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INDIGENOUS SAMI PEOPLE, YESTERDAY AND TODAY: FROM GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Indigenous Sami People

The Sáámis are the indigenous peoples of Northern Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Majority of Sáámi people live in Norway, in large areas of Scandinavia, Northern Finland and Northwestern Russia, from the Kola Peninsula in the Northeast to Dalarna and Femund in the South. It is difficult to state exact number of Sámi population because, sometimes it depends on each individual whether they want to be considered Sámi or not.

Their traditional territory stretches from the Northern part of South Norway and the middle part of Sweden across the northern parts of these countries. Sámi culture is spread among four countries, strong and clear borders do not protect it.

The Sáám religion contains many gods who steered the powers of nature in differing ways. The will of these gods was interpreted by Sáám shamans called Noaid. However, the arrival of Christian missionaries brought with it the edict that man's consciousness could be ruled by only one god.

There are between 40 000 and 45 000 Sáámi in Norway, of which 25 000 live in the Northernmost County, Finnmark. About 17,000 Sáámi live in Sweden, around 6000 live in Finland, and approximately 2000 live in Russia. Sáámis are an Asiatic people and speaking a Uralic-Altai language. They migrated to Scandinavia from Russia's Kola Island and Asia. They can't be defined as settlers, they are migrating people. Their main source of income was hunting deer and other animals. Starting from XVII century, Norway and Sweden started to

assimilate Sáámis by forcing them to convert to Christianity. Their social and cultural identity started to get destroyed. Their native language was banned and they were forced to learn Swedish and Norwegian at schools. Swedish monarchy and Swedish governments practiced all these policies. All this assimilation policies and sufferings of Sáámi people were proven and accepted by a court decision in February 1996¹.

The Sáámi call themselves, *sámit* or *sápmelačcat*. In Norway they were previously called “*lapper*” or “*finner*,” similarly “*lappar*” in Sweden and “*lappalaiset*” in Finland. Now the designation is Sáámi being incorporated internationally, e.g. in trend-setting reference works and, of course, in the global aboriginal peoples’ efforts in which the Sámi actively participate².

Sáámi culture has changed greatly in recent decades and they are the ethnic group which are interestingly studied in the world. New laws and Sáámi political awareness have raised the appreciation of Sáámi culture but on a daily level the situation is still not without controversy. Since World War II, Sáámi society has been impacted by great economic and social change.

Their culture was not so isolated as it is often supposed. The presence of other populations and cultures constantly offered new influences, challenges and pressures for change. The Sáámi have dynamically assimilated influences, taking some parts permanently into their own culture. They have adapted even to great changes without losing their own identity as Sáámi.

Traditional livelihoods have been threatened by the use of land for industry and large-scale tourism. Population distribution has changed, as permanent settlement has increasingly replaced nomadism. Immigration has increased, while some Sami have moved to the South. Reindeer husbandry has been adapted to the modern market economy, requiring larger herds, greater dependence on technology and mechanization, and higher costs. The intensive use of land and resources by different industries, including the new kind of reindeer husbandry, has burdened the Arctic environment. Concerns have arisen among environmentalists regarding the ecological sustainability of large-scale, commercial reindeer husbandry. Conflicts over land use have emerged between herders and settled inhabitants of Sáámi. Political and legal disputes have also erupted between the Sami and the Nordic authorities over the use of land and resources.

Sweden and Norway names were in the list of genocidal countries of XX century because of the violence against their minorities. The oppression policies of Sweden against Sáámi were proved and accepted. A heavy assimilation policy until 1990s by Sweden didn’t allow Sáámi people to have peace. Their native language, beliefs were banned and they were forced to convert to Christianity.

The newborn babies were getting blessed again secretly at homes according to shaman traditions after force at the churches baptizes them. Especially after 1920, to prevent population exchange, more than 60 000 Sáami were sterilized. More than 90 % of these were women³.

