An Historical Overview of Gender Equality and Sámi Women in Reindeer Herding Communities

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Abstract

This chapter provides an historical overview of gender equality of Sámi in the area that is now known as Finnish Lapland. This study focuses on the populations of Utsjoki, the northernmost Sámi parish of Finnish Lapland, and Inari, situated on the south side of the Utsjoki. The Sámi area of northernmost Finland is compared with Sweden and the rest of the northernmost Fennoscandia. Due to their inherited reindeer stock, reindeer herder Sámi women have often been economically independent, and there have been many outstanding female reindeer herders in Utsjoki and Inari during the past centuries. However, there were also certain limitations in women's lives, and Sámi women of the past were marginalised in a number of ways. Women were usually not able to participate in social and professional activities of Finnish society. In reindeer herding Sámi families, men and women had many similar duties, but there are also historical examples of imbalances in the division of labour. Although the gender roles were restricting and labour division was sometimes very gendered, the gender roles of Sámi men and women also complemented each other. Despite their heavy workload in families, Sámi women often held acknowledged positions in their own communities (reindeer villages) and families.

Introduction

In 1716, the Norwegian missionary Thomas von Westen (1682–1727), who worked among the Sámi people in northernmost Norway, gave instructions to two novice missionaries. He mentioned, among other things, 'Qvindernes herredömme og tyrannie over deres maend' – women's dominance and tyranny over their men[1] (von Westen, 1910, 109). This likely referred to the central role of women in Sámi families (Bäckman, 1985, p. 199). Although von Westen's

[1] All translations to English were made by the author.

idea may sound a little surprising, Sámi history has known many prominent women, including those who fought for the rights of the Sámi people.

A well-known example of a prominent Sámi woman is Elsa Laula (1877–1931), who was born in Sweden to a reindeer herding family and married a reindeer herder in 1908. She was one of the first Sámi people to engage in political debate through her writings. Her pamphlet *Inför Lif eller Död? Sanningsord i de Lappska förhållandena* [Do we face life or death? Words of truth about the Lappish situation] was published in 1904. Laula tried to appeal specifically to Sámi women. She wanted them to organise themselves because she recognised the importance of women in the management of social affairs and in making social and power structures more positive for the Sámi people (Hirvonen, 1999, pp. 72–82; Seurujärvi-Kari, 2014).

There were also some Sámi women in Finnish Sápmi who were highly appreciated in their own communities. In his 1927 book *Taka-Lappia*, the Finnish ethnographer Samuli Paulaharju (1875–1944) described a Sámi reindeer herder woman named Juoksan-Kadja. She was married to Oulas-Niila Vuolabba, who moved in 1849 from Finland to northernmost Norway. According to Paulaharju, Niila was a considerate and quiet man, and his wife was quite the opposite. Kadja was the master of her husband, her reindeer flock and their female and male servants: she 'gave orders, led migratory journeys, bought stuff, and sold reindeer as she pleased' (Paulaharju, 1927, pp. 103–104). For mighty Sámi women like Kadja, going to the fairs (*markkinat*) was a major spectacle where their festive outfits were greatly admired. From a Lutheran clergymen's point of view, Juoksan-Kadja was a textbook example of a dominant Sámi woman (von Westen, 1910).

This chapter is an historical overview of gender equality among the Sámi residing in the area that is today known as Finnish Lapland. Historical sources on the Sámi were collected from official and private archives, newspapers, memoirs and travelogues to trace the Sámi women who lived in this area (especially the parish/municipality of Utsjoki) during the past centuries (see Kylli, 2012). One way of keeping track of the histories of Sámi women is to investigate estate inventory deeds (*perukirja*) – lists of the worldly possessions of individual Sámi upon their death. All the animals, houses (e.g. *goahtis*), clothes and other goods that people owned at the time of their deaths were recorded in these deeds (Markkanen, 1988).

This study focuses on the populations of Utsjoki (Ohcejohka in Sámi), the northernmost parish of Finnish Lapland, and also to some measure Inari situated on the south side of the Utsjoki.

