result of specific campaigns to recruit more women as candidates and encourage women to vote in the Sámi Parliament elections. Currently, the percentage of women in the Sámi Parliament in Norway is 46 (2009 elections) and in Finland 42 (2007 elections). Below, the article considers Sámi women's political participation in more detail.

3. Methodology

In May–June 2008, the author interviewed 15 Sámi women from two neighbouring Sámi municipalities: Kárášjohka (Karasjok) in Norway and Ohcejohka (Utsjoki) in Finland. Three of the interviewed women did not currently live in either of these municipalities; however, two were originally from the area and one was living in a neighbouring Sámi community. The emphasis of selecting participants was on Sámi women who were not involved in Sámi political institutions (Sámi Parliaments or the Sámi Council). Also Sámi female politicians (both senior and junior) were interviewed for the sake of comparison but also to include the perceptions of those Sámi women who were “insiders” in debates on Sámi self-determination. The age of the women ranged from the 30s to 70s. A majority (nine participants) were in their 50s and 60s, four were in their 30s and 40s and

¹⁰ Min Áigi, Historjjálaš Vuollástahttin, *Min Áigi*, 25.2. 2005, 2. Ironically, only a few years later, 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 in the planet. Significantly, the report proposes that human activities should “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 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.

¹¹ V. Stordahl, ‘Sametinget – Kvinner Begrenset Adgang? Refleksjoner over Debatten Om Kvinnerepresentasjonen På Sametinget’, in B. Bjerkli and P. Selle (eds.), *Samer, Makt Og Demokrati: Sametinget Og Den Nye Samiske Offentligheten* (Gyldendal Akademisk, Oslo, 2003) pp. 219–245; V. Stordahl, ‘Why Are They So Few in Numbers? Women Leaders in a Sample of Saami Insitutions’, in IWGIA (ed.), *Indigenous Women on the Move* (IWGIA, Copenhagen, 1990) pp. 57–76.

two in their 70s. Ten women had at least some post-secondary education. Based on their involvement in Sámi political life, the participants can be divided into three groups: eight women were not and had not been involved in Sámi political institutions¹² (although several were or had been active in Sámi society in other ways such as through other Sámi organizations), three had been previously involved and four were currently members of the Sámi Parliament either in Norway or Finland.

The participants were contacted in advance and asked their interest in participating in the research project. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the Sámi language and they varied between 1.5 and 2.5 hours in length. The semi-structured interview consisted of four main parts. First, the women were asked about their understandings of the concepts of self-determination and autonomy. The second set of questions delved into different forms of participating in Sámi society. In this section, the women also discussed their understanding of the notion of Sámi society. Third, the interviews focused on the women's views on the current pursuit of Sámi self-determination and the role of women in these processes. This section consisted of questions such as whether Sámi self-determination efforts adequately include and reflect the voices, interests and needs of women and what are the most effective or meaningful ways for Sámi women to participate in Sámi self-determination. Finally, women were asked to reflect on the effects of globalization in Sámi society and Sámi self-determination processes. Below, the article focuses on three broad areas of discussion based on the interviews: the concept of self-determination, Sámi society and participation, and the current debate on and efforts toward Sámi self-determination.

4. The Concept of Self-Determination

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 Sámi politics, focused on the collective dimension of self-determination. One woman defined self-determination as a right to live as Sámi, 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 Sámi 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

¹²⁾ 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 (non-governmental organization representing the Sámi in all four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia).

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”.¹³

Also one of the representatives of the Sámi Parliament¹⁴ 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 Sámi 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.

For three women, collective self-determination must occur first and foremost on the local level and deal with issues related to land management and rights to traditional livelihoods such as fishing. Many women addressed the limitations of self-determination and pointed out one’s responsibility – whether that of an individual or of a nation – to take others into consideration in decision-making. A member of the Sámi Parliament noted that self-determination is also about individuals participating and taking responsibility in society, not turning everything over to higher levels such as the Parliament: “The path to self-determination is so long, the Sámi Parliament cannot tread it alone.” Her view, according to which the establishment of the Sámi Parliament had stifled individual engagement and activism, was shared by several other women. Another representative of the Sámi Parliament maintained that “every people has a right to self-determination but at the same time it is necessary to follow the laws of the people and of the state and take others into account”. For her, self-determination was more a matter of having a right to *advance* affairs considered important rather than *decide* over one’s own affairs.

In terms of (collective) Sámi self-determination, decision-making was seen important in determining or prioritizing what issues are considered important, what issues the Sámi people want to promote and in what direction. This reflects closely the view of a woman who used to be involved in Sámi political institutions. She contended that since the early days of Sámi politics, the debate around self-determination has been about the scope: what the issues that belong to sphere of Sámi self-determination are. For example, she personally thought it was not

¹³) This continues to be the case today. The Sámi newspaper *Ávvir* recently reported on 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* A. H. Guttorm Johansen, ‘Ti Beasa Boazodollui’, *Ávvir*, 12 February 2010, p. 4.)

¹⁴) 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.

important for the Sámi to decide about foreign affairs such as being a member in military alliances.

