Gendered Violence and Politics in Indigenous Communities

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Gendered Violence and Politics in Indigenous Communities

THE CASES OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN CANADA AND THE SÁMI IN SCANDINAVIA

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Abstract ───

This article examines the depoliticization of violence against women in indigenous communities. It argues that there is a pressing need to examine the ways in which gendered violence is explained, addressed and often sanctioned in indigenous communities. The article draws on Crenshaw's concept of political intersectionality and examines responses to gendered violence in indigenous communities through two groups: Aboriginal women in Canada and Sámi women in Scandinavia.

─── Keywords

violence against indigenous women, political intersectionality, indigenous politics, Aboriginal women in Canada, Sámi women in Scandinavia

In 2012, the first ever high-level UN meeting focusing solely on indigenous women was held in New York. The fact that the theme of the expert group meeting was "Combating Violence against Indigenous Women and Girls" is telling; as the meeting noted, violence against indigenous women is all too common globally and is endemic in many countries.[1] One of the issues thoroughly discussed was the challenge of recognizing the internal dimension of violence against indigenous women and girls, the existence and prevalence of which is often a forbidden subject within indigenous communities. Hence, indigenous leadership and institutions were urged to adopt the issue of gendered violence as an inseparable part of human rights advocacy and

self-determination, requiring "the recognition and dismantling of existing patriarchal social relations, eliminating discriminatory policies and the continuous commitment to indigenous women's rights in all indigenous institutions and at all levels" (UNPFII 2012, para. 14). The expert group meeting concluded that an important part of this process is "changing societal attitudes that condone violence and aggression and perpetuate gender injustice" (UNPFII 2012, para. 32). If in-community norms of violence go unchallenged, indigenous women and girls internalize and naturalize violence, compounding their susceptibility to abuse.

The history of colonization of indigenous peoples continues to manifest itself in structural factors such as poverty, lack of access to lands and resources or limited access to education and health services, and indigenous women often bear the excessive brunt of these factors (Anaya 2012, 2). Yet limiting the analysis to recognition of this historical causality risks considering internal oppression based on gender as merely a consequence of discrimination against the entire indigenous community. Rather than victims of gendered violence in their own right, indigenous women become simply the means by which discrimination against indigenous communities at large can be recognized (cf. Crenshaw 1991, 1277). Accordingly, efforts to address various forms of violence tend to ignore how indigenous women must both confront the racial bias *and* challenge their status as instruments, rather than beneficiaries, of the indigenous rights struggle.

Internalization and adoption of colonial policies and practices designed to regulate and discriminate against indigenous women by indigenous leadership and institutions has resulted in reluctance and refusal to deal with gendered violence. This article examines the depoliticization of violence against women in indigenous communities and argues that in order to dismantle existing patriarchal social relations and eliminate discriminatory policies, there is a need for an analysis of the scope and nature of gendered violence and forms of intragroup oppression in indigenous communities. As Caroline Dick (2011, 148) argues, "we must account for in-group oppression and the way in which the construction of difference supports unequal relations of power within groups as readily as it does among them." In addition to considering the ways in which various forms of gendered violence have been employed as instruments of colonization past and present (see Razack 2002; Smith 2005; Kuokkanen 2008a), there is a pressing need to examine the ways in which gendered violence is explained, addressed and often sanctioned in indigenous communities. For example, the 1991 Manitoba Justice Inquiry asserts:

> Most chiefs and council members are male and often exhibit bias in favour of the male partner in a domestic abuse situation. This can effectively chase the woman from her home and community. The unwillingness of chiefs and councils to address the plight of women and children suffering abuse at the hands of husbands and fathers is quite alarming. We are concerned enough about it to state that we believe that the failure of Aboriginal government leaders to deal at all

with the problem of domestic abuse is unconscionable. We believe that there is a heavy responsibility on Aboriginal leaders to recognize the significance of the problem within their own communities. They must begin to recognize, as well, how much their silence and failure to act actually contribute to the problem. (Hamilton and Sinclair 1991, n.p.)

