

Holding Ourselves Responsible Dismantling the Binary between Violence against Women and Self-Determination in Indigenous Communities

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Violence against Indigenous women is a global concern, yet in many parts of the world it remains a little-studied question. There is a lack of statistics, detailed reports, and disaggregated data on the extent of violence against Indigenous women, especially in Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, Latin America, and most of the Arctic. The lack of concern and interest in gender violence statistics among Indigenous peoples is not limited to mainstream society but is fairly common internally.¹ Scholars have suggested that the lack of statistics regarding gender violence among certain populations is neither accidental nor neutral. Rather, it is an indication of lower social importance in society. The lack of statistics has serious consequences, as “statistics are fundamental to the distribution of funds and the creation of social policy, which in turn shape the development of mental health initiatives, the availability of services, and the possibility of safety for disenfranchised populations.”²

A long-standing major problem in all studies is that violence against Indigenous women has been categorically separated from questions of self-determination and treated as a social or criminal issue. Yet globally, for Indigenous women, self-determination (both individual and collective) and gendered violence are central and pressing issues and, as many argue, indivisible. This chapter draws on my 2011–14 research in Canada, Greenland, and Sápmi (the Sámi territory in Scandinavia and

northwest Russia) and examines the relationship between gendered violence and Indigenous self-determination. My work connects violence against Indigenous women with the question of self-determination and shows that collective self-determination is not possible without upholding and ensuring individual self-determination, including bodily autonomy, of all community members. Most Indigenous political institutions and leaders have failed to make this linkage, and as a result, a considerable gap remains in dealing with these two major issues in Indigenous societies.³

Comparative Data of Gender Violence in the Three Regions

In Canada, Indigenous women experience violence at rates three times higher than other women in general and are five times more likely to be killed or disappear compared to non-Indigenous women. Moreover, Indigenous women in Canada are more likely to be victims of violence than Indigenous men.⁴ In Canada and in the United States, disproportionate rates of gendered violence are a result of a history of state policies and institutional practices as well as racist and sexist attitudes that devalue and dehumanize Indigenous women. This has led to a normalizing and internalizing of gendered violence.

In Greenland, violence and homicide rates are high, but specific statistics on violence against women in Greenland are next to nonexistent. Available information is mainly from police reports and hospital records. The government's population survey 2005–2010 estimates that 60 percent of the population over seventeen years has experienced violence or serious threats. This is a significant increase since the survey in 1993, when the figure was 47 percent. While men are most at risk of violence from strangers, women are mostly exposed to intimate partner violence.⁵ According to the Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic, 63 percent of the adult population in Greenland perceive family violence and 58 percent perceive sexual abuse as a social problem.⁶

Detailed information or statistics about violence against Sámi women is even more scarce. A recent study challenges previously held views about the rates of violence against Sámi women and shows that in Norway, Sámi women experience physical and sexual violence at higher rates than non-Sámi women in the country. Similar data from Sweden, Finland, or Russia does not exist. Of all groups (Sámi men and women, non-Sámi men and women), Sámi women "reported highest prevalence

of violence exposure."⁷ Nearly half of the Sámi women reported violence (emotional, physical, and/or sexual) compared to one-third of the non-Sámi women. In a great majority of cases (80 percent), the perpetrator was known to the victim. Sexual violence was more prevalent toward women (one in five or 21.8 percent). Nearly 17 percent of Sámi women reported experiencing sexual violence in their childhood. The authors of the study note:

Our findings are consistent with other studies which show that Indigenous people are more likely to be exposed to violence than non-Indigenous people. Findings for Sámi women in our study (49.1%) are congruent with a study of the Inuit population in Greenland that reported that 47% of Inuit women were exposed to violence.⁸

The study, which was published four years after the interviews I conducted in Sápmi, has been an eye-opener to many. A number of participants in my research did not think violence against Sámi women was more prevalent than against other women in Scandinavia. Some health-care professionals were aware of the scope of violence in Sámi society but noted that the problem has long been disregarded. When asked whether there is a crisis regarding violence in Sápmi, Sámi psychologist Anne Lene Turi admitted she does not know the answer: "The Sámi have never been portrayed that way. You can get an impression of Greenland that everyone drinks, fights and beats children and everything is a total tragedy. Sápmi is not portrayed that way. I don't know whether it is as bad [in Sápmi] or whether we are so skilled at covering up."⁹