One woman also addressed the concept of autonomy, which for her was broader than self-determination. In her view, Sámi today are afraid of autonomy and of talking about “governing our own territory and nation like other nations”. Instead, she noted, the Sámi prefer to publicly declare that the Sámi do not want a separate state. “From whom the Sámi politicians have received a mandate to shout all the time we don’t want our own state, that we are so satisfied and we don’t strive for autonomy? We haven’t had a referendum about that in Sápmi”, she proclaimed and continued:

I am quite shocked with the way Sámi politicians speak – as if the Norwegians had pressured the Sámi to never mention autonomy. The Sámi are to receive only small amount of self-determination according to what the Norwegians or Finns happens to dole out. Easiest to get is stuff related to cultural affairs, but with regard to resource management, we have to beg.

According to her own analysis, the hundred years of assimilation policies had given rise to today’s fears about autonomy among the Sámi. In addition, she pointed out contemporary reality in which “you don’t get money [from the government] if you talk in any other way; if you do, you are punished”.

5. Women’s Participation in Sámi Society

Among the participants there was a broad, shared understanding of basic components of Sámi society: language, traditional livelihoods, way of life and communication¹⁵, *duodji* or Sámi handicrafts, the land, the people, the extended family. Some women mentioned Sámi institutions but questioned if they had Sámi foundation (*e.g.* values, mode of organization). Many brought up Sámi social life – people gathering, meeting and engaging in and taking care of common issues – and the culture of socializing and visiting with one another which, however, was disappearing as people no longer seem to have time to visit even their own families. Two women mentioned the car as the key factor in this change: “now people only drive to the shop, they don’t have time to stop by”. One of these two women noted that with those Sámi who had been away from their communities – “living in the south” – and later moved back, the connection to the older generation had been broken. Another, older woman pointed out how family connections were no longer as strong as they used to be; yet, in her experience, today’s grandchildren are searching for contact and expect guidance from their elders.

¹⁵ As one woman explained it, it is not only the Sámi language but also certain shared codes of communication such as indirect expressions and allusions.

Others also talked about the importance of a sense of connection and belonging as part of what makes Sámi society but also how it seemed to be diminishing, indicated, for example, in contemporary language use: instead of speaking of one Sápmi, people talk about “Norwegian Sámi”, “Finnish Sámi” and “collaboration across borders”. A younger woman who considered the language and a sense of belonging key aspects of Sámi society also problematized both by pointing out how the Sámi language can also exclude those who do not speak it or those who do not speak the same Sámi language¹⁶ and how a sense of belonging may mean different things to different generations. As an example, she mentioned her own grandmother and contended that she would not regard Sápmi as a distinct society simply because she would not have a sense of belonging with the South Sámi. In other words, for her grandmother, Sámi society would be her local community. According to this woman, “to consider the entire Sápmi a distinct society, you need some kind of education for that”. In her own case, the involvement in Sámi organizations had given her a sense and understanding of Sámi society as encompassing different languages and regions.

A similar view was shared by another participant according to whom Sámi society today can be felt most strongly at the old people’s home. For her, Sámi society exists first and foremost at the local level, in the community where she grew up. In her view, “Sámi society about which I have learned and read as a grown-up sometimes seems a bit shallow; today Sámi society has become, to some extent, a rhetoric”. At the same time, however, she acknowledged that her view might be distorted as she did not live in Sápmi all year around.

Although many women underlined the local community and one’s interactions in it when considering Sámi society, only two participants explicitly addressed geography. One woman who has not been living in Sápmi for over ten years argued that Sámi society was not tied to geographical location and instead it was a shared sense of unity among Sámi independent of their current place of residence. The other woman had an entirely different view: “I can’t think that Sámi society is some Sámi living in Oslo.” She asked: if one’s home region no longer means anything to Sámi, “how, in such circumstances, can we possibly transmit Sámi identity and heritage to the future generations?”

Living in Sámi society was also discussed by another participant. She had previously lived elsewhere but returned to her hometown several years ago. For her, Sámi society had a great significance, otherwise she “would not live in this town”, feeling that elsewhere she would have to explain herself, be a “Sámi ambassador”. In her view, however, Sámi society exists if one chooses it and decides to “live as

¹⁶ There are seven to nine (depending on the definition) different, though closely related, Sámi languages that form a continuum from the South Sámi (spoken in Central Norway and Sweden) to Eastern Sámi (spoken in the Kola Peninsula, Russia). In between is, *inter alia*, the North Sámi, which is the most widely spoken Sámi language in Northern Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Sámi, eat Sámi food, go to the land for various activities and participate in Sámi livelihoods, socialize with Sámi people and be able to be Sámi without the need to explain it to others”. Further, in her view, it also requires knowledge how to advance Sámi society and how to promote and protect Sámi culture and language – according to her, “this is the responsibility we have inherited from our ancestors”. For her, the existence of Sámi society has not always been given: people in her generation had to fight for it, which also makes it important for her to live in it.

One woman had very little positive to say about the “official” Sámi society (as defined in public discourse and by the Sámi institutions). Her first response to the question of Sámi society was a rejection: “I have many times asked myself if I am Sámi at all because so often our issues are not taken into account.” The background and context for her strong reaction was related to the continued tension between the local reindeer herders and other Sámi in the area and, as far as she was concerned, to the obvious bias and refusal of Sámi political institutions such as the Sámi Parliament to consider also the rights of non-reindeer herding Sámi: “When we talk about the Sámi and Sáminess we should start from the smallest and take everyone into account, not just reindeer herding; it’s not everything.” She herself had never been involved in nor interested in participating in Sámi organizations or politics in general.