Employing Crenshaw's (1991) concept of political intersectionality, the article examines responses to gendered violence in indigenous communities through two groups: Aboriginal women in Canada and Sámi women in Scandinavia. Political intersectionality calls attention to the ways in which women of color "are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (Crenshaw 1991, 1252). Crenshaw's approach enables a detailed examination of the ways in which structural factors such as dispossession, displacement and poverty of indigenous peoples are gendered and have different effects on men and women, and how these processes have contributed and reinforce intragroup hierarchies and patriarchal oppression in indigenous communities, all of which result in increased levels of interpersonal gendered violence. The agenda of indigenous peoples which focuses on self-determination is led by male priorities while women's struggles against sexism and patriarchy are usually characterized by white middle-class concerns. As a result, indigenous women's concerns such as gendered, racialized violence are marginalized by both groups. Public discourse and politicization of violence against women is commonly curbed in the name of maintaining the integrity of the community. Indigenous women are thus torn between the oppression they share with their men and the violence they experience at the hands of those same men.

While we cannot omit the interrogation of colonization, this article argues that there is a need to reject those discourses of colonization that externalize responsibility for gendered violence or construct male violence as a reflection of their own victimhood and loss of status. These considerations tend to construct a hierarchy of subordination, positioning indigenous men as greater victims of colonization. Violence is rationalized and somewhat normalized as a consequence of colonial history, yet externalizing violence denies agency and condones perpetrators' behavior (Søvndahl-Pedersen 1994; Sorensen 2001; Davis 2011). Such discourses fail to account for the internalization of patriarchy, which perpetuates the colonial construction of indigenous women as second-class citizens and subordinate members of their communities.[2] Thus, the article recognizes the dilemma raised by indigenous women: using colonization as a blanket explanation for gendered violence perpetuated by indigenous men in their own communities. As the report of the UN Expert Meeting on Violence against Indigenous Women and Girls states:

There is a need to be vigilant against the often-repeated narratives of colonization and its associated trauma that can cause women and girls not to report

> violence for fear of being ostracized [...]. Such fears compound the already marginalized and vulnerable situation of indigenous women and girls arising from prevailing racist and sexist attitudes among State and public authorities and non-State actors, and explains why there is a chronic underreporting of violence. (UNPFII 2012, para. 24)

While there is much research on violence against Aboriginal women in Canada (Canadian Council on Social Development and NWAC 1991; Amnesty International 2004, 2009; Pauktuutit 2006; Canada 2008; Quebec Native Women 2008; NWAC 2009), there is a striking absence of scholarship, statistics or reports on violence against Sámi women.[3] In Canada, it is widely recognized that Aboriginal women experience violence, including spousal abuse, at much higher rates than non-Aboriginal women (Brzozowski et al. 2006; Brzozowski and Brazeau 2008; Brennan 2011). Further, it has become apparent that hundreds of Aboriginal women have gone missing or been murdered in the past thirty years (NWAC 2010).

Some may argue that the lack of Scandinavian studies indicates that violence against Sámi women is not an issue. Yet the former UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women acknowledged this dearth and recommended commissioning an intergovernmental study (Ertürk 2007). Interviews conducted in several Sámi communities in the past four years unanimously reveal that various forms of gendered violence – including physical, sexual, psychological and structural – are indeed a pressing problem that is largely hidden and not adequately addressed by political institutions.[4]

Between the two groups of women, there are considerable socioeconomic differences. In Canada, the poverty rate of Aboriginal women is considerably higher than that of non-Aboriginal women, with that of Aboriginal single mothers at 73 percent (Statistics Canada 2006; see also McCaskill et al. 2011, sec. 6.2.2). In Scandinavia, there is no information indicating that the poverty rates of Sámi women are higher than those of Sámi men or of other Scandinavian women. In fact, in 2007 the Sámi town of Kautokeino was the only Norwegian municipality where women earned more than their male counterparts (Balto 2007). Other social problems such as unemployment, addiction, inadequate housing and service access barriers are also far less pronounced among the Sámi.

One reason for their general socioeconomic wellbeing is the integration of Sámi individuals into the Nordic welfare state after World War II, which led to their enjoying essentially the same standards of living as their non-Sámi counterparts.[5] Based on their relatively better socioeconomic standing, some may conclude that structural oppression does not apply to Sámi women. However, even if it does not necessarily manifest through factors such as poverty, discriminatory employment or inadequate housing, it is clear that structural problems like cultural and language barriers often frustrate Sámi women's utilization of support services and reporting or escaping battery, thereby exacerbating their isolation. Such barriers "not only limit access to

information about shelters, but also limit access to the security shelters provide" (Crenshaw 1991, 1249).