Some Sámi families in Utsjoki were fishermen who lived along the Teno River (Deatnu) and caught salmon as they travelled up the river from the Arctic Ocean. These salmon fishers also practiced hunting and cattle raising (see Koivisto, 1903). In Utsjoki, there were also families of Sámi reindeer herders. Reindeer herders spent their summers in Norway on the coast of the Arctic Ocean and wintered in the interior part of Finland. In other words, reindeer herder Sámi of Utsjoki followed their reindeer herds' annual migration cycle. They could cross the border between Finland and Norway freely until the 1850s. This border was closed in 1852, which deeply affected their nomadic way of life. After that, summer pastures had to be found on the Finnish side of the border. Despite this, nomadic reindeer herders continued to travel around with their reindeer herds and live in portable homes even during the late 19th century (Nahkiaisoja, 2016). By the 1920s, all of the reindeer herding Sámi in Utsjoki and Inari had log houses and some even had potato fields near their homes (Paulaharju, 1927, pp. 147, 226).

In Inari (Aanaar in Sámi), Sámi inhabitants were often referred to as fisher Sámi; they lived mostly by fishing and hunting, and they also sometimes kept sheep. Finnish settlements started to form in Inari during the last decades of the 1700s (Nahkiaisoja, 2016). The Sámi living in Finnish Lapland were in constant contact with the northern coast of Norway, but clergymen, rural police chiefs and other officials as well as many researchers and travellers came to Lapland from southern Finland (Kylli, 2005). Some nomadic Sámi families moved from Utsjoki and other parts of Lapland to the municipality of Inari in the late 1800s (after the border between Norway and Finland was closed), but until that time, the Inari Sámi were mainly fishers and shepherds.

This chapter focuses primarily on the Sámi area of northernmost Finland with some comparisons between Finland and Sweden as well as the rest of the northernmost Fennoscandia. The northern environment has had an influence on the similarity of Arctic livelihoods. Reindeer, for example, were herded by Sámi communities in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia (see McCannon, 2012). Reindeer herders of Utsjoki were well-adjusted to the subarctic environment. In 1831, it was noted that reindeer herders of the area always had access to fresh reindeer meat, and as a result, their nutrition remained at a reasonably good level (Fellman, 1831). Reindeer fat and bone marrow were also great delicacies, and fish fat could be obtained from the coast of the Arctic Ocean (Paulaharju, 1927, pp. 111–189).

Economically Independent Sámi Women

Sámi girls were raised from a young age to be able to fulfil the role set for women by their communities. The girls started to learn handicraft skills with women at the same age that boys started to follow their fathers into men's work (Bäckman, 1985, p. 200; Hirvonen, 1999, pp. 181–183, 259). Although Sámi girls and boys were carefully taught their place in the community, in some cases they were treated equally. In reindeer herding families, girls also had (from early childhood, ever since they got their first teeth) their own reindeer as well as a unique reindeer earmark which constituted proof of reindeer ownership. With this earmark, the girl's father marked all the calves born to her first reindeer and any reindeer she received as a gift. In this way, Sámi girls were able to accumulate personal possessions that they were allowed to use as they wished. This reindeer property made women financially independent – at least in cases when the reindeer possessions were built up as planned. This was not always the case, as reindeer herds were threatened by diseases (such as reindeer plague) and wolves. When these girls of reindeer herder families got married, they could bring their reindeer property to their new homes (Bäckman, 1985, p. 198; Hirvonen, 1999, pp. 177–178; Kylli, 2005, p. 251; Ranta-Rönnlund, 1975, p. 9).

In some cases, women were able to accumulate significant wealth for themselves, which also had a positive impact on their marriage prospects. If a girl had many reindeer, her other skills and features became of secondary importance. Wealth even took precedence over Sámi handicraft skills, which was generally a highly valued feature for women in Sámi communities. In reindeer herding communities, people who were capable of work were also valued regardless of their gender (Hirvonen, 1999, p. 182).

Sámi reindeer herders were often very wealthy (especially when compared to the poorer Finnish settlers), as some of them had thousands of reindeer. Womenfolk of the reindeer herding Sámi families were also financially independent due to their inherited reindeer stock (M. Aikio & Aikio, 2010, pp. 8–17; Fur, 2006, p. 47). Estate inventory deeds of the National Archives of Finland give detailed information of the possessions of Sámi reindeer herders since the 1700s. In addition to having their own reindeer, Sámi women also had silverware as a sign of their wealth. According to the Utsjoki Estate Inventory Deeds (n.d.), they also owned reindeer dogs, sledges, wolf traps, etc.