Although no comprehensive statistics exist to draw simple comparisons, it is fairly evident that in Canada, violence against Indigenous women is more prevalent, systemic, institutionalized, and extreme than in Sápmi or Greenland. The Nordic countries, including Denmark and Greenland, never had legislation comparable to the Indian Act that would have systematically excluded women and their children from their communities and all levels of participation. Violence against Indigenous women, however, is a stark reality and a considerable problem in all three regions regardless of the differences. As confirmed by the participants, the issue of violence is neither adequately discussed in public nor properly addressed by Indigenous leadership and other institutions.

Gender Violence and Self-Determination

Female Inuit politicians interviewed in Greenland agreed that high levels of violence have undermined the promise of self-determination in *The 2009 Greenland Self-Government Act*. The “self” in self-determination comprises both individual and collective selves, and therefore, self-government fails without the right to individual and bodily integrity and freedom from violence. In the words of former Inuit Greenlandic parliamentarian Naaja Nathanielsen, “Self-government requires every single person in Greenland; we cannot lose anyone to violence. Self-determination is about freedom from violence and [from] fear of violence.”¹⁰

In Sápmi, the disinclination of Sámi leadership to address violence against women up until recently can be partially explained by the process of nation building. For example, when accounts of sexual abuse of young women first surfaced in the Sámi town of Guovdageaidnu (Kau-tokino) in the late 1980s, it was during a crucial period of rebuilding Sámi society, which saw the establishment of key institutions such as the Sámi Parliament. This contributed to more stringent demands for loyalty and unity, which Sámi leaders believed was necessary for state approval and a recognition that Sámi society had to speak with one strong voice. A public airing of incidents of sexual abuse was perceived as an act of disloyalty and a threat to the advancement of Sámi society. Sámi organizations were negatively portrayed in the Norwegian media, which often conflated individual criminal offenses with the entire Sámi population.

Hence, a concern for reinforcing negative stereotypes played a role in turning a blind eye to violence in Sámi society.¹¹ Yet this suppression was highly gendered: portraying Sámi men in a detrimental light would reinforce prevailing negative stereotypes. Among Scandinavians, Sámi men are stereotypically considered “uncivilized, dirty drunken men.” Thus, protecting Sámi men from being viewed unfavorably came at the cost of exposing violence against Sámi women. Because attacks on Sámi men were equated with assaults on the Sámi people, direct assaults on individual Sámi women became a private concern that could not be addressed in public. The nation-building process became synonymous with Indigenous men, and criticism of them was considered a critique of the Indigenous nation.

In Canada, Indigenous gender violence has been a long-standing social issue but typically focused on domestic or family violence, and expressly separate from self-government issues. Audrey Huntley,

the cofounder of the No More Silence network (NMS is a Southern Ontario-based network of Indigenous women and non-Indigenous allies working to stop the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women and LGBTQ2 individuals), notes that until recently, discussing violence against Indigenous women together with sovereignty and decolonization was considered inappropriate by a number of organizations and individuals. The inextricability of gender violence and self-determination was the position NMS took from the start but was considered too radical by many. Indigenous organizations afraid of losing their funding did not want to be associated with the network. According to Huntley, most Indigenous organizations and groups working against violence against Indigenous women “have not framed their advocacy in terms of sovereignty—it’s been more just about the marginalization of that community and poverty.”¹²

While a number of leading Indigenous female politicians recognize gender violence as being indelibly linked to self-determination and self-government, for many male leaders, violence against women typically is a social (or criminal) issue that, if not outright dismissed, is regarded as a low priority and as a result, falls off the table. Nathanielsen says politicians tend to approach the problem “in a very sedate . . . [and] politically correct manner so that the gender dimension is diminished. . . . We have a problem with openly saying we have a problem with our men hitting our women. We are trying to make it not a question of gender so much as a question of we have this statistic, oh it’s bad, maybe we can talk to our children more about violence.”¹³