ABORIGINAL WOMEN

The main national Aboriginal organization in Canada, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), has identified gendered violence as one of its main policy areas. An AFN Women's Council was established in 2006 and it has worked closely with Aboriginal women's organizations, particularly the Native Women's Association of Canada, on missing and murdered Aboriginal women. This was one of the three agenda items at the AFN National Justice Forum in 2012 (AFN 2012a, 2012b). The Forum held a ceremony honoring the families of missing and murdered indigenous women and developed an action plan to end gendered violence. Four main themes were identified: accountability; prevention and holistic responses; systemic/structural issues; and agency approaches. Like the UN Expert Meeting on Violence against Indigenous Women and Girls (discussed at the 2012 AFN Forum), the accountability of indigenous leaders was emphasized, together with the need to address underlying causes such as residential school-related intergenerational trauma and economic insecurity, including access to housing. The Grand Chief of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs "issued a challenge to First Nations men and leaders to take ownership and responsibility for their attitudes and actions" (AFN 2012a, 5).

While commendable in its objectives and acknowledgment of the critical role of leadership, it will take some time to assess the success of the plan's implementation. Moreover, problems that the Justice Forum overlooked are policies and practices in Aboriginal communities that perpetuate gender discrimination. One example is the ongoing dispute over Aboriginal women reinstated through Bill C-31 (1985), which was passed to address the Indian Act's (1876) discriminatory removal of status through "marrying out." For women, "marrying out" literally meant exile from their communities and hence, from their rights and ties to their families, cultures and identities. McIvor (2004, 106–107) explains:

> Since 1869, colonialist and patriarchal federal laws [. . .] have fostered patriarchy in Aboriginal communities and subjected Aboriginal women to loss of Indian status and the benefits of band membership, eviction from reserve home, and denial of an equal share of matrimonial property. Colonialism and patriarchy have also enabled cooperation between male Aboriginal leadership and Canadian governments to resist the inclusion of Aboriginal women in Aboriginal governance. These denials and exclusions perpetuate the exposure of Aboriginal women and their children to violence and consign many to extreme poverty.

Although Bill C-31 did not fully eliminate gender discrimination in the Indian Act (see Silman 1987; Weaver 1993; NWAC 1999; McIvor 2004; Monture

2004; Eberts 2010), some Aboriginal communities considered it too contentious. According to the Sawridge Band of Alberta, "Bill C-31 constitutes an unjustifiable limitation on its Aboriginal right to determine its own band membership, which it argues is protected by [. . .] the Canadian constitution" (Dick 2011, 1). The band responded by enacting its own membership code to block re-enrollment of reinstated women. Invoking the cultural vulnerability of the community, the band constructed the women as outsiders and excluded them on the basis of their "weak cultural affiliation" (Green 1997; Dick 2011). Although directed at women forced to relocate upon marriage, the Sawridge code also has ramifications for those still living in the community. Due to the band-defined demands of cultural authenticity and affiliation, women who experience violence may feel pressured not to report abuse for fear of being labeled as engaging in "culturally inappropriate behavior" and hence being disciplined for speaking out.

Aboriginal women's contestation of their subjugation is commonly perceived by male leadership as a threat to the security and unity of their nations (see Jamieson 1978; Green 1985; Holmes 1987; Silman 1987; Bear 1991; Krosenbrink-Gelissen 1991; Voyageur 1996; Nahanee 1997; McIvor 2004; Monture 2004; Fiske and George 2006). This nationalist discourse maintains that "any appeal to an outside authority diminishes the autonomy of the community/nation, imperiling the struggle for self-determination and diminishing traditional culture and decision-making processes" (Fiske 1996, 69). Like the discourse of the fraternal, masculinist nation in general, the male-driven Aboriginal nationalist discourse assumes that "what is good for the nation is good for the women" (69). Yet Aboriginal male leadership has largely failed to ensure the basic safety and security of women. A young woman in Manitoba recalls:

> I tried to get away. First I went to his mom's house. She said I was a bad wife and I deserved to get beat. She told [him] I tried to talk to her, and he beat me hard. He would never let me have any money. I had to account for every penny. He took out the phone so I couldn't talk to anybody. I tried to go to the Chief. He told me to go home. Then [the Chief] told [him] he'd better keep an eye on his woman . . . It's sixty-two kilometers to town. I've got no money. There's nobody I can trust. I don't drive. The social worker is [his] cousin, and all my relatives tell me to keep quiet cause it's "family business." I would just walk to town but I don't want to leave my kids with him. (Cited in Bopp et al. 2006, 2)

Community dynamics reinforce the alienation and vulnerability of women in violent relationships. Gendered violence is condoned and family relations make it difficult to seek or receive help. Victims are often accosted with disbelief, anger and family denial or betrayal (LaRocque 1993). There are also obstacles related to the small size of the community such as a lack of privacy, fear of ostracism, intimidation and humiliation through gossip. Further, political realities and community dynamics can radically constrain

the interventive capacity of professional and community support services because victims are unlikely to seek help. These services can be also troubled by lack of confidentiality, favoritism and/or hostility toward some families and lack of knowledge, experience or protocols for dealing with victims of violence, all of which may result in re-victimization and abuser retaliation (Bopp et al. 2006).

Entrenched patriarchal norms and practices render domestic violence against Aboriginal women as a private concern ("family business") and relegate Aboriginal women's rights to a secondary position in their communities. Gendered violence is effectively depoliticized and as a result, women's calls and concerns are downgraded, devalued or dismissed. Women's accounts of physical or sexual violence are not taken seriously or victims are blamed for the violence they have experienced. Moreover, extended families often protect the male perpetrators of violence rather than support female victims of violence. Inter- and intrafamilial relations and obligations also may form barriers to acknowledging and addressing violence against women.

The normalization of gendered violence in community life leads to public and private acceptance of violence and to not recognizing acts of physical and sexual violence as violence. One of the main factors contributing to continuing cycles of violence in Aboriginal communities is the legacy of the residential school system. Jacobs and Williams (2008, 113) link the current safety and survival of Aboriginal women to residential schooling:

> In most cases, parents or grandparents of the [missing and murdered Aboriginal] women had attended residential school. Many [interviewees] spoke of the resulting family dysfunction or disconnect as impacting their lives and placing the women in a vulnerable situation.

Central in Canadian colonial policy from the late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century, the objective of the system was to eliminate Aboriginal cultures and rights and assimilate Aboriginal people into the mainstream. Removal from community and mandatory attendance at residential schools jointly operated by the state and the churches disconnected Aboriginal children from their families, cultures and languages, while many were also physically, sexually and mentally abused. The legacy of the system manifests in intergenerational trauma and a range of social ills such as substance abuse, interpersonal violence, suicide, homelessness, dependency and low self-esteem.

SÁMI WOMEN

For Sámi leadership and political institutions, violence against women is not considered a priority. At best, bodies such as the Sámi Parliaments[6] have paid non-gendered lip service to the issue. In its 2009–13 strategic plan for

equality, the Norwegian Sámi Parliament identifies three priority areas, one being the prevention of violence in local communities, with the objective of strengthening culturally appropriate support services in the Sámi language (Sámediggi 2008). This section is vague and brief. Given the lack of information on the rates or scope of violence, it is striking that the plan does not prioritize data collection on violence in Sámi society in general and on violence against Sámi women in particular.

As its response to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 2008 country report, the Finnish Sámi Parliament issued a brief statement on women, discussing their role, status, future challenges, gender mainstreaming, political participation, education, employment, access to social services, girls' health and finally, gendered violence. The final subsection identifies a lack of resources, expertise and Sámi-language victim services. Rather than providing details about gendered violence in Sámi society, the statement emphasizes "the need to increase the awareness and knowledge of authorities and health service providers about the language and culture of the only indigenous people in our country" (Sámediggi 2009, n.p.). How such awareness may assist Sámi women victims of violence, or more fundamentally, violence against Sámi women, goes unaddressed. Considering the brevity and placement of this discussion, the Finnish Sámi Parliament does not appear to regard gendered violence as a serious concern.