Sáami Women as Custodians of their Traditions and Cultures

Indigenous women are the most vulnerable among indigenous peoples, and face double discrimination — on the basis of their gender for being women and for their ethnicity for being indigenous. In some parts of the world, there is triple burden to bear, as indigenous women are also poor. Indigenous women are often described as the custodians of traditions and cultures. They bear the prime responsibility of ensuring the culture and traditions of their peoples are passed on to future generations.

While it is clear that women are generally allowed a certain amount of prestige in a community by virtue of being the primary caretakers of children, Sámi women are especially important because they are also responsible for passing on their unique indigenous culture to their children. The mother is also in charge of ensuring her family's survival, and her responsibilities indicate that Sámi culture contains a matriarchal element⁴.

Well-celebrated Sámi author Rauni Magga Lukkari claims if Sámi women brought up according to tradition have a lot of power. Lukkari says that women's power is expressed through traditional Sámi outlets, such as making clothes. The clothes that Sámi women make are necessary for survival in the harsh winter climate, which, according to Lukkari, puts women in a position of power. She does say that this is not as true as it once was, when "sewing clothes took up the better part of women's daily work"⁵.

As the Sáami became more strongly integrated into the majority society, the state decided that the rights to occupations should be tied to men. This was based on the European idea of the man as breadwinner and thus the person who is economically responsible for the family, despite the fact that agriculture had once been the responsibility of the women of Sáami. Sáami women in reindeer communities formerly held a relatively stronger position than women in the majority society because of their participation in reindeer breeding. A woman owned the reindeer that she brought with her into her marriage. The state's management and laws brushed aside the position Sáami women traditionally had, effectively weakening their position in relation to men⁶.

Women's position has traditionally been strong in both the Sáámi society in general and reindeer herding communities in particular. Women played a central role in the family structure including in organizing and managing the family economy, in raising and educating children and youth, producing the necessary clothing and household items. This traditionally strong position of women in reindeer herding communities has gradually deteriorated due to various factors:

1. The gradual shift from subsistence-based economy to a monetarized economy;
2. Legislation which has indirectly marginalized women in the reindeer herding livelihood; and
3. The general state policy related to reindeer herding in which the man has become the de facto head of the family reindeer herds⁷.

For many indigenous peoples, the balance lies in the preservation of traditional knowledge, values and cultures, at the same time as the indigenous society and the surroundings continuously change. Many indigenous peoples find themselves in the intersection between tradition and modernity. It is all about adapting to a new world without losing sight of, or forgetting, the values of the traditional culture.

Sáámi Women's Feminist Movement

All over the world, women's rights are questioned and restricted with reference to traditions, religions and cultures. Principles of universal rights and democracy are called into question. Economic, environmental and political crises have repeatedly been shown to have the most negative impact on women, especially poor women, while women have been excluded from decision-making that led to the crises.

The Nordic countries are also facing major policy challenges to achieve gender equality. The Beijing Platform for Action formulates clear demands, which the Nordic countries still do not live up to. There are major shortcomings in areas such as violence against women, labor market conditions and equal pay, women's economic independence, organizing and sharing of care work and women's influence and power.

The history of the struggle for Sáámi rights goes back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this struggle, Sáámi women have always a central and significant role. The first national Sáámi conference in 1917 was organized particularly due to the efforts and vision of Elsa Laula Renberg (1877–1930), the chair of the first Sáámi women's organization. She also established the first

(though short-lived) national Sáámi organization in 1904 and several local associations in both the Swedish and Norwegian sides of Sámiiland. A well-known figure of the time, Renberg actively promoted Sáámi 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 Sáámi to claim their rights to land — Renberg’s role in the early Sáámi rights movement has usually been neglected or left out in historical accounts (including those written by Sáámi men) which focus on her male contemporaries and their activities⁸.

The struggle for gender equality policy as a main part of the world democratization process also influenced on Sáámi women political activity. It activated the Sámi women’s political action which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Greenland and Northern Scandinavia were discovered as regions, and the Greenlandic and Sámi peoples began to view themselves as ethnic minorities: no longer must they feel inferior to the dominating cultures, now the people’s own voice should be heard in its own language. A new generation of writers emerged in protest against the cultural invasion of the Danes, the Norwegians, and so on, and the women also got involved. This was the same period as the decade of the women’s movement.