When asked about ways of participating in Sámi society, all participants mentioned Sámi organizations even if not all of them were actively involved in them at the moment. Only two of the participants were not and had never been involved in any Sámi organizations or associations. Three women were currently focusing more on local politics through municipal councils and committees. An older woman contended that she would be interested in engaging more in Sámi politics but her experience was that women “are erased from the ballots” – something that, she contended, had happened to her as well as other women. In her view, for these reasons, women have given in and no longer bother signing up.

Other important ways of participation included interacting and meeting with other Sámi people, following Sámi politics and Sámi media and being involved locally in municipal politics; the level at which a lot of the decisions affecting people’s everyday lives are made, such as health care, education, day care and recreational services. Several women noted participation in Sámi society through work, whether one worked at a Sámi institution or in a job dealing with Sámi culture and language. Other institutions important to Sámi social life that were mentioned included the reindeer herding cooperatives and the church which continues to play a significant role in Sámi social life, particularly for the older generation. Two women said they participate in Sámi society through *duodji*, making Sámi handicrafts and maintaining the tradition, and in the case of one woman, also being a member of a *duodji* organization. For the two women who currently live outside the Sámi region, ways of participating in Sámi society included also reading Sámi literature and listening to Sámi music.

Two women also emphasized the significance of interacting with and on the land, whether fishing, gathering, skiing or teaching various land-based skills to their children or grandchildren. An older woman also discussed the values stemming from the land such as the responsibility to give back to the land and ask for its permission. She referred to the teachings of the older generation according to which human beings were creatures of nature equal to all the others. She talked about the importance of balance between human beings and the land and challenges of finding it in contemporary society.

6. Perspectives on Sámi Self-Determination

The discussion on Sámi self-determination with the interviewees was divided into three main themes: views on Sámi self-determination, critiques of the Sámi Parliaments and alternatives to current arrangements. The overall scope and substance of Sámi self-determination appears markedly unclear to most participants. Several women indicated they did not have a coherent understanding of what Sámi self-determination would mean in practice or what its scope was (or would be). They also contended that the key Sámi political institutions lacked an explicit plan with regard to self-determination; that the Sámi Parliaments' objectives and intentions to implement self-determination were vague if not entirely missing. According to a long-term participant of Sámi politics, "not even all of the Sámi politicians know what self-determination means". Another woman asked: "Where is the road map, where are the written statements, strategies and visions for the future?"

For many women, the foundation of Sámi self-determination was overly narrow and limited from the onset only to cultural issues to the exclusion of land rights and resource management. As a woman who had previously been long involved in Sámi politics put it: Sámi self-determination was "on the leash of Nordic bureaucrats". In her view, there was an urgent need to bring the discussion to the level of nation-building: "If the goal [of Sámi self-determination] is nation-building, we're just fooling around [with the current efforts]."

One woman maintained that Sámi self-determination does not work even in areas where laws were already in place such as the Sámi Language Acts (in Norway and Finland). These Acts have recognized the Sámi language as the official language in the Sámi region and according to them the Sámi have the right to use their mother tongue before state bodies and authorities. However, they have largely remained unimplemented paper rights. Another participant, a representative of the Sámi Parliament, also admitted that the implementation of Sámi self-determination was deficient. She put forward: "So far the language and linguistic rights have made progress but have other issues been advanced at all?"

Another senior Sámi politician argued that Sámi politics have become too localized and fragmented with too much focus on competition between different

Sámi regions. In her view, the only way to advance Sámi self-determination was capacity-building in Sámi society: “to ensure we have enough doctors, lawyers – our own experts in all areas and fields”.

With regard to the question whether Sámi self-determination has relevance to the everyday life in Sámi society, the answers varied greatly. Most participants maintained that Sámi self-determination was too abstract or had no connection to ordinary people’s lives. For others, Sámi self-determination arrangements (in Norway) have influenced their working lives to some extent, for example in educational institutions or Sámi organizations. One woman believed that in the long run current Sámi self-determination efforts will have an impact on the local level for example by improving social and health services.

One of the reasons for the lack of a better understanding of the processes related to Sámi self-determination was lack of information available in Sámi society. Several women mentioned the role of the media and were especially critical of Sámi media, arguing that it does not adequately cover issues related to self-determination. In their view, the focus of the Sámi media was extensively on internal conflicts – or deliberately creating conflicts by taking issues out of their contexts – without providing an in-depth understanding to the background of various issues and debates.

7. Critique of the Sámi Parliaments

For most participants, Sámi self-determination was synonymous with the Sámi Parliaments – when asked about the current efforts related to Sámi self-determination, they all discussed the elected Sámi bodies. This is entirely expected as the Sámi Parliaments are the main players in the very institutionalized Sámi self-determination debate. In Sámi society, self-determination debates are almost entirely limited to the Sámi political institutions, which, in addition to the three Sámi Parliaments, include the Sámi Council. To some extent, local Sámi organizations also raise and address it from time to time. It is not a topic discussed by ordinary people in everyday contexts, a reality also indicated by the interviewees. This was addressed in detail by one of women, a member of the Sámi Parliament, who contended that in Sámi society so much time and energy has been spent on building the Sámi Parliaments and other Sámi institutions that Sámi civil society has been dissolved. Three interviewed women, one of them a representative of the Sámi Parliament, pointed out that the shortcomings related to implementing Sámi self-determination were due to the shortage of funding or an extremely limited budget of the Finnish Sámi Parliament.¹⁷