Economically, it is difficult to find gender-based structural inequality in Sámi reindeer herding communities. For example, Margareta Nilsdotter Länsman, who died in September 1852,

was according to her estate inventory deed a Fjell Lapp hustrun (mountain Sámi wife) ([Margareta Länsman's Estate Inventory Deed], 1853). During her lifetime (or at least in her final years), she owned various objects, such as a very early coffee pot made of copper. Länsman's estate inventory demonstrates that she was wealthy in other ways as well. She owned, for example, silver goblets, buttons and rings. She also had Finnish silver coins (or Russian silver rubles, as Finland was part of the Russian Empire in the 19th century) and Norwegian currency, which tells of the transnational dimensions of Margareta Länsman's life. She also owned many reindeer, a summer tent, a pulk and a sledge as evidence of her mobile lifestyle ([Margareta Länsman's Estate Inventory Deed], 1853).

Researchers have examined how independent women lived in the Sámi reindeer herder communities. According to M. Aikio (1988), the traditional Western idea of women being inferior to men did not apply to the reindeer Sámi communities – at least when it came to women's economic independence. Reindeer Sámi women also travelled much more outside their homes than Finnish women, who may have resented the greater mobility of Sámi women. Sámi women could easily drive to reindeer round-ups or visit people in neighbouring Sámi villages. Even small children were not an obstacle to their journey, as they travelled along in the sledges (M. Aikio 1988, pp. 213–214).

There were certain limitations in Sámi women's lives, however. Sometimes Sámi men had a better chance to practice their own traditional culture. For example, when alone in the forests with their reindeer, they would often *yoik* (perform a traditional form of Sámi songs). Yoiking was sometimes condemned as sinful by Lutheran clergymen, but according to oral histories, some of the most outstanding female reindeer herders (for example Juoksan-Kadja, mentioned above) nevertheless dared to yoik like men (Paulaharju, 1927, pp. 103–104).

Gendered Division of Labour

The social status and equality of a Sámi woman in Finnish Lapland (e.g., in Utsjoki) varied according to whether she belonged to the reindeer herding Sámi or the fisher Sámi communities, whether she was a servant and whether she was single or married. In historical sources, many writers have noted that the workload for Sámi women was often very high. In fisher Sámi families, work was divided strictly according to gender: for example, women were responsible for collecting firewood; making handicrafts; and taking care of the cattle,

domestic reindeer and children. During the summer, fisher Sámi men were busy at their salmon weirs, while in winter they prepared wooden handicrafts (such as sleds and boats) and sold them to the reindeer herding Sámi. According to many Finnish observers, Sámi men seemed to take long rests between their hunting trips, but women were never able to be entirely idle (Andelin, 1858, pp. 221–223; L. Lehtola, 1984, pp. 123–127).

The conditions in nomadic reindeer herding families were somewhat different. In reindeer Sámi families, men and women had many similar duties. Young girls were also involved in herding reindeer and guarding them from wolves (Paulaharju, 1927, pp. 206–219). According to Fur (2006), these tasks may earlier have been more gender specific, but when the herds increased and became bigger, cooperation became necessary: 'Among the reindeer-herding mountain Saamis both men and women traveled with the herds and participated in the milking' (p. 49).

According to Sámi author Sara Ranta-Rönnlund (1903–1979), who grew up in a Sámi reindeer herding community in Sweden, women had more tasks (compared to men) in reindeer herder families. When needed, women had to be flexible and do men's jobs, such as coating sledges and boats with tar, while men did not perform women's work in the same way:

> Now as I think of my youth as a nomad, I come to think of some foreign cultures where women do all the hardest work while men are lazing around, and I see that the Sámi of old times in many ways resemble those primitive peoples among whom the burden of labour is shared incorrectly, at least from our Swedish point of view. (Ranta-Rönnlund, 1975)

Based on this, gender dichotomies prevailed to some degree in traditional Sámi communities, and women were hierarchically defined below men. There was a clear imbalance in the division of labour within reindeer herding families, at least in the early decades of the 20th century (Ranta-Rönnlund, 1975; see also Hirvonen, 1999, pp. 178–179).

