



**PART 3**

Inussuk sculpture by Niels Mølstedt above the waterfront in Nuuk, Greenland on 20 July 2022

# NOW OR LATER?

## Gender and Self-Determination

By Dr. Rauna Kuokkanen

In this four-part article series, Research Professor Rauna Kuokkanen shares the key findings of her research that has been published as the book *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender* (Oxford University Press, 2019). For her comparative study, she interviewed over 70 Indigenous individuals from Sápmi, Greenland and Canada, the majority of whom were women. She wishes to share her findings as a means to increase awareness and empower women.

**I**ndigenous self-determination means breaking up power relations and restructuring them. A key political goal of Indigenous movement has long been to gain equal standing with other peoples in the world. My and other research show, however, that this is not enough. Indigenous self-determination must also consist of gender justice. Colonial structures, including governing bodies, have changed gender relations in Indigenous societies and established similar unequal gender structures that can be found in mainstream political structures. This is why it is very important that gender is a central part of implementing Indigenous self-determination. Otherwise, colonial power is maintained in the name of Indigenous self-government.



In Indigenous politics, we often hear comments that “once we get self-determination” everything else will fall into place. Behind this thinking is that everything troubling Indigenous societies is due to colonialism and that self-determination will solve all problems in Indigenous communities. Idealizing Indigenous self-determination is problematic and dangerous for Indigenous women in particular. If sexism and gender discrimination are not taken into consideration at the time of establishing self-government, gender-based marginalization becomes rooted as an inseparable, normal part of political institutions. Afterward, it is difficult to change the institution, its founding values and premises.

In the first part of this series, I wrote about how the rights framework is too limited to understand Indigenous self-determination. For Indigenous Peoples, self-determination is a central right and a collective foundational value, a broadly shared view about what a people or nation considers necessary for its wellbeing both at individual and collective levels. This article considers how gender issues have been addressed in Canada and Greenland.

### Gender Equality Policies in Greenland

Greenlandic women played an important role in gaining greater autonomy in Greenland but were



Jody Wilson-Raybould

marginalized when Greenland Home Rule was established in 1979. Greenlandic women’s involvement in politics was restricted by structural and systemic discrimination that came with the Danish governance model. Passed in 2003, the first gender equality act centered on equal treatment of men and women in

employment and in public services. It was replaced by new legislation in November 2013. According to some Inuit Greenlandic women, an individualistic approach to the gender equality legislation in Greenland has significance only to the urban well-educated elite. Yet it is the women in small communities with stronger patriarchal gender patterns who would need gender equality legislation more.



Karasjok city centre lying on the banks of the Tana river, the Sami Parliament in the background, Norway



Karasjok, Lapland, Norway – March 3, 2020: interior of the Sami Parliament in Karasjok

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Unlike Greenlanders, most Indigenous Peoples are not in a position to consider whether and what kind of gender equality legislation they need to pass. They have adopted the Western gender equality ideology rather than considering Inuit conceptions of gender and gender egalitarianism. High rates of violence against women in Greenland, however, point to the inadequacy and incapability of legislation alone to eradicate gendered violence.

In Greenland, political institutions and non-governmental organizations are seen as masculine institutions, with a focus on male traditional economic activities and self-determination as defined by men. Social issues have been marginal to the agenda of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), the leading NGO in Greenland. Though this is slowly changing, social issues still receive much less attention within ICC.

### **Indigenous Gender Issues in Canada**

Indigenous women in Canada were among the first to raise the problem of gendered violence in the 1980s. This was the result of the heightened public debate on self-government combined with Indigenous women's struggle against sex discrimination in the *Indian Act*. There was a broadly shared concern among Indigenous women that they would be marginalized in self-government and community development in the same way as they have been excluded from their communities by the *Indian Act*. Many asserted that leadership had internalized and naturalized patriarchal values and that they would be carried into self-governing institutions and practices. They were worried that, as a result, women's concerns and realities, especially gender violence, would be neglected.



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 — G.D. ANDERSON

Accusing Indigenous women in particular of being “anti-Indian” when raising issues of gender discrimination has been a highly successful strategy of normalizing the division between sovereignty and gender, and developing a gender silence in most areas of policy, law and politics. It has also disempowered and further marginalized Indigenous women. Postponing key concerns affecting a large segment of Indigenous Peoples enables violence in its many forms to continue and leaves relations of domination firmly in place.

Indigenous women have made important inroads to politics and are represented in political institutions more than before, yet they are still expected to take responsibility for certain issues that are not considered self-determination or sovereignty issues. “Women’s issues” include child care, elder care, social issues and education. So long as men can count on women looking after “social issues,” men simply do not need to concern themselves with them. The mostly male

leadership can focus on land rights and state relations because they can depend on the caretaking role of Indigenous women in their communities.

Reclaiming Indigenous women’s political roles, or rematriation, was seen by many as a precondition for Indigenous self-determination and implementing Indigenous governance. Rematriation also recognizes the different ways of participation in Indigenous nation-building and self-determination. These include ways that are not typically considered “political,” such as raising and educating children, choosing to speak their Indigenous languages, engaging in direct action, running community programs, providing support and shelter to victims of violence, and interrogating patriarchal attitudes and behaviours. This must not, however, serve as an excuse for excluding women from formal politics.

Some Indigenous women argue that structural change can only be created by joining politics at all levels, including municipal and city councils. Many Indigenous women take leadership roles because they see the need to “come forward and stop the bus.” Some consider it possible to change the system from within. Others refuse to enter into formal politics, arguing that Indigenous women should not waste their time, energy and resources on a faulty system. They stress on-going grassroots activism and creation of alternatives, not participation in existing political structures.

Regardless of the approach, through introducing different priorities to the self-determination agenda, Indigenous women seek to transform the self-government framework to include issues that inherently are Indigenous governance issues. If there is a segment of a society whose concerns are ignored in establishing political institutions, it is very hard to change them later. ✘



### **Rauna Kuokkanen**

Rauna Kuokkanen (Sámi) is a Professor of Arctic Indigenous Studies at the University of Lapland (Finland), an Adjunct Professor at the University of Toronto, and a 2021–2023 Fulbright Arctic Initiative Fellow. She previously lived and worked in Canada for nearly 20 years. Kuokkanen is a long-time advocate for the protection of Sámi sacred sites, particularly Suttésája, a sacred Sámi spring in Northern Finland. Currently, she leads the Siida School project, a community-driven renewal of Sámi Siida system. For more information visit [rauna.net](http://rauna.net).