¹⁷⁾ Two women were from Finnish Sápmi and one from Norwegian Sápmi. In this particular context, the qualifier is warranted as there is an enormous discrepancy between the annual budgets of

A great majority of the interviewees were critical of the Sámi Parliaments in their efforts to advance and implement self-determination. A younger woman who had been involved in Sámi politics expressed this criticism most explicitly: “The worst thing ever happened with regard to Sámi self-determination was the establishment of the Sámi Parliaments!” In her view, it has resulted in a situation where each Sámi Parliament seeks self-determination internally within the state and where the Sámi have lost the “basic premise that we are one people”. Referring to the Deatnu (Tana) River that forms the present-day border between Norway and Finland, she retorted: “What do we do with self-determination that ends in the middle of the river while on the other side another Sámi self-determination begins?”

Two women explicitly stated that the Sámi Parliaments were currently not advancing self-determination. For one of them, the Sámi Parliament was stuck in party politics. The other woman with a long history of involvement in Sámi politics suggested that one possible explanation for the present impasse might be found in the fact many of the current members of the Parliament were young first-timers and did not have the necessary political experience. This has resulted in a political system with very little continuity. Similar criticism was shared by two other actively involved women (but not members of the Sámi Parliament) who pointed out that many of these young first-timers were either from urban areas or regions where Sámi culture and identity no longer have a strong hold. For these two women, it was not so much the political experience but the lack of a strong Sámi background – as one woman put it, “they are themselves searching for Sámi identity; how can they advance Sáminess if they don’t know it yet themselves?”

The criticism of party politics interfering with Sámi self-determination agenda was reiterated by nearly all participants in the Norwegian side of Sápmi. In Norway, the Sámi Parliament elections follow the Norwegian electoral system in which the parties – or in the case of the Sámi Parliament, in addition to parties, also Sámi organizations or local lists – rank their candidates and create a list from which a certain number of candidates are elected, based on the number of votes for the party. The Norwegian parties that have participated in the Sámi Parliament elections include the Labour, the Conservative and the populist Progress Party, the Labour becoming the biggest party for the first time in the most recent elections in 2009 (26.8 per cent of the votes). According to many interviewed women, it was a big mistake to allow Norwegian parties to join the Sámi Parliament elections. One participant contended: “Norwegian parties block Sámi thinking; they shouldn’t be there, all they do is squabble about nothing.” Internal fighting instead

the Sámi Parliaments. The annual budget of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament for 2010 is USD 54.4 million whereas in Finland it is USD 2.2 million.

of finding common ground and a shared vision were mentioned by several other women as a central reason for the apparently stalled self-determination process.

An older woman who has long been involved in Sámi politics (but never a member of the Sámi Parliament) lamented the fact that the Sámi Parliament turned out to be something else than she had envisioned: “I thought we would be capable of building something that would be ours, that we wouldn’t have to think how the Norwegian Parliament works, how Norwegian political parties work.” Other interviewees also maintained that from the very beginning the Sámi Parliament has been a carbon copy of the Norwegian model in which representatives are forced to toe the line according to the mainstream political system. As one woman pointed out: “The current situation is that everyone has to advocate and conform to their party lines and try to topple the opposing party. Whom is the Sámi Parliament working for, the Sámi people or the mainstream political parties? Whose voice is it that we hear in the Sámi Parliament?”

Also one of representatives of the Sámi Parliament was dissatisfied with the current (Norwegian) organizational structure in which the parties have to promote themselves through constant verbal attacks over slightest differences between their platforms: “In the current system too much time, energy and resources are wasted on unnecessary fights over small differences.” In her view, the entire mainstream political organization and culture are inappropriate for Sámi society and the Sámi way of communication. This criticism was not limited to the Norwegian Sámi Parliament. In Finland, the Sámi Parliament elections are based on an individual ballot – there are no parties or organizations involved and instead the 21 representatives are voted in directly. The main shortcoming with this system is the lack of answerability and transparency when members represent only themselves and are not held accountable to their constituents. Like in Norway, the Sámi Parliament in Finland is modelled after the Nordic parliamentary system and very little, if any, thought has been given to Sámi models of organization.

An interviewee who had been involved in setting up the Sámi Parliament and a long-time member explained the decision for modelling the Sámi representative body after Western political structures: “We did not have other models, we didn’t have a continuity with traditional Sámi structures, practices – those ties have long been broken. We simply didn’t know any other way. The Nordic or Western model of parliamentarianism is the only way to promote democracy and democratic ideals although the biggest challenge has been the inclusion of women’s perspectives.” Another member of the Sámi Parliament agreed that the organizational structure followed closely the Norwegian parliamentary system and acknowledged that representatives and staff from the Sámi Parliament often travelled to the Norwegian Parliament for a study trip. In her view, this close resemblance was important as “many of the official statements were directed to the Norwegian Parliament, and it is easier to communicate with them if we use the same template”. However, the current orientation and focus of the Sámi

Parliaments to serve first and foremost the needs of Norwegian/Finnish bureaucracy rather than those of the Sámi people was seen by many as diminishing the legitimacy of the Sámi Parliaments. Activities such as writing statements and allocating funds on an ad hoc basis were seen overly reactive and lacking planning or a long-term vision.