In its Equality Program of 2004, the Swedish Sámi Parliament recognized violence against Sámi women as a problem and proposed that it is part of the Sámi Parliament's work to address the problem (Sametinget 2004). In 2008, the Sámi Parliament organized a seminar to discuss a need for a telephone help line for Sámi women victims of violence. Rather than recognizing the need for such a service and draft a plan to make it a reality, the seminar concluded that the Swedish Sámi Parliament should apply for funding to further investigate a basis for a Sámi help line (Sametinget 2008). In 2010, the Parliament received funding from the Swedish National Institute of Public Health for this purpose but it had not used the funding by the end of the grant period.

In Scandinavia, colonial assimilationist state policies have not been as explicit or pronounced as in Canada. Missionary work beginning as early as the eleventh century was a central means of the colonization of the Sámi. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, intensified conversion initiatives sped up the corruption of cultural traditions, social practices and belief systems. By the time the early Sámi movement emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, traditional worldviews and cultural practices had largely been replaced by Christianity. Christianity has thus long played a central role in shaping Sámi cultural norms, including creating the taboo of female sexuality and proscription of talk about sex (Kuokkanen 2008b; Paltto in Krumlinde 2009; Turi 2011). Consequently, public discussion of sexual violence is largely off-limits and Sámi politicians, authorities and researchers regularly

and problematically shy away from it. In some cases, girls and young women are blamed for sexual abuse they experience because they do not follow the norms of "proper" female behavior, including "dressing properly" not to attract male attention (Utsi 2006a). Sexual abuse of girls and young women has also been explained by referring to "traditional" child rearing, according to which women bear the brunt of responsibility for male behavior. Expected to behave modestly, if a man happens to "go too far" with his sexual advances, it is a girl's or woman's responsibility to say "no." In this way, boys and men learn that they do not need to pay attention to women's refusals; according to the traditional Sámi upbringing, "no" means "yes" (Pulk 2005; Utsi 2006b).

The views of female responsibility and gendered upbringing of children are common particularly in more traditional Sámi communities. They are often regarded by Sámi as traditional norms; however, parallels to Christian values and notions of female chastity are conspicuous. The long process of colonization has ensured that Christian gender frames have been internalized and integrated and there has been very little public discussion or challenge of the validity, appropriateness and origins of these Sámi "cultural" norms and "traditions."

Other widely held cultural perceptions and norms subordinating Sámi women and preventing them from seeking help when facing violence include the traditional view of Sámi women's resilience. Although challenged by several Sámi women (e.g. Bäckman 1982; Eikjok 2000; Amft 2002), this norm continues to construct many women's perceptions of themselves as "strong Sámi women" they should not be hit in the first place, or if they are abused, they should not seek help after a domestic assault (Paltto in Krumlinde 2009, 13). The primacy of family reputation is also a powerful cultural norm. Family honor precedes individual concerns and peaceful relations within and between families are often maintained even if it means hiding problems and silencing individuals. A person who voices "unspeakable" issues can be severely disciplined by her family or others, as is particularly noticeable in more traditional communities where strong extended family ties are prioritized (Henriksen 2011; Turi 2011).

The internalization of colonial, patriarchal norms is one reason for the depoliticization of violence against indigenous women. Another reason is the fear of further stigmatization of indigenous peoples, since making the issue a public concern and focus of political action may affirm negative stereotypes and retrench prejudice (Crenshaw 1991, 1253). This fear is common and not necessarily unfounded within many minority and indigenous communities. However, "the cost of suppression is seldom recognized in part because the failure to discuss the issue shapes perceptions of how serious the problem is in the first place" (Crenshaw 1991, 1255–1256).

When accounts of sexual abuse of young women first surfaced in the Sámi town of Kautokeino in the late 1980s, the town had a flag-bearing role in rebuilding Sámi society. Sámi involved in this process since its inception in the 1970s had learned that in order to get the approval of Norwegian

authorities, the Sámi society has to speak with one voice. Accounts of sexual abuse were therefore perceived as acts of disloyalty and a threat to the development of Sámi society. The Sámi organizations had also long experienced negative coverage in Norwegian media, which often associated individual criminal offences to the entire Sámi population. In the late 1980s, Sámi society was also in the process of institution building (such as the Sámi Parliament), which contributed to more stringent demands for loyalty and priorities for some leaders. According to Henriksen (2011), the process of nation and institution building partly explains the refusal to address violence against women at the time.