The feminist movement in Sapmi began in the 1970s when female reindeer herders wanted to have the same rights as their male counterparts. They argued that modernization; overprotective national policies and non-Sáámi legislation have caused oppression and led to a decline in equality between men and women.

Though feminism made their voices heard, it did not reach out to all Sáámi women. Because feminism tends to portray women as victims, many Sáámi women have trouble identifying with it. Kirsti Paltto says that the word ‘feminist’ is “perceived as a kind of ‘f’ word, ensuring that many closet feminists refuse to identify with feminism”. Also, because Sáámi feminist groups do not have any interaction with feminist groups in Finland, the potential bond that could exist between the two societies as a result of common feminist goals is lacking.

After the Nordic Council’s Women’s Conference in 1988, Sáámi women decided to band together and form their own women’s organization, Sarahkka. The organization takes its name from the mythical daughter of the ancient mother and father of the Sáámi. It concentrates on women’s issues, focusing on the fact that Sáámi women are a unique group of people because they are primarily responsible for child care and the passing on of culture, in addition to being an indigenous population and an ethnic minority.

Modernization and Changing Sáámi People

The Sáámi of the Nordic countries are a small minority and a distinct culture with its deep roots in nature and in the history of North. Modern development has thrust this ethnic group into a difficult situation. To preserve the culture's distinctiveness their adaptation to the new times is highly active. Active adaptation means Sámi cannot alone and without criticism adopt modern culture, casting aside their culture's irreplaceable values, but that they hold fast to their cultural traditions in the new conditions. Sámi wakefully follow every change in the new situation.

In the atmosphere of changing ideology, ideas about the value of individuals and the rights of small peoples and minorities improved section so that the United Nations added an important section to its Charter securing attention for the priority of aboriginal people's rights.

The new attitudes, along with scientific research, overturned the racially prejudiced images of Sáámi that had been widely presented and publicized before the war. However, these good intentions often did not translate into actions, which were dictated by the economic and social realities of rebuilding after the war, especially in Norway and Finland. Living in four countries caused the division of culture and language of Sáámi people. The first Sáámi Associations was founded in Finland after the Second World War. Before the war they lived independently, separately from one another.

From the beginning, the main aim of young educated Sáámi was to build a bridge between tradition and modern time. The most important turning point in Sami political and cultural history was Alta Conflict. (The Norwegian government decided to build a hydro electric power construction — a big dam — in the area of Alta. The protests against that plan caused the biggest conflict in the Norwegian society since the Second World-war. However, the Alta case became a kind of cultural rape where Norway used the force of the police and the army, against the Sáámi People.) A movement in the early 1980s, which spoke out against a hydro-electric dam proposed for the Alta River. This gave impetus to Sáámi culture and resulted important changes in Sámi politics in Norway and inspired a whole generation of Sáámi throughout Sapmi.

In 2005, a draft Nordic Sámi Convention was presented, prepared by an expert group consisting of government-appointed members from Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Convention has a total of 51 articles and the purpose of the Convention is to allow the Sámi people to safeguard and develop their language, culture, livelihoods and way of life with the least possible interference by nation-

al borders. The Convention stipulates minimum rights, states that the Sáámi are an indigenous people in the three countries and that the Sáámi have the right of self-determination. The states' responsibility comprises all administration levels: national, regional and local.

The early Reindeer Grazing Acts also had serious consequences for rights. With them, the Sáámi lost the right to own land and the individual reindeer pasture right was turned into a collective right for the Sami villages⁹. Moreover, the rights were different for men and women. The Act not only excluded Sámi that weren't nomadic reindeer herders. The Sámi woman's legal status was steadily weakened following the Reindeer Grazing Act of 1886 and in particular through the 1928 Act¹⁰. Reindeer herding was defined as a man's job and the reindeer-herding Sami woman's rights were based on her husband's status, including whether he was defined as a Sámi or not¹¹. The woman's legal status was thus dependent on the man's, a system that persisted until 1971 when the concession herding system was introduced. The Act made women formally equal, but in practice subordinate to the men. Any reindeer belonging to a female member of a household were still counted as belonging to her husband or father¹².