Nearly all interviewees were critical of the Sámi Parliaments and Sámi politics in general as male political arenas where women's voices and views were not adequately heard even in the Norwegian Sámi Parliament where, at the time of conducting the interviews, women formed a majority. All five representatives of the Sámi Parliaments had either experienced or witnessed discrimination such as trivialization or exclusion by their male colleagues – also known as master suppression techniques of making invisible, ridiculing, withholding information, blaming and shaming.¹⁸ The double standards of Sámi politics was also pointed out: the male experience and involvement were recognized and celebrated whereas experienced Sámi female politicians were cast aside and even derided. One interviewee (not a member of the Sámi Parliament) questioned the possibilities of presenting different views in political structures permeated by masculine thinking: “Why do we [women] get involved in politics? If it is to conform to the male thinking, it doesn't matter how many women get involved, it won't change anything.” For her, the Sámi self-determination debate was too materialistic with very little focus on fundamental, shared values “that would guarantee the well-being of all”.

Many argued that women are not taken seriously or that their perspectives are not taken into consideration. Some also suggested that women and female politicians are afraid of making public statements and taking power and that they should be more proactive in talking to the Sámi media, for example. Several participants contended that women's involvement would ensure a broader perspective on any issue, including activities on and rights to land – an area almost exclusively focused on male activities of hunting, fishing and reindeer herding. A member of the Sámi Parliament had observed how women's perspectives are overlooked because their activities on the land differ from those of men. In her experience, women representatives of the Sámi Parliament are keen on taking part in debates on self-determination but they are often shunned by more experienced, senior male politicians who are used to setting the agenda and employing various control mechanisms. This view was also expressed, during the recent election campaign, by a Centre Party female candidate for the Norwegian Sámi Parliament who argued that Sámi women's views and land use practices are

¹⁸⁾ B. Ås, *Master Suppression Techniques*, Kilden, Information Center for Gender Research, <www.kilden.forskningsradet.no/c16881/artikkel/vis.html?tid=35123>, 2 November 2006.

invisible in the Sámi rights debate.¹⁹ A more senior member of the Sámi Parliament, on the other hand, argued that Sámi women do not participate sufficiently in contemplating and deliberating the contents of self-determination:

It is mostly men who dare to discuss, and they pretend they know more than women about self-determination. Men have been attending international meetings and return home with that experience, and women think they don't know anything. At the international level, self-determination is tied to livelihoods and land rights and it is men who are in control of these debates. Men don't take women seriously; I have experienced and seen this myself. But women know as much as men, for example older women know the land as well as the men, about rights, collective use, family boundaries and so on.

Yet in her view, women cannot be blamed for the fact that women's voices are not adequately heard in the Sámi Parliament. Instead, the fault is with the Sámi electorate who votes inexperienced, ill-informed candidates in and who does not understand the level of the Sámi Parliament politics. On the other hand, another interviewee maintained that women who are more educated and are familiar with the structures do not adequately apply their knowledge, skills and broader perspective especially in promoting and protecting Sámi heritage, language and culture. A differing view was expressed by a member of the Sámi Parliament in Finland where, according to her, women's views are both heard and taken into account because, for one thing, "women are much more skilled in debating and grounding their arguments than men". Men who are used to making decisions among themselves prior to the meetings are often frustrated with women who delay the meetings by "talking too much".

The existence of 'old boys clubs' was also mentioned by others. Two participants pointed out the close relationship between the Sámi media and senior male politicians. Sámi journalists have certain politicians – often their personal acquaintances or friends – whom they contact for comments or information and vice versa. One interviewee, a member of the Sámi Parliament, had learned that certain methods characterized as masculine also guaranteed media attention, such as direct attacks and charges against another member. Moreover, she had noticed that certain topics attracted more media attention than others.

8. Alternatives

In spite of their criticisms, several participants agreed that although flawed Sámi Parliaments are important institutions. As the woman criticizing the Sámi Parliament for being bogged down by Norwegian parties and not advancing

¹⁹ 'Sámi Nissoniid Árvvut Oaidnemeahtumat', *Ávvir*, 18 April 2009, p. 7.

self-determination put it, “it nevertheless gives us a peace of mind that we have the Sámi Parliament – before we didn’t have anything keeping an eye on the state oppression of the Sámi”. Unlike among many other indigenous peoples worldwide, however, the debate on alternatives to state-driven or state-centric structures in Sámi society or Sámi politics has been very thin. Very few of the interviewees had ever considered alternatives for the Sámi Parliaments or possibilities of advancing self-determination differently. One woman who had been long involved in Sámi politics (but never in the Sámi Parliament) asserted that “there is no room for alternatives as long as we think we are divided into four countries”. Another woman, a senior Sámi politician, saw no reason to be “outside the system” and, therefore, outside power and authority. According to her, the formal structures such as the Sámi Parliaments are necessary. Her view, according to which the most important way to participate in Sámi society and advancing self-determination is through these formal institutions, was shared by several other participants, mostly those who were members of the Sámi Parliament.