A fear of reviving and further reinforcing negative stereotypes played a role in the widespread inclination to conceal and ignore sexual abuse cases of young Sámi women in Kautokeino also more recently[7] (Turi and Bals 2008). However, most common negative stereotypes portray Sámi men as uncivilized and dirty drunks. Hence, the fear of reviving negative stereotypes is a fear of casting Sámi men in a further detrimental light. Rather than the female victims of violence, it is Sámi men who need to be protected. As a result, the indirect assault of Sámi manhood through negative popular representations is considered an assault on the Sámi people, the direct assault on individual Sámi women is not (cf. Crenshaw 1991). Sámi men are seen as analogous to the nation building process as well as the natural embodiment of the Sámi nation; thus, their gender is erased and their negative stereotypes become representative of the entire Sámi nation. As Fiske puts it: "Violence as a political issue is secondary to the call for self-government and subordinated to the presumed interest of the collective" (1996, 84). Parallels can also be drawn to Marchetti's conclusions of silencing violence against Aboriginal women in Australia in the context of the Australian Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: "The concerns of racialized women are put aside for the sake of saving racialized men from state-inflicted forms of violence and thereby saving the marginalized group as a whole" (2008, 170).

Although not nearly as economically and socially disadvantaged as other Aboriginal women in Canada, cultural and societal norms and expectations – whatever their origin – create subtle forms of structural oppression and subordination that intersect in Sámi women's lives, rendering them vulnerable to violence in their communities. The imposition of sociocultural expectations for female behavior compound the disempowerment and isolation of women facing physical or sexual violence, hindering their escape, while cultural obligations of familial loyalty pressure them to forgive and stay. This is exacerbated by the severe shortage of shelters and the reluctance to seek out non-Sámi support services due to language and cultural barriers (Ertürk 2007; Paltto in Krumlinde 2009; Magga 2011). The lack of shelters in both Aboriginal and Sámi communities compounds the marginalization and subjugation of both Aboriginal and Sámi women.

SILENCING AND DISTORTED PRACTICES

Comparing the cases of Aboriginal women in Canada and Sámi women in Scandinavia sheds light on how in spite of their differences in socioeconomic status, responses to gendered violence are similar particularly at the local community level. At the national level however, there are considerable differences. Aboriginal organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations have recognized violence against women as a serious problem and have identified it as a key policy area. Particularly the organization's Women's Council has collaborated with Aboriginal women's organizations, such as the Native Women's Association of Canada. In 2012, the Assembly of First Nations developed an action plan to end gendered violence which recognizes, among others, the responsibility and accountability of indigenous leaders. In comparison, the three Sámi Parliaments have not identified violence against Sámi women as a serious concern. By and large, it is a non-issue and if violence is discussed at all, it is often in generic and non-gendered terms. In spite of the 2007 recommendation of the former UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women to commission an intergovernmental study on violence against Sámi women (see Ertürk 2007), the Sámi Parliaments have not considered such a study a priority.

At the local level, similarities exist in political realities, community dynamics and in the ways these can exacerbate women's experiences of violence. Internalizing colonial and patriarchal practices as cultural norms almost invariably results in the depoliticization of gendered violence and thus the silencing and marginalizing of women who experience abuse in their communities. In the case of Aboriginal women, the lack of legislation against violence or government legislation and policies incorporated as however arguable "cultural customs" as in the Sawridge case led to women being ostracized, coerced and controlled through biased or distorted practices. Demands of cultural authenticity created and imposed by community leaders create pressure to conform and not to speak out for fear of being disciplined. The Sámi women are silenced and held back by Christian norms adopted as part of tradition and by entrenched views of "traditional Sámi women."

Due to prevailing sexism and internalized colonialism in their communities, both Aboriginal and Sámi women often face dismissiveness, victim-blaming or normalization of violence. Traditions commonly considered "indigenous" but which are often informed by colonial norms (such as female respectability), impose codes of silence and family obligations of loyalty, which in turn impede public acknowledgment of gendered, in-community violence and the recognition of the distinct concerns of indigenous women. Thus "cultural" norms along with fears of affirming racist stereotypes or eroding political unity can present structural oppression of indigenous women and increase their marginalization and vulnerability. Whatever the reason, the real cost of silencing is rarely acknowledged, partly because non-discussion of the issue occludes awareness of how pressing the problem is to start with.

The reasons for the silencing and dismissal of gendered violence range from internalization and adoption of patriarchal, colonial norms to the fear of further stigmatization of indigenous peoples. Internalizing and adopting patriarchal, colonial norms have resulted in the construction of women as second-class citizens whose suffering is less significant than family relations, reputation and honor. Part of the problem of internalizing colonial norms is that they have in many cases been entrenched as indigenous tradition and are used against female victims of violence in the name of culture through victim blaming, shaming, demands of cultural authenticity and disciplining.

The fear of further stigmatization is common and not always unsubstantiated in indigenous communities. Making the issue of gendered violence a public concern or focus of political action might confirm already existing stereotypes and prejudice. However, the failure to deal with gendered, in-community violence creates a cycle allowing indigenous leaders and laypersons alike to consider violence a non-issue, which in turn leads to condoning violence through silence, and to the complicity of politicians, academics and authorities spurning calls to action or discussion. This culminates in accepting the suffering of a significant portion of indigenous community members as a justifiable cost of nation building, further sanctioning the domination of male priorities of self-government, land rights, traditional livelihoods and economic development (all assumed to be gender-neutral) (cf. Davis 2008).

CONCLUSION

Violence against indigenous women is prevalent the world over, commonly occurring in disproportionate numbers. Intersecting forms of racism and sexism combined with poverty and economic dependence make indigenous women particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence in mainstream society. Violence against women is also common in indigenous communities although community members are often reluctant to discuss it publicly or raise it as a problem. The recent UN expert meeting on violence against women recognized this reluctance and the cumulative danger of not challenging community norms of violence. This article has analyzed the depoliticization of violence against women in indigenous communities – the way in which gendered violence is discussed, addressed and in some cases condoned in indigenous communities. Drawing on the concept of political intersectionality, it has focused on two groups of women, Aboriginal women in Canada and Sámi women in Scandinavia. While there are significant differences in how both national Aboriginal and Sámi organizations have thus far addressed gendered violence, there are considerable similarities at the local level. Similarities in responses to gendered violence are particularly salient when considering how socioeconomic standing of indigenous women does not seem to impact the way with which gendered violence is dealt. Whether it is relatively

well-off Sámi women or low-income and impoverished Aboriginal women, the violence they face in their own communities is regularly silenced or dismissed.

While it is necessary to examine the ways in which patriarchal and colonial norms have been entrenched in indigenous communities, this article has argued that gendered violence in indigenous communities cannot be considered only as a result of the colonization of indigenous peoples. If gendered violence is recognized only as a consequence of the history of colonization of indigenous peoples at large, analyses will overlook indigenous women as victims of violence in their own right within their own communities. If internal oppression based on gender is considered merely a consequence of discrimination against the entire indigenous community, indigenous women become merely the means by which discrimination against indigenous communities at large can be recognized. As a result, indigenous women are considered instruments rather than beneficiaries of the indigenous rights struggle.

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Notes

1   The author attended as one of the invited experts.
2   For analyses of the ways in which patriarchy has been internalized in indigenous communities, see Allen (1986), Poupart (2003), Green (2007), Denetdale (2008).
3   The first ever statistics on the Sámi in Norway did not include information about violence generally or gendered violence (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2008). Sámi-specific statistics are not available in Finland or Sweden.
4   In 2008, the author conducted fifteen interviews with Sámi women in Norway and Finland. In 2011, twenty interviews were conducted with Sámi women and men in Norway, Sweden and Finland as part of a comparative research project on gendering indigenous self-determination (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada).
5   I have argued elsewhere (Kuokkanen 2007) that while beneficial for individual Sámi, integration into the welfare system amounts to what Paine (1977) calls "welfare colonialism" and to a wholesale oversight of Sámi collective rights (see also Olsson and Lewis 1995).
6   The Sámi Parliaments in Sweden, Norway and Finland are representative (mainly consultative) bodies elected by Sámi individuals on a specific electoral register.

7   In 2005, there was a sudden increase of sexual abuse cases in Kautokeino, a town in the heart of the Sámi region. Considered one of the most traditional Sámi communities, 85 to 90 percent of the town's population of 2000 is Sámi who speak the language. Most people in the town are either actively involved or connected through family to the traditional livelihood, reindeer herding.

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Notes on contributor

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