In 1956 Sáámi Committee was established to discuss principles and concrete measures for Sámi. Its conclusions, issued in 1959, included numerous initiatives to facilitate the Sámi retention of their culture within the framework of Norwegian society. This was the first time that Sáámi issues were put to the Norwegian National Assembly, for debate on a wide-scale and principle basis. Among the intentions was a wish to create positive special advantages for Sáámi. Opposition to the committee's ideas was initially vigorous. When put to the National Assembly in 1963 the strongest agreement involved proposals for social and economic development. In the following decades, Sáámi policies were particularly oriented toward the social sphere and regional development.

The major step forward came in the 1960s, when the Sáámi right to preserve and develop their own culture was officially acknowledged. Sáámi was taught in the schools, and new institutions were established. But time has left its indelible traces on the Sáámi through a loss of language, traditions and a fading perception of their history and background — and these values are difficult to regain.

The Sáámi in the Nordic region were split up when the Nordic states drew up their national borders. The Sáámi still experience different conditions in the three Nordic countries, and there are three Sáámi parliaments. Finland was the first to establish a publicly elected Sáámi body, which was formed in 1973. The decision to establish Norway's Sáámi Parliament — Samediggi — was adopted

in the Norwegian national assembly Stortinget in 1987, and the first election was held in autumn 1989. Right from the first Samediggi, women's representation has been an issue. In one of the electoral districts (Karasjok) a special Women's List was offered even at the very first election. It was a reaction to the striking off of a young woman candidate from the top of one party list during the nomination process. The Women's List turned out to be a potent competitor to the established organizations and lacked a handful of votes to carry a representative into the newly formed Samediggi. The List was not invoked at later elections, but Sami women's organizations have unfailingly kept the woman's suffrage issue hot ever since¹³.

The Samediggi has 39 representatives who sit for a four-year term. The first election was that 13 women took office (1989–1993), which means that the women's representation in the first term of the Samediggi was 33 per cent. Since then the level of women's representation has dropped at each election. In 2001, the women's representation in the Samediggi fell again. In four elections, therefore, the suffrage of women has tumbled from 33 to 18 per cent, with the result that today there are only seven women in the Samediggi.

In Norway, the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is part of the national Norwegian legislation. Norwegian authorities also ratified ILO Convention No. 169 in 1990. This Convention's Articles 13 and 14 are of particular importance for Sámi land rights. In 1987, the Storting (Norwegian Parliament) adopted the Sámi Act (Act of 12 June No. 56 1987). Section 1 states that: *The purpose of the Act is to enable the Sámi people in Norway to safeguard and develop their language, culture and way of life.* Approximately the same text has been incorporated into the Constitution as Article 110 a. Chapter two of the Sámi Act has provisions regarding the Säämi Parliament. Section 2-1 stipulates that "The business of the Säämi Parliament is any matter that in the view of the Parliament particularly affects the Säämi people". Chapter three provides provisions regarding the use of Säämi language for public bodies as well as geographical and administrative delimitations. The Säämi language is an official language in Norway.

In Sweden, the Säämi's status as an indigenous people has not yet been codified into law. In connection with Sweden's ratification of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, it was stated, however, that the Sámi are an indigenous population. The status as an indigenous people has not, however, been stipulated in the Constitution. The reasons given

by the Swedish authorities for this is that the Swedish Constitution's provisions that ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities shall be granted the opportunity to keep their culture and social life, also provide constitutional protection for the Sáámi.