There are several explanations for why Indigenous communities are hesitant to embrace the intersectional framework of sovereignty, self-determination, and gender violence. The fear of dividing the ranks is a common explanation. Another is the complicity of Indigenous male leadership in the very gender violence they are expected to address. When Indigenous male leaders abuse their positions of power and authority and engage in acts of physical and sexual coercion and violence, they often do so with impunity. Colonization has produced a hegemonic Indigenous male leadership that has often taken place at the expense of women leaders and excluded alternative forms of Indigenous masculinity.¹⁴ Colonized Indigenous men adopted the ideology of their male colonizers and joined forces to further oppress colonized women. Indigenous men have been complicit in incidents of interpersonal violence but also, in collaboration with non-Indigenous men, have established patriarchal structures in Indigenous societies.

In Greenland, violence against women is not generally considered a self-government issue. While there is fairly extensive awareness of violence in general, its gendered character is frequently overlooked or downplayed. This is also the case with the 2013 Government of Greenland action plan to address violence in Greenlandic society.¹⁵ A number of Greenlandic participants criticized the action plan's gender neutrality. Also missing from the plan is an analysis of the root causes and the broader context of violence. As scholars have long pointed out, male violence against women in intimate partner relationships is part of larger structures of domination and control. Conceptualizing violence in gender-neutral terms obfuscates the dynamics and power relations involved in "domestic violence," resulting in analysis and solutions that are partial at best or misguided at worst. Political implications of this trend include disregarding women as legitimate victims, cutting back on crisis services for women, and revoking important policies for women. Moreover, overlooking the gendered nature of violence fails to address structural violence against women beyond abuse in intimate relationships, including state violence, which is particularly an issue for already marginalized groups such as Indigenous women, women of color, and LGBTQ2 individuals.

In Sápmi, the most frequently raised concern pertaining to gender violence was the lack of public debate and support (both material and psychological) for the victims or survivors of gendered violence. The persistent silence about gender violence in Sámi society was addressed by nearly all participants, many of whom linked it directly to the question of self-determination and insisted that as long as gender violence is not taken seriously and put on the agenda, self-determination will remain a distant dream.

Existing Indigenous self-government arrangements vary greatly in terms of their jurisdiction and decision-making authority. In Greenland, the Inuit majority has their own Parliament and government. In Scandinavia, there are three Sámi Parliaments that wield limited political authority and serve mainly as consultative bodies to each nation-state. In Canada, there is a range of self-government arrangements, the most common currently being the negotiated model. Regardless of the degree of self-determination, none have systematically addressed gender violence or sought to protect women from multilayered violence they experience in their own communities and in society at large. The inaction is sometimes explained by the lack of necessary resources and jurisdiction. For example, in Canada, Indigenous communities do not

possess shared constitutional responsibility for addressing gendered violence. Similarly, in the United States, tribal governments do not have jurisdiction over crimes committed on reservations by non-Native Americans.¹⁶ There are, however, other significant factors, including a depoliticization and naturalizing of violence against women in Indigenous communities.

Community Dynamics and the Conspiracy of Silence

There is a tendency to normalize and sanction gender violence in Indigenous communities. On the one hand, gendered violence is often considered something that couples do, "that's how it is," while violence against children is taken far more seriously and there is a greater willingness to do something about it. On the other hand, violence has become naturalized after several generations of abuse and because of residential school violence.