All four members had given some thought to restructuring the Sámi Parliaments, especially changing the electoral system. In Finland, personal elections would be replaced by groups or organizations (but not political parties like in Norway). In Norway, one member would replace political parties with a more local electoral structure. Another member contended she did not know what the alternative to current arrangements could be. She mentioned the traditional Sámi governing system of *siida* and noted that it has sometimes been proposed as a model for contemporary Sámi political organization. She, however, was quite unconvinced and regarded such suggestions as romanticization more than anything else: “We don’t know how the *siida* system really worked for what has been described about them are representations by outsiders.” She also was sceptical of calls for returning to traditional Sámi ways of debating until reaching consensus.²⁰ She questioned the authenticity of such consensus and noted that it can also function as a way of silencing those who disagree. Yet she recognized the need to change the current structures and practices that prevent the Sámi Parliaments communicating with local communities – a challenge also addressed by a member of the Sámi Parliament in Finland.

²⁰ She did not, however, elaborate what the notion of consensus might mean in the Sámi context. Some other indigenous peoples have noted that for them consensus does not mean unanimous agreement. For the Dene, for instance, it implies a relational process oriented toward “reaching decisions through the open and respectful sharing of views”. Rather than an imposition of dominant views upon others, this kind of “transparent form of interest sharing reveals a direction which should be taken that would be in the best interests of the collective, not only in the present but in the future” (Dene Nation 1984, cited in G. Fondahl and S. Irlbacher-Fox, *Indigenous Governance in the Arctic. A Report for the Arctic Governance Project* (Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, Toronto, 2009) p. 9).

9. Analysis

Almost all interviewed Sámi women were critical of the current Sámi self-determination efforts; only one woman in her early 70s could not think of anything worth criticizing in the Sámi political institutions. Women were particularly critical of the lack of information and public discussion of the contents and scope of Sámi self-determination – in other words, what it actually stands for and what it would mean in reality. They also criticized the stagnation with regard to the process of implementing self-determination in Sámi society – stagnation due to the overall lack of vision and understanding of what Sámi self-determination really is about but also due to what the women saw as continuous in-fighting and disagreements over trivial things. Many of them also pointed out that a considerable part of the problem is that Sámi political bodies are direct copies of mainstream institutions and do not reflect at all Sámi values or modes of organization. Several women were highly critical of the male-centric institutions, political processes and agendas which often shun women's participation and their perspectives. All women who currently were or had previously been involved in the leading Sámi political institutions (the Sámi Parliaments, the Sámi Council) had experienced, in one way or other, male mechanisms of control.

In spite of the increased political participation of Sámi women in the past years, practices of trivialization of and discrimination continue to exist in contemporary Sámi and other local organizations and political processes. Usually these practices are very 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.²¹ Sámi female politicians' perspectives and attempts to participate in political debate are particularly trivialized when the topic is considered belonging to the 'male sphere' such as traditional livelihoods and land use.

For most interviewed Sámi 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

²¹) See Ås, *supra* note 18; C. Enloe, *The Curious Feminist. Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004); V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, London, 1993).

domination”.²² 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.²³ She contends:

Insofar as outsiders are affected by the activities of a self-determining people, those others have a legitimate claim to have their interests and needs taken into account even though they are outside the government jurisdiction. Conversely, outsiders should recognize that when they themselves affect a people, the latter can legitimately claim that they should have their interests taken into account insofar as they may be adversely affected. Insofar as their affect one another, peoples are in relationships and ought to negotiate the terms and effects of the relationship.²⁴

Several interviewed Sámi 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 Sámi governance institutions and the precept of collective self-determination – what Young calls the indigenous peoples’ “quest for an institutional context of non-domination”.²⁵ Importantly, all of these principles were fully congruous – not oppositional – with one another and to Sámi women’s understanding of the concept of self-determination in general and Sámi 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.

Sámi 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.²⁶ Three women explicitly stated that collective self-determination must primarily take place on the local level rather than through

²² I.M. Young, ‘Two Concepts of Self-Determination’, in *Global Challenges. War, Self-Determination and Responsibility for Justice* (Polity Press, Cambridge & Malden, MA, 2007) p. 46.

²³ 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” (*ibid.*, p. 51).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁶ T. Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1999) p. 90.

centralized institutions and several others discussed the paralyzing effect of the establishment of the Sámi 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 livelihoods. They saw the current efforts of Sámi self-determination abstract and irrelevant only insofar as it was constituted through centralized institutions of the Sámi Parliaments. Further, one could speculate that 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 Sámi governance – points made by some interviewees as critiques for women’s lack of participation.

In spite of their often strong criticism toward current Sámi self-determination processes, Sámi women are not mobilizing to change the existing political structures. They are not going to media to voice their criticisms in public or demanding change; they are not openly challenging the system, nor are they calling for or thinking of alternatives for either masculine political institutions or the contents of Sámi self-determination. This is quite different from many other indigenous women who explicitly reject indigenous self-determination structures which imitate adversarial nation-state models and replicate domination and patriarchal hierarchies and instead call for alternative frameworks of indigenous self-determination based on indigenous values and philosophies.²⁷

A cynical interpretation for the lack of alternative Sámi thinking or calls for alternative accounts of self-determination might suggest that for Sámi women the status quo works and by and large there is no real need for change. Further, not really knowing what Sámi self-determination means or how it would change things in their lives and in Sámi society (maybe things would be worse?) could be seen as an effective barrier for a more proactive stance. Such an interpretation would postulate that the integration of the Sámi (as individuals, not as a distinct people) into the Nordic welfare state has ensured the Sámi do not experience