However, from the point of view of historical Sámi communities, the whole issue of equality between women and men may have seemed rather irrelevant. It was likely not among the most pressing issues in the subarctic region of the European High North during the 19th century. Although gender roles were very restricting and labour division was very gendered, the roles also complemented each other. Many sources also stress that Sámi men were responsible for cooking meat and fish dishes instead of women (e.g. Andelin, 1858, pp. 230–231; see also Fur, 2006, p. 49). Some examples of this continued in Sámi reindeer herding communities

of Inari into the early 20th century – a rural police chief mentioned in a letter that reindeer meat was always boiled by the male host (V. Lehtola, 2012, p. 155). This ritual may have originated in pre-Christian sacrificial ceremonies, which women were not allowed to attend. For these ceremonies, only men would have been allowed to deal with sacrificial reindeer and to prepare the sacrificial meal (Bäckman, 1985, p. 202).

Although women's sphere of living was in some respects significantly smaller in comparison with men's domain, they wielded considerable power in the home and rarely hesitated to use it. Despite their heavy workload in their families, Sámi women held acknowledged positions in their communities. By taking care of their children, women also had power over and responsibility for future generations (V. Lehtola, 2012, p. 133).

Unequal Status of Sámi Women in Reindeer Herding Communities

It is often difficult to find information about the way of life of Sámi women in official documents produced by the church and state in previous centuries. Unofficial private sources, such as diaries and memoirs, contain some limited information on their lives, but there are not many Sámi women even in these sources, at least not under their own names (Kylli, 2012). In addition to the written sources, it is necessary to use oral history sources and collections, such as the compilations of Samuli Paulaharju.

There is a clear reason for the absence of Sámi women in written sources – it was due to the limited nature of their social and professional activities. For example, young Sámi women were not trained to become catechists (circular teachers in the parishes of Lapland) during the 18th and 19th centuries in the same ways as young Sámi men were. Catechists were able to read and write, and they even produced written source material as part of their work (Kylli, 2005, pp. 148–149). All in all, Sámi women of the past were marginalised in numerous ways. Both women and Sámi in general were considered a topic of minor interest for the serious study of history, and the histories of 19th-century Sámi are mostly the histories of Sámi men. The invisibility of Sámi women is particularly noticeable in documents from official authorities. The sources most often used by historians (e.g., Kylli, 2012; Lakomäki et al., 2020) are from the spheres of administration and state and economic authorities – areas of life where women of the time had very little influence.

Traditional *siida* systems in Sápmi were replaced with Nordic administration in the northernmost areas of Fennoscandia during the late 17th century. *Siida* were Lapp villages or reindeer herding communities, and these villages had common territories (where village dwellers had rights of possession over the meadows and fishing waters) and sources of livelihood (Koponen, 2015; V. Lehtola, 2015, p. 25). Fur (2006) stated that women also had rights to the lands which were controlled by these *siidas*. However, it is unclear whether women were able to participate in decision making in the *siidas*. It seems, in light of the very limited information, that only adult men gathered to determine issues of importance for the whole village. Olaus Graan (who passed away in 1690) wrote that 'the oldest and wisest of the men assisted in dividing estates' (p. 49).

In researching the history of the 18th and 19th centuries and the reindeer Sámi communities in Finland, one can still find some obvious inequalities, as the roles of the Sámi women were limited to their families and Sámi community. Before the 20th century, it was common in the Sámi area of Finnish Lapland (e.g., Utsjoki) for Sámi reindeer herders to marry Sámi women from the Norwegian side of the border. As mentioned before, reindeer herders crossed these borders often before the latter half of the 19th century. Each year they moved with their reindeer from Finnish Lapland to the Norwegian coast, where they spent their summers. Reindeer herders thus often spent many months on the Norwegian coast, and there were many marriages between Sámi men of Finland and Sámi women of Norway (A. Aikio, 1998, p. 84; Nahkiaisoja, 2016).