A frequently raised issue among participants in Greenland and Sápmi is internal community dynamics. In Greenland, some suggest that violence is so commonplace and normal that many violent incidents are "not dramatized or taken very seriously. . . . Wife beating among neighbors is usually commented on with a shrug of the shoulders—this is their way of life, their choice."¹⁷ Malina Abelsen, former Inuit Greenlandic parliamentarian and minister for gender equality, considers violence such a common occurrence in Greenlandic society that people have stopped reacting to it: "when you read about violence every day, you think that's kind of, well, it's not too bad."¹⁸

In his study on violence against women in intimate relationships in Greenland, Bo Wagner Sørensen argues that male perpetrators of violence against women are often considered victims of colonialism and historical suffering, while social agency, gender, and power relations are generally overlooked. Thus, violence against women is construed as a symptom of the deep-seated problems facing men rather than a problem of its own right. Sørensen further holds that there is "a peculiar ambiguity of both scholars and lay people" when it comes to the gendered nature of violence. Very few seem to "question the 'naturalness' of male violence against women. Rather, it is taken for granted that violent men are under great pressure and hence cannot be held fully responsible."¹⁹ Externalizing responsibility for gender violence and constructing male violence as a reflection of their own victimhood and loss of status

creates a hierarchy of subordination in Indigenous communities and positions Indigenous men as greater victims of colonization. By failing to account for the internalization of patriarchy, the colonial construction of Indigenous women as second-class citizens and subordinate members of their communities is perpetuated.

Several participants raised the problem of silence around violence not only in the Indigenous political institutions but in their communities at large. In Greenland and Sápmi, participants mentioned that talking about violence, especially sexual abuse, is still considered taboo, especially in small communities where family ties are paramount and people are more interdependent than in larger towns. Problems are further compounded by the lack of shelters or support services. As one interviewee, an employee of the municipal government in Nuuk put it, "Communities are so small and everyone knows each other. So it's difficult to find sympathy and find shelter. So many women just live with the violence, and it's very often lethal."²⁰

Others discussed the cultural preference for conciliation over conflict. In small, tight-knit communities where family ties are extensive through blood and marriage, it is considered fundamental to agree and not create strife and controversy: "This is very generalized but we [Sámi] don't like disagreement. We want to have peace, and the traditional norm has been that everyone has to get along."²¹ This, however, appears true only with regard to certain issues. There are increasing internal tensions and conflicts over land use in reindeer herding in some regions where pastures have been appropriated and lost to industry, tourism, and infrastructure. When asked about these two types of conflict, one Sámi professional replied: "It could be that it is easier to talk about certain conflicts, such as disagreement over pastures, compared to sexual abuse, which is such a taboo."²²

The issue, therefore, is not so much a cultural preference for avoiding conflict as it is a reluctance and refusal to address sexual violence and the powerful cultural norm of family reputation. In some Sámi communities, family honor precedes individual problems, and peaceful relations within and between families can be upheld at the cost of hiding violence and silencing individuals. A person who voices "unspeakable" issues can be severely disciplined in more traditional communities where strong kinship ties are held in very high regard. Several Sámi women discussed how the victim is sometimes left completely alone inside the family "to suffer in the name of collective peace," and how those who experienced violence felt ashamed or blamed

themselves for being weak for letting it happen, without knowing where to go.

Talking about collective trauma and the need for healing, common among many other Indigenous peoples, has not been considered acceptable in Sápmi. A typical response in Sámi society to someone publicly discussing the sexual abuse they have experienced has long been belittlement and disregard.²³ In the wake of the #MeToo movement, however, individual Sámi have begun to talk openly about sexual and physical violence in their lives. Reconciliation processes have also opened avenues for collectively processing the trauma resulting from colonial violence and practices of assimilation.

While it is necessary to critically examine the tendencies and practices of normalizing violence against women in Indigenous communities and to hold Indigenous political institutions and leadership responsible for addressing these practices, we cannot ignore how the state and its institutions create and naturalize the structural conditions that lead to and enable gender violence. Dehumanizing Indigenous women through sustained negative racialized and gendered stereotypes has led to extreme forms of violence against Indigenous women being normalized and is commonly met with indifference and impunity. Blaming Indigenous men or Indigenous communities for dysfunction and disrespect for women conceals the role of the state in gender violence.²⁴ Not surprisingly, a number of Indigenous women no longer "seek justice [through the state] because they know they will not get it."²⁵