²⁷ See J. Barker, ‘Gender, Sovereignty, Rights: Native Women’s Activism against Social Inequality and Violence in Canada’, 60 *American Quarterly* (2008) pp. 259–266; M. Belausteguigoitia, ‘Zapatista Women: Place-Based Struggles and the Search for Autonomy’, in W. Harcourt and A. Escobar (eds.), *Women and the Politics of Place* (Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, CT, 2005) pp. 190–205; C. Ecohawk, ‘Reflections on Sovereignty’, *Indigenous Woman* (1999); M. Gutiérrez and N. Palomo, ‘A Woman’s Eye View of Autonomy’, in A. B. C. Mayor (ed.), *Indigenous Autonomy in Mexico* (IWGIA, Copenhagen, 2000) pp. 53–82; P. Monture-Angus, *Journeying Forward: Dreaming First Nations’ Independence* (Fernwood, Halifax, N.S., 1998); J. Nash, ‘Global Integration and Subsistence Insecurity’, 96 *American Anthropologist* (1994) pp. 1–31; NWAC, *Our Way of Being: Gathering of Indigenous Women on Self-Government* (Native Women’s Association of Canada, Ottawa, 2003); L. Parisi and J. Corntassel, ‘In Pursuit of Self-Determination: Indigenous Women’s Challenges to Traditional Diplomatic Spaces’, 13 *Canadian Foreign Policy* (2007) pp. 81–98; A. Smith, ‘Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change’, 31 *Feminist Studies* (2005) pp. 116–132; S. H. Venne, ‘The Meaning of Sovereignty’, *Indigenous Woman* (1999) pp. 27–30; I. Washinawatok, ‘Sovereignty Is More Than Just Power’, *Indigenous Woman* (1999) pp. 23–24.

poverty or other social ills nearly to the levels of many other indigenous communities in even the “First World” countries and therefore the current system works well enough for the individualized Sámi. In other words, Sámi self-determination is seen as additional luxury that might be a fun idea to entertain but is not a matter of survival of the Sámi people – no longer a question of “life or death” as it was for Laula Renberg in the early 20th century.

While this might be the case for some individual Sámi women, I do not believe that it comes even close to telling the whole story of challenges of Sámi self-determination. Sámi political institutions have failed to explain to their constituencies what Sámi self-determination would mean in people’s lives and to their livelihoods. Particularly the discussion above of several Sámi women conceiving self-determination in terms of what is often called traditional indigenous governance – localized, decentralized forms of participation and decision-making – demonstrates clearly that many Sámi women do desire different models for self-determination but their initiative is restricted by broader societal and political factors. In the remainder of the article, I offer two related explanations to the lack of alternative thinking with regard to Sámi self-determination. Both explanations link the question with the broader issue whether Sámi Parliaments and the existing model represent a legitimate expression of Sámi right to self-determination.

The first explanation considers different approaches to feminism and prevalent Nordic feminist discourses of equality. The Nordic countries are strongholds of liberal feminism and its equality of opportunity policies. Dominant paradigms of Nordic feminism are fairly homogeneous and largely focused on discourses of equality of opportunity. Critiques of liberal feminist discourses remain marginal and as a result debates about alternatives are limited if not dismissed as “utopian”. The fact that the Nordic welfare state model is praised globally might be also a factor in the public faith in the existing systems and modes of organization.

Although in the 1970s and 1980s, Sámi women stressed their difference from their Nordic counterparts as part of the nation-building efforts,²⁸ today Sámi women and their organizations largely focus on gender equality, anti-discrimination, personal autonomy and participation in existing structures and institutions on an equal footing with men in a very similar fashion to mainstream Nordic feminists and women’s organizations. The basic assumption is that change is achieved through a legal and institutional reform and by creating more opportunities for women in society. Evidence of progress is often measured by the numbers of women in positions previously held by men, especially in positions of power.

²⁸) J. Eikjok, ‘Indigenous Women in the North. The Struggle for Rights and Feminism’, 3 *Indigenous Affairs* (2000) pp. 38–41.

Indigenous feminism, on the other hand, brings together the critiques of colonialism and patriarchy and argues that both need to be addressed simultaneously in order to liberate indigenous peoples, and indigenous women in particular, from oppression.²⁹ While important, equality as understood in liberal feminism is often considered in a critical light and instead the emphasis is on gender complementarity and on restoring women's traditional political and economic roles.³⁰ According to Paula Gunn Allen, 'tribal feminism' can also produce strategies with which damages of patriarchal colonialism can be healed. For her, feminism signifies a return to the woman-centred, "gynarchical, egalitarian, and sacred traditions" of Native American life.³¹

One of the characteristics of assimilation is difference-blind liberalism that treats indigenous people like any other members of the mainstream society.³² The ideologies of individualism and social equality which translate into 'sameness' have been very powerful driving forces in the Nordic society for the past several decades³³ without prevailing counter-discourses to make a strong case for a collective 'indigenous difference' of the Sámi. Due to the homogenizing effects of difference-blind liberalism, many Sámi are today hesitant and unwilling to discuss reclaiming their traditions and practices for fear of being dismissed or ridiculed. There is also a broadly acknowledged norm and expectation in Sámi society to conform and not to 'cause trouble' for the fear of being labelled as a 'radical' and therefore a black sheep.³⁴

Moreover, as a result of centuries of colonization the Sámi today are, for the most part, disconnected from their traditional institutions and only the educated elite are familiar with the details of the international law outlining the arguments

²⁹ P. G. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1986); J. Green (ed.), *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Fernwood, Halifax, N.S., 2007); Smith, *supra* note 26.

³⁰ See for example K. Anderson, *A Recognition of Being. Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Second Story Press, Toronto, 2000); K. Anderson and B. Lawrence (eds.), *Strong Women Stories. Native Vision and Community Survival* (Sumach Press, Toronto, 2003).

³¹ Allen, *supra* note 29, p. 223.

³² J. Tully, 'The Struggles of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom', in D. Ivison *et al.* (eds.), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000) pp. 36–59.

³³ S. E. Olsson and D. Lewis, 'Welfare Rules and Indigenous Rights: The Sami People and the Nordic Welfare States', in J. Dixon and R. P. Scheurell (eds.), *Social Welfare with Indigenous Peoples* (Routledge, London & New York, 1995) pp. 141–187.

³⁴ This surfaced, for example, during the heyday of the Sámi political mobilization in the 1970s. One of the most vocal and visible movements was called ČSV – short for "Show the Sámi Power" in the Sámi language – but it quickly became a derogatory label in more conservative Sámi circles and is still used as such by many Sámi to dismiss and demean various forms of Sámi activism or even everyday acts that could be interpreted as activism, such as calling for Sámi language education, media, *etc.* See for example Sara Marielle Gaup in R. Ragazzi, *Firekeepers*, Sonar Film, Norway, 2007, DVD, 57 min.

for the right to self-determination – hence they are more vulnerable to hegemonic control and pressure to conform. This has resulted in a situation where there is very little else to draw upon than international law (for the rationale and explanation for the existence of the Sámi right to self-determination) and mainstream parliamentarianism (for the organization of Sámi political institutions).

This leads to the second explanation which focuses on critiques of the state-centric, rights-based discourse on indigenous self-determination. The heavy Sámi involvement in the United Nations system since the inception of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982³⁵ and the steadfast confidence by the Sámi political elite of the potential of the international law to guarantee and deliver indigenous rights has led to a statist understanding of indigenous self-determination.³⁶ The Sámi political institutions have been institutionalized and mainstreamed within the state systems.³⁷ The centralization and institutionalization of the Sámi political process has rendered grassroots engagement and debate on self-determination irrelevant. There are no venues for local participation because the current system does not consider them important enough to prioritize them. As a result, grassroots initiatives and organizing have been dampened,³⁸ but people also no longer tend to take ownership of the process. Instead, the centralization has led to a situation where many people expect the Sámi Parliaments to deliver them self-determination.

A centralized, statist approach, however, will not be able to deliver viable indigenous self-determination premised on community involvement and citizen participation. Jeff Corn tassel contends: “Strategies that invoke existing human rights norms and that solely seek political and legal recognition of indigenous self-determination will not lead to a self-determination process that is sustainable for the survival of future generations of indigenous peoples.”³⁹ For him, sustainable self-determination is a process that ensures “that evolving indigenous livelihoods, food security, community governance, relationships to homelands and

³⁵ See Minde, *supra* note 9; H. Minde, ‘The Destination and the Journey. Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations from the 1960s through 1985’, in H. Minde (ed.), *Indigenous Peoples. Self-Determination, Knowledge, Indigeneity* (Eburon, CW Delft, 2008) pp. 49–87.

³⁶ See Alfred, *supra* note 25; J. Corn tassel, ‘Partnership in Action? Indigenous Political Mobilization and Co-Optation During the First UN Indigenous Decade (1995–2004)’, 29 *Human Rights Quarterly* (2007) pp. 137–166; G. Coulthard, ‘Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the “Politics of Recognition” in Canada’, 6 *Contemporary Political Theory* (2007) pp. 437–460.

³⁷ See E. G. Broderstad, ‘Political Autonomy and Integration of Authority: The Understanding of Saami Self-Determination’, 8 *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* (2001) pp. 151–175; N. Oskal, ‘Political Inclusion of the Saami as Indigenous People in Norway’, 8 *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* (2001) pp. 235–261.

³⁸ E. Josefsen, ‘The Saami and the National Parliaments – Channels for Political Influence’, 2 *Gáldu Čála – Journal of Indigenous Peoples Rights* (2007).

³⁹ J. Corn tassel, ‘Toward Sustainable Self-Determination: Rethinking the Contemporary Indigenous-Rights Discourse’, 33 *Alternatives* (2008) p. 108.

the natural world, and ceremonial life can be practiced today locally and regionally, thus enabling the transmission of these traditions and practices to future generations”.⁴⁰

Most Sámi women who were interviewed discussed extensively the continued significance of various traditions – language, *duodji*, Sámi livelihoods and land use practices – in constituting Sámi society in the present and the future. Very few mentioned international law or human rights norms in their definitions of self-determination – yet these are the very foundations upon which official Sámi self-determination discourse is currently premised. In order to make Sámi self-determination more sustainable, there is a need to bring the political discourses and processes back to the local level and the level of people’s everyday lives and away from abstract and often alien conceptions and state-oriented processes and structures which leave many Sámi uninformed about the scope and contents of and alienated from efforts toward Sámi self-determination. This would enable a much-needed fundamental public dialogue about the source and authority of Sámi self-determination and about appropriate and legitimate forms of expression of the Sámi right to self-determination.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.