As Sámi spouses who came from Norway did not know how to speak Finnish (which was usually the official language of church services), it was difficult for these reindeer herder Sámi women to communicate with Finnish officials. In 1832, Finnish clergyman Johan Stenbäck, who was working in Utsjoki, was shocked to find that one reindeer herder Sámi woman he met by the river Teno could not even remember the name of Jesus. Because of her inadequate Finnish language skill, she had not even learned the basics of Christianity, which was considered important in 19th-century Finnish society – people needed to know certain facts before they could be confirmed and receive a marriage license (Kylli, 2005).

Finnish officials, researchers and other visitors who were involved with the Sámi were generally men who emphasised men's activities. Philologists Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) and Matthias Alexander Castrén (1813–1852), for example, studied Sámi languages in Finnish Lapland during the 1840s and worked closely with Sámi men (who acted as their language

teachers). Even though they and other travellers enjoyed Sámi women's hospitality when visiting Sámi families and photographed Sámi women while their men were out in the woods, they did not usually see women as significant actors. Sámi men took care of most activities dealing with Finnish society: farm management responsibilities (in cases of new settlements), decision making in local governing bodies, reindeer herding administration and participation in public debates. In addition to understanding the Finnish language, literacy and writing skills also provided many Sámi men with good opportunities in Finnish society (V. Lehtola, 2012, p. 447).

Thus, Sámi women could be equal in their own communities (reindeer villages) but not when facing social institutions. In 17th-century Swedish parishes, there were some court cases in which Sámi women did not appear in court at all, and after that the court case could dry up completely. Court records of the Sámi parishes show that only men were appointed 'as guardians or as arbitrators in inheritance battles' (Fur, 2006, p. 49). In early modern Sweden and Finland, in general, women were expected to take legal action and be responsible for their own crimes. Court records of the Sámi parishes also show that only men were involved in issues that were important for the whole community (e.g. Fur, 2006, pp. 49, 72; Vainio-Korhonen, 2009, p. 66). Trade contracts and many other interactions also had a very clear gender dimension (Fur, 2006, p. 65).

There were also no Sámi women among the members of juries, *sexmans* (parish caretakers), church councils (*kyrkoråd*), etc. (see Kylli, 2005). It must also be remembered that these men were, at least in Utsjoki, mostly from fisher families and not reindeer herding families. Reindeer herding was not appreciated as a source of livelihood by Finnish officials, who encouraged people to become settlers and farmers (V. Lehtola, 2015, p. 25). In 1862, Sámi teacher Aslak Laiti (1837–1895), who had been born in Utsjoki, was concerned about the fact that Finns encouraged the Sámi to give up reindeer herding, which (according to him) was without a doubt the most profitable livelihood in the northernmost part of Lapland.

Discussion

In Sweden, Elsa Laula and some other Sámi women did very visible work for Sámi communities, but in Finland there were no comparable actors during the early 20th century. V. Hirvonen (2017) pointed out that during the first decades of the 20th century, there were

no women on the municipal council of Utsjoki, which at that point was the only entirely Sámi municipality in Finland. Sámi women in the communities of Finnish Lapland were not used to performing in public positions. The Utsjoki region was still very patriarchal, and Sámi women were used to staying in the background and taking care of their homes (Hirvonen, 2017). Traditionally, Sámi men and women had defined roles in order to enable each member of the community to know his or her tasks and complete them on time, but in 20th-century Sámi society, there was no longer a need for such strict gender distinctions (Bäckman, 1985, pp. 197–199; Fur, 2006, p. 49; V. Hirvonen, 1999, p. 173).

V. Lehtola (2012, p. 447) also wrote about Sámi women and the need to research them more thoroughly. He argued that Sámi women's position as actors in their homes, educators of their children, knowers of their neighbourhood, maintainers of family relationships, organisers of annual rotation assignments, participants in reindeer round-ups and pillars of the Laestadian movement have often been overlooked. Studying what kind of actors the Sámi women were in their communities during the past centuries and what kind of actors they are today is important (V. Hirvonen, 2017).

Reindeer husbandry and other livelihoods should also be researched more from women's perspectives. How much was women's work appreciated in terms of reindeer herding? Finally, when tracing historical Sámi women of reindeer herding communities, researchers should make use of new kinds of historical sources, such as archaeological material.

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