The Role of the State

Through law, policies, and practices, the state has institutionalized a patriarchy that has privileged male power and has systematically compromised Indigenous social, political, and legal institutions that have traditionally held Indigenous society together through kinship structures. This has created circumstances in which Indigenous women have had to struggle on two fronts: against state-imposed policies and legislation and against "the internal imprint of state-enforced patriarchy on our men and on our political structures."²⁶

The patriarchal colonial state has failed to ensure the safety and protection of Indigenous women through long-standing and systemic neglect of women's often dire socioeconomic circumstances and by a structural lack of resources to address them. Because of the state's

complicity in gendered violence and settler colonialism's displacement of Indigenous peoples and gendered violence, a growing number of Indigenous women in Canada, the United States, and Australia reject the state as the solution in addressing and ending gendered violence against Indigenous women.

While criticism of the state did not strongly feature in interviews with Sámi and Greenlandic women, it was widely shared by participants in Canada. No More Silence cofounder Huntley is adamant that because the state is the root cause of violence against Indigenous women, solutions cannot come from the perpetrator. Instead, strategies and solutions need to be community-based, "looking to the state for solutions just has . . . always ended up increasing the violence."²⁷ In particular, the colonial state's legal system cannot bring justice, because heteropatriarchy is its foundational principle. Relying on the police and criminal justice system for protection of Indigenous women and children not only has proven to be "a crapshoot" but also often means an exposure to further abuse, violence, and victimization.²⁸ Indigenous women are increasingly incarcerated for poverty-related crimes, among others, and comprise a third of the female prison population in Canada.²⁹

The idea of mobilizing the entire community and community-based strategies against gender violence has long been debated by Indigenous women in Canada, the United States, and Australia. A commonly held view is that the entire community is needed in the process of building healthy relationships, gaining empowerment, and developing joint strategies rather than merely focusing on violent behavior and aggressive individuals. Based on Indigenous Australian practices in Australia, Judy Atkinson argues: "Restitution must be decided by the victim and the perpetrator, with support and encouragement from the community. Forms of conflict that facilitate such behaviour must be dealt with within the community, so that the community itself begins to redefine its social control mechanisms."³⁰

As one of its initiatives, No More Silence has created a community database documenting premature and violent deaths of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people, and trans people. There are a number of other community-driven initiatives to address violence against women in Canada, many of which are based on specific cultural teachings and traditions such as spirituality, connecting with the land, and land-based activities. For many Indigenous women and girls who have experienced violence, including sexual exploitation and trafficking, such programs not only fulfill their need to connect to their spirituality and culture

(connection that some women never had), but also help understand why their background as Indigenous women renders them vulnerable in society.³¹ Women are not inherently vulnerable, rather vulnerability is a result of patriarchy and is always socially constructed.³² Other initiatives focus on traditional methods of dispute resolution and restorative justice initiatives that may include elders as advisers or mediators. Yet others emerge from an immediate need for safety and protection, such as informal women's groups and shelters in private homes, as well as local safety patrols. In Greenland, a new approach of resolving conflicts evolved from the tradition of *inermeg* (drum song), which would allow reincorporating offenders of domestic violence into society rather than continuing to exclude them.³³

While the motivating concerns for rejecting the state are understandable, it can also be a double-edged sword. By constructing solutions along the binaries of state versus community, we may end up blaming Indigenous women once more. First, there is a danger of reifying the very masculinist nationalist discourse that male-led Indigenous organizations employed against Indigenous women advocating for sex equality in their communities. A dogmatic stance against engaging the state in addressing violence against Indigenous women may create new exclusionary and hegemonic practices in which only the unproblematically "traditional" approach is valid. Similar to the male-led Indigenous organizations blaming women for their co-optation and for breaking the ranks in calling for the elimination of sex discrimination, women resorting to the state are blamed for their naïveté and lack of critical consciousness. This is particularly cruel in the current circumstances, which offer few options in violent situations or conditions.³⁴