In Finland a publicly elected body called Sáámi Párlameanta or the "Delegation for Sami Affairs" was established as long ago as in 1973, and was given the status of advisory function to the Government. It was intended to monitor the Sami people's rights, as well as their economic, social and cultural conditions. In 1996, Sáámi Párlameanta was restructured to correspond to the Swedish and Norwegian Sami Parliaments, with administrative duties in relation to Sáámi culture and the Sami language. Sáámi has been an official language in some municipalities in northern Finland since 1992. The authorities in Finland are obliged to negotiate with the Parliament regarding all measures that can have a direct and specific impact on the Sami's status as an indigenous people.

The Sámediggi has 21 members, at least three from each municipality in the Finnish part of Sápmi. They are elected every fourth year. The assembly has five communities that make presentations on issues from economic policy to cultural concerns.

Two provisions have been incorporated into the Finnish Constitution that cover Sáámi rights. Article 17, third subsection recognizes the Sáámi status as an indigenous people, as well as the right to use their native language when submitting inquiries to the authorities. Article 121, fourth subsection states that the Sámi have linguistic and cultural autonomy within their homeland to the extent that this is stipulated in other legislation. In 1995 the Finnish Parliament adopted an Act on the Sáámi Parliament (No. 974 of 17 July 1995). Section 1 states the following regarding cultural autonomy within the homeland: *The Sáámi asan indigenous people shall, as is further detailed in this act, be ensured cultural autonomy within their homeland in matters concerning their language and culture.* Section 5 goes on to stipulate that the Sámi Parliament may consider all issues concerning the Sámi language, culture and status as an indigenous people.

According to the constitution, the Sáámi enjoy genuine autonomy following a decision by the Finnish Parliament in June 1996. The constitutional protection reinforces the Sáámi position as an indigenous people, with the right to preserve their language and culture. The Finnish constitution includes a paragraph stating that as an indigenous people, the Sáámi must, in accordance with that stipulated in law, be assured cultural autonomy within their home area on matters concerning their language and culture".

Contrary to what is the case in both Sweden and Norway, the authorities are obliged to negotiate with the Sámi Parliament regarding all important decisions that either directly or indirectly may affect the Sáami 's status as an indigenous people. Section 9 states: *The authorities shall negotiate with the Sámi Parliament regarding all far-reaching and important measures, that directly or indirectly may affect the Sámi's status as an indigenous people.* Compared with Sweden and Norway, the Sáami in Finland therefore have the strongest statutory rights.

Sáami Parliament

Sáami self-determination was synonymous with the Sáami Parliaments. Today Sáami in Sweden, Norway and Finland each have their own representative body — Sámdiggi (Sáami Parliament). Finnish Sáami were pioneers, founding the *Sáami Parliament* in 1973. Its mandate was to “oversee Sámi rights and promote Sáami economic, social and cultural well-being.

The purpose of the Sámediggi is to strengthen the political position of the Sámi people and promote Sáami interests in Norway, contributing to equal and equitable treatment of the Sáami people and paving the way for Sámi efforts to safeguard and develop their language, culture and society.

How do Sáami women understand the concept, how do they evaluate the current efforts to implement self-determination by Sáami political institutions and what kind of forms their socio-political participation takes in contemporary Sáami society?

Today, Sáami women are increasingly involved in Sáami politics through various organizations and institutions at local, national and international levels. Sáami women's increased political participation, however, is a fairly recent phenomenon¹⁴, and, in some cases, a result of specific campaigns to recruit more women as candidates and encourage women to vote in the Sáami Parliament elections. Currently, the percentage of women in the Sáami Parliament in Norway is 46 (2009 elections) and in Finland 42 (2007 elections).

Although in the 1970s and 1980s Sáami women stressed their difference from their Nordic counterparts as part of the nation-building efforts, today Sáami 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 op-

portunities 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 power¹⁵.

Today Sámi women think men, specifically Sami male politicians in particular — need to change their attitudes to women. They have to stop meeting women's contributions with moody silence or undisguised sarcasm. They have to understand that women — particularly the younger generation — are not impressed by sexist male commentaries.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ J. Eikjok, “Indigenous Women in the North. The Struggle for Rights and Feminism”, 3 Indigenous Affairs, 2000, pp. 38–41.