Second, restorative justice programs can be more damaging than healing when applied to cases involving violence against women. Drawing on her research on Navajo peacemaking, Donna Coker posits that restorative justice processes are potentially helpful for *some* women but *only* if certain conditions are met. These requirements include "prioritiz[ing] victim safety over batterer rehabilitation; offer[ing] material as well as social supports for victims; work[ing] as part of a coordinated community response; engag[ing] normative judgments that oppose gendered domination as well as violence; and . . . not mak[ing] forgiveness a goal of the process."³⁵ In many cases these conditions are not even considered, resulting in the revictimization of women.³⁶

Instead, I argue there is a need to acknowledge the ubiquitous quality and power of the state. Rather than assuming a straightforward step

outside unitary state power and its ability to structure myriad relations, the more important questions include how to hold the state accountable and what form state engagement should take. Feminist legal scholar Jennifer Nedelsky proposes that we "should always look beyond the immediate choices—say mandatory arrest or not—to the ways the whole structure of relations could be reshaped such that those choices are not necessary."³⁷ Within Indigenous communities, the restructuring of relations of violence and domination could foster the ability to prevent or respond to aggression and coercion at a local level. This might entail a network of neighbors and friends who can be called to attend to the incident rather than calling the police.

The state, as the creator of the historical and social conditions for the violence, must be held accountable while seeking to transform the conditions in Indigenous communities. However, there is need for caution with how the issue of eliminating gendered violence as a fundamental aspect of Indigenous self-determination is taken up and discussed by the state and Indigenous leadership. There is always a danger of co-optation by neoliberal governance institutions that may warp any discussion of violence against Indigenous communities or grassroots people, blaming either Indigenous communities in general or Indigenous women and girls in particular while masking the structural factors creating, perpetrating, and contributing to violence.

Taking Responsibility and Restructuring Relations of Domination

Gender violence as a self-determination issue entails first and foremost taking responsibility individually and collectively to end violence and abusive behavior. Identifying gender-based oppression is the responsibility of self-determining peoples "for whom the self fully includes women."³⁸ For many Sámi women, collective self-determination is considered inseparably linked to the question of responsibility. For Helena Omma, a member of the Sámi Council and a former member of Sáminuorra, the Sámi youth organization in Sweden, the failure to take responsibility for violence and other difficult questions in Sámi society is a reflection of an inability to take responsibility for self-determination:

"If we are not able to take responsibility for our society and engage with these questions, if we pass the responsibility of dealing with violence to mainstream society, we are clearly not able to take responsibility for our society. No question these two issues are connected."³⁹

Former member of Norway's Sámi Parliament Laila Susanne Vars concurs, noting that the Sámi Parliaments have the primary responsibility to raise the issue in public: "If we at the Sámi Parliament don't dare to address these issues, then how can we expect Sámi society in general [to] dare to do it? So we must. One of our roles is to strengthen society, which necessitates discussing these issues."⁴⁰ A member of the Swedish Sámi Parliament strongly agreed: "The Sámi Parliament has an important role to raise questions and support those people who want to bring these issues up. But we the members of the Parliament also ourselves need to be aware of these issues."⁴¹

The failure to hold ourselves responsible for gender violence as individuals was one of the key issues raised by a number of participants in all three regions. An insistence on individual responsibility of the leadership and political elite in particular cannot be overstated. At the same time, individual responsibility for gender-based violence needs to be situated in a far broader context.

Taking gendered violence seriously as a self-determination issue involves the transformation and restructuring of *all relations* that create harm for Indigenous women. These relations of domination range from institutions of the state to interpersonal relations of gender as well as to oppressive familial and kinship relations that either blame women for violence or keep women in violent relationships by downplaying, trivializing, and dismissing the violence in women's lives. Moreover, gender relations of domination include the relationships women have with the state and its institutions, such as the police, courts, and health and welfare agencies.

Restructuring the relations of domination requires dismantling the hierarchy embedded in conventional conceptions of self-determination, which is constructed in terms of rights and relations with the state. For Indigenous self-determination, relations with the state are not the only site of (political) significance. If we took the task of restructuring relations of violence as seriously as we take the task of restructuring relations of domination with the state, we would potentially be further along in implementing Indigenous self-